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Written by Chris Pavone

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THE TRAVELERS

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A NOVEL

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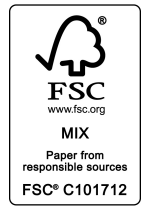

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THE TRAVELERS

To know that one has a secret is to know half the secret itself.

—HENRY WARD BEECHER

1

FIVE WEEKS EARLIER
NEW YORK CITY

A man is running along the sidewalk of a quiet leafy Brooklyn street, panting, sweat beaded on his face, quarter to six in the morning. He's wearing jeans, a dirty tee shirt, dingy white sneakers. This man is not exercising; he's working. He reaches into a canvas sling, cocks his arm, and tosses a newspaper, which flies across a fence, over a yard, landing on a townhouse stoop, skittering to a stop against the front door. A perfect toss.

In the street beside him, a battered old station wagon crawls at three miles per hour, the car's tailgate held partly open by a couple of jerry-rigged bungee cords. It's his sister behind the wheel of the Chevy, which they bought from a junkyard in Willets Point owned by another guy from Campeche. There are a lot of Mexicans in New York City, but not too many from the west-coast Yucatán city. Four hundred dollars was a good deal, a favor, a chit to be returned at some indefinite point, for some unspecified price.

The sling is empty. The man jogs into the street, and hauls a pile of papers from the way-back. He returns to the sidewalk, to the house with scaffolding over the portico, and a piece of plywood covering a parlor-floor window, and a stack of lumber plus a couple of sawhorses dominating the small front yard, whose sole greenery is a rosebush that's at least half-dead.

He tosses the newspaper, but this time his aim isn't perfect—he's been throwing papers for an hour—and he knocks over a contractor's plastic bucket, from which an empty beer bottle clatters onto the stone stoop before falling to the top step, crash, into pieces.

"Mierda."

The man jogs to the stoop, rights the bucket, picks up the broken glass,

sharp shards, lethal weapons, like what his cousin Alonso used to warn off that *coño*, that *narcotraficante* who was grabby with Estellita at the bar under the expressway. Violence has always been a part of Alonso's life; sometimes it's been one of his job responsibilities. For some people violence is woven into their fabric, like the bright blood-red thread that his grandmother would weave into the turquoise and indigo serapes on her loom that was tied to the lime tree in the backyard, before that type of work relocated to more picturesque villages within easier reach of the *turistas*, who paid a premium to travel dusty roads into tiny hamlets to buy their ethnic handicrafts directly from the barefoot sources.

The man runs out to the car, deposits the broken glass in the trunk, then back to the sidewalk, tossing another paper, racing to make up for lost time. You waste ten seconds here, twenty there, and by the end of the route you're a half-hour behind, and customers are angry—standing out there in bathrobes, hands on hips, looking around to see if neighbors got their papers—and you don't get your ten-dollar tips at Christmas, and you can't pay the rent, and next thing you know, you're begging that *coño* for a job as a lookout, just another *ilegal* on the corner, hiding from the NYPD and the DEA and the INS, until one night you get gut-shot for sixty dollars and a couple grams of *llelo*.

He tosses another paper.

The noise of the breaking bottle wakes Will Rhodes before he wants to be awake, in the middle of a dream, a good one. He reaches in the direction of his wife, her arm bare and soft and warm and peach-fuzzy, the thin silk of her nightie smooth and cool, the strap easily pushed aside, exposing her freckled shoulder, the hollow at the base of her neck, the rise of her . . .

Her nothing. Chloe isn't there.

Will's hand is resting on the old linen sheet that bears someone else's monogram, some long-dead Dutch merchant, a soft stack that Will purchased cheaply at a sparse flea market along a stagnant canal in Delft, refitted by an eccentric seamstress in Red Hook who repurposes odd-shaped old fabrics into the standardized dimensions of contemporary mattresses and pillows and mass-production dining tables. Will wrote an

article about it, just a couple hundred words, for an alternative weekly. He writes an article about everything.

Chloe's note is scrawled on a Post-it, stuck on her pillow:

Early meeting, went to office. Have good trip. —C

No *love*. No *miss you*. No-nonsense nothing.

Will had gotten out of the karaoke bar before falling into the clutches of that wine rep, back-seam stockings and hot pink bra straps, a propensity for leaning forward precipitously. She was waiting to pounce when he returned to the table after his heartfelt "Fake Plastic Trees," a restrained bow to the applause of his dozen inebriated companions, whose clapping seemed louder and more genuine than the measured clapping of the thousand pairs of hands that had congratulated Will hours earlier, in the ballroom, when he'd won an award.

"You look great in a tuxedo," she'd said, her hand suddenly on his thigh.

"Everybody looks great in a tuxedo," Will countered. "That's the point. Good night!"

But it was two in the morning when he got home, earliest. Maybe closer to three. He remembers fumbling with his keys. In the hall, he kicked off his patent-leather shoes, so he wouldn't clomp loudly up the wood stairs in leather soles. He thinks he stumbled—yes, he can feel a bruise on his shin. Then he probably stood in their door-less doorway, swaying, catching a glimpse of Chloe's uncovered thigh, eggshell satin in the streetlight . . .

She hates it when Will comes home in the middle of the night wearing inebriated sexual arousal like a game-day athletic uniform, sweaty and stained and reeking of physical exertion. So he probably stripped—yes, there's his tuxedo, half on the chair, bow tie on the floor—and passed out, snoring like a freight train, stinking like a saloon.

Will shades his eyes against the sunlight pouring through the large uncurtained six-over-six windows, with bubbles and chips and scratches and whorls in the glass, original to the house, 1884. Built back when there were no telephones, no laptops or Internet, no cars or airplanes or atomic bombs or world wars. But way back then, before his great-grandparents

were born, these same glass panes were here, in these windows, in Will and Chloe's new old house.

He hears noise from downstairs. Was that the front door closing?

"Chloe?" he calls out, croaky.

Then footsteps on the creaky stairs, but no answer. He clears his throat. "Chlo?"

The floorboards in the hall groan, the noise getting nearer, a bit creepy—

"Forgot my wallet," Chloe says. She looks across the room at the big battered bureau, locates the offending item, then turns to her husband. "You feeling okay?"

He understands the accusation. "Sorry I was so late. Did I wake you?"

Chloe doesn't answer.

"In fact I was getting ready to come home when . . ."

Chloe folds her arms across her chest. She doesn't want to hear this story. She simply wants him to come home earlier, having had less to drink; their time home together doesn't overlap all that much. But staying out till all hours is his job—it's not optional, it's not indulgent, it's required. And Chloe knows it. She too has done this job.

Plus Will doesn't think it's fair that once again Chloe left home before he awoke, depositing another loveless note on the pillow, on another day when he's flying.

Nevertheless, he knows he needs to defend himself, and to apologize. "I'm sorry. But you know how much I love karaoke." He pulls the sheet aside, pats the bed. "Why don't you come over here? Let me make it up to you."

"I have a meeting."

Chloe's new office is in a part of the city filled with government bureaucracies, law firms, jury duty. Will ran into her one lunchtime—he was leaving a building-department fiasco, she was picking up a sandwich. They were both surprised to see each other, both flustered, as if they'd been caught at something. But it was only the interruption of the expectation of privacy.

"Plus I'll be ovulating in, like, six days. So save it up, sailor."

"But in six days I'll still be in France."

"I thought you were back Friday."

"Malcolm extended the trip."

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot to tell you."

"Well that's shitty. There goes another month, wasted."

Wasted isn't exactly what Will would call the month. "Sorry."

"So you keep saying." She shakes her head. "Look, I have to go."

Chloe walks to the bed. The mattress is on the floor, no frame, no box spring. Will has a mental image of the perfect frame, but he hasn't yet been able to find it, and he'd rather have nothing than the wrong thing. Which is why the house is filled with doorways without doors, doors without doorknobs, sinks without faucets, bare bulbs without fixtures; to Will, all of these no-measures are preferable to half-measures.

This is one of the things that drives Chloe crazy about the renovation project, about her husband in general. She doesn't care if everything is perfect; she merely wants it to be good enough. And this is exactly why Will doesn't let her handle any of it. He knows that she will settle, will make compromises that he wouldn't. Not just about the house.

She bends down, gives him a closed-mouth kiss. Will reaches for her arm.

"Really, I'm running late," she says, but with little conviction—almost none—and a blush, a suppressed smile. "I gotta go." But there's no resistance in her arm, she's not trying to pull away, and she allows herself to fall forward, into bed, onto her husband.

Will sprawls amid the sheets while Chloe rearranges her hair, and replaces earrings, reties her scarf, all these tasks executed distractedly but deftly, the small competencies of being a woman, skills unknowable to him. The only thing men learn is how to shave.

"I love watching you," he says, making an effort.

"*Mmm*," she mutters, not wondering what the hell he's talking about.

Everybody says that the second year of marriage is the hardest. But their second year was fine, they were young and they were fun, both being paid to travel the world, not worrying about much. That year was terrific.

It's their fourth year that has been a drag. The year began when they moved into this decrepit house, a so-called investment property that

Chloe's father had left in his will, three apartments occupied by below-market and often deadbeat tenants, encumbered by serious code violations, impeded by unfindable electrical and plumbing plans—every conceivable problem, plus a few inconceivable ones.

The work on the house sputtered after demolition, then stalled completely due to the unsurprising problem of running out of money: everything has been wildly more expensive than expected. That is, more than Will expected; Chloe expected exactly what transpired.

So flooring is uninstalled, plumbing not entirely working, kitchen unfinished and windows unrepaired and blow-in insulation un-blown-in. Half of the second floor and all of the third are uninhabitable. The renovation is an unmitigated disaster, and they are broke, and Chloe is amassing a stockpile of resentment about Will's refusals to make the compromises that would allow this project to be finished.

Plus, after a year of what is now called "trying" on a regular basis—a militaristically regimented schedule—Chloe is still not pregnant. Will now understands that ovulation tests and calendars are the opposite of erotic aids.

When Chloe isn't busy penciling in slots for results-oriented, missionary-position intercourse, she has become increasingly moody. And most of her moods are some variation of bad: there's hostile bad and surly bad and resentful bad and today's, distracted bad.

"What do you think this is about?" she asks. "The extended trip?"

Will shrugs, but she can't see it, because she's not looking his way. "Malcolm hasn't fully explained yet." He doesn't want to tell Chloe anything specific until he has concrete details—what exactly the new assignment will be, any additional money, more frequent travel.

"How is Malcolm, anyway?"

As part of the big shake-up at *Travelers* a year ago, Will was hired despite Chloe's objections—both of them shouldn't work at the same struggling company in the same dying industry. So she quit. She left the full-time staff and took the title of contributing editor, shared with a few dozen people, some with only tenuous connections to the magazine accompanied by token paychecks, but still conferring a legitimacy—names on masthead, business cards in wallets—that could be leveraged while hunting for other opportunities.

Hunting for Other Opportunities: good job title for magazine writers.

Chloe came to her decision rationally, plotting out a pros-and-cons list. She is the methodical pragmatist in the couple; Will is the irrational emotional idealistic one.

"I think the takeover is stressing Malcolm out," Will says. "The negotiations are ending, both sides are doing due diligence. He seems to have a lot of presentations, reports, meetings."

"Is he worried for his job?"

"Not that he'll admit—you know how Malcolm is—but he has to be, right?"

Chloe grunts an assent; she knows more about Malcolm's office persona than Will does. Those two worked together a long time, and it was a difficult transition when Malcolm eventually became her boss. They both claimed that her departure was 100 percent amicable, but Will had his doubts. The closed-door I-quit meeting seemed to last a long time.

They also both claimed they'd never had a thing—no flirtation, no fling, no late-night make-out session in Mallorca or Malaysia. Will had doubts about that too.

"Okay then," she says, leaning down for another kiss, this one more generous than their previous good-bye. "Have a good trip."

People can spend hours packing for a weeklong overseas trip. They stand in their closets, desultorily flipping through hangers. They rummage through medicine cabinets, searching for the travel-sized toothpaste. They scour every drawer, box, and shelf for electrical adapters. They might have some of the foreign currency lying around somewhere, maybe in the desk . . . ? They double- and triple-check that their passports are in their pockets.

It's been a long time since Will was one of those amateurs. He collects his bright-blue roll-aboard—easy to describe to a bellhop, or to spot in a lost-and-found. It would also be easy to ID on a baggage carousel, but that will never happen. Will doesn't check luggage.

He mechanically fills the bag with piles from dresser drawers, the same exact items he packed for his previous trip, each in its preordained position in the bag's quadrants, which are delineated by rolled-up boxer

shorts and socks. It takes Will five minutes to pack, long-zip short-zip upright on the floor, the satisfying clunk of rubberized wheels on bare parquet.

He walks into his office. One bookshelf is lined with shoeboxes labeled in a meticulous hand: W. EUROPE, E. EUROPE, AFRICA & MIDEAST, ASIA & AUSTRALIA, LATIN AMERICA & CARIBBEAN, USA. From W. EUROPE Will chooses a small stack of euros from among other clipped-together clumps of paper money, and a packet of Paris Metro tickets, and a burgundy-covered street-map booklet. He grabs a plug adapter, refits his computer charger with the long cylindrical prongs, ready to be inserted into exotic European outlets.

Last but not least, his passport, thick with the extra pages from the State Department, filled with stamps and visas, exit and entry, coming and going. It's the rare immigration officer who fails to comment on the peripatetic paperwork. Will has been detained before, and no doubt will be again.

Will stands in the doorway, looking around, worried that he's forgetting something, what . . . ?

He remembers. Opens a drawer, and removes a box clad in wrapping paper and bound in silk ribbon, just small enough to fit into his jacket pocket, just large enough to be uncomfortable there.

Will clambers down the long flight of rickety stairs to the parlor floor, and out the front door. He picks up the newspaper, descends more dangerous steps, and exits their postage-stamp yard, where a surprisingly undead rose vine clings to the iron fence, a handful of perfect red blooms.

He sets off toward the subway, dragging his bag, just as he's done every few weeks for a decade.

The bag rolls over the remains of a single rose that seems to have met a violent end, petals strewn, stem broken. Will glances at the little red mess, wondering what could have happened, and when, why someone would murder one of his flowers right here in front of the house. He can't help but wonder if it was Chloe who did this.

Will has been increasingly worried that his bride is slipping away, that theirs may become another marriage that succumbs to financial pressures and work travel and the looming specter of infertility. Worried that love is

not always enough, or not permanent enough. Worried that all the non-fun parts will eclipse the fun parts.

Will bends over, looks closer. This decimated flower is not a rose, not from his yard, nothing to do with him. It's someone else's dead carnation, someone else's crime of passion.

Maybe he's worried about all the wrong things.