In 1990, **Patricia Cornwell** sold her first novel, *Postmortem*, while working at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Richmond, Virginia. An auspicious debut, it went on to win the Edgar, Creasey, Anthony, and Macavity Awards, as well as the French Prix du Roman d'Aventures – the first book ever to claim all these distinctions in a single year. Growing into an international phenomenon, the Scarpetta series won Cornwell the Sherlock Award for best detective created by an American author, the Gold Dagger Award, the RBA Thriller Award, and the Medal of Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters for her contributions to literary and artistic development.

Today, Cornwell's novels and iconic characters are known around the world. Beyond the Scarpetta series, Cornwell has written the definitive nonfiction account of Jack the Ripper's identity, cookbooks, a children's book, a biography of Ruth Graham, and three other fictional series based on the characters Win Garano, Andy Brazil, and Captain Calli Chase. Cornwell continues exploring the latest space-age technologies and threats relevant to contemporary life. Her interests range from the morgue to artificial intelligence and include visits to Interpol, the Pentagon, the U.S. Secret Service and NASA.

Cornwell was born in Miami. She grew up in Montreat, North Carolina, and now lives and works in Boston.

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PATRICIA CORNWELL

SHARP FORCE

A SCARPETTA NOVEL



Little, Brown

SPHERE

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To Staci—
You make everything better…
And in memory of Charles Cornwell, 1939–2024.
You helped me get started in life.

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

—*William Faulkner*

SHARP FORCE

CHAPTER 1

"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" rocks from the vintage boom box on a surgical cart. Before that it was Elvis crooning "Blue Christmas," and the Beach Boys harmonizing "Little Saint Nick," interspersed with local news and holiday blather.

Wiping my gloved hands on a towel, I'm changing the blade in my scalpel, alone at my stainless-steel workstation near the walk-in cooler's massive door. Up to my elbows in what the cops call a floater, I find the festive songs, jingles and breaking news on the verge of annoying.

"…NORAD is tracking Santa as he makes his way around the globe tonight," the radio announces cheerily. *"We'll hope the big storm won't delay his deliveries! In other news, police are clueless about what happened to Rowdy O'Leary, his body recovered from the Potomac earlier this afternoon…"*

The latest update starts in again about the dead man on my table, decomposed beyond recognition, his soft tissue turned into soap after a week in the river. No doubt, he never intended to be an assault on the senses. He likely didn't mean to cause inconvenience and pain to anyone, most of all his wife and two young sons.

"… The thirty-nine-year-old software designer was last seen fishing the night of December seventeenth just south of Mercy Island…,"

the radio goes on. *"O'Leary's body was found nine miles from where it's believed he fell into the water…"*

X-rays on lightboxes show healed skeletal fractures, the bones bright white against the murky shapes of organs. I can make out prosthetic knee joints, and degenerative changes from old trauma. Living with chronic pain, Rowdy O'Leary had trouble walking.

"…Alexandria police aren't saying if they suspect foul play in his mysterious disappearance and death…"

Spaced across the room are three autopsy tables covered with his wet winter clothing and personal effects. Boots, socks, a hooded parka, jeans, a flannel shirt are spread out to dry on long sheets of brown paper.

"…Commonwealth's attorney Bose Flagler is calling the case highly suspicious, demanding a thorough investigation…"

The radio cuts to Flagler's syrupy voice as he talks about the heartbreak for the O'Leary family. How dreadful to lose a husband and father this time of year.

"I won't rest until there are answers," he declares.

"Doctor Scarpetta?" Shannon Park pokes her head inside the autopsy suite.

My secretary's not about to come any closer, her Ugg-booted foot propping the door half open. I catch a glimpse of her purple overcoat and matching leather gloves, and a quilted pocketbook as big as a rucksack. Her red bucket hat is decorated with winking lights, plastic candy canes and sprigs of mistletoe.

"God, that's bloody awful!" she exclaims in her thick Irish brogue, covering her nose and mouth with her coat sleeve. "I don't know why you're doing it now. Seems it could have waited."

"Someone had to take care of him. And no, it couldn't wait." I

raise my voice over Karen Carpenter's pitch-perfect "Merry Christmas, Darling."

"Bless his poor family," Shannon muffles, and maybe it's the stench stinging her eyes, but she seems about to cry.

I look up at the wall clock. It's 4:35.

"You should get on the road before the snow starts," I tell her.

"Bose Flagler keeps calling."

Talking behind her pocketbook, she won't look at the gutted body on my table, the skin marbled green, the top of the head sawn off.

"The media is ringing your phone off the hook." She stares down at the tile floor. "And Maggie Cutbush is demanding information as usual."

"Definitely no comment," I reply.

"As I keep telling everyone."

"Merry Christmas, Shannon."

"And to you and Benton. Safe travels tomorrow," she says, the door swinging shut.

Pulling down my face shield, I return to what I was doing. The brain is in terrible shape, disintegrating like wet tissue paper. Had I decided to leave the body in the cooler several days, the condition would have continued to deteriorate. It wouldn't be fair to anyone, most of all Rowdy O'Leary's wife and children.

Several hours ago, I was notified by police that the body was on the way here. I couldn't in good conscience walk out the door to start my vacation. I was the only one left who could do the autopsy. Most employees in my office and the forensic labs were gone by early afternoon because of the holiday and predicted bad weather.

I continue glancing up at the security video display on the wall across from my table. The late afternoon is volatile, thick clouds

rolling in like a tarp. The parking lot is nearly empty, dead leaves skittering over pavement, trees shaking and shivering. Streetlights are bleary in the fog.

I watch Shannon on video as she emerges from the back of the building, the wind snatching at her coat, and I sense her anxiety. Hurrying to her pink Volkswagen Beetle, she holds on to her hat flashing red and green like a low-flying aircraft. She's glancing around as if someone monstrous might be hiding in the darkness, watching, waiting.

Fumbling her car key, she bends down, groping to pick it up, her attention everywhere, and I can imagine her swearing under her breath. She yanks open the driver's door, heaving her big pocketbook across the stick shift and into the passenger's seat. Locking herself in, she's glancing around frantically, and it's out of character.

A former court stenographer in her sixties, my secretary is no stranger to human nature's savagery. She's aware of what can happen when one least expects. There's little she's not seen and has always seemed fearless. But a serial killer dubbed the Phantom Slasher has gotten to her and a lot of people as he continues terrorizing Northern Virginia.

Shannon complains that she doesn't sleep well anymore. Living alone in a ground-level condo, she doesn't feel safe. She's talked about moving to a high-rise or leaving this area altogether. Installing a security system and deadbolts on doors, she keeps a Smith & Wesson "Ladysmith" revolver by her bed.

I watch her VW on the video display, the engine puttering, the headlights blinking on. Then she's driving through the security gate, taillights fading in the roiling grayness.

. . . Better watch out, better not cry . . . shrills the Jackson 5, and it's too late for that.

Rowdy O'Leary didn't watch out and died rather much the way he lived. Eating and drinking as he pleased, never exercising, chronically depressed. According to his wife, he was the *perfect package* until six years ago when he was struck by a car while jogging at night.

"A hit-and-run, whoever did it never caught," Reba O'Leary said to me over the phone before I began the postmortem. "After that a light went out inside Rowdy. He gave up."

I'm dropping sections of liver into the plastic bucket by my feet when the vintage wall phone begins to clangor. The black push-button model is decades old, the handset cradled by a metal hook that you push down to hang up, reminding me of my childhood.

The long cord is always hopelessly snarled, a sign taped to cinder block demanding *Clean Hands Only*. There's no caller ID, and I won't be able to see who it is. But not many people have this number. Those who do aren't likely to interrupt autopsies in progress.

An exception is Pete Marino, a former homicide detective I've worked with most of my career. He's now my head of investigations for the statewide medical examiner system. He's also married to my sister, Dorothy, making him family. That gives him extra privileges, at least in his mind.

He doesn't hesitate to intrude no matter the circumstances or the hour. Taking off my gloves, I toss them into the trash. Turning off the boom box, I flip up my face shield, pulling down my surgical mask, the stench so intense it seems to discolor the air.

I pick up the handset, pressing it against my ear. "Doctor Scarpetta," I answer.

"Hate to bother you. I know it's a bad time to talk," Marino says.

I can tell he's inside his big pickup truck, the police scanner quietly chattering while he listens to a Megyn Kelly podcast. I catch the edge of her saying something about the CIA and how to know if someone's lying.

"You're supposed to be home, Marino." I'm breathing with my mouth, not my nose. "And yes, it's a bad time."

"We've got a sensitive situation," he announces. "And I'm on my way to help Fruge out."

"Why would you need to meet with a police investigator on Christmas Eve?" I ask suspiciously. "You're off for the holiday."

"My presence has been specifically requested by the complainant at the scene."

He has a habit of talking in police jargon when he knows I won't approve of whatever it is he's decided.

"You've lost me," I reply, and it's not fair what he's doing.

"We're following up on something from Dana Diletti that could be important," Marino says, and the celebrity TV journalist is rather much the bane of my existence. "She has a tip about the Phantom Slasher cases. It sounds like something's happened that's got her pretty shook up."

"Careful. She's not known for being trustworthy." I shouldn't have to remind him.

"What she says she witnessed sounds credible, Doc."

"Credible to whom?" I ask.

"Point being, it's not hearsay."

"What isn't?" I'm trusting this less every second.

"It's to be expected that the Slasher would know who Dana Diletti is and watch her on TV as she talks about him," he reasons.

"Is she the one saying this, Marino? Or are you?"

"We can expect the Slasher to follow everything in the media.

He gets off on being headline news while scaring the crap out of everybody with his fake ghost."

Marino's referring to a computer-generated hologram the Slasher uses to stalk and terrorize his victims. Knocking out the Wi-Fi with signal jammers, he invades homes undetected, leaving no fingerprints or DNA. We're no closer to catching him.

"What's the tip?" I ask, and it had better be legitimate.

I imagine my sister home on Christmas Eve while Marino is out with the cops, his favorite place to be if he's honest about it. Which he's not. A sexually violent psychopath is on the loose, a dangerous storm barreling in, and Dorothy is by herself. I wouldn't blame her for being hurt and furious.

"I'm on my way to Dana Diletti's house," Marino continues to explain. "She requested me and Fruge by name."

I'm sure she did.

"Do we know what the tip is?" I again ask.

"We won't be told until we're face-to-face," he explains.

"How convenient. Hopefully her film crew won't be waiting when you and Fruge roll up. And I hate that you left Dorothy by herself." I go ahead and say it as something darts past my Tyvek-bootie-covered feet.

A tiny gray field mouse stops and starts, zigzagging about, and I assume it's the same one that Marino nicknamed Pinky. Several days ago, the presumed Pinky visited my second-floor office after I'd left an unfinished chef's salad on my desk.

He's been sighted in the breakroom, various storage areas, hiding behind corn plants in the lobby, evading all catch-and-release efforts. Now he's staring at me with shiny dark eyes, whiskers twitching.

"Our visitor is back," I tell Marino. "He just scampered by. Now he's looking at me."

"Pinky?"

"Unless we have more than one mouse."

"Maybe while Fabian's on call tonight he'll finally catch him. But don't throw the little fella out the door into the cold. He won't survive."

"Wouldn't think of it."

"Doc, you should be heading home before the storm lands."

"As soon as I finish what I'm doing." I glance at Rowdy O'Leary's body on my table, grateful his loved ones will never see him like this. "Then I have a stop along the way to drop off personal effects to the family."

"Say what?"

I repeat myself.

"Why not send the stuff UPS like we always do?" Marino's tone has turned disapproving.

"That's a tough package to find on your doorstep, especially during the holiday season," I explain as the mouse vanishes under a cabinet. "The O'Leary family lives off King Street on South Payne. I practically go right past."

"That's mighty nice of you, Doc." Marino doesn't want me doing it. "But no way you should. You don't know these people."

"I'm thinking of the wife and two young boys he left behind. It's Christmas Eve."

"Yeah, I know. It sucks. It always does."

"A perfect occasion for a little extra kindness. And I have questions that might help me determine her husband's manner of death. When you show up in person, it's easier to get someone to talk . . ."

"It's not a good idea to be doing something like that alone, Doc."

"If I don't figure out why he's dead, I'll have to sign him out as

undetermined. I don't want to do that—" I'm saying when Marino cuts me off.

"Got to go. I'm pulling into Dana Diletti's driveway. And holy shit, she's got her place decorated like a tacky tour, lights strung everywhere."

He sounds wonderstruck, almost happy.

"The Grinch, Frosty the Snowman, Snoopy and his doghouse," Marino marvels. "All kinds of amazing stuff that's probably going to blow away in the storm. Happy to report there's no sign of her film crew."

"Glad to hear it, and where's Fruge?"

"Right behind me."

"Please keep me informed," I reply, dropping the handset in its cradle.