Digital Fortress

Dan Brown

Chapter 1

They were in the Smoky Mountains at their favorite bed-and-breakfast. David was smiling down at her. 'What do you say, gorgeous? Marry me?'

Looking up from their canopy bed, she knew he was the one. Forever. As she stared into his deep-green eyes, somewhere in the distance a deafening bell began to ring. It was pulling him away. She reached for him, but her arms clutched empty air.

It was the sound of the phone that fully awoke Susan Fletcher from her dream. She gasped, sat up in bed, and fumbled for the receiver. 'Hello?'

'Susan, it's David. Did I wake you?'

She smiled, rolling over in bed. 'I was just dreaming of you. Come over and play.'

He laughed. 'It's still dark out.'

'Mmm.' She moaned sensuously. 'Then *definitely* come over and play. We can sleep in before we head north.'

David let out a frustrated sigh. 'That's why I'm calling. It's about our trip. I've got to postpone.'

Susan was suddenly wide awake. 'What!'

'I'm sorry. I've got to leave town. I'll be back by tomorrow. We can head up first thing in the morning. We'll still have two days.'

'But I made reservations,' Susan said, hurt. 'I got our old room at Stone Manor.'

'I know, but-'

'Tonight was supposed to be *special* - to celebrate six months. You *do* remember we're engaged, don't you?'

'Susan.' He sighed. 'I really can't go into it now, they've got a car waiting. I'll call you from the plane and explain everything.'

'*Plane?*' she repeated. 'What's going on? Why would the university . . . ?'

'It's not the university. I'll phone and explain later. I've really got to go; they're calling for me. I'll be in touch. I promise.'

'David!' she cried. 'What's-'

But it was too late. David had hung up.

Susan Fletcher lay awake for hours waiting for him to call back. The phone never rang.

Later that afternoon Susan sat dejected in the tub. She submerged herself in the soapy water and tried to forget Stone Manor and the Smoky Mountains. *Where could he be?* she wondered. *Why hasn't he called?*

Gradually the water around her went from hot to lukewarm and finally to cold. She was about to get out when her cordless phone buzzed to life. Susan bolted upright, sloshing water on the floor as she grappled for the receiver she'd left on the sink.

'David?'

'It's Strathmore,' the voice replied.

Susan slumped. 'Oh.' She was unable to hide her disappointment. 'Good afternoon, Commander.'

'Hoping for a younger man?' The voice chuckled.

'No, sir,' Susan said, embarrassed. 'It's not how it-'

'Sure it is.' He laughed. 'David Becker's a good man. Don't ever lose him.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The commander's voice turned suddenly stern. 'Susan, I'm calling because I need you in here. Pronto.'

She tried to focus. 'It's Saturday, sir. we don't usually-'

'I know,' he said calmly. 'It's an emergency.'

Susan sat up. *Emergency?* She had never heard the word cross Commander Strathmore's lips. *An emergency? In Crypto?* She couldn't imagine. 'Y-yes, sir.' She paused. 'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

'Make it sooner.' Strathmore hung up.

Susan Fletcher stood wrapped in a towel and dripped on the neatly folded clothes she'd set out the night before - hiking shorts, a sweater for the cool mountain evenings, and the new lingerie she'd bought for the nights. Depressed, she went to her closet for a clean blouse and skirt. *An emergency? In Crypto?*

As she went downstairs, Susan wondered how the day could get much worse.

She was about to find out.