

NANCY MEHL

AUTHOR OF THE KAELY QUINN PROFILER SERIES

DEAD FALL





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To Brandon Brotton,
an exceptional young man who loves God and
promised me he'd try harder in his English classes.
Brandon, I'll make you a character in one of my books when
your parents say you're old enough to read them, okay?
In the meantime, keep giving it your best.
I'm so proud of you!

Those in law enforcement pay a heavy price when they constantly look into the dark minds of evil.

JOHN DAVIS, *DARK MINDS*

1

John Davis turned up the collar on his jacket as he swiftly walked away from the shrill voices bleeding through from the hotel banquet hall behind him. March certainly wasn't going out like a lamb. This last blast of cold weather was intense.

He took a quick look behind him. If he didn't make a fast getaway, he'd be stopped by some convention attendee asking him for advice on how to get their book published. Or even worse, begging for help finding the person who murdered their child, husband, wife, brother, sister, or parent. Over the years, the darkness in the eyes of the grieving had taken a toll on him.

He'd just turned seventy-six. Maybe it was time to stop speaking to groups full of people who thought murder was somehow exciting. Who believed they could learn behavioral analysis during a three-day convention. He'd been at this since his early days at the FBI, when profiling was just an

experiment. Now, thanks to television shows and movies that romanticized the process, everyone and their dog thought they could understand the evil that festered in the hearts of certain human beings.

Although statistics and analysis helped to narrow down possibilities so law enforcement had a better chance at finding violent criminals, those procedures couldn't explain the kind of malevolence they witnessed. As a Christian, he knew where true evil came from, but that knowledge didn't banish the images that burned in his mind. The ones that showed up in his nightmares.

He took the key card he needed to enter the building that housed the hotel's guest rooms from his pocket. Before he fit it into the card slot, he thought he heard someone behind him. A quick look around showed no one. Just his imagination. Why was he so rattled? He'd been uneasy ever since he'd arrived in Bethesda.

John entered the building and made sure the outer door behind him clicked shut and locked. He hurried to the elevator and more than once punched the button to the third floor as if it would somehow make the elevator move faster. When it finally arrived, he hurried inside and pressed the button to close the door. He didn't want anyone riding up with him.

The elevator had just started to move when his cell phone rang. It was one of the Murder Will Out convention organizers and speakers, a successful suspense author he respected. This guy got it right. Few writers did. Some of the things included in novels made John cringe. In fact, he'd publicly criticized several of them. But not D. J. Harper. John recommended his books to those who wanted a real look into the lives of behavioral analysts.

“Hi, D. J.,” he said into his phone.

“Hey. You were great tonight. Thanks again for coming.”

“You’re welcome. You’ve done a great job with this group. This convention’s larger every year.”

D. J. laughed. “Sure, because you show up. You’re the main event, you know. The FBI’s most renowned profiler.”

D. J. was being humble. He had a huge readership, and after every convention his book sales rocketed well beyond John’s own. Seemed to be a win-win situation for them both.

“What can I do for you?” John asked, hoping there wasn’t anything. He was so tired his bones hurt. He just wanted to lie down and close his eyes.

“I thought I’d ask if you’d like a nightcap. We’ve been working so hard that we haven’t had much time to talk.”

John couldn’t hold back a sigh as he exited the elevator and headed down the hall. “I’d love to, D. J., but I just can’t. Not even for you. I’m beat.”

“I understand completely. As the years go by, it gets harder and harder to keep up with all these young, eager fans. I’m getting by on fumes as it is. Hey, by the way, a rather odd guy asked to meet you. I told him you weren’t available for personal meetings. Just wanted to warn you.”

“There’s always at least one, isn’t there?”

D. J. chuckled. “You’re right. Some people get so entrenched in this stuff that it warps them.”

“I worry about that.”

“I do too, but it sells books. Hard to walk away from that.” He paused for a moment. “Ever wonder if we’ve sold our souls?”

“Every day.”

John was almost to his room when a group of people got off

the elevators at the other end of the hall. They were dressed up, so they were probably coming from the semiformal dinner that was the last event of the convention. He hurried to slip into his room before they saw him, but he didn't make it.

"Mr. Davis," a woman in the group called out. "We really enjoyed your lectures this weekend."

John nodded and tossed her a smile before sliding his card into the key slot. He was happy to hear the door unlock. Thankful to be free, he quickly stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The final click caused him to nearly groan with relief.

"Hey, sorry I rushed out after my speech," John said into the phone. "Hope I didn't come off as a snob."

D. J. laughed. "Nah. Just the regular disappointed groupies who wanted a chance to talk to you. They'll get over it."

John sat down on the side of his bed. "I had the strangest feeling after leaving the banquet hall. I . . . I can't really explain it. Almost like someone was watching me. I guess I'm letting my professional life bleed over into my real life."

"Too many meetings, too many serial killers."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

D. J. grunted. "If our fans only knew the truth. But no one wants to hear that. The carnage. The twisted facts that make you want to puke."

"Nothing exciting about looking at photos of young women slaughtered by one of these psychopaths. Most television shows and novels aren't honest. They portray us as heroes and the UNSUBs as inhuman. But the frightening thing is they *are* human. Some can fit neatly into society so that no one knows what they really are. Some of the people here tonight could be working next to a monster and not know it."

“You’re thinking of Ted Bundy.”

“That’s the kind of killer that scares me the most. The ones who can’t connect to society? They’re easier to find. Sometimes I wonder how many Bundys are out there. Making friends. Gaining trust. Just waiting for an opportunity to . . .” He sighed. “Sorry. I’m babbling. I’m just so tired tonight. Truthfully? I’m too tired every night. It might be time for me to go home and spend what time I have left with my family.”

“You do what you need to do, John. You’ve given enough.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

Maybe D. J. was right. These things sucked the life out of him. His speeches were whitewashed versions of the truth. People wanted *nice* killers. Stories you could repeat in polite society. Some of the more sordid facts stayed in the minds of law enforcement, lurking in the recesses of their thoughts, sometimes trying to claw their way out, overthrowing the idea of a sane and sensible world. A world where redemption still existed.

“Thanks for the call, D. J., but I’ve got to hit the hay. I’m out of here first thing in the morning. I have an eight a.m. flight.”

“I could meet you for breakfast. You have to eat.”

“Maybe. Can I let you know after I get up?”

“Sure. Just call me. No pressure. Hey, thanks again for coming.”

“You bet. Talk to you in the morning.”

John disconnected the call, D. J.’s words echoing in his head. “*You’re the main event, you know.*” He’d done thirty of these speaking engagements last year. It was March, and here he was at it again. He was exhausted, inside and out. He had enough money, and his ego didn’t need more attention. He’d made his mark. So why keep going?

He took off his jacket and tossed it over a nearby chair. He'd told housekeeping not to clean the room but to leave fresh towels. He checked, and sure enough his used towels were gone and new ones had been left in their place. He noticed that a tray from breakfast was still on the table. He'd assumed they'd take it, but it seemed they took it literally when he said towels only. He thought about putting the tray in the hallway, but he might run into another excited convention fan. He decided to just leave it on the table. The cleaning staff would get it tomorrow after he left.

He grabbed his sweats out of his suitcase. He'd hung up his convention clothes, but everything else stayed packed. Faster and easier when he was ready to check out.

After a quick shower, John grabbed his cell phone. Sometimes Susan wanted to video chat so she could tell him how much she missed him. He needed to hear that now. He just wanted to go home to Houston and sit by her side on the couch with the fireplace crackling in the background as they drank hot cocoa and watched a funny movie. He was at peace then. The demons quieted. The flashes of horror stayed buried.

He called Susan using the new app he'd recently downloaded. He'd been sent an offer for a free three-month trial. If he decided to keep it, the cost was surprisingly low, and it was supposed to be better than Zoom. It not only allowed you to see the person you were talking to but recorded the video in case you wanted to replay it later. He'd accepted the offer only because he missed Susan so much when he was gone.

When she answered, he saw her beautiful face smiling at him. Her warm voice filled his ear.

“I love this new video calling program,” she said, “but I’d like to see you too. Isn’t it supposed to work both ways?”

“Sorry. I haven’t figured out the problem yet. You know I’m useless when it comes to technology. I’ll ask Brandt to look at it when I get home. I’m sure he’ll take pity on his clueless grandfather and show me how to work this thing.”

They chatted for a few minutes before John told her he had to get some sleep. “I can’t wait to be home. I love you.”

They always ended their calls the same way. He waited for Susan’s “I love you more” before hanging up.

He put down his phone, but then he decided to check his email. He found nothing vital, but one message’s subject line—in all caps—caught his attention: *John. Read this. Important.* He thought about ignoring it, but curiosity got the better of him. It was probably from a Nigerian prince telling him he would get millions of dollars if he helped the man transfer his billions, but John had to know just what was so important to someone. He opened it and read the message: *Those in law enforcement pay a heavy price when they constantly look into the dark minds of evil.*

It was a quote from his book *Dark Minds*. John shook his head and exited his account. Someone playing games. Probably another serial killer groupie trying to impress him. It had happened many times before.

John got up and made sure the door was locked, then flipped the metal swing bar closed as well. As he turned around he noticed an envelope on the floor. A bill? He picked it up. He wasn’t paying for his room. The people in charge of the convention were picking up the tab. He opened it anyway and found a page from a book folded inside. He walked over to the bed and sat down. The lamp on the nightstand was

still on, and he held the paper under the light. It was a page from *Dark Minds*. What was going on?

Three sentences were underlined in red. *In those early days, I worked with several great agents. The success we had didn't belong to one person. We were a team, each agent bringing his special skills to our efforts.* He turned the page over and found a numeral scrawled on the back, but he had no idea what it meant.

John frowned. He was getting irritated. Tomorrow he'd talk to the people in charge of the convention as well as the hotel manager. They shouldn't have allowed this to happen. But as he thought about it, he sighed. It wasn't anyone's fault. The hotel was full, and management couldn't watch every single guest. Neither could the organizers watch every attendee. He should be used to it. At least a dozen times he'd had to contact the police for help against people who'd felt compelled to get involved in his life. Who thought they knew him since they'd read his books. He prayed this wasn't another stalker. If anything else unusual happened tonight, he'd call the manager and let him know.

But right now all he wanted was sleep. He was safely locked inside his room. This situation only served to reinforce his new commitment to stay home with Susan and enjoy whatever years they had left together. Maybe God was sending him a message, confirming what he felt in his heart.

He put the envelope with the page inside on the nightstand, then got up and opened the long drapes that covered the large glass windows stretching across the wall on the other side of the room. Good, a full moon was out, and the hotel property had some outdoor lights too. He never slept in the dark. Hadn't for years. Not since he'd learned what can lurk

there. He also didn't like feeling closed in. He mentally acknowledged the moon's beauty, but tonight his soul was too deadened to really appreciate it. He turned off every light in his room, then climbed into bed and lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He'd decided. This would definitely be his last speaking engagement. He'd cancel the rest.

He was just dozing off when his phone rang. Thinking it might be Susan, he rolled onto his side. When he saw her name on the screen, he answered.