

————— *Bloodline Trilogy 1* —————

PROOF

A Novel

JORDYN
REDWOOD

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Publications

Chapter 2

DETECTIVE NATHAN LONG perused the series of manila folders open on his desk. He knew in his heart his city was in trouble. There was a monster in their midst. Frustrating though it was to admit it, he needed help on this one.

That meant asking the FBI to consult.

Before his demise from the Bureau five years ago, he'd been a lead hostage negotiator assigned to the Denver, Colorado, office. He was well known and respected by local law enforcement for his calmness under pressure, which he considered an honor as his age at the time was just shy of thirty. Nathan's attention to detail and his quirky ability to surmise a situation quickly, determine a course of action, and have the issue resolved in under an hour solidified his reputation.

Most of the time.

That was before he met John Samuals. Initially, it had seemed like any other ordinary day—at least for a hostage negotiator. According to reports, Samuals had been holed up in his rural home in south central Colorado for several hours, threatening his wife and six children. He was well known to Teller County Sheriff's office because of the anti-government literature posted on his property. This included several large plywood, spray-painted signs asserting his right to privacy and weapons. Due to concern that he may be stockpiling guns, he was flagged as a potential terrorist bringing him onto the radar of the FBI and Homeland Security.

Nathan and a few other agents neared the property after a two-hour drive from Denver. Upon arrival, on-scene law enforcement had been unable to make contact by phone. All utilities had been disconnected the previous week. No phone. No gas. No electricity. The temperature was nearing 105 degrees in the mid-afternoon July sun. Combine the record-breaking heat and humidity, and the temperature felt closer to 120. A hot temper fueled by oppressive heat was like a fuse lit on a barrel of TNT.

Nathan wore the famous bureau-blue, button-down-collared polo

adorned with the FBI seal on the left breast, which was always his choice for fieldwork. His pants were heavily stitched khakis with large cargo pockets cinched with a department store brown leather belt. The only trick was finding one wide enough with a sturdy buckle to properly support his holster, one spare magazine, handcuffs, badge, and cell phone. Nathan learned a long time ago to spend the money for comfortable, protective footwear. Tired, sore feet could be a mental distraction during a marathon standoff. Baseball cap was snug on his skull to shield from the heat.

The FBI bare necessities.

Nathan exited his vehicle and surveyed the front of the structure. Dilapidated would be a compliment for this home. The roof had several areas of missing shingles. One side of a porch swing had broken off and the free end scratched against the porch, the pull creating an incessant squeaking on the chain that rattled at Nathan's nerves. Old wood siding showed from beneath the chipped white paint, making the house look gray and brittle. Three windows faced his direction from the upper level, and two large windows framed either side of the front door. Nathan noticed a flimsy white curtain pull aside from the middle window on the upper level. A young girl with raven hair and curious eyes fluttered a wave. He returned the gesture. Her fingers lingered on the glass before she was pulled away by someone unseen. The curtain closed.

Raven—that's what he would call her.

Nathan found the on-scene commander, who was the local sheriff. He extended his hand, and they shook hands briefly.

"George Benson. Glad to make your acquaintance."

Nathan smiled. Southern charm was like ice-cold beer to his nerves, smoothing his frayed edges. The sheriff smiled back, his chocolate brown eyes echoed the rich tone of his skin.

"What do you know?" Nathan readjusted his baseball cap, which was already slick with sweat after a mere two minutes outside.

"Seems Mr. Samuals has run into a bit of financial trouble," Benson explained. "Lost work at a biomedical firm several years ago. His job was the family's only income. Been in a downhill slide ever since. He'd been eking out a living by doing odd repair jobs in town but seems his reputation caused his customers to shy away. Last week all their utilities were turned off. So no landline we can use." He wiped his face with a dark

blue bandanna. “His vehicles have been repossessed. Today two of my deputies came to evict them from the property, and all hell broke loose. He grabbed a shotgun, got off several shots before they were able to take cover. They knew there were kids inside so they didn’t return fire. All they could really do was get somewhere safe, begin observations, and call in the cavalry.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“One deputy took a couple pellets from the shotgun blast to the arm. He’ll be all right. That was a couple hours ago.”

“Where is the injured deputy?”

Benson pointed to a vehicle near the front of the house. “He’s behind there.”

“How far out do you think SWAT is?”

“Seems like the devil came to play today. Our SWAT team is on another incident but El Paso County has offered assistance. Their tactical team should be on scene in another twenty minutes.”

“When was the last time you spoke with him?”

“Can’t say we’ve done much talkin’. We’ve tried to make contact through a megaphone. He doesn’t respond.”

“Has there been any additional gunfire since the initial encounter? You sure he’s still alive in there?”

“Oh yeah, he’s still kickin’. He’s been peekin’ from the windows.”

“Do you know for sure how many people are in the home?”

“At this point it’s an educated guess. We talked to several people he goes to church with and know he’s married with six children ranging in ages from twenty-three on down to three months. Several different children have been spotted looking out as well, so we think they’re all in there.”

“Do you believe they’re centralized in any one area?”

“Not sure, but I doubt it.”

“You have any floor plans for the house?”

“My deputies are workin’ on that as we speak. This house is older than Abraham, and there may not be any plans on file. We’re talkin’ to some neighbors to see if they’ve been inside. Bad part is he’s an isolationist so even that is doubtful.”

“What kind of weapons?”

“We know he has a shotgun for sure. Out here, people generally have

quite a few long guns, and there's no requirement to register what they got. It would be hard to say 'xactly what he owns."

"When you're interviewing the neighbors and friends from church, make sure they're asked what kind of weapons he has in the home."

"Not a problem." He ordered the command through the radio.

"What does he look like?"

"Grizzly Adams on crack would give you a good mental picture."

"He's using drugs?"

"Not illegally, but when he lost his job, he came undone. I heard he caused some strange accident. People died." Benson wiped his brow. "We've been in contact with the family before. A couple of times related to domestic violence issues. Wife called once because he tried to commit suicide. That was about a year ago."

"Maybe she should have let him," Nathan said. "Did you make an arrest on any of the domestic complaints?"

"Nope. From what we could gather talkin' to the oldest child, the incidents were all verbal. He apparently threatened to off the whole family and himself, but the wife wouldn't cooperate with the responding deputies. She never acknowledged that he made the threats, and she would just say he was all talk, anyways. I guess she needs him around more than she needs him in jail."

"So your deputies have been inside?"

"Actually, no. He always came out to meet 'em. When our guys would insist on checking the welfare of the rest of the family, John would just yell for them to pile out, and they all came runnin'. He's pretty territorial, and he's got this family under his thumb."

Nathan slid his pen from behind his ear and flipped his notepad onto the burning hood of the command vehicle. The heated metal would have seared his palm in a heartbeat, but the paper provided a barrier and would take a while to burst into flames.

Maybe.

A glint from the front of the house caught the corner of his eye, and he turned to look. Raven was in the upper left window, flashing him with a mirror. Once their eyes met, she placed her palm on the window before easing back.

Not distressed. *She's playing hide-and-seek.*

Nathan took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead with

his bare hand, swiping the saltwater on the thigh of his cargo pants. His hat was soaked through to the point that the sweat band was little more than a worn speed bump for all the fluids that were leaking from the top of his head. Confirming the roll on the bill with a quick squeeze, he dipped his head and seated the hat back into place.

“What happened with the suicide attempt?”

“That incident landed him in the county’s psych ward on an involuntary hold. He’s supposed to be on some meds, but who knows if he’s actually taking ’em.”

“Can we talk to a doctor—anyone who has provided treatment for him?”

“We can try.”

“We need to get him a phone. I’ve brought a couple of cell phones with me. Let’s see if we can get him to take one.”

Nathan prepared to expose himself from behind the cover of the command vehicle. He preferred his life before comfort, so he grabbed his tactical vest from the ground where it had been resting against his shins while he spoke with the sheriff. The vest was heavy from armor plating, his police radio, and additional spare magazines for his assault rifle, which was leaning within lunging distance against the side of the SUV. He slid the vest over his head and secured the one open side. The weight and lack of airflow would become cumbersome in less than thirty seconds, but the protection was reassuring. He grabbed the rifle next and threw the specially designed strap over his head and right shoulder, passing his right arm through as well. This allowed the light weapon to drape across his chest for quick access and fast target acquisition. Nathan physically and visually verified his selector switch was on SAFE, and he pulled the bolt back all the way and released it to seat a round into the firing chamber. Pulling the bolt back again, only about an inch, he verified he’d chambered a round and the weapon was hot. Never before had he found it empty, but he always checked twice. Maintaining this ritual in every situation ensured he wouldn’t miss a step under stress.

Nathan grabbed the megaphone off the bumper and leaned out from behind cover, exposing himself as little as possible.

“Mr. Samuals. John Samuals! My name is Nathan Long, and I work for the FBI.” He paused, waiting for the gunfire that could ensue from announcing that federal law enforcement was present.

Only stillness.

“Sheriff Benson was kind enough to call me in. Said you and he were having a little trouble.”

A window slid open and the barrel of a rifle poked out. Nathan’s instincts forced him to pull back a little at the sight of the subject’s weapon.

“Are you a man in position to help me?”

“Hopefully! I want to try my best to do so. Can I get you a phone so we can stop yelling?”

“I have one!”

Nathan turned to Sheriff Benson, who shrugged in response. Nathan rubbed a drop of sweat out of his eye. “What’s the number?”

Samuals rattled it off. Nathan grabbed his own phone and dialed. Samuals picked up immediately and pulled the shotgun from the window.

“I don’t want to be forced out of my home.”

“All right, Mr. Samuals. We can work all of this out. We’ll get a call into the bank, see what we can do. Can I call you John?”

“That’d be all right.”

“I need to know how everyone is doing. Who’s in there with you today?”

“My whole family and Lucent.”

“So your wife and all your children are there?”

“Yes, and Lucent.”

“Who’s Lucent?” Nathan asked, not only over the phone but to Benson as well. Another shrug. Nathan shook his head in disbelief.

Lord, a little help here. Just a little.

In the right upper window, Raven held up a picture of a big red heart.

“He’s a man. Tells me what I should do.”

“What’s he telling you to do right now?” Nathan watched the SWAT team truck bump its way down the dirt driveway.

“To kill my family. Says to get rid of them since I can’t take care of them anymore.”

Nathan’s spine tingled despite the heat.

“John. We’re going to help you take care of your family so you don’t have to do anything like that. Can you promise me not to hurt them?”

“I don’t like to make promises I can’t keep.”

“Are they hurt now?”

“No, not yet.”

“Can I talk to Lucent?”

“I’ll put the phone to his ear.”

Nathan wiped his neck with a towel. “Hello? Lucent?” Dry static was all he heard.

“Did you hear what he said?” John asked.

“No. What did he say?”

“That you don’t have too long.”

“John, I need you to promise me you won’t hurt any of them. And that you’ll tell me if you’re thinking about hurting them.”

“I’ll try.”

“John, I understand you have a baby in there. Is she okay? I’m concerned about her because of the heat and all.”

“It’s a boy, and he’s doing fine. He was crying pretty good earlier, but he’s quiet now.”

Nathan was appealing to the man’s fatherly instinct to protect his children, but John’s description of the infant caused him concern. Was the baby too weak to make noise, or had he merely cried himself to sleep?

“Are you guys hungry in there? Can we bring you some food and cold drinks?”

“Yeah, we haven’t eaten in a few days.”

“All right, John. I’m going to get some things together for you, and I’ll call you back.” Nathan disconnected the phone and disappeared behind cover.

“I’ve got his psychiatrist on the phone.” A uniformed deputy handed him another cell.

“Hello, this is Nathan Long. I’m a negotiator with the FBI. With whom am I speaking?”

“Dr. Lucy Freeman.”

“I understand John Samuals was under your care recently.”

“Yes, he was.”

“Can you tell me, specifically, what for?”

“That would be a breach of his patient confidentiality. If you’d like to present me with a warrant, I’d be happy to release his records to you and have a conversation with you then.”

Nathan slapped his hand on the top of the car. The searing heat fueled his frustration.

“Dr. Freeman, I understand your need to wrap this all up in a nice

little package. I also understand patient confidentiality issues and HIPAA violations and such. But let me explain to you that John Samuals is currently holding his entire family hostage. Yes, that would be his wife and six children, and he's armed with a shotgun at this very moment. Oh, and there seems to be a man named Lucent involved. So if your conscience is fine with him killing these individuals, which he is currently threatening to do, without aiding me in any way, then I guess we can end this conversation until I get you that warrant you requested."

"He says Lucent is there?"

"Yes, and that Lucent is telling him to kill his family."

"That's a problem."

"No kidding."

He heard a heavy sigh on the line. Nathan kept quiet, hopefully allowing the silence to give her mind time to make a favorable decision.

"Can I get some kind of documentation after this is all over, no matter what the outcome, detailing these exigent circumstances which are forcing my cooperation with you due to a life-and-death situation?"

"Yes, ma'am. I will get you an FBI letterhead memorandum that will most certainly protect you."

"Lucent is not real. He's a hallucination. He's the one that prompted John's suicide attempt."

"How did he try to kill himself?"

"He stabbed himself in the abdomen. Knives are a fascination for him. We started him on some antipsychotics. Under the medication, the hallucinations were kept at bay, and we discharged him home. Obviously, he's not taking them anymore."

"It may not be his fault. The family has run into significant financial difficulty."

"You're right. These medications do tend to be expensive."

"Do you have any advice on how to handle him?"

"He takes Lucent's advice very seriously. If Lucent is telling him to kill his family, I'd be very worried about that. You're not going to be able to control the hallucination unless you medicate him."

"All right, we'd appreciate you keeping close to the phone. Please give this deputy a number where we can reach you at all times if we need more help."

"Certainly."

Nathan handed the phone back. A tall man with bright blue eyes and military-cut blond hair in full SWAT dress approached him, extending his hand.

“Lee Watson, TAC team leader.”

“Nice to have you here. Do you know Sheriff George Benson?” Lee nodded, and they shook hands. “I’m Nathan Long, FBI negotiator. I’ve got a handful of agents with me spread out in a loose perimeter right now. The sheriff’s got himself and a couple of deputies, one of whom is injured. He caught the edge of a shotgun blast and needs to be evacuated.”

“Okay. We’ll make that our number-one priority right now. We passed a staged ambulance on the road in. We’ll get the wounded officer to them. The situation is too active for them to come up here. Sheriff Benson,” Watson said, “if it’s all right with you, I’d like to start deploying my guys in a perimeter around the house and have my snipers start scouting out some good observation posts. I’ll have my entry team grab a couple of shields, and we’ll get your wounded man safely to a vehicle and bus him out to the ambulance.”

“Thank God. Just let me know what you need.”

Watson clapped his shoulder. “Don’t worry. My guys can handle the evacuation of your wounded deputy.”

Nathan lowered the brim of his sweaty cap, shielding his eyes from the sun.

“Actually, Sheriff, I need you to put together a box of sandwich fixings, soda, water, and juice boxes for the kids. Get a bag of ice in there, too. I don’t want these sandwiches already made. I want them to have to do it. And throw in some chips and candy.”

“I’ll get to work on that.” Benson walked away and signaled a few of his deputies closer.

Watson squawked something brief into his radio, and Nathan saw an eager young SWAT member sprint over to their tactical vehicle. Watson gave his secondary a brief but meaningful order, and he was off in no time.

“I haven’t gotten the full details yet, Nathan. Can you fill me in?”

“John Samuals has taken hostage his wife and six children. He’s suffering a psychotic break, likely brought on by his financial difficulties and inability to purchase his antipsychotic meds. It all started when the sheriff’s deputies arrived this A.M. to evict him. Apparently the bank has foreclosed on the property. He says he wants to stay in his home. He

produced a shotgun and cranked off a few rounds, most likely birdshot. As you know, one deputy suffered minor injuries. I think that's the least of our problems."

"We need to try to get eyes and ears," Watson said.

Nathan watched as several of Watson's team members set up a perimeter. "Our major issue is Lucent."

"Who's that?"

"This is the not-so-good part. Evidently, Lucent is an imaginary friend, a hallucination. About a year ago, Lucent told John to kill himself and the subject actually stabbed himself in the gut. Now, Lucent is telling him to kill his family. According to his psychiatrist, John loves knives. She says Lucent is as real to him as you and I standing here in front of one another, and we need to be very concerned about Samuals' interaction with him."

Watson nodded in silent concern. "This is bad. Hallucinations and a knife as a preferred weapon are a silent, deadly combination."

"Agreed."

"What's your approach?"

"I'm going to try to trade the three youngest children for food. We've got an infant in there who may be in the early stages of heat exhaustion. I'm hoping when they have to work together to get lunch made, he'll look upon them more favorably, be less likely to want to hurt them. Also, so far it looks like he's letting the family roam freely in the home. We need to watch for opportunities to coax them out individually. I don't want your guys to approach the residence without approval, but they are free to coax these people out with hand signals, smiles, chocolate bars, whatever."

One of Watson's boys approached. "Nathan, this is Ryan. He's the entry team leader."

He gave a quick nod to Nathan before turning to Lee. "Sarge, there's a window on the north side with good cover up to about the last three feet. Oscar was able to approach without being detected, and he slipped a microphone inside. Snipers say there hasn't been anyone in that room since they set up. All we're picking up on the mike is the voice of one male. He seems to be talking to himself or to someone who's not talking back."

"What's he saying?" Watson asked.

"Please, Lucent, don't make me. I don't want to kill them."

Watson adjusted his Kevlar vest, and his shirt remained unmarred by sweat stains. Nathan's eyebrows hitched upward.

How does this man not sweat?

Lee shielded his eyes from the sun and glanced at Nathan. “Looks like your assessment is on target.”

Nathan watched as three more of Lee’s men, two protected by heavy shields, the third man behind, reached the injured deputy and dragged him to the edge of the perimeter. Once at a safe distance, the team put him in a car for transport to the ambulance down the road.

John Samuals remained quiet.

Watson pressed his ear piece tighter and nodded.

“Is your deputy okay?” Nathan asked.

Ryan smirked, amused at the radio transmission as well. “Yeah. Poor guy wanted to be Superman. He didn’t want to leave the scene. The sheriff had to give him a direct order.”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll get a nice medal for that. Do we have our building sketch done yet?” Watson asked.

“Yes, sir. It’s posted on the backside of our vehicle.”

“Good job. We’ll need to plan to go in heavy with shields and masks. Figure out where Joey needs to set up with his gas gun in order to get that whole house with CS.” Watson turned, surveying the crew. “Sheriff! Got a second?”

“Just wrappin’ up the food. What’s up?”

“Sheriff, as you know, our subject has already used deadly force against one of your deputies, and we don’t have any reason to believe that he won’t react the same if we attempt to make entry. Can I give my shooters permission to take this guy out if the opportunity presents itself?”

“Nathan? What’s your assessment?”

He was relieved Benson was willing to listen to more than one point of view considering his own man had been shot. Tactical decisions were best made by a group of seasoned officers rather than one stressed out sheriff who wanted to ensure his injured deputy got justice.

“Sheriff, I agree with Watson. I think this guy will shoot right now if we attempt to make entry. But the negotiations have just begun, and he’s expecting a call from me. As long as I feel like Samuals is actively participating in the process, I have a hard time agreeing with flipping this guy’s switch at the first chance. I want to keep him talking, use the SWAT team to observe his movements, and maybe come up with a solid plan to catch him off guard and take him down without killing him. However, at the

first moment I perceive he is giving up on the negotiations and becoming unpredictable, I will let Lee know, and he can give the order to shoot on sight.”

“What do you think, Watson?” Benson asked.

“We can work within those parameters. Ryan?”

“I’m clear.”

“Okay then.” Benson grabbed a blue-and-white handkerchief from his back pocket and mopped the sweat from his brow. “Those are the rules of engagement right now. Watson, unless your shooters think someone’s life is in imminent jeopardy, they will not shoot. Let’s give our FBI negotiator some time to get inside this guy’s head.”

“We should try to get the bank manager on the phone. Have him talk directly to Samuals and let him know he can keep his home,” Watson offered.

Nathan folded his arms across his chest. “No. Absolutely not. What do we do when John finds out he’s lying and goes ballistic? Besides, I don’t want him talking to someone he’s contentious with. One of my guys will get in touch with a bank representative and try to work up a real relief plan on John’s behalf. Maybe if he can get him a couple of months’ worth of deferred payments, he’ll put his gun down. Then we just take him into custody on the attempted murder charge for shooting the sheriff’s deputy, and he goes away forever.”

A sheriff’s deputy came to a quick stop in his marked unit near the command post. He leapt out of the driver’s seat and then scrambled to retrieve something from his trunk. The cumbersome box made it difficult for him to see the ground and he stumbled as he ran.

“There was a mini-mart close by. Had everything you asked for,” the man said, placing the box on top of the hood of the car.

“Looks like it’s time to talk to Mr. Samuals,” Nathan prompted.

Benson inhaled and held his breath.

“Ryan, get your team into position.” The young man trotted off. “Stand by.” Watson spoke in even soft tones into his tactical mike confirming that his team was positioned. He turned back to Nathan. “Ready when you are.”

Nathan dialed. Samuals answered on the first ring.

“John, everyone okay in there?”

“Yeah.”

“I have the food and drinks for your family as I promised. I want you

to help me out with an act of good faith. John, I want you to put the three youngest children, including the infant, on the front porch. I'm concerned for their health in this heat. I'll send some nice police officers up there to get them. Then they'll leave you the box of food. Okay?"

Nathan waited. John talked in pressured speech, though Nathan only made out muffled garble as he must have placed his hand over the receiver. Nathan tapped his fingers against his chest.

"Lucent doesn't think that's a good idea."

"John, it's your family. You need to make the decision. Think about what's best for your kids. I'm really concerned about your baby boy. I want to get him out of the heat. Don't let Lucent force you to do something that will hurt your kids."

More silence . . . everlasting silence. The black-haired girl peeked out the left, first-floor window.

Peek-a-boo.

"All right. He says it's fine."

"Great. Just do everything slowly. All right?"

Samuals had disconnected the phone.

"You ready?" Nathan asked Watson.

"Absolutely."

Grabbing the box of food, Watson approached several of his comrades. Watson spoke into the mike wired to his ear and circled three fingers in the air behind the other hand, which was stretched out flat. Three SWAT members ran over to Watson's position, one of them hefting a ballistic shield weighing more than seventy pounds. The importance of his job was set in his face. Every man behind him was counting on his stamina and ability to remain steadfast, especially under fire. He was the bullet catcher, and he wouldn't let them down.

Watson passed the food off to Ryan, who took the middle position. The third man was there to cover Ryan because his hands would be full. The three set off for the front door at a steady pace. Taking it too slowly would put extra strain on the lead man. The front man stopped a couple of feet from the door, and then the small unit swung to the right, taking up position along the exterior wall, crouching beneath the picture window before inching closer to the screen.

From Nathan's vantage point, he could see a woman framed in the doorway. He grabbed his binoculars for a closer look. The right sleeve of

her dress was torn and several long scratches made their way down the length of her arm.

Scratches or knife marks?

Nathan couldn't be sure from this distance. The screen door opened, and out through the crack was borne a two-year old and a young woman holding a small baby, struggling to keep him contained in her arms.

Ryan set the box of food down to the side of the shield. When his hands were free, he lunged forward in a slow but sure motion to brush the threesome back behind him.

The small child scurried out of his reach and back to the house. Her little fists pounding on the aluminum screen cut through the stillness.

Nathan felt panic rise in his chest.

Ryan grabbed her by the shirt and pulled her back behind the barrier. The child fought to get away. Her cries fed Nathan's anxiety.

From the corner, two additional SWAT members came forward and waved the children to come toward them as Ryan tried to scoot them away from the house. Concern propelled one officer forward, and he snatched the infant from the young woman, tucking the boy into his chest like a linebacker heading for the goal. He offered his back to the residence as a shield for the child and jogged off at an angle that offered Samuals a limited target. The second perimeter man scooped the toddler up in one arm, pulled the young woman away with his free hand, and headed off in the same direction. Once everyone was concealed in the thick trees, they were moved to an additional ambulance.

Nathan's heart sank. Raven was not among them.

When was the last moment he'd seen her look through the window?

With the number of promised children out of the house, the approach team pivoted left and began retracing their steps back toward the perimeter. When they were halfway back, Watson called out that the screen door was opening. The woman Nathan had caught a glimpse of before, presumably Samuals' wife, crawled out toward the box of food. Nathan, along with everyone else, could see that John held the shotgun's muzzle in contact with the back of her head. The further she got out the front door, the more he leaned, hanging onto the door frame so he wouldn't fall forward.

"Sniper one has a clear shot right now. What do you want to do?"

"Hold! No fire! No fire!"

Watson relayed the order.

“This is progress, Lee. He’s not going to shoot her because she’s bringing the food in. He’s just letting us see that he’s in control and he’s not letting his guard down. He won’t kill her. No fire.”

The moment passed. The woman crawled back, dragging the box inside, and they both disappeared into the shadows.

“Three down, four to go,” Watson said. “EMS is checking out the kids now.”

“Good job.” Nathan slapped his shoulder. “Your team executed that perfectly.”

It wasn’t too long after they stopped congratulating one another that Watson received a call from one of his team members who had taken the children to the ambulance.

“Nathan, my SWAT medic wants us at their location. Something’s wrong with the kids.”

It was rare for people who worked as first responders to become nervous. After all, they had seen the worst of the worst and past that point every day, many of them for years. It was usually children that caused distress.

And usually something that shouldn’t be happening to children.

Nathan and Lee hurried to the ambulance that was stationed about five hundred yards away and entered the back. The two older children were seated on the pram, the younger girl clinging to her older sister. Fresh tears made clean wakes down their dirty faces. Another paramedic held the infant to his chest, stroking the back of his head to calm his cries.

Each girl was dressed in tattered tank tops and shorts. There were several open lacerations on each of them. Nathan took a knee before the young woman. He guessed her to be in her early twenties.

“I’m Nathan.”

“Keelyn.” The water bottle she held in her hands shook as much as her voice trembled.

“I want to be sure I know how many are left in the house. Can you tell me?”

Keelyn’s hand clenched the thin plastic, causing water to geyser through the top and onto her legs. She swiped at her knees, mixing the fluid with dirt sending small rivers of mud down her calves. Nathan reached forward and placed his hands over hers to still her. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“Keelyn?”

“My mother, step-father, and three more kids.”

“Where is Lucent?” Even though John’s psychiatrist claimed Lucent wasn’t real, it was Nathan’s job to ensure he had the most accurate on-site information.

“Lucent is nowhere. He’s a ghost.”

“Why did he let you go when I asked for the three smallest children?”

“He wanted me to take care of the baby.”

“What are these wounds, Keelyn? All of you have them.” Lee bent in for a closer look.

Nathan scooted on his knees a few inches, positioning himself in front of the younger sister. He lifted up her shirt, revealing puncture wounds that dotted her abdomen and chest.

“They’re hesitation marks,” Nathan said. “He’s been practicing with his knife on them. Trying to get up the nerve to do as Lucent asks.”

“The baby?” Lee asked.

The paramedic gently lifted the back of the infant’s shirt.

He was the worst of all of them.

“Keelyn, did your step-father do this?” Lee asked.

Her trembling became so severe that Nathan eased the water bottle from her hand. Lee sat next to her and placed a protective arm around her shoulders.

“Why?”

“He does as Lucent asks.”

“Why do you let him?” Nathan persisted. Lee’s piercing look told him he’d crossed a line.

“If we didn’t, he said he’d kill my mother.”

“He promised me he wasn’t going to hurt them.” Nathan stood.

“We’ve got to get in there.” Lee eased away from Keelyn and waived the SWAT medic over.

“Wait, Lee. Let me call.”

Nathan grabbed the phone. It rang. This time there was a delayed answer. It stopped ringing, but there wasn’t any salutation.

“John? Can you hear me?”

“I’m sorry . . .”

“John, what’s happened?”

“I couldn’t take it. Lucent said they would at least be in heaven.”

“What did you do, John!”

The response sounded like a prayer, broken by loud sobbing.

“Lee! Hit the house now! Take it down!”

Lee jumped from the back of the ambulance, landing solidly on two feet, barking orders through his earpiece. Ryan’s team sprinted for the front door. At the side of the house, three members of the perimeter group busted windows by pitching flash-bang grenades. The sound was like thunder, deafening even at a distance. The entry team poured through the front door, which had been broken in half by a well-aimed kick.

A shotgun blast rang out.

Nathan was troubled by what he didn’t hear.

No screaming or crying from frightened children.

Please, Lord.

He stepped down from the rig and walked slowly to the house. He could hear the men shouting as they cleared the residence. The commotion was over in seconds and there was a cloud of dust caught in the humid air. Waves of heat distorted his vision as he continued to walk forward. Two officers half fell, half pulled John Samuals out of the front of the house.

“Get the medics in here!”

Nathan ran forward and crossed over the threshold.

The wife and remaining children were piled up, a hill of bodies bathed red in the middle of the living room, duct tape over their mouths so their screams of pain would be silenced. He eased limp forms off the pile, placing them on their backs; each had wounds incompatible with life.

Raven was at the bottom.

Picking her up, he placed his cheek next to her lips and felt the flutter of her breath whisper against the side of his face. Her brown eyes opened and settled on his before she twisted from his embrace, crying and reaching for her mother.

He felt something inside himself shatter.

Sometimes it’s hard to identify a man’s breaking point.

But Nathan knew it was this day for him.

As he held the young girl in his arms and rocked her gently, stroking her head and pulling her eyes away from the mother she longed for, Nathan knew this was his last day with the FBI.

This day, he started his list of unforgivables.

And this was number one.