



THE DESIGNATED SURVIVOR

A ROAD TRIP MYSTERY

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Chapter 1

On the Run

People get lost in this world for lots of different reasons. Some people don't pay attention and the years slip away. Others make bad decisions. But most people are brought to where they are by circumstance. By misfortune. Or a broken heart. Or something else happening that they could have never imagined.

The things that happened to Tess weren't anything she planned, but despite her best intentions, all those past events had brought her here, to a dingy diner in a small town just outside of Atlanta. She stood in the corner next to the restrooms, huddled over an old pay phone, penniless, alone, and talking to her little girl for the first time in three years.

"I'm thinking Disneyland. We're riding the Teacup, spinning round and round. We're laughing. Having the best day ever." Tess' voice trembled as she held the phone to her ear. She leaned against the wall, staring down at her gray sneakers. They were missing shoe laces. "Now it's your turn..."

"I can't think of anything, Mama. I just want you to come get me."

It had been a long time since Tess heard her daughter's voice, so sweet and happy. No trace of all the pain that had infiltrated their lives over the past few years. She had never been this far away or separated this long from her. The courts – that old, eagle-nosed judge – had no right to take her baby girl away from her and give custody to her in-laws. The Monster-In-Laws of Sarasota, of all places. Then to Tess' horror, she found herself locked up in some women's penitentiary in the backwoods of Georgia. It was a nightmare, but she survived. It was during a work detail picking up trash along State Route 20 that she slipped away. Escaped. Never looked back. Now, she would get her daughter. And no one – no courts, no white coats, no police officers, not even God himself would separate her from her daughter ever again. Tess' eyes welled with tears.

“I'm trying. I'll get there as fast as I can,” she said quietly, forcing a light chuckle from her throat, then added, “Now it's your turn. Anywhere but here... where would you want to be?”

“I'm thinking.”

“It's okay. Take your time.” She tried to smile as she spoke. Emma would be nine years old now. Was that even possible? Nine years old. She was almost grown. Tess wondered how much her daughter would've changed in that time. What would she look like now?

“I can't think of any place,” Emma said. *“I just want you to come get me. Grams says that you're sick.”*

“I'm going to get there as fast as I can, baby.” Her eyes scanned the diner for the umpteenth time, certain that she was being watched. Her waitress was serving coffee to a couple in a booth. An elderly man sat at the counter reading a paper. A fat chef wearing a backwards baseball cap and apron rang a bell and yelled, ‘order up!’ No one seemed to be paying attention to her. She looked back at the phone. “Just as fast as I can.”

“*When?*” Emma’s voice rose with excitement.

“I’m not sure. I don’t have any money, but...” She paused. There was some commotion on the other end and it sounded like someone was demanding the child hand over the phone.

“Emma? Are you there?”

An angry voice replaced her daughter’s. “*Who is this? Who’s speaking?*” It was Mrs. Conners, the Monster-In-Law. “*Is this Tess?*” she demanded. “*If it is, so help me God...*”

Tess slammed the receiver down on the old pay phone. She shut her eyes, forcing back the tears.

When the bell above the entrance doors chimed, she jerked her head around to see who was coming into the diner. It was a man wearing a dirty wife beater and jeans. He was tall, with several days of stubble growth on his chin. He needed to run a comb through his hair. Saying something to the waitress, he plopped down at the counter next to the old man reading the paper.

Hesitantly, Tess returned to her booth. The waitress had left the check beside a plate of crumbs that was once a tuna fish sandwich, another saucer had one last uneaten bite of a peach pie, and there was nothing but ice left in her cup. She sucked on the straw, making a slurping sound, but it was no use. She considered ordering another, until looking down at her gray shoes with missing laces.

She didn’t have a purse.

Her eyes scanned the exit doors, then back again. The waitress was flirting with the unshaven man at the counter. The couple in the booth was talking, paying no attention to her. The elderly man flipped a page in the paper. She couldn’t see the chef; he was probably in the kitchen.

She folded the check and slipped it under the plate of crumbs. Scooting out of the booth, her head down, she made her way toward the exit doors. She could feel everyone's eyes on her back, but she kept walking. Pacing herself. Her heart racing. A moment later, she slipped outside onto the sidewalk.

She had only seconds before the waitress came rushing out. Maybe they'd already called the cops. There were cars parallel parked along both sides of the street. She considered one; it was locked. Noticing a blue Impala convertible across the street, she ran to it, hopped in the back seat and ducked her head.

Peeking out, she could see the waitress rushing out the diner, looking both directions. The chef was right behind her, with a meat cleaver in his hands. They were yelling for the police in the midst of asking 'Where'd she go?' and 'Have you seen her?'

She ducked again. Waiting, holding her breath, she remained perfectly still. She heard voices as their shadows passed over the car. But she stayed hidden in the back seat for several moments until they passed. Waiting, she watched one shadow that grew larger until a voice startled her from above.

"Why are you hiding?"

She'd been discovered. It was the unshaven man from the diner, his wife beater undershirt looking dingy and gray in the late afternoon sun. Wind blew his wild, brown hair. Tess put her index finger to her lip and shushed him. He smiled at her. Opening the driver's side door, he slipped behind the wheel of the convertible.

"I knew you'd find me again," he said, stretching his neck to look at her in the backseat.

"Just drive," she whispered, peeking back over the seat. The waitress flagged down a police officer on the sidewalk. From the odd angle in the convertible, Tess could barely make out the

top of their heads. Their voices grew louder though and she knew they had to be crossing the street headed toward the car.

The man ignored the screaming waitress and fat chef; he seemed solely focused on Tess.

“Your shoes don’t have laces.” His head was still craned so he could peer down into the back seat. She didn’t respond. Shrugging, he turned back toward the steering wheel, started the engine and pulled out into traffic. Several minutes passed before Tess comfortably sat up.

“I guess I owe you one,” she said.

His eyes glanced up to the rear view mirror where her reflection smiled back at him.

“Why?” he asked.

“For getting me out of that fix back there.”

He looked back at the road. “I think they mistook you for someone.”

“Yeah, wink, wink.” Tess looked down the street behind them. They weren’t following. Then she glanced around the car’s interior. It was a plush back seat. Roomy and comfortable.

“This car is incredible. What is it?”

Once again, he looked at her image in the rear view mirror, perplexed. “You know that – it’s a 1963 Chevy Impala. It was Dad’s. He collected them.”

“Nice ride.” Tess ran a hand along the interior. Impala’s had a reputation as the make-out vehicle of choice for their roomy backseats. She looked up. Again, her eyes met his in the rear view mirror. “So what’s your name?”

“Is that a joke?” He slowed the car coming to a red light. “You have such an imaginative sense of humor, but I’m not sure I get it.” With the car stopped, he leaned over to the floorboard of the front passenger seat and held up a small yellow lunch box. Turning toward the back seat,

he showed it to her. “Do you want something to drink? I have your favorite in the thermos: mushroom soup.”

Tess glanced at the lunch box and then back at him. “Really, I’ve got to get...”

He set the lunch box down on the front passenger seat beside a ceramic vase with a set of praying hands etched into the side. It was seated as if it were an actual passenger with the seat belt buckled tightly across it. The light changed to green and he let up on the break, moving the car forward again. “It’s all right,” he said to her. “I like your jokes. Sometimes I just don’t get them.”

Tess grimaced. Of all the classic convertibles in all the world, she had to duck into this one. “Look, I’m grateful for your help.”

“You know there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for my sweet Maggie.”

“My name is Tess.”

“Tess?” He paused as if considering this. “Is this another joke?”

Tess leaned forward in the back seat. “Listen, you look like a real nice guy, but you don’t want to get mixed up with me. I’m on my way to Sarasota...” She hesitated, choosing her words. “I’m getting my daughter back.”

The man looked dumbfounded. “You’re talking crazy.”

“I’m not crazy!” Tess looked behind her. She thought she heard a siren down the street. She turned back around. “May I use your cell phone?”

He shook his head. “I don’t have one.”

Tess sighed. This was getting her nowhere. “Okay. Then tell me, where are you going?”

“You should really be more careful.” He cocked his head, scratching his stubbly chin and turned the car onto a side road winding into a wooded development. “You didn’t even have time to pay for your meal. But I know what you like. Mushroom soup.”

She fidgeted in the back seat and looked behind her once again. There were no cars. They were alone. “Just drop me off at the corner,” she insisted. “I can make my way to the Interstate.”

“But we just found each other again.” The man’s voice turned panicky. He was pleading. As if desperate to prove a point, he motioned toward the lunch box. “Soup. I got your favorite.”

Tess frowned. “Look, I really don’t have time. My little girl is waiting for me.”

“You sound so serious.” He looked at her again in the rear view mirror, studying her as he drove. Cocking his head as if he had just noticed something that had escaped his attention, he asked, “What are you wearing?”

“Excuse me?” Tess glanced down at her white blouse and jeans. She had swiped these from a Good Will donation box where she ditched her orange jump suit.

“I don't recall you ever wearing jeans,” he said. “You look very nice. Very free and unencumbered.”

Tess wasn't sure what to say. “Thank you?”

This made him smile. “What am I saying? You always look lovely.” Then his face turned dark again, worry lines deepened on his forehead. “Where's your locket?”

“My what?” Tess was losing patience and it reflected in her voice. “Look, you've obviously got me confused...”

“Your locket,” he insisted. “Your locket, the one I gave you for your 30th birthday.”

“I'm 29,” she said flatly.

“Please tell me you didn't lose it,” he said, shaking his head. “You're always losing things.” He muttered something as his gaze returned to the road. Tess couldn't understand him -- not that she cared. Then he turned back toward her again, as if he suddenly had an epiphany.

“That's why you want to go back to Sarasota, isn't it?” he said urgently. “To get your locket. You left it there.”

“No,” Tess corrected him. “My daughter is waiting.”

He turned back around, grinning as if he had finally come to a decision. “We'll leave immediately,” he said. “We just have to make one quick stop. We can't keep her waiting any longer.”

“Keep who waiting?”

“Mother, of course.” He glanced toward the passenger seat. Tess looked into the front seat and at the vase tucked securely in place with the seat belt. That's when she realized it; she was looking at an urn.

“Mother?” she asked, her voice cracking as he rolled the convertible uphill past two gray-stone pillars on either side of a massive wrought-iron gate. At the top of the hill, she was looking down on a forest of magnolias and cypress swaying in the breeze, surrounded by row upon row of neatly lined gravestones. He pulled onto the gravel road winding through a cemetery.

Slipping beneath the broad branches of a giant magnolia, the man parked the convertible, unbuckled the urn from the passenger seat and gently lifted it in his arms. He turned to Tess in the backseat, but she shook her head.

She watched as he got out of the car and carried the urn past the silent rows of headstones, wet grass squishing beneath his feet as he plodded toward an embankment. He searched for one specific grave, bobbing in front and behind crumbling headstones. Once satisfied, about a

hundred seventy-five, eighty yards from the car, he knelt and set down the urn. Withered flowers were strewn in front of it and weedy vines had sprout up among tufts of grass around the block.

Tess watched him a moment. When she was sure he was distracted and not paying any attention, she leaned over the center console and flipped into the front passenger seat.

Her elbow knocked the yellow lunch box back onto the floor board among ten or eleven scattered cassette tapes. Curious, she picked one up. *Fred Neil: The Other Side of This Life*. She looked at another, then another. They were all Fred Neil cassettes. Tossing them back to the floor uninterested, she opened the glove box and dug through a mess of coupons, receipts and folded papers. There was a pearl necklace hidden among the mess, and Tess picked it up. Examining it, she decided it was a fake and tossed it back. She continued searching until finally finding a brown, leather wallet.

“Bingo,” she exclaimed. Opening it, she found three twenty dollar bills and his driver’s license. “Wesley Cade,” she read. He was 6’3”, 235 pounds, 34 years old. Returning the license, she then pulled out the cash. She slipped the three twenty-dollar bills into the hem of the bra under her shirt. Then she tossed the wallet back in the glove box and found his cell phone.

“I knew he was lying to me!” Picking it up, she pressed the ‘ON’ button. Three quarters of the battery left. Just enough, she decided, then climbed out of the car.

Tess looked back toward Wesley, still kneeling beside the headstone. He appeared to be talking to the grave, and lifted the urn as if showing it to some invisible person. She shook her head then made her way on foot toward the cemetery entrance. She walked along a gravel path, her gray tennis shoes sliding ever so slightly against the back of her ankles and she wished she had shoe laces to tighten them.

With the cell phone in hand, she ran up over the hill and down through the orderly rows of headstones, which stood like black sentinels against the orange hue of the late afternoon sun. Black wrought iron gates loomed ahead, and beyond that the secluded street. She wasn't sure just how far they'd driven off the main highway, or how far she was from the Interstate, but she could walk it. She was sure of that.

Tess approached the entry gates when, somewhere in the distance, a siren screamed. It grew louder. Then there was another

She halted, her heart pounding in her ears. She looked down the street. Had they followed her? If so, she wasn't going back. She would never let them separate her from Emma again.

"Maggie!" Wesley called from deep in the cemetery. She turned. He was waving to her. "Maggie, where are you going?"

Tess watched him a moment, wondering just how imbalanced this Wesley guy was. But still, he seemed concerned for her. Or at least for this Maggie. He must have heard the sirens as well, as he waved urgently and called to her again. Focused on the rows of symmetrically chiseled gravestones which seemed to float and sway in the distance, she made her way back to him.

"Hurry Maggie, my darling! Run!"

As the sirens roared louder somewhere down the street behind her, Tess raced back to Wesley. She stopped next to him beside the crumbling headstone. The urn was on the ground.

"Do you think they made your license plate?" she asked.

"Is this another joke?"

She ignored him, focused instead on the stone entrance behind her. The sirens echoed through the cemetery now, as if the police had turned directly onto the street beyond the fence. “I need to hide,” she said.

Wesley took Tess by the hand and led her back to magnolia tree and the convertible waiting under it. Climbing in the passenger side, she knelt down in the floorboard, among the collection of Fred Neil cassettes. Her knees pressed against the yellow lunch box.

Wesley slipped into the driver’s seat and shut the door. He leaned down across the front seats, his face coming close to hers. The siren blare was deafening.

Tess stiffened and held her breath. They weren't taking her back. No matter what, she would get to Emma and she would never let them separate her again. “They’re everywhere,” Tess whispered. “They’re searching the area.”

“You have such a nonsensical sense of humor.” His breath was hot on her face. “But I guess that's why I married you.”