

# SANDRA



*a novel*

# *ricochet*

# BROWN

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*RICOCHET*

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SIMON & SCHUSTER  
New York London Toronto Sydney



SIMON & SCHUSTER

Rockefeller Center  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

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Designed by Jaime Putorti

Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN-13: 978-0-7432-8933-7

ISBN-10: 0-7432-8933-1



*By the same author*

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Where There's Smoke

French Silk

Breath of Scandal

Mirror Image

Best Kept Secrets

Slow Heat in Heaven

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Savannah, Georgia, not only has some of the best food and most beautiful scenery in the continental United States, its people are the nicest. Among them are Major Everett Regan of the Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Police Department, who gave of his valuable time to answer myriad questions. Ellen Winters went out of her way to assist me when I was relying strictly on “the kindness of strangers.” Without the help of these professionals, getting the necessary details would have been much more difficult.

I’m also indebted to Cindy Moore, to whom Southern hospitality isn’t just a catchphrase. She exemplifies it, and then goes above and beyond. Thank you, friend, for opening doors.

And, for exploring with me every square, every street, toting camera gear and risking life and limb to take requested photographs, without complaining—too much—of the heat and humidity . . . thank you, Michael.

Sandra Brown

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*RICOCHET*

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# PROLOGUE

THE RECOVERY MISSION WAS CALLED OFF AT 6:56 P.M.

The grim announcement was made by Chief of Police Clarence Taylor during a locally televised press conference.

His somber expression was in keeping with his buzz haircut and military bearing. "The police department, along with all the other agencies involved, devoted countless hours to the search in hope of a rescue. Short of that, a recovery.

"However, since the exhaustive efforts of law enforcement officers, the Coast Guard, and civilian volunteers haven't produced any encouraging evidence in several days, we've come to the sad conclusion that to continue an organized search would be futile."

The lone drinker at the bar, watching the snowy TV screen mounted in the corner, tossed back the whiskey remaining in his glass and motioned the barkeep for a refill.

The barkeep held the open bottle poised above the highball glass. "You sure? You're hitting it pretty hard, pal."

"Just pour."

"Have you got a ride home?"

The question was met with a menacing glare. The barkeep shrugged and poured. "Your funeral."

*No, not mine.*

Off the beaten path in a low-rent area of downtown Savannah, Smitty's attracted neither tourists nor respectable locals. It wasn't



the kind of watering hole one came to seeking fun and frivolity. It didn't take part in the city's infamous pub crawl on St. Patrick's Day. Pastel drinks with cute names weren't served.

The potables were ordered straight up. You might or might not get a lemon twist like the ones the barkeep was mindlessly peeling as he watched the television news bulletin that had preempted a *Seinfeld* rerun.

On the TV screen, Chief Taylor was commending the tireless efforts of the sheriff's office, canine unit, marine patrol and dive team, on and on, blah, blah, blah.

"Mute that, will you?"

At the request of his customer, the barkeep reached for the remote control and silenced the TV. "He's dancing around it 'cause he has to. But if you cut through all the B.S., what he's saying is, the body's fish food by now."

The drinker propped both elbows on the bar, hunched his shoulders, and watched the amber liquor sloshing in his glass as he slid it back and forth between his hands across the polished wood surface.

"Ten days after going into the river?" The barkeep shook his head with pessimism. "No way a person could survive. Still, it's a hell of a sad thing. Especially for the family. I mean, never knowing the fate of your loved one?" He reached for another lemon. "I'd hate to think of somebody I loved, dead or alive, being in the river or out there in the ocean, in this mess."

He used his chin to motion toward the bar's single window. It was wide, but only about eighteen inches deep, situated high on the wall, much closer to the ceiling than to the floor, providing a limited view of the outside if one cared to look. It allowed only a slash of semi-light to relieve the oppressive gloom in the bar, and gave only a slim promise of hope to the hopeless inside.

A ponderous rain had been soaking the Low Country of Georgia and South Carolina for the last forty-eight hours. Unrelenting rain. Torrents of water falling straight down out of opaque clouds.

At times the rainfall had been so heavy that you couldn't see across the river to the opposite bank. Low-lying areas had become lakes. Roads had been closed due to flooding. Gutters roiled with currents as swift as white-water rapids.

The barkeep wiped lemon juice from his fingers and cleaned the blade of his knife on a towel. "This rain, can't say I blame 'em for calling off the search. They'll probably never find the body now. But I guess that means it'll forever remain a mystery. Was it murder or suicide?" He tossed aside his towel and leaned on the bar. "What do you think happened?"

His customer looked up at him with bleary eyes and said hoarsely, "I know what happened."

# CHAPTER

# 1

*Six Weeks Earlier*

THE MURDER TRIAL OF ROBERT SAVICH WAS IN ITS FOURTH DAY. Homicide detective Duncan Hatcher was wondering what the hell was going on.

As soon as court had reconvened after the lunch break, the defendant's attorney, Stan Adams, had asked the judge for a private meeting. Judge Laird, as perplexed by the request as ADA Mike Nelson, had nonetheless granted it and the three had withdrawn to chambers. The jury had retired to the jury room, leaving only the spectators to question the significance of this unexpected conference.

They'd been out for half an hour. Duncan's anxiety grew with each passing minute. He'd wanted the trial to proceed without a blip, without any hitch that could result in an easy appeal or, God forbid, an overturned verdict. That's why this behind-closed-doors powwow was making him so nervous.

His impatience eventually drove him out into the corridor, where he paced, but never out of earshot of the courtroom. From this fourth-floor vantage point, he watched a pair of tugs guide a merchant ship along the channel toward the ocean. Then, unable to stand the suspense, he returned to his seat in the courtroom.

"Duncan, for heaven's sake, sit still! You're squirming like  
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a two-year-old." To pass the time, his partner detective, DeeDee Bowen, was working a crossword puzzle.

"What could they be talking about in there?"

"Plea bargain? Manslaughter, maybe?"

"Get real," he said. "Savich wouldn't admit to a parking violation, much less a hit."

"What's a seven-letter word for surrender?" DeeDee asked.

"Abdicate."

She looked at him with annoyance. "How'd you come up with that so fast?"

"I'm a genius."

She tried the word. "Not this time. 'Abdicate' doesn't fit. Besides, that's eight letters."

"Then I don't know."

The defendant, Robert Savich, was seated at the defense table looking way too complacent for a man on trial for murder, and much too confident to allay Duncan's anxiety. As though feeling Duncan's stare on the back of his neck, Savich turned and smiled at him. His fingers continued to idly drum the arms of his chair as though keeping time to a catchy tune only he could hear. His legs were casually crossed. He was a portrait of composure.

To anyone who didn't know him, Robert Savich looked like a respectable businessman with a slightly rebellious flair for fashion. For court today he was dressed in a suit of conservative gray, but the slim tailoring of it was distinctly European. His shirt was pale blue, his necktie lavender. His signature ponytail was sleek and glossy. A multicolored diamond glittered from his earlobe.

The classy clothes, his insouciance, were elements of his polished veneer, which gave no indication of the unconscionable criminal behind them.

He'd been arrested and brought before the grand jury on numerous charges that included several murders, one arson, and various lesser felonies, most of which were related to drug trafficking. But over the course of his long and illustrious career, he'd been indicted and tried only twice. The first had been a drug charge. He'd been acquitted because the state failed to prove their case, which, granted, was flimsy.

His second trial was for the murder of one Andre Bonnet. Savich had blown up his house. Along with ATF agents, Duncan had investigated the homicide. Unfortunately, most of the evidence was circumstantial, but had been believed strong enough to win a conviction. However, the DA's office had assigned a green prosecutor who didn't have the savvy or experience necessary to convince all the jurors of Savich's guilt. The trial had resulted in a hung jury.

But it hadn't ended there. It was discovered that the young ADA had also withheld exculpatory evidence from attorney Stan Adams. The hue and cry he raised made the DA's office gun-shy to prosecute again in any sort of timely fashion. The case remained on the books and probably would until the polar ice caps melted.

Duncan had taken that defeat hard. Despite the young prosecutor's bungling, he'd regarded it a personal failure and had dedicated himself to putting an end to Savich's thriving criminal career.

This time, he was betting the farm on a conviction. Savich was charged with the murder of Freddy Morris, one of his many employees, a drug dealer whom undercover narcotics officers had caught making and distributing methamphetamine. The evidence against Freddy Morris had been indisputable, his conviction virtually guaranteed, and, since he was a repeat offender, he'd face years of hard time.

The DEA and the police department's narcs got together and offered Freddy Morris a deal—reduced charges and significantly less prison time in exchange for his boss Savich, who was the kingpin they were really after.

In light of the prison sentence he was facing, Freddy had accepted the offer. But before the carefully planned sting could be executed, Freddy was. He was found lying facedown in a marsh with a bullet hole in the back of his head.

Duncan was confident that Savich wouldn't escape conviction this time. The prosecutor was less optimistic. "I hope you're right, Dunk," Mike Nelson had said the previous evening as he'd coached Duncan on his upcoming appearance on the witness stand. "A lot hinges on your testimony." Tugging on his lower lip, he'd added thoughtfully, "I'm afraid that Adams is going to hammer us on the probable cause issue."

"I had probable cause to question Savich," Duncan insisted. "Freddy's first reaction to the offer was to say that if he even farted in our direction, Savich would cut out his tongue. So, when I'm looking down at Freddy's corpse, I see that not only is his brain an oozing mush, his tongue has been cut out. According to the ME, it was cut out while he was still alive. You don't think that gave me probable cause to go after Savich immediately?"

The blood had been fresh and Freddy's body still warm when Duncan and DeeDee were called to the grisly scene. DEA officers and SPD narcs were engaged in a battle royal over who had blown Freddy's cover.

"You were supposed to have three men monitoring his every move," one of the DEA agents yelled at his police counterpart.

"You had four! Where were they?" the narc yelled back.

"They thought he was safe at home."

"Yeah? Well, so did we."

"Jesus!" the federal agent swore in frustration. "How'd he slip past us?"

No matter who had botched the sting, Freddy was no longer any use to them and quarreling about it was a waste of time. Leaving DeeDee to referee the two factions swapping invectives and blame, Duncan had gone after Savich.

"I didn't plan on arresting him," Duncan had explained to Mike Nelson. "I only went to his office to question him. Swear to God."

"You fought with him, Dunk. That may hurt us. Adams isn't going to let that get past the jury. He's going to hint at police brutality, if not accuse you outright. False arrest. Hell, I don't know what all he'll pull out of the hat."

He'd ended by tacking on a reminder that nothing was a sure thing and that anything could happen during a trial.

Duncan didn't understand the ADA's concern. To him it seemed clear-cut and easily understood. He'd gone directly from the scene of Freddy Morris's murder to Savich's office. Duncan had barged in unannounced to find Savich in the company of a woman later identified by mug shots as Lucille Jones, who was on her knees fellating him.

This morning, Duncan's testimony about that had caused a hush

to fall over the courtroom. Restless movements ceased. The bailiff, who had been dozing, sat up, suddenly wakeful. Duncan glanced at the jury box. One of the older women ducked her head in embarrassment. Another, a contemporary of the first, appeared confused as to the meaning of the word. One of the four male jurors looked at Savich with a smirk of admiration. Savich was examining his fingernails as though considering a manicure later in the day.

Duncan had testified that the moment he entered Savich's office, Savich had reached for a gun. "A pistol was lying on his desk. He lunged toward it. I knew I'd be dead if he got hold of that weapon."

Adams came to his feet. "Objection, Your Honor. Conclusion."

"Sustained."

Mike Nelson amended his question and eventually established with the jurors that Duncan had rushed Savich only to defend himself from possible harm. The ensuing struggle was intense, but finally Duncan was able to restrain Savich.

"And once you had subdued Mr. Savich," the prosecutor said, "did you confiscate that weapon as evidence, Detective Hatcher?"

Here's where it got tricky. "No. By the time I had Savich in restraints, the pistol had disappeared and so had the woman."

Neither had been seen since.

Duncan arrested Savich for assault on a police officer. While he was being held on that charge, Duncan, DeeDee, and other officers had constructed a case against him for the murder of Freddy Morris.

They didn't have the weapon that Duncan had seen, which they were certain Savich had used to slay Freddy Morris less than an hour earlier. They didn't have the testimony of the woman. They didn't even have footprints or tire prints at the scene because the tide had come in and washed them away prior to the discovery of the body.

What they did have was the testimony of several other agents who'd heard Freddy's fearful claim that Savich would cut out his tongue and then kill him if he made a deal with the authorities, or even talked to them. And, since Lucille Jones's whereabouts were unknown, Savich couldn't produce a credible alibi. The DA's office had won convictions on less, so the case had come to trial.

Nelson expected Duncan would get hammered by Savich's attor-

ney during cross-examination that afternoon. Over lunch, he had tried to prepare him for it. "He's going to claim harassment and tell the jury that you've harbored a personal grudge against his client for years."

"You bet your ass, I have," Duncan said. "The son of a bitch is a killer. It's my sworn duty to catch killers."

Nelson sighed. "Just don't let it sound personal, all right?"

"I'll try."

"Even though it is."

"I said I'll try, Mike. But, yeah, it's become personal."

"Adams is going to claim that Savich has a permit to carry a handgun, so the weapon itself isn't incriminating. And *then* he's going to claim that there never was a weapon. He may even question if there was really a woman giving him a blow job. He'll deny, deny, deny, and build up a mountain of doubt in the jurors' minds. He may even make a motion to dismiss your entire testimony since there's no corroboration."

Duncan knew what he was up against. He'd come up against Stan Adams before. But he was anxious to get on with it.

He was staring at the door leading to the judge's chambers, willing it to open, when it actually did.

"All rise," the bailiff intoned.

Duncan shot to his feet. He searched the expressions of the three men as they reentered the courtroom and resumed their places. He leaned toward DeeDee. "What think you?"

"I don't know, but I don't like it."

His partner had an uncanny and reliable talent for reading people and situations, and she had just validated the foreboding he was feeling.

Another bad sign—Mike Nelson kept his head averted and didn't look in their direction.

Stan Adams sat down beside his client and patted the sleeve of Savich's expensive suit.

Duncan's gut tightened with apprehension.

The judge stepped onto the bench and signaled the bailiff to ask the jury to return. He took his seat behind the podium and carefully arranged his robe. He scooted the tray holding a drinking glass and a



carafe of water one-half inch to his right and adjusted the microphone, which needed no adjustment.

Once the jury had filed in and everyone was situated, he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for the delay, but a matter of importance had to be addressed immediately."

Cato Laird was a popular judge, with the public and with the media, which he courted like a suitor. Nearing fifty, he had the physique of a thirty-year-old and the facial features of a movie star. In fact, a few years earlier he had played a cameo role of a judge in a movie filmed in Savannah.

Comfortable in front of cameras, he could be counted on to provide a sound bite whenever a news story revolved around crime, criminals, or jurisprudence. He was speaking in that well-known, often-heard silver-tongued tone now. "Mr. Adams has brought to my attention that during voir dire, juror number ten failed to disclose that her son is enrolled in the next class of candidate officers for the Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Police Department."

Duncan glanced at the jury box and noticed the empty chair in the second row.

"Oh, jeez," DeeDee said under her breath.

"The juror has admitted as much to me," Judge Laird said. "She didn't intentionally try to deceive the court, she simply failed to recognize how that omission could affect the outcome of this trial."

"What?"

DeeDee nudged Duncan, warning him to keep his voice down.

The judge looked in their direction, but continued.

"When seating a jury, attorneys for each side have an opportunity to eliminate any individuals who they feel have the potential of swaying the verdict. Mr. Adams is of the opinion that a juror whose family member will soon become a police officer may have a fundamental prejudice against any defendant in a criminal trial, but especially one accused of this particularly egregious slaying."

He paused, then said, "I agree with counsel on this point and am therefore compelled to declare a mistrial." He banged his gavel. "Jurors, you are dismissed. Mr. Adams, your client is free to go. Court is adjourned."

Duncan came out of his chair. "You have got to be kidding!"