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GREG ILES

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TRUE EVIL

A NOVEL

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GREG ILES



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GREG ILES is the author of ten *New York Times* best-selling novels, including *Turning Angel*, *Blood Memory*, *The Footprints of God*, *Sleep No More*, *Dead Sleep*, *The Quiet Game*, and *24 Hours* (released by Sony Pictures as *Trapped*). He lives in Natchez, Mississippi.

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TURNING ANGEL

Greg Iles

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CHAPTER

1

Some stories must wait to be told.

Any writer worth his salt knows this. Sometimes you wait for events to *percolate in your subconscious* until a deeper truth emerges; other times you're simply waiting for the principals to die. Sometimes it's both.

This story is like that.

A man walks the straight and narrow all his life; he follows the rules, stays within the lines; then one day he makes a misstep. He crosses a line and sets in motion a chain of events that will take from him everything he has and damn him forever in the eyes of those he loves.

We all sense that invisible line of demarcation, like an unspoken challenge hanging in the air. And there is some wild thing in our natures that makes us want to cross it, that compels us with the silent insistence of evolutionary imperative to risk all for a glinting shadow. Most of us suppress that urge. Fear stops us more often than wisdom, as in most things. But some of us take that step. And in the taking, we start down a path from which it is difficult and sometimes impossible to return.

Dr. Andrew Elliott is such a man.

I have known Drew since he was three years old, long before he was a Rhodes Scholar, before he went to medical school, before he returned to our hometown of twenty thousand souls to practice internal medicine. And our bond runs deeper than that of most childhood friends. When I was fourteen, eleven-year-old Drew Elliott saved my life and almost lost his own in the process. We remained close friends until he graduated from medical school, and then for a long time—twenty years, I guess—I saw him hardly at all. Much of that time I spent convicting murderers as an assistant district attorney in Houston, Texas. The rest I spent writing novels based on extraordinary cases from my career, which gave me a second life and time to spend with my family.

Drew and I renewed our friendship five years ago, after my wife died and I returned to Natchez with my young daughter to try to piece my life back together. The early weeks of my return were swallowed by a whirlwind of a murder case, but as the notoriety faded, Drew was the first old friend to seek me out and make an effort to bring me into the community. He put me on the school board of our alma mater, got me into the country club, talked me into sponsoring a hot air balloon and a Metropolitan opera singer during Natchez's annual festivals. He worked hard at bringing this widower back to life, and with much help from Caitlin Masters, my lover for the past few years, he succeeded.

All that seems a distant memory now.

Yesterday Drew Elliott was a respected pillar of the community, revered by many, held up as a role model by all; today he is scorned by those who venerated him, and his life hangs in the balance. Drew was our golden boy, a paragon of everything small-town America

holds to be noble, and by unwritten law the town will crucify him with a hatred equal to their betrayed love.

How did Drew transform himself from hero into monster? He reached out for love, and in the reaching pulled a whole town down on top of him. Last night his legend was intact. He was sitting beside me at a table in the boardroom of St. Stephen's Preparatory School, still handsome at forty, dark-haired, and athletic—he played football for Vanderbilt—a little gray at the temples but radiating the commanding presence of a doctor in his prime. I see this moment as clearly as any in my life, because it's the instant before revelation, that frozen moment in which the Old World sits balanced on the edge of destruction, like a china cup teetering on the edge of a table. In a moment it will shatter into irrecoverable fragments, but for an instant it remains intact, and salvation seems possible.

The boardroom windows are dark, and the silver rain that's fallen all day is blowing horizontally now, slapping the windows with an icy rattle. We've crowded eleven people around the Brazilian rosewood table—six men, five women—and the air is close in the room. Drew's clear eyes are intent on Holden Smith, the overdressed president of the St. Stephen's school board, as we discuss the purchase of new computers for the junior high school. Like Holden and several other board members, Drew and I graduated from St. Stephen's roughly two decades ago, and our children attend it today. We're part of a wave of alumni who stepped in during the city's recent economic decline to try to rebuild the school that gave us our remarkable educations. Unlike most Mississippi private schools, which sprang up in response to forced integration in 1968, St. Stephen's was founded as a parochial school in 1946. It did not admit its first

African-American student until 1982, but the willingness was there years before that. High tuition and anxiety about being the only black child in an all-white school probably held off that landmark event for a few years. Now twenty-one black kids attend the secular St. Stephen's, and there would be more but for the factor of cost. Not many black families in Natchez can afford to pay five thousand dollars a year per child for education when the public school is free. Few white families can either, when you get down to it, and fewer as the years pass. Therein lies the board's eternal challenge: funding.

At this moment Holden Smith is evangelizing for Apple computers, though the rest of the school's network runs comfortably on cheaper IBM clones. If he ever pauses for breath, I plan to tell Holden that while I use an Apple Powerbook myself, we have to be practical on matters of cost. But before I can, the school's secretary opens the door and raises her hand in a limp sort of wave. Her face is so pale that I fear she might be having a heart attack.

David gives her an annoyed look. "What do you need, Theresa? We've got another half hour, at least."

Like most employees of St. Stephen's, Theresa Cook is also a school parent. "I just heard something terrible," she says, her voice cracking. "Kate Townsend is in the emergency room at St. Catherine's hospital. They said . . . she's dead. Drowned. Kate Townsend. Can that be right?"

Holden Smith's thin lips twist in a grimace of smile as he tries to convince himself that this is some sort of sick prank. Kate Townsend is the star of the senior class: valedictorian, state champion in both tennis and swimming, full scholarship to Harvard next fall. She's literally a poster child for St. Stephen's. We even used her in a TV commercial for the school.

"No," Holden says finally. "No way. I saw Kate on the tennis court at two this afternoon."

I look at my watch. It's nearly eight now.

Holden opens his mouth again but no sound emerges. As I glance at the faces around the table, I realize that a strange yet familiar numbness has gripped us all, the numbness that comes when you hear that a neighbor's child has been shot in a predawn hunting accident, or died in a car crash on homecoming night. It occurs to me that it's early April, and though the first breath of spring has touched the air, it's still too cold to swim, even in Mississippi. If a high school senior drowned today, a freak accident seems the only explanation. An indoor pool, maybe? Only I can't think of anyone who owns one.

"Exactly what did you hear and when, Theresa?" Holden asks. As if details might mitigate the horror of what is upon us.

"Ann Geter called my house from the hospital." Ann Geter is an ER nurse at St. Catherine's Hospital, and another St. Stephen's parent. Because the school has only five hundred students, everyone literally knows everyone else. "My husband told Ann I was still up here for the meeting. She called and told me that some fishermen found Kate wedged in the fork of a tree near where St. Catherine's Creek washes into the Mississippi River. They thought she might be alive, so they put her in their boat and carried her to the hospital. She was naked from the waist down, Ann said."

Theresa says "nekkid," but her word has the intended effect. Shock blanks the faces around the table as everyone begins to absorb the idea that this may not be a conventional accident. "Kate was bruised up pretty bad, Ann said. Like she'd been hit with something."

“Jesus Lord,” whispers Clara Jenkins, from my left. “This can’t be true. It must be somebody else.”

Theresa’s bottom lip begins to quiver. The secretary has always been close to the older students, especially the girls. “Ann said Kate had a tattoo on her thigh. I didn’t know about that, but I guess her mama did. Jenny Townsend identified her body just a couple of minutes ago.”

Down the table a woman sobs, and a shiver of empathy goes through me, like liquid nitrogen in my blood. Even though my daughter is only nine, I’ve nearly lost her twice, and I’ve had my share of nightmares about what Jenny Townsend just endured.

“God in heaven.” Holden Smith gets to his feet, looking braced for physical combat. “I’d better get over to the hospital. Is Jenny still over there?”

“I imagine so,” Theresa murmurs. “I just can’t believe it. Anybody in the world you could have said, and I’d have believed it before Kate.”

“Goddamn it,” snaps Bill Sims, a local geologist. “It’s just not fair.”

“I know,” Theresa agrees, as if fairness has anything to do with who is taken young and who survives to ninety-five. But then I realize she has a point. The Townsends lost a child to leukemia several years ago, before I moved back to town. I heard that was what broke up their marriage.

Holden takes a cell phone from his coat pocket and dials a number. He’s probably calling his wife. The other board members sit quietly, their thoughts on their own children no doubt. How many of them have silently thanked God for the good fortune of not being Jenny Townsend tonight?

A cell phone chirps under the table. Drew Elliott lifts his and says, “Dr. Elliott.” He listens for a while, all eyes

on him. Then he tenses like a man absorbing news of a family tragedy. "That's right," he says. "I'm the family doctor, but this is a coroner's case now. I'll come down and speak to the family. Their home? All right. Thanks."

Drew hangs up and looks at the ring of expectant faces, his own face white with shock. "It's not a mistake. Kate's dead. She was dead before she reached the ER. Jenny Townsend is on her way home." Drew glances at me. "Your father's driving her, Penn. Tom was seeing a patient when they brought Kate in. Some family and friends are going over there. The father's in England, of course, but he's being notified."

Kate's father, a British citizen, has lived in England for the past five years.

A woman sobs at the end of the table.

"I'm adjourning this meeting," Holden says, gathering up the promotional literature from Apple Computer. "This can wait until next month's meeting."

As he walks toward the door, Jan Chancellor, the school's headmistress, calls after him. "Just a minute, Holden. This is a terrible tragedy, but one thing can't wait until next month."

Holden doesn't bother to hide his annoyance as he turns back. "What's that, Jan?"

"The Marko Bakic incident."

"Oh, hell," says Bill Sims. "What's that kid done now?"

Marko Bakic is a Croatian exchange student who has been nothing but trouble since he arrived last September. How he made it into the exchange program is beyond any of us. Marko's records show that he scored off the charts on an IQ test, but all his intelligence seems to be used only in support of his anarchic aspirations. The charitable view is that this unfortunate child of the Balkan wars has brought confusion and disruption to St.

Stephen's, sadly besmirching an exchange program that's only won us glory in the past. The harsher view is that Marko Bakic uses the mask of prankster to hide more sinister activities like selling Ecstasy to the student body and anabolic steroids to the football team. The board has already sought my advice as a former prosecutor on how to deal with the drug issue; I told them that unless we catch Marko red-handed or someone volunteers firsthand information about illegal activities, there's nothing we can do. Bill Sims suggested a random drug-testing program, but this idea was tabled when the board realized that positive tests would probably become public, sabotaging our public relations effort and delighting the board of Immaculate Heart, the Catholic school across town. The local law enforcement organs have set their sights on Marko, as well, but they, too, have come up empty-handed. If Marko Bakic is dealing drugs, no one is talking about it. Not on the record, anyway.

"Marko got into a scuffle with Ben Ritchie in the hall yesterday," Jan says carefully. "He called Ben's girlfriend a slut."

"Not smart," Bill Sims murmurs.

Marko Bakic is six-foot-two and lean as a sapling; Ben Ritchie is five-foot six and built like a cast-iron stove, just like his father, who played football with Drew and me more than twenty years ago.

Jan says, "Ben shoved Marko into the wall and told him to apologize. Marko told Ben to kiss his ass."

"So what happened?" asks Sims, his eyes shining. This is a lot more interesting than routine school board business.

Clearly put off by the juvenile relish in Bill's face, Jan says, "Ben put Marko in a choke hold and mashed his

head against the floor until he apologized. Ben embarrassed Marko in front of a lot of people."

"Sounds like our Croatian hippie got what he deserved."

"Be that as it may," Jan says icily, "after Ben let Marko up, Marko told Ben he was going to kill him. Two other students heard it."

"Macho bullshit," says Sims. "Bakic trying to save face."

"Was it?" asks Jan. "When Ben asked Marko how he was going to do that, Marko said he had a gun in his car."

Sims sighs heavily. "Did he? Have a gun, I mean?"

"No one knows. I didn't hear about this until after school. Frankly, I think the students were too afraid to tell me about it."

"Afraid of what you'd do?"

"No. Afraid of Marko. Several students say he does *carry a gun sometimes*. But no one would admit to seeing it on school property."

"Did you talk to the Wilsons?" Holden Smith asks from the doorway.

Bill Sims snorts in contempt. "What for?"

The Wilsons are the family that agreed to feed and house Marko for two semesters. Jack Wilson is a retired academic of some sort, and Marko seems to have him completely snowed.

Jan Chancellor watches David expectantly. She's a good headmistress, although she dislikes direct confrontations, which can't be avoided in a job like hers. Her face looks pale beneath her sleek, black bob, and her nerves seem stretched to the breaking point. They must be, to bring her to this point of insistence.

"I move that we enter executive session," she says, meaning that no minutes will be taken from this point forward.

“Second,” I agree.

Jan gives me a quick look of gratitude. “As you all know, this is merely the latest in a long line of disruptive incidents. There’s a clear pattern here, and I’m worried that something irreparable is going to happen. If it does—and if it can be demonstrated that we were aware of this pattern—then St. Stephen’s and every member of the board will be exposed to massive lawsuits.”

Holden sighs wearily from the door. “Jan, this was a serious incident, no doubt. And sorting it out is going to be a pain in the ass. But Kate Townsend’s death is going to be a major shock to every student and family at this school. I can call a special meeting later in the week to deal with Marko, but Kate is the priority right now.”

“Will you call that meeting?” Jan presses. “Because this problem’s not going to go away.”

“I will. Now I’m going to see Jenny Townsend. Theresa, will you lock up when everyone’s gone?”

The secretary nods, glad for being given something to do. While the remainder of the board members continue to express disbelief, my cell phone rings. The caller ID shows my home as the origin of the call, which makes me unsure whether to answer. My daughter, Annie, is quite capable of pestering me to death with the phone when the mood strikes her. But with Kate’s death fresh in my mind, I step into the secretary’s office and answer.

“Annie?”

“No,” says an older female voice. “It’s Mia.”

Mia Burke is my daughter’s babysitter, a classmate of Kate Townsend’s.

“I’m sorry to interrupt the board meeting, but I’m kind of freaked out.”

“It’s all right, Mia. What’s the matter?”

“I’m not sure. But three people have called and told

me something happened to Kate Townsend. They're saying she drowned."

I hesitate before confirming the rumor, but if the truth hasn't already spread across town, it will in a matter of minutes. Our secretary learning the truth from an ER nurse was part of the first wave of rumor, one of many that will sweep across town tonight, turning back upon themselves and swelling until the facts are lost in a tide of hyperbole. "You heard right, Mia. Kate was found dead in St. Catherine's Creek."

"Oh God."

"I know it's upsetting to hear, and I'm sure you want to be with your friends right now, but I need you to stay with Annie until I get there. I'll be home in ten minutes."

"Oh, I'd never leave Annie alone. I mean, I don't even know what I should do. If Kate's dead, I can't really help her. And everyone is going to be acting so retarded about it. Take whatever time you need. I'd rather stay here with Annie than drive right now."

I silently thank Jan Chancellor for recommending one of the few levelheaded girls in the school to me as a babysitter. "Thanks, Mia. How's Annie doing?"

"She fell asleep watching a documentary about bird migration on the Discovery Channel."

"That's good."

"Hey," Mia says in an awkward voice. "Thanks for telling me the truth about Kate."

"Thanks for not flipping out and leaving the house. I'll see you in a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay. Bye."

I hang up and look through the door at the boardroom table. Drew Elliott is talking on his cell phone at the table, but the rest of the board members are filing out of the main door. As I watch them go, an image from our promotional

TV commercial featuring Kate rises into my mind. She's walking onto the tennis court in classic whites, and her cool blue eyes burn right through the camera. She's tall, probably five-ten, with Nordic blonde hair that hangs halfway to her waist. More striking than beautiful, Kate looked like a college student rather than a high school kid, and that's why we chose her for the promo spot. She was the perfect recruiting symbol for a college prep school.

As I reach for the office doorknob, I freeze. Drew Elliott is staring at the table with tears pouring down his face. I hesitate, giving him time to collect himself. What does it take to make an M.D. cry? My own father has watched his patients die for forty years, and now they're dropping like cornstalks to a scythe. I know he grieves, but I can't remember him crying. The one exception was my wife, but that's another story. Maybe Drew thinks he's alone here, that I slipped out with all the others. Since he shows no sign of stopping, I walk out and lay my hand on his thickly muscled shoulder.

"You okay, man?"

He doesn't reply, but I feel him shudder.

"Drew? Hey."

He dries his eyes with a swipe of his sleeve, then stands. "Guess we'd better let Theresa lock up."

"Yeah. I'll walk out with you."

Side by side, we walk through the front atrium of St. Stephen's, just as we did thousands of times when we attended this school in the sixties and seventies. A large trophy cabinet stands against the wall to my left. Inside it, behind a wooden Louisville Slugger with thirteen names signed on it in Magic Marker, hangs a large photograph of Drew Elliott during the defining moment of this institution. Just fourteen years old, he is standing at the plate under the lights of Smith-Wills Stadium in