

DANIELLE STEEL

RANSOM

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To all of my wonderful children,  
who are extraordinary people I admire, love,  
and respect so much,  
And especially to Sam, Victoria, Vanessa,  
Maxx, and Zara for being brave, loving,  
patient, and courageous.  
And to the remarkable men and women  
in state, local, and federal agencies,  
often unknown and unseen,  
who keep all of us safe.

with deepest thanks  
and all my love,  
d.s.

*"Tenderness is more powerful than hardness.  
Water is more powerful than the rock.  
Love is more powerful than violence."*

Hermann Hesse

RANSOM

## Chapter 1

*Peter Matthew Morgan* stood at the counter, picking up his things. A wallet with four hundred dollars in it, from his cash account. The release papers he had to take with him, and give his parole agent. He was wearing clothes the state had given him. He was wearing jeans, a white T-shirt with a denim shirt over it, running shoes, and white socks. It was a far cry from what he had worn when he came in. He had been in Pelican Bay State Prison for four years and three months. He had served the minimum amount of time of his sentence, which was nonetheless a big hunk of time for a first offense. He had been caught with an extraordinary amount of cocaine, prosecuted by the state, convicted in a jury trial, and sentenced to state prison at Pelican Bay.

At first, he had only sold to friends. Eventually, it not only supported the habit he had developed inadvertently, it supported all his financial needs and at one time his family's as well. He had made nearly a million dollars in the six months before he'd been caught, but even that didn't fill the hole in the dam he'd created with the financial juggling he'd done. Drugs, bad investments, selling short, huge risks on commodities. He'd been a stockbroker for a while, and got in trouble with the SEC, not enough to be

prosecuted, in which case he would have been arrested by the feds and not the state, but he never was. He had been living so far beyond his means, to such an insane degree, had so many potentially explosive balls in the air, and developed such a massive drug habit hanging out with the wrong people, that eventually the only way to negotiate his debt to his dealer had been to deal drugs for him. There had also been a small matter of bad checks and embezzlement, but he got lucky once again. His employer had decided not to press charges, once he got arrested for dealing cocaine. What was the point? He didn't have the money anyway, whatever he had taken, and it was in fact a relatively small amount in the scheme of things, and the money was long gone. There was no way he could recoup the funds. His employer at the time felt sorry for him. Peter had a way of charming people, and making them fond of him.

Peter Morgan was the epitome of a nice guy gone wrong. Somewhere along the way, he had opted for the low road too many times, and blown every golden opportunity he'd ever had. More than Peter, his friends and business associates felt sorry for his wife and kids, who became the victims of his crazy schemes and rotten judgment. But everyone who knew him would have said that at the core, Peter Morgan was a nice guy. It was hard to say what had gone wrong. In truth, a lot had, for a long time.

Peter's father died when he was three, and had been the scion of an illustrious family from the cream of social circles in New York. The family fortune had been dwindling for years, and his mother managed to squander whatever his father left, long before Peter grew up. Soon after his father died, she married another very social, aristocratic young man. He was the heir of an important banking family, who was devoted to Peter and his two siblings, educated and loved them, sent them to the best private schools, along with the two half-brothers who came into Peter's life during the course of their marriage. The family appeared wholesome, and



moneyed certainly, although his mother's drinking increased steadily over time, and wound her up in an institution eventually, leaving Peter and his two full siblings technically orphaned. His stepfather had never legally adopted them, and remarried a year after Peter's mother died. His new wife saw no reason why her husband should be burdened, financially or otherwise, with three children who weren't his own. She was willing to take on the two children he had had by that marriage, although she wanted them sent away to boarding school. But she wanted nothing to do with the three children that had come into his previous marriage, with Peter's mother. All Peter's stepfather was willing to do after that was pay for boarding school, and then college, and an inadequate allowance, but he explained, somewhat sheepishly, that he could no longer offer them haven in his home, nor additional funds.

After that, Peter's vacations were spent at school, or at the homes of friends, whom he managed to charm into taking him home. And he was very charming. Once his mother died, Peter learned to live by his wits. It was all he had, and worked well for him. The only love and nurturing he got in those years were from friends' parents.

There were often little incidents, when he stayed with friends during school holidays. Money disappeared, tennis rackets vanished mysteriously, and seemed to be missing when he left. Clothes were borrowed and never returned. Once a gold watch seemed to evaporate into thin air, and a sobbing maid was fired as a result. As it so happened, it was later discovered, Peter had been sleeping with her. He was sixteen at the time, and the proceeds from the watch that he had talked her into pilfering for him had kept him going for six months. His life was a constant struggle to come up with enough money to cover his needs. And he did whatever he had to do to meet those needs. He was so kind, polite, and

pleasant to have around, that he always appeared innocent when things went sour. It was impossible to believe that a boy like him could be guilty of any misdeed or crime.

At one point, a school psychologist suggested that Peter had sociopathic tendencies, which even the headmaster found hard to believe. The psychologist had wisely surmised that under the veneer, he appeared to have less of a conscience than he should. And the veneer was incredibly appealing. It was hard to know who Peter really was beneath the surface. Above all, he was a survivor. He was a charming, bright, good-looking kid, who had had a bunch of rotten breaks in his life. He had no one to rely on but himself, and deep at his core, he had been wounded. His parents' deaths, his stepfather's distancing himself from him, and giving him almost no money, the two siblings he never saw once they were sent to different boarding schools on the East Coast, had all taken a toll on him. And later, once in college, the news that his eighteen-year-old sister had drowned was yet another blow to a young soul already battered. He rarely talked about the experiences he'd had, or the sorrows that had resulted from them, and on the whole, he appeared to be a levelheaded, optimistic, good-natured guy, who could charm just about anyone, and often did. But life had been far from easy for him, although to look at him, you'd never know it. There was no visible evidence of the agonies he'd been through. The scars were far deeper and well hidden.

Women fell into his hands like fruit off trees, and men found him good company. He drank a lot in college, friends remembered later on, but he never seemed out of control, and wasn't. Not obviously at least. The wounds on Peter's soul were deep, and hidden.

Peter Morgan was all about control. And he always had a plan. His stepfather lived up to his promise, and sent him to Duke, and from there he got a full scholarship to Harvard Business School, and graduated with an MBA. He had all the tools he needed, along

with a fine mind, good looks, and some valuable connections he'd made in the elite schools he had attended. It seemed an absolute certainty that he was someone who would go far. There was no question in anyone's mind that Peter Morgan would succeed. He was a genius with money, or so it seemed, and he had a multitude of plans. He got a job on Wall Street when he graduated, in a brokerage firm, and it was two years after he graduated that things started to go wrong. He broke some rules, churned some accounts, "borrowed" a little money. Things got dicey for him for a while, and then, as usual, he landed on his feet. He went to work for an investment banking firm, and appeared to be the golden boy of Wall Street for a brief time. He had everything it took to make a success of his life, except a family and a conscience. Peter always had a scheme, and a plan to get to the finish line faster. He had learned one thing from his childhood, that life could fall apart in an instant, and he had to take care of himself. There were few, if any, lucky breaks in life. And whatever luck there was, you made yourself.

At twenty-nine, he married Janet, a dazzling debutante, who happened to be the daughter of the head of the firm where he worked, and within two years, they had two adorable little girls. It was the perfect life, he loved his wife and was crazy about his kids. It looked like a long stretch of smooth road ahead of him finally, when for no reason anyone could fathom, things started to go wrong again. All he talked about was making a lot of money, and seemed obsessed with that idea, whatever it took. Some thought he was having too much fun. It was all too easy for him. He had fallen into a golden life, played too hard, got greedy, and inch by inch, he let life get out of control. In the end, his shortcuts and old habit of taking what he wanted did him in. He started cutting corners and making shaky deals, nothing he could be fired for, but nothing his father-in-law wanted to tolerate either. Peter appeared to be on a fast track, heading for danger. Peter and his father-in-

law had several serious talks, while walking the grounds of his parents-in-law's estate in Connecticut, and Janet's father thought he had made the point. To put it simply, he had tried to point out to Peter that there was no such thing as a free lunch or an express train to success. He warned him that the kind of deals he was making, and the sources he used, would come back to haunt him one day. Possibly even very soon. He lectured him about the importance of integrity, and felt sure that Peter would heed him. He liked him. In fact, all he succeeded in doing was make Peter feel anxious and pressured.

At thirty-one, first for the "fun of it," Peter started doing drugs. There was no real harm in it, he claimed, everyone was doing them, and it made everything more amusing and exciting. Janet was worried sick about it. By thirty-two, Peter Morgan was in big trouble, losing control over his drug habit, despite his protests to the contrary, and started running through his wife's money, until his father-in-law cut him off. A year later, he was asked to leave the firm, and his wife moved in with her parents, devastated and traumatized by the experiences she'd had at Peter's hands. He was never abusive to her, but he was constantly high on cocaine, and his life was completely out of control. It was then that her father discovered the debts he'd incurred, the money he'd "discreetly" embezzled from the firm, and given their relationship with him, and the potential embarrassment to them, and Janet, they covered his debts. He agreed to give Janet full custody of the girls, who were by then two and three. He lost his visiting rights subsequently, over an incident involving him, three women, and a large stash of cocaine on a yacht off East Hampton. His children had been visiting him at the time. The nanny had called Janet on her cell phone from the boat. And Janet had threatened to call the Coast Guard on him. He got the nanny and the girls off the boat, and Janet wouldn't let him see them again. But by then he had

other problems. He had borrowed massive amounts of money to support his drug habit, and lost what money he had on high-risk investments in the commodities market. After that, no matter how good his credentials, or how smart he was, he couldn't get a job. And just as his mother had before she died, he spiraled down. He was not only short of money, but addicted to drugs.

Two years after Janet left him, he tried to get a job with a well-known venture capital firm in San Francisco, and couldn't. He was in San Francisco by then anyway, and settled into selling cocaine instead. He was thirty-five years old, and had half the world after him for bad debts, when he was arrested for possession of a massive amount of cocaine with intent to sell. He had been making a fortune at it, but owed five times as much when he was arrested, and had some frightening debts to some very dangerous people. As people who knew him said when they heard, he had had everything going for him, and managed to blow all of it to kingdom come. He was in debt for a fortune, in danger of being killed by the dealers who sold to him, and the people behind the scenes who financed them, when he was arrested. He had paid no one back. He didn't have the money to do it. Most of the time, in cases like that, when people went to prison, the debts were canceled, if not forgotten. In dire cases, people got killed in prison for them. Or if you were lucky, they let it go. Peter hoped that would be the case.

When Peter Morgan went to prison, he hadn't seen his children in two years, and wasn't likely to again. He sat stone-faced through his trial, and sounded intelligent and remorseful when he took the stand. His lawyer tried to get him probation, but the judge was smarter than that. He had seen people like Peter before, though not many, and certainly not one who'd had as many opportunities that he'd blown. He had read Peter well, and saw that there was something disturbing about him. His appearance and his actions didn't seem to fit. The judge didn't buy the pat phrases

of remorse that Peter parroted. He seemed smooth, but not sincere. He was likable certainly, but the choices he'd made were appalling. And when the jury found him guilty, the judge sentenced him to seven years in prison, and sent him to Pelican Bay, in Crescent City, a maximum security prison, inhabited by 3,300 of the worst felons in the California prison system, three hundred and seventy miles north of San Francisco, eleven miles from the Oregon border. It seemed like an unduly harsh sentence for Peter and not where he belonged.

On the day Peter was released, he had been there for all the time he'd served, four years and three months. He had gotten free of drugs, minded his own business, worked in the warden's office, mostly with their computers, and hadn't had a single disciplinary incident or report in all four years. And the warden he worked for totally believed him to be sincerely remorseful. It was obvious to everyone who knew him that Peter had no intention of getting in trouble again. He had learned his lesson. He had also told the parole board that the one goal he had was to see his daughters again, and be the kind of father they could be proud of one day. Peter made it sound as if, and seemed to believe that, the last six or seven years of his life were an unfortunate blip on an otherwise clear screen, and he intended to keep it clear and trouble-free from now on. And everyone believed him.

He was released at the first legal opportunity. He had to stay in northern California for a year, and they had assigned him to a parole agent in San Francisco. He was planning to live in a halfway house until he found work, and he had told the parole board he wasn't proud. He was going to take whatever kind of work he could get, until he got on his feet, even manual labor if necessary, as long as it was honest. But no one had any serious worries that Peter Morgan wouldn't find a job. He had made some colossal mistakes, but even after four years in Pelican Bay, he still came across

as an intelligent, nice guy, and was. With a little bit of luck, his well-wishers, which even included the warden, hoped that he would find the right niche for him, and build a good life. He had everything it took to do that. All he needed now was a chance. And they all hoped he'd get one when he got out. People always liked Peter and wished him well. The warden came out himself to say good-bye and shake his hand. Peter had worked for him exclusively for the entire four years.

"Stay in touch," the warden said, looking warmly at him. He had invited Peter to his own home for the past two years, to share Christmas with his wife and kids, and Peter had been terrific. Smart, warm, funny, and really kind to the warden's four teenage boys. He had a nice way with people, both young and old. And had even inspired one of them to apply for a scholarship to Harvard. The boy had just been accepted that spring. The warden felt as though he owed Peter something, and Peter genuinely liked him and his family, and was grateful for the kindness they'd shown him.

"I'll be in San Francisco for the next year," Peter said pleasantly. "I just hope they let me go back east for a visit soon, to see my girls." He hadn't even had a photograph of them for four years, and hadn't laid eyes on them in six. Isabelle and Heather were now respectively eight and nine, although in his mind's eye they were still considerably younger. Janet had long since forbidden him to have contact with them, and her parents endorsed her position. Peter's stepfather, who had paid for his education years before, had long since died. His brother had disappeared years before. Peter Morgan had no one, and nothing. He had four hundred dollars in his wallet, a parole agent in San Francisco, and a bed in a halfway house in the Mission District, which was predominantly Hispanic and a once-beautiful old neighborhood, some of which had gone downhill. The part Peter was living in had worn badly. The money he had wouldn't go far, he hadn't had a decent

haircut in four years, and the only things he had left in the world were a handful of contacts in the high-tech and venture capital worlds in Silicon Valley, and the names of the drug dealers he had once done business with, and fully intended to steer clear of. He had virtually no prospects. He was going to call some people when he got to town, but he also knew there was a good chance he could be washing dishes or pumping gas, although he thought that unlikely. He was after all a Harvard MBA, and had gone to Duke before that. If nothing else, he could look up some old school friends, who might not have heard that he'd gone to prison. But he had no illusions that it was going to be easy. He was thirty-nine years old, and however he explained it, the last four years were going to be a blank on his résumé. He had a long uphill climb ahead of him. But he was healthy, strong, drug-free, intelligent, and still incredibly good-looking. Something good was going to happen to him eventually. Of that much, he was certain, and so was the warden.

"Call us," the warden said again. It was the first time he had gotten that attached to a convict who worked for him. But the men he dealt with at Pelican Bay were a far cry from Peter Morgan.

Pelican Bay had been built as a maximum security prison to house the worst criminal elements that had previously been sent to San Quentin. Most of the men were in solitary. The prison itself was highly mechanized and computerized, and state of the art, which allowed them to confine some of the most dangerous men in the country. And the warden had spotted instantly that Peter didn't belong there. Only the vast quantities of drugs he'd been dealing, and the money involved, had wound him up in a maximum security prison. Had the charges been less serious, he could just as easily have been incarcerated in a minimum security facility. He was no flight risk, had no history of violence, and had never been involved in a single incident during his time there. He was a quintessentially civilized person. The few men he chatted with



over the years respected him, and he steered a wide berth of potential problems. His close relationship to the warden made him sacrosanct and gave him safe passage. He had no known associations with gangs, groups known for violence, or dissident elements. He minded his own business. And after more than four years, he seemed to be leaving Pelican Bay relatively unscathed. He had kept his head down, and done his time there. He had done a lot of legal and financial reading, spent a surprising amount of time in the library, and worked tirelessly for the warden.

The warden himself had written a glowing reference for him to the parole board. His was a case of a young man who had taken a wrong turn, and all he needed was a chance now to take the right one. And the warden was certain he would do that. He looked forward to hearing good things from and about Peter in future. At thirty-nine, Peter still had his whole life ahead of him, and a brilliant education behind him. And hopefully the mistakes he'd made would prove to be a valuable lesson of some kind. There was no question in anyone's mind that Peter would stick to the straight and narrow.

Peter and the warden were still shaking hands, as he was about to leave, when a reporter and photographer from the local newspaper got out of a van, and walked up to the desk where Peter had just collected his wallet. Another prisoner was just signing his release papers, and he and Peter exchanged a look and nodded. Peter knew who he was—everyone did. They had met in the gym and in the halls from time to time, and in the last two years, he had frequently come to the warden's office. He had spent years unsuccessfully seeking a pardon, and was known to be an extremely savvy unofficial jailhouse lawyer. His name was Carlton Waters, he was forty-one years old, and had served twenty-four years for murder. In fact, he had grown up in prison.

Carlton Waters had been convicted of the murder of a neighbor and his wife, and attempting unsuccessfully to murder both their