

SUZANNE
BROCKMANN

FORCE
OF NATURE

A NOVEL



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

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Force of Nature is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

To the multitude of readers across America who wrote to tell me about their GLBT friends and family members who, like Jules Cassidy, proudly celebrate who they are while walking in the sunlight.

To the reader who matter-of-factly told me how, at age sixteen, she left home forever in loving support of her brother when their parents kicked him out because he was gay.

To the teenaged reader who wrote to say, after reading *Hot Target*, she told her brother, "If you were gay, I wouldn't care—why should I? I love you," and he cried and then said, "Oh, by the way . . ."

To the father who thought his son was gay and wasn't sure how to start that conversation, so he left a copy of *Hot Target* on his kitchen counter, open to the book's dedication, so that his son would read it and understand that his love, too, was unconditional. (A few days later, much to both of their relief, his son came out to him.)

To all the parents who love and accept their sons and daughters, and marvel with pride at the variety of ways they are their own unique selves.

And again, always, to my own son, Jason, who inspires me not just to change the world, but to change it *now*.

This one's for you.

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Mega-thanks, as well, to my rockin' agent, Steve Axelrod.

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Thank you, too, to my first-draft readers: Deede Bergeron, Lee Brockmann, and Patricia McMahon.

Thank you to the incredible Tom Rancich, for being available to answer my questions about underwater explosives, as well as for his insightful posts on my bulletin board. Tom, you always make us think and you usually make us laugh. Thank you for your awesome stories. (And finish writing your book, will you?!)

Thank you to the real-life Lora Newsom, for donating her name for an incredibly worthy cause—the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance program. You rock, woman!

And thank you, too, to Ann Schauffler (and her hero of a husband, Stan Griffith) for your wonderful donation to Greater Boston PFLAG.

Thank you to my crew of brave volunteers, who are currently helping me plan my next reader weekend: Elizabeth and Lee Benjamin, Suzie Bernhardt, Stephanie Hyacinth, Beki and Jim Keene, Laura Luke, Jeanne Mangano, Heather McHugh, Peggy Mitchell, Dorbert Ogle, Gail Reddin, Erika Schutte (yay!), and Sue Smallwood.

Check my website at www.suzannebrockmann.com/appearances.htm

for information about my next reader weekend, and information about my *Force of Nature* book tour.

I've got to share a story about something truly amazing that happened while I was on tour for my last book, *Into the Storm*. Literally a week before I left for Atlanta to hold a reader event to promote this book, I was made aware of a young Navy SEAL named Justin who had cancer and needed to find a bone marrow donor for a life-saving transplant. The odds of his finding a match were one in twenty-five thousand, yet he was optimistic and undaunted.

I tried, via my e-mail newsletter, to help spread word of his situation, and of the need to register as a bone marrow donor, and one of my readers, Deborah DeVane, stepped up and hit the ball out of the park. Deborah organized an impromptu bone marrow donor registration drive for my Atlanta reader event. It was amazing—in record time, she made it happen.

Another incredible reader, Paulette Smith, created a blog at www.imaswabbie.blogspot.com, to provide people with information about bone marrow donor registration drives, as well as to provide reports on Justin's progress. Plus, she also helped organize drives at many of the bookstores during my *Into the Storm* book tour. She found volunteers to man the tables, and even arranged for bone marrow donor test kits to be sent to the participating stores. (And she did this as her husband got ready to leave for Iraq.)

Other readers set up drives across the country, too—including the amazing Jan Albertie, who seems to have become something of a force of nature, herself.

Here comes the good news: On September 11, 2006, we received word that Justin had found a bone marrow match. He had a willing donor—and finally a fighting chance to survive his cancer. At last report from his parents, I'm happy to say that he is doing well. (You can check out his progress at the blog listed above!)

For more information about how to register as a bone marrow donor (It's easy—and imagine being *the* one person in 25,000 who could save another's life!), please visit www.marow.org.

Last but not least, thank *you*. For reading my books, for clamoring to see more of the recurring characters in my Troubleshooters world—especially FBI agent Jules Cassidy. Jules first appeared ten books ago, in *The Defiant Hero*, and has appeared in nearly every book since. I hope you enjoy this installment of his ongoing story.

As always, any mistakes I've made or liberties I've taken are completely my own.

FORCE OF NATURE

PROLOGUE

It was a hot, humid night. A sweaty night.

A night exactly like hundreds of other hot, sweaty Saturday nights in Sarasota, Florida.

The moon was nearly full and it made the Gulf sparkle. The beautiful, fine white sand of Crescent Beach seemed to glow.

As he walked toward the crowd gathered at the southernmost life-guard station on the public beach, some of that sand shifted into one of Detective Ric Alvarado's black dress shoes, where it was significantly less beautiful.

"Over here," Bobby Donofrio called, as if Ric could've missed his bald head gleaming in the searchlights that had been set to illuminate the crime scene. He was standing with wiry Johnny Olson, who could've been the department's best detective if he'd cut back on his drinking. "'Bout time you showed up."

It had been only fifteen minutes since Ric got the call. He'd made good time on the road. But there was never any point in arguing with Donofrio. "Any witnesses?" he asked.

"None so far," Johnny said, turning toward him. He whistled. "Nice suit, kid."

"We caught you in the middle of a hot date or something, huh?" Donofrio asked.

"Or something," Ric responded, unwilling to rub their noses in the fact that they, unlike the other members of the detective squad, *hadn't* been invited to Martell Griffin's party for passing the bar exam, at the Columbia Restaurant out on St. Armand's Circle.

Which was where Ric had been just fifteen—sixteen—minutes ago. Listening to the salsa band his own father put together with only a few hours' notice when the club's regular musicians got stranded at the Key West airport. Flirting with a pretty blond teacher on vacation from Ohio. Celebrating his best friend's well-deserved success.

It was where Ric had been enjoying himself—before Donofrio had called him in to translate, even though Lora Newsom, who spoke fluent Spanish, was among the uniformed officers on the scene.

"Why am I here?" Ric kept his voice even as he gazed at the heavy-set detective, but he knew his annoyance showed in his eyes.

"Because the victim's sister don't speak bueno English and the last thing we need is another weeping female." Donofrio rolled his eyes toward a woman who was, no doubt, the sister. She'd collapsed in the sand, several of the uniforms keeping her back so that the crime-scene photographer could finish taking pictures of the body sprawled on the beach. "One is bad enough."

That was crap. Newsom was one of the few women on the force, which meant she'd worked twenty times harder to get there than any of the men. Compassionate yet firm, capable of kicking ass when she had to—she was a rock in a crisis. But ever since she'd broken down in the locker room at the news that her mother-in-law had died in a car accident, she'd been getting all kinds of grief. Especially from Stan and Ollie here.

One incident, one time, and now it was all these clowns could remember.

Thanks to his famous father, Ric knew that he stood on that same shaky ground.

"You don't think the sister has the right to cry?" Ric asked. He should have just ignored Donofrio, but he was pissed. One of these days, this son of a bitch was going to push him past his breaking point. And Christ, as he got closer, he could see that the victim looked to be no more than eleven or twelve years old. He knew the gangs were initiating 'em younger these days, but this kid was an infant.

"Guess we blew your chances at getting lucky." Skinny Johnny O would not let go of the fact that Ric was out of his usual uniform of sneakers and jeans.

"Not necessarily," Donofrio quipped. "The sister's a mamacita. You could still make time if you play your cards right. Make her think it's about comfort."

He wasn't kidding. Ric had to turn away. One of these days . . .

It was then that he saw them.

Two kids. Older than the dead boy, but not by much. They were separated from the rest of the onlookers by a good forty feet, standing in the shadows outside of the light from the spots.

There was little for him to do until the photographer finished her morbid task. Ric could tell just from looking that the sister wouldn't be good for questions until after she was allowed to approach the victim. Even then, she probably wouldn't be up for a police interview until the body was sent to the morgue.

If then.

So Ric sauntered down the beach, careful not to head directly toward the pair of kids. His intention was to flank 'em, to put them between him and the crowd of police officers and detectives, but he didn't get far before Donofrio spotted them, too.

"Hey! You kids! Come 'ere!" he shouted.

Of course they turned and ran.

Johnny and Bobby D took off after them, but even in his dress shoes, Ric was faster.

He chased them up into the dunes—ecologically fragile areas that were off-limits to the public. They were running full out, and Ric scrambled after them, through the brush that divided the beach from a poorly lit parking area.

He was finally starting to gain on the boys, his lungs burning as he pushed himself even harder, faster, when one of them—the taller one—tripped.

He went down hard, but came up almost immediately, moonlight glinting off of metal in his hand.

The kid had a handgun.

Ric could see it clearly, the stainless-steel slide gleaming. It was a Smith & Wesson nine-millimeter, tiny but deadly.

He had his own weapon out as he shouted, "*Suelta el arma!*"

But the kid didn't drop it and the world went into high-def slo-mo.

Details stood out in sharp relief. The black grip of the pistol. The tightness and fear on the perp's face.

He was older than Ric had first thought, probably more like eighteen or nineteen, but small for his age.

The other kid was long gone.

"*Suelta el arma,*" Ric shouted again, the words stretched out long and loud as it took an eternity and then another eternity for his heart to pump his blood through his body, roaring in his ears.

But the kid didn't drop it and still didn't drop it and Ric's weapon was

up and he had a clear, easy shot, but God damn it, hadn't one dead boy on the beach been enough?

Apparently not, because the kid fired twice—a quick double pop—and a hot slap to both his side and his left arm spun Ric around. So much for his new suit.

The kid fired again, this time missing him, giving Ric enough stretched out endless fractions of a second to re-steady his own weapon and take the kid down.

He pulled the trigger, and the kid hit the sand, his weapon flying out of his hand.

But damn, Ric couldn't keep himself standing and he, too, fell heavily to his knees just as Johnny and Bobby D crested the dune.

"Officer down," Johnny shouted as Donofrio fired.

"No," Ric said, but they didn't hear him, couldn't possibly hear him as Donofrio unloaded most of his magazine into the scrawny kid. Two, three, four, five, six, seven shots, and the night's body count was doubled.

Son of a bitch.

"Hang on, kid," Johnny told Ric, leaning close, his breath smelling like lower-shelf whiskey and cigarettes. "Help's coming. Just hang on."

On a scale of one—mere nausea—to ten—curled in a fetal position, weeping in a darkened room for hours—today's hangover was a solid eight.

Coffee took the teeniest edge off of his skull-splitting headache, but increased the nausea factor a hundredfold. It didn't help that he couldn't remember the night before. How he'd gotten home. Whom he'd been with.

As if he couldn't guess.

Still, Robin Chadwick had thrown himself into the shower. He'd gotten dressed, organized his day pack, lathered himself up with sunblock, found his hat, and stumbled out the door.

His brother-in-law had gone to a lot of trouble to set up today's activities. How often was it that an actor got to train with a team of Navy SEALs?

Sure Demi had spent some time at Coronado before filming *G.I. Jane*. But she went through channels, through the Navy's public relations department. She didn't have the kind of access to the real team members that Robin did.

No, his situation was pretty unique. His sister, Jane, had married a SEAL chief named Cosmo Richter.

Seriously. The guy's given name was Cosmo.

It wasn't some meaning-laden handle bestowed upon him by his BUD/S instructors, the way Robin's latest character had been nicknamed "Crash."

No, apparently his brother-in-law's slightly crazy mother had given birth to him, looked into his little red face, and declared that he was to be called Cosmo.

And there he-with-the-funny-name was, leaning against his truck out in the driveway, watching as Robin winced when the bright sunlight hit him like a pickax to the head.

Holy Jesus, and he already had his sunglasses on.

Robin fumbled for his keys with shaking hands, rushing back inside, where he surrendered his coffee in an attempt to appease the porcelain god. The sacrifice was apparently accepted, because the pounding in his head lessened almost immediately. After splashing his face with water, he looked almost human again.

Almost.

Luck and genetics had given him one of those launch-a-thousand-ships faces, and as he moved more solidly into his midtwenties, he was losing the boyishness and gaining something more rugged and even elegant. He was definitely one of the lucky ones—as he got older, he was getting even more handsome.

But this morning there was a grayness to his skin. Unattractive purple shadows around his blue eyes.

Harve, a friend in the makeup department and a fellow hearty-partier, often quipped that the secret to looking great was all in the hair. As long as you were having a good hair day, no one would notice the little imperfections that any self-respecting makeup person could easily hide.

Ever since he'd turned thirteen, Robin's life had been one giant, continuous good hair day.

He leaned in closer to the mirror. Today he could definitely benefit from thirty minutes in Harve's chair, though. A little foundation, some cover-up on the bags beneath his eyes . . .

And yeah—like he was going to hang out with Navy SEALs while wearing theatrical makeup. Way to get them to open up and talk to him.

The eyes could be kept hidden behind sunglasses. The pallor would improve when he got some fresh air. The shaking hands could also be concealed—although that one was easier said than done, especially where Cosmo was concerned.

Still, Robin was an actor. Fooling people was his job.

Exit from the house, take two.

"Sorry about that," Robin called to his brother-in-law. Hey now, he *was* one hell of an actor. He actually managed to sound cheery. Light-hearted. As if he hadn't just puked his guts out. "Forgot my cell phone. And then I couldn't find it. I had to call myself, except I had it set on vibrate. Long story short, I finally found it. So." He even smiled as he pocketed his keys. "I'm all set to go, Chief."

Cosmo hadn't moved. Unlike Robin, who found it hard to stay in one place for too long, Cosmo had a stillness to him that could be unnerving. He also had a BS meter that was infallible.

As Robin approached his truck, Cos still didn't move. He also didn't say anything. He just looked at Robin expressionlessly, his eyes hidden behind his trademark mirrored shades.

"Yeah, okay, great." Robin cracked under the pressure. "I don't know why I always try to bullshit you."

"Y'look like shit," Cosmo finally said. At times, he spoke as if he were charged a hefty fee for every word he used, creating contractions that didn't really exist.

"Cos, believe me, I *feel* like shit," Robin admitted as he climbed into the truck, setting his pack on the floor at his feet.

"Sure you want to do this?" Cosmo got in behind the wheel.

"Yes. Shooting starts in just a few months." A fact that scared the crap out of him. Was he really ready to open a movie? A lot of people were counting on the fact that Robin Chadwick could be a bankable box-office draw.

Cosmo sat there, on the other side of the truck's cab, just looking at him.

Holy crap, that made him uncomfortable. Dude should have been a priest or a CIA operative. His mind-reading ability—or at least his ability to make it seem as if he could read minds—was off the charts. How the hell did he do that?

Finally, Cos looked away. He put his truck in gear and pulled out onto the street. He didn't say anything else, not for a good long while. It wasn't until he was signaling for the turnoff into the navy base that he even glanced over at Robin again. "Janey's worried about you."

Robin sighed. "Janey's always worried about—"

"I am, too." Cosmo broke the bank, putting forth two entire sentences. "I'm not sure you should take this role, Rob."

Robin bristled. "You don't think I can play a SEAL?"

"This training is intense. You're not in the kind of physical condition you need to be in, to—"

"I can do this," Robin said. "I'm going to do this." Like he was going to turn down half a million dollars and a chance to work with Oscar-winning director Victor Strauss? "This movie puts me onto an entirely new level. After this, I'm a star."

"You're already a star."

"No, I'm not. I'm a flavor. Yeah, I've lasted longer than a month, but *Riptide* puts me on the map."

Cosmo glanced at him. "*Riptide*?"

"Yeah. That's the new title they're going with—this week, anyway," Robin told him. "My character gets framed for a botched assassination attempt on the U.S. President. I pretty much get caught up in this situation that I can't escape from. *Riptide*—get it? But the bad guys have no idea who I am or what I'm capable of doing. I pretty much kick their asses and clear my name and save POTUS from a second assassination attempt. Plus I get the girl." There was always a girl—a love interest—in a movie like this.

Cosmo shot him another look, but said nothing.

"It's a popcorn movie," Robin continued. "It'll be my face on the one sheets. If I do it right and it opens big, I'm a star." And if it didn't open big, or if he somehow screwed it up by being indiscreet . . .

"So that's what you want," Cosmo said with another of those penetrating looks. "To be a star."

"Yes," Robin said, gazing out the window so he didn't have to see Cosmo's disbelief. But he didn't need to see it to feel it. "It's what I want that I can have, okay? So just . . . zip it. Not everyone gets to have the kind of relationship you have with Janey. So just . . . don't go there. Please."

Cosmo, of course, wasn't about to say anything. In fact, he didn't speak again until he'd parked in the lot outside a single-story building, among a variety of cars, trucks, and SUVs that screamed alpha male.

As they both got out of Cos's truck, he gave Robin the most matter-of-fact warning in history. "This training is going to break your balls."

"Well, gee golly," Robin said, hefting the strap of his pack up onto his shoulder. "Whatever are we waiting for?"

Annie Dugan was sick and tired of late-night emergency phone calls.

For months she'd lived on the brink of disaster, cursing the inevitable.

She was a prisoner of the specter of approaching death, trapped in a corner yet still fighting like hell against the odds—for someone who, in the end, had gone and quit on her.

Pam's funeral was lovely, of course. Pam had made all the arrangements herself, in advance, and her parents were there to see that it went off without a glitch. Annie had sat in the back of the church, too tired and still too angry at her best friend to cry.

The house—a rustic New Hampshire farmhouse that Pam had renovated with her artistic flair two years before she was diagnosed as inoperable—sold almost immediately, mere hours after the hospice bed was removed from the front parlor.

It had felt as if it were all happening too quickly to Annie, but in her heart she knew it was a good thing. As much as she'd loved that house, as much as she thought of it as a home, it wasn't *her* home and she didn't want to stay.

Annie had gone back to Boston. Templar, Brick and Smith hired her back, just as they said they would. Eunice Templar, known throughout the business world as the Dragonlady, had gotten tears in her eyes when Annie had explained she couldn't just take a month's leave of absence, that she was moving to New Hampshire for an indeterminate amount of time so that her best friend, Pam, could live out her last months at home, instead of in a hospital, surrounded by strangers.

After Pam died, Annie went back to work at the accounting firm. She found an apartment in Newton, and took her furniture and business suits and shoes out of storage.

This was when, the hospice coordinator and the grief counselors had all said, she would slowly but surely find her life returning to normal. It would take time, though. She should be patient. Expect bumps in the road.

It would feel strange at first, going back to work in a cubicle, after spending so much time outside. It would feel surreal, even. Almost as if she'd never left, as if the past few months hadn't happened.

She should continue with counseling, they'd told her, so she dutifully went. Once a week, as part of her new/old routine.

But it had been months now, and still none of it seemed even remotely familiar—at least not until the phone rang tonight, interrupting Jon Stewart, at a quarter after eleven.

It was Celeste Harris, the woman who had bought Pam's house, and she was clearly distressed. Pam's dog, Pierre, a tiny mutt, part poodle, part mystery, had run away from his new home with Pam's mom and had

shown up again, in Celeste's backyard. She'd tried to coax him inside, tempting him with food, but he'd shied away. It was cold out and getting colder. She'd called the town dogcatcher, but he couldn't make it out there until the morning.

Celeste was afraid that would be too late—that Pierre would freeze to death by then.

So she'd called Annie, hoping she could help.

And here Annie was. Heading to the rescue. North on Route 3. Shivering as her car took forever to warm up in the cold New England night.

She'd called Pam's mother, who reported Pierre had run away a full week ago—she hadn't wanted to bother Annie with that bad news. That dog was such a trial. Always hiding under the desk in the kitchen. Refusing food. Pooping at night on the dining-room floor.

Pam, who'd arranged every detail before she'd done the unspeakable, had made sure Pierre would go to live with her cousin Clive, of whom the little dog had grudgingly approved. But when Clive was offered a promotion and a move to his firm's London office, Pierre went to live with Pam's mom.

It was nearly 1 A.M. when Annie turned off the road and onto the crushed gravel of the drive that led back to Pam's house. Pam's former house.

The lights were still on, both porches lit up. The kitchen windows glowed, too, and the back screen opened with a familiar screech as Annie parked and got out of her car.

"Thank you for coming," Celeste came out onto the back porch, followed by her two daughters.

Pam would've loved the fact that children were living in her house. She wouldn't have loved the hatchet job they'd done on her beloved mountain laurels, though.

"He's over by the garbage pails," the younger girl announced. "Alongside the garage."

"It's a barn, dimwit," her older sister loftily corrected her.

"Yeah, but we keep our car there, so it's also a garage, *stupid*."

"Girls," their mother chastised.

Annie was already heading—slowly, carefully—around the side of the barn. "Pierre," she whispered, very softly.

Pierre had had a painful past, Pam had once told Annie as she snuggled the little dog in her arms, his head possessively on her shoulder. Long before Pam had met Pierre at the animal shelter, someone had neglected and even beaten him. It was hard for him to trust anyone, but he'd finally