

New York Times bestselling author

CATHERINE
COULTER

BLIND
SIDE

AN FBI THRILLER



BLINDSIDE

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CATHERINE COULTER

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THE FBI THRILLERS

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The Edge (1999)

The Target (1998)

The Maze (1997)

The Cove (1996)

TO MY MOTHER
ELIZABETH COULTER

BLINDSIDE



It was pitch black.

There was no moon, no stars, just low-lying rain-bloated clouds, as black as the sky. Dillon Savich was sweating in his Kevlar vest even though it was fifty degrees.

He dropped to his knees, raised his hand to stop the agents behind him, and carefully slid into position so he could see into the room.

The window was dirty, the tattered draperies a vomit-brown, with only one lamp in the corner throwing off sixty watts. The rest of the living room was dark, but he could clearly see the teacher, James Marple, tied to a chair, gagged, his head dropped forward. Was he asleep or unconscious? Or dead?

Savich couldn't tell.

He didn't see Marvin Phelps, the sixty-seven-year-old man who owned this run-down little 1950s tract house on the outskirts of the tiny town of Mount Pleasant, Virginia. From what they'd found out in the hour before they'd converged on this small house, Phelps was a retired math teacher and owned the old Buick sitting in the patched drive. Savich knew from his driver's license that Phelps was tall, skinny, and had a head covered with thick white hair. And for some reason, he was killing other math teachers. Two, to date. No one knew why. There was no connection between the first two murdered teachers.

Savich wanted Phelps alive. He wanted the man to tell him why he'd caused all this misery and destroyed two families. For what? He needed to know, for the future. The behavioral science people hadn't

ever suggested that the killer could possibly be a math teacher himself.

Savich saw James Marple's head jerk. At least he was alive. There was a zigzagging line of blood coming over the top of Mr. Marple's bald head from a blow Phelps must have dealt him. The blood had dried just short of his mouth.

Where was Marvin Phelps?

They were here only because one of Agent Ruth Warnecki's snitches had come through. Ruth, in the CAU—the Criminal Apprehension Unit—for only a year, had previously spent eight years with the Washington, D.C., police department. Not only had she brought her great street skills to the unit, she'd also brought her snitches. "A woman can never be too rich, too thin, or have too many snitches" was her motto.

The snitch had seen Marvin Phelps pull a gun on a guy in the parking lot of a small strip mall, pull him out of his Volvo station wagon, and shove him into an old Buick. The snitch had called Ruth as he was tailing them to this house, and told her he'd give her the whole enchilada for five hundred bucks, including the license plate number of the man taken. Savich didn't want to think about what would have happened to Mr. Marple if the snitch hadn't come through.

But Savich shook his head as he looked at the scene through the window. It didn't fit. The other two math teachers had been shot in the forehead at close range, dying instantly. There'd been no kidnapping, no overnight stays tied to a chair with a sixty-watt bulb chasing the shadows. Why change the way he did things now? Why take such a risk by bringing the victim to his own home? No, something wasn't right.

Savich suddenly saw a movement, a shadow that rippled over the far wall in the living room. He raised his hand and made a fist, signaling Dane Carver, Ruth Warnecki, and Sherlock that he wanted everyone to stay put and keep silent. They would hold the local Virginia law enforcement personnel in check, at least for a while. Everyone was in place, including five men from the Washington field office SWAT team who were ready to take this place apart if given the word. Every corner of the property was covered. The marksman, Cooper, was in his place, some twenty feet behind Savich, with a clear view into the shadowy living room.

Savich saw another ripple in the dim light. A dark figure rose up from behind a worn sofa. It was Marvin Phelps, the man whose photo

he'd first seen just an hour ago. He was walking toward John Marple, no, swaggering was more like it. What was he doing behind the sofa?

When Phelps wasn't more than a foot from Marple, he said, his voice oddly deep and pleasant, "Are you awake, Jimbo? Come on, I didn't hit you that hard, you pathetic wuss."

Jimbo? Savich turned up the volume on his directional receiver.

"Do you know it will be dawn in another thirty-seven minutes? I've decided to kill you at dawn."

Mr. Marple slowly raised his head. His glasses had slipped down his nose, and with his hands tied behind him, he couldn't do anything about it. He licked at the dried blood beside his mouth.

"Yes, I'm awake. What do you want, Philly? What the hell is going on here? Why are you doing this?"

Philly? The two men knew each other well enough for nicknames.

Phelps laughed, and Savich felt his skin crawl. It was a mad old laugh, scratchy and black, not at all pleasant and deep like his voice. Phelps pulled a knife from inside his flannel shirt, a long hunting knife that gleamed even in the dull light.

Savich had expected a gun, not a knife. It wasn't supposed to go down like this. Two dead high school math teachers, and now this. Not in pattern. What was going on here?

"You ready to die, Jimbo, you little prick?"

"I'm not a prick. What the hell are you doing? Are you insane? Jesus, Philly, it's been over five years! Put down that knife!"

But Mr. Phelps tossed the knife from one hand to the other with easy movements that bespoke great familiarity.

"Why should I, Jimbo? I think I'm going to cut out your brain. I've always hated your brain, do you know that? I've always despised you for the way you wanted everyone to see how smart you were, how fast you could jigger out magic solutions, you little bastard—" He was laughing as he slowly raised the knife.

"It's not dawn yet!"

"Yeah, but I'm old, and who knows? By dawn I might drop dead of a heart attack. I really do want you dead before me, Jimbo."

Savich had already aimed his SIG Sauer, his mouth open to yell, when Jimbo screamed, kicked out wildly, and flung the chair over backward. Phelps dove forward after him, cursing, stabbing the knife through the air.

Savich fired right at the long silver blade. At nearly the same moment there was another shot—the loud, sharp sound of a rifle, fired from a distance.

The long knife exploded, shattering Phelps's hand; the next thing to go flying was Phelps's brains as his head exploded. Savich saw his bloody fingers spiraling upward, spewing blood, and shards of silver raining down, but Phelps wouldn't miss his hand or his fingers. Savich whipped around, not wanting to believe what had just happened.

The sniper, Kurt Cooper, had fired.

Savich yelled "No," but of course it was way too late. Savich ran to the front door and slammed through, agents and local cops behind him.

James Marple was lying on his back, white-faced, whimpering. By going over backward he'd saved himself from being splattered by Mr. Phelps's brains.

Marvin Phelps's body lay on its side, his head nearly severed from his neck, sharp points of the silver knife blade embedded in his face and chest, his right wrist a bloody stump.

Savich was on his knees, untying Jimbo's ankles and arms, trying to calm him down. "You're all right, Mr. Marple. You're all right, just breathe in and out, that's good. Stay with me here, you're all right."

"Phelps, he was going to kill me, kill me—oh, God."

"Not any longer. He's dead. You're all right." Savich got him free and helped him to his feet, keeping himself between James Marple and the corpse.

Jimbo looked up, his eyes glassy, spit dribbling from his mouth. "I never liked the cops before, always thought you were a bunch of fascists, but you saved me. You actually saved my life."

"Yeah, well, we do try to do that occasionally. Now, let's just get you out of here. Here's Agent Sherlock and Agent Warnecki. They're going to take you out to the medics for a once-over. You're okay, Mr. Marple. Everything is okay."

Savich stood there a moment, listening to Sherlock talk to James Marple in that wonderful soothing voice of hers, the one she had used at Sean's first birthday party. One terrified math teacher wouldn't be a problem compared to a roomful of one-year-olds.

Agent Dane Carver helped support James Marple, a slight smile

on his face until Sherlock stepped back, and then he and Agent Warnecki escorted Marple to the waiting paramedics.

Savich turned back to the body of Marvin Phelps. Cooper had nearly blown the guy's head off. A great shot, very precise, no chance of his knifing Marple in a reactive move, no chance for him to even know what was happening before he died.

It wasn't supposed to have happened that way, but Cooper had standing orders to fire if there was imminent danger.

He saw Police Chief Halloran trotting toward him, followed by a half-dozen excited local cops, all of them hyped, all of them smiling. That would change when they saw Phelps's body.

At least they'd saved a guy's life.

But it wasn't the killer they were after, Savich was sure of that. Theirs had killed two women, both high school math teachers. And in a sense, that maniac was responsible for this mess as well. It was probably why Cooper had jumped the gun and taken Phelps out. He saw himself saving James Marple's life and taking out the math teacher killer at the same time. In all fairness, Coop was only twenty-four, loaded with testosterone, and still out to save the world. Not good enough. Savich would see to it that he had his butt drop-kicked and then sentenced to scrubbing out the SWAT team's bathroom, the cruelest penalty anyone could devise.

The media initially ignored the fact that this killing had nothing to do with the two math teacher killings. The early evening headlines read: SERIAL KILLER DEAD? And underneath, in smaller letters, because math teachers weren't very sexy: MATH TEACHERS TARGETED. The first two murders were detailed yet again. Only way down the page was it mentioned that the kidnapping and attempted murder of James Marple by Marvin Phelps of Mount Pleasant, Virginia, had nothing to do with the two other math teacher killings.

Par for the course.

Savich wasn't stupid. He knew it when he saw it, and the gorgeous woman with the long black hair pinned up with a big clip, wearing a hot pink leotard, was coming on to him.

He didn't know her name, but he'd seen her around the gym a couple of times, both times in the last week, now that he thought about it. She was strong, supple, and fit, all qualities he admired in anyone, male or female.

He nodded to her, pressed the incline pad higher on the treadmill, and went back to reading the report Dane Carver, one of his CAU agents, had slipped under his arm as he'd walked out of the office that evening.

Bernice Ward, murdered six days before, was shot in the forehead at close range as she was walking out of the 7-Eleven on Grand Street in Oxford, Maryland, at ten o'clock at night, carrying a bag that held a half-gallon of nonfat milk and two packages of rice cakes, something Savich believed should be used for packing boxes, not eating.

There had been no witnesses, nothing captured on the 7-Eleven video camera or the United Maryland Bank ATM camera diagonally across the street. The 7-Eleven clerk heard the shot, found Mrs. Ward, and called it in. It was a .38 caliber bullet, directly between Bernice Ward's eyes. She'd been married, no children. As yet, there was no motive in sight. The police were all over the husband.

And just three days ago, the second victim, Leslie Fowler, another high school math teacher, was shot at close range coming out of the

Alsalm Cleaners on High Street, in Paulette, Virginia, just before closing at 9 p.m. Again, there were no witnesses, no evident motive as of yet for the husband, and the police were sucking him dry. Leslie Fowler had left no children, two dogs, and a seemingly distraught husband and family.

Savich sighed. When the story of the second shooting broke, everyone in the Washington, D.C., area was on edge, thanks to the media's coverage. Nobody wanted another serial killer in the area, but this second murder didn't look good.

Dane Carver had found no evidence that either woman had known the other. No tie at all between the two had yet been found. Both head shots, close range, with the same gun, a .38.

And as of today, the FBI was involved, the Criminal Apprehension Unit specifically, because there was a chance that a serial killer was on the loose, and the Oxford P.D. and the Paulette P.D. had failed to turn up anything that would bring the killers close to home. Bottom line, they knew they needed help and that meant they were ready to have the Feds in their faces rather than let more killings rebound on them.

One murder in Maryland, one murder in Virginia.

Would the next one be in D.C.?

If the shootings were random, Dane wrote, finding high school math teachers was easy for the killer—just a quick visit to a local library and a look through the high school yearbooks.

Savich stretched a moment, and upped his speed. He ran hard for ten minutes, then cooled down again. He'd already read everything in the report about the two women, but he read it all again. There was no evidence of much value yet, something the media didn't know about, thank God. The department had started by setting up a hot line just this morning, and calls were flooding in. Many of them, naturally, had to be checked out, but so far there was nothing helpful. He kept reading. Both women were in their thirties, both married for over ten years to the same spouses, and both were childless—something a little odd and he made a mental note of that—did the killer not want to leave any motherless children? Both husbands had been closely scrutinized and appeared, so far, to be in the clear. Troy Ward, the first victim's husband, was the announcer for the Baltimore Ravens, a placid overweight man who wore thick glasses and began sobbing the moment anyone said his dead wife's name. He wasn't dealing well with his loss.

Gifford Fowler was the owner of a successful Chevrolet car dealership in Paulette, right on Main Street. He was something of a womanizer, but he had no record of violence. He was tall, as gaunt as Troy Ward was heavy, beetle-browed, with a voice so low it was mesmerizing. Savich wondered how many Chevy pickups that deep voice had sold. Everything known about both husbands was carefully detailed, all the way down to where they had their dry cleaning done and what brand of toothpaste they used.

The two men didn't know each other, and neither had ever met the other. They apparently had no friends in common.

In short, it appeared that a serial killer was at work who had no particular math teacher in mind to target. Any math teacher would do.

As for the women, both appeared to be genuinely nice people, their friends devastated by their murders. Both were responsible adults, one active in her local church, the other in local politics and charities. They'd never met each other, as far as anyone knew. They were nearly perfect citizens.

What was wrong with this picture?

Was there anything he wasn't seeing? Was this really a serial killer? Savich paused a moment in his reading.

Was it just some mutt who hated math teachers? Savich knew that the killer was a man, just knew it in his gut. But why math teachers? What could the motive possibly be? Rage over failing grades? Beatings or abuse by a math teacher? Or, maybe, a parent, friend, or lover he hated who was a math teacher? Or maybe it was a motive that no sane person could even comprehend. Well, Steve's group over in behavioral sciences at Quantico would come up with every possible motive in the universe of twisted minds.

Two dead so far and Steve said he'd bet his breakfast Cheerios there'd be more. Not good.

He wanted to meet the two widowers.

Savich remembered what his friend Miles Kettering had said about the two math teacher killings just a couple of nights before, when he and Sam had come over for barbecue. Six-year-old Sam was the image of his father, down to the way he chewed the corn off the cob. Miles had thought about it a moment, then said, "It's nuts. But you know, Savich, I'll bet the motive will be something you can't even begin to imagine." Savich was thinking now that Miles could be right,

he frequently had been back when he and Miles had been agents together, until five years before.

Savich saw a flash of hot-pink leotard from the corner of his eye. She started up on the treadmill next to his, vacated by an ATF guy who'd gotten divorced and was telling Bobby Curling, the gym manager, that he couldn't wait to get into the action again. Given how many single women there were in Washington, D.C., old muscle-bound Arnie shouldn't have any problem.

Savich finished reading Dane's report and looked out over the gym, not really seeing all the sweaty bodies, but poking around deep inside his own head. The thing about this killer was that he was in their own backyard—Virginia and Maryland. Would he look farther afield?

Savich had to keep positive. Even though it had been unrelated, they'd saved James Marple from having a knife shoved in his chest or his head. It had come out last night that Jimbo had had an affair with Marvin Phelps's wife, who'd then divorced Phelps and married Marple—five years before. But Savich knew it wasn't just the infidelity that was Phelps's motive. He'd heard it right out of Phelps's mouth—jealousy, pure and simple jealousy that had grown into rage. The last time Savich had seen James Marple, his wife, Liz, was there hovering, hugging and kissing him.

"Hello, I've seen you here before. My name's Valerie. Valerie Rapper, and no, I don't like Eminem." She smiled at him, a really lovely white-toothed smile. A long piece of black hair had come loose from the clip and was curved around her cheek.

He nodded. "My name's Savich. Dillon Savich."

"Bobby told me you were an FBI agent."

Savich wanted to get back to Dane's report. He wanted to figure out how he was going to catch this nut case before math teachers in the area became terrified for the foreseeable future. Again, he only nodded.

"Is it true that Louie Freeh was a technophobe?"

"What?" Savich jerked around to look at her.

She just smiled, a dark eyebrow arched up.

Savich shrugged. "People will say anything about anyone."

Standard FBI spew, of course, but it was ingrained in him to turn away insults aimed at the Bureau. And, as a matter of fact, what could he say? Besides, the truth was that Director Freeh had always been fascinated with MAX, Savich's laptop.

"He was sure sexy," she said.

Savich blinked at that and said, "He has six or seven kids. Maybe more now that he has more time."

"Maybe that proves that his wife thinks he's sexy, too."

Savich just smiled and pointedly returned to Dane's report. He read: *Ruth Warnecki says she's kept three snitches happy since she left the Washington, D.C., Police Department, including bottles of bubbly at Christmas. She gave a bottle of Dom Perignon to the snitch who saved James Marple's life, only to have him give it back, saying he preferred malt liquor.*

The booze Ruth usually gave to her snitches would probably burn a hole in a normal person's stomach. They'd been very lucky this time, but what could a snitch know about some nut killing high school math teachers? They weren't talking low-life drug dealers here. On the other hand, most cases were solved by informants of one sort or another, and that was a fact.

He tried to imagine again why this person felt that his mission was to commit cold-blooded murder of math teachers. Randomly shooting company CEOs—that was a maybe. Judges—sometimes. Politicians—good idea. Lawyers—hands down, a top-notch idea. But math teachers? Even the profilers were amused about how off-the-wall crazy nuts it was, something that no one could ever remember happening before.

He was inside his brain once more when she spoke again. He nearly fell off the treadmill at her words. "Is it true that Congress, way back when, was responsible for shutting off any communication between the FBI and the CIA? And that's why no one shared any information before nine-eleven?"

"I've heard that" was all he said.

She leaned close and he smelled her perfume, mixed with a light coating of sweat. He didn't like Valerie Rapper looking at him like she wanted to pull his gym shorts off.

She asked, "How often do you work out?"

He had only seven minutes to go on the treadmill. He decided to cut it to thirty seconds. He was warmed up enough, loose, and a little winded. "I try to come three or four times a week," he said, and pressed the cool-down pad. He knew he was being a jerk. Just because he was anxious about this killer, just because a woman was interested in him, it didn't mean he should be rude.

And so he asked, "How often do you come here?"

She shrugged. "Just like you—three or four times a week."

Without thinking, he said, "It shows." Stupid thing to say, really stupid. Now she was smiling, telling him so clearly how pleased she was that he liked her body.

He was an idiot. When he got home he'd tell Sherlock how he'd managed to stick his foot all the way down his throat and kick his tonsils.

He pressed the stop pad and stepped off the treadmill. "See you," he said, and pointedly walked to the weights on the other side of the room.

He worked out hard for the next forty-five minutes, pushing himself, but aware that she was always near him, sometimes standing not two feet away, watching him while she worked her triceps with ten-pound weights.

Sherlock, much smaller, her once skinny little arms now sleek with muscle, had worked up to twelve-pound weights.

Thirty minutes later he forgot all about the math teacher killer and Valerie Rapper as he opened the front door of his house to hear his son yell "Papa! Here comes an airplane!" and got it right in the chest.

Two evenings later at the gym, while Sherlock was showering in the women's locker room after a hard workout, and Savich was stretching his tired muscles in a corner, he nearly tripped on a free weight when Valerie Rapper said, not six inches from his ear, "Hello, Dillon. I heard that you saved a math teacher from a crazy man a couple of days ago. Congratulations."

He straightened so fast he nearly hit her with his elbow. "Yeah," he said, "it happens like that sometimes."

"The media is making it sound like the FBI messed up, what with that old man getting his head blown off."

Savich shrugged, as if to say what else is new? He said again, "That happens, too."

"Maybe you'd like to have a cup of coffee after you've finished working out?"

He smiled at her and said, "No, thank you. I'm waiting for my wife.