

**REARVIEW**  
**MIKE DELLOSSO**





*For Jen and our girls . . .*

*You're reason enough to get up every day.*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is one of my favorite parts of every book because it's a chance to recognize all the folks who have played a part in the making of this story and who never receive any recognition for it.

First, all thanks go to my God and Savior, Jesus. Without him none of this would be possible. I would be living an empty life full of self-fulfilling endeavors and getting nowhere.

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# 1

The alarm sounded the same time it did every morning, pulling Dan Blakely from London's nineteenth century industrial district. The steady beeping gradually grew louder, like an approaching train in the middle of the night, rousing the residents of a small rural town from their sleep, until he reached over and groped for the Off button.

7 a.m.

Lying on his back, he shut his eyes and almost drifted back to the squalid orphanages and workhouses that so often populated his dreams, but he had to stay awake, had to get up, shower, dress, grab some breakfast. The day awaited him and he had office hours at eight, then his first class, English lit, at nine. All fifteen students would be waiting anxiously for him to convey some deep meaning about the purpose of life behind the character of Mr. Bumble in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*.

A night owl who preferred to do his work by the light of the

midnight oil, Dan didn't need a lot of prep time in the morning. He was the definition of low maintenance.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, ran his hands over his stubbled jaw, and stretched his mouth in a lionlike yawn. Narrow rods of muted light peeked through the blinds, dusting the room in a moody morning glow. He stretched, stood, adjusted his boxers, and headed for the master bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later Dan emerged, shaved and showered, with only a towel around his waist. He had no need to comb his hair (he kept it cropped at a half-inch) and no need to iron his clothes. (Sue had ironed them the night before.). Low maintenance, indeed.

In the kitchen he fixed himself a quick breakfast of coffee and a plain bagel. He'd passed on the blueberry one because Sue had dressed him in a white shirt today and Dan wanted to take no chances of getting a blue stain on it.

A yellow sticky note waited for him on the toaster. It read: *I love you, babe. You're the best (husband, dad—you know!) Love, Sue.* After kissing it, he folded it once and put it in his shirt pocket.

With his coffee in one hand, the bagel in the other, and his attaché slung over his shoulder, he left the house and walked the mile to the Boone College campus. The air was chilly and damp and still, the sky overcast with a thick cover of gunmetal clouds. The meteorologist had said there was a chance of snow and it felt like it, even smelled like it. Tall oaks and maples reached their barren arms heavenward, hands open, fingers splayed, as if begging the sky for sun, for warmth.

On campus, Dan was greeted by bundled students milling around, looking more like prisoners in a Soviet-era Russian labor camp than future teachers and engineers and hamburger flippers, some heading to their first class of the day, some returning from the cafeteria. The semester would soon be over, everyone gone home for Christmas break, and then the place would be a frozen ghost town. He enjoyed

it like that. The quiet, the peace of a deserted campus . . . there was something calming about it after the rush and stress of finals week and Christmas preparations.

On the other side of the campus, he entered Buchanan Hall, a three-story Federal-style brick building dating back to the early 1800s. It had been fully restored and updated several times over the past two hundred years, the most recent job adding security cameras at every entrance and a new key-card door lock system. His office was on the second floor.

Dan loved the smell of his office in the morning. The cleaning crew went through at night, vacuumed, dusted, emptied the waste cans, washed the windows, and tidied up the place. By morning only a hint of the piney odor of cleaning fluid was left and it mingled nicely with the aroma of old wood and furniture polish.

Sitting behind his desk, Dan pulled a stack of papers from his attaché and placed them on the desktop. He'd graded the last of them the night before and some of the students wouldn't be happy with the outcome; in fact they'd be downright disappointed, some even disturbingly upset. And this was the second time around. Their first attempt was so dismal that he'd given them a week to go over their papers again, edit and revise them and, in some cases, wholly rewrite them, then turn them in for another look. Unfortunately, the second go-around was not much better.

He pushed away from the desk and stood, crossed the room, and leaned against the wide molding that framed the window. The six-over-six panes were the original leaded glass and gave a wavy, distorted, almost-undulating view of the outside world. From up here, he could see most of the campus. The grounds were beautiful, dotted with buildings dating back two centuries, trees nearly as old, and large stretches of manicured lawn where students gathered in the spring to sun and study and frolic their stress away. In the center of campus, an area called the commons, stood a thick-trunked, gnarled

oak (named Old Oaky by some bygone senior class), its branches twisted and knotty, bark scaly and scarred. No one knew exactly how old it was, but the botanists on faculty all agreed it had seen at least three centuries. The campus was built around it, a circle with the tree in the middle. A wheel and its hub. Old Oaky was the grandfather of Boone College.

Returning to his chair, Dan lifted the phone and checked his messages. He had one from Gary Packard, the chair of the English department.

Gary's voice sounded strained and nervous. "Dan, I need to see you in my office first thing in the morning. It's urgent." There was a pause so long Dan thought the message had ended and Gary had forgotten to hang up the phone. Then his voice was there again, quiet. "As soon as you get in, okay?"

Dan placed the phone in its cradle, a knot forming in his stomach. He knew what it was about; of course he did. Gary wanted to talk to him about Erin Schriver. Suddenly Dan's palms were slick with sweat. But he'd done nothing wrong. If anything he'd been lenient. He could have brought the hammer down on Erin, had her expelled.

Walking over to the window again, Dan leaned on the sill and watched the methodical movement of students along the walkways below. From up here, the outside world appeared so isolated, so uncomplicated and innocent. But he knew better. It was anything but innocent. He was sure Gary just wanted to get the facts, hear it from Dan's own mouth. Dan had completed all the proper forms and sent Gary both an e-mail and a hard-copy letter explaining what had happened in class, but he'd left some parts out, parts he now wished he'd included. Parts Gary must have somehow found out about.

Below, the student traffic moved in a steady fashion, as if the whole scene had been choreographed for a movie set. Something was out of place, though, and threw the odd dance off rhythm. A man stood in the grass at the corner of Bradley Hall, hands clasped

in front of him. Dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, he had the lean athletic build and stoic posture of a Secret Service agent. Dan didn't remember any dignitaries on the schedule to visit the campus. They usually let faculty know about that. The man lifted his eyes and found Dan in the window. Slowly, as if to make a point, he reached into his jacket and pulled out something small, a pocket watch maybe. He glanced at it, then returned his gaze to Dan. For some reason beyond his immediate understanding, the way the man looked, the movement of his arms, the tilt of his head, sent a sliver of ice down Dan's spine, and an involuntary shiver rippled through his muscles.

Dan pushed away from the window. He needed to calm himself before seeing Gary. He couldn't walk in there beaded with cold sweat, nervous, shaky, looking pathetic. He wished now that he had told Sue about the whole thing, but he rarely, if ever, talked about his day with her. He never had. For a moment he thought of calling her and confessing everything before his meeting with Gary, like a child admitting he'd broken the vase before his brother could tattle on him. Except he'd done nothing wrong. He had nothing to confess and there was nothing for anyone to tattle about. In fact, until now his teaching experience had been clear of any kind of controversy. He'd never even flunked a student.

After a brief visit to the bathroom, where he splashed water on his face and dried it with a paper towel, Dan Blakely headed down to the first floor and the office of Gary Packard.

