

MIKE



A JED PATRICK NOVEL

DELL

*KILL DEVIL*

OSSO

# PRAISE FOR MIKE DELLOSSO

“Dellosso has written a tense psychological thriller with the feel of *Total Recall* in its story line. It’s a suspenseful ride for the reader. A solid read-alike is Ted Dekker’s *Eyes Wide Open*.”

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“Dellosso... writes with punch and moves the story along briskly.”

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“With mind-bending twists and tangled truths, *Centralia* is one killer story! Mike Dellosso has outdone himself with this heart-pounding story of one man’s fight to find the truth—but is it the real truth? This one will keep you guessing right to the end. If you’re a Bourne addict like me, you can’t afford to miss this novel!”

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“Every time I read a Mike Dellosso thriller, I find a new favorite—until another hits bookstores that tops the last. Definitely the best yet, *Centralia* is not just a nonstop thrill ride with Dellosso’s signature spine-chilling suspense; it is a deeply moving story of one man’s desperate search for all that has been ripped from him. *Centralia* is a story I will not soon forget.”

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**SUSAN SLEEMAN**, [TheSuspenseZone.com](http://TheSuspenseZone.com)

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*Kill Devil*

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# PROLOGUE

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Light.

Piercing. Stabbing at his eyes like a thousand shards of glass. Blinding.

He blinks once. Twice. Thrice. Rapidly then, fluttering his eyelids as if they were wings attempting to take flight.

Slowly, like the melting of ice, the light fades into a dull monotonous haze. Concrete walls, water-stained and dirt gray, surround him. Exposed pipes encased in flaking asbestos form a grid along the concrete ceiling. The room is windowless, at least as far as he can tell. Despite its drab appearance, the place is clean. No cobwebs decorate the ceiling; no dust collects on the pipes.

He's on his back. The table upon which he lies is as cold

and hard as a slab of granite. His head throbs along the right side, just above the ear. He tries to move, to sit, but his arms and legs are bound. The more he strains against his bonds, the more his head hurts. And as the throbbing intensifies, the light fades even more. Soon the light is gone and all that remains is the throbbing. Like his heart has been transplanted to his head. He wonders if that has been the case, if he's been the subject of a sick and twisted experiment performed by some devotee of Dr. Frankenstein himself.

Soon, the throbbing too begins to fade; the heartbeat weakens. And then all is gone and there is only stillness, dark nothingness.

He awakens in the woods, standing alone in the middle of the day in a thick forest. Trees—pines, mostly Douglas fir—stretch upward, reaching over a hundred feet above the forest floor and spreading their broad limbs into an impenetrable canopy. Only a few bars of muted light make it past the canopy of needles and reach the forest floor. The musky smell of pine hangs thick in the cool air. He closes his eyes and draws in a deep breath.

He's had the dream again, the dream of torture, of bondage, of feeling alone and desperate. Lost.

A rustle to his right draws his attention. A woman steps out from behind a tree. His wife, Karen. She's dressed in jeans and a thick maroon sweatshirt, boots and a knit hat. She approaches him quietly, head tilted back, face upward, studying the piney ceiling. She leans her head on his chest.

"You've had the dream, haven't you?" she says. Her voice is sweet and soft but laced with concern.

He smells her hair and nods. "Yes."

"The one with the headache?"

Again, he nods. "Is it real? Did it really happen?"

She presses her face into his chest and tightens her hold on his waist. "I don't know. There's so much we don't know."

"I hate not knowing."

Karen raises her head and meets his eyes. "You don't have to know. You have us now—me and Lilly. We're together and nothing is going to change that."

Lilly. His daughter. Just eight but so full of wisdom and insight. He scans the forest for her, but she is nowhere to be found. He releases his hold on Karen and turns a complete circle, searching every shadow and shaded place, panic now clutching at his chest like two bony hands.

His breathing increases; his palms begin to sweat; his heart begins to pound. The headache is there again. The throb. The panic.

"Where's Lilly?"

But Karen says nothing.

He faces his wife and reaches out to her, takes hold of her shoulder. "Karen, where is Lilly?"

Karen's eyes fill with tears. Her chin tightens and lips tremble. Slowly she shakes her head.

"Where is she, Karen?"

Tears spill from Karen's eyes and make tracks down her cheeks. "She's gone, Jed. She's gone."

Jed Patrick jolts awake and opens his eyes. Once more, the light is there, bringing with it the pain, the stabbing, poker-like sting. He closes his eyes and opens them to just a sliver.

He's in the concrete room with the asbestos pipes. Still bound. Still fighting the throb along the right side of his skull. But this time something is wrong. The room is a blur; the colors run together like watercolors. He can see the outline of the pipes above but cannot make out any of their details.

A man appears then, fuzzy, out of focus. He has a large head and wears dark glasses. No other features are distinguishable. When he speaks, his voice is high-pitched and whiny, almost feminine in tone.

"Wakey, wakey, Sergeant Patrick. Welcome back."

Jed opens his mouth to speak, but no words come. His throat is as dry as paper and his tongue as clumsy as if it were disconnected from the rest of his mouth.

"Don't try to speak just yet. You need your rest." The man's voice carries a thick Russian accent. "The procedure was a success, and we'll begin testing as soon as you recover."

# ONE

• • •

The weather was about to turn, and a heaviness laced the air as if the weight of the atmosphere were about to tamp down the forest as the impending tempest crept closer.

Jed Patrick climbed out of his Chevy pickup and paused a moment to study the western sky. A wall of dark-gray clouds, the leading edge of a massive front, rolled over the bald summit of Rathdrum Mountain like an army of ancient Vikings having just overtaken the Selkirk range. The air was thick with the smell of ozone and pine as it pushed ahead of the front and through the forest that cloaked the foothills.

Jed shut the truck's door and unscrewed the gas cap. He inserted the nozzle and held it in place, one hand in his pocket. The tank held twenty-six gallons and it guzzled

almost every bit of that. He replaced the nozzle on the pump and, rubbing his beard with one hand while screwing the cap in place with the other, glanced once again at the sky. He hadn't seen clouds like that since moving to the Coeur d'Alene area two months ago. It was going to be quite the storm.

Making his way across the parking lot, he kept his head down and his baseball cap low. He'd made it this long without bringing any attention to himself, and he'd like to keep it that way. Folks here were friendly and could get chatty. They wanted to know where you were from, where you were from *originally*, where your family was from, what you were doing in Idaho, what you were doing in Coeur d'Alene, how long you planned to stay, and where you were going to go next. Not that they were skeptical about anyone's arrival in their lovely region of the globe and not that they wanted to dissuade anyone from putting down roots in the Coeur d'Alene area; they were just being neighborly and showing genuine interest in who was setting up home in their corner of the country. Jed had to be careful to entertain their conversations without giving away too much information but without appearing overly reserved. Either could raise suspicion and draw attention, and that would not work in his favor. Nor in the favor of Karen or Lilly.

He'd considered finding work in town, but Jed was starting to think they actually ought to stay away, even scale back their weekly trips to Coeur d'Alene. People at the library were starting to notice the new regulars. His new plan was then to emerge from the cabin once a week, head

to the Mobil on Highway 95, and gather whatever supplies they'd need at the small convenience store that serviced the RV park just behind. He would then only need to make the trip to Coeur d'Alene once a month for items the convenience store did not carry.

Inside the Mobil mart, Jed grabbed a small cart and headed down each aisle, gathering toiletries, cleaning supplies, and food. He avoided eye contact with other shoppers, mostly tourists staying in the RV park, and completed the chore as quickly as he could. At the register he placed each item on the counter, then removed his wallet as the clerk rang up the bill.

The clerk, a twentysomething with a spotty beard and long hair pulled into a ponytail, bagged the merchandise carefully. Midway through, he glanced at Jed. "You live up in the forest, don't you?"

"Yup."

"Eric, right?"

Jed glanced at him. He still wasn't used to being known as Eric Bingsley, the pseudonym the relocation agent had given him.

"You had to show your ID last week when you bought that cough medicine."

"Yeah. Right."

The clerk finished bagging the items and punched a button on the register. "\$59.34."

As Jed removed three twenties from his wallet, the clerk said, "Where you from?"

Jed took quick inventory of the store. There was a

woman by the frozen section, midfifties, short, thin; a teenage male checking out the magazine rack, flipping through a *Sports Illustrated*; a man, forties, thick build, full beard, reading the label on a box of cereal. The man glanced at Jed, then went back to whatever interested him on that label.

“East,” Jed said. He wanted to get out of there. He suddenly felt he needed to.

“How far east?” The clerk opened the register and removed some coins. “I’ve been to Ohio, but that’s as far east as I’ve been.”

Jed put out his hand. He remained calm, not wanting to raise suspicion from the clerk or the other shoppers. “All the way. East Coast.” He’d been in the store three other times, and not once had this cashier or any other attempted to engage him in conversation.

“I’ve never been to the East Coast,” the clerk said. “I’ve never been to any coast, never stood on a beach. Crazy, huh?”

Jed looked again to the bearded man, who was now reading the label on a box of instant oatmeal. Pocketing the change, he said to the clerk, “Yeah, crazy. You’ll have to get there sometime. Thanks.” He grabbed his bags and exited the store.

Outside, the storm front had crept closer, now breaching the edge of the Coeur d’Alene basin. The air was oddly still.

Getting in his truck, Jed glanced back at the store. The bearded man was at the counter now. He said something to the cashier, who then turned to look at Jed.

Jed hesitated, vacillating between an urge to go back into the store and confront the men, find out what they were



saying, what they knew, and scolding himself for being so paranoid. The clerk might have just been making light conversation in an attempt to be friendly. It certainly wasn't uncommon for the area. And the bearded man might have just been a nosy local or a curious tourist. Nothing sinister, nothing dangerous.

But there was always the other possibility, the one Jed kept in the back of his mind but within easy reach. The possibility that they'd been found. Anything out of the ordinary, any daily event that seemed unusual, stirred in him the awareness that his nightmare had become a reality. And a bearded fortysomething checking the label on a box of cereal was out of the ordinary.

The road through the Coeur d'Alene National Forest followed the winding curves of Hayden Creek deep into the dense land of trees. Hemlock, Douglas fir, spruce, and lodgepole pines all towered above the road, spreading their needled branches like umbrellas, protecting the earth from the falling rays of the sun. Eventually, near Crooked Ridge, the road divided, and Jed steered the pickup onto a dirt service road that would lead him all the way to Chilco Mountain.

The road wound for miles like a snake weaving through a wheat field. Jed wondered what it would be like to make his weekly trek out of the forest in the dead of winter. He was sure he'd be glad he had the Silverado.

At times, in higher elevations, the forest thinned to reveal craggy rock formations jutting from the earth's crust like rotted, half-broken teeth.

Near the summit of Chilco Mountain, another dirt road split from the service road. It was this trail that would take Jed another mile into the forest and back to the cabin, back to Karen and Lilly.

Finally, in the clearing where the cabin sat, Jed stopped the truck and killed the engine. He sat in the silence of the cab for a moment, waiting. It was odd that Karen and Lilly weren't there to greet him. They usually heard the Silverado's large tires crunching dirt as it approached the clearing and met him at the truck. But today the clearing remained quiet and still. And the cabin door stood slightly ajar.

Something was wrong. Prickles danced on the back of Jed's neck; his heart rate quickened. He drew in a deep breath. It could be nothing. Maybe they'd gone for a hike or to collect firewood. But they never strayed far from the cabin. They still would have heard him approaching.

Jed reached across the seat and retrieved a handgun. Slowly he opened the truck's door and stepped out, listening, watching.

The clearing was as still as any postcard photo. The headwinds of the approaching storm had yet to reach the top of Chilco Mountain. On all sides the forest stretched as far as the eye could see. Varying shades of green coated the terrain like a bristly blanket. To the west that storm front loomed, closer. It was moving slowly but relentlessly. Inching nearer, threatening to let loose the fury of heaven on the basin and forest. It had overtaken the city of Coeur d'Alene and now neared the edge of the national forest. If Karen and Lilly were in the woods, if they'd ventured too

far and gotten lost, he would need to find them quickly before the elements struck, unleashing nature's ferocity on them without the protection of shelter.

Heart now in his throat, pulse pounding through his neck, and gripping the gun with both hands, Jed crossed the distance between the truck and mounted the steps, then pushed the door open with his foot.

The interior of the cabin appeared untouched as if Karen and Lilly had left and simply forgotten to close the door. Maybe Karen had instructed Lilly to close it, and like any eight-year-old she'd gotten distracted, maybe by a bird or a chipmunk or a rabbit, and failed to do so. Or maybe...

Slowly Jed moved farther into the cabin, gun still raised, expecting an intruder to reveal himself at any moment and squeeze off a shot or attack with some other kind of weapon. Jed listened as he stepped through the room. His first warning would be the sound of movement. Clothes rustling, floorboard creaking, a sudden exhale. He needed to stay alert, focused, and ready to react with only a fraction of a second's warning.

The cabin only had two bedrooms and Jed first checked Lilly's. The door to her room was already open. He entered and paced the floor, sweeping the handgun back and forth and always listening. When he had cleared the room, he then moved to the second bedroom. The door was closed here, but Karen usually kept it closed. She had at their other home, too, the one where men had intruded, hunted Jed, and met early deaths. The home where Jed discovered things about himself that both awed and terrified him.

At the bedroom, he put his hand on the doorknob and turned slowly. When the knob was fully turned and the latch fully disengaged, he quickly shoved open the door and stepped through, gun high and ready to spit bullets.

But there were no masked men hiding in the closet or under the bed, no armed assassins waiting behind the door. Only a solitary figure crouched in the corner. Karen.

When she saw Jed, she sprang to her feet and threw herself into his arms. The tears came quickly as sobs racked her frame.

Jed held her with one arm while keeping the handgun ready for action with the other. He still hadn't cleared the rest of the cabin.

"Karen, what happened here? Where's Lilly?" Even as the question exited his mouth, a rock dropped into the pit of his stomach. Lilly wasn't there.

Jed pulled Karen away and held her at arm's length. Tears stained her cheeks and matted hair to her face.

"Karen, where's Lilly?"

She dragged the back of her hand across her face. "They took her. Jed, they took our baby girl."