

The background of the entire cover is a detailed, sepia-toned photograph of classical architecture. It features a series of columns on the left and a large, ornate capital or decorative element on the right, with intricate scrollwork and carvings. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and curves of the stone.

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

DAVID
BALDACCI

THE

SIMPLE

TRUTH

“Compelling...finely drawn...
a page-turner worth losing sleep over.”—*USA Today*

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The Simple Truth

Also by David Baldacci

Absolute Power

Total Control

The Winner

**DAVID
BALDACCI**

**THE
SIMPLE
TRUTH**



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To Michelle:

The simple truth is,

my life doesn't work without you

This book is also lovingly dedicated to the memory of Brenda Gayle Jennings, a special child

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The Truth is rarely pure and never simple.

— Oscar Wilde

CHAPTER ONE

At this prison the doors are inches thick, steel; once factory smooth, they now carry multiple dents. Imprints of human faces, knees, elbows, teeth, residue of blood are harvested large on their gray surface. Prison hieroglyphics: pain, fear, death, all permanently recorded here, at least until a new sla of metal arrives. The doors have a square opening at eye level. The guards stare through it, use the small space to throw bright lights at the human cattle on their watch. Without warning, batons smack against the metal with the pop of gun reports. The oldies bear it well, looking down at the floor, studying nothing — meaning their lives — in a subtle act of defiance, not that anyone notices or care. The rookies still tense when the pop or light comes; some dribble pee down their cotton pants, watch flow over their black low-quarter shoes. They soon get over it, smack the damn door back, fight down the push of schoolboy tears and belly bile. If they want to survive.

At night, the prison cells hold the darkness of a cave but for odd shapes here and there. On this night a thunderstorm grips the area. When a lightning bolt dips from the sky, it splashes illumination into the cells through the small Plexiglas windows. The honeycomb pattern of the chicken wire stretched tight across the glass is reproduced on the opposite wall with each burst.

During the passage of such light, the man's face emerges from the dark, as though having suddenly parted the surface of water. Unlike those in the other cells, he sits alone, thinks alone, sees no one in here. The other prisoners fear him; the guards too, even armed as they are, for he is a man of intimidating proportions. When he passes by the other cons, hardened, violent men in their own right they quickly look away.

His name is Rufus Harms and his reputation at Fort Jackson Military Prison is that of a destroyer. He will crush you if you come at him. He never takes the first step, but he will the last. Twenty-five years of incarceration have taken a considerable toll on the man. Like the age rings of a tree, the ruts of scars on Harms's skin, the poorly healed fractures of bone on his skeleton are a chronicle of his time here. However, far worse damage lies within the soft tissue of his brain, within the centers of his humanity: memory, thought, love, hate, fear, all tainted, all turned against him. But mostly memory, humbling tumor of iron against the tip of his spine.

There is substantial strength left in the massive frame, though; it is evident in the long, knotty arms, the density of Harms's shoulders. Even the wide girth of his middle carries the promise of exceptional power. But Harms is still a listing oak, topped out on growth, some limbs dead or dying, beyond the cure of pruning, the roots ripped out on one side. He is a living oxymoron: a gentle man, respectful of others, faithful to his God, irreversibly cast in the image of a heartless killer. Because of this the guards and the other prisoners leave him be. And he is content with that. Until this day. What his brother has brought him. A package of gold, a surge of hope. A way out of this place.

Another burst of light shows his eyes brimming with deep red, as though bloodied, until one sees

the tears that stain his dark, heavy face. As the light recedes, he smooths out the piece of paper, taking care not to make any sound, an invitation to the guards to come sniffing. Lights have been extinguished for several hours now, and he is unable to reverse that. As it has been for a quarter century, his darkness will end only with the dawn. The absence of light matters little, though. Harms has already read the letter, absorbed every word. Each syllable cuts him like the quick bite of a shiv. The insignia of the United States Army appears bold at the top of the paper. He knows the symbol well. The Army has been his employer, his warden for almost thirty years.

The Army was requesting information from Rufus Harms, a failed and forgotten private from the era of Vietnam. Detailed information. Information Harms had no way of giving. His finger navigating true even without light, Harms touched the place in the letter that had first aroused fragments of memory drifting within him all these years. These particles had generated the incapacitation of endless nightmare, but the nucleus had seemed forever beyond him. Upon first reading the letter, Harms had dipped his head low to the paper, as though trying to reveal to himself the hidden meaning in the typewritten squiggles, to solve the greatest mystery of his mortal life. Tonight, those twisted fragments had suddenly coalesced into firm recollection, into the truth. Finally.

Until he read the letter from the Army, Harms had only two distinct memories of that night twenty-five years ago: the little girl; and the rain. It had been a punishing storm, much like tonight. The girl's features were delicate; the nose only a bud of cartilage; the face as yet unlined by sun, age or worry; her staring eyes blue and innocent, the ambitions of a long life ahead still forming within their simple depths. Her skin was the white of sugar, and unblemished except for the red marks crushed upon a neck as fragile as a flower stem. The marks had been caused by the hands of Private Rufus Harms, the same hands that now clutched the letter as his mind careened dangerously close to that image once more.

Whenever he thought of the dead girl he wept, had to, couldn't help it, but he did so silently, with good reason. The guards and cons were buzzards, sharks, they sniffed blood, weakness, an opening, from a million miles away; they saw it in the twitch of your eyes, the widened pores of your skin, even in the stink of your sweat. Here, every sense was heightened. Here, strong, fast, tough, nimble equalled life. Or not.

He was kneeling beside her when the MPs found them. Her thin dress clung to her diminutive frame, which had receded into the saturated earth, as though she had been dropped from a great height to form the shallowest of graves. Harms had looked up at the MPs once, but his mind had registered nothing more than a confusion of darkened silhouettes. He had never felt such fury in his life, even as the nausea seized him, his eyes losing their focus, his pulse rate, respiration, blood pressure all bottoming out. He had gripped his head as if to prevent his bursting brain from cleaving through the bone of his skull, through tissue and hair, and exploding into the soaked air.

When he had looked down once more at the dead girl, and then at the pair of twitching hands that had ended her life, the anger had drained from him, as though someone had jerked free a plug embedded within. The functions of his body oddly abandoning him, Harms could only remain kneeling, wet and shivering, his knees sunk deeply into the mud. A black high chieftain in green fatigues presiding over a small pale-skinned sacrifice, was how one stunned witness would later describe it.

The next day he would come to learn the little girl's name: Ruth Ann Mosley, ten years old, from

Columbia, South Carolina. She and her family had been visiting her brother, who was stationed at the base. On that night Harms had only known Ruth Ann Mosley as a corpse, small — tiny, in fact — compared to the stunning breadth of his six-foot-five-inch, three-hundred-pound body. The blurred image of the rifle butt that one of the MPs smashed against his skull represented the last mental sliver Harms carried from that night. The blow had dropped him to the ground right next to her. The girl's lifeless face pointed upward, collecting droplets of rain in every still crevice. His face sunken into the mud, Rufus Harms saw nothing more. Remembered nothing more.

Until tonight. He swelled his lungs with rain-drenched air and stared out the half-open window. He was suddenly that still rare beast: an innocent man in prison.

He had convinced himself over the years that such evil had been lurking, cancerlike, within him. He had even thought of suicide, to make penance for stealing the life of another, more pitifully a child's. But he was deeply religious, and not a fleeting jailhouse convert to the Lord. He thus could not commit the sin of prematurely forcing his last breath. He also knew the girl's killing had condemned him to an afterlife a thousand times worse than the one he was now enduring. He was unwilling to rush to its embrace. Better this place, this man-made prison, for now.

Now he understood that his decision to live had been right. God had known, had kept him alive for this moment. With stunning clarity he recalled the men who had come for him that night at the stockade. His mind once more clearly held every contorted face, the stripes on the uniforms some of them wore — his comrades in arms. He recalled the way they circled him, wolves to prey, emboldened only by their numbers; the telling hatred of their words. What they had done that night had caused Ruth Ann Mosley to die. And in a very real sense, Harms had died as well.

To these men Harms was an able-bodied soldier who had never fought in defense of his country. Whatever he got, he deserved, they no doubt believed. Now he was a middle-aged man slowly dying in a cage as punishment for a crime of long-ago origin. He had no power to see that any semblance of justice was done on his behalf. And yet with all that, Rufus Harms stared into the familiar darkness of his crypt, a single passion empowering him: After twenty-five years of terrible, wrenching guilt that had relentlessly taunted him until he was just barely in possession of a ruined life, he knew that it was now their turn to suffer. He gripped the worn Bible his mother had given him, and he promised this to the God who had chosen never to abandon him.

CHAPTER TWO

The steps leading up to the United States Supreme Court building were wide and seemingly endless. Trudging up them was akin to laboring toward Mount Olympus to request an audience of Zeus, which in a real sense you were. Engraved in the facade above the main doorway were the words EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW. The phrase came from no significant document or court ruling but from Cass Gilbert, the architect who had designed and built the courthouse. It was a matter of spacing: The words fit perfectly into the area designated by Gilbert for a memorable legal phrase.

The majestic building rose four stories above ground level. Ironically, Congress had appropriated the funds to construct it in 1929, the same year the stock market crashed and helped bring on the Great Depression. Almost a third of the building's \$9 million cost had gone to the purchase of marble. Pure Vermont was on the exterior, hauled down by an army of freight cars; crystal-lined Georgia rock padded the four interior courts; and milky Alabama stone lay over most of the floors and walls of the interior, except in the Great Hall. Underfoot there was a darker Italian marble, with African stone in other places. The columns in the hall had been cast from blocks of Italian marble quarried from the Montarrenti site and shipped to Knoxville, Tennessee. There ordinary men struggled to cast the blocks into thirty-foot shapes to help support the building that had been the professional home to nine men since 1935 and, since 1981, to at least one woman, all of extraordinary achievement. Its supporters deemed the building a fine example of the Corinthian style of Greek architecture. Its detractors decried it as a palace for the insane pleasures of kings, rather than a place for the rational dispensation of justice.

And yet since John Marshall's time, the Court had been the defender and interpreter of the Constitution. It could declare an act of Congress unconstitutional. These nine people could force a sitting president to turn over tapes and documents that would ultimately lead to his resignation and disgrace. Crafted alongside the legislative authority of the Congress and the executive power of the presidency by the Founding Fathers, the American judiciary, headed by the Supreme Court, was an equal branch of government. And govern it did, as the Supreme Court bent and shaped the will of the American people by virtue of its decisions on any number of significant issues.

The elderly man walking down the Great Hall carried on this honored tradition. He was tall and bony, with soft brown eyes in no need of glasses, his eyesight still excellent even after decades of reading small print. His hair was nearly gone; his shoulders had narrowed and curved over the years, and he walked with a slight limp. Still, Chief Justice Harold Ramsey had a nervous energy about him and a peerless intellect that more than compensated for any physical slide. Even his footfalls seemed to carry special purpose.

He was the highest-ranking jurist in the land, and this was his Court, his building. The "Ramsey Court," the media had long deemed it, like the Warren Court and its other predecessors — his legacy for all time. Ramsey ran his court tight and true, cobbling together a consistent majority that was now

going on ten years running. He loved the wheeling and dealing that went on behind the scenes at the Court. ~~A carefully placed word or paragraph here or there, give a little on one point with the favor to be repaid later.~~ Waiting patiently for just the right case to come along as a vehicle for change, sometimes in ways unexpected by his colleagues. Culling together the five votes necessary for a majority was an absolute obsession with Ramsey.

He had come to the Court as an associate justice and then been elevated to the top rank a decade ago. Merely first among equals in theory, but something more than that in reality. Ramsey was a man of intense beliefs and personal philosophies. Fortunately for him, he had been nominated to the Court when the selection process had nothing of the political sophistication of today. There were no bothersome questions about a candidate's positions on specific legal issues like abortion, capital punishment and affirmative action, queries that now littered the highly politicized process of becoming a Supreme Court justice. Back then, if the president nominated you, if you possessed the requisite legal pedigree, and if there were no particularly bad skeletons lying in wait, you were in.

The Senate had confirmed Ramsey unanimously. It really had no choice. His educational and legal backgrounds were of the first order. Multiple degrees, all from Ivy League schools, and top of his class in every one of them. Next had come an award-winning stint as a law professor with original, sweeping theories on the direction the law and, by extension, humanity should take. Then he had been nominated to the federal appellate bench, quickly becoming chief judge of his circuit. During his tenure on the appellate bench, the Supreme Court had never reversed one of his majority opinions. Over the years he had built the right network of contacts, done all the necessary things in his pursuit of the position he now held as tightly as he could.

He had earned the position. Nothing had ever been given to him. That was another of his firm beliefs. If you worked hard, you would succeed in America. No one was entitled to any handouts, not the poor, not the rich, not the middle class. The United States was the land of opportunity, but you had to work for it, sweat for it, sacrifice for its bounty. Ramsey had no patience for people's excuses for not getting ahead. He had been born to abysmal poverty and an abusive, hard-drinking father. Ramsey had found no refuge with his mother; his father had crushed any maternal instincts she might have had. Not a promising start in life, and look where he now stood. If he could survive and flourish under those circumstances, then others could too. And if they didn't it was their fault, and he would not hear otherwise.

He let out a contented sigh. Another Court term had just begun. Things were going smoothly. But there was one hitch. A chain was only as strong as its weakest link. And he had one of those. His potential Waterloo. Things might be going well now, but what about five years down the road? Those problems were better dealt with early on, before they surged out of control.

He knew he was close to meeting his match with Elizabeth Knight. She was as smart as he, and just as tough, perhaps. He had known this the day her nomination had been approved. A young-blood female on a court of old men. He had been working on her from day one. He would assign her opinions when he thought she was on the fence, with the hope that the responsibility of penning a draft that would bring together a majority would put her firmly in his camp. He had tried to place her under his wing, to guide her through the intricacies of the Court process. Still, she had shown a very stubborn independent streak. He had watched other chief justices grow complacent, let their guard down, with the result that their leadership had been usurped by others more diligent. Ramsey was determined

never to join that group.

* * *

"“Murphy’s concerned about the *Chance* case,”” Michael Fiske said to Sara Evans. They were in her office on the second floor of the Court building. Michael was six-two and handsome, with the graceful proportions of the athlete he once was. Most clerks did a one-year stint at the Supreme Court before moving on to prestigious positions in private practice, public service or academia. Michael was beginning an almost unprecedented third year here as senior clerk to Justice Thomas Murphy, the Court’s legendary liberal.

Michael was the possessor of a truly wondrous mind. His brain was like a money-sorting machine. Data poured into his head and was swiftly sorted and sent to its proper location. He could mentally juggle dozens of complex factual scenarios, testing each to see how it would impact on the others. At the Court he happily labored over cases of national importance, surrounded with mental sabers equal to his own. And Michael had found that, even in the context of rigorous intellectual discourse, there was time and opportunity for something deeper than what the stark words of a law proclaimed. He really didn’t want to leave the Supreme Court. The outside world held no appeal for him.

Sara looked concerned. Last term, Murphy had voted to hear the *Chance* case. Oral argument was set, and the bench memo was being prepared. Sara was in her mid-twenties, about five-five, slender, but her body possessed subtle curves. Her face was nicely shaped, the eyes wide and blue. Her hair was thick and light brown — it still turned blondish in the summer — and seemed always to carry a fresh, pleasing scent. She was the senior clerk for Justice Elizabeth Knight. "“I don’t understand. I thought he was behind us on this. It’s right up his alley. Little person against a big bureaucracy.””

"“He’s also a firm believer in upholding precedent.””

"“Even if it’s wrong?””

"“You’re preaching to the choir, Sara, but I thought I’d pass it along. Knight’s not going to get five votes without him, you know that. Even with him she might fall short.””

"“Well, what does he want?””

This was how it went most of the time. The famed clerk network. They hustled and debated and scrounged for votes on behalf of their justices like the most shameless political hucksters. It was beneath the justices to openly lobby for votes, for a particular phrasing in an opinion, or for a specific angle, addition or deletion, but it wasn’t below the clerks. In fact, most of them took great pride in the process. It was akin to an enormous, never-ending gossip column with national interests at stake. In the hands of twenty-five-year-olds at their first real job, no less.

"“He doesn’t necessarily disagree with Knight’s position. But if she gets five votes at conference, the opinion will have to be very narrowly drawn. He’s not going to give away the farm. He was in the military in World War II. He holds it in the highest regard. He believes it deserves special consideration. You need to know that when you’re putting together the draft opinion.””

She nodded her head in appreciation. The backgrounds of the justices played more of a role in the

decision making than most people would suspect. "“Thanks. But first Knight has to get the opinion to write.””

““Of course she will. Ramsey is not voting to overturn *Feres* and *Stanley*, you know that. Murphy will probably vote in favor of Chance at the conference. He’s the senior associate, so he gets to assign the opinion. If she gets her five votes at conference, he’ll give Knight her shot. If she delivers the goods — meaning no broad, sweeping language — we’re all okay.””

United States v. Chance was one of the most important cases on the docket for this term. Barbara Chance had been a private in the Army. She had been bullied, harassed and frightened into repeatedly having sexual intercourse with several of her male superiors. The case had gone through the internal channels of the Army with the result that one of the men had been court-martialed and imprisoned. Barbara Chance, however, had not been content with that. After leaving the military, she had sued the Army for damages, claiming that it had allowed this hostile environment to exist for her and other female recruits.

The case had slowly worked its way through the proper legal channels, Chance losing at each stop. The matter presented enough gray areas in the law that it had eventually been plopped like a big tuna on the doorstep of this place.

The current law said that Chance had, ironically, no chance of winning. The military was virtually immune from suit by its personnel for any damages, regardless of the cause or the element of fault. But the justices could change what the law said. And Knight and Sara Evans were working hard behind the scenes to do just that. The support of Thomas Murphy was critical to that plan. Murphy might not support overturning completely the military’s immunity right, but the Chance case could at least punch a hole in the Army’s wall of invincibility.

It seemed premature to be discussing resolution of a case that had not yet been heard, but in many cases and for many justices, oral argument was anticlimactic. By the time it rolled around, most had already made up their minds. The argument phase of the process was more an opportunity for the justices to showcase their positions and concerns to their colleagues, often by use of extreme hypotheticals. They were akin to mental scare tactics, as if to say, ““See what could happen, Brother Justice, if you vote that way?””

Michael stood and looked down at her. It was at his urging that Sara had signed up for another term at the Court. Raised on a small farm in North Carolina and educated at Stanford, Sara had, like all the clerks here, a wonderful professional future waiting once she left the Court. Having a clerkship at the Supreme Court on one’s résumé was a gold key to entry at just about anyplace an attorney would care to put down his briefcase. That had affected some clerks in a negative way, giving them inflated egos that their actual accomplishments did not quite back up. Michael and Sara, though, had remained the same people they had always been. Which was one reason, aside from her intelligence, good looks and refreshingly balanced personality, that Michael had asked her a very important question a week ago. A question he hoped to receive an answer to soon. Perhaps now. He had never been a particularly patient man.

Sara looked up at him expectantly.

““Have you given my question any thought?””

She had known it was coming. She had avoided it long enough. "“That’s all I’ve been thinking about.””

"“They say when it takes that long, it’s a bad sign.”” He said this jokingly, but the humor was obviously forced.

"“Michael, I like you a lot.””

"“*Like?* Oh boy, another bad sign.”” His face suddenly grew warm.

She shook her head. "“I’m sorry.””

He shrugged. "“Probably not half as sorry as I am. I’ve never asked anyone to marry me before.””

"“You’re actually my first too. And I can’t tell you how flattered I am. You’ve got it all.””

"“Except for one thing.”” Michael looked down at his hands as they quivered a bit. His skin suddenly seemed too tight for his body. "“I respect your decision. I’m not one of those who thinks you can learn to love someone over time. It’s either there or not.””

"“You’ll find someone, Michael. And that woman will be very lucky.”” Sara felt so awkward. "“I hope this doesn’t mean I’m losing my best friend on the Court.””

"“Probably.”” He held up a hand as she started to protest. "“I’m just kidding.”” He sighed. "“I don’t mean this to sound egotistical, but this is the first time anybody’s really turned me down for anything.””

"“I wish my life had been so easy.”” Sara smiled.

"“No, you don’t. It makes rejection a lot harder to accept.”” Michael went over to the doorway. "“We’re still friends, Sara. You’re too much fun to be around. I’m too smart to let that go. And you’ll find someone too, and he’ll be very lucky.”” He didn’t look at her when he added, "“Have you found him yet, by the way?””

She started slightly. "“Why do you ask that?””

"“Call it a sixth sense. Losing is a little easier to accept if you know who you lost out to.””

"“There’s no one else,”” she said quickly.

Michael didn’t look convinced. "“Talk to you later.””

Sara stared after him, very troubled.

* * *

"“I remember my first years on the Court.”” Ramsey was staring out the window, a smile working across his face.

He was seated across from Elizabeth Knight, the Court's most junior associate. Elizabeth Knight was in her mid-forties, average height, with a slender body, and long black hair tied back in a harsh, unflattering bun. Her face possessed sharply edged features, and her skin was unlined, as though she never spent any time outdoors. Knight had quickly established a reputation as one of the most vocal questioners at oral argument and as one of the most hardworking of all the justices.

"I'm sure they're still vivid." Knight leaned back in her desk chair as she mentally checked off her work schedule for the rest of the day.

"It was quite a *learning* process."

She stared at him. He was now looking directly at her, his large hands clasped behind his head.

"It took me five years just to figure out things, really," Ramsey continued.

Knight managed not to smile. "Harold, you're being much too modest. I'm sure you had it all figured out before you walked in the door."

"Seriously, it does take time. And I had many fine examples with whom to work. Felix Abernathy, old Tom Parks. Respecting the experience of others is nothing to be ashamed of. It's an indoctrination process we all go through. Though you certainly have progressed faster than most," he quickly added. "Still, here, patience is a very cherished virtue indeed. You've been here only three years. I've called this place home for over twenty. I hope you understand my point."

Knight hid a smile. "I understand you are a little perturbed that I led the way for *U.S. v. Chance* be put on the docket at the end of the last term."

Ramsey sat up straight. "Don't believe everything you hear around here."

"On the contrary, I've found the clerk grapevine to be extraordinarily accurate."

Ramsey sat back once more. "Well, I have to admit that I was a little surprised about it. The case presents no unsettled question of law that requires our intervention. Need I say more?" He threw up his hands.

"In your opinion?"

A tinge of red eased across Ramsey's face. "In the published opinions of this Court over the last fifty years. All I ask is that you accord the Court's precedents the respect they deserve."

"You'll find no one who holds this institution in higher regard than I do."

"Very happy to hear that."

"And I'll be delighted to entertain your thoughts further on the *Chance* case after we hear oral argument."

Ramsey looked at her dully. "It will be a very short discussion, considering that it doesn't take long to say yes or no. Bluntly speaking, at the end of the day, I'll have at least five votes and you

won't."

"Well, I convinced three other justices to vote to hear the case."

Ramsey looked as though he might laugh. "You'll quickly learn that the difference between votes to hear a case and votes to decide it is enormous. Rest assured, I will have the majority."

Knight smiled pleasantly. "Your confidence is inspiring. That I *can* learn from."

Ramsey rose to leave. "Then consider this other lesson: Small mistakes tend to lead to large ones. Ours is a lifetime appointment, and all you have is your reputation. Once it's gone, it doesn't come back." Ramsey went to the door. "I wish you a productive day, Beth," he said before leaving her.

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