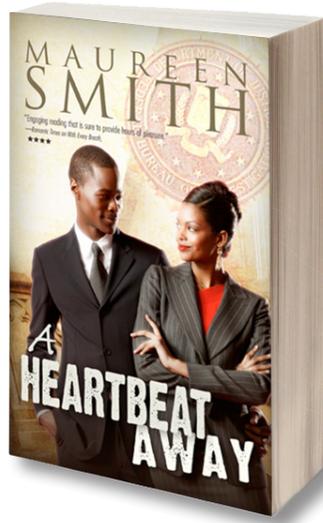


# MAUREEN SMITH



## AN EXCERPT FROM A HEARTBEAT AWAY

### **Prologue**

Washington, D.C.  
Thursday, November 6

Something is seriously off about this creep.

Jefferson Spangler shoved sweaty hands into his jeans pockets and cast a nervous glance around. He stood at the northeast end of the National Mall in Washington, D.C. He and his companion were partially obscured by one of the many elm trees that lined the endless stretch of manicured lawn. In the distance, the dome of the capitol was silhouetted against the clear night sky, a proud symbol of freedom and democracy. Tomorrow morning, crisply dressed senators would march down those hallowed corridors and into stately chambers to debate politics and partisan legislation. His father would be one of them.

Reluctantly Jefferson turned back to his companion and found a pair of dark, fathomless eyes already fixed on him. The stranger's face was shadowed beneath a hooded black parka, giving him an almost ghoulish appearance. Like the Grim Reaper.

The fine hairs at the nape of Jefferson's neck rose. He told himself that his reaction had more to do with the brisk November air than the fact that he was scared.

"Relax, kid." The voice was a low drawl laced with cold humor. "If I didn't know better, I would think you were a narc on his first undercover assignment."

"Of course not," Jefferson mumbled quickly. "I just want to get this over with before someone sees us. The police patrol this area pretty often, you know."

"Yes, I know." But the stranger made no move to hasten the transaction. Those dark, penetrating eyes continued to watch Jefferson as if he were a foreign microorganism beneath a microscope.

Jefferson shifted impatiently from one foot to another. "I usually buy from Ace. Where did you say he is?"

"I didn't." A hint of a smile lifted one corner of the stranger's mouth. But the smile seemed more sinister than amused. "Don't worry, Jefferson. You're in good hands with me. I've got something that will make you more popular with your classmates than anything you've ever had before."

A sliver of apprehension wound its way down Jefferson's spine. He swallowed hard. "I-I'm not looking for the hard stuff, man. I just want some weed, that's all. Ace always hooks me up with a good stash."

“What I have is far better than marijuana, Jefferson. That’s child’s play. Don’t you want to graduate to the majors? Aren’t you bored with being a small-time pusher?”

Jefferson hesitated, intrigued in spite of himself. “Whatcha got?”

The stranger withdrew a small package from his parka and passed it to Jefferson, who stuffed it hastily inside his backpack without even glancing at the contents. His hand was shaking like that of an addict in withdrawal.

“How much do I owe you?” he asked, throwing another anxious look around the darkened park. Other than a shrunken old man walking an Irish terrier on a short leash, there was no one in sight.

“No charge, my friend.”

Jefferson stared at the stranger in surprise. “You’re giving me this stuff for free?”

“First time’s on the house.”

Jefferson snorted in disbelief. “Why? In case I’m not a satisfied customer?”

“Oh, you’ll be satisfied, Jefferson,” the stranger said, eerily soft. “You and your friends will be very satisfied. I guarantee it.”

Jefferson suppressed an instinctive shudder. “What did you say this stuff is?”

“I didn’t.” Once again Jefferson thought he detected that sinister smile, but it was too dark outside to be sure.

“Is it Ecstasy?”

“Even better. Take my word for it, Jefferson. Once you and your friends get a taste of this stuff, you’ll be the talk of the town.”

Jefferson liked the sound of that. He liked being known for something other than who his father was.

He hitched his backpack securely onto one shoulder and started backing away. He was as eager to get home as he was to get away from the creepy dealer. “How do I get in touch with you if I want more?”

“I’ll be around,” came the vague promise.

Jefferson nodded and headed toward the sleek Mercedes Roadster parked at the curb. It occurred to him that he at least needed a name for the substance he would soon push off on his high school classmates. Everyone expected him to deliver good old-fashioned Mary Jane. If he had something better to offer, he could jack up his prices. But no one—not even the steroid-pumping jocks—would be stupid enough to fork over their parents’ hard-earned dough for a drug with no name.

He turned, the question on the tip of his tongue.

But the stranger was nowhere in sight.

Jefferson’s baffled gaze swept up and down the vast expanse of lawn. The old man with the mutt was receding in the distance. Two joggers had appeared on the path, their low laughter filling the air as they passed Jefferson.

There was no sign of the cloaked stranger. Just as suddenly as he had appeared to give Jefferson the mysterious drugs, he had disappeared. Vanished into thin air. Like a specter.

Jefferson shivered at the thought. Something like dread settled in the pit of his stomach.

He turned and hurried to his car as if the devil were on his heels.