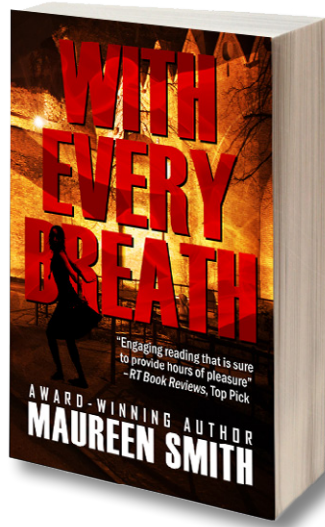


MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **WITH EVERY BREATH**

Excerpt from Chapter One

*University of Maryland, College Park
Sunday evening*

The shuttle was late.

Althea Pritchard jammed her hands into the pockets of her denim jeans, rocked back and forth on her heels. At least it wasn't cold that night. That would have made the delay that much worse. She glanced over her shoulder, trying to quell the uneasy sensation of being watched. The campus, which normally bustled with the activity of students walking to and from classes, was unusually deserted. Even for a Sunday night.

She looked down the street again, expecting to see the twin headlights of the red and white UM shuttle bus, her favorite wisecracking driver behind the wheel. But the street was empty. And dark. She frowned,

glancing up at the street lamp with its intermittent flickering. Probably a short circuit. She silently willed the light to remain on, afraid to be plunged into complete darkness.

A faint breeze stirred the surrounding trees, the rustle of fall leaves an oddly eerie sound. She shivered, told herself she was being spooked for nothing. Nonetheless, she wished she had accepted a ride from her professor. Althea had decided to walk back to her dormitory to grab an overnight bag in case she wound up spending the night at her boyfriend's apartment. She wanted to kick herself for not thinking of the idea earlier. She could have saved herself a lot of time and aggravation.

A movement to her left caught her eye, and she glanced around to see a dark sedan creeping slowly down the street. She sucked her teeth in disappointment, her frustration mounting. What was taking that darned shuttle so long?

By the time the car rolled to a stop at the curb, it was too late for her to run.

Imani Maxwell awakened with a start and bolted upright.

Her cotton nightshirt was drenched, plastered to her body like a second skin. She blinked in the still darkness, her heart beating rapidly in her chest. The clock on her nightstand glared at her.

Twelve-thirty-four.

She shivered, easing back against the pillow unsteadily. No matter how many times she had the dream, she still awakened the same. Depleted, haunted, struggling to shake the remnants of horror the images left behind.

Trembling, she slipped from the bed and padded barefoot across the chilled hardwood floor to the adjoining bathroom. Flipping on the light switch, she winced against the sudden glare and ducked her head to splash cold water over her face.

Lifting her head to blot her cheeks with a towel, she peered at her reflection in the mirror and frowned at her bloodshot eyes. She wondered, perhaps for the millionth time, when her sleep would not be plagued by the dream.

Something cold and wet nudged her bare thigh, and Imani looked down into a pair of somber dark eyes. “What’re you staring at?” she grouched, giving her face one last dab and tossing the towel into the wicker hamper. “You know the routine, Shiloh. I’m having another bad night.”

Panting lightly, the golden retriever watched her, unperturbed by her grumpiness.

The phone rang suddenly, piercing the stillness of the night.

Imani jumped, then craned her neck around the bathroom door to stare into the darkened bedroom at the phone on her cherrywood nightstand. Who on earth could be calling at this late hour? she wondered, swallowing instinctive panic. She knew all too well that late-night phone calls never bore good news.

Shiloh released a short bark, his tail wagging excitedly as he bounded toward the nightstand. Imani followed on his heels, picking up the phone on the final ring before voice mail intercepted. “Hello?”

“Professor Maxwell?” ventured a low, tremulous voice. “This is Malik Toomer.”

Cold unease slithered down Imani’s spine at the sound of her student’s voice. “Malik? Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know...Is Althea there, by any chance?”

“No.” Imani frowned, pressing the receiver closer to her ear. “We finished our meeting hours ago. Why?”

There was a heavy pause, deepening the foreboding in Imani’s chest. “She never came over like she was supposed to,” Malik continued unsteadily, “and no one’s seen her around.”

Comprehension slowly dawned. And still Imani resisted. “What are you saying, Malik?”

“I-I think something’s wrong...I think something’s happened to her.”

Baltimore, Maryland

Tuesday morning

“FBI! Freeze, drop your weapon!”

Although the streets of Baltimore were still slick from last night’s downpour, Garrison Wade’s steps were swift and sure, his movements mirroring the agility of a panther’s as he propelled his body over a barbed wire fence and landed on both feet, barely missing a beat as he continued the chase. Twenty paces behind him, Special Agent Edward Balducci followed in pursuit, leaving a trail of muffled curses in his wake.

Relentless, Garrison cut across a narrow side street and followed his prey down a dark, fog-drenched alley littered with hypodermic needles, empty liquor bottles, and discarded trash. Anger and impatience surged through him like an electrical voltage, mingling with the adrenaline and blood rushing through his veins as he closed the distance. He ducked behind a dumpster just as his quarry fired another shot at him. The shot came so close that Garrison could smell the smoking lead as it just missed his shoulder by a fraction of an inch, making him grateful that his partner had fallen far behind, out of harm's way.

The ensuing silence told him that John Doe had stopped running, likely taking cover in an abandoned store doorway further down the alley.

Garrison listened keenly for a moment, his nine-millimeter Glock drawn and trigger-pulled in preparation. The beginning rays of dawn arced across the fall sky, a slice of lavender peeking from the orange horizon. Soon the city would be awake with morning commuters bustling to work and school, oblivious to the volatile situation unfolding in their own backyards. He couldn't risk the lives of innocent bystanders again.

Garrison heard a faint sound and slowly emerged from behind the dumpster just in time to see his prey make another dash down the alley. With controlled precision, keeping his eyes trained on his target, Garrison raised his Glock, aimed and fired once. John Doe went down hard, clutching his ruptured knee with a surprised howl. He lay on the ground, writhing like a wounded animal. As Garrison hurried toward him, John Doe's bloodied fingers reached out, groping along the concrete for his fallen weapon. With lightning speed, Garrison cocked his gun and squeezed the trigger. John Doe screamed in outrage as the bullet tore through his palm, sending his weapon flying.

Garrison was upon him in a heartbeat. He forced the man's arms behind his back, turned him over onto his stomach and planted a knee firmly in his back. "You have the right to remain silent—" Garrison began.

Balducci approached, panting briskly as he glared at the man pinned to the ground beneath his partner. "You crazy son of a—"

"Not now, Eddie," Garrison muttered. He fastened handcuffs onto the perpetrator and hauled him unceremoniously to his feet.

Eddie bent over for a moment, bracing his hands on his knees as he labored to catch his breath. "Christ," he panted, "you would think I still smoked."

Garrison raised a sardonic eyebrow as he half dragged their suspect toward the black federal-issue Crown Victoria that had just screeched to a halt at the alley's entrance. Two plainclothes federal agents spilled from the car and strode briskly toward them.

"I want my lawyer," groaned the wounded John Doe as Garrison handed him over to the waiting federal agents. "He busted my kneecap! I'll never walk right again!"

Eddie laughed scornfully. "For where you're going," he called after him, "that was only going to be a matter of time!" Shaking his head after the prisoner in disgust, he turned to Garrison and pointed matter-of-factly to his forehead. "You're bleeding, by the way."

Garrison reached up, grimacing when his fingers touched the sticky wetness that confirmed the rupture of stitches only two weeks old. The wound had come as a result of an early morning raid on an East Baltimore crackhouse. The perpetrator was a reputed drug dealer directly responsible for the shooting deaths of several local teenagers. He hadn't gone down without a fight.

Garrison hated hospitals. The idea of having to return to one to have his forehead restitched irritated him beyond reason.

“He didn’t finish reading my Miranda rights!” John Doe complained to the grimfaced FBI agents who lowered him into the backseat of the Crown Victoria. “That’s against the law. My rights have been violated. I demand justice!”

Garrison sauntered over to him. Heeding his murderous scowl, the two agents glanced away as Garrison seized the hobbled man by the lapels of his shirt and spoke in a low, scathing tone into his startled face. “Don’t talk to me about rights. Not after the way you tortured those innocent children. You want justice? How about we go for a little walk, just you and me, and we’ll talk about justice, you sick piece of sh—”

“You can’t threaten me!” wailed John Doe, but with less bravado than before. The corner of his bloody mouth trembled as he eyed Garrison warily. “I know my rights. I know a threat when I hear one, Agent Wade, and that was definitely a threat.”

Garrison’s dark eyes narrowed for only a fraction of a second before his fist connected with John Doe’s sallow cheek, snapping his head hard to the left. John Doe cried out in protest, slumping weakly against Garrison.

With a lethal smirk, Garrison pulled the man’s face to his. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to consult with an attorney before being questioned. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed to represent you. Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you?”