

TO KILL THE TRUTH

SAM BOURNE

Quercus

Monday

Chapter One

Charlottesville, Virginia, 2.40am

The past was present. At this late hour, he could feel it curl around him like smoke.

Normally, when he was teaching, standing before an auditorium full of students, history felt as the word sounded: distant and dusty, even to him. The same was true in the library, surrounded by people. There too the events of long ago remained beyond the horizon, out of reach.

But here, alone in this room, in the early hours, the years fell away. He had taken precautions to ensure modernity would not intrude: the phone was stilled, the computer sound asleep. It was just him and the documents, piled high on his desk. Outside, though it was too dark to see now, was the Lawn, the centre-piece of the University of Virginia's founding campus here in Charlottesville, a marvel of landscaping designed by Thomas Jefferson himself. After nearly three decades in the history department, no one begrudged Professor Russell Aikman his office with

a perfect view. Even in the darkness, the mere knowledge that the Lawn was there, just on the other side of the window, narrowed the gap between him and the America of centuries earlier.

But it was the documents themselves, examined in solitude, that transported him. These were not the originals, so there was nothing sensory about this act of magic. It was not the smell or touch of these texts that sent Aikman tumbling back through time, though he knew the power of such a physical connection. He had, in the course of his career, touched the very parchment that, say, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton or, as it happens, Jefferson had scratched and etched with the hard nib of their quills. He had felt that strange kinship with ancestors that can flow through the fingertips, the sensation that both you and they had touched this same object, your skin and theirs somehow joined across the generations. But the link he felt on these late nights was not physical.

No. The grip these documents exerted on him came only from their words. For Aikman, to read a sentence set down more than two hundred years ago was to connect with the mind of a fellow human being long gone, to be allowed into their thoughts. When he contemplated the wonder of it, he pictured those images from the space age days of his youth, when an American craft would 'dock' with its Soviet counterpart. Two individuals conquering a vast distance, holding out their hands and touching.

He felt it that night, as he drilled down into the text placed at the centre of his desk. He lost himself in the words, a diver sinking deeper and deeper into dark water. Only when he heard the

noise did he cannon upward, bursting through the surface and back into the present.

He bolted upright, alert as a hare, his head darting from left to right. What was that? There were occasional sounds here at night: a rumble of the heating, a shudder of the air-conditioning, depending on the season. But this was more direct. It sounded like a creak in the corridor.

‘Hello?’ He felt ridiculous as he called out, but he did it again. ‘Hello there?’

No reply. Of course not.

He looked down and saw the array of papers on his desk as if they had been laid out by someone else. He hadn’t realized how much he’d written this night, already filling three separate sheets of his yellow legal pad, along with dozens of Post-it notes. After all these years, the process still mystified him, how these scraps of scribbled half-thoughts turned steadily, over time, into something that would be called history.

He found his place once more, about two-thirds of the way through this diary of a Confederate soldier. A couple in Richmond had found it a matter of months earlier, in a stack of boxes they were about to throw out of a newly purchased nineteenth-century farmhouse. In fact, it was their daughter, fourteen years old, who had spotted it, an unbound sheaf of papers with little to announce that it was a journal. When she saw the references to battle, she thought the crumbling pages might date back to the Vietnam war. It took the family a while to understand what they had. But once they—

There it was again. Unmistakable this time. The creak of a human footstep on a floorboard, no doubt about it.

Aikman stood up, shifted around his desk and headed for the door. He felt his head grow dizzy, the colours swirling. He'd stood up too quickly.

When he opened the door, he could see nothing. The corridor was in darkness. He stepped forward, clapping his hands. He told himself his only purpose was to activate the motion-sensitive lighting. It was an unintended side effect that the noise broke the silence, providing him with the reassurance of his own presence.

'Hello?' he said again, peering into the corridor of faculty offices, adjusting his eyes to the bright light. 'Mr Warner, is that you?'

Silence.

'Is there something you need? Is there someone you need me to call?'

He scanned the doors of his colleagues, each one shut and expressionless. In the light, he noticed which doors were unmarked and which decorated, either with bumper stickers for long-forgotten, defeated liberal candidates or with a form attached to a clipboard, letting students know their office hours and when they would be available for a drop-in visit, complete with ballpoint pen dangling on a string for those keen to book an appointment. Old school, Aikman thought to himself of what had once seemed a vogueish innovation: the young faculty did all that online these days. He looked at his own door, adorned only with his name.

One last try and he would go back in. Perhaps a gentler tack

might coax his brilliant, but troubled, student out of the shadows. 'Adam, if you need me to take you to the hospital, I can do that. Just say the word. No need to skulk around in the middle of the—'

He was cut off mid-sentence. The lights had gone out, their automated time expired, the sudden darkness taking him by surprise. He considered requesting an extension by waving his arms around again, but thought better of it. He turned his shoulder and headed back inside towards his desk. The door behind him swung steadily back towards the latch, without ever quite meeting it.

Slower than he once was, Russell Aikman had only just reached his chair when the door opened again. When he looked up, he could barely make out the face of his visitor. The light from his desk lamp, pooled on the spread of papers, didn't reach that part of the room. He may have squinted but if he did, it was only for a split-second.

Was that time enough to see the intruder make a small movement – a small rub of the eyebrow – which seemed to act as a cue for the arm to arc upwards until it was held straight ahead, the hand unwavering, as it trained itself directly on the space just between the target's eyes? Did Russell Aikman have the time to understand what was happening to him, to comprehend that this was his very last second of life? Did he know that at that moment his present was sinking forever into the past?

Chapter Two

Washington DC, 12.05pm

Maggie Costello wriggled in her seat for the fifth time in as many minutes. She was straining to concentrate. It wasn't that the spectacle unfolding on stage before her wasn't riveting. It was. The arguments traded across the floor in this packed university lecture theatre were compelling. But still it was hard to stay focused. The noise outside was just too great.

She could hear the chants; they all could. They'd heard them as they made their way in, coming from the two armies of protesters facing off against each other, separated into two blocs on either side of the entrance path into the auditorium by a thin, struggling line of campus police reinforced by officers of the MPD, Washington's metropolitan police department.

On one side were the students, backed by allies who'd travelled in from New York, Philadelphia and beyond. They were young and unmissably diverse: Latino women, black men – one of them wearing mock-manacles around his wrists, linked by a

chain to a collar around his neck – and plenty of white demonstrators draped in Pride flags, their arms tattooed and their faces multiply pierced. Their loudest, most consistent battle cry: ‘No platform for racists!’ and, pertinently for today, ‘Slavery is real!’

Ranged against them were ranks of white men in an unofficial uniform of beige chinos and white (and occasionally black) polo shirts. Most were carrying shields, some rectangular, shaped like those wielded by riot police, some circular, like those favoured by comic book super-heroes. They were decorated with a variety of patterns that Maggie struggled to identify. Of course she recognized the Iron Cross, adopted and adapted by the Third Reich, and the Confederate flag of the old south. But the rest of the assorted triangles and crosses were new to her: they seemed to be variations on the swastika theme, hinting at some ancient Nordic pattern. Several were in a distinct white-and-red, nodding to the colours of the Crusades. At first, Maggie, watching from just a few yards away, had tried to decipher each one; a few of them she looked up on her phone. But there were so many that, after a while, they merged into a blur.

Their chants were more direct. ‘Blood and Soil’ was a favourite refrain, as was ‘You will not replace us’, often reworked as ‘Jews will not replace us.’ But the one that struck Maggie with greatest force, and which seemed to be tailored especially for the occasion, was, ‘Don’t know, don’t care/Nothing happened, nothing’s there.’

She could still make them out now, from her seat in the back row of the lecture theatre. They were muffled but unambiguous,

even when they clashed with and overrode each other. Sometimes the words were drowned out by the percussive beat of men pounding their shields with sticks and, at intervals, the chants would merge into a single crescendo, a collective surging sound, which, Maggie guessed, meant one side had rushed against the other.

Of the three speakers on stage, improbably seated in chat-show formation around a low circular table bearing three glasses of water, only one seemed unfazed by the noise outside. His name was Rob Staat and he was the reason for the protests. He had emerged as the chief media spokesperson and defender of William Keane, the notorious self-styled historian who had become a hero to the American, and increasingly global, far right. Keane was currently at the centre of what the media had, inevitably, hailed as the ‘trial of the century’.

Keane, even his enemies had to admit, was a floridly charismatic figure, in his white suits and insistence on old-world southern courtesies – all ‘Yes, ma’am’ and ‘No, sir’ee’ – and the thirty-something Staat was a pale substitute. But thanks to a constant quarter-smile that played on his lips, threatening to flourish into a full-blown smirk, he managed to arouse Maggie’s loathing all the same.

Against Staat was Jonathan Baum, a scholar from Georgetown’s history department. Usually a solid, methodical speaker, he was now visibly unnerved. He reached for his water glass often, the microphone on his lapel picking up the audible gulp as he drank. Perched on his lap was a large file, which he would rummage through while Staat talked, as if searching for the document that

would settle the matter once and for all. Whenever the rhythmic pounding of stick against shield outside resumed, he'd look up, startled.

Seated between them was Pamela Bentham, heiress of the same Bentham family that had endowed this theatre along with the newly established Bentham Center for Free Speech to which it was attached. Besides a few opening remarks, she said almost nothing, content to let the two antagonists dominate proceedings while she maintained a studied neutrality. Maggie watched her – mid-fifties, expensively coiffed, wearing spectacles whose necessity Maggie questioned – as she swivelled to face whichever man was speaking, nodding along with each point intently. She was working hard to ignore the pandemonium outside but, Maggie noticed, one Bentham hand was gripping the other, as if to stop it from shaking.

In a way, it was impressive, Maggie concluded. Not so much the charring, as the determination. This Bentham woman was putting her mouth where her money was, turning up in person, rather than contenting herself with a mere donation, to ensure this debate took place, despite all the pressure there had been on the university to stop it. And doing it simply to insist on the right to free speech.

Most institutions would – and indeed had – run a mile from the Keane trial. It could only bring trouble. Maggie was sure that the university grandees' collective heart had sunk when Bentham suggested airing the issues on campus. Everything about it screamed unsafe space.

And yet there was no doubting its importance. Americans had

been gripped by the trial, with plenty of the cable networks carrying long stretches of it live. That was partly thanks to Keane and his courtroom antics. But it was also because of what was at stake.

Keane had sued the African-American writer Susan Liston for libel over a paragraph in a book she'd written on the alt-right, in which she had referred to Keane as a 'slavery denier'. His case, brought before a federal court in Richmond, was simple. He could not be a slavery denier because there was nothing to deny. Black people had never been slaves in the United States.

Staat was now parroting Keane's arguments, the same ones everyone present had seen Keane make a hundred times before. Slaves' testimony was unreliable; slave owners' testimony was unreliable; the documents were unreliable. He used the word 'myth' a lot, Maggie noticed, as if it were a one-word rebuttal or perhaps an expletive. 'Myth!' he said again now, for the dozenth time.

Maggie looked around the lecture theatre. The first rows were packed with journalists, as were the seats surrounding her at the back. The entire rear of the hall was a thicket of tripods and TV cameras. As for the rest, it was a mixture of university notables, especially those associated with the Bentham Center, doubtless keen to ingratiate themselves with their patron, and handpicked graduate students. It seemed the Georgetown authorities hadn't wanted to take the risk of letting in undergrads, who were liable to whip out placards, heckle Staat or rush the stage. (Clearly, Maggie concluded, the Center for Free Speech had decided free speech had its limits.)

While Staat was off on a riff about the nature of libel, Maggie wondered about herself: was she here as a grad student or as a notable? She'd never really thought about her exact status at this institution. It was enough that she was here.

After the White House, after everything that had happened, she needed a chance to think – and that, she told herself, is what universities were for. Liz had begged Maggie to come live with her, her husband and kids in Atlanta – ‘If you truly want to make a clean break, you have to leave that swamp of a city’ – and Maggie had considered it, she really had. But seven days with her sister had been enough to confirm it would never work. Too much family, too much scrutiny.

She needed her own turf and, after the best part of a decade, that turf was Washington, DC. She'd never flatter it with the word ‘home’. To this day, that meant Dublin. But Maggie knew her way around Washington and, for now, that was good enough.

Still, there was no denying that she needed to make a break. Writing essays and attending seminars felt like the right change. Now if she encountered a crisis, it might result in a missed lecture, rather than a nuclear conflagration and the end of the world. ‘Why are academic politics so vicious?’ ran the old gag. ‘Because the stakes are so low.’ And that suited Maggie just fine.

This lunchtime debate over the Keane trial, with the potential riot going on outside, was the closest she had got to politics since she'd left the administration. The tension in the hall, which was clearly getting to Baum and Bentham if not to Staat, who seemed to relish it, barely made a dent on Maggie's central nervous

system: she had endured so much worse. But it was, at least, a reminder of the life she had left behind. She felt the first, unbidden stirrings of adrenalin.

Like a recovering alcoholic who'd risked a visit to a bar, she now cursed her own recklessness. She should never have come. She should have stayed in the library, or at home in her apartment. Studying history was meant to have been her escape from all this, a haven of calm, serene contemplation far away from political combat. This had been a mistake, a needless—

A thudding noise came from outside. Several heads turned in the hall; Baum seemed to jolt. Had there been an attempt on the door? Had one or other faction pushed forward, trying to break in? Maggie caught herself waiting. For the sound of broken glass or a scream, she wasn't sure, but something that might explain what had just happened. Instead, there was a resurgence in the chanting, louder now and angrier too. 'Don't know, don't care, nothing happened, nothing's there!'

Was this the sound of Keane's backers – the white supremacists, neo-Nazis and Klansmen – high on a frisson of triumph or, alternatively, the righteous thrill of victimhood? Were they cheering a successful charge on the building, or raging that they had been unjustly attacked by their opponents? Maggie was listening keenly, but it was hard to tell.

On the platform, Bentham was urging people to settle down. 'This, ladies and gentlemen, is exactly why this centre is so badly needed. As you can see with your own eyes, and hear with your own ears, the threat to free speech in this country is real. Yet our

future depends on our being able to talk openly with each other, no matter how difficult the topic. That's why . . .'

As she spoke, Maggie noticed, the hands were trembling again. Baum was staring at the doors at the back of the hall, as if he feared a stampede at any moment. Many in the audience, perhaps following his lead, were doing the same thing. In the eye of this hurricane sat Staat, the smirk now unbound.

A sudden vibration made Maggie jump. She realized her heart was thumping as she took the phone from her pocket. A text message, from Donna Morrison, a former colleague from Maggie's first, happier stint at the White House. Morrison's response to the craziness of recent events had been to step out from the shadows, to quit the backroom, and run for office herself. She had made some history, becoming the first black woman elected as the Governor of Virginia.

The message was typical Donna: straight to the point.

I need your help.

Maggie put the phone back in her pocket. She'd not been short of job offers. There were old friends, and people she'd never met, constantly pestering her to come back to politics, to help out with this or that crisis. They always said a version of the same thing. 'You're the best troubleshooter in the business, Maggie – and I'm in trouble.'

It was flattering, but Maggie's mind was made up. She needed a break. Or, as she would tell each would-be employer: she had needed to get out, and the best way of sticking to that was not to get back in.

Her phone buzzed again.

Sighing, she pulled it out, mentally drafting her ‘Thanks, but no thanks’ reply.

She read the message and let out a gasp.

A man is dead, Maggie. I need you.

Chapter Three

Richmond, Virginia, 2.30pm

‘How about a cookie?’

Maggie shook her head, though not because she didn’t want to eat one of the chocolate chip treats, as wide as a saucer, laid out on the plate before her. Rather she had been in Washington long enough that at least some of its mores had left their mark on her. When they brought the dessert menu, you only ever ordered coffee or a mint tea. At lunch, the only drink required was a bottle of sparkling water. And in a meeting, all snacks were to be declined. Maggie struggled with the first two, but she had succumbed to the third. She now saw the little fruit platters or bowls of M&Ms left on Washington conference tables not as small gestures of courtesy but as a test, and a poorly concealed one at that.

‘Baked them myself?’

‘You’re kidding. You’re the Governor of Virginia. There’s no way you’ve got the time to do that.’

‘Oh yes, I do.’ Donna Morrison looked up at the door, making sure no one was about to come in. ‘I am the *menopausal* Governor of Virginia, who feels like she hasn’t had a full night’s sleep since the Bush administration.’ Seeing Maggie’s reaction, she added, ‘What else am I gonna do between two and four am? There’s only so much Fox a girl can watch.’

Maggie felt herself smile, wide and open. Long time since she’d smiled like that, she realized. Though, she now remembered, that was hardly uncommon in a meeting with Donna, who’d headed up the policy planning staff for the president they had both served so proudly. She was warm and welcoming, with an easy laugh. How she had come so far in Washington politics was a mystery to many in the city, including, it seemed, Donna herself. But there were lots like her in that administration, good people handpicked by a president who liked to boast he had a ‘no shits’ hiring policy.

‘So,’ the governor said, taking her place on the sofa opposite Maggie, and smoothing her skirt as she pivoted the conversation to business. ‘Like I told you, a man is dead.’

‘I know.’

When she’d first got Donna’s text, and only for a moment, Maggie had wondered if the governor was referring to events directly outside the auditorium at Georgetown. Perhaps the commotion, that thudding noise they’d all heard, was the sound of a man crushed to death by protesters. Maybe the police had alerted the governor and she had instantly called Maggie.

But a cursory look at Twitter told her that the death her old friend had in mind was closer to home and within her state lines.

Shortly after eight o'clock this morning, a cleaner at UVA, Charlottesville, had discovered Professor Russell Aikman, long-serving member of the history faculty, dead in his office. He had been slumped over his desk, his brains sprayed over the antique maps that adorned his office walls. Which was why Maggie was now face to face with the new Governor of Virginia, fighting the urge to pick up a chocolate chip cookie.

'First question I asked, Maggie, was—'

'Is this suicide?'

'But they said no. Ruled it out within an hour. Ballistics and whatnot.'

'Which was not what you wanted to hear.'

'Damn right. I was *praying* they'd tell me he'd taken his own life. I mean, that would be horrible for his family. Just horrible. Not that this is much better. But at least, we could avoid—'

'All this.' Maggie gestured at her phone. The tweets had started straight away, as soon as word of Aikman's death had got out, which would have been shortly after the Staat vs Baum debate had begun.

One conservative talkshow host had got in early, harvesting thousands of retweets within an hour. *Tearing down statues is one thing. Taking a man's life, that's another. #RussellAikmanRIP*

But those on the other side of the argument had wasted no time either. Widely shared was a tweet by someone whose profile announced her as an activist in #pullthemdown, the campaign to remove Confederate-era statues. *Russell Aikman wrote about the history of slavery. Now he has been silenced by those who can't handle the truth. But #TheTruthLives*

‘Exactly.’ Donna’s smile had gone. ‘They’re both claiming Aikman as a martyr for their cause, both blaming each other.’

‘That’s how things are here these days,’ Maggie said. She was suddenly aware of her own voice, with its Irish accent, and worried that she sounded detached: the smug foreigner looking with pity on the basketcase nation America was becoming. Neither needed to say the name of the man they blamed.

‘I know. But it’s getting worse, Maggie. Let’s say one or other of these groups did actually kill Aikman. Let’s say that happened. That is a whole other level of serious. That’s not just talking heads yammering at each other on TV or Facebook or whatever. That’s . . .’

Maggie watched her run out of words. For all the folksy cookie talk, Donna Morrison looked gaunt, eaten up with anxiety.

‘You think this could spread?’

‘I tell you why I’m losing sleep, Maggie.’ She corrected herself. ‘Even more than usual. The verdict in the Keane trial is due this week. Friday, most likely.’

‘The Keane trial? That guy’s crazy. It’s a publicity stunt. There’s no way he could—’

‘That’s not what I’m hearing. That’s not what I’m being told to prepare for.’

‘You’ve got to be joking.’

‘The defence say the signs are not good. They think there are grounds on which Keane could win.’

‘That’s ridiculous. He’s already said—’

‘Look, Maggie. You’re not a lawyer and nor am I. I’m just telling you the advice they’re giving me. Keane could win this thing, if only on a technicality.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

‘Just imagine if that happens, Maggie. A court in the southern United States declaring that slavery did not exist. You’re too young to remember the Rodney King riots, but I’m not. Whole of LA blew up because white police beat a black man half to death and got away with it. This would be a thousand times worse. A thousand times. I’m telling you, Maggie, it wouldn’t just start a riot. It would start a civil war.’

‘Especially if the two sides are already killing each other.’

‘Exactly. Think about it, Maggie. If we get into some death spiral thing here, with tit-for-tat killings, reprisals and all that – then that verdict on Friday will be like pouring a barrel of gasoline on a fire that’s already raging.’ She paused. ‘And they’re angry to start with.’

Maggie furrowed a brow.

‘They’ve got a black woman sitting in the governor’s mansion in Richmond, Virginia. The capital of the Confederacy.’

Maggie sighed. ‘I hear you, Governor, I really do.’

‘It’s Donna to you, Maggie.’

‘But I can’t. I just can’t. I’m out of this now. I’m—’

‘Maggie. D’you know what the president – *our* president – used to call you?’ She didn’t wait for an answer. ‘“Troubleshooter-in-chief”.’

‘Donna, please. Don’t.’

‘“You show Maggie Costello any crisis, any crisis at all . . .”’ She was impersonating his voice, and doing a half-decent job. ‘“She’ll get to the bottom of it. And then she’ll solve it.” That’s what he said.’

‘He was a very generous man.’

‘Generous, my ass. He called it as he saw it. No bullshit praise from him.’

‘I’ve moved on now.’

‘Moved on? You’re doing some hippy dropout college course!’

‘I’m taking some time, to get my—’

‘What? Get your head straight? Look, I get that. I *really* get that. Nothing I’d like more right now than a big long rest. Sheesh! And you went through a lot. I mean, *a lot*. We’re all aware of what happened in the White House. You did something incredible. The nation owes you a great debt for that.’

‘You don’t need to flatter me, Donna.’

‘No? Well, tell me what I do need to do, Maggie. I’m serious. Tell me what the fuck I need to do to get you to help me. To get to the bottom of this Aikman thing and shut it down, before it gets out of hand. Because I think a race war is about to erupt in my state and I am genuinely terrified that it could devour the whole country.’

Maggie stared at the floor. She didn’t dare meet the governor’s eye. She knew what it would do to her resolve.

‘I need my life back,’ Maggie said at last.

‘I know you do,’ Donna said quietly. ‘And once this is done, you will and you must get your life back. But right now, you’re the only person who can help. Please.’

There was a long silence, eventually broken by Maggie. ‘I’ll give you one week,’ she said, rising to her feet. ‘No more.’

The governor took her hand, clasping it tightly. ‘We don’t have a week, Maggie. We have less than five days.’

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by Sam Bourne

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