

PRAISE FOR JAMES TUCKER

“Gripping from its opening lines, *Next of Kin* is a white-knuckle page-turner, where ruthless power, murder, and crimes hidden for generations create an intricate, utterly absorbing tale. The life of a vulnerable young boy hangs in the balance, and Detective Buddy Lock must find the killer before it’s too late. Simply a fantastic read.”

—Marya Hornbacher, Pulitzer Prize–nominated author of *Wasted*,
The Center of Winter, and *Madness*

“Terrific plot! And Buddy Lock is a cop protagonist that’s a delightful departure from the norm. I’m wholeheartedly recommending *Next of Kin*.”

—Mike Lawson, author of the Joe DeMarco thrillers

NEXT

OF

KIN

JAMES TUCKER

f THOMAS & MERCER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Chapter One

Ben heard shattering glass. He pictured the bottle of champagne his father had been holding, now lying in shards on the oak floor.

His father's voice boomed from the living room. "What are you doing? *What are you doing?*"

He froze.

He was in the walk-in pantry at the back of the house, looking for a chocolate bar.

He listened for an answer to his father's question, but only heard him groan loudly. His mother screamed.

Then she shouted: "Run, Benjamin! *Run! Ru—*"

Silence. Her voice had been cut off.

A shiver passed through him. His hands began to shake.

He stared at the columns of shelving. If he could keep his hands steady, he might be able to get out. But what about his sister, Ellen-Marie?

She cried once, a pitiful burst, and the house again grew quiet.

Then he heard footsteps on the oak-plank floor, moving toward the back of the house, toward him.

Slowly, quietly, as only a ten-year-old can do, he moved to his right, to the farthest segment of shelving, the one he'd accidentally pressed against the previous June. He pushed on the section of shelving holding

the jars of olives, just as he'd done last summer, but it wouldn't budge. He put both hands on the vertical planks and pushed. Nothing. He wondered if his father—who'd told him never to mention the secret doorway—had nailed it shut, to keep him from exploring.

The footsteps again. They were in the long hallway now, perhaps fifteen yards from him.

He brought his shoulder against the shelf, leaned into the wood, and shoved as hard as he could. He strained and his slippers began to slide on the floor, but then he heard the faint snap of the catch.

Now he pulled on the heavy shelf, grateful it made no sound as it swung into the pantry. He saw the stone steps leading down into darkness.

The footsteps grew closer and came faster.

He moved onto the stairs, balanced precariously, and turned to pull the pantry shelf closed behind him. He did so carefully. When he heard the catch snap into place, he stood on the top stair, perfectly still.

The footsteps entered the pantry. He heard them cross from one end of the generously sized room to the other and back again. Then they ceased. There was no sound. Yet Ben hadn't heard the footsteps leave. He held his breath. Someone knocked on the pantry walls. One wall. Another wall and another. Not six inches from his face, a knock on the fourth wall. Startlingly loud. He shook involuntarily and swayed backward. He hoped the shelving sounded solid. For thirty seconds he heard nothing. He shivered with fear and cold. He was dressed in a thick cotton bathrobe over his pajamas, but his hiding place was frigid and he was thin as a reed. Even the pantry had been cold.

Now he heard breathing on the other side of the shelves. He listened carefully but kept still. There was no sound other than the person's calm, full movement of air in and out of his—or her—lungs. An unusual scent, one he didn't recognize, passed through hairline cracks in the shelving. New leather mixed with lemon and something else.

And then, all at once, the footsteps retreated from the pantry.

A moment later he sensed a change in the air, followed by the sound of the house's front door opening and closing, but he couldn't be sure. And because he wasn't sure, he knew that he remained in danger. He couldn't go back into the house.

He drew his bathrobe more tightly around himself and eased down the steps into the darkness. It was farther than he remembered. When he reached the tunnel's soft earthen floor, he began walking. His hands guided him along the left concrete wall into the unknown. He went much farther than he had last summer. His teeth chattered and his hands tightened with cold. He thought he had to get out or he'd die.

After a while he stumbled upon another set of stairs. These he climbed carefully and at the top of them, touched the wooden surface he found. At first it seemed to be the back of another hidden pantry door with no discernable latch, but he was relieved to find a typical round knob.

Turning it, he pushed open the door and walked into a pantry that was much larger than the one in his parents' house. He knew he'd reached the lodge. Recessed lights burned low, illuminating shelves of spices and juices, canned goods and cereal, flour and wheat, syrup and sugar. On the floor he saw bushels of potatoes and winter squash. At the edge of a green marble countertop was a telephone. Beside the telephone was a pile of folded wool blankets.

Without alerting anyone in the lodge to his presence, he picked up the telephone and dialed 911.

"Someone killed my family," he whispered when the dispatcher answered. "Please help me."

Chapter Two

Three days later, Buddy's cell phone rang in the silent, brittle cold. He considered not answering. He was standing at his mother's grave in Kensiko Cemetery north of New York City—his mother who'd died of cancer twenty-one years ago today. He'd been close to her and didn't want to be distracted. But a feeling of duty welled up within him. He was a detective first grade with the New York City Police Department, and his job was nearly all that mattered to him. He reached into the breast pocket of his navy-blue overcoat and pulled out the phone.

"Lock here," he said.

"Detective Lock, this is Ray Sawyer. I'm an attorney for a member of the Brook family."

The names weren't immediately familiar. "Yeah?"

"Detective, I need your help solving murders."

In the faint light—it wasn't yet seven in the morning—Buddy shook his head, annoyed this stranger had called him. He said, "I'm with the NYPD and I don't moonlight. You'll have to find someone else to work the murder."

"*Murders*, Detective Lock. Three of them. Almost an entire family. Upstate, at a great camp in the Adirondacks wilderness."

Now Buddy made the connection. He'd read about the crime in the *Gazette*. Many hints about the murder of a rich family at their estate up

north. No arrest, he recalled. Hardly any information. Not even a statement of how the family had died. And some of the details he'd found didn't add up. For example . . .

No, he told himself. *Goddammit, no. Stop thinking about it.* He turned from his mother's grave and said, "Mr. Sawyer, I'm assigned to the Nineteenth Precinct in Manhattan and normally don't have jurisdiction anywhere else. Aren't the State Police handling it?"

"Yes, but they're lost," Sawyer told him. "And this is a *Manhattan* crime. I need you, Detective Lock," Sawyer pleaded. "I need you or I wouldn't have called."

Buddy stopped. Turning, he looked at his car, the only one parked along Lakeview Avenue. "What do you mean, a 'Manhattan crime'?"

Sawyer said, "Camp Kateri is owned by the Brooks. Four houses arrayed around a main lodge, one house for each branch of the family. In the winter there's nobody up there except the caretaker and one or two of the staff. But a few days ago the entire family was gathered for the New Year's holiday. Somebody entered one of the houses and killed Alton Brook, his wife, Brenda, and their daughter, Ellen-Marie. The murders are Manhattan crimes because all the family live in Manhattan."

"And the staff?" Buddy asked.

"They may be local, but why would they do something so awful?"

Buddy thought of a number of reasons as he headed back to his car. He wanted to end the call with Ray Sawyer and get down to the precinct before the worst of the morning traffic. He also wanted to quash the interest in this case that had formed in his gut. He couldn't get involved, but at the same time he wanted to know more. A bad sign. A sign of an addiction he recognized all too well, one that tallied his clearance rate against the breakup of his family. He'd long ago chosen to focus all his energy on work, the organizing principle of his life. Work helped him blot out his misfortunes. It helped him move forward and was the key to his survival. For years there had been nothing else. Until he'd met Mei on a case the year before. Now his world had two suns

that eyed each other warily. He said, “Mr. Sawyer, you said *almost* an entire branch of the Brook family was murdered.”

“That’s right.”

He came to a monument in the shape of a cross. With his free hand he brushed off the snow and looked down at the name: Sergei Rachmaninoff. Here lay the great Russian composer who’d been one of Buddy’s inspirations when he was on the concert circuit as a young man, before he’d failed in the most public way possible, at Carnegie Hall.

“Detective Lock? Are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Buddy said, touching the headstone once, then turning from the grave and hurrying down the hill toward Lakeview. “Who survived?”

“Their ten-year-old son, Ben. I’m now his guardian.”

Jesus. Buddy closed in on the last thirty yards between him and the unmarked Dodge Charger. “Was Ben at the camp that night?”

“Yes, but he escaped. We don’t know how, and he won’t tell us.”

“Where is he right now?”

“He’s with my wife at our apartment on West End Avenue. We’re afraid to put him back in school until we know he’s safe.”

Buddy reached the Charger, opened the door, and dropped into the driver’s seat. He closed the heavy door and started the car. “The remaining family won’t take him?”

“Ben’s parents were very clear in the family trust documents. They didn’t want him living with his aunts and uncles. They thought his uncles were unethical in business and in life, and that his aunts spoiled their children so much those children didn’t need to work. Ben’s parents hated their laziness. And I won’t allow these people custody of the boy, especially when a family member might be the killer.”

Buddy said, “And you think Ben is safe at your apartment?”

“I think so.”

More and more questions filled Buddy's mind, but he stifled them. He bit down on the insides of his cheeks and tasted blood. His left hand gripped the steering wheel. Years as a piano prodigy had taught him to see order in a thousand notes, and he thought this skill would help him find clues invisible to everyone else. His relentlessness would lead him to the killer. And yet he knew the job couldn't be his. Forcing his voice to be calm, he said, "Mr. Sawyer, I can't take over an investigation upstate. But I'm going to refer you to someone who might be able to help."

"Who?" Sawyer asked, his voice betraying disappointment.

"His name is Ward Mills. He has the time and money this case will require."

Buddy gave out his half brother's telephone number, wished Sawyer the best of luck, and ended the call.

He thought of why—why Ben Brook had lost his mother, why he couldn't help the boy or his family. In frustration he pounded the steering wheel with his heavy fist.