

Drug Wars

A Peden Savage Novel

PJ Grondin

PROLOGUE

Saturday, August 10, 2013, 1:45 AM

Two agents from the Savannah satellite office of the Drug Enforcement Administration moved through the front door of the house one-quarter mile east of Downtown Savannah, Georgia. Stale, acrid odor from burnt marijuana filled the small living room in the rundown, cinderblock house. Two other team members handled the back entrances. All wore black tactical uniforms with “DEA” in large gold letters on their front and back.

“Living room clear,” team leader, Vincent Mercado, uttered into his headset microphone.

As Mercado made his way deeper into the house, he saw the green laser-dot from Agent Alex Smith’s LAR-15. He was coming through the patio door in the back of the house.

He heard Smith in his earpiece, “Dining room, kitchen clear.”

Crouched in a bedroom closet with a cordless phone and a twelve-gauge shotgun, twenty-one year old Weston Ross cowered with his hands covering his face. Seized by fear, he was certain that the intruders could hear his body shaking. Time crawled, the seconds dragged. Every sound from outside the closet echoed in his ears. The windows were buffeted by the light breeze. To him, it seemed as though they would shatter with every slight gust. Even the sound of the crickets

belting out their chorus tweaked his anxiety. Sweat poured down his brow into his eyes. His tee shirt stuck to his drenched body.

But the sound he feared most was one he hadn't yet heard: the sound of the bedroom door followed by footsteps. He knew they would be coming for him and he knew why.

From his early teens, trouble followed Weston. He started using and selling drugs when he was in junior high school and never stopped. His parents threatened to throw him out. At sixteen, his father followed through on their promise. He was on the street with nothing but the clothes on his back.

But Weston had cash and dope. His friends were happy to give him shelter. They just gave their own parents a sob story about how their good friend's parents threw him out into the street. It didn't take long for his friends' parents to see that Weston Ross was trouble.

Three months after being kicked out on the street, his father was killed in an automobile accident, leaving his poor mother a widow in an empty home. Weston seized upon the opportunity and moved back home.

She tried to lay down the rules, to reel him in and steer him away from his business partners. It was too late.

He countered her attempts with lots of cash. It saved her from bankruptcy. She wouldn't have to sell the house and the car and it put food on the table. She could buy new cloths. And she could party with her son's "friends." The pain and sorrow of a lost husband washed away in a river of booze and the haze of pills. Before long, she was nothing more than a party favor for her son's business partners.

The night of the DEA raid, Weston's mother, Paula Deming Ross, had had enough. She'd sobered up enough to know that she was no more than a drunk and an addict. In the bathroom off the hallway, she wiped the thick film of grime off the mirror. She was forty-three, but the old hag in the mirror looked to be at least sixty with pronounced facial wrinkles, hair turning gray at the roots, puffy bags under her eyes, and thick mascara now running down her face from the sweat, mixing with tears.

She thought of her dead husband and how he stood by their family, listening to her defend their son. *He's just confused, influenced by his stupid friends. He'll grow up and get on the right path*, she had said.

Her husband was patient, but did not understand why she was soft on their only son. He wanted the best for his son. He expected his own flesh and blood, the child that they raised to follow the rules, to be a productive member of society, to find a perfect girl and marry, and produce grandchildren. He didn't expect them to turn into a gangster, a thug, and a criminal. Her husband compared their son to his cousin, Jarrod Deming, her brother's son. *Jarrod's going to be a cop. Why can't he be more like Jarrod?* But her husband knew it was time to force their son to make hard choices, to either sink or swim. They had to think about their own futures, their own sanity.

She looked into the mirror again. She'd become worse than her son. It was time.

She had found one of Weston's many handguns in the bathroom vanity, a Smith and Wesson 9mm. She picked it up and looked at it for a long moment. The feel of the plastic handle was rough and cold. The magazine was full and the safety was off. Her vision clouded as tears welled up in her eyes.

She locked the door to the bathroom. She knew that the flimsy door wouldn't hold back anyone intent on entering. She believed it to be her last defiant move, separating her from her son and all the pain he'd brought down on this house and their family. She took a deep breath before sitting down on the edge of the tub, still holding the gun.

Even though the temperature in the house was nearly eighty-five degrees, she felt cold. She lifted her face to the ceiling, intending to ask her husband for forgiveness before she took the final step. But she stopped, noticing the dust clinging to the cob webs hanging from the ceiling. This made her laugh and shake her head. A moment later, she started crying in earnest.

She took a final deep breath. In a voice broken by deep sobs, she whispered to her husband and to God and any other

spirits that were listening, “I’m sorry.”

Mercado and his team continued their slow, methodical sweep of the house. All was proceeding as planned until they heard a loud, but muffled bang. They immediately knew the sound of a gunshot originated from somewhere inside the house. Mercado, in a hoarse whisper filled with tension, ordered, “Reports, Smith.”

“Clear.”

“Deming.”

There was silence. Mercado paused, then repeated with more emphasis, “Deming!”

“Clear.”

“Deming, you hit?”

“Negative.” A pause. “Let’s go.”

Weston Ross heard the loud *bang* from the bathroom. It sounded like a gunshot, but his mom was the only other person in the house. *She wouldn’t do anything that crazy, would she?*

The scent of gunpowder reached his nostrils. He jumped up from the closet floor, grabbing the shotgun and ran into the hallway to the bathroom door. “Mom?” Silence. “Mom, you okay?”

The scent of cordite was strong. He was growing tense. He tried the door, finding it locked.

Louder and in a near panic, he yelled, “Mom! Mom, are you in there?”

Finally, he backed up, then charged. The flimsy, hollow-core door with the cheap lock popped open.

A night light shed a dim glow throughout the bathroom. When his right shoe hit the floor, it slid nearly causing him to lose his balance. He looked down at the dark liquid, confused until he saw his mother’s body sprawled in the bathtub. The bullet had entered at the right side of her head. The left side of her skull was blown away, with bits of brain and skull mixed in the pattern of blood on the mildewed tile wall.

The big macho kid who stood up to his father, who had a swagger in his walk, who talked like a thug, dropped the shotgun against the wall, turned, and vomited into the sink. His

body convulsed twice more. He ripped off several sheets of toilet paper from the roll that sat on the vanity and wiped his lips and chin dry. He picked up the shotgun and backed out of the bathroom into the hallway, his brain on overload. He leaned the shotgun against the wall in the hallway and wiped his face with both hands.

The image of his dead mother flooded his mind, like a scene from a horror film. *What have I done?* In an instant, like his mother, he realized what he'd become, and he hated himself for it. He grabbed the shotgun and turned towards the living room.

A moving green dot appeared on the wall. He quietly took two more steps, then stopped to listen. He shifted the gun to his other hand. When he did, a man dressed in a robotic looking outfit came around the corner of the hallway. A bright green light was at the tip of whatever robot man was holding.

Weston started to raise the shotgun to his shoulder. In a flash, Jarrod Deming unleashed three rounds into Weston Ross' chest killing him instantly.

He didn't hear his cousin say, "Sorry, Wes."

As soon as the remaining rooms were cleared, Vincent Mercado yelled orders. The DEA van backed into the driveway up to the garage. A flurry of activity followed as several trash bags laden with marijuana and cocaine were hauled into the house. Crime scene photos were taken of the drugs and cash. Mercado called District Attorney Andrew Newsome and sent him pictures of the bust via cell phone. The raid was a profitable one for members of the Savannah Drug Enforcement Administration.

Chapter 1

Twenty-Two Months Later
Tuesday, June 16, 2015, 10:20 AM

Peden Savage, owner of Savage Investigative

Consultants, sat at his nineteenth-century mahogany desk, waiting for a call from the manufacturer of a tiny spy camera. The device was disguised as a tie-clasp. Testing had not gone well with the gadget. Savage and his only full-time employee couldn't get the video and audio to transfer to the host server. In his line of work – private investigations, law enforcement consultation, and surveillance equipment supply and support – flawless device performance was expected. Worse, they planned to use the device in the field in less than twenty-four hours. If the manufacturer couldn't resolve their problem, they had to go to plan “B,” and there was no plan “B.”

Savage Investigative Consultants provided support services to law enforcement agencies from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Administration, all the way down to local law enforcement agencies like the Savannah-Chatham Metro Police Department. They all had a high degree of confidence in Savage's work, even the FBI. Four years earlier, Savage was forced out of the Bureau amid an internal scandal and no small amount of distrust between Savage and his coworkers. He had planned to blow the whistle on agents who were illegally planting evidence to assure convictions in high profile cases. He resigned from the Bureau, but only after receiving assurances from management that they would fire the dirty agents.

Savage and Sparks had been on the phone numerous times with the manufacturer's technical expert trying to find the bug with the camera. *We'll*

call as soon as we have a solution for you, he had said. That was hours ago.

Savage was surprised when he answered the phone on the first ring and the husky, female voice of Special Agent Megan Moore asked, “So, who do you think the killer is?”

He replied, “Miss Scarlet in the Billiard Room with the lead pipe.”

He knew she was smiling on her end of the receiver, as much as she ever smiled. She said, “Peden, have you seen the news this morning? It’s on every channel except Disney.”

“Sorry, Megan. I’ve been busy, you know, making a living.”

Moore didn’t reply, though he could hear her breathing through the receiver. Megan had been his partner at the FBI during his short tenure there. Her face was model thin with eyebrows perpetually sculpted into an angry look, and framed by light blonde hair that hung just below her cheek bones. Savage wasn’t sure if her eyebrows were naturally that way or if she purposely penciled in the scowl.

She and Savage had a history, but not a sexual one, though he couldn’t convince his wife that was the case. In fact, Megan Moore was one of the reasons that his wife was now his “former” wife.

Finally, she said, “Tune in to any TV station. I’m sure you’re going to want to see it for yourself. No doubt the boss will be calling you.”

He frowned. ‘The boss’ was Roland Fosco, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI’s Savannah office. Fosco was Megan’s boss, and had been Savage’s boss. Since Savage was in business for

himself, and since his wife left him nearly five years ago, he really didn't have a boss. That is, unless you count the hundreds of clients of Savage Consultants. Fosco was one of those clients.

Before he could ask about Fosco, a dial tone buzzed in his ear. He hung up and grabbed the remote for the flat panel TV, clicked the power button and watched as the screen came to life. Another beautiful, serious-looking blonde, this one a news anchorwoman with shoulder-length hair, was introducing the reporter on location.

The picture on the screen shifted to the front steps of the Drug Enforcement Administration's Savannah office where a crowd of about fifty people had gathered. Most of the crowd appeared to be employees of one news organization or another with microphones in hand or cameras hoisted up on their shoulders. A news conference was about to start.

Savage hit the button to increase the volume. He noticed the caption in the lower right corner that stated the clip was previously recorded. The anchorwoman had just warned the audience that the clip contained graphic images. A man in an expensive-looking suit stepped up to the bank of microphones. There was no podium, just a few chrome and black stands. Several of the microphones were held to each other with duct tape or Velcro.

The man faced the crowd flanked by another man and a woman who were a few feet to his backside. The reason for Special Agent Moore's call became crystal clear. Peden recognized the man

stepping up to the microphones. It was Jarrod Deming.

Savage first met Deming when his company established business ties with the Drug Enforcement Administration. His appearance on camera didn't do him justice. The combination of the light gray suit and the natural tendency of television cameras to distort a person's true stature made him look less impressive than he was in person. In reality, he was built like an athlete at the height of training for a championship game. There was not an ounce of fat on him. He was well over six feet tall, muscular, handsome, with a narrow face. His wide neck appeared to go straight to his ears. He could have been a model for a military action figure. Savage believed that he could have been a middle linebacker for the Atlanta Falcons. Deming had played college football at the University of Georgia in his freshman year, but wasn't committed to the game.

Savage had heard that Deming was a rising star, but not on the football field. Many felt that he'd eventually be among the leadership at the DEA, at least at the Georgia field office in Atlanta. But there he was on TV, his title still listed as Special Agent Jarrod Deming. Savage thought that something must have happened to stop his upward movement in the agency. Or he simply could have decided that he wanted to stay in the field.

On screen, Deming looked to either side. The man and the woman both nodded. The camera slowly zoomed in on his face so that the people on either side of him were barely visible. His features

were now vivid. Reaching into his suit coat he pulled out several pages and unfolded them. He cleared his throat, took a deep breath, looked up, his eyes seeming to fix on a point in the distance, then he moved slightly to his right and opened his mouth to speak.

From that moment, it was total chaos. Three cracks could be heard, like firecrackers exploding in quick succession, followed by a fourth crack. Deming fell backwards. As he did, the camera angle changed. The images on the screen were in continuous motion, just streaks and swirls of color. Savage tried to make out any of the images to no avail as the cameraman scampered for cover.

The audio was only slightly better. Between the screams and shouts from the crowd, Savage could hear panicked voices yelling, “He’s been shot! Call 911!” and “Oh my God!” and “He’s bleeding!”

After a few seconds, the cameraman got himself together and started panning the crowd. He turned to Deming as the agent lay on the steps, bleeding from the chest. The film clip was immediately cut off. Savage waited while the stunned anchorwoman regained her composure, then she continued.

Special Agent Jarrod Deming was shot and killed less than twenty minutes ago in a hail of gunfire as he was preparing to deliver what a source close to the agent described as a scathing report about tactics used by the Drug Enforcement Administration. The details of Agent Deming’s disclosure of alleged wrongdoing by members of the

DEA are not known. Speculation was mounting that high-ranking officials of the federal agency were concerned that this announcement would hurt the DEA and cripple its mission.

The shots appeared to have come from the parking lot just beyond the DEA's office, though information about the exact location, if known, has not been disclosed.

The Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Police Department has cordoned off the entire parking area in hopes of keeping the crime scene undisturbed. A crime scene investigations team has been called...

Savage was listening to her account of the shooting when his phone rang again.

It was Megan. "So, what do you think?"

In a relaxed tone, Savage said, "I think the anchorwoman is hot. The field reporter isn't bad either."

Moore didn't respond and let the silence get her message across that she wasn't in the mood for his sexist humor.

He replied honestly, "I'd say that it's far too early to speculate on anything. It doesn't look good for the agency, though. If I was Cliff Metzger, I'd be watching my six."

Cliff Metzger was the current head of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Georgia. No doubt he would soon be on the hot seat, if he wasn't there already.

"What are you going to tell Roland?"

"That my fees just went up. Maybe he'll get a different consultant."

Megan replied, "Fat chance, Pedee. Later."

Savage hung up. He hated when she called him Pedee.

Savage started thinking about the murder...assassination really. He thought it would be insane for anyone at the DEA to order the hit.

Savage was deep in thought, replaying the newscast over in his mind when the phone rang again, jolting him out of his thoughts. It was the manufacturers' representative calling about the micro-camera. The software update was sent via file attachment to Lee Sparks' e-mail with instructions on how to copy the code into the program. Savage should have been elated, but his priorities had changed in the last ten minutes. Besides, Sparks could take care of the software issue. He now had bigger irons in the fire.