

CHAPTER ONE

Slamming my van door shut, I realized how long it had been since I last worked a crime scene. I missed it. The wee hours were too early for most civilized lives, but for me the quiet before the chaos was the best time. Of course, back then I was FBI. This would be a different experience, and I wondered if I was ready.

I shifted the shoulder straps of my equipment bags. “Game face, Brok.”

Brok exited from the passenger side with a thin, determined smile. “Game face, Mace.”

The Boston Inn faced M23, a four-lane divided highway just north of Ann Arbor. We trudged up the snow-packed drive to the motel’s parking lot, which was closed off. A gray-uniformed officer with a clipboard met us at the yellow tape barrier. I identified us.

He took his Maglite and scanned the access list on his clipboard, shaking his head. “For sure you’re not on this list, Mr. Franklyn.”

“How many Boston Inns can there be in Ann Arbor? Officer...” I squinted in the dim light at his nametag, “ah Trooper Mandell, check your access list again, Criminal Profiles, Mace Franklyn and Brok Blevins.”

Pursing his lips he shook his head again, and we were about to begin a stare-down contest when a familiar voice yelled, "Mace!" I glanced to our destination, a bright-lit motel doorway, to see State Police Captain Dorian Ashford, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of a long, dark overcoat, picking his way through the March slurry of snow and mud. His snowcapped head bobbing as he trudged to Trooper Mandell, he yelled, "It is all right Edmund. You can add them to the list."

"For sure, Captain," Trooper Mandell said while he nodded and raised the tape.

Dorian smiled and reached for my hand. "I'm not accustomed to the secretarial duties, my assistant is out sick. It's been a long time, Mace. BSU class 0503, I believe."

Brok gave me a quizzical look. I said, "Behavioral Services Unit, profiling class of 2005. The captain here was my instructor at Quantico before he retired to the state police. Dorian, Brok Blevins my forensic technician." Dorian smiled and shook Brok's hand.

As we tramped through the muck, I turned to Dorian. "I want to thank you for the opportunity here. It's the first since my recovery."

Dorian shook his head. "Encephalitis is a nasty thing, you were lucky it just left you with a speech problem. But, don't thank me yet. You might wish your aphasia was back after this case. It will not be any bed of roses and here comes the first thorn." A large bareheaded man in a gray wool coat stepped off the covered walkway fronting the rooms and into the parking lot slush. The man raised his hand. "Hold on here Dorian, who is this?"

“Mace Franklyn, a former FBI profiler I’ve brought on. Mace, Roger Mandell, Michigan Bureau of Investigation.”

“Superintendent Roger Mandell to you, Mr. Franklyn. And nothing personal, but we don’t need any help from the FBI, former or otherwise.”

Local law against the FBI again, even if I didn’t have the badge. I pursed my lips and shook my head, said, “I disagree.”

Roger Mandell’s square jaw clenched tight and his heavy jowls shook as he continued his protest. “This ain’t happening, Captain. MBI has jurisdiction, it’s our ball game, and that decision comes from Lansing.”

“That might be, but this region is mine and I am the operational commander,” Dorian said. “And that trumps everything until I’m relieved. So get over it Roger. There has been no progress on these killings, and the locals are getting nervous—and vocal. I personally trained Mace. And his FBI support busted the Kensington Killer and Werewolf Wayne cases. And it won’t hurt to take advantage of his expertise.”

It had taken a long time to push those memories out of my head, the first and most gruesome in my career. But the superintendent didn’t seem to budge. He appeared to be over six feet, and bundled in his heavy gray coat, his arms folded, he seemed like a granite boulder poised over us, waiting to pounce. The weather-driven steam coming off the top of his head completed the picture.

“All right Captain Ashford, have your way,” he said. “But the MBI is still lead. Mace can give us the benefit of his experience by reviewing our reports.”

The superintendent was irritating and getting in the way, and I would not let that slide. “Captain, I can’t work that way. I might be a new face here, but I’m not a novice. I have the background and experience, and I should be lead. I have run several capital murder investigations.”

“Yeah, when you were FBI.” Roger sniffed. “You ain’t FBI now.”

“All right, you two. We’ve got an investigation to conduct,” Dorian said. “The point is, we need fresh eyes on this, so Mace and Brok Blevins here, his CSI tech, will process this scene, and god forbid any others. Roger, your team is lead, but you will give Mace copies of everything. He will do likewise. Now let’s get out of this March winter and meet the others on your team.”

Roger Mandell pursed his lips, dropped his arms, and led the way to the motel room adjoining the crime scene. I noted his pause at the doorway, of him saying something into the ear of a man built like a linebacker and wearing an MBI jacket.

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He had created an angel, and from a hard-shelled Jeep on the roof parking level of the mall across the street he waited to see her one final time. He observed the MBI greeting for the new faces, and knew they were, for he had watched twice before. Now he was waiting, knowing it would be a long wait, but worth it for another glimpse of her. They thought they were smart, but he thought they

were dumb, plodding through their routine. Getting caught never occurred to him. Knowing what they knew, thinking how they thought, he could stay well ahead of them. He had an image of himself, a powerful predator playing with its prey; the visualization brought a low laugh as he watched them enter the motel.

What will they see, what will they not see, he knew this, for everything he did after he took control of her was to show them what they wanted to see. Drugs had killed her, but they would control her no more. He had done a good thing, he had left her as an angel, wings spread on the bed. Now he dropped the binoculars and checked his watch and frowned in disappointment. It always took them so long. Raising the binoculars, he continued his vigil.

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The linebacker in the MBI jacket was Roger's lead detective, Kirt Grouse. Roger introduced himself and his partner, and we all moved to the doorway joining the two rooms, where Roger interrupted the two CSIs working in the adjoining room with perfunctory introductions. Detective Grouse pointed to a naked body on a bed opposite the doorway.

"Victim's name is Jolee Hui." He droned through an overview of the crime scene, ignoring the two crime scene investigators in their collection of trace evidence. He coldly started with the first estimate of time and cause of death, and then the details.

"Our unknown subject, the UNSUB, was taking no chances. He strangled Ms. Hui and broke her neck..." I only half listened after that while I added us to the crime scene log held by another

uniformed officer. I donned a cap, booties, and gloves, gave Grouse a nod and smile, cut off his spiel with a curt thank-you. Roger and Dorian had disappeared behind me. I entered the room, Brok followed, and took his position for our slow dance around the murder bier.

She was young and beautiful... once. There were no obvious signs of blood, and she lay on a narrow bed with her bleached-cornstalk-thin limbs spread wide across it, her arms raised above her head, legs splayed down over the end. Sexual assault is nearly certain, but something for the medical examiner to determine.

I started with her hair. Brok followed my focus, the high-pitched beeps of his camera shutter cataloging her life's last imprints and death's first. Her hair was punk styled, watermelon red, streaked with yellow and pink, with a ragged cut obscuring the signs of neglect, thinning hair, and splitting ends.

Her face, long and oval, frozen in the shock of death's claim. It still held its Grecian proportions of thin nose, high cheeks, and deep-set eyes. But what was once full and flowing was now gaunt and sunken into skeletal hollows. Her full lips formed a relaxed oval, like someone taking a deep breath before blowing out a candle. Her enlarged blood-filled eyes the only sign of her killer's surprise. I would leave the ME to explain the appearance, but I thought I knew the answer: an overuse of pressure. Her septum was red and receding from heavy cocaine use. Another question for the ME.

With a wave to Brok, I drew his attention. "Close-up on her nose."

Through the plastic her bagged hands and nails looked clean, and I doubted they would yield any defensive-wound evidence. Her wrists, high over her head, had ligature marks that suggested restraints were used, but the bruising showed something wide or soft. Another question for the ME.

I pointed her wrists out to Brok, and he hovered over each, recording the details from multiple angles. Her arms had needle marks, some fresh, others older and crusted, and her sides displayed faded bruises suggesting this was not the first rough night she'd had. Her mutilated full breasts had their nipples removed. The lack of blood suggested that occurred postmortem, a trophy for our killer.

Stepping back, I had the sense of a passionate encounter, not a violent one. The pillows on the bed had cradled heads, the top sheet and spread folded down, not something done during an attack. But is this staged to give that impression?

Brok continued searching for any trace evidence. I snapped off my gloves and turned back to the adjoining room.

Roger, perched on a bed, locked in conversation with the linebacker, Detective Kirt Grouse, didn't acknowledge my presence. Dorian had already departed, so I interrupted the bedside chat. "I haven't seen the other crime scene photos yet. Is this typical?"

Roger halted mid-sentence, burned a look in my direction, but Kirt answered. "Pretty much. Hair, signs of drug use, this one seems to be the youngest."

"I'd like to see what you have on the other two. I'm also hoping to pay a call to the ME."

Roger smirked and then tugged on his chin. "Have your tech contact Kirt here, he'll set you up with access. I'll give Horace a call. Now do you mind if we finish?"

"Sure, no problem," I said, and did a deliberate slow walk back to the crime scene, trying to take in the whole of it, but I felt eyes burning a hole in my back.

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Roger rose from the bed and watched Mace doing his FBI swagger walking back to the murder scene while Kirt finished his update to him. Without looking over at Kirt, he said, "Keep your eye on him.... Have someone filter our files. I want the most pertinent information removed. Then you send them to me. I'll do the release. I don't want Aphasia Boy getting ahead of us."

"Yes, sir. Maybe shuffle them a bit, too."

"That's the spirit. Don't want an FBI head case scooping us, or finding this perp too soon. The perp is doing us a service, cutting into the population of whores and junkies, and keeping the MBI on the front page."

"Our Facebook page has been hot all week."

"Yeah, likes and tweets, it's good I guess."

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I updated Brok on getting us connected and we were discussing our computer assets when they removed the uncovered body from the room. Thinking it was an embarrassing oversight by

tired technicians, I yelled as they exited. Roger was at the door, gave me an angry stare, and tossed a sheet to the coroner's men who halted long enough to cover the body.

I followed them into the parking lot and then turned down the access drive to my car. I thought that was an odd oversight when the resonant exhaust of a hard-shelled Jeep drew my attention. It sped out onto the highway and disappeared behind a cloud of blue smoke. I wonder what that was about.

CHAPTER TWO

The stark red brick building at 22 North Ingalls looked as cold as the bodies it housed. In the public lobby, I approached the receptionist, Nancy her nameplate said, a slender strawberry blond behind a raised shelf who I was sure was someone's doting grandmother. She had a thin sweater draped over her shoulders, and was intensely focused; glasses extended the length of her nose, her eyes fixed on her computer screen, her face seeming only inches from it.

"Excuse me, Nancy, I'm—"

"This cut-and-paste thing, always gives me problems." She looked up at me with a disarming smile, and said with a laugh in her voice, "All I seem able to do is keep cutting, and the first thing you know there's nothing left and I have to start all over."

Then she put a form on the counter. "You're Mace Franklyn, aren't you? Of course you are. Just sign on the bottom line and step over there for your picture."

Like an obedient schoolboy, I did as told, and after a few seconds, I had been properly badged.

Nancy made a call, and within a few minutes, as Roger had promised, Horace Gruevich, MD, Washtenaw Medical Examiner,

complete with Vandyke beard and spotless white lab coat, was enthusiastically shaking my hand.

“Mr. Franklyn, good to meet you again. Roger called, mentioned you have been added to the investigation.”

“Yes, I bet he did,” I said, then we passed through some security doors and walked down a highly polished corridor. “We’ve met before?”

“Well, not actually. You got your badge?” Giving a glance at the lapel of my trench coat. “Ah, I see you have, good. You will be able to get in on your own with that, after it is activated tonight. But where was I? Oh, yes, I was an associate ME during the Kensington Killer case. Some of the bodies were brought here. We shook hands is all.”

I didn’t remember him, but that was probably a good thing: no angst between us. “Great, we will be working together again.”

Horace swiped his card to unlock another set of double doors, tilted a weak smile toward me. “No I’m not in the lab much anymore, and Roger made an unusual request.”

“Oh, he did?” I could see this was going to be a real roller coaster ride, and I was just at the first drop. I hated roller coasters.

As he gestured me forward into an autopsy lab, I had visions of some crotchety half-blind assistant ME, but instead I found worse.

“Yes, Mace, you will be working with our senior associate Miss Helyn Harper.”

Like an ice-water wave ambushing me, she swept around a partition, both stunning me and taking my breath.

“Doctor Helyn Harper-Franklyn, Doctor Gruevich. Nice to see you again, Mace.”

My ex still kept her blond hair long, but had braided it into a halo on top of her head. With one hand thrust into a long lab coat, hiding a bikini-perfect body I once knew, she gracefully presented the other hand.

Horace stammered, “Oh, dear ... I ... I didn’t know.”

I clasped her hand, stirring sweet memories. “It’s okay, Doctor, I think we’ve both been set up.”

“Well, I’ll leave you two ... to ... to ... I’ve got a meeting.”

With that, Horace spun around on his heels and left.

“You couldn’t wait to get back into it, could you Mace?”

“You look dootiful ... like flowers ... grape.” Damn, I thought I had this speech tic beat. “I mean great, you look great.”

Dropping her hand, and with an amused smile, she said, “Feeling stressed? But thanks, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Looking down at the floor, I just shook my head. “Just Alph, my aphasia jokester, turning my tongue into a pretzel.” I lifted my eyes to hers. “So, it’s been a long time.”

“Has it? I haven’t noticed.” She crossed her arms and leaned against an exam table. “But tell me, how has life been? You got your business off the ground, I see.”

“Yes. Called in some favors. Dorian saved me from a life of cheater chasing.”

“Might have been better for you. Less stress.”

“How about you? I heard you left the BSU, but didn’t realize you ended up here.”

“I’m finally going for my doctorate in forensic science, cuts out the travel. Ann Arbor’s great. Teaching’s a possibility.”

“Sounds great.” I removed my coat and dropped it on an exam table, and then, scratching the back of my head, I must have snagged the string to the ex-husband autotron, because out of my mouth came, “Are you seeing anyone?”

“Mace, that issue is as dead as the women you came to see. Shall we start?”

Worse than talking stupid to your ex, is being called on it. Shaking my head, I retrieved a note pad and pen from my coat. “Yes, right, that’s what I meant, let’s get to it.”

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Helyn rolled the first victim’s gurney out of cold storage and next to a vacant exam table. I perched on a stool between them. She retrieved a file and spread some crime scene photos out on the table. She removed the evidence sheet from the body and tossed it

onto the table. Turning toward the body, she read from a lab report. "The first victim was Chelsey Landri, white, Caucasian ..."

I glanced at the crime scene photos, and then rotated to face the body while Helyn read more particulars. I was listening to Chelsey. She looked so peaceful; her youthful skin, now gray, was without blemish and had no sign of mutilation. She was small-breasted, with her hair shaped in a blue Mohawk that seemed better kept than the victim I just left. I bent down to examine her nostrils.

"... ultimate death by strangulation. She was a fighter with defensive wounds, but nothing recovered under the nails. Are you even listening?"

Helyn was still attention sensitive. I should have given her more, probably a piece to my marriage-ending puzzle. I looked up. "Yes, of course. Did she have any evidence of drugs?"

Helyn gave me an annoyed look, I knew it well. "Yes, she had trace amounts of cocaine, benzoylecgonine to be precise, in her nose. The purity was sufficiently high to suggest addiction. She also had amphetamines in concentrations consistent with use during the previous four hours."

"So she was doing cocaine and prescription meds at the same time. No needle marks?"

"Checked between toes, vaginal area, and the other usual places, but no, we couldn't find any."

I pursed my lips, and nodded. "Not as far along in her addiction, perhaps."

I now concentrated on her neck. Helyn picked up on my focus. "She was manually strangled, with the petechiae on the eyelids and conjunctiva. Her killer had large hands that wrapped around her neck."

"Hmm. I noticed the same specks of blood on the lid and eye lining of the latest victim. Must be using a lot of force."

Helyn shook her head. "Actually not very much. The pinpoint hemorrhaging that you observed in the skin and conjunctiva, what you referred to as the lining, is indicative of a long and controlled strangulation. It doesn't take much pressure."

I leaned low over Chelsey's neck; she had pronounced bruising on the sides, over the path of the jugular veins, and elongated scratches over the trachea. I looked up at Helyn. "Are these actual or pseudo contusions?"

"Pseudo, resulting from ecchymosis or blood pooling into the area of the contusions...." Helyn sorted through some of the photos on the exam table. "The photos are consistent with light pressure on the larynx and veins. They appeared more clearly a day later. And the downward scratches are from our victim's own fingernails trying to remove the hands of her attacker."

"Interesting," I said. "And the ligature marks on her wrists?"

"Faint, but yes, they are there."

"She was restrained," I said, and underlined the words in my notes, "but not enough apparently." Then I stepped back and asked, "Rape kit?"

“Black-light sweep of the body revealed vaginal discharge, but no semen. There was also evidence of postmortem penetration.”

I turned from Chelsey to the table with the photos. “How was she found?”

Helyn flipped through the tabbed folder and pulled out more photos. “Naked, facedown, near the motel room door. Like I said she was a fighter.”

Now I was confused. She was only a little strangled? “Hmm. Sex gone bad, and rage afterward?”

“More likely this was a mistake, or one of the first for our unknown subject.”

Helyn flipped through the file, pulling another photo, this one showing the dissection of Chelsey’s throat. “That the UNSUB didn’t apply much pressure is confirmed by the neck musculature, which shows very little contusion damage, consistent with restriction of the jugular veins.”

“So, blood congestion in the brain, hence the petechiae, too little oxygen, and lights out.”

“Right, but immediate death required constriction of the larynx sufficient to cause asphyxia and immediate death.”

“So that didn’t happen.”

“Correct, however, she had sufficient brain damage that, when she did recover, she was confused, disorientated, and in flight mode.”

“Never made it to the door. So what killed her?”

“A pathologic change in her brain called anoxic encephalopathy, caused by the lack of oxygen. Basically, many of the brain cells had already died, but those that remained, coupled with the adrenaline, revived her. Nonetheless, once the process of dying starts in the brain, it can’t be reversed. Revival is very temporary.”

“So in this case, only a few steps.”

I sifted through the other photos. The pillows on the bed had been used, the bedclothes in disarray. But her clothing had been neatly folded and arranged on a chair. I updated my case notes.

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Helyn retrieved the case files and body of the second victim, and began reading. “Megan Kelbee, twenty-three, cause of death, strangulation, and her neck broken postmortem.”

I bent over the body. “Two weeks between victims, he’s in a rhythm. Still likes colorful hair like this one’s red-streaked pixie cut. The first victim must have really bothered him. He made certain she was dead.”

Many of the other details were similar to the first victim, in age, clothing. But a negative tox screen, and no neck defensive wounds. She was found the afternoon after her murder, eyes closed, lying faceup, her body under the covers, as if sleeping. Her large breasts had been mutilated, shocking the duty manager who, thinking she was asleep, had yanked off the spread covering her in his attempt at eviction.

“Any evidence of sexual activity?”

“Only postmortem penetration, black-light scan didn’t reveal any fluid discharge.”

I added that to my notes. It was now twelve hours since my arrival at the latest murder scene, and my stomach was telling me about it.

I dismounted the stool and reached for my trench. “Well, I’m beat, and that rumbling you hear isn’t thunder, it’s me. Care to join me for a bite?”

“You do look tired, Mace. Are you sure you’re up for cases like this again?”

“Yeah, sure, it’s in my blood. C’mon, let’s hit Zimmerman’s and talk about it ... or not.”

“I think it’s best if we keep this professional. But I do think you’re lucky the encephalitis only left you with a language disorder, not one with comprehension.” Pausing, she folded her arms, and with a tell-me-the-truth look said, “But are you sure?”

“Yes I’m sure. Stress brings on Alph, tangling my tongue a bit, but otherwise I’m fine.”

“Oh? Then why did you miss the possibility of necrophilia? That the perp returned to the first vic for a postmortem attack? My husband would never have missed that.”

“Postmortem sex, both vics, yeah, picked up on that.”

“Oh, really? Every other detail you commented on, but not that one.”

“Oh, so it’s okay for you to pry into my life, but not yours, is that it?”

“Okay, Mr. Franklyn, to your earlier question, yes, I am seeing someone, if you must know. But who they are is none of your business. That’s different from being concerned about the health of a friend.”

“Ah, friend is it? That’s what we are after a divorce? Look, I comprehend just fine. I see Roger’s sick humor in putting us together, so yeah, let’s just keep it professional.”

I swirled into my coat, pocketed my pad, and said, “Call me when you’ve processed the latest victim. Next time I’ll do my best to comprehend your report.”

I hustled out of the building, angry that I let her get under my skin and angrier still that I reacted.

I made the necrophilia connection, I just didn’t say.

Didn’t I?

CHAPTER THREE

Mandell sat back in his chair as a server arrived. “Your scotch, Mr. Mandell.”

Mandell tugged on the waiter’s sleeve, and brought his head close to him. “Bring me another Laphroaig in about twenty minutes, along with a message that I have a call.”

“Certainly, Mr. Mandell.”

Cassandra was already judging Roger from across the table. “Roger, are you scheming your way out already?”

“Not at all.” He grabbed the waiter’s sleeve again. “Would you like something dear?”

“You know I never mix pleasure with business.”

Roger gestured him away. “The First Responder Recognition Dinner is neither, just a nuisance.”

“And that, my dear husband is why ... my family has all the money, and your father was run out of politics. At these affairs, it’s all business.”

Thanks for reminding me Cassy, again.

She gave a wave and an open-mouth smile to a popular redhead, the Michigan secretary of state, and rose from their table. “Now don’t disappoint me by saying something foolish, Rog, I’m going to chat with Selia, and see if I can get the Kent development nudged along.”

He nodded and toasted her away with my scotch. *Good riddance.* But he admired her as she slithered through the crowd, her low-cut silver dress catching many wanting and jealous eyes. He had to admit at parties she was good at the schmoozing and politicking, sought after like a tropical breeze, but at home an arctic gale.

Roger felt at these events there was too much drinking, with no control of the conversation or what they would admit to the next morning. Across the round table sat the black Detroit police commissioner and his wife. His polished head perched on a bulging neck like a hubcap on an overinflated tire. *Must have been the net result of all the donuts he’s eaten.* He sipped his drink and smiled gratuitously, since they seemed to be enjoying some inside joke. *I hate Detroiters. Thank god the band is playing, so conversation isn’t necessary.* Roger savored more of his drink and, putting down the glass, noticed that it only had been ten minutes since he got the waiter the last time. *God this is going to be a long night, or I’m going to get really, really drunk.*

A slap on his back brought him around to face George Chrysler, old-money rich and his marina neighbor.

“Hey, Rog, how are you? Haven’t seen you down at the point lately.”

Yes, fortunate for me. Turning, with a broad smile, he greeted the Vandyke-bearded face of George. "Busy chasing the bad guys, George, how is Chrysler Corp doing?"

"How the hell do I know, and why should I care? We got our money out years ago. But, hey, I noticed you berthed a new toy at the marina."

Envious, old boy? "Oh, yeah, I haven't been able to take it out yet. Not since they brought it through the St. Lawrence, in the fall."

"It's a beauty. Is it custom-fitted, how many does it berth?"

Good, got you drooling. "Yeah, it's custom, bought it new, built by Kypurs Doggersbank, sleeps six, crew of four. I fell in love with it when Cassandra was visiting her father in Ft. Lauderdale...."

A swoosh of her gown announced the return of a triumphant, beaming Cassandra. With talons flared.

"Hello, George, haven't seen you since the Christmas dance."

"Cassandra, how lovely you look, as always. Roger was just telling me about his new toy."

She perched next to Roger, but focused on George. Gave a slim smile and said, "Oh yes, the Amnesia, aptly named in Roger's case. He keeps forgetting I paid for the purchase of the resale. Like a kid in a toy store, would you believe? He just had to have it." Then she reached for Roger's drink, finishing it. Just so he couldn't.

"Well, you'll have to give me a tour sometime, Roger," George said. "I've heard of the builder, and I'm thinking of getting

something for the west coast, a little larger perhaps. Right now I better go find my new wife, before some young buck tries to pick her up.”

With a wave, George ambled off toward the bar. The band stopped playing and the pair of Detroiters had shuffled off somewhere.

“What was that kerosene you were drinking, Rog?”

Roger sat silent. Like deer caught in headlights they stared into the cocktail crowd. “It was Laphroaig, but never mind. How did it go with Selia?”

“Easy. It came down to skeletons, and Selia’s closet is full. We should have all our permits and break ground in April. Real estate is what you should be doing now also Rog, instead of politics. The state is coming back, lots of electronics firms looking for land and office space.”

“Politics is in my blood, just like my father. The MBI appointment will get me back in the game.” *And end my life as your social doormat.*

“If your serial killer doesn’t murder everyone first.”

I would like to give him your name, too bad he prefers young girls. That’s what he wanted to say, but instead he dropped his head, and rubbed his brow. “Don’t you worry about him, I’ve got control of the situation. And thanks for pointing out to George who purchased the boat. I did contribute, remember. And did you have to point out it was used? I looked like an ass for chrissake.”

Looking him in the eye, she gave a reedy smirk. “What’s your point Rog? Everyone knows the wealth is in the Meiler side of our family, my family. Unlike the Mandells, we know how to make money. What you paid would hardly have covered Amnesia’s runabout. Your family hasn’t been a political force with any money since your father lost his election the year after we were married. And too bad that didn’t happen sooner.”

“That so?”

“Yes. Had it happened earlier, we wouldn’t have married and we wouldn’t have a son. In fact, you are a drag, Rog. And now that Edmund is on his own, if you don’t get your political blood flowing and start contributing to the fortunes of this family, I’m going to exercise our prenup and cut you loose so you can go play with your boat on your own.”

Then with a stifled giggle, she threw in, “Although I daresay it will likely be a dinghy.”

He looked away, like he was searching for a drink, fuming, but knowing better than to say anything. I could make governor in a few years, but I need her money to start the effort. Then, with a few well-placed purchases, I would be the one cutting the cord.

“Speaking of political blood,” Cassandra smirked, “did you seek out Martin and discuss things? You know he’ll likely run for governor next year.”

“No, I haven’t yet, it’s ...”

Just then another drink arrived, and the waiter said, “Mr. Martin O’Reilly, the lieutenant governor, would like to speak to you.”

The waiter pointed him out standing by the bar. Roger got up to leave, and Cassandra had to get in the last word. “Blood flowing, Roger.”

* * *

He slipped his way through the maze of tables and cliques of people gossiping about other cliques of people. *She never quit pushing: me, herself, as long as Cassandra Meiler-Mandell was on the front society page.*

Roger gave a wave to Martin, simultaneously finding himself almost fatally between a man reaching with both arms and a tray of hors d’oeuvres, and reminding himself. *I’ve had a checkered political career, that’s for sure. My name, the Mandell name, turned from asset to liability overnight when scandal ended my father’s bid for reelection. She stood by me. Yeah she did. But not because she loved me, not even because she was my wife, but only for how it would read in the Grosse Pointe papers. If she knew the truth, she would drop me with the shock of finding a mouse in her shoe.*

Roger reached his hand out. “Martin, I’ve been looking for you.”

Martin clasped his, and gave a perfunctory shake. “Oh, I thought the opposite.”

Roger laughed as if he knew Martin was kidding and signaled for another Laphroaig. “No Martin, c’mon, got a lot of

hands to shake. Hey, you know what, as soon as the weather breaks, we've got to get together on my boat. A little strategy session, dinner, it will be great."

Martin turned away, faced the bar, and signaled for another round. Then talking to Roger's bar mirror reflection, "Look, if you want to be part of my ticket next year, you've got to bring more to the table than Meiler money. I'm counting on you for the college and rural county votes."

Roger leaned against the bar and faced Martin's profile. "Not a problem, Martin, my face is in the press every day."

Martin nodded, accepted his drink, but kept staring at the back of the bar. "That is the problem, Roger. You're in the paper every day, all right, but just below the headline that reads, "Serial Killer."

"True Mister Martin O'Reilly, but if you would come down from the thin air you're in, you would see there is no such thing as bad press. And besides, not much attention is being paid to the Detroit Revitalization Bill you have been pushing. I understand that will be very good for Detroit real estate. Maybe even, say, O'Reilly Realty."

Martin's head snapped toward him, his chin taut, eyes narrowed. "Playing the devil's advocate is a bad habit of yours, Roger. Finding fault with the local police and state, pushing for the formation of the MBI was a good tactic."

Roger smiled. "Kept my face in the public eye."

“Yes, but the public wants problem solvers, people who fix things for them. This serial killer thing isn’t getting fixed.”

Roger gulped his scotch. “It’s just the press scaring the public to sell papers.”

Martin faced him. “And it’s working. The people are getting damned scared. Governor Brooks is backing away from supporting us, and we can’t afford that. I’m running as a law-and-order candidate. My running mate has to bring solid creds to support that. Either you or someone else. Got it?”

The pleased expression on Martin’s face told Roger he was the one now looking grim. “It will be me, Martin. You need the money, and I’ve got this under control. Already have my hook into the serial killer, just playing him for effect is all.”

“Good to hear. My bill will get through both houses in a couple of weeks, and you damn well better have the serial killer dead or in jail.” He got off his barstool and leaned into Roger. “You had some records sealed twenty years ago. I don’t know what you’re hiding, but my gut tells me I don’t need you to get the Meiler money. Just a judge to unseal those records, and I have plenty of judges in my pocket. So, just don’t fuck up nailing this SOB, Rog.”

CHAPTER FOUR

My encounter with Helyn exposed questions I didn't want to answer. I had mulled things over savoring some Glenlivet well into the night, and this morning I was in no mood to get out of bed, but my open apartment window and rising sun conspired otherwise. I drove to my office in the Huron Professional Building on the north side of Ypsilanti, hoping to have a quiet morning and put some answers together. But as I climbed up the three flights of stairs to my office, I stopped when I realized quiet wasn't going to happen, that my new office manager, Ms. Sheryl Safire, would be in today.

I plodded up the last flight, settling for the fact that the work was helping to get her post-addiction life back together. Reaching my office I attempted to enter, but the door opened only an inch before I was stopped by, "Just a minute. Unpacking your boxes."

Then the door pulled from my hand and Sheryl, smiling brightly with her pixie-cut hair, lavender today, greeted me. "Sorry, Mace."

She was dressed in her usual punk black denim complete with miniskirt, but with something different added today.

"What's with the dog collar?"

"Oh, my choker," she giggled, "just a bit of fashion fun this morning."

"Lose the collar."

Giving me a defiant pout, she reached behind her neck and unbuckled the collar. "Fine. Look, I appreciate your help, you giving me a chance with this job and all, but you don't own me."

"Thank god for that," I said. Viewing bodies of young women trying to make a similar fashion statement, and seeing the collar on her, unnerved me. I cared about her, and probably always would, and I could have explained, but decided just to say, "It's our new dress code, so no dog collar."

"It's the case, isn't it?"

That stopped me. I still didn't want to lay it out, because if I did she would realize that I consider her an ideal target. She was at one time, but I had helped her put that life behind her, and it did try to reemerge sometimes, but I didn't need the added stress now. So I took her by the shoulders, and stumbled as I tried to assert, "Book ..." Damn, Alph again. I've got to control this. "Look, just do as I ask, okay."

We hugged, and with a nod she went back to the boxes, and I stepped into the eye. The eye was what served as our offices, and pretty much anything else we needed it to be, two desks and a worktable forming a capital "I".

As I laid my computer case down on my desk at one end of the worktable, Brok raised his head from behind his monitor at the other end.

"Hey, Mace. Got a secure-tunnel connection to MBI. Transferring their files now."

That was good news. I wanted to get some quick definition to this case. "Great. Let me know when they finish, I want to start reviewing their ViCAP data."

"Give me a minute, got the NCIC numbers, and you can access ViCAP directly."

I nodded, and unpacked my notebook and connected it to the docking station, when it occurred to me what I hadn't explained to Sheryl: the danger she was in, she could discover herself, and might jumpstart our profiles for both victim and assailant.

"Sheryl, put down the boxes and clear your desk, I have something else for you." Turning to Brok. "Brok, NCIC numbers."

Brok tossed me a notepad containing the numbers, and I stepped through the doorway over to Sheryl's desk. Sitting down, she cleared the last of her stack of folders, and when her computer prompted her, she logged into our little network.

I wrote down our FBI client user ID and password, and said, "Commit these to memory and don't leave this laying around."

Sitting next to her, I logged us in. "This is the NCAVC. Stands for FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime website."

Sheryl's eyes widened. "Oh, tight, I get to do some real detective work."

I grimaced, and she seemed tickled that she got a reaction out of me. I didn't want her to get too enthusiastic about this; youthful fervor can lead to trouble. "Yes, well sort of, it's more like data analysis. Click here to get into the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, ViCAP database, and then search using these NCIC numbers. They're the National

Crime Information Center numerical ID's for the first two cases, and ... Brok, what about the third case file?"

"Nothing yet."

That was irritating, but hopefully just startup glitches. "It's been twenty-four hours. Someone should be online, message them and see what the holdup is."

Sheryl thrust her tongue onto her upper lip, typing the numbers, staring intently at the display screen. She was too cute, and I was glad I had taken the time to help her. We had formed a bond the minute we met. I was finishing my rehabilitation, and she was struggling getting started and looking for a sponsor. I stepped up to the task, and now for me she was like a sister I never had.

I pointed to the web links displayed on the page. "I want you to compare information for these two cases, and the third when we get it. Put together one of your famous spreadsheets, with the details of what is known about the victim, crime timeline, forensics, anything under the major headings."

A nod of her head, and she was off.

I stepped back into the eye and closed the door behind me. I opened up my notebook, and looking over the display, asked Brok, "How did it go at the Boston Inn?"

Brok continued scanning his screen while he said, "The crime scene techs are a lot more cooperative than the MBI guys, but there wasn't much to find. No blood, hair, or fluids." Then smiling, he looked up. "But hey, one bit of good news. Ward Holridge, my old super from the Detroit lab, is running the MBI lab. So I might be able to work something out."

"That is good news, now all we need is some forensics."

"How did it go at the morgue?"

He knew about Helyn, so I tried to say as little as possible. "Okay, I guess. Restraint prior to being strangled seems to be an emerging MO."

"Yeah, at the Boston Inn I found fibers on the bed frame, possible that's how she was restrained. But they aren't consistent with the ligature marks. I've seen these fibers before, likely just common clothesline cord, but that would cause deeper, more defined bruising."

"Could he use a different type of rope? Maybe something more decorative."

"Perhaps. Looks like I'll be calling Ward soon."

“The first victim had sex with her assailant, and then apparently was strangled, although not enough to cause immediate death. There was also evidence of sex after-the-fact.”

“Necrophilia?”

“Yes. Second victim only had evidence of postmortem penetration.”

Brok sat back in his chair, his arms partly folded and hand rubbing his chin. “Who is the case ME? Is he good?”

“She ... Helyn, my ex.”

“Whoa, okay, didn’t see that coming. Did she check for epithelial transfer?”

“What do you mean?”

“The layers of your skin are formed from epithelia. Those cells line the cavities and cover all the flat surfaces of the body. It’s possible to extract the suspect’s DNA from this transfer of cells during strangulation. It’s not common, but they have been finding it, especially where there are defensive wounds on the neck.”

“First victim had that, but I don’t know if Helyn checked.” I picked up my phone and began typing. “One good thing about the ME being my ex, I’ve got her phone numbers and I can text her questions.” The text was short and to the point.

Putting down the phone, I asked, “Any cameras catch the UNSUB?”

Pitching forward over his keyboard Brok said, “That is another weird thing. Only the victim was seen checking into the office. They checked into a room covered by a camera that wasn’t working.”

“Our victim does the checking into the motel, the UNSUB avoids camera coverage, and he leaves next to nothing in forensic evidence.”

“Pretty slick.”

“Yes, too slick, perhaps, for someone on his third victim.”

Sheryl pulled the door open and shouted from her desk. “The Boston Inn and the Scenic View motels are owned by the same man, Frank Kosko.”

Brok furrowed his brow. “The Scenic View?”

“Yes, the site of the second murder, at the end of Dhu Varren Road.”

Brok shook his head. "A view of Highway 14 is all that place has. That road isn't scenic when it's under two feet of snow."

I swung around in my chair facing her. "Don't go mentioning the Boston Inn to anyone. The fact that it's linked to these series of murders is holdback information, hasn't been released to the press. So now, the site of the first murder was ..."

"At the old Madison House. It's closed now, doesn't say who owned it. State does now."

So that link was a possibility. Sheryl, arms folded, was beaming, apparently pleased she had found something. She had on a long-sleeved blouse, which I thought might be typical for a recovering addict like herself. "How about clothing?"

Sheryl returned to her screen and searched. "All dressed in leathers, some cool stuff too."

I rolled my eyes. What is it about young girls and clothes?

"Well I'm just saying."

"And the sleeves?"

"Let me see, one and two ... yes, both wore long sleeves. Don't know about the third."

Brok added, "I remember her top when I was processing the room, black long-sleeve thing, leather. Tag listed Lip Service as the brand."

"Ooh they have cool stuff."

I gave Sheryl an irritated look; she stuck out her tongue which I ignored. "Well, I think our second victim was an addict also, even though the tox screen came back negative."

"I could have told you that Mace."

"And why is that, Sheryl?"

She stared down at her desk for a moment; I suspected she was debating continuing. I was part of her past, and understood the problem we once shared, but Brok wasn't part of her past and might not understand the unrelenting grip of addiction.

"It's not just about long sleeves. I know about these places from my dark years when I was using. They're all motels struggling to keep going. All the users and pushers know about them. They're cheap, and don't ask any questions."

“That’s good, Sheryl. Dig deeper and see who the last owner of the Madison was, and put together a list of similar places you know about, and then call them and see if they have any broken surveillance cameras. Maybe we can save a life.”

I was still bothered by the efficiency of our killer. “Brok, let’s go to the war room.”

Brok got out from behind his desk and into the narrow space between our worktable and a large whiteboard we had hanging on the wall. We were now in the war room.

“Two columns: what we know and what we need to know.”

“We know we have three victims, the first was simply strangled. For victims two and three he didn’t take any chances and broke their necks. That makes strangulation a necessary part of his fantasy, but not for the murder. Okay, and the victims all had radical hairstyles....”

Sheryl yelled, “Even though I’m excluded, just your secretary, or whatever ... that is punk hairstyles.”

I didn’t want her too deeply involved, but figured it was too late for that. With a surrendering grimace I looked over at her. “War room, now.”

Her tongue poking through a smile of delight, Sheryl pulled down on her small skirt, and with note pad in hand thrust out her chin and took four royal steps, and sat down at the worktable opposite Brok.

“Again, three victims, punk hairstyles, and clothing ...”

“‘Attitude’ or ‘rock’, ‘punk’ to old guys like you.”

Ouch, hadn’t thought of myself as old. “Thanks for the enlightenment, little girl. Let’s go with attitude, Brok. We know they are drug addicts.”

“Potential drug addicts.”

Understanding her sensitivity, I said, “Okay, potential drug addicts. We had breast mutilation in two of the victims. Let’s list that as a known ...”

Sheryl squeezed her arms to her chest. “Ouch, I didn’t know that. What? How bad?”

“Victims two and three, nipples were removed. Add ‘trophy taken’ also to the list. Victim one could have something missing that we don’t know about yet. What we don’t know: the first encounter site for each victim, his method of approach, how the victims are subdued, and relationship to each victim, and ...”

My mind went blank. I didn't understand why. Alph taking control? My illness had never affected my thinking before. I should be able to list dozens of known items, even with the paltry forensics we had, but I couldn't think of anything else. I'm going to really screw this up, I'm bailing.

"We really don't have enough to put together an image ... picture ... I mean profile for this."

Brok cocked a confused-looking face at me. "Not true, Mace. With the same certainty that we know about the victim using drugs, we know the UNSUB is Caucasian, male, and given the victims were all college age, he is also probably in his early twenties."

"You're right, that much is probable. Add that to a third column, 'probable'."

Sheryl frowned. "I don't understand, Mace. How do we know all that?"

"What Brok is pointing out is that ninety percent of serial killers are Caucasian and male, and applying it to a college environment, the age is probably right."

"I know if I was one of these girls, back in my dark days, I would be looking for a far-out guy who could treat a girl to a good time ... meaning he had money for drinks."

"She has a good point, Mace. Except for the restraints, did you see any other signs of trauma at the morgue?"

I shook my head. "So we can rule out assault and blitzing as the method of approach, more likely something that was more social and friendly. Drinks could be how they were subdued."

"So we attitude girls like to party," Sheryl said. "Maybe that is how he meets them."

I looked over my notes; all three victims so far checked into a motel in the late evening, their bodies found in the morning.

"Okay, let's list party as the site of the first encounter, and new acquaintance as the relationship, and perhaps drinking as the means for subduction."

"Building the spreadsheet, I noticed none of the girls were under five feet," she said. "Wouldn't the UNSUB just being a man be enough to subdue them?"

"Could be, but serial killers can continue killing for a long time because they're careful. They don't take chances. Usually use a surprise or blitz attack, or overwhelm with some incapacitating chemical, like ether or a DFSA in their drinks."

Sheryl looked confused, so I explained. “DFSA, drug-facilitated sexual assault drugs.”

“What are you telling me that for, I knew that.”

I knew otherwise, but let her have ground. I rolled my eyes again, and then sat at my desk. We were all facing the whiteboard. Stroking my chin, I considered what we had on the board. It should have been coming easier for me, but it wasn’t. I decided to dismiss my mental falter and press on. I can do this.

“I think we have enough for a profile. I’ll text Helyn to add DFSAs to her tox screen. Brok, take what we have and search the Canadian Police Criminal Information database to see if there are any murders that fit. I think our UNSUB has had more experience at this, and Canada is not far away. You might even start with the Windsor Police Service. Sheryl, continue to work the Madison angle, and check around for parties people with attitude might attend, but be careful. Also don’t forget your list of motels.”

I plugged my office monitor into my notebook and plotted the victims’ home addresses on a map of the Ann Arbor area. Two points didn’t give me much, but it was a start. I saved the map and culled the ViCAP data submitted by the MBI detectives. They hadn’t addressed the UNSUB’s method of approach either, not even any credit card activity, and the sections covering sexual activity were blank. Are they that bad that they completely missed that? What the hell’s going on?