



# Chapter 1

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SITTING IN A PARKED work van on Fifth Street on a beautiful April morning, Marcus Sunday used high-definition Leica binoculars to monitor Alex Cross's house and felt a genuine thrill, thinking that the great detective was sure to make an appearance sometime in the next half hour or so.

After all, it was a Thursday and seven thirty in the morning. Cross had to work. So did his wife. And his children had school to attend.

Sunday had no sooner had that thought than Regina Cross Hope, Cross's ninety-one-year-old grandmother, came up the sidewalk from the direction of St. Anthony's Catholic Church. The old bird was tough and moving at a surprising clip despite the cane. She walked right by his van, barely gave it a glance.

Then again, why would she?

Sunday had attached magnetic signs to the van that advertised OVER THE MOON VACUUM CLEANER COMPANY. And behind the tinted glass he was wearing the uniform of said company, a real find at the Salvation Army. Fit perfectly.

The used vacuums in the back of the van had been purchased at a secondhand store out in Potomac for sixty bucks apiece. The phony magnetic signs had been ordered online through FedEx Office. So had the phony badge on his left shirt pocket. It read: THIERRY MULCH.

A lithe, fit man in his late thirties with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and slate-gray eyes, Sunday checked his watch as Cross's grandmother disappeared inside the house. Then he took up a black binder stowed between the driver's seat and the center console.

Flipping it open, he noted the tabs on the first five section dividers, each marked with a name: Bree Stone, Ali Cross, Jannie Cross, Damon Cross, and Regina Cross Hope, otherwise known as Nana Mama.

Sunday went straight to the Regina Cross Hope/Nana Mama section and filled in the exact time the old woman had entered the house and from what direction. Then, waiting for more sightings, he

flipped to the back of the binder and found a four-page copy of the floor plan of the house, which had conveniently been filed with the city planning board last month as part of Cross's application for permits to redo his kitchen and bathrooms.

Alternately studying the plan and the house itself, Sunday made notes on the diagrams regarding entries and exits, positions of windows, landscaping, and the like. When Cross's wife, Bree Stone, also a detective with the DC Metro Police, came out on the porch to fill a bird feeder at 7:40, he recorded that act as well, and the fact that her backside looked glorious in a tight pair of jeans.

At 7:52, a truck bearing a logo that read DEAR OLD HOUSE pulled up in front of Cross's house, followed by a waste disposal company hauling a construction Dumpster. Out came the great detective onto the porch to greet the contractors and watch the unloading of the Dumpster. So did his grandmother, his wife, and two of his three children: fifteen-year-old Jannie and seven-year-old Ali.

*Nice happy family, Sunday thought, studying them through the binoculars in turn. The future for them seems bright. Looks full of promise. Doesn't it?*

Sunday allowed himself a smile, thinking that a good deal of the fun in any adventure lay in the

planning, the preparation, and the anticipation. Maybe more than half, he decided, enjoying the way his ever-fertile brain conjured up various dark ways to destroy the dream scenario unfolding before his eyes.

Then Dr. Alex left with his kids. The three of them walked past Sunday on the other side of Fifth, but the detective barely looked at the work van.

Then again, why would he?

Sunday felt deflated after Cross and his children disappeared. It just wasn't as enjoyable scouting the house with the detective absent, almost like looking at a maze in desperate need of a rodent.

Sunday checked his watch, shut the binder, and put it away, feeling that he was a free, authentic man with a purpose that would not waver no matter the consequences. He started the van, thinking that wavering in any way was almost an insult to one's opponent. You had to want to destroy your enemy as much as he wanted to destroy you.

As Sunday drove off, he believed he was up to his task. He also believed Cross's family deserved the wickedness to come.

Each and every one of them.

Especially Dr. Alex.

# Chapter 2

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IN A NORMAL YEAR the murder rate in Washington, DC, waits for the stifling days of summer to peak. In July and August, when the air along the Potomac is the consistency and temperature of a rabid dog's mouth, people just seem to snap left and right. In my line of work you come to expect it.

But beginning with the terrorist attack at Union Station on New Year's Day, there had been a steady run of homicides through the winter and on into spring. It was barely April, but this was shaping up already as one of the worst years in three decades for homicide in the District of Columbia.

That had put enormous political pressure on the mayor and the city council, which meant the Metro police chief, too, was under enormous pressure. But the squeeze was especially tight around the homicide and major case squads. Since

I was now a roaming investigator for both teams, the nonstop murders meant the biggest squeeze had been put on me and on my partner and closest friend, John Sampson.

We had not had a day off in nearly two months, and our caseload seemed to grow every day. To make it worse, I was fielding calls from a contractor who was about to remodel the kitchen and put an addition on our house. So the last person I wanted to see around nine thirty that Thursday morning was Captain Roelof Antonius Quintus, who ran Homicide.

Captain Quintus knocked on the door of my office, where I'd been finishing up a breakfast burrito and a second cup of coffee while looking at a cabinet hardware catalog my wife had shoved into my hand as I left home. Sampson, a locomotive of a man, was on the couch, devouring the last of his morning meal.

Sampson saw Quintus and groaned. "Not another one?"

Quintus shook his head. "I just need an update to take to the chief. The mayor's out of her mind and hounding him nonstop."

"We cleared three this week, but you handed us four," I replied. "So the takeaway is that we're making progress but falling behind."

“Sounds about right,” Sampson said. “Like that king in mythology who keeps pushing the boulder up the hill, only it keeps falling down.”

“Sisyphus,” I said.

“Like him,” Sampson said, pointing at me.

“C’mon, Cross,” Quintus said. “We’re counting on you to put some of the higher-profile cases like Rawlins and Kimmel to bed, get the *Post* off our backs. Did you see that goddamned editorial?”

I had. Just that morning they’d run a piece that described the effect the murders were having on tourism, called for the police chief to resign, and floated a proposal to have the FBI take over the department until the murder rate could be lowered.

“Tell you what, Captain,” I said. “You tell people to stop killing each other, and we’ll have more time to work on cases like Rawlins and Kimmel.”

“Funny.”

“I wasn’t joking.”

“No, really, you should try stand-up at open-mike night, Cross,” Quintus said, turning to leave. “I think you may have missed your calling.”



# Chapter 3

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DRESSED NOW IN A black leather jacket, black jeans, black polo shirt, and black harness boots, Marcus Sunday hurried toward the New North building at the center of the Georgetown University campus. Weaving through a throng of students, he reached the 120-seat McNeir Auditorium and went in, passing a sign outside that read, THE PERFECT CRIMINAL. LECTURE TODAY. 11 A.M.

The place was abuzz with anticipation. And as Sunday moved down the aisle toward the front rows, he saw that other than an empty director's chair onstage, there wasn't a seat to be had, standing room only.

When he reached the front row, Sunday saw students sitting on the floor in front of the stage. He smiled, moved through them, and bounded up the stairs onto the stage, where he shook hands

with the tweedy-looking, gray-bearded fellow waiting.

“Sorry I’m running late, Dr. Wolk,” Sunday said.

“I’m just out of class myself,” the man said. “Shall I introduce you?”

“Please,” Sunday replied, and bobbed his head with deference.

Dr. Wolk turned on the microphone and tapped it twice before saying, “Good morning. I am David Wolk, chairman of Georgetown’s philosophy department, and I’d like to welcome you once again to the Spring Series of Lectures by Diverse Scholars.”

He smiled and went on: “They say the study of philosophy is not relevant to the real world, but as this crowd shows, that’s not true. The creative, resourceful application of philosophical methods to modern problems can be penetrating—ground-breaking, even. Today’s guest, who has a PhD in philosophy from Harvard, does just this sort of startling, innovative, and controversial work.

“His first book, published earlier this year, was *The Perfect Criminal*, a fascinating look at two unsolved mass-murder cases told through the eyes of a truly original thinker focused on the depths of the criminal soul.

“Please welcome Marcus Sunday.”

Sunday grinned, stood, and took the mike from Dr. Wolk.

Facing the clapping audience, the writer scanned the crowd, his gaze hesitating only briefly on an extremely sexy woman, there in the second row. She had a bemused look about her. Curly, dirty-blond hair hung down over her shoulders and a well-filled white tank top. A colorful sleeve tattoo covered her left arm, depicting a black panther lying on a blooming branch in the jungle. The panther’s tail roamed down the woman’s forearm and crossed her wrist. The cat had bewitching green eyes, the color of new, wet clover. So did she.

“Five years ago, I set out to find the perfect criminal,” Sunday began, forcing himself to look away from her. “To my knowledge he’d never been studied, never been identified. That made sense, because if he was perfect, he would never get caught. Right?”

There was nervous laughter in the room, and nods of agreement.

“So how do you find perfect criminals?” Sunday asked, looking around the room and seeing no confident faces. He focused on that young woman

with the ruby lips and the startling clover eyes.

She shrugged, said in a light Cajun accent, “Look at unsolved crimes?”

“Excellent,” Sunday said, dropping his head toward his left shoulder. “That is exactly what I did.”

The writer went on to describe two unsolved mass murders that had become the heart of his book. Seven years earlier, the five members of the Daley family of suburban Omaha had been found slain at home two nights before Christmas. Except for the wife, they were all found in their beds. Their throats had all been cut with a scalpel or razor. The wife had died similarly, but in the bathroom, and naked. The house doors had either been unlocked, or the killer had had a key. It had snowed during the night and all tracks were buried. Police had found no valuable evidence.

Fourteen months later, the Monahan family of suburban Fort Worth was discovered in a similar state in the aftermath of a violent storm: a father and four children under the age of thirteen were found with their throats slit in their beds. The wife was naked, dead on the bathroom floor. The doors had either been unlocked or the killer had had a key. Again, because of rain and high winds, and

the killer's meticulous methods, police had found no usable evidence, DNA or otherwise.

"I became interested because of that lack of evidence, that void," Sunday informed his rapt audience. "After traveling to Nebraska and Texas several times, going to the scenes, reading the files, and interviewing every investigator who worked the cases—FBI, Nebraska State Police, Texas Rangers—I came away understanding that other than the carnage the killer had left, the cases were black holes."

Sunday said that the dearth of evidence had forced him to backtrack and theorize about the philosophical worldview of a perfect killer.

"I came to the conclusion that he had to be an existentialist of some twisted sort," the writer said. "Someone who does not believe in God or any kind of moral or ethical basis for life, someone who thinks there is no meaning to be found in the world beyond what he alone gives to it."

Sunday slowed, seeing he'd lost a few in his audience, and changed tack.

"What I'm saying is that the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky almost got it right," he went on. "In his masterwork, *Crime and Punishment*, the central character, Raskolnikov, nearly pulls off the

perfect crime. Raskolnikov decides life is meaningless and he kills a man no one cares about for money.

“At first he’s fine with it,” Sunday continued, and tapped his head. “But eventually Raskolnikov’s mind, specifically his imagination, does him in. Because Raskolnikov can imagine a moral, ethical universe where life has actual meaning, he breaks. Not so, our perfect criminal.”

The writer paused, seeing that he held his audience again, before pushing on.

“The perfect killer, I believe, understands clearly that life is meaningless, absurd, without absolute value. As long as the criminal operates from this perspective, he can’t be tripped up by his own mind, and he can’t be caught.”

Sunday went on in this vein for some time, explaining how the evidence surrounding the murder scenes supported his theories and led to others.

He left time at the end for questions. After several nit-pickers fixated on minor notes in the book, the sexy woman in the second row batted her clover eyes and raised her panther tattoo as if she were languidly summoning a waiter.

The writer nodded to her.

“The reviews you got were pretty solid,” she said in that rich southern voice. “Except for the one that Detective Alex Cross wrote in the *Post*. I think you’ll agree he trashed it, disagreed with almost everything you said. Claimed you changed his words after you interviewed him to fit your thesis.”

Sunday gritted his teeth a moment before replying, “Miss, as any journalist will tell you, sources saying they didn’t say something are commonplace. What Detective Cross and I have is a strong difference of opinion. Nothing more.”

After a long moment of awkwardness, Dr. Wolk cleared his throat, said, “I have a question, Dr. Sunday. As I indicated, I found your book riveting, but I, too, have a quibble about one of your conclusions.”

Sunday forced a smile onto his face. “Which one is that, Doctor?”

“At one point in the book you describe the antithesis of the perfect criminal,” Dr. Wolk replied. “A detective who believes in and is emblematic of the moral, ethical universe, and so of a meaningful life.”

Sunday nodded.

“But I was surprised at your suggestion that

someone like your perfect detective could be made to see that life was meaningless and valueless, and . . .”

“In so doing become a perfect criminal himself?” Sunday asked. “Yes. I wrote that. I believe that it logically follows, Doctor. Don’t you?”



# Chapter 4

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SUNDAY DID NOT GET to his apartment in Washington's Kalorama neighborhood until almost five. There had been a few books to autograph after his lecture, followed by an unavoidable lunch with Dr. Wolk, who drank too much and often reduced philosophical arguments into object lessons worthy of Dear Abby.

To make matters worse, Dr. Wolk had pressed Sunday repeatedly about the sort of research or writing he was doing while on sabbatical. Sunday finally told the chairman of Georgetown's philosophy department the unvarnished but completely vague truth: "I'm conducting an experiment that tests the dimensions of an existential world and the role of human nature in that world."

Dr. Wolk had seemed genuinely intrigued, wanted more, but Sunday had gently and firmly

refused, telling his colleague he'd be able to read all about it someday when his research was complete. In fact, he'd promised, Wolk would get the first read.

Hearing zydeco music inside the apartment now and smelling garlic frying somewhere, Sunday used his key to open the door and entered a room with white walls, a white ceiling, and a pale-gray rug. Several pieces of chrome-and-black-leather furniture faced a flat-screen television tuned to a music channel; that was the source of the zydeco.

A woman was in the room, dancing to the music. Her back was to him as her hips swayed and shimmied. Her riot of dirty-blond hair was tied up on her head. She was barefoot, wore loose, flowing olive-green pants and a tight-fitting white tank top that showed off the damp skin and muscles of her shoulders as she reached high overhead, revealing the colorful tattoo of the lounging panther that covered most of her left arm.

Sunday smiled and shut the door loudly. The woman stopped dancing and looked over her shoulder at him with those clover-green eyes. She grinned, clapped, and turned. She ran to him, kissed him hungrily on the mouth, and said in that

light Cajun accent, “Thought you’d never get here, Marcus.”

“Couldn’t be helped,” Sunday said. “Had to keep up appearances.”

She jumped up into his arms, locked her powerful thighs around his waist, and kissed him again. “But I had something to show you, sugar.”

“Been reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* again, Acadia?” he asked, amused, as he stared into her impossible irises.

“Better,” Acadia said, unlocked her legs, and slid from his arms. “Follow me, sugar?”

The writer trailed her down the hall, watching her rear sway, imagining some carnal delight. But instead of heading to the master bedroom, she turned right into a room they’d been using for storage.

Four seventy-two-inch flat-screens had been affixed to the far wall, creating one floor-to-ceiling screen that was interrupted only by an Xbox 360 Kinect device aiming outward. The screens glowed dull blue.

A scruffy young guy in a denim jacket sat with his back to them, facing the screens, wearing Bose noise-canceling headphones that were blaring hard rock. A helmet of some sort lay on the table.

Beside the table were a server about the size of a large suitcase and an Xbox 360. Cables linked it all to several laptops.

“Ta-da,” Acadia said. “What do you think?”

Furious, Sunday grabbed her by her panther tattoo and dragged her back into the hallway and into a bedroom. He whispered fiercely, “I didn’t okay this, and who is that guy?”

Furious right back at him, Acadia hissed, “Preston Elliot. Computer genius. You want state-of-the-art understanding, you need state-of-the-art minds and equipment. You said so yourself!”

Before Sunday could reply, she softened, said, “Besides, sugar, Preston picked up most of it at Costco. No-questions-asked return policy on all electronics.”

Sunday stayed skeptical. “What about him? What’s his fee?”

Her nostrils flared and she looked at him like he was meat. “The eager young man expects two hours of ultra-kinky sex with me. He’ll use a condom. Isn’t that what you said you needed right about now?”

Sunday cocked his head, appraising her anew. “Really? I didn’t notice, is he—?”

“Approximately your height and weight, yes.”

Intrigued now, the writer saw all the possibilities. “That means?”

“Don’t you think?” Acadia asked. Her breathing was slow. “It has been a while since we indulged, sugar.”

Sunday looked into her dark eyes and felt a thrill of primal anticipation ripple through him. “When?” he asked.

She shrugged. “All he has to do now is debug the software. Says he’ll be finished tomorrow around this time.”

“Who knows he’s here?”

“No one,” she replied. “Part of the deal. A secret.”

“Think he’ll keep it?”

“What do you think?” she asked, pressing against him a moment and igniting crazy desire in him. Sunday looked into Acadia’s green eyes and saw himself at eighteen, feeling that predatory rush for the first time as he carried a shovel and slipped up behind a figure crossing a dark yard. For a second it was all so real he swore he heard pigs squealing.

“Well, sugar?” Acadia whispered.

“I’ll leave,” he said, feeling that thrill all over again. “It’s better if he doesn’t see me tonight.”

She put on a saucy look, pressed against him again, and whispered in his ear, “Acadia Le Duc is limitless. No restrictions. None. You believe that, don’t you, sugar?”

“Oh, I do, baby,” Sunday said, almost breathless. “It’s one of the reasons I’m totally addicted to you.”

# Chapter 5

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MUCH LATER THAT SAME day, Kevin Olmstead, a soft-featured man in his late twenties, spotted the neon sign of the Superior Spa, a massage parlor on Connecticut Avenue reputed to offer “happy endings.”

*Happy endings*, Olmstead thought, running his fingers delicately over his smooth skin. Despite all the craziness in his head, he still knew the enduring value of a happy ending. He had enough money in his pocket, didn't he? He seemed to remember withdrawing cash from an ATM some-time that day.

*Was that real? Do I still have the money?*

Olmstead stopped, blinking, trying to get his thoughts on track again, a common problem recently. Then he dug in the right front pocket of his jeans, pulled out a wad of cash. He smiled

again. He wasn't losing the old noodle when it came to sex *or* money.

Excited now, he hurried toward the massage parlor.

A man in a business suit, no tie, darted out the front door, looked furtively at Olmstead, and then scurried past him. Something about the man's demeanor activated searing memories of another massage parlor and another night.

Olmstead remembered most vividly the smell of citrus cleaner. And he vaguely recalled five bodies: three women in bathrobes, a Cuban in a striped bowling shirt and porkpie hat, and a white guy in a cheap business suit, no tie, all shot at close range, all bleeding from head wounds.

Pain ripped through Olmstead's own skull, almost buckling him on the sidewalk. Was that real? Had that happened? Were there five people dead in a massage parlor in . . . where? Florida?

Or was that all a hallucination? Some blip in his meds?

Olmstead's mind surfed to another memory: a hand putting a Glock 21 pistol into a backpack. Was it the backpack on his shoulder? Was that his hand?

He looked at his hands and was surprised to



see that he wore flesh-colored latex gloves. He was about to check the backpack when the front door of the Superior Spa opened.

A young Asian woman looked out at him, smiled luridly in red hot pants, stiletto heels, and a T-shirt that said *GODDESS* spelled out in glitter.

“It okay,” she said in halting English. “We no bite. You want come inside?”

*Happy endings*, Olmstead thought, and went toward her feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the invitation.

Everything about the Superior Spa was a marvel to Olmstead, even the thumping rap music. But what entranced him most was the smell of citrus disinfectant. As one might with a freshly baked pie, he sniffed long and deep, flashing on the image of those corpses in Florida. Were they real? Was this?

He looked at the little thing in the red hot pants, said, “Any other girls working tonight?”

She pouted, poked him in the ribs. “What, you no like for me?”

“Oh, I like you fine, Little Thing. Just looking at options.”

A big, hard-looking man in a black T-shirt came out from behind the maroon curtain. A second

Asian woman followed him. Scrawnier than Little Thing, she gazed at Olmstead with pink, watery, vacant eyes.

“See anything you like, bro?” the big guy asked.

“I like *them* both,” Olmstead said.

“You think this is Bangkok or something? Make a choice.”

“Cost?”

“Shower, soapy table, massage, seventy-five to me,” the bouncer replied. “Anything extra, you talk to the girl. Anything extra, you pay the girl.”

Olmstead nodded, pointed at Little Thing, who looked overjoyed.

The bouncer said, “Seventy-five and you gotta check your pack, bro.”

Olmstead went soft-lidded, nodded. “Lemme get my wallet.”

He swung the pack off his shoulder, set it on one of the plastic chairs, and unstrapped the top flap. He drew back the toggle that held shut the main compartment and tugged the pouch open. There was his wallet deep inside. And a beautiful Glock 21.

Was that a suppressor on the barrel? Was the weapon real? Was any of this?

Olmstead sure hoped so as he drew out the pistol. When it came to happy endings, a wet dream was rarely as satisfying as the real thing.

# Chapter 6

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JUST AFTER EIGHT THAT night, I was getting ready to pack it in, head home, have a beer, see my wife and kids, and watch the last half of the game. So was John Sampson. It had been a long, grinding day for both of us and we'd made little progress on the cases we were working. We both groaned when Captain Quintus appeared, blocking the doorway.

"Another one?" I said.

"You've got to be kidding," Sampson said.

"Not in the least," Quintus replied grimly. "We've got at least three dead at a massage parlor over on Connecticut. Patrolmen on the scene said it's a bloodbath just based on what they've seen in the front room. They're waiting for you and Sampson to go through the rest of the place. Forensics is swamped, backed up. They'll be there as soon as they can."

I sighed, tossed the Kimmel file on my desk, and grabbed my blue Homicide Windbreaker. Sampson grabbed his own Windbreaker and drove us in an unmarked sedan over to Connecticut Avenue just south of Dupont Circle. Metro patrol officers had already set up a generous perimeter around the massage parlor. The first television news camera crews were arriving. We hustled behind the yellow tape before they could spot us.

Officer K. D. Carney, a young patrolman and the initial responder, filled us in. At 7:55 p.m. dispatch took a 911 report from an anonymous male caller who said someone had “gone psycho inside the Superior Spa on Connecticut Ave.”

“I was on my way home from work, and close by, so I was first on the scene,” said Carney, a baby-faced guy with no eyebrows or lashes and no hair on his face or forearms. I pegged him as a sufferer from alopecia areata, a disorder that causes a total loss of body hair.

“Contamination?” I asked.

“None from me, sir,” the young officer replied. “Took one look, saw three deceased, backed out, sealed the place. Front and back. There’s an alley exit.”

“Let’s button up that alley, too, for the time being,” I said.

“You want me to search it?”

“Wait for the crime scene unit.”

You could tell Carney was disappointed in the way only someone who desperately wanted to be a detective could be disappointed. But that was the way it had to be. The fewer people with access to the crime scene, the better.

“You know the history of this place, right?” Carney said as Sampson and I donned blue surgical booties and latex gloves.

“Remind us,” Sampson said.

“Used to be called the Cherry Blossom Spa,” Carney said. “It was shut down for involvement in sexual slavery a few years back.”

I remembered now. I’d heard about it when I was still out working at Quantico for the FBI. The girls were underage, lured by the promise of easy entry into the United States, and enslaved here by Asian crime syndicates.

“How in God’s name did this place ever reopen?” I asked.

Carney shrugged. “New ownership, I’d guess.”

“Thanks, Officer,” I said, heading toward the massage parlor. “Good work.”

I opened the door, and we took three steps into a scene straight out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie.

The place reeked of some kind of citrus-based cleanser, and stereo speakers hummed with feedback. Sprawled in every ounce of her blood, an Asian female in red hot pants, heels, and a white T-shirt lay on the floor. One round had hit her through the neck, taking out the carotid.

A second victim, also an Asian female, dressed in a threadbare robe, lay on her side next to a maroon curtain. She was curled almost into a fetal position, but her shoulders were twisted slightly toward the ceiling. Her right eye was open and her fingers splayed. Blood stained her face and matted her hair, draining from what used to be the socket of her left eye.

The third victim, the massage parlor's night manager, was sprawled against a blood-spattered wall behind the counter. There was a look of surprise on his face and a bullet hole dead center in his forehead.

I counted four 9mm shells around the bodies. It appeared that the killer had sprayed disinfectant all over the room. Streams of it stained the bodies, the furniture, and the floor. There was an empty five-gallon container of Citrus II Hospital Germicidal Deodorizing Cleanser concentrate by

the manager's corpse. We discovered a second empty container of it beyond the maroon curtain in the L-shaped hallway, as depressing a place as I've ever been, with exposed stud walls and grimy, unpainted plasterboard.

In the back room on the right, we found the fourth victim.

I am a big man, and Sampson stands six foot five, but the bruiser facedown on the mattress was physically in a whole other league. I judged him to be six foot eight and close to three hundred pounds, most of it muscle. He had longish brown hair that hung over his face, which was matted in blood.

I took several pictures with my phone, squatted down, and with my gloved fingers pushed back the hair to get a better look at the wound. When I did, the big man's face was revealed and I stopped short.

"Sonofabitch," said Sampson, who was standing behind me. "Is that—?"

"Pete Francones," I said, nodding in disbelief. "The Mad Man himself."



# Chapter 7

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PETE “MAD MAN” FRANCONES had anchored the Washington Redskins defensive unit for fourteen years. A defensive end with outstanding speed and quickness, Francones wreaked havoc in the NFL, earning a reputation as a tireless worker and an insanely passionate player on game day.

His histrionics on the sideline during big games in college had earned him the nickname, and he’d parlayed the whole Mad Man thing into a fortune in commercial endorsements. It didn’t hurt that Francones was good-looking, smart, well-spoken, and irreverent, traits that had earned him a coveted spot commentating on *Monday Night Football* just the season before.

And now Francones was the fourth victim in a killing spree in one of the sleaziest places in DC? This guy?

“Didn’t he date, like, Miss Universe or something?” Sampson asked, sounding baffled as well.

“Runner-up. Miss Venezuela.”

“So why would he be in this hellhole?”

I could think of several reasons, but I got his point. Francones was the kind of guy who did not have to pay for sex. If you believed the gossip, he’d had women throwing themselves at him for—

Something puzzled me. “Where’s the hooker he was with?”

We looked under the bed. We even lifted Francones’s body to see if she’d been pinned beneath him. But she hadn’t.

“Suppressor,” Sampson said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Again?” I said.

“Killer must have used a suppressor on the gun. Or Francones would have heard the shots and been up and facing the door.”

I saw what he was saying, replied, “So the three in the outer room die first. Then the killer comes down the hall, finds victim number four, shoots to incapacitate, and then to kill.”

“Sounds professional.”

I nodded, studying the Mad Man’s wounds again, thinking trajectories. “He’s kneeling when

he takes the first shot, and then falls forward. So again, where's the hooker?"

"And what's with the cleanser?"

"Maybe the killer doesn't like the smell of death?"

"Or maybe the killer gets off on the citrus smell."

"Definitely not a robbery," Sampson said, gesturing toward the Breitling watch on Francones's wrist.

I picked up the Hall of Famer's pants, rifled the pockets, and came up with a gold money clip holding a thousand dollars in fifties, and then something I didn't expect to find. The vial held at least three grams of white powder but was capable of holding twice that. I tasted it. My tongue and lips numbed at the bitter taste of high-grade cocaine.

Showing the vial to Sampson, I said, "I don't remember anything to do with the Mad Man and drugs."

"Maybe he wasn't all *naturally* amped up and crazy."

We bagged the cocaine as evidence.

"You seeing a phone?" Sampson asked.

"No," I said. "And no car keys, either. And no third woman."

We went through the rest of the Superior Spa. The manager's office had been lightly tossed. Oddly, however, the unlocked strongbox was untouched and contained nearly four thousand dollars. Untouched as well were a wallet with six hundred dollars and IDs that pegged the manager as twenty-nine-year-old Donald Blunt of College Park, a grad student at the University of Maryland. The only thing we could determine as missing was the hard drive that recorded the feed from the lobby security cameras.

In the women's locker room we found clothes, cash, three cell phones, and documents that identified the two female victims. The woman in the red hot pants was Kim Ho, a twenty-year-old Korean national who'd come to the United States three months before on a temporary work visa. The woman who'd died in the fetal position was An Lu, also Korean, nineteen, also in the United States on a short-term work visa.

"Third cell phone," Sampson said.

"Third hooker," I said, nodding as my mind flashed back to the wound on the Mad Man's lower back, imagining how he had to have been kneeling when—

"Detective Cross?" Officer Carney said.

Sampson and I spun around. The patrolman was standing in the doorway, wearing surgical booties.

“Officer, I clearly asked you to stay outside and maintain the perimeter.”

Carney’s head retreated by several inches. “I’m sorry, sir, but I thought you’d want to know that there’s a hysterical young woman outside who says she knows at least one of the people working in here tonight.”

# Chapter 8

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“I’M ALEX CROSS,” I said to the young woman after Officer Carney had brought her under the tape and led her over to me. “Could I see your identification, miss?”

Young, Asian, and wearing jeans, sneakers, and a George Washington University Windbreaker, she seemed not to hear my request at first. She just stared at the door to the Superior Spa. Everything about her looked tortured.

“Miss?” I said softly.

Her voice trembled as she asked, “They all dead?”

“I’m afraid everyone inside is deceased, yes,” I replied. “How did—”

Everything about her seemed to dissolve right then. I couldn’t catch her before she collapsed to the sidewalk. She choked, retched, and vomited several times. Then she looked up at me and began

to sob. “I knew this place was—I . . . I told her. But she always said it was—”

The young woman started hyperventilating and then dry-heaving. I squatted down next to her, put my hand on her back, trying to comfort her. But it was as if I’d put a hot iron on her skin.

She jerked away from me, cowered against the front of a paint store, flinging up her hands, screaming, “No! No! Don’t touch me!”

“Miss,” I said. “I’m not here to—”

And then I got it.

I stood, took several steps back, and squatted down again. Like I said, I’m a big man, and I was trying to make myself smaller. I motioned with my chin for Sampson, who’d been listening, to do the same.

“Miss?” I said. “Do you work here?”

Her eyes had gone haunted again, but she shook her head violently.

“Did you used to work here?” Sampson asked.

Her eyes darted toward the front door and the tears began to gush out of her. “My parents,” she sobbed. “They’re going to know, aren’t they?”

We spent the next fifteen minutes getting the gist of her story. Her name was Blossom Mai. She was nineteen and a sophomore at George

Washington University, a premed major from San Diego. Her parents were Vietnamese immigrants who'd worked eighty-hour weeks to send her to school. They covered what she had not received in scholarships for room and board, but nothing more.

The job Blossom had at school was not enough to live on, or at least it did not feel that way when she compared her life to her rich classmates'. Last fall, Blossom had made a new friend. Her name was Cam Nguyen. A year older, a junior economics major at GW, Cam came from Orange County, California, and was also a second-generation Vietnamese-American girl whose parents had scrimped for her education.

But Cam wore the latest clothes. And on Saturday nights she went to expensive bars in Georgetown. Cam seemed to have anything she wanted.

"So you asked her how she was doing it?" Sampson said.

Blossom nodded. "She said it was safer working here than as an escort because there was always an armed manager guarding you."

The deal was simple. Each girl paid the house manager five hundred a shift. Each customer paid the manager seventy-five dollars. The girls took