



# One

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IT'S NOT EVERY day that I get a naked girl answering the door I knock on.

Don't get me wrong—with twenty years of law enforcement under my belt, it's happened. Just not that often.

“Are you the waiters?” this girl asked. There was a bright but empty look in her eyes that said ecstasy to me, and I could smell weed from inside. The music was thumping, too, the kind of relentless techno that would make me want to slit my wrists if I had to listen to it for long.

“No, we're not the waiters,” I told her, showing my badge. “Metro police. And you need to put something on, right now.”

She wasn't even fazed. “There were supposed to

be waiters,” she said to no one in particular. It made me sad and disgusted at the same time. This girl didn’t look like she was even out of high school yet, and the men we were here to arrest were old enough to be her father.

“Check her clothes before she puts them on,” I told one of the female officers on the entry team. Besides myself there were five uniformed cops, a rep from Youth and Family Services, three detectives from the Prostitution Unit, and three more from Second District, including my friend John Sampson.

Second District is Georgetown—not the usual stomping grounds for the Prostitution Unit. The white brick N Street town house where we’d arrived was typical for the neighborhood, probably worth somewhere north of five million. It was a rental property, paid six months in advance by proxy, but the paper trail had led back to Dr. Elijah Creem, one of DC’s most in-demand plastic surgeons. As far as we could make out, Creem was funneling funds to pay for these “industry parties,” and his partner in scum, Josh Bergman, was providing the eye candy.

Bergman was the owner of Cap City Dolls, a legit modeling agency based out of an M Street office, with a heavily rumored arm in the underground

flesh trade. Detectives at the department were pretty sure that while Bergman was running his aboveboard agency with one hand, he was also dispatching exotic dancers, overnight escorts, masseuses, and porn “talent” with the other. As far as I could tell, the house was filled with “talent” right now, and they all seemed to be about eighteen, more or less. Emphasis on the less.

I couldn’t wait to bust these two scumbags.

Surveillance had put Creem and Bergman downtown at Minibar around seven o’clock that night, and then here at the party house as of nine thirty. Now it was just a game of smoking them out.

Beyond the enclosed foyer the party was in full swing. The front hall and formal living room were packed. It was all Queen Anne furniture and parquet floors on the one hand and half-dressed, tweaked-out kids stomping to the music and drinking out of plastic cups on the other.

“I want everyone contained in this front room,” Sampson shouted at one of the uniforms. “We’ve got an anytime warrant for this house, so start looking. We’re checking for drugs, cash, ledgers, appointment books, cell phones, everything. And get this goddamn music off!”

We left half the team to secure the front of the house and took the rest toward the back, where there was more party going on.

In the open kitchen there seemed to be a big game of strip poker in progress at the large marble-topped island. Half a dozen well-muscled guys and twice as many girls in their underwear were standing around holding cards, drinking, and passing a few joints.

Several of them scrambled as we came in. A few of the girls screamed and tried to run out, but we'd already blocked the way.

Finally, somebody cut the music.

"Where are Elijah Creem and Joshua Bergman?" Sampson asked the room. "First one to give me a straight answer gets a free ticket out of here."

A skinny girl in a black lace bra and cutoffs pointed toward the stairs. From the size of her chest in relation to the rest of her, my guess was she'd already gone under the knife with Dr. Creem at least once.

"Up there," she said.

"Bitch," someone muttered under his breath.

Sampson hooked a finger at me to follow him, and we headed up.

“Can I go now?” cutoffs girl called after us.

“Let’s see how good your word is first,” Sampson said.

When we got to the second-floor hall, it was empty. The only light was a single electric hurricane lamp on a glossy antique table near the stairs. There were equestrian portraits on the walls and a long Oriental runner that ended in front of a closed double door at the back of the house. Even from here I could make out more music thumping on the other side. Old-school this time. Talking Heads, “Burning Down the House.”

Watch out, you might get what you’re after.

Cool babies, strange but not a stranger.

I could hear laughing, too, and two different men’s voices.

“That’s it, sweetheart. A little closer. Now pull down her panties.”

“Yeah, that’s what you call money in the bank right there.”

Sampson gave me a look like he wanted to either puke or kill someone.

“Let’s do this,” he said, and we started up the hall.

# Two

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“POLICE! WE’RE COMING IN!”

Sampson’s voice boomed over everything else. He gave one hard pound on the paneled mahogany door—his own version of knock and announce—and then threw it open.

Elijah Creem was standing just inside, looking every bit as pulled together as the pictures I’d seen of him—slicked-back blond hair, square cleft chin, perfect veneers.

He and Bergman were fully dressed. The other three—not so much. Bergman had an iPhone held up in front of him, taking a video of the freaky little ménage à trois they had staged there on the king-size sleigh bed.

One girl was laid out flat. Her bra was open

at the front, and her bright pink thong was down around her ankles. She was also wearing a clear breathing mask of some kind, tethered to a tall gray metal tank at the side of the bed. The boy on top of her was buck naked except for the black blindfold around his eyes, while the other girl stood over him with a small digital camera, shooting more video from another angle.

“What the hell is this?” Creem said.

“My question exactly,” I said. “Nobody move.”

All of them were wide-eyed and staring at us now, except for the girl with the mask. She seemed pretty out of it.

“What’s in the tank?” I said as Sampson went over to her.

“It’s nitrous oxide,” Creem said. “Just calm down. She’s fine.”

“Screw you,” John told him and eased the mask off the girl.

The buzz from nitrous is pretty short lasting, but I didn’t assume for a second that it was the only thing these kids were on. There were several blue tabs of what I assumed was more XTC on the nightstand. Also a couple of small brown glass



bottles, presumably amyl nitrate, and a half-empty fifth of Cuervo Reserva.

“Listen to me,” Creem said evenly, looking me in the eye. As far as I could tell, he was the ringleader here. “Do you see that briefcase in the corner?”

“Elijah? What are you doing?” Bergman asked, but Creem didn’t respond. He was still watching me like we were the only two in the room.

“There’s an envelope with thirty thousand dollars in that case,” he said. Then he looked pointedly from a brown leather satchel on the antique setback cabinet, over to one of the three windows at the back of the bedroom. The fringed shades were all drawn, but it was pretty clear to me what he was going for.

“How much time do you think thirty thousand dollars is worth?” he said. He was unbelievably cool about the whole thing. And arrogant. I think he fully expected me to go for it.

“You don’t seem like the climb-out-the-window type, Creem,” I said.

“Ordinarily, no,” he said. “But if you know who I am, then you know I’ve got quite a bit at stake here—a family, a medical practice—”

“Six and a half million in revenue last year

alone,” I said. “According to our records.”

“And then there’s my reputation, of course, which in this town is priceless. So what do you say, detective? Do we have a deal?”

I could tell he was already halfway out that window in his mind. This was a man who was used to getting what he wanted.

But then again, I wasn’t a seventeen-year-old girl with a self-image problem.

“I think my partner put it best,” I told him. “What was it you said, John?”

“Something like screw you,” Sampson said. “How old are these kids, Creem?”

For the first time, Dr. Creem’s superior affect seemed to crack right down the middle. His silly grin dropped away, and the eyes started moving faster.

“Please,” he said. “There’s more cash where that came from. A lot more. I’m sure we can work something out.”

But I was already done with this guy. “You have the right to remain silent—”

“I don’t want to beg.”

“Then don’t,” I said. “Anything you say can and will be used against you—”

“For Christ’s sake, you’re going to ruin me! Do you understand that?”

The narcissism alone was kind of staggering. Even more so was the cluelessness about what he’d done here.

“No, Dr. Creem,” I said as I turned him around and put the cuffs on. “You’ve already done that to yourself.”

# Three

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TWO MONTHS TO the day after Elijah Creem's unfortunate scandal broke in the headlines, he was ready to make a change. A big one. It was amazing what a little time, a good lawyer, and a whole lot of cash could do.

Of course, he wasn't out of the woods yet. And the cash wasn't going to last forever. Not if Miranda had anything to say about it. She was only speaking to him these days through her own attorney, and he hadn't been allowed to see Chloe or Justine since the future ex-Mrs. Creem had packed them off to her parents' house in Newport. Word from the lawyer was that they'd be finishing out the school year there.

The silence from the girls had been deafening

as well. All three of his blond beauties—Miranda, Justine, Chloe—had swiftly turned their backs on him, just as easily as closing a door.

As for the medical practice, there hadn't been a consult, much less a booking, since it had come out in the press that Dr. Creem (or Dr. Creep, as a few of the less savory rags were calling him) had traded surgical procedures for sex with more than one of Joshua Bergman's unfortunately underage protégées. Between that, and the little video collection Creem had accumulated on his home computer, there was still the very real possibility of a jail sentence if they went to trial.

Which was why Elijah Creem had no intention of letting that happen. What was the old cliché? *Today is the first day of the rest of your life?*

Yes, indeed. And he was going to make it count.

"I can't go to prison, Elijah," Joshua told him on the phone. "And I'm not saying I don't *want* to. I mean, I *can't*. I really don't think I'd make it in there."

Creem put a hand over the Bluetooth at his ear to hear better, and to avoid being overheard by the passersby on M Street.

“Better you than me, Joshua. At least you like dick.”

“I’m serious, Elijah.”

“I’m joking, Josh. And believe me, I’m no more inclined than you are. That’s why we’re not going to let it come to that.”

“Where are you, anyway?” Bergman asked. “You sound funny.”

“It’s the mask,” Creem told him.

“The mask?”

“Yes. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. There’s been a change of plans.”

The mask was an ingenious bit of latex composite, molded from human forms. The very newest thing. Creem had been experimenting with it since the scandal broke, and his own famous face had become something of a social liability. Now, as he passed the plate-glass window in front of Design Within Reach, he barely recognized his own reflection. All he saw was an ugly old man—sallow skin, sunken cheeks, and a pathetic remnant of dry, silver hair over a liver-spotted scalp. It was spectacular, actually. Poetic, even. The old man in the reflection looked just as ruined as Dr. Creem was feeling these days.

Dark-rimmed glasses masked the openings around his eyes. And while the lips were tight and uncomfortable, they were also formfitting enough that he could talk, drink, eat—anything at all—with the mask on.

“I didn’t want to let you know until I was sure this would work,” Creem told Bergman, “but I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“What do you mean? What kind of surprise?” Bergman asked.

“Joshua, do you remember Fort Lauderdale?”

There was a long pause on the line before he responded.

“Of course,” he said quietly.

“Spring break, 1988.”

“I said I remembered,” Bergman snapped, but then softened again. “We were just a couple of fetuses then.”

“I know it’s been a while,” Creem said. “But I’ve given this a lot of thought, and I’m not ready to just go quietly into the night. Are you?”

“God no,” Bergman said. “But you were the one who—”

“I know what I said. That was a long time ago. This is now.”

Creem heard his friend take a long, slow breath.

“Jesus, Elijah,” he said. “*Really?*”

He sounded scared, but more than that he sounded excited. Despite the mousy tendencies, Bergman also had a wonderfully twisted streak. He’d always been more excited by the murders than Creem.

For Creem, they’d been cathartic as much as anything else. A means to an end. And this time around, he had a whole new agenda.

“So . . . this is really happening?” Bergman said.

“It is for me,” Creem told him.

“When?”

“Right now. I’m waiting for her to come outside as we speak.”

“And, can I listen?”

“Of course,” Creem said. “Why do you think I called? But no more talking. Here she comes now.”



# Four

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CREEM POSITIONED HIMSELF across the street from Down Dog Yoga as the seven forty-five evening class let out. Among the first to emerge onto Potomac Street was Darcy Vickers, a tall, well-proportioned blonde.

He couldn't take credit for the tall or blond part, but as for the well-proportioned elements, those were all thanks to him. Darcy's ample bust, the perfectly symmetrical arch of her brows and lips, and the nicely tapered thighs represented some of Dr. Creem's best work.

Not that Darcy Vickers had ever expressed the first drop of gratitude. As far as she was concerned, the world was populated with her lackeys. She was a typical specimen, really—a K Street lobbyist

with a steroidal sense of entitlement and a desperate need to stay beautiful for as long as possible.

All of it so very familiar. So close to home, really.

He waited outside Dean & DeLuca while she ran in for whatever it was women like her deigned to eat these days. He watched while she held up the line at the register, talking obliviously away on her cell phone. Then he crossed the street again, to follow her down the quaintly cobblestoned alley toward the garage where Darcy's Bimmer was parked.

There was no need to keep too much distance. He was just some geezer in a windbreaker and orthopedic shoes—all but invisible to the Darcy Vickerses of the world. By the time they reached the deserted third level of the garage, he'd closed the gap between them to less than twenty feet.

Darcy pressed a clicker in her hand, and the Bimmer's trunk popped open with a soft click. That's when he made his move.

“Excuse me—Miranda?” he said, half timidly.

“Sorry, no,” Darcy said, dropping her grocery bag and purple yoga mat into the trunk without even a glance.

“Funny,” he said. “You look so much like her.” When the woman didn’t respond, he stepped in closer, crossing that invisible line of personal space between them. “Almost exactly like her, in fact.”

Now, as she turned around, the annoyance on her face was clear, even through the Botox.

“Listen,” she said, “I don’t mean to be rude—”

“You never do, Miranda.”

As he came right up on top of her, she put a hand out to deflect him. But Dr. Creem was stronger than the old man he appeared to be. Stronger than Darcy Vickers, too. His left hand clamped over her mouth as she tried to call out.

“It’s me, sweetheart,” he whispered. “It’s your husband. And don’t worry. All is forgiven.”

He paused, just long enough to see the surprise come up in her eyes, before he drove the steak knife deep into her abdomen. A scalpel would have been nice, but it seemed best to stay away from the tools of his own trade for the time being.

All the air seemed to leave Darcy Vickers’s lungs in a rush, and she collapsed forward, bending at the middle. It was a bit of work to get the knife out, but then it came free all at once.

With a quick sweep of his leg, Creem kicked

her ankles off the ground and lifted her into the trunk. She never even struggled. There were just a few gurgling sounds, followed by the glottal stoppage of several half-realized breaths.

He leaned in close, to make sure it would all reach Bergman's ears over the phone. Then he stabbed again, into the chest this time. And once more down below, opening the femoral artery with a swift, L-shaped motion, so there could be no chance of recovery.

Working quickly, he took a hank of her long blond hair in his hand and sawed it off with the serrated edge of the knife. Then he cut another, and another, and another, until it was nearly gone, sheared down to where the scalp showed through in ragged patches. He kept just one handful of it for himself, tucked into a Ziploc bag, and left the rest lying in tufts around her body.

She died just as ugly as she had lived. And Dr. Creem was starting to feel better already.

When it was done, Creem closed the trunk and walked away, taking the nearest stairs down toward M Street. He didn't speak until he was clear of the garage and outside on the sidewalk.

"Joshua?" he said. "Are you still there?"

Bergman took a few seconds to answer. "I'm . . . here," he said. His breath was ragged, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Are you . . ." Creem grinned, though he was also a little disgusted. "Joshua, were you masturbating?"

"No," his friend said, too quickly. Bergman had an ironic sense of modesty, all things considered. "Is it done?" he asked then.

"Signed, sealed, delivered," Creem said. "And you know what that means."

"Yes," Bergman said.

"Your move, old pal. I can't wait to see what you cook up."

## Part One

WIN, LOSE, OR DRAW



# Chapter 1

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IN THE PREDAWN darkness of April 6, Ron Guidice sat behind the wheel of his car, keeping an eye on the house across the way.

Alex Cross's place was nothing special, really. Just a white three-story clapboard on Fifth Street in Southeast DC. The shutters were ready for a coat of paint. There was a tidy little herb garden on the front stoop.

Cross lived here with his grandmother, his wife, and two of his three children, Janelle and Alex Jr., aka Ali. The oldest Cross child, Damon, was home for spring break, but he spent most of his time at boarding school these days. And there was a foster kid, too. Ava Williams. It wasn't clear whether she was on track for adoption, or what.



Guidice still had some digging to do. He liked to know as much as possible about his subjects.

There were a dozen Metro police officers on his list, and he'd been keeping tabs on all of them, mostly as a point of comparison. But Cross was special. Alex was the one that Guidice wanted to kill.

Just not yet.

Killing a man was easy. Any half-wit with a gun could put a bullet in someone's head. But really *knowing* a man—learning his weak spots first, getting to know his vulnerabilities, and taking his life apart, piece by piece? That took some doing.

Meanwhile, whether Cross knew it or not, he had a big day ahead of him.

Guidice watched the front windows, waiting for a light to come on. It wasn't strictly necessary to spend this much time on a subject, but he enjoyed it. He liked the quiet of the early morning hours, even if it meant just sitting and absorbing the seemingly inconsequential details—the missing chunk of concrete on the stairs, the eco-friendly bulb in the porch light. It was all part of the larger picture, and you never knew which tiny piece might take on some kind of significance in the end.

He passed the time scribbling observations into a spiral notebook on his lap.

Then, just after five, a soft stirring came up from the backseat.

“Papa? Is it time to get up?”

“No, sweetheart,” he said. He kept his chin down and his eye on the house. “You can go back to sleep.”

Emma Lee was cuddled up in an army sleeping bag with her favorite Barbie, Cee-Cee. Her pillowcase had Disney’s Cinderella on it. She’d chosen it for the picture of the little helper mice, whom she adored, for whatever reason.

“Will you sing me something?” she asked. “‘Hush, Little Baby’?”

Guidice smiled. She always called songs by their first words.

“‘Hush little baby, don’t say a word,’” he sang quietly. “‘Papa’s going to buy you a mocking-bird . . .’”

The front hall light came on in Alex’s house. Through the frosted glass of the door, Guidice could see the tall, dark shape of the man, descending the stairs.

Guidice continued to take it all down while he

sang. “If that mockingbird don’t sing, Papa’s gonna buy you a diamond ring . . .”

“A real one?” Emma Lee interrupted. It was the same question, every time. “A real diamond ring?”

“You bet,” he said. “Someday, when you’re older.”

He looked back over his shoulder into the soft, sleepy eyes of his daughter and wondered if it was even possible to love someone more than he did her. Probably not.

“Now go back to sleep, Baby Bear. When you wake up again, we’ll be home.”

## Chapter 2

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I GOT THE first call at headquarters around two o'clock that afternoon.

A woman had been found dead in the trunk of her car, in a Georgetown parking garage. Pretty unusual for Georgetown, so my hackles were up more than usual. I took the elevator straight down to the Daly Building garage and headed out with an extra-large coffee in hand. It was going to be a long-ass day.

That said, I really do like my job. I like giving a voice to the people who can't speak for themselves anymore—the ones whose voices have been stolen from them. And in my line of work, that usually means through some kind of violence.

The responding officer's report was that a

garage attendant at American Allied Parking on M Street had found what looked like a pool of dried blood underneath a BMW belonging to one Darcy Vickers. When the cops arrived, they'd forced open the trunk and confirmed what they already suspected. Ms. Vickers had no pulse, and had been dead for some time. Now they were waiting for someone from Homicide to arrive and take it from there.

That's where I came in. Or at least, so I thought.

It was a beautiful spring day. The best time of year in DC. The National Cherry Blossom Festival was on, and we hadn't yet gotten hit with the first wave of summer humidity—or summer tourists. I had my windows down and Quincy Jones's *Soul Bossa Nostra* up loud enough that I almost didn't hear my phone when the second call came in.

Caller ID told me it was Marti Huizenga, my sergeant at the Major Case Squad. I juggled the volume down on the stereo and caught the call just before it went to voice mail.

"Dr. C.," she said. "Where are you?"

"Pennsylvania and Twenty-First," I told her. "Why?"

"Good. Take a right on New Hampshire.

Another body just popped up, and it sounds god-awful, to tell you the truth.”

“So you thought of me.”

“Natch. I need someone over there right away. It’s a bad scene, Alex—a dead girl, hanging out of a sixth-floor window. Possible suicide, but I don’t know.”

“You want me on this instead of Georgetown?”

“I want you on both,” Huizenga said. “At least for now. I need one set of eyes on both scenes, as fresh as possible. And *then* I want you to tell me this is all just a coincidence, okay? I’m asking politely here.”

Huizenga’s sense of humor was as dark as mine could be sometimes. I liked working with her. And we both knew that the difference between two *unrelated* dead bodies and two *related* ones was the difference between not getting much sleep for the next forty-eight hours, and getting none at all.

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

“Vernon Street, between Eighteenth and Nineteenth,” she said. “I’ll tell Second District to get started without you at the garage in Georgetown, but try to be there as soon as you can.”

That’s kind of like telling the clouds when to

rain. I had no idea how long I'd be at this new scene. You never do until you're there.

And this one turned out to be a nightmare.

# Chapter 3

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VERNON STREET IS just a single tree-lined block off the west end of U Street. It's a quiet residential area, but I could see a crowd of people pooled on the sidewalk as soon as I turned the corner from Eighteenth. Most of them were looking up and pointing at a mansard-roofed brick building on the south side of the street.

As soon as I got out of my car, I saw the girl. It was like a check in the ribs. She hung suspended by her neck on a length of rope, about three feet below one of the dormered sixth-floor windows. Her face was visibly discolored, and her hands seemed to be tied behind her back.

Jesus. Oh Jesus.

There were two cruisers and an ambulance



parked out front, but the only personnel I saw was a single cop on the door of the apartment building. The rest of the sidewalk was filled up with looky-loos, snapping away on their phones and cameras. It pissed me off as much as it amazed me.

“Get this street roped off, right now!” I told the cop on my way into the building. “I don’t want to see anyone on that sidewalk by the time I’m up there looking down, you got it?”

I knew he had his hands full, but I couldn’t help feeling revved up by the whole thing. This girl was someone’s daughter. She had a family. They didn’t need her picture on some goddamn Facebook page for the world to see.

I left the cop to it and took the stairwell instead of the elevator. It seemed like a more likely exit, if this was in fact a murder we were talking about. And you only get one chance to see a crime scene for the first time.

When I came out into the sixth-floor hall, another cop and two EMTs were waiting outside an open apartment door. The building had three units on this level, all facing the street. Our dead girl was apparently in the center one.

“Door was locked when we got here,” the police

officer told me. “That splintering on the frame is us. We were inside just long enough to get a flatline on the girl, but it wasn’t easy. I can’t guarantee we didn’t move anything in there.”

The apartment was a small alcove studio. There was a closet kitchen to one side, an open bathroom door on the other, and a futon couch that looked like it doubled for a bed. As far as I could tell, there were no signs of a struggle. In fact, the only thing that looked out of place was the old-fashioned coat tree, braced sideways against the open window, with a loop of rope hanging down from the center.

I forced myself to enter the room slowly, checking for drag marks, or anything that might have been left behind. When I got to the window and looked down, I could see the top of the girl’s head, just out of reach. Her heel had broken through the window of the apartment below, and the cord around her wrists seemed to be more of the same rope that had been used in the hanging.

That didn’t rule out suicide, either. A lot of people will bind themselves just before they do the deed, to keep from trying to struggle free in the heat of the moment.

Down below, another cruiser had arrived and

the street was clear. But now I had another problem. When I looked straight across, I could see at least a dozen people in the windows of the facing apartment building, looking my way—more phones, more cameras. I wanted to give them all the finger, but I held back.

Still, I wasn't going to let this go on for one second longer than I had to.

"Give me a hand over here!" I shouted toward the hall.

Technically, the body at any crime scene belongs to the medical examiner, not the cops. But I wasn't thinking about technicalities right now. I was thinking about this girl and her family.

I already had my own phone out, and I fired off a bunch of shots. I got the coat tree, the window frame, the rope, and the girl, from above. I needed to preserve as much detail as I could before I did what I was about to do.

"Sir?" a cop said behind me.

"Help me pull her in," I said.

"Um . . . don't you want to wait for the ME?"

"No," I said, pointing at the audience we had across the street. "Not anymore. Now give me a hand, or get me someone who will!"

# Chapter 4

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WE LAID THE girl out as carefully as we could on the floor of the apartment, and left the rope around her neck. As long as she was out of the public eye, that's all I needed. The rest I could leave to the investigation.

Her name was Elizabeth Reilly. According to the driver's license I found in a purse by the front door, she was just two weeks shy of turning twenty-one. The apartment had all the signs of someone who lived alone, from the Lean Cuisines in the freezer to the single towel and washrag hanging neatly in the bathroom.

Obviously there was more to the story here, but I wasn't seeing it yet.

When the ME did arrive I was glad to see it

was Joan Bradbury. Joan's an easygoing, sixty-something Texan. As far as I knew, she never came to work in anything but top-stitched cowboy boots, even after twenty years in DC. She's opinionated, but also easy to work with, and didn't give me any big lectures when she saw what I'd done with the body. Joan has four daughters of her own; I think she instinctively got it.

While she started her initial exam, I got our team of investigators out knocking on doors, especially across the street. This hanging had gone down in broad daylight. Someone had to have seen something.

I also got some more info from Sergeant Huizenga on our victim. Elizabeth Reilly had been a nursing student at Radians College on Vermont Avenue until the previous December, when she'd dropped out. There was no word yet on recent employment, but other than one unpaid parking ticket her record was squeaky clean.

By the time I got back to Joan, they were ready to wrap and bag the body for transport to the morgue.

"I'm going to need a full autopsy," she told me, "but I'm thinking this girl was dead before she

went out the window. Maybe strangled with the same rope.”

She reached down and pointed at some dark, purplish marks on Elizabeth Reilly’s lower neck.

“You see these contusions? These are all consistent with manual strangulation. But up here, higher, where the rope caught her? Just faint bruising. If there was any blood flow when she was actually hanged, those marks would be darker.”

I rocked back on my heels and ran a hand over the bottom of my face.

“This is what I was afraid of,” I said.

“There’s more, Alex.”

Normally Joan was pretty matter-of-fact, even at the roughest scenes, but there was a tightness in her voice I’d never heard before. This one was getting to her.

“The abdomen’s still flaccid, and she’s got obvious striations around her midsection and breasts,” she told me. “As far as I can make out, our girl here had a baby recently. And, Lord help me, I mean *recently*.”

# Chapter 5

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IT WAS LATE evening by the time I finally got over to the American Allied Parking garage in Georgetown. The site was well preserved, but Darcy Vickers's body had already been removed. I'd have to fill in some blanks with the crime-scene photography later and glean what I could for now.

Ms. Vickers's silver BMW 550i was parked on the third level. That's where she'd been found. One of the Second District detectives, Will Freemont, walked me through it. He seemed like he wondered what I was doing so late to the party, but that was the least of my worries right now. My thoughts were still consumed by the Elizabeth Reilly case.

"So, they found her in here," Freemont said,

pointing into the open trunk. “Stab wounds were here, here, and here.” He pointed with two fingers to his own chest, abdomen, and upper leg. “This lady didn’t die too well, but you can bet she died quick, for whatever that’s worth. And just for shits and giggles, I guess, he cut off her hair, too.”

Left behind were a yoga mat, a briefcase, a few shopping bags, and a garment bag, all covered in a combination of dried blood and a mess of loose blond hair, some of it matted with the blood.

There was also a good-size dark stain—more blood—pooled on the cement under the car.

“He would have needed it to be quick,” I said. “It’s a pretty risky site for a murder.”

“He?” Freemont said.

“I’m guessing,” I said. It was all about first impressions at this point. “What do we know about Darcy Vickers?”

The detective flipped open a small notebook, the same kind I carried, and looked down at it.

“Forty-two years old. Divorced, no kids. Works for Kimball-Ellis on K Street, mostly retainer work for a couple of the big tobacco companies. Supposedly she had a real cutthroat reputation, from what I’ve got so far.”



In other words, Darcy Vickers had plenty of enemies. Most lobbyists do. But not every lobbyist ends up stabbed to death in the trunk of a car. Who, exactly, would want to do this? And why?

And for that matter, could this possibly have anything to do with Elizabeth Reilly's hanging?

Nothing obvious had been taken. Darcy Vickers's wallet, cash, phone, and jewelry were all still there, as far as anyone knew. That led me to believe that the killing itself was the motive, either to satisfy some impulse for violence or to get rid of this woman in particular—or maybe both.

In those respects, the two cases seemed the same. But the m.o. was completely different.

Assuming Elizabeth Reilly hadn't committed suicide, her killer wanted the body put on display for everyone to see. He would have had to go to some trouble for that. Whereas with Darcy Vickers, it was all about the act itself—the stabbing, and then for whatever reasons, the cutting of the hair.

My gut was telling me these were two different cases, but we still had a lot of background work to do. Maybe these two women shared some connection, somewhere.

“Any witnesses?” I asked Freemont.