

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.