

## CHAPTER ONE

“Fleming! Why the hell did you assign a possible serial murder case to someone as green as Coates?”

Police Chief Pedro Perez shook his head, turning away. Outside his office window a tree lizard scurried up the trunk of a palm tree. “We have a fourth murder victim. And that victim has a related cause of death to three others!”

The profile of his square chin and long slender nose was in silhouette, with the chief’s deeply receding hairline almost hidden in the shaded corner.

“Budget cuts mainly, Chief.” Arthur Fleming sighed, resisting a habit when frustrated of running his fingers through his carefully cut, graying brown hair.

“All of my detectives are working other open cases plus at least half a dozen cold-cases too.”

“I realize Coates is inexperienced, but he still doesn’t have a partner - or any open cases and he’s the one who linked the first three. I had assigned him to review only cold files to get him started. I didn’t anticipate that any of them would be connected.”

“Besides, I’ve directed Coates to report directly to me every day. He may be the youngest officer to make detective, but his IQ is the highest.” Captain Fleming shrugged. “With the right guidance Andrew Coates has great potential.”

When the police chief returned to his desk chair, his tone was low and measured. “I don’t want someone with *potential* investigating a violent serial killer – I want someone with *experience* investigating a violent serial killer.”

“I agree. But remember each of the three previous murders, were at least a year apart and because each one had been investigated by different lead detectives, it wasn’t until those cold-case files landed on Coates’ desk that the similarities were even flagged.”

“Okay. I’ll give the kid that, but I got a preliminary copy of the M.E. report from Dr. Lopez. It arrived even before my Wall Street Journal and *before* I had my first morning coffee.”

Tucson Police Chief Perez handed an unlabeled file to the police captain.

“Here.” The folder was open with a single sheet of paper stapled in place on the right side.

Fleming scanned the few typed lines then looked up obviously shaken. “Carol Huntington? She’s the fourth victim? Holy...” His voice faded as he reread the medical examiner’s initial findings.

Chief Perez leaned forward with his arms folded across the top of his desk. “Same mutilation pattern, *except* Huntington wasn’t a hooker nor was there any evidence of sexual intercourse prior to death like the first three.”

“Which, brings us back to my original very deep concern, Captain Fleming. Because of this,” Perez pointed to the medical examiner’s report, “those three cold-cases now take on a sharper significance.”

The captain didn't look up.

"Fleming?"

Arthur Fleming closed the file folder then handed it back to Chief Perez. "Right, sure does. Every detective we've got will want this one. Don't worry. I'll park Coates right outside my door."

Captain Fleming stood to leave. "If that's all, sir I better keep Coates moving."

"Send me regular updates at least once a day, even if there's no change – understood?"

"Understood."

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Captain Fleming's long legs stretched across the elevator threshold even before the doors opened fully.

"Coates, my office!" The pace of his stride was a rush, by several scattered desks directly to his office.

Third floor Robbery-Homicide was almost deserted except for two other detectives - Sergeant Lucia Mendoza, and her homicide investigating partner Lieutenant Clarence Brayburn.

Their desks were set on the east side of the open room against a wall of windows. An early morning Arizona sun bounced light off the glass from the office windows across the street.

Detective Brayburn waited impatiently for copies of information from a slow printer. His typical two-day beard merged with the sideburns of his close cut black curly hair. He wore the same dark grey tie everyday regardless of his shirt choice.

Lucia Mendoza, Brayburn's fashion opposite - made written notes interviewing a witness from her desk phone. Typically, her long deep brunette colored hair was braided and pinned high on her head. She wore one of her many crisp tailored suits as if she never sat at a desk.

Startled, Andrew stood so abruptly his desk chair rolled several feet, bumping into a metal file cabinet behind him.

He smoothed his sand-colored hair and adjusted his tie under a white button-down collar. Hurrying to catch up to his captain he looked down checking the crease on one front leg of his khaki cotton pants.

The captain still holding his briefcase had stopped in front of his office window. His back was to the office door and his rookie detective.

"I just came from a meeting with Chief Perez, who's trying to keep the mayor calm. What'da ya got for me?"

"Everything's the same as the other three, sir." Andrew remained standing, nervous and unsure of what to do with his hands. "Except this victim wasn't a hooker, she was a Lutheran Church pastor."

The captain didn't move. "And?"

"Oh, yeah, Dr. Lopez said there was no sign of any pre-death sexual activity, like the others."

"So, *not*, exactly the same is that correct Detective?" Fleming spoke still looking out of his office window. He didn't trust his emotions, needing to maintain his image.

"Aw, no sir, that would be correct. Sorry sir."

Andrew felt foolish, he knew better. Accuracy, obscure details, and fine points made all the difference between a solid case and a case with holes. But his elevated heart rate made speaking difficult, jamming his brain cells in a holding-pattern.

"When do you see Father Reynolds?"

"I was ready to leave for the church when you arrived, sir. Did you want to come with me?"

"No. When will the crime scene photos be ready?"

"They could be on my computer now, sir. Ms. Huntington's body was discovered just before midnight. Would you like me to forward copies to you?"

The captain shook his head. "Print them off when you get back. We can go over them and your interview with Father Reynolds then."

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At one time Father Fredric Reynolds had been a formidable hockey player with dreams of a career in the NHL. However, a waterskiing accident between college semesters damaged his left shoulder too badly to consider any professional sport let alone the National Hockey League.

Decades later at sixty-one it was difficult for the young detective to visualize the Lutheran pastor qualified for any other role than that of Saint Nicholas. Through the years, Fredric Reynolds had become the shape of a pear and his red hair had faded to the color of icing sugar.

Reynolds was missing a long white beard, but his pale blue eyes and sunburned cheeks fit the rest of Madison Avenue's advertising portrait of Kris Kringle – though perhaps a disorganized one.

The pastor's mahogany paneled office was a square sixteen by sixteen-foot room at the back corner of the ninety-year-old mission style church in the center of Tucson. The walls, unlike any horizontal surfaces were almost bare. Small, high windows let in light partially blocked by the shadows of taller buildings outside.

Pastor Reynolds had to clear several papers from the seat of a chair by his desk before Detective Coates could sit.

"Thank you, sir." Coates skipped small talk heading directly to his listed questions.

"Do you know of any appointments that Reverend Huntington had scheduled for this week Father? I ask this because when the break-in was first noticed uniformed officers on the scene called detectives from robbery, but all that was listed as missing was Huntington's laptop and cell phone."

Father Reynolds retrieved his bound date book from a lower desk drawer appreciating how tense the young detective was. "I prefer paper." Smiling at the eager novice, he opened his date book to that week marked with a large paperclip.

"Carol was more tech savvy. She used her phone and her computer. However, since we went to nearly every hospital and assisted-living facility as a team I can make a photocopy of my datebook and anything else you might need. But as far as her office counseling sessions, only our church secretary, Hazel Woods will have that information."

Andrew added the secretary's name to his interview list. "Thank you again, sir." He scrolled down from his first question to his second.

"Was anyone hanging around the church over the last few weeks, or months you didn't recognize or who may have made you or anyone else here uneasy?"

The pastor shook his head. "Frankly there's been no one or nothing unusual we couldn't handle around Saint Luther's since I've been here. Oh, let's see – eight years now."

"And – to answer what I might guess to be your next question, I know Carol was never concerned about anyone either and she, was at Saint Luther's almost as long. Eighteen months after I arrived, I lured her away from the police department as I'm sure you know."

Father Reynolds' smile was that of an impish child who had snatched an extra cookie.

Andrew looked up from typing notes into his ePad. "No, I didn't know. I joined the Tucson police nine months ago. It's only been seven months since I passed my detective exams. For three years before that I was in uniform and on traffic patrol in Casa Grande."

The pastor nodded. "Well Carol was staff psychologist with Tucson, Internal Affairs Division. But the volunteer work she did at Saint Luther's was so impressive that with the Lutheran Church open to ordaining women too, I lobbied her quite relentlessly to leave police work and join the ministry."

"I don't mind telling you that Police Chief Perez was not happy with me at all – at all, but she still counseled police officers after she resigned. She saw a couple dozen regularly and others intermittently."

"Son, Carol Huntington had that rare combination of instinct, logic, compassion and humor." The pastor stopped to collect himself. "I'll miss her," his voice caught. "Everyone I know will miss her."

Detective Coates took a photo of the pastor's date book for each week in the previous month of January and for that week of February.

After interviewing Hazel Woods, she printed out a current congregation list. Andrew photographed the secretary's calendar for Pastor Huntington's counseling sessions, with time and client names scheduled for the first six weeks of the New Year and the previous four years.

He scrolled from screen to screen studying some of the names he had yet to interview then checked the accumulating documentation in the paper file box on his passenger seat. Andrew wondered as he replaced the lid if there such a thing as too much information and too many possible suspects?

It was an advantage to hide in a crowd.

Andrew zigzagged across Tucson for the rest of that day and the next three days, interviewing obvious people like clients scheduled for the week of and prior to Pastor Huntington's death and as well as others not so obvious. The couple planning to marry, were just as nervous as he was, so were neighbors and clerks at small businesses where the pastor shopped regularly.

Saturday morning in his apartment, wearing plaid boxers and a faded University of Arizona T-shirt, Andrew finished typing up his latest notes and conclusions. With a discouraged sigh he hit the *SEND* button with an email copy to his captain.

Monday morning, Andrew with his file box and crime scene photos was back in Captain Fleming's office.

Fleming sat at his desk and watched as Coates lined each photo in a neat row across the evidence-case board. With most of the photos in place, Detective Coates stood back by his captain's desk.

Both men studied the gruesome images in silence.

Like a surreal halo a pool of blood circled the latest victim's head from the same type of wound inflicted on the previous three victims.

Pastor Huntington's office had been trashed. Pictures ripped from the walls, lamps knocked over, all flat surfaces cleared with everything pushed to the floor.

"What do you see in each and every one of these photos, Detective Coates?"

With his heart pounding again and praying he didn't say something stupid the rookie spoke from the base of a developing hunch. "Rage sir. This looks personal, like someone was real pissed."