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# **Installment One: Book One Detective Bourque Series**

*by*

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***Blood Ties* © A.M. Potter**

*Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.*  
~ Confucius

*Cape Cod is the bared and bended arm of Massachusetts.*  
~ Henry David Thoreau

## Chapter 1

*East Falmouth, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. May 14<sup>th</sup>*

Swirls of mist rose off the infinity pool. The water was royal blue, the color of Adriatic tiles.

Rollo Novak shed his robe, dove in and surfaced two-thirds of the way along the pool. New Blue, he called it, the first outdoor swim of the year. He plunged underwater, scissor-kicked to the shallow end and came up for breath. Beyond the pool, the sun crested the horizon.

He slipped underwater and headed for the deep end, this time reaching the wall. Surfacing, he saw his wife Katrina on the deck. “Jump, ljubezen,” he called. Jump, *my love*.

She grinned at him, dropped her robe and jumped in naked, cannonball style. The waves splashed over his head. Giggling, she grabbed his hand and led him to the shallow end. He heard a click at the back gate, and then another one.

Katrina pulled his swimsuit down. Forget about the gate.

## Chapter 2

### **DAY ONE: *Cape & Islands Detective Unit, Massachusetts State Police. May 14<sup>th</sup>***

Detective Ivy Bourque roared up a long narrow driveway. Thick stands of black spruce shut out the sun. Her radio crackled, reporting another trooper on the way. A quarter of a mile later, the spruce finally receded and the forest revealed a gargantuan house.

The white stone hulk featured a colossal central turret. The roof was cerulean blue. It melded perfectly with the sky. Rollo Novak, originally from Slovenia, had finished the faux Adriatic castle a year ago—another example of big money coming into Cape Cod. While big money was often entwined with big egos, by all accounts Novak was a true gentleman. He'd built the castle for his new wife. Bourque was more than happy with her man, but a gentleman *and* a castle, that could be a fairy tale come true.

She stepped out of her unmarked car. The grounds were eerily silent. The sun peered over the turret like a giant red eye. The front door swung open. State Trooper Donnelly walked toward her, sidearm holstered.

“Two hangers,” he gruffly said. “Rich folks: the larger the fortune, the greater the misfortune.”

He shook his head. “It’s the way of the world.”

“You can’t win,” she commiserated.

“Never. There’s one man in there, unarmed.” Donnelly winked. “Unless you count his stare.”

“Lethal weapon?” she kidded.

“Oh yeah, loaded with attitude. Get your sunglasses on.”

She followed Donnelly up the stairs, detecting no signs of a break-in. Inside, a vast foyer underscored the castle theme: gold-leaf paint, cognac-coloured wood, Old World tapestries. A few yards away, she saw a painting that looked like a medieval masterpiece. It could be an original. Novak was that rich.

Donnelly gestured toward a man sitting in a throne-like chair, guarded by Trooper Derlago. The man's face projected haughtiness. She pegged him at forty-plus: olive complexion, black hair, heavy crow's feet around the eyes.

"Detective Lieutenant Bourque, State Police. What's your name, sir?"

He stood. "Damijan Zupan. I am House Manager. Butler, you can say."

The name sounded Slavic. Slovenian? she speculated. He wore an expensive blue-serge suit.

With his wide shoulders and stony face, he looked to be cut from the mold of bodyguard *cum* butler. His slicked-back hair was shiny and duck-tailed. She pressed the recording button on her duty phone, preparing to watch forensically, to capture every tick. "Did you call the police?" she asked.

"Yes, I call." He didn't seem distressed.

"Why?" An obvious question, but she wanted to hear his story.

"Mr. Novak, he is dead. Wife as well."

Bourque waited. A man of few words.

"He does not come for breakfast," Zupan eventually said, "nor wife. I went to look for him. I know he swims. I went to outdoor pool. There is indoor pool as well, but I know Mr. Rollo swims outside today."

"Did you see anyone?" she asked.

“I see no one.” Zupan’s dark eyes were empty. He’d called in the deaths, but levelheaded murderers sometimes did that.

“Where did you find the bodies?”

“Outdoor pool. Shallow end. Half an hour ago. No, less.” He pulled out a smartphone and aloofly showed her the call list. “I make nine-one-one at three minutes before eight.”

Bourque glanced at her watch: 0823 hours. She’d been dispatched at 0802. Zupan’s timeline seemed right. “Who else is in the house?”

“No one. It is quiet season. I look after whole house myself.”

“Cooking, cleaning, serving meals. Everything?”

He nodded abruptly, his eyes suddenly indignant. They flashed like lightning, only black. *Do not doubt me*, they ordered.

A reticent man with a temper. “Are there any groundskeepers?” she asked.

“No. They come next week. Wife, she is gardener. Mr. Rollo, he cuts lawn yesterday with rider mower.”

Strange, Bourque thought. A billionaire on a rider mower. “Did you touch either body?”

“No.”

“How did you know they were dead?”

“I was soldier.” Zupan’s eyes were emotionless again. “I know death.”

“Did you see or hear any vehicles on the property this morning?”

“No one comes until your policemen,” Zupan asserted and then continued, apparently feeling more forthcoming. “Mr. Rollo, he usually eats at seven-thirty. I do not worry until fifteen minutes later. Then I start to look. I find him hanging beside wife, like from a tree.” Zupan paused. “I am thinking. Who would do this? Šef, I mean, boss, he is good man.”

She remained silent, hoping for more details.

Zupan obliged her. “Mr. Rollo, he is happy man. Always content. Always, I tell you.”

She waited again, but Zupan was done. *Always?* Was he overstating things? Trying to snow her? She’d send his footwear and clothes to the lab. He could be the killer. On the other hand, he might simply be a person of interest, a POI. “I have to get some equipment,” she said. “Then you can take me to the pool. You’ll remain with a trooper.”

She motioned for Derlago to cover Zupan. Leaving the castle, she gave the interior her full attention, taking in the area closest to the foyer: a great-room, a study, two sitting-rooms. More heavy furniture. The rooms felt abandoned, as if they hadn’t been entered in years. In her experience, victims’ houses were often useful clues. This one felt tired and stale, which was incongruous. The Novaks were said to be a gregarious couple.

Walking to her car, she replayed the butler’s words in her head. His original reticence was followed by a more cooperative stance. For the moment, she’d treat him as a POI. If she was wrong, she’d wear it. That was the job. You made snap decisions and you lived with them.

According to Zupan, no one had driven onto the property, but the perps could have travelled by foot. A beach track bordered the southern edge of the Novak estate. There were numerous wharves nearby, so the perps could have come ashore by boat. In any case, almost half-an-hour had passed since Zupan’s call-in. The killer or killers were likely gone.

After grabbing her crime scene bag, she pulled up Google Earth on her phone. The Novak property was 10.2 acres, a massive lot considering the neighboring estates, which were all under two acres. She called Donnelly outside. Using Street View, she showed him the acreage. “Check the two side access roads,” she began. “Both have closed barricades. Find out if they’re locked. Look for fresh tire prints, anything suspicious.”

“Roger. By the way, I viewed the bodies from a distance. Didn’t contaminate the scene. I was thinking of you.”

She grinned. “Aw shucks. We’ll make a detective of you yet.”

“No thanks.”

“You’d like it. No road patrols. No underage drinking parties.”

Donnelly laughed. “No flying beer bottles?”

“Never say never.”

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Derlago in tow, Bourque followed Zupan to the pool, staying silent, letting Zupan hang on the hook. He didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he seemed to welcome the silence.

Outside the pool, she donned her crime scene gear: shoe covers, gloves, and a hooded clean-suit.

Instantly, she felt confined yet twice as big. She stepped through a sliding glass door.

The setting surprised her. Compared to the Old-World interior—cluttered and ornate—the pool was ultra-modern and utilitarian, about twenty yards long. The only common denominator with the house was the deck, blue-bordered white tiles that matched the hall floors. The area resembled a cloister—windowless, high stone walls—with one exception: the pool’s infinity feature opened half the southern wall. She scanned the deck. No blood stains. No signs of scuffles or bodies being dragged. Then she saw the bodies, two corpses hanging by the neck from a pool stair rail, about a yard above the water.

She approached methodically, mentally recording the details. The corpses were submerged from the mid-thigh down, suspended side by side, with no space between them. Their position seemed unnatural—too uniform, too perfect—as if the scene had been staged. Both were naked, except for the man’s shorts, which were caught on one foot.

She recognized his face instantly: Rollo Novak, billionaire businessman, TV celebrity, a star on *Angels or Devils*, the hit show featuring financiers who funded startups, sometimes to the detriment of the startups. Angel investors often became devils, executing hostile takeovers. As for the woman, Bourque had seen her on TV as well, a beauty who'd hooked Novak two years ago and snagged him from his first wife. Bourque knew her name: Katrina Hayden. She'd been born in Falmouth. Locals said she made Novak build the castle nearby instead of on Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard, the usual summer playgrounds for the rich. She was a former Miss USA, a dancer, about thirty years old. If Bourque remembered correctly, she was fifteen years younger than her new hubbie.

The former Miss USA was closest to Bourque. Even in death, she looked exquisite, and with no make-up. Her skin was absolutely flawless. Although her blonde hair hung lankly, it was clearly expensively cut. Her large brown eyes looked like marble.

Bourque moved closer and examined the torso, letting her eyes travel upward from feet to neck. To say Hayden's body was perfect was an understatement. Muscular legs, strong arms. No signs of trauma. Her bowels had loosened. Bourque ignored the smell. Rigor hadn't begun, indicating Hayden hadn't been dead long. She sported an almost hairless bikini wax. Although her head hair was blonde, her pubic hair was brown. Bourque looked again. A head dye job, she decided. Gentlemen preferred blondes, or was it that blondes preferred gentlemen?

Hayden had joined the ink club. She had a collection of 'bedroom' tattoos, visible only when naked. The most noticeable tat was above her pubic bone: a signpost about an inch long, pointing south, with a 'G' on it. Nice one, Bourque thought. *To the G-spot, Jeeves*. Two small G-signs adorned each breast, just below the nipples, pointing down. Bourque chuckled privately. Maybe Hayden had some directionally-challenged lovers. Nothing new there.



Bourque's gaze reached the victim's neck. It was lassoed by the broad end of a dark red necktie, about three inches wide. There was something under the tie. She leaned closer. It was a silver-toned wire, cutting deeply into the skin. She shifted to the side, carefully moved Hayden's hair, and inspected the back of her neck. The wire ligature was crossed just below the top spinal vertebra and twisted six times, very neatly.

Bourque's mind quickened. The victim couldn't have pulled the wire that deep herself and then twisted it—certainly not so neatly—which pointed to murder, not suicide. She resumed her scrutiny, focusing on the wire. Each end was about eight inches long—not long enough to hang someone. From what she could tell, the wire was the murder weapon, not the necktie.

Moving on to Novak, she found similar indications, but the MO, modus operandi, was different.

There was only one ligature: the broad end of a dark red necktie, again about three inches wide.

No wire. Perhaps Novak hadn't been murdered. She assessed the whole scene. Maybe he strangled Hayden and then hanged himself? Possible. More questions surfaced, buzzing her mind like bees. Did the twin red neckties signify anything? If so, what? If suicide was in play, why didn't Novak just weigh himself down and jump in the pool? It'd be easier than hanging himself. Was he making a statement?

Slow down, she ordered herself. Let the crime scene reveal itself. She inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, and then repeated the cycle. It stilled her mind. She continued her examination, taking in Novak's body. For a middle-aged man, he was very fit. Well-muscled yet slim. As with Hayden, rigor hadn't begun and his bowels had loosened.

Her eyes returned to the necktie. The end tied to the stair rail was about a yard long—long enough to enable suicide by hanging. Then again, someone could have used it to strangle him.

The noose knot was at the back of his neck. She knew most male strangulation assaults occurred

from behind. A frontal assault gave a fit man a chance to fight back. A rear assault suggested murder. However, there was no throttling wire. Given the Hayden MO, that seemed to rule out homicide. So, his death could be a suicide.

Bourque stepped back. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't offer the victims any dignity. They had to remain hanging until the forensic experts, the whitecoats, were finished with them. Either she was looking at two murders, or a murder-suicide. She didn't know which. She exhaled noisily. Her job wasn't to pronounce the cause of death. That was up to the state medical examiner. Her job was to study the scene, to find details that could reconstruct events and solve the crime.

Pulling out her phone, she called her unit chief, Detective Captain Peabody. "Bourque here," she said. "Two fatalities confirmed."

"Identities?" Peabody asked. His voice was insistent and high-pitched, like a whistling teakettle.

"Rollo Novak and his wife," she replied. "Could be two murders. Or a murder and a suicide."

"Suicide?"

"Could be."

"Damn. Messy."

Bourque didn't respond. Peabody preferred murder over suicide. In the public eye, suicides were sad stories. In Peabody's, they were resource burners. Suicide was just another type of murder: premeditated and self-inflicted. His staff would need to probe for motive and opportunity.

"All right," he grudgingly said. "I'll call in two whitecoats."

She kept her counsel. It was a big property. They'd probably need more. Peabody wouldn't like that. Extra forensic officers would ratchet up his budget.

“Okay, Lieutenant. I don’t suppose you’ll be back in the office today. You know, to register your investigation.”

“Correct. I won’t be.” She disconnected. Peabody and his protocols.

## Chapter 3

Bourque turned away from the crime scene, but the hanging bodies were burned into her mind. Whenever she encountered murder, she plunged into work mode—secure the scene and collect evidence—and then later, when her duties stabilized, the corpses flooded her consciousness and became people: husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. It was always like that.

Pacing slowly, she examined the deck area. Nothing except for two plush red robes, which she left to the experts. She stepped close to the infinity pool ledge, leaned out, and looked down. A sheer, smooth wall; a five-yard drop to the ground. The perps could have climbed it using grappling hooks or a ladder, but she didn't detect any scrapes or indentations.

Looking up, she noted it was clear all the way to the ocean. Whitecapped waves were rolling ashore, breaking on a golden beach. Quite the location, she thought, close to New England royalty. The Kennedy Compound was barely fifteen miles away. Her mother Sarah, a descendant of the Puritans, had noted Novak's incursion into the area, mentioning his wealth, suspecting it to be "foreign and ill-begotten." Sarah didn't have anything against money per se—as long as it was old money. In her mind, nothing trumped the past.

As a teenager, Bourque had rebelled against everything her parents represented. Nowadays, however, she had a soft spot for local history. Incidentally, it happened to have a practical angle. Most New England murders didn't come out of the blue. They had a link to the past, if not the distant past, at least a few generations back.

Scanning southward, she saw no buildings or trees, no apparent sightlines for surveillance.

However, a drone operator could have sent up a camera. Returning to the pool's shallow end, she strode to a backwall gate and turned the handle. It clicked open. Was it usually open?

She walked outside. A blue jay kamikazed her from the roof, squawking proprietorially. She ducked. Another jay joined the fray. It was slightly smaller. A nesting pair, she figured, a male and female.

Knowing her presence signified an intrusion, she stood completely still, taking in the surroundings. If not for the murders, it'd be a hell of a morning. The dew-laden grass glittered with tiny diamonds. The golden beach magnified the sun, shining like a mini sun itself. A line of nearby red cedars was twisted helter-skelter, distorted by gales. With its two moods—one refined, one untamed—Cape Cod was as lovely as a lady and as drunk as a lord.

In due course, the jays resettled and she began surveying the gate area. No signs of forced entry. Manicured shrubbery, a path leading south, toward the ocean. She walked beside the path, leaving it untrampled.

As she paced, her senses logged the grounds. A wide swathe of lawn. The smell of freshly-mown grass. Deciduous trees to the east, coming into leaf. Not much cover for intruders. Thirty paces later, she turned back. No recent prints or obvious DNA carriers, like bottles or cans. However, considering the dearth of evidence in the pool area, the back gate and grounds were a prime zone for the whitecoats.

Preliminary inspection complete, she returned to the house and shed her crime scene gear, glad to be back in civvies—dark green slacks and a brown leather jacket—a bonus of being a non-uniformed officer, along with not wearing a trooper hat. Her long auburn hair wasn't exactly regulation. It was wavy and free. Some called it unprofessional. She called it ideal. When

Peabody got bothered, she pulled it into a ponytail. In her eyes, a good strategy for a police detective was to avoid looking like one. With her sun-bronzed skin and quick movements, some people pegged her as a thirty-something athlete. Having a competent manner, others mistook her for a paramedic or doctor—which helped at crime scenes. The public tended to tell healthcare workers the truth. Even when she showed her State Police badge, people still seemed to see her as someone helping them, not grilling them.

Walking toward Derlago, her duty phone crooned Elvis Costello. She'd recently changed the default State Police ringtone, reminiscent of a submarine claxon, to *Watching the Detectives*.

“Watching the detectives,” Costello sang. “Watching the detectives—”

She fished out the phone and answered.

“Hello, Bourque. Pryce here. They're parachuting me into the Novaks case.”

She didn't reply.

“They deemed it top priority,” he continued. “They want two lieutenants on it.”

“Understood.” She'd worked a few cases with Detective Lieutenant Victor Pryce, one of eight roving lieutenants run by the State Attorney General's office, known as Central. Though they weren't close friends, Pryce was a good detective. He'd once had an eighty-six percent solve rate. It had dipped under eighty, which still made him the envy of Boston's homicide squad.

They rarely cracked sixty percent these days, not from lack of trying. Her recently departed father, Albert, a Boston homicide superintendent, used to say that the main reason murders went unsolved was out of his control: *dead people didn't talk*. As much as her mother Sarah had wanted to, she'd never been able to lord it over her husband. Albert actually had deeper roots in the New World. His ancestors had settled Quebec City in 1608, whereas Sarah's had arrived in Salem in the 1630s.

“I’ll update Peabody,” Pryce continued. “I know how you hate filing reports.”

She did. On the other hand, reporting to Peabody was a way for Pryce to control the case. He seemed oblivious to his assumed pre-eminence. While she didn’t care if he took the spotlight, she didn’t want him controlling everything. Being a rare female detective, she often had to push back. She’d found that when she ruffled old boy feathers, they roosted elsewhere. Temporarily. “What’s your two-minute synopsis?” he asked.

She had a one-minute version. He’d approve of that. “Two dead, either a double murder or a murder-suicide. Strangulations.”

“What’s your feeling, Double-M or M-S? Your intuition, that is.”

*Intuition?* This was a new Pryce. On other cases, it’d been weeks before he spoke of intuition.

“Can’t say yet. Too close to call.”

“Got it. I’m in my car now. See you in two hours. Likely less.”

That was fast. Peabody wouldn’t like Pryce’s speeding. The captain was always on his detectives to obey the law and show respect to the public. He spent half his time urging them to be ‘good ambassadors,’ and the other half castigating them for taking too long to solve cases.

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Bourque motioned for Derlago and Zupan to follow her. Back in the foyer, she began recording the butler’s second interview. “Mr. Zupan, please tell me again. When did you find the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Novak?”

Zupan appeared to be affronted. He raised his large chin. “I tell you,” he said. “Okay. No problem.” He stopped.

“Go ahead,” she prodded.

“I am thinking. I want to tell exactly.”

She waited, reflecting on Zupan's odd voice. It wasn't only his accent. It sounded like he was swallowing his words, holding them back, as if speaking English offended him. She took in his gelled hair. The comb lines were perfectly straight. He might be tough, but he was also vain. You didn't get hair like that without spending time in front of a mirror.

He studied the ceiling before speaking. "All right. I know nine-one-one call was seven-fifty-seven. I found bodies three minutes before that, maybe four. Not more, this I can say. I am officer in Serbian army. Artillery captain. I know how to be exact. You police need precise and my time is precise to within a minute."

Too precise, she thought. "When did you last see Mr. Novak or his wife?"

"Last night, maybe eleven p.m."

"Who was in the house last night?"

"Mr. Rollo and wife, and also Mr. Rollo's friend. I serve dinner to those three at eight p.m."

"What's the friend's name?"

Zupan's lips curled into a partial sneer. "Karlos Vega."

Bourque knew that name. Vega, another bigshot on *Angels or Devils*—for many viewers, the face of the devil. "The billionaire?"

Zupan nodded.

"Was Mr. Vega here this morning?"

"No. He goes last night, about quarter after eleven. I see his car leave from my suite over garage."

"How do you know he actually left?"

"I hear too. His car reached main road and turned left, to direction of Falmouth. I have window open. I can hear this."



“Why was your window open?”

“I sleep like that.” Zupan unleashed the first smile Bourque had seen from him. “The air here, it is clean, like in Slovenian mountains. I love to sleep here.”

She smiled back, switching to good cop mode. “Are you from Slovenia?”

“Yes. I am born there. Northwest of Ljubljana. Jesenice, very fine place, I tell you. Especially now, in spring. Trees come to life. Apple, pear, plum. Many blossoms.”

“Sounds very nice,” she said. Despite his new volubility, she wondered about the open window. Although mid-May, it had been very cold at night. The heat in her house was still on. However, she let it pass. She didn’t want Zupan to realize how much she doubted him. “You mentioned Mr. Novak was always content. Did he have any enemies?”

Zupan’s face hardened. “Mr. Rollo is very fair man, but not simple man. Some people think so. They *misjudge* him, I hear him say. He is not easy to fool. Sometimes he gives money, sometimes he takes. I am not business man,” Zupan confided, “but I hear. Many dollars. Millions.”

“How about personal enemies?”

“He does not have.”

She took that with a grain. Everyone except angels had personal enemies. Probably even angels.

“How about his family?”

“Older son, Rollo Junior, he does not like his father.” Zupan’s face hardened again. “Of this I am sure. He want to run all of Šef’s business. He want to takeover, you call it.”

“What about the rest of Mr. Novak’s family?”

“There is ex-wife and another son, Atlas.”

“Tell me about him.”

“He is soft.” Zupan shook his head in disgust. “A young man who does not care to fight. Point of fact, he does not know how.” Zupan snorted as if to say such a thing was ludicrous. “But he does not like Rollo Junior. They are certainly not best friends.”

“What about Mr. Novak’s ex-wife?”

“I never meet her.”

“Do you know anything about her?”

He shrugged. “A little. Mr. Rollo, he still give her money. She has none of her own.”

“How do you know?”

“I hear it from Mr. Rollo.”

Bourque wondered about that. Either Zupan overheard a lot, or Novak told him a lot. When she’d learned more, she’d question him about the unlocked back gate and the house alarm system. Time for a little fib. “The troopers heard birds squawking when they arrived. Did you hear any birds this morning?”

“Some,” he admitted, “those big blue ones.”

“At the back of the house?”

He eyed her quickly: *You know?* “Yes.”

Blue jays were very territorial. She suspected intruders had used the back gate, possibly intruders connected to Zupan. She decided to detain the butler, without arresting him. Always a tricky dance, but she didn’t have anything concrete against him. “Thank you, Mr. Zupan. You’ve been very helpful. You’ll remain at the house for the time being, for your security. You can stay in your suite. I’m posting Trooper Derlago to secure your safety.”

“I do not need,” he boomed. “I look after myself!”

“Of course,” she replied, “but we’re going to err on the side of safety.” He brought to mind a human stormfront: thunderous voice, lightning eyes, body barely controlled. She sensed he could unleash it in a flash.

Derlago had just passed his one-year anniversary, but he often seemed like a teenager. The less time he spent with Zupan, the better. As soon as Donnelly was free, he’d take over. A grin was never far from his face, but people didn’t mess with him. It wasn’t only his size. When he was serious, one word from him convinced you to do what he decreed.

Bourque heard a car in the drive. Looking out a window, she saw Dr. Andre Wozniak, the regional medical examiner, slowly exit his car. He was getting wobblier and chubbier by the month. According to Donnelly, Wozniak’s weight stemmed from his booze intake. He had a love affair with Polish vodka.

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Bourque strode to the front door and opened it. Wozniak huffed up the entrance stairs. His face was red. His nose was redder. As usual, he wore a tight three-piece suit. His head looked like Humpty Dumpty’s, shiny and comically wide. The lobes of his large ears extended below his mouth. “Morning, Lieutenant Bourque. What a surprise,” he facetiously added.

She bowed good-humoredly. She worked most Cape Cod homicides.

Before entering the pool area, Bourque donned full crime scene, aka CS, gear and insisted Wozniak do the same. Although he always wore gloves and shoe covers, he was averse to wearing clean-suits. She had some idea why. After fifteen minutes, the suits made her sweat. She could imagine what they did to him. Nearing the corpses, she took a series of CS photos before signaling him forward.

Wozniak began with Hayden's body, studying it intently. Being a long-serving medical examiner, he knew the drill. Don't move a body unless absolutely necessary. Finally, he spoke. "We have proximity to sufficient water for drowning, but there are no signs of drowning. Or blunt force assault or firearm injuries. However, there are two ligatures. I haven't seen that before. A wire and a necktie. The wire caused deep compression. Extensive bruising of the neck, extensive hemorrhaging of the infrahyoid muscles." He challenged Bourque. "Do you know them?"

"Yes. AKA the straps. Eight muscles that help hold the head in place."

"Correct," he snidely replied. "A in Anatomy One-oh-One."

And an F to you in manners, Bourque thought, but let it go. No use sparring with Wozniak. Although the crime scene was hers, the bodies belonged to the medical examiner and State pathologist.

Wozniak pointed to the victim. "Widespread hemorrhaging in the eyes. As you no doubt know," he sarcastically said, "that often accompanies strangulation. Now, look at the neck," he ordered, his voice rushed and unrelenting. "The wire is the culprit, not the tie. The extensive blood flow indicates homicidal strangulation. Infrahyoids only bleed that much when a ligature is applied with sufficient force. If someone applies force to their own neck, they can certainly strangle themselves, but they rarely cause that kind of blood flow. From what I see, the wire wasn't tightened by the victim. I see homicide, not suicide."

That's what she saw.

His eyes moved down the body. Eventually he looked up at Bourque. "Regard the vulva. It shows evidence of recent intercourse, including the presence of semen. Sadly, strangulation is frequently associated with sexual interference. Make sure your technicians capture the semen."

Bourque nodded.

Wozniak switched to Novak. As with Hayden, he studied Novak before speaking. “Again, no signs of drowning, blunt force assault, or firearm injuries. I only detect one ligature, a necktie. There’s not as much bleeding as with the female. Which could indicate either homicidal strangulation or self-strangulation. Unlike with the previous victim, this victim could have hanged himself.”

Again, as she thought.

The examiner bent closer to the corpse. “There are traces of semen on the penis. Advise your technicians to capture it. I won’t theorize as to why a wire ligature was used in one case, and a necktie in the other. I’ll leave that to you. I hope you have better training than those TV detectives.”

Bourque didn’t reply. “Would you be able to estimate time of death?”

Wozniak scowled at her. “Of course. What do you think I am, a wet nurse?”

She raised an eyebrow. Wozniak always got offended when she asked for PMI, post-mortem interval. However, she always asked. If she could place a suspect at a crime scene during the PMI window, she had opportunity; she could probe for motive.

“You’re lucky,” Wozniak declared. “The hat trick should work today.”

She nodded. Wozniak’s *hat trick* was lividity, algor mortis, and rigor mortis. Lividity, or blood pooling, left bruise-like patterns on a corpse, usually reddish or purple. Algor referred to a body turning cold. When the heart stopped and blood flow ceased, body temperature dropped by about two degrees Fahrenheit each hour, until it reached air temperature. Rigor mortis, or body stiffening, took hours to become fully established.

Wozniak knelt next to Hayden. “Rigor hasn’t hardened the largest muscles,” he pronounced and pointed to the glutes. “Which indicates this victim died less than twelve hours ago. No sign of lividity, not to the naked eye. We’ll use algor.” He drew a liver thermometer from his medical bag and pierced the victim’s right side. “Ninety-three-point-one Fahrenheit,” he read. “Given ninety-eight-point-six is the norm, algor suggests the victim died roughly three hours ago.”

Wozniak moved on to Novak. “I see the same indications,” he soon said. “No large-muscle rigor. No lividity.” He used his liver thermometer to read Novak’s internal temperature. “Ninety-two-point-five.” He stood. “I’d conjecture both victims died three to three-and-a-half hours ago. Approximately,” he warned. “Cause of death is strangulation. I can’t definitively rule on means for both. It’s not clear.” He appeared to be embarrassed, as if he’d failed his calling. He soon composed himself. “I’d rule homicide for the female. The male could be either homicide or suicide. That’s it.”

Bourque nodded. She almost felt bad for Wozniak. Almost. As he hobbled back to the house, she lagged behind. The sun’s rays ricocheted off the deck tiles, creating confusing reflections. Her thoughts were ricocheting around as well, flying in different directions.

## Chapter 4

With the medical examiner gone, Bourque sat on the front steps. The castle was only four stories high yet it loomed above her, an alien presence in the spruce forest. Dawn had become day. The cloudless sky was brighter and bluer. May warmth suffused the air. In a nearby redoak, grackles chattered vociferously, countering the presence of death. The blue jays were silent. Leaning against a stone balustrade, she went over what she knew with certainty. Not a lot.

Two dead bodies. One clear case of murder: Hayden. One of suicide or murder: Novak. As for motive, she had no firm leads. No evidence of forced entry. From what she'd seen of the castle interior, it hadn't been ransacked. She could be looking at a botched B&E, a Break-and-Enter gone bad, but why would thieves string up the Novaks? They might kill them, but hang them with neckties? She didn't see it. The more time spent on killing, the less time left to pillage.

As she told out-of-state friends, over 200,000 people lived in Cape Cod year-round. However, in some places, such as Martha's Vineyard, the population increased more than tenfold in summer, which, as she related, didn't result in a similar increase in crime, particularly violent crime. In one sense, the Cape was like any region in America: most murders could be attributed to greed. In another sense, the region was very different: considering the amount of wealth, murders were rare.

Bourque eyed the large reflecting pool facing the castle. It was as still as the air. Deep within Novak's acreage, there was no wind. The castle was isolated, located in a private estate—a good locale for murder.

She let her mind cycle. There were suggestions from Zupan that financial gain was in play. The old chestnut. Money. Who'd benefit from Novak's death? His family would certainly be centerstage. Ditto for his business partners. She wondered how often he'd become a devil investor. Depending on the money involved, an aggrieved partner could turn into a murderer. She'd subpoena all *Angels or Devils* footage, including the outtakes. Then there were Novak's many other business ventures. He'd been a billionaire well before rising to TV stardom. Get your blinkers off, she chastised herself. What about Hayden? Just because she was a glamour girl, it didn't mean she had no money of her own. Someone could have killed her for financial gain, maybe Novak himself. However, that undermined the murder-suicide angle. Why would he murder her for money and then kill himself?

Bourque shrugged. What if someone murdered him? Perhaps he'd taken Hayden's money previously and left it with someone, who then killed him to keep it. Enough, she told herself. You're getting convoluted.

It was time to marshal what she knew. As she dictated preliminary observations into her duty phone, Donnelly pattered up in his squad car. He drove like a farmer piloting a hay baler: slowly and with deference. Peabody approved of that.

Donnelly raised his hands in disappointment as he reached her. At six-foot-four, two-hundred-and-thirty pounds, even in his mid-forties he resembled a football linebacker. Not surprisingly, he'd once played professionally, having been drafted by the New York Jets. "No fresh tire marks," he said. "Nothing suspicious."

"What about the barricades?"

"Both padlocks were covered in rust. Not opened since the Pope kissed a girl."

She chuckled.



“I’m not saying kissed a boy. That could be last night.”

She nodded. She knew Donnelly was a Catholic. She knew all about Catholicism. Being from French Quebec, her paternal grandfather had been a staunch Papist. Unlike her Quebec-born grandfather, Donnelly claimed his Irish Catholicism gave him license to mock what he called *holy fuckers*. She overlooked his occasional crassness. If you had to keep all your jokes clean, you’d stop laughing. “Derlago’s guarding the butler’s suite above the garage. Please relieve him and post him at the sliding pool door.”

“Consider it done. By the way, that’s a suspicious butler. Fancy suit, but doesn’t trim his ear hair.” Donnelly grinned.

“That is suspicious.”

“I know,” he said, “only in the movies. But I’m half-serious. He moves like a big cat. A killer cat.”

“Agreed. You have a good eye.”

“Listen, why don’t we nudge things along a tad and set a few snoops in his suite?”

Bourque shook her head gently. Snoop cameras, she knew. In her undercover days with the Boston Police Department, she’d have done it. Back then, she’d temporarily *adjusted* rules to snag perps. She’d tried hard to be a successful criminal—and succeeded. That’s when she knew she had to leave undercover and straighten out. It wasn’t something she ever talked about. She’d been on the other side, and come back. As her mother’s friends would have put it, where once she was lost, now she was found.

“We might catch him in the act,” Donnelly continued, “flushing evidence or throwing it out.”

“Appreciate the thought, but when your head tells you to play it by the rules, you do.”

“Sounds good.” He winked. “Sounds like self-preservation too.”

She smiled. “Call it personal experience.”

“I hear you. Don’t get ahead of yourself, as in don’t plow the driveway before it snows.”

She laughed. “Exactly. Besides, Zupan’s story checks so far. He’s not in possession of potential evidence, such as wire, or weapons. Anyway, your idea would backfire. One, we don’t have a surveillance warrant. If we found anything, it’d be considered ‘fruit of the poison tree.’ Two, he hasn’t been charged with anything. Innocent until prov—”

“No need to harelip the Pope.” Donnelly shook his head. “Jesus H, I hate being hogtied.”

She nodded heartily. Yet that was the system. As she now knew, the undercover way was easier, but it was also a good way to torpedo a court case. One glitch and a guilty perp could walk on a technicality.

Donnelly shrugged. “Wife says I’m too good for my badge.”

“And too sexy for your uniform.”

“*Me?*” Donnelly wiggled his butt, then sashayed away with an exaggerated strut.

She laughed and almost went inside to type her case notes. However, the May sun was warm, intense enough to draw out the scent of pine. She could taste it in the air. The moon was in perigree that day, the closest it came to Earth, not only raising tides, but also tugging at human emotions. It was unseen now, outshone by the sun until early evening. The grackles had multiplied. Though not her favorite bird—she considered them long-winded blackbirds—they dispelled the castle’s gloom. It seemed to be growing.

Seeing a patio table in the shade, she fetched her laptop from her car and began making case notes, the least favorite part of her job. When she’d applied to become a detective, she had no idea how much paperwork it entailed: case notes, warrants, subpoenas, reports.

Having almost finished her notes, she looked up to see Pryce's elongated black Ford Explorer roaring up the drive.

Like her, Pryce had a lead foot. His car reminded her of a hearse, which, given his job, seemed appropriate. While she was a generalist—handling major crimes as well as homicides—he was a specialist, a full-time homicide detective. In twenty-six years as a detective, he'd worked over 300 murders. In her nine years—four with Boston PD, five with the State Police—she'd worked eighty-plus, two-thirds of them with Boston PD. Jumping out of his hearse, he grabbed a crime scene kitbag and strode rapidly toward her.

Pryce was a tall, fit man with a long nose and a high-domed forehead. His visage was civil yet shrewd. When he smiled, his face resembled Tom Hanks'. Although in his mid-fifties, he walked like a much younger man. Instead of his usual drab grey, he wore a natty midnight blue suit and a blue-green tie.

“Hello, Bourque,” he said and extended his hand ceremoniously.

She stood and shook hands, trying to match his formal demeanor. “Good to see you. Welcome to my temporary HQ.” She gestured at the patio table.

He smiled. “I like it. *Al fresco*.”

She smiled back. He seemed to have loosened up a bit already. His sartorial style certainly had.

A good omen.

“Let's look at the bodies,” he suggested.

Bourque led Pryce to the pool area, keeping her investigative opinions to herself. She didn't want to color his first impressions.

After donning CS gear, the two detectives walked the pool deck to the shallow end, Pryce's eyes sweeping the tiles. Reaching the corpses, he knelt beside Hayden. He seemed lost in thought.

Bourque almost asked what he was thinking. She'd never seen him so unhurried. Another good omen. In their past collaborations, he'd shown one gear only: full speed ahead. Just as she parted her lips, he spoke.

"I see murder." He pointed to the wire ligature. "Can't cut it any other way. The necktie is a red herring. A very red herring."

She grinned. The man really was more relaxed. She hoped he didn't have a joke quota. A year ago, he seemed to be good for one a day, no more.

He turned to Novak's corpse. This time, she left him to his analysis and took in the complete crime scene. The dark red of the two neckties caught her eye. It reminded her of the bottom band of the Slovenian flag. She'd taken a few holidays in the Adriatic with her ex-husband Nico, who was born in neighboring Italy. Did the necktie color mean anything? Maybe it was a message from Novak. If so, to whom?

Pryce finally looked up. "Another murder," he stated. "I don't see suicide." His cadence was more measured than the last time she'd worked with him. "Hangers sometimes change their minds, try to undo their neck ligatures, and leave evidence: broken fingernails, self-lacerations. There's no indication of that. Beyond that, look at the position of the Hayden wire crossing, and then the Novak necktie knot."

She did so. She'd only worked a few hangings.

"Both are below the upper spinal vertebra," he pointed out, "which suggests murder, not suicide."

She nodded, remembering her anatomy studies. In a hanging suicide, when a body fell, in most cases, the noose was jerked upwards. It rode up the neck, ending above the spinal vertebra.

"What did the medical examiner rule?" he asked.

“Cause of death, strangulation. Means, homicide for Hayden. Either homicide or suicide for Novak.”

Pryce shrugged. “I don’t like second-guessing a medical examiner, but when you see something, you see it.”

“Can’t un-see it.”

“Right. Looks like two murders. I’ll get Peabody to release a press statement this afternoon.”

Pryce pursed his lips. At first, she saw a kissing codfish. Seconds later, his face morphed into a pondering sage. “Let’s hold off on what we actually know. We can announce a double suicide. Let the murderers think we don’t have a clue.” He chuckled. “We’re useless idiots. Ruling possibilities out when we should be ruling them in. What do you think? Two suicides?”

She nodded.

“But we’ll close with a little caveat: pending further investigation. Don’t want to have egg on our faces when we announce the real McCoy. No live news interviews, not yet.”

She knew Pryce was thinking aloud. She didn’t mind. She liked his MO. He didn’t keep his ideas to himself. Other detectives she’d worked with kept their theories private, never airing missteps, believing the way to get ahead was to always look right, regardless.

Pryce carried on. “Before I left Central, I looked up recent strangulation cases. There aren’t many in the system. It’s a rare form of murder in Massachusetts, less than ten in the last three decades.”

“Good,” she said. Rare was useful. It limited the known perp gene pool.

“All the cases were solved, not that that helps us. But we can use it to bolster the troops. Past victories point to future success and all that. *Now go and solve this!* You know the speech.”

Bourque wasn't the rah-rah speech type. These days, she figured the "troops" didn't need someone on a high horse to lead them to victory. If finding murderers didn't motivate them, what would?

Pryce turned back to Novak's body and continued as if still thinking aloud. "I don't see Novak standing around while his wife was strangled, or vice versa. There were likely two perps. One to strangle her; the other to strangle him. And maybe someone riding shotgun. The corpses are hanging very close together, touching in places. If more people were involved, it would crowd the scene, making close work difficult."

Bourque agreed. "I think we have a staging of sorts. Perhaps there's messaging in play."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Let's talk to the butler," she said.

"There's a butler?" Pryce grinned. "The butler did it. Case closed."

She chuckled. "If only."

Pryce switched gears. "What's your read on him?"

She shrugged. Again, she'd didn't want to color Pryce's first impressions. She didn't believe everything Zupan said. Although people preferred to believe each other—belief built cooperation; it was a societal glue—in her detective work, she defaulted to the opposite: she distrusted them. She walked the fine line between treating POIs with respect and treating them like liars, being courteous but, at the same time, skeptical. She liked cops who thought on their feet and changed their minds if needed, something many of her colleagues were loath to do.

Bourque walked Pryce to Zupan's studio, delivering a synopsis of her two previous interviews with the butler. Damijan Zupan was Slovenian, like Novak. He'd been an artillery captain in the

Serbian army. He'd served dinner to Novak and his wife the previous evening, and to a guest, Karlos Vega.

Pryce stopped her. "*The* Karlos Vega?"

"Yes. From what I know, Vega is one of Novak's best friends."

"Hard to believe. Oil and water, those two, with Vega the oily one."

"Very greasy. I'll email you the audio of my interviews with Zupan."

While Pryce listened to the audio files, she retrieved her laptop, sat outside and resumed her notes. Her never-ending notes. Despite the ideal spring weather, she felt trapped. Fortunately, the trap was soon sprung. Pryce approached her half an hour later.

"So," he said, "I'm thinking Vega should be at the front of the POI line. You?"

"Good place to start."

"It appears he was the last POI to see Novak alive. I talked to Vega. He's at his Boston condo. Back Bay area. He'll *entertain us*—his words—at eighteen-hundred."

"Kind of him."

"He's granting us thirty minutes, no more. Apparently, he has to fly to Miami this evening.

Private jet from Logan but, still, there's the limo to the airport and the pilot needs runway time."

"Poor Vega." She shook her head in mock sympathy. "So little time to add to his billions."

"And the likes of you and me, we'll have to hoof it to Boston."

"How about my car this time?" Working previous cases, they'd used his vehicle.

"Sure. Let's stay in Boston tonight. Rollo Junior is there too, as well as his brother and mother. They all live downtown, but in scattered neighborhoods. By the way, I hooked Junior for ten-hundred tomorrow."

Bourque nodded. Fast work. Per the norm with Push-It-Pryce.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Pryce rolled on. “I also hooked Atlas for eleven-hundred-thirty and the ex-wife for thirteen-hundred-thirty. Let’s leave as soon as we’re done with Zupan.”

“It won’t be right after. The local forensics crew is on the way. I have to debrief them.” One side of her wanted to stay behind to work the crime scene and consolidate the evidence. On the other hand, they had to gather new evidence. The first forty-eight hours were critical. A murder case was like an avalanche. If it lost its momentum, it ground to a halt.



## Chapter 5

Unlike the rest of the castle, Zupan's studio apartment had no medieval art. The furniture was white ash; the window coverings, peach-coloured shutters—which didn't match anything in the castle. In Bourque's view, the mismatch was potentially suspicious. Maybe the suite was an afterthought, like the butler himself. Would Novak, a man who mowed his own lawn, hire a butler? Had Zupan wormed his way into the job to eventually kill the Novaks? If so, why? She filed her questions away.

As Pryce entered the studio, she glanced at him. The moment he saw Zupan, his demeanor changed. His body stiffened; his gaze sharpened. She'd seen it before. She sensed he'd go bad cop from the get-go. Too bad. It was often counter-productive.

"Detective Lieutenant Pryce," he said as he thrust out his badge. "Homicide."

Zupan snorted, and not quietly. He sounded like an irritated horse.

Pryce curtly waved him to a kitchen chair but remained standing, legs wide apart, big head tilted back. His stance said *enough of your horseshit*. "I'm curious, Mr. Zupan, how did you know Mr. Novak was swimming in the outdoor pool today?"

Zupan said nothing for a few long heartbeats, seemingly telling Pryce to eat more horseshit. "He advises me yesterday."

"I wonder if you can enlighten me. Why do you think Mr. Novak hanged himself?"

"He did not!" Zupan's eyes flashed. He appeared about to bull-rush Pryce, but then gripped the sides of his chair and remained seated.

"Why do you say that?"

“Is truth.” Zupan’s voice had descended a few octaves, almost to a growl. “Complete truth. This I know.”

“How can you know he didn’t kill himself? Not to get philosophical, Mr. Zupan, but no one knows what goes on in someone else’s head.”

“This I agree. I know only what I know. And, in this case, I know. That is good enough for me.”

“But not for a court of law.”

“This too I know. We are caught between inner truths and outer truths. Always. But I am responsible for knowing. And for making correct choices.”

Okay, Bourque thought, enough of the existentialism.

Pryce seemed to agree. He switched topics. “Tell me about Karlos Vega.”

“He is loud, but he is rich. Much richer than Mr. Rollo. I hear Mr. Rollo say this. Also he says Vega is sometimes, what is word, tactless. But Mr. Rollo, he likes Vega.”

“Do you like Vega?”

“Not so much. But I do not dislike either. He is like older brother to Mr. Rollo. He is watchful.

No, that is not correct word. I am now remembering my English lessons. Better word is *protective*. I hear Mr. Rollo say to wife, ‘Karlos and I are good together.’ Vega is making sure boss makes more money. Much more. Mrs. Katrina likes that. She showed much interest in making money.”

Bourque read his tone. Disapproval. Wives shouldn’t sully themselves making money.

“Did you like her?” Pryce asked.

Zupan shrugged.

Not much of an endorsement, Bourque concluded. She regarded Zupan’s face: sullen, almost menacing. There appeared to be no love lost between the butler and the new wife.

Pryce carried on. “Are you responsible for the security of this house?”

“I am very responsible,” Zupan haughtily replied. “I set and monitor security system. Mr. Rollo shows me how. He trains me. System is very precise, very powerful. Has twelve cameras, all outward-facing. They see everything.”

Bourque would have continued the Hayden line of questioning. She’d circle back to Hayden later. Pryce often neglected to probe a POI’s personal details. For the most part, however, she let him lead interviews. It gave her time to fully concentrate on POIs, to study both their body language and words.

“And inside the house?” Pryce asked.

“There are no cameras. Mr. Rollo, he does not like. He wants good privacy inside.”

“What about the artwork, such as the three-piece painting in the foyer?”

Zupan snorted. “You mean triptych? Is *altare portatile*. Reproduction of ‘Dresden Triptych’ by Jan van Eyck. Mr. Rollo try to buy original, but they would not sell.”

*Dresden Triptych*, Bourque thought, *altare portatile*. Zupan was no goon. In the same vein, Novak wasn’t a typical nouveau-riche New Englander. He bought devotional art, not big-screen TVs.

“Is the *altare*,” Pryce snidely asked, “secure?”

“Yes, same as all art in house. Is protected one-hundred percent with force fields. You try to remove art, fields zap you. If power goes out, there is backup, run by generator.”

“Is it fail-proof?”

“No. No system is fail-proof,” Zupan stated matter-of-factly. “But I am here. I am trained in other things,” he imperiously added. “Hand-to-hand, guns, knives. I know them all.”

“What about the grounds? Do you monitor the grounds?”

“Yes,” Zupan peevishly replied. “I tell you already. Grounds are secure.”

“Then why was the pool gate unlocked?”

“Is not unlocked.”

“It was this morning.” Pryce eyed Zupan as if he’d unlocked it himself.

Zupan’s face reddened. “That is not possible. Not possible, I say.” He jutted out his hefty chin.

Bourque contradicted him. “The gate was unlocked. I opened it and went through it at approximately nine a.m., about half-an-hour after I first met you.”

Zupan studied her, seemingly judging her words. Eventually he shrugged, apparently conveying acceptance. “That is very strange. It is, as you say, suspicious.”

“Yes,” Pryce said. “It is. So, Mr. Zupan, the premises were not secure.”

“I am surprise.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Pryce’s smile said the polar opposite. “For the time being, you’ll remain here.”

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Bourque figured Zupan didn’t realize he was being jailed without a warrant. Or maybe he did. Maybe he was feigning cooperation, the better to break out when he saw the chance. Despite his ostensible cooperation, she didn’t trust him. She told herself to forget his rights. A snoop camera or two was tempting.

Outside the studio, she stopped next to Donnelly and gestured inside. “He doesn’t leave.”

“Roger. A butler in hand is worth two in the woods. Running like hell.” Donnelly winked. “Get him a bottle of whiskey. That’ll keep him grounded.”

“Nah. Sooner or later, you’d be skoling with him.”

“Possibly.”

“Possibly?” She chortled. “How about definitely?”

“You know me too well.”

She smiled. “Just trying to keep you employed. Lieutenant Pryce and I are going to Boston. Troopers Walsh and Newhart have been sent to control access to the castle. When you need a break, switch with one of them, not Derlago.”

As she caught up to Pryce, he informed her that Peabody had booked the autopsies for the next afternoon. “The fan’s starting to spin,” Pryce said with a wry smile. “Shit will fly.”

“Oh yeah.” Autopsy openings usually took several days. As they both knew, it didn’t bode well when Peabody got involved. Pryce was a tortoise compared to Peabody, the most impatient detective she’d ever known.

Walking back to the crime scene, Bourque dissected Zupan’s interviews in her mind. The butler had used the word ‘precise’ a few times. *My time is precise. System is very precise.*

How was the wire twisted around Hayden’s neck? Precisely. Zupan was certainly strong enough to pull it very tight. She recalled his sullen face when speaking of Katrina Hayden. Small observations, but, collectively, they hung in the air.

Maybe he’d killed Hayden and a comrade killed Novak? It was only a supposition, yet Bourque couldn’t dismiss it. Her mind had dredged up some of Zupan’s exact words. When it did that, she listened. For now, she’d keep her speculation to herself. Although the new Pryce seemed open to intuition, it wasn’t time to hit him with word associations and body language.