

**STARK HOUSE CRIME FICTION**

# **THE COLOR RED**

**A.M. Potter**

**STARK  
HOUSE**

## Here's what the critics are saying about *The Color Red*:

"Impressive series launch .... Fans of intelligent procedurals will hope for a long series run." ~ **Publishers Weekly**

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"Potter has done it again with his new novel, *The Color Red*, a nail-biting murder mystery. Thriller fans and lovers of New England, and the Cape Cod region in particular, will be captivated by *The Color Red*. I loved every page." ~ **James W. White**, Author of *Giants* and *Cisco*

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“A superb police murder mystery. The writing is crisp and the story compelling until the very end. I was hooked at Page One and couldn’t put it down.”

~ **David Hoath**, Police Psychologist (Retired)

“*The Color Red* is a captivating eddy of old world and new, east and west, masculine and feminine, fed on a healthy menu of well-cooked dishes of revenge. Potter’s language is accurate and elegant, and his characters are on point. A superb read.” ~ **S.M. Collins**, author of *To Be Human Again*

“*The Color Red* opens with Detective Ivy Bourque encountering mysteries within a mystery. Is the case a double murder or murder suicide? What is the significance of the two dark neckties from which the victims are hanging? A maze of personal relationships complicates the investigation. But Bourque’s unquenchable curiosity helps her discover exactly what happened and the reasons behind it.” ~ **Jim Poling Sr.**, author of *Tecumseh: Shooting Star, Crouching Panther*

“A winning read with fascinating suspects. Detective Bourque is wry, intelligent, and sympatico. What a great main character for a series.” ~ **P. W. Tilley**, Former RCMP Detective

“An accomplished whodunit told with verve and insight. Well-paced, perfectly pitched ending. Looking forward to more Detective Ivy Bourque.” ~ **CLL**, Mystery Reviewer

“*The Color Red* stands out as a gripping, intelligent, and well-written detective story. An excellent start to what promises to be a must-read series.” ~ **Jane Bwye**, author of *Breath of Africa*

# **THE COLOR RED**

**Book One in the  
Detective Bourque Series**

**by A.M. Potter**

**Stark House Press • Eureka California**

**Preview of *The Color Red***  
**Attention: Not for Resale or Distribution**

For purchase information, go to <https://ampnorthnoir.com/> or your favorite book seller.

THE COLOR RED

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

*It's not what you look at that  
matters, it's what you see.  
~ Henry David Thoreau*

DEDICATION  
*To David and Penny:  
Supporters and friends extraordinaire.*

## 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 swam swiftly to the end of the pool. New Blue, he called it, the first outdoor swim of the year. Beyond the pool, the sun crested the horizon. He plunged underwater and returned to the deep end. 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 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 umbrella pine shut out the sun. Her radio crackled, reporting another trooper on the way. A quarter of a mile later, the trees finally receded and the forest revealed a gargantuan house.

The white stone hulk featured a colossal central turret. The sun peered over it like a giant red eye. 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. As she stepped out of her unmarked car, 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.

"There's one man in there, unarmed." Donnelly winked. "Unless you count his stare."

"Lethal weapon?" she kidded.

"Oh yeah, loaded with attitude."

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-colored 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 a junior trooper. 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 listen forensically. "Did you call the police?"



"Yes, I call."

"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 go to look for him."

"Where did you find the bodies?"

"Outdoor pool. Shallow end. Half an hour ago. No, less." Zupan's dark eyes were empty. He'd called in the deaths, but levelheaded murderers sometimes did that. He pulled out a smartphone and aloofly showed her the call list. "I make nine-one-one at seven fifty-two."

Bourque glanced at her watch: 0821 hours. She'd been dispatched at 0758. 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, everything?"

He nodded abruptly, his eyes suddenly indignant. They flashed like lightning, only black.

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.

"Mr. Rollo usually eats at seven-thirty," Zupan continued, apparently feeling more forthcoming. "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. "Šef is happy man. Always content. Always, I tell you."

She waited again, but Zupan was done.

Leaving him with the troopers, she quickly surveyed the castle interior, taking in the area closest to the foyer: a great-room, a study, two sitting rooms. More heavy furniture. No evidence of fights or scuffles. 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.

Returning to the foyer, Bourque beckoned for Donnelly to join her. "We'll let Junior guard the butler," she quietly said. "Please control access to the driveway."

"Consider it done. 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."

\*\*\*

Bourque motioned for Zupan to take her to the pool and remained silent, letting him hang on the hook. He didn't seem to mind. In fact, he seemed to welcome the silence. Outside the pool, she left him with the junior trooper and donned 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 bodies being dragged. Then she saw the bodies, two corpses hanging by the neck from a pool stair rail.

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. She was a former Miss USA, a dancer, about thirty years old. If Bourque remembered correctly, she was fifteen years younger than her new hubby.

The former Miss USA was closest to Bourque. Even in death, she looked exquisite, and with no makeup. Her skin was 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. To say Hayden's body was perfect was an understatement. Strong arms, muscular legs. No signs of trauma. Her bowels had loosened. Bourque ignored the smell. Hayden 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 studied the victim's neck. It was lassoed by the broad end of a dark red necktie, about three inches wide. There was a silver-toned wire under the tie. She 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.

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. 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 repeated the cycle. It stilled her mind. Continuing her examination, she took 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 find details that could reconstruct events and solve the crime.

She 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 later, when her duties stabilized, the corpses flooded her consciousness and became people: husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters.

## Chapter 3

Pacing slowly, Bourque 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, which formed the southern boundary of the estate. The perps might have used a boat, possibly motorless. Gentle waves were rolling ashore, breaking on a golden strand. 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—as long as it was old money. In her world, nothing trumped the past.

As a teenager, Bourque had rebelled against everything her parents represented. Nowadays, however, she had a soft spot for history. Incidentally, it happened to have a practical angle. Most New England murders had a link to the past. *Cherchez* the past.

Scanning southward, she saw no useful surveillance posts. However, the perps could have sent up a camera drone. 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. She ducked. Another jay joined the fray, squawking proprietorially. It was slightly smaller. A nesting pair, she saw, a male and female.

Knowing her presence signified an intrusion, she stood completely still and closed her eyes. She felt the sun heating her face, yet just the surface of her skin. The midday air might say summer but the morning air said spring. It would have been chilly when the Novaks went swimming.

Opening her eyes, she took 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 beach sand 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 delicate 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 toward the ocean. She walked beside the path, leaving it untrampled.

As she paced, her senses logged the grounds. Ocean brine in the air. The smell of

freshly-mown grass. A wide swathe of lawn. 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 called her unit chief, Detective Captain Peabody. "Bourque here," she said. "Two fatalities confirmed."

"Identities?" Peabody asked. His voice was fast 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? 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 have 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 whitecoats would ratchet up his budget.

Bourque 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. She had her father's thick auburn hair. More than one man had said if she were a blonde, she'd pass for Uma Thurman. Bourque didn't know about that. Her hair certainly wasn't regulation. It was long, wavy, and free. Peabody called it unprofessional. She called it ideal. When he 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 competent manner and quick movements, people often pegged her as a thirty-something 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.

Bourque motioned for 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. "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 referred to his phone. "All right. I know nine-one-one call was seven fifty-two. 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 minutes."

Perhaps too precise, Bourque 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. The air here, it is clean, like in Slovenian mountains. I love to sleep here."

She switched 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 nice," she said. Despite his new volubility, she wondered about the open window. Although mid-May, it had been unusually cold at night. The heat in her house was still on. "You mentioned Mr. Novak was always content. Did he have any enemies?"

"Mr. Rollo is 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 enemies. Probably even

angels. "How about his family?"

"There is one son, Atlas. He does not like his father." Zupan's face hardened. "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 but 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. "Do you have relatives in America?"

Zupan hesitated. "I have sister in Boston."

"Does she work there?"

"Yes. At pharma lab near MIT."

"What's her full name?"

"Snežana Marija Zupan."

"Did Mr. Novak know her?"

Zupan nodded. "They are friends. They share Old Country in common. Good food, good company."

How much in common, Bourque wondered. "Did your sister see Mr. Novak often?"

"When he is in Boston, almost everyday. She is also friends with his wife."

"Where was your sister this morning?"

"Airport. She is leaving for Slovenia."

Bourque's antennae went up. "When?"

"Ten-thirty."

She glanced at her watch. Snežana's flight was already gone—barely hours after the hangings. Coincidence? "Why did she leave?"

"Holiday."

Bourque would ask Boston PD, aka Metro, to question Snežana's employer. When had she booked her holiday? When was she due back? Given the territorial blue jays, Bourque suspected intruders had used the back gate, possibly intruders working with Zupan or his sister. The link seemed too obvious, but in homicide cases insiders raised red flags—whether they were relatives or people in the victims' orbit. She'd send Zupan's 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.

Although Bourque had nothing concrete against Zupan, she decided to detain him, without arresting him. Always a tricky dance. "Thank you. 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 a trooper 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." The butler brought to mind a human stormfront: thunderous voice, lightning eyes.

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While the junior trooper led Zupan away, Bourque's 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 her phone and answered. "Lieutenant Bourque, Cape & Islands."

"Eller here. They're parachuting me into the Novaks case. They want two lieutenants on it."

"Understood." She'd worked a few cases with Detective Lieutenant Victor Eller, one of eight roving lieutenants run by the State Attorney General's office, known as Central. Eller had an eighty percent solve rate, which 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, a Boston homicide superintendent, used to say that the main reason murders went unsolved was out of his control: *dead people didn't talk*. He had deeper roots in the New World than his wife, which annoyed her. Her ancestors had arrived in Salem in the 1630s, whereas his had settled Quebec City in 1608.

"I'll update Peabody," Eller went on. "I know how you hate filing reports."

"Always the gentleman." She smiled to herself. Reporting was a way for Eller to get ahead, yet she didn't care if he took the spotlight. She didn't want to climb the career ladder. The top brass were paper-pushers; they didn't do any actual detecting.

"What's your one-minute synopsis?" Eller asked.

"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 Eller. On other cases, it'd been weeks before he'd spoken of intuition. "Can't say yet. Too close to call."

Hearing a car in the drive, Bourque looked out a window and saw Dr. Andre Wozniak, the regional medical examiner, exiting his car.

She strode to the front door and let Wozniak in. His face was red. His nose was redder. The medical examiner had a love affair with Polish vodka. As usual, he wore a tight three-piece suit. His head looked like Humpty Dumpty's, shiny and comically wide.

The corners of his mouth turned up into a jovial smile. "Morning, Lieutenant Bourque. What a surprise," he teased.

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, a wire and a necktie. I haven't seen that before. The wire caused deep compression. Extensive bruising of the neck, extensive hemorrhaging of the infrahyoid muscles. I bet you know them?"

She nodded. "The straps. Eight muscles that help hold the head in place."

He smiled. "A in Anatomy. Look closely at the neck. 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 don't usually 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 glanced 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."

Wozniak switched to Novak. As with Hayden, he studied Novak before speaking. "There are traces of semen on the penis. Advise your technicians. 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.

"We're lucky," the examiner stated, "the hat trick should work today."

"Good." 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. The triumvirate predicted PMI, post-mortem interval. If the team could place a suspect at a crime scene during the PMI window, they had opportunity; they

could probe for motive.

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 four hours ago. Approximately," he emphasized. "Cause of death is strangulation. Means are trickier. I'd rule homicide for the female. The male could be either homicide or suicide."

While Wozniak walked back to the house, Bourque 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 pine forest. Dawn had become day. The cloudless sky was brighter and bluer. May warmth suffused the air. In a nearby red oak, 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. She had no firm leads on motive. There was 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.

The population of Cape Cod was relatively small, about 200,000. In some places, like Nantucket, it increased more than tenfold in summer, which had yet to result in a similar increase in 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 unusual.

Bourque eyed the large reflecting pool facing the castle. It was as still as the air. Away from the ocean, there was no wind. She pulled up Google Earth on her phone. While the nearby properties were all under two acres, Novak's estate was 8.8 acres. The castle was isolated—a good locale for murder.

Before becoming a cop, she'd studied organic chemistry, a discipline based on the transmutability of carbon. The building blocks of life were the building blocks of death. All life was death. How could homicides unsettle her? Ashes to ashes, carbon to carbon. She found organic chemistry overly theoretical, which led her to seek more tangible work, like tracking down murderers.

She sat quietly, letting 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 center stage. 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 kill himself?

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

It was time to marshal what she knew. Peabody's favorite saying was *a detective without facts is like a duck without wings. Lame*. As far as his bromides went, it wasn't bad.

While dictating 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. A grin was never far from his face but people didn't mess with him. At six-foot-five, two hundred-and-forty pounds, even in his mid-forties he still resembled a football player. He'd once played linebacker for the New England Patriots.

"I'll handle the butler now," he said. "By the way, that's a suspicious man. Fancy suit, but doesn't trim his ear hair."

She grinned. "That is suspicious."

"I know, only to a rookie. 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."

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

She chuckled. "Exactly. Besides, Zupan's story checks so far. And we don't have a surveillance warrant."

"Understood. If we found anything, it'd be considered 'fruit of the poisoned tree.'" He shook his head. "You detectives, you're all hog-tied."

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 almost went inside to type her case notes. However, the sun was pleasant, warm enough to intensify the scent of pine. Pine sap was one of her favorite organic compounds. It smelled sweet yet sharp, it spoke of summer and winter at the same time. Seeing a patio table in the shade, she fetched her laptop from her car and began making case notes. When she'd applied to become a detective, she had no idea how much paperwork it entailed: case notes, warrants, subpoenas, reports. Stenographer City.

Having almost finished her notes, she looked up to see Eller's elongated black Ford Explorer roaring up the drive. His car reminded her of a hearse, which, given his job, was 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 eight years—three with Boston PD, five with the State Police—she'd worked ninety-plus. Jumping out of his hearse, he grabbed a crime scene kitbag and strode rapidly toward her. He wore a natty midnight blue suit and a blue-green tie.

Eller was a tall, fit man with a high-domed forehead and steel-grey hair. His visage was civil yet shrewd. He kept his home life to himself but Bourque knew he lived in a rambling bungalow near Holyoke, far from Central. Although in his mid-fifties, he walked like a much younger man, one who got things done. He gestured at the patio table. "Nice HQ."

She winked, "Alfresco." She worked well with Eller. He was usually calm and even-tempered, although he could do a tough bad cop, which is what she wanted in a partner: a level-headed detective who breathed fire when it was called for. She waved him to the castle. "I'll take you to the bodies."

Leading him to the pool area, she kept 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, Eller's eyes sweeping the tiles. Reaching the corpses, he knelt beside Hayden. He seemed lost in thought. Bourque almost asked what he was thinking. He was more unhurried than usual. 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." He gestured at Hayden's pubic area, then her head. "The front porch isn't the same color as the roof."

Bourque nodded. "Pretty common these days."

"A dime a dozen?"

"Depends on social circle and fashion trends."

"Sounds like a study unto itself." He turned to Novak's corpse.

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 to Novak's family. If so, from whom? Old-World connections? In the movies, she'd be jetting off to Slovenia to track down Novak's past. Not in real life. Too bad. She loved the Adriatic. People *respected* wine there; i.e., they knew how to drink it. In real life, two words got in the way of a jet plane: Central's budget.

Eller finally looked up. "Another murder," he stated. "I don't see suicide." His voice was measured and quiet. "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, there's the position of the necktie knot. In a hanging suicide, it usually jerks up when the body falls, ending above the spinal vertebra. But it's below that vertebra, which suggests murder, not suicide. What did the medical examiner rule?"

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

"I don't like second-guessing a medical examiner," Eller mused, "but when you see something, you can't un-see it. Looks like two murders. I'll ask Peabody to release a press statement this afternoon. 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."

She knew Eller was thinking aloud. 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.

Eller 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. The "troops" didn't need someone on a high horse to lead them to victory. If finding murderers didn't motivate them, what would?

Eller turned back to the bodies. "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. 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?" Eller grinned. "The butler did it. Case closed."

She chuckled. "If only."

"What's your read on him?"

She shrugged. Again, she'd didn't want to color Eller'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—on a case, she walked the fine line between treating POIs with respect and treating them like liars.

Bourque led Eller 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 had a sister in Boston who knew the Novaks. He'd served dinner to the Novaks the previous evening, and to a guest, Karlos Vega.

Eller 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 Eller 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. Eller approached her half an hour later.

"So," he said, "it appears Vega was the last POI to see the Novaks alive. I'm thinking he should be at the front of the POI line. You?"

"Good place to start."

"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?"

"Sure. Let's stay in Boston tonight. Atlas is there, as well as his mother. They live



downtown, but in different neighborhoods. By the way, I hooked Atlas for ten-hundred tomorrow. I hope you don't mind. I also hooked the ex-wife for thirteen-hundred. Let's leave as soon as we're done with Zupan."

"It won't be right after. The local forensic 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.

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Unlike the rest of the castle, Zupan's studio apartment had no medieval art. The furniture was white ash; the window coverings, peach-colored—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, was Snežana part of the con? It'd be a long con but, as Bourque knew from her undercover years, a long con was the best con. She filed her thoughts away.

Eller preceded her into the studio. She usually let him lead interviews. It allowed her to focus on a POI's body language.

Eller invited Zupan to take a kitchen chair and remained standing. "Detective Lieutenant Eller, Central Homicide. I'm curious, Mr. Zupan. Did you know Mr. Novak was swimming in the outdoor pool today?"

Zupan said nothing for a few long heartbeats. "Yes. He advises me yesterday."

"I wonder if you can help us. Why do you think Mr. Novak hanged himself?"

"He did not." Zupan's eyes flashed. His voice had descended a few octaves, almost to a growl.

"Why do you say that?" Eller placidly asked.

"Is complete truth. This I know."

"How can you know he didn't kill himself? Not to get philosophical, 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. 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. But I am responsible for knowing. And for making correct choices."

Okay, Bourque thought, enough of the existentialism.

Eller 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, is not correct word. I am now remembering my English lessons. Better word is *protective*. I hear Mr. Rollo say to wife, 'Karlo 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?" Eller asked.

Zupan shrugged. "Snežana likes her. They cook together, they laugh."

"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 powerful. Has twelve cameras, all outward-facing. They see everything."

"And inside the house?" Eller asked.

"There are no cameras. Mr. Rollo want 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*," Eller mildly 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. Hand-to-hand, guns, knives. I know them all."

"What about the grounds? Do you monitor the grounds?"

"Yes. Grounds are secure."

"Then why was the pool gate unlocked?"

"Is not unlocked."

"It was this morning."

Zupan's face reddened. "Is not possible. Not possible, I say." He jutted out his hefty chin.

Bourque contradicted him. "The gate was unlocked. I went through it about half an hour after I met you."

Zupan studied her, seemingly judging her words. Eventually he shrugged. "Is strange. Is, as you say, suspicious."

"So," Eller said, "the grounds weren't secure."

"I am surprise."

"I'll take your word for it." Eller's smile said the polar opposite.

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Outside the studio, Eller gestured at the closed door. "Good idea to pen him. Let's keep him as long as possible."

Bourque called Donnelly over and gestured inside. "He doesn't leave."

"Roger. A butler in hand is worth two in the woods. Running like hell."

Eller smiled at Donnelly. "Can't say you're wrong."

While Bourque and Eller headed to her car, he informed her Peabody had booked the autopsies for the next afternoon. "The fan's starting to spin," Eller said with a wry grin. "Shit will fly."

"Oh yeah." Autopsy openings usually took several days. As they both knew, when Peabody got directly involved, although the budget didn't go up, their pace did, not that she minded a fast pace. A good murder investigation had the pulse of a Blondie song: hard-driving, made for moving down the highway.

## Chapter 5

### *Boston. May 14<sup>th</sup>*

Early that evening, Bourque and Eller pulled up to the Regency Private Residences in Back Bay. The sun sat low in the west, tingeing the condo tower burgundy red. The sky was robin's-egg-blue. A valet sluggishly walked their way, in no mood to service them. Bourque assumed it was due to her car: an eight-year-old Mazda 3, unwashed to boot. These days, she didn't get to Boston often. To some, it was open-minded, even radical; to others, past its best-before date. To her, it was the city she'd grown up in, a melding of the old and the new, riding a wave of tech and healthcare—unrecognizably glitzy in places, stately New England in others.

Eller powered the passenger window down. "We're here to see Mr. Karlos Vega," he snapped.

The valet's back instantly straightened. "He expecting you, sir?"

"Yes. We have a six o'clock appointment." They were five minutes early.

The valet bowed and pointed to the lobby. "Go right in. I'll take care of your car."

Inside the lobby, a liveried attendant escorted them to a quiet alcove with a pair of luxurious coffee-brown leather chairs. "Please, have a seat."

Thirty minutes later the two detectives were still sitting. Bourque had begun researching Zupan on her phone. The butler was born in 1973, which made him Novak's age. Maybe Novak talked to him because of their shared past. They came from a fractured region. Yugoslavia had disintegrated in the 1990s, giving way to seven nations, Serbia and Slovenia among them, adding further complexity to the historical divisiveness of the Balkans. Though Slovenia was the same size as Massachusetts, its population was two million, as opposed to the state's seven million. She scanned a Balkans topographical map. It was no wonder the Balkans were divided. There was little geographic continuity. The region resembled a maze. The valleys ran in all directions—north, south, east, and west.

Moving on, she determined Zupan had arrived in the U.S. three years ago and worked a year as a security guard in Boston before joining Novak. Snežana, who was eight years younger than Zupan, had arrived just after her brother joined Novak and had begun working as a lab assistant. On the drive to Boston, Metro had called to report on her employer. Snežana had requested her holiday two weeks ago, relatively short notice. She was due to return in five days. She was an excellent employee: a hard worker, on time, always pleasant.

Bourque looked up the siblings' addresses. Zupan lived with Novak at his main residence on Avon Hill Street, Cambridge. Snežana lived three blocks away, where

she rented a coach house. Excellent employee or not, that made Bourque suspicious. Coach houses in Novak's neighborhood were beyond the means of most lab assistants.

Switching to Wikipedia, she checked out the Serbian Army, which, she soon learned, had supported the Bosnian Serbs during the Siege of Sarajevo, at three-plus years, one of the longest sieges in modern history. She remembered it and the bitter Bosnian War. She wondered if Zupan had taken part in the Siege. He was an artillery man. He was old enough: nineteen at the start. The team would question the siblings separately and simultaneously to see if their stories held together.

For now, she zipped off a secure email to her old friend Tom Gronski, a captain in Organized Crime with Metro, asking for a global search on Zupan and his sister. Research done, she sank into the lobby chair. Very nice. She'd like to buy two for her living room. Then again, the likely price—a fortnight's salary—wasn't on. She sensed someone close by and looked up to see a beefy man approaching them. Given his severely broken nose, she took him for a brawler. He wore his expensive dark suit and polished shoes proudly, but they didn't make him a gentleman. His wide neck said *muscle, pure muscle*. Unlike with Zupan, she wasn't expecting any existential musing from this man.

"Show me your IDs," Wideneck bluntly ordered.

The detectives obliged. "And who are you?" Eller asked.

"Mr. Vega's Security Manager. Follow me."

No name offered, Bourque noted, no pretense of welcome. The three rode up an elevator in silence. It opened onto a huge private foyer. Vega owned the Residence's only penthouse, the entire top floor. Wideneck ushered them forward, leaving them in another placid alcove. A huge rococo vase held dozens of fresh tiger lilies. The stamens were glossy and engorged. The petals glowed like they were lit from within. Bourque eyed the vase. She'd bet it was solid gold. She was familiar with ostentation. Nico had expensive tastes, yet Vega's condo orbited another planet altogether.

A waiter appeared bearing a gold drink tray. He wore a gold-braided uniform. "Champagne or Cognac?" he asked.

Eller waved him off.

Bourque asked if he had water. A minute later, he reappeared with sparkling water served in a gold-rimmed glass. More gold. A Midas theme.

Within seconds, Karlos Vega joined them. She didn't hear him coming. Taking in his last step, she saw he walked like a puma, on the balls of his feet. She and Eller stood. The famous man was about her height, five-foot-seven, above average for a woman, but subpar for a man. He wore a sleek ebony-black suit, white shirt, charcoal tie, gold cufflinks, and crocodile-skin shoes. His long dark hair was tied back in a ponytail. It shone like buffed onyx. His face radiated health—wrong, Bourque decided—it radiated money. She felt distinctly underdressed.

Vega shook hands and sat in the chair opposite them. His eyes said he could buy anything, including them. According to the celebrity rumor mills, what you saw of him in public was what you got in private: a take-no-prisoners smart-ass. "I could have met you on time," he divulged, "but I decided to keep you waiting." His voice was loud yet silky. "Don't be offended, Lieutenant Eller, I wanted to find out about you. With some people, it takes less than a minute. With you, longer. In my world, the longer you wait, the more important you are." He smirked. "Sometimes."

Eller said nothing.

Vega turned to Bourque. "You, Lieutenant, are a bit difficult to plumb. Keep out of the limelight, don't you?" He scrutinized her frankly. "Not likely from any lack of confidence. Yet you prefer to lay back."

He'd nailed her on that one, Bourque admitted. Was it that obvious? In any case, it seemed to be his nature. From what she'd seen on TV, he was a man of quick judgments that were often correct. He liked to probe people for weaknesses and show right away he'd uncovered them.

He glanced at his watch. "What do you want to ask me?" His tone was somehow both arrogant and agreeable.

Eller leaned in. "Was Mr. Novak on edge lately, worried about anything?"

"The old standard." Vega waved dismissively. "The *old wives* standard, I should say. Haven't you detectives gotten past Agatha Christie?" He huffed. "To answer your question, Rollo wasn't a worrier."

"Did he mention any business deals that were troublesome?"

"All deals are troublesome," Vega replied with condescension. "Contrary to what most people think, a deal is not sealed with a handshake. That's just the start."

Bourque shook her head inwardly. Most POIs acted deferential or nervous, even fearful. Not Vega.

"I mean," Eller said, "was he involved in any deals that might have made enemies?"

"All deals have that potential. However, he had no enemies that I knew of, business or personal."

Eller tried a new tack. "Do you know why Mr. Novak committed suicide?"

"Suicide? That's ridiculous. Where do you detectives get your theories? If one can call them theories."

"Forensic science," Eller said.

"You call that science? Imprisoning people based on a fingerprint pattern? Excuse my bluntness. That's bullshit."

Bourque couldn't argue with that. The man was right. Fingerprints were unreliable.

"That was the past," Eller stated. "We've learned."

"I hope so," Vega shot back. "Move it along." He shook his head as if they'd kept

him waiting, not the opposite.

Bourque stepped in. "Apparently, Mr. Novak had no enemies. Given the detection you do on TV—the *theories* you form—why don't you tell us why."

"Touché, Lieutenant. And I will tell you. Because Rollo was fair in everything, often too fair. Not a patsy, but too much of a gentleman for his own good."

"For his own profit, you mean."

"Let's not waste time. You two have a lot of hard work ahead of you."

She nodded accord but not acquiescence. Like many arrogant people, Vega shut down topics he disliked. "When did you last visit Mr. Novak's house in East Falmouth?"

"Yesterday. Only for the day. I arrived around eight a.m. and departed about eleven-thirty p.m."

"Where did you arrive from?"

"Here. I left just after seven. Some people think Rollo and I spent all our time drinking champagne. Incorrect. We worked. We got up early."

"What can you tell us about Melanya, Mr. Novak's first wife?"

"Very little. She's beautiful, but everybody knows that. I rarely socialized with her." Vega stopped and regarded his hands, then looked up. "We didn't talk, other than to say hello, and Rollo didn't talk about her with me. I didn't visit him much at home until he married Kat."

*Kat*, Bourque noted. No one else had called her *Kat*. A small thing, but Bourque looked for small things. She committed the tidbit to memory. "When did you meet Mr. Novak?"

"About five years ago, on the set of *Angels or Devils*. We became fast friends, which surprised some." He grinned mischievously. "To extend a theme, to many people, Rollo's an angel and I'm a devil. I'm not all ego, Detective. I have some self-knowledge."

She nodded. "What about Katrina Novak?"

"Let me put it this way: she is—was—" he corrected himself and sighed heavily. "She was both an angel and a devil. Both heavenly and earthly. Tall, blonde, and beautiful, like Melanya, but a lot more worldly. Despite the bombshell appearance, one might say bimbo appearance, she was as smart as they come. And as tough." Vega glanced at his watch.

"Did Mr. Novak have many female friends?"

"Of course. A handsome man like him."

"Did he have any special ones?"

"I can't think of any."

Or you're not saying. Bourque wouldn't be surprised if Novak had a lover or two tucked away. He was handsome *and* rich, an irresistible combo for many women.

"Very good, Mr. Vega. We'll need to speak with you again."

"That won't be easy to arrange. After Miami, I'm due in São Paulo. Two days later, I'm back here for a night, but I fly to Hong Kong the next morning."

"We'll book a time."

Vega shrugged.

"I thought Mr. Novak was one of your best friends. With all due respect, I think you should make time."

Vega studied Bourque silently. Eventually he nodded. "You're right. Here's my card. Call me."

"In the meantime, we need to take a DNA swab and fingerprint you."

Vega's eyes narrowed.

"Standard procedure," she explained. "We have a kit."

"I'm going to call my lawyer."

"By all means," she said. "We simply want to eliminate you as a suspect. We don't want to confuse your bio matter with anyone else's."

Vega considered her words. "All right."

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As Bourque approached the Sheraton on Dalton Street, Eller perked up. He'd won their hotel debate. He'd insisted on the Sheraton. She'd voted for the Holiday Inn Express on Boston Street, but he said it was too down-market. She hated splurging, even when it was taxpayer's money. In that respect, she took after her mother and a long line of no-nonsense Yankees. Nico used to joke that being part-Yankee, her cheapness was inevitable. *I'm frugal*, she would counter. In her view, you were frugal if you pinched pennies on your own behalf. If you pinched them when buying for others, you were cheap.

She didn't miss Nico Rizzi in the least. His family, on the other hand, was a great loss, especially his mother, who was a magnificent cook. The Rizzis were from Brindisi, the heel of Italy's boot. In *mamma's cucina*, the tomato reigned supreme, whether sun-dried or roasted, stewed or grilled; whether flavored with basil, rosemary, or oregano. Then there were her fish stews, cioppino-type marvels chock full of tomatoes, garlic, scorpion fish, squid, mussels, and clams. Bourque counted herself lucky to be living in Massachusetts, where first-rate tomatoes, garlic, and seafood were plentiful. While she could cook a decent cioppino, it didn't hold a candle to Mamma Rizzi's.

Having reached the Sheraton, the detectives checked into their rooms and went to the hotel steakhouse for dinner. When they were away from home overnight, they could expense their meals. Nonetheless, Bourque kept things simple. They rushed through their mains—filet mignon for Eller, fettucine with chicken & wild mushrooms for her (disappointing)—and passed on dessert in order to reach his



room for a teleconference with forensic officers Dan Munro and John Wolf from Central, known as the ninjas, as well as Barnstable forensic officers Paul Magnotta and Tamara Miller.

All communication lines encrypted, the ninjas began the proceedings. They worked seamlessly together, as if they were a single unit. They reported the Novak security system was state-of-the-art, but it wasn't wireless. The wire arming the back-gate alarm had been cut at 0622. They swept the path from the pool which ended at the beach, 260 yards away. They only found three workable shoeprints.

Miller went next, relating that she videotaped the crime scene and took over 200 photos. She searched the house for personal electronic devices and discovered a laptop and two smartphones. Having powdered the complete pool deck, she found shoeprints leading from the sliding pool door to near the hanging rail, and back. She also uncovered eleven partial shoeprints, eight clustered around the rail, three leading to the back gate. Magnotta then summarized his work. He recovered blood, skin, and hair from the wire around Hayden's neck as well as both neckties. He conducted an intensive DNA sweep of the pool area, hoping to at least find perp hairs, skin flakes, or nail slivers, but found nothing.

Bad luck, Bourque thought. Killers often left DNA signatures near bodies, especially when struggles occurred. She took over, described Zupan's interviews and concluded with his Serbian Army background.

Eller thanked everyone and signed off. She left him at the main hotel bar and walked to a nearby pub, a favorite haunt from her undercover days.

Although she'd grown up in Boston, the city center felt alien. The stars that illuminated her home in Falmouth were absent, devoured by a massive urban corona. She loved Falmouth, an eclectic mix of low-rise brick buildings and wooden houses, of steep gabled roofs and deep porches. She walked on, wishing she were there, hearing plovers chattering and waves crashing, rhythms older than human cunning.

At the pub, Bourque ordered a half-pint of Samuel Adams stout. Murder didn't swell her thirst; it suppressed it. Nursing the stout, she checked her bank account on her personal phone. Hell! Two hundred and eighty-two dollars left for the month of May.

Her money troubles were a recent development. She was beholden to two banks. She'd let Nico talk them into buying a huge house in Falmouth. She'd also paid off his crushing grad school debt, which put her deep in the hole before the house came along. Prior to university, he'd raved about American art. He'd finished university claiming the only thing that mattered was the Italian Renaissance. Matisse, Gauguin, and Picasso were pretenders. In his view, there wasn't an American artist worth mentioning.

These days, after shelling out for an enormous mortgage, what was left of Bourque's decent pay packet barely covered utility bills, work lunches, and

groceries. Being half-Yankee, she knew how to weather financial trouble. "Avoid" spending money. Eat dinner at home. Eying her account balance, she shook her head. What could she do? She wasn't going to quit her women's hockey team. She loved ice hockey. She had no choice. She had to cut back on wine and groceries. She knew what she'd cut first: groceries. If she'd learned one thing in her misspent youth, it was 'wine has calories.'

Thinking of wine, her mind turned to Marty Dalton. She'd share a bottle or two with him anytime. They'd been "seeing each other" for eight months. More to the point, as she teased, they'd been smelling each other. And Marty Dalton smelled very good.

She'd moved a few outfits to his place, and a few more. Now she spent most nights there, happy to inhabit his world. He had the laugh of a younger man, genuine and hopeful. His house was a ten-minute drive from hers. It was shipshape and modern. In comparison, hers felt dark and haunted. She'd commandeered his small backyard and planted high-bush blueberries, which would take years to yield fruit. Presumptuous of her, but sometimes you looked ahead.

Marty, a journalist, generally worked from home but with a murder investigation on the boil she'd rarely see him. So far, he had no strikes against him. Being a former Navy Seal, he was calm and capable. Her mother Sarah didn't like him. Another point in Marty's favor. In Sarah's eyes, he was a nothing. He didn't wear suits. His car was older than Bourque's. Bourque's best friend, Gigi Lambert, loved him. Two more points. Bourque and Gigi had done their detective training together. Gigi, a brainy dynamo, soon went to the big leagues—the FBI—which everyone knew was going to happen.

These days, the two only saw each other once or twice a year, when Gigi got home to Boston for a few days off. They didn't call each other often. When they did, they gabbed long into the morning, yet their bosses had nothing to fear. They never talked specifics, just feelings and thoughts, ruing the way the Old Guard tended to go full speed ahead, often in the wrong direction.