

Chapter 1

A strand of yellow crime scene tape had broken free and struggled in the wind as Ian Carter trudged down the low hill to where an old barn waited in the long grass. The deserted farmyard was busy with law enforcement personnel weaving in and around each other like a well-rehearsed ballet corps, each one focused on their own part of the dance. The previous night's steady rain was dissipating, leaving charcoal-smudged clouds hanging low in the sky and rippling puddles reflecting a cold gray light across the landscape. The face of the barn was weather-beaten; remnants of red paint just visible on the faded boards marked the building as a relic of another time. Ian felt like an intruder as he crossed toward it.

At the center of the scene, his partner, Mike Kellogg, squinted into the hazy morning light as he watched Ian's careful progress down the hill. At forty-five, Mike was about a decade older than Ian, but his heavy body, strained by stress and hard use, made him look twice that. His flat, brown hair was thinning above a round face incongruously dusted with freckles.

“Morning, starshine.” Mike’s deep baritone echoed crudely above the noise of the crime scene.

“What have we got?” Ian asked.

“What, no small talk this morning, Carter?” Mike caught Ian’s eye, and he sighed. “Caucasian female, early twenties. No ID. Some high school kids found the body when they came out to the boondocks to enjoy a little beer and some weed. We’ve got some uniforms canvassing, but it’s unlikely we’ll get lucky there.” Mike waved his hand across the empty field surrounding them.

“Cause of death?” Ian pulled a pair of latex gloves from his coat pocket.

“Waiting on the ME, but . . .”

“But, what?”

“Better if you see it yourself,” Mike replied enigmatically, striding away from Ian. “There aren’t words for this one.”

“That bad?” Ian asked, jogging after his partner.

“Not so much bad as, well . . .” Mike slowed to a halt as he searched for a description. “Whoever did this is a special kind of batshit.” He shook his head and continued toward the inner perimeter of the crime scene, Ian following at his heels.

Ian paused at the threshold of the barn, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light within. He scanned the large structure slowly: well-worn boards pulling against rusted nails, scattered hay too old for use, a battered wooden ladder leaning against one wall, bits of twine and leather lying helter-skelter, petrified chunks of manure, and a few abandoned tools rusting from disuse. It smelled of dust, mold, and the soft, sweet scent of decay. A swarm of scene-of-crime techs clustered at the far end. A few others paced slowly in parallel lines along the length of the barn, pausing periodically to mark and record something they thought might be important. The constant activity created a humming undertone that played beneath Ian’s thoughts like the drone of a bagpipe. As he approached, his steps slowed as he tried

to decipher the scene before him. Mike walked a careful path to the back of the barn, leaving Ian to follow.

This part of the structure was different. The area was meticulously clean, the detritus having been swept from a large rectangular section by the rear door. The door itself had been painted with a bright mural, an idyllic scene that was jarringly at odds with the dim interior of the building. The image of a broad-leafed tree stretched from the ceiling to the floor, the board's texture giving it a discomfiting realism. A frothy stream curled around the tree's roots and disappeared into the distance, its banks alive with a vibrant swath of flowers—a tangle of purple, yellow, white, and green. One of the painted tree's long limbs dipped nearly to the water, and from it hung what looked like a rope of the same flowers that colored the ground, braided and tied around the branch. It dangled partway down the trunk, coming to a severed end a foot above the water. Centered in front of the painted door sat an old metal water trough. It looked to have been scrubbed clean, with dull metal showing through where rust had eaten away at the lining. Golden hair spilled over the rim, and Ian could just see the blue-white skin of the victim's knees visible above the dented metal.

He moved closer, looking down at the immobile body of a young woman. The trough was partially filled with water, covering her stomach and shoulders. Her face rose above the surface as if she were taking a final breath. Her beauty had turned waxy and shrunken beneath the harsh lights illuminating the crime scene. Heavy-lidded eyes stared blankly from a rounded face, still almost childlike despite the full curves revealed where the water trapped her clothes against her body. Her lips were parted slightly as if she were sighing.

Ian had learned to anticipate the worst in his cases and expected—feared—that he would find the girl naked, but instead, she was dressed in a long silver gown embroidered with

beads or some sort of metallic thread that glinted through the murky water. Her knees were pushed up, and the heavy material of her skirt gathered at her pelvis and coiled around her pale thighs. The slender arms were bent at the elbow so that her hands floated near her shoulders, the palms and fingers breaking the water's surface. Her hair floated in a corona around her, sliding across her collarbone and catching on her upturned fingers. A knot of plants wound around her neck. Ian leaned in to see it more closely: purple, yellow, and white flowers tangled against her skin.

Ian stared at her for a silent moment before pulling on the gloves and crouching down to examine the floor beside the trough. Several gutted candles sat at uneven intervals around the base. They had burned just long enough for slim streaks of wax to melt down the sides. The killer had not just lit them and left; he had stayed to watch them burn around his victim before snuffing them out. A paperback book lay before them, opened to reveal darkened pages, some roughly torn out. An old-fashioned inkwell lay on its side, the spilled liquid leaving a deep red stain on the grayed flooring.

Ian glanced over his shoulder. "Has this all been photographed?" he called to a nearby CSI tech.

"Yep. We've got overalls and close-ups, and everything's been documented. Have at it."

Ian squatted down, leaning close to the stain. The viscosity and color suggested that the pooled substance was blood. The pages, too, were coated in it, obscuring any identifying words. Using the end of a pen he pulled from his jacket pocket, Ian gingerly flipped the book closed so that he could see the cover, but the thick paper was saturated and unreadable. The image of what might have been a skull was the only distinguishable marking. Ian rose as he heard someone walk up behind him.

"What'd I tell ya," Mike's voice rumbled. "Special kind of batshit."

Ian glanced over his shoulder with a noncommittal shrug before staring at the victim again. He was reminded grotesquely of a passage from a Raymond Chandler novel where the narrator sees a stained glass window depicting a knight rescuing a bound woman—rather ineffectually, as the narrator points out. He wishes that he could rescue her himself, knowing that is impossible.

For a moment, in the girl's staring blankness, he saw another face. He reached down and brushed a dried strand of hair from the girl's cheek.

"See something?" asked Mike, misinterpreting the tender gesture.

"I, uh—" Ian leaned toward the body to disguise his sentimental lapse and studied the flowers. "The flowers look hand braided," Ian stated, narrating his thought process aloud, "not a store-bought decoration. Specific. They match the painting." He handled the woven strands gently, plucking them away from the girl's skin and revealing a purplish welt along her neck. "Ligature marks. Looks like she was strangled."

"Very good, Detective," came a throaty voice from behind him. "You gonna tell me time of death, too?"

"That's all you, Ivy," Ian responded without looking up.

A shadow darkened the girl's torso, and he turned his head to see the medical examiner standing at his shoulder. She snapped on a latex glove with more force than necessary. Ian stood and looked down at her. Dr. Ivy Wollard was in her midforties and stood at barely five feet, with close-cropped dark hair and a surprisingly lithe build. Her manner of dress and general attitude seemed to work actively against the potential beauty that lay in her face. She was blunt, short-tempered, and fiercely territorial about her job.

"Finished yet?"

"Just about." Ian knew he would have an ample supply of photos to which he could refer, but he bent down once more

and thoughtfully studied the girl's face. He noticed something odd about the set of her lips.

"I think there's something in her mouth," he said, reaching forward. Ivy smacked his hand as if he were a naughty child.

"Don't," she said shortly, pushing past him to stand nearer the water trough. She accepted forceps from an assistant who had fetched them without being asked and gingerly pulled an object from beneath the girl's tongue. "Paper."

Mike gestured at one of the CSI techs. "We need an evidence bag." Turning to Ian, he asked, "What do you think?"

"There are pages missing from the book," Ian stated simply.

"Huh." Mike shook his head. "Bag and tag, guys. Then let the doctor get to work." The scene-of-crime technicians collected any evidence that might be disturbed and then moved it aside. Ivy methodically examined the body in situ before gesturing to her waiting staff. The gloved assistants lifted the body and lowered it onto a waiting gurney. The girl maintained her rigid position as she was moved.

Ian watched the puddles grow around the gurney as water streamed from the folds of the girl's dress, not looking toward Ivy's efficient movements. He was used to death and rarely upset by what he saw, but something about the scientific precision of Ivy's work always made him uneasy.

"Can you tell us anything?" Mike asked impatiently.

She stared at him for a long moment, then shrugged. "The water complicates body temperature, but I'd say she's been dead eight to ten hours, right around dinner last night. I'll check the stomach contents to see if anything is identifiable. Rigor's begun but isn't fully set. Lividity's fixed, though; discoloration on the legs suggests she was killed first, lay prone for an hour or two, and then was placed in the trough before rigor set in. Posed more accurately. Whoever did this put her in the position where she was found."

Mike nodded. "You drop a body in a trough, that's not how it lands."

Ivy cut him a sharp glance, and her mouth tightened. "No. It's not."

"Was the water an attempt to disguise time of death?" Ian asked.

"Possibly, although there are more effective methods." Ivy surveyed the scene. "My guess? Whoever this was, he wasn't interested in hiding what he did. He wanted to display it. The water means something."

"What?" Mike asked.

"That's your job, *Detective*," she responded dryly, signaling her people to pack up. She glanced at Ian. "I'll know more once I get the autopsy done. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks." Ian watched as the body was rolled slowly out of the barn, the medical assistants maneuvering skillfully around the debris scattered on the floor. He turned his attention back to the mural and the now vacant water trough.

"She's right, you know," Mike said, approaching. "This guy's not trying to hide."

"No," Ian said, thoughtfully studying the mural. "He wants everyone to know what he's done."