

CHAPTER 1

Special Agent Maddison Cade leaned over the young man he so desperately wanted to understand and looked directly into his eyes. "Tell me something pal, anything," he whispered. "What's your name, brother?" Cade paused for several seconds, his eyes locked on the blank stare of the man in front of him. "Hey dude, we're on the same team here, trying to find a killer. Come on, give me something." He reached out and touched the man on his forehead with his index finger, trying to emphasize the importance of what he was saying. Although touching a suspect or interviewee was off limits, he knew this man did not have a lawyer. "Tell me who did this" Cade said, inches away from the man's face.

Cade stood up straight at the commotion barely fifteen feet away. "Get outta there!" a police officer yelled in the direction of Cade's black Suburban. The SUV had become a target of the local news reporters as they jockeyed for the best spot to film anything that would interest viewers of the ten o'clock news. They couldn't film the entire scene from their position, so they settled on Cade and his vehicle instead. A throng of reporters were trying to get close to the crime scene, but after a glare from Cade, uniformed officers quickly pushed them back. Cade knew that there would be yet another story about another death in a case that was beginning to reach the national news.

Returning to the blank stare of the latest victim, Cade crouched to one knee and gently closed the eyelids over the victim's hazel eyes. As he stood and slowly backed away from the dead man, he observed that the man was closely shaven. The victim's grooming suggested that he had someone to clean up for, perhaps a family, or girlfriend. Cade hoped this might lead to an interviewee, and some identifiable piece of the puzzle might fall into place in this ongoing investigation that as of yet, had no leads. The young man's clothing, now soaked in blood, appeared to have been in fair condition. It was an outfit that one might wear to a low-paying job. This was another good sign, Cade noted. The amount of blood was surprising, and oddly, it was still seeping from the man's body. The pool of red, spreading across the sidewalk, quickly surrounded Cade's shoes. He slowly began backing away from the body, but his shoes stuck to the oozing liquid. The thick blood seemed to come alive as it saturated the cuffs of his pants. He looked for support, but all the local police and onlookers had vanished.

Cade sprang up in bed just like all television actors do when coming out of a nightmare. It took a full five seconds of focusing on objects in the bedroom for his brain to boot up for the day. The last item of familiarity was Georgia, his French Mastiff, who sat silently at the foot of the bed. Her giant head,

slightly tilted to one side, came into focus. She looked as though she was trying to understand his strange behavior. After eye contact was made, she stood, stretched and slumbered to his side. He hung his legs off the bed and she put her head on his lap for a few moments of petting. She somehow seemed to understand that he had once again brought the dead home with him and they had invaded his dreams.

He fell back to the bed for just a few moments, hoping to find some energy. Georgia returned to the air vent. Cade stared at the ceiling fan trying to clear his head. Rolling his head to one side, his thoughts shifted from the grime of downtown to the selflessness of his wife. Her light brown hair covered her face. He gently brushed it across her eyes which remained closed. She was exhausted most days with good reason. He thought only briefly about waking her to finish the conversation they didn't finish the night before. After all, it was the same conversation they'd had and not finished at least a hundred times before.

His eyes returned to the ceiling while his hand combed through her hair. He made a decision to postpone the remaining pile of forms and documents regarding yesterday's victim until he could return to the scene and work the details out in his mind. Sleep had eluded him yet again, and he was showered and dressed before the loud buzz of the alarm clock sounded. He cancelled the alarm, grabbed his gun, badge and keys, and headed out into the thick morning air.

Maddison Cade was a Special Agent with Homeland Security. His small but far-reaching and elite division of the Department of Homeland Security was a government creation, formed within one month of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, with the intention of closing the gaping holes in communication between local, state and federal agencies. Agents of *The Division*, as it was called by those on the inside, had broad authority to access both federal and state databases and information systems immediately after any case was labeled as a terrorism matter. The position came equipped with a certain amount of mystery because so many of the agents' and agency's reports weren't public. Division agents also faced a fair amount of jealousy from some officers and agents who found themselves in the path of a Division agent's needs, because The Division generally got what it needed, one way or another.

Agent Cade's success had come partially from his ability to neutralize these feelings and to create a real *kumbaya* type of atmosphere. Successful and highly thought of in the law enforcement community, Cade maintained a demeanor and a record of service that invited approval. He pushed the envelope just enough to be respected by colleagues, but not so much to be seen as a loose cannon by management. He was forty-one years old, but refused to see himself aging. He was conscientious about his appearance, and his brown hair naturally had that messy look that was often seen on younger men. He was usually dressed in the hip or trendy jeans of the moment. Today

he was wearing Lucky brand jeans, paired with a simple Polo shirt and Timberlands.

He was a people pleaser, friendly with everyone, and he fit into most any situation. In moments of deep reflection, he tried not to dwell on the fact that his attempt to be liked by everybody most likely was the reason he had very few, if any, very close friends.

Optimistic to a fault, Cade really believed that most everything would work itself out, and that caused him the occasional disappointment, but his outlook on life remained the same. His people skills used during an investigation were legendary. He was like a chameleon, jumping from one situation to the next, changing appearance and style with each. Working this case, he was going to have to use every bit of leverage, available resource and observational skill that he had acquired during his fifteen years as a federal agent.

Parking in front of the window tinting company that was located just a few miles from the most recent crime scene, he got out of his Suburban and looked around. Although the hours listed on the tinting company's door, scribbled on a piece of poster board, stated that they opened for business at eight o'clock, the place was still locked and quiet. The heat shimmered off the asphalt of Highway 78 and 16th Street, and the Alabama air was thick and heavy. Sweat had already started to form on his forehead. He leaned against the back bumper of his SUV and started to go over the details of the previous day in his mind.

At 8:22 a.m., the young owner of the window tinting company casually pulled into the parking lot. The man looked as if he was wearing yesterday's clothes, and with grease and dirt under his fingernails, he unlocked the front door and turned to address his only customer.

"Tint job today?" he asked.

"Nah, I just crawled out of bed to see if I could catch the sunrise from this side of town," Cade answered sarcastically. He had the ability to convey a sarcastic wit, while his body language and facial expression kept it friendly, if not even enjoyable for the recipient of the sarcasm.

"Let me guess, you want limo tint, like all the other smart aleck cops," the younger man stated. Cade just nodded to confirm the dark tint selection. Within five minutes, the film was being applied to his windows and he was back in the parking lot, re-playing the events surrounding yesterday's murder and its connection to the five previous murders. He did this while spitting sunflower seed shells on the weed-infested sidewalk. As he chewed the seeds, his brain pursued hundreds of *what if* scenarios.

A bead of sweat trickled down his face, reminding him of the oncoming heat. He decided to walk across the street to the Kangaroo truck stop for a bit of free air conditioning and a brief change of pace. The Kangaroo's huge parking lot was full of customers and several others who seemed to be just hanging out. Several

panhandlers were asking customers for handouts or spare change. It was a known gathering place for a handful of drug dealers and prostitutes.

Cade expected a certain number of these individuals at any given corner in this part of town, but was not accustomed to seeing them conducting their business at this early hour. The vast majority of Kangaroo visitors, legitimate customers and otherwise, were African American, the ethnic group that comprised a large majority of the surrounding residential area. The scene momentarily distracted Cade.

Growing up in the "Deep South" during the seventies, Cade had been surrounded by people with all sorts of prejudices. The actions and attitudes he experienced didn't make him feel prejudiced during his childhood, but as a child he was largely ignorant regarding various groups of people. As an adult, he didn't feel like he was racially prejudiced, or had any prejudice against anyone. In fact, his upbringing had made him more open and accepting as he got older. His past had created though, a feeling of obligation to correct the stereotyped image of the racially biased white Southerner. Surely people would recognize that a man working so hard to solve the murders of six dead black men held no preconceived ideas about color or race.

Refocusing his mind on the case, he thought about the toxicology reports. According to the Coroner, the deaths had been the result of a highly complicated mixture of chemical compounds, one of which was presumed to be a type of nerve agent, but the most recent lab update provided no specifics. The toxic powder was being mixed with street drugs, and the victims were paying a violent, fatal price for their drug-filled lifestyle. After the third death, the Coroner reported that the same unknown fatal substance had been present in all three cases. The fourth and fifth victims had the local police scrambling to trace the drugs back to a supplier. To avoid the headache, city council members and police management searched for a way to transfer the case to the feds.

The one fact that had set these deaths apart from most others seen in the Magic City, a strange fact that caused the attention to this case in the first place, was an unusual death investigation detail. The bodies of the dead were all discarded away from their place of death, in public areas. The city and county leaders, in an attempt to cover their collective butts, had stated that someone was trying to send a message by these very public crime scenes. This fact, combined with the identification of the nerve agent, had allowed them to label the case as "suspected terrorist activity."

It was a label Cade thought was used all too often when local officials were flustered by media scrutiny. They quickly cleared the files out of their own offices, and dumped them on Homeland Security. Cade initially thought this was simply a case of a bad batch of drugs and politics mixed together, but part of him knew that six suspicious crime scenes and six young victims weren't all coincidence.

Media outlets were offering many conspiracy theories and rumors for the public to digest and spread around. Homeland Security now had the intense pressure and the task of finding a solid lead in this case, and Cade, as usual in seemingly impossible cases, eagerly accepted the assignment of searching out that lead. He sometimes wondered if he was working fifteen hour days for the humans that were dying, or for the glory attached to any high profile federal case. He wanted to believe that his personal motivations were honorable.

Making his way through the parking lot and grabbing the left side of the double glass door (which he subconsciously assumed had been handled less), Cade walked into the air-conditioned convenience store. Immediately sizing up the other patrons, and not seeing anything out of the ordinary, he walked over to the soft drink dispenser. After filling the largest container available with ice and diet Mountain Dew, he paid for his drink and a backup bag of sunflower seeds at the front counter. A thick bullet-resistant shield blurred the image of the clerk processing the purchase. Exiting the store, he could see that his Suburban was still being tinted, so he slowly strolled across the parking lot, chewing and spitting out the salty shells of the sunflower seeds. They kept his mind off the can of "dip" he didn't purchase and hadn't purchased in nearly six months.

He had picked up the tobacco habit on a recent surveillance gig with the violent crimes unit of the Birmingham Police Department, all of whom seemed to constantly have tobacco of some sort in their mouths. It had kept him awake during the long listening posts, and avoiding swallowing the bitter juice was a distraction for the even more bitter conversation. The suspects targeted by the Violent Crimes Unit were crudely discussing attributes of "merchandise," which were young ladies in their mid to late teens. Any of the investigators would have struggled not to kill the goons selling and trading the girls, should they ever meet in an alley, but they trudged through the case which ended in sixty year sentences for seven of the ring leaders. One died in a questionable suicide before trial, but for some reason, detectives were slow to open a homicide case.

Killing some time before he returned to the tint shop, Cade, rarely intimidated by any circumstance or person, approached a man leaning against a dented and dingy garbage can. The man probably hadn't seen a shower in days, and had given up his razor months ago. The man began to light a fresh cigarette using the one he'd just finished. He was wearing a T-shirt that barely covered his sizable belly. The shirt had a simple stamped word, arching over the man's gut, reading, "Bourbon." Cade wondered if this was an advertisement or a lifestyle statement.

"People dying left and right around here, huh?" Cade asked, as he stepped close enough to the man to smell the mixed odor of sweat and tobacco. The man finished lighting his Marlboro and took a long drag.

"Yep, gets better every day," he said, as he walked away without another word.

The dejected investigator continued across the parking lot, toward a trio of shirtless teenagers approaching. He spoke first with only, "S'up" and a nod. One of the teens acknowledged him with a brief glance and a slight nod as they passed, headed to the entrance of the Kangaroo.

The reality that most everyone living in the area knew about the drug-related deaths, and of those, only the drug users seemed to care, weighed heavily on Cade. The deaths had been caused by a toxin, but the toxin was mixed into popular street drugs. A dismissive attitude was prevalent among Birmingham's citizens, government and some law enforcement in cases such as this. If they bought the illegal drugs, and the drugs killed them, it made their death less important and perhaps their own fault. Even though he tried to remain a neutral party in every investigation, focused only on gathering clues, he desperately wanted to solve this case before another life was lost. He again paused to consider if his desire was ultimately rooted in his passion of succeeding on the job.

Shaking out of his internal thoughts, he headed toward his SUV, crossing the busy Highway 78 with a quick wave to a slowing pickup truck. The windows of his SUV were all tinted as black as night, and it actually looked like a fairly decent job. He entered the front of the tinting company, where the young man was filling out a hand-written receipt on a receipt booklet that looked rarely used. He looked up when he finished writing.

"You're ready to roll, brother. Did you arrest anybody over there?" the man asked. Cade was going to dismiss the question, but was still hopeful that he could find someone in this neighborhood to talk.

"Your shop is right in the middle of all the action. You got dopers dying all around you, man. You hear any good rumors?" Cade asked.

"Nope, everybody that touches that crap dies, so there ain't nobody to hear from." After a long pause he added, "So you're workin' the doctor case?"

"What doctor case?" Cade immediately shot back, with a fear that the shop owner was in fact talking about his nightmare case.

"This morning on the news, some guy was interviewed in front of Cooper Green. My kids were yellin' 'bout being out of Appledabs, so I didn't hear all of it, but he said the stuff was cooked up by a doctor." Cade felt his body go stiff, and he tried to hide his irritation at hearing critical facts about his case from the young man.

"Yeah, unfortunately, I'm working that case. You've got my number, so give me a shout if you hear anything. I won't even ask your name if you call." Cade could sense a growing disinterest from the body language of the man, so he moved on to more familiar conversation. "Did you grow up around here?"

"Yeah, over in Brookside."

"Me too, just down the road from you in Adamsville. Look, I know you could care

less about a bunch of dead crack-heads, but how about the fact that every news station from here to Houston is pumping video of the 'hood all over the country?"

"So, ain't none of my business." Cade took a deep breath, and tried not to show his irritation at the attitude of the tint shop owner.

"I'm just saying it bothers me that the video has the words Birmingham, Alabama attached to it. Folks are going to think this is what Birmingham is all about," Cade said calmly.

"Honestly, man, if it don't hurt my little business here, I just don't give a crap what people think. So, where did you go to high school?" the shop owner asked, returning to a more neutral topic.

"Right down the road there at West Birmingham."

"West Birmingham? Well, why don't you track down Esposito? Didn't you go to school with him? That cracked out piece of crap probably knows more than I do."

"Esposito?" Cade said, as his puzzled look invited more information.

"Yeah, Esposito, the big all-star from your school. You might be younger. I don't know how old he is 'cause he looks about sixty. But back in the late eighties, Esposito was the quarterback when West Birmingham went to state. The stupid dago got a full ride to some Tennessee college and threw it all away when he got on the pipe."

Cade concealed the fact that he knew Esposito. He had a crystal clear image in his mind of the former football star, wearing the number ten on his bright red West Birmingham home jersey. He could easily picture Esposito in the football huddle barking commands at teammates who were willing and eager to follow his lead. Esposito was the caliber of athlete that every high school coach dreamed about.

"I think I know the Esposito you're talking about," Cade said. "I heard he died after he moved to L-A. Somebody said he was living with some prostitutes and got AIDS."

"Yeah, I heard all that too, and more. I don't know what's real and what's crap, but I know he ain't dead. He lives with his mom behind the CVS in the same house he grew up in. But most weekends he's laid up on a couch at his uncle's, right over there by the machine plant, stoned out of his mind."

The greasy tint man pointed down 16th Street.

For some reason, Cade felt the need to defend an old school friend that he hadn't seen or thought much about in twenty years, but instead, he pushed to end the conversation. He paid the bill with a credit card that didn't match the name he'd given the shop owner. The owner seemed happy for the business, especially so early in the morning, and didn't even inquire about the name on the credit card.

Getting into his Suburban with the new dark interior, Cade started his car and pulled out onto 16th Street, heading toward the machine plant. He pulled up the number for the County Medical Examiner's Office on his cell phone while he drove and kept an eye on his surroundings through the darker than legal tinted windows of

his Suburban.

He couldn't think of anyone, other than maybe the coroner, who would have given an interview in front of Cooper Green Hospital. The county coroner was housed in the basement of Cooper Green, so it was a logical place to start trying to find the idiot who had given facts about the case to the media.

"Medical Examiner's Office," a pleasant voice answered.

"Hi, this is Maddison Cade, I'm..."

"Hold on, Agent Cade, I'll pass you right through." Cade inadvertently raised his eyebrows as he heard the tone in the woman's voice which signaled recognition if not familiarity. In all his years on the street, he had only been inside the morgue twice to view autopsies, and had only once met the medical examiner. And until now, there hadn't been a reason to meet with him on this case. He found it hard to believe that anyone, especially the receptionist, would have any memory of him. The woman's actions were most likely connected to the current media debacle.

"Hello Agent, this is Bill Justice." Cade had forgotten the M-E's name was Justice, and he took a second to consider the irony. It sounded more like a name out of a comic book or graphic novel, and didn't fit the man personally.

"Good morning, Doc. I heard that an interview..."

"Yes," Justice interrupted. "I was sure you'd be calling. I sincerely hope that didn't put you in a bad position." Cade struggled to keep up with the flustered speech of the medical examiner.

"I was completely caught off guard this morning when the news was waiting for me outside. I wasn't even fully awake. I had actually arrived early to follow up on a theory, or a hunch to be more specific, that I had yesterday evening about your latest victim. Toxicology sent some very disturbing data and I was planning to call your office today after I finished some follow up comparisons. The news crew being here today was coincidental, and I told them I hadn't even updated the lead investigator, but you know how those vultures are."

"Yeah, sure, so should I come see you in person or just go home and make popcorn for the news at noon? You've told the community that a doctor is killing people." Cade tried to balance between starting a line of communication and showing his frustration regarding the man's media interaction. He realized from the tone in Dr. Justice's explanation that the medical examiner was no competition for the hungry news media.

Cade vaguely remembered Dr. Justice had the look of a mad scientist crossed with a nerdy high school chemistry student. His clothes didn't match, he seemed somewhat socially inept, and he probably spent more time in the morgue than anywhere else. Justice seemed to be the kind of guy who only knew about something if it related to his job. Cade knew that Justice had not purposely sought media attention, and he decided

he wouldn't blame the man for the public reaction that was probably about to happen as a result of his interview.

"I knew I had made a mistake as soon as I opened my mouth, and I really am sorry. They were asking if this could possibly be a vigilante, and I replied that vigilantes are not normally medically trained. Actually it's not even what I meant. Of course, they immediately came up with the doctor angle."

"So, go ahead and give me the full exclusive. What did you really mean to say?"

"Not so much medically trained, but trained in chemistry or in chemical compounding. I'd be willing to bet that when you find this guy, you'll find that he has a set of letters behind his name. If it's not MD, it's PhD. If you could just give me one more day, I'd like to get a final report on some additional testing I requested to further explain the initial toxicology reports. I will have everything ready for you tomorrow. Of course, I won't speak to anyone except you. The news crews won't catch me off guard again."

"I'll see you in the morning. Do I need to make an appointment?" Cade asked, thinking he would get one last snide comment in to drive the point home about the confidentiality he needed from Dr. Justice.

"Of course not, Agent. Come any time after nine o'clock."