

Chapter 1

Sirens echoed in the distance as Jack Stanwick entered the rural town of Rockfort, Virginia. Another gruesome discovery led the local boys to claim jurisdiction—but the Bureau had their own ideas and about to pull rank. After he sliced through the necessary red-tape and secured the needed sanctions, FBI Director Gordon Weaver issued an order to survey the tragedy and retrieve all remnants from Granite’s Mill.

With hardly a resident looking his way, Jack hastened through the four-way stop and hurried up Old Gulch Road. He noticed the sparse trees had turned into a dense forest that dimmed an already cloudy sky. So after a quick flick of his wrist, the headlights came on.

As the car gained speed, it careened along the crushed-stone route. The loose gravel struck the undercarriage like a hail of bullets. At the same time, the screeching cry of police horns blared louder with each impending tread. It put him on high alert. While the adrenaline surged, he sped over a hill and caught sight of the glaring flares that inflamed his path, which improved his view. The crime scene now became visible.

Jack veered off onto a dusty road and pulled ahead of the pack of scattered cars. He shut off the engine, peered out the windshield and eyed the disarray of yellow police tape that encircled the crime scene. All the grave facial expressions gave weight to what lay just ahead.

Here we go again! His mind raced.

He reached over to unlock the glove compartment and removed a mini-recording device. Once his throat cleared, he pushed the corresponding buttons and spoke in a deep and sturdy voice, "This is Special Agent Jack Stanwick. It's Sunday, the twenty-sixth of October and the time is..." He looked at his watch then continued logging the rest of his statement. When finished, he shed the blazer and put on his FBI jacket. He shoved the gadget into a pocket and turned it back on.

Jack unbuckled his seatbelt and thrust open the door. He emerged from the car and was overtaken by a brisk wind that stiffened his face and stirred his spine. With a quick zip of his jacket, he advanced toward the group of men who had gathered around as if in a football huddle. One of the local cops approached him.

"You must be the FBI agent?" Out came a hand. "I'm Deputy Morton Talbot."

Jack grasped it. He noticed how the gun holster hung loosely around the deputy's waist; seemingly held up by a uniform that was one size too big.

"You got here mighty quick."

"I drove like a banshee." Jack turned and stuck his head between the congregated men. "Why is everybody just standing here?" He looked down at a body partially covered with leaves.

"We don't want to touch anything until Chief McAllister gets here."

Jack pulled his head out from the group. "Where is he?"

"The chief is on his way up from Gallagher County. He's been visiting his brother over the weekend." The deputy glanced at his pocket watch. "He should be here any minute."

Jack was raised to be respectful, but also knew cops from the South played by their own set of rules. If things weren't done their way, an investigation could come to a screeching halt and critical clues would be lost. "I take it

you haven't started processing the crime scene? His eyes narrowed. "You know crucial evidence is disintegrating."

"Like I said before, we're waiting for the chief."

Realizing the jig—a name he called the dance—Jack prepared for another whirl. "Can't you initiate things?" He wanted to plant the seed. "Aren't you second in command?"

"Ah...yeah."

"Where's my CSI team?"

"Right behind you."

Jack spun around his head and noticed some FBI vans from Quantico, Virginia.

"We've got our folks standing by," Deputy Talbot said. "I told your team that."

"C'mon people, you can at least take pictures." He pointed down. "I need those tire marks cast."

Nobody moved.

"Damn it!" His body wrenched. "Where's the camera? I'll start this investigation myself."

"Oh no ya won't," bellowed a loud, crass voice. The man hustled his way through the crowd. "This here's my case that happened in my county that happened in my state."

Jack stood in the presence of the South's Wyatt Earp. He was a short, portly dynamo. Stuffed in an old suit with cowboy boots, he looked like a real hellcat. "You must be Chief Denton McAllister?"

"You'd be right, son."

"I'm FBI Special Agent Jack Stanwick." He stuck out his hand.

The chief ignored it, reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cigar. He bit off an end, ran it under his nose then popped the blunt into his mouth and lit it. His eyes darted toward Deputy Talbot. "What's all this excitement about?" His heavy drawl languished. "Have ya found Jimmy Hoffa?"

A sharp burst of laughter erupted from his men.

“No,” Deputy Talbot answered. “It’s more like a freak show.”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” Jack piped up.

The chief took a steady puff of his stogie. “I reckon I’ll be the judge of that.”

Jack gritted his teeth. These were backwoods boys and he knew nothing would get done if they weren’t treated with kid gloves. “You know by all accounts the FBI would be taking over this case once we were informed.” His voice remained calm and steady.

“I know the playbook, son.” The fiery tip of Chief McAllister’s cigar floundered with every word. “Your boss called the governor and raised a hell of a dickens.”

“I don’t know anything about that. What I do know is I’ve got to haul this body up to our medical examiner, and soon, so I need my CSI team to do their job.”

The chief blew his noxious mist into the air. “Can I at least take a gander at the body before those fellas get in my way?”

“Just don’t drop any ashes on the crime scene,” Jack countered.

Chief McAllister clutched the cigar between his stubby fingers and stared him down. “Son, I’ve been doin’ this here job a long time. Pert’ near close to forty years now; about as long as ya been in swaddlin’ clothes, and ya got the where-for-all to be tellin’ me how to do my job?”

Jack didn’t flinch. “No, sir, I wasn’t.”

The stogie slid back into his mouth. “I didn’t think ya was.”

Jack realized the conversation was going nowhere fast and that things had to be done differently. “Chief McAllister, I feel we started off on the wrong foot. Look, I’m just here to oversee the investigation, grab whatever

the CSI team finds and take the victim back to Washington, DC. That's it. I'm not here to step on any toes. Can we make this happen?"

The chief drew a lengthy hit off his cigar. "Ok, son, do what ya need." The smoke billowed out of a half-cracked smile.

Jack gestured to the CSI team to come out of their vehicles. "Thank you, sir." He slid on a pair of gloves.

"Yep." More smoke escaped out of his parted lips.

The CSI team walked up as Jack crouched down and brushed off the rest of the leaves from the body, careful not to disturb any evidence. After a quick inspection, he stood up and stared at Chief McAllister. "Go ahead, sir, take a look, but prepare yourself."

"Son, I've pert' near seen everythin'." He squatted down as much as his protruding gut would allow. "What in tarnation is this?" His breath rasped. "Where in God's creation did this thing come from?" Wheezing sounded. "Talbot, help me up."

The deputy grabbed onto the chief's hefty arm. "I told you it was freaky."

McAllister's eyes blazed. "This here some kinda joke..." He shifted around, his face flushed with fury. "Who's pullin' my leg?" His glare ended on Jack.

Agent Stanwick flung up his hands. "Look, I'm just down here doing my job."

"Show me them here credentials!" McAllister ordered. "I wanna make sure I'm not bein' taken a fool."

Jack reached into his back pocket, yanked out a leather case and flipped out his badge. "Here you are, Chief."

McAllister grabbed it, gave it a stern eye then handed it back. He faced Talbot. "I'm not amused."

The deputy stepped back.

Jack edged forward. Now that Chief McAllister had gotten a glimpse of his badge, the game had played out. It was time

to enact his authority. "I'll tow the body away as soon as it's bagged and tagged."

"Boys, help the CSI gang process this here crime scene for the agent."

The men scrambled.

"I appreciate your help, sir."

"Nothin' doin', son."

"Do you have any theories about the case?" Deputy Talbot inched in.

"It's too early to speculate," Jack responded.

The deputy snickered. "I think it's a tranny."

"A what?" Chief McAllister uttered.

"A transsexual, sir," Jack retorted.

The chief's eyebrows crinkled.

"It's a person who has undergone gender reassignment surgery," Jack explained.

Deputy Talbot smirked. "Well, I call it what it is—a sex change."

Chief McAllister winced. "My God!" He turned both eyes heavenward. "One day this here sky's gonna open wide and when that happens y'all will witness His wrath."

A solemn expression emanated from Jack's face.

"Working the beat in Washington, DC, you come upon people like that," Deputy Talbot spoke up. "I've arrested drag queens and transsexuals for all kinds of things, especially prostitution. They're out on the streets selling favors right along with the real women—"

"I've come across a few of them myself," Jack added.

"I remember one case in particular," continued the deputy. "My partner and I had pulled up to a red light in an unmarked car when we noticed this beautiful woman hustling on the corner. We watched as a guy strolled up

and struck a conversation with her. Within a couple of seconds, this guy was throwing punches while she was kicking kicking back; slamming him in the head with her purse. We stormed out of the car, arrested both and tossed them into the backseat. They still fought; calling each other out. She was yelling that he was a pimp, and he was hollering that she was a man. When we got back to the station, we found out that she was indeed a man. I was shocked. I mean, she was hot; looked like a model. I knew right then and there that the big city had run its course. I needed to move to a small town where a woman was actually—a woman.”

Jack shook his head. “I don’t think this person is a transsexual.”

“Then it’s one of those um...” Chief McAllister snapped his fingers. “I’ve seen ‘em on the ol’ television with the missus. It’s a her, um...a herm, a—”

“A hermaphrodite,” Jack pronounced.

“Yep, one of those things,” said the chief.

“No, the victim isn’t a hermaphrodite,” Jack remarked. “Usually they’re born with both male and female genitalia as one sex, either a man or a woman. This body’s a mixture of male and female features. Determining the original sex could be quite a challenge.”

“Well, I think it’s disgustin’,” Chief McAllister clamored. “All these new fads creepin’ ‘round out there and the drugs these here young-uns are taking. No wonder there’s creatures like this roamin’ the planet. My missus is worried about our grandkids, especially with these bath salts and whatever else is here slitherin’ down the ol’ pipeline.”

“We just had to arrest a teen the other day for arson.” Deputy Talbot rattled his handcuffs. “This kid snorted some industrial-strength glue that was stored in his parent’s garage and thought the Devil was in the house. So he grabbed his dad’s welding torch as a weapon and went after him, burning down the house in the process. The boy was clearly out of his mind.”

“Times are certainly changing.” Jack nodded. “Years ago you didn’t see drugs in the sticks. It’s now moving from the city streets to the suburban sidewalks.”

“Right into our own backyards,” Deputy Talbot blurted out. “It seems these kids nowadays will sniff, snort or swallow just about anything for a high. Right, Chief?”

“Enough with the darn yappin’ ‘bout that!” McAllister’s head bowed toward the body. “Somethin’ fishy is goin’ on here. If it’s not one of them there hermaphrodites then what in God’s graces is it?”

“They just turned over the victim.” Jack nudged in to get a glimpse.

“I also want to see it.” Talbot eked his way in.

Jack leaned in for several minutes then backed out. The deputy followed.

“What did y’all see or hear?” McAllister asked.

“I didn’t see any contusions, lacerations, blunt trauma or strangulation, which I heard confirmed,” Jack reported. “The CSI agents are just now looking for fluids and anything latent,” he mentioned. “Besides obvious rigor and pooling, the only unusual thing I observed was the combination of male and female characteristics. It’s like a morphing of sorts took place.”

“A what?” Chief McAllister uttered.

“It’s as if you took two bodies of the opposite sex and mashed them together, making them into one.” Jack squashed his hands against one another. “It’s called morphed or morphing. It comes from the word metamorphoses.”

“Y’all and ya big city words.” The chief shrugged.

“It basically means the changing from one entity into another,” Jack explained. “You know when a caterpillar changes into a butterfly. That’s metamorphosing one thing into another.”

Chief McAllister's head pitched back. "Now I've done gotcha—"

A vehicle roared up and parked a few feet away. The faint sound of country music seeped out of an open window.

"That's Macdonald Cole, the Rockfort County Coroner." Deputy Talbot grinned. "He's a real character."

The coroner jumped out of his car and rushed up to them.

"Hi, Mac—"

"Hey, Chief..." Cole slapped him on the shoulder. "Sorry about being so late. Old lady Winslow finally died so I was out to her house. Things would've gone smooth if it wasn't for that touched son of hers getting in my darn way. You know his nonsense. He kept babbling that her soul was sucked out by some aliens from a planet I've never even heard of. Those damn aliens should've sucked him instead."

Chief McAllister sniggered under his breath as he reached an arm around Cole. "Well, this here'll make your day."

"I heard it's something out of a circus sideshow." Mac looked down at the body and leapt back. "Phew, what happened here?"

"I'm afraid we've got more than a sideshow on our hands!"

Chief McAllister moved in. "This here's Special Agent Stanwick with the FBI."

Mac lobbed out his hand as Jack halfheartedly took it. "I see you're using the forensic team from Quantico."

Jack pulled away. "Yeah."

"What're you here for?" Mac asked.

"For taking over our case," Deputy Talbot responded.

Mac eyed Jack. "Then why'd you call me?"

"I didn't."

Mac pulled his baseball cap forward. "I should explain something—"

“Ok!” Jack stood focused.

“I’ve been in this business a long time and have seen many a corpse so I tend to take things with a grain of salt, and sometimes it rubs people the wrong way. I feel that might’ve happened here.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Jack loosened his stance. “I’m somewhat tense myself. It’s not every day where you see a victim who is a morphed mess of male and female parts.”

“If it helps, I’ve never seen this muddle of hodgepodge either.” Mac gestured with his head. “I should see if those agents need any help.”

“Thanks, I’d appreciate that.” Jack nodded. “As soon as the CSI team gets finished processing the crime scene, I’ll be taking the body back with me to Washington, DC, to reunite with the others—”

Gasps were heard.

He slipped, and they caught it.

Mac’s eyes widened. “Did you just say—others?”

“There’s more?” Deputy Talbot asked.

Jack huffed. “Listen, what I’m about to say needs to stay close to the vest. I don’t want the press to catch a word. They’ll just muddy the waters while fishing for a tale to tell.”

Heads shook in agreement.

“Son, just how many others did ya find?” Chief McAllister questioned.

“Two bodies were discovered in Maryland over the weekend, and now this one.”

The deputy pointed down to the victim. “Do they look like him, ah...her, um...that?”

“Yeah.” Jack peered down at the body. “All have those disturbing physical characteristics—”

“Chief! Chief!” A young man ran up.

“Jay, what’s with the dang racket?”

“We’ve found another body.”

“Where?” McAllister roared.

“Down yonder, right behind Granite’s Mill.”

They bolted down the hill toward the old stone structure. In the distance, the warped paddlewheel wobbled from the weight of the cascading currents.

Jack arrived first, followed by Deputy Talbot and Macdonald Cole.

“Don’t ya boys touch nothin’ till I get there, do ya hear me?” McAllister hobbled down the hill. He rounded the corner and slowed to nearly a crawl. The chief was winded. “Is it another, um...he/she?”

“He’s not altered at all,” Jack noted.

Chief McAllister removed the cowboy hat and wiped off his bald dome. He placed it back on, shoved the damp handkerchief into a pocket and looked down.

“Do you know him?” Jack asked.

“Beats me who this here fella is.” Chief McAllister shrugged. He turned to his men. “I want y’all to fan out and search a hundred yard radius of both these crime scenes. Could be some more bodies settin’ along.”

Jack turned to the chief. “Do you mind if I...” He pointed down. “Check him out?”

“Nah, go for it, son.”

Jack put on a fresh pair of gloves and lifted a side of the body. While his eyes ran up and down, he patted every inch. Raising the other side, he completed the same routine and got up.

Deputy Talbot leaned in. “What’s in your hand?”

“His wallet.” Jack opened it. “According to a Social Security card, he’s Harvey Welch.”

“I don’t recognize the name,” Mac said.

The other men shook their heads in agreement.

Jack rifled through it. “Other than a little cash and some betting stubs, there’s nothing else in it.”

“Talbot,” Chief McAllister grunted. “Grab an evidence bag.”

Mac leaned in. “I wonder who he is?”

“At least he’s a guy,” Jack quipped. “My pat job confirmed that.”

“I better go over and tell those agents they have more work to do,” Mac offered. “I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

A young man walked up to the chief. “Sir, we’ve gone over the first victim and the surrounding area with a fine-tooth comb. The Quantico team has the bagged contents, impressions, castings and whatnot. They’re ready to process the second scene.”

“Good work, Boyd.”

“Here’s a few evidence bags.” The young man handed them off. “Deputy Talbot said you needed these as he took off into the woods to relieve himself.”

“That Morton has the bladder size of a small critter.” Chief McAllister mocked. He keeps a small bottle of that there hand sanitizer in his back pocket just for situations like these.” He laughed. “Well, Boyd, we’re gonna get outta the way so y’all can do your work.”

The young man smiled.

Chief McAllister gave Agent Stanwick an evidence bag as they headed up the hill.

Jack dropped the wallet in and sealed it. “You’ve got a really tight team.”

“Yep, took me some time though, whoopin’ these strappin’ young boys into shape. Let’s just say it aged me a few years, but we’ve pert’ near got it down to a science.”

“Would you come up to DC, and teach my partner a thing or two?”

“I reckon a cracking of the whip is in order.”

“I’ll keep your number in my book—just in case.”

Mac walked up to Jack and handed him a piece of paper. “I did a liver temp on both bodies for an estimated time of death. They most likely spent the night here,” he remarked. “I put it beside their names. The first one I called Mrs. Doe. It’s Mr. and Ms. added together, and the second is HW, obviously for Harvey Welch.”

“Ok, thanks.” He bared a slight grin. “Would you do a favor for me and ready the bodies for transport when the CSI agents have finished? My team should be here any minute.”

“Your men pulled up when I put my instrument bag in the car, but I’ll still help prepare them,” Mac replied. “I’m just happy as a pig in slop not having to open those two up, especially the first one,” he clamored. “Well, boys, see you around.”

They watched him trot away as Deputy Talbot strode up.

“You’re both right...” Jack chuckled. “He’s something all right.”

“More like something else,” Deputy Talbot added.

Chief McAllister snickered. “Ya gotta be a certain breed to be a coroner.”

Nodding and laughter took over.

“Well, gentlemen, I better get over to the transport vehicle and help. I don’t want it to look like I’m slacking.” Jack held out his hand. “Thanks for your cooperation.”

Deputy Talbot grasped the offered hand. “You’re welcome.”

Jack extended his hand to the chief, but instead of taking it he pulled out a cigar, ran it under his nose and inhaled the smell. Agent Stanwick immediately pulled it back, tilted his

head and winked an eye. Chief McAllister grinned then fired up his lighter.

“By the way, son, how’d ya agency find out about this here crime?”

“I phoned the Bureau,” Deputy Talbot responded. “You did leave me in charge. Besides, I couldn’t get you on the radio or your phone.”

Jack watched as Chief McAllister turned his head toward Talbot. “Ya did, huh?” A slight smile gave way. “Good work, Deputy.”

His eyes shined.

“I almost think here you’re gunnin’ for a raise,” continued the chief.

“Yes, sir,” Deputy Talbot stated. “You taught me well.”

“I’d say I did.”

Jack stepped back, admiring Chief McAllister. He knew that was the way to treat your squad—with commendation.

“Well, Talbot, enough yammerin’ about this nonsense, I’ve gotta talk a minute to Jack. Why don’t ya run over and help Mac with...well, everythin’?”

The deputy hurried away and called out a hasty goodbye.

Jack glanced at Chief McAllister and noticed his expression had shifted.

“I just can’t reckon the idea that this kinda thing would happen in my jurisdiction. I’ve lived in these parts all my life and have never come across anythin’ of this sort. The only body I’ve seen in a while is when ol’ Joe Hubbard shot himself while deer huntin’ a couple years back.” He rubbed his chin. “I know somethin’ though. These here boys at the ol’ precinct are gonna have a field-day over this yarn.”

“Would you wait until I get a better grasp around this case before you give the press all the details?” Jack

requested. "I don't want the media getting wind of this and blowing all over us for answers."

"Gotcha," Chief McAllister uttered. "I'll make mighty sure to lay down the law. It'll all stay hunkered down."

"I really appreciate your help," Jack remarked. "I might need more of it in the near future."

"Just give me a holla."

"I know we started off on the wrong foot but, um...I—"

"Son, I know. No need here to mention it."

"Thanks, sir."

"Just let me know how everythin' turns out?"

"I will, and if you hear anything pertinent, you'll let me know."

"You betcha!" Chief McAllister tipped his hat. "Well, I guess it's pert' near time for me to be takin' my hide and high-tailin' it out of Dodge. It's not like I got me a precinct to run." He looked about then thrust out his hand. "Bye, son."

Jack, thrown off-guard, reached out and grabbed it. He gave a quick shake then let go. "Goodbye, Chief."

McAllister dipped his head then toddled away as the cigar smoke trailed behind him.