

Chapter 1

Chandler, MA

“Fogerdy!”

The old man cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled for his dog over the howl of the North Atlantic wind. The shepherd’s muted bark came to him from the distance.

At three in the morning, the stretch of beach between Williams Landing and pier twenty-eight was cloaked in impenetrable darkness. The wind raged with a particular vengeance in the pre-dawn hours of November 12. It churned the waters of Chandler Bay and spewed a biting mist off the swells before the waves slammed onto the shore. Still, the cold snap that swept across the isolated section of beach was as expected as Thanksgiving turkey and pumpkin pie.

Moist sand sunk under the weight of the old man’s steps. He staggered and leaned into the gusts to keep his balance. He aimed the flashlight beam deep into the night and yelled for his dog again. Tiny pellets of snow spat at an angle past the shaft of light before disappearing into the darkness.

“There you are, you stinker.”

Ten yards ahead, the dog stood poised like a pointer barking incessantly at the incoming waves.

“Crazy mutt.”

The dog lowered his head and eased toward the water’s edge.

“Fogerdy. Here, boy.” He clapped his hands to get the pet’s attention. “Get over here.”

The dog remained fixed; his hackles on end.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked as he bent to leash him. “You’re never this ...” The man swept the light in the direction of whatever had caught the dog’s attention. He squinted, leaned in for a closer look, and recoiled. Disgust hit as hard as the stench that rose from the decomposed body.



The Homicide unit of the Chandler Police Department expected the annual hike in crime that seemed to always usher in the holiday season. But the floater cases and a recent outbreak of the

flu among the officers had crimped the department's roster. Three of the eleven detectives were out on sick leave; two were recuperating from injuries sustained during a high-speed chase. Those left to serve double duty were on the short end of a fuse with no apparent escape from the madness.

Harper stirred and moaned at the high-pitched ring of his cell and frowned at the phone's intrusive shrill. A familiar sound that no longer jolted him out of bed as it once had. He pried his eyes open, tempted to throw the phone against the wall. Instead, he remained face down with the pillow wrapped tight around his head. Unable to block the irritating disturbance, he grunted and snatched it off the nightstand.

The congested voice on the other end of the line belonged to Dave Mann, Harper's partner of just over a year. Mann had a hell of a cold and his usual laid-back demeanor had given way to irritability. His patience had vanished six murders ago.

"Didn't you hear me call? Twice. I let the damned phone ring forever."

Harper winced as the red alarm clock numbers came into focus. "It's four in the morn—"

"Got another floater."

"Jesus." Harper didn't have to see the body to know the victim was another teenage boy. This was the third case in a matter of weeks. He knew what they'd find – nothing. They'd have a corpse and a cause of death, but no motive or weapon, no time of death, no trace evidence and no suspect.

"Where?"

"Beached a quarter mile south of Williams Landing. Are you coming?"

"Yeah. I'm up."

"Sam?"

"I said I'm up. Just give me a minute!"

"It's colder than hell out here. Come on, Fowler's already done with the preliminary. We're waiting on you."

Harper wiped the corners of his mouth as he tried to block out Mann's rant. "I'm on my way." He tossed the cell onto the bed, rubbed his eyes and glanced at Kay's empty pillow. His fiery six-month affair with the city's assistant prosecuting attorney ended abruptly with a single phone call she received from the New York D A and his offer to give her a shot at a high-profile case. The first teen's body surfaced days after she left. Harper convinced himself that was the only reason he was thinking of her now. He slammed a fist into her pillow, swung his legs out of bed, and forced her from his mind again.



Harper parked his Jeep along the shoulder of the road. Fowler's medical examiner's van, three marked units, and Mann's Nissan were parked a few yards ahead. Beams of portable spotlights shone like beacons on the beach below while the usual gathering of city personnel crowded the scene.

Mann, an ex-college quarterback, was a head taller than the two techs on duty tonight and a hard target to miss from any distance. When the first tech raised his camera for a shot, Mann leaned

in and pointed at the angle he wanted. By the time Harper reached the beach, Mann had moved on to inspect the other tech's initial crime-scene sketches. Fowler also stood out among them like a smudge on a page. He was the middle-aged guy with a '60s crew cut sporting his trademark red sneakers. At his feet, the black body bag stretched across the wet sand.

Harper and Mann had chased after a faceless killer since the end of October when the first teenage boy bobbed up like an apple in Chandler Bay. The corpse in the body bag made it clear they were dealing with a serial killer. He held that thought and jerked his collar snug around his neck as he made his way down the snow-covered embankment.

"Hold it, Doc." Harper shoved his hands into a pair of latex gloves.

"About damn time. What took you so long?"

"Got here as fast as I could."

"I've got more bodies than hours in a day to do them." Fowler did nothing to disguise his irritation. "I don't have time—"

"Give me a break, will you? You're not the only one pulling double shifts. What do we have?" Harper reached for the tab on the body bag's zipper and pulled it open while Fowler described the obvious.

"Another male, looks to be in his mid-teens. Has a trace of a tattoo left on his chest, just like the others." Fowler paused and gave his watch a quick glance. "The killer's playing with you, Harp. Look at the throat – slit this one wide open."

Harper frowned and leaned forward for a closer look at the three-inch gash. "Okay, so he beats the crap out of vic number one, strangles the second, and slices up the third. What the hell's pushing this guy's buttons?"

He swept a glance over his shoulder toward the bay. Every officer on the force knew the water temperatures dropped by early September; the colder the water, the slower the putrefaction process. That single fact meant the murders were weeks old when the bodies rose from the bottom. To Harper, it meant only one thing – a snag.

"What difference do motives make when we don't have a suspect?" Mann asked. "The guy's probably three states away by now."

"Or right in our backyard watching every move we make." Anything was possible. Harper understood Mann's frustration, but the worse thing they could do was second guess the killer.

"Then how do we find him? We have no prints and no trace. Any viable DNA got flushed off the bodies the minute they hit the water. If you've got a new theory, let's hear it."

"We follow the trail."

"What trail? We've got nothing."

"He'll make a mistake. They all do."

"Not this guy. He's thorough. Empties their pockets, doesn't leave anything behind," Mann said. "Damn near a perfect crime."

"But not quite." Fowler pointed a gloved finger at the caps on the victim's two front teeth. "This one's had some fine dental work done, and where there's a cap, there's a dentist with records."

“So we’ll ID the vic and the doc who drilled him. He’ll have an old address and phone for the kid, landing us right back where we started. Nowhere.” Mann turned away.

“He can’t hide forever,” Harper said. “If he left the state, the shortest way out is north, to New Hampshire. We’ll send out another BOLO.”

“And tell them what? What are they supposed to *be on the look out* for?” Mann asked.

“The killer’s calling card is his choice of victims and location. If he’s moved on, you can bet some other detective unit is scratching their heads or worse, not making a connection between murders.”

A frown rippled across Mann’s brow as he studied the victim’s face. “I say we’re looking at this all wrong. Somewhere there’s a kid trying to make a name for himself. That’s what this is all about.”

“I don’t think so,” Fowler said.

“Sure it is. It’s a territorial thing. No different than a drive-by shooting only this one is up close and personal.”

“We would have heard something by now, someone would have talked. These are anything but random murders.” Harper turned his back to the wind and shifted his weight from one foot to another. “The killer chose his victims – street-smart kids without loyalties. Hundreds of kids to choose from, why these three?”

“It’s gang related. Nothing else ties them together.” Mann pressed his point.

“I don’t buy it. If that’s what the killer wants us to think, he just made his first mistake.”

Mann and Fowler seemed to hang on those words.

“The murders were premeditated – thought out, and that tells me one thing. There was a connection among his victims. Figure that out,” Harper said, “and maybe we’ll find him before he kills again.”

“We’re out of leads, Sam. We have no suspects.”

“Sure we do.”

“Who, damn it? Face it, we’ve got a thumb up our ass on this one.”

Harper studied his partner for a moment. The case had gotten to the entire detective unit. But now wasn’t the time to let tempers blow like pistons.

“We’ll go back and re-examine each of the cases. We’ve missed something. The kids on the streets don’t get tight-jawed for nothing.”

“You think they’re protecting the killer?” Mann asked.

“No, their skin. They’re scared, you can bet one of them knows who did this and why.”

“That puts us back on the serial killer theory.” Mann shook his head. “It doesn’t fit the profile.”

Harper knew the FBI’s description of a serial killer concluded offenders were usually white males between the ages of 18 and 32. He also knew there were as many exceptions to the profile rules as there were offenders. No one, including the FBI, wanted to risk misidentifying a serial killer based on a minor point like not fitting a typical profile.

“The best lead we had was the tattoo artist down by the docks,” Mann said, “and you know where that led us – zilchville.” He paused to raise his hand to his temple. “This reminds me of the Cromwell case.”

Harper shook his head. Cromwell had worked as a cabby for twenty-three years when he lost his job. He systematically killed every person he blamed, including the doorman at the Hyatt Regency for giving his fares to the other cabs. He knew each of his victims well enough to use a different method to kill them according to their fears.

“Cromwell snapped; he lashed out,” Harper said. “Whoever killed these boys was precise and deliberate.”

“I agree,” Fowler said. “No seventeen-year-old I know is sophisticated enough to plan an elaborate scheme like this. Kids act on impulse. They leave their victims where they drop.” He nodded at the corpse. “This isn’t your classic gang killing.” Fowler stooped next to the body and carefully lifted the boy’s arm. “Look at his skin; same rough, pimple-like texture as the others. It’s a normal change of decomposition. It happened in cold water – out there – in the deep and you can’t dump a body in the middle of the bay without a boat. How many boys have access to the type of vessel needed to maneuver these waters?”

Mann looked away and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. “I’ll call the port authorities again. See if anyone reported any unusual activities at the docks since the last murder.”

“I found traces of drug use on the other two kids,” Fowler said. “If I were you, I’d keep looking for a high-end dealer.”

“That’s not all those two had in common. They both had rap sheets; this one probably does too. We need to look at their records again.” Harper methodically examined the victim’s face and hands. “Bloated, fingertips are puckered. Aside from the missing flesh around the face, there’s not much sign of decay.”

“Like I said, twenty-degree water temp acts like a preserving agent. The body fat turns into that soap-like consistency he’s covered in. A shot of saline into those fingertips will pop them right up. If not, we have his teeth imprints.”

“How long do you think he’s been dead?” Harper asked.

“You know the process.”

“Right, Fowler, would you cut me some slack here? Just answer the question.”

“Can’t even come close. You know that. Too many variables.”

“Then damn it, toss me your best guess.”

“Hypothetically, same as the others – weeks. Look at his skin, Harp. He’s not the first floater you’ve looked at. Soft tissue of the nose and ear lobes are gone, adipocere – that soap like substance is over eighty percent of the body. It takes weeks for that to happen.”

Another strong gust of wind cut in from the bay. It threatened to topple the portable spotlights and sent a ripple of snow flurries across the beach.

“What about those?” Harper stooped down to examine the laceration across the top of the victim’s head.

“This kid floated in face down, head hanging; got rammed against the rocks,” Fowler said. “In floaters, the blood flows down to the head. If it wasn’t for the obvious cut across the throat,

I'd say those would be a toss-up between ante- or post-mortem injuries. As it is, I'll wager post-mortem. Want to bet another steak dinner I'm right?"

"I quit betting against you, remember?" Harper tilted his head and continued to study the corpse.

Fowler looked at his watch again and stifled a yawn. "Alright. You guys done here? I have five others to do before I cut him open. Which one of you wants to watch?"

"I'll do it. Call when you're ready." Harper peeled off his gloves and shoved them into his pockets.

A moment later, Fowler and his assistant struggled to carry the body up the snowy embankment to the city van. While the techs took care of the lights, Harper turned his attention to Mann. His partner's hacking cough sounded worse than it did the day before.

"Who found him?"

Mann tried to suppress another cough as he thumbed over his shoulder at the squad car where the dog and his owner were waiting. "Last name, Zirmack, Gene Zirmack. Lives up the road. Retired. Works part-time as a caretaker at St. Paul's Church. Said his dog got loose. He was chasing after him when he found the vic."

"Did he notice anything unusual?"

"Besides the stiff? No. He said if it hadn't been for his dog running off, he wouldn't have been down this far."

"Must be his lucky day."

"Yeah, well, we're taking him in for a statement."

Harper reached for the door handle of his Jeep when the sound of the waves lapping against the rocks below made him shift his attention. The sun wouldn't crest for another half hour. Chandler Bay and the distant horizon were indistinguishable from the black of night.

"You think Fowler's right?" Mann asked.

"About what?"

"That the killer's playing with us. You believe that?"

"These kids weren't killed to impress us. Whoever did this made damned sure the murders couldn't be traced back to him."

"Then why toss the bodies in the bay? He had to know they'd wash back to shore."

"Yeah, he did. The question is, did he do it because he wanted them to be found or is he cocky enough to think we'll never catch him?" Harper asked himself the same question a number of times. He swung open the car door and again looked over his shoulder toward the bay.

"Three bodies in eighteen days. Assuming they all decayed at the same rate, he's killed one kid every week. If he's still at it, we're already too late to prevent ... Jesus, who knows how many more."

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