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# CHAPTER 1



At the time of the murders, nine years ago, I was in FBI training in Quantico, Virginia, where the Bureau, the US Marine Corps, the DEA, and certain very secret facilities share nearly 400 acres of tree-rimmed seclusion off I-95 South, one of the meanest highways on the Eastern Seaboard.

As a new agent in training, I was far too focused on passing nine academic examinations to pay much attention to three killings, no matter how high profile. Not to mention mastering the art of “defensive tactics,” and achieving an eighty-percent shooting record with my weapons. Adding to the challenge was Quantico’s Hogan’s Alley, a faux town inhabited by faux robbers, killers and kidnapers—all of whom had to be outwitted, outgunned, outsmarted, and, finally, cuffed and faux arrested. I had little space in my life for real murders and murderers.

During those training days, my interest was not in violent crime, but in counterintelligence and anti-terrorist work, which I considered to be the profoundly significant areas of investigation on both the domestic and international fronts. That three killings were the subject of considerable buzz on the campus made little impression on this recruit, whose bloodshot eyes were focused on graduation day, getting my credentials, and getting uproariously drunk—this last in secret, of course.

If someone had told me back then that I’d be trying to solve these same three (or could it be one?) ice-cold homicide cases nine years into my tenure with the FBI, I would have wondered if that person had beaten me to the alcohol.

For me, it began on a quiet Saturday morning in my kitchen, where I was deep into gourmet pursuits with my neighbor from across the street, Skyler Robinson. Seventeen-year-old Skyler, closing in on seven feet tall, tips the scale at only 165, despite his being the ultimate eating machine. I am convinced that he is hollow from his throat on down. He was perched on a stool in my kitchen pitting Kalmata olives, because I mistakenly bought the wrong kind.

“Why don’t I just go to the store and buy pitted?” he suggested. “These don’t look pretty after I’ve squeezed their guts out.”

“Sky, they don’t have to look pretty, just taste pretty.”

I was somewhat concerned, because the post-surgical olives going into the bowl were clearly outnumbered by those going into Skyler’s mouth. He might have to run to the market after all.

It was a lovely morning in the nation’s capital, rare because winter so often thaws into a humid summer, bypassing spring in its rush. I had the kitchen windows open, and the season’s perfume wafting in from my tiny garden was blending pleasantly with the heady fragrance of coriander, mustard, and fenugreek seeds just crushed in my Mini-Chop. We were working on one of my specialties, Greek Lamb with Kalmatas, Eggplant, and Raita, which I planned to offer dinner guests tomorrow night along with a screening of *Zorba the Greek*.

I have two addictions my friends find unnatural, given that I have just turned thirty, am a special agent of the FBI, and was Miss Long Beach during an embarrassingly flighty period of my life. I am absolutely obsessed with old movies and I love to spend hours cooking, which explains why I have a television set and combination DVD player taking up a lot of space in my under-sized kitchen. I like to spend my spare time, such as it is for an agent assigned to the Terrorist Screening Center, with people like Julia Child and Clark Gable.

Skyler, who has sophisticated taste buds for a kid, likes to hang out with my obsessions. Not only does he get to sample as we cook, but also I often send him home with a loaf of my homemade Italian bread or one of my killer desserts. I like to have him around because he can reach the overhead light fixtures in my old, high-ceilinged Victorian house, and is remarkably adept at fixing nearly everything that can go wrong around the place. Last week, it was my vacuum cleaner.

"I've decided I want to be an FBI agent when I grow up," Skyler announced.

"Skyler, there is very little up left for you to grow to."

He ignored my humor. "Yesterday in one of my classes we talked about role models." Big sigh. "I think you're it for me."

Flattered, I had to ask, "What about your parents?" He pooh-poo-hed the possibility. His father is a science librarian at the Library of Congress, and his mother is a heating and cooling specialist who also can fix things like broken vacuum cleaners.

"I think it would be fun to do secret stuff like you do."

It doesn't take a crystal ball to see Sky's future. He's the star of his high school basketball team and still a junior. "You'll probably change your mind. By this time next year you'll be choosing from a batch of athletic scholarships. Then, four years later, you'll be getting offers from NBA teams, and then..."

"Money's not everything."

"Yeah, but you said you want to have fun. Think of how much fun it will be to check your bank balance when you're an NBA star." I didn't add how much fun it would be for him to have a flock of women mooning over him. This last is certain to befall him, whether he's in the Bureau or scoring points for the New York Knicks. Skyler already is exceptionally handsome, even if he is skinny. No acne, nicely arranged features, toothpaste-ad teeth, sandy hair, and Caribbean-blue eyes. Actually, I think he's too tall for the Bureau, but I haven't shared that thought with him.

The phone rang, and I said, "Skyler, get that."

"Hmm. Add more cumin." He'd left the olives for the Raita.

"Skyler," I persisted. "Get the phone!"

He sauntered over, picked up the phone and announced, "Gone. And no number in the ID window."

This meant one of two things. Either someone dialed by mistake and disconnected immediately, or my boss was calling from the Bureau. Calls originating from the Bureau do not register on telephone ID systems, and Logan, my boss, often dials and hangs up because he's thought of something—or someone—more important at the moment.

Logan Angus MacLean is a surly, mean-tempered, ill-mannered Scot of advanced years—nearly fifty. No one complains about his

disposition because he is who he is, a man whose brilliance and success in dealing with hostage crises and terrorist activity abroad is legendary. Here at home, he's been called a "Holmesian detective," a forensic expert with phenomenal skills in behavioral science. He could profile a dead rat and tell what was in the mind of the rodent as it breathed its last, and deduce the dinner plans of the cat who did him in. More important, of course, is that he can tell you what's playing in the psyche of a suicide bomber romancing death, or in the muddled head of a fanatic who has waylaid a school bus filled with terrified children.

Despite his lack of certain social skills, Logan attracts women like a picnic woos ants. Barbara Miller, who works down the hall and is sixty-four, says, "He's so Bogart! Just watching the way he walks makes me damp in certain sensitive places." If she had to work for Logan, she'd dry out in a hurry. Besides, Logan is a lot taller than Bogart, and I can't see any similarity in their ways of walking.

Rumor, among the women, is that Logan has a single physical flaw—or, more precisely, a small collection of flaws, the result of a gun fight in Pakistan's Balochistan Province during his search for Mir Aimal Kasi, the terrorist who shot up the CIA a few years back. But no one I know has actually seen the rumored evidence of his wounds.

The telephone rang again, and I prepared for the worst, which was what I got.

"Get down here, Sachet. We have a problem."

"On Saturday?" I whined.

"Sachet, if this is Saturday, and if I'm telling you to hustle your backside down here, then the answer is yes. On Saturday. *Capice?*"

I capished. "So, what's the big deal?"

"Three dead men, one annoyingly alive woman, and they're all ours."

"I need to put my lamb away, but that'll only take a few minutes," I told him.

"A lamb? On Capitol Hill?" He banged up the telephone. Courtesy is not Logan's long suit.

"See, Skyler? Life as a Bureau agent is not always fun. My boss wants me in the office five minutes ago. On Saturday."

Skyer pondered. "When you get there, tell him to fuck off."

“Skyler!”

“Come on, everybody talks like that.”

“Not you, Buster. Not in my kitchen.”

Within the hour, I was rethinking Skyler’s advice.

I left my silver Cruiser tucked away in the garage and walked three blocks to the South Capitol Metro Station. Normally, taking the Metro saves time, and I love walking through my Capitol Hill neighborhood, with its tree-shaded streets and meticulously restored two-story frame houses. It’s all so wonderfully Hometown America, in spite of being only spitting distance from the Capitol.

Living in this unpretentious, outrageously expensive neighborhood on my agent’s salary would have been impossible, except for my mother’s having discovered the house and deciding that a gift of half the purchase price was essential to her maternal happiness. I didn’t argue for obvious reasons—two of the most obvious were a short, private driveway and an actual garage, as rare in this town as bi-partisan support for a Supreme Court nominee.

I felt a growing sense of unease as I rode the seemingly mile-long escalator down to my platform, not only because of realizing that I might have to wait for a train run less frequently on Saturdays, but also because Logan’s urgent summons didn’t make sense. Unless the dead men were in that unfortunate condition as a result of terrorist activity. I pictured the woman who, annoyingly, was not yet dead, as being a serious threat to national security.

“Well,” Logan welcomed me, “here’s Mary at last. And is her little lamb taken care of?”

Very funny. “Sorry, Logan, my private jet was at the cleaners or I’d have been here sooner.” Twenty minutes, well, maybe twenty-five, since he called me. I fell into a chair and waited. He glared.

“What’s up with the dead, the living, and my ruined Saturday morning?” I finally asked.

“Adriana Bell. Ever hear of her?”

I read every page of every issue of *Vanity Fair*. Bell is the hot, young writer who can be positively and deliciously brutal, her unfortunate targets the current and former High and Mighty. Thus far, nobody has sued, but I’d be a bit nervous about the crusading Bell if I were Mr. Newhouse and the rest of the folks at Conde Nast.

“*Vanity Fair’s* Bell? How is she our problem?”

Logan was sitting at his desk, chair pushed back, long legs propped up in front of him. “Miz Bell,” Logan began, “has decided that the Bureau bungled three murder cases nine years ago. She’s working on a ten-year anniversary story for summer—not this summer, but next—a piece she’ll no doubt title something titillating like, ‘The FBI’s Summer of Stupidity.’ We could end up with her being around for months. The sweet thing’s been granted access to everything unclassified related to the cases.”

I chewed on that for a minute, then admitted to Logan that I read Bell before anyone else because she’s so exquisitely vituperative. His reaction was a glare capable of taking the paint off my Cruiser. “So,” I hastened to ask, “what are the cases we supposedly bungled? And how?”

Slap. Logan’s palm hit the arm of his chair, and I jumped. “Ha! Nothing was bungled! This was before your time with the Bureau, but you must have been aware of at least two of them—the ever-so-popular, hymn-singing TV evangelist Bobby Ray Taft, and the Hollywood big-time movie guy, mega-millionaire Bertram Godfrey.”

He was right. To a point. “Actually, Logan, I was at Quantico at the time. I remember a little, very little, about the preacher and the movie guy. There was a lot of buzz about the cases, but I wasn’t paying much attention. What about the third?”

“Number three, actually number two in the sequence of events, was a federal judge in South Dakota. Let me summarize for you.” He ticked them off on his fingers. “One—on a Friday in June nine years ago, Bertram Godfrey, a notoriously rich, successful, and nasty Hollywood movie mogul, is blown to pieces on board his yacht off the California coast. No accident, because a college kid accidentally overheard a call to the boat telling Godfrey he would soon be confetti. Two—exactly three weeks later, to the day, Isadore Strange, a controversial Federal judge in Rapid City, is the target of a poison dart delivered in the midst of a crowd of people celebrating some damned annual law event. Nobody sees anything. Still with me?”

“With you. Can it get any better than a poison dart? A hired vampire?”

“Not nearly so inventive. Another three weeks, again to the day, and our beloved television evangelist is very neatly shot in a Georgetown restaurant parking lot, lured to the scene by the promise of

a large contribution. Nobody sees anything. One bullet recovered. Doesn't match anything."

"And the problem with Bell is..."

"She thinks they're connected. Young Miss Bell has decided, just from reading material in the public domain, that three apparent strangers were victims of a single plot, an evil conspiracy. RICO, no less. And, of course, one of the victims is a federal judge. So, the issue of jurisdiction, of our handling this mess, is conveniently solved. Further," he said, "if we didn't figure it all out nine years ago, we're to blame in all three cases."

Rats. There is nothing more troublesome in our line of work than wild-eyed conspiracy theorists.

I asked the obvious. "But why is this our problem? It belongs to Homicide. No, Cold Case. Whoever gets it should be trotting around to ViCAP for help." ViCAP, the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, is a part of our National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. The program's database is where investigators go to search for connections and comparisons. Unsolved violent crimes end up with the Center. They should not end up with Logan and me, who are "dedicated to fighting terrorism at home and abroad," which is how our public information office likes to phrase it. I pushed for an answer to my question of jurisdiction.

"Why aren't these other people gathering on some Saturday morning to talk about Miss Bell instead of us? And how come she's getting this VIP treatment?" Logan spun around in his chair and swung his feet off the desk.

"Two reasons, Sachet. One, it's our problem because the deputy director has given it to us as a special temporary assignment. Bell asked for me, for whatever reason. Two, Miss *Vanity Fair* is the niece of the esteemed chairman of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, which has the say on which intelligence agencies get what money." He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "The veteran, ever-powerful Congressman Conrad Hudson has kindly asked the director to cooperate with this spiteful child."

"But wait," I said. "Our funding is authorized by the House Intelligence Committee. Is Hudson..."

"There are authorizers and deciders. These beloved sub-committee members are deciders, and Hudson is chief among them."

I wondered about the spiteful child's request for Logan. Most likely, it was because she learned about him from Uncle Conrad, who certainly would be aware of the man and his exploits. Logan would be perfect—an FBI hero she could fry in sizzling syntax on glossy pages.

“So, she's asked for—and apparently is getting—you,” I said to the boss. “Is this going to be a one-man operation? Like James Bond or Charley Chan or...”

“Try Miss Marple.”

“But she wanted you, and you're no...”

“By default, she gets you. Oh, not to worry,” he assured, “I will supervise you every step of the way. That is, if this circus actually comes to our town, which I strongly hope it will not.” Another spin of the chair. “I gather, from what Deputy Davis said, that Hudson believes his niece simply wants to do a story on the inner -workings of the Bureau.”

“Simple, then. Davis goes to the congressman and says...”

“Nobody's going to the congressman. This has got to be defused from the inside.”

“What's the big rush? Why couldn't we have talked about this on Monday morning like normal working people?”

Logan got out of his chair, walked around his desk, hitched a sexy hip on the front of it, and favored me with hooded eyes. “Because, Agent Sachet, the problem in question will be in my office at ten o'clock that very same morning, although I hadn't expected her for another two weeks. We have to strategize at eight on Monday. One of us must carefully review at least one of the cases before then.” He gestured at a stack of files on his desk. “*Capice?*”

“But I have something planned for tomorrow night, and I...”

“Don't say it. Think carefully before you speak.” Logan patted the top file. “Here's your homework. Choose one case to review in detail before Monday, but take them all, in the event you have trouble sleeping.”

“Insomnia only between now and Monday, or for the rest of my life?”

Logan's instructions continued. “Be prepared to argue that our original investigation proved beyond the proverbial shadow of a doubt that the murder of the whomever you choose was not

associated with the murder of any other whomevers anywhere in the effing world—particularly and including the other two in question. We've got to nix this assignment. We must discourage and enlighten this woman; otherwise, I've got to convince the powers that float above that this is a waste of time. No conspiracy. Do we understand each other?"

"*Capito*," I said smugly.

"Excellent. On your way, then."

I looked again at the stack resting on Logan's desk. "I gather none of this is in our computerized data base. I've got to lug all this stuff around?"

"Makes sense. If it isn't, then you do."

I bit my tongue. For just a moment I thought of taking Skyler's advice, but figured that if I used the f-word on Logan, I'd be an ex-agent in a hurry.

"One last question, if I may. Why me, Logan? Unlike you, I haven't had any real hands-on experience in violent crime, unless you count my time in Hogan's Alley. Isn't there someone else you'd like to have deal with this dingaling?"

His grin was wicked. "Let's be honest here. You're the same age. You have certain attributes others on my team do not have." Was he looking at my bust? "You're perfect for this assignment. Take the stuff home with you. Nothing's here that can't leave the building."

"Goody! Bell and I can get together after school and drink beer and talk about boys." I headed for the door.

"Wait, Sachet," he called. "You're forgetting your files. Oh," he tossed a videotape on top of the stack, "you'll want to see this."

I turned and grabbed the material from his desk. "I'm taking a cab," I huffed, "you'll find the tab on my expense account. This stuff is heavy."

"No need," he offered, "I'll drop you off. I'm on my way to Annapolis for the weekend."

Logan keeps his sailboat at an Annapolis marina. If looks could kill, my boss would be lying on the floor, face up, unseeing eyes staring at the ceiling.