

Chapter 1

“Look, anyone would get that she died violently. I mean just *look* at her.”

Crater paused in his cold assessment, his years of experience with crime scenes telling him to consider all the less obvious options first before running with any theory about the cause, or the perpetrator. Once you committed, a kind of brain paralysis would inevitably impede any further ability to be objective. But he quickly discarded them, a smug satisfaction washing over his thin hollowed-out face (the reason for his odd nick-name) before adding with a sudden irritation that colored his tone.

“But *still*—something is just not totally right.”

He and Mort, his longtime associate, strolled around the horrific scene, their casualness at odds with the bloody gore, all purposely staged and displayed before them. They carefully studied the bruised and battered victim, analyzing, and making mental notes about each detail, however innocuous.

Watching them work the scene in a practiced and altogether detached manner, a spectator might wonder how two so different looking characters had ever started working together in the first place. Crater’s gait might appear lumbering at first glance, but his tall, lanky and be-speckled form, in stark contrast to that first impression, gave him an ‘*Ichabod Crane*’ look about him. A constant tension seemed to grip his slightly hunched shoulders, as if a small child perched there, holding sway over his every movement.

In contrast, Mort’s aggressively robust figure was accentuated further by his shortness, barely reaching the five foot height mark at the doctor’s office, his last visit for a bout of meningitis at age seventeen. Most observers were distracted from his ‘bowling ball’ appearance (a common insult among many that he endured growing up) by his forever flushed jowls which quivered slightly when he talked, and vibrated like cherry colored Jell-O whenever he laughed. And that was often and without reservation. The uncomfortable childhood memories were still raw though, now ten years later and lying just below the surface, his boisterous laugh a kind of shield and barrier against the still simmering hurt.

But this particular moment was no time for mirth and joviality. Mort listened quietly while his partner listed the highlights garnered from a studied analysis of the murder scene.

“Slashes to the throat, three—and deep ones too. They would have to be the fatal *blows*, so to speak,” said Crater. Mort nodded in agreement with that statement. Crater pressed ahead. “Now the rug-rash on her upper arms and elbows would suggest she struggled on the bedroom carpet or was dragged across it, maybe both.” Mort nodded again and chimed in.

“And her outfit, suitable for an office setting, indicates she likely just got off work. But her plans to change into the sweats, laid out there on the bedside, were apparently delayed or interrupted.” Crater nodded back his agreement this time.

They paused near the victim’s shoe-less feet, careful not to disturb the thick blood pool under her upper thighs and bunched-up short skirt. But her thigh-length hosiery was rolled carefully, intentionally, down to each ankle; and it was pristine, bloodless.

“And see how the carotid artery blood flowed down the front of her blouse,” said Crater, holding himself in a thoughtful pose, his chin resting on one hand, his other folded across his middle-aged paunch, an index finger casually pointing towards the subject of their intense scrutiny, “then on to her skirt *and* out across her exposed legs.” He paused, as if reconsidering an

already formulated conclusion waiting anxiously to be released from his lips, then committed to it.

“It suggests, that maybe she was starting to remove the hosiery *before* the attack,” he said. “Otherwise both her legs *and* hosiery would be a bloody mess.” Crater put both hands on his hips and stiffened into a stage speaker’s stance; the motion a sign he’d reached another important decision. “So—one might assume she felt comfortable with him, her guest, maybe even intended to get romantic. What do you think?” He looked over at Mort with a slightly condescending glance, one that invited his opinion but also warned *it should be supportive of mine*.

Mort, clever in some things though not in many, knew how to slide his own view into the mix while avoiding direct confrontation. Even though Crater had the gift, and the vision, when it came to analyzing and dissecting these aftermaths, it was not uncommon for Mort’s insights to make Crater pause in reflection. He made a little “mm” sound and then nodded, finally looking up past the sitting victim, her motionless form snugly ensconced against the bed and night stand, and out towards the open balcony door.

“Yeah, another subtle clue, the two wine glasses just there on the balcony table would suggest she spent some quiet time first, with him—or *her*.”

He smiled at his *misdirecting* response, knowing Crater had most likely ignored the possibility of a ‘lesbo’ encounter as he often, and quite crudely, described *that* kind of relationship. Neither of them understood the biological, or emotional underpinnings to the gal-on-gal thing; it just seemed to gnaw at Crater’s sense of rightness, warped as it was. Mort rushed forward with the rest of his comment, no pause for a breath, intending to quash any resulting retort from Crater. It worked, Crater only managing a quickly muttered, one word curse.

“But then, if you look close,” said Mort, his ruddy cheeks jostled about as he looked back and forth from the victim’s lips—her ruby red lipstick unceremoniously smeared across both cheeks—and the outside table, “there *is* only one glass with a red lipstick smudge, the one partially filled with wine. So one *could* assume the guest, and murderer,” smiling as he twisted back to Crater’s usual suspect, “*was* a guy.” But Crater’s focus was already beyond Mort’s unintended detour around the main purpose, determining the ‘*something*,’ that was ‘*just not totally right*.’ Mort sensed now that Crater had found it.

“Ah yes,” said Crater. “I see it now,” his eyes wide, excitement from the sudden realization causing his hunched upper torso to rise up, almost looking normal but only briefly, quickly returning to the interminable stoop. “The business card clasped in her bloody hand is *not* believable. It’s *too* clean, undamaged. I mean, assuming *he*,” (his emphasis on gender was not accidental) “gave it to her at some point in their initial introductions, how could it stay so pristine during the struggle? And then, how would she manage to hold onto it while she bled to death. Not only that, the card in her hand is in full view, as if staged for anyone not blind to see it. And why would he leave it there in plain sight, only to be used as evidence anyway?”

“Maybe he planted it there on purpose,” said Mort. “Yah know, stuck it there after the deed was done.”

“Mm,” said Crater, considering briefly that scenario, then shaking his head. “Too amateurish for this killer. And he certainly wouldn’t leave his own card; that would be insane. And if it was meant to implicate someone else for the crime, the fact that it looks so out of place, planted as you say, is reason enough for any investigator to be suspicious about it. That’s *why*, it doesn’t look right.”

Mort nodded, seeing the logic in Crater’s reasoning, and offering up a partial solution. “So,” he said, the idea still forming in his own mind, “if he *had* given his card to her, maybe he always

intended to get it back before leaving, but lost track of where she had put it during their brief interaction.” Crater pursed his lips, his eyes squinting as he absorbed Mort’s half-baked hypothesis but seeing quickly the perfect resolution buried within.

“Yes, yes,” he said, excited again, “he left without it, not knowing it was buried in her skirt pocket. And just as she was losing consciousness, she managed to reach in with her bloodied hand and grab it, but was only able to pull it partially free, most of her hand and the card still hidden—before she expired.”

“Brilliant!” said Mort, voicing his admiration for Crater’s skill at scene setting. Crater nodded with satisfaction, acknowledging Mort’s praise but ready to hand over the last and final steps.

“Then make it so,” said Crater, and sighed, a subtle clue to Mort that the close of a long day of work and preparation was near. The reward for their efforts was moments away, the scene requiring only a slight modification to get it ‘*totally right.*’

Mort leaned over and pulled the business card free from the victim’s hand. He rumbled it, roughly, between his thumb and index finger, adding a disheveled appearance to it, something that might be caused by the life-and-death struggle she had suffered.

Reaching behind, he pulled a plastic bottle from his back pocket, turning and pointing the spout down to the card and squeezing lightly. Thick blood-red droplets of goo oozed out. He spread the goo out along the edges of the card and slid it back between the victim’s thumb and index finger but left the top half visible. Careful to stay clear of the blood pool under her legs, he adjusted her hand, sliding it into the skirt pocket, then raised her finger tips up so the card was not completely hidden below the pocket’s edge, making sure the two lines of text on it were still visible. He stood back, studying his handiwork. Mort sighed, an unconscious empathetic response to Crater’s earlier expression of relief. Turning to Crater, they smiled in unison, both satisfied.

It was only then that they became aware of the world beyond the staged murder scene, the all-consuming spell of it finally broken. The array of spot-lights illuminating the large 19th century factory work space had become the dominant glare as the darkening sky that rimmed the top of the one long wall of two-story windows signaled the coming dusk.

Crater glanced absentmindedly at the apartment and office buildings across the street, an historic four-story hotel at one end, noting the few street lights that had blinked on, their mercury-vapor lamps glowing faintly and casting an eerie yellow glow on the few leaves that still clung to the maple and elm trees. Movement high up on the top floor of the hotel, along a thin gap between closed curtains at the last, and corner window, caught his eye.

“Our neighbor is watching again,” said Crater, causally, strolling closer to the windows with his hands clasped behind.

He stood there, scanning the wide street vista; left, then right, as if preparing to speak to a crowded theater. He remained silent instead, his ears alert for the sounds of Mort’s activities, awaiting his final exclamation.

Mort barely paused at hearing Crater’s observation, stepping back from the scene with only a sideways nod toward the outside world, his gaze focused ahead, undeterred.

“Our fan? I hope they got their money’s worth today,” said Mort.

He turned and walked around behind a three-legged tripod positioned forlornly a few feet away and stooped down to look through the viewfinder of the camera mounted on top. Crater glanced back over one hunched shoulder, patiently waiting for Mort’s studied analysis of what the camera saw, confident in *his* skill to get the *million-dollar* magazine cover shot.

“Okay Melissa,” said Mort, his focus held rigidly on the scene displayed in the viewfinder, “only a few seconds more. You’re a real trooper for hanging in there all day.”

The murder victim’s lips pursed into a kind of smiling grimace, the movement nearly imperceptibly, then returned back to their former ‘dead’ appearance. “Now loosen your grip slightly on the business card,” said Mort, “so it looks more relaxed and not frozen, as if your muscles totally relaxed *just* at the moment of death.” The right hand of the bloodied victim moved, the fingers slowly un-flexing from the *rigor-mortised* looking clench that had bothered Mort. “Good, just a little more. Okay. Now drop your thumb a quarter inch. Good, right there!”

He stood up and walked up to the brightly illuminated, staged scene, reaching out with the light meter one last time. Satisfied, he back-stepped over to the side of the old Hasselblad 503ELX studio camera, reaching down for the remote shutter device hanging from the camera body and dangling between the tripod legs. Slowly, he raised the connecting chord up, careful not to disturb the camera in the slightest and rested his thumb on the shutter release button.

“Ready everyone? Hold position Melissa, here we go.”

Mort pushed and held the button. The camera’s mechanism whined quietly as a series of faint clicks and clacks sounded out, echoing in and around the constructed mock-up of the apartment bedroom and outdoor balcony space, the seemingly lifeless and bloodied victim positioned carefully within, then bouncing off the exposed metal roof trusses high up in the studio’s voluminous ceiling space. His thumb raised up off the button. Utter silence descended on the scene, then broke, Mort’s voice shattering it like a pane of glass crashing to the floor.

“Perfect, that’s a wrap!”

Crater smiled at Mort’s exclamation, the one he’d been anxiously waiting for the last full month. Immediately, a rolling laugh welled up from deep in Mort’s belly. It was thunderous, uncontrollable, releasing the day’s tension and forced seriousness that was in stark contrast to his otherwise boisterous personality.

“Mmha. Mmhaha, ahaha, *ahahaha!*”