

VERITAS



CHAPTER 1

“Had I known that the call would come so early, I probably wouldn’t have stayed so late trying to hydrate with vodka”

The secretary at the main desk has a familiar smile, one I remembered from years earlier. Good to see not much has changed on the 26th floor.

“Neil Baggio, I had a feeling we’d be seeing you back here.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “I was afraid I’d never see your face again. How are you, Jen?”

“I’m doing pretty well. They’re paying me well now, plus the benefits are alright for a change. How are *you*? I’ve read quite a few stories in the paper that had your company’s name in them. It sounds like running your own shop is keeping you busy these days.”

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“Yeah, but I mostly just sit back and enjoy the show now that I have a lot of talented people working for me. I have a few ex-military guys, and a couple of veteran investigators, including an ex-cop. Business is booming, as they say.”

“All those cheating, rich husbands must be keeping your lights on.”

“And for that, Jen, I thank them. Because of those cheating, rich husbands, I can finally enjoy a decent life.”

“Well, let me tell Agent Garcia that you’re here. You know the way—it’s your old office, after all. Though from the looks of it, she’s done a far better job with it than you did.”

“That’s not saying much, considering I never did a thing to it while I was here.”

“That’s true. As I recall, you seemed to prefer unfinished drywall and folding chairs to a nice paint job and a leather sofa. Maybe you never planned to stick around in the first place.”

“You got me there. It was good seeing you again, Jen.”

“You too, Neil. Don’t be a stranger.”

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After all these years, the offices of the FBI's Detroit branch still had the feel of death in them. The hallways were filled with mildew as much as ever, and the only noticeable change since I last worked out of the McNamara Federal Building was the new carpet. When I was here, it was just linoleum flooring and white walls. I think the building was designed that way on purpose, to ensure that the agents spent most of their time out in the field, instead of trapped in this soul-sucking over lit fluorescent box.

Could it be any brighter in here, I mean fuck! I swear I'm seeing spots right now and my head is killing me. Of course, that could also be due to the hangover I brought in with me this morning. One can be careless and stay out a little too late when you own your own business. Having a flex-time schedule is just one of the perks of running a private investigation and security firm; unfortunately none of these perks were helping my head get out of the hangover's vice-grip.

The fact that I'm not bringing my A or B game was cemented by the incessant ringing of my home and cell phones this morning. No one likes to be rudely woken from a deep sleep, let alone at 5am and by the FBI, no less. I already knew the Bureau would want to bring me back in for this case, should it ever be reopened. Had I known that the call would come so soon after the latest

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development on Trumbull Ave., and so early in the morning, I probably wouldn't have stayed out so late trying to hydrate with vodka. The biggest question that was running through my head was, how much of my help did they actually need? The first step towards solving that mystery was meandering down the hallway to Agent Garcia's office, trying not to look like a lopsided cartoon character.

My first impression of my old office was utter amazement. To say that Garcia made a few adjustments would be an understatement. It looked as if she had changed everything, including the favorite wall I used to punch, which doubled as a hiding spot for paperwork I had yet to turn in. I know, I know—look at the meathead G-man who can only express emotions with his fists. But at the end of a crazy work week or month, paperwork was the absolute lowest priority for us agents. Fortunately, Jen saved my ass on more than one occasion, taking dictation as I ranted around the room, and making sure those papers were filed on time, one way or another.

“Come on in and take a seat, Mr. Baggio, I'll just be a moment,” Agent Garcia directed me while standing off to one side of her desk, ear pressed to her phone.

At first glance, everything about Agent Maria Garcia's appearance was planned and executed to the last detail.

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From the crisp tailored suit, she was wearing, to her catalog-worthy hair and makeup, to the way she straightened her posture as I entered, she had an air of someone who was hyper-aware of the way they are perceived. It's a double standard, but government jobs such as these do tend to carry more scrutiny and hurdles for women than they do for men. After all, a male agent could drag into the office rumpled and unshaven and nobody would say a word about it, especially if he had been up all night working a case. For female agents, their image and the Bureau's image were intertwined.

I sat down in the leather chair in front of Garcia's desk and couldn't help but admire what she had done with the place. To me, having an office was an obligation I never asked for, and I treated it as nothing more than a place to store boxes of case files. For Garcia, the office was another carefully curated extension of her persona. For starters, she had a handcrafted oak desk made by the Amish. You may ask yourself how I know that, and I'll tell you: It's because there's a small tab on the desk that says so. But amidst all of that amazing woodwork, Garcia had a simple metal folding chair behind her desk. As expected, all of her degrees hung on the wall, alongside photos of herself with several political figures and local celebrities. My favorite was her picture with Thomas "The Hitman" Hearns, the legendary boxer and local hero who still shows up at the Kronk Gym on

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Mettetal St. from time to time to growl encouragement at young fighters.

The way Agent Garcia put such an emphasis on detail in her office got under my skin. It just seemed too nice of a workspace for a field agent; it looked more like a politician's office. Then again, for all I knew she might have aspirations in that direction. The persona that she broadcast screamed political figure. Even her oak squirrel paperweight fit perfectly with everything else in the office. Judging by the wood grain and the color of the stain, it was likely handcrafted by the same Amish family who did the desk.

"Sorry about that, I had some loose ends to tie up," Garcia said. "It seems as though some of my superiors aren't too happy that you're here right now."

"Let me guess. Bob Hendrickson?"

"Very perceptive, Mr. Baggio. Is there anything else you picked up eavesdropping while I was on the phone?"

"Honestly speaking?"

"I'd have it no other way."

"You appear to have a problem with your image; you worry about it too much. That's probably why you're so

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good for the FBI. I was never image-conscious, myself. I just wanted to work the case, and I couldn't care less which politicians I pissed off in the process."

"Oh, is that a fact? It looks like you've deduced quite a bit from just one phone call."

"You also keep staring at your chair."

"My chair?"

"It doesn't exactly fit your aesthetic, does it? My guess is that you were supposed to have something much fancier delivered this week, but it didn't come in, so now you're stuck sitting on an unstylish leftover from the supply closet. If you're going to throw around words like 'deduced,' then I'll be happy to show off my Sherlock Holmes impression. It's always a crowd-pleaser."

I knew I was pushing it, but I thought a little charm might break the tension. I have a tendency to try and disarm any situation I'm in, from simple conversations to criminals pulling a firearm on me.

"Nice job, I'll give you points for the chair. An old colleague and mentor of mine ordered me a new one as a gift; I got my first big collar last month."

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“Congratulations. Gracin?”

“Gracin what?”

“He’s still giving out those Eames Executive chairs. Let me guess, merlot-colored leather with extra lumbar support.”

Agent Garcia narrowed her eyes at me suspiciously—a look I’ve seen on the faces of more women than I care to admit. “How did you know?” she said.

“Because I can see the order form on your desk. Sorry, Agent Garcia, I was just having a little fun at your expense. I’ll try to keep the *deducing* to a minimum.”

“Old habits die hard, I suppose. Now let’s move on to the business at hand. Have you been following the news?”

“Close enough to know why I’m here.”

“Well let’s get straight to the point then, shall we?”

I’d been following this thing for months, but I wasn’t going to tip my hand quite yet, because the less they thought I knew, the more freedom I’d have in gaining information. Plus, if Garcia found out how much I actually knew about the case, she’d be very curious how I came

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across the information, and I wasn't willing to tell her, at least not at this point. It was much better to keep her and Hendrickson in the dark.

The first time I worked the Cappelano case, it took a long time to get a handle on him because of his obsessive nature and his highly personal approach to murder. For instance, he would burn an insignia into the skin of each victim using a branding instrument, and each branding stamp was individually made. Cappelano enjoyed the intimate process of customizing each victim's stamp, and the thrill of knowing that there was someone out there blissfully going about their day, completely unaware of the horror that was in store for them. He was and is a sick and twisted individual. What kind of man can kill innocent people and, in his head, think he's doing the world a favor? It wasn't as if he thought any of the people he killed deserved to die. Instead, he believed that his first-hand "research" on the psychology of a murderer would bring humanity to some greater understanding.

"Well you called me here, so why don't you start?" I said, getting comfortable in my leather chair.

"First things first, we believe 'Veritas' has come out of hiding to continue what he started back in '98."

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“That’s a good guess. Do you have any evidence to indicate that this is in fact Cappelano, and not a copycat killer?”

“We are almost certain this is ‘Veritas,’ based on....”

“Please call him by his name,” I interrupted. “I can’t stand that tag. His name is Frank Cappelano.”

“Apologies, I didn’t mean to strike a nerve. Anyway, we know he wants you on this case, and we think he’ll keep killing until we bring you back in.”

“Fuck, Cappelano always did have a hard-on for me.”

You never know what will inspire a serial killer’s lust, but sexual gratification is almost always a driver of the violent act. The physical appearance of the victims could trigger a killer’s dark urges, or it could even be the personal attention they feel from being hunted by individual detectives. Their motivations can even evolve from one trigger to another over time, which is why I often think of the serial killers I chase as pansexual; there are few defined boundaries to their lust.

“Mr. Baggio watch your language. The reason you’re here is that we want you back, and we’re willing to pay you substantially in return.”

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“Substantially, please—the Bureau doesn’t pay substantially for anything. But I hear you. I guess I only have one question before I take some time to think this over.”

“I know what you’re thinking. And yes, Bob Hendrickson is still running things around here. No, he’s not entirely happy about this move to bring you in, but then again, this decision goes over his head as well.”

She had no clue what I was thinking; she wasn’t there when the case fell apart, and she had no idea what it did to me. Hendrickson was one of the reasons I’d been gone for so long. I was doing my job with handcuffs on, because Bob Hendrickson didn’t want any bad publicity. When it comes to a murder case, all I care about is getting the offender off the streets. If I wanted to get into politics, I would have chosen a different path than working serial homicide cases for the FBI. I’ve always felt that one of the reasons our justice system has become so crippled is because of its ties to the political system. It’s hard to shoot straight when you’re worried about the votes those in office will gain or lose because of it. Instead of making the right choice, we end up choosing the safest path so that no one important looks bad. I wanted no part of working within that system anymore.

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“Really, why don’t you enlighten me on what I’m thinking?” I asked her.

“I know how you feel you were treated. It was just standard Bureau practice, you know that.”

Bureaucratic practice would be more accurate. Pulling me off of the Cappelano investigation was nothing but a political move on Hendrickson’s part. He was more concerned with the political and public fallout of my plan—and sure, maybe the financial cost of it too—than he was about catching a crazed killer. But hey, that’s why I don’t have a position in leadership; I don’t think of the cost, I get too tied up in the catch. It just seems to me that the citizens who Hendrickson claimed to serve would be more interested in us catching the guy than in how we did it, as long as there was no collateral damage.

“The ball is in your court, Mr. Baggio.”

“Well, I need a day to think about it. How about lunch tomorrow? I have to set some things in motion at work if I’m going to do this.”

“That’s fine. Say, noon tomorrow at Mama Rosa’s? Do you remember the place?”

“Yeah, I know the place. Sounds good, I’ll see you then.”

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Of course, I didn't *actually* need time to think about it, but I had to do some posturing because I didn't want them to understand how eager I was to get back on this case. If they knew how fixated I'd been on chasing Cappelano again—how I fantasized about putting the cuffs on him once and for all—they would use my eagerness as a form of control. Acting like I could take it or leave it gave me bargaining power. If I played my cards right, I could get the Bureau to give me near-complete control over the case instead of having to play a supporting role, taking orders like a rookie on a ride-along.

I got a sudden vision of Bob Hendrickson fuming in his office, not just because the Bureau wanted to bring me back in for this case, but because he's always known that he wouldn't have a shot at catching Cappelano without my help. It's bad enough to let a killer get away once in the public eye; it would be an unmitigated disaster if it happened twice. So, for once, Hendrickson's political reputation and the high profile around this case was going to help me instead of hindering me. It's sad that the two of us couldn't set aside our personal problems and work together on this, but then again, we are both stubborn-ass men. I know it's not a good excuse, but the simplest explanation is usually the best one.

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“Well then, I guess we’re done here, we can cover the Trumbull case tomorrow. I’m still waiting on some more details from the assigned case agents.” Agent Garcia said, flashing me a professionally rehearsed smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Mr. Baggio?”

“I’ll be there with bells on. And it’s Neil.”

I know you’re asking yourself about the murder on Trumbull, that brought me here. When dealing with Cappelano the Bureau, like myself, thinks this case is merely another way of Cappelano working his way back into the fold. They are going to let the team already assigned to work on it, if they think they find anything new, they’ll let me know, but I’m assuming at this point is more about the next case. With Cappelano, there’s always a next case.

Walking out of Agent Garcia’s office, I knew that I had accomplished what I had set out to. Garcia and I established some level of understanding, I got my foot back in, and they got a carrot to dangle in front of me. Before I could even exit the building, my cell started to ring. It was Ken calling from the warehouse.

“Neil, how’d the meeting go?”

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“Ken, you called quick, I could still be in Garcia’s office right now.”

“Come on, I’ve known you for too long, bud. We both know you keep it short, especially when you’re trying to get your way.”

“I guess you do know me pretty well since that’s exactly what I did; but I was in there for twenty minutes not fifteen.”

“Why do you think I waited to call you? I figured they might have tried the old stall technique. You know the one where they have the secretary call them as you walk into the office and they act like they are on an important phone call to make you wait.”

“Nice job Ken; that was exactly how she played it. How is everything out at the warehouse tonight; anything major going on?”

“Nothing too special; are you coming in so we can schedule things up for this case?”

“I’m heading out there right now and since I’m already downtown it shouldn’t take me too long to get there. I’ll see you in about fifteen minutes.”

“Alright sounds good Neil see you in a bit.”

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It was around May 2001 when I met Ken and I was frequenting a small bar not too far from my house called Kelly's. I had been there a lot, not drinking, I just liked the atmosphere, and it gave me a chance to get some work done outside of the house. I used to bring in my laptop and some old unsolved case files and just work. That's when I met Ken; he used to own the bar as a retired Army ranger of twenty-three years. We got to talking and he told me he wanted out of the bar business and would love to help anyway he could with some of the cases I was working on. Eventually we worked together a few times; the first time he helped me out was on a case where a company was concerned that one of their warehouse managers was stealing.

Ken and I rotated an eight-hour shift for six days to stakeout the warehouse. We got to know each other and eventually worked together a lot more. Ultimately the business kept coming in, and we had to hire more help to keep up with demand. He called some of his old military buddies, who in turn brought in some ex cops, eventually CB Inc. was born. The "C" stands for Chamberlain, Ken's full name is Kenneth Maurice Chamberlain, and never call him Mo or Maurice, he'll hurt you, he hates that name. The "B" stands for Baggio, as in Neil Baggio. Coincidentally, the company that hired me for that warehouse job ended up closing that warehouse and moving out of state allowing Ken and I to purchase it.

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It wasn't until a year or so had passed that we had enough money and clout to turn a two-man operation into half a dozen men. For a while there we were operating out of Ken's bar because we had no other place to set up shop. It wasn't until the summer of 2002 that Ken and I decided to find a place to set up shop; the warehouse just happened to fall in our laps. We drove around looking for properties and saw that it was for sale, so I called the owner and because of our relationship he was nice enough to sell it to us for next to nothing. Ken sold his bar and we used that money along with some money I had been saving up to remodel the inside from top to bottom. When we bought the building, it was completely gutted; it was just a shell of a building, but it was just what we needed.

Today the outside of the warehouse still looks the same; it's the inside that we've done all the work on. We fixed all the weak points in the structure and built new doorways just inside of the other ones. Technically the doors on the outside are always unlocked but once you walk in you are in a small hall with another door than can only be opened by key card access. Even the car bay has to be opened by card key; we did this so that we can keep track of who is opening what and when if there is ever a worry. Everyone's office is locked by the same keypads as to allow people security for everything that is there's. This way if someone does use their card to break into the building, they can only open a few other

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doors in the building. Most of the surveillance equipment is locked up in a separate room that a small amount of people are allowed access. If an investigator needs a piece of equipment, they must check it out. I know it is a little elementary, but it works, and it keeps our cost down; it forces people to take care of things. No one wants to have to pay for a new camera or high-powered night binoculars.

The meeting with Ken is going to be nothing of great importance tonight. It is just the two of us looking at where everyone is at on cases and see who we might want to use on this case. I know I'm working for the bureau on this case, but I don't trust them as far as I can throw them. So, for my sanity and that of the people around me I'm going to be using my guys where the bureau can't always go. In other words where the bureau must follow legal procedures to gain the evidence my guys don't have to; it allows me a little bit of movement within the investigation that I would otherwise not have.

The meeting didn't take but a thirty or so minutes and most of the time Ken and I were just bullshitting around and making fun of the FBI. It was mainly the two of us making sure that we are going to be on the same page entering this investigation so that we don't step on each other's toes.