

CHAPTER 1

It was Saturday night, October 23rd. They were talking, they were laughing. They were friends, close friends. Like soldiers on a battlefield. That's how the events of the previous few weeks had made them feel. This weekend was a chance to relax and celebrate. Celebrate a wedding with friends.

Two couples walked through the dimly lit, litter strewn parking lot behind the Kensington Palace Hotel on the Las Vegas strip. Fiona said, "That was a great show. How do you think the acrobats performed so many high jumps?"

Her husband, Joseph Fitzgerald, smiled and answered, "Maybe they chug a bottle of energy drink before every show."

Fiona said, "Come on, Joseph. You know there's more to it than that. Athletes need training and lots of practice."

"I bet they used some kind of machine to help them," said Bill Clauson as he turned his head to face Joseph and Fiona while walking with his arm around his wife's shoulders. Her arm was tight around his waist, and her head rested against his shoulder. They made a statuesque couple since Bill was six-four and Mary was almost six feet tall.

Joseph chuckled and said, “So, you were paying attention to our conversation. We assumed you were lost in dreamland with your new bride.”

Bill smiled and said, “Don’t worry, I can follow your conversation and walk with Mary.”

Mary Clauson said, “All the Vegas shows have tremendous performers. I chose this show because the internet reviews said it had the highest flying stunts.”

Fiona said, “You chose a good one, Mary. The sets and costumes were amazing.”

Mary added, “Yes, they must have used hundreds of yards of red and yellow silk.”

The couples continued walking through the expansive parking lot behind their hotel when Fiona asked, “Do you smell that?”

Joseph asked, “Smell what...the garbage?”

Fiona looked around and spotted a dumpster in the corner of the parking lot. She sniffed the air again and said, “No, the other smell. It smells like...like death.”

Joseph said, “All I can smell is garbage. Maybe a rat or squirrel died inside the dumpster.”

“I don’t think so.” If anyone knew the difference between the smell of garbage and the smell of death, Fiona did. She was a certified Crime Scene Investigator. She recognized the sweet/sour smell of decaying human flesh. Fiona walked toward the dumpster while the others stopped in their tracks, watching, and wondering what she would do next. At five-feet-four-inches tall, she couldn’t see over the edge of the dumpster. She propped her left foot on the side of it, grabbed the rim, and

hopped up to look inside. Fiona switched on the small flashlight she always carried and exclaimed, “Holy shit!”

Mary gasped, “What is it?”

Fiona jumped down, rubbed the dirt from her hands, and reached for her cell phone. She answered, “A dead body,” as she dialed 911. Joseph noticed her brow had furrowed and her stare intensified in seconds. He saw it every morning as she put on her police uniform. Fiona stepped away as she reported the dead body to the 911 operator.

Joseph turned to Bill and Mary and said, “Damn! This is no way to end your wedding day. I’ll stay with Fiona if you two want to go up to your room.”

Bill glanced at Mary, then faced Joseph, and said, “I’d prefer to stay and see what the officers do, if Mary doesn’t mind.”

Bill and Joseph looked expectantly at Mary. She sighed and said, “As a park ranger, I’ve smelled dead animals before, but I’ve never smelled a human corpse.” She swallowed hard and said, “I guess we can stay here a little while, as long as we’re upwind from the dumpster.”

Fiona returned to the group and said, “The Clark County Sheriff is sending a couple of deputies and a detective in a few minutes.”

Mary asked, “Why is the Sheriff responding instead of the local police?”

Fiona replied, “A lot of the strip is outside the city of Las Vegas, so it’s under the Sheriff’s jurisdiction. Police calls inside the city limits are handled by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department.”

Bill asked, “What’s the condition of the body?” As a Deputy Sheriff for Pima County, Arizona, he was naturally curious.

Fiona answered as she would have to any other police officer when she said, “One GSW to the left temple. There isn’t much bloating yet so he’s probably been there twenty-four hours or less. Otherwise, we couldn’t stand the stench.” Fiona noticed Mary was turning pale as she clutched Bill’s arm. Fiona realized her mistake and said, “I’m sorry, Mary. I forgot where I was for a moment. I’ll save the rest of the details for the deputies.”

Mary’s smile quivered as she said, “Don’t mind me. I’ll be fine as long as the wind blows toward the dumpster.”

Bill said, “I’m sorry, too, Mary. My police instincts got the better of me.” He smiled and brushed several strands of Mary’s long blond hair away from her green eyes. He turned to Fiona and said, “With those sirens echoing off these tall buildings, I can’t tell which direction the deputies are coming from.”

Fiona said, “Neither can I, but it sounds like they’re getting close.” She turned and walked toward the dumpster. Less than a minute later, a Sheriff’s patrol car, with its siren wailing and flashing lights, careened into the parking lot. Its tires screeched as it stopped near the dumpster where Fiona had directed the officers. A white unmarked sedan with government plates approached the patrol car and parked behind it. Two uniformed deputies hopped out of the patrol car and walked toward Fiona as she said, “He’s inside the dumpster.”

The first officer used his arms to prop himself on the edge of the dumpster to look inside. He pointed his flashlight at the body and almost went head over heels into the dumpster after looking into the dead man's lifeless eyes. The second uniformed officer hopped up to view the body, abruptly jumped down, and stooped over to vomit. The first officer laughed loudly as he patted the second officer on the back and teased him for his weak stomach.

A slender black man who appeared to be in his late twenties, wearing a dark suit and tie, with a white shirt, exited the white sedan. He hung a detective's shield on his jacket breast pocket as he approached Fiona. He said, "Hello, I'm Detective Sergeant Sam Chambers. Did you report a dead body?"

"Yes, I'm Fiona Fitzgerald. My friends and I were walking back to our hotel when I noticed the telltale smell coming from the dumpster. There's a half-naked white man in there, maybe in his early thirties. There's one GSW to the left temple. I'd guess he's been there about twenty-four hours. I didn't see any other bruising on the front of his torso. And there's a bloody T-shirt lying inside the dumpster, near the body."

While listening, Chambers reached into an inside jacket pocket for a pad and pen to take notes. He faced Fiona and said, "That's an impressive description. Are you on the job?"

Fiona showed her badge and replied, "Yes, I'm a CSI tech for the Phoenix PD. I'm with my husband and our friends for a long weekend in Vegas."

Chambers asked, "How long have you been a CSI?"

Fiona replied, “Since I graduated from college. I started as a CSI for Omaha’s PD for about a year. When I married Joseph and moved to Phoenix, about a year-and-a-half ago, I went to work for the Phoenix PD.”

Chambers smiled as he realized this was a lucky break. He believed Fiona’s police skills could prove useful to his investigation. Chambers said, “I’ve been a homicide detective for two weeks after four years on patrol duty and another three years working as a narcotics detective. You know the drill. A new department means no seniority. I have to work double shifts all weekend because the other homicide detectives went out of town to watch UNLV’s football game with Utah State. So any professional assistance you could provide would be appreciated.”

Fiona said, “Sure thing. I know what it’s like to start over in a new department or a new city. This is a chance to prove yourself.”

“My mentor always told me the same thing...”

Fiona asked, “Who’s your mentor?”

Chambers looked a little embarrassed and finally said, “My mother...she was a patrol officer for almost twenty-five years until she died eight years ago...lung cancer. But I can still hear her voice encouraging me.”

Fiona could hear the emotion in Chambers’ voice. She said, “I know what you mean. My mother died when I was in high school. I can still hear her voice when I get frustrated. She always says, ‘Fiona, calm down. It’ll be okay.’ So what’s our next step?”

“First, I’ll call our CSIs to process the dumpster. When they finish, I’ll notify the ME to retrieve the body.”

“The dead man’s fingerprints might be in AFIS. Your CSI’s might also find my fingerprints on the dumpster where I jumped up to view the body.”

Chambers said, “Along with dozens of other people’s prints. It shouldn’t be a problem. We’ll take your prints later if we need them. Is there anything else you can tell me about the DB?”

Fiona stood silent for a moment visualizing the dead man in the dumpster. Fiona’s eyes widened as she said, “I remember the DB had a service tattoo on his upper right arm. It shows a clenched fist with lightning bolts. I’d bet it has something to do with the Air Force. You might ask someone at Nellis if they’re missing an airman.”

Chambers said, “Thanks. I’ll follow up on that.”