

PROLOGUE

Dark clouds, pregnant with moisture, loomed in the late afternoon sky. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Slatted shutters had been opened allowing overcast light into the oppressive gloom. The air was rancid with the stench of decay causing bile to rise in the back of Detective Mark Winward's throat. He swallowed hard. His lean, six-foot frame was still as he stood with his fists in the pockets of his brown leather jacket. Besides droning flies, his dark head and eyes were the only things that moved as he scrutinized the nude male corpse hanging from a rafter in the empty attic. The dead man's silver-white hair appeared stylishly barbered, but in disarray. Milky eyes bulged and seemed to glow red with hemorrhage. Deep gashes marred the neck around the embedded rope. Shredded, matted flesh clung under the dark nails. What remained of the mutilated genitals was a disfigured mass.

Winward shifted his gaze to the bloody wooden chair overturned beneath the slightly pointed toes and then over to where an antiquated, pearl-handled stiletto knife had been found resting against the baseboard a few feet away. In the dim light of the attic, the slender, blood-smeared blade had appeared eerily menacing.

The clap of wingtips echoed on the wood floor. "Mark, George Stelling just arrived."

Ignoring the fat, sluggish flies that buzzed around the corpse and his own head, Winward turned to face his approaching partner. "Good. How's Jenkins doing downstairs with trace?"

"He's wrapping things up." Detective Don Hayes's baritone voice suited his tall, muscular form. His coffee-colored skin made the dress shirt beneath his paisley suspenders appear startlingly white. A hip holster was attached to his belt securing a Glock 9mm like the one Winward wore snug against his ribs in a custom-made shoulder holster.

Winward nodded and then stretched his arms out to encompass the space around him. "Why is it so clean?" he asked with a puzzled lilt in his voice. "No respectable, unused attic should be this dust free. A few dusty footprints might have at least told us if our pal here had company."

"I have the answer to that," Hayes replied, unconsciously drawing attention to his intimidating biceps as he placed his hands on his hips. "Apparently, the woman who discovered the body owns a cleaning business. A crew was sent in to tidy the place up for a tenant, and she came in to inspect their work after being delayed a couple of days. They obviously did a thorough job."

"Why was she delayed?"

"Because she has more than one crew and 'business is cruisin'.' Her words, not mine."

"Great." Winward's eyes were drawn back to the body. The wounds in the neck and genitals had begun to undulate with hatching larvae. "At least those nasty little guys can give us a time frame." He turned back to Hayes. "Have any reporters arrived yet?" he asked, changing gears.

Hayes's expression was grim as he swatted away a persistent fly. "Yeah. Mitchell's in charge of securing the perimeter. So far, everyone's been kept behind the tape, but you know as well as I do that there's always a slippery one in the bunch."

Winward turned his dark scowl to the officer who had been guarding the attic stairs. "Pritchett, go down and help Mitchell. Make sure no one gets in or near this house. It might get out of hand if they find out who we've got up here. And tell Jenkins to process that stiletto as soon as possible. Maybe it'll tell us something useful."

"Yes, sir." Pritchett turned and headed down the narrow stairs.

Hayes surveyed the scene and shook his head. "What do you think?"

"At this point, I'm not sure what to think." Winward thought of the blade of the stiletto as his gaze traveled the length of the corpse. "From the amount of blood on and around the chair, and the indentions pricked into the wood, he sat while the knife was used on his genitals. After he was hung, he dangled, clawing at the rope as he was asphyxiated. The question is, did he do it himself, or was he murdered?" He shook his head. "Hopefully George will have something for us after he examines the body."

Hayes wore an expression of horror. "I don't know about you, but I don't think I could just sit there while someone came at my crotch with a sharp, pointed knife. I'd have to be drugged or bound and gagged."

"I agree," Winward said as he stepped closer to the body. "There don't appear to be any ligature marks."

"But if he was incapacitated, he wouldn't be able to try and claw his way out of the noose."

Winward shrugged. "He woke up."

They heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to watch the medical examiner advance toward them. He was in his late fifties with thinning salt and pepper hair, watery gray eyes, a bulbous nose. The khaki pants and white button-up dress shirt covering his thin frame looked like they'd been slept in.

"Hello, George," Winward greeted. "Long night?"

"And getting longer. What have you got?" Stelling asked, meeting the detective's eyes.

"It's not pretty."

"It never is. Any idea who it is?" he asked, waving a limp hand at the fly buzzing around his ear.

"Yeah, we know. It's Theodore Chandler."

Stelling's brow went up. "You're kidding. *The* Theodore Chandler?" He stopped to fully take in the scene. His eyes widened as his thick lips pursed to let out a low whistle. "Not a very dignified way to go. Can he be brought down?"

"Yeah. We've done all we can do."

Morgue attendants lowered the body. Stelling knelt, pulled on a pair of latex gloves, and examined the dark, distorted face.

"Time of death?" Winward asked.

"I'll have a better estimate after a thorough exam. Hell, I'll be able to tell you what he had for breakfast. But I'd say thirty-six to forty-eight hours." He ran his gloved finger around swollen lips and pushed the protruding tongue aside ignoring the infant maggots revealed underneath. "Well, well. Looky what I found."

He retrieved a pair of tweezers from his bag and grasped what appeared to be cellophane. When it was fully extracted, what he found was startling. It was a zip-lock sandwich bag. Inside the bag was a folded piece of paper.

CHAPTER ONE

The Georgia sun was straight overhead declaring the noon hour. The day promised to be warm with a moderate level of humidity. Cumulus clouds drifted across the cerulean sky, shifting into bunnies and trains—shapes that could be seen if you used your imagination. Automobiles roared by on the one-way, two-lane street, passing through dappling shade created by old oaks, sycamores, and dogwoods lining the streets and gracing manicured lawns. Some of the stately homes were antebellum; others were built as the small town grew. All had seen decades of change and all had stories of past generations to enthrall, sadden, or delight. Most were very well maintained and loved, sporting white trim and stained glass. One or two along the way showed signs of neglect, evidence of economic change, or just a lack of interest and respect.

“For Sale” signs were rare in downtown Marietta, but one stood in the yard of the two-story house at 1122 Church Street, named for the impressive religious structures on either side of the street as you entered the town square. A light breeze stroked the man’s raven hair as he stood with his thumbs hooked in his jeans pockets, surveying the house. A surge of excitement raced through his body. A glint in the depths of his ocean blue

eyes was the only clue to his emotions, but they were well hidden behind the cover of the shades protecting his calculating gaze from the afternoon sun. A hint of a smile played along the line of his lips. *It needs work*, he thought. The corners of his wide mouth tilted a fraction higher, softening the chiseled, sun-darkened features of his handsome face.

The slamming of a car door drew his attention away from the house. His shuttered expression revealed nothing to the probing eyes of the woman who advanced toward him in a gray dress-suit that matched her straight, bobbed hair. Her hurriedly applied make-up was unsuccessful in hiding a dull, almost pasty, complexion.

"Well, here we are," stated Mrs. Dempsey with a quick, thin-lipped smile. She walked to him with her stork-like gait. "As you have probably noticed, it needs a little work."

"I've noticed." His voice was deep and resonant. His lips twitched with a repressed smile.

"Yes, of course," she said. "Shall we go in, Mr. Shear?"

"Absolutely."

Thomas Shear moved with the sensual grace of a panther as his tall frame fell in step behind the realtor. With each movement, his broad shoulders seemed to caress the thin, white cotton of his shirt, hinting at the sleek, well-defined muscles hidden from view. His faded denim jeans only served to enhance the lean, powerful legs that carried him with a surefooted stride along the cobbled path leading to the house.

"I'm sure you'll realize the wonderful potential the house has once we're inside. They don't build them like this anymore." Mrs. Dempsey led the way up the porch steps to the door. Long, etched-glass sidelight windows flanked both sides of the door frame.

"Our little city is just oozing with Civil War history, you know. There were battles fought all around this area. William Sherman bullied his way through in 1864 on his way to burn Atlanta. The Battle of Kennesaw is legendary. Kennesaw Mountain is only a couple of miles from here to the west. It's a national park, you know. You might want to consider a little exploring. The museum is fascinating, and there are wonderful hiking trails through the woods, as well. There are even cannons along the trail up the mountain. And you wouldn't believe the flora." She rolled her hazel eyes up to look at Tom as she placed her hand against her non-existent bosom like she might swoon before inserting the key. "In the spring and summer, everything's so green, and the wild azaleas are beautiful. You really must see it," she said, pushing the door open.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Tom stepped inside. Removing his shades, he revealed long, ebony lashes that framed the deep blue of his eyes. A wavy lock of black hair fell across his forehead. He swept it aside before stepping deeper into the musty interior of the house.

The foyer was broad and spacious with a wide-planked hardwood floor the color of rich honey. The wide staircase flared at the bottom with elegant volutes and curved to the right as it rose to the second-floor landing. It split the foyer, allowing for two hallways to lead deeper into the house on either side. A runner of gold carpet covered the steps, revealing the tread of many feet and the passage of time. The banisters were carved oak, thick and sturdy, a work of art in themselves.

As his eyes were drawn upward, Tom saw a crystal chandelier dangling from the fourteen-foot-high ceiling. Hundreds of tear-drop crystals sloped inward to create a large suspended stalactite

that waited to dazzle the eye with shining prisms. From there, his eyes traveled to the crown molding surrounding the room. Plaster rosettes with adorning leaves had been painstakingly carved and set into place by the loving hands of an artisan.

To the left and right of the foyer stood open French doors. The rooms beyond were cavernous and seemed to glow with an abundance of natural light. Tom glimpsed large marble fireplaces in the rooms, each with a carved mantle. More works of art.

As he passed from room to room, the constant jingling of coins stirred by the restless fingers he kept deep within his pockets was the only hint to his mounting excitement. His artist eyes absorbed the sun-drenched rooms of the first floor while he envisioned the paintings he held in storage, and the ones he had yet to create, hanging on freshly painted walls. Finally, coming to a halt at the front of the house, he stood silent as his mind's eye formed a picture of the gallery he longed for within the walls that surrounded him.

"Besides the obvious, Mrs. Dempsey, why is the asking price so low?" he asked, turning to meet the realtor's gaze.

The directness of the question seemed to fray her cool composure. "The owner has been in dire straits since the death of her husband. She can't afford to maintain the property, so she has lowered her asking price. That's all there is to it."

Mrs. Dempsey's small, pinched face remained polite and attentive, but Tom thought he detected impatience in her voice.

She forced her thin lips into a smile. "Of course, for your own peace of mind, you might consider having it inspected."

"Oh, I intend to."

Tom turned and walked back across the foyer, through the second set of French doors on the right of the staircase, and stood

gazing at the enormous, sun-lit room. He moved to a long window overlooking the back of the property. The lot was extensive. Additional parking would be easy to arrange. His heart swelled with the possibilities.

“What about children?” he asked, seeing a little girl standing motionless in front of a garage-sized metal shed with barn-like double doors. Her piercing gaze seemed to be directed straight at him. The hair rose on his forearms and prickled on the back of his neck. “Are there many around here?”

The realtor came to stand beside him. “Not as many as you’d think. Why do you ask?”

Tom glanced at the woman. When he looked back through the window, the little girl was gone.

“No reason.” He turned and walked back into the foyer. “How soon do you need an answer?”

“Well, considering the current market, a listing like this won’t last long.”

The corner of Tom’s mouth quirked at the ploy. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I intend to make an offer—contingent upon the outcome of a full inspection, of course.”

“Of course.”

“Can you have the documents I’ll need to sign ready by tomorrow afternoon?”

“Certainly.”

“Good. Then I’ll meet you at your office at two o’clock.”

“That’ll be fine.” Tom followed the realtor out of the house and across the wide front porch.

“Well then, until tomorrow,” he said, shaking her delicate, bony hand.

“I’ll have everything ready.”

As Tom turned away and followed the cobbled footpath toward the shining black Jaguar waiting on the wide asphalt driveway, a satisfied grin spread across his face. He pulled the car door open and turned his eyes back toward the house.

"It's perfect," he said under his breath. It was all he could have asked for and more. The roof was high and steep. Perfect for the studio he planned to install in the attic. Of course, he'd have to add skylights for additional lighting, but that would be no problem.

He thought of the rooms throughout the house, spacious and rich with the exceptional light that streamed in through tall windows. New carpet would have to be laid. That was definite. Fresh paint also, inside and out. These were all minor problems, however, when Tom looked into the future and pictured the finished product. He lifted his hand to the realtor watching from the porch, then slipped into the Jag.



Mrs. Dempsey watched him until he pulled out into the early afternoon traffic. *He's hooked. Next week I'll finally be rid of this place.* "And with good riddance," she mumbled, tightening her grip on the keys she held in her hand.

Mrs. Dempsey turned to lock the gaping front door and was startled by the muffled sound of a child's whimper coming from within the house. She stepped back inside and waited. Breathing soft and shallow, her ears strained for the slightest sound. The silence surrounding her only deepened.

"I know what I heard," she muttered, "and it came from up there." Mrs. Dempsey's eyes followed the wide staircase curving up to the second floor. "I don't know who you are or how you

got in," she shouted, "but I will not tolerate trespassers." She waited, but still heard only silence. "Come out at once." Still nothing. Shaking her head in frustration, Mrs. Dempsey proceeded across the foyer to the foot of the stairs, the heels of her shoes clapping against the hardwood floor.

"If I have to come up and find you, I can assure you, your parents will be informed of your ill conduct."

The silence continued. She began the climb with determined steps and her anger mounted as she passed from room to room, only to find each one empty. With an exasperated sigh, Mrs. Dempsey stepped back into the hallway to await a sound that might give their position away.

A muffled thump sounded above her head. She threw her hands on her bony hips in agitation. *The attic. I should have known. Well, when I'm through with them, they'll wish they had never started this preposterous game of hide and seek.*

Mrs. Dempsey went over to the narrow passage leading to the attic and looked up. The gloom waiting at the top seemed to deepen and grow into something forbidding. Chilled air enveloped her. Her instinct told her to avoid the attic altogether and leave the house at once, but her legs were suddenly leaden.

"This is absurd." Her voice quavered. She took a deep breath then lifted an unsteady hand to grip the banister before mounting the steep stairs.

Mrs. Dempsey felt the chilly air grow colder and her heartbeat sped up. By the time she reached the shallow landing at the top, her warm breath was misting in the frosty air. Her hand trembled as she grasped the knob and turned. After a gentle push, she shivered as she watched the door swing back on un-oiled hinges.

Standing very still, Mrs. Dempsey gave her eyes time to adjust to the dimness of the attic. She expelled the breath she had been holding and was assaulted by the musty smell. She forced her feet forward.

Swallowing to lessen the tightening of her throat, she stated firmly, "I know you're up here, so you might as well show yourself." With a cautious step, she walked deeper into the cavernous, bare-wooded room.

Bright shafts of light streaming in between the slats of the shuttered widows did little to expel the oppression surrounding her. Shadows clung to the rafters, creating the eerie sensation that she was being watched. She felt exposed and her brittle confidence began to crumble. Her eyes searched the corners and any deep shadow that might hide the small form of a child, but the further she searched, the more desperate her plight became. Her thinning confidence vanished altogether with the dawning realization that she was alone.

Then a fleeting whisper passed her ear. Her heart raced as a child's soft moan trickled from the rafters. A tiny whimper filled the stale air, and she spun around, eyes wide, scanning the shadowy corners. Seeing nothing, her fear mounted and a cold, clammy sweat dampened her skin just as the sickening smell of death reeked through the air. Surging vomit filled her throat as she reeled and ran for the door.

"Stop, please! I hurt so bad. I want my mommy! Find my mommy!" The frightened little voice rang in Mrs. Dempsey's ears and her quick breath became sobs. Every hair on her body stood on end, tingling against raw, trembling nerves. She was unable to suppress a terrified scream as a seemingly huge presence filled the doorway in front of her.