

"In valor there is hope."

—Tacitus

Chapter One

My hands are behind my back. The thumbs have been lashed together with a short length of zip-tie, the kind of stuff that gets tighter the more you pull at it and right now the short strips holding my thumbs and pinkies are so tight that the tips of my fingers feel like they're going to burst like hot grapes. It must be bad, since I lost feeling in the rest of my hands hours ago.

Blood is rolling down my hairline, making a half circuit along the side of my face like a scarlet moon before cutting in and dribbling over a cheek and into one swollen eye. The blood comes from a six-inch trench going from the top of my scalp to just north of my forehead. Someone put it there with a two-foot length of rebar wrapped in electrical tape. The tape wasn't there to soften the blow; it was to give him a better grip. The deep, diamond-shaped cross-hatching that gives rebar a better bond with cement is what laid my scalp open, but it was the force of the blow that cracked my skull. I'm nauseous and can smell my own vomit, which is puddled in front of me. That probably means I'm lying on the floor. I can't tell since my good eye is closest to the ground and any time I move my head, I scream.

The pain doesn't stop at my face. My ribs feel gone, too, half of them snapped like plastic straws. It's hard to breathe, though that may be from the blood running down my throat. The bruises up and down both arms aren't worth mentioning, but my gut is aching and my testicles

have ballooned to the size of tennis balls, which is what happens when they've been kicked repeatedly.

The beating, as brutal as it was, wasn't systematic. For what it's worth, this was done in a frenzy; it wasn't an interrogation and it wasn't about payback. Nobody asked questions or took time to gloat. They just wanted to hurt. Small consolation, but the guy with the rebar hadn't done anything a hospital couldn't put back together with enough time and health insurance. No one had lopped off a finger or spooned out an eye. It might take weeks or months or years, even, to heal. But as long as I have a pulse, I have a chance.

I'm still thinking that when he comes back. Quietly, this time, maybe to watch me struggling to take a breath. I don't hear him at first. Blood has pooled in my ear and my pulse is loud. Then a shoe scuffs a wall or a doorframe or a piece of furniture and I turn my head towards the sound instinctively. But a small click, like a gear falling into place, tells me my chance is done, and I want to yell, to tell them, no, I need to see my boy and my wife and—

...

"You see it?"

"I see it," I said, putting the last of the crime scene photos down. I was happy to get them out of my hands. A year ago, they would've been nothing special for Marty Singer, homicide cop, especially after thirty years in Washington DC's police force, the MPDC, but time had given me some distance from that life and I realized I didn't have quite the same perspective on things now that I did then. "This is bad."

"It is," Sam Bloch said. He was a lieutenant with the MPDC Major Narcotics Branch, the catchall division that did most of the city's drug enforcement. Bloch was a slim, tall man with a pinched face and a small, pencil-thin mustache. With his black hair and dark eyes, he could've been Clark Gable's twin, but with a nose so broken that the tip almost touched one cheek, he would've had to have settled for being the stunt double.

"Who was he, again?"

"Danny Garcia," Bloch said. He picked up the photos and slipped them back into a manila envelope, conscious of the people passing our table at the Java Hut. We had a nook in one of the duskiest corners of the coffee house, but still, no sense risking someone tossing their biscotti just because they looked over and saw a stack of eight-by-ten glossies of a mutilated body.

"Danny was one of our best undercover guys," Bloch continued. "Hispanic, obviously, so he was a huge help with the Latino gangs, but it was more than that. He was good because he fit in anywhere. Fast talker, knew the street, great instincts on when to step it up or back off. He could put together a buy over in Southeast where even the black cops won't go, for Christ's sake, and the next day be out in Hicksville, picking up a John Deere full of weed from some good old boys spitting Skoal between their last two teeth."

I took a sip of coffee. It picked a fight with the bile Bloch's pictures had brought forth.
"Looks like somebody wasn't buying that night."

Bloch lifted the cover of the folder and looked at the top picture again, then let it fall back shut. "I couldn't believe this when I saw it. We get our share of outrageous shit—more than our share—but Danny was good and this kind of...butchery doesn't happen every day. Not anymore.

Maybe in a gang war or when people are sending a message about who's boss, but no one was going to mistake Danny for a *chavala*."

I frowned.

"A rival gang leader," Bloch explained. "Danny was going on fifty. The only gangsters that old are either in maximum lockup or dead. Most of today's honchos are in their twenties."

"Maybe someone just made him." I gestured at the folder. "This was vicious enough to be driven by cop hate."

Bloch shrugged, a short roll of the shoulders. "It's possible. Anything is. But, like I said, he was good at what he did. Too good for me to believe he just happened to slip up."

"When he was on a case, did he pose as a junkie? Or a buyer?"

"A little of both," Bloch said, picking up a sugar packet and turning it rhythmically in his hands, corner-to-corner. I had smelled the cigarette smoke on him when we'd met; judging by the urgency with which he was spinning that packet, it must've been a while since his last puff. "He'd break in as a user, see who was dealing. Then he'd graduate to hand-to-hand deals. Penny-ante shit, but it gave him an idea on who was willing to play ball. Final stop might be to set up a mid-level buy for a small cut or to get two dealers together, see if they would do business."

"Why such small beans?" I asked. "He was a twenty-year pro."

"For just that reason. If we used Danny once on a big bust, he was burnt. He'd have to sit at a desk for two years before he could go back on the street. Instead, I kept him simmering somewhere in the middle, which worked. We set up three major busts a year without compromising him."

"How'd he like that?"

"Not much," Bloch admitted. "It was blue collar work. No glory, none of that lining up millions on a kitchen table with a dozen AK-47s and getting on the evening news. He wasn't happy about it, but he knew he was doing good work."

I wondered about that. Cops are people, too, and it can be hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel if you're asked to turn the crank on the same wheel day-in, day-out. But I kept that to myself. "What was he working on when this happened?"

"I don't know."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Danny demanded a lot of rope," Bloch said. "He kept his own list of snitches, dealers, leads. I got him to agree to weekly updates, but he missed them all the time and even when we did connect, he was cagey about everything."

"So you don't know if this was part of a case or not."

Bloch nodded. "There's no reason to think that it wasn't, but which one? New or old? Was he just fishing, or was this the next to last meet before he set up a bust? He left us crap for notes. I've gone over all of them and don't have a clue."

I spun my coffee cup around by the handle. Bloch's fidgeting was contagious. "When you called, you said you had something that made you nervous, something you wanted to talk over. Garcia's killing is bad, really bad, but—no disrespect—it's something you should take up with MPDC Homicide."

"They're on it. In their own way."

"So why me?"

"What do you know about HIDTA?" He pronounced it "hide-uh."

"High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area," I said. "A task force. Feds and locals from all the Metro jurisdictions get together to compare notes on drug traffic, trying to keep the left hand in touch with the right."

"Right. Crack dealers don't pay attention to county and state lines. Dope that winds up in DC didn't magically sprout there, it had to come through Virginia or Maryland. And it didn't start there, either, of course, those are just distribution points along the chain."

"Every city with a population of two or more's got that problem."

"Sure, but we've got two states, a city, and a federal jurisdiction in a ten mile radius. Dealers know what a headache it is for a DC cop to try and get a warrant in Maryland or set up a wiretap in Virginia. And if they decide to go up to a sunset overlook on the George Washington Parkway to do a deal, well, that's a National Park, right? All of a sudden it's a federal case. Then the DEA and Park Service police are in charge, even if every ounce of the dope from that deal winds up on K Street in the District."

"Enter HIDTA," I said.

He nodded. "Virginia cooperates with Maryland cops who work with MPDC who partners up with the DEA. Jurisdictions melt away, everybody shares the work and the glory, bad guys have nowhere to hide."

The wood of the booth popped and creaked as I leaned back. "Must look good on a poster."

"It works better than you'd think. There are a lot of egos, sure, and the higher up you go, the crustier everyone gets. At the soldier level, though, everybody's on the same side."

"It sounds beautiful," I said. "Before I tear up, though, what does this have to do with me?"

"I'm a medium cheese with HIDTA. Danny worked directly for me. The important point is that, while I might be a DC cop, I'm also dialed into all the other players. I hear things, I see things, I might not get to if I was buried all by myself in Major Narcotics."

"Okay."

Bloch reached into a brief case resting on the floor and pulled out a thick handful of manila folders identical to the one he'd produced on Danny Garcia. He pushed them across to me.

Inside the top folder was a single photo of another crime scene, another murder. It was a black man in his boxers and a T-shirt. He had a belly and soft, un-muscular arms and legs. Salt and pepper hair cropped close. He'd been beaten badly—the bones of his arms and hands looked broken and bent out of shape—and shot in the back of the head, apparently with a small caliber round since there wasn't much of an exit wound to speak of. Blood and probably urine had puddled around the body. It looked like a lot of other scenes I'd seen over the years.

I flipped the photo over, revealing another. A white guy in a tank top and shorts, young and in good shape. Red hair. Pale. Freckles. Or maybe it was blood. Superman tattoo on his left deltoid--a little ironic. Like the first body, he looked like he'd gone through a thresher, with arms out of joint and a lot of blood-letting. The photo had been taken from near his feet, so I couldn't make out details, but two small, quarter-sized black dots in the side of his head testified to more gunshot wounds. His fingers were broken and mangled.

I turned that one over. Beneath, a third scene, a third body. Or fourth, counting Danny Garcia. Like the first, this was a black man, sprawled on a blacktop parking lot or road. There wasn't much context, but comparing him to a nearby car door, he looked enormous, maybe six and half feet tall. Two-seventy, two-eighty? He was fully dressed, sporting jeans and a

University of Maryland polo shirt. Blood was hard to discern against his ink-black skin and the asphalt. Unlike the others, he hadn't been beaten. I couldn't see evidence of a gunshot, but on a body that big, it could be anywhere.

"Bloch, I don't want to look at this," I said. But I cycled through the pictures again. I could feel Bloch's eyes on me as I peered at the glossies, closer this time. Not surprisingly, I'd focused on details at first glance. Looking for setting, characteristics, gun shot wounds. I shuffled back and forth between the three photos several times, then added Danny's, checked, and looked up. "The beatings. They're crazy. Vicious. Faces broken apart. Arms and hands and feet twisted, pulled."

Bloch nodded.

"Except for that last one," I said. "That one's odd man out."

"Maybe. But for the rest, they're the same. It's the beatings. They were all pre- and post-mortem, or so the coroners tell me."

"Coroners? Plural?"

He reached over the table and flipped the stack over so that I was looking at the first body again. "Terrence Witherspoon. MPDC beat cop, First District."

"PSA?"

"One-oh-six."

I grimaced. One of the worst in Southeast DC. "Okay."

He flipped to the next photo. "Brady Torres, Arlington PD." Flip. "Isaac Okonjo. Montgomery County Sheriff's department, Maryland."

I felt a twist in my gut that had nothing to do with the coffee. "Danny Garcia. MPDC Major Narcotics Bureau."

Bloch nodded, looking at me with eyes like twin lumps of coal. "You see it?"

"I see it," I said, but not liking it. "Someone's killing cops."

We were both quiet for a minute, looking down at the photos. The noise swelled around us as a small group of businessmen and women swept in to get an afternoon latté, bringing a wash of spring air in with them that seemed out of synch with what Bloch and I were talking about. The scenes of death seemed more appropriate for the moldering back of the coffee shop than the scent of flowers from a late May morning. The group chatted and laughed about some dust-up at the office, then left in a swirl of coffee and perfume. The noise subsided to a more comfortable murmur.

I looked at Bloch. "You heard about these through HIDTA?"

"More or less," he said. "When Danny was killed, I couldn't find what he was working on, like I told you. But his killing wasn't random; no one does that kind of damage over a mugging. So I started to ask around through my connections with HIDTA. Anyone heard about random killings, especially with an M.O. like this?"

"And these came back?"

"Not at first," Bloch said. "I wasn't looking for cop killings, I was just working backwards from the M.O. The beating, the weapons, ballistics. But nothing came up. Eventually, these did, but I didn't really look too close at first. No pattern. Only one cop was MPDC and none of them worked Vice. Only Torres was even close."

"What was he?"

"Arlington gang detail. MLA, La Eme, Aryan Nation."

"Then what?"

"I asked for the files on Witherspoon and Torres and that's all I needed to see. Okonjo's rolled in after that, but it was just icing on the cake. I already knew I was dealing with a multiple."

I rubbed my eyes. "Besides the beatings, do you have any other connections? What did ballistics get you?"

"A .22 for Witherspoon and Torres. The slugs weren't recoverable for Garcia or Okonjo, though they were small caliber."

"Match on the .22?"

He nodded. "Same gun. Registration went nowhere."

"What about the beatings?"

"Done with whatever was at hand. The rebar, a chair, a trophy. No other connections. None of these cops worked together or knew each other as far as I can tell."

I closed the manila folder on the table and squared it with the edge of the table. "As far as you can tell? Isn't MPDC or Arlington or someone all over this?"

Bloch's shoulders slumped and I saw for the first time how tired he looked. "Someone? Like who? Who looks into multi-jurisdictional cop killings?"

"The FBI, for one."

"And big-foot each jurisdiction's own Homicide department? Piss off half a dozen local chiefs? Not on your life."

"I thought you said HIDTA meant everyone played nice-nice."

"Sure, for drug busts. Multiple unrelated homicides that, if proven to *be* related, would indicate that no one's been aware of a cop serial killer who's been on the loose for a couple months? Not so much."

“Really?”

He sighed. “I went there, Singer. Really, I did. I went down to the Bureau Office, laid out the pictures just like I did for you.”

“And?”

“And they told me to get back to them when I had more evidence. Wasn’t a serial. Their profilers took a quick look and said these looked like vanilla, on-the-job ‘events.’”

“And the victims' departments?”

He shrugged. “They’ll take the info I give them and they’ll cooperate if it’s in the best interests of *their* case, but no one wants to take on all of these murdered cops at once. They’ll spare no expense to track down the guy who killed their own. But work overtime for another department? Sure, if they get to it.”

"Are you telling me you've been doing this on your own?" I asked, incredulous.

"You got it," Bloch said. "Funny, huh? You and I can see it, plain as day. And maybe they can, too. But no one else wants to touch it."

"So, they're all handling just their own department's murder? But nothing else?"

"While there's a guy out there, offing cops," Bloch said, nodding. "And he's got his pick of ten or twelve different districts to do it in. None of which will cooperate with each other."

I blew out a breath. "I think I see where I come in."

Bloch gave me a weary smile. "I figured you would. Once I caught on I was being stone walled everywhere, I started asking around, seeing if anyone would take this up as a hobby, do the leg-work for me. I can't do this thing by myself."

"Any takers?"

"What do you think? But I got a couple of nods about you from some guys I know in Homicide. Great track record, a good cop. They said you retired, but still had a hand in things."

"Ah," I said. "That thing last year was kind of foisted on me, Bloch. I didn't ask for it."

"I get that. I didn't ask for this, either, you know? But sometimes things come looking for you and you can't say no. What am I supposed to do with this--walk away, act like everyone else? What happens next week or next month or next year when I hear about another cop getting shot? Send a memo? I owe Danny more than that. I owe these other cops more than that."

I looked at Bloch. I didn't need the rah-rah, brothers-in-arms spiel. But he had a point. When you see something's broken, you fix it. Just because it isn't any of your business doesn't mean it's less wrong. Or any less your responsibility to do what you can to help. Even if I didn't already have debts to pay in that regard, I knew about this, now. And that meant I should do something about it.

I held out a hand. "Let's see those folders."