

CHAPTER 1

Pathetic fallacy.

The words of my 9th grade lit teacher intruded into my head as I got out of my car and stepped into the expanding fog and misty drizzle. I began to grind my teeth involuntarily. It wasn't the words that irritated me, it was the thought of that awful woman, and my secondary education in general that darkened my mood and intensified my sense of foreboding.

"Morning," I grumbled to Harshan who, as always, looked fresh as a damned daisy.

"Nice breakfast," he said nodding at the half eaten, bruised apple in my hand.

I shrugged, took one last bite, and threw it in the garbage.

"Wasteful," he tutted.

I rolled my eyes.

"Special Agents Lowery and Rupasinghe," I said as we showed our credentials to the tall, slender Cincinnati police officer standing sentry in front of the yellow crime tape.

"Go ahead." She stepped aside allowing us access.

Several flood lights bathed the area in and around Fountain Square in a harsh white light as Evidence Response Technicians, ERTs, some in crinkly, white Tyvek suits, others in FBI emblazoned jackets, stood around a tall, athletic woman with a long auburn braid wearing a jacket with "Medical Examiner" on the back.

"Hope you brought your swimsuits," Diane joked from several feet away. Dr. Diane Charles was at her comedic best before 8 am.

She took off her jacket and put on waterproof boots attempting to redirect her impatient energy.

"Pretty early to call us in. The Cincinnati PD should be able to handle a murder in the city."

"They, well, to be frank, they don't want it."

"Why not?" I asked, finally reaching the granite edge of the fountain.

The answer was instantly apparent.

In the large basin, below the water cascading from the hands of the Bronzed Lady, bobbed a rigid body, half submerged on its right side. Her long blond hair hugged her neck in some horrible imitation of a scarf, while her layered clothing floated around her body, shroud-like and morbid. Harshan and I stood, transfixed, watching her body undulate in the water.

I could see why the Cincy cops turfed it; I would too given the choice.

There was a sudden flurry of activity breaking our pseudo hypnosis.

"Finally!" Diane exclaimed.

The cascading water had ceased, and she waded towards the body with, what I thought to be unnatural ease; her plastic-coated entourage followed her lead, albeit with more splashes and stumbles.

"Grab the skimmer," she ordered one of the plastics who had to turn around to retrieve the requested equipment.

By the time they had all reached her, Diane was dictating observations into a small recorder. As they continued their aquatic examination, Harshan and I laid out and secured a tarp.

Once satisfied there was no more to do in the water, Diane and the plastics positioned themselves around the body's limbs and head.

"On three. One. Two. Three."

Each of the plastics grabbed one of the victim's limbs while Diane supported her head and neck; they gently, but purposefully lifted her over the fountain edge and onto the waiting tarp. Diane and 3 of the ERTs exited the water while the other stayed in to collect and catalogue the waterlogged evidence.

Out of the water and on her back, the corpse remained unnaturally contorted and fully displayed the rainbow hues of death. Unlike the fictional depictions of napping models, the victim's face was punctuated by grotesque, burgundy splotches. Her wide-open, amber eyes seemed shocked by the abruptness of her own death. The lips, which retained their artificial, honey color, were swollen and cracked with a sliver of engorged, blue tongue protruding slightly through them; a trickle of something foamy ran down her chin. Her wig, dislodged by her removal from the water, began slowly sliding down the side of her neck, the exposed part of the woman's face was sullied by the partially disintegrated garbage that had collected in the water around her.

Diane removed the blond wig, bagged it unceremoniously, and continued dictating.

"Victim is an African American female appearing to be between 25 and 40 years of age. The body is in rigor mortis." She touched one of the red areas. "Livor mortis is blanching." She inserted a thermometer with a sharp, pointed end into the woman's abdomen. "Core body temperature is 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Hey Andy." The technician skimming the basin looked up. "Make sure you get a water temp for me."

"Will do," Andy replied, then went back to skimming.

"The victim has a series of small abrasions on her both her palms. Possible defensive wounds? Maybe from a fall? No obvious gunshot wounds, blunt force trauma, or sharp force trauma. No petechia visible. Clothing intact, save for a series of small tears in the middle of her coat. Possibly from a struggle? No outward evidence of sexual assault."

Another click. Diane turned to face us.

"Despite her low core body temperature, I estimate her to have been dead less than 12 hours based on lividity, but I may be able to give a more definitive TOD once I have the water temp."

"Just found her purse," Andy called from the water.

He waded over and tipped the sodden mass of red leather into a plastic tub at the edge of the tarp.

“Although, I think, technically it’s a handbag,” he corrected then waded away.

Confused, I picked it up, the leather slippery against my nitrile gloves. I turned it over and saw the word “Hermès” emblazoned on a silver button; even I knew that meant high end.

I turned the “handbag” upside down; a torrent of water and personal effects fell out. I pushed aside the lipstick, gum, and keys attached to a mountain of novelty key chains all covered in slimy pumpkin seeds. I shook it and a black wallet with a metal “H” for a clasp, also Hermès, landed heavily in the tub. There was no phone. I opened the wallet and pulled out the first legible thing I could find, a plastic gold and green card that said “R.N.A. – Romance Novelist Association” across the top.

“This says her name was Marguerite Chevalier.”

The effect of my statement was immediate. Diane, Harshan, and the ERTs abruptly stopped what they were doing looked at me in disbelief.

“The romance novelist?” asked one of the ERTs.

“I think so.”

“What a tragedy!” He exclaimed sounding devastated. “*Plantation Pleasures* is a modern classic!”

That, I felt, was a matter of opinion. No romance novel should be mentioned in the same breath as a Walker, Angelou, or Morrison, their books are modern classics.

“My wife is obsessed with her,” Harshan said as I continued digging through the wallet.

“Really? Prema?”

“She eats that stuff up.”

“Victim tentatively identified as Marguerite Chevalier...” Diane told the recorder once everyone had settled.

There was a suspicious lack of normal in the wallet. No government ID, credit cards, or money. Just a pulpy white mass that used to be a business card and something that may have once been a picture of someone important to her but was now little more than streaks of color on matte paper.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up and Harshan pointed. A CPD officer was waving at us.

“We good to go?”

Diane gave a thumbs up and continued dictating as we walked away; the cop was indicating the witnesses were finally ready to talk.