

PROLOGUE

The Beast, who had yet to be so named, lay on his bed in the dark, staring up at the ceiling. He took in a deep breath, exhaling slowly, and listened to the world around him. It was still cool, and he'd turned the air conditioner off at two that morning. The rumble of the forced air interfered with his listening. Out in the parking lot, he heard the motorcycle start up with a clatter and roar.

That meant it was about six o'clock; that's when the man in the apartment on the corner always left for his job at the construction site. He knew this because he'd followed the man several times. He discovered that his name was Charles Russell by intercepting his mail at the outdoor mailboxes three afternoons ago. It'd been easy; the man was still out, and all he'd had to do was ask the letter carrier if there was anything for 104. He smiled in the darkness. *Will Charles be the first?* Probably not, he decided for the fifth day in a row. He was far too predictable.

About an hour later, the two children from 206 at the other end of the complex attracted his attention. Even through closed doors, windows, and heavy drapery, he could hear them running down the outside steps to the parking lot, chasing each other happily as they did every morning. Thomas was about twelve, he estimated, and his sister, Haley, was maybe ten. They were going to meet the school bus, and be off for the day. *What about them?* Once again, he decided they would be too easy. It had been too easy in Chicago, and that was one of the reasons he'd left for Arizona.

He sighed, threw back the unwashed sheet that covered him, and rose to meet the day. He showered quickly, and dressed in his uniform. The oval white and red embroidered badge on his grey work shirt read simply 'Fast Produce.' He put his grey baseball cap atop his now neatly combed shock of dark brown hair, and left his apartment.

The woman in 109 had just slammed her door, heading toward whatever it was she did for a living. She always left around eight during the week. *Maybe her...* he considered; it would at least be worth checking into. He could do that tomorrow. He had a day off coming, and he might as well put it to good use.

He smiled as he walked to his ancient black Ford Expedition, his dark eyes flashing left, then right, observing...always observing. As he left the apartment complex, he thought about what he was planning. Chicago had been his awakening. Phoenix would be his place. Phoenix would be his hunting ground.

CHAPTER 1

Detective Daniel Gage came into work Monday morning at seven, as usual. Even before he got to his desk, he saw Lieutenant Tanner Marsh signaling to him from his office. The door to Marsh's office was open, and the lieutenant shouted across the room.

"Gage, get in here."

The lieutenant seemed anxious, so Gage dropped the file he'd been carrying on his desk, and headed to the back of the large room. The other three homicide investigators were already at their desks. Gage nodded to them in greeting, and received return greetings from two of them. Detective Warwick ignored his greeting. Gage wasn't surprised; Warwick was the reason he'd been suspended for a week. Gage walked on, not breaking his stride, and entered Marsh's office.

"Yes, sir?"

"I need you to drive out to Youngtown and take custody of a barber from MCSO."

Gage looked at Marsh, tilting his head so he could examine Marsh from side to side.

"Daniel, what the hell are you doing?"

"Frankly," Daniel commented, completely straight-faced, "I don't think your haircut is bad enough to warrant the arrest of the barber."

"Very funny. Now get your ass out of here and pick up that barber."

"Do I get to know why?"

"There was a murder last night, and we have reason to believe this barber's the killer."

"Barbers don't usually kill...except in films, of course—oh, and Rossini." He lifted his left index finger to make the point.

"You're a real wiseass this morning aren't you? And who the hell's Rossini? Is he a barber too?" Gage held his tongue.

Marsh continued, "Our barber is one Viktor Bagrov; he also runs a below-the-radar 'we buy gold' operation out of his barbershop. We're pretty certain that's the reason behind the killing."

Gage knew the term. The Russian mob operated many unlicensed and illegal gold-buying operations out of barbershops around the Valley. They were the leading reason victims of jewelry and coin robberies almost never had their property recovered.

"Any other details I need to know?"

"Bagrov had a...falling out with an employee two days ago. It was vocal and violent. Someone called it in, and MCSO investigated the

complaint. But by the time the deputy arrived, the man who'd been arguing with Bagrov had left."

"Any idea what the fight was about?"

"None at all. That's why we're bringing Bagrov in; that employee's the one who hit the deck with three 9X18 Makarov rounds in his upper back. Happened last night at eleven. The killing was in Phoenix, so we're handling the investigation."

"All right," Gage responded. "I'll get right on it." He turned to leave Marsh's office.

"Oh, Gage." Daniel paused, looking over his shoulder. "I don't want to hear any of that 'my instincts tell me the man is innocent' crap; you got that? We deal in facts, motives, and evidence, not funny feelings."

"Yes, sir," Daniel responded.

"One other thing, Gage. I'm putting Esparza with you again, just like before your...situation. Warwick and Westlake can partner up. Neither one of them wants to work with you right now anyway."

"Hmmm, I can't imagine why." Daniel turned and walked back into the squad room. As he passed Warwick's desk, he could see the smirk on the detective's face.

"Want to ride along?" Daniel taunted.

"Well, let me think about this," Warwick said, pausing to look up at the acoustic tile ceiling. "Naw...my instincts tell me not to."

"Suit yourself," Daniel said, "I just thought that since you had enough time on your hands to play games on your cell, you might actually want to do some police work."

Warwick glanced in the direction of the lieutenant's office, but the man was on the phone. Warwick didn't respond to Daniel's taunt, but he did slip his cellphone back into his pocket.

Gage walked past the empty interrogation rooms and out the back of the stationhouse. He looked up at the sky. It was the middle of April and the sky was only slightly cloudy. It would be a warm day. He reached into the pocket of his slacks and removed his unit's keys. He walked into the parking area, unlocked his unit, and got in. He shut the door, starting the engine and the air conditioner almost simultaneously. The car was already cooling down by the time he'd exited the parking area. He took I-10 to the west 101 loop, and headed north toward Sun City and Youngtown.

When Gage arrived at the Sheriff's substation, Bagrov was waiting for him with his hands cuffed behind his back. Two deputies escorted the short Russian through the door of the station to the rear of Gage's Crown Victoria.

One of them put his hand on the man's head as he and his partner shoved the man into the back seat.

"He's all yours now," one of the deputies said. "Now you can listen to his pleading that he's innocent." The other deputy laughed, and they both walked back into the station. Gage got back in the driver's seat and started the sedan. He released the brake, and they were rolling.

"Why are you treating me like this?" the man in the back seat demanded. "I have done nothing wrong." Gage said nothing to the man; that would happen in the interrogation room with witnesses, not in the police cruiser. Daniel inhaled deeply.

"Does this vile machine have AC?" the man in the back demanded. Daniel turned up the air conditioner, and lifted the vents so they'd blow through the wire mesh into the back seat.

"Thank you," the Russian said. As they cruised back down the 101, Bagrov had nothing more to say.

When they arrived at the station, two uniforms were waiting to escort Bagrov inside. They took him to the first interview room, and uncuffed his hands. They told Bagrov to sit down, and that someone would be in shortly to speak with him. The detective who would be doing the interview would come in a little later; the technique gave the man time to sit and ponder his fate before answering questions.

Gage stopped by Marsh's office, and reported. Marsh made a note on his pad, but Gage didn't leave. Marsh glanced up. "Yes, Detective?"

"I'd like to see the crime scene."

"I was hoping you'd ask," Marsh responded. He handed the detective a piece of paper. "Here's the address. The lab rats are still there, but the body's already in the morgue."

Gage nodded, returned to his sedan, and drove off. He glanced at the scrap of paper the lieutenant had given him. The crime scene was an apartment complex in the Maryvale district on 75th Avenue near Indian School Road.

Upon his arrival at the Happy Sunshine complex, he turned his sedan into the apartment's parking lot, and pulled in beside the white Ford CSI van. He slid out of the Crown Vic, and walked up the sidewalk to where the yellow tape had been placed to cordon off one of the first floor apartments. He lifted the tape, showing his badge to two uniformed officers, and walked through the open door into the apartment.

Inside the small living room of the rental, he spotted Thomas Carroll, one of the crime scene response team investigators. He'd worked with Tom on several homicides the past few years, and they'd hit it off pretty well. He

walked up to the man who was squatting beside a large dark red stain that marred the vaguely tan wall-to-wall carpet. The man had forceps in his hand, and was lifting what looked to be a hair. He placed it in a zippered plastic bag, looked up, and smiled. “Well, Daniel, nice to see you back to work! How long will it be for this time?” He laughed good-naturedly.

The story of this latest incident involving Daniel Gage had made the rounds of the station well before his one-week suspension had ended. Gage and Warwick had been investigating the stabbing death of a prostitute in a narrow back alley off of East Van Buren Street. It was a late call for them, five in the afternoon. Usually they went off duty at five, but with budget cuts and manpower shortages, they took the call. Warwick had quickly concluded they had an open and shut case against another working girl who’d been seen having an argument with the victim over money just two hours before the killing.

Gage had not been so sure, and he’d been rather vocal about it. Further, the suspect did have an alibi of sorts; she’d been talking with another potential john very close to the time of the murder, about a block farther east of the alley—a john that just happened to have been a vice cop out trolling the area. She’d been streetwise enough to see through the undercover cop’s moves, and had walked away without incriminating herself. The problem was, it still left her in the immediate vicinity, close to the time when the other woman had been stabbed. And that was the point Warwick latched on to when he’d made his decision to charge the woman.

Gage, however, had come back out the alley where the body still lay, and told Warwick in no uncertain terms that the woman they’d taken into custody was innocent, although at the time he couldn’t exactly specify how he’d come to that conclusion. There was something he’d noticed, but he couldn’t put his finger on it precisely. And precise is what Warwick insisted upon. After impatiently hearing Gage out, he scoffed, and told the uniformed officer in whose car the handcuffed woman was sitting, to take her downtown and book her.

Warwick was the senior detective on the case, and immediately filed murder charges against her. The assistant DA was happy with the evidence, and that was that. Later that night, Daniel had been asleep in his apartment. He was having a dream, oddly enough, about fragrance—and a big gray dog, or at least he thought it had been a dog, that had seemed to be his partner.

He awoke with a start at two in the morning. That was it! The dead woman had been wearing perfume, but interestingly, the woman they’d arrested had not—and neither of them carried the scent he’d picked up in the

alley when he'd gotten close enough to the corpse to detect it. There'd obviously been a third person there, but how to prove it?

Gage declared the woman's innocence to everyone in the squad room the next morning, insisting the killer was actually a male. And then he explained his reasoning for his statements, and that the elusive other scent he'd picked up was an aftershave called Polo Black. It wasn't a scent especially popular with the working girls in the neighborhood, he informed the group. Then he proceeded to tell Warwick he was a fool and an idiot for assigning guilt so quickly.

Warwick was his superior in rank, so Gage had been charged with insubordination and suspended. The fact that he'd been suspended for a similar insubordination incident when he was in the robbery division a few years earlier didn't help matters, even though he'd been right in that case. Insubordination was insubordination even if it turned out you were right about the case in question.

As it turned out, the evidence that freed the woman wasn't the lingering scent of aftershave; it was a smear of blood on the handle of the switchblade knife that had been left lying on the gravel beside the body. It wasn't only the victim's blood on the blade. Her assailant had probably cut himself when his hand slid down the handle of the knife as he was stabbing the woman, the medical examiner had stated, when the point had struck the woman's sternum.

Two months later, they had the man in custody. He had a record for violence against women and his DNA was already in the system. Once they had the DNA match, it was quick work finding him where he worked at a plumbing supply store. The cut on his right thumb and the palm of that hand was, he admitted when interrogated, why he'd dropped the knife. His parole from a previous assault was rescinded. The man was now in jail awaiting trial. He was working toward a plea bargain with his court appointed lawyer; his only real hope after his confession.

CHAPTER 2

Gage looked back down at Carroll and asked, “What’cha got?”

“Well, the shell casings were policed up after the murder, for starters; amateurs usually forget that little detail.” Gage nodded. “It appears the man was ambushed; there was no struggle. Right now it looks like the killer stood behind the deceased, and fired three rounds at close range into his upper back. There are powder burns on his shirt, so the gun was very close to him.”

“Anything on the door locks?”

Carroll shook his head. “It doesn’t appear anything was jimmed or forced; windows either. If I had to say right now, I’d say the killer either came in with the deceased but a step behind him, or he was in here waiting for him.”

“And that would probably mean the killer had a key?”

“Most likely,” Carroll responded. “He didn’t get it from the victim; his keys were in his left pants pocket when we found him. His wallet appeared intact as well; there was almost eight hundred dollars stuffed inside it. This was not an ordinary robbery.”

“The place looks tossed,” Gage commented.

“Oh, yeah! The killer or killers—most likely there were at least three people in here with the victim when it went down—went through everything pretty thoroughly.”

“Really? How can you tell there were three assailants?”

Carroll pointed to the large bloodstain on the carpet. “One of the perpetrators put his big foot in the pooling blood and left that set of prints on the rug.” He pointed to three visible partial shoe prints. “I’d say this fellow was a size eleven. Our victim is a nine and a half. But come over here.” Carroll led the detective into the bedroom, and pointed to the dresser.

Gage walked over and looked at the top of the dresser. It was obvious that Sheldon Fournier, the dead man, was not very adept at house cleaning. The top of the dresser was covered in a thick layer of dust, and imprinted into that dust were four shoe prints, two very clear and two smudged. Gage looked back at Carroll.

“See what I mean? I measured those prints, and they belong to a smaller man; size eight. So now we have two perps. But there’s another slightly smudged shoe print on the comforter on the bed. It’s not real clear, but I’d say it’s another nine and a half.”

“Could it be Fournier’s from another time?”

Carroll grinned. “Not unless he stepped in his own blood. Ergo, there were three people in here when Fournier died. We’ve already taken photographs; they should be in our internal database by now. You can print them when you get back to the station.”

“Anything else?”

Carroll shook his head. “We’re still looking. The man had a computer, but it’s missing. Just the cables are here. I figure it was taken at the time of the killing. Someone climbed up on the dresser and removed a framed print from the wall. The print is sitting over there,” he gestured to the closet door, “it was taken out of the frame. Somebody was looking for something, that’s for sure. We’ll know more after the autopsy too.” Gage thanked Carroll, and headed back to the station.

By the time he got back, Detectives Dale Warwick and Marie Esparza were in interrogation questioning Viktor Bagrov. Gage watched the two detectives work for a couple of minutes, and then he opened the door, and motioned to Esparza. She glanced at Warwick, who seemed none too happy at the interruption. She got up, and left the room, closing the door behind her.

“What is it, Dan?” she asked.

He held out the printout of the shoeprint. “Ask Bagrov what his shoe size is, and see what he says. Then show him the photograph. Forensics searched his apartment already and recovered the shoes that match this print exactly, both tread pattern and size.”

Marie smiled at Dan. “You got it. Marsh told me we’re partners now.”

Esparza went back into the room with the print in her hand. She looked at Bagrov, smiling knowingly at the man. “Tell me, Viktor, what’s your shoe size?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“The kind I expect you to answer.” She looked at him coolly.

Bagrov licked his lips. “I want my lawyer. How’s that for an answer, cop-bitch?” He grinned contemptuously at the woman.

“All right,” she responded calmly, “but it doesn’t really matter anymore. Our forensics people found a series of footprints at the scene of Sheldon Fournier’s murder, Mr. Bagrov. We’ve searched your apartment and we found an exact match for tread pattern and size.” She held up the photo.

“Him n’ I were friends,” Bagrov said belligerently. “Not surprised my prints might be there.”

“On top of his dresser?”

Bagrov paled. “I want my lawyer.”

The detectives rose, and walked out, leaving Bagrov alone again for several minutes. Then a uniformed officer entered, cuffed him, and led him back to the holding cell.

“Pretty clear case, eh, Gage?” Warwick was enjoying himself.

“Probably,” Daniel responded, more to annoy the man than because he thought Bagrov might be innocent. “But we have to find the other man. We can’t really prove Bagrov pulled the trigger, and we still don’t have a real motive. Forensics tells me he tested negative for GSR.”

“No gunshot residue,” Marie said thoughtfully. “Can’t pin the shooting on him then unless we find the gun in his possession.”

“We have uniforms canvassing the apartment complex as we speak,” Warwick stated. “We’re also questioning people in the shopping center where his shop is located. Maybe somebody saw or heard something.”

“We still need a motive,” Gage said thoughtfully. “Why would he kill his employee?”

“Maybe Viktor caught him stealing, or doctoring the books or something,” Marie stated. “When the barber shop was searched, we found a small portable furnace in the back room for smelting gold. Apparently they’d buy the gold for cash, and instead of filling out the required forms and waiting the required time for LE to check the forms against stolen property reports, they were pulling stones, and then melting down the gold and scrapping it immediately.”

“Well,” Gage said, “I’m sure our examiners will see if Bagrov’s records mean anything, if they can get their hands on them. One thing I know about the Russians is that they tend to keep good records, even if they keep them hidden. In that kind of business where the clients selling them the jewelry are most frequently thieves and fences, and everything is a cash transaction, the people above you are always looking over your shoulder, even if you’re family.”

“Fournier wasn’t family,” Marie reminded them. “He wasn’t even Russian.”

“A mistake on his part for sure; going to work for them was pretty stupid. He’d always be the fall-guy if anything went amiss,” Gage said.

“Bagrov didn’t have Fournier’s computer at his place either,” Warwick added. “But, we found a key to a padlock with the name of a small storage facility near his barber shop in a desk drawer at his apartment. It’s in the process of being searched now. Let’s see what turns up.”

“I think I’m going over to his apartment,” Daniel said thoughtfully. Warwick was about to object, but he was cut off by Esparza, who said she’d like to go with him. The two detectives left the station in Gage’s cruiser.

“It’s good to see you two playing together all nice again,” Marie said with a smile as they drove down Camelback Road, looking for the address.

“If he plays nice, I will too,” Gage said. “But it’s a mistake to place blame so quickly. That’s how innocent people get sent to prison.”

“I know,” Marie commiserated, “but you have to keep rank in mind, Dan. You can’t challenge him like you did and not expect repercussions.”

Gage sighed. “I know you’re right, Marie,” he agreed, “but sometimes I just seem to know things. I can’t say how or why, but it happens. I think motive, opportunity, and means are very important; but we can’t rule out feelings.”

“I agree,” she replied. “But try not to feel so loud the next time.” They both laughed.

“There it is,” Esparza said, pointing. Daniel turned into the complex, scanning for the marked units that would be on the scene along with the detectives. The apartment they were looking for was on the second floor. They climbed the steps together, and walked past the uniforms, who nodded in recognition of the badges on their belts.

Thompson from burglary was inside, helping with the search. He knew Gage from when they worked together. He nodded.

“So,” Gage asked, “anything interesting?”

Thompson laughed and said, “We found a laptop, don’t know for certain whose it is though. It’s encrypted in Cyrillic. This’ll be a good one for the lab rats, I think.” Gage just nodded.

“Anything to link Bagrov to the murder?”

“Not explicitly,” Thompson said. “We haven’t found the murder weapon, but we did find a photograph that’s interesting.” He walked into the bedroom. The homicide detectives followed him. He stopped at the bureau and picked up a bagged five-by-seven photo in a frame and turned it so Gage and Esparza could see it. The glass covering the photo was crazed; it had obviously been dropped. The photo showed their victim standing next to a stunningly beautiful, dark-haired young woman. He had his arm around her. They were smiling, heads together.

Gage and Esparza looked at the photo. Gage asked, “Any idea who she is?”

“Nope. But we’ll check into it. There’s some blood on the glass, as you can see here, and here,” Thompson explained as he pointed out the dark stain along one corner and the tiny flecks dispersed in a spray away from the stain. “It was in the closet over there, inside a gym bag rolled up in a tee shirt.” He pointed toward the closet. “We’ll get it checked for prints, but my guess is it was taken from Fournier’s place after he was killed.”

“Anything else in the bag that would interest us?”

“Only if you have a sweaty socks fetish,” Thompson quipped. “It was filled with dirty laundry. Forensics has it already; they’ll go through it for evidence, but I think Bagrov would be too careful to leave much that would be incriminating just laying around.”

“Like, say...the photograph of the happy couple?”

Thompson snorted and nodded. “That’s why forensics took it. I’m trying to figure out why he took the photo from the dead man’s apartment and why he kept it. It’s odd; it connects him to the killers.”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Gage said thoughtfully. “That definitely puts our Russian at the crime scene, or at least in collaboration with the killer.” Thompson nodded in agreement.

Daniel then turned to Marie. “Let’s go back to Fournier’s place.” They left Thompson and the forensics people to finish up with Bagrov’s apartment.

Inside the dead man’s apartment, the forensics crew there was finishing up. Gage and Esparza looked around the place with critical eyes.

“Hey, Tommy,” Gage said, “did you guys find any photographs laying about? Maybe a photo album or something?” The other man just shook his head. “No other pictures at all?”

Tommy shrugged. “Maybe he had some on his computer.”

Esparza looked at Gage. “We might as well head back; I don’t imagine we’ll find anything of interest the forensics people haven’t already found.”