

Chapter One

Monday, October 23, 9:15 am – Living Water Church

Mark Ripley rushed into the baptistery changing room, slammed the door, and locked the handle. He scanned the room for his phone.

A loud thud reverberated through the tiny room as the entire doorframe shook. Mark searched under the towels. Another thud accompanied by the sound of cracking wood. He found the phone and glanced down at his lock screen, a picture of his wife and two children. He held the phone to his face to unlock it. Before he could dial 911, the frame splintered, and the door swung open. Realizing there was nowhere to run, Mark turned and tried to talk through the situation.

The wooden club struck the right side of his head with such violence that Mark spun sideways and toppled into the open clothes rack, dragging several white baptismal robes down with him. His phone flew from his limp hand and bounced off the wall, sliding into the opposite corner of the eight-by-eight changing room. It rested beneath the small bench.

His attacker nudged him with his foot. A few moments passed, and he nudged him again. Mark moaned. He touched his right cheek and temple, the source of his pain, and felt the warmth of his own blood. The man watched as Mark pushed up on all fours. The pastor's only thoughts were his phone and 911. Before he could move, the man swung the club again, landing a solid blow to Mark's back. The young pastor collapsed like a pile of soaking wet towels.

Chapter Two

Tuesday, October 24, 9:41 am – Living Water Church

Sergeant McNally's assignment of Detective Tidwell as my mentor frustrated me to no end. A detective who, like water, took the path of least resistance.

He snapped his fingers in front of my face, "Hey Rhodes, which way?"

"Sorry, Detective. It's just past Riverside at the bottom of the hill."

"What did I say about formalities? Save that for the brass. Just call me Tidwell or Sam."

"Yes, Detective." It came out before I could catch it.

"It's bad enough you look like a little girl; don't act like one."

I hate when they do that! Ironic. When I was twelve, everyone thought I was older and treated me as such. Now at twenty-four, I looked like an overdeveloped twelve-year-old.

Detective Tidwell loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. He stroked the salt and pepper beard which gave him a distinguished look and glanced down the road. He had a deep sorrow that added ten years to his appearance. I suppose we were a chronological paradox. "Church murder...that's bad luck."

"What do you mean?" Maybe he had a bad experience too.

"Nothing good ever comes from it," he said.

I caught sight of the steeple and rubbed a sudden chill from my arms. I hated churches and church people.

It was a traditional small church building in the shape of an L with a one-story sanctuary connected to the two-story educational wing at the base of the L, just like so many small churches I'd seen as a kid.

When we pulled into the driveway, Detective Tidwell said, “Remember, just follow my lead. You got something to say, say it; otherwise, just observe.” As soon as he got out of the car, he straightened his tie and buttoned the first button of his suit coat. “If it’s too much, Rhodes, get some air.” He walked through the front doors and let them shut behind him.

I wanted to say, “This wasn’t my first homicide, and I’m pretty sure it won’t be my last,” but nothing came out. I stood there staring at the closed wooden double doors.

As I entered the tiny four-foot-deep foyer of the small church, my partner made the introductions, saying, “Detectives Tidwell and Rhodes.” I stared through the open double doors of the tiny foyer, fixated on the wooden cross on the far wall at the opposite end of the sanctuary. A Metro officer greeted us and printed our names and titles in the crime scene logbook.

He directed us to Officer Lee, the lead officer, who extended his hand to Detective Tidwell. Tidwell shook his hand then ducked under the crime scene tape dividing the foyer from the sanctuary. He glanced around the fifty-by-one-hundred-foot box of a room and walked down the center aisle. Officer Lee brought him up to speed.

I listened from the foyer as he recited the particulars of the crime scene from his memory and notes. He pointed to the baptistery which was situated behind a wall on the sanctuary stage and could be seen through an arched open space that began about chest high and ended two feet from the twenty-foot-high ceiling. Detective Tidwell walked across the hardwood-floored stage and stopped halfway between the pulpit and the baptistery window. He turned and listened to the rest of Officer Lee’s report. “Officers Hernandez and Smith are mapping out the crime scene and taking photos. Officer Grant has the church leaders spread out in the fellowship hall. CSI is on the way.” He pointed to the baptistery. “Our vic’s at the bottom.”

I stood frozen at the entrance of the sanctuary. My eyes locked on the wooden cross hung at the back wall of the baptistery, powerless to turn away. I stood there like an idiot, holding the crime tape in my hands. The officer behind me asked, “Hey, Rhodes, How’s the new gig?” “Still learning where I fit in,” I muttered. “For now, I’m just the shadow.” I pointed to Detective Tidwell. “He’s the lead.”

The moment I said it, Detective Tidwell turned and said, “Hey, Rhodes, can we move on, or would you rather stay there and socialize?”

I rolled my eyes as I ducked under the tape. As I forced myself down the center aisle, I counted thirteen rows of pews. The décor was a mix of old and new. New ceiling, but old fixtures. Stained glass windows on the side walls, each depicting a scene from Jesus’s life, with a can light pointed at each one. A modest stage with drums, keyboard, guitars, and a baby grand in the opposite corner. Classic baptistery in the center behind the pulpit...a clear, acrylic pulpit. *Nice.* Detective Tidwell stepped up to the fourteen-inch-tall baptistery glass set in the bottom of the window. He looked down into the water. “That’s something you don’t see every day.”

At five-six, I had to stand on my tiptoes to see over the glass window that allowed a view from the pews. I could hear the pump churning and noticed a slight movement in the water’s surface. A man’s body lay at the bottom, traces of a dark fluid seeping from the vic’s mouth and nose. The body was already releasing liquids as it decomposed. “Do we know who he is?” I asked. “The pastor, Mark Ripley. Thirty-three-year-old white male, married, father of two.”

Detective Tidwell stared at the body. “Family been notified?”

“Not yet.” Officer Lee flipped through his notes. “According to Faith Jones, the church secretary, the pastor’s wife and kids are on their way back from St. Louis.”

“Any witnesses?” Detective Tidwell asked.

“No, but the church leaders all have theories as to his death. He was discovered when they arrived for their Tuesday morning leadership meeting.”

“How many leaders?” Detective Tidwell asked.

Officer Lee looked through his notes. “Twelve.”

“That explains all the vehicles,” I said. “Who called it in?”

“Owen Jenkins, the Men’s Ministry leader.” Lee led us out of the sanctuary to a small hallway at the side of the stage that led to the main hall of the educational building. From there we turned left to the doors of the changing rooms, one for men, and one for women. The door to the women’s side was cracked, and the frame shattered.

I scanned the room before entering. Something didn’t fit. “Why are the stairs and floor wet? The body’s been there at least a day.”

“According to Owen Jenkins, he saw the body and ran back to the church office to call 911. While he was doing that, the secretary and youth minister entered the church through the sanctuary doors. Noticing the baptistery light on, the secretary went up on the stage to turn it off. That’s when she saw the body and screamed. The youth minister took it upon himself to check the body, believing the pastor was still alive. Owen Jenkins heard the commotion, came back to the sanctuary. As soon as he noticed the youth minister in the water, he yelled for him to get out.”

Officer Lee closed his notebook. “We taped it off the moment we arrived.”

“What an idiot!” Detective Tidwell snapped.

The officer smiled faintly and read another note. “The youth minister’s name is Jonathan Williams.”

Detective Tidwell pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re telling me a well-intentioned staff member compromised our crime scene?” Tidwell didn’t like complications. They took more time.

I recorded detailed notes in my book. “I’m sure prints won’t help anyway. A church this size probably doesn’t clean back here often.” Turning to Officer Lee, I asked, “Did someone take pictures anyway?” Officer Lee nodded. “What about a sketched diagram with measurements?” He nodded again. Standard procedure. These were officers of East Precinct. They were trained well.

“Officers Hernandez and Smith will get those down to Homicide as soon as they’re finished.”

“Smell that? Bleach.” I looked at the remains of the door and frame where someone had broken through. “Looks like someone tried to clean up.” After donning sanitary booties and Nitrile gloves, we entered the crime scene, doing our best to preserve the integrity of the remaining evidence. I knelt by the stairs and pointed to a seam where the vinyl flooring met the rubber treads of the steps leading up to the baptistery. “There’s blood here.”

Detective Tidwell knelt beside me. “Here too. Look in the grooves of the stairs.”

“Sloppy job. Must have been in a hurry.”

Detective Tidwell turned to Officer Lee. “Could you see if there’s a janitor’s closet somewhere? If so, look for a looped-end string mop. If so, bag it. We’ll have the lab check it for blood and prints on the handle.”

“More here,” I announced, holding out a white robe with spots of blood on the sleeve. “Do we have any Luminal so we can check the whole room?”

Detective Tidwell said, “CSI will.” He called out for Officer Smith to take photos of the blood stains.

Detective Tidwell’s phone rang. He answered it and listened. He lowered the phone from his ear and said, “CSI is pulling in now. If you don’t mind, have them spray the room and light it up.”

“Will do, Detective. Anything else?”

“If you have anyone to spare, I’d like to have them canvass the immediate neighborhood to see if anyone saw cars coming or going between their last church service and this morning.”

Detective Tidwell sighed and asked, “Now, where are those witnesses?”