

Silent Killer - Excerpt

CHAPTER 1

What would be a landmark day for any other federal agent was an exercise in misery for Special Agent Gordon Stone. He sat, restless and uncomfortable, in the crowded auditorium inside the Albert V. Bryan US Courthouse in Alexandria, Virginia. Wesley Jay, the US Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia (EDVA), was on stage addressing the capacity crowd. Jay extolled the virtues of his office and its extraordinary success in managing the Eastern District's "rocket docket." The court's namesake had coined the term in the seventies, District Court Judge Bryan himself. What it meant for Jay and his stable of Assistant US Attorneys (AUSAs) was that they were forced to be one of the most efficient offices in the country when it came to prosecuting cases. They gathered annually to recognize the most successful investigations and prosecutions of the preceding year. Lawyers, law enforcement, and family members filled the auditorium. For an office that had prosecuted some of the most notorious spy and terrorist cases in the country—not to mention the occasional political scandal—the yearly awards ceremony always attracted a full house.

"Copied by many, mirrored by none," said Jay. "We bring justice to the American people more quickly and effectively than anywhere else in the country. I take great pride in that fact and hope you do as well."

Gordon tried to listen, but his discomfort just being there compelled him to tune out Jay's speech. It wasn't that he did not want to be there. On the contrary, his greatest desire was to be able to sit in the audience, listen to Jay, and enjoy a career highlight. Gordon was being recognized for his work as lead agent on an application fraud case with the Food and Drug Administration Office of Criminal Investigations (FDA-OCI).

But Gordon did not fit in. He liked people, but he had trouble relating to them and was painfully aware of his social awkwardness. Way back in elementary school, he had been diagnosed with high-functioning autism, at the time referred to as Asperger Syndrome, or colloquially as Asperger's.

Gordon appeared just like everyone else, but when it came to basic human interaction, it took a great deal of effort for him to engage with most people. It was always hard and frequently exhausting. Small talk, humor, and sarcasm often flew past him. Therapy had brought him a long way, but still, those who did not know him thought he was aloof. Some actually found his behavior offensive.

"Damn Asperger's," he said to himself.

The true irony, he knew, was however damning Asperger's was to his social status, it was also his superpower, allowing him to focus on a particular topic—or investigation—to the point where he could see things no one else could see. He could anticipate what others viewed as

unexpected. That focus bred unparalleled intuition, which was what made him a great investigator.

That was why he was here in this crowded hall, surrounded by people he did not know. He *was* a great investigator. But he was most definitely not a great socializer, and he was uncomfortable. As much as he wished he could enjoy the ceremony and embrace the praise of his peers, his Asperger's would not allow it. In fact, a big group setting surrounded by strangers? That was pretty much the nightmare scenario.

Gordon's brain was wired differently. At least that's how Katherine, his longtime therapist, described it. He thought differently, acted differently, saw the world differently than most. She emphasized repeatedly to him he was not broken, just different, and Gordon knew it was okay to be different. Most of the time, that was enough. But even now, as a successful thirty-two-year-old federal agent, he could still feel broken. He hoped today would not be one of those days.

"The work we do—check that—the work *you* do for this country is, simply put, extraordinary," Jay continued. "We put more cases before a judge than anyone else, and that means when it comes time to recognize our best work in a given year, the competition is tight. I salute those of you sitting in this room. Your work, your intellect, your dogged pursuit of justice places you at the top of what we do here. You are the best of the best. Thank you for all you do for our organization, our district, and our country." Jay smiled to his audience. "Now then, let's hand out some hardware."