

Chapter One

Thursday, March 20, 5:45 AM – Davidson Street, Nashville

Death doesn't keep a schedule. Dispatch called at four-thirty this morning announcing another homicide in Nashville. Unfortunately, I was on my morning run and left my phone at the apartment. Once I saw the message, I showered, dressed, and added a touch of makeup. When I arrived at the crime scene in the warehouse district of Davidson Street, the officer directed me past the gate and to the right of a gravel split. It was a materials recycling lot approximately six hundred fifty feet wide and about five hundred feet deep from the streetside fence to the Cumberland River. It gave the owner access to the river, the railroad, and the street. They could move everything in and out by any of the three methods.

I stepped cautiously, avoiding puddles of water from last night's rain. I looked up and couldn't believe my eyes as I passed a second pile of scrap metal. It wasn't the dead body. I was getting used to seeing that. After all, what is a homicide without a dead body? There, amongst the gravel, dirt, scrap metal, loading trucks, and heavy machinery, sat a brand-new Bentley Continental GT. It was a stunning topaz blue, the newest color, and had to be worth at least a quarter of a million new—a sharp contrast to the rest of the scene. I caught myself gawking at its beauty, even with the visible blood and bullet holes throughout the front seats and the crushed right and rear panels. Parts of the bumper were loose on the ground. Someone had made three-inch deep ruts in the gravel, trying to back the Bentley out of the recycling lot in a hurry. The driver crashed through the plastic orange barrier, lodging the Bentley onto the pile of steel and scrap metal. If this hadn't been a crime scene, I might have cried over the loss of a priceless

car.

Sam whistled. It was his way of saying, “Hurry up.” I flashed my credentials as I ducked under the police tape. “Detective Abbey Rhodes, Homicide.” The young officer waved me on, and I joined Sam. It was much colder than I remembered when I was running earlier. Of course, then I was wearing sweats and generating my own heat. My dress pants were thin and offered no defense against the cold, damp air.

Sam looked old—older than usual. “Well, Detective Tidwell, you certainly got an early start today,” I said with a smile. Beneath it, my teeth were chattering.

“Nice of you to finally join us.” He was in a sour mood.

That’s my line. Punctuality was not one of Sam’s strong suits—neither was his choice of clothing. If I didn’t know better, I would venture that he was in his late sixties, not his fifties. Plain suits and winged-tip shoes went out before he started wearing them. Thankfully, some things like his skinny ties were making a comeback—no thanks to Sam. He was staring at his watch, hidden beneath his crime scene gloves. Anyway, I always beat him to the crime scene and the office. Not today.

Sam handed me a cup with my name written on it. “Iced Caramel Macchiato.”

My favorite. “You remembered. That’s so sweet.” I took the cup from his hand. He’d been trying so hard to be nice to me lately. No more looking at me like he just saw the ghost of his daughter Molly. No more snide rookie remarks. No more tricks or traps. No old cop, new cop, just...

“Young people don’t even know what real coffee is, Abbey.” And there it was—the ‘young people’ comment. I couldn’t help the fact that I was twenty-five and looked fifteen. Sam took a sip of his drink to emphasize his point. “Coffee...black...hot.” I watched the steam roll

out of his mouth as he said a long, drawn-out, “Ahhh.”

I was freezing. I needed to get Sam back on track and focus on the case so we could get on to the warmth of our Homicide offices. I said offices, but they were nothing more than a bunch of cubicles all jammed together. Sam and I shared one. “How did they find the crime scene? This is not something you see driving by.” I turned and tried to see any visible line from the car to the street. There was none.

“On a 911 call,” Sam said. “One of the drivers came in early to take his load to Chattanooga.”

I glanced down at the body lying at Sam’s feet. White male in his early twenties with curly brown hair and eyes frozen in fright or surprise, with a fatal wound in his neck and two in the chest. He wore faded blue jeans, a rugby shirt, and a leather jacket. The young man lay in a dark red patch of blood that had soaked into the gravel road. He held a small Ruger three-eighty in his right hand. I examined the car, approximately thirty feet north of the body. “That’s a high-money Bentley.” Both the driver and passenger side doors were open. I couldn’t see inside from my current vantage point. As I walked past it on my way to his body, I noted that the interior was riddled with bullet holes and blood splatter. The car was set at an angle, the highest point being the right end of the trunk.

I walked over to examine the Bentley more closely. The driver’s seat was soaked with blood. Without leaning in and grabbing it, I determined the pistol lying on the passenger floorboard to be a 44 Glock. I donned my Mylar gloves to preserve the integrity of our crime scene. “What do we have so far?” I asked, turning back to Sam, who was studying the body of the victim.

“Three GSWs, two to the chest and one to the neck. All kill shots.” He pointed to the car.

“It looks like he stopped the carjacking, but at the cost of his life.”

“Not dressed like a Bentley owner, and he’s so young.”

“Coming from you, that’s something.” There it was again—the jab at my youthful looks, which was how I like to put it instead of what I heard some men say. To my dread, I looked like a well-developed fifteen-year-old. Sam winked. He could tell he was getting under my skin a bit. He pointed to the street just beyond the open passenger door. “Looks like the carjacker was hit multiple times. Blood trail leads out the passenger side, up the scrap heap of metal, and down the other side. Then, it heads northeast but stops at the edge of Davidson Street. There’s a pretty good trail of blood in the gravel and pavement.”

“An accomplice probably picked him up,” I said as I counted the holes in the seats, dash, and passenger door panel. I walked over to Sam and the body. “Any ID?”

Sam held up the vic’s wallet and phone. “The key fob is still in the console.” Sam tossed the wallet to me and looked at his notes. “Dean Swain, twenty-two. According to the zip, he lives in the Buckhead section of Atlanta. Serious money.”

I opened the wallet and looked at the ID to confirm what Sam told me. “That’s either the owner at your feet or a young man who took the wrong turn during a joy ride.” I turned my attention back to the Bentley. I carefully climbed on the pile. It wasn’t easy. The scraps had sharp edges. Once around the open passenger side door, I opened the glove box. “Car’s registered to Dean A Swain. Our dead man is the owner. Wonder what he was doing here of all places? It’s not the kind of place you would imagine seeing this kind of a car. Any sign of drugs?” That’s the only reason I could find for this car being in the salvage lot.

“Not so far. The officers secured the sight at four-o-eight and interviewed the truck

driver. One of them took photos of the scene. Officer Chen just finished the sketch, complete with accurate measurements. I haven't been here long myself. So far, no casings have been discovered."

"My guess is he either used a revolver, or he stopped to pick up his empty casings."

Sam looked up at me. "What about the car?"

"It's totaled."

"No kidding?" Sam asked sarcastically. I tested the solidity of the car's placement upon the plastic barrier and heap of metal before I leaned into the floorboard. I did my best not to compromise the crime scene or jeopardize the evidence. "We got casings here." I could see the brass. One lay on the console between the front seats, just two inches away from the key fob. The other two lay below the brake pedal. I reached under the driver and passenger seats. Nothing else. "Three forty-fours here." After examining the Glock, I added. "That's exactly how many are missing from the magazine."

"All three hit. Not an amateur. I'll wager he has to be an experienced shooter to score three kill shots while being shot at. I couldn't do that."

"Expert shooter; terrible driver." I didn't mean it to be funny, but Sam laughed.

He examined the bullet wounds in the boy's throat and chest. "I'd say the holes match a forty-four." Sam scratched his salt-and-pepper beard with his clean hand. Deep lines formed on his forehead. It was his "something doesn't fit" look. "We need to begin by focusing on the shooter. We have solid evidence for him. The rest we'll have to piece together."

I grabbed my knife and dug out one of the slugs lodged in the passenger door.

"Nine-millimeter."

“You sure?” he asked with doubt in his voice.

“Positive.” I dropped it in an evidence bag and dug another slug from the far-right edge of the dash. Same. He was trying to back out while being shot at. The only way forward would have gone through Dean, who was holding a gun. There’s no way Dean made these shots from his angle.” I returned to Sam, glad to be out of the scrap pile. I sipped my drink and put my other hand in my coat pocket. “It’s cold out here, especially this close to the river.” In times like this, I wished I could drink my coffee like Sam did—hot and black. My iced Macchiato just made me cold on the inside too.

“It’s the first day of spring, Abbey. Be thankful.” He started whistling a bright song. He knew his peppy optimism aggravated me on days like this.

“It doesn’t feel like spring.” I jogged in place to create some body heat. Last night’s rain brought in another cold front. “I should have dressed better but was rushing out the door.” When I arrived at my army base in Grafenwoehr, Germany, everyone laughed at me, the little girl from Central America. The slightest cold front came in, and I would wear multiple layers under my heavy coat. I’d come from balmy Guatemala, after all. But I adjusted to the cooler climate of Germany a year into my service and didn’t mind it. Then it happened all over again when I moved to Nashville, Tennessee, and I grew accustomed, once again, to the warm seasons of the south. Now, I was at the mercy of changing seasons. I felt the slightest downward dip in the thermometer, and I cringed. I was getting soft. Jumping up and down to warm up encouraged sniggering from the patrol officers. I didn’t care. It warmed my body and made me feel better. I glanced over the lot, which had small puddles of water. “What time did it rain yesterday?”

“Between eight and nine. It was short, but it came in pretty heavy.” He stopped what he was doing and looked up. “What are you thinking, Abbey?”

“We’re lucky. I can tell you this happened after nine o’clock. Dean Swain’s clothes are dry. That tells us any footprints we find were made after the rain. Do we have a time of death?”

“Not yet. I’ll get a preliminary time when the ME gets here. What do you think about the scene?”

I examined the footprints in the granules of the gravel. The rim around each impression was almost as precise as the plasters we made of crime scenes. There was a clear picture of last night’s event. I could easily make out Dean’s path from the car toward the river. The prints stopped abruptly twenty feet past where his body lay now. “Look here, Sam. I can see where Dean stopped and turned back.”

“Meaning?” Sam asked. I’m sure he had his own theory by now. He probably wanted to hear mine. He was always encouraging me to grow in my observations.

“Well,” I began in a whisper, almost as if I was saying to myself. “On the surface, Dean was dumb enough to leave his keys in his very expensive car. So, he either trusted his passenger or thought he was alone. When he heard the car start, he stopped and ran back to see what had happened. He knew his key fob was still in the vehicle. When Dean came back this way, the driver panicked and shoved it in reverse while his door was still open. He hit the barrier with enough force to run it over and get stuck on top of the metal. He didn’t go forward because Dean had his gun. So, in a panic, he floored it and spun out on the wet surface. Before he knew it, he’d wrecked the car and was hopelessly stuck on the debris.”

“Where did the driver come from?” Sam asked, forcing me to fill in details off the top of my

head. “Someone must have followed the Bentley here and taken advantage of its missing driver, who, for some reason, was walking toward the river. Then, when Dean ran toward the car, we had a shootout, and both parties were hit multiple times.” Sam nodded. “Make sense to you, Sam?” I asked, hoping he was getting the same vibe.

“Not really. But that’s what we’re supposed to think.” It was music to my ears. Sam had come a long way since the Ripley case when he wanted to jump at the first opportunity to close the deal and move on. Now, he was back to his old self, looking beneath the surface and searching for all the clues.

“Sam, don’t you think this is odd?” He glanced up and smiled. I was still getting used to calling him by his first name. We’d grown close in my year and a half in Homicide. “Two major things are wrong with this scene. First, if you were shot in the chest and the neck, could you hold on to your gun?” He shook his head. I bent over and picked up the gun in Dean Swain’s hand. “A three-eighty. Wrong caliber.” I showed Sam the slugs in the bag. Ejecting the magazine from the Ruger, I pressed down on the top bullet. It didn’t budge. I checked the chamber, and it was still empty. I smelled the barrel. All I could detect was cleaning oil. “All the bullet holes in the car tell me the shots came from behind the driver’s door. Dean is nearly thirty feet to the front. Whoever staged this scene was either in a hurry or didn’t know what he was doing.”

“That—or he thinks we’re stupid, which adds a different animal into the mix.” Sam studied Dean’s hand. “When CSI gets here, have them swab his hand. I bet they don’t find any powder residue on it.”

“Smell it. The gun is clean. It’s not been fired for some time.”

Sam took the gun from me and smelled it. He nodded and flipped it over. “Serial numbers are

still in place. We'll run a search for the owner. Probably stolen."

I noticed a bulge in Dean Swain's ankle, bent over, and pulled up his right pant leg. "Ankle holster. Small enough to fit a three-eighty." Swain's wounds matched the forty-four, but the slugs I pulled out of the car were nine-millimeter. Dean didn't shoot the carjacker, at least not with this gun. "There had to be another shooter, Sam. It fits the evidence so far. But I'm confused. If he was defending Swain, the shots would be justified. So, why leave the scene? Why not report it?" "That's a good question. I've been wondering that myself. He probably panicked. Or maybe he has a record. Maybe the gun's not registered. Or maybe he ran after the shooter. Whatever the reason, he left."

"What about a security guard?" I asked.

"I already checked. They laughed and said, 'Not to watch scrap metal.'"

I examined the prints around Dean's body. I knelt behind his body and looked at the Bentley. Holding out my hands like I was shooting a gun, I tried to line up the shots. The open driver's door blocked my line of sight. "Not possible to hit anything but the exterior of the driver's door from here. I looked down and noticed another set of footprints led to Dean's body and away to the back of the lot. They disappeared when they reached the blacktop drive. From Dean's body, I took a step to my right, another and another, and finally a fourth. In that position, I could see clearly into the car. "The first shots came from this angle or even further to my right. I still can't see the front of the passenger door or dash."

"Assuming the shots occurred after the car hit the barrier," Sam said.

I knelt. The ground was harder here and didn't display good prints. I had to search in a wide arc to find the trail. "Sam, the prints start here," I said from the rear of a semi-trailer sixty feet from

the Bentley. I searched the trailer's exterior and found a lone nine-millimeter casing stuck in the treads. "I got something." Sam came to my side and bagged the evidence. I looked back at the body. Dean bled out where he lay. The gravel absorbed almost all of the blood, making a perfect marker for later.

"Do you see any blood over where you are?" Sam asked.

I glanced around. "No, but there were only three casings in the car, and Dean was hit exactly three times. The other shooter must have surprised the car thief. He obviously hit him. The seats are soaked, and the trail leads out the far side to the street." I examined the ground around the trailer. "We have some good shoeprints here if we want to make plasters."

"No other casings. How many shots were fired at the driver of the car?" Sam asked.

"At least five that I could find. That doesn't include any stray bullets or direct hits still lodged in the carjacker's body."

"Someone cleaned up the scene and tried to make it look like Dean fired back. Why would they do that?"

"But Dean didn't get a shot off," I insisted.

"No. He didn't. But the shooter wants us to think he did. For some reason, he wants to keep himself anonymous—free of the investigation."

"If he really wanted us to think it was just Dean and the carjacker, why not take the time to fire off several rounds from Dean's gun first? And why not take the time to line up the body with the shots taken?" This was an amateur job of staging a scene. This wasn't a trained killer, or he'd know better. Any shooter worth his salt would know the differences between a three-eighth, a nine-millimeter, and a forty-four. "Who would have shot the driver and tried to hide the fact that

he was here?”

“I don’t know, Abbey, but I have a more puzzling question. Where’s the carjacker now? We know he’s wounded and lost a lot of blood. Assuming someone picked him up at the street, based on the blood trail, where would they have gone?”

“To get emergency help,” I said. “He’d have to get help quickly, or he would bleed out, too.”

“That’s right. If he lost that much blood, he was in dire need of immediate medical attention.”

I paused and thought for a moment. The first and most obvious answer would be a hospital. They had the equipment and the staff to handle gunshot wounds successfully. Secondary sources of healing and possible surgery would be a veterinarian hospital or clinic, a dental surgeon’s facility, or an urgent clinic. “I know we need to follow the clues to the carjacker’s identity, Sam, but I also want to know who shot him. Who else was here last night?”

“That’s the million-dollar question, Abbey,” Sam said, pausing to sip his coffee. He held the cup in both hands to absorb its heat. Then, he sipped from it again. “We have a crime to solve, Abbey. It’s what we do best.”

“Okay, Sam. Let’s do our due diligence here, find every available clue, study every aspect of the scene, and then we can run scenarios back at Homicide where it’s warm.” A gust of wind blew my hair over my face. I set my cup on the ground, pulled my hair back into a ponytail, and secured it with a black hairband that I kept on my wrist. I turned back to Sam. “When will the ME’s office get here?”

“They’re running a little later than usual. They’ll get here when they get here. Don’t worry about it.”

“Any witnesses? Anyone see or hear anything unusual last night?”

“None and no cameras in sight.”

“Someone had to hear this many shots,” I said. The lot was too close to Broadway and its outside activities for no one to hear gunshots.

“What’s your gut telling you, kid?” he asked.

There it was again, the “kid” comment. I didn’t know if that made it worse for me or for him. If I were a kid, that would make him an old man. *Focus, Abbey*. “Well, at first glance, it looks like a random carjacking that went wrong. Not only did he damage the car and lodge it on the barrier, he was shot several times before he could escape. Of course, you know I don’t go with first glances. This car would be big money to anyone willing to steal it. Why is it back in the middle of this lot, and who was waiting to find it?”

He smiled. “Go on.”

“Also, the timing is too convenient. We have some rich kid out here in the middle of the night two weeks before the council votes on a development plan for the East Bank Project. My gut says he’s tied to the project in some way. We have to dig into Dean’s background and see why he chose this lot for a stroll last night. Any way you slice it, there’s more here than meets the eye.”

“Well, then, let’s get at it,” Sam said. “I’m cold.”

“It’s spring. Remember?” I noticed something fall from Sam’s beard as he laughed. I bent over and picked it up. “Hey, you didn’t say you brought chocolate donuts. Where are they?”

“Who told you?” Sam asked, looking quickly at the officer to his right. The officer put his hands up in the air as if to say, “Don’t look at me.” Sam had a guilty look, and he couldn’t hide it.

“Honestly, I meant to give you one, but I ate them both. I couldn’t help myself.”

I leaned forward and brushed the remaining pieces of a chocolate donut from his beard. “Let’s

just hope our carjacker and shooter are as careless and obvious as you.” I laughed and punched him lightly in the shoulder.

We meticulously analyzed the crime scene, photographing tire and shoe impressions and measuring the different strides of the steps. I photographed most of the site myself, even though I knew an officer had already done so. I also mapped out the area specific to the crime scene and bagged everything inside the car. There were two partially smoked cigars. Sam bagged those as well. We walked around the lot several times to ensure we didn’t miss anything else.

Sam said, “We need to get a list of workers on the lot from the end of the rain to the time of death and rule out their shoe prints.”

“Sam, they ought to make great casts of all the prints.” The rain hardened the concrete powder, which made its own mold. “I hope they can make casts of the various-sized shoeprints. It could tell us how many people had been in the lot since last night’s rain.”

“We’ll see.” He shouted to an officer at the site, “Make sure they get casts of each print marked. And don’t forget to list the location for each.”

The ME’s office arrived and signed the paperwork to take possession of the body. They gave an approximate time of death between twelve and two. A few minutes later, the CSI team began their site work. We returned to our cars and made plans to sort through the evidence back at Homicide. My body was almost numb from the cold. Just as I was getting in, a gust of wind knocked the empty cup from my hand and blew it to the far side of the lot. Sam said to let it go, but I hated to litter, even if it was in a scrap yard lot like this. The cup rolled here and there. I must have looked like an idiot chasing the cup around like a cat chases a light on the floor. Another gust of wind finally lodged it beside the fence separating the parking lot from the

Cumberland River.

I ran to get it and noticed a flash of light from the opposite bank. The sunrise reflected off someone's binoculars. A man in fatigues was watching me. *Maybe he was watching the events of last night, too.* "Sam, come here!" Just as I called out, the man dashed into the brush.