

## Prologue

March 15, 1902

Her hand touched cold wet stone. She recoiled. By now her body temperature had dropped, and shivering was all that kept her blood from freezing. Still, she reached out again and groped in the dark for the slimy wall. Another nail broken. Nothing left but nubs.

One bare foot touched down on the first uneven step. Another footfall, and another, the biting cold worked its way to her heart. She tread lightly, lest she slip. Far below stretched the tunnels beneath the asylum. Tunnels that would lead to her freedom.

She stumbled, gasped, and righted herself. The lightheadedness never left now. Her last meal, when did she last have food? What did it matter? Soon she would be free, back in the real world.

Finally, she reached the bottom. Darkness forbade her running, although she desperately wanted to. She scabbled the damp walls with two hands and placed one foot in front of the other, stubbing her toes often on the lumpy floor stones. She'd become accustomed to the fetid smell. It wasn't much different from her cell, actually. Simply add a few dead rats to the putrid mix.

She kept moving, praying for that tiny glimmer of light that Bridget had promised. And Liam. Could she trust them? Would there be a boat waiting on the shore, one to carry her off the island? And what then? Bridget's assurance of escape did not include a final destination.

Now was not the time to reconsider. No choice but to move forward.

The tunnel veered left and she could hear water drip. It seeped down the walls and dribbled from the ragged underground ceiling, which created puddles along the stone floor. Something poked her ankle and she screamed, swirled in a frenzy, and covered her mouth with both hands. Sound carried in the yawning cavern.

She slogged faster now through the passageway that seemed to have no end.

"Please, please, please, God," she whispered.

What was that? She stopped suddenly. A voice? Her hammering heart would not quiet enough for her to listen. No, nothing. She kept going.

Her foot caught a loose stone and she stumbled. Before she could catch herself, she ended up sprawled on the wet ground, face down. She lay there a moment, sobbing, exhausted, and out of breath. With a groan, she spurred herself up, felt a twinge of pain in her wrists. God, were they broken?

She inhaled a breath of foul air, which forced her to her knees, shivering out of control. Through sheer will, she rose to her feet again, her knees and palms scraped and bleeding. Pain screamed from every joint. She begged her lungs to accept every foul breath.

*This is what it's like to be old*, she realized. Something she would never be if she remained down here. The thought propelled her to move, one foot, then another, forward, until she regained her stride. She trudged like a walking corpse.

Thoughts flashed and bounced in her head. How did she come to be here? Locked up like a crazy woman. How long had it been? A month? Two? Time had lost its meaning. Her family, how could they have subjected her to this horror? Wait, no, they were gone. Dead, dead. They weren't to blame. But a flicker of a memory stabbed at her brain. She tried to force it to surface, knew it was important, but the treatments had robbed her...

She clutched her head and stifled a scream. Don't think about it. Not now.

*Look forward, not backward*, she berated herself, fearful her resolve would falter. The future, that's where she headed. Once she was free, out of this chasm of hell, her old self would return. Her competent, self-reliant, keen self. Not this mad woman who had been locked away. The truth would be revealed. She would right the wrongs.

A foghorn sounded from afar, giving her strength a boost.

She spied it then. A tiny pinprick of light in the distance. It seemed to grow and shimmer, then recede and darken. It sparked and sizzled. Her feet stumbled toward it, gaining speed, strength. The light grew until it seemed the sun itself had rolled into the maw of the abyss.

Wait. That was not sunlight. It was that awful yellowish, crackling light called electricity. Too late. Her feet kept their momentum and she found herself in an artificially lit cave at the end of the tunnel. There was no blue sky. No ocean breezes, no rescue boat. No daylight, in fact.

And she was no longer alone.

She stood trembling in her sopping, filthy dress. Water streamed from her hair and into her eyes as she whirled about in a desperate circle. Tears welled and she choked down a bitter cry.

Four men in white lab coats stood in front of her.

"Hello, Ruby," one said. "We were worried about you."

New York City

2016

## Chapter 1

May 12, 2016

The call came at 7:30 a.m. It wasn't his cell phone that woke him. Rather his cacophonous parrot squawking from the kitchen.

"Awright, Dexter, I hear you." Frank Mead swung his legs around to sit on the edge of the bed and grabbed his cell. "Mead."

The voice of his sergeant, Will Jefferies, was expected but not welcome. It meant another murder in this grand city. His grand city.

"Shit. Ten minutes."

Frank hustled into the kitchen and yanked off the pillowcase covering the cage of the blue and yellow macaw. "Morning to you, too."

Dexter awwwped in reply.

"Yeah, yeah. Keep your shirt on."

Wings flapped.

In his briefs and tee shirt, his grayish blond hair punked out in all directions, Frank looked a bit less than the illustrious homicide lieutenant of the NYPD. He reached under the kitchen cabinet and brought out bird seed, filled Dexter's cup and gave him fresh water.

Then he stood a moment staring at his friend. A rescue bird, who, in fact, had rescued him. Frank sighed and hurried to get ready for the day.

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Frank found Will Jefferies waiting for him on the street in an unmarked Ford Fusion Hybrid.

"Morning." Will handed his boss a Venti Starbucks and rolled the quiet vehicle down Prince Street.

Frank noted Will, as usual, wore a pressed suit and shirt, striped tie. In contrast, Frank's sport jacket was rumpled and his shirt would be embarrassed to accept a tie. He popped the lid flap on the coffee. "What have we got?"

"Don't freak. It's an older woman and she lives a coupla blocks from your mom."

Frank squinted through the windshield. A recent conversation with his mother brought an uneasy prickle down his back.

"Something ring a bell?" Will asked.

"What do we know?"

"A neighbor of the vic came to pick her up for yoga class."

"Yoga?"

"Yeah, you know...down dog, up cat, that kind of—"

"What's the vic's name?"

Will brought the car up short near several police cars, lights flashing, and a CSI van. The street was blocked off with yellow tape, and several officers kept bystanders away. He whipped out his pocket notebook and flipped through. "Her name was Sophie Hunt."

Frank let out the air he was coveting. "Fuck." He jumped out of the car and pushed through the throng of cops to get to the scene. That uneasy prickle had become an unbearable itch.

Will followed at his heels. "What? You know her? Your mom knows her? What?"

Frank didn't respond, but with trepidation, he approached the first-floor apartment of a three-story. He walked through the door into a bright, airy, recently remodeled apartment to a tableau of chaos. Furniture tipped and upended, books and papers strewn around the room, drawers yanked out of desks, and wall hangings crooked on the newly painted walls.

"Whoa," Will said. "Ya think someone was looking for something? What the hell?"

Heart beating with fury, Frank stormed to the bedroom. He stopped upon entry and stared at the scene. That cold familiar feeling of grief punched him in the gut. He hated this part of his job. Lives wasted, not just the victim's but all those the victim touched. Like his mother. Shit. "Sophie was mom's best friend."

Will shook his head. "I figured something like that. Jesus."

Frank plodded closer to Sophie. She was lying on her side on the bed, dressed, eyes closed. She looked like a rag doll with limbs askew. A woman in a blue paper jumpsuit hovered over the body, checking temp and rigor signs.

He looked at the M-E, Serena Oliver, whom he'd worked with for five years. Had she always had that much gray in her hair? She was still tiny, with latte colored skin. And a delight to work with. Efficient, smart, always right, yes always. *Not like me.*

"Frank?" Serena said. "You're white as chalk."

He clamped his jaw.

"You knew her?"

He nodded.

"Sorry."

"What can you tell me?"

"T-O-D between ten last night and two this morning. Signs of struggle. There are marks on her arms and wrists as if someone grabbed her. Small caliber bullet to the heart..." she trailed off, thinking, "...close range. Might've gone off in the struggle. I'll call you later today...make sure I get to this one."

He nodded again, felt like a bobble head, a bobble head in shock.

Will strode up. "Robbery gone bad, maybe. Hard to know if anything is missing. Maybe her family, or friends, well—"

"Yeah, I'll talk to my mother. If anyone will know, she will."

"Close, huh?"

"They went to high school together, so, what, sixty years?"

"Jeez. Sorry."

Frank moved to the window, looked out onto Essex Street. Old neighborhood in the process of gentrifying. Still just red and brown brick, a few blooming oaks, their leaves wilting in the heat, and trash cans. *Today must be trash day.* He wondered absently if Sophie had put her trash out before... What the fuck was he thinking? Trash? He spun around and headed to the front door.

"Talk to the neighbors, check the phones, any CCTV cameras around? Right, cameras, what is this, London? And don't forget to—"

"Yeah, Frank, I know, I know. I'll take care of it." Will followed him to the street. "Go see your mother." Will handed him the car keys.

"Nah. I'll walk."

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63 Orchard Street was a three-block walk from Sophie Hunt's apartment on Essex Street. Frank knew the Lower East Side intimately, having grown up there. He'd left for

Washington D.C. in 2000, after his wife died, but returned in 2010 to become the chief homicide detective for Manhattan's 6<sup>th</sup> Precinct.

At first, moving back struck him as a failure, laid like a rock in his stomach. Now, he was glad to be home. He'd somehow managed to rebuild a relationship with his daughter, Amanda, and strengthened his bond with Lizzie, his feisty, cop-loving mother over the last few years. All was good. Except for the fact that there was no woman in his life. Still, he had Dexter. Yup, all was good.

The day confirmed it. Blue sky, sunshine, low humidity. Easy to love New York on a day like this. The other bright spot for Frank appeared in the latest Times article he read—about crime across the country. New York City did not even make the top 25 of cities with high murder rates. *Yahoo*. Not a bad recommendation for his own work in resolving homicide cases.

He walked south on Essex Street and turned right onto Rivington for two blocks. At Orchard, he turned left and came to his mother's building.

Reluctant to relay the news about Sophie to Lizzie, Frank shoved his hands in his pockets, inhaled the sun-sweetened air, and stared at his mother's home. The building, more than a century old, five-story gritty brick tenement, sorely needed renovation. Three storefronts: a tiny dress shop at the first level and two below ground; a dry cleaner and a shoe repair inhabited the street spaces. Above, ten units complete with eight sets of tenants. Some families, some couples. The Lower East Side had developed a caché since the Tenement Museum had opened down the street.

He looked around at similar buildings. Quintessential tenements built in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. Prior to central heating, these places froze tenants in the winter and roasted them in the summer. Before electricity, darkness pervaded the interiors, particularly the hallways where no windows lit the space. Running water was always cold and sometimes had to be obtained from an outdoor pump. Water closets were situated on each floor, not in each flat. His mind floated back in time to the former Mead ancestors who had occupied the tenement.

*Quit postponing the inevitable.* He walked to the front door. Lizzie's apartment took up two units on the first floor, and over the years, large mullioned windows replaced grim interior walls. The place was light and welcoming.

So was his mother until she gleaned his expression. "Frank. It's early, what—?"

"You gonna invite me in?"

She stepped back and he walked through the door.

"What's wrong, Frank. I know that look. Someone died. Who? Who died?" The color had blanched from her face.

He closed the door and led her into the living room. "Sit."

“I don’t want to sit.”

“Sit, Ma.”

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then sank down on a dark brown velvety sofa. “You’re scaring me, Frank.”

He sat next to her, watched her smooth her blouse and slacks. Always a lady. Steel-gray hair neatly coiffed, chiseled high cheekbones, soft blue eyes that now reflected dread.

Both turned to each other.

“It’s Sophie, isn’t it? Sophie is dead.”

“What are you now, a psychic?”

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

He tightened his lips and looked at her. “How did you know?”

For a long moment, Lizzie didn’t answer, didn’t move, hardly blinked. Then: “I knew she was in trouble.” It came out a whisper.

“What kind of trouble?”

Lizzie touched her forehead as if trying to release the words from her brain. “She was murdered, wasn’t she? Oh God, why didn’t I do something?” She struggled up from the couch and waved her arms. “I could’ve done something, Frank. She didn’t have to die. If you had known. If I had gone to you—”

“Ma, slow down, take it easy.” He stood and put his arms around her.

She pushed away. “It’s my fault.”

“Come on, Ma...” Frank dropped his arms and watched helplessly as she paced the room. He waited, knowing full well she wouldn’t calm down until she was ready. “How ‘bout I make us some tea?”

“Tea?”

“Yeah. They always do that in British movies, right?” He tried a smile. “I can handle making tea.”

Lizzie pulled a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose then collapsed on the couch. “First tell me. How was she killed?”

“Ma, that’s not important—”

“You let me decide what’s important. Now tell me, Frank, please, how was she killed?”

“She was shot.”

“Where?”

“In her bedroom.”

“Not where in the house. Where was she shot?”

“Ma?”

“In the head?”

“In the heart. I doubt she felt a thing.”

“Oh, good God have mercy.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.” He realized he hadn’t called her Mom since he was a kid. He sat with her on the couch again. “I know she was a good friend.”

“The best.” She turned to him. “You know we were friends for a long time. Went to school together. She always helped me out in math. I was never very good at fractions, but Sophie Hunt, well, she was a genius at numbers.” Her eyes leaked tears. “And I know you’re going to catch the son-of-a-bitch who did this.”

He shrugged. “I’ll need your help.”

“Me? What can I do?”

“Start with Hunt. That was her maiden name, right?”

“So?” She sniffled.

“Why didn’t she change her name to O’Connor when she married Aidan?”

“She was ahead of her time. A staunch feminist. She was born a Hunt and wanted to keep that name.”

“And her daughters?”

“They go by O’Connor. There was just so much *feminist* Aidan could stand.”

Frank nodded. “How long has he been gone?”

Lizzie bit her bottom lip. “Years. Now they’re together again.”

They looked at each other, the sudden silence between them like a wispy fog. Frank thought about life after death, Aidan and Sophie together again for eternity. What if they hated each other? Would that be hell?

“Ma, you don’t know they’re together, for sure.”

“Maybe not,” Lizzie blurted out. “But I do know you need to act fast before the case goes cold.”

“You watch too much TV.”

“Hey, I was a cop’s wife, a cop’s daughter-in-law, and I’m a cop’s mother, what do you expect?”

He took her hand. “There’s something I need you to do.”

She looked at him like he’d grown a second nose.

“Her apartment was ransacked. The killer was looking for something.”

Lizzie brought a hand to her mouth. “Oh God.”

“Do you know what it was?”

“Sophie trusted me not to say anything to anybody.”

“Say what?”

“But I can tell you, Frank. I’m sure she won’t mind... now...” Lizzie dabbed her eyes with the tissue. “Now that she’s gone. But I should have told you sooner.”

“What do you know about her murder?”

“I know what Sophie’s killer was looking for.”