

Chapter One

THERE ARE PLACES I'LL REMEMBER ALL MY LIFE – RED SQUARE with a hot wind howling across it, my mother's bedroom on the wrong side of 8-Mile, the endless gardens of a fancy foster home, a man waiting to kill me in a group of ruins known as the Theatre of Death.

But nothing is burnt deeper in my memory than a walk-up in New York – threadbare curtains, cheap furniture, a table loaded with tina and other party drugs. Lying next to the bed are a handbag, black panties the size of dental floss and a pair of six-inch Jimmy Choo's. Like their owner, they don't belong here. She is naked in the bathroom – her throat cut, floating face down in a bathtub full of sulphuric acid, the active ingredient in a drain cleaner available at any supermarket.

Dozens of empty bottles of the cleaner – DrainBomb, it's called – lie scattered on the floor. Unnoticed, I start picking through them. They've all got their price tags still attached and I see that, in order to avoid suspicion, whoever killed her bought them at twenty different stores. I've always said it's hard not to admire good planning.

The place is in chaos, the noise deafening – police radios blaring, coroner's assistants yelling for support, a Hispanic woman sobbing. Even if a victim doesn't know anyone in

the world, it seems like there's always someone sobbing at a scene like this.

The young woman in the bath is unrecognizable – the three days she has spent in the acid have destroyed all her features. That was the plan, I guess – whoever killed her had also weighed down her hands with telephone books. The acid has dissolved not only her fingerprints but almost the entire metacarpal structure underneath. Unless the forensic guys at the NYPD get lucky with a dental match, they'll have a helluva time putting a name to this one.

In places like this, where you get a feeling evil still clings to the walls, your mind can veer into strange territory. The idea of a young woman without a face made me think of a Lennon/McCartney groove from long ago – it's about Eleanor Rigby, a woman who wore a face that she kept in a jar by the door. In my head I start calling the victim Eleanor. The crime scene team still has work to do, but there isn't a person in the place who doesn't think Eleanor was killed during sex: the mattress half off the base, the tangled sheets, a brown spray of decaying arterial blood on a bedside table. The really sick ones figure he cut her throat while he was still inside her. The bad thing is – they may be right. However she died, those who look for blessings may find one here: she wouldn't have realized what was happening – not until the last moment, anyway.

Tina – crystal meth – would have taken care of that. It makes you so damn horny, so euphoric as it hits your brain that any sense of foreboding would have been impossible. Under its influence, the only coherent thought most people can marshal is to find a partner and bang their back out.

Next to the two empty foils of tina is what looks like one of those tiny shampoo bottles you get in hotel bathrooms. Unmarked, it contains a clear liquid – GHB, I figure. It's

getting a lot of play now in the dark corners of the Web: in large doses it is replacing rohypnol as the date-rape drug of choice. Most music venues are flooded with it: clubbers slug a tiny cap to cut tina, taking the edge off its paranoia. But GHB also comes with its own side effects – a loss of inhibitions and a more intense sexual experience. On the street one of its names is Easy Lay. Kicking off her Jimmy's, stepping out of her tiny black skirt, Eleanor must have been a rocket on the Fourth of July.

As I move through the crush of people – unknown to any of them, a stranger with an expensive jacket slung over his shoulder and a lot of freight in his past – I stop at the bed. I close out the noise and in my mind I see her on top, naked, riding him cowgirl. She is in her early twenties with a good body, and I figure she is right into it – the cocktail of drugs whirling her towards a shattering orgasm, her body temperature soaring thanks to the meth, her swollen breasts pushing down, her heart and respiratory rate rocketing under the onslaught of passion and chemicals, her breath coming in gulping bursts, her wet tongue finding a mind of its own and searching hard for the mouth below. Sex today sure isn't for sissies.

Neon signs from a row of bars outside the window would have hit the blonde highlights in this season's haircut and sparkled off a Panerai diver's watch. Yeah, it's fake, but it's a good one. I know this woman. We all do – the type, anyway. You see them in the huge new Prada store in Milan, queuing outside the clubs in Soho, sipping skinny lattes in the hot cafés on the avenue Montaigne – young women who mistake *People* magazine for news and a Japanese symbol on their backs for a sign of rebellion.

I imagine the killer's hand on her breast, touching a jewelled nipple ring. The guy takes it between his fingers

and yanks it, pulling her closer. She cries out, revved – everything is hypersensitive now, especially her nipples. But she doesn't mind – if somebody wants it rough, it just means they must really like her. Perched on top of him, the headboard banging hard against the wall, she would have been looking at the front door – locked and chained, for sure. In this neighbourhood, that's the least you could do.

A diagram on the back shows an evacuation route – she is in a hotel, but any resemblance to the Ritz-Carlton pretty much ends there. It is called the Eastside Inn – home to itinerants, backpackers, the mentally lost and anybody else with twenty bucks a night. Stay as long as you like – a day, a month, the rest of your life – all you need is two IDs, one with a photo.

The guy who had moved into Room 89 had been here for a while – a six-pack sits on a bureau, along with four half-empty bottles of hard liquor and a couple of boxes of breakfast cereal. A stereo and a few CDs are on a night stand, and I glance through them. He had good taste in music, at least you could say that. The closet, however, is empty – it seems like his clothes were about the only things he took with him when he walked out, leaving the body to liquefy in the bath. Lying at the back of the closet is a pile of trash: discarded newspapers, an empty can of roach killer, a coffee-stained wall calendar. I pick it up – every page features a black and white photo of an ancient ruin – the Colosseum, a Greek temple, the Library of Celsus at night. Very arty. But the pages are blank, not an appointment on any of them – except as a coffee mat, it seems like it's never been used, and I throw it back.

I turn away and – without thinking, out of habit really – I run my hand across the night-stand. That's strange: no dust. I do the same to the bureau, bedhead and stereo and

get the identical result – the killer has wiped everything down to eliminate his prints. He gets no prizes for that, but as I catch the scent of something and raise my fingers to my nose, everything changes. The residue I can smell is from an antiseptic spray they use in intensive-care wards to combat infection. Not only does it kill bacteria but as a side effect it also destroys DNA material – sweat, skin, hair. By spraying everything in the room and then dousing the carpet and walls, the killer was making sure that the NYPD needn't bother with their forensic vacuum cleaners.

With sudden clarity, I realize that this is anything but a by-the-book homicide for money or drugs or sexual gratification. As a murder, this is something remarkable.

Chapter Two

NOT EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS – OR CARES PROBABLY – BUT the first law of forensic science is Locard’s Exchange Principle, and it says ‘Every contact between a perpetrator and a crime scene leaves a trace.’ As I stand in this room, surrounded by dozens of voices, I’m wondering if Professor Locard had ever encountered anything quite like Room 89 – everything touched by the killer is now in a bath full of acid, wiped clean or drenched in industrial antiseptic. I’m certain there’s not a cell or follicle of him left behind.

A year ago, I wrote an obscure book on modern investigative technique. In a chapter called ‘New Frontiers’, I said I had come across the use of an antibacterial spray only once in my life – and that was a high-level hit on an intelligence agent in the Czech Republic. That case doesn’t augur well – to this day, it remains unsolved. Whoever had been living in Room 89 clearly knew their business, and I start examining the room with the respect it deserves.

He wasn’t a tidy person and, among the other trash, I see an empty pizza box lying next to the bed. I’m about to pass over it when I realize that’s where he would have had the knife: lying on top of the pizza box within easy reach, so *natural* Eleanor probably wouldn’t even have registered it.

I imagine her on the bed, reaching under the tangle of

sheets for his crotch. She kisses his shoulder, his chest, going down. Maybe the guy knows what he's in for, maybe not: one of the side effects of GHB is that it suppresses the gag reflex. There's no reason a person can't swallow a seven-, eight-, ten-inch gun – that's why one of the easiest places to buy it is in gay saunas. Or on porn shoots.

I think of his hands grabbing her – he flips her on to her back and puts his knees either side of her chest. She's thinking he's positioning himself for her mouth but, casually, his right hand would have dropped to the side of the bed. Unseen, the guy's fingers find the top of the pizza box then touch what he's looking for – cold and cheap but, because it's new, more than sharp enough to do the job.

Anybody watching from behind would have seen her back arch, a sort of moan escape her lips – they'd think he must have entered her mouth. He hasn't. Her eyes, bright with drugs, are flooding with fear. His left hand has clamped tight over her mouth, forcing her head back, exposing her throat. She bucks and writhes, tries to use her arms, but he's anticipated that. Straddling her breasts, his knees slam down, pinning her by the biceps. How do I know this? You can just make out the two bruises on the body lying in the bath. She's helpless. His right hand rises up into view – Eleanor sees it and tries to scream, convulsing wildly, fighting to get free. The serrated steel of the pizza knife flashes past her breast, towards her pale throat. It slashes hard—

Blood sprays across the bedside table. With one of the arteries which feed the brain completely cut, it would have been over in a moment. Eleanor crumples, gurgling, bleeding out. The last vestiges of consciousness tell her she has just witnessed her own murder; all she ever was and hoped to be is gone. That's how he did it – he wasn't inside her at all. Once again, thank God for small mercies, I suppose.

The killer goes to prepare the acid bath and along the way pulls off the bloody white shirt he must have been wearing – they just found pieces of it under Eleanor’s body in the bath, along with the knife: four inches long, black plastic handle, made by the millions in some sweatshop in China.

I’m still reeling from the vivid imagining of it all, so I barely register a rough hand taking my shoulder. As soon as I do, I throw it off, about to break his arm instantly – an echo from an earlier life, I’m afraid. It is some guy who mumbles a terse apology, looking at me strangely, trying to move me aside. He’s the leader of a forensic team – three guys and a woman – setting up the UV lamps and dishes of the Fast Blue B dye they’ll use to test the mattress for semen stains. They haven’t found out about the antiseptic yet and I don’t tell them – for all I know the killer missed a part of the bed. If he did, given the nature of the Eastside Inn, I figure they’ll get several thousand positive hits dating back to when hookers wore stockings.

I get out of their way, but I’m deeply distracted: I’m trying to close everything out because there is something about the room, the whole situation – I’m not exactly sure what – that is troubling me. A part of the scenario is wrong, and I can’t tell why. I look around, taking another inventory of what I see, but I can’t find it – I have a sense it’s from earlier in the night. I go back, mentally rewinding the tape to when I first walked in.

What was it? I reach down into my subconscious, trying to recover my first impression – it was something detached from the violence, minor but with overriding significance. If only I could touch it . . . a feeling . . . it’s like . . . it’s some *word* that is lying now on the other side of memory. I start thinking about how I wrote in my book that it is the

assumptions, the unquestioned assumptions, that trip you up every time – and then it comes to me.

When I walked in, I saw the six-pack on the bureau, a carton of milk in the fridge, registered the names of a few DVDs lying next to the TV, noted the liner in a trash can. And the impression – the word – that first entered my head but didn't touch my conscious mind was 'female'. I got everything right about what had happened in Room 89 – except for the biggest thing of all. It wasn't a young guy who was staying here; it wasn't a naked man who was having sex with Eleanor and cut her throat. It wasn't a clever prick who destroyed her features with acid and drenched the room with antiseptic spray.

It was a woman.

Chapter Three

I'VE KNOWN A LOT OF POWERFUL PEOPLE IN MY CAREER, BUT I've only met one person with genuine natural authority – the sort of guy who could shout you down with just a whisper. He is in the corridor now, coming towards me, telling the forensic team they'll have to wait: the Fire Department wants to secure the acid before somebody gets burnt.

'Keep your plastic gloves on, though,' he advises. 'You can give each other a free prostate exam out in the hall.' Everybody except the forensic guys laughs.

The man with the voice is Ben Bradley, the homicide lieutenant in charge of the crime scene. He's been down in the manager's office, trying to locate the scumbag who runs the joint. He's a tall black man – Bradley, not the scumbag – in his early fifties with big hands and Industry jeans turned up at the cuff. His wife talked him into buying them recently in a forlorn attempt to update his image, instead of which – he says – they make him look like a character from a Steinbeck novel, a modern refugee from the dustbowl.

Like all the other regulars at these murder circuses, he has little affection for the forensic specialists. First, the work was outsourced a few years back and overpaid people like these started turning up in crisp white boiler suits with

names like ‘Forensic Biological Services, Inc.’ on the back. Second – and what really tipped it over the edge for him – were the two shows featuring forensic work that hit it big on TV and led to an insufferable outbreak of celebrityhood in the minds of its practitioners.

‘Jesus,’ he complained recently, ‘is there anybody in this country who isn’t dreaming of being on a reality show?’

As he watches the would-be celebrities repack their labs-in-a-briefcase, he catches sight of me – standing silently against the wall, just watching, like I seem to have spent half my life doing. He ignores the people demanding his attention and makes his way over. We don’t shake hands – I don’t know why, it’s just never been our way. I’m not even sure if we’re friends – I’ve always been pretty much on the outside of any side you can find, so I’m probably not the one to judge. We respect each other, though, if that helps.

‘Thanks for coming,’ he says.

I nod, looking at his turned-up Industries and black work boots, ideal for paddling through the blood and shit of a crime scene.

‘What did you come by – tractor?’ I ask.

He doesn’t laugh; Ben hardly ever laughs, he’s about the most deadpan guy you’ll ever meet. Which doesn’t mean he isn’t funny. ‘Had a chance to look around, Ramón?’ he says quietly.

My name is not Ramón, and he knows it. But he also knows that, until recently, I was a member of one of our nation’s most secret intelligence agencies, so I figure he’s referring to Ramón García. Ramón was an FBI agent who went to almost infinite trouble to conceal his identity as he sold our nation’s secrets to the Russians – then left his fingerprints all over the Hefty garbage bags he used to deliver the stolen documents. Ramón was almost certainly

the most incompetent covert operator in history. Like I say, Ben is very funny.

‘Yeah, I’ve seen a bit,’ I tell him. ‘What you got on the person living in this dump? She’s the prime suspect, huh?’

Ben can hide many things, but his eyes can’t mask the look of surprise – a woman?!

Excellent, I think – Ramón strikes back.

Still, Bradley’s a cool cop. ‘That’s interesting, Ramón,’ he says, trying to find out if I’m really on to something or whether I’ve just jumped the shark. ‘How’d you figure that?’

I point at the six-pack on the bureau, the milk in the fridge. ‘What guy does that? A guy keeps the beer cold, lets the milk go bad. Look at the DVDs – romantic comedies, and not an action film among them. Wanna take a walk?’ I continue. ‘Find out how many other guys in this dump use liners in their trash cans? That’s what a woman does – one who doesn’t belong here, no matter what part she’s acting.’

He weighs what I’ve said, holding my gaze, but it’s impossible to tell whether he’s buying what I’m selling. Before I can ask, two young detectives – a woman and her partner – appear from behind the Fire Department’s hazchem barrels. They scramble to a stop in front of Bradley.

‘We got something, Ben!’ the female cop says. ‘It’s about the occupant—’

Bradley nods calmly. ‘Yeah, it’s a woman – tell me something I don’t know. What about her?’

I guess he *was* buying it. The two cops stare, wondering how the hell he knew. By morning, the legend of their boss will have grown even greater. Me? I’m thinking the guy is shameless – he’s going to take the credit without even blinking? I start laughing.

Bradley glances at me and, momentarily, I think he's going to laugh back, but it's a forlorn hope. His sleepy eyes seem to twinkle, though, as his attention reverts to the two cops. 'How'd you know it was a woman?' he asks them.

'We got hold of the hotel register and all the room files,' the male detective – name of Connor Norris – replies.

Bradley is suddenly alert. 'From the manager? You found the scumbag – got him to unlock the office?'

Norris shakes his head. 'There are four drug warrants out for his arrest; he's probably halfway to Mexico. No, Alvarez here' – he indicates his female partner – 'she recognized a guy wanted for burglary living upstairs.' He looks at his partner, not sure how much more to say.

Alvarez shrugs, hopes for the best and comes clean. 'I offered the burglar a get-out-of-jail-free card if he'd pick the locks on the manager's office and safe for us.'

She looks at Bradley, nervous, wondering how much trouble this is gonna cause.

Her boss's face gives away nothing; his voice just drops a notch, even softer. 'And then?'

'Eight locks in total and he was through 'em in under a minute,' she says. 'No wonder nothing's safe in this town.'

'What was in the woman's file?' Bradley asks.

'Receipts. She'd been living here just over a year,' Norris says. 'Paid in cash, didn't have the phone connected – TV, cable, nothing. She sure didn't want to be traced.'

Bradley nods – exactly what he was thinking. 'When was the last time any of the neighbours saw her?'

'Three or four days ago. Nobody's sure,' Norris recounts.

Bradley murmurs, 'Disappeared straight after she killed her date, I guess. What about ID – there must have been something in her file?'

Alvarez checks her notes. 'Photocopies of a Florida

driver's licence and a student card or something – no picture on it,' she says. 'I bet they're genuine.'

'Check 'em anyway,' Bradley tells them.

'We gave 'em to Petersen,' says Norris, referring to another young detective. 'He's on to it.'

Bradley acknowledges it. 'Does the burglar – any of the others – know the suspect, anything about her?'

They shake their heads. 'Nobody. They'd just see her come and go,' Norris says. 'Early twenties, about five eight, a great body, according to the burglar—'

Bradley raises his eyes to heaven. 'By his standards, that probably means she's got two legs.'

Norris smiles, but not Alvarez – she just wishes Bradley would say something about her deal with the burglar. If he's going to ream her out, get it over with. Instead she has to continue to participate, professional: 'According to a so-called actress in one-fourteen, the chick changed her appearance all the time. One day Marilyn Monroe, the next Marilyn Manson, sometimes both Marilyns on the same day. Then there was Drew and Britney, Dame Edna, k. d. lang—'

'You're serious?' Bradley asks. The young cops nod, reeling off more names as if to prove it. 'I'm really looking forward to seeing this photofit,' he says, realizing that all the common avenues of a murder investigation are being closed down. 'Anything else?' They shake their heads, done.

'Better start getting statements from the freaks – or at least those without warrants, which will probably amount to about three of 'em.'

Bradley dismisses them, turning to me in the shadows, starting to broach something which has been causing him a lot of anxiety.

'Ever seen one of these?' he asks, pulling on plastic gloves

and taking a metal box off a shelf in the closet. It's khaki in colour, so thin I hadn't even noticed it. He's about to open it but turns to look at Alvarez and Norris for a moment. They are heading out, weaving through the firefighters, now packing up their hazchem pumps.

'Hey, guys!' he calls. They turn and look. 'About the burglar – that was good work.'

We see the relief on Alvarez's face and they both raise their hands in silent acknowledgement, smiling. No wonder his crew worships him.

I'm looking at the metal box – on closer examination, more like an attaché case with a serial number stencilled on the side in white letters. It's obviously military, but I only have a vague memory of seeing anything like it. 'A battle-field surgical kit?' I say, without much conviction.

'Close,' Bradley says. 'Dentistry.' He opens the box, revealing – nestled in foam – a full set of army dental instruments: spreader pliers, probes, extraction forceps.

I stare at him. 'She pulled the victim's teeth?' I ask.

'All of 'em. We haven't found any, so I figure she dumped 'em. Maybe she flushed them down the john and we'll get lucky – that's why we're tearing the plumbing apart.'

'Were the teeth pulled before or after the victim was killed?'

Ben realizes where I'm going. 'No, it wasn't torture. The coroner's team have taken a look inside her mouth. They're pretty sure it was after death, to prevent identification. It was the reason I asked you to drop by – I remembered something in your book about home dentistry and a murder. If it was in the US, I was hoping there might be a—'

'No connection – Sweden,' I say. 'A guy used a surgical hammer on the victim's bridgework and jaw – same

objective, I guess – but forceps? I’ve never seen anything like that.’

‘Well, we have now,’ Ben replies.

‘Inspiring,’ I say. ‘The onward rush of civilization, I mean.’

Putting aside my despair about humanity, I have to say I’m even more impressed by the killer – it couldn’t have been easy pulling thirty-two teeth from a dead person. The killer had obviously grasped one important concept, a thing which eludes most people who decide on her line of work: nobody’s ever been arrested for a murder; they have only ever been arrested for not planning it properly.

I indicate the metal case. ‘Where’s a civilian get one of these?’ I ask.

Ben shrugs. ‘Anywhere they like. I called a buddy in the Pentagon and he went into the archives: forty thousand were surplus – the army unloaded the lot through survival stores over the last few years. We’ll chase ’em, but we won’t nail it that way, I’m not sure anybody could—’

His voice trails away – he’s lost in a labyrinth, running his gaze around the room, trying to find a way out. ‘I’ve got no face,’ he says softly. ‘No dental records, no witnesses – worst of all, no motive. You know this business better than anyone – if I asked you about solving it, what odds would you lay?’

‘Right now? Powerball, or whatever that lottery’s called,’ I tell him. ‘You walk in, the first thing you think is: amateur, just another drug or sex play. Then you look closer – I’ve only seen a couple anywhere near as good as this.’ Then I tell him about the antiseptic spray, and of course that’s not something he wants to hear.

‘Thanks for the encouragement,’ he says. Unthinking, he rubs his index finger and thumb together, and I know from

close observation over a long period that it means he'd like a cigarette. He told me once he'd given up in the nineties and there must have been a million times since then that he'd thought a smoke might help. This is obviously one of them. To get over the craving, he talks. 'You know my problem? Marcie told me this once' – Marcie is his wife – 'I get too close to the victims, ends up I sort of imagine I'm the only friend they've got left.'

'Their champion?' I suggest.

'That's exactly the word she used. And there's one thing I've never been able to do – Marcie says it could be the only thing she really likes about me – I've never been able to let a friend down.'

Champion of the dead, I think. There could be worse things. I wish there was something I could do to help him, but there isn't – it's not my investigation and, although I'm only in my thirties, I'm retired.

A technician enters the room fast, yelling in an Asian accent: 'Ben?' Bradley turns. 'In the basement!'