

Every Crooked Path

by
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Chapter One

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New York City

9:37 p.m.

I clicked on my Mini Maglite as I slit the police tape crisscrossing the apartment's front door, swung it open, and stepped into the darkened living room.

Jodie and I would reseal the door after I was done in here.

I pocketed my automatic knife.

The NYPD's Crime Scene Unit had finished up this morning so the scene had been processed, but I put on a pair of latex gloves just in case I did find anything.

At thirty-four years old, I'd been with the Bureau for eight years, after leaving the Milwaukee Police Department, and I'd worked with evidence recovery teams and analysts from all around the country. The CSU here in New York City was sharp, so I wasn't necessarily looking for forensic evidence they might have missed; I doubted I would find any of that. I was here to look at context.

Though this would normally have been an NYPD case, because of my work with the joint task force, the Bureau was involved. Assistant Director-in-Charge DeYoung had asked me to take a look around.

I'd been consulting on another investigation earlier today, so this was my first time at the actual scene, which worked out well since it was the same time of day as when the crime occurred. Similarity brings perspective. I'd taught that at the FBI Academy. Now was my chance to put it into practice.

Almost exactly twenty-four hours ago, the man who rented this apartment was stabbed to death in the room just down the hall.

Orienting myself to the lighting, the sounds, in this location at the time of day of the crime was crucial. It's always about the intersection of an offender being in a specific place at a specific time. Start there. Motives you can try to decipher later—if you venture in that direction at all. Most investigators go about things completely backward.

My partner, Special Agent Jodie Fleming, would be up in a few minutes. She was on the phone down by the car talking over a personal matter with Dell, the woman she was living

with. Their relationship had hit a rough spot lately—actually, things had been going downhill for a while and I wasn't sure they were going to weather this storm.

The lights had been off in the apartment when the responding officers arrived, so, to get a better understanding of how the room had looked at the time of the crime, I kept them off as I closed the door, swept the flashlight beam before me, and studied the room.

Well-worn, mismatched furniture. A couch. An easy chair. Two floor lamps. The glass end table was still overturned from the struggle. A wide-screen television looked out across the room from its mount on a swiveling arm on the wall. From studying the files, I knew that the windows on the south side of the room overlooked a park—even though it wasn't visible from where I stood.

The television was angled so that the screen was visible from the reclining chair, rather than the couch that lay perpendicular to it.

Two remote controls sat on the arm of the recliner. I checked them—one matched the VCR player, one the DVD player. A wireless keyboard for surfing on the TV's Internet browser rested nearby on the footstool. The television remote lay tossed haphazardly out of reach on the couch.

Clicking off my flashlight, I noted how the residual light from the city found its way into the room through the windows.

The struggle that started in here had ended in the master bedroom.

My specialty wasn't blood spatter analysis, but I'd looked over the initial reports, and now, Maglite on again, I could picture the struggle playing out.

At a crime scene, blood can tell the story.

The progression of the attack, the location and responses of the individuals involved—did they duck? Try to run? Fight back? If there was a struggle, the blood spatter could show who struck first, where he was standing, where and how quickly he moved while he was trying to escape. It was a study in microcosm of geospatial interactions.

And *that* was my specialty.

I watched the tale unfold.

According to what we'd been able to piece together, the offender had accessed the apartment through the front door, apparently, based on the tool marks, picking the lock. The victim, a forty-two-year-old African-American man named Jamaal Stewart, had been seated in the recliner facing the television.

At some point the intruder must have startled him, because the blood spatter indicated that Jamaal was most likely rising from the chair when his arm was sliced.

Low-energy stains are created simply by the force of gravity and are circular. Impact spatter is more distinctive and happens when blood forcefully impacts a surface, so perhaps, from someone swinging his cut arm. The void patterns, that is, the absence of blood spatter where you would expect it, showed where the offender was standing during the struggle.

When studying blood spatter that's not just a gravity drop, you analyze the length and width, and take into account the concentration of the blood in the different parts of the spatter to identify the point of origin.

For an unknown reason, Jamaal fled to the master bedroom rather than the front door.

I studied the droplets, followed them down the hall. Based on the size, shape, and directionality of the spatter, he was moving rapidly.

Since he had defensive wounds, we knew he'd struggled with his attacker. The orientation of the capillary and arterial bleeding showed that the fatal stab wound was to the right side of the neck, which might have indicated a left-handed assailant, or a right-handed one, depending on how he—or she—held the knife.

Jamaal bled out sprawled facedown on the covers of his neatly made bed.

Often, evidence isn't so much finding what is present, but what isn't present that should be—like the voids in the blood spatter. Emptiness where you wouldn't expect it speaks to you.

The CSU found a computer cord in the apartment, but no laptop. There was a cell phone recharger here, but no cell phone. Also there were two Xbox controllers but no console and a VHS player and a DVD player, but no videocassettes or DVDs.

By all appearances, someone had taken all of Jamaal's computers and recorded media storage devices. When we followed up to see if the computer, phone, or gaming system had remote location services turned on, none of them showed up.

If our premise was correct that the intruder was looking for something, I wondered if he'd found it.

And of course, what it was.

A neighbor had heard the struggle, called 911, and two NYPD officers responded, only to find that Mr. Stewart was already deceased. There was no sign of his attacker.

I checked the bedroom, under the bed, in the closet, but didn't find anything noteworthy.

The French doors opened to a balcony four meters long and two meters wide that overlooked Manhattan.

I snapped the flashlight off, pocketed it, and then stepped outside. Twelve stories up. Directly below me, at the entrance to a dance club, twenty-two people stood on the sidewalk, waiting to be admitted inside.

A storm earlier in the evening had left the smell of damp concrete lingering in the air, a musty scent of summer rain.

A few horns honked in the distance. Someone flagged a taxi down at the end of the block. Nothing out of the ordinary.

I was thinking of the missing electronics and recorded media, the location of the remotes, the television screen's angle, the fact that the unit was off when the responding officers got here.

Off.

But—

I heard footsteps behind me in the bedroom.

“Hey, Jodie, I'm out here.”

No, the television is off. So—

Jodie didn't respond. The footsteps came closer.

And it wasn't her gait.

Because it wasn't Jodie.

Chapter Two

The man came at me lightning fast, swiping the blade across my left forearm. My shirtsleeve offered little protection and the knife left a streak of red behind.

I threw my other hand up to grab his wrist and disarm him, but he knew how to block the move and easily knocked my hand away. I pivoted backward to keep him from driving the blade into my chest. When I turned, it drew him with me, onto the balcony.

Four inches taller than me, six foot seven. A beast.

There wasn't much room out here for a fight.

He held the bowie knife military-style, with the blade angled back parallel to his wrist. A lot harder to disarm. This man knew what he was doing. He'd been trained.

I was not going to fare well.

It didn't scare me.

Motivated me, though.

I would have gone for my gun, but I needed both hands to stop him from slicing me open. I tried to sweep his leg, but it was like trying to knock a tree trunk out of the way.

Normally, I could hold my own in a fight, but this guy was better than I was and I wasn't going to be able to keep him at bay for long.

Get some distance. Shoot him if you need to.

I head-butted him, slamming my forehead brutally against his nose.

It took him by surprise and he staggered back two paces. Before he could come at me again, I whipped out my gun and leveled it at his chest.

"Federal agent. Drop the knife."

Immediately, he stopped. He stood his ground but didn't come at me. "You're a federal agent?"

"FBI. Now get rid of the knife or I will put you down."

He took a step backward and tossed the blade over the railing of the balcony. I just hoped it wouldn't hit anyone on the sidewalk below us.

"Hands up," I said. "Get on your knees."

He didn't comply. "Do you have the file?"

"What?"

"You said you're with the Bureau. Did you find it? Do you have the file?"

I wasn't thrilled about the idea of trying to cuff this guy by myself. I had a feeling that he would be able to get my gun from me and overpower me before I could stop him even if he was lying facedown when I approached him. But now that he'd gotten rid of his knife, I wasn't about to shoot him either.

Jodie was on her way. Once she got here we could take him down. Until then we were in a bit of a standoff.

"What file?" I asked.

"Aurora's birthday."

I was aware that my sleeve was soaked with blood from my injured arm, but I didn't feel any pain—adrenaline will do that to you.

But the adrenaline would go away.

And the pain would come.

He didn't kneel, didn't look afraid, and I didn't know if he had another weapon. Seemed likely to me that he would be packing, though.

Keeping my gun on him, I tugged out my phone, speed-dialed Jodie, and told her to call NYPD for backup and to get up here ASAP. Then I slid my phone into my pocket. "If you make a move, if you come at me, I'm going to put you down."

"I understand." Then, "It wasn't on the computer or the phone."

"What wasn't?"

"The file."

"Aurora's birthday."

"Yes."

"Were you here last night?" I asked. "Did you kill Jamaal Stewart?"

"They won't let this happen." He eased back half a step.

"Stay where you are. Who? Who won't let this happen?"

He took another step. He was at the railing.

"Do not move!"

"They know things. They can find out things. It'll never stop."

He glanced down at the street, then looked in my direction again.

"Don't even think about it," I said.

There are people down there.

He's not the only one in danger here. They are too.

"You can't stop me," he said.

"I'll do whatever's necessary to protect those people down there. Now get on your knees."

Slowly, he turned away from me, perhaps guessing that I wasn't going to shoot him in the back.

You can't let him jump, Pat.

"Step away from the railing!"

Thoughts raced through my mind, thoughts of the people outside the club twelve stories below us, of what might happen if this man did throw himself over the edge.

I shouted again for him to stop, but he just lifted one leg to the railing to climb over it.

I considered his state of mind, the danger he posed to those people—

He tossed the knife. He might not be armed.

You can't kill him.

But he's posing an immediate threat to innocent life.

I stared down the barrel.

Made my decision.

Avoid the femur.

Fired.

The leg that was supporting his weight buckled and he collapsed onto the balcony.

"Do not move." I took a step forward.

“You’re not sending me to prison.” In obvious pain, he grimaced as he pushed himself to his feet. “I’m not going to prison. I’m dead already.”

“We can protect you.”

He scoffed. “Like you protected Ted?”

I had no idea who he was talking about. “That wasn’t our fault.” I was making this up as I went along. “We’re trying to get to the bottom of that. You can help us. Now just—”

Jodie called my name from the other room.

“Out here!” I hollered.

“You have no idea how far this goes,” he said to me, “what they’re going to do if . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Tell me.”

But instead of replying, he made the sign of the cross in front of his chest and then, in one swift and desperate motion, grabbed the railing and heaved himself over it and disappeared from sight.

I rushed forward and got there while he was still in the air on his way down.

He didn’t cry out. He didn’t scream. He just fell silently toward the sidewalk, where he collided with the ground within a meter of one of the women waiting outside the club.

The sound of impact followed, rising through the night, a thick, sickening thud.

Then the screams of the people in front of the club began.

And they didn’t stop.