

Chapter One

Tally Hance checked his watch: midnight. He hoped he wouldn't have to wait two more hours until the bars closed to have his encounter, but that wasn't up to him. Surprise was his friend, and that required patience.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness of Vibe, a club well known by Millennials as a place to drink, dance, and watch. Although it was twenty degrees warmer inside than the windy December chill outside, he left his jacket on, the collar turned up. His black jeans and white, long-sleeve shirt fit in with the crowd, though his age wasn't a match. His college days were nearly a decade behind him.

He studied the men at the bar. No one he recognized. A good start. He started a slow walk around and pretended to look at the bartenders. Every few seconds, he stole glances at the men close by. It took him three minutes to circle the inside. Nothing. He started another lap. And this time was rewarded.

Three-quarters of the way around, tucked into a semi-circular leather-upholstered booth in the corner, sat Sean Riggins with five friends. Three men, three women, all college-aged, all flirting and laughing. A hip-hop beat kept their heads and bodies moving.

Tally realized Sean's male friends were his teammates, football players who, unlike the rest of the students at Orlando University, must not have finals in a few hours. The girl sitting next to Sean looked familiar. *What was her name?* He stared at her for a few seconds, then turned away before she saw him. Tonight he needed to remain inconspicuous.

He made his way out the front door and walked across the brick-paved street to a pizza café, where he bought a slice of pepperoni-and-cheese and a bottled water and picked a sidewalk table. He positioned himself to watch Vibe's front door and wondered how long this would take. He couldn't sit here until the club closed. He'd need to wander and stay close, keep an eye on Vibe.

The hot crust felt good in his hands as he took a bite and promptly burned the roof of his mouth. He guzzled his water, but he knew he was too late. With his tongue, he felt dead skin already coming off. *Small sacrifice*, he thought.

His meal lasted three more bites. Tally recognized the gold long-sleeved button-down hugging Sean's muscular arms and shoulders, a contrast against the rich brown of his skin, as he exited the club and made a right. Tally waited for the others to follow, but Sean was alone. He passed Tally, fifty feet away.

Tally stood and abandoned his meal. From across the street, he paralleled Sean's path to an ATM on the corner. Leaning against a brick building where he could see, he pretended to thumb out a text message while keeping a focus on Sean. If Sean felt he was being followed, he didn't let on.

Sean pulled cash from the automated teller, glanced at the receipt, and started back toward the club. Graceful and athletic, the kid carried more than two-hundred pounds on a frame that stood just over six feet. Not that these were issues for Tally. He was a couple of inches shorter and not as fast as he used to be, but he was stockier than Sean. And meaner. Besides, this wouldn't take long. He expected no fight, no chase. He needed only to pass along a message with a little menace.

Sean retraced his course to the bar. Tally checked for traffic and crossed the street, tucking directly behind Sean and closing the gap quickly. As they approached the club, he made up a ten-foot distance separating them with three quick steps and seized Sean by the arm. "How you doing, Sean? Got a minute?"

Sean protested until he recognized the face. "What the hell, man?"

"We need to talk." Tally steered the taller player past the club to a spot on the sidewalk in front of an empty storefront. It was just the two of them, and Tally faced Sean head-on.

"I don't have anything to say to you. Or anyone else," Sean said.

Tally narrowed his eyes and crooked his lip. "You made promises you need to keep."

Sean backed up and pointed a finger at him. "That's bullshit. All I did, they owe me. They must think I'm stupid. I'm done."

Tally looked around, then threw a hard, quick jab into Sean's stomach. The kid doubled over and gasped for air. Tally followed with a fist to sternum, hard enough to raise Sean upright. "Listen, pal, you'll do what you're told."

He pulled back, surprised that Sean didn't respond with a shove or a bear hug.

Instead, the younger man's face twisted into a pained, questioning scowl. His eyes opened wide, then rolled back. A ploy? Tally wondered. Then Sean's knees buckled, and his body folded

down to his feet. The back of his head bounced off the concrete sidewalk with an audible crack. His mouth gaped open, motionless.

“Hey, hey.” Tally bent over and looked into Sean’s eyes. Nothing. He couldn’t tell if the kid was breathing. Twice on a football field he’d seen a player unconscious. Both times the eyes were half-closed. This didn’t look like that.

He looked next to Sean’s head and saw no blood. But the kid had nothing, no more fighting for air, no writhing in pain, nothing. Tally reached into Sean’s jeans and pulled out the cash spit out by the ATM. He found an iPhone in the kid’s other pocket. He tugged on it, but a rubber case caught inside the tight pocket.

Too much time. He left the phone. He needed to improvise.

He stood and waved at a small group of people in front of the bar. “Help! Help me! Somebody call an ambulance!”

A young man with a full red beard ran up and kneeled in front of Sean. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Tally said. “He just fainted.”

Three other men and two women circled them as the first man checked Sean’s breathing and eyes and then started CPR.

“I’m calling 911,” Tally said, and walked away from the group and away from the club. After a few steps, he picked up his pace. Fifteen seconds into his escape, a siren shrieked down the narrow street. Help on the way. He sped to a jog to the corner and made a quick right toward the parking lot. The siren fell silent.

His Ford Fusion started on the first try. He felt his heart race as he maneuvered out of his parking space and out of the lot. He sped north out of downtown.

What the hell happened? A heart attack? A stroke? Some weird seizure? He didn't know, and he couldn't explain it, though he knew he'd have to. And soon.

Chapter Two

Conrad Keane awoke to a soft knock and the creaking of a bedroom door opening. A small beam of light illuminated the bed, and he blinked the sleep away, remembering where he was: in a guest room that had no clock.

“What’s up?” he asked his friend, who also happened to be the father of his half-brother.

Quentin Riggins cleared his throat. “Something’s happened. I’ve got coffee going.” Riggins sniffled and retreated, leaving the door cracked.

Keane rolled over and reached for his phone. Four-fifteen. He laid back and closed his eyes. An early December wind whistled around the window frame and blew palm branches against the house outside. He was sure the temperature outside was in the sixties, typical for Boynton Beach, but it sounded like a real winter.

Groaning, he rose and stretched his sturdy, six-foot frame, moving left and right to raise a crack from his back. Today was his getaway day, and his flight back to East Tennessee didn’t leave for seven hours. So much for his plan to sleep until seven.

He pulled on last night's jeans and t-shirt, which hung off the footboard, and walked down the hall to the guest bathroom. He closed his eyes as he flipped on the bright fluorescent light, then slowly opened them to assess a night of less than five hours' sleep. A week of South Florida sun, combined with his mostly light-brown hair, gave him a vibrant look. Come tomorrow, his fellow agents at the FBI's Knoxville field office would razz him about his early winter tan. *Oh well*, he thought. The gradual march of gray hair along his temples didn't make him look younger, but it didn't bother him. The crow's feet springing from outside his green eyes did.

He warmed up water in the sink, splashed and rubbed his face and gauged whether this was a shave day. Three days of growth said yes: one more day away from home argued no. The stubble had started to disguise a diagonal, one-inch scar under his chin, not necessarily a deal-breaker. There wasn't much of a story behind it—he'd taken a helmet to the jaw playing high school football twenty years earlier—but that hadn't stopped him from embellishing the truth over the years. It was the only reason he tolerated it, but at least the scar had held its shape. He couldn't say the same for his waistline.

Although he fancied himself as in shape and ready for middle age, whatever arbitrary period that was now, evidence to the contrary was mounting. All his shirts fit tighter than they used to, and his slacks snugged up just enough to display a slight side lop-over and belly paunch. If this kept up, he'd have to lose the extra pounds to pass his upcoming fitness test.

Barefoot, he followed the huffing and groaning of an old-school drip coffee maker through Quentin's sparsely decorated, two-bedroom home for one. The smell of the brew permeated the kitchen, where a single bulb in the stove hood made for a low glow. He found his friend, whom everyone called Q, seated at the head of a table and wiping his eyes with the back of his hands. A cell phone sat in front of him.

“You okay? What’s going on?” Keane asked.

Q looked up with red-rimmed eyes and tear trails. “He’s gone. They said he’s gone.”

“Who said? Who’s gone?”

“Sean. He’s dead.”

It took a couple of seconds for the news to register, and it hit Keane like a gut punch. He fell back into a wooden chair next to Q. He tasted bile, and a wave of nausea rolled through him.

“What happened?”

Q pointed at his phone. “A detective called from Orlando. She said Sean got mugged around midnight outside a bar downtown. They couldn’t revive him.”

“Shot?”

“They don’t know exactly. They found him on the ground, and they couldn’t bring him back. They think maybe he hit his head on the sidewalk, but they’re not sure. They don’t . . .”

Sean’s father couldn’t finish the thought and ducked his head into his palms and sobbed.

Keane sat quietly and let Q heave out the loss of his only child, a smart and talented twenty-two-year-old with a future full of career options. There would be no more football, no early graduation, no talk of turning pro.

The coffee machine hissed to a halt, and Keane took it as a cue. Assembling the questions racing through his head—he couldn’t stop being an FBI agent, no matter what—he pulled two oversized mugs from the cupboard and filled them with Maxwell House, doctoring Q’s with cream and sugar.

Q raised up and stared at the darkness outside the kitchen. He sobbed again. “This ain’t happening, man. This can’t be happening.”

Keane sat back down next to his friend. “What else did they tell you? What did they ask?”

Q cradled his cup. “She wanted to know if I knew about anyone who wanted to hurt him. If he had enemies or anyone who would have wanted to hurt him. I told her I had no idea. She said they didn’t know much but that it was early. She said they’d know more soon. But first . . . first they asked me to come to Orlando, you know, to talk about him. And to ID him.”

Q broke down again. Eventually he reached for a napkin and blew his nose.

Keane put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. His heart ached for Q. But his insides started to boil. Yes, this was a tragedy. But something felt wrong.

They drank their coffee and let silence wash over them. Keane allowed himself a few more self-critical thoughts, especially about the past ten years when he and Sean should have shared more than a few weekend visits. He’d wasted so much time. And now there was none left.

Eventually, Keane refilled their cups and slipped into autopilot, thought about what the detective had told Q. *Know more soon* could mean a lot of things. It could mean additional witnesses, video or even preliminary results from an autopsy. The detectives had only just begun. He’d been there.

“They’re still talking to witnesses,” Q said. “They haven’t caught anybody. Seemed like she was in a hurry to get off the phone and get going.”

Keane waited.

“She said they were getting security video and that after they saw what was on it they’d probably have a better idea of what happened.”

Keane pondered that. If a police officer had volunteered that she had video and witnesses, that was a positive sign. He doubted any detective would lie just to make the next of kin feel better. They were trained simply to say, “I’m sorry,” and let that suffice. Maybe there would be a quick arrest.

“Did they ask you if Sean was in trouble, if he had mentioned anything? Something that might have, you know, led to this?” he asked.

Q nodded. “I told them I didn’t know anything.”

Keane let his professional instincts take over. He focused on the few facts that had been relayed from the police. He wouldn’t really know until he saw the file—if he saw the file. Wait, this was Florida, the best open-records state in the country. Eventually, they’d get paperwork.

His memory drifted back eighteen hours. After they finished sweeping and mopping their mother’s house, Sean had texted friends and played video games. At this same table, the three of them shared an oversized dinner of barbecue, mac and cheese, collard greens, and cornbread. Keane had insisted on cooking the pork shoulder, and Q prepared all the sides. They’d called their Southern feast an early Christmas celebration, minus any gifts, because they knew they were going back to three separate lives the next day—Sean, the college student, Q, the bar owner, and Keane, the special agent in the FBI.

While they ate, they half-watched Army-Navy football on TV in the adjacent living room. Sean seemed unusually interested in the game. He’d reacted angrily to a fluke fourth-quarter touchdown by Navy, one that had all but assured another Army loss. “I’d just like an underdog to win once in a while,” Sean had said, explaining why he’d screamed at the referees on TV.

Then, while Keane washed the dishes, Sean had loaded up his car for the three-hour drive to Orlando. This morning, Sean was supposed to take his first final exam of the fall semester.

“Why would Sean be out so late on Sunday night? Finals start today. Didn’t he have a curfew?”

“He lives off campus. They can’t enforce curfew for players who aren’t in the dorm,” Q said. “Why would he be out, man, I have no idea. Why do kids do anything?”

Keane nodded and realized they were both still referring to Sean in the present tense.

Q rapped his knuckles twice on the pine table. “Can you help with this? Can you keep the police honest? Make sure they do the right thing, put in the time to find out who did this? I don’t want Sean to become just another black kid who died on the street.”

The back of Keane’s head tingled, which happened when someone singled him out for duty. “You don’t trust the police? What makes you think they need to be kept in line?”

“C’mon, man. It’s another black kid dead and nobody knows what happened. That’s not exactly an original storyline.”

“Let’s see what the story is first. Go from there. After that, if I need to keep the heat on, I’ll find a way to do that.” Keane thought about his boss, about what to say and not to say. After he canceled his return flight home, he’d report his sudden PTO extension. He had shared with his boss about the recent death of his mother in Florida and the need for occasional trips to get her less-than-modest estate probated and settled. The Bureau would understand that part of it. Better that Happy Harding, the special agent in charge, didn’t know yet about Sean. Harding would wave him off first thing, and Keane preferred not to disobey a direct order. *Ask for forgiveness, not permission.* If he exerted official influence as an agent, well, he’d need that to stay on the down-low. He put his hand on Q’s shoulder as he got up and poured them more coffee. “How long will it take you to line up people to cover the bar for a few days?”

“Not long,” Q said. “I can do it from the road.”

They finished their coffee in silence. They had a three-hour drive and a world of loss ahead of them.

Chapter Three

Tina Rossi thought it ironic that she'd lived her entire life in a water-logged, creature-filled state and yet despised fishing, hunting, and even lying on a beach. What others called relaxation she deemed boredom. Yet she made a career of the real-world version of a Florida outdoorsman. She fished for information. She hunted killers.

Today the hunter needed eye drops. She had a dead Orlando University football player, no good suspects, and only a couple of witnesses, neither of whom qualified as solid. The three women and two OU players hanging out with Sean Riggins at the club provided little help. Even the girlfriend, a pretty, petite junior at OU, described Riggins as a college student with no enemies or even an ex-girlfriend. They'd dated less than a year, and they didn't live together.

Rossi pinched the top of her nose. The fluorescent lights in the detectives' room at the Orlando Police Department did their job too well. Four hours of glare from her computer screen pushed pain into the front of her head. Another rewarding day on the job.

Rossi had been a homicide detective for nearly five years, and all her friends still imagined her life as one gun-filled car chase after another. In truth, going blind from grainy video was far

more representative of her life. She squinted at black-and-white images and jotted down tag numbers. *Is that a J or an I? Is that a 5 or an S?*

Rossi shut her laptop and unclipped her jet-black hair, letting it tumble behind her. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Just a fifteen-second nap would work.

“Perfect timing.” Detective Bob Thomas dropped a DVD on her desk as he sat down across from her. “More video.”

She let the chair rock her back upright. “I can’t wait.”

“What have you got so far?” Thomas loosened his tie and opened up his laptop.

“The ATM video has Riggins taking out money, looks like ten twenty-dollar bills, right after he left the club,” she said. “So right before he died. He counted the money, put it in his pocket, and headed back in the direction of Vibe. . . . you got any eye drops?”

He lobbed a tiny bottle of Refresh drops at her. She flushed her eyes and blinked. She placed the bottle on her desk. She had a feeling she’d need them again soon.

“Riggins didn’t have any money on him,” Thomas said. “Somebody was watching him.” He held up his own disc. “Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“There’s always that. How long are these?”

Thomas queued up his video. “They’re all an hour. They start right before the assault and end about fifty-five minutes after that. You can see a few of our witnesses on there.”

“And the suspect?”

“He’s there, too.”

She ejected the ATM video and put in the new one. The camera was fixed catty-corner from Vibe, west of the front door. Designed to document the comings and goings of residents and

visitors of a recently constructed condo complex, it captured the final moments of a college kid who lived twenty miles away.

Riggins came into frame first, pushed ahead by the other man. There was a quick conversation: not pleasant, not violent. His back to the camera, the other man did most of the talking. Got into Riggins's face.

They knew each other. No one would let a stranger get this close.

A couple walked by, from the right to left, but neither person reacted as if danger were imminent. *It wasn't a loud argument.*

Half a minute in, the shorter man threw a surprise punch, then another. The second blow looked particularly power-packed. Riggins collapsed like a tall building coming down on itself. He landed hard on his left side, facing away from the camera, his head bouncing off the concrete. Start to finish, it took forty-six seconds.

"Jesus," she said, and watched the white man look around, take Riggins's money, and finally look for help. And then he slipped out of frame. "Look at this."

Thomas stopped his video and stepped around behind her. She rewound and re-started the video, and they watched it together twice: first at normal speed, then slowed down.

"House of cards," Thomas said. "It's pretty rare to take a shot to the midsection and not get up. I don't even know what to make of it. You get hit like that, you get a broken rib maybe, but you don't die."

"Skull fracture?" she said. "A lot of force when his head hits the sidewalk."

"He'd have bled. It's possible he got a brain bleed. I've never seen one, but would you go out just like that? One minute you're here, the next you're dead?"

She agreed. Not much made sense. She'd witnessed nonsensical violence—and the aftermath—but this was downright strange. The medical examiner expected to find an enlarged heart and possibly evidence of drug use or a genetic defect.

None of those factors would work a prosecutor into a lather, but she didn't worry about that. The ER doctor had said it was likely a heart attack, and she could only argue, "Who the hell dies of a heart attack at twenty-two?" The kid had had an altercation, but no evidence existed of a weapon. There was no mess, no blood, no broken bones. The kid had no bullet holes or stab wounds. She'd collected witnesses, but no good ones.

They'd already run the 911 calls, which provided little help. Three people called in, two women and a man. All of them sounded concerned but not panicked. To them it looked like someone had fainted.

Two people heard the dead kid arguing with another man but neither knew why. The kid was black. Witnesses said the other man was white. One Good Samaritan reported the white man said he was going to get help. The man never returned. No one saw any blows struck, just one man trying to help another early Monday morning—not a crowded time downtown.

Rossi said, "At least we have a robbery charge."

Thomas tapped the back of her chair. "We may get more, assuming we find him. He sucker-punched Riggins twice, and the kid crashed. It shouldn't have killed him but it did."

"They argued, but we're going to need more than this."

"More than what?" Sherman Beale asked.

Rossi looked at the bright-eyed face of the chief of detectives. "More than what we have."

Beale half-smiled. "I need you two for a minute."

They followed Beale back to his office, where his charcoal-gray suit coat hung on a rack behind his desk.

“Close the door,” he said. “Sit.”

Rossi followed Thomas into the boss’s office and shut the door behind her. They sat side by side in front of the chief’s large oak desk, which was littered with reports, manila folders, stray papers, and dozens of yellow sticky notes.

Everything about Beale was red: bright hair muted only by the start of gray at the temples, a button nose with a rosy tip, cheeks that looked like they’d been scrubbed by a Brillo pad. They looked particularly raw today. Beale ran a hand through his hair, one of his tells. This wasn’t good news.

“Where are you two on the football player?” Beale asked.

She looked at Thomas. He nodded ever so slightly.

“Looking for more witnesses,” she said. “Chasing down leads from video. We’ll get there. We’re waiting for more video to come in. We don’t have any DNA yet, and there’s not much there. We don’t know why the kid died. The ME has a couple of bad-heart theories. Those would fit with him getting hit in the chest.”

Beale looked at Thomas. “You have an opinion here?”

“I think it’s possible this was a guy wanting to settle a score, and the situation went bad,” Thomas said. “Witnesses confirm what we see on video, that the attacker was built like a football player. Broad shoulders, plenty of muscle. This probably wasn’t random.”

Beale put his hands together as if in prayer and buried his chin in them in thought. “So, you’re guessing.”

Rossi uncrossed her legs and sat up for the oncoming battle. Thomas said nothing and waited out Beale, who wasn't known for his patience.

"This kid was an NFL prospect," Beale said. "The media's going to eat us for lunch if we screw this up. So, you two have clear objectives. Solve this, and don't drop the ball. Find the guy in the video, lean on him to get some answers. Get a story to feed the media. You've got a week."

She sighed. Seven days wasn't realistic, especially on this case. The university's penchant for red tape and politics would eat into their time. She and Thomas needed immediate luck.

"That's fast," Thomas said finally.

"There's no sense in wasting any time in here." Beale rose from his chair, signaling the end of the discussion. "You already know the mayor is fond of OU's president. Understand?"

Too many outside voices, Rossi thought, but nodded. They left Beale to his politics, and Rossi checked her watch. She needed to learn more about Sean Riggins. What had he done to deserve this?