

Chapter 1

Jack Mathis incorporated the sound into his nightmare, the shrill alarm screaming a warning that Becky's oxygen levels had fallen. Heart racing, he bolted upright in his bed and reached for her. He let his arm fall to the cold, empty sheet.

He licked dry lips then grabbed his phone and hit the talk button to silence the racket. "Mathis," he croaked, closing his eyes to stave off the worst of the pounding in his head.

"Agent Mathis? Field Agent Randy Martin, Duluth office." He paused as if waiting for an acknowledgment, then filled the silence. "I understand you're the lead on the weather girl case. Looks like we've got a victim to add to the list."

With an inward groan, Jack shoved the sheets aside and sat up on the edge of the bed. The shadowed room tilted. Rubbing his hand over his face, his gritty gaze landed on the finger of scotch left at the bottom of the bottle. His stomach rolled.

"When?"

"Late yesterday. Got a positive ID on her a couple of hours ago. Dana Palmenteri."

Jack squeezed his eyes closed. He wasn't fool enough to believe the killer he'd been tracking for almost a year would vanish, but damn him for intruding on this time. This was his time. Becky's time. He swallowed the bitterness that welled in his chest.

Resigned, he stood, the hardwood cold on his bare feet. "Another weather girl?"

"Sort of. Not on TV, though. This woman was a meteorologist at the National Weather Service."

The agent shared the details. Same MO as the others – all young women, all killed and placed post-mortem in a simulated work environment. But the details didn't matter yet, not until he saw and assessed them for himself.

Jack shook his head, the late afternoon hour on his clock surprising him. "I'll be on the first flight in the morning."

As he tossed the phone toward the bedside table, he caught a strong whiff of himself, and whatever was left in his stomach from last night's binge was damn close to seeing the light of day. He stumbled to the bathroom and cranked the hot water. Under the steaming spray, his nausea subsided and his mind cleared for the first time in a week.

The miserable routine he succumbed to during the holidays might've been cathartic, if it was a one-and-done deal. But it wasn't. This was year seven. And, so far, it wasn't any easier. He could still feel Becky's soft hand as it rested in his, still see the pain in her eyes that the medicine dulled but never vanquished. And on the second day of every January, he could still hear her final, sighing breath.

Jack stayed in the shower long enough to steam the mirrors and shove the memories into their well-worn box. Stepping out, he dried off, then cinched the towel around his waist and went in search of something clean to wear. Once again, he'd climb back to the land of the living, even if the person who mattered most wasn't there.

In front of the FBI field office, Jack slammed the car door and eyed the gray clouds that promised snow later in the day. He imagined the sky looked like that most of the winter in Minnesota. It did last time he was here. The efficient receptionist barely had time to offer coffee and a seat before a young man with short blond hair and obvious Nordic bloodlines strode toward Jack, palm extended.

"Randy Martin. Thanks for getting here so quickly. The vic's in the morgue, well-preserved, thanks to Mother Nature's sub-zero refrigerator. We'll check on her later. Let's get you settled in first."

After a brief handshake, Jack followed Randy down a painted cinder block hallway. “Do you have the final forensics report yet?”

“Should have it later today.” Randy swung open a wooden door and pointed to a scuffed desk in the corner. “Your temporary office.”

Three heads swiveled toward Jack as he entered the room. The agents looked at each other then, in a rush of scraping chairs, clamored toward him. Randy laughed. “I knew this was coming. Let me introduce you around.”

Jack shot him a questioning look but had no time to ask as the winner of the race pumped Jack’s hand. “Bob Schilling, Sir. It’s a pleasure to meet you in person. Is it true that you single-handedly put the pieces together on the Minneapolis strangler case?”

Ahhh...so that was it. A few years had passed, but it had been a big deal up here. Even made the national news for a couple of cycles. Jack started to reply, but a petite blonde who looked like she was fresh out of training jumped in.

“Linda Cole, Agent Mathis.” The gleam in her eye bordered on adoration. “We studied that case in my Methods class during training. It was amazing.”

Again, Jack opened his mouth but was cut off.

Another handshake. “Incredible work. Hope to crack a case like that myself someday. What was it that sent you in Brown’s direction? Doug Jankowski, by the way.”

Jack waited a few seconds to see if anyone else would jump in, as uncomfortable with the praise now as he had been when it had first come from his superiors. He’d only been doing his job. Looking at their expectant faces, he sighed and repeated the words he’d said so many times.

“I wasn’t looking at him any differently than anyone else. We were leaning hard on his boss, the butcher store owner. So many things pointed to him. But one day, I was in the shop and watched how the kid’s hands wrapped somebody’s order. God’s truth. That was it. For whatever reason, something clicked and I started digging deeper into his background.” Jack knew they wanted more, but he’d wasted enough time already. He met each of their gazes. “The lesson, I guess, is never look past anybody. But that case was over a long time ago, and we have another perp to find.” He turned to Randy. “So tell me more about where they found Dana Palmenteri’s body.”

The other agents took the hint and stepped back as Randy laid open the file on Jack’s desk and pulled out the photos. “Storage shed behind her house out in Hermantown. Didn’t show up for work for two days, so her coworkers became concerned. Local police found her and called us as soon as they saw this setup. Her belongings were shoved to the side. You can see the mock lab best in this photo. I’ll take you out there later today.”

After he’d reviewed the file, Jack agreed with Martin’s assessment. Definitely the same profile: Strangulation and asphyxiation. So how long had he pursued this woman? And how had he connected with her? Did he use email to entice her like he had the others? Or could this be a copycat? It was always a possibility, and this girl was only broadly in the same industry. Jack checked his watch. Better find a hotel room. He was going to be here a while.

Lunch consisted of a cold turkey sandwich, chips, and way more information than Jack wanted about Randy Martin’s new girlfriend before they finally headed out to the crime scene. Icicle lights hung from the front of the small brick ranch, the cheery Christmas decorations in the yard jarring against the yellow crime tape that led them around the side of the house to a wooden shed.

Pulling hat flaps down over his ears, a local officer left his vehicle to greet them. “Nothing new out here. Cold as hell, though.”

Jack briefly acknowledged the man, his mind already studying the scene. The killer was long gone, of that he was certain. He eyed the gloomy sky again. The coming snow would obliterate their footprints, just like the fresh blanket already on the ground had done for the killer. Jack stepped inside the frozen shed and was impressed that it looked relatively undisturbed. Within minutes, he found what he was looking for. It was the one link that had been kept from the media, removing any chance of this being a copycat killer. A simple piece of paper, partially hidden by the computer keyboard with three printed words: BETTER THAN YOU.

Jack finished his perusal and walked with Randy to the car. "We're good. Go ahead and send the crew in to clean up."

As Jack kicked the snow from his shoes, a red Subaru SUV pulled in behind them. Almost before the wheels stopped, a young man with a notebook and a handheld recorder slipped and slid around the front of his car, hurrying toward Jack.

"Agent Mathis, right?"

The officer monitoring the area stepped out of his car again and sauntered over as Jack studied the eager young man. His hood had slipped, revealing a shaved head that rang a bell with Jack, but he couldn't place him.

"Ken Johnson. I'm with Internet Intelligence, the Source of Virtual Truth." He juggled his notebook then extended his gloved right hand.

"That's the best slogan your boss could come up with?" Jack quirked an eyebrow as he shook the kid's hand.

His cheeks flushed red. "Yes, Sir. I mean no, Sir."

Jack had pity on him. "How can I help you, Mr. Johnson?"

The reporter's eyes darted toward Agent Martin who waited on the driver's side. "Uh, my boss sent me up here to follow the story. It's another one, isn't it? Like the one in Los Angeles?"

The connection clicked. "You covered that."

Johnson nodded, his grin revealing a gap between his front teeth. "Yep. Must've done a good enough job because the boss heard about this case and sent me asap. What can you tell me?"

Jack mentally cringed. Glad someone had done his job in Los Angeles, because *he* sure as hell hadn't. Three victims. Now four. He had to find a way to get ahead of the bastard.

Yeah, the Minneapolis Strangler case was ancient history.

Shelving his frustration, Jack tightened his hood as the wind sliced through his jacket. "Can't tell you anything right now." Ken opened his mouth, but Jack held up his hand. "Press conference tomorrow at ten. Ask your questions then."

He slid into his seat and out of the frigid wind, as the eager puppy look faded from Ken's eyes. Too bad. Jack's job wasn't to boost anybody's journalistic dreams. He had a killer to find.

Back at the office, he settled in at his make-shift desk and shoved a hand through his hair. This wasn't how he'd expected his break to end, yet the adrenaline coursing through his veins told him this was exactly where he needed to be. *Alive*. He was alive and ready to catch this son of a bitch. He re-read the file cover to cover then pulled out the files on the other cases. He'd reviewed them a hundred times already, but there had to be something he was missing, something they were all missing. There always was.