

## PROLOGUE

“Elinor Grace is dead!”

“Yes?” Victor Hardman didn’t add the implied “so what” as he continued to read the documents on his desk.

Dr. Eric Martin came farther into the large office suite, closing the door behind him. Then he walked over to stand in front of Victor’s desk. “There was no medical reason why she should’ve died. I know. I examined her medical records myself.”

Victor looked away from his papers. “Old people die, Dr. Martin. Now, if you haven’t any business reason for taking up my time, why don’t you go home? Enjoy your weekend.”

“I’m going to ask the family to have an autopsy done.” Martin’s mouth firmed into a thin, stubborn line.

Victor straightened in his chair and glared at the man who had suddenly grown a pair of balls. “No, you won’t.”

Martin shuddered visibly at the three words. “Why not?”

“Because I own you, Martin, and you will do as you’re told—or else. Go home, have that drink you so obviously need, and think about what you owe me and the company. Need I say I don’t want to hear about this again? ”

“No. I understand perfectly.” Martin turned and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Victor frowned. The good doctor had become a problem. He reached over and hit a stored number on his phone.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Two weeks later.*

Rob Craig took his house key from under the fake rock in his garden then let himself into his 1930's cottage-style home.

His morning run through his Broad Ripple neighborhood had left him feeling invigorated and ready to face the body of the elderly Jewish woman lying in the embalming room of the mortuary where he routinely did his private autopsies. The body would not be a pretty or sweet-smelling job because of the lack of embalming. A traditional Jewish burial had the bodies buried so quickly after death that the bodies were barely out of rigor.

Rob could have done the autopsy at the Jewish funeral home, but he preferred that the bodies were brought to his autopsy room. He didn't like making macabre small talk with mortuary attendants who didn't know him and how he worked. He had always had trouble making small talk. He knew others considered him, at the very best, standoffish and, at the worst, a troublemaker.

But as his mother had always told him, "Robbie, you can't control what other people think about you." Taking his mother's advice, he'd never tried.

He walked into his kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and took out a bottle of sports drink. He drank it on the way to the bathroom.

Stopping just inside the doorway, he laughed. "Laurel, get out of the shower." Rob's Great Dane puppy looked up from his nap on the tile floor.

"Yeah, it's hot—Indian Summer, old boy. But you've got to get out of there so I can get cleaned up. I need to go to work."

Laurel didn't move.

Rob reached in and turned the water on full blast then stepped away just in time to avoid getting hit by ninety pounds of very wet dog.

Chuckling, Rob stripped off his running clothes and stepped into the stall. As he washed, he thought about the deceased who required his services. From what Karen Grace, granddaughter of the dead woman, had said upon hiring him, Elinor Grace had never had a heart attack or even indications of a heart problem. That didn't necessarily mean anything. Elderly people could die of heart failure without ever presenting symptoms. But he did acknowledge that such a clean medical history should have been an indicator for an autopsy.

Rob shook his head and snorted with disgust. Shoddy work by someone. That was why he had left the Med Center. The staff did okay with the obvious coroner cases, but to cut costs they overlooked the less obvious. The emergency room doctor had seen an elderly woman, dead on arrival with no signs of trauma, assumed a heart attack or some other cardiovascular event, and signed off on it. The family, now past their initial shock and grief, wanted questions answered. And to get those answers, they had to go to the time and trouble of hiring a lawyer, exhuming the body, and having a private autopsy done to pinpoint the cause of death.

Rob stepped out of the shower and stopped short of stumbling over his very disgruntled dog. He grinned at the wet canine that had turned sad, brown eyes on him.

"Okay, I'm sorry I turned the water on you, but you should've moved. Look, you putz,

you've got Hardy feeling sorry for you. You don't need me too."

Hardy, a twenty-pound cat of unknown origins, groomed the Great Dane after the puppy's untimely shower. The tubby feline stopped licking her housemate, meowed, walked over, and began grooming Rob's wet leg.

He stooped to scratch Hardy's head. "Thanks, old girl, but I think a towel will get the job done faster. Appreciate the thought, though."

After Rob pulled on some scrubs, he grabbed the copies of Elinor Grace's medical records sent over by the Grace's family lawyer and headed out the door. Locking up the house, he reflected on his phone conversation with the lawyer, Mici Smith. He'd received the impression she was humoring her clients and didn't expect much out of this procedure or him. He shrugged. Unfortunately, he was used to that attitude. Most people didn't understand what a forensic pathologist could do.

After locking up the house, he placed the key under a stone bunny rabbit in the garden then climbed into his Dodge Ram truck. The trip to the mortuary took less than five minutes.

His new pathology assistant's beat up old Ford compact was already in the lot.

*Good, maybe this med student will work out. We'll see if he can keep up on this case.*

An elderly woman who hadn't been embalmed and had been entombed for over a month was not for the faint of heart. Many a medical student who'd set their sights on pathology as a specialty quickly changed their minds after an autopsy or two.

Entering through the mortuary's back door, Rob heard the sounds of Metallica coming from the embalming room. At least this diener shared his musical interests. If Tod lasted longer than the previous four, maybe the two of them could hit some concerts and clubs. Rob had always gone alone in the past, but some company would be nice once in a while.

*Hell, Tod probably won't last either.*

If the smells and sights didn't get him, Rob's obsession with his work would. That's what had scared off the others. That's what had skewed his ability to work with his peers at the Center—he was a perfectionist and the others hadn't given a flying fuck.

Tod looked up as Rob entered the room. "Good morning, Dr. Craig. I think I've got your setup all done."

There was an expectant look in Tod's eyes—the look reminiscent of an over-eager puppy starving for affection. Since he couldn't scratch his diener's ears, Rob fumbled around for an appropriate ice-breaker. "Looks great. Thanks for turning on the music—nothing like a little Metallica to get things going."

He'd obviously said the right thing, because Tod's face lit up.

Approaching the embalming table, Rob slipped on gloves and began to unzip the body bag containing Mrs. Grace's remains. The smell of putrefying flesh quickly filled the air. Other than a slight cough and a scrunching of his nose, Tod made no other acknowledgment of the strong, nauseating odor. At that moment, he knew Tod would work out just fine with the technical aspects of the job. The jury was still out whether the younger man could take Rob's personality idiosyncrasies.

"Okay, let's get started." Rob used the foot pedal to start the recorder for his informal oral dictation. He would use this recording to create the more formal written report for the family. "We have here Mrs. Elinor Grace, a sixty-eight-year-old Caucasian woman of Jewish faith who died approximately one month ago of a suspected infarction and was buried un-embalmed within twenty-four hours of her death. Tod, what condition would you expect the body to be in?"

Rob turned to look at Tod, who'd closely watched as Rob unzipped the bag.

"Well, Dr. Craig..."

"Tod, call me Rob. This isn't the Med Center."

"Okay, uh, Rob. The deceased would have no rigor since the enzymes that cause the muscles to stiffen up would've dissipated." Tod paused and looked at Rob as if to see if he was right so far.

"Good, go on. I'll stop you if I disagree."

Tod blushed and let out a breath. "Uh, well, there would be dependent *livor mortis*—the lower part of her body would be a purplish color with mottling above it. Superior skin would be pale, as would pressure points such as the elbows and other bony areas that had made contact with a hard surface. Because she wasn't embalmed, her abdomen would be protuberant from the gas-producing bacteria in her gastrointestinal tract. There would be autolysis—um, the cellular detail in her body would disappear because of the lack of oxygen to the cells. I guess that's all. Other than that she'd be in pretty good shape unless the coffin or, in this case, the crypt had leaks or cracks so that insects and worms could get inside and do other damage."

"Very good. I'm impressed." This second-year medical student was more with it than some first year residents. "Where did you learn all that?"

Tod turned slightly redder at the praise. "Well, I studied some of the forensic texts after I got this job, and then I went to the coroner's library and read some of your old dictated cases. I'm not kissing up to you when I say that I learned more from your case dictations than the books. Really!"

Rob was speechless. He had never had someone look up to him before—other than his pets. "Well, thanks ... Let's get to work and see what killed this woman."

"Yeah, it sure wasn't a heart attack if her medical records were accurate." Tod turned and checked over the instruments once again.

"What makes you say that?" Rob paused in removing the body bag from the stainless steel table.

Tod shrugged. "I don't know, but it's a gut feeling I've got. The medical records have no indications of any ill health other than the usual colds, flu, and such. She wasn't obese. Her family history shows no history of heart problems. If there's a fire, there has usually been some smoke. No smoke."

"No smoke. I couldn't have put it better myself. My gut says the same thing. Tell me, what do you plan to specialize in after you graduate?"

"Pathology and then a fellowship in Forensics. That's why I would've killed to get this job—no matter what everyone else said." Tod grinned.

"And just what did everyone else say? Or, better yet, let me guess—'Watch out for that Dr. Craig, Tod. He's a crazy, obsessed, anti-social bastard.' Something along those lines?"

Tod nodded. He looked away, a darker flush of red on his cheeks. "Yeah, something like that. But they're wrong."

"How do you know? You've only worked with me for a week."

"I just know. Hey, just ask around—my classmates think I'm weird because I want to be a pathologist."

Rob didn't know what to say about Tod's willingness to accept him at face value, so he changed the subject. "You might want to wear a mask. The smell is bad enough now, but when we get to the gut, it'll be awful."

In what was for him a companionable silence, broken only by the throbbing base of the

Metallica CD, Rob turned toward Elinor Grace exposed once more to the harsh light of the living world.

Without even being asked, his assistant had turned down the CD player so Rob could dictate without yelling over the deafening music. He read into the record the attending physician's conclusions as to the cause of death, the exact time of death, and other pertinent information from the death certificate.

"Help me turn her over, Tod. We'll start with her back."

Tod moved to assist, and it was as if they had worked together forever. Gently, competently, and with respect, they turned Mrs. Grace over. Rob took several pictures.

"Help me turn her back." Tod had anticipated Rob's request and was already positioned to turn the body over. Rob took more pictures of the front.

"Upon complete visual examination, there are no abrasions or indications of external trauma of any kind on the deceased." The lawyer had advised him of the family's suspicions that Elinor had been murdered. If she had been, there were no obvious signs of such on her body.

As a highly trained scrub nurse would have done for a surgeon, Tod had the scalpel ready and waiting for Rob to use in the process of cutting into the chest.

Rob made a large V-shaped incision around the breasts by cutting diagonally down from each side so that at the bottom of the V the skin and attached tissue could be pulled up over the deceased's face. Like a blanket shielding her eyes from the indignities of the process.

He then made a midline cut down her abdomen to complete the Y-cut and pulled the skin with its tissues to each side. With the ribs exposed, he accepted the rib cutters from Tod and cut the ribs protecting the heart, placing them on a tray so they could be replaced before he closed her.

"Let's see how your heart looks, Elinor." Rob was in the zone now—communing with the body itself, asking it to give up its secrets to him.

Rob cut the right carotid, then the left, and finally the left subclavian. Making a cut just past the arch of the aorta, he removed the heart intact so he could look at all the major vessels *in situ*. "Looks normal on gross. I'll want some slides."

Tod held the tray for the heart and took it over to the side bench where he would later take the tissue for the slides.

Rob continued his examination of the chest cavity. "You were in excellent shape, Elinor. You could have lived a lot longer on this heart and lungs. You sure as hell didn't die from any infarction I can see."

Getting ready to look at the brain, Rob turned to ask for the Stryker saw and realized that Tod had again anticipated him. A warm glow of what could almost be called contentment flowed through him.

"Thanks, Tod. As you guessed, we're going to keep hunting for cause of death. I'm ninety-nine percent sure she didn't die from heart failure and the lungs look good, too. Our guts are on track so far." Rob made an extra effort to include Tod in the process. No diener had ever been able to share the zone with him.

Tod smiled and nodded.

Rob started up the Stryker and gently placed the flap of skin back down over the open chest cavity. The saw would vibrate through the skull bone and stop at the tissue, just like the saw did when used to take off a cast. One saw, two uses.

He swiftly and cleanly removed the top of the skull. The brain looked normal—a gelatinous gray mass with peaks and valleys.

“It looks normal.” Tod voiced Rob’s thoughts.

“Yes. We’ll weigh it and take tissue for a tox screen.”

Tod looked at him with a satisfied smile curling his lips. “Poison?”

“Maybe. I’m not ruling out anything ... yet. We’ll take all the usual tissues for a tox—brain, liver, kidneys, and ocular vitreous. Since she wasn’t embalmed, we’ll try to see if the bacteria left us anything in her stomach contents.”

Tod grimaced. The autopsy had been routine so far, but the next half hour promised to be gruesome. Un-embalmed abdominal cavities were gross—even for old-timers.

“Let’s put on the space suits before we get to the gut.” Rob was of the old school and usually just wore scrubs and goggles or the mask for flying bone and spatter. Space suits were for the unusual—and this case was bordering on such. “Who knows what kind of stuff is growing in the body. Sorry, Elinor,” he patted her arm, “we know you can’t help it.”

Tod got the suits out of the supply cupboard, and they both quickly suited up.

The opening of the abdominal cavity was as bad as Rob had anticipated. With Tod’s assistance, he got in and out quickly with enough samples to satisfy the most Type-A toxicologist.

Since he’d seen nothing out of the normal in Elinor’s body, he went ahead and took samples from under her nails. Rob didn’t want to overlook any possible avenue for evidence.

“Good job, Tod. Finish up taking samples for making slides so we can put Mrs. Grace back together. The mortician will finish fixing her up all nice and pretty so she can go back into the family crypt for her well-deserved rest.”

“Okay, Rob.” Tod turned and began to take samples for slides then handed the removed organs respectfully to Rob who carefully reconstructed the remains of Elinor Grace.

“Don’t worry, Elinor.” Rob covered her with a sheet, once again shielding her from the prying eyes of the world. “We’ll get evidence so the police can find your murderer.”

“Rob, you’re sure it’s murder even before we get the tox screen back. How?”

“Considering the lack of evidence of heart failure or any other obvious system failure, then it’s Ockham’s razor: Don’t complicate things more than you need to; the simplest hypothesis is usually the best.”

“Why not suicide? How do you know she didn’t ingest poison?”

“You saw her. You read her charts. You read the family reasons for the autopsy. Do you really think she committed suicide?” Rob looked at Tod.

“No. I don’t. But will the police buy our murder conclusion?”

“I don’t know, Tod, but it won’t be because we didn’t give them everything they need to investigate what should have at the very least been classified as a suspicious death.”

## CHAPTER TWO

*Friday, three weeks later.*

“What else could go wrong today?” muttered Michelle Smith as she looked around the dimly lit and crowded courthouse elevator. The non-moving elevator.

As the walls closed in on her, Mici repeated under her breath, “Breathe, damn it!”—a mantra that might just get her through this living death.

Her fellow prisoners looked at her, probably wondering what her problem was. *Tough. Let them.* If someone didn’t get her out of this metal coffin—and soon—she’d really give them cause to stare.

God, she hated small spaces!

As if some god in the machine had heard her prayer, the elevator jerked and started downward. With each slowly moving second, Mici continued to voice her mantra. Finally the doors opened. *Freedom.*

Mici breathed a sigh of relief and vowed never to take an elevator again—even if the Probate Courts were moved to the top floor. She knew it was an unreasonable fear, but she couldn’t help it. Her father had a lot to answer for.

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“Great!” Mici gasped for much-needed oxygen after climbing the six flights of stairs to the offices of Benjamin, Tyler and Harrison, P.C. “Everyone went home.”

Only security lights showed through the glass side windows of the office entrance. At six o’clock on a Friday evening, there was usually some die-hard associate still working.

*Oh well, I guess they have lives. My pillow and the Tina Whittle mystery novel will wait, my associates’ significant others won’t.*

Mici dropped her briefcase on the floor and fumbled for her office key. Hell, she needed a bottle of aspirin, a cold Pepsi, and a chair, in that order.

Finally making it inside the office reception area, she made her way down the dimly lit hall to her office. She noticed a large manila envelope in the middle of her clean desk.

Mici picked up the note attached to the envelope and read:

*Boss,*

*Well here it is—the Grace autopsy. Karen Grace brought it over around 3 P.M. Said to call her tonight—no matter when you got in. Urgent. I didn’t peek—tempted to—but didn’t.*

*Sherry.*

Mici grinned. She knew what it must have cost Sherry not to look. Oh well, she’d let her read it Monday. Good secretaries were hard to find, so you kept them happy.

Before she even attempted to read the contents of the package, she needed the aspirin and a Pepsi.

Mici walked over to the small bar refrigerator cleverly hidden in the built-in wall units. It

had taken years, but she'd finally earned the right to a corner office with lots of windows and high ceilings. Already she'd made the room her own—pale peach walls set off by the mahogany of the built-in wood shelves, Chinese wool area rugs on the parquet wood floors, and pastel watercolors—the feminine touches needed to lessen the severity of the formerly masculine domain of a recently deceased partner. Her office gave her peace of mind and underlined the fact she'd made it in a man's world.

Headache on the way to being assuaged, Mici glanced at the extremely thick report. “What did Dr. Craig think he was writing? The sequel to *War and Peace*?” she muttered.

The two times she'd spoken with Craig by phone he'd been so short with her that she knew how he'd come by his antisocial reputation. The only information she could get out of the cranky pathologist was the report would be done after the toxicology screens came back.

Now it was here.

Mici opened the report. The words “Elinor Grace was murdered” leapt off the page. Even though she'd been somewhat prepared for the possibility, the reality was still a shock.

Before reading any farther, she picked up the phone and dialed Karen Grace. “Karen, this is Mici. I just saw the report. Your family's suspicions were correct. I'm so sorry.”

She half-listened to Karen's anguish over her Gran's death at the hands of an unknown person and pondered what the next steps to be taken were. She was torn from her ruminations by Karen's words “...the autopsy report only confirms what the caller had already told me—Gran was murdered...”

“What caller?” she asked, cutting off Karen's emotional rant.

“Oh, I didn't tell you about that, did I?” Karen continued without waiting for a response. “A few days after Gran died, some man called and told me Gran had been killed and to get a private autopsy. That's why I had you get the exhumation and hired Dr. Craig. Before the call, I'd thought Gran died because her heart gave out.”

Mici couldn't believe her ears. “Karen, if you knew this over a month ago, why didn't you tell me then? We could've gone to the police immediately.” She rubbed her temples, willing her headache not to return.

As she listened to Karen's attempts to rationalize keeping such news a secret, she flipped through the report and read that Elinor had been poisoned with nicotine. She cringed at the autopsy photos of Elinor's poor body and vowed someone would pay for the woman's death and the indignities that came with being a murder victim.

She cut off Karen's flow of grief, anger, and excuses. “Karen, I'm taking this to the police tonight.—Yes, you heard me. Tonight. I don't care what Dr. Craig said about the police not listening. The police will listen to me.”

\* \* \* \*

*An hour later.*

Mici stared at Indianapolis Homicide Detective Lieutenant Mitch Adams in disbelief. This hadn't been her day—stuck elevators, beloved client proven murdered, and now this—a stubborn, close-minded police detective. She massaged her pounding temples. She needed more aspirin, but didn't think Excedrin had a number for her current headache.

“Ms. Smith, one more time. You have nothing that convinces me that Mrs. Grace was murdered. Nothing.”

Holding onto her patience by one thin and rapidly unraveling thread, she forced her lips into a polite smile. “Detective Adams, I'll admit everything we have alone wouldn't indicate a

murder, but together they make fairly convincing circumstantial evidence. Look at this logically, we have an autopsy report—”

Detective Adams interrupted Mici. “Look at what I have on my desk, Ms. Smith.” He waved a big hand, barely missing several piles of thick file folders. “See these stacks? These are the case files for the murders committed in Indianapolis to-date this year. There are well over sixty cases there. On these cases, we either know who did it or have a pretty good idea. Now, you want me to add to this very large pile being handled by overworked homicide detectives, a case where the woman could’ve accidentally ingested her rose poison? I don’t think so.”

Mici recognized a stone wall when she met one.

Rising, she looked Detective Adams in the eye. “If you want more evidence, I’ll get you more evidence. Then you’ll have to open one more file for your stack whether you like it or not.”