

BENT

By Wendy Gee

PART ONE

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Present Day

The woman leaning beside the pineapple-shaped fountain exuded an air of elegance. She wore clothes that'd make fashionistas green with envy, and her nails were perfectly manicured. Her hair, a cascade of silky darkness, framed her face with the kind of precision that suggested a very expensive stylist. Everything about her was meticulous, resembling a still life painting—except for the unfortunate addition of a bullet hole, dead center on her forehead.

Charleston Police Department's top homicide detective, Lieutenant Draymond "Dino" Bernadino, hooked a thumb toward the initial responder at the grisly scene. "Newton, feed me. Tell me everything." He was still eying the victim. *A dirty rotten shame*, he thought.

The veteran patrol officer, a man Dino knew well, wore close-cropped dark hair and a mischievous grin as he relayed the chilling details. "Call came in at zero-six-forty. The witness reported finding a motionless body by the fountain while they were out for a run."

"Any ID on the witness?"

"Guy declined to leave his name, but the operator managed to grab his digits and track the cellphone to Curtis Daly. According to DMV, he lives on East Elliott Street. Only a few blocks away. I sent a unit to take his statement."

Dino rested his head in his hands. "Anybody else report her?"

"Two more calls came in at 0656 and 0658." The officer used military time to eliminate any confusion. "Passersby out walking their pups. I was already on scene. Guess they didn't see me here," Newton explained.

Dino ducked under the yellow perimeter tape amid the quiet splash of the fountain. "Stick around please," he instructed Newton.

An assistant coroner crouched over the body, obscuring TV reporters and camera operators lurking just beyond the barricade tape from their relentless quest for footage. "Lieutenant, you ready to check her purse and pockets? Maybe get an identification?"

Dino didn't need a driver's license to ID the victim. He'd recognized the dead woman the moment he arrived. "Give me a sec."

A saffron glow from the new day, that had broken a half-hour earlier, chopped undulating ribbons of light and shadow across the Cooper River's restless outbound tide. A tropical disturbance was brewing in the Caribbean and forecasters warned it could steer itself toward the Carolinas. Days away and more than fifteen-hundred miles offshore, the gathering storm was already affecting the local current and pushing hungry sharks closer to the beaches.

Despite the bounty of sunshine, Dino aimed his flashlight's high-powered beam along the stone walkway surrounding the showy fountain searching for clues as he circled a fourth time. Each lap, he discovered something new. Another crevice in the concrete. Feint droplets of dried blood. A discernable shoeprint.

As Dino continued to take in the scene, what he didn't find told an even bigger story.

No spent casing suggested the killer either picked up his brass, used a revolver that didn't eject a shell, or had made this a secondary dump sight. Considering the astonishing lack of pooled blood, the latter seemed most plausible, because head injuries created an awful mess. Ask any man who'd ever nicked himself shaving. That meant the victim had been killed elsewhere, then her body staged at the fountain for dramatic effect.

Dino toed the ground-level nozzles of a splash zone feature where adults and kids were encouraged to squish through dazzling arcs to mollify summer heat. "Hey, Newt. You ask Parks and Rec to secure the water?"

Officer Newton nodded. "They have the attraction on a timer. Would've started spraying at eight, but I told a foreman to cut power until he gets a greenlight from the lead detective. Shall I give him your name, LT?"

"Give him yours. You're in charge of scene security until we release it." Dino eyed the condos facing Waterfront Park. He spun toward another officer hanging around for an assignment and rested a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Begin your canvas up there. Look for early risers and night owls. Maybe even find a security camera that caught what we need. Let's work this hard."

"On it." The officer signaled his partner and they headed for the luxury high-rise.

Dino focused his attention on the assistant coroner. "Okay, let's do this. What's your TOD estimate?"

"Preliminary time of death is anywhere from one to five this morning based strictly on jaw rigor."

Rigor mortis, the process by which the body's muscles stiffened, was a well-established forensic tool. Dino couldn't recite all the science behind the phenomenon, but had learned enough through the years to know the victim hadn't been dead for very long.

The assistant coroner continued. "Might be able to narrow the window once we get her to MUSC."

Since the state employed coroners in lieu of board-certified medical examiners, Charleston County contracted with the Medical University of South Carolina's Autopsy Division to conduct scrupulous post-mortem examinations when needed. In general, coroners were only tasked with identifying the body, notifying their next of kin, and returning the deceased's personal belongings recovered on scene.

The assistant coroner added, "Of course, you recognize she probably wasn't killed here. And I'm going out on a limb with likely COD. See the stippling?" She pointed to discoloration on the immediate periphery of the gunshot wound.

The presence of unburned particles on skin indicated a firearm was discharged in close proximity. Evidence techs would analyze the area for trace metals and gunpowder residue. Dino had to consider whether the killer intended for the body to get soaked by the fountain in an effort to destroy or distort evidence. Though he knew from experience stippling couldn't be washed away, maybe the offender didn't. Still, outdoor crime scenes needed expeditious processing before weather, looky-loos, or animals could carry off potential evidence.

While nothing told him who'd done the killing, Dino grasped the irony of the location. The fountain was located in the city's touristy French Quarter that included Waterfront Park—eight acres of pristine green space built just after Hurricane Hugo ravaged the state many years earlier. Bounded on the west by pricey condos, while the east fronted the Cooper River, the public park afforded a low degree of privacy. That made it the least likely spot in the entire Lowcountry to ditch a dead body. But the significance of the pineapple was targeted at Dino.

He refocused his attention on the coroner. He liked this one for her patented bluntness. "Good observation about the stippling, Connie. Though I'll leave both cause and manner of death blank in my report until we get a final certificate. No one can accuse either of us of jumping to conclusions."

Dino's cellphone vibrated in his pocket. He fished it out and grimaced at the caller ID. "Hey, Flynn. What's shaking?"

“Your number one guy is being released early.”

Dino was accustomed to receiving official notification whenever there was a change in confinement status for any of the lowlifes he’d collared. Despite a sizable number to track, he knew exactly who the caller was talking about. “Why are you letting that dirtbag walk?” Dino asked.

“Compassionate release. He’s dying. Stage 4 liver failure.” Flynn outlined the prisoner’s prognosis in horrific detail.

“Who’s notifying the family?” Dino asked.

“They got advocates for that shit. Not gonna be me, for damn sure. Remember the kid? What was he back then?”

“Almost thirteen.”

“Not sure where to find him. I think he and his mom went to live with the asshole uncle-slash-brother—”

“I’ll make the notification,” Dino said. “Thanks for the heads up, but I gotta get back to a new scene I’m working.” He disconnected knowing exactly how to find the kid, Travis, since they’d stayed in touch through the years. As for his mother, she was the dead woman whose petite hands clutched a pink Dolce & Gabbana handbag right there at the base of the pineapple fountain.

Dino gloved up and dropped into a crouch to inspect her bag. He hated this part of his job. A purse seemed so much more cloistered than a wallet, and Dino always felt as though he was invading a woman’s privacy. Another end-of-life indignation he couldn’t avoid.

Dino found what he considered the usual assortment: make-up, cellphone, and leather billfold. He removed the billfold. Money and credit cards remained in place. Then he glanced at the dead woman and noted her rings, watch, and expensive necklace were also left untouched, that suggested robbery was an unlikely motive. Next, Dino located her license to confirm the name he already knew.

Miranda Pinion.

He observed Miranda with a mounting sense of propriety and sadness. Dino drew in a breath and scrunched his eyes remembering the last time he’d spoken to her. A week ago, he guessed. She’d served cookies and sweet tea. And told fresh stories about her son, Travis, and his

budding career. She'd finally landed in a good place. Comforted by Travis. A proud mama by all accounts.

Then his concentration spooled to their first encounter.

Human memories were notoriously unreliable. The mind tended to bake in a defensive bias in favor of the storyteller who often refused to incorporate mistakes. Or chose to embellish any rough edges. Or tripped over the stark reality of forgetfulness. The result—a ragged and oft edited historical narrative.

Yet even so, Dino recalled things with exacting clarity.

Cookies and sweet tea—the same thing she'd served eighteen years earlier—inside the worst week of both their lives.

Until now.