

# CHAPTER 1

*February 17, 2002*

**M**y eyes had to adjust after I closed the scratched and dented door behind me. None of the outside sunlight permeated the windowless room; the artificial light was hazy. The stench of stale beer and something putrid I couldn't identify assaulted my nostrils. The grime on the walls could be felt without touching them.

A long, chipped wooden bar ran up the right side of the room. Five patrons sat on stools in front of it, but there was no bartender present. All of the men had looked in my direction as I entered, but after the door was closed and the natural light was gone, they'd resumed talking or staring into the drinks sitting in front of them.

A pool table stood in the middle of the room, a foot-long tear in its faded green felt.

"The Old Man Down the Road" by John Fogerty played on the jukebox just loud enough to hear.

Along the left wall was a bank of six burgundy vinyl booths. The first one had a top-to-bottom rip in its back.

I was supposed to find her in one of the booths. This wasn't



the kind of place I would've chosen to meet. From what little I remembered about Summer, this wasn't a typical spot for her to hang out in, either.

The booth backs were high, so I couldn't see the top of any occupant's head. I had to walk down the row and check each one for her.

A woman came out from a back room carrying a large bottle of pickled eggs under her right arm and holding a big bag of beef jerky in her left hand. She looked well seasoned, with over-managed shoulder-length blonde hair and pouty bright red lips. She wore high black pumps, black fishnet stockings, a short, tight black skirt, and a sheer black blouse. Her black bra had ample bosom to push up.

I realized that I'd stopped and was staring. She didn't even notice me as she proceeded behind the bar.

I continued past each booth toward the back of the room. They were all empty until, in the last one, I recognized her profile.

"Hi, Summer."

She didn't acknowledge me as I slid in across from her. Her pretty face was pale and expressionless, her green eyes vacant. She didn't blink. She didn't move. She looked past me as if I wasn't there. "Summer, it's Nick."

I reached across the table, past her folded eyeglasses, and touched her shoulder. Her upper body slowly, then with momentum, fell over. Her head hit the wall with a dull thud.

*Shit, shit. Shit!*

I swung around to her side. Grabbing her small, limp wrist, I felt for a pulse. Nothing. I placed two fingers on the artery of her neck. Nothing! Her skin was still warm.

*Holy fuck, she's dead.* What the hell was going on? I stared at her. This was awful. *Poor girl.*

I took a deep breath. I had to compose myself.

An older guy in loose jeans and a white T-shirt walked by me,

looking straight ahead. Even though he was ten feet away when he passed, I could tell by the acrid smell following him that he'd just smoked a cigarette. I turned to peer around the booth and saw him perch on the farthest stool at the bar. None of the barflies could see Summer from that angle.

I tried to find a pulse on her wrist again, just in case I did it wrong the first time. Nothing. *This is crazy. How can she be dead?*

With one finger, I opened up her brown leather jacket to see if there was blood or any visible markings on her. Nothing. Her white blouse and brown pants looked clean.

There was a slight bulge in her inside jacket pocket. A closer look revealed sunglasses.

The thing to do was to check all her pockets. Maybe there was a clue as to why she wanted to meet or something that would tell me what had just happened to her. I had to force myself to look, because I felt like I was violating her. All I found was a set of keys.

A brown leather purse sat next to her. I placed it on the table and opened it. The wallet still had money in it, so she hadn't been robbed. There were business cards in a little plastic case, some makeup, gum, and two pens. No clues. I returned the purse to her side.

I looked at her face and was about to close her eyes when I noticed it. There was the small smear of blood on her neck. I gently pulled away her blonde hair and discovered a tiny pinprick where blood had coagulated. I must've smeared it when I felt for a pulse.

Had someone stuck her with a needle?

Fighting an urge to just run out the back, I took another deep breath.

"Don't Stop" by Fleetwood Mac began playing in the background. I usually found the song motivational. At that moment, it was annoying and out of place.

After a few more calming breaths, I got up and walked over to the bar. "Excuse me."



“Yeah, hon?” The bartender’s voice had a rasp with a breathy lilt to it. “What’ll it be?”

“Does anyone know what happened in the back booth there?” I pointed in Summer’s direction. “The woman is dead.” Past experience had taught me the illusion of sounding calm, even though I was freaking out on the inside.

“Really?” The bartender pushed the tap handle away from her to stop the flow and slid the mug of beer to one of the patrons. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“We need to call 911.” My voice had risen an octave; I hoped no one had heard the tremor in it. I placed my hand on the edge of the bar, which was sticky, so I pulled it back.

There was a phone beside the cash register. When I looked back at the people, all seven were staring at me. One man slid off his stool, standing.

“You sure she’s dead?” the bartender asked. “Maybe she’s just wasted.”

“It’s eleven in the morning on a workday ...” I realized that made no difference to these people. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“You know why?” asked the guy sitting closest to me.

“No, I don’t.” No one seemed to be particularly disturbed that there was a dead woman in the back corner booth.

“We don’t like to make that call unless we absolutely have to,” the bartender said.

“You have to.” These people were definitely not the type I was used to dealing with. “Go check her for yourself.”

The bartender’s eyes narrowed. Then she took the three steps needed to get to the phone, her heels clicking on the hard floor. “What’s your name, handsome?”

“Nick Barnes.” After watching her pick up the receiver and press three digits, I turned to the patrons. “You guys see anything?”

The guy who’d stood up said, “I don’t need no trouble.” He

swayed and held onto the bar for support. He was around sixty and bony, but with a gut. Gray stubble framed his ruddy face.

The man right next to me said, “I don’t see nothin’ unless I get paid.” I could smell the alcohol on his breath. His eyes were pale, with red around the edges, his skin doughy and glistening with perspiration. “I can see anything you want, if you pay me.”

The guy next over glanced at me, but kept his mouth shut. He looked younger and less seasoned than the others.

The bartender was giving the address to the operator on the other end of the line.

“Sure none of you guys noticed anything?” I asked.

“I remember seeing a guy leaving,” said the oldest-looking one of the bunch. He was the one who’d been out back having a smoke. Guessing by his yellowed, wrinkly skin and dark circles around his eyes, he’d been smoking his whole life.

“They’re on their way, Nick,” the bartender said, coming back to stand behind the beer taps.

“I’m out of here,” said the man who was standing. “I don’t need this.”

“Don’t—”

The bartender cut me off. “He didn’t do anything, Nick. Let him go.”

He shuffled with a right lean to the door.

“I’m sure I know who did it,” the bartender said.

Everyone looked at her.

“You guys probably didn’t notice. They never notice anything.” She looked directly at me. “I’m not a waitress, Nick, you know. People need to come up to the bar to get a drink. He didn’t get a drink from me. Neither did the cute little girl. I wouldn’t have seen either of them if he wasn’t leaving when I went to the back room for supplies.”

“I noticed him,” the smoker protested.



“Who?” I asked.

She tilted her head to her left. “He was a little darker than you. Thicker brown hair but cut closer. Bit taller than you. Better shape than you, by the looks of it.”

“Uh-huh.” I wasn’t in bad shape. And she wasn’t taking this situation seriously enough.

“He had broader shoulders and a thinner waist, that’s all.” She surveyed me for another second. “I’d bet a couple years younger than you. Maybe not as good looking; something about his face.”

“Faggy,” noted one of the barflies.

A sly smile crossed her lips. “I wouldn’t kick either of you out of bed, Nick.”

The way she said my name made me shudder. She was a cougar that hunted fresh meat, preferably marinated by alcohol. Come to think of it, she’d make a good character for my book.

“I saw him too,” said the youngest barfly, his speech slow. “He left just before you came in. You probably saw him outside.”

That triggered a faint memory. There’d been the guy walking up Market Street, right near the front door of the bar. I didn’t get a good look at his face, but he seemed out of place in the neighborhood at that time of day. He was too Caucasian and too well dressed, like he was going to a club. Too GQ.

The smoker said, as if to himself, “Fancy shoes ... didn’t make a sound when he walked.”

I looked down at the scratched, dirt-ingrained linoleum. I scraped my running shoes across the floor. Even with rubber soles, he would’ve made *some* noise when he walked.

The burst of natural light distracted us as the door opened. Everyone turned to see a dark silhouette entering. Two more figures appeared, and the door closed behind them.

In front of us were two police officers in uniform, and one in plain clothes. It was Detective What’s-His-Name ... Cortes.

## CHAPTER 2

I had a 1994 Nissan Pathfinder. I could afford something newer with less mileage, but when I moved here six months ago it didn't feel permanent. I didn't need to drive the truck much, because I was living in the Russian Hill area, in the heart of San Francisco. With me added to the nearly million other people, it was just easier to take the bus most times. I'd never been like that before. I'd driven everywhere when I lived in Seattle and grew up in Tacoma.

Due to the usual afternoon traffic, the bus wasn't moving anywhere in a hurry. That didn't bother me. I needed time to absorb what had happened.

There were two pieces of paper in my pocket. I rubbed them together with my right hand. One was a small napkin, the kind they put cold drinks on to absorb moisture. When I had left, the bartender had told me her name was Lacy and shoved it into my hand. It had her number on it and "call me" written in red. There was a slight smudge to the right on a couple of the numbers indicating she wrote left-handed. I always got an ink stain on my middle finger when I wrote as well. I'd keep the napkin in case I needed to talk to her about what happened to Summer, not for the reason she was hoping. I was feeling lonely at times these days, but not *that* lonely.



The other was a business card from Detective Cortes. I'd recognized him as soon as he entered the bar. It'd been a year and a half ago, and I'd only met him once: the day I'd found Dr. Elles dead in his office. Cortes remembered me, too.

The two deaths were eerily similar in that the only mark was a pinprick on the neck. I pointed it out this time. It couldn't have been the same killer, because I'd seen Dr. Elles' murderer die from a bullet between his eyes in Maui a year ago.

Cortes had asked me questions, and I'd responded with what little I knew. He'd wondered why the people I was supposed to meet died just before I arrived. In Dr. Elles' case, he'd been killed because he knew too much, and they hadn't wanted him to give me his research. This time, I had no clue.

Cortes had told me he was sure I didn't commit the murder and that if I could figure out why Summer wanted to meet me, it could really help him.

I closed my eyes, took a few deep breaths, and tried to clear my mind. Maybe I could meditate for a few minutes. The practice helped ground me, but I was having trouble with it lately. I couldn't get rid of all the chatter between my ears; I lacked focus. Today was no different. With the bouncing of the bus and conversing passengers, it didn't work.

I pulled the cable above my head, so the bus would pull over at the next stop.

It was only a two-block walk to my place, but uphill. The fog that had rolled in off the bay was dense and contained a misty drizzle.

I rented a nice one-bedroom in an old building that had character. There was a plaque embedded in a cornerstone beside the front entrance that said it was built in 1922. It had white stucco, blue trim, and extended picture windows. The building was still standing, so it must've been safe against earthquakes. However, the hallways had a faint smell of mold, which couldn't be good.



I walked in and threw my keys in an old wooden bowl near the door. My grandfather had carved it as gift for me. It was the only memento I had of him.

Walking over to the window in the corner, I bent over my desk and opened the blinds. The outside mist hid the view, but at least naturally brightened the room. That would help me find the phone that was hidden under something. I retraced my steps. When Summer had called I was preoccupied with going through last week's newspapers for subplot ideas. I looked toward the counter at the edge of the kitchen and saw the empty charger plugged into the wall socket. The cordless phone's battery was probably dead. Other than yesterday's short call, it'd been over a week since it was last used. The phone had never held a charge long.

I pulled off my hoodie and tossed it over my desk chair.

Sitting down on the edge of the couch, I leaned forward to look under the pile of newspapers and magazines that had fallen over and scattered. My place wasn't messy, just needed tidying. I wasn't a slob or a clean freak, but somewhere in the middle.

There it was, under yesterday's *San Francisco News* and a *Golf Digest*. I pressed the talk button and brought it to my ear. Just as I suspected—no dial tone.

I didn't want to make a long distance call on my cell; too expensive. I went to the charger and plopped the phone onto it. I'd give it fifteen minutes.

Back on the couch, the cushion sagged in the spot where my butt always landed. I moved over the blue throw blanket my mother gave me thirteen years ago when I first left for Washington State University.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. It took effort to keep them shut and concentrate. I had to block out the image of Summer's dead eyes staring at me.

My journalist training allowed me to compartmentalize what



facts I knew. The bartender and her patrons had given me some information, and listening to Detective Cortes ask them questions had added a bit more. Summer had arrived about ten minutes early. No one had noticed if the guy was with her or came in just after. Neither ordered a drink. There hadn't been a struggle. She had died between five and ten minutes after sitting down. I had a basic description of the guy, but I wished I'd paid more attention when I'd seen him just outside the bar.

I tried to picture different scenarios. Did she know the tall, quiet murderer? Had she been scared or had it happened too fast? Why would anyone want to extinguish the life of the generous, likable woman in her mid-twenties?

I racked my brain. What the hell could she have wanted to talk to me about? What was so serious that someone would kill to prevent her from telling me?

*Should I be worried that I was in danger ... again?*

I was jerked from my thoughts when the phone started ringing. I looked up at the clock on the wall. I'd been thinking for almost thirty minutes.

Great, the phone was working. I got up to get it.

"Hello."

"Finally!" Sue's voice sounded anxious.

"I was just about to call you."

"Where have you been, Nick? I've been calling you since yesterday."

"Oh, the phone needed to be charged. Why have you been trying to reach me? I really need to talk to you."

"You and your stupid phone. Bill—"

I cut her off. "I need to talk to you about what happened. Do you remember—"

"It's about—"

We were speaking over each other and said the names at the exact same time.

“Summer Perkins.”

“Bill’s dead.”

We both stopped talking, stunned.

“Dr. Bill Clancy is dead,” Sue repeated.

I sank down on the couch. “What happened?”

“Two days ago, Bill and Ivan were on their way back from meeting someone who had new information.” There was a hitch in Sue’s voice. “They were crossing a canal bridge on foot in Amsterdam, and an elderly woman’s car jumped the curb after being rear-ended by a delivery truck and hit him. He was thrown over the bridge. His skull was cracked against the stone wall of the canal and he drowned. A cyclist was killed too, because the car went through a bike lane before it ended up in the pedestrian lane.”

“That’s awful.” I first met Dr. Bill Clancy at Dr. Carl Elles’ funeral. He was a colleague of Dr. Elles and Dr. Ivan Popov at Naintosa, the genetic engineering seed conglomerate. He was a very kind and gregarious Englishman. “I hope he didn’t suffer.”

Sue sniffled. “Ivan said he would’ve been knocked out when he hit the wall.”

“Shit. How is Ivan?”

“He said the car missed him by an inch.”

Dr. Ivan Popov had helped us make sense of Dr. Elles’ notes. Ivan and Bill were the ones who had convinced the Northern European Council for Ethical Farming in Norway to help us. The two had stayed to work with them to fight against genetic engineering and the pending lawsuit against the release of the book I’d written, based on Dr. Elles’ research. “Was it an innocent accident?”

“Doubtful.” Sue’s voice went into her factual reporter mode. “Ivan said the old lady driving the car was innocent. It was like her car had been pushed at them. She’s in the hospital with serious whiplash. The driver of the delivery van that caused the whole thing is suspect. Ivan dropped the envelope with the information when



he went to try save Bill. When it was over, the envelope and the driver were gone.”

“Yeah, that’s suspect. Do you know what was in the envelope?”

“Something new. Ivan said he never had the chance to read the document.”

Had the premeditated attack been intended to take out both scientists? Last fall, the media director for the Council for Ethical Farming had been killed by a car while he was riding his bicycle. They’d never found that hit-and-run driver, either.

“Should we be worried?” Sue’s voice rose. “It seems to be starting again.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that feeling.” I moved the phone from my left ear to my right. “When is the funeral?”

“Ivan said he’s flying his body back to England and that Bill hadn’t wanted a funeral.”

“Yeah, but Ivan can’t take care of everything alone.”

“I told him the same thing. He said he has others to help and that the Council now has its own security force. He’ll have bodyguards with him, just in case.”

“Where were the security people when Bill was run down?”

“I don’t know.”

I shook my head. “The Council’s grown into quite the organization.”

“Like they said when we were there, they have the backing of some deep-pocketed people who want to fight against genetically modified organisms.” Sue took an audible breath that was magnified by the phone. “Dr. Elles’ exposé has given them the facts they needed to rally.”

“Too bad Naintosa’s application for the injunction against publication on the exposé still needs to be sorted out.”

“We were still able to get some information to the European independent media, and there’s attention on the suit. It bites, but

we have to wait until it's all over.”

Frustration rose inside me. “Remember they said it could take years.”

We were both silent for a couple of seconds, before I said, “So we don't go to England?”

“I don't see any point.”

I felt sad for Bill. He had been a man with the strength of conviction to do what was right. He'd felt guilty about not helping Dr. Elles more when he'd been gathering information against Naintosa. Bill had retired and distanced himself from the trouble. But after Dr. Elles' death, he'd promised to redeem himself. Along with Ivan, the two had done what they could to help get the exposé written and follow through with the Council for Ethical Farming.

Sue cut off my thoughts. “Did you say something about Summer Perkins?”

“More bad news. She was killed today.”

“What! What happened?”

“She called me out of the blue yesterday and wanted to meet me this morning. When I got to the seedy bar where she wanted to meet, she was dead.”

I gave her a rundown of what happened.

“That's terrible.” Sue's voice shook. “Summer called me at the magazine first thing yesterday morning. She was looking for you. Felix had told her where I was working.”

“Who's Felix?”

“Our co-reporter at the *Seattle News*, remember?”

“Sort of.” I didn't remember a Felix at all.

“She kept in touch with Felix after she moved to work at the *San Francisco News*. I bumped into him a while back and had mentioned I was at the magazine. When Summer called she sounded quite anxious to talk to you. She needed your opinion on something you had experience with. Then I heard about Bill and forgot about it.”



“Okay, that explains how she found me. Did she say what exactly she needed my opinion on?”

“No.” Sue sniffled. “What a horrible thing. She was so sweet. Why would anyone want to kill her?”

“I have no idea.”

I could hear her wipe her nose with something. “What else did the detective say?”

“He asked if it could have been somehow related to Dr. Elles’ death.” In September 2000, I had been approached by Dr. Carl Elles to help him write his memoir on his pioneering research on genetic food engineering. When I had gone to meet him to start the project, I had found him dead at his office. The coroner had determined it was a heart attack, but later we’d found out he had been murdered by Naintosa’s security force.

“Do you think it could be related?”

“The Lieutenant’s dead, so it obviously wasn’t the same killer. Maybe ... maybe she found out something else Dr. Schmidt was doing and wanted to tell me about it?” Dr. Hendrick Schmidt was the owner and chairman of Naintosa, an agrochemical corporation, and Pharmalin, a pharmaceutical company. Both were huge conglomerates. Dr. Schmidt was extremely powerful and connected. He, through Naintosa, was suing the Council for Ethical Farming to prevent the release of the exposé I had written from Dr. Elles’ notes.

“How would she even know about Dr. Schmidt?” Sue said. “It didn’t even make the news here in the States, just in Europe. And he’s so private, not exactly a well-known public figure.”

“Not sure. That’s the only connection I can think of.”

“But why kill her? Why wouldn’t he just have *you* killed? I’m sure he still wants to.”

“You’re right and thanks for reminding me,” I said. “It’s not like he wouldn’t want to do you in either. Remember, you were almost the first to go in Maui.”

“I don’t remember; I was unconscious.”

I always admired how Sue could make light of bad things that happened in the past. It was like a pressure release, so she wouldn’t dwell on them. “That is true.”

“Sure, I’ve been cautious ever since we got back from Oslo,” she said. “But after I heard about Bill’s death yesterday, I feel like they’ll be coming after us next. Now Summer ...”

“If that were the case, I would’ve died at the bar today. We’re not even sure they’re related.” I thought for a second. “Now that we’re talking it through, Summer must’ve wanted to see me about something else.”

“Hmm. I guess.”

“And remember what the Council’s lawyer said about us? That killing any of us would immediately implicate Dr. Schmidt, so we were too hot to eliminate. That’s why they let us come back to the United States. Besides, I’m higher on Schmidt’s list than you.”

“Something may have changed. We need to be extra careful. *Accidents* happen, you know.”

I got up and walked over to the big window. The mist had lifted some, and I could see more than a few blocks now. “You got to know Summer better after I left the *News*. Can you think of anything she was doing that could provide a clue?”

“That was like a year ago. We went out for drinks a few times after you’d taken off with Morgan to British Columbia. The last time was just before you came back to Seattle. That’s when Summer told me she got a job at the *San Francisco News*. It was a full-time reporter position. She was excited at the advancement from junior trainee. That’s it.”

“And you never mentioned to her what Morgan and I were doing?” Morgan Elles had a second copy of her father’s notes and had convinced me to write the exposé.

“Excuse me? You think I’d ever do that?”



“Sorry, just making sure.” I rested my free hand on the back of the black leather office chair I’d bought at a secondhand store.

“You still haven’t heard from Morgan?” Sue sounded tentative.

“Nope.” That was still a sore spot for me, and I didn’t want to talk to Sue about it anymore.

She must’ve sensed it, because she changed the subject back. “What are you going to do about Summer’s death?”

“What’s there to do? I’ll just wait and see if Detective Cortes contacts me.”

Sue paused and then said, “Summer’s family is in Seattle, so the funeral will be here. I’ll go and see if anyone says anything.”

“Good idea.”

“Can you please give me your cell number so I can still reach you if your phone isn’t charged?”

“You don’t have it?”

“You never gave it to me.”

“Oh, sorry.” I gave her the number.

“Make sure you’re extra careful.”

“I will. You too.”

I walked over to the kitchen and placed the phone on the charger as soon as I hung up.

My stomach growled. I didn’t feel hungry, but I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. I pulled on the old fridge door. Inside were various condiments, all organic, some not easy to acquire. I had enough beer for a few days, some cheese, and a few eggs, two leftover chicken drumsticks, but that was it. A half loaf of bread sat on the counter, along with two thirds of a bottle of Aberlour Scotch, remnants of some by now stale chips in a bag, a tomato, and a banana. I needed to buy groceries.

Ever since I’d learned about what genetic engineering was doing to the world’s food supply, I’d become really conscious of what I put into my mouth. I bought organic or European whenever possible,



even alcohol. I'd never been like that before, but now I was strict, even almost paranoid about it.

I closed the fridge door and stared at its blank white surface. My mind went from seeing Summer's lifeless eyes to imagining the scene of Bill dying, his head smashed against the canal rock.

I had a sudden urge to run and hide. But where, I didn't know. *Snap out of it and buck up.* I needed to be strong if things were heating up again.

I'd feel better if I ate something. I'd go for a good food shop tomorrow. Today, I'd get some take-out from the Japanese place in the next block.

When I put my jacket on I zipped it right up and pulled the hood around my head. It was my subconscious protecting me from getting a needle stuck in my neck.