

## A Serial Affair

## Prologue

Out by the pool, Elliot Washington sipped his mixed drink and grinned in anticipation of a night of hot sex. Clad only in a pair of swim trunks, he relaxed on a chaise lounge. There wouldn't be many more nights like this because he would be getting married soon. Once the honeymoon phase with his blue-blooded bride was over, he'd be back in business though.

He glanced at his watch. It was getting pretty late. He was used to getting what he wanted when he wanted it and that was a lot sooner than this. How long was he going to have to wait for satisfaction? "What's going on?" he asked his companion.

The words that came out of his mouth bore no resemblance to those he'd formed in his mind. He felt weird. His gaze fell on the glass in his hand. A third of his Zombie remained. The glass on the table was empty. He could usually drink at least four before he flew this high.

His companion removed the glass from Elliot's numb fingers with a gloved hand and placed it on the table

beside the other. Then his companion leaned over him, the long blond hair brushed Elliot's chest and stomach, tickling him. There was something distorted about his view of his surroundings and his companion, but he couldn't quite grasp what it was. Elliot gazed around him, enjoying the air of unreality. Then he saw the wicked-looking knife in his companion's hand.

"This is for all of us, for what you did. You see you didn't really get away with it."

The words fell on Elliot's ears like a benediction.

The knife rose.

Gasping, Elliot tried to scream, to get away, anything but keep his body frozen to the chair. A whimper escaped his lips as the knife fell again and again...

## Chapter One

The whites of Marina Santos' mahogany brown eyes shone bright in the bathroom mirror as she skillfully thickened her lashes with mascara. Quickly lining her lids she filled in her eyebrows. Grumbling in frustration, she gave her thick hair one last impatient brush. Why hadn't she been blessed with easy care hair like her cousins Janisa and Carmen? Maybe her hair would be easier to manage with a permanent.

Her full, berry colored lips twisted ruefully. With the dense, moisture-laden July air, her shoulder length hair would be even thicker before she got to work. She would have pulled it back, but she hated the drab, toned down, buttoned up look that most sported at her job. Wearing her hair down was one of the small ways she rebelled.

Straightening the casual navy pantsuit that she'd brightened with a multicolored camisole, she inserted a pair of ruby studs into her ears. In the background she

could hear the Channel 9 news playing. Brushing lint off one sleeve of her jacket, she froze:

*Early this morning the body of twenty-six year-old Elliot Washington was found floating in the pool at the Hartford Hotel. The family has been notified. The cause of death has not been determined and police are not releasing details, but there are several reports that the body had been mutilated. Washington was last seen partying with friends on the North End last night. You may recall that Washington was a close friend of Mayor Dansinger's daughter, Jade. He was a press favorite at several events featuring the mayor and his family. Police are asking that anyone with information that might lead to an arrest contact them.*

Marina stepped out of the bathroom in her low-heeled sensible shoes in time to see a television screen close-up of a tall blond man, shown with the mayor's daughter. She recognized him from stories she'd seen on television and the newspapers. A stockbroker, he was young, good-looking, and known to be a bit wild. Washington appeared often on the arm of the mayor's daughter and many speculated that things might have been heating up.

Eyes narrowing, Marina reached for her purse. Working under Lowell Talbot, the FBI's violent crimes expert, had so honed her instincts that she'd never look at life the way she used to. Now, she saw patterns in everything. Leaping in anticipation of a new puzzle, the analytical part of her brain took in the news information, dissected it, and searched for comparisons with things she'd seen and heard.

Reaching back in her memory, she recalled reading about a similar homicide, several months ago. Hadn't there been another young man found dead and mutilated? Yeah. They'd found his mutilated body in a stall at the Union Station. And she was betting that he hadn't been the first. It usually took three similarly patterned murders before a murderer was considered a serial killer. Could Chicago have a serial killer on the loose?

Washington's body had been mutilated according to the reporter. Just what did they mean by mutilated? Working with Talbot she'd seen it all. Murder and mutilation were disturbing enough, but in general the damage was more visceral when a serial killer was involved. The victims were usually women. That made the possibilities in this instance even more intriguing. If her instincts were on target, this time a group of men were in danger.

Settling the strap of the purse on her shoulder and palming her car keys, she exited the front door of her remodeled brownstone. With the alarm set, she carefully locked the door. Taking the steps in brilliant sunlight she opened the door of her red Mustang, at which point she allowed herself to wonder; *has anyone else even noticed the two murders enough to tie them together?* Of course, the Chicago Police Department had noticed but that wouldn't be on the news. Getting the local population all excited with the news wouldn't be smart anyway.

Settling on the seat and buckling the safety belt, she savored the sound of the engine roaring to life, then took off in a squeal of tires.

By the time she'd parked her car at work, and made it to the cubbyhole that held her desk at the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, she knew something was up. Everyone seemed unusually busy when she passed by on her way to her cubicle.

Scanning the area and the people in it, she still didn't have a clue what was up. Some of her co-workers had been distant ever since she landed a promotion in the afterglow of helping Lowell Talbot solve a high profile murder case. Marina straightened her shoulders. She'd

earned that promotion and she'd be damned if she'd apologize for it.

Her boss's young blond secretary, Ilene, was hovering near her desk.

Marina checked her watch. She was still fifteen minutes early. She slowed her stride, sparing her boss's office a quick, surreptitious glance. The door was closed.

Marina greeted Ilene and began to put her things in her desk.

"Keep the jacket on. Spaulding wants to see you as soon in his office as soon as you get settled," Ilene announced.

Marina looked up from locking her purse in the bottom drawer. "What's going on?"

Ilene shrugged, her expression giving discreet evidence of the battle within her. She didn't like Marina, but was still the kind of person who enjoyed knowing things others didn't and controlling the flow of information. "I think you're going to get a new assignment," she admitted.

"Tell me something I don't know," Marina prompted, slanting her a glance.

Nostrils flaring, Ilene's gaze flicked over her. "This one is big. You'll either fall on your face or prove you deserved that promotion."

"I got the promotion because I've already more than proved myself, but I'm down for a new assignment." Marina straightened, ready to squash any smart-assed comment Ilene might make. Still, she swallowed at the smirk on Ilene's face.

"We'll see." Turning abruptly, Ilene headed back to her desk.

Marina hesitated, torn between rushing into her boss's office to hear the news as soon as possible and enjoying the last minute of peace she was likely to get for some time. She opted for the momentary peace and headed for the coffee room with her cup. Three gulps of hot coffee later she knocked at her boss's door.

"Santos!" Ross Spaulding called, beckoning her into the room, "I've been waiting for you."

Inclining her head in acknowledgement, she took a seat at his conference table. "What is it, sir?"

"We got a call from the mayor's office this morning," he announced. "Dansinger is asking us to work with the Chicago Police Department on a special task force."

"And how does Chicago's finest feel about us encroaching on their territory?" she shot back.

"Damn lucky for a change!" Spaulding grinned almost affably. "With the economy being so rough right now, crime



has almost doubled in Chicago. The CPD has got just about all they can handle." The smile faded as he eyed her critically. "Been paying attention to the news lately?"

"What kind of violent crime are we talking?" she asked.

"You're the expert. What do you think? Why do you think you're sitting in the hot seat?" he countered.

Her eyes widened. She hadn't wanted to draw conclusions since the request had come from the mayor's office and she'd been assigned the case, but deep in her gut she knew. "Are we talking Elliot Washington and the other man being found dead with their bodies mutilated within a four or five month period?"

"Bingo." Spaulding weighed her with his eyes. She'd gotten points for that answer. "Washington's death has the mayor's family pretty upset. Jade Dansinger thought she was in love with him apparently."

"Was there another incident, another body?" she asked.

Spaulding's beefy fist choked the life out of an ink pen as his head inclined in answer to her question.

"You'll work with one of their homicide lieutenants and you'll have resources available from the Chicago Police Department and the FBI. I don't have to tell you how important this case is for us and to you and your career?"

"No sir. I will find the killer." Marina spoke with cool confidence but inside she was bouncing off the walls with nervous excitement. Spaulding hadn't promoted her to his section. She'd been promoted and dumped on him by his management. Since then, they'd both been trying to make the best of it. Her fingers tightened on the edges of the chair beneath the table.

He made a rough grinding sound in the back of his throat. "I've had agents waste valuable time and tax payer dollars wrestling with the CPD over jurisdictional issues and one-upmanship. Don't even think of letting the fact that you'll be working with the CPD keep you from solving this case as soon as possible, understand?"

"Yes sir. I can work with them," she said quickly, hoping her new partner wouldn't be a complete ass.

Spaulding's piercing gaze sized her up once more. He nodded as if she'd passed some test. "You're due at the twenty-fourth district Town Hall Station on Halstead at ten-thirty, so get moving. Talbot wants you to check in with him before you leave."

Marina thanked him and left the office. Outside, she let herself breathe. She could do this. She would do this. The prospect actually excited her.