

MURDER AT THE CAR WASH

By R Shannon

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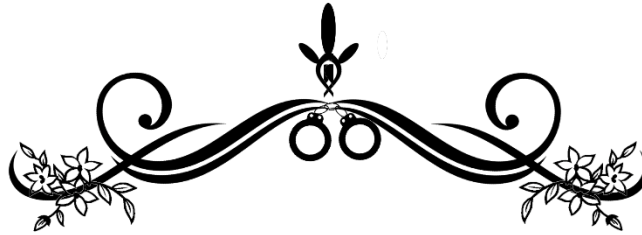
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CHAPTER 1

JEROME WILLIAMS WAS still groggy as he walked up to the Big Splash Car Wash entrance. It was Tuesday morning. He was out partying with his twenty-something friends the night before and had too much to drink, not to mention staying out too late. He always fell for the same trick. He would tell himself, *You only live once*, and that would get him in trouble every time.

It would take him another hour as well as a few cups of coffee to get it together enough to face the general public for the day. You wouldn't think car wash customers could be so demanding, but that would mean you haven't worked with the general public in recent years. They're all demanding -- everywhere.

It was ten to nine when he unlocked the front door and entered. The business was empty and all was quiet and still. He had ten minutes to get the coffee going and turn everything on in order to bring the car wash to life.

He flipped the proper switches to turn on the car wash and the neon signs so they would look open for business. He walked over to the coffee machine and made the first pot of coffee on autopilot. This quiet time would be the only peace he had the entire day.

The business phone rang. As he glanced at the clock, it was still five minutes before nine. He toyed with the idea of not answering, but it could be an employee calling in sick.

"Big Splash. How can I help you?"

"Hi, Jerome. It's Mrs. Sanchez. Is Manuel there?"

"Hi, Mrs. Sanchez. Let me look in his office. He's usually not in this early." Jerome walked back to the manager's office and slowly opened the door. His office was empty.

"He's not here, Mrs. Sanchez."

"He never came home. He hasn't answered his phone since nine o'clock last night. I think something has happened to him," said Gloria Sanchez. "Did he say he was going somewhere after work?"

Jerome could hear the worry, as well as the suspicion, in her voice. "No, he didn't tell me anything. Actually, I can see his car in the parking lot now. Let me go out and have a look. He didn't say anything to me about going anywhere." Jerome walked outside with the wireless business phone.

"Well, he's not home, and I don't know where else he could be. Where would he go without a car?"

Jerome felt his boss' wife slyly pumping him for information. Jerome kept walking. He didn't want to get involved in his boss' marital issues. He walked over to Mr.

Sanchez' 2022 Chevy Malibu. He leaned down, blocked the sun with his hand, and looked closely inside the vehicle. Nothing.

"I don't see him inside the car either. Nothing looks off or weird about his car." He walked around the car. "None of his tires are flattened. The office door was locked this morning. There's no bank bag on his front seat. He always goes to the bank right after closing."

"I don't know where he is. He usually at least comes home. I didn't sleep all night. I called my sister and she said I should file a missing person's report this morning. I think he may have left with someone. I don't know what to do. When he shows up, Jerome, have him call me. I'm very worried."

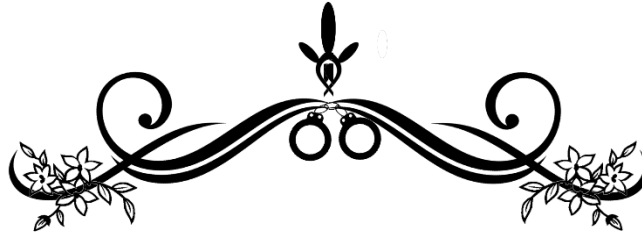
"Okay, Mrs. Sanchez, I'll have him call you when he shows up." The call ended.

Jerome looked again inside his boss' car. He checked the floor of the passenger side and the back floors of the vehicle. Everything was clean and empty.

As he walked away from the car, he called Mr. Sanchez' cellphone. The least he could do was give his boss a heads-up about his wife looking for him. As he took a few steps back towards the office, he suddenly heard a phone ringing behind him. He turned around and listened intently. It was unmistakable. He heard a phone ringing somewhere close to where he stood, but there was no one around. The ring did sound a bit faint. He looked all around the parking lot but saw no one. After five rings, the call ended.

Jerome walked slowly back towards Mr. Sanchez' car. He dialed again and listened carefully to where the ring was coming from. As the phone began to ring, he followed it to the area around his boss' car. As he walked over to the driver's side, the ring was the loudest. He got down on his knees and looked under the car. Manuel Sanchez was stuffed under his car. He was in an awkward position with his shoulders squished together. His eyes were open, but he was bloody and dead.

Jerome let out an audible gasp and then dialed 911.



CHAPTER 2

IT WAS 9:30 ON a beautiful Tuesday morning in May. Detective Fiona Quinn sat on the bench outside a Marion County Superior Courtroom. Her partner, Detective Jack Nolan, was testifying on one of their cases inside the courtroom behind her. She hated testifying in court. Too often, the only defense for a guilty defendant was a sloppy police investigation. And with closed-circuit cameras stationed every ten feet now, it was becoming the only defense. Police work was thankless enough without having to deal with lawyers accusing them of incompetent investigations and all other kinds of nefarious deeds. She had been a cop for going on seven years now, but today would be her first day testifying in the Marion County Courts.

Fiona was dressed in one of her better suits for her court appearance. It was still from her detective-ware wardrobe but was one of her newer and crisper suits. Her long wavy red hair was pulled back in her signature ponytail.

She moved up to Ocala to be with her boyfriend, Gus. They had been engaged for about two months and there was talk first of a Christmas wedding — but now Gus was suggesting Valentine’s Day would be a better time to tie the knot. There was still no exact wedding date. Fiona was thirty years old and her biological clock threw up a caution whenever Gus talked about putting off the wedding date for one reason or another. She had decided not to think about that today.

She and her partner Jack were testifying in a murder case they had worked on a few months earlier. Since it was her first time testifying in a new court, Jack offered to go first to take the brunt of the lawyer’s accusations.

She had just finished texting Gus when the courtroom door opened and Jack walked outside. He came over to the hall bench where she sat.

“How did it go?” asked Fiona, looking up at him.

“The usual. The defendant is sitting at the counsel table acting innocent and victimized for the jury. His lawyer is acting like this case is the biggest miscarriage of justice known to man. Nothing you have haven’t seen before or have to worry about. It should go faster for you. They want you in there now.”

“Can you watch my handbag while you’re sitting here? I don’t want to walk in holding a shoulder bag.”

“You’re treating me like your husband,” said Jack with his usual smirk. “This is husband stuff. I think this is a huge signal you’re giving me.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle. “You wish. I’ll see you later,” said Fiona, as she let his teasing roll down her back.

Jack Nolan was a cop for twelve years, the last five of which he spent with the Crescentville Police Department. This was also about the time the world went *woke* and he went *jaded*.

He was six feet tall and, being as thin as he was, looked every inch of it. He was only thirty-eight years old but already had a full head of gray hair. The gray started to come in by the time he was twenty. It was an errant gene that ran in his family.

His cell phone rang. The phone face read *blocked*. He quietly shook his head in exasperation as he answered. "Hello?" No answer. "You've been calling me every day lately so you must want to say something." No reply. "Megan, I know this is you." The caller hung up.

Megan was Jack's wife who left him almost eleven months previously without any notice. He went from being stunned, to being hurt, to being lost in all that time. Now he was numb but resigned. He was in the process of rebuilding his life -- at least trying to. He just wasn't doing that well.

Maggie, his sister, was his confidant, his morale builder, and lately, even his dating coach. He sat on the bench and called her.

"What's up, Jack?"

"Are you busy?"

"I'm working, but I have a few minutes to talk, if that's what you mean," said Maggie.

"That's what I mean. I'm still getting these hang-up calls every day," said Jack. He was seeking some kind of validation of his suspicions that the calls were coming from his wife.

"I have time to talk, Jack, but not about fantasies about getting calls from your soon-to-be ex-wife," said Maggie. "I'm telling you, I get those dead calls all the time. They're robocalls. You're letting them make you crazy."

"I won't say anything more about it then."

"How is the dating going?" asked Maggie, changing the subject.

"I'm taking a break."

"For how long?"

"For a week. Is that okay?" asked Jack, sarcastically.

"Look, Jack, you don't need to give me any explanations about anything you do or don't do. I'm only trying to help you."

"I know."

"Has your lawyer found Megan yet?"

"No — well, he found her boyfriend, so my lawyer said it should only be a couple more days before he locates her. The private investigator has to get a picture of her on the property and then the divorce papers can be served. It shouldn't be much longer."

"I'm glad to hear that. Once you get to the other side of this nightmare she brought into your life, the better you'll feel."

"It'll be a relief because I have to pay the investigator by the hour to sit there and wait to see her. He's on his third day."

"It will be worth it when you get to put this all behind you."

"I guess."

“How is Fiona?” asked Maggie.

“Still engaged. I’m trying to sabotage things every day, but she’s still on cloud nine over that engagement ring. Women get delirious about the big diamond rings. It’s a hard distraction to compete with.”

“Setting your heart on a woman that’s engaged to another man is not a good move, Jack.”

“I’ve got my priorities straight. Plan A is the online dating. Sabotaging her relationship is only Plan B. It’s only my backup plan. I’m devoting all of my energies to rebuilding my life. I just have multiple strategies working right now.”

“All right. I need to go now. Call me tonight if you want to talk. I love you, and everything will get better from here.”

“Thanks, Maggie. I love you too.”

He put his phone away in his inner jacket pocket. He saw a fellow police detective talking to a prosecutor across the courthouse hallway. He stood up and put Fiona’s handbag on his shoulder. As Officer Blake approached, Jack began pacing with the purse on his shoulder.

“That’s a good look for you, Nolan,” said Blake, chuckling. “You forgot your high heels.”

“They’re still too hard to walk in. I’m practicing walking in the heels at night for my male-to-female transition coming up,” said Jack, playing it up.

“You’re doing well. You’ve got the whole shoulder, arm, and thumb action on the handbag down pat. Is Fiona inside testifying?”

“Yeah. I already finished.”

“Listen, buddy, gotta go. See you back at the station.”

“Yeah, good to see you, Blake.” Jack sat down again on the bench. He left Fiona’s handbag on his shoulder. Just then, he heard her phone text signal. He reached into her purse and opened her phone. He read the text that came in from Gus, her fiancé. He replied to the text.

Several minutes later, Fiona came out of the courtroom, and Jack stood up again wearing her shoulder bag.

“I said watch my bag, not wear it. Give it to me.”

Jack gave her the shoulder bag.

“The prosecutor was great. He’s short, curt, and to the point. I like him,” said Fiona.

“How was Mueller’s lawyer?” asked Jack as he led the way out to the parking lot.

“The usual. Acting like his client was getting railroaded. But I could tell the jury is not buying it.”

“By the way, Gus texted you. I answered him for you,” said Jack.

“You answered him? About what?” asked Fiona as she grabbed her phone from her purse.

Are we getting together for dinner?

Yes. By the way, I have some complaints about your recent bedroom performance.

Fiona lightly smacked Jack on his upper arm. “I can’t believe you wrote that.” She dialed his number.

“Gus, that was Jack sending you that text. He was trying to be funny,” she said. She smacked him a second time.

“This is on-the-job domestic abuse,” said Jack, pointing to the area she smacked.

“How old is your partner? Is he like fifteen?” asked Gus.

“Emotionally, yes.”

“Are we going to dinner tonight?” asked Gus.

“Yes, we’ll go to dinner. I’ll see you later. I’ll come to the shop when I’m done with work. I have an early night.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then. I have a customer. I have to go,” said Gus.

She hung up. “He said you’re immature.”

“How will I go on now that Gus thinks so terribly about me?” Jack asked, acting offended.

Fiona didn’t reply. They walked outside to the parking lot. She changed the subject from her and Gus. “How is your online dating going?”

“I’m taking a week off,” said Jack.

“Really? I thought things were going well with that new girl, the dental assistant,” said Fiona.

“Well, she went all hardcore feminist with me, so I’m taking a break.”

“How did she go feminist with you?” asked Fiona.

“She was talking about how one of the male customers at the dental place better watch his step or he’ll be sorry. Like she, at five feet four inches tall, weighing a hundred pounds, will make some guy sorry. It was too much for me to take.”

“You need to let go of the 1950s, Jack.”

“I’ll die first,” Jack said. “After you, my dear.” He held the door open for Fiona to leave the courthouse.

As they approached their detective unit, she said, “I’ll drive.”

“After you smashed into those garbage cans two days ago? No, I’ll drive for safety reasons.” He walked quickly and got into the driver’s seat.

Fiona got in the passenger seat. “I did not smash into those garbage cans. I grazed them. I barely touched them. And we were chasing someone.”

“The proper verb for that type of hit is *sideswiping*. I stand corrected. I think I should drive since you sideswiped the two garbage cans.”

“I barely touched them.”

“They both had dents.”

“They were made of cheap aluminum,” said Fiona, getting in the last word.



Jack and Fiona took a break from bickering and continued their drive to the station in silence. Jack’s cell phone rang.

“Hey, Chief,” said Jack.

“How long will you two be in court?” asked their boss.

“We’re done. We’re on our way back to headquarters. What’s going on?”

“We’ve just sent the crime scene techs out to the Big Splash Car Wash. The manager, Manuel Sanchez, was found murdered in the parking lot by an employee this morning. He’s been shot in the chest and once in the back of the head. I want you and Quinn to take it.”

“We’ll drive right there, sir.”

“It’s the car wash on the corner of 61st Street and Route 200.”

“We’re on it, sir,” said Jack.

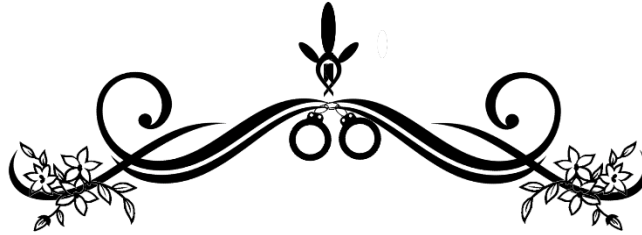
“We’ve had two robberies of town businesses that were closing this past week. One was the liquor store close to the industrial center. The other one was Wally’s Bar and Grill. The manager was on his way to do a night deposit at the bank and he was car jacked and robbed,” said Chief Salvo.

“Also, the manager’s wife called in this morning and wanted to report her husband missing. He didn’t come home from work. Her name is Gloria Sanchez. She was told he had to be missing for twenty-four hours before she could file a report, but that was before we knew he was dead,” said Chief Salvo.

“Okay. We’re on our way.” Jack hung up.

“What’s going on?” asked Fiona.

“We’ve been assigned to a murder case.” He filled her in on the details as they made their way to the Big Splash.



CHAPTER 3

AS JACK DROVE up to the car wash, the driveway and entranceway to the business were taped off with crime scene tape. CSI techs were already working on the scene. Jack spotted the police unit for the officer in charge. He parked in the Racetrac Gas Station, which was located right next door to the car wash.

He and Fiona put on latex gloves as they walked over a grassy median separating the businesses and approached the crime scene techs. The manager's car had already been jacked up and the photographer was squatting down and taking the first pictures of the victim. Jack squatted down to take a look. Mr. Sanchez's body was still squished from getting stiff under the car.

Two crime scene techs were dusting the inside and outside of the manager's car. Crescentville Sergeant Dante Jackson was inside the car wash office, speaking with two employees.

After taking a long look at the murder scene, Fiona and Jack walked into the business office. When Jackson saw them, he stopped talking to the employees. "Hey, Jack. Hey, Fiona. Is this your case now?"

"Yeah. What do you have so far?" Jack took out a small writing pad from his inner jacket pocket. Fiona did the same.

"The manager was found murdered this morning. Mr. Jerome Williams here," said Jackson, pointing with his pen to the young African American employee, "found the manager after getting a call from the manager's wife. Apparently, Mr. Sanchez never went home last night. Mr. Williams found him shot dead and stuffed under his car this morning.

"This is employee Elena Fernandez. She and Jerome both work here. Jerome came in this morning and — I'll let him tell you what happened. The chief wants me back as soon as you show up."

"Yeah, sure. Thanks, Sarge.

"Hello, Mr. Williams and Ms. Fernandez. I'm Detective Jack Nolan and this is my partner, Detective Fiona Quinn. We've been assigned to this investigation now. Why don't you tell us what happened? We'll start with you, Mr. Williams, since you found Mr. Sanchez."

"I came in a little before nine o'clock and started getting ready to open for the day. The phone rang and it was Mrs. Sanchez, the manager's wife."

"What's the manager's full name?" asked Fiona.

"Manuel Sanchez."

"What did his wife say when you answered?" asked Jack.

Jerome relayed the details of the call he received from Mrs. Sanchez before he found her husband under his car.

“So he was missing since last night around nine?” asked Jack.

“That’s what she said. He stopped answering her texts after nine.”

“What time does the business close?” asked Jack.

“We technically close at nine, but we take cars until nine. That means if we have a car that comes in at nine, we may not be done until nine-thirty. Then the closing itself may take up to another half hour. So we close between nine and ten.”

“Did you tell Mrs. Sanchez you found her husband?”

“No, I hadn’t found him then. I called him after I hung up with her. I heard his phone ringing and it sounded like it was coming from his car. I freaked out as soon as I saw him under the car. I called 911. The last thing she said was that her sister told her she should fill out a missing person’s report this morning.”

Jack looked over to Fiona.

“When you found Mr. Sanchez, did it look like he could have been looking at something under the car? Or maybe he was hiding under his car for some reason?” asked Fiona.

“I don’t think so. It looked like he was shot and then someone shoved him under the car. His shoulders were squished together. He was in an awkward position. I think he was dead first and then pushed under the car.”

“Do you know of anyone who wanted to harm Mr. Sanchez?” asked Jack.

“No. He was a good guy. He was easy to work for,” said Jerome.

“Do you have surveillance video of the parking lot?” asked Fiona.

“We have security cameras, but last night, Mr. Sanchez told us to pull out the video equipment because corporate would be delivering new equipment in the morning. So, he had me dismantle it and put it on the front counter. That’s the unit right there.” Jerome pointed to a white plastic bag on the front counter.

“So, you have no surveillance video from last night?” asked Jack.

“No, it wasn’t on.” Jerome shook his head.

“How many cameras do you have in total?” asked Jack.

“There are two outside. There’s one showing the cars coming in the driveway and then another one showing them leaving the car wash. We have other ones inside the office; one is over the cash drawer and one is over the customer area.”

“So all the cameras were disabled last night?”

“Yeah,” said Jerome, shrugging his shoulders.

“Does Mr. Sanchez own the car wash?” asked Jack.

“No, he’s the manager. A corporation owns the car wash.”

“Anything else happen?” asked Jack.

“That’s it really,” said Jerome with another shrug.

Jack turned his attention to the small blonde Hispanic woman standing next to Jerome.
“Ms. Fernandez, did you see anything?”

“No, when I come in, the cops were here. I just came.”

“Do you know of anyone who would want to harm the manager?” asked Jack.

“No,” said Elena, wide-eyed and shrugging her shoulders. Fiona noticed Jerome leaning in towards Elena. He seemed protective of her.

“Do you know of anyone who would want to hurt Mr. Sanchez?”

“No, no,” said Elena.

“We have to notify the wife, but we’ll be back,” said Jack. “We’ll need to question you two further and have you sign a formal statement. Let me have your full names, addresses and phone numbers.” The two witnesses gave their information to Jack as he recorded it in his notebook.

Fiona examined the DVR unit in the bag and took a photograph of it. Jack looked all around the front customer area and poked his head into the back manager’s office. He was looking for any signs of violence or anything else that looked amiss.

Once Jack stepped out of earshot of the witnesses, Fiona heard Elena whisper something to Jerome. The only thing she was close enough to hear was ‘¿Le preguntaste?’ Her Spanish wasn’t the best, but she knew Elena said: ‘Did you ask him?’ She took two subtle steps closer to listen more carefully. Jerome answered her but his fluent Spanish was too fast for her to catch all of it. The gist of it was Elena had asked him if he asked his boss if she could work at his other job too. He said they didn’t need anyone right now and he was waiting for the right time to ask him.

As Fiona continued to pretend to look at the DVR unit, she saw Elena walk away from Jerome and her disappointment land on him. She could tell Jerome had a crush on Elena and assumed he was trying to help her get a second job of some kind. Or maybe a better job? Working at a car wash wasn’t the most lucrative job for a young attractive woman in central Florida. It was no surprise she was trying to get either more work or better work.

As Fiona read the energy between the two young employees, it was obvious that Jerome had the crush and Elena held the power between them. Mainly because the crush was not reciprocated. It made her wonder who held the power between her and Gus. She pulled out two business cards and handed them to both witnesses. “If you think of anything else that you forgot to tell us, call us on this number.”

They both took the cards and nodded.



The detectives went back outside. The photographer was now taking pictures of the car. Fiona could see fingerprint dust residue on all handles of the car. It was a late model Chevy Malibu.

Jack and Fiona walked over to look at the body, which was now covered by a white sheet awaiting pickup by the medical examiner’s office.

Officer Dante Jackson was standing next to the body. “Here’s the manager’s cell phone.” He handed Fiona the evidence-bagged cell phone.

“Did you call the coroner?” asked Jack.

“Yes. I called him a half hour ago, so he should be here any minute,” said Jackson.

“I want to take a look,” said Jack.

“He’s been shot in the chest and there’s another shot to the back of his head. That one in the back looks like the final shot to make sure the job was done.”

Fiona squatted down next to the body and lifted the sheet. She took a photograph of Mr. Sanchez' chest bullet wound and another one of the back of his head.

Jack squatted next to her. They both looked at Mr. Sanchez. His eyes were still open, but the life in him was gone.

"He looks like he got shot in the chest first," said Fiona, agreeing with Jackson. "He started to bleed out, but it stopped after a few minutes."

"The shot to the back of the head stopped his heart from pumping," said Jack.

"Exactly. He lived long enough to know he'd been shot," said Fiona.

"We'll look at his phone and see if there are any clues there."

"Nolan, look at this," said Officer Dennis Young, who was a part of the crime scene squad. He had opened the trunk of the victim's car and stood aside for Jack to look.

Jack and Fiona both stood up and walked a few feet over to look inside the trunk. There was a navy-blue gym bag that was stuffed with clothing and packets of cash. Each packet was wrapped with a yellow-colored paper strip with a different amount handwritten in different ink colors on top.

"What do we have here?" asked Jack.

"Cash and lots of it," said Officer Young.

"Have you counted it?" asked Jack.

"Not yet. There's too much here. We just found it."

"The employee said he went to the bank every night," said Officer Young.

Jack reached in with his pen and pushed around some of the packets of money. "This cash doesn't look like a bank deposit. To me, this looks more like a personal collection of money. This could be cartel money that needs to be washed into the business or the victim may have been skimming cash off the top of the business. This could be our first real clue right here."

"His gym clothes were on top, covering the cash," said Officer Young. "We'll take possession of it and count it back at the station."

"Just count the actual packets here," said Fiona.

Officer Young looked at Fiona, and he let her know he felt accused by her last command.

"We'll count the packets here. How's that?" asked Young sarcastically.

"That's fine," said Fiona. She swore she saw the two guys pass a 'guys-only' look between them. She was used to it.

"We have to notify the victim's wife. Dust the packets for fingerprints. I want to see if there are multiple sets of fingerprints or only the manager's," said Jack.

"Will do," said Officer Young.

Jack's cellphone rang. "Hey, Chief."

"Are you still on the scene?"

"Yes, Fiona and I are planning to notify the wife now."

"That's why I'm calling. She's here. She came in to fill out a missing person's report. She's just been told of her husband's death. Do you want to question her here?"

She said she hasn't slept all night. We've asked her to wait to talk to the detectives on the case. Can you come now? Or should I send her home?"

"We'll be right there," said Jack before hanging up.

"Was that the chief?" asked Fiona.

"Yeah. The victim's wife is at the station. She's already been told about her husband," said Jack.

"That's good. I always dread telling the family about a murder," said Fiona.

"Tell me about it."

As they got into their unmarked car, Jack's cellphone rang. He looked and handed his phone to Fiona. "Can you answer this for me? This is another call that's blocking its number. Tell me if it sounds like a hang-up call or a bad connection." He passed his cellphone to Fiona.

"It says *blocked*. It's probably a solicitation." She answered it. "Hello? Hello?" She closed the call and handed it back. "It's one of those robocalls. If you wait long enough, someone will come on the line and start a sales pitch. It's best to simply block the numbers each time you get one."

"Thanks," said Jack, still looking forward as he drove.

"So what do you think so far?" asked Fiona. She looked at the victim's cellphone.

"Knowing as little as we know, it could be a robbery in the string of robberies the chief told us about. It could just be a drug addict targeting someone closing a cash business. Jerome claims he was told to dismantle the video cameras. We have to figure out how to confirm that. But in all honesty, it's too soon to tell.

"But then again, with the bag of cash in the trunk, that's a big clue about something. I predict there's going to be a bit of a story that attaches to our victim. What do you think?"

"I think the bullet to the back of the head makes it look like an execution. The fact that the victim was pushed under his car could mean the murderer wanted or needed time to get away."

"Good point. Let's see what the wife says."

As they drove back to the station, Fiona scanned Mr. Sanchez' phone calls. She found several calls had come in over the last hour and a half before nine. She checked his texts and they were more telling as to what was going on right before he was murdered.

"First of all, he has his wife listed as *Gloria – Nagging wife* in his contacts," said Fiona, looking over towards Jack.

He chuckled and said, "That's not a clue but it's probably insight."

"True. She texted him three times. One was suggesting they go for a drink together. The other two were asking him what time he was coming home. He answered her about the drink, saying he was coming home on time but was too tired to go for a drink. He suggested they could have a drink when he came home."

"It sounds to me like he was closing the business with the intention of going home," said Jack.

"Here is a flurry of texts between Sanchez and Charles from the Gym. Fiona read them out loud.

“Manuel texts: I need to talk to you in person tonight. It’s very important.

“Charles: We don’t have anything to talk about.

“Manuel texts: Yes, we do. There’s been a new development.

“Charles: I get out at nine. Can you be here at nine? If not, I’m leaving. I’m not waiting if you’re late.

“Manuel texts: I’m finishing on time. I’ll be there by 9:10. I promise.

“Charles: OK. You better be on time. I’m out of patience with you.

“Then at eleven minutes after nine – which would make him one minute late – Charles texts:

“Charles: Don’t bother coming tonight. I have other plans now.

“Manuel: I’m on time. Chill out. I’ll be there in a few minutes. I’ll explain everything.

“Huh, I wonder who this Charles is,” said Fiona. She looked over to Jack.

“Charles? From the gym? Maybe our victim has someone by the name of Charles that he sees after hours. The tone from Charles sounds sharp and dismissive, like Charles is mad at Manuel,” said Jack, chuckling. “And so begins the story with the victim.”

“Charles does sound a bit snippy. Those are the only phone calls and texts he got after seven on Monday night. We have to find out who Charles is,” said Fiona.



Mr. Sanchez’ wife, Gloria, was sitting alone in an interview room when Jack and Fiona entered headquarters. She was in her fifties but could have easily passed as a forty-something. She was blonde, petite, still slim and toned. Her hair was cut into a short bob hairstyle. Fiona thought she looked well cared for and recently nipped and tucked. She was teary-eyed and sipping from a glass of water she had been given while waiting.

“Good morning, Mrs. Sanchez,” said Jack, just above a whisper.

“Good morning,” she answered in a whisper.

Jack and Fiona shook her hand before sitting across the table from her.

“My name is Detective Jack Nolan, and this is my partner, Detective Fiona Quinn. I’m assuming you’ve already been told that your husband’s body was found this morning at his business?”

Mrs. Sanchez nodded silently. Her eyes and cheeks were tear-stained. The tissue she held was in tatters.

“We’re sorry for your loss, ma’am.” Jack put a pad and pen down in front of him.

Fiona took out a packet of tissues and offered a new one to Mrs. Sanchez, who took it with a whispered *thank you*.

“I’ve been told your name is Gloria Sanchez?” asked Jack.

“Yes.” She dabbed her eyes with the new tissue.

“You came in this morning to file a missing person’s report?”

“Yes. My sister told me to file the report, so I came to do that. They told me he had to be missing for twenty-four hours before they could take the report. I was waiting in the front reception area to figure out what to do next when they called me in to tell me about my husband.” She teared up again.

Jack waited for her to regain her composure. “That’s the policy here about a missing person’s report. Again, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Mrs. Sanchez nodded and two more tears spilled out of her eyes.

“When was the last time you spoke to your husband?”

“Last night. I called him right after dinnertime to ask him if he wanted to go out after work. I also asked him if he was coming home on time.”

“What did he tell you?” asked Jack.

“He said he was getting ready to leave on time. I called him around dinnertime, but then I texted him after dinner,” said Mrs. Sanchez.

“What time were you expecting him home?” asked Jack.

“He usually gets home by ten o’clock. Sometimes at nine-thirty if it’s a slow night.”

“Did he say it was a slow night or did he say he would be home late?” asked Jack.

“He didn’t answer my last couple of texts. He thinks I over-text him, so sometimes he gets annoyed and stops answering. He tells me I nag him. I thought that’s why he didn’t answer,” said Gloria.

“I see. Then what happened?” asked Jack.

“As the time went past ten o’clock, I called him and it went to voice mail. He never called back.” She began to cry again, this time a little harder. She covered her face with both hands.

Jack waited again for her to regain her composure. Fiona placed a second fresh tissue down in front of her.

Mrs. Sanchez recomposed herself within two minutes. “He never came home. I thought he was back with his mistress so I got really mad. I drove over to the gym where she works and her car was not there. I went inside and asked for her, and they said she finished working and left already. I figured they must be out together. I think she’s the one who killed him or had him killed.”

“Let’s take this one piece at a time. How long did he have a girlfriend?” asked Jack.

“I found out about her six months ago, but they were already together then. It was probably a year. She works at the gym he goes to. She’s young and she’s a home wrecker.”

“What is her name?” asked Jack.