

## Chapter 1 – A Very Bad Date

THE GIRL ON THE FLOOR in the skimpy red dress groaned softly and rolled her head to the side. The corner of her right eye was caked with dried blood. A gooey scarlet trickle ran down toward the dirty blond hair hanging in unkempt wisps around her ear. One of the thin shoulder straps of her dress was snapped off, allowing the shiny material to peel down, exposing the top half of her small breast. A knot on her forehead the size of a golf ball throbbed an angry shade of red with each heartbeat.

“We should dump her in the river,” a male voice said, without a hint of anxiety. He sat casually on the edge of a bare wooden desk in a Spartan room lacking any semblance of charm. The bed, covered with a drab brown comforter, was pushed up against the wall in front of an imitation leather headboard with large buttons holding in the padded surface. Next to it, a nondescript lamp glowed on a stained nightstand. There was no art on the walls and the floor was industrial-grade carpet with a swirling pattern that hid most of the remnants of prior visitors. The air smelled of musty sweat and industrial-strength disinfectant. The calm man, by contrast, wore an expensive suit and a gold Citizen watch. He was tall and fit, with graying black hair that was carefully groomed. He looked decidedly out of place in the dumpy room.

“She might not drown, though,” a different voice replied. “She’s not hurt that bad. Look, she’s coming around.” This second voice was agitated and came from a much shorter man, who paced within the cramped space. He was thin and wiry. He ran his hand through a head of brown curls, pondering his next move. He wore blue jeans and a plaid button-down shirt. His gaunt face looked like it was pushed together from the sides, with large bulging eyes and a bent nose. “We’ll make it look like an overdose, but make sure she’s dead. We don’t want her ending up in an ambulance like the last one.”

“Not many people accidentally go in the river, Eddie,” the first man said, still without emotion.

“She’s an addict. She can OD, then there’s lots of reasons somebody might toss the body in the river.”

“All of those reasons involve somebody trying to hide something.”

“Yeah, I know, but what other options have we got? She was gonna run. She knows who you are, so sending her into lockup ain’t gonna be safe.”

The first man stood up, stretching his arms above his head. He was much bigger than his companion and thick, like the trunk of a sturdy tree. He looked down at the girl, who had brought one arm up to her head. She was clearly going to open her eyes in a few moments, but she was no threat to jump up and run away. “I don’t want to get in the habit of just shooting up every girl who gets out of line.”

“Nobody has said boo about the others,” replied Eddie, who stopped pacing. “I can go upstairs and get it from the doc.” He glanced nervously down at the girl, then back up at his comrade. “I’ll go right now.” The taller man nodded, and then Eddie scurried to the door and disappeared into the dimly lit hallway beyond. The heavy door slammed behind him with a loud thump.

The girl partially opened her eyes, then blinked several times. Once she focused on the tall man, a shadow of fear passed over her expression and she started to cry. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed, her body shaking, causing the remaining fabric of her dress to fall completely off her left breast. “Please. I won’t say anything. I promise. I’ll be good. I’ll be—”

Her voice was snuffed out by the man’s vicious kick to the side of her head, which then lolled in the opposite direction as her eyes re-closed and she sank back into unconsciousness.

The tall man looked down, dispassionately. “You’ll be dead, Sweetheart.”

## Chapter 2 – Physical Torture

[Wednesday, Feb. 6, 2019]

MIKE STONEMAN'S FACE was contorted in a mask of pain. "Aaaahhoooww! No more!" he groaned, a tear forming in his right eye as he turned his head to that side. He was laying on his back on an elevated table; his feet were strapped down to prevent movement. The man on his left, wearing a plain white t-shirt and sweat pants, held Mike's left wrist in a vice-like grip with his left hand and pressed his right hand into Mike's elbow, keeping the arm straight and pushing upwards. Pain shot through Mike's shoulder and down his arm, making his fingers tingle. He could feel the sinew in his labrum stretch to the breaking point and heard the pop and crunch of scar tissue ripping. He gritted his teeth and held his breath as long as he could stand it, before shouting out again "Stop!"

Mike felt the pressure relax slightly, allowing him to catch his breath. He blew out three quick puffs of air as he looked up at Terry Kramer with malice in his eyes. Then the pressure returned as the man once again pushed against the limits of Mike's flexibility.

"You can take more," Terry said, pushing a little harder this time, until Mike cried out again. "What's the PIN to your ATM card?!"

"You'll never get me to . . . Aahhh . . . talk, you bastard!" Mike grunted out. Then the pain subsided slightly as the big man eased his grip on Mike's wrist and relaxed the pressure. Mike sighed, then cried out in pain again as his arm retracted down toward his side. He panted as he lay on the soft tabletop, sweat running down his forehead and dripping onto the vinyl surface. "I hate you," Mike said softly, slowly regaining his regular breathing.

"Good," Terry replied as he released Mike's legs from their straps. Mike sat up with some struggle, careful to keep his left arm immobile as much as possible at his side. He swung his legs over the edge of the table and looked across the therapy room, where his recovery partner, Dolores, was doing arm curls with a giant blue rubber band while standing against a full-length mirror. Terry smiled. "You got up to sixty degrees today, Mike. I'm proud of you."

"Hmmff," Mike grunted. "You're going to rip all my pins out and send me back to surgery."

Terry laughed robustly and slapped Mike on the back with a solid open palm. “Like I don’t know how far I can push you without doing damage? C’mon, Mike. Trust me.”

Mike was now fourteen weeks removed from being stabbed in the shoulder in a Queens warehouse by former Army lieutenant Ronald Randall, dubbed the “Righteous Assassin” by the New York press. After his surgery, he spent six weeks in a brace to keep his arm immobile, and then started physical therapy in mid-December. Now, it was the middle of February and struggling into his parka was an ordeal, but the New York winter would not permit Mike to get away with just a light jacket or a zip-up hoodie. At least the abdominal knife wound was fully healed. He had a scar that looked like he had given birth by Caesarian section through his belly button, but his abs looked pretty decent due to the exercises he had to do for his post-operative recovery. Overall, he was down fifteen pounds since the fall. At least that was a plus.

“I’m gonna shoot you,” Mike replied with a smile. He took a deep breath, then hoisted himself off the table and walked slowly toward the far wall, where Dolores had finished her arm work. She was a traffic enforcement agent who had injured her shoulder in a kayaking accident while on vacation in Florida. She was a thick Black woman just over five feet tall, but she had disproportionately slender calves and ankles. Her upper body was dominated by a huge bosom and a pile of black hair mounted on her head in a never-ending variety of styles. Today she wore a 70’s afro that increased her apparent height by a good six inches. She also sported a set of bright white teeth that were nearly always smiling. Her perpetual good mood sometimes caused Mike to be even more curmudgeonly than normal, as if it were a competition to see whether Dolores could get him to smile back. She had a torn labrum and a torn rotator cuff and had her surgery one week after Mike’s. They had been in rehab together since just before Christmas and were basically on the same regimen of exercises.

Terry, the physical therapist at the NYPD athletic and medical facility, had scheduled them for simultaneous sessions so that he could maximize his efficiency as the two patients traded off time on the table with time on the exercise equipment. Mike and Dolores had a running wager on who would complete rehab and get to a full range of motion first. As Dolores sauntered past, Mike whispered, “Sixty.”

“Ooohh,” Dolores said with a twinkle in her eye. “You are making progress. I better get busy!” She laughed and hopped up on the table so that Terry could manipulate her arm and shoulder, as he had done with Mike moments before. The therapy included strengthening exercises and also manual stretching to push the now ultra-tight muscles, ligaments, tendons, and cartilage back to their normal range of motion and flexibility. Terry forced the joints to move despite the fact that the surrounding muscles and tissue had been sewn together and locked down tight during surgery, then allowed to sit immobile for six weeks while the cuts healed. Now, stretching the joints back out involved more pain than the original injuries. Dolores took it all with her usual smile and good cheer. Mike was just sore.

Mike went to work on the rubber bands, lifting his arm up in front of his body as far as he could before the pain stopped him, then down. Ten reps with his injured left arm, then ten with the right, just to keep both arms in shape. Then side-to-side, then from the floor up to his waist, then pressing his side against the wall and stretching his left hand upwards as far as he could. This was his eighth week of physical therapy. He could see the progress. When he started, he could not lift his arm more than ten degrees, even without weights or resistance from the rubber band. Now he was at sixty degrees. He still had a long way to go, and progress was agonizingly slow. He was sure that if he were twenty years younger, he would be recovering faster. As always, he thought, it sucks to get old.

Dolores hopped off the table, fresh off her torture at Terry’s hands, but Mike did not recall her screaming even once. She flashed him her bright teeth and whispered “Sixty-five,” as she passed him by, on her way to grab her coat and purse from a hook on the wall. Mike congratulated her as sincerely as he could, dropped his last resistance band, and waved to Terry that he was also calling it a day. They were actually several minutes beyond the official end of their time, but Terry always allowed them to stay as long as they wanted to keep stretching. Mike grabbed his workout towel and pushed through the glass doors of the PT room. He waved at the elderly receptionist who scheduled the appointments and exited out into the general gym portion of the facility. Mike thought that, on the one hand, it was great that the NYPD had its own physical therapy facility so that the recovering cops did not have to fight with the general public for appointment times. On the other hand, it was unfortunate that the police had so many injuries that its officers could fully book an entire physical therapy operation, to the point that it was

difficult finding open time slots and officers had to double up with the therapists. At least he had been able to set up a reasonable schedule.

After changing in the locker room, Mike headed south down Amsterdam Avenue, bending his head down against the chilly wind. He fished a knit hat out of the pocket of his jacket with his right hand and managed to get it on his head one-handed, since he could not get his left arm up that high. He had twenty blocks to walk, but he needed to keep up the exercise. It was still impossible for him to jog because the pounding jarred his injured shoulder too much, but walking was fine, so he had been walking everywhere, even through the snow and slush of the city. His plan was to stop by the precinct on 94<sup>th</sup> Street for a while, then continue on to his apartment on 68<sup>th</sup> Street. That would be close to fifty blocks of walking by the end of the afternoon. He wished he were back on active duty, but he was mollified somewhat by Captain Sullivan's willingness to let him visit the precinct, consult on pending cases, and work on his training class materials while he was drawing disability pay. This was not strictly permitted under departmental rules, but as long as nobody from the downtown brass or the benefits consultants came in to check on him, Sully would swear he was never there. Mike limited his appearances to about once per week, just in case.

After several weeks of bitterly cold weather, which the reports had referred to as the "polar vortex," the temperature had shot up in to the low 40s, which seemed like spring. It was nearly 4:00 p.m. when Mike turned west on 94<sup>th</sup> Street and saw the line of black & white cruisers lined up in the parking spaces in front of the precinct house. He climbed up the four steps of the building that was once a brownstone residence and pushed open the heavy wooden door with his right arm, nodding in greeting at two uniformed officers who were exiting. He climbed the stairs to the third-floor bullpen, where the detectives had their desks, and waved at his comrades. He scanned the room for his partner, Jason Dickson, but didn't see the big man anywhere. Jason was the only Black detective in the Homicide division and he was also always the best dressed cop in the room, so he stood out in the crowd. Mike called out a greeting to Detective Steve Berkowitz, who grinned widely and yelled back that Mike should demand a new contract with the Mets, now that he had a surgically repaired left arm.

"I'm leaving for Spring Training in the morning," Mike quipped back.

"Hey, Mike!" came the booming voice of Jason Dickson from the foot of the stairs. Jason came bounding into the bullpen and charged toward Mike with his

arms extended as if he were going to tackle the older detective, or put him in a bear hug. Mike crouched quickly and held out his right palm, signaling for Jason to stop. Jason kept running right up to the point of contact before stopping short and softly giving Mike's right hand a high-five. Jason towered five inches and easily fifty pounds of muscle over Mike's five foot, ten inch frame. "A little late for work, aren't you, Detective?"

"I make my own hours now," Mike deadpanned.

"While you're here, do you have a minute?"

"Sure. I got nowhere to be."

Jason turned and yelled across the room, "Hey, Ray!" as he waved at Detective Raymond McMillian, who was filling in as Jason's partner while Mike was out on disability. Ray rose from his desk and slowly walked in Jason's direction. Ray was in his early thirties and tried to look even younger, sporting a Fu-Manchu beard and moustache combination and combing back his flowing brown curls into a wave. He was shorter than Jason and stockier, but still bigger than Mike. He swaggered across the room with an attitude not generally seen from the newest detective in the group.

"Hey, old man," Ray said with a smile. "How's the broken wing?"

Mike scowled at the man's familiarity. "It wasn't broken, Kid. If you survive in this job long enough to reach my advanced age, you can tell me how your body's doing."

"OK," Ray said, only slightly chastised, "I'll be sure to look you up in the rest home to tell you."

"Great. Maybe you'll pass my evidence handling class by then."

That shut Ray up for a moment and let Jason insert himself between the two of them. "Ray, I want Mike to join us on the call with the M.E. on the floater. Let's go into the conference room." Mike raised an eyebrow at the mention of the Medical Examiner, Dr. Michelle McNeill, who was a veteran of many homicide investigations and a frequent witness in high-profile trials. She was also the woman with whom Mike was spending most of his nights, now that he was able to sleep in a reclining position again after his surgery. Dr. McNeill had also been present in the Queens warehouse when Mike was injured. Mike and Jason exchanged a knowing look, passing between them the understanding that Ray was not clued in to Mike's relationship with the doctor.

The three men huddled around a small wooden table in a cramped, windowless room, which passed for a conference area in a Manhattan precinct where space was always at a premium. An ancient telephone with a black cord snaking to a large silver speaker box sat in the center of the pock-marked tabletop. Mike glanced toward a credenza at the far side of the room where an urn of coffee sat next to a stack of paper cups and a bowl of sweetener and creamer packets. A red light glowed over the black spigot, indicating that the coffee was brewed and ready to drink. There was a small pile of paper plates on the opposite side of the wooden surface, along with a leaning tower of white paper napkins, but the rest of the space was bare. Mike raised an eyebrow and asked, “No donuts today?”

“He hasn’t heard?” Ray asked.

“I guess not,” Jason replied. “No donuts, Mike. No food at all. We’ve got a rat issue.”

“Issue?” Mike said with another raise of his brow.

“Yeah. We had one running around the bullpen a few days ago. The exterminators came in and said they found droppings all over the place and a bunch of bags of candy and crackers had been chewed open. They say we have to clear out all the food in the building until they get the infestation under control, so Sully has banned all food. We can have coffee, but that’s it. Anybody caught eating in the building will do hard time.”

“That sucks,” Mike said, stating the obvious. “What about lunch?”

“We have to go out of the building to eat. We’ve turned the squad cars into makeshift food trucks, since it’s too damned cold to stand around outside.”

“I guess you do what you gotta do.”

“It’s a pretty poor reflection on the city’s building maintenance program,” Ray cut in.

Mike and Jason just stared at him without speaking. Jason shot Mike a look to say, “This is what I have to put up with from this guy,” then reached for the phone without further comment. He picked up the receiver, then paused.

“Ray, please brief Detective Stoneman on the case before we call the M.E.”

Ray looked up, slightly flustered at being put on the spot. He quickly recovered his composure, sat back in his chair, and began his summary. “Well, Mike, it’s pretty routine, I think. Some jogger reported seeing a body floating in the East River. The uniforms and the EMTs fished her out, but she was way dead. We got prints and we’re running them through the national database, but her fingers



were pretty bloated, so we're not sure about getting a match. She was naked except for a pair of red silk panties. Looked to be early 20s. Bruise on her head, but other than that no obvious signs of injury." Ray looked at Jason, seeking approval for his recitation.

Jason looked at Mike. "Any questions?"

"Not yet." Jason dialed the phone and punched a button at the bottom of the ancient device, which blinked once, then stayed lit. The line connected and rang several times before being answered.

"Medical Examiner," came the voice through the tinny speaker.

"Doctor McNeill, it's Jason Dickson from Homicide. I'm here with Detective Raymond McMillian and Detective Mike Stoneman. You sent me a note that you wanted to talk about the Jane Doe that you've been examining."

There was a pause on the line and the detectives could hear the sound of footfalls. Mike pictured Michelle walking across her examination room to her neatly organized desk, extracting a file from her desktop, and then walking back to the phone. He smiled at the thought, and remembered that he needed to pick up something he could make for dinner at Michelle's downtown apartment later. "I have the file, gentlemen."

Mike said, "Go ahead, Doctor."

"We have a Caucasian female between eighteen and twenty-three. Cause of death is drowning. I'd say she was in the water between twenty-four and thirty-six hours. Deceased has a large contusion on her left forehead consistent with a blunt force blow, which occurred several hours before death. She has other assorted scratches and bruises that I can't say for sure existed before she went into the water. Most importantly, she had a large quantity of opiates in her system, and a single needle scar on her right arm consistent with an injection of heroin shortly before her death. When her system shut down, she stopped metabolizing the drug, so I was able to detect about how much she had in her at time of death, which was pretty significant. Her teeth and nose showed signs of recent use of crystal meth, but the tox screen didn't find any of that in her system. Her stomach was basically empty. She had semen in her vagina but no indication of trauma or tearing, so it does not look like sexual assault."

When Dr. McNeill stopped talking, Mike spoke up. "Anything else to suggest foul play, and not just an overdose and an accidental or intentional dive into the water?"

The doctor was silent for ten seconds before responding. “You know that I can’t speculate. That’s your job. But I’ve seldom seen an overdose case with just one needle mark.”

“What do you mean?”

“This girl had one needle scar in her arm. Nothing in the other arm, and no other indication of heroin use. So, if she accidentally overdosed, she did it on the first hit, or at least the first hit in a very long time. That’s not normal for a heroin addict, in my experience. The big bump on her head, which did not happen when she went into the water, suggests that she took a significant impact, and then a few hours later, high as a kite from a big dose of heroin, she ends up in the river. And it’s February and freezing cold, so she’s not skinny dipping. She may have been wearing something when she went in, but it wasn’t anything warm, which would have stayed attached to her. So, either she walked in light clothing to the river while really high, after taking a serious blow to the head, and jumped or fell in, or somebody clubbed her in the head, before or after she took the drugs, and then helped her in where she was sure to drown.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Mike said, determining that McNeill was done. He then looked at Jason. “Any other questions?” Jason shook his head. Mike turned to Ray, who leaned forward, but then waved a hand to indicate that he had nothing to say. “Okay, Doctor. Thanks for the report. We’ll get back to you if we think of any other information we want. By the way, are her fingerprints more legible now than when she came in?”

“Yes, I think so. Her bloating has subsided some. I’ll take another set of prints and send them up for processing.”

“Thanks again.” Mike reached out to punch the lighted button and end the call. “So,” he said, looking at Jason, “you’re treating this as a homicide?”

“We’re treating it as a possible homicide,” Jason responded. “Let’s see what we get once we have an ID on her and take it from there. It’s still possible that she went into the river because she was so high she didn’t know any better. Stranger things have happened to junkies.”

“The M.E. just told us that she doesn’t think she was a heroin addict. I must say that I tend to agree – it’s pretty rare for an addict to have no track marks.”

“She can’t know that for sure,” Ray broke into the discussion. “The lady said there was evidence of crystal meth use, and she was high on the smack for sure at the time. Let’s not make her out to be Cinderella yet.”

Mike frowned, but chose not to respond. Ray was not wrong. Mike would have supported the M.E. loudly, but he didn't want to seem like he was too deferential. He was pretty sure that Jason got the message. "It's your case, gentlemen. What can I do to help?"

Ray started to say something but Jason cut him off. "What do you think, Mike? Where would you go from here?"

"Well, you don't know where she went into the river. It could have been anywhere on the Manhattan or Brooklyn side. Without an ID, you have no idea where to look or who to talk to. I'd say you work every angle you can to find out who she was and go from there. Until you have that, you have nothing."

"That's what I was gonna say," Ray blurted out.

"That's good, Detective McMillian," Mike said, nodding at Ray. "We're on the same page. Now see what you can do to get a positive ID on the poor girl."

"How would you suggest we do that?"

"You look like a smart guy, Detective. I'm sure you can figure it out." Mike stood up slowly, careful not to put weight on his left arm as he pushed up from his chair. He shook hands with Jason, then waved in the direction of Ray, who was sitting on the opposite side of the table and who did not stand up when Mike did. Jason walked Mike to the door of the precinct and watched as the older man climbed carefully down the four slippery stone steps to the sidewalk, turned left, and walked away toward Broadway.

When Jason went back inside, Ray was still sitting in the conference room. "Can we talk about the Sheffield case?" he asked when Jason came in.

"You think there's nothing else to do about our unidentified floater girl?"

"Nah. Let's wait to see if the fresh prints come back with an ID. No point spinning our wheels over this junkie until we know something."

"You've decided you don't like her already?"

"Hey, I see a lot of these strung-out losers on the street over in Robbery. They are suspects in a lot of the snatch-and-grab cases; just trying to snag enough for their next fix. They're disgusting. Maybe the crazy bitch wanted to kill herself. Maybe she fell in. Maybe she thought she could fly and jumped off the bridge. Maybe a lot of things. I'm not losing any sleep over her."

"Is there anything that makes you lose sleep, Ray?"

"Not really."

“I didn’t think so.” Jason turned toward the door to the conference room. “I tell you what. I’m going to go home. We can work Sheffield in the morning. You do what you want.”

“I always do,” Ray said smiling and leaning back as he clasped his hands behind his head.

Jason turned and walked out, muttering, “I know.”