

# Chapter One

Robert Panzieri opened his bedroom door and came face-to-face with death. Moonlight glinted off the sleek body of the Glock 19 pointed at his chest. Jason's black-gloved fist held the gun steady in the air.

A tense, uneasy silence settled between the men as they stared into the darkness obscuring each other's features. There was no mistaking Robert, however; thin wisps of gray hair crowned his head, and his clothes sloped a particular way across narrow shoulders. Even before he'd opened the door, Jason had recognized his gait as he approached, the weight and rhythm of his footsteps loud against the hardwood floor.

Robert raised his hands, palms facing forward. Light from the corridor behind him spilled around his gaunt frame and stretched toward the corner of a massive bed. "There's no use running, is there?"

"No."

"Is that you, Jason? No—I know it is. You're the only man I've met with the balls to accept a contract on my life. I suppose I should be honored. You were one of the best I ever hired."

Jason said nothing.

Robert twitched to his right.

Two silenced gunshots went off in quick succession. Robert hit the floor with a heavy thud. The sharp scent of gunpowder filled Jason's nose as he crossed the room and stepped around the bed. Robert lay on his stomach, one arm stretched toward the bedside table with the hidden pistol Jason had already removed. The wet, gurgling noise of Robert's death rattle filled the air. His body spasmed as blood oozed from the bullet wounds in his chest and spewed from his mouth.

Jason aimed at Robert's head and killed him with a third, final shot.

Moving with calm efficiency, Jason unscrewed the suppressor from his Glock, pocketed it, and tucked away the gun in the holster hidden at his waist. With his phone, he took several photographs of the corpse and sent them to his client with the encrypted text, *It's done.*

A moment later, he received a response: *Great work. I've transferred the rest of your payment to the account you specified. It's always a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Ridley.*

Jason turned off the phone, removed the battery, and stowed both away, along with the empty bullet casings that had cooled on the floor. In Robert's massive, walk-in closet, Jason had stored a small, black duffel bag. Keeping his gloves on, he swapped the navy blue overshirt of his maintenance worker disguise for the plain brown bomber jacket in the bag. Then he put on a black, unmarked baseball cap for good measure. Though the penthouse's Elevator lacked security cameras, several watched the apartment building's front lobby and the street outside.

With the bag slung over his shoulder, he left the bedroom and started down the hall. A clear and pleasant chime from the foyer cut through the silence.

The elevator. Someone had arrived.

Without hesitating, Jason backtracked down the hallway and slipped into Robert's bedroom again. He kept the door open ajar, peeking through the crack and straining his ears to hear the newcomer over the wild beating of his own heart.

He'd spent weeks stalking Robert, learning the old man's routine with all its peculiarities. No one else was supposed to be there that night—a sweet spot of solitude in an otherwise packed schedule. An unexpected visitor was a problem, in more ways than one.

“Robert, are you home?” called a high-pitched voice. Melodious. A woman. Her heels clicked on the hardwood as she strode through the apartment. “Robert, this isn't funny. Where are you? Things are getting out of hand. We need to meet with the others and revisit our strategy.”

Jason's professionalism demanded his escape. A witness stumbling upon Robert's corpse was less of an issue than them catching him at the scene of the crime. But the penthouse elevator was the only way out, and the woman's footsteps were growing louder. He could kill her, of course. It was a messy solution with unaccounted repercussions—at best, a hassle for both him and his broker, but at worst, a stain on his career.

And besides, there was his pride. He had a reputation to uphold. A man who murdered indiscriminately was no better than a serial killer, unable to control his urges.

That left one last option: threaten the woman into silence.

He drew his gun from its holster and cocked the hammer. Twelve bullets remained. Every muscle in his body tensed with anticipation. He glimpsed the sliver of her as she stepped into the space between the door and its jamb: a young woman with platinum blonde hair and dark business attire. She paused, her gaze falling upon the bedroom door.

“Robert?” she called again, uncertainty creeping into her voice. She moved toward Jason's hiding place.

He emerged from the room, smoothly shutting the door behind him, his Glock pointed at her chest. She jumped and screamed, eyes wide with terror.

“Quiet,” he said.

She shut up immediately.

He swept his gaze over her from head to foot, memorizing her features. Tall and slender, she reminded him of a model; he guessed she was in her mid-twenties, the right age for one. Her button-up satin blouse, pencil skirt, and tights were much more conservative than what he expected from one of Robert's late-night visitors. Perhaps business roleplay was her specialty, especially considering her outburst upon entering.

“What's your name?” Jason asked after finishing his assessment.

“S-Sabrina.” Instead of looking at him, she stared down the barrel of his gun, every part of her trembling.

“Full name.”

“Kopanski. Sabrina Kopanski.”

“Why did you come here?”

She didn’t answer right away. “Just business.”

“What kind of business?”

“Shipping. Robert—his family owns the harbor. The shipyard.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that?”

She met his gaze for the first time. “Please. I’m not here for what you think. I swear. I—I shouldn’t have come here at all.”

“No. You shouldn’t have.” Jason stepped toward her, forcing her backward down the hall. “Robert’s not here tonight, so this is what’ll happen: you and I are going to leave here together. We’ll exit the building, I’ll hail you a cab, and you’re going to go straight home. And if you so much as breathe a word of our encounter to anyone, I will find out, and I will kill you. Do I make myself clear?”

Sabrina swallowed. Nodded.

He motioned for her to lead the way. She turned and made a beeline for the elevator. He followed with his gun still drawn. In the close confines of the carriage, he pressed the Glock’s muzzle against her back. She flinched at the contact but did not move away.

As they descended to the first floor, Jason expanded on his instructions. “When we leave the elevator, we’re going to pretend we’re friends who’ve just left a mutual friend’s party because another guest insulted you. I’ll be sympathetic to your hurt feelings. When you get into the cab, give the driver your address; I’ll wait on the corner and wave goodbye. If you try to run, tell the driver the truth, go to the police, or anything besides what I’ve told you, I *will* find out.”

Sabrina nodded again.

“What kind of comment would insult you?”

“I, um . . . I can’t stand being talked down to.”

“Then a man named Ron insulted your intelligence and tried explaining your own career to you, even though he knows nothing about it.”

Her blurred reflection in the carriage’s metal doors twisted with disgust.

“Perfect,” Jason said, his flat tone at odds with his words of praise. “Keep that up.”

The elevator slowed to a stop at the first floor. He tucked his gun back into its hidden holster moments before the doors slid open. As he and Sabrina stepped into the building’s lobby, with its elegant dark wood walls and creamy marble floor, he donned a worried frown and soft voice. “You sure you don’t want me talking to Ron? What he said wasn’t cool.”

Sabrina gaped at him.

Jason chuckled. “I know, I know—you can stand up for yourself. I just thought I’d offer.”

“It’s . . . fine. Thank you.”

He suppressed a sigh of exasperation. At least she had the sense to reply instead of stare

like a fish at the hand holding the rod. “I’d ask if you’re sure, but honestly, I’d leave too. So I don’t blame you.”

“Yeah. I can’t stand him.”

Jason held the front door open for her as they exited. The city of Lansing sprawled out in all directions from where they stood, a behemoth of industry and urbanization. Skyscrapers stretched toward the starless night, their highest reaches obscured by blackness and clouds. Yellow lights scattered across countless windows like constellations amid a gridwork of darkness. At the street level, neon signs blinked and blazed, while streetlamps illuminated the sidewalks and roads. The persistent rumble of cars and chatter of pedestrians rose up in a cacophony on all sides; the ripe, pungent smell of piss, garbage, and weed blew by on a blustery wind. Shivering, Sabrina pulled her coat more tightly around her body. Jason kept her in his line of sight as he hailed an approaching cab. It pulled up along the sidewalk in front of them. He opened the door for her again.

“Have a good night, all right?” he said as she climbed into the back seat.

“Thanks. You too,” she said, avoiding eye contact, before sharing an address with the driver. Jason didn’t recognize it as any place he knew. He committed it to memory.

He held his hand up in a reserved wave of farewell, a slight smile on his face, as the cab peeled away from the curb. Once it had blended in with the rest of the traffic, his smile faded into stoic neutrality. He started off in the opposite direction, pulling the brim of his cap lower over his face. No one on the street paid him any mind.

After walking for two blocks, he reinserted the battery of his phone and turned it back on. The home screen flashed at him. He opened the app that made encrypted voice calls and dialed a number he’d memorized.

“Grosmont Fish Market, Vince speaking,” answered an older man after a couple of rings.

“I heard hornet tilapia are in season,” Jason said, giving the passphrase.

“Oh, Jason, good evening.” The curt professionalism in the broker’s voice eased into familiarity. “What can I do for you?”

“I need you to keep tabs on someone for me.”

“Who? Did something happen?”

Fighting the urge to lie, Jason said, “I finished a job half an hour ago, and a woman arrived on the scene before I could leave. I threatened her so I could get out of there.” He gave Sabrina’s full name, physical description, and the address she’d recited for the taxi driver. “Does any of that sound familiar?”

“No, not at all. I’ll have my team look into her and send some runners to that address. Anything else I should know that might be useful?”

“She mentioned she did business with the target.” Jason paused. People in his line of work were supposed to keep their clients’ and targets’ identities a secret, but without that information, Vince couldn’t act. “Robert Panzieri.”

Vince was silent for a long moment. “I see. Maybe your client was trying to set you up?”

“Doubtful. By the way he talked, he just wanted to eliminate some competition.”

“And this girl claimed to be business partners with Robert?”

“Yeah, but I don’t believe her. She was probably just a prostitute.” Ahead of Jason was an alley with a dumpster. He ducked into its shadows and hurled the duffel bag containing his disguise into the trash.

“You’re probably right,” Vince said. “Still, lay low for a while. No contracts. Do your cover job. If this girl’s smart, she’ll put two and two together once she learns about Robert’s death. I’ll make sure she doesn’t call the police—or do anything else stupid.”

“Thanks, Vince. Update me if you learn anything.”

“Of course. Goodnight, Jason.”

After hanging up, Jason removed the SIM card from his phone and snapped it in half. He tossed the pieces into the dumpster and made to leave, but froze.

Every small hair on his body stood on end. Something was in the alley with him, watching. Not something harmless like an animal or a homeless person, but a predator. A threat.

He turned in a slow half-circle to face the black maw of the alley. It seemed to lengthen the longer he stared into it, stretching for miles into an endless abyss. He lurched from the sudden vertigo. A faint humming reached his ears, growing louder with every passing second. Hunger gnawed at him, but it did not come from within. It pressed against him from the darkness, a palpable sensation that filled the air with dreadful tension. The humming reached a distorted, droning crescendo. He pressed his palms against his ears instinctively, but the discordant, fluctuating noise was in his head, vibrating against his skull. When he squinted into the alley, he saw movement. Light. A ripple of nebulas, a collision of stars.

And at the very center, the suggestion of something colossal and all-consuming.

## Chapter Two

Ayana looked up from her book at the sound of her front door opening. She grew still, listening to the movements from the floor below, conjuring the man and his actions in her mind's eye. Her husband was a creature of habit, always removing his shoes in the townhouse's entryway before hanging his coat and keys nearby. The latter clinked softly as they swayed on their key hook next to hers.

Finally, soft footsteps up the stairs signaled his approach. Smiling, Ayana slid a bookmark between the pages of her reading and set it aside. Jason ascended into their living room, dressed in a brown jacket she'd never seen before, a slim paper bag cradled in one arm. He looked like he'd gone for a walk to the store, but she knew better. He'd been working. If she stood close enough to him, she would smell the gunpowder.

He paused at the top step and stared at her, his expression inscrutable, though she thought she saw tension ease from his jaw.

"You're home early," she said, rising from the couch to cross the room and kiss his stubbled cheek. Warmth radiated from him, but she resisted the temptation to press herself into an embrace. The bag was in the way, anyway.

He kissed her cheek in return. "Work went off without a hitch. I even had time to stop by the liquor store."

Stroking his neck, she looked into his eyes, searching them for the truth. Beneath her touch, his muscles were tight with unspoken stress. Something unexpected had happened. But he'd returned home safely, in the end, and that was what mattered.

Ayana took the bag from Jason and reached inside. Lifting the black bottle of wine by its neck, she examined its glossy, golden label. "Château Pichon Baron," she read aloud before raising an eyebrow at him. They had visited one of its vineyards in the French countryside for a decadent wine and cheese tasting during their honeymoon. Tenderness bloomed in her chest at the nostalgic memory—and at his thoughtfulness. "The 2005 vintage, even. What's the occasion?"

He matched her smile with the slightest curl of his own mouth. "Can't I treat my wife to something nice every so often?"

Chuckling, she padded over to the open kitchen-dining area and set the bottle down on the island's granite countertop. He followed her there, circled strong arms around her from behind, and pressed his chest against her back. Her grin widened. She relaxed into him, tilting her head as his lips trailed kisses down her neck. Heat burned low in her abdomen, kindled to life by his attention.

"How much were you paid tonight?" she asked, her gaze lingering on the wine. Calculations ran through her head, weighing the price of the single bottle against their accounts. Was this the vintage that cost two hundred dollars, or two thousand? She couldn't remember,

not with one of his hands sliding up the front of her silk nightgown.

“You can check tomorrow.” The roughness of his voice in her ear sent a shiver down her spine.

Ayana turned in Jason’s embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Tell me, please,” she said, injecting just enough force into the command to make him pause.

“Eighty thousand.”

“Total?”

“Total.”

She kissed him on the lips as a reward. A thrill swept through her when he reciprocated eagerly.

“Let’s bring the wine upstairs,” he murmured between kisses.

“We could,” she said, slowing down as a new idea entered her head, an answer to a riddle she had yet to solve, “or we could save it.”

“For?”

“Dinner at Connor’s next week. I haven’t purchased a host gift yet, and it would be perfect.”

Jason’s face darkened at once, and his hands dropped to his sides. He stepped out of her embrace, leaving her cold. “I bought the wine for us, not him.”

Ayana held her husband’s gaze. “I know, but bringing it means we can still drink it. We can use it to talk about our trip to France, which should impress his new girlfriend.”

“I don’t need to impress her or anyone.”

“I *know*. But you *do* need to keep up appearances. We both do.” She reached for his hand. When he did not pull away, she knew he understood. “You don’t need me to remind you how important that is, especially if this girl is someone your brother will marry one day. Connor will tell her about your childhood sooner or later, and the earlier you charm her, the less trouble she’ll be for us. She’ll think his concerns are matters of the past, or at least less serious in the present.”

The wrath in Jason’s face only deepened. “He knows better than to talk about that.”

Ayana sighed at his stubbornness and switched tactics. “Yes. At least, he should.” Stepping closer, she cupped her husband’s cheek with her other hand. “I promise this’ll be the only time you have to play pretend for him. I’ll make up excuses if they want to see us again. You know I’m an expert at that.”

He frowned but didn’t argue her point—a victory, no matter how small. Instead, he released his anger in a slow exhale. “Fine. Just this once.”

“Thank you.” Kissing his cheek again, she trailed her hand down the front of his body until it rested on the buckle of his belt. Her fingers worked the leather free. “Now, where were we?”

He stood without moving, and for a moment, she feared the topic of his brother had cooled his blood too much. Then he seized her with both hands, pulling her hard against him, and crushed her mouth in a bruising kiss.

\*\*\*

On the day of dinner at Connor's, Ayana went to work with two cups of coffee from her favorite café instead of one. She spied her assistant already at his desk, unpacking his messenger bag. The bespectacled man looked up at her approach and smiled. "Good morning, Dr. Hudson," he said.

"Good morning, Rahul." She handed him one of the cardboard-sleeved paper cups. "Happy one-year anniversary with us. Sparrows Street Café does filter coffee and I thought you might like a taste of home."

His eyes lit up. "Oh, you didn't have to!"

"I wanted to. Consider it a 'thank you' for all your hard work this past year."

Ten clusters of desks occupied the spacious, open area that served as their office; her own was directly across from Rahul's. As she moved past him, she spotted a thin booklet on his desk she hadn't seen before. Its colorful cover depicted a menacing, tentacled shadow looming over a screaming man. Large, purple letters in a font that reminded her of cheesy Halloween advertisements spelled out the title, *The Void Between the Stars*.

She picked up the booklet. "What's this?"

Rahul rubbed the back of his neck, a shy gesture. "A vintage comic that came in the mail yesterday. I brought it to read during lunch."

"I didn't know you read comics."

"Never had a reason to mention it before."

Setting the book back down, Ayana considered ending the conversation there. She had zero interest in his personal life or hobbies, but discouraging idle conversation wasn't conducive to a good working relationship, either. At least he wasn't annoying and knew when to shut up. "Do you have a favorite comic?" she asked, finally sitting at her computer to begin the tedious process of logging in.

His eyes lit up. "Yeah! It's an earlier volume in this same series. They're episodic, you see. Anyway, there's a family living on a farm in rural America. The father and mother prefer life away from the city while the kids hate being in the middle of nowhere. One day, a meteor hits their property and starts killing off everything: the crops, the farm animals, and eventually the family."

"What happens at the end?"

"The alien goes back home to somewhere in space."

Ayana looked up at Rahul. "The . . . alien."

"Yeah. An alien arrives with the meteor."

Chuckling, she shook her head. "Okay then."

"You don't like sci-fi?"

She did not miss the flicker of uncertainty that entered his face. Ignoring it, she said,

“This isn’t science fiction. It’s fantasy. A supernatural idea with no basis in reality, unlike sci-fi.”

“Well . . . yeah, it’s space horror.”

“There’s more than enough horror in the real world these days. I don’t need to read stories about UFOs and cryptids if I want to be scared.”

“What do you read, then?”

Ayana pulled a book from her tote bag and showed it to him. “Crime thrillers and mysteries.”

Another man’s booming voice cut through the quiet office. “Hudson! Goswami! What is this, a book club?”

Rahul yanked back his outstretched hand while Ayana turned to acknowledge their boss. What Harvey Blumenthal lacked in height, he possessed in girth, a considerable contribution to the force of his presence. He was also the only person on staff at Lancing Forensic Medical Center who bothered to wear a suit every day. That morning, he’d chosen to accessorize with a garish pink tie, which did nothing for him except accentuate the ruddiness of his own complexion.

“No, of course not.” Forcing an apologetic smile, Ayana stowed her book into her purse. “We were just chatting while prepping for the day.”

“You can chat at Goswami’s happy hour celebration tonight. You *are* going, right, Hudson?”

“No, sorry. I already have plans—dinner at my brother-in-law’s.”

Harvey harrumphed. “Always busy. You should make time for your colleagues. They held a one-year anniversary happy hour for *you*, after all.”

Her smile remained plastered to her face until he’d shuffled over to harass another of his employees.

Rahul leaned in. “It’s okay if you can’t make it. I’d stay home with Oscar if I had a choice, but the party’s for me, so . . .”

“And how is he?” Ayana asked, failing to remember which chronic illness plagued Rahul’s husband.

“He’s going through a flare right now, so it’s kind of been a bad week. But my mother-in-law’s visiting, so she can help him whenever he needs something while I’m at work.”

“Well, I hope he feels better.” Her computer chimed, signaling the completion of its startup procedure and saving her from further personal conversation. “Let’s get to work.”

Fifteen minutes later, she stood at one of four autopsy stations, dressed in scrubs, gown, surgical mask, face shield, gloves, and knee-high boots. A corpse lay on the table in front of her. The accompanying file named him a John Doe—identity unknown. His mop of long, unkempt hair and his ragged beard were streaked with silver and white; his skin was mottled from age and sun exposure.

Beginning her examination, Ayana commented on body rigidity and lividity. The information formed a clear image of the time of death and the stranger’s position when he died: the middle of the night, while he was lying on his side. Rahul jotted down notes and took photos.

“Not much out of the ordinary on this one,” he said after they finished the external inspection.

Humming a note of agreement, she picked up a scalpel and sliced into the torso, making a Y-shaped incision across the breastbone and down through the abdominal wall. She peeled back the flesh, exposing the rib cage and the organs underneath. Peering into the body cavity, she did a double take at the sight that greeted her. “What in the world?”

The dead organs of the corpse pulsed and quivered with clusters of black holes, none larger than a quarter, most of them much smaller. They reminded Ayana of black tapioca pearls or the honeycomb of beehives, except they swirled in a bizarre, hypnotic pattern. A sudden bout of vertigo seized her; she clutched the edge of the table until the dizziness passed.

Her assistant shot her a confused look, his face pale, sweat beading on his forehead. “Ever see anything like this before, Dr. Hudson?”

“No, never.” She took a deep breath to steady herself. Her heart thundered in her ears. Carefully, she prodded one of the holes with her scalpel. The metal warped and twisted backward on itself, as if it were not steel at all but putty in unseen hands.

She dropped the tool and snatched her hand away. The scalpel slid across the intestines, hitting several more holes in its path. Within seconds, it was no longer recognizable. Its contorted form spiraled into the wells of inky blackness and disappeared.

Rahul took a step back. “It’s just . . . *gone*?” he whispered, a tremble in his voice.

Ayana’s mind scrambled for an answer, but she couldn’t recall a single lecture, research paper, or textbook that mentioned such a phenomenon among the living *or* the dead. What she and Rahul witnessed defied all scientific logic as she knew it—but no, that was impossible. Dangerous thinking. There *had* to be a rational explanation.

She waited until her hands stopped shaking before picking up another scalpel. “I don’t know what this is,” she said at last, “but we’re going to find out. Take photos. We’ll try another way to remove the organs. Once we’ve finished the autopsy, we’ll show everything to Harvey. He’ll know what to do.”