

A LEOPOLD BLAKE THRILLER

# PANIC

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# PANIC

## A Leopold Blake Thriller

Leopold Blake, expert criminology consultant for the FBI, had his weekend all planned out – and it didn't involve dealing with a murdered senator, a high-profile kidnapping, and at least three near-death experiences.

Three politicians have been murdered in as many weeks, all expertly dispatched, and only Leopold can get to the bottom of it. Unfortunately, as all hell breaks loose on the streets of New York City, he soon finds himself the next target of a powerful enemy who wants him silenced. Permanently.

Against a backdrop of political corruption and murder, Leopold and his team must fight for their lives to uncover the truth before it's too late.

*Panic* is the first novel in the Leopold Blake series of thrillers.

# Chapter 1

Leopold Blake sighed and removed the gun from the hand of the dead senator. The body lay face-down on the hardwood floor, dressed in an expensive suit, a fresh exit wound to the back of the head staining the dead man's white collar and neatly trimmed gray hair with dark blood. He examined the left hand, turning it over to get a better view in the dim light, lifting it to his nose and sniffing the skin in long, drawn inhalations. He noted a distinct smoky, metallic scent. The forensics team stood back, shuffling impatiently, waiting for him to finish. Leopold took no notice and continued sniffing. Satisfied, he stood and turned to the police lieutenant who was glaring at him from the back of the room.

“Thoughts, Bradley?” asked Leopold, brushing the dust from his knees to the floor.

The living room was spacious and decorated with expensive furniture, although it was in need of a serious cleaning. Warm cinders glowed in the fireplace, the flames having died hours earlier.

Lieutenant Bradley folded his arms. “You’re supposed to be the expert.”

“You look like a man with something to say. What’s your take on this?”

Bradley arched his eyebrows, further creasing his wrinkled forehead. Leopold wondered if another fifteen years would have the same effect on his own face, but he pushed the thought to the back of his mind and reminded

himself he was still young, if a little scruffy around the edges. Bradley paced over to the body and glanced down.

“Meet State Senator George Wilson,” said Bradley, hands on hips. “Records show he’s lived here in Boston for the last ten years. Dead in his own living room on a weekday night, with no witnesses and no signs of forced entry. Clearly a suicide. Initial blood work confirms cause of death as a gunshot wound to the head, and splatter analysis shows that the body wasn’t moved after death. The bullet we found lodged in the wall matches the gun in the senator’s hand, which was registered in his own name and purchased several years ago. There’s gunshot residue on the senator’s hand where he held the gun, and to top it all off we’ve even got a suicide note.”

“Seems you have everything all wrapped up nicely,” replied Leopold. “Why call me in?”

“Standing orders from the commissioner. Apparently the FBI are insisting, and they want you involved on any high profile cases. Says your perspective is useful, though I can’t see what use you are here. Open and shut, if you ask me.”

Leopold resisted the urge to grin.

“The commissioner asks for my involvement on a consulting basis because I pick up things people like you and your team miss. For example, is it possible you’ve failed to notice this is the third dead state senator that’s shown up in as many weeks?”

“I heard on the news. The FBI said the deaths weren’t homicides, and it’s not like they’re well known for sharing information, so that’s all I know. What exactly have we missed here?” asked Bradley.

“Good, you’re finally asking the right questions. Can you tell me how the senator managed to shoot himself while he was unconscious?”

“What the hell do you mean, unconscious? That’s impossible.”

“Not impossible, just unlikely. Observe.”

Leopold took a thin penlight from his jacket pocket and shined a narrow beam of light over the senator’s body, illuminating the various points of interest against the musty gloom of the old house.

“You can see the senator is lying face down on the floor. How did he get there? There’s no evidence of trauma to the head, other than the bullet wound, so a fall is unlikely. You’ll also notice the dust on the back of the senator’s suit jacket and trousers; how did the dust get there?”

The consultant moved the beam of light across the floorboards and continued. “There are patches of floor that have less dust than others – which means the senator was on his back at some point tonight. Dust never lies, Lieutenant.”

“So what? People do all kinds of weird things, especially if they’re suicidal.”

“There’s that word again. You mentioned a note?”

Bradley nodded.

“Typed, no doubt? No signature? Yes, I thought so. Moving on then, you’ll also notice the senator’s shoes. Expensive and well-maintained, the sole is worn but there’s no dirt. Why is he wearing dress shoes indoors? In fact, he’s dressed to go out; but there’s no evidence at all that he’s left the house tonight. Doesn’t that seem a little odd?”

“Maybe. But it doesn’t prove anything.”

Leopold sighed impatiently and continued. “You’ll no doubt be aware that the senator is holding the gun in his left hand – even you couldn’t miss that. We know the senator was indeed left-handed; so why were his shoelaces tied by someone right-handed? You can easily tell by the knot. Lastly, look again at the hand holding the gun. There’s gunpowder residue on there all right, I could smell as much. What’s unexpected, however, is that the senator chose to fire the weapon with his index finger, instead of holding the gun at a different angle and using his thumb.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Try it. Holding the gun like that is awkward. If I were going to shoot myself in the head, I’d want to make sure I didn’t miss. Using the index finger means the wrist is twisted at an unnatural angle, and is not something one sees in suicides. This man was murdered.”

Bradley smirked. “That’s nothing but guesswork.”

“I’m not guessing, Lieutenant. I’m observing the evidence and applying logic, reason, and experience to reach a conclusion.”

“None of this is proof that the senator was murdered.”

“No? Picture it: The senator is in the house all evening and dressed in a formal suit, even though he’s not expecting company and has not intention of going out. After dressing, he ties his shoes with the wrong hand and walks downstairs, lies on his back on the floor and then stands up again, awkwardly positions a gun in his mouth, pulls the trigger, and then somehow falls onto his front. Does *that* seem likely?”

Bradley scowled. “I suppose not. What’s your genius theory then, Mr. Blake?”

Leopold paused before replying, lifting one finger to his lips as he considered his response. “The senator has a highly stressful job, enough to cause his hair to turn white despite only being in his mid-forties. A man like that will probably have trouble sleeping. Tell me, was the senator on any kind of medication for insomnia?”

“We found an empty bottle of sleeping pills on his bedside, nothing out of the ordinary. Over-the-counter stuff.”

“Any alcohol?”

“An empty glass.”

“Whiskey?”

“Smelled like it. How did you know?”

“It helps me sleep too,” said Leopold. “So the senator takes sleeping pills on a regular basis and washes them down with whiskey, meaning that all our killer has to do is swap out the pills for something a little stronger. Once the senator is unconscious, our killer dresses him and takes him down to the living room, where he puts the gun in the senator’s hand and fires a single shot through the head. As a result, toxicology reports will show nothing in the senator’s system other than sleeping drugs, which would be nothing out of the ordinary, and the whole thing looks like a suicide.”

“Why bother knocking him out? Why not just shoot him and reposition the body? Or use poison?”

“Too risky. The killer had to make it look like suicide, which means that as well as making sure there were no unexpected substances in the blood, he had to avoid any evidence of a fight. The killer would have had to make sure

the senator was alive when he shot him, otherwise the wound would have bled out differently.”

“Okay, say your theory is correct. What do we do now?”

“Run the usual toxicology reports and check for any elevated levels of sleeping drugs, particularly those not present in over-the-counter medication. Try Midazolam for starters. When you isolate the chemical not present in the senator’s usual bedtime cocktail, you’ll know it wasn’t suicide.”

“But why would anyone murder the senator?”

“Good, Lieutenant, your second intelligent question of the evening. The vast majority of premeditated crimes happen for one of three reasons: money, revenge, or power. The senator was wealthy, no doubt about that, but nothing is missing from his home, which suggests we can rule out a robbery.”

“So we’re looking for a revenge killing? Or something politically motivated?”

“Precisely. The senator was in a position powerful enough to make enemies; we just need to narrow down the list.”

“How do we do that?” asked Bradley, pulling out a pen and small notepad from his coat pocket.

“I expect you’ve been watching the news recently. This is an election year, and tensions are running high. Senator Wilson made a lot of enemies by speaking his mind. Find out who has the strongest motive, and you’ve got your killer.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes. Focus on any leads you have on hired killers or mercenaries; this has all the hallmarks of a professional job.

With high-profile targets like this, you're looking for someone who can afford to pay for the best. Start by checking out the wealthier members of government with a reason to hold a grudge. Other than that, I'd recommend good old-fashioned police work."

"You're not going to help?"

"I've already helped. You don't want me taking all the credit, do you? I've given you everything you need to get started. If you find any more bodies, let me know."

Lieutenant Bradley opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it.

Leopold stepped back from the body and made his way to the front door, nodding to the forensics team as he passed. "He's all yours."

"Wait, Mr. Blake." Bradley strode across the hallway and caught up with Leopold on the doorstep.

"Yes, Lieutenant Bradley?"

"Don't for one second think I'm impressed with your showing off. We would have figured it out eventually."

"I'm sure you would."

Bradley turned to go back inside, then paused. "I'm curious. Have you ever been wrong?"

Leopold looked straight into the lieutenant's eyes and smiled. "Just once."

He walked out into the night, closing the door firmly behind him.

## Chapter 2

Christina Logan and her two girlfriends sat at the bar, giggling and wailing along to the music. Suave, the newest mid-town New York hotspot, had only been open a few weeks, and it was still impossible to get in unless you had the right connections. Christina knew this, and had taken advantage of her social status to bag a few VIP tickets for herself and her friends. She looked around the nightclub and beamed a brilliant white smile as she caught the eye of a tall, muscular guy across the room. He raised his bottle of beer in salute and started walking over, smiling back at her as he weaved in and out of the crowd.

The VIP room at Suave was not like your average club. People didn't come here to dance, they came to be seen and they came to drink. Usually by the bottle. The music was played loud and the lights were kept low; nobody wanted conversation and everybody wanted to look their best. Christina felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to the girlfriend to her right – Candice, the one with the sharp nails.

“That guy is totally into you!” Candice shouted over the thrumming music, nodding at the muscular guy as he drew closer.

“He's cute!” Dakota chimed in from the left. “But what about your boyfriend?”

“Hank?” replied Christina. “He's not really my boyfriend. Just some guy I'm seeing. Besides, he's been

acting a little weird recently. He said he didn't want me going out tonight. He still thinks I'm back at the dorm."

"Good move," said Candice. "He never has to know. You just concentrate on having fun!"

Christina grinned and began to feel the effects of the vodka from their fifty-dollar cocktails. She felt her skin warm as the alcohol spread through her body, making her smile even more as the tall, handsome guy approached and leaned against the bar, looking at Christina as he spoke.

"Hey, you ladies having a good night? The name's Finn. What's yours?"

"Christina," she beamed and looked down, fiddling with the cocktail stick in her now olive-free Martini. She saw Dakota bobbing up and down on the stool, trying to look over Finn's back to hear what she was saying.

"You in college? You look like a student. Isn't it a little late to be out on a school night?" Finn's voice was smooth, even though he was practically shouting over the beat of the dance track that was playing, and his eyes twinkled as he spoke.

"We're all Columbia Law. Nobody works much on a Friday, so we can sleep in. You won't tell anyone, will you?" Christina said coyly, biting her bottom lip.

"Your secret's safe with me."

"So, what do you do for a living?" said Christina, wanting to know just how many drinks she could expect him to pay for.

"Oh, you know; this and that. Mostly private equity investments, that kinda thing."

"Sounds interesting, I'd love to hear more, but we're running out of drinks. Why don't you pull up a chair?"

Finn laughed and shook his head. He put down his drink, stood up, and took a few steps back so that he could address all three girls.

“Ladies, it’s been an absolute pleasure, but I’m afraid I have to be leaving soon. I’ve got other places to be tonight.”

Christina pulled a face in disappointment, a trick that always worked on her father. This guy wasn’t going anywhere.

“I’m sorry, I really do! But how about this: I’ve got a friend who works the doors at Halo downtown. My driver’s outside; you guys are welcome to take a ride down to the club and I’ll meet you there later. I’ll call ahead and have the champagne waiting.”

Christina looked to her girlfriends, all of whom seemed impressed, and nodded enthusiastically at Finn. “Sure, sounds like a plan. Lead the way!”

Finn took Christina by the hand and led the three girls toward the exit. Christina stumbled as they went down the stairs, her impossibly high heels not helping her balance, and Finn caught her before she could fall. She looked up into his gorgeous brown eyes and grinned.

“My hero!”

Christina grabbed onto his thick arm with both hands and let him carry most of her weight out of the club and onto the streets. She was looking forward to getting him home later.

The four party-goers spilled out onto the sidewalk, and Christina immediately felt the brisk midnight air around her bare legs; this was not the weather for short skirts, but looking good came with a price and cold legs were part of

the bargain. Christina found her footing despite the clawing numbness brought on by the vodka, and unhanded Finn so that she could walk unaided. Dakota and Candice walked ahead, looking around for signs of a town car.

“It’s just up here,” Finn called out, pointing to the end of the street where the streetlights had gone out. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Dakota and Candice disappeared from view, and Finn ushered Christina to where the car was waiting, just out of sight of the main road. Except there was no car. Candice and Dakota turned around, clearly confused. *There is no car.* Christina wheeled around to face Finn, the adrenaline now pumping away the alcohol that had been making her fuzzy and slow. Finn was stood still just a couple of feet away, and he spoke slowly.

“I did what you wanted. I couldn’t get her alone.”

Christina didn’t realize until it was too late. Finn’s eyes were focused somewhere above and behind her; he was speaking to someone they hadn’t seen. Before she had time to react, Christina heard a metallic *thunk* and Finn’s head jerked back, a small, red mark appearing in the center of his forehead. Thick, dark fluid began to drip slowly down his face as Finn’s lifeless body first crumpled onto its knees and then fell backward onto the road. Christina felt her stomach lurch and she spun around, kicking off her high heels, ready to put five years of kick-boxing training to use. Candice and Dakota were a little slower, still wondering what was happening as a dark figure approached from behind. The enormous man wore what looked like body armor, with thick boots, gloves, and a ski mask. He held the

gun limply by his side. The two girls turned slowly as he drew within a few feet and spoke.

“I’m in the mood for some exercise.”

The voice was deep and raspy, but strangely quiet and calm. The man dropped his gun to the floor. What happened next was a blur; the man brought his fist hard against Candice’s nose, forcing her to stumble back as her nasal bridge collapsed with a wet crunch. A palm edge connected with Dakota’s throat, apparently crushing her wind pipe as she immediately fell to her knees, gasping and choking for air. Christina’s feet were rooted in place. *Move, dammit, move!* She tried to will her uncooperative legs to propel her away from the horror in front of her, but she couldn’t get them to function.

Two huge hands grasped Dakota’s head, an arm as thick as a tree trunk across her throat. Christina knew what was going to happen next. With a savage jerk, the man broke Dakota’s neck before she could take another ragged breath. He dropped the lifeless body and moved toward Candice, who held one hand to her bloody face, blindly flailing the other in an attempt to work out where she was. The attacker grabbed her loose arm and pulled her in toward him, bringing his knee to her stomach and knocking the wind out of her. He put both hands around her neck and squeezed. Christina could see Candice’s eyes bulge in surprise and horror and heard the cartilage and muscle in her neck popping and tearing as the man’s grip collapsed her larynx. She quickly fell still.

Christina felt her legs begin to move. *Just a little more,* she willed them, desperate to get away. The man walked toward her; he was only a couple of feet away. *That’s it!*

Christina regained control of her legs and brought her right foot up fast, using the left to pivot, and aimed her instep at the weak point behind the knee joint. The man blocked her attack effortlessly, and countered by spinning on his back leg and driving the bottom of his heel into her shin. Christina gasped in pain and toppled to her knees. The last thing she felt was a blow to the back of her head, and then there was nothing.

# Chapter 3

Police Sergeant Mary Jordan was tired. Damned tired. The call had come in about an hour before, a triple homicide outside a mid-town club. Not her favorite way to start a Friday, especially not at one thirty in the morning and on only two hours' sleep. The gas station coffee in her hand just wasn't cutting it, and she hoped she didn't look as bad as she felt. Mary was attractive enough not to need makeup, but she had thrown on a cursory dash of lipstick and tied back her unruly dark hair just in case she didn't get a chance later, which was becoming more and more likely as she contemplated the scene in front of her.

On the ground lay the remains of two young women, both of whom had probably been pretty attractive before some sicko decided to mess with their faces. One girl's nose had been caved in and her eyes were bulging from their sockets, and the other girl's head was at a funny angle, a grotesque expression on her horrified face. Mary noticed they were both wearing clothes she couldn't afford if she saved up for a year. A few feet further back lay the body of a young male, Mary guessed late twenties, with a single gunshot wound to the head.

"Looks like we've got two killers, Sarge," one of the duty officers addressed her. He was young and puffed up, trying to prove himself. Mary eyed his badge number.

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, this guy's been shot and the others weren't. Two killers."

“Or just the one guy who likes to strangle women.”

Mary had seen it before. Some crazies liked to see the life drain out of their victims, liked to dispatch them using their own two hands. They got some kind of sick sexual kick out of it. As for the stiff with the bullet wound, Mary guessed he just wasn't the killer's type.

“Just the one set of boot prints,” she continued, “no car, no bullet casings. There was just one guy, and he was a pro.”

“Buy why would anyone want to kill someone coming out of a club?”

“You find any ID on these guys?”

The officer nodded, “Wallets and purses weren't taken, so it was easy enough to check. Finn Johnson, Candice Berkeley, and Dakota Hall. Finn's a nobody, works at a nightclub round the corner. Probably knew the doorman, otherwise no way he'd get in. The girls are your usual type, living off Daddy's money and enjoying their college years. Checked immediate family, they're all clean. Not a parking ticket among them. So why would someone want to kill them?”

“They wouldn't. Whoever killed these people was after something else.”

“How do you know?”

“Like you said, these guys are nobodies,” said Mary, glancing down at the bodies. “You don't see pros like this taking out nobodies on the street. He was after either something they had, or someone they were with. It doesn't look like anything was stolen, so I'd bet on the latter.”

“What do you want me to do, Sarge?”

“Tape this place up. When forensics get here, get them searching for any hair or fibers that don’t match our other vics and have them call me straight away. Let’s find out what’s missing from this picture.”

The rookie dashed off and left Mary staring at the scene in front of her. This was all she needed, more unexplained deaths. The captain was already riding her ass over a string of high-profile cases the FBI was investigating. Apparently they expected the police to do their damn jobs for them. Unfortunately for Mary, that meant she had to deliver a suspect with at least enough evidence to guarantee a court hearing. If she didn’t find one soon, the captain, the commissioner, and even the Mayor would be baying for blood, and she knew where they’d be looking.

Mary swore under her breath and patted down her jacket pockets, looking for her cigarettes. Then she remembered she had quit last week and swore again. It was hard enough to give up smoking without having to deal with this mess. Coffee just wasn’t cutting it. Mary bit her tongue in frustration and stalked back to her car, a mid-nineties sedan that was more inconspicuous than a squad car but lacked a decent heater. She turned the car around in the narrow alley and set off in the direction of the precinct, a full night of paperwork ahead of her.

# Chapter 4

Leopold saw the blade arc through the air toward his head a moment too late. The blunted edge struck him hard against the padded armor that protected his skull, but he still felt the blow like a sledgehammer striking a stone wall. Faltering slightly, he steadied himself with his right leg and assumed a more defensive stance.

Leopold tensed as his opponent advanced, sword held high. Jerome was forty-six years old, six feet seven inches tall, and built like a pro wrestler. Despite his build, he carried himself gracefully and effortlessly, even with the bulky armor weighing him down. Against his black skin, the dark padding made him look even more imposing, like a deadly shadow. Leopold wished Jerome hadn't insisted on swapping out their usual wooden swords for steel ones.

His sparring partner attacked again, aiming his blows at Leopold's side this time, and he had to parry with increasing speed to avoid a blow to the ribs, filling the empty gymnasium with the echoing clash of metal on metal. The sound only worsened his wavering focus as his arms began to ache from exhaustion. As Leopold's parries slowed, his opponent found an opening and struck hard, connecting with Leopold's ribcage and knocking the wind out of his lungs. Despite the thick armor and blunted swords, the blows still hurt like hell.

"You're distracted," said Jerome through the grille of his headgear.

"I'm just tired. Five A.M. is far too early for a beating."

“It’s only a beating if you don’t concentrate. I can tell you’re not focused. Tell me what’s going on.”

Jerome lowered his sword. Leopold followed, secretly relieved he would get a few moments to catch his breath. Neither removed his head protection, which was lesson number one in any sport involving deadly weapons.

“I’m trying to figure out the connection between the dead state senators. Three now, all killed within a few weeks of each other. One from Massachusetts, one from California, and one from Florida.”

“I remember. It took you all of five minutes to figure out what happened. Staged suicides, right?”

“Right. All three deaths made to look like suicides, all three victims state senators. Other than that, I can’t find a connection between them.”

“So what’s the problem? You’ll figure it out eventually,” said Jerome, raising his sword.

“The FBI has jurisdiction,” – Leopold raised his own weapon – “which means I don’t get to know the facts. They’re playing a media game and trying to keep me off the team. They’ve announced that the bodies were recovered, but no mention of the connection between them or the cause of death.”

“What’s your point?” Jerome began to advance.

“It means that I can’t get to the bottom of what happened without going through the FBI staff, who so far aren’t returning my calls. There are going to be more deaths unless I can figure out who’s behind this.”

“Your problem, Leopold,” – his opponent circled to cut off Leopold’s retreat – “is you just have no faith in other people.”

“Thanks, Jerome, but you’re my bodyguard, not my shrink.”

“Bodyguard? That’s a hell of way to sum up twenty years of loyal service. I’m not so sure I should be taking it so easy on you.”

Leopold tried to dodge, but he was too slow. Despite years of practice, he could still not hope to compete at the same level as Jerome, who had the added benefit of a lifetime of combat training and expertise.

The giant bodyguard wheeled his blade round with impossible speed and connected sharply with Leopold’s wrist, causing him to drop his sword. He felt his eyes water from the pain, but picked up his weapon and resumed the defensive stance, shaking his wrist to get the blood flowing again. His wiry frame was a relatively small target, which he intended to use to his advantage against his opponent’s stronger strikes and longer reach. Jerome’s attacks were fast and powerful, but so far Leopold hadn’t provided much of a challenge, meaning that his sparring partner was bound to grow complacent eventually. All he had to do was focus and wait for the right opportunity.

Jerome advanced again, whirling the blade through the air faster than Leopold’s eyes could reliably follow. He counted on his instincts and brought his own sword up to parry, successfully avoiding a blow to the shoulder. The bodyguard countered with a strike to the side of the head, which he also managed to block. He sensed Jerome going for the wrists again and instinctively parried, dodging to the right and following up with an attack of his own.

But he was too slow. His opponent blocked the attack and stepped left, causing him to lose balance and open up

his sides to attack. Jerome pressed his advantage and struck Leopold on the upper arm as he stumbled, knocking him to his knees.

“Better!” shouted the bodyguard.

“Hardly. I can’t feel my arms, legs, or head.”

“You kept yourself from getting hit for nearly two minutes. A personal best.”

Leopold stood and bowed. Usually, the first to land two strikes would be declared the winner, and Jerome had managed at least four so far.

“It’s over. You win.”

Jerome bowed back.

“I’m taking a shower before I regain feeling in my body and it starts getting too painful to move,” said Leopold.

“No problem. Don’t you need to be somewhere this morning?”

“Yes, I have that appointment later on, but I need to make an unscheduled stop first. This morning’s beating has given me an idea.”

The bodyguard nodded and followed his employer out. They stepped through into the main apartment, connected to the private gymnasium by a set of heavy glass doors, and Jerome slipped away to make use of one of the many wash rooms dotted around the sprawling penthouse.

Leopold let out a ragged sigh as the pain in his muscles reached a crescendo, before limping off in the direction of his bedroom, where he knew a hot shower was waiting. His apartment took up the entire top floor of an Upper East Side complex, with a view of Central Park to the west that stretched the entire width of the living area, thanks to the floor-to-ceiling windows. He had inherited the property,

cars, and bank accounts several years ago, thanks to a trust fund, and had systematically turned the apartment's chic décor and expensive furnishings into something that fitted his tastes a little better. As a result the apartment resembled a bomb site, with books and equipment strewn all around, often in piles several feet high. The only area kept relatively tidy was a small space in the cavernous living room, near the fireplace, where two high-backed armchairs faced each other across a shallow coffee table on which lay the day's newspapers and a bottle of expensive scotch.

Housekeeping staff kept the place clean, but were under strict instructions not to move anything. Food was brought in from one of the many nearby restaurants, and Leopold worked off the calories during his daily training sessions with Jerome, who lived with in a self-contained suite at the other end of the apartment, which he kept in immaculate condition.

There were no photographs or paintings on the wall, only faint outlines where frames had been removed. All the family portraits had been taken down after the funeral and Leopold had still not found the time to hang any replacements. Seeing the portraits brought back painful memories, images of the day he'd buried his mother and said goodbye to the empty casket where his father's body should have been.

The Blake family fortune had sustained a life of luxury for many generations, but since the death of his parents Leopold had no desire to continue that tradition. Instead, his considerable inheritance went into philanthropy, scientific research, and work in the local community. Despite his general distaste for wealth, however, the money only ever

seemed to grow, vast investments tied up in everything from timber and coal to nuclear power and military weapons contracts. Such power, however, has inevitable downsides, which is why Jerome was paid to stay close at all times. Powerful men make powerful enemies.

Still reeling from his beating, Leopold stepped into the shower and gasped as the hot water struck his bruised body. Eventually the heat and steam helped ease his pain, and he began to feel human again. Once finished, he dried himself off and threw on a shirt, a ruffled suit jacket, and a pair of jeans, grabbing a cup of thick espresso from the machine as he headed out the door to his first meeting of the day.

He was glad they had no idea he was coming.

# Chapter 5

At seven A.M., the leafy expanse of Federal Plaza NYC was already full of people on their way to work, clocking in at any one of the dozen-or-so federal buildings nearby. The FBI field offices were located in the plaza's newest and tallest building, on the twenty-third floor overlooking the state supreme court. It certainly was quite a view. Leopold sat at the back of the conference room and watched FBI Special Agent Todd Coleman take the podium and raise his palms to the noisy crowd of journalists that had gathered inside. The room gradually fell silent and he spoke.

“Thank you for coming this morning. As you already know, the bodies of State Senators Wilson, Carrera, and Hague underwent forensic analysis earlier this week to determine cause of death. I am calling this press conference to announce that the results were inconclusive. As such, we're waiting for more evidence before we can make a definitive statement.”

He spoke slowly and calmly. Leopold noticed his suit. Probably Armani, based on the size of the lapels, and at least twelve hundred dollars. His skin was fresh and bright, a product of regular sleep and a healthy diet. This man clearly hadn't seen any field action in quite some time.

“The FBI would like to reiterate that there is no evidence to suggest that any of the deaths are related. The FBI would like to send our deepest condolences to the families of the victims and offer our assurances that we are doing all we

can to bring the perpetrators to justice. I'll now take questions."

Leopold watched the hands fly up into the air as Coleman finished his statement. A deep female voice asked the first question.

"Special Agent Coleman, do you expect us to believe that three state senators turning up dead in as many weeks is a *coincidence*?"

"I can understand your concern, but I must remind you that we are in possession of no evidence to suggest otherwise. Next question."

"Are you saying these men killed themselves, or that they were murdered?" a male voice continued.

"There is nothing yet to suggest the deaths were homicides. We can't take a firm position until more evidence comes to light. I'm afraid I can't give any more specific information at this time. Next, please."

Another round of general questions followed, all of which Coleman answered as vaguely as possible. After ten more minutes, Coleman thanked his audience and left in a hurry. Leopold waited until the crowd of journalists began to make their way out of the door at the front of the room, and then slipped out of the rear exit while the security guards were distracted. He managed to catch up with Coleman making his way back to his office.

"Special Agent Coleman, just one second," said Leopold, matching Coleman's long stride.

Coleman turned, still maintaining his pace. "Who are you?"

"Leopold Blake. Pleasure to meet you."

He held out his hand. Coleman ignored it.

“Blake? What are you doing here? I gave specific instructions to keep you out of the press conference.”

“Yes, I figured Bradley would phone ahead, so I came a little early. Nice to finally meet you, by the way. I wanted to see for myself whether you had taken my advice or not. It appears you haven’t.”

“I’m busy, Blake. There are bigger things going on today that I have to sort out, and I don’t have time to worry about this case. Tell me why I shouldn’t have security throw you out.”

Leopold took a step forward. “Because there are two dozen of the city’s most influential journalists in the room next door, just itching for some more dirt on one of the biggest stories of the year. So, if you really don’t want to talk, I can always schedule a conference of my own.”

Coleman’s face hardened and Leopold could see the muscles in his jaw bulge as he clenched his teeth. “My office. Now.”

Leopold followed Coleman to his office and sat down on the spare seat with his back to the door. The room was modestly sized, and almost every spare surface was crowded with plaques and trophies engraved with Coleman’s name. The special agent took the chair on the other side of the desk and sat partially silhouetted by the light coming in from the tall window behind him. On the right side of the window hung the blue and gold flag of the FBI, and on the left side hung the stars and stripes. Leopold chuckled softly and imagined himself on a corny television show.

“Something funny?”

“No, nothing. Nothing at all.” Leopold wondered whether the man was wearing FBI socks and slept with a picture of J. Edgar Hoover under his pillow. He held back another chuckle.

“You said you wanted to talk. So talk.”

“You told the journalists out there that you hadn’t determined cause of death,” said Leopold. “Why lie to them like that?”

“Cause of death can’t be determined, to any degree of certainty, until evidence comes to light that can prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. That’s how we work here.”

“Yes, that’s the official line. I’ll catch the evening news for your sound bites. But you and I both know these three deaths were murders. And we both know they were committed by the same person.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Coleman, scowling.

“I was there. I know a serial killer’s work when I see it.”

The FBI agent leaned forward in his chair and jabbed his index finger at Leopold.

“Now listen here. The NYPD might have every faith in your abilities, but as far as I’m concerned, there’s no place for amateurs in a murder investigation.”

Leopold reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a selection of photographs. He turned the first one face up and slapped it onto the table. “State Senator Wilson. Killed earlier this week. Single gunshot wound to the head. Made to look like a suicide, but the killer got sloppy.”

“Yes, I’ve read the —”

Leopold slapped a second photo down. “State Senator Carrera. She was found hanged in a hotel room with no

signs of a struggle. Another suicide note, this time with a signature. I also found rope fibers on her wrists, which made me wonder how she managed to untie her hands and dispose of the cord after her death.”

“This isn’t necessary.”

A third photo.

“State Senator Hague, found dead in his garage. This is my favorite. He had apparently hooked up a hose to his car exhaust and committed suicide by inhaling half a tank’s worth of carbon monoxide. Problem is, he died with both hands gripping the steering wheel, which is very difficult to do if you’re in the process of gradually passing out.”

Coleman didn’t respond.

“In short: three senators plus three murders plus three staged suicides equals one killer. And you’re right.”

“Right about what?”

“There is no place for amateurs in a murder investigation.”

Coleman leant back in his chair again and held his hands together in his lap. “Like I said, Blake, there’s no evidence to suggest homicide, let alone a serial killer. This isn’t police work, this is just your particular brand of conjecture.”

“I was at all three scenes. There’s a consistent M.O. and a consistent demographic of targets. What more could you possibly need?”

Leopold’s voice caught the attention of one of the office interns as she passed by carrying a tower of paper files. The special agent waved her away and let out a long sigh.

“We need forensic evidence putting the same person at each scene, a credible witness who is willing to make a

statement, or even a sensible motive that fits all three victims. We currently have none of those things, so until such evidence materializes, there's no need to cause unnecessary panic by suggesting there may be a serial killer at large."

Leopold looked Coleman in the eye and smiled. "And that's it, isn't it?" He continued, "You want to keep this as quiet as possible. You know as well as I that these deaths are connected, but you don't want to admit you can't figure out why. Better to blame the whole thing on a lack of evidence, I suspect. You need to trust me, I know you want to get to the bottom of this before any more bodies start surfacing."

Coleman broke eye contact shuffled uncomfortably in his chair. "The FBI will not release statements of record that are based on the opinion of one consultant," he said, in a tone that clearly signaled the end of the meeting.

"You're making a mistake. There are people in danger."

"We're done here, Blake," grunted Coleman, gesturing toward the door. "I have work to do. I don't have time to entertain these unsubstantiated theories. Come back to me with some solid evidence, and maybe we'll talk. Please see yourself out."

Leopold nodded a brisk goodbye before stalking out of the office back to the elevators. He paused at the lobby desk and leaned over to speak to the middle-aged receptionist, whispering just loud enough for her to hear him over the television that had been bolted to the wall to keep visitors entertained as they waited. A news anchor mentioned something about stolen military weapons before the video

feed cut to a busty weather girl for the day's forecast. *Talk about priorities.*

“Madeline, thank you again for your help this morning,” said Leopold, grasping her hand and smiling broadly.

“Any time, Leopold,” replied Madeline, blushing slightly. “I hope the meeting went well. And thank you again for getting me this job. I can't tell you how much it's helped me out.”

“Don't mention it.”

“And good luck this morning at the University.”

Leopold kissed the back of her hand before saying goodbye and heading to the elevators. As he rode the thirty stories down to the ground floor, his cell phone rang.

“Yes, hello?”

“Blake. This is Bradley. I just got a phone call from Coleman and he's not pleased. What the hell do you think you're doing?”

“I needed to speak to Coleman in person, seeing as how he doesn't return my phone calls.”

“Can you blame him? How the hell did you get in?”

“The secret to getting what one wants,” said Leopold, “is to have friends in high places.”

“What the hell are you – ”

He grinned and hung up.

# Chapter 6

Mary eyed the clock on the wall of her office and groaned. It was nearly eight A.M., and she hadn't taken a break since she'd been called out in the middle of the night. Her report glared at her from her monitor – yet another case with no leads. Nobody had witnessed the attack, and the area had been wiped clean, not so much as a speck of dust out of place. Which meant Mary had no blood spatter, fiber, or DNA evidence to work with. Which also meant that Captain Oakes would bust a blood vessel when he found out. Mary put her head in her hands and closed her eyes. *Shit.*

She raised her head again and stared at the screen, watching the cursor blink impatiently. Her headache returned, throbbing behind her eyes and squeezing the inside of her skull like a vice. She reached for the coffee cup. Empty.

“Jordan! What the hell is going on?”

Captain Oakes burst into the room, slamming the door into the wall as he came. The cheap shutters on the windows rattled in protest. He crossed the tiny office in one step and slapped both palms down onto the edge of Mary's flimsy desk. His considerable weight caused the whole thing to rock side to side. Oakes smelled of cigarette smoke and cheap cologne and wore a thick moustache that, at this range, Mary could see was stained with coffee. His fat face was red and sweaty, as it always was when he got angry about something. Which was pretty often.

“I want answers, Jordan. Don’t tell me this is another dead end? It’s my ass on the line right now,” said the Captain.

*Bullshit*, thought Mary. She resisted the urge to say it out loud, but she knew Oakes would hand her over on a silver platter the second he needed to escape blame himself. Instead, Mary drew a deep breath and composed herself.

“Three victims were found dead at the scene. One Caucasian male was shot in the head, two Caucasian females killed by...” Mary paused. “Other methods. The ID checks at the club brought up details of another girl with them who wasn’t found at the scene.”

“Suspects? Leads? Anything?”

“Not yet, sir. But we’re working on it.”

“Well, you’d better work faster. I’ve got enough with the commissioner up my ass about helping the FBI with this dead senator case, I don’t need this gang warfare shit hitting the papers as well.”

“I don’t think it was gang-related, sir.”

“I don’t give a shit what you *think*, Jordan. Just get me some answers. Find out who the girl is and get me some answers.”

“We know who the girl is, sir. Christina Logan. Daughter of New York State Senator Logan.”

“Shit. The FBI are going to want in on this one too. Get them on the phone.”

“Already done, sir. They put me in touch with Senator Logan’s office. His assistant is setting up a call for later this morning.”

“You better get me something solid, Jordan,” Oakes growled, “I can’t go back to the commissioner with another

dead-end case. You've got until Monday to find me something useful or I'll have your ass working the graveyard shift for a year. Understood?"

Mary nodded. She was used to working weekends anyway. The Captain grunted something and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The shutters rattled again and the room fell silent. Mary groaned and resisted the urge to punch the computer screen. Conjuring a solid lead out of thin air was going to be impossible, but she'd be damned if she'd work nights for a year. She had seen what that did to people.

Mary flicked off the screen and screwed up her eyes in an attempt to relieve her headache. She picked up the phone and dialled Senator Logan's office for the third time, praying she could get through to him before he had a chance to speak to the FBI and ruin any chance she had of finding some answers.

# Chapter 7

The mid-morning New York City sun rose just high enough to peek over the tall buildings that surrounded Columbia University's Morningside campus as ten thousand students, parents, and faculty members congregated on the lawn. The sea of light-blue caps and gowns bobbed up and down as the crowds milled about, waiting for the master of ceremonies to announce that everyone should take their seats. This Saturday morning in mid-May marked the 259<sup>th</sup> academic year's Commencement ceremony, where the University would grant degree certificates, medals, awards, and honorary degrees to its students and prominent members of the community. The ceremony was due to last until the early afternoon, and tradition mandated that the entire event would be held outdoors on the Low Plaza lawns, come rain or shine.

Leopold hoped for the latter as he pulled on his cap and gown and made his way toward the stage at the head of the gathering masses, just in front of the university's statue of the *alma mater* that looked out over the entire north side of the campus. He climbed the shallow steps to the stage and took a seat next to an elderly woman, probably one of the senior faculty members, who nodded politely as he took his seat. Leopold sat quietly, watching the crowd gather, and wondered how long the ceremony would take.

The view was impressive. The lawns were surrounded on all sides by the grand University buildings, including the dominating visage of Butler Library to the south and the

dome of the Low Memorial building to the north. The disjointed murmurs wafting up from the crowd suggested nobody was paying attention quite yet, but the noise levels were beginning to rise.

Leopold felt his cell phone buzz underneath his robe and reached into his jacket pocket to check who was calling. The name Mary Jordan flashed up on the screen and Leopold grinned. *Finally.*

“Morning Mary, long time.”

“I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time,” said Mary, barely audible thanks to a bad signal. “I need you to meet me as soon as you can. There’s been another move on a state senator.”

The crowd began to take their seats and Leopold put a finger over one ear, trying to hear Mary’s voice through the noise.

“I knew it! Another staged suicide? Or has our killer given up the pretense?” he said, cupping a hand over his mouth and trying not to shout.

“Actually, it’s not a murder,” said Mary, “but we think it’s the same perp. This time we’re dealing with a kidnapping.”

“Kidnapping? The police don’t usually ask for my help unless there’s a body to examine.”

Leopold’s voice was loud enough that the elderly woman sitting next to him raised an eyebrow. Leopold cupped his hand over his mouth again.

“The police aren’t the ones who called,” said Mary. “Christina Logan, the daughter of State Senator Christopher Logan, was abducted early this morning, and two of her friends were killed outside a mid-town nightclub. The

senator received a phone call demanding thirty-five million dollars in ransom in exchange for her life. Logan asked for you by name. It seems you've earned yourself something of a reputation."

Leopold leaned forward in his chair and took a moment to think. "I'm in the middle of something right now. Sounds simple enough for the police to handle," he said, eventually.

"Just hang on, I'm getting to the good bit," said Mary, her voice getting more animated. "The senator received the ransom demand yesterday, two hours before Christina disappeared. Now he can't get hold of the kidnapper to agree to an exchange."

Leopold sat up straight. She had his attention. "Okay, you've given me something to think about," he said. "Tell Senator Logan I'll take a look. When does he want to speak?"

"The senator wants to meet you today. In two hours. I'll text you the address; just meet me there."

"Good. I'll make my way over there as soon as I can. There's just something I have to take care of first."

Mary hung up. Leopold stood and walked to the front of the stage, where the Master of Ceremonies was checking the microphone and leafing through his script. He could feel the eyes of the elderly woman with the raised eyebrows on his back.

"Excuse me." he tapped the robed man on the back of the shoulder.

"Mr. Blake, hello! Good to see you here bright and early! What can I do for you?"

“Something’s come up, I’m afraid. Have to go. Please give my apologies to the Dean,” said Leopold, turning to leave.

“Something more important than receiving a doctorate from one of the world’s leading universities?”

“Honorary doctorate, actually,” he replied, “and yes, I’m afraid so. Please be kind enough to drop it in the mail. Thank you.”

He walked briskly away before the old man had a chance to respond, and texted Jerome to come and pick him up. He made his way down the steps and onto the lawns, squeezing his way through the thick crowd of students and parents. After a few minutes of jostling, Leopold finally made it off the campus and onto the street. Jerome arrived thirty seconds later and pulled the dark Bentley Mulsanne to the side of the road. Leopold pulled open the rear passenger door and slipped inside. He updated the bodyguard on the conversation with Mary, and they set off toward the senator’s East Hampton address.

“How do you know it’s the same guy?” said Jerome, turning his head.

“Who else would target a senator’s daughter on US soil? There are definitely easier targets. This is clearly someone trying to send a message.”

“What message?”

“That’s the thirty-five million dollar question. I’ll know more after a chat with the senator. How fast can you get us there?”

“It’s maybe two hours,” said Jerome, “but once we get out of the city I can probably make up for lost time.”

“Good. Don’t be afraid to put your foot down.”

Once free of the New York City traffic, the Mulsanne glided effortlessly through the Suffolk County back roads, lined on either side with green trees and a horizon specked with the occasional gated community and small town. Despite the ultra-high spec of the Mulsanne, Leopold hadn't been able to help adding his own touches to the car's cabin. In addition to the standard features, he had installed a wireless system that could sync directly with his cell phone and add extra functionality – such as call tracing, digital encryption, and satellite connectivity to ensure he always had a signal. Leopold always made sure he had the best equipment money could buy, and his money could buy a hell of a lot.

Jerome turned on the radio and tuned into a news channel to pass the time. The two men whose voices came through the Bose speaker system were discussing the stolen military weapons story, and the conversation was getting heated. He asked Jerome to turn up the volume. According to a reliable source, one of the men claimed, a large supply of prototype explosives had been stolen from a secure facility in Maryland three days before, and the authorities were at a loss as to how it had happened. Leopold wondered whether this was what had put Coleman in such a bad mood. The news story was cut short as the commercials started playing.

Leopold pulled his cell phone out of his coat pocket and noticed a missed call from an unknown number, probably Mary leaving another message about the case. He dialed his voicemail and punched in his access code, absent-mindedly rubbing his temple in an effort to numb a sudden headache. The morning's workout hadn't been kind to him, and he

was looking forward to finishing the meeting with the senator as soon as possible and taking a long, hot bath. But that would have to wait. The electronically altered voice that greeted him wasn't Mary:

*Good morning, Mr. Blake, I notice you've been taking quite an interest in my recent work. I'm flattered by the attention, but I'm afraid this is where the fun has to stop. I look forward to finally meeting you in person, although I expect the feeling won't be mutual.*

Leopold frowned and hooked his cell phone up to the car's wireless stereo system. After a few seconds, the devices synced and he cranked up the volume.

"Jerome, what do you think of this?" He played back the message through the car's speakers.

"I'll run the tracer and see where it leads," said the bodyguard. "You do remember I told you to keep this cell phone number private, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. I haven't shared it with anyone. Even Mary has to dial through a password-protected proxy to get through. Looks like whoever called me didn't want to be found."

"He probably just used a scrambled line," said Jerome, pressing a series of keys on the car's touchscreen panel. "The system will work out the origin of the signal eventually. It'll only take a minute."

"Unless he's used a scrambled signal. In which case we've got no chance of tracking it."

"Hang on. We've got company," said Jerome, putting both hands back onto the wheel.

Leopold turned in his seat and looked out the rear window. A black SUV was approaching fast, straddling

both lanes of the road. He could make out at least two people inside, although the windshield was slightly tinted so he couldn't be sure. He could hear the roar of the SUV's engine as it approached, straining to beat the pace of the Mulsanne.

"Hold on," said Jerome, planting his right foot to the floor.

The Bentley surged forward, carried by the huge twin-turbo V8 engine under the hood, and the SUV started to fall behind. The bodyguard eased the car around the winding roads, letting the speed fall slightly to avoid throwing them into a ditch. The SUV kept pace, then began to gain ground again as they found themselves on a long stretch of road where the Bentley's precise handling was no advantage. The noise of the Mulsanne's engine filled the cabin as the car sailed forward, pulling away from the SUV by a few feet. Leopold turned to face the front and saw the speedometer hit ninety miles per hour, ninety five. One hundred. Then he saw the bend approach.

Jerome steered into the turn and the Mulsanne's computer-assisted traction control kicked in. The system engaged the rear brakes for a split second and sent more power to the outer wheels, helping guide the heavy chassis round the tight corner. Unfortunately, the SUV had no intention of making the turn, and increased its speed on approach. Leopold already knew what would happen next. He felt the car lurch forward with a deafening crunch as the other vehicle slammed into their back, sending the Bentley spinning out of control. He heard the sound of screeching metal and then there was darkness.

# END OF SAMPLE

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