

Chapter I

First I must state two things: I am a mathematician, and I am not crazy. I mention the first because it alone explains my involvement in the events that recently took place in Howard County, Maryland. Otherwise, I would have had no connection to them whatsoever and would have been spared injury. I mention the second for two reasons. First: strangeness is associated in the public mind with my profession, notwithstanding that relatively few mathematicians are odder than the average person. Second: it seems to me the tale I'm about to tell could only have been imagined by a lunatic. Indeed, there was a lunatic. But he was not I.

With those points in mind, let us proceed.

Mathematical studies typically begin with a question or curious observation. In this case, it began with both. Σ

The envelope had landed on top of a pile of paperwork, to the casual glance one snowflake in a storm. Snowflakes are supposed to be unique, Detective Lieutenant Rick Peller thought as he eyed it. But if you don't look closely you don't notice the differences, and who looks closely in a blizzard?

Snow was on Peller's mind just then. It lay sixteen inches deep and counting on the ground outside Northern District Headquarters and, more to the point, on streets rendered impassable by the stuff. The whole of Maryland east of the mountains had flown into a panic as the late February storm trundled up from the south. Residents stripped grocery shelves of milk, bread, and toilet paper. Now few were out and about aside from TV reporters bundled up alongside impassable roads informing viewers how treacherous and, well, impassable those roads were. Stay home, they told the camera. Just stay home.

The mugger Criminal Investigations Division detectives had privately dubbed "the mad golfer" had apparently been following that advice. Not that he'd find any victims if he did try to play in the snow. A good thing, certainly, but with a downside: Peller wouldn't make any progress on the case today. They had little to go on aside

from the location—all four attacks had occurred in or around Centennial Park—and the medical reports describing nearly identical wounds on the backs of the heads of the victims, who had been relieved of their money and jewelry. Only one victim remembered much of anything: the bloodied head of a Wilson nine-iron resting on the ground in front of his face while someone, squatting beside him like a pro lining up a putt, yanked his Omega watch from his wrist.

Well. There was no good way to get beat up, but at least nobody had died, and just maybe the victims would have a weird story to tell their grandkids someday.

Peller eyed the newly-arrived envelope without much interest. It couldn't possibly have a bloodstained golf club inside, at any rate. Neatly hand-lettered in a tight script, addressed to him personally, postmarked three days ago on Friday, February twenty-fifth in Cambridge on the Eastern Shore, it bore a return address he didn't recognize. Someplace called Leonardo's of Pisa. An Italian restaurant? Peller didn't care much for pasta. Having grown up in Lockport, New York, thirty miles northeast of Buffalo, he was principally a meat and potatoes man, although he had taken a liking to the Chesapeake region's specialty, the blue crab.

He took up the envelope and weighed it by feel. It was light, as though it only contained a single sheet of paper, and upon opening it he discovered he was right. The paper was folded into precise thirds, and in the same neat script as on the envelope it bore an odd message. Peller read it twice, feeling his mouth twist itself into a frown.

I start with zero. Nobody dies today.

"Hey Corina," he called over his shoulder. "Come have a look at this."

The slight, dark-haired woman gazing through the window at the falling snow pivoted on her heel. Thanks to the storm, she was one of only four detectives currently in the office. Peller smiled inwardly as she rushed to his side, swerving around unoccupied chairs and battered desks. The woman never did anything at a leisurely pace.

The scowl with which she had regarded the outside world remained fixed to her face as she approached, but Peller knew it wasn't for him. When she was fourteen, Corina Montufar had come with her family to the U.S. from Guatemala. Winter hadn't been part of her lexicon then, and even twenty-one years later, now a Detective Ser-

geant, she looked upon it as an unpleasant aberration.

“You found a golf club in the slush?” she asked, deadpan. Her accent was light—lighter, Peller thought, than it had been several years ago, as though she’d been consciously ridding herself of it.

“I wish.” He nodded at the note now lying on his desk. “This came in the mail. Better not touch it without gloves.”

She bent over the note for a minute. Finally, she shook her head. “I don’t get it. Who tells the cops they *aren’t* going to whack somebody?”

Peller pointed to the envelope. “It came in that.”

“Leonardo’s of Pisa. Sounds like an Italian restaurant. There’s no such place, of course.”

“Oh?”

She quick-stepped to her desk, set her fingers to the keyboard, and in a moment was scanning a list of restaurants in Cambridge. “Well, there wouldn’t be, would there? It’s some kind of stupid joke. Nope, nothing remotely like that name. The address doesn’t map, either.”

“So why do I feel like I should take it seriously? I’d better bag this, just in case.”

While Peller slipped envelope and note into an evidence bag, Montufar returned to his side and gazed at him without expression. “Because you need a vacation. Take some time off, visit your son and his family.”

He read the note again through the gloss of the plastic bag. “I don’t think so.”

“Rick!”

He shot her a surprised look, then laughed. “I didn’t mean that. I mean that’s not why I’m uneasy. This message. It’s a promise.”

“That nobody dies?”

“Just the opposite.”

Montufar regarded the note again. “I *start* with zero. But after zero . . .”

“Comes one,” Peller said. “Nobody dies today, but somebody does die tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that.”

Montufar frowned as she considered the possibility. “Maybe. But it still sounds like a joke to me. Who writes this kind of note?”

Σ

Before long, somebody did die.

That night the snow stopped, the clouds gave way to a clear sky dotted with glittering stars—or at least those bright enough to cut through the light pollution—and on Tuesday morning Marylanders began the slow process of digging out.

Peller wasn't sure if this was a case of March coming in like a lion or of February going out like hyena, laughing at them as it bounded into the distance. Either way, he'd made it home the previous evening courtesy of his F150 four-by-four and experience negotiating the winters of northwest New York. The drive reminded him of a storm from his youth, a snowfall of over a foot and a half followed by two days of sub-zero cold. A freshman in high school, he'd taken on a paper route that year. His father drove him through the predawn chill both days so his customers could get what they'd paid for. Dad had managed a clothing store in town, but he'd grown up on a farm and didn't believe in letting a little thing like spell of bad weather get in the way of work.

Peller began shoveling out in the dim pre-dawn, layered up to keep the cold off until the heat of exertion kicked in. He didn't go in for snow blowers. He disliked the noise and figured the exercise was good for him. Besides, shoveling gave him time to think.

Today he thought about what Montufar had said. His wife Sandra had died four years back in an automobile accident. Her funeral was the last time he had seen Jason, Belinda, and the grandkids. Denver was a long way off. None of them had found the time or money to bridge the space. Or was that just an excuse? Maybe they were all afraid that seeing each other would bring back the pain of their shared loss.

If so, it was a poor excuse.

After two hours of carefully-paced work, he was shoveled out. He rested with a cup of coffee and a cinnamon roll, then ventured back into the cold to start on his neighbor Jerry Souter's walk. Jerry was ninety-three and not quite as handy with a shovel as he used to be. Or at least that's what he said his doctor said, although Jerry himself only took it easy under protest. He had once shown Peller a photograph of himself in a World War II Army uniform. The photographer had captured the defiance in the eyes of the ebony-skinned man, and Peller had thought at the time that if

the Allies had had a dozen more men like Jerry, Hitler would still be running. Despite his advanced age, Jerry still stood ramrod-straight, a seasoned veteran whose eyes had seen in a few short years a lifetime of woe. He had insisted from the beginning of their acquaintance that Peller call him Jerry, saying, “Jeremiah makes me sound like a two-hundred-year-old white guy with a beard down to my kneecaps.” Eventually Peller became used to the name, but for a long time he had felt as though he were calling one of the Three Kings “Balty”.

Peller had just about finished the job when his cell phone went off, a call from dispatch. “Don’t tell me,” he said. “Another golf clubbing.”

“Even better,” the dispatcher replied. “A patrolman found a snowplow driver shot in the head on Little Patuxent between the mall and Symphony Woods. We have officers and an ambulance on the scene. The victim’s dead.”

“Well damn. His plowing wasn’t *that* bad, was it? Sorry, shameless joke. As a Marylander, you probably wouldn’t get it.”

“Wanna bet?”

“I’ll be there in about fifteen, twenty minutes,” Peller said. As he hurried to his truck, he saw Souter looking out the window. Peller waved, and the old fellow saluted with his coffee cup. Normally Souter would have invited Peller in, but perhaps he could tell from the look on the detective’s face that a visit would have to wait.

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Symphony Woods was, as its name suggested, a wooded park separating Little Patuxent Parkway and the Merriweather Post Pavilion music theater. On the opposite side of the road stood a series of ten-or-so-story office buildings and beyond them the Columbia Town Center—which Peller had always thought a strange thing to call a shopping mall. Town Center sounded to him like a geographical term, like the point from which mileage was calculated, or the business district on Main Street, around which a town had grown. Whatever it was, thick snow blanketed everything around it except for a thin channel down the middle of the road where the plows had muscled through.

The driver had been shot while plowing the south lanes alongside the park. The vehicle had careened off the road and come to rest blade against an oak trunk.

The snow apparently slowed the truck, because the tree was only lightly scarred. The driver, though, was another matter. He had been shot from the right, the passenger side, and the part of his face not contused from striking the steering wheel was spattered with blood from the exit wound.

The shot must have come from the woods. Scanning the whiteness beneath the trees, Peller noticed a mound about a hundred feet off the side of the road. One of the patrolmen had with some effort slogged through the snow and was now examining the area.

Convenient, Peller thought as he set off down the patrolman's trail, looking for but seeing no sign of disturbance on either side. "Looks kind of like a kid's snow fort," the patrolman remarked as Peller arrived.

Behind the mound—in reality a clumsily-made snow wall—was a hollow of well-stomped snow, a small supply of snowballs, and a path leading out the back. Someone had apparently been as determined to cut through the snow as the officer. The trail led westward towards Broken Land Parkway.

"Get someone to drive around there and see where it comes out," Peller said. "And let's get this area photographed. Maybe the lab can do some digital magic and tell us what size feet were back here."

The officer nodded. "You think the shooter hid back here?"

"Seems likely."

"Pretty fair shot. Not so much the distance, but through the trees at a moving target."

Peller squinted back toward the road. "Doesn't it strike you as a lot of trouble to go through? He wasn't the President. He was a snowplow driver."

"Maybe when we know who he was it'll make some kind of sense."

Not at all sure about that, Peller replied, "Maybe. Let me know what you find at the other end of the trail. I'm going to have another look at the plow."

The wind had picked up. Blowing snow already obscured the trail the officer had broken. Back at the plow, Peller waited for the body to be removed, then took a look around the cab. Very little caught his eye. A pack of chewing gum and a copy of *Fish and Stream* lay on the floor on the passenger's side. The keys were still in the ignition, although the engine had been turned off. Peller made a mental note to ask who

had done that. The glove compartment was strangely empty, but he didn't quite know what to expect in the glove compartment of a snowplow.

Peller wondered about the driver's family: who they were, how many they were, what they would do without him. He'd know soon enough, but he always found it disturbing to witness how swiftly a family's world could be demolished.

He wondered what his own family would do if anything happened to him. *Whatever the excuses keeping us apart, he thought, not one of them is a good one.*

Σ

When the second letter landed on his desk on Wednesday, March second, Peller almost didn't realize it. Unlike the first, the address was typed, the postmark was Frederick, and the return address claimed the sender was a Mr. F. Leonard. When the latter connected, he called Montufar over. "I think the Italian joint sent us another coupon," he said. Donning a pair of latex gloves, he carefully opened the envelope with a letter opener and pulled out the contents. Again, it was a single sheet of paper, folded neatly into thirds. The contents, like the envelope, were typed:

Killed with one shot.

"The snowplow driver." Murder being so rare in Howard County, Peller didn't doubt the connection.

Montufar studied the paper as though a novel were written on it. "He's calling attention to the numbers."

Peller rose and walked to the window. As luck would have it, a snowplow was making its way down the road outside. "First zero victims, then one shot. Two comes next. But two what? Could be anything. He's changed what the numbers are attached to. He's changed the location where he mails the notes. He's even changed how he wrote the notes."

"But he didn't change his name. Not exactly, anyway." She joined him at the window, looking upward.

Following her gaze, Peller saw several turkey vultures wheeling overhead. "Leonardo's of Pisa. Mr. F. Leonard. You think he's telling us his name?"

“Not necessarily. That might just be what he wants us to call him.”

“It means lion, or something about lions.” Before he could pursue the thought, he was called back to his desk by the phone warbling. He snatched up the receiver, said, “Peller,” and listened for a moment. “Okay. Corina and I will be over.”

Montufar wheeled, ready for action. “What now?”

“I guess the storm is over. There’s been another golfing.”