Winterbourne

Chapter Five

In a gray little suit, the gray little man sat smoking a little cigarillo in a cramped gray little glass enclosed office. On the door, engraved in black letters, was the official title of County coroner and the name of Michael Swayze, MD. Inside sat the coroner, a disgruntled puff of a man, with a pencil thin mustache and a gummy smile. He was balding, with rumpled hair and a pinched wrinkled face. He dressed in a tight gray suit, a black bolo tie, with too short, cuffed pants, worn over a pair of shiny black boots. Long yellow rubber gloves covered his tiny hands. A gold embossed placard on the desk announced the inhabitant as Malcolm Daniels, coroner.

Malcolm Daniels dominated the office now for 14 years. Doctor Michael Swayze died in that office in 1948. Why was the name never changed? Well, only Malcolm knew. However, the title of doctor was often incorrectly given to the man. Malcolm never bothered to correct the mistaken use of the noble title. His MD initials justified the oversight in his mind.

The coroner was known behind his back as Jack, as in Jack Daniels. The scent of the Kentucky mash whiskey mixed with the formalin odor was a sweet ever present fragrance that suggested the source of his limited knowledge.

The office was a cluttered mess. Jam packed gray metal file cabinets lined each of the walls. Stacked to the ceiling were manila folders, papers, and charts. The same items littered the floor, leaving only a circuitous tenuous path to navigate the office.

Malcolm was busy smoking and writing, all the while eating a mustard covered liverwurst sandwich. He wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand and took one deep smoky puff. Done with the sandwich, he tossed the crust across the room, landing on the floor at the foot of a wooden perch. A brilliantly colored red and blue rainbow lorikeet immediately jumped to the floor, devouring the bread. The bird squawked in a bothersome high-pitched tone, emitting four letter curse words, before returning to the perch.

The black box on the desk crackled. “Malcolm, officer Marley is here.”

The morgue was cold as the stiff’s that lined the steel covered drawers along the tiled wall. Officer Ben Marley stood tentative, a green cloth mask covering his face. The strangely sweet formalin scent was thick, the smell disgusting. The place, and the coroner, always gave him the creeps. He refrained from attending these autopsies, except in unusual circumstances. The recent John Doe was undoubtedly that.

“Officer Marlex.” Malcolm marched into the morgue, still smoking his cigarillo. He walked to the corner box and pulled out a corpse. “Oops.” An obese, elderly woman lay dead before him. He pulled up a tag from the woman’s toe. “Mrs. Samuels, why are you in here?” It was humorous, if not so sad.

The adjacent drawer contained a tall, bald, African American man, with a huge tattoo of a battleship, across an otherwise normal appearing chest. “Ah, yes. Your John Doe.”

Marley was aghast. “No, Malcolm. He was a white fella.” He reached for the toe-tag. “This here says Tommy Tuffle.”

Malcolm reached for his clipboard. “Says here, John Doe. DOA 10/20/62.”

“It was 10/30/62, Malcolm. Friday last. He has a crushed chest, and by the way, he was white.”

Malcolm used a stubby finger to peruse the clipboard. “John Doe…John Doe…Ah drawer three.”

Drawer three contained John Doe. Malcolm took the last puff and put the cigarillo out in the formalin of the tray. He scratched the side of his nose with a gloved finger. “Here’s the little squirrel.” He pulled down a headphone and microphone from above. He moved to the toe-tag. “This here is John Doe. File number 60572. DOA 10/30/62.”

The bird screeched over the intercom. “Effen a.”

Without waiting, he began dictating. “Victim is a 30+-year-old, white male victim. He is 69 ½ inches tall, weighs 137 lbs. Has a brown ponytail and a scruffy dark beard.” He reached and pried open one eye. “Eyes Brown. There is an apparent crushing left chest injury. A1/2 inch, clear plastic tube, exits through the third left costal interspace as a chest tube.”

He next moved to the forearms. “Maturing injection sites all along the forearms are noted. Several sites have abscesses within the vein.”

Malcolm began closing the drawer.

“Wait, what about the laceration. You know on his left lower leg?”

“What laceration?”

Malcolm pulled the drawer out. He moved across to the left side of the drawer. Over the posterior surface of the calf was a deep, long laceration. It was on the lower leg by the ankle and Achilles area.”

Malcolm dismissed it. “That is post-mortem.”

“Not really! I saw it on the man immediately at the scene.”

“Coyotes…there’s coyotes in Winterbourne. This is from a coyote strike.”

Malcolm laughed to himself. “It definitely is not! Look at the straight and clean nature of the laceration.”

“Plate-glass window injury. We see them all the time.”

Marley stood, looking at the man for the longest time. He took a pencil from his pocket and probed the wound. It began at the upper extent of the Achilles tendon. On an angle, the laceration cut through the skin and tendon for some 4 inches. “Cut Malcolm. Someone cut it. But not by a plate glass window. Look at the skin edges. They are crushed. An ax, someone used an ax and cut the Achilles tendon.”

“Dental impressions. Have you taken them?” Marley was somewhat perturbed. He hoped to ID John Doe by dental impressions.  
 “Nope. No alginate or polyvinylsiloxane. There’s been a run on that.” Here the two substances referred to the materials used to take these impressions. Malcolm pried open the man’s mouth. He dictated again. “Teeth, normal.”

Marley stood, staring at the coroner. The man was lighting another cigarillo with a Bunsen burner from the counter. “The chest, are you going to open the chest?”

Malcolm was already on his way out of the morgue. Marley left behind him. The morgue was freezing, and he was frozen to the bone. He realized that nothing else was going to get done here.

“Effen a, good doctor,” filled the morgue over the intercom. “Squawk.”.