

Chapter Two



Kurt Hunter

Kurt Hunter pulled his sedan into the parking lot of the Audrain County Agricultural Museum and turned off his lights and siren. He was one of the first to arrive, and he expected to be one of the last to leave.

He strode toward the converted barn that housed the museum. As he approached, he scanned the lot for Hector Vega. Hector was his partner on this call-out. With Kurt's own lack of experience on the detective squad, he relished the opportunity to collaborate with the most knowledgeable detective in their department.

Patrol officer Randy Howard, short and heavysset, glanced over as he established a perimeter in front of the building. Once he had the traffic cones and crime scene tape in place, he approached Kurt. "That was fast."

"Pure luck," Kurt said. "Dispatch notified me of this suspicious death as Ross and I were heading to church. I barely slowed, handing him off to my parents."

With Hector still absent, Kurt asked, “What have we got?”

“Currently unidentified deceased Caucasian male. Approximately thirty to thirty-five years old. Found inside the museum by the cleaning lady. Her name is ...” Officer Howard pulled a small notebook out of his uniform pocket. “Ah ... one Josefina Delgado. Twenty-eight. Part of the cleaning crew. That’s her van.” He gestured to a beat-up white cargo van. “She’s an employee of the cleaning service, not the museum.”

“Did she touch the body?”

“I don’t believe so. Her English is spotty. I suggest you wait until Hector gets here to talk to her.”

Kurt nodded. “Did you touch the body?”

“Only to verify the man was deceased. He’s face down on the concrete floor. No identification yet. Body’s in the display room to the right. Enormous blood pool around him, and broken glass scattered everywhere. Also, a wooden and glass display case is broken into pieces nearby.”

“Did he have anything in his hand? Or lying nearby?”

Officer Howard scrunched his face. “Like a tool or something?”

“Right. Something used to break in or break the display case?”

“Didn’t see anything. I was looking to see if he was alive or dead. Could be underneath him or part of the mess scattered on the floor.”

“I’ll check that when the coroner removes the body. Any thoughts as to how he might have died?”

“My guess is the guy broke the display case and then somehow fell into the broken pieces or was pushed against the glass. If he was dumb enough to stand on the case, it might have collapsed under him. In any of those scenarios, if the shards of glass sliced into him, he could have bled out.”

Kurt grimaced. “Exsanguination. An ugly way to die.”

Officer Howard shrugged. "I'm only guessing. Someone could have shot him and I missed the bullet hole."

"You've been to more death scenes than I have. I trust your instincts and experience. At least until the coroner proves something else." Kurt eyed the exterior of the building. "Any cameras?"

"Not that I've seen. You best check with whoever runs this place. It's wired for a security system, but no alarm was chiming when I arrived."

Kurt pondered this. "Mrs. Delgado should have disarmed any alarm if one was on when she arrived. I'll have Hector ask her. Curious how the deceased got in there without tripping it." He turned to the patrolman. "There was no alarm when she arrived, right?"

"Best I can tell, nothing was unusual until she spotted the body. Ms. Delgado called it in. 911. The station had no record of a tripped alarm here. I checked."

"Good man." Kurt pulled out his own notebook and added this information. "Any nearby neighbors that heard an alarm?"

Officer Howard grinned and swept his hands outward. "Cows?"

"I'm hoping for a miracle."

"The nearest house is a mile or two away."

With a nod, Kurt tried another angle. "Know who the alarm provider is?"

"Mexico Security Service."

Great. Donnie Davis's company. Kurt and Donnie had been rivals in high school. "Could you please ask your officers to search for a parked, abandoned vehicle along Highway 22 or any dirt or gravel road offshoot."

"You mean turn rows, city boy?"

Kurt smiled. "Yes, turn rows. Any drivable road or trail from town to here and from here to Centralia. If this guy was a

thief, he parked near here and walked, or someone dropped him off.”

“What about surveillance cameras?”

Kurt considered the pastures that surrounded them. “Have them identify any place along those routes that might have cameras. Residential and commercial.” Kurt rubbed his neck. “Assuming everything took place last night, I don’t know how much will be visible, but it would help to figure out what vehicle he used.”

“Will do. Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of. You’re doing a great job.”

“Thanks,” Officer Howard said. “Dispatch said the coroner requested the State Police forensic team to work the scene. He said it was beyond his capabilities.”

This surprised Kurt. “Has the coroner even been here yet?”

“No, but he’s coming.”

Kurt studied the museum exterior. “He knows a medical examiner will be required, so he might as well call in forensics, too.”

Officer Howard pointed to an approaching red truck with a camper top. “You can ask him about that right now.” He turned back to Kurt. “About Ms. Delgado—”

Kurt noted the concern in the patrolman’s voice. “What about her?”

“That woman is upset. So much so, she strikes me as being close to a mental breakdown.”

“That bad?”

“I didn’t make an official entry in my notes about her mental or emotional state. But she’s not doing well.”

Kurt glanced around. “Where is she?”

“I put her in my patrol car. Wrapped her in a blanket. She’s mumbling in Spanish. It’s obvious she’s upset to have discovered the corpse.”

“I’m glad you’ve taken care of her.”

“But Kurt, if I write any of this down, I might have to testify about her state of mind. I’d rather testify about what I did when I arrived and let you address her mental state in your report.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Kurt approached Officer Howard’s patrol car. Mrs. Delgado was, as Officer Howard described, distraught, with a limited ability to speak English. After a few minutes of questioning, Kurt sent her home and hoped she understood they would contact her with any further questions.

Kurt headed for the coroner’s truck, where Anthony Cappelli was struggling to unload two enormous duffel bags of equipment.

“Tony, let me help you.”

Tony handed one of the duffel bags to Kurt. “Officer Howard says this one is messy. And unique.”

“That’s what he’s told me. I’d like to shadow you and let you teach me everything you know.”

Tony had been the county coroner for over ten years. The state of Missouri had no requirement for medical training, but as an undertaker, Tony brought experience in anatomy, an ability to handle any situation involving human death, and an innate kindness for those left behind.

Tony patted Kurt on his shoulder. “How about I teach you to observe? That skill is the most important at a death scene.”

“I’d like that.” Kurt scanned for Hector, but there was no sign of him yet. “I was going to wait for Hector before going inside. But since you’re here, I’ll watch your processes.”

“Perfect.”

They stopped outside the entry. Tony pulled a high-grade digital camera out of his duffel bag, attached an elongated lens, and documented everything.

Kurt hurried back to his cruiser to grab a packet of plastic gloves and the small digital camera assigned to him. When he returned, they both shot photographs of the front of the building, then narrowed their activities to the two oversized plate-glass windows.

When Tony finished, he turned to Kurt. "These windows don't open and haven't been compromised."

Kurt pulled on gloves and checked the glass to be sure. "They're solid."

Tony switched lenses and took close-up shots of the locks on the doors.

Kurt did the same. "As Officer Howard said, no signs of forced entry on the front of the building."

Tony circled the building with Kurt trailing him, and both took pictures of every possible entry. Neither located any damage or suspicious marks on the exterior or spotted any cameras.

Kurt looked up at the roofline. "Before I leave here, I'll make sure no one came in through the roof."

Tony grinned. "Think we have a cat burglar in town?"

"Remember that burglary at the perfume store a couple of years ago? They broke in from the roof." Kurt shrugged. "It was a one-story building. Even with two stories, we can't say there was 'no forced entry' until someone examines the roof or attic. We have to eliminate the possibility of roof access to the structure."

"See there? You're teaching me, instead of the other way around."

Kurt chuckled. "That will change the minute we get inside."

"Ready?" Tony handed him a pair of booties and a mask. "Outfit courtesy of the county coroner's office."

"Thanks."

When properly garbed, each man grabbed one of Tony's duffel bags. Kurt followed Tony as they crossed the threshold of glass double doors into the entrance lobby.

While Tony snapped pictures, Kurt glanced around. Although it had been several months since he'd been here, he noted nothing out of place. He'd brought Ross for a tour of the museum, and the items displayed in the entry were like displays they'd seen.

This museum had an excellent reputation for their exhibitions of antique farm equipment, combines, and tractors. Even though the information was more for adults, Kurt's seven-year-old loved anything on wheels and enjoyed his visit.

Kurt took pictures and noted the glass cases in the reception area were untouched. A magnificent antique cash register, possibly solid brass, was on top of a case. Several valuable antiques dotted the shelves inside. If the deceased's intent was to steal items of value, he'd overlooked these. Or the thief hadn't plundered this area before he met his demise.

To the left of the reception area was a glass wall and the door to a small gift shop. Tony checked the doorknob. "Locked."

They peered through the glass into the gift shop. "Appears untouched," Tony said.

Kurt pointed to the right. "The deceased is supposed to be in there."

Tony led the way into the exhibit room. Once beyond the threshold, he stopped and snapped pictures of the room. The dead man lay toward the back wall, to their left.

Although the building began as a two-story barn, this exhibit room was part of the renovations. The interior structure was a one-story framed room, paneled in reclaimed barn wood from the local area.

Kurt glanced at the concrete floor and the ceiling, covered in drywall and painted white. The only visible blood was the gigantic pool coagulating on the floor. As he stepped closer, the coppery aroma of the blood reached his nostrils and made his stomach queasy.

Tony turned to Kurt. "What do you see?"

"A dead man lying in a pool of drying blood. Broken glass, a smashed wood and glass case, along with knickknacks scattered everywhere."

"Give me details."

From his angle, Kurt examined the soles of the deceased's shoes. "The man is wearing a worn pair of sneakers. Gouges in the rubber. Cuts, too. They've had some hard wear." He squinted at the footwear. "It appears pieces of glass are imbedded in the soles." He then evaluated the man's pants. "Even with today's 'distressed' jean fashions, this guy's jeans are in poor shape. Those aren't fashion holes, they're wear and tear."

"Good. Step closer and tell me more."

Kurt examined the tattoos covering much of the deceased's neck and arms. "Various tattoos on the majority of visible skin. Not artistic. Low quality tattoos, like prison tats, but I'm speculating."

Kurt took another step closer, careful to avoid walking on glass shards. "The victim is wearing latex gloves. A professional thief, perhaps? He was concerned about leaving fingerprints."

"You're speculating again. Just the facts. Now tell me about the blood."

"Huge pool of blood. Only a few bloodstains outside of the pooled area." Kurt looked around. "The ceiling is clear of blood spatter."

Tony nodded. "With spatter being a type of blood pattern

produced with force or motion, I'd guess there was no outside force." He glanced at the ceiling then down. "There appears to be some blood spatter on the floor, which could be from a fall. "We'll know more once the crime lab completes an inspection."

The exterior door opened. Both men turned to see Detective Vega striding toward them. Hector was an inch or two above six feet tall, but his thin, lanky build seemed to add several inches. God blessed him with bushy black hair, which added even more height to his appearance.

Kurt stepped back from the body. "Hi, Hector. Looks like we caught an interesting one. Tony's letting me follow him while he does his job."

"You've taken the perimeter shots? Checked for forced entry?"

"Yes, to the pics. No forced entry found, but I haven't been to the roof or attic yet."

Hector smiled. "You can't let go of the perfume store B & E, can you?"

"It was a clever method. It sticks with me."

With a gesture toward the dead man, Hector said, "This horrific scene is going to stick with you, too. I feel sorry for him and for us."