

# **Murder By Symbols**

**A Detective Colton Baker Thriller**

by  
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A very special thank you

# Detective Dan Barber

For always responding, even all my late night texts.

This book would not be possible without you!

I remember going to the station and talking to dispatch and asking to speak with a detective regarding a book I was working on.

I thought for sure they'd just toss my request into the trash. Never in my wildest imagination did I expect to receive a call back, never mind hearing how interested you were in the project.

We first met on May 19, 2021 as Covid was winding down, so when we met at the station we still had to wear masks.

From the word *Go*, you were all in. You let me record all our conversations and even traveled around town with me to all the different locations where the victims' bodies in my story would be found.

You answered not only all of my questions but took me for a deep dive into the inner workings of what a detective does. The ride-along with you was totally badass! Can we do another one?

I had the pleasure of speaking with your fellow officers and a common theme emerged. I constantly heard throughout the department how smart, professional and dedicated you are to the job.

I hope you know how much respect I have for you. I am both privileged and honored to call you a friend!

Stay safe out there!

# Chapter 1

**July 1st**

**Stoughton, Massachusetts**

Detective Colton Baker adjusted his tie in the bathroom mirror and hoped for an easy first day. It would be anything but.

Colton wasn't a big man. Most would consider him average build. But he was strong. He worked out daily and took MMA fighting. He could scrap with anyone and had a grip like Superman. When he grabbed someone, they knew it. But his true talent was his intellect. Most people either had common sense or high intelligence. Colton had both.

Although Colton appeared young, he was almost thirty years old. His looks were deceiving. Many a criminal assumed him inexperienced and naïve. He was anything but.

Colton graduated at the top of his class in the police academy and aced his detective test. He loved to read and had years of experience on the street as a patrolman. His ability to deduce situations and solve problems was a gift. It came natural to him.

He looked at himself in the mirror. His face was smooth after his morning shave. Some officers had facial hair, which Colton found unacceptable. He believed male officers should have a clean shave and keep their hair short. He did both.

Hayley, a seven-year-old poodle mix, darted between his legs, sat down on the tile floor and looked up at him.

Using the mirror, he looked down at her.

"Did she call?"

He exited the bathroom and headed over to the nightstand to check his phone. Hayley followed him, her tiny claws clicking on the tile. He checked his phone. No missed calls.

Sprawled out on the bed was Roxy, his thirteen-year-old Shih Tzu mix. She looked at him with sad eyes that pleaded, *Don't go to work. Come back to bed and snuggle.*

He reached out, scratched behind her ear, and kissed the top of her head. Roxy rolled over, exposing her belly, but Colton didn't have time to give her the attention she wanted. No tummy rubs this morning.

He picked up his phone and put it in his pocket. Then clipped his new detective badge onto his belt.

A gun safe that appeared to be a large alarm clock with a phone charging station sat on the nightstand. He entered the code by pushing a few buttons, and the safe opened. Inside was a Glock 26. It was a compact weapon with a ten round capacity magazine. He picked it up, pulled the slide back, and exposed the brass round in the chamber. It was ready to fire.

Colton holstered his weapon and headed for the front door.

Hayley followed, right on his heels. Her tiny nails click clacking away. When they reached the door, he squatted down, rubbed the top of her head, then bent over and gave her a kiss. Having already made their morning pit stop outside, Colton made sure they had plenty of food and water. He grabbed his suit jacket and headed out the door.

Colton grew up in Stoughton and after graduating college, he joined the Stoughton Police Department. He'd started out as a patrolman and quickly got a glimpse of the side of town many didn't see. Most crimes take place behind closed doors and out of the public eye. It was a vast comparison to the small town he knew.

Colton's ability to adapt and get the job done caught the eyes of his supervisors, who encouraged him to take the detective's test. His uncanny knack of absorbing knowledge, combined with his love to read and study, made him the perfect candidate. As expected, he aced the detective's test.

On his ride to the station, Colton passed several yellow yard signs that said, *Keep 911 Local*. It was a hot topic around town, and the signs would surely only help fan the flames.

Colton wanted to get an early start and arrived at the station an hour before his shift started. He used his fob to gain entry through the employee's entrance.

He stopped at the front desk. Inside sat the Desk Duty Officer and two dispatchers. In Stoughton, both the police and fire dispatched from the same location. They sat side by side, which led to faster communication between the two departments as they both worked on different frequencies. It was a win for the town and its residents. *Why would they want to split that up?* Colton wondered.

"Have you seen the signs popping up around town?" Colton asked.

"Don't even get them started, Detective," the Duty Officer said.

Colton looked at each of the dispatchers.

"The county wants to control all the 911 calls," the first dispatcher said. "They want to pull dispatchers from the police and fire stations and house them all in one location."

"Why?" Colton asked.

"Money. What else?" said one dispatcher.

"It just seems...dumb," Colton said.

"Fucking stupid, is my choice of words," said the other dispatcher.

"Welcome to small-town politics," said the Duty Officer.

Colton shook his head and walked away.

The Duty Officer leaned over the desk and yelled after Colton. "Small-town politics is everywhere, Detective. There's no escaping it. You'll see!"

Colton had responded to calls before, which led to heated debate around town, but he never had to investigate them. That had always been Detective Peterson's job. The small-town politics was one thing Colton wasn't looking forward to.

Colton walked to the detective's office and used his fob. Because the evidence locker was inside, only the detective and chief had access.

Once inside, he found a stack of case files on his desk waiting for him. After getting situated, he sat down and went through them.

A few minutes later, the door lock clicked, and it swung open.

Chief Catherine McCormack stood in the doorway. She appeared to be around fifty and had a commanding presence. She wore glasses and had her blonde hair tied up in a bun.

Scandals had plagued the department for years. It was no secret that Stoughton had some bad cops in its ranks. Chief McCormack had made it publicly known she intended on weeding out all the corrupt cops and replacing them with good ones once she became chief. She was trying to right a ship that was way off course.

The economic downturn caused a rise in crime across the country, including Stoughton. Detective Peterson's death added to the already full caseload. The department urgently needed a detective. Public pressure mounted, and the Board of Selectmen and Town Administrator felt it. They couldn't wait another month and agreed to promote Colton earlier than planned.

"Good morning, detective," Chief McCormack said.

"Good morning, chief," responded Colton.

"Getting an early start, I see."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm sorry I had to bump up your start date. With Peterson passing away before he retired, I couldn't go without a detective. As you can see, his caseload was piling up."

"No worries, chief. I'll get through them as fast as possible."

"Are you getting settled in, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” the chief said, and closed the door.

Colton had some time to kill until roll call. He sat down at his desk and perused through the stack of open case files. In his summation, his predecessor was biding his time until retirement and let his caseload lag. Colton was confident he could easily clear some cases and get them off the books. As he finished reading through each file, he jotted down notes for himself on a Post-It and stuck it on the inside of the folder. He looked down at his watch. It was 7:00am. Time for roll call.

Roll call was just starting when Colton walked in. Lieutenant Bonnett stood at the podium and addressed the patrol officers. Each one sat ready with a pen and notebook. Colton stood in the back corner as the Lieutenant spoke about a rash of home invasions and car break-ins. Like everywhere across the country, Stoughton had a drug problem too. Addicts would do anything for their next fix and once their money was gone, some turned to stealing to fuel their habit. “The chief has called for an increase of patrols through the hardest hit neighborhoods,” Lt. Bonnett said. “Also, we’ve seen an uptick in overdoses again. We’ve added extra Narcan to each cruiser’s med kit. Remember, Fentanyl is everywhere nowadays. Keep your gloves on at all times and be cognizant when searching anyone or their belongings. Just a whiff of that stuff can kill you.”

Lieutenant Bonnett looked up and spotted Colton.

“As you all know, detective Peterson would have retired next month, but he suffered a massive heart attack and passed away. The poor bastard never got to enjoy a single day of his retirement. Detective Baker is taking over for him,” Lt. Bonnett said, pointing to the back of the room.

After roll-call Colton loaded up his cruiser and signed on over the air. His first stop would be a follow up to a breaking and entering case his predecessor started.

As Colton pulled out of the station parking lot, dispatch called him over the radio.



“Control to D-One.”

“D-One,” Colton said into the mic.

“Respond to the train station for a possible sudden.”

*Jesus, Colton thought. A dead body in the first hour of the first day.*

“D-One received.”

# Chapter 2

## Train Station Stoughton, Massachusetts

Colton arrived at the train station and found a swarm of onlookers standing by the South entrance of the train station. He glimpsed a body lying on the ground.

Two cruisers pulled in behind him as he exited his vehicle.

As the two officers approached, Colton pointed to the first officer.

“Push those people back.”

Then he pointed to the second officer.

“Grab the yellow crime scene tape and cordon off this entire area.”

Both officers did as instructed.

Colton walked over to the body. He expected to find someone who had overdosed. That’s not what he found.

A man in his late fifties lay on the ground. A railroad spike protruded from the top of his head and a pool of blood surrounded it. Colton noticed what appeared to be a fresh tattoo on the man’s forehead, which was a combination of letters, numbers, and strange symbols.



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“D-One to Control,” Colton said into his radio mic.

“Control’s on,” replied the dispatcher.

“I have an active crime scene. Notify the MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority), the State Police CPAC Unit (Crime Prevention and Control) and the Medical Examiner.”

“Received,” the dispatcher said.

Colton composed his thoughts on what to do next.

"D-One to Control."

"Go ahead, detective."

"Cancel fire and start me the Shift Supervisor."

"Received."

Colton went back to his cruiser and pulled out his crime scene kit. As a patrolman, he'd been on dozens of 'unattended deaths' scenes. Most were overdoses, suicides and natural causes like cancer or extreme age. In those cases, he usually assisted Detective Peterson roll the body over for photographic purposes.

Now, he was the detective. He was in charge. As he walked back, he recalled his training. When he arrived back at the body, he took out his department-issued cell phone and began taking photos of the body and the ground surrounding it. Everything was evidence until proven otherwise. He'd supply the photos to the State Police and MBTA investigators.

The sound of approaching sirens cut off. The fire department had received word to cancel.

Colton continued taking photos when the two officers returned.

"What now?" asked the first officer.

"Keep everyone behind the tape. This happened on the train station property. It's an MBTA case."

Minutes ticked past and then Colton heard the faint sound of sirens growing closer.

Another minute later, three MBTA police cars pulled into the lot.

One cruiser had the word 'Supervisor' written on the front corner panel. A woman got out. She appeared to be in her late thirties and had bright red hair, which was tucked up under her cap. She scanned the scene and walked over to Colton.

"Captain Morris," she said, holding out her hand.

They shook hands, and Colton introduced himself.

"What do you have, detective?" she asked.

"Homicide. Male. Possibly early fifties," Colton said.

Morris looked down at the body. "Wow, he pissed someone off."

"I'd say so," Colton replied.

"What do you need from us, detective?" Morris asked.

"What? This is your case," Colton said.

"How do you figure?"

"Oh, I don't know. Because he's on your property."

"Nope!" Morris said.

"What, you don't handle murders? You just chase turnstile jumpers?"

"Haha. Real funny. This is your case, detective," Morris said.

"Fuck you, it is," Colton said. "Get the Staties down here."

"They're gonna tell you the same thing, detective."

"Oh yeah, why's that?"

"Because the town of Stoughton owns this property."

"Since when?" Colton asked.

"Years ago," Morris said. "You new on the job?" she said sarcastically.

Colton laughed.

"Actually, today's my first day," Colton said.

"No shit?" Morris said.

"No shit."

Morris stood there a moment, staring at him.

"I just made detective," Colton said. "Today is literally my first day."

"Damn!" she said. "You caught a body on your first day. That's just cruel."

"You sure it's mine?" Colton asked.

"If it was found on the tracks, it would be our jurisdiction," Morris said. "This is all yours."

# Chapter 3

## Stoughton Bakery Stoughton, Massachusetts

Twenty minutes later, the Massachusetts State Police Homicide Detective arrived on the scene.

“Hey, detective!” the patrolman standing by the entrance yelled. “Statives are here.”

The unmarked State Trooper vehicle pulled up to the tape. Detective Steve Barnes, a tall, bald black trooper with massive shoulders, stepped out. He wore black slacks and a Polo shirt with the Massachusetts State Police Logo on the left breast.

Barnes walked over and introduced himself to Colton and the MBTA Supervisor. Then he looked down at the body. “Well, I guess we can rule out suicide.”

Colton nodded.

“Any ID on him?” asked Barnes.

“None,” Colton said.

“Hey Detective!” the same patrolman yelled. “Chief is here.”

Chief McCormack pulled up to the yellow tape and stopped next to Barnes’ cruiser.

Colton walked over to meet her. “Good morning ma’am.”

“Tell me what we’ve got, detective.”

“White male, late fifties. Sharp force trauma to the head.”

“Robbery?” the chief asked.

“Appears so,” Colton said. “Bystanders saw a bum standing over the victim.”

“Lots of transients around here. They use the tracks to move from town to town,” the chief said.

“The MBTA supervisor is here, and she said the town owns the train station. Is that correct?” Colton asked.

"Yes," the Chief said. "The town purchased it a few years ago. They even filmed a scene for the movie Little Women here. The end scene at the train station, it took place right here.

"That's right," Colton said. "The one with Meryl Streep."

"Yup," she said.

"I forgot the town bought it," Colton said.

"Most people did," McCormack said. "Probably because it took forever and seemed like the sale wasn't going to happen, until it did."

Colton and the Chief walked over to Barnes.

"Hi Barnes," the Chief said. "Good to see you."

"Good morning, ma'am," Barnes replied.

"Detective Barnes here is one of the best," she said. "We worked together a few months back on a domestic abuse case where the husband violated the restraining order and killed his wife."

"Likewise, ma'am," Barnes said. "I'm sorry about Detective Peterson. He was a good man."

"Thank you, Barnes," the Chief said.

"I do have a few questions," Barnes said.

"Shoot," she said.

"Any reports of violence in this area?"

"No," she said. "Mostly just nuisance complaints about the homeless begging for change."

"I have the uniforms rounding them all up," Colton said. "Hopefully we grab the one responsible, or at least one that saw something."

"Any ID?" the Chief asked.

"None ma'am. We believe the perp took the victim's wallet," Colton said.

"Detective, you said sharp force trauma to the head, correct?" asked the Chief.

"Yes, ma'am," Colton replied.

"With what?"

"Well, ma'am, someone drove a railroad spike into the top of his head."

The chief's eyebrows furled.

"Come, look for yourself," Colton said.

They walked over toward the body. The Chief looked down.

"Holy shit!" she said, squatting down. "That's firefighter Bill McDonald."

"You know the victim?" Colton asked.

"Yeah, he's been on the fire department forever. He was getting ready to retire."

"You can cancel that retirement party," Barnes said.

"Jesus!" she said. "Bill never had that tattoo on his forehead."

"It looks new," Colton said.

The Chief stood up and scanned the parking lot.

"What is it?" Colton asked.

"I don't see his truck," she said. "He drives a huge black Dodge pickup. It's not here."

Colton walked over to the body and kneeled down next to it. He patted down both front pockets and then tucked his hand under the body, feeling the back pockets. "No keys," he said.

"What was he doing here?" Barnes asked.

"Probably came to grab breakfast from the Stoughton Bakery before starting his shift," she said.

"Where's the bakery?" Barnes asked.

The chief used her thumb to point behind her.

Barnes turned. The bakery was less than fifty feet away.

"It's fairly new," she said.

"I'll go find out if he bought breakfast," Colton said.

A bell chimed when Colton walked in. Several staff members stood behind the counter.

"We're closed," said the young man behind the counter. "Per order of the police."

Colton flashed his badge. "Detective Baker, Stoughton P.D."

"Sorry, didn't know you were a cop. We get a lot of customers in suits every morning before they catch the commuter rail."

"I suppose you heard what happened out in the parking lot," Colton said.

"I can't believe it," the older woman behind the counter said. "He was such a nice man."

"Did you see what happened?" Colton asked.

"I was out back, making custards. I heard Maria, my mother-in-law, scream for help," said the man.

"And your name?" Colton asked.

"Kyle."

"Are you the owner, Kyle?" Colton asked.

"I own it with my sister-in-law, Lena, and my mother-in-law, Maria."

"Any other employees?"

"No, just the three of us."

Colton turned his attention towards Maria.

"What exactly was it you were doing when you saw the body?" Colton asked. "Walk me through it. What you saw and heard."

"I was wiping down the table after a customer left," Maria said. "I looked out the window and that's when I noticed the body lying on the ground."

"You open at six. Is that correct?" Colton asked.

"Yes," Maria answered.

"Then what?" Colton asked.

"I saw a bum leaning over the body," Maria said. "He was touching Bill's face."

"Was he trying to help?"

"I don't know," Maria said. "Why run then?"

"He ran?"

"Yes," Maria said. "When he saw me, he took off."

Colton turned his attention back to Kyle.

"So...you heard her call for help, then what?" Colton asked.



"I came running out from the kitchen," Kyle said.

"Did you see anyone?" Colton asked.

"I saw a bum scurry around the corner," Kyle said, pointing across the street.

"When did you notice the body?" Colton asked.

"Maria had gone over towards the body and came running back," Kyle said. "She said it was Bill McDonald. Said he was dead."

"Did you go over near the body?" Colton asked.

"Yes," Kyle replied.

"How close did you get to it?" Colton asked.

"Did we do something wrong?" Maria asked.

"No," Colton said. "The ground is pretty dirty near the body. We'll need to eliminate your shoe prints in the dirt."

"Oh, I understand," Maria said.

"Now, you know the victim by name. Is he a regular?" Colton asked.

"Yes, he comes in here every morning before his shift," Maria said.

"Have you had trouble around here before?" Colton asked.

"To be honest," Kyle said. "I thought it was one of those bums. Several live over there at the train station. They beg for money, but they never really bother anyone. But they sometimes fight with each other."

"Do you know what they fight over?"

"Money. Who has the better cardboard box? I really don't know."

"What else did you see?" Colton asked.

"That's it. I ran in to call 911."

"So McDonald usually comes in for coffee, correct?" Colton asked.

"Usually," Maria said.

"Usually?" Colton said.

"He usually comes in a little before seven and orders a hazelnut ice coffee, light, two sugars."

"But not today?" Colton asked.

"No," Maria said. "He must have gotten attacked on his way in."

"Do you know which vehicle he drives?" Colton asked.

"It's a big black truck," Maria said. "My late husband had one just like it."

"Do you have security cameras?" Colton asked.

"Yes, but only inside the store." Kyle said. "And another above the backdoor, so we can see when deliveries arrive."

"I'll need to see that footage, please."

Colton followed Kyle and Maria out back into a small office. Kyle played the video from the time they arrived, which was 3:30am. Nothing was on the video inside the store until 5:30am. Maria could be seen bringing items from the kitchen and placing them in the display case. Maria unlocked the front door at 6:00am. Shortly after, a slew of customers came in.

"Just to confirm," Colton said. "The victim didn't come into the store this morning, correct?"

"Correct," Maria said.

"Alright," Colton said. "Stick around in case we have any more questions." He turned and headed towards the front door.

"Excuse me, detective." Kyle said.

Colton stopped and turned around.

"Do you know if we'll be able to open today? I have all these fresh items just sitting here."

"I'll see what I can do."

Colton talked to the Chief and Barnes. He told them McDonald usually came in for coffee around seven and, like the Chief said, he drove a large black pickup truck. He told them he reviewed the bakery's camera footage and McDonald hadn't gone inside. They could eliminate the bakery, and it didn't need to be processed. Colton requested the bakery be allowed to open. The chief agreed, but only after notifying

McDonald's family. Last thing they needed was someone who grabbed a coffee and muffin telling the family.

Colton walked back over to the bakery and informed Kyle they could open. But for obvious reasons, deliveries needed to go through the front door. He also asked them to refrain from discussing the incident with any patrons or posting anything on social media.

"Can we post that we're open?" Maria asked.

"Yes, but please don't mention the deceased."

When Colton returned, the State Police forensics team had arrived and began processing the crime scene.

Colton told Barnes that he was going to go knock on doors. See if anyone heard or saw something. He'd scope out the area for any cameras that might have caught something.

Barnes agreed and said he was going to wait for the Medical Examiner.

An hour later, the medical examiner arrived and took the body away.