



TIME HUNTER

Federal Bureau of Time
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TIME HUNTER

FEDERAL BUREAU OF TIME #1

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Also By NJ Litz

No Bed of Roses
Scent of Fear

Chapter One



Fourth Dimension
United North America, 2152
St. Louis

TIME USED TO MAKE EVERYONE equal. Every person only had twenty-four hours, no matter how rich, how smart, or how pretty she was.

Not anymore.

Standing in the doorway of the bedroom of one of the world's wealthiest men, surveying the death tableau, I knew I would bend the maximum time my body could tolerate to solve this case. Absurd isn't it, that a woman whose genetics allow her to expand her day to thirty-six hours still doesn't have enough time?

Just going over the preliminary report from the cops who had been first on the scene told my partner, Heath Meyers, and I that the case was unusual. No identification. No comm-coins either. Fingerprints altered. Everything already screamed 'up to no good'.

As agents of the Federal Bureau of Time, Heath and I spent most days tracking drug dealers who sold illegal and deadly versions of Bender, the drug that allowed those of us to expand time. We were always amazed at how foolish people were to think they could buy a drug as powerful and controlled as Bender on a street corner. Still, seeing four dead people who had been duped by some dealer both infu-

riated me and drowned me in sorrow.

As we prepared to enter the room, I touched my late father's old-fashioned badge clipped to my belt. At thirty-two, I was five years younger than his badge, and tapping it twice was my ritual at the start of each case. *For you, Dad.*

Heath didn't bother to look my way. He accepted my need to honor my father, though he didn't understand it. As the disinherited heir to one of the continent's largest fortunes, he had serious issues with his own family. Ones that made my mother's and sisters' colorful escapades seem normal.

We coated our hands with the special lotion we used to prevent our fingerprints from contaminating evidence as we approached the four victims—two men and two women. They lay crumpled in what appeared to be a circle. Two had collapsed on their sides, their hands outstretched toward each other. Perhaps they had been holding hands in their final minutes. Or maybe they'd reached for the other in their last seconds. The remaining two victims had fallen forward.

One of the women wore a slight smile, while the larger of the men had died with his eyes wide and his mouth open. Had he felt the horror of his death in those last precious seconds? The other two looked peaceful, their eyes closed and mouths soft. Maybe they simply hadn't had time to register what was happening before they died.

Behind each person's feet were rust-colored footprints scorched into the wooden floor.

As we moved closer to the bodies, Heath stopped. "Smell that?"

I expected to smell paint, or maybe cleanser, because the empty mansion was being remodeled. Instead I caught a faint whiff of a sour odor like rotten eggs.

Heath picked up an empty vial near the smallest woman. "Smell comes from the vials."

So the field test the local cops had conducted when the

bodies were found had been correct. Not pure Bender. The drug we took to manipulate time was odorless.

"Damn."

I looked over at him.

"The vials," he said. "They're labeled 'team three.'"

Double damn. What happened to teams one and two? Worse, was there a team four? Would we discover more bodies before the night was over?

Heath began searching the bodies of the two men. I squatted down to do the same to the two women—one, a pixie with freckles and short red hair; the other, a twin for Snow White with her pale, pale skin and shoulder-length black hair.

I closed my eyes and silently said affirmations for their souls. No one should die like they had. I drew several deep breaths to ease the sadness squeezing my heart.

"Somewhere in their twenties?" Heath asked.

"Such a waste. They're all *so* striking. Lots of money invested there, don't you think?" I looked at him.

He shrugged. His own good looks—the blonde hair, brown eyes, handsome face—came naturally, though he had no vanity about them. As a Meyers, he expected life to bring nothing but the best.

"Their clothes are cheap, and they don't fit well. Not current styles," I said. "And certainly not what you would expect if you were going to the home of one of the world's richest men."

"Yeah, I don't see these being the kind of people Benjamin Penhurst would spend time with, no matter how attractive they look," he said.

"Their clothes are incongruent with how much they cared about their looks."

"But no marks or skin discoloration to indicate the two men are consistent drug users."

"Same with the women," I said. "Kidnappers, maybe? But

why not leave once you discovered Penhurst wasn't here?"

"We'll need a list of the contractors working on the renovations," Heath said. "And the first person to interview is that mood system installer who found the bodies. This would be a hell of a place to throw a party since no one lives here. Maybe he knows more than he's letting on."

I nodded as I pulled measuring wands out of my pocket and fitted them to my thumb and index finger so I could electronically calculate the size of the scorch marks and the size of the shoes of each victim. "Scorch marks match the sizes of the victims' shoes."

Pity this sign of death was the only color in the house. I ran my hand over the scorch marks. They were dry, hard and crispy around the edges where they'd burned into the wood. Bender never caused this kind of reaction, even in the early trials.

"What if this was a mass suicide? Cops didn't mention any notes, though," I said. "If their intention was suicide, they didn't want to be alone at the end. They'd died as a group, so contact with these other three people was important to each of them. So surely the victims wouldn't have killed themselves without leaving a message for other people they'd left behind."

Heath heaved a hefty sigh, uncharacteristic for a man who valued restraint. "Lexie, you're looking for logic. And you keep expecting the best of people when we're dealing with the worst."

He hadn't had four stepfathers. He didn't know optimism was a survival technique.

"No blood, no bruises, no trauma on the bodies as far as I can see." I rested my hands on my knees. "Doesn't look like someone murdered them. So what made them stay here?"

"And if the vials contain an illegal version of Bender or some other drug, why come to Penhurst's place?" Heath asked. "Why not take it at one of their homes? Why this

house?"

Too many questions. No easy answers.

"The lab's backed up, like always. We may not know for weeks what's in those vials." He ran his hand through his hair. The heat in his voice wasn't directed at me, and I understood his frustration.

We spent another thirty minutes going through the rest of the second-floor rooms, all beige and unfurnished. The smell of the special paint for a mood system and just-laid wooden floors permeated every room. Eau de New House. However, we came up with nothing. A thorough search of the first floor yielded zip as well.

These deaths would ripple through many other lives. They always did. No one knew that better than a woman whose father had been shot to death twenty-seven years earlier. For my family, the ripples continued to this day. As we exited the house, I wondered how many lives our investigation would change.

On the front porch I peered at the gawkers standing at the edge of the yard in the moonlight. Neighbors most likely, but not friends, because none of them talked to each other for solace. Perhaps they were dazed or uneasy that death had trespassed into their exclusive new neighborhood—a grim reminder that money didn't always protect them.

Also an ironic one, given that huge homes like this one—with no compound walls to protect the owners in case of another global catastrophe—were the latest trend for the rich. Their glib belief that the disasters of the last century, which still shaped our lives, would never be repeated. Yet death had already visited.

Local cops huddled in the front yard against a brisk October wind that drove dry leaves down the street like a border collie herding sheep. Chilled, I instructed my clothes to increase temperature.

As soon as we stepped out from the protection of the

porch, we were blinded by flashing lights. Swallow drones, the bird-shaped cameras favored by media, sailed through the skies. Either a neighbor or a cop had leaked news of the deaths, which were a big story because of Penhurst.

The local police chief rejoined us. None of us said a word until her team hastily triggered a blackout shield to block access by the drones so they couldn't take images or pick up voices.

"Penhurst is in United Asia with his entire management team negotiating a deal," the chief shared.

As alibis went, being eight thousand miles away at the time of the crime would make Benjamin Penhurst an unlikely suspect. However, a man of his wealth didn't need to be present to be involved in a crime. Rich people could buy long, long lives; no doubt they could shorten the lives of others with a call to the right criminal.

"He designated someone local to represent him, though," the chief said.

She motioned to the police officers at the perimeter of the yard. They parted, and out of the shadows stepped Rodrigo, a time hunter.