



A MORGAN CROSS MYSTERY--BOOK #5

FOR

EVER

BLAKE PIERCE

FOREVER

(A Morgan Cross FBI Suspense Thriller—Book
Five)

BLAKE PIERCE

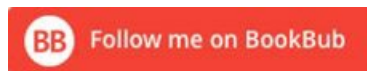
Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising thirty-one books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising twenty-one books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting), of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), and of the new FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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PROLOGUE

"Please," Stacy whimpered, her voice muffled by the damp cloth that pressed tightly against her lips.

She couldn't see, not through the blindfold, but the cold, hard surface beneath her sent shivers up her spine as she struggled to find purchase on the slick surface. Her captor's hands were rough and unyielding, tying heavy weights around her ankles with a cold efficiency that left her breathless.

"Let me go," she pleaded again, the words barely escaping her throat in a pitiful whisper. But her captor seemed to take no notice of her pleas, continuing his work with a detached precision that made her stomach churn.

Stacy's heart pounded in her chest as the blindfold rendered her world dark and shapeless. She strained to hear anything that might give her a clue as to where she was. The faint sound of water lapping at the edges of something solid reached her ears, accompanied by an unmistakably strong scent of chlorine.

"Help!" she attempted to scream through the cloth, the sound echoing through the empty space around her. "Somebody help me!"

To her surprise, her captor stilled his movements and took hold of the blindfold, ripping it away from her eyes. As the darkness gave way to light, Stacy blinked furiously, trying to make sense of her surroundings. Slowly, the world came into focus - a night sky dotted with stars, the faint outline of a roller coaster in the distance, and the shimmering expanse of water beside her.

As her eyes adjusted, it became clear that this wasn't any ordinary pool. Shadows darted just below the surface of the water, their shapes unmistakable even in the dim light. Dolphins?

She was standing beside a pool filled with dolphins. And there were more pools, too.

"Wh-why?" she stammered, terror robbing her of coherent thought.

Her captor said nothing, his face expressionless as he regarded her with an unsettling calm. Panic surged through Stacy's veins, her mind racing to find a way out of this nightmare.

"Please... don't do this," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the sound of her own ragged breaths.

But as her captor turned away from her, his actions spoke louder than any

words ever could - and in that moment, Stacy knew that mercy was not something she would find here tonight.

"Look at me," the man commanded, his voice cold and detached. Stacy's heart pounded in her chest as she forced herself to meet his gaze, confusion and desperation swirling within her.

"Wh-what do you mean?" she asked hesitantly, tears welling up in her eyes, unwilling to look away from him for fear of what might happen next.

"Watch," he replied, a cruel smile slowly stretching across his face. He bent down, gripping the weighted end of the rope attached to her ankles. Her breath hitched, her chest tightening with each agonizing second that passed.

"Please... don't," she choked out, her voice trembling.

The man ignored her plea, his smile never wavering as he lifted the weight effortlessly and tossed it into the pool with a splash. The sound echoed through the deserted amusement park, sending chills down Stacy's spine.

Her mind raced, struggling to comprehend the situation. She couldn't believe this was happening to her. Was there any hope for escape? What would happen when the weight hit the bottom of the pool? Panic threatened to overtake her, but she held onto the tiniest shred of hope, praying for someone - anyone - to come to her rescue.

As the last trace of the rope disappeared beneath the surface, Stacy felt her legs begin to wobble, threatening to buckle beneath her. Desperation clawed at her insides as she tried to muster the courage to fight back against her captor. But as she stared into his emotionless eyes, she knew that no amount of pleading or struggling would change the outcome. The rope slipped into the dark water, leaving behind only ripples as it disappeared into the inky depths. Stacy's eyes remained glued to the spot where the rope had vanished, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Please, don't do this," she begged, her voice trembling with fear.

Her captor stared back at her, his face a chilling mix of amusement and malice. The smile that had been plastered on his face since the beginning never faltered, even as he stepped closer to her, invading her personal space.

"Isn't it beautiful?" He gestured to the pool, his tone mockingly affectionate. "I picked it just for you."

"Please, I don't want to die," Stacy choked out, tears streaming down her face.

"Ah, but who does, really?" He raised an eyebrow, feigning deep thought. "But we all have to go some time, don't we?"

Stacy searched his cold eyes, trying to find some semblance of humanity within them, but found none. She knew she was running out of time, and her thoughts raced through her mind, desperate for a solution, a way out, anything.

"Why?" she whispered.

"Good, keep looking at me," he said. "I want to see the light leave your eyes, Stacy."

And then, without warning, he shoved her forward with all his strength.

As Stacy plummeted toward the water, her scream tore through the air, echoing across the water park. The world seemed to slow down, and for a moment, all she could see were the stars above and the terrifying abyss below.

Then, the cold water enveloped her, and everything went black.

CHAPTER ONE

The morning sunlight poured through the blinds, casting a warm glow across Special Agent Morgan Cross's living room. She sat on her couch, her legs tucked under her, cradling a steaming cup of coffee in her hands. Her Pitbull, Skunk, was curled up beside her, his head resting on her thigh.

As she sipped her coffee, Morgan's thoughts drifted back to her time in prison. The cold concrete walls, the iron bars that had caged her for ten years – all for a crime she didn't commit. It was a past that still haunted her, even now that she was back in the FBI. Now, after everything, she didn't have anyone left to trust.

Her eyes wandered to the photograph on the mantel. It showed her and her former partner, Derik Greene, beaming at the camera after they'd solved a high-profile case together. She used to think she could trust him completely, but now...

Morgan shuddered at the memory. It had been a week since Derik admitted he knew more about who had framed her than he'd originally let on. He'd tried reaching out to her several times since then, but she'd ignored each call and text message. Unless he was ready to tell her the whole truth, she couldn't bear to face him—there was still too much she didn't understand, but one thing was clear: Derik knew more than he'd told her, and that was enough for her to not trust him.

Of course, there were things Derik clearly didn't know, too. Morgan had been holding her breath, waiting for him to come to her and tell her he knew about Darren La Roux—that she'd accidentally killed him in self-defense. But Derik hadn't brought it up, nor had he used it to blackmail her. If Derik did know about Darren, he wasn't mentioning it.

So maybe there was a chance he didn't know everything. Maybe he was just a pawn too.

"Skunk, buddy," she said softly, scratching the dog behind his ears, "I don't know what to do about Derik. I thought we were partners, friends even. Maybe more than that. But how can I trust someone who's keeping secrets like that?"

Skunk lifted his head, his brown eyes meeting hers with an understanding look. He let out a soft whine, as if agreeing with her dilemma. Morgan sometimes felt like a crazy person for talking to her dog, but these days, he

was all she had. Skunk listened to her. He was the only innocent one in her world, as far as she was concerned.

Morgan sighed and took another sip of her coffee, letting the warmth spread through her. She knew she needed answers, but getting them from Derik wouldn't be easy. *Maybe I need to keep him close*, she thought, *to find out what he knows and who's behind all this.*

Just then, Morgan's phone buzzed on the coffee table. The screen displayed "AD Mueller" in bold letters. She hesitated for a split second before answering the call. Mueller was another person she had little interest in speaking to--she didn't trust the man for a second. He had never believed in her innocence, and since getting back from prison, their relationship had been tenuous at best. He'd even suspended her, only to rescind it, claiming that he'd realized she was a good agent and that they'd needed her. It seemed Mueller was making some effort, but still, Morgan didn't trust him as far as she could see him.

"This is Cross," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Cross, it's Mueller. Are you busy?"

Morgan took a breath. No, she was just trying to relax, and he'd ruined it. She said, "No, sir. What's going on?"

"A body's been found at a sea park just outside of the city," Mueller informed her tersely. "I'm getting reports of a deliberate drowning, but the details are still coming in. I need you on this case."

Morgan's heart raced, but she couldn't let her unease show. "Sir, I told you last week that I can't work with Derik anymore," she reminded him.

Mueller's tone was firm and unyielding. "Too bad, Cross. Derik's your partner, and he's already on his way to the scene. Whatever drama you have between you two--you're gonna have to figure it out."

Morgan gripped the phone tighter, her knuckles turning white. "Sir, I can't take this case," Morgan said, her voice firm but laced with frustration. "I refuse to work with Derik."

There was a brief pause on the line before Mueller's tone softened slightly. "Listen, Morgan, kids found the body. Can you imagine the trauma they're going through right now? This is bigger than your personal feelings about Derik. This guy had the gall to kill and leave someone in a public place, where kids had to see it—I need my best agents on this. I don't have time to assign you a new partner right now."

Morgan stared out the window, watching as a group of children outside

the house across the street. If what Mueller said was true, then some children out there were almost certainly traumatized by whatever it was they saw.

With a sigh, she glanced down at Skunk, who seemed to be picking up on her internal struggle.

Her mind raced as she weighed her options. It was true that she needed to keep the FBI close if she wanted any chance at finding out who framed her. And if Derik knew something, then maybe it was best if she played nice with him to get the information out.

"Fine," she conceded, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'll take the case."

"Good," Mueller replied, relief evident in his tone. "Derik is already en route to the scene. I expect you both to work together professionally and get this case solved. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," Morgan said, her jaw clenched as she fought to maintain her composure. She hung up the phone and let out a slow breath, trying to quell the rising anger within her. She set her coffee cup down on the table and rubbed her temples for a moment. Skunk, sensing her distress, nuzzled his head against her leg.

She patted him gently before grabbing her jacket and heading out the door.

CHAPTER TWO

The sun blazed hot and relentless as Morgan pulled up to the entrance of Orca World, allowing herself a moment to take in the scene. The sprawling park loomed ahead, its colorful façade contrasting sharply with the grim reality of what lay within. Pleasant hues of blue and white with a cartoon orcas made it look family friendly and fun. Despite the years Morgan had spent investigating crime scenes and witnessing humanity's darkest underbelly, places like this still turned her stomach. The thought of intelligent sea creatures confined to tiny tanks for human entertainment was sickening.

She stepped out of her car and immediately felt the oppressive heat envelop her. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she walked toward the entrance, past the caution tape and heavy police presence. It was unsettling to see guests still being ushered out of the park, their expressions a mix of confusion and fear. Families clung to each other as they navigated the chaotic scene, and Morgan couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for the traumatized children who had witnessed something no child should ever see.

"Special Agent Cross?" A uniformed officer approached her, snapping her out of her thoughts. "I'm Officer Ramirez. I'll be assisting you with the case."

"Thank you, Officer," Morgan replied, extending a hand. As they shook, she looked around, trying to spot Derik among the sea of law enforcement personnel.

"Is my partner already inside?" she asked, hoping to get a sense of where he was without betraying her true feelings about working with him.

"Special Agent Greene? Yeah, he arrived a few minutes before you did," Ramirez said, pointing toward a cluster of officers near one of the large tanks. "He's been coordinating with the staff and local authorities."

"Great," Morgan muttered, her jaw tightening. She knew she'd have to play nice with Derik for the time being, but that didn't mean she had to like it. "Let's go," she said, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand. As they walked toward the tank, she steeled herself for what she was about to encounter. It was never easy to face the aftermath of a killer's actions, but she couldn't let her emotions cloud her judgment. There was a murderer on the loose, and she would do whatever it took to bring them to justice.

Morgan scanned the bustling scene around her, squinting against the bright sunlight that reflected off the water in the nearby tanks. Her gaze

flicked from face to face, searching for any sign of Derik among the uniformed officers and frantic park employees. A knot of tension formed in her stomach as she tried to suppress her resentment toward him. She needed answers about her past, and he was the only one who could give them to her, and yet he'd refused. As far as Morgan was concerned, Derik had been involved in framing her. She just didn't know the extent.

Morgan noted a group of employees talking to some officers up ahead. She nodded at Ramirez, signaling she intended to stop here first. She held up her FBI badge as she approached, and the group looked at her. One girl in particular appeared very torn up--her big, tear-filled eyes landed right on Morgan, and her nametag read 'Chrissy.'

"These are some of the staff who made the call," Ramirez explained.

"You're Chrissy?" Morgan said, acknowledging her with a nod. "You're part of the staff here?"

"Yes, ma'am," Chrissy replied nervously. "I... I was working the dolphin exhibit when it happened."

"And what exactly happened?" Morgan asked, folding her arms across her chest and fixing her attention on the young woman. Inwardly, she couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for her; it was clear that she was shaken up by whatever had happened.

"Um, well," Chrissy began, fidgeting with her hands. "We were just starting our routine performance with the dolphins when the crowd suddenly started screaming. At first, I thought maybe someone had gotten hurt or there was a fight or something, but then I saw what they were all looking at." She swallowed hard, her eyes filling with tears. "There was a body floating in the water, right next to the tank."

Morgan's jaw tightened as she absorbed Chrissy's words. Another innocent life taken, another killer on the loose. As much as she wanted to ignore her own personal feelings about Derik, she knew she couldn't let this case slip through her fingers.

"Alright," Morgan said, trying to keep her voice steady. "What exactly did they see?"

Chrissy opened her mouth to respond, but before she could get a word out, Derik jogged over, slightly out of breath. "Cross!" he called out, waving a hand to catch her attention. "Derik Greene, FBI," he announced, showing his badge to Chrissy and the others. "I'm Special Agent Cross's partner."

Morgan clenched her jaw and forced herself to keep her focus on Chrissy,

refusing to acknowledge Derik. Her heart pounded in her chest, a mix of anger and trepidation coursing through her veins. How could he just come up to her like nothing had happened? Morgan couldn't stand the sight of him.

"Please, continue," she urged Chrissy, pointedly ignoring Derik as he took a place beside her.

"Right," Chrissy nodded, swallowing nervously. "It'd probably be best if I just showed you."

She led them toward the exhibit where the incident had taken place, her hands trembling. Officer Ramirez trailed behind.

As they walked, Morgan's mind raced with questions. What had happened here? Who had been found, and why? She could feel Derik's gaze on the side of her face, his eyes boring into hers as if trying to decipher her thoughts. It made her skin crawl, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of looking back at him.

Chrissy led them through the winding pathways of the marine park, her footsteps echoing against the concrete. As they approached the dolphin tank, Morgan's heart clenched at the sight of a woman's body floating lifelessly in the water, her hair fanned out like a dark halo around her head. Officers milled about, taking photographs and preparing to remove the body.

"Jesus," Derik muttered under his breath, his face pale as he stared down into the tank.

Morgan swallowed hard, forcing her emotions to take a back seat as she focused on gathering information. "This was how she found?" she asked Chrissy, her voice steady despite the gruesome scene before her.

"During our routine performance this morning. The crowd started screaming when they saw... her," Chrissy replied, her voice wavering slightly as she gestured toward the tank. "No one knows how she got there."

Morgan noticed that the woman's hands were tied behind her back, and a heavy weight was secured around her ankles, anchoring her to the bottom of the tank by a rope.

"Definitely not an accident or suicide," Morgan murmured, her eyes narrowing as she assessed the situation. "Looks like we've got a new killer on our hands."

"Damn it," Derik muttered, his jaw clenched as he studied the woman's features. "What kind of monster would do something like this?"

"Someone who wants to send a message," Morgan mused, her mind already working through possible scenarios and motives. She glanced over at

Derik, noticing the way he kept stealing glances at her as if searching for a reaction. It only fueled her determination to keep her focus on the task at hand and not let him see any sign of weakness.

"Chrissy," Morgan said, her voice firm and authoritative. "Is your manager in today?"

"Uh, yes, he's in his office," Chrissy replied hesitantly, glancing between Morgan and Derik.

"Take us to him, please," Morgan instructed, her mind racing with questions about the victim and possible suspects. She could tell Derik wanted to talk, but she wasn't about to let him distract her from the case. Her personal feelings would have to wait.

For now, she wanted to speak to the man in charge around here and find out how on earth this had been able to happen.

CHAPTER THREE

"Right this way," Chrissy said, leading Morgan and Derik through winding corridors and past various exhibits until they reached a door marked 'Manager.' Morgan took a breath, steeling herself for the difficult conversation they were about to have.

"Thank you, Chrissy," Morgan told the young woman before knocking on the door and opening it without waiting for a response.

Inside, a portly man sat behind a cluttered desk, looking up in surprise at their sudden entrance. The nameplate on his desk read 'Stew Granger, Regional Manager.'

"Agent Cross, FBI," Morgan announced curtly, flashing her badge. "This is Agent Greene. We need to ask you some questions about the body found in the dolphin tank."

"Of course, of course," Stew stammered, rising from his chair and extending a sweaty hand. Morgan shook it briefly, her expression unreadable. "Please, have a seat," Stew gestured to the chairs opposite his desk, wiping his palms nervously on his pants.

Morgan could see the unease in his eyes as he glanced at the door, as if contemplating an escape. But there was also something else, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. She filed that thought away for later as she sat down in one of the chairs, Derik taking the other.

"Let's start with the basics," Morgan began, her voice steady and controlled. "When did you first hear about the body being discovered?"

Stew shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his cheeks reddening under her unrelenting gaze. "Well, not even an hour ago," he said. "Chrissy called the police first, and another one of our employees ran down to inform me. I was in here at the time."

Morgan nodded, taking note of his reaction. She couldn't be sure if it was guilt or fear that clouded his eyes. She imagined this wasn't easy for him, knowing that someone had been murdered in the park he was responsible for. "Did you see the victim?"

"Well, yes," Stew said. "I went to check out the scene for myself. It was... just awful."

"Did you recognize the victim?" Morgan asked.

"Uh, no," Stew replied, avoiding her eyes and fidgeting with a pen on his

desk. "I've never seen her before."

"Really?" Morgan raised an eyebrow, sensing there was more to the story. "You seem awfully nervous for someone who claims not to know the victim."

"Look, I can assure you, I don't know her," Stew insisted, his voice cracking slightly under the pressure.

"Then why are you so anxious, Mr. Granger?" Morgan pressed, her tone icy as her eyes bore into him. She could feel Derik's presence beside her, but she refused to let him deter her from her mission.

"Because there's a dead body in my park!" Stew blurted out, his face flushed with frustration. "I've got employees and guests to worry about, and now this!"

Morgan nodded, easing off, reminding herself not to treat everyone like a suspect. There was a good chance Stew was innocent in all of this.

"Understandable," Morgan conceded. "But we need your full cooperation if we're going to catch whoever did this."

"Of course," Stew agreed, swallowing hard as he met her eyes again. "Whatever you need."

"Good," Morgan said. "We'd like to review your security footage from last night," Morgan said, her voice firm and her eyes never leaving his face.

"Uh, about that," Stew mumbled, shifting nervously in his chair. "We've been having some technical issues with our cameras lately. They haven't been working properly."

Morgan raised an eyebrow, her suspicion growing. "You're telling me there's no footage at all?"

"Unfortunately, no," he replied, avoiding her gaze. "I've been meaning to get them fixed, but... well, things have been hectic around here."

"Seems like a major oversight for a place with such valuable and dangerous animals," Morgan remarked, her tone laced with skepticism. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was off, and Stew's anxiety wasn't helping. "Speaking of which," she continued, "what about night security? Surely you have someone keeping an eye on the park after hours."

Stew hesitated, his mouth opening and closing as if searching for the right words. "Actually, uh, we don't have any night security at the moment."

Morgan's eyes narrowed, her disbelief evident. How could a place like this not have any security measures in place? Her gut told her there was more to it than what Stew was letting on. She glanced at Derik, who seemed equally puzzled by the revelation. He'd been quiet, letting Morgan take the lead,

which she didn't wholly mind.

"Let me get this straight," she said, turning back to Stew. "An Orca Park park with thousands of dollars' worth of marine life, and you have neither functioning security cameras nor any form of night security?"

Stew swallowed hard, beads of sweat forming on his brow. "It's... complicated. We've had some financial setbacks recently and had to make some cutbacks. Night security was one of them." He wrung his hands together, desperation seeping into his voice. "I know it sounds bad, but we didn't have a choice. There have been these activists protesting our park and it's been costing us a lot of business."

Morgan's eyes narrowed as she observed Stew's nervous demeanor. His hands twitched at his sides, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, avoiding her gaze. She needed to keep digging.

"Activists?" Morgan asked, her tone skeptical. "How long has this been going on?"

"Months," Stew admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "Ever since that documentary came out about marine parks, we've had people picketing outside nearly every day. The protests have scared off a lot of customers."

"Interesting," Morgan muttered, filing away the information for later. "And you're certain the victim isn't an employee or a guest here? You've never seen her before?"

Stew shook his head vehemently. "No, never. I don't know who she is or why she ended up in our dolphin tank."

"Right..." Morgan trailed off. "Tell me about yourself, Stew," she said, switching gears. "How long have you worked here?"

"Twenty years," he replied, his voice cracking slightly. "Started out as an animal trainer, worked my way up to park manager."

"Have you ever had any issues with your employees? Any conflicts or disputes?"

"Nothing major," Stew insisted, looking almost offended by the question. "We're like a family here. Sure, we have our disagreements, but who doesn't?"

She nodded. It seemed this conversation was going nowhere helpful, and she was wasting time. They needed to get out there and get some answers.

"Thank you for your time, Stew," Morgan said, her eyes scanning the room as she gathered her thoughts. He offered a tight smile and nodded.

"Of course, Agent Cross. Let me walk you out." Stew led them through

the winding hallways of Orca World's administrative offices, his footsteps echoing off the tiled floors. Derik walked silently beside Morgan, his eyes lingering on her every few seconds, but he never said a word.

As they stepped outside into the sweltering Texas heat, Morgan took in the sea of uniformed officers and crime scene technicians that had descended upon the park. The distant sounds of sirens and murmured conversations mingled with the shrill cries of seagulls overhead. It was a surreal juxtaposition against a backdrop of colorful attractions and posters promoting family fun.

They were making their way towards the exit when an officer jogged up to them, his face flushed from the heat. "Agents, we've pulled the body from the tank. There's a guest here who claims he knows the victim. He's pretty hysterical."

Morgan's jaw clenched, and she glanced at Stew, whose nervous demeanor seemed to intensify.

"Where's the guest now?" she asked.

Before the officer could respond, a young man came running over to them, his face a mixture of agony and disbelief.

"Dad!" he choked out, looking at Stew with tear-filled eyes. "It's Stacy! It's her body they found in the tank!"

Morgan's stomach sank, and she locked eyes with Stew, who stared at her, petrified.

So, he did know the victim after all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Morgan clenched her jaw, watching Stew with suspicion as the guest--who was apparently his son--came over to him with tears streaming down his face. The boy was probably not much older than nineteen.

"Jesus, Evan," Stew muttered, his skin paling as he reached out a hand to steady his distraught son.

Morgan narrowed her eyes, watching the exchange with a wary curiosity. "Evan, is it?" she asked, her voice firm but not unkind. "I'm Special Agent Cross. Do you know the victim?"

He nodded, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Yeah, I do," he managed to say through ragged breaths. "Stacy was my girlfriend."

"Damn," Derik whispered under his breath, casting a sidelong glance at Stew.

Morgan could hardly believe what she was hearing. The victim was Stew's son's girlfriend, and he not only had known that--but he'd lied about it too. Morgan had the strong urge to snap cuffs on him right there, but she needed more information first.

"Take a deep breath, Evan," Morgan instructed, her tone gentle but insistent. "I need you to tell me everything you can about Stacy. When did you last see her? Did she have any enemies or people who might want to hurt her?"

Evan wiped at his tears with the back of his hand, trying to regain some semblance of composure. "I saw yesterday afternoon," he said, his voice trembling. "We were supposed to meet up this morning, but she never showed. She didn't have any enemies that I know of -- everyone loved her. This doesn't make any sense."

Morgan studied him for a moment, taking in the raw pain etched across his features. She couldn't offer him comfort right now--she had to focus on finding the truth. And the truth was often a jagged, unforgiving thing.

"Freeze!" Derik suddenly shouted.

Morgan whipped her head around, her eyes narrowing as she saw Stew trying to slip away from the scene. She marched over to him, her steps deliberate and measured.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded, anger simmering just beneath the surface. "You lied to us about knowing the victim, and now you

try to sneak off while I'm talking to your son? How exactly did you think this would play out?"

"Look, it's all a misunderstanding, I swear!" Stew stammered, his hands raised in a placating gesture. "I didn't kill Stacy, I promise. I didn't even know it was her until Evan said something."

"Dad, what are they talking about?" Evan whined.

Morgan kept her focus on Stew, searching for any hint of deception. A decade spent behind bars had taught her how to read people – how to peel back the layers of self-preservation and fear to find the truth buried within.

"Alright," she said slowly, her voice edged with steel. "Then you'd better start explaining. And don't leave anything out."

"Okay, okay," Stew agreed, his voice shaky. His eyes darted to Evan, who stood nearby, watching the exchange with wide, fearful eyes.

"Please," Stew implored, turning his gaze back to Morgan. "I didn't hurt her. I wouldn't hurt anyone. I know I messed up by lying, but I just... I didn't know what else to do."

"Start talking," Morgan ordered, her tone brooking no argument. "And maybe, just maybe, I'll believe you."

Stew's face turned a deep shade of red, clearly embarrassed and cornered. He wiped the sweat from his forehead before admitting his secret. "A few weeks ago, I had an argument with Stacy. I asked her to break up with Evan because of her drinking problem."

Evan's eyes widened in horror as he stared at his father. "You did what?" he shouted, betrayal evident in his voice. "You had no right to say that to her! She was trying to get better, Dad!"

"Son, I'm sorry," Stew stammered, attempting to reach for his son's arm. "I thought I was doing what was best for you. I didn't want to see you hurt."

"Enough!" Morgan snapped, cutting off their bickering. "We're not here for your family drama. A woman is dead, and we need to find out who's responsible." She stepped closer to Stew, her gaze never wavering. "Now, if you have any relevant information, share it. Otherwise, keep quiet."

Evan clenched his fists, trying to hold back tears. It was clear that the revelation had hit him hard. He glanced at his father, a mix of anger and disappointment on his face. Morgan felt a pang of sympathy, but quickly pushed it aside. This wasn't the time or place for emotions.

She studied Stew intently, searching for any sign of deception. The man seemed genuinely remorseful, but she couldn't afford to be lenient. Trusting

too easily had cost her everything once, and she wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Is there anything else you haven't told us?" Morgan pressed, her tone stern. "This is your last chance to come clean."

Stew shook his head, his words tumbling out in a rush. "No, I swear. That's everything. I didn't hurt her, Agent Cross. You have to believe me. I couldn't have killed Stacy, Agent Cross. I was home all night." He wiped the beads of sweat off his brow and took a shaky breath. "Our house is small, and sound travels fast. If I'd gone out, my wife or Evan would've noticed."

Evan, clearly still reeling, hesitated before he reluctantly said, "He's right. I didn't hear him leave last night, and I was up late. Mom would've heard something too."

Morgan studied the two men, noting the desperation in Stew's eyes and the anguish in Evan's. Maybe they were both telling the truth, but at the same time, Morgan didn't know enough about even Evan to clear him. What if it had been a conspiracy? If it was, then Evan was a one heck of an actor, but still. She couldn't afford to let her guard down.

"Alright," Morgan said, her voice firm. "We'll check with your wife to verify your alibi. But don't think you're off the hook just yet."

Stew exhaled in relief, nodding profusely. "Of course, Agent Cross. We'll cooperate fully with your investigation."

"Good," Morgan replied, her eyes narrowing as she glanced around the Orca World grounds. The sun glared down at them, casting long shadows that seemed to stretch towards the crime scene, where Stacy's lifeless body had been discovered only hours before. An unsettling feeling crept over her, a reminder that a killer was still on the loose.

Morgan stared at Stew and Evan, her eyes narrowing as she tried to gauge the truth of their words. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this story than they were letting on, but for now, it was all she had to go on.

"Alright," she said tersely, signaling to a nearby officer. "Take them both into custody for further questioning. I don't want either of them out of our sight until we have some answers."

As the officer led Stew and Evan away, Morgan turned her attention at the direction of the dolphin tank. If the body had been taken out, then she needed to see it for herself. She began storming toward it, Derik on her tail.

"Hey, Morgan," Derik began hesitantly, his voice low and cautious. "I, uh, I just wanted to say—"

"Derik, not now," Morgan cut him off sharply, her focus fixed on the body. "We have work to do."

When they reached the dolphin tank, Morgan's stomach fell. The body lay on the concrete now, cold and lifeless, a morbid curiosity for the forensic team swarming around it like flies to carrion.

She approached the corpse, her gaze sweeping over the waterlogged clothes clinging to the pale skin, the hands bound behind Stacy's back. The image sent a shiver down her spine despite the relentless heat of the Texas sun.

"Have you noticed anything strange about the body?" she asked one of the forensic techs, trying to keep her thoughts focused on the task at hand, rather than the gnawing questions about her partner's loyalty.

"Nothing too out of the ordinary, Special Agent Cross," the tech replied, wiping sweat from his brow. "Apart from the obvious signs of drowning, she seems relatively unharmed. We'll know more once we get her back to the lab."

Morgan nodded in approval, her gaze sweeping across the body one last time as she looked for any clues that might help them in their investigation. She noticed an odd bruise on the side of Stacy's neck and a mark that looked like it had been made by a pair of small hands. She leaned closer to get a better look, but something else caught her eye: something glittering in the sun between the corpse and the tank. Morgan reached down and plucked up a tiny blue stone, feeling its cool surface beneath her fingers before pocketing it for further investigation.

"What do you make of this?" she asked Derik, gesturing towards the stone as she stepped away from the body.

Derik held it up to inspect it more closely, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion before he shrugged and replied, "I don't know. It looks like jewelry or something."

Morgan let out a heavy sigh, feeling an unfamiliar sense of defeat settle over her as she tucked the stone away into her pocket. The answers were somewhere out here if she just knew where to look - but right now they seemed hopelessly elusive.

"Make sure you go over her with a fine-toothed comb," Morgan instructed the tech team. "I want to know everything there is to know about her, and I want it yesterday."

"Understood." The tech nodded, his expression unreadable. "I'll make sure

the team doesn't miss a thing."

"Good. The sooner we find out what happened here, the better."

Morgan stared down at the body, her stomach sick with dread. She could only imagine what horror had played out here. Stacy, being lured here in the night by a faceless man, tied up and thrown into a tank, forced to drown. It was a horrible end.

"Seems like she was drowned," Derik commented, breaking the silence. He stood beside Morgan, his gaze also focused on the victim. "No visible wounds, other than the marks from the ropes."

"That much is obvious," Morgan replied sarcastically, not taking her eyes off Stacy. She resented that Derik was here, invading her personal space after everything she had learned about him. Even if it was in her best interest to keep him close, she was struggling to keep her emotions at bay.

"Look, Morgan," Derik began, his voice strained, "I know you're pissed at me, and I get it. But we need to work together on this case. We can't let our personal issues get in the way of finding justice for this girl."

Morgan clenched her jaw, fighting the urge to lash out at him. Instead, she focused on the scene before her, trying to piece together what might have happened to Stacy. "Let's just concentrate on the crime scene, Derik. That's all that matters right now."

"Fine," he acquiesced, taking a step back. "You're right. The case comes first."

They both fell silent, their gazes locked on the young woman who would never take another breath. Morgan felt a familiar ache in her chest, a reminder of the injustice that had defined her own life. She couldn't change the past, but she could do everything in her power to prevent someone else from suffering the same fate.

"Once they've taken the body away, I want a thorough search of the area for any evidence," Morgan said, her voice steady and determined. "I want to know how she ended up here, who tied those knots, and why."

"Of course," Derik agreed, his voice equally resolute. "We'll find the answers. Together."

Morgan nodded, not looking at him, her mind already racing with thoughts of the investigation ahead. Working alongside Derik on this wasn't going to be easy. She watched as the forensic team, clad in white protective gear, prepared to remove Stacy's body from the scene. She turned her gaze to the water, now tainted with the memory of death. The ripples on the surface

seemed to whisper secrets, ones she was determined to uncover.

"Make sure you get everything," she instructed the team leader, a tall man with graying hair named Dr. Howard. "I want a full examination – the works. There's more to this than just drowning."

"Of course, Agent Cross," Dr. Howard replied, his voice muffled by his mask. "We'll be thorough."

As they carefully lifted the lifeless form onto a waiting gurney, Morgan couldn't help but feel an odd connection to the dead woman. Both of them had been betrayed, left to suffer at the hands of those they thought they could trust. And while she had survived her ordeal, Stacy hadn't been so fortunate.

"Derik, I need you to start canvassing the area for witnesses," she said, turning to face her partner. "Anyone who might have seen or heard something last night."

"Sure thing," Derik replied, hesitating for a moment as if he wanted to say more. But he simply gave her a nod and walked away, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Closing her eyes, Morgan took a deep breath and tried to center herself. The weight of the past pressed down on her like an anchor, threatening to drag her under. She needed answers – not only for Stacy but for herself as well.

Alright, Morgan, she thought to herself. Focus. You've got a job to do.

With renewed determination, Morgan opened her eyes and scanned the area, taking in every detail. The sun was beginning to cast long shadows across the ground, but she refused to let the darkness win.

CHAPTER FIVE

Morgan's eyes flicked between the laptop screen and her surroundings as she sat in her car, parked just outside of Orca World. She took a deep breath, trying to block out the noise in her head and focus on the details she had uncovered about Stacy Cox, the girl whose lifeless body had been found submerged in the shark tank.

"Stacy Cox," Morgan muttered under her breath as she scanned the information before her. "Nineteen years old, orphan." She sighed, feeling a pang of sympathy for the young woman. She knew firsthand how cruel life could be, but this girl had faced more than her fair share of adversity. Morgan moved her cursor over Stacy's medical records, confirming what Stew had mentioned earlier about the girl's struggle with alcoholism.

Rehab at seventeen, she noted. She'd attended AA meetings regularly. It seemed that Stacy had been fighting to better herself, but there was one thing that still nagged at Morgan – her relationship with Evan. The two came from very different backgrounds. While Evan grew up in a world of wealth and privilege, it appeared that Stacy had been barely scraping by.

Opposites attract, I guess, Morgan mused, rubbing her temples. But were their differences enough to drive Evan to hurt Stacy? She shook her head, unsure of where to go next in her investigation. Evan had seemed sincere in his care for her, but maybe it was all an act.

Determined to learn more about Stacy's personal life, Morgan turned her attention to social media. She navigated to the young couple's profiles, her fingers tapping quickly on her laptop's touchpad. Scrolling through their timelines, she found pictures of Evan and Stacy together, smiling happily as they posed by the ocean or shared intimate moments over dinner.

"Happy times," Morgan muttered, scrutinizing the images for any signs of underlying tension between them. But all she could see were two people seemingly in love, enjoying each other's company.

She continued scrolling until she came across a post from Evan, declaring his love for Stacy and how proud he was of her progress in overcoming alcoholism. It didn't seem like the words of someone who would want to hurt his partner. As she read the comments, she saw that friends and family had chimed in with supportive messages.

Nothing out of the ordinary. She sighed, feeling frustrated. Her instincts

told her there was more to this story, but so far, everything seemed to be pointing towards a happy, loving relationship.

Just then, a sharp knock on the car window pulled Morgan from her thoughts. Looking up, she saw Derik standing outside, one hand resting on the roof of her vehicle as he peered inside. With a sigh of annoyance, Morgan rolled down the window.

"You talk to any witnesses?" she asked.

"Haven't gotten any hits yet, no. Seems like no one saw anything."

Morgan sighed. Then why was he here? "Derik, what do you want?" she asked tersely, trying to keep her frustration in check. She was eager to find a lead in the case, and Derik's presence felt like an unnecessary distraction.

"Hey, I just wanted to see if you'd found anything useful," Derik replied defensively, his hands raised placatingly. "We're supposed to be working together, remember?"

Morgan clenched her jaw, biting back a harsh retort. She knew she needed to focus on the task at hand, not petty arguments with her colleague. Taking a deep breath, she replied, "I'm looking into their relationship. So far, everything seems fine, but I have a feeling there's more to it."

Derik leaned in closer, his eyes softening with genuine concern. "Morgan, if we're going to work this case together, then we need to actually work together." He paused, studying her guarded expression. "We're a team. We can't afford to let any personal issues get in the way of solving this."

Morgan's jaw tightened, but she knew he was right. Their dynamic had become strained over time, and she couldn't deny that it was affecting their ability to work with him. Hell, she didn't even want to work with him. She took a slow, measured breath before replying.

"Alright," Morgan conceded. "You want to help? Look deeper into Evan and his relationship with Stacy. See if you can confirm both of their alibis from last night. I'm going to dig deeper into Stacy's life." Her gaze locked onto Derik's, making her intentions clear. "I want to work alone on that part."

Derik hesitated for a moment, clearly not thrilled with the arrangement. But ultimately, he nodded in understanding. "Fine. Just... keep me updated, alright?"

"Of course," Morgan agreed, forcing a tight smile. As Derik stepped back from the car and walked away, she rolled up the window and refocused on her laptop screen.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she delved further into Stacy's

past. The more she uncovered, the more determined she became to bring justice to the young woman whose life had been tragically cut short. And if working closely with Derik was what it took to achieve that, then Morgan would put aside her reservations and do just that—for Stacy's sake, and for the integrity of the investigation.

She turned her attention to her next destination: the church where Stacy attended AA meetings. It was time to dig deeper into the life of the young victim.

The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows over the cityscape. As Morgan drove through the city, her thoughts kept returning to Stacy—so young, so desperate to turn her life around. And now, all those dreams had been snuffed out like a candle in the wind.

A heaviness settled in Morgan's chest as she navigated her way to the church. The neighborhood grew poorer, the buildings more run-down, the streets narrower and more cluttered with debris. This was where Stacy had grown up, where she had fought to survive against all odds.

As she pulled up outside the church, Morgan took a moment to gather herself. The building was old, its bricks weathered and worn, its once-bright paint chipped and faded. A rusted metal fence encircled the property, a single gate creaking in the breeze. Despite its state of disrepair, the church stood tall and proud, a beacon of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape.

Morgan stepped out of her car, her footsteps crunching on the gravel as she approached the entrance. Her eyes scanned the area, taking note of the people who milled about or sat huddled on the church steps. They were a mix of ages and backgrounds, all united by their struggles with addiction.

"Excuse me," she said to a middle-aged man leaning against the fence. "I'm looking for the AA meetings that take place here. Can you point me in the right direction?"

The man looked her up and down, his gaze lingering on the badge clipped to her belt. He hesitated for a moment before nodding toward the church's side entrance. "Through there," he mumbled, turning away as if to distance himself from her authority.

"Thank you," Morgan replied, her voice softening. She knew how intimidating her presence could be, especially in a place like this. But she

wasn't here to judge or condemn—she was here to uncover the truth. And if that meant ruffling a few feathers along the way, then so be it.

With renewed determination, Morgan crossed the church courtyard and entered through the side door, leaving the fading light of the sun behind her. Inside, the air was heavy with history and the quiet murmurings of prayer. Morgan followed the sound of voices down a dimly lit hallway, stopping outside a door where she could hear a woman speaking. She knocked lightly and waited for a pause in the conversation before pushing the door open.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, stepping into the room. "I'm Special Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI. I'm here to speak with the person in charge of the AA meetings."

A hushed silence fell over the small group, and all eyes turned toward a kind-faced woman seated at the front of the room. She looked to be in her fifties, with graying hair pulled back into a neat bun and a warm smile that seemed to invite trust. As she stood, Morgan noted the subtle authority in her posture—the way she commanded respect without demanding it.

"Hello, Agent Cross. My name is Belinda," the woman said, extending her hand. "I'm the one you're looking for. How can I help you?"

"Can we talk in private?" Morgan asked.

Belinda's eyes crinkled with concern, but she nodded and led Morgan back into the hallway, where they found a quiet corner to speak.

Morgan took a breath. "Thank you, Belinda. I'm afraid I have some bad news." She hesitated, gauging the reactions around the room. "Stacy Cox, one of your attendees, was found dead this morning."

Belinda's hand flew to her mouth, and her eyes filled with tears. "Oh my God... poor Stacy. She was just nineteen years old..."

Morgan nodded solemnly. "I'm sorry for your loss. I was hoping you could tell me more about Stacy, what she was like, and if anything seemed off about her recently."

"Of course," Belinda said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Stacy was a good girl. Troubled, yes, but she truly wanted to get better. She had been attending AA meetings for a while, determined to overcome her alcoholism and save her relationship with her boyfriend, Evan."

"Did she talk about any issues they might have been having?" Morgan asked, her mind already spinning with possibilities.

"Nothing specific," Belinda replied. "Just the usual struggles that come with loving someone who doesn't understand addiction. But she was

committed to making it work. And Evan was committed to helping her."

Morgan took a deep breath, trying to keep her emotions in check. Stacy had been fighting for her future, a chance to break free from the chains of her past. And now, because of some unknown monster, that future had been stolen from her.

The overhead lights cast a warm glow on the worn wooden pews, casting long shadows that seemed to reach out towards Morgan. She glanced back at Belinda, whose expression was downcast.

"Belinda," Morgan began, her voice firm yet gentle, "was there anything different about Stacy recently? Anything out of the ordinary?"

Belinda hesitated, her brow furrowing as she searched her memory. "Well, there was one thing," she finally admitted. "A few days ago, I saw her leave with a man I didn't recognize. He was new to our meetings, and I never got his name."

Morgan felt a chill run down her spine, her instincts screaming that this detail was important. "Can you describe him?"

"Sure," Belinda replied, wringing her hands nervously. "He was in his forties, I'd say. Short black hair, glasses... nothing really distinctive about his appearance. Just an average-looking guy. I suppose some might consider him good-looking."

"Did you see them together after that?" Morgan asked, her mind racing with the possibilities.

"No," Belinda shook her head sadly. "That was the last time I saw Stacy. And he never came back for another meeting either."

Morgan's thoughts raced, analyzing every word and trying to fit the pieces together. Could this mysterious stranger be connected to Stacy's death? Or was it just a coincidence?

"Thank you, Belinda," Morgan said, her tone appreciative but tense. "You've been incredibly helpful."

"Anything I can do to help find justice for Stacy." Belinda's voice trembled with a mix of hope and fear.

"Please call me right away if that man shows up again," Morgan urged Belinda, handing her a business card with her direct line. "I appreciate your help."

"Of course, Agent Cross," Belinda replied, clasping the card between her fingers as if it were some lifeline to justice. "I want Stacy's killer found as much as you do."

Morgan nodded, sensing the woman's determination, despite the fear that lurked beneath her eyes. With that, Morgan turned to leave the church. She had a lot more work to do before the day was over. Somewhere out there, Stacy's killer was lurking--maybe even looking for his next target.

First, she had to understand what exactly had killed Stacy, starting with the coroner's reports.

CHAPTER SIX

The sterile fluorescent lights of the FBI office flickered overhead as Morgan sat at her desk, poring over the coroner's report that had just arrived. It was later in the day now, and the sun was dipping deeper into the horizon.

As she flipped through the crisp pages of the file, autopsy photos stared back at her, forcing her to confront the brutal reality of Stacy's death. The images were gruesome – the young woman's body bloated and discolored from her time in the water, hands bound behind her back in a cruel show of control.

"God, Stacy," Morgan whispered under her breath, her stomach churning at the sight. She forced herself to focus on the coroner's notes instead, searching for any clues that might lead her to the killer.

"Subject was found submerged in water, with hands tied behind back..." she read aloud, her voice barely audible. "Cause of death confirmed as drowning. No signs of intoxication or other substances present in the system."

Morgan's thoughts raced. She needed answers, and she needed them now. She rubbed her temples, feeling the weight of the unsolved case pressing down on her. If Stacy was sober when she died, then her alcoholism wasn't a direct factor in her murder. It was a piece of the puzzle that kept growing more complex with each new discovery.

"Could he be connected?" Morgan muttered, her thoughts drifting to the mysterious man Belinda had mentioned earlier. The man who had left the AA meeting with Stacy just days before her body was found. She leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling as she tried to fit the pieces together.

The steady hum of the office printer filled Morgan's ears as she paced back and forth, her thoughts occupied with the mysterious man from Stacy's AA meeting. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was somehow connected to the case, but without any solid leads or evidence, it was nothing more than a hunch.

Morgan's phone buzzed in her pocket, breaking her concentration. Glancing at the screen, she saw Derik's name flash across the display. With a sigh, she answered the call. "What did you find out?"

"Stew and Evan were both at home last night," Derik reported. "A neighbor's security camera faces their house, and their cars never left. Stew's wife even backed them up."

"Okay," Morgan said, making a mental note of this new information. It eliminated two potential suspects, but still left plenty of questions unanswered. "Anything else?"

"Not about the case, no."

"Okay, then I'll talk to you later."

"Actually, I wanted to—"

"Thanks, Derik," she interrupted, hanging up before he could continue. She could sense that he had something more to ask, but she didn't have the patience for a drawn-out conversation, especially with him. Time was of the essence, and she needed to stay focused on finding the truth behind Stacy's murder.

Morgan continued her pacing, her shoes clicking against the tiled floor as her mind raced. Every new piece of information seemed to lead her further away from a concrete answer, and it frustrated her to no end. As an experienced agent, she knew that solving cases like this often took time—time she wasn't sure they had.

She stopped and leaned over her desk, eyes locked on the autopsy photos again. They were gruesome images, a stark contrast to the warm afternoon sun filtering through the blinds. She could feel the weight of Stacy's lifeless body pressing against her thoughts, urging her to find justice and uncover the truth.

A sudden knock at her door startled her, and she looked up to see Mueller standing in the doorway. Her jaw tightened; she didn't trust him or want to see him, but she couldn't exactly turn him away either. Morgan reluctantly met his gaze, noting the barely-concealed curiosity in his eyes.

"Agent Cross," he began, stepping into her office. "How is the case going?"

"Still in the early stages," Morgan replied, doing her best to keep her voice neutral. "I'm working on it."

"Good to hear," Mueller said, leaning against the edge of her desk. "And how are you getting along with Derik?"

"Fine," Morgan lied, gritting her teeth. "We're both professionals, after all."

"Still, I've never seen you so turned off of Greene before." Mueller raised an eyebrow, clearly not convinced. "I thought you two used to be close friends. What changed?"

Morgan sighed, forcing herself to confront the question she'd been trying

to avoid. "Look, it's not about Derik specifically. I just... I prefer working alone these days." It wasn't true, of course, but she didn't trust Mueller either.

"Is that really what's best for the case, though?" Mueller asked, pushing further. "Two heads are better than one, especially when dealing with something as complex as this."

Frustration bubbled inside Morgan, threatening to spill over. She didn't need Mueller questioning her methods, especially considering everything she'd been through. But instead of snapping at him, she turned her focus inward, wrestling with her stubbornness and the nagging feeling that maybe—just maybe—he might be right.

"Your concern is noted," she replied tersely. "But I can handle this case, with or without a partner."

Mueller held her gaze for a moment longer before nodding. "Very well, Cross. Just remember that we're all here to help. Don't let your pride get in the way of doing what's best for the investigation."

Morgan could still feel the weight of Mueller's gaze on her as she forced herself to focus back on her files. The temperature in her office seemed to have dropped a few degrees since his arrival, and she shivered involuntarily, rubbing her hands together for warmth.

Her eyes scanned the pages before her, but her thoughts refused to cooperate, scattered by the tension in the air. She knew that Mueller was watching her closely—judging her competence, assessing her willingness to work with Derik—and the scrutiny made her skin crawl.

"Excuse me," Mueller said suddenly, his tone clipped and businesslike. "I need to take this."

Morgan watched him step out into the hall, phone pressed to his ear, and took advantage of the momentary reprieve to let out a slow breath. She didn't want to admit it, but there was a small part of her that wondered if maybe he was right. Maybe she shouldn't be so stubborn about working alone.

But as soon as the thought entered her mind, she pushed it away. She couldn't afford to second-guess herself now, not when lives were on the line.

In the hallway, Mueller's voice grew sharp and alarmed. "What? Another body?" He paused, listening to the person on the other end of the line, and then swore under his breath. Meanwhile, Morgan's stomach fell to the floor. She prayed this wasn't about her case. Mueller continued, "No, we'll be right there. Thank you."

He stormed back into Morgan's office, his face tight with barely contained

fury. She held her breath as he said.

"Another body has been found, Cross. Get your ass in gear and head out. Now."

Morgan felt her heart drop like a stone in her chest, the shock and horror threatening to overwhelm her. Another victim, another innocent life snuffed out by a monster who was still walking free. And while she sat here, bickering with Mueller about her personal preferences, someone else had paid the price.

"Where?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

"Lake Ray Hubbard," Mueller replied, his eyes dark and stormy.

Morgan didn't need any more encouragement. She grabbed her jacket and keys, her resolve hardening with each step she took toward the door. This killer had taken enough lives already; she wouldn't let him take any more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sun dipped low in the sky, casting a warm golden glow over Lake Ray Hubbard. The fading light reflected off the water, creating a shimmering contrast to the grim scene unfolding on the shore. Despite the serene beauty of the lake, Morgan felt her heart constricting in her chest as she pulled into the marina's parking lot. She swallowed hard and took a deep breath, trying to steady herself for what she was about to face.

Focus, Morgan, she whispered to herself, her voice barely audible over the sound of the engine idling. She knew she couldn't afford to let her emotions get the best of her—not now, not when another life was dangling by a thread.

Morgan parked her car and stepped out, her eyes scanning the busy crime scene. The area was swarming with police officers and forensic technicians, their movements hurried and purposeful as they worked to preserve any evidence that might lead them to the killer. Among them, a group of divers clad in scuba gear prepared to search the murky depths of the lake for any additional clues.

As she approached the shoreline, her eyes were drawn to the unmistakable shape of a woman's body, pale and waterlogged from its time submerged in the lake. Her stomach churned at the sight, and she forced herself to look away for a moment, steeling her resolve before continuing forward.

The evening sun cast long shadows over the grisly scene, and the scent of damp earth and rotting vegetation filled the air. As she approached, Morgan steeled herself, knowing that what she was about to see would be seared into her memory for years to come.

Kneeling beside the waterlogged corpse, she took a deep breath and began her examination. The woman's body had a rope tied tightly around her ankles, its frayed end indicating that it had snapped at some point. Now adrift, she had washed ashore, her lifeless form sprawled grotesquely on the rocky bank.

Morgan studied the damage the lake had wrought on the victim's pale, bloated skin. It appeared as though she'd been submerged for more than just a few days, her clothes tattered and stained with algae. Despite the ravages of time and water, the woman's face was still recognizable, and Morgan felt a pang of sorrow for the lost soul before her.

"Any idea who she is?" Morgan asked one of the officers nearby, her eyes never leaving the body.

"No, ma'am," he replied, a grim expression etched across his weathered face. "We're waiting on an ID from the coroner."

Morgan crouched beside the victim, her eyes scanning the woman's body for any other similarities to Stacy. Despite the bloated and discolored state of the corpse, it was clear that this woman was older than Stacy by at least a decade. As Morgan examined the woman's hands, she noted that they were bound tightly behind her back, just like Stacy's had been.

"Dammit," she muttered, her frustration mounting. "This can't be a coincidence."

"Agent Cross?" a nearby officer called out tentatively, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Get this poor woman out of here," Morgan ordered without looking up. "I want forensics on every inch of her body, scraping for DNA samples, fibers, anything that can lead us to her killer. And get me an ID as soon as possible."

"Understood, ma'am," the officer replied with a nod, signaling for his colleagues to begin the process.

As the officers carried the lifeless body away on a stretcher, Morgan couldn't shake the feeling that this case was quickly spiraling out of control. Whoever was responsible for these gruesome acts seemed to have little regard for human life, discarding their victims like used toys. And with each new discovery, Morgan felt the pressure weighing down on her, threatening to crush her spirit.

Morgan's nostrils flared, inhaling the faint scent of gasoline as she strode past Derik, who had just joined her at the marina crime scene. She could feel his eyes on her, lingering like a physical touch, but she refused to indulge him with a response.

"Cross," Derik called out, slightly breathless from jogging over to her. "Can you give me the run-down?"

"Ask the cops," Morgan snapped, not even bothering to glance in his direction. Tension coiled around her heart like a clenched fist, which only tightened when she thought of the lives that hung in the balance.

Ignoring Derik's hurt expression, Morgan marched towards the marina's office, her footsteps echoing against the wooden dock beneath her. A gust of wind teased the ends of her hair, carrying the sharp tang of saltwater and

algae. Through the glass doors, she spotted a young woman behind the counter, her face pale and fingers trembling as she clutched the edge of her desk.

"Hello?" Morgan asked, stepping into the small office. The air inside was stale, mixed with the scent of damp paper and printer ink.

"Y-yes," the girl stuttered, looking up at Morgan with wide, fearful eyes. The nameplate on her desk read 'Annie.' "How can I help you?"

Morgan could see the terror etched into every line of Annie's face, her eyes reflecting the same haunted look she'd seen in countless victims throughout her career. It took her back to her time in prison, where she had been surrounded by women broken by their own demons and the cruel indifference of the world around them.

"Annie, I need your help," Morgan said gently, fighting the urge to reach across the counter and offer the girl some form of comfort. "I need your help finding answers."

"Of course," Annie replied, her voice quivering. "I... I don't know how this happened or who that girl is, but I'll help however I can. What do you need?"

"Tell me everything you know about the people who use this marina," Morgan said, her voice firm but not unkind. She knew that Annie held the key to unlocking this mystery, and she needed her to understand the gravity of the situation.

Annie hesitated for a moment before nervously twirling a strand of hair around her finger. "Well, there are a few regulars who keep their boats here year-round. And then there are some people who just rent the boats for a day or two," she said, her eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape route.

Morgan leaned forward, her eyes locking onto Annie's. "Do any of them stand out to you? Anyone who gives you a bad feeling?"

Annie chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes narrowing in concentration. "I don't know. I really can't say."

Morgan sighed. There was a good chance Annie hadn't seen anything, and talking to her, trying to pry her brain for information when she didn't even witness the crime, could be a waste of time. Morgan would rather just get the investigation done herself.

"Annie, I need a list of everyone with a license to use the marina," Morgan said. "Anything you can give me," she added quickly, seeing the fear creeping back into the girl's eyes. "It's important that we cover all our bases."

Annie nodded quickly, reaching for a clipboard from beneath the counter. "I can print it out for you," she said, her fingers flying over the keyboard.

A few moments later, the printer whirred to life, spitting out pages upon pages of names. Morgan glanced at the stack that was quickly piling up on the counter, her heart sinking as she realized the enormity of the task ahead of her. She'd have to review each person on this list, searching for any red flags or connections to the case.

It was going to be a long night. Back to the office, it was.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The first rays of sunlight seeped through the blinds of Morgan's office, casting a soft, golden glow across the room. Her head throbbed, weighed down by exhaustion and the relentless pursuit of justice. The stack of papers from the marina lay strewn across her desk, the names and details of each boater blurring together into an indecipherable mass.

As Morgan stirred, the scent of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air, coaxing her back to consciousness. Her mind sifted through the foggy memories of the previous night. She must have fallen asleep at her desk while researching the list of people using the marina. The crumpled papers beneath her cheek and the lingering stiffness in her neck were evidence enough of that.

She lifted her head, blinking against the harsh morning light, only to find Derik standing over her with a steaming cup in his hand.

"Here," Derik said, setting a cup of coffee on the edge of the desk as he slid into the chair across from her. "You look like you could use it."

"Thanks," Morgan muttered, taking the cup and inhaling the rich aroma. The steaming liquid served as both a balm for her fatigue and a reminder of the long day ahead. She wasn't thrilled to be seeing Derik first thing in the morning, but he was still her partner.

"Did you find anything?" Derik asked, his eyes scanning the disarray of documents covering her workspace.

Morgan hesitated, recalling the countless names and faces she'd combed through last night. "Not yet," she admitted, disappointment heavy in her voice. "None of the names I looked into so far had a criminal record."

Derik leaned back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. "But you're not giving up, are you?"

"Of course not," Morgan said, determination flaring within her. "There has to be something we're missing, some connection between these people and the killer."

"Well, here," Derik said, interrupting Morgan's thoughts as he handed her a file. "It's the full autopsy report on the second victim."

Morgan took the folder from him, steeling herself for the gruesome details she knew would be contained within. As she opened it, she was confronted with an image of Martha McTavish, her face bloated and discolored from her

time in the water.

"Thirty-one years old," Morgan murmured, scanning the text beneath the photograph. "Drowned at least a week ago." The confirmation of her suspicions settled heavily in her chest. They were dealing with a serial killer, and Stacy had not been the first victim.

"Martha was single and an addict," Derik added, watching Morgan's reaction closely. He knew how personal this case had become for her, and he wanted her to feel supported, even if their partnership was far from perfect.

"Addict?" Morgan questioned, the word catching her attention. She recalled Stacy's history of alcoholism and wondered if there might be a connection between the two women. Was their vulnerability to addiction somehow tied to their deaths?

"Maybe there's a pattern here," she mused aloud, her eyes still fixed on Martha's lifeless face. "Stacy was an alcoholic, Martha was an addict... Could the killer be targeting vulnerable women?"

"Could be," Derik agreed, nodding thoughtfully. "We'll need to look into their backgrounds further, see if there are any other points of intersection."

"Right," Morgan replied, her gaze shifting to meet his. For a brief moment, their eyes locked, and she could see the determination reflected in his own. It was a determination that matched her own, born from the desire to bring justice to the victims of this monstrous killer.

But Morgan couldn't simply forget what Derik had done. She wasn't ready to sit and work with him. Maybe she never would be.

"Anyway, I'll see you later," she said, turning away. Derik took the hint, nodding as he left.

Morgan's fingers tapped impatiently on the edge of her desk while her mind replayed the details she had discovered about Martha McTavish and Stacy Cox. They both struggled with addiction, but what else connected them? Her gaze flickered between their autopsy photos, trying to find any other similarities or clues.

"Hey," Derik said, standing in the doorway of her office, a flash drive held up between his fingers. "I've got something that'll make your life much easier."

Morgan raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued despite her irritation with

him. "What's that?"

"Footage from the security cameras at the marina," he explained, a hint of pride in his voice. "Thought it might help us find some leads."

She hesitated for a moment before grabbing the flash drive from his hand. "Thanks," she muttered begrudgingly, "but I don't need your help."

"Come on, Morgan," Derik replied, his tone firm but not unkind. "This isn't personal. We need to put our issues aside and get the job done. You know as well as I do that we work better together."

Morgan hated to admit it, but he was right. They had been through enough cases together to know that they made a formidable team when they put their differences aside. Swallowing her pride, she nodded. "Fine," she conceded. "Let's see what we can find."

Derik pulled up a chair beside her. Morgan's fingers trembled slightly as she inserted the flash drive into her computer. The scent of stale coffee hung in the air, mingling with the quiet hum of the office building. She glanced at Derik, who settled into the chair beside her, his eyes laser-focused on the screen. She couldn't help but feel a begrudging sense of gratitude for his persistence.

"Alright," she sighed, "let's see what we've got."

As the footage began to play, Morgan's eyes darted from frame to frame, searching for any clue that might lead them closer to the truth. Each grainy image flickered by, revealing nothing more than ordinary marina activity. Boats bobbed gently in the water, their reflections rippling across the surface like echoes of the past.

"Wait," Derik said suddenly, pointing to a figure on the screen. "There. What's that?"

Morgan leaned in, squinting at the pixelated shapes before her. A man and a woman appeared in the frame, their faces obscured by shadows. The timestamp indicated it was just last night. The man, tall and broad-shouldered, was engaged in a heated argument with the woman. He seemed to be pulling her roughly after him, her body tense with resistance. Just as quickly as they had appeared, they vanished from view, swallowed by the darkness.

"Who are they?" Morgan asked, her pulse quickening. "And what were they arguing about?"

"Couldn't tell you," Derik replied, his brow furrowed in concentration. "But it seems important. We should look into it."

"Agreed," Morgan nodded, her thoughts racing. Could this argument hold the key to unlocking the mystery of the victims? Was there some connection between this couple and the killer?

"Let's rewind and watch that part again," she suggested, her voice taut with determination. "Maybe there's something we missed."

As they played the footage once more, Morgan couldn't shake the feeling that they were on the cusp of a breakthrough. It was as if the truth was within her grasp, just waiting for her to seize it. One thing was certain; they needed to go back to the marina.

CHAPTER NINE

The sun was just beginning to climb higher in the sky, casting a golden glow on the marina as Morgan and Derik pulled up in their car. The morning air was tinged with the salty scent of the sea, and seagulls called overhead as they swooped and dived around the boats. Morgan's jaw clenched; the serene beauty of the scene sharply contrasted with the dark reality of their investigation.

"Let's find Annie," she said tersely, her gaze locked on the marina office.

"Right behind you," Derik replied, keeping pace as they strode across the dock.

Entering the office, Morgan spotted Annie hunched over a computer, her fingers flying across the keyboard. She looked up when the door opened, her eyes wide and fearful.

"Agent Cross, Agent Reynolds," Annie stammered. "What can I help you with?"

"I need you to identify someone for me," Morgan said, holding out her phone to show Annie the image they'd captured from the security footage. "Do you recognize this man?"

Annie hesitated, biting her lip. Her hands trembled slightly as she took Morgan's phone, studying the image. "I think I know who he is," she admitted softly, "but I'm not sure if I should say."

"Annie, this is important. We're investigating two recent murders, and this man could be connected," Morgan implored, her voice edged with urgency. "Please, tell us who he is."

"His name is Felix Scale," Annie finally whispered, her voice barely audible. "He's one of our most high-profile clients, a millionaire who owns multiple boats and yachts here at the marina."

Morgan's mind raced, the implications of Annie's words sinking in. Could Felix be the link between the victims? Or was he just another red herring, drawing them further away from the truth?

Annie hesitated for a moment before reaching into a drawer and pulling out a file. As she handed it to Morgan, her fingers brushed against the edge of the glossy photograph, making Morgan acutely aware of the gravity of the situation.

"Here's a better picture of Felix from our records," Annie said softly,

avoiding eye contact.

Morgan gazed at the photograph, feeling her stomach tighten as her suspicions seemed to confirm themselves. The man in the image was in his forties, with short, dark hair that matched Belinda's description of the mysterious stranger from the AA meeting. Could they possibly be the same person?

"Annie, have you seen this woman arguing with Felix?" Derik asked, holding up the grainy still from the security footage.

Annie squinted at the image, her brow furrowing with uncertainty. "I think that's Heather Marshall," she finally admitted. "She's the daughter of another client here at the marina."

Morgan's mind raced, trying to piece together the connections between Felix, Stacy, and now Heather. What could tie these seemingly unrelated individuals together? She needed more information, but first, she wanted to make sure Heather was safe.

"Annie, do you happen to know if Felix has been around today?" Morgan asked, her eyes scanning the marina through the office window.

"Actually," Annie hesitated, glancing at a clipboard on her desk. "His speedboat is still missing from its usual spot."

"Missing?" Derik interjected, his brow furrowing with concern.

"Since yesterday evening," Annie confirmed. "It's not like him to be gone this long without telling us."

Morgan's heart rate quickened as the pieces fell into place in her mind. She tried to temper her rising anxiety, knowing that every second counted.

"Annie, please give us Heather's contact information. We need to get in touch with her immediately."

"Of course." Annie quickly scribbled down the information and handed it to Morgan.

"Thanks for your help, Annie," Morgan said, her voice tense. "Stay safe, and let us know if you see or hear anything suspicious."

"Will do, Agent Cross," Annie replied, nodding gravely.

Morgan and Derik hurried out of the marina office, their footfalls echoing on the wooden planks of the dock. The sun cast long shadows across the water, painting the scene in an eerie light that only heightened Morgan's sense of urgency.

"Call Heather," Derik instructed as they climbed into their car. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, ready to race off as soon as they had a lead.

Morgan dialed the number, her fingers trembling slightly. She pressed the phone to her ear, listening to the hollow ringing on the other end. Come on, pick up, she thought, her chest tightening with each unanswered ring.

"Derik, we have to find Felix," Morgan muttered under her breath, her eyes fixed on the empty spot where his speedboat should have been.

"Something tells me Heather's life might be in danger."

"Let's go," Derik said curtly, slamming the car into gear and peeling out of the marina parking lot.

As they sped away, Morgan couldn't shake the image of Felix's empty boat slip. Whatever was going on, she knew deep down that time was running out to save Heather – and potentially any other victims tangled in this deadly web.

Morgan stood on the dock outside, the wind tugging at her hair and casting ripples across the water's surface. The scent of salt and gasoline filled her nostrils as she dialed Heather's number, her fingers slick with sweat. She glanced over at Derik, who paced nervously by her side.

"Come on," she whispered to herself, willing someone to pick up on the other end of the line. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, a man answered.

"Hello?" his voice was tense and strained.

"Hi, I'm looking for Heather Marshall. This is Special Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI," Morgan said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Uh, this is her father, Richard. Heather isn't here right now," he replied, sounding uneasy.

"Mr. Marshall, has something happened? Is Heather alright?" Morgan pressed, feeling a chill creep down her spine.

"Actually, she never came home last night. It's not like her to just disappear without a word. She left her phone behind too," Richard's voice trembled with worry. "I was about to call the police."

Morgan's heart sank as she exchanged a concerned glance with Derik. "Thank you for letting me know, Mr. Marshall. We're actually working on a case that might be connected to Heather's disappearance. Stay by your phone in case we need to reach you again. And please, do call the police to report her missing."

"Alright, Agent Cross. I'll do that," he said, his voice cracking. "Please..."

find my daughter. Bring her home safe."

"Will do, sir," Morgan replied and ended the call.

She turned to Derik, her expression grave. "Heather's missing. And Felix's boat is still gone. We need to find him."

Derik nodded, his jaw set in determination. "We might need a boat."

CHAPTER TEN

The police boat cut through the dark waters of Lake Ray Hubbard, sending ripples along the surface as it sped over the waves. Morgan Cross clutched onto the railing beside Derik, her partner for this case, as they searched for Felix Scale, the millionaire suspected of kidnapping Heather and murdering two other women. The wind whistled in their ears, whipping Morgan's hair back from her face as she stared out at the vast expanse of water before them. Other police boats zipped around the coastline like bees around a hive, all searching for Felix's boat – named Infinity, written in cursive on its side.

"Stay focused, Morgan," Derik said, shouting over the roar of the boat's engine. "We'll find him."

Morgan nodded, her grip tightening on her phone as she looked up Felix Scale online. She knew time was running out, and with each passing second, her thoughts turned to the worst-case scenario. What if they were too late? She couldn't bear the thought of another life lost under her watch.

As she scrolled through search results, an article caught her eye: *Millionaire Influencer Accused of Soliciting Sex*. Her heart skipped a beat as she read the headline again, feeling a potent mix of anger and determination course through her veins. Morgan's eyes darted back and forth as she read the article, feeling her chest tighten. The words painted a disturbing picture of Felix Scale: a man who had no qualms about preying on vulnerable young women. She could almost hear the sneer in his voice as he allegedly offered the girl money for sex, as if trying to buy her dignity. Morgan clenched her jaw in disgust.

"Derik," she said, unable to keep the revulsion out of her voice. "It says here that Felix was accused of soliciting sex from a young woman – offering her cash in exchange."

"Are you kidding me?" Derik shook his head, his expression darkening. "Sounds like a real piece of work."

"Wait, there's more," Morgan muttered, scrolling further down the page. She tapped on Felix's social media profile, which was linked in the article. Almost immediately, she was bombarded with images of him living a luxurious and seemingly carefree life. He had hundreds of thousands of followers, but one look at him made Morgan feel sick to her stomach.

"Look at this guy," she said, holding up her phone so Derik could see.

"He's clearly in his forties, but he's trying so hard to play it off like he's younger. It's pathetic."

"Seems like the kind of person who'd have no problem taking advantage of someone like Heather," Derik commented, his eyes narrowing as he studied Felix's smug grin plastered across the screen. The millionaire was surrounded by beautiful women in most photos, wearing designer clothes and sporting flashy jewelry.

"Exactly," Morgan agreed, her grip tightening around her phone. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were closing in on Heather's captor. This man – this predator – needed to be stopped before he hurt anyone else.

Inside Morgan's head, a storm of emotions raged. Anger, disgust, and fear for Heather's safety fueled her determination to bring Felix to justice. She couldn't allow another woman to fall victim to his twisted desires.

"Let's make sure this guy gets what he deserves," Morgan said, the fire burning in her eyes as she stared out at the choppy waters of the lake. They would find Felix Scale – and they would save Heather.

The wind roared around them as the police boat cut through the dark waters of Lake Ray Hubbard. Morgan's fingers flew over her phone, pulling up the FBI database to dig deeper into Felix Scale's background. The cold air nipped at her cheeks, but she barely noticed. All that mattered was finding Heather and stopping Felix before he could do any more harm.

"Here we go," she murmured, her breath clouding in the chilly air. Her eyes scanned the screen, taking in Felix's criminal record. Tax fraud. While it wasn't as damning as assault or murder, it solidified her belief that Felix was a scumbag. The fact that he had access to the docks only fueled her suspicion that he had Heather with him.

"Got anything?" Derik asked, his voice barely audible over the roar of the boat's engine and the crashing waves.

"Tax fraud," Morgan shouted back, not giving Derik much more than the basic information - she didn't want to engage in conversation with him any more than necessary. "He definitely had access to the docks."

Derik nodded, his gaze fixed on the horizon as if he could somehow see their target through sheer force of will. "We'll find him, Morgan. We'll find Heather and put this bastard away for good."

Morgan clenched her jaw, nodding curtly. She knew they had to work together, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something was off with Derik and that she'd never be able to trust him again, after everything. For now,

though, she pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the task at hand: bringing Felix Scale to justice.

Her heart pounded in her chest, adrenaline coursing through her veins like liquid fire. It had been a long time since she'd felt so alive - so driven by purpose. In her mind's eye, she pictured Felix's smug face and imagined the satisfaction of finally slapping handcuffs on him. The thought brought a fierce smile to her lips.

"Let's hope we get there in time," she said, her voice steely and determined. "Heather's depending on us."

And with that, they sped across the lake, their eyes scanning the shoreline for any sign of Felix or his boat, Infinity. Time was running out, and Morgan knew that every passing second could mean the difference between life and death. All they could do now was pray they'd find Heather before it was too late.

The police boat cut through the water, its engine roaring as they approached the north side of Lake Ray Hubbard. Morgan's heart raced in anticipation, her grip on the railing tightening. The wind whipped through her hair, sending strands flying across her face and obscuring her vision momentarily.

"North side of the lake, we got eyes on the Infinity. Repeat, we've spotted the boat," the voice on the radio crackled with urgency.

"Copy that, we're on our way," the officer at the helm replied, pushing the throttle forward. The boat leaped ahead, racing towards their target.

Morgan stole a glance at Derik, who wore an expression of grim determination. She could feel his gaze on her even as she turned away, focusing on the approaching shoreline. She tried to ignore the uneasy feeling that crawled up her spine, concentrating instead on the task at hand.

"Almost there!" the officer shouted over the roar of the engine. "Get ready!"

Every muscle in Morgan's body tensed as they closed in on their destination. She couldn't help but think about Heather, about the terror the young woman must be feeling if Felix Scale had indeed taken her captive. Morgan felt a surge of anger towards the man, a fire that burned deep within her and fueled her resolve to see him brought to justice.

"Keep your eyes peeled for any movement," she instructed Derik, her voice barely audible over the boat's engine.

"Got it," he responded tersely, still watching her with an intensity she

couldn't quite place.

As the boat drew nearer to the dock where Felix's boat was reported, Morgan's thoughts raced. What would they find when they reached the Infinity? Was Heather still alive, or had they arrived too late? And what of Felix himself? She steeled herself for the confrontation that was sure to come, her hands itching to draw her weapon and put an end to the nightmare that had consumed them all.

The police boat approached the private cottage concealed among the trees on the north side of the lake. Morgan's heart raced with anticipation. The sleek, expensive speedboat emblazoned with the word "Infinity" in elegant cursive script was docked nearby – a glaring beacon that they had found their target.

"Here's the place," the officer said, expertly docking the boat alongside the Infinity. "Looks like we got ourselves a party going on."

"Wait here," Morgan instructed the officer, her eyes never leaving the opulent boat as she imagined Felix Scale within its confines. She and Derik disembarked from the police boat, their shoes squelching on the damp wooden boards of the dock.

"Ready?" Derik asked, his voice tense and alert.

"Let's go," Morgan replied tersely, still avoiding eye contact with him. Her focus remained fixed on the task at hand: finding Heather and apprehending Felix Scale.

As they walked up the gravel path toward the cottage, the sound of pounding bass grew louder, pulsating through the evening air like a living heartbeat. The scent of freshly cut grass and blooming flowers filled Morgan's nostrils, a stark contrast to the dark uncertainty looming over them.

"Did you expect this?" Derik questioned, gesturing to the sprawling garden surrounding the picturesque cottage.

"No," Morgan admitted, her eyes scanning the idyllic scene for any sign of foul play. "But it doesn't change anything. We need to find Heather and bring Felix to justice – whatever it takes."

"Agreed," Derik nodded, falling into step beside her as they closed in on the cottage. The thumping music reverberated through the walls, a taunting reminder that time was of the essence. Morgan's gut churned with a strange mixture of dread and determination.

"Stay sharp," she reminded herself, feeling the weight of her gun resting on her hip. Her mind raced with thoughts of what they might find inside the

cottage – had Felix brought Heather here, like he had done with his other victims? They were about to find out, and Morgan steeled herself for whatever horror awaited them beyond the door.

"Right behind you," Derik assured her. His presence was both a comfort and an annoyance; she appreciated his support but couldn't shake the nagging feeling that he was scrutinizing her every move. At the same time, there was a familiarity in it; they had worked many cases together, known each other for years. Sometimes intimately. It was just his betrayal that had put a stain on it, something Morgan wouldn't soon forget.

As they reached the back door, Morgan's hand instinctively hovered over her holstered gun. Peering through the glass, she tried to make out the interior of the cottage. The dim light filtering through the curtains revealed an empty room, but the situation still felt off.

"See anyone?" Derik whispered, his breath hot on her neck as he leaned in, trying to catch a glimpse as well.

"Nothing," she replied, her voice low and steady. They both knew that the absence of people didn't mean they were safe. Morgan's mind raced, filled with the haunting images of Felix's prior victims. Could Heather still be alive? They needed to find out.

"Let's try the front," Derik suggested, his eyes darting around the property as they moved cautiously. The music grew louder and more distorted as they approached the front entrance, its pounding bass reverberating through the ground beneath their feet.

"Stay close," Morgan instructed, her senses heightened and nerves taut as they crept along the side of the cottage. With each step, she imagined Felix inside, holding Heather captive or worse. Her heart hammered against her ribcage, her determination fueled by the memory of the women who had come before.

"Copy that," Derik responded, his tone serious and focused. He followed closely behind her, his own thoughts mirrored in Morgan's – they couldn't let another life be lost to this monster.

Reaching the front door, Morgan wasted no time in banging on it. "FBI! Open up!" she shouted, her voice barely audible over the deafening music. The melody continued to blare from within, drowning out her demands for entry.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, her frustration mounting as she banged harder on the door. Her knuckles turned white with the force of her

pounding, the sound of wood connecting with flesh echoing in her ears.

"Think he's got Heather in there?" Derik asked, his concern etched across his face. "Maybe the other women, too?"

Morgan clenched her jaw and nodded. "It's possible. We have to get inside," she said, her mind racing with plans of action. As they continued their attempts to gain entry, the sickening thought that Felix might already be hurting Heather – or worse – fueled Morgan's urgency. She wouldn't let another innocent life be destroyed by this man, not on her watch.

Just then, she heard a scream.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The muffled scream cut through the pounding music like a siren in the night, causing Morgan's heart to leap into her throat. Jerking her head toward Derik, she saw the same fear etched on his face that she felt twisting in her gut.

"Did you hear that?" she asked, even though they both knew he had. The scream, a woman's voice – Heather's? – had hung in the air for just a moment, but it was enough to solidify their resolve.

"Let's do this," Derik said, his eyes locked with hers. In unison, they stepped back and drew their guns, preparing to breach the door.

Morgan took one last deep breath, steeling herself for whatever horrors awaited them inside. Then, in one swift motion, she kicked the door open, the wood splintering as the lock gave way. They moved in quickly, guns raised, scanning the room for any sign of Felix or his victims.

"Clear!" Derik shouted over the music, his voice strained. But there were no people, only a sea of empty beer bottles littering the floor, glinting in the dim light like so many discarded dreams. Each shattered bottle seemed to mock Morgan's hope that they'd find Heather alive and well; instead, it was as if they had been led into a tomb.

"Where the hell are they?" Morgan hissed under her breath, her eyes darting around the room. She could feel her anger bubbling up, threatening to explode. "Felix, come out now! This is the FBI!"

The deafening music pulsed through the air, making it difficult for Morgan to hear anything else or even think clearly. She clenched her jaw and tried to focus, following the reverberating sound waves until she found the source – a massive stereo system in the living room. A display of neon lights blinked and flashed to the beat, casting eerie shadows on the walls. With a swift motion, Morgan flicked the power button off, silencing the chaotic noise.

"Hey, where'd the music go?" a man's voice called from upstairs, his tone irritated and confused.

Morgan looked up toward the ceiling, her face tense as she listened for any other sounds. Derik, still sweeping through the lower level of the house, glanced at her with a nod, signaling that he was ready for whatever came next.

"Show yourself!" Morgan shouted, trying to maintain authority despite the

uncertainty gnawing at her insides. "We're armed and we're not afraid to use force if necessary!"

"Who are you people?" the voice replied, sounding more alarmed than angry now. The floorboards above them creaked as the man began to move, likely seeking the safety of a locked door or hiding place.

"Damn it," Morgan thought, her frustration mounting. He had the advantage of being on higher ground, and they had no idea what weapons he might have access to. She knew she couldn't afford to let her guard down for a second. "Please, just come out peacefully," she called, her voice betraying her desperation. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will if you force my hand."

A door creaked open, and Morgan held her breath, waiting for whatever was about to unfold.

The air grew tense as they waited, the silence almost deafening after the cacophony of music moments before.

Finally, footsteps shuffled above them, and a disheveled figure appeared at the top of the stairs. It was Felix, wearing nothing but his boxers, his hands raised in the air as he trembled uncontrollably.

"Who are you really?" he stammered, his eyes darting between Morgan and Derik. "Are you here for money? Look, I can pay you."

"Enough games," Morgan snapped, feeling her patience wearing thin. She pulled out her badge, allowing it to catch the light just enough to emphasize its authenticity. Beside her, Derik did the same, the pair presenting a unified front. "We told you who we are. FBI. You're not getting out of this by throwing cash around."

"Please, I have more than enough money," Felix persisted, sweat beading on his forehead as his voice cracked. His desperation was palpable, and Morgan couldn't help but feel a pang of pity for the man, despite her suspicions about him.

"Money isn't going to save you this time," she thought, trying to maintain her steely exterior. "But maybe the truth will."

"Then prove it," Felix challenged, his bravado returning momentarily. "Prove that you're really agents and not... not some kidnapers or something."

Morgan's clenched jaw began to ache, her fingers gripping the handle of her gun with white-knuckled tension. She didn't have time for Felix's pathetic attempts at bribery; lives were on the line, and every wasted second felt like an eternity.

Just then, a woman appeared at the top of the stairs, wearing a housecoat and looking bewildered. Her disheveled hair framed her face in a way that was somehow both wild and endearing. Morgan's heart leaped into her throat – this had to be Heather.

"Are you Heather?" she asked, her voice strained with urgency.

The woman blinked down at them, eyes wide in surprise. "Yes," she replied, her tone laced with confusion. "What's going on? Who are you people?"

"Finally," Morgan thought, relief washing over her like a cool wave. "We might be getting somewhere." She allowed herself a moment to collect her thoughts before diving into the explanation Heather so clearly needed.

"We're with the FBI," she said, gesturing to Derik beside her. "We're investigating two murders. One of the victims was found by the marina where Felix keeps his boat. Security footage shows you two fighting there. We need to know what happened."

Heather's face went pale, her breath hitching as she processed the information. Though she seemed genuinely shocked, Morgan couldn't help but scrutinize her every movement, searching for anything that might indicate deception.

"Two murders?" Heather whispered, her fingers curling around the railing as she steadied herself. "I... I don't understand. We weren't fighting, exactly. It was just a disagreement."

"Disagreement?" Derik repeated, his brow furrowing. "We saw you struggle. It looked violent."

Heather's face flushed with indignation as she stepped closer, her hands balled into fists at her sides. "Look, I was really drunk that night, and Felix was just trying to help me into the boat. It wasn't what it looked like on the security footage."

Morgan studied her for a moment, searching for any hint of deceit in her eyes. But Heather's gaze remained steady, filled with an earnestness that Morgan found difficult to dismiss.

"Alright," Morgan conceded, though not entirely convinced. "So you've been here all night, partying?"

"Yes," Heather replied, nodding vigorously. "This is my friend's place. She let us use it for the weekend."

The pounding bass from the stereo had ceased, leaving only an eerie silence hanging in the air. Morgan could hear the faint sound of water lapping

against the shore, the distant hum of police boats patrolling the lake. She knew they couldn't afford to waste more time on dead ends, not when a killer was still at large.

"Your father was about to report you missing, Heather," Morgan told her, her voice tinged with an uncharacteristic gentleness. "You left your phone behind, and he was worried sick."

Heather's eyes widened in surprise, her hand flying to cover her mouth. "Oh God, I didn't even think..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "I should call him, let him know I'm okay."

Morgan watched as Heather's shoulders sagged, her eyes flickering with a mixture of defiance and vulnerability. "My family doesn't approve of my relationship with Felix," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "He's twenty years older than me, but I'm an adult now. I can make my own choices."

"Choices like staying up all night partying at your friend's place without telling anyone?" Derik asked, his voice skeptical.

Heather's cheeks flushed a deep red, but she met his gaze head-on. "Yes. Like that."

Morgan studied the young woman, the stubborn tilt of her chin and the fire in her eyes. She couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for her – after all, she knew what it was like to have people doubt her judgment and question her decisions. But their priority was solving this case, not validating Heather's life choices.

As she glanced back at Felix, who stood nervously in the background, Morgan felt a gnawing sense of frustration building in her chest. Everything about him screamed 'sleazebag,' from his greasy hair to his too-tight boxer shorts. And yet, as much as she wanted to pin these heinous crimes on him, something told her he wasn't their man.

"Alright," she sighed, rubbing her temples as if to ward off an impending headache. "I want both of you to stay put while we continue our investigation. If we have any further questions, we'll be in touch."

"Of course," Heather murmured, her relief palpable.

As Morgan and Derik made their way back to the police boat, her mind raced with the implications of this dead-end. She could almost hear the clock ticking, each second bringing them closer to the killer's next move. And though she hated to admit it, she knew that finding the truth would require more than just her instincts and determination.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, her frustration evident as they boarded the boat. "I was so sure we were onto something."

"Sometimes things don't work out the way we hope," Derik replied quietly, his eyes sympathetic but unwavering. "But we'll find him, Morgan. We always do."

She nodded, trying to draw strength from his words as they sped across the water, the wind whipping through their hair and the distant shoreline gradually fading into the darkness. But deep down, she couldn't shake the feeling that time was running out – and with each passing moment, the killer was growing bolder, more dangerous, and increasingly out of reach.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Amber's heart pounded in her ears, drowning out the sound of her own ragged breaths. The sun was a warm kiss on her face, but it offered cold comfort as panic clawed its way up her throat. She squirmed against the restraints that held her wrists tightly behind her back, the rough fibers digging into her skin. But no matter how much she wriggled, they held fast. Her mouth was filled with the taste of stale fabric - a gag to stifle her cries.

"Please," she whimpered, her plea muffled and barely audible even to herself. "Let me go."

It defied belief. She had been kidnapped in broad daylight, snatched right off the street like a helpless child. She couldn't fathom how or why it had happened. All she wanted was to be free of this nightmare.

"Wh-what do you want from me?" Amber tried to shout, but the gag choked her voice down to a pitiful croak.

She felt a presence near her feet, and then something itchy being looped around her ankle. It had to be a rope. Her mind raced with horrifying possibilities.

"Stop! Please, I'll do anything!" she sobbed, her voice cracking with terror. She strained against the blindfold, desperate for any glimpse of her surroundings, but her world remained shrouded in darkness.

"Shh," her captor said, his voice dangerously calm. "Just relax, Amber. I won't hurt you if you cooperate."

Amber's stomach churned at the sound of him using her name. How could he possibly know who she was? Her fear intensified, and she fought to keep her breathing under control. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and decay, making Amber's nostrils flare as she inhaled. She could hear the faint lapping of water against some unseen shore, and her heart pounded against her chest like a trapped bird. Was he going to drown her?

"Please," she whispered again, straining to keep her voice steady. "I don't know who you are or what you want, but I beg you, let me go."

There was no response, only the oppressive silence that hung over them like a shroud. Amber's thoughts wandered to her parents, who had both passed away recently. They had wanted so much for her to live her life after they were gone, to make something of herself, to be happy. And now fate seemed determined to play a cruel game on her.

"Mom... Dad..." she murmured, a note of despair creeping into her voice. She felt tears sting her eyes, but they remained trapped behind the blindfold.

"Your parents can't help you now, Amber," her captor said, his voice cold and mocking. Her heart skipped a beat at his words, and she couldn't suppress a sob.

"Please," she choked out again, desperation dripping from her voice. "I'll do anything if you just let me go."

"Anything?" he mused, sounding almost thoughtful for a brief moment. "Well, that's an interesting offer, but I'm afraid it's not quite enough."

Amber clenched her fists, struggling against the ropes that bound her hands behind her back. The coarse fibers dug into her skin, but she was unable to loosen them even a fraction.

"Then tell me what you want!" she cried out, fear making her voice tremble. "I'll do whatever it takes, just please don't hurt me!"

"Ah, Amber," her captor sighed, an odd note of regret in his voice. "If only things were that simple."

The sound of water grew louder, and the air around her felt colder, damper. She shivered involuntarily, her body shaking with terror and the chill in the air. Was he going to throw her into the water? Was this how she was going to die?

"Please," she whimpered one last time, her voice barely audible even to herself. "Please don't do this..."

"Shh," he whispered, his breath hot against her ear, making her shudder. "There's no point in begging any longer, Amber. It won't change anything."

Amber's heart pounded in her chest as she desperately tried to speak, to plead with her captor once more. But the gag in her mouth stifled her words, reducing them to pitiful, unintelligible whimpers.

"Please," she thought, praying that whoever had taken her would somehow understand her silent plea. "Please, let me go."

But there was no response, and the sound of water continued to swell around her, heightening her fear. She could feel the dampness in the air clinging to her skin, chilling her to the bone.

Suddenly, the blindfold was yanked away, and harsh sunlight assaulted her eyes. Amber squinted against the brightness, trying to make sense of her surroundings.

"Where am I?" she wondered, struggling to focus on the details of the unfamiliar landscape before her.

As her vision cleared, she realized she was standing on a wooden dock at the edge of an eerily still lake. The water was dark and foreboding, a stark contrast to the clear blue sky overhead. There was no sign of civilization anywhere – just trees and the seemingly endless expanse of water.

"Wh-where are we?" she managed to choke out, her voice muffled by the gag but marginally more audible than before.

"Does it matter?" her captor asked, his tone almost conversational. "You won't be here much longer, anyway."

"Stop this," she begged silently, her mind racing as she tried to come up with some way to escape, to save herself from whatever fate he had planned for her. "I can't die like this. Not now."

"Look around you, Amber," the man continued, seemingly unaware of her internal struggle. "No one will find you here. No one will even hear you scream."

Her heart sank at the cold truth of his words. All the hope she'd been clinging to vanished in an instant, replaced by a crushing sense of despair. She was utterly alone, abandoned to the mercy of a man who seemingly had none.

The man's ice-cold eyes seemed to drill holes straight through Amber's skull as he reached down and removed the gag from her mouth. She gulped in a breath of fresh air, feeling the sting of tears at the corners of her eyes. The rough fabric had left her lips raw and chapped, and she fought to suppress the urge to scream.

"Go ahead," her captor said, his voice devoid of emotion. "Scream your lungs out. No one will hear you."

Amber hesitated, weighing her options. A part of her wanted to heed his words, to release the fear and rage that was bubbling beneath the surface. But another part of her, a small glimmer of hope, whispered that perhaps there was still a chance for escape.

"Please," she stammered, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Please, let me go. I'll do anything. I won't tell anyone about this, I swear."

The man eyed her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Amber's heart raced in her chest, each beat a desperate prayer for survival. She couldn't bear the thought of dying here, alone and helpless, her parents' memory tainted by the violence of her own end.

"Anything?" he finally replied, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

"Y-yes," Amber answered, her voice trembling with fear. "Just... just let

me live, please."

For a moment, the world seemed to hang in the balance. Amber held her breath, waiting for the verdict that would decide her fate.

"Look at me," he commanded, his smile growing wider and colder. Amber forced herself to meet his gaze, her eyes wide with terror. She searched for any trace of mercy in the depths of his dark, unfeeling eyes, but found nothing.

As she stared into the void that was her captor's soul, Amber felt something shift within her. It was as if the light inside her – the hope, the love, the very essence of who she was – was being slowly choked out, leaving only darkness and despair.

"Please," she whispered again, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I don't want to die."

"Life is full of disappointments," he replied, his voice a cold, emotionless monotone. "You can't always get what you want."

Amber clenched her jaw, trying to find the strength to fight back, to resist this man who held her life in his hands. But she was bound, blindfolded, and utterly powerless, and she knew that there was no escape from this nightmare.

"Remember my face," he said, his tone taunting. "Remember it as the last thing you'll ever see."

Before Amber could respond, before she could beg or plead or curse him to hell, she felt a strong push against her chest. Her heart leaped to her throat as she fell backward, the air around her suddenly replaced by the shockingly cold water of the lake.

The world disappeared around her, swallowed up by the murky darkness of the water. Panic surged through her body, her mind screaming for oxygen as she fought against the restraints that held her captive. But no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't break free.

As the blackness closed in around her, Amber desperately tried to hold onto the memories of her parents, their love and warmth providing a small comfort in her final moments. And as the water filled her lungs and the darkness consumed her, she prayed that they would be waiting for her on the other side.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The police boat's engine hummed as it cut through the dark water, the sun dipping in the midday sky. Morgan Cross stood at the bow, one hand gripping the railing, her eyes scanning the shoreline for any sign of movement. She could feel the weight of her past pressing down on her shoulders, the ten years she'd spent in prison never far from her mind.

Derik stood beside her, his gaze equally intense as they approached the lakeshore. As they neared the dock, Morgan's phone buzzed in her pocket, startling her out of her thoughts. She pulled it out and saw Mueller's name on the screen. "Cross," she answered, her tone clipped.

"Morgan, you aren't going to believe this," Mueller said, urgency heavy in his voice. "Another body has been found. Very fresh – just happened today, maybe an hour ago. About forty minutes outside of town."

Morgan's stomach dropped, a cold dread settling in her chest. "Are you sure? It's connected to our case?"

"It's the same guy, Cross. Trust me."

"We're on our way," she replied, then hung up the phone and turned to Derik. "Another victim," she said, her voice tight with controlled anger.

"Where?" Derik asked, his face tense with concern.

"Forty minutes out of town," she responded, already calculating the quickest route in her head. "Let's get moving."

As the boat docked, Morgan couldn't shake the feeling that time was running out - not just for this latest victim, but for all of them. Each step towards the car echoed the rhythmic beat of her heart, reminding her of the stakes involved, the lives lost and destroyed by someone who remained unknown.

"Drive," she ordered Derik, her voice a whip crack of command. He nodded in silent agreement, starting the car and pulling away from the lakeshore with practiced efficiency.

Morgan's thoughts raced as they sped through the streets, each unanswered question gnawing at her like a hungry beast. She couldn't afford to let her emotions take over - she had a job to do, and she would see it through to the end, no matter what it cost her.

The police sirens wailed in the distance, a mournful ode to yet another life lost. Morgan and Derik pulled up to the scene, their car gliding to a stop on the gravel road. The lake lay ahead, a still and glassy surface that belied the horror beneath. A cacophony of birds sang from the surrounding fields, ignorant of the tragedy unfolding.

"Come on," Morgan said, unbuckling her seatbelt as she stepped out of the car. Her boots crunched on the gravel, each step heavy with the weight of responsibility. Derik followed close behind, his own face a mask of determination.

"Agents," an officer greeted them, his voice strained. "You made it."

"Tell us what happened," Morgan demanded, her eyes scanning the tape cordoning off the area.

"An elderly fisherman reported finding a body in the lake," the officer explained, gesturing towards the water. "He came here for his usual fishing trip and spotted something in the water. When he realized it was a woman, he tried to help, but she was already dead."

"Any witnesses other than the fisherman?" Derik asked, his brow furrowing.

"None that we know of," the officer replied. "This place is pretty secluded."

Morgan stared out at the lake, her mind racing with questions. Another victim, another life taken, right under her nose.

"Lead us to the body," Morgan instructed the officer, her voice firm and authoritative.

They followed him as he led them through a long field with tall grass, the blades brushing against their legs as they walked. The sun beat down on them mercilessly, but Morgan's focus remained solely on the task at hand.

As they approached the private lake, a small wooden dock came into view, jutting out into the still water. On the shoreline, a forensics team was already hard at work, examining the lifeless form that lay sprawled on the damp ground.

"Thank you, officer. We'll take it from here," Derik said, dismissing the man with a nod. As he walked away, Morgan's gaze fell upon the body, her heart tightening in her chest.

"Another one," she whispered under her breath, taking a step closer. The woman looked so peaceful, her skin clean and unblemished, her clothes free

of any obvious stains or damage. She seemed almost as if she could open her eyes at any moment, yet Morgan knew the terrible truth - this woman's life had been violently cut short.

"Third victim," Derik murmured, his voice heavy with the weight of the situation. "A woman, just like the others."

Morgan approached the body, her mind focused on the task at hand. She couldn't let herself dwell on emotions — not now, with a killer still out there. A gust of wind sent ripples across the lake's surface, and Morgan shivered, struck by the contrast between the serene surroundings and the tragedy that had occurred here.

"Okay," she muttered to herself before slipping on a latex glove. The rubbery smell permeated the air as she gently lifted one of the woman's arms, checking for any signs of struggle or defensive wounds.

"Find anything?" Derik asked, his voice low and respectful.

"Nothing obvious," Morgan replied, her brow furrowed in concentration. "No bruising, no cuts."

"Same as the others," Derik noted, his eyes scanning the area around them. "What the hell is going on here?"

Ignoring his question, Morgan continued her examination, her gloved fingers searching the woman's pockets. Her touch encountered something cold and wet; carefully, Morgan pulled out a waterlogged wallet. The leather was swollen from its time in the water, but she managed to pry it open.

"Let's see who you are," she murmured, extracting a damp driver's license. She wiped away the moisture, revealing the face of Amber Jade, thirty-six years old. A pang of sadness hit Morgan as she took in the lifeless woman's details — her light brown hair framing a soft, round face, her green eyes once full of life, now vacant.

"Her name was Amber Jade," Morgan announced, her voice wavering slightly despite her best efforts to remain composed. "She was only thirty-six."

"Damn," Derik breathed, his expression somber. "Another young life taken too soon."

Morgan beckoned to the forensics team, her voice firm and demanding. "Get her out of here, and sweep the area for DNA. I want this place turned inside out."

As they moved into action, Morgan scanned the scene, taking in the flurry of activity around her. It was then that she noticed a figure standing near two

local police officers — an elderly man, his face etched with concern and confusion.

"Derik," she said, nodding toward the old man, "I think that's our witness. Stay here and keep an eye on the forensics team. I'm going to talk to him."

Without waiting for a response, Morgan strode across the grass, her boots leaving a faint trail in the dewy blades. As she neared the man, she caught snippets of their conversation — something about fishing and how he'd never seen anything like this before.

"Excuse me," Morgan interjected, her tone polite but authoritative. She flashed her badge, the gold gleaming in the sunlight. "Special Agent Morgan Cross, FBI. I understand you found the body?"

The elderly fisherman glanced at her, his eyes filled with sadness. "Yes, ma'am. I'm Fred Ericson. I was just telling these officers here... I come to this lake all the time to fish. Never seen anything like it."

Morgan nodded, trying to project empathy while keeping her professional distance. "I can only imagine how shocking this must have been for you. Can you walk me through what happened?"

Fred hesitated, then sighed deeply. "Well, like I said, I was here to fish. Just minding my own business when I saw something floating in the water. Didn't think much of it at first, but then..."

He trailed off, visibly shaken. Morgan felt a pang of sympathy for the man, but she knew she had to keep pressing if they were going to find answers.

"Take your time, sir," she said gently. "What did you do when you realized it was a body?"

The fisherman swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing as he spoke. "I tried to pull her out, but she was too heavy. And I could tell she was already gone... so I called the police."

Morgan pursed her lips, considering his story. It seemed straightforward enough, but there was always more to uncover. She needed to know everything this man had seen and heard, no matter how seemingly insignificant.

"Thank you for your help," she told him, her voice firm but compassionate. "We'll do everything we can to bring this killer to justice. You have my word."

As she turned to rejoin Derik, her mind raced with questions and possibilities. There had to be something they were missing — some clue that

would connect Amber Jade to their other victims and lead them closer to the truth.

Fred took a shaky breath, his gaze returning to the crime scene as if it held answers instead of gruesome reality. "Well, like I said, I came here to fish like usual. I'd just set up my gear when I saw something floating in the water." He rubbed his hands together nervously, as if trying to rid himself of the memory. "At first, I thought it was debris or something, but then I could see... her."

Morgan followed his gaze to where the forensics team was still working on Amber Jade's body. The pristine condition of her skin and clothes made the whole situation even more unsettling. She refocused on Fred, knowing she needed every piece of information he could provide.

"Go on," she urged, her eyes locked onto his.

"The lake isn't that deep here, but she was clearly being weighed down by something," Fred continued, his voice trembling. "I tried to pull her out, but she was just too heavy. And I knew... I could tell she was already dead. So I called the police."

As Morgan processed his words, a well of empathy stirred within her. Despite her hardened exterior, she couldn't help but feel for this innocent man who had stumbled upon such a grisly scene. A part of her hoped that he wouldn't be haunted by the image for too long, though she knew that was unlikely.

"Did you notice anything unusual or suspicious before you found her?" Morgan asked, her gaze steady on Fred's face. She tried to read any subtle changes in his expression, hoping for a clue that would lead them in the right direction.

Fred shook his head slowly. "No, nothing at all. This lake is very private—I never expected something like this to happen here." His voice wavered, and Morgan could sense the shock and disbelief that still lingered beneath the surface.

"Alright," she said, nodding. "If you remember anything else, please don't hesitate to contact us."

"Of course, Agent Cross," Fred replied, giving her a solemn nod.

Morgan turned away from him and walked back towards Derik, who had been observing their conversation from a distance. As she approached, she could see the shared determination in his eyes—a reflection of her own resolve.

"Let's get back to HQ," Morgan told him, her voice firm yet tinged with urgency. "We need to hash out everything we've learned so far and figure out our next steps."

Derik nodded in agreement, his eyes narrowing slightly as he processed the weight of the situation. "You're right. We can't afford to waste any more time."

As they made their way back to their vehicle, Morgan's mind raced with questions and possible connections between the victims. She knew that the answer lay somewhere within the details, and she was determined to uncover it—no matter how long it took or how many sleepless nights it demanded.

The fluorescent lights flickered above Morgan's head as she sat in her cluttered office at FBI headquarters, the silence and stillness of the late hour pressing down on her. Scattered across her desk were case files, autopsy reports, and photographs—each one a haunting reminder of the lives that had been snuffed out far too soon.

Morgan took a deep breath and opened the latest file on her desk, immersing herself in the details of Amber Jade's life. As she read, she discovered that Amber had lived with her parents until their recent deaths—her mother succumbing to stomach cancer and, just weeks later, her father suffering a fatal heart attack.

"Broken heart, huh?" Morgan muttered under her breath, her own chest tightening at the thought. She knew all too well the pain of losing loved ones, the overwhelming grief that could consume a person whole. It was a pain she had carried with her since her release from prison, a constant reminder of the life that had been stolen from her.

As she continued reading, Morgan noted that Amber appeared to have no other family, no friends or acquaintances listed as emergency contacts. The realization left Morgan with an aching sadness, a hollow emptiness that echoed through her heart.

"Who do I even inform of her death?" she whispered, her voice barely audible in the empty office. The words hung heavy in the air, a stark reminder of the loneliness that seemed to envelop Amber's life—and, if she were honest with herself, her own as well.

Morgan sighed, rubbing her temples as she forced herself to focus on the

task at hand. There had to be something more to this case, some connection between Amber and the other victims that would lead them to the killer. And she wouldn't rest until she found it.

But despite her determination, Morgan couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched, that someone—perhaps the killer themselves—was observing her every move. She shivered at the thought, her instincts screaming at her to stay alert and trust no one.

There had to be something to connect these victims—something she'd missed.

She was going to find it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Morgan leaned back in her chair, the soft hum of the fluorescent lights overhead providing a steady soundtrack to her thoughts. Her gaze wandered from Amber's file to the evidence board on the wall—photographs of Stacy Cox and Martha McTavish stared back at her, their eyes hauntingly empty.

Stacy, Martha, and now Amber, Morgan thought, her brow furrowing as she tried to make sense of the pattern. Each woman had been struggling with her own demons: Stacy with alcoholism, Martha with drug addiction, and Amber with grief. Was this what the killer was after? Women in vulnerable states, grappling with trauma?

She pursed her lips, a small knot forming in the pit of her stomach. If that were true, then the killer wasn't just vicious; they were also ruthlessly calculating, preying on those who were already suffering.

Morgan's eyes flicked over the case files spread across her desk, the dim lamplight casting long shadows on the walls. She rubbed her temples, feeling the exhaustion seep into her bones. The room felt smaller, more suffocating than usual.

"Hey," Derik's voice broke through her thoughts as he leaned against the doorway, holding out a bag of food. "I grabbed some burgers. You want one?"

Morgan hesitated for a moment, her stomach growling in protest, but her distrust of Derik won out. "No thanks, I was planning on stopping somewhere on my way home later." Her voice sounded distant even to herself, cold and detached.

"Alright," Derik said, not pushing the issue. He set the bag down on a nearby chair before crossing his arms. "So, have you read all of Amber's files?"

Morgan nodded, her gaze returning to the papers in front of her. She pictured Amber's lifeless body by the lake, the haunting image burned into her brain. "Yes, it's a sad case. She lost both her parents recently, and she didn't have any other family. It seems like grief was consuming her."

Derik frowned, concern etching lines into his forehead. "This killer has a knack for picking vulnerable women, doesn't he?"

"Whoever it is, they're preying on these women's pain, and that just makes this whole situation even more twisted."

"Agreed," Derik murmured, his gaze meeting hers for a brief moment before he looked away. "It's heartbreaking, isn't it?" Derik agreed, the somber tone in his voice matching Morgan's. "Heartbreaking, really. Amber and her parents all gone within such a short period of time." He shook his head, looking down at the floor as he processed the information.

Morgan glanced up at Derik, noting the genuine sadness in his eyes. It was moments like these that reminded her they were both human, both affected by the darkness that surrounded them daily. When she didn't respond, Derik continued.

"Can't help but wonder how the killer managed to get to her," he said, running a hand through his hair, ruffling the dark strands. "I mean, she must have been grieving, vulnerable... What kind of monster targets someone like that?"

"Someone sick and twisted," Morgan muttered, her jaw clenched tight as her mind raced with possibilities. She looked away from Derik, focusing on the photographs of Amber sprawled out on her desk. The young woman's eyes seemed to stare back at her, pleading for justice.

"Anyway," Derik sighed, sensing the tension in the room, "If you need me, just give me a shout. I'll be around." He hesitated for a moment, his gaze lingering on Morgan before he turned towards the door.

"Thanks, Derik," Morgan replied quietly, without looking up. She heard the door click shut behind him and let out a small breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She knew Derik was trying to be supportive, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she needed to keep her distance.

As she stared down at Amber's lifeless face, Morgan's determination strengthened. Like Amber, Morgan had lost her family – her mother passing many years ago, and her father's recent death still weighing on her heart. She had pushed people away during her time in prison, and now, there was no one she could truly call a friend.

The realization struck her with an icy wave of loneliness. If she were to die tomorrow, who would be left to mourn her passing? Who would care enough to notify anyone or see that her life mattered? The only person she could think of was Derik, but he was quickly becoming a source of distrust and uncertainty.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, gripping the edge of her desk until her knuckles turned white. Her anger wasn't directed at Derik, but at the situation she found herself in. She needed to solve this case, to bring justice

to Amber and the other victims, but at what cost?

Frustration gnawed at her insides like a trapped animal, desperate to escape. She couldn't stay cooped up in her office any longer. Morgan grabbed her coat and paperwork, deciding to finish her reports somewhere else – somewhere she could clear her head and find some semblance of peace. The diner, she thought, remembering the familiar comfort of its worn leather booths and the smell of strong black coffee.

As she strode through the dimly-lit hallway, her footsteps echoing in the emptiness, Morgan felt the weight of her solitude pressing down on her shoulders. She was determined to put an end to these senseless deaths, even if it meant facing her own demons in the process. But as her hand closed around the door handle, she couldn't shake the nagging voice in the back of her head, whispering that she'd never truly be free from the shadows of her past.

"Let them try," she whispered fiercely to herself, stepping out into the storm. "I won't let them win." And with that, Morgan walked away from her office and towards the diner, hoping to find some solace – however fleeting – within its walls.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The diner's neon sign cast a warm glow over the sidewalk, beckoning Morgan inside like an old friend. She stepped into the refuge of the familiar establishment, where the scent of frying bacon and percolating coffee enveloped her like a comforting embrace. Finding a booth near the back, she shrugged off her coat and slid onto the worn leather seat, its faint creak a testament to countless conversations held within these walls.

"Long day, huh?" The waitress asked, setting down a steaming mug of black coffee in front of Morgan. Her voice was tinged with sympathy, the lines on her face evidence of the long hours she spent serving others.

"Seems like every day is a long one lately," Morgan replied, forcing a ghost of a smile as she cradled the mug, letting the warmth seep into her chilled fingers.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"BLT please, the usual."

"Coming right up." The waitress nodded before disappearing behind the counter.

Morgan sighed and opened the file folder she had brought with her, spreading the paperwork across the table. As she filled out the reports, her mind wandered to Amber Jade. What would her life have been if not for the senseless violence that had snuffed it out? Would she have found happiness or succumbed to the grief that threatened to swallow her whole?

"Here you go, hun," the waitress said, placing the BLT sandwich on the table. "Enjoy."

"Thank you," Morgan murmured, her attention fixed on the case documents scattered around her.

Her appetite waned, but she forced herself to take a bite of the sandwich, savoring the salty crunch of the bacon even as her thoughts churned. How could she uncover the truth behind Amber's death when so much of her own life remained shrouded in mystery?

"Excuse me, Morgan?" The waitress's voice cut through her reverie. "There's a call for you. Do you want to take it?"

"Sure," she replied, curiosity piqued. Who could be calling her here?

As she walked towards the phone, her fingers brushed against the cold metal of her FBI badge tucked securely in her coat pocket. It was a constant

reminder of the path she had chosen and the sacrifices she had made to pursue justice. Whoever was on the other end of that line, she would face them head-on – just as she had faced every challenge that life had thrown her way.

Morgan approached the phone mounted on the diner wall, her hand hesitating for a moment before she picked up the receiver. The hum of conversation in the background faded as her focus narrowed to the voice on the other end of the line.

"Hello?" she asked, trying to sound casual despite the uneasy feeling that settled in her gut.

"Special Agent Morgan Cross," came a muffled response, barely audible over the crackling static. "Your father served in the FBI, but it ended badly for him and he had to get out. He made too many enemies, and you paid the price, getting locked up for ten years. It's time you faced the truth."

Her grip tightened on the receiver, knuckles whitening. She leaned closer, straining to pick up any nuances in the distorted voice that could offer a clue. The words echoed in her head, stirring up memories she had buried deep within herself. She had known her father to be a simple project manager for the city—a man who oversaw the construction of various buildings. It was a low-key job, and he kept his head down. Morgan had no memory of him ever having any problems with anyone, at work or otherwise.

"Who is this?" Morgan demanded, her voice tense and sharp as a razor's edge. "Tell me who you are right now."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, then the call disconnected abruptly, leaving her standing in the diner with nothing but the low hum of static to keep her company.

"Damn it," she hissed under her breath, slamming the receiver back onto the wall-mounted phone. Her heart raced, adrenaline coursing through her veins like fire.

"Everything alright?" asked the waitress, eyeing Morgan with concern.

"Fine," Morgan replied curtly, her mind already racing on to the next steps. She couldn't trust an anonymous tip – especially one that seemed so calculated to unsettle her – but the implications were too significant to ignore.

Shaking hands retrieved her jacket from the booth, the half-eaten BLT sandwich forgotten. As she shrugged into the garment, Morgan couldn't help but think back to the conversations she'd had with her father before he passed. He'd always been cryptic about his past profession, evading every

question with a skill she could only now recognize as professionally honed.

Could he have been an agent like me?

No, it was ridiculous. He would have told her. There was no way he would have taken that to the grave. Her father loved her, trusted her--he would have told her. *If my father was an agent, and it ended badly for him, did his enemies come after me? Did they frame me for murder?* she pondered, the questions gnawing at her insides like a ravenous beast. Her father couldn't have been an FBI agent, she was certain of it. He was a quiet man. The anonymous call had to be a sick prank, and the only person who knew where she would be at that moment was Derik.

"Enough," she whispered to herself, her voice tense and strained. She gathered her belongings and stormed toward the exit, the door jingling as she pushed through it. Outside, the sun cast long shadows on the pavement, streaks of gold and darkness blending together like the swirling thoughts inside Morgan's head. Morgan's grip on her phone tightened as she stood outside the diner, the wind whipping strands of her hair across her face. The metallic taste of anger mixed with confusion flooded her mouth as she punched Derik's number into her phone. The paperwork in her other hand crumpled under the force of her emotions.

"Derik," Morgan spat out before he could even say hello. "Do you think it's funny to mess with me? Calling my diner with some twisted story about my father?"

"Whoa, Morgan, hold on," Derik replied, clearly taken aback by her anger. "I didn't call you. I swear."

Her eyes narrowed as she stared off into the distance, processing his words. She wanted to believe him, but her gut instinct whispered otherwise. "Right," she scoffed. "This is just a coincidence, then? You knew I'd be here, and now someone calls with information about my past? Seems pretty convenient."

"I promise, it wasn't me," Derik insisted, genuine concern lacing his words. "But if it wasn't me, then who was it?"

Morgan bit her lip, considering the possibilities. If it wasn't Derik, then did that mean the call was genuine? Or was someone else trying to manipulate her? She shook her head, forcing herself to focus. Morgan clenched her fist, the anger surging through her veins like a wildfire.

"I don't believe you," she spat bitterly, clenching her teeth. "Just stay away from me, Derik."

"Wait, Morgan—" Derik's protest was cut short as she disconnected the call, leaving him on the other end with only the sharp beep of the line going dead.

With her heart pounding in her chest, Morgan stared at her phone for a moment before shoving it into her pocket. She stood outside the diner, lost in thought, the soft glow of the neon sign flickering overhead, casting a reddish hue on the pavement.

"Trust no one," she whispered to herself, her father's old advice echoing in her ears. It was a mantra that had served her well during her time in prison – but now, out in the world once more, she found herself questioning everything, including her ability to know whom she could rely on.

She shook her head, forcing her thoughts back on track. There was work to be done, and she couldn't afford to let her guard down – not with lives at stake.

Determinedly, she strode across the parking lot to her car, the gravel crunching beneath her shoes. As she slid behind the wheel, she glanced around, taking note of the other vehicles and people milling about. Paranoia gnawed at her, making her hyper-aware of everything around her.

She needed to stay sharp and keep her emotions in check. Whoever this mysterious caller was, they had managed to get under her skin – but she couldn't let them win. She had to find this killer before they struck again, and uncovering the truth behind the call would be part of that.

As she pulled out of the parking lot, her resolve hardened, matched only by the steely determination in her eyes. She would not let this caller manipulate her, nor would she allow Derik's presence to compromise her investigation. Right now, she had to find the man who was drowning those women.

There had to be something she'd missed in the case files. Whatever it was, she was going to find it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Morgan sat hunched over her kitchen table, the glow of her laptop screen casting angular shadows on her face. A half-empty cup of cold coffee sat untouched next to her as she flipped through a stack of files that seemed to spill out from every corner of the table like a paper waterfall. Skunk was curled up at her feet, his gentle snores punctuating the otherwise quiet room.

"Come on," Morgan muttered under her breath, scanning the documents with her hardened eyes. She was searching for a connection between Stacy Cox, Martha McTavish, and Amber Jade - but so far, the thread remained elusive. Her mind continued to circle back to the AA meeting where Stacy had been last seen, leaving with an unknown man in his forties. Was he the key to all of this? Or just another dead end?

Letting out a sigh, she decided it was time to follow up on Amber Jade. With no family or friends to contact, her only lifeline was her physician, Dr. Stone. Morgan pulled out her phone and dialed his number, tapping her fingers impatiently on the table as she waited for him to pick up.

"Dr. Stone speaking," came the voice on the other end.

"Dr. Stone, this is Special Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI. I'm investigating the death of one of your patients, Amber Jade," she said, trying to keep her voice steady, despite her frustration.

"Oh, goodness, yes," he said. "I received word of Amber's passing. It's tragic."

"She was the victim of homicide, yes, and she was not the first victim. I understand you were Amber's physician. Can you tell me anything about her life that might help me understand what happened to her?"

There was a pause before Dr. Stone replied, his voice guarded. "I treated Amber, yes, but I can't share personal medical information without proper authorization."

"Of course," Morgan said, quickly assuring him that she had the necessary clearance. "We're just trying to piece together any possible connections between these women, and any information you have could be crucial. It doesn't have to be anything medical--I'm merely trying to understand who Amber was as a person."

Dr. Stone hesitated for a moment longer before relenting. "Well, Amber didn't have any close friends or family, as far as I know. She was a private

person, but we had built up a rapport over the years. It's tragic what happened to her."

Morgan nodded even though he couldn't see her. She knew she needed more than just sympathy – she needed a lead. "Did Amber ever mention attending AA meetings, doctor? Or had she been struggling with an addiction?"

"AA meetings?" Dr. Stone's surprise came through clearly. "No, I don't believe she ever mentioned anything like that to me. She was quite well-adjusted in our sessions, but she wasn't handling her parents' deaths very well. It's possible she turned to alcohol after I last saw her, but I couldn't say for certain."

"Thank you, Doctor. If you think of anything, please let me know."

"I will, Special Agent Cross. Thank you."

Morgan hung up and sighed, disappointment heavy in her chest. She had been hoping she could somehow tie Amber to Stacy with the AA meetings, but if Amber wasn't even an alcoholic, then the theory was moot.

Morgan stared at the cluttered mess of files strewn across the table. If there was no lead in Amber's life, then maybe she had to turn it back to Martha, the last victim they'd found. Martha was most likely the first victim, unless there were still others out there, waiting to be found.

Morgan grabbed the worn manila folder with Martha's name scrawled on the front, flipping it open to reveal a collection of documents and photographs.

Her eyes scanned the pages, taking in the details of Martha's life: known drug addict, frequented shelters, no fixed address. It was possible Martha had attended AA meetings with Stacy.

The only name that seemed viable was a welfare caseworker – Francine, who was Martha's emergency contact. Morgan dialed the number, hoping against hope that Francine might hold the key to unlocking this mystery.

"Hello?" A warm, kind voice answered the phone.

"Hi, Francine? My name is Morgan Cross, I'm an FBI agent investigating the recent murders of Stacy Cox, Amber Jade, and Martha McTavish. I understand you were Martha's caseworker?"

"Yes, I was," Francine responded, concern evident in her tone. "How can I help you, Agent Cross?"

"Did Martha ever mention anything about attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, or knowing anyone who did?" Morgan asked, her

fingers gripping the edge of her couch tightly.

"AA meetings? No, not that I recall," Francine replied thoughtfully. "Martha struggled with addiction, but she never expressed an interest in getting sober through AA or any other program."

"Damn," Morgan muttered under her breath, her heart sinking further. "Can you tell me anything else about Martha?" Morgan asked, her voice straining to hold back her frustration. She rubbed her temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on.

"Martha had a very hard life," Francine sighed. "She lost a child when she was younger and just never quite picked herself back up. To be honest, I think that's what led her down the path of addiction. It was her way of coping."

Morgan glanced at the photo of Martha in the file, her heart aching for the pain she must have experienced. But how did this information connect her to Stacy and Amber? She dug her nails into the couch cushions as she fought the urge to grunt in frustration.

"Thank you, Francine," Morgan said, forcing a polite tone. "I appreciate your help."

"Of course, Agent Cross," Francine responded kindly. "If there's anything else I can do, please don't hesitate to call."

"Will do. Take care, Francine." Morgan ended the call and tossed her phone onto the coffee table, the frustration boiling over. She ran her fingers through her hair, tugging slightly in an attempt to ease the tension building inside her.

They took a breath and thought about the victims. Stacy Cox, the orphaned waitress; Martha McTavish, the grieving mother who couldn't escape addiction; and Amber Jade, struggling to cope with the loss of her parents. They all shared a traumatic past, but what was the link between those traumas that led each of them to their tragic end? Was it their trauma that made the killer target them?

"Skunk," Morgan said, rubbing her dog's head as she lay curled up at her feet. "Am I missing something obvious here? What connects these women?"

The dog simply snorted in her sleep, providing no answers.

"Thanks for the help," Morgan muttered sarcastically, leaning back on her chair and closing her eyes for a moment. She tried to gather her thoughts, to clear the clutter in her mind and see the pattern that was eluding her.

Maybe I should refocus on the marina, she thought aloud, opening her

eyes again to glance at the list of people with access to the docks. She had been so sure that the marina held the answer, but with three different murder locations, she couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't the key to solving this case. After all, the bodies were found at all different locations.

Morgan's thoughts wandered, and she found herself back in the diner earlier that day. The anonymous phone call echoed in her mind - a voice claiming her father had been an FBI agent. She shook her head, dismissing the idea. There was no way he had been; he would have told her. Her dad loved her, and especially since she joined the FBI, she knew there was no reason why he'd keep it from her.

"Skunk, watch the files for me, buddy," she mumbled to her loyal dog, who looked up at her with sleepy eyes. Morgan pushed herself out of the chair and made her way to her bedroom closet. She slid open the door and dug out an old cardboard box wedged between her hiking boots and winter jackets.

"Alright, Dad, let's see if there are any secrets hiding in here," she muttered as she peeled the tape off the dusty box. Inside were photo albums from her childhood, each one filled with memories of simpler times. Pictures of her and her dad filled the pages, his ever-present grin warming her heart.

Could he really have been an agent before she was born? But why would he hide it? And why would he quit?"

"Hey, kiddo," her dad's voice seemed to echo from the past, a memory of him calling her inside after playing in their front yard. Morgan blinked away tears that threatened to spill over, focusing on the pictures instead.

Is there something I missed all these years? she asked herself, studying every detail of her father's face in each photograph. *You always said you wanted to protect me, but from what? Was it this life? Being an agent?*

The photo albums seemed to whisper as Morgan turned the pages, each image a window into her past. A snapshot of her riding a bike through their suburban neighborhood, with her dad's strong hands steadying her from behind, brought back the smell of fresh-cut grass and the feeling of the wind against her face. A pang of sadness stabbed at her heart, but she continued to flip through.

"Look at us, Dad," she murmured, tracing a finger over a picture of them building a snowman together. Morgan could almost hear his laughter and feel the chill of the snowflakes melting on her cheeks. "You made life so much fun."

She held up a photo of her hugging her dad after her high school graduation. The pride in his eyes was something she'd never forget. He was always her biggest supporter.

Morgan's fingers trembled as she turned another page, and her eyes fell upon a photograph of them dancing at the Father-Daughter Dance. She closed her eyes for a moment, allowing the memory to wash over her. The sound of the music playing softly in the background – it all felt so real.

"God, I miss you," she whispered, her voice cracking under the weight of her grief. "I wish you were still here. You would know what to do."

A tear slid down her cheek as she stared at the last photo in the album. It was taken just before her arrest – her father's arm around her shoulders, both of them smiling for the camera, blissfully unaware of the storm that was about to hit.

Is it true, Dad? Were you really an FBI agent before I was born? And if so... why didn't you tell me?

Her father's eyes seemed to bore into hers through the photograph, but they offered no answers. The room felt colder now – the silence heavy and oppressive.

Morgan took a deep breath, trying to steady her racing heart. With a sudden burst of energy, she shoved the boxes back into the depths of the closet, shutting the door with a resolute slam. The sound echoed through the quiet room, and as it faded away, Morgan felt an odd sense of determination settle over her. She couldn't let some stranger's words get to her. She knew her dad. Even if he did lie to her, she knew there would have been a good reason.

Her footsteps felt heavy as she crossed the living space, feeling the weight of her past threatening to crush her. She sank back onto the kitchen chair, surrounded by the files and photos that she had been poring over for hours. Her eyes flicked between them, searching for connections that remained elusive.

"Stacy, orphan... Martha, lost child... Amber, parents gone..." Morgan whispered, her voice barely audible against the hum of her laptop. She could feel the exhaustion creeping up on her, but she refused to give in. There had to be something she was missing – some clue that would unravel the mystery.

"Three different traumas, three different murder locations..."

She leaned back on the chair, staring at the ceiling as if the answers were written there. Her mind swam with faces and names, victims and locations,

but nothing seemed to fit together.

As much as she hated to admit it, Derik would probably be a good help right now. But as always, she'd pushed him away. Even if her reasons were good, she was frustrated with herself. They needed answers. She just hoped Derik was looking for them too.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Megan leaned her head against the cool window of the van, watching her own breath fog up the glass as she exhaled. The night was dark, the streetlights casting a soft orange glow on the pavement below. She couldn't help but smile at the thought of their earlier movie date - her cheeks still felt warm from all the laughter they shared. Her date was older than her, but there was a certain charm that came with his age. She felt a surge of gratitude for having met him at the church group; it was a serendipitous blessing.

Mom and Dad would love him, she thought to herself, thinking about how proud they'd be of her choice. Megan had always been teased by her parents for her string of not-so-perfect boyfriends.

Her eyes drifted towards the hardware store's entrance, willing her date to emerge any moment now. As much as she wanted to bask in the afterglow of their evening, the clock was ticking. It was already almost ten p.m., and she had to be home by 10:30 at the latest. Where was he? What could possibly be taking him so long?

"Okay, Megan, calm down," she murmured, folding her hands in her lap and taking a deep breath. "He'll be out soon."

She tried to distract herself by replaying the funniest moments from their date in her mind, focusing on the sound of his laughter and the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled. But the longer he took, the more her anxiety began to bubble up inside her. A part of her worried about her parents' reaction if she was late, while another part couldn't shake off a nagging unease about being alone in a parked van at night.

At long last, her date strode back to the van, a plastic bag swinging from his hand. He tossed it on the backseat before sliding behind the wheel. Megan craned her neck to get a better look at its contents: rope and duct tape. Her curiosity piqued, she turned to face him as he settled in the driver's seat.

"Sorry for taking so long," he said, adjusting the rearview mirror. "I needed to pick up some stuff for work tomorrow before the store closed."

Megan offered a tight smile, her unease momentarily forgotten. "It's fine," she replied, brushing off her previous anxiety. "But I really need to get home now. My parents are expecting me back soon."

"Of course," he said, nodding understandingly as he started the engine. The van roared to life, and Megan felt a shiver of relief run down her spine.

As much as she'd enjoyed their date, she really did need to get home.

As they pulled away from the hardware store, Megan couldn't help but glance back at the rope and duct tape once more. She wondered what kind of job required such items, but decided that it was none of her business. Instead, she focused on the familiar sights passing by outside her window, counting the minutes until she would be back within the comforting embrace of her family home.

Yet, despite her best efforts, the lingering image of the rope and duct tape gnawed at the edges of her thoughts. A small voice within her whispered doubts, planting seeds of unease that threatened to grow with each passing second. With a determined effort, Megan pushed those thoughts away and focused on the road ahead, willing herself to remain calm and collected.

Megan noticed her date's grip on the steering wheel tighten. The engine hummed softly as he turned onto the main road, flicking on the turn signal to indicate a left turn. A chill crept up her spine, and she glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard. 10:12 PM. Not much time left.

"Hey," she said hesitantly, "my parents' place is back the other way."

"Is it?" He smiled, his eyes never leaving the road. "I must have gotten turned around."

"Y-yeah," Megan stammered, trying to ignore the nagging feeling that something was amiss. As they continued to drive, the houses lining the streets became fewer and farther apart, replaced by dark, looming trees that cast eerie shadows across the road. Her heart rate picked up, each beat pounding in her ears like a warning drum.

"Are you a good swimmer, Megan?" he asked, his voice light and casual as if discussing the weather.

"Swimmer?" She furrowed her brow, thrown off by the sudden change in topic. "I-I guess so, why?"

"Always good to know," he replied, his smile never faltering. "You never know when you might need that skill."

Megan's thoughts raced alongside the passing scenery, struggling to find any logic or reason in his words. She gripped the door handle, her knuckles turning white as her body instinctively prepared for flight. But the doors were locked, trapping her inside this moving metal cage. She swallowed hard, her throat dry and tight.

"Really, we should turn around," she insisted, her voice wavering slightly. "My parents are going to worry."

"Don't worry, Megan," he said, his tone still cheerful but now carrying a hint of steel beneath the surface. "We'll get you home, eventually."

As the van continued to speed farther and farther away from her parents' house, Megan's thoughts turned inward. She searched her memories for any sign that this man was not who he claimed to be, anything that could explain the chilling dread that now consumed her. And with each passing moment, the image of the rope and duct tape in the backseat loomed larger and more sinister in her mind.

The van's engine hummed ominously as the headlights pierced through the darkness, casting eerie shadows on the road ahead. Megan's heart pounded in her chest, each beat resonating with her mounting fear.

"Stop the car!" she demanded, desperation seeping into her voice. "I want to get out!"

"Sorry, no can do," he responded with a smirk, his eyes never leaving the road.

Megan's hands shook as she fumbled for the door handle, tugging at it with all her might. The lock held firm, refusing to relent under her frantic efforts. Her breathing grew rapid and shallow as panic clawed at the edges of her mind.

"Unlock the doors!" she screamed, her voice cracking. "Let me out!"

"Ah, now why would I do that?" he replied, his tone sickeningly sweet. "You're mine now, Megan."

Her stomach twisted into knots, revulsion mingling with the terror that threatened to consume her. What did he mean by that? And what did he have planned for her? Images of the rope and duct tape flashed before her eyes, only serving to heighten her fear.

"Please," she begged, tears streaming down her face. "I just want to go home."

"Home?" he mused aloud, as if considering her words for the first time. "Well, we'll see about that."

Megan's thoughts raced, searching for any possible means of escape. She glanced at the glove compartment, wondering if there might be something inside that could help her. A tool, a weapon, anything.

"Looking for this?" he asked, holding up a small knife, its blade glinting in the dim light of the dashboard. "Don't worry, it won't hurt... much."

Sobs wracked her body as she realized the gravity of her situation. He had complete control over her, and there was nothing she could do about it. She

felt sick, powerless, and completely alone.

"Please," she whispered, her voice hoarse with fear. "Don't hurt me."

"Aw, don't cry, sweetheart," he cooed, his words dripping with false sympathy. "You'll see. We're going to have so much fun together."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The dull morning light filtered through the blinds, casting a soft glow on the white sheets. Morgan stirred, her body aching from the previous day's endeavors. She blinked groggily, trying to shake off the last remnants of sleep. As she rolled over, she became aware of a warmth beside her, and her eyes snapped open in shock.

Derik lay next to her, naked and grinning. His lean form seemed out of place in her bed, as though he were an apparition borne from the depths of her subconscious. Her heart raced with a mixture of confusion and desire.

"Derik?" Morgan's voice was barely above a whisper, as if speaking any louder would shatter the moment. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey, Morgan." His smile was intoxicating, his blue eyes shining with mischief. He reached up and brushed a stray strand of hair from her face, fingertips grazing her cheek gently. "Don't worry about it. Everything's going to be okay."

Morgan's mind reeled at the sensation of his touch, her body betraying her hardened exterior. She swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry, her pulse pounding in her ears. She knew she should question him further, but found herself unable to resist the allure of his presence.

Suddenly, Derik's expression shifted, his eyes narrowing as he reached under the pillow. Morgan's heart clenched in her chest as he withdrew a gleaming knife, its razor-sharp edge glinting in the dim light. Her breath caught in her throat, and she tried to back away, but her body refused to obey.

"Derik, what are you doing?" she choked out, barely able to speak through her terror.

"Sorry, Morgan," he whispered, his voice devoid of emotion. "But it has to be this way."

Morgan's brain screamed at her to move, to fight, but she was paralyzed by fear. With a swift motion, Derik raised the knife above his head, its cruel edge pointing straight at her heart. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound emerged. The knife descended toward her in a blur, and—

Morgan jolted upright in bed, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and her heart hammered against her ribcage like a caged animal. It took her several moments to process that she was awake, and that the terrifying encounter with Derik had only been a dream.

Her eyes darted around the room, taking in the familiar surroundings of her bedroom. The morning light cast long shadows across the floor, and the comforting scent of coffee wafted up from the kitchen below. Most importantly, she was alone—there was no sign of Derik, naked or otherwise.

"Jesus," she muttered, running a hand through her damp hair. "Get a grip, Morgan."

As she tried to steady her breathing, Morgan couldn't shake the lingering unease that clung to her like a cold sweat. She knew that dreams were often just manifestations of subconscious fears, but something about this one felt different. More real. And given her complicated relationship with Derik, it left her feeling more vulnerable than ever.

Morgan shook her head, trying to dispel the last remnants of the nightmare. She couldn't afford to let it rattle her—not with a killer still on the loose and the memory of her past haunting her every step.

The shrill sound of her phone ringing on the nightstand tore Morgan from her thoughts, making her wince. She snatched it up, ready to silence the unwelcome interruption, but paused when she saw Mueller's name flashing on the screen. She promptly answered.

"Cross," Mueller's gruff voice greeted her. "Apologies for the early hour, but we've got another one. A body has been found."

"Jesus," Morgan whispered, her blood running cold. The nightmare was suddenly forgotten, replaced by a sickening sense of dread that weighed heavy in her gut. Guilt overtook her; she'd fallen asleep, and now the murderer had struck again. "Where?" she asked, holding her breath.

"Out by a lake, near the cottage area," he replied, his voice tense and urgent. "I need you there ASAP."

"Understood," she said curtly, already throwing off her covers and reaching for her clothes. Her mind raced as she tried to make sense of this latest development. Another victim? So soon after the last one?

"Be careful, Cross," Mueller added, a note of concern creeping into his otherwise stoic tone. "We don't know what we're dealing with here."

Morgan clenched her jaw, resolved to face whatever lay ahead. "I will be," she promised, and ended the call.

As she dressed hastily, her fingers fumbling with buttons and zippers, Morgan couldn't help but feel a gnawing unease growing within her. The dream was still fresh in her mind, and the chilling thought that it might somehow be connected to this new crime scene sent shivers down her spine.

But as she stepped out into the pale morning light, the image of Derik's haunting smile lingered in her thoughts, an unwelcome specter that refused to be banished. And for the first time since she'd been released from prison, Morgan couldn't help but wonder if she was truly prepared for the darkness that awaited her.

The morning sun glinted off the surface of the lake, casting a serene, picturesque scene that belied the horror lurking beneath its placid waters. Morgan stepped out of her car, the gravel crunching under her shoes as she made her way to the small gathering of police officers by the water's edge. The cottage area outside of town was usually a haven for vacationers and families seeking respite from the daily grind – but today, it had become the stage for yet another gruesome discovery.

"Agent Cross," greeted Officer Daniels, a young man with a solemn expression who seemed to have aged years since their last encounter. "We've got another one."

Morgan nodded curtly, steeling herself for what lay ahead. "Show me."

They led her down a narrow path that wound through the trees, their shadows dappling the ground like dark, silent witnesses to the atrocity that had taken place. As they rounded a bend, Morgan caught sight of the victim – a young woman, her lifeless body lying on the shore of the lake, her pale face turned towards the sky as though pleading for mercy that would never come. Her hands were bound behind her back, like the others, and there was a rope hooked to her ankles.

Officer Daniel's expression was solemn. "A local fisherman found her. His line got stuck on her dress. We've ID'd her as Megan Hart, twenty-three."

Morgan swallowed hard, her throat tight with anger and frustration. This killer was growing bolder, more deranged with each passing day – and despite all her efforts, she still had no idea who he was or how to stop him.

She crouched down beside the victim, taking in every detail with a forensic eye. There were no obvious signs of trauma, no visible wounds or marks on the young woman's body. But Morgan knew from experience that there was much more to this crime scene than met the eye. Every fiber of her being screamed that there was something here she was missing, some clue that could lead her to the killer.

She stood upright, locking eyes with Daniels. ."Get the forensic team here ASAP. I want a full report on my desk as soon as humanly possible."

"Understood, Special Agent Cross," Daniels replied, then jogged over to the team standing by.

Morgan turned away from the scene, her mind racing as she tried to piece together the fragments of this horrifying puzzle. There had to be some connection, some clue that would lead her to the monster responsible for these heinous acts – and she was determined to find it, no matter what it took. And first thing was first--she had to talk to the witness.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Morgan paced away from the lake, her sights set on talking to the witness, when Derik arrived on the scene. Morgan's heart raced as she saw Derik approach, his tall frame cutting a striking figure against the backdrop of the lake. The memory of her dream surfaced in her mind, making her insides churn with a mixture of anger and longing. She couldn't help but be drawn to him, even knowing that trusting him could be dangerous.

"Hey, Morgan," Derik said, his voice warm and inviting. "Thought you might need some backup."

Morgan turned away. "I told you to stay away from me."

"Well, too bad. This is my case too. What do we have?"

Morgan clenched her jaw, hating that he was right. She had to work with him.

"Another victim," Morgan said, her voice tight with anger. "Same MO as before."

"Damn," he whispered, running a hand through his hair. "We need to catch this guy."

Morgan nodded, finally forcing herself to meet his gaze. "Yeah," she agreed, steeling her resolve. "I'm going to go talk to the witness. He's the one who found the body."

Together, they approached the fisherman, who stood by the water's edge, cradling his young son in his arms. As they drew nearer, Morgan noticed the man's haunted expression, the way his hands shook as he clutched his child protectively. She felt a pang of sympathy for him, recognizing the familiar weight of trauma in his eyes.

"Excuse me, sir," she said gently, flashing her badge. "I'm Special Agent Cross, and this is Special Agent Greene. We'd like to speak with you about what happened here."

"Sure," the man replied, his voice trembling. "My name's Sam, and this is my boy, Davis."

"Hi, Sam," Morgan said softly. She couldn't help but think of the parents who had lost their children to this monster, aching for the pain they must be feeling. "Can you tell us what happened?"

Sam swallowed hard, his eyes welling with tears as he recounted the grisly scene. "I was fishing with Davis when my line got caught on something. I

tugged, and it felt like I'd hooked something big. When I looked in the water... that's when I saw her. I couldn't believe my eyes. I reeled her in as fast as I could and called the police. Thankfully, Davis didn't see anything."

"Good thinking," Morgan said, grateful that the young boy had been spared from witnessing such horror. She watched as he played, blissfully unaware of the tragedy that had unfolded mere feet away.

"Did you notice anything else unusual while you were out here?" she asked, turning her attention back to Sam.

"Yeah, actually, now that you mention it," Sam said, furrowing his brow in concentration. "There was this van that drove by. It had some kind of logo on the side, but I didn't get a good look at it. I thought it was odd because we don't usually see delivery vans around these parts."

"Anything else? Did you catch the license plate or any other details about the van?" Morgan pressed, hoping for a lead that might help them track down the killer.

"Sorry, no," Sam replied, clearly frustrated with himself. "It all happened so fast."

"Thank you for your help, Sam," Morgan said, her eyes scanning the lake one last time. The water rippled gently, belying the horror it had concealed just moments ago.

"Of course," Sam said. "If there's anything else I can do to help, I will in a heartbeat."

"Let's go," she whispered to Derik, a sense of urgency rising within her. It was clear that they needed to act fast. With every passing moment, the killer could be plotting his next move, selecting another innocent victim.

For now, she needed to know more about Megan's life. She turned to Derik and said, "Derik, see if Megan has any family we can contact. I want to meet with them."

Morgan entered the local precinct with purpose, her footsteps echoing through the quiet hallway. She found herself in a small, sterile room where Megan's parents, Darlene and Mark, sat huddled together, their faces etched with despair.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hart, I'm Agent Morgan Cross," she introduced herself, her voice gentle yet professional. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

The couple looked up at her, clutching at their cross necklaces as if they were lifelines. Morgan could see the raw pain in their eyes, and her heart ached for them.

"I want you to know that we're doing everything we can to find the person responsible for Megan's death," she continued. "She's not the first victim of this killer, but we're working tirelessly to make sure she's the last."

Morgan watched as Darlene's eyes filled with tears, her hands clutching at the cross necklace even tighter. She looked up to the heavens and cried out, "Why, God? Why did you do this to our baby girl?"

Mark, his own face crumpled in grief, put a comforting arm around his wife. "Darlene, we can't understand His ways," he whispered, his voice hoarse from crying. "He works in strange and mysterious ways, and someday, it will all make sense."

"Mr. and Mrs. Hart," Morgan began, her eyes locked onto the couple's grief-stricken faces, "I know this is difficult, but I need to ask if there was anything unusual about Megan lately, anything at all that could help us find the person responsible."

Darlene blinked away tears, clasping her hands together as she thought back over recent events. "Well, she did mention meeting a nice young man at her church group last week," she said hesitantly, as though unsure whether the detail held any significance.

"Did she say anything more about him?" Morgan prompted gently, her mind racing with the implications of this new information. A church group meeting... maybe it was the same guy who went to Stacy's AA meeting.

"No," Darlene admitted, shaking her head. "She just said they were going out last night, but she didn't tell us where or who she was going with."

"Where does this church group meet?" Morgan asked, trying to keep her voice steady despite the growing knot in her stomach. She couldn't shake the memory of Stacy, another victim, seen leaving her AA meeting with an unidentified man shortly before her death. Could these cases be connected?

"St. Anne's, down on Elm Street," Mark supplied, his voice heavy with sorrow. But Morgan's resolve only steeled. She had a place to look now.

The sun was sinking low in the sky, casting a warm golden glow over St. Anne's Church as Morgan pulled into the nearly empty parking lot. She

stepped out of her car, taking a moment to survey the surroundings before making her way up the steps to the heavy wooden doors.

"Excuse me," she called out softly as she entered the church, the faint scent of incense filling her nostrils. The priest, an older man with kind eyes and a gentle smile, turned from his duties at the altar to face her.

"Can I help you, my child?" he asked, his voice soothing and compassionate.

"Father, I'm Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI," she said, showing her badge. "I'm here to talk to you about Megan Hart."

A shadow crossed the priest's face, his expression turning somber. "Ah, yes," he sighed. "Such a tragedy. Megan was a bright and talented girl. It's difficult to believe that she's gone."

"Did you notice anything unusual about her lately?" Morgan asked, scanning the rows of pews for any sign of other parishioners. "Anything at all?"

The priest shook his head sadly. "I wish I could say I did, but Megan seemed her usual self. She attended services regularly and participated in our youth group. I saw no indication that anything was amiss."

"What was Megan typically like?"

"She was a kind and gentle soul, always eager to help others," the priest replied, his eyes distant as he reminisced about the young girl. "She had a strong faith and a loving heart. It breaks my heart to think that someone could do this to her."

Morgan nodded, taking in the priest's words carefully. She couldn't help but feel a sense of frustration at the lack of leads. If there was a connection between Megan's death and Stacy's, they needed to find it soon.

"Father, do you happen to know if Megan attended any other groups or meetings outside of church?" Morgan inquired, her voice gentle yet probing.

The priest furrowed his brow in thought, as if trying to recall something from memory. "I don't believe so, no."

"Did you happen to notice any new faces in the congregation recently?" Morgan inquired, recalling the connection to Stacy's AA group. "Maybe someone who took a particular interest in Megan?"

The priest furrowed his brow, considering her question. "We have many people come and go, Agent Cross. It can be difficult to keep track of everyone. If there was someone new, I'm afraid I didn't notice."

Morgan nodded, feeling the frustration build within her. Another dead

end, it seemed. But she couldn't afford to give up.

"Thank you for your time, Father," Morgan said, offering a weary smile. "I appreciate your help."

"Of course, Agent Cross," the priest replied solemnly. "We all want to see this monster brought to justice."

As she walked away from the church, Morgan's mind raced with possibilities. She couldn't shake the feeling that the killer was using churches and support groups as hunting grounds for his victims. But without any solid leads or evidence to work with, she felt like she was stumbling around in the dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Morgan stepped out of her car, the gravel crunching under her shoes as she made her way to the front door of her house. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, casting the world in a cool twilight. A slight breeze stirred her hair, but it did little to clear the fog of frustration that clung to her.

As she reached the mailbox, she noticed an envelope nestled inside. Her heart thudded in her chest, adrenaline surging through her veins. She knew it wasn't just another bill or advertisement. This was something else entirely – something that could potentially change everything.

She plucked the envelope from its resting place and examining it closely. It was unmarked, with no return address or postmark. Carefully, she slid her finger beneath the sealed flap, tearing it open with a soft ripping sound.

Inside was a single photograph, old and slightly faded. It depicted a group of stern-faced FBI agents arranged in a neat row, their expressions betraying nothing. Morgan's eyes lingered on each face for a moment before moving on, her mind racing with questions. Who were these people? Why had someone sent her this photo?

A flicker of recognition lit up her eyes as she identified one of the agents – a younger Assistant Director Mueller, his hair still dark and full. And then another face caught her attention, causing her breath to hitch in her throat.

"Is that...?" she whispered, her fingers trembling as they traced the outline of the man who looked so much like her father. But it couldn't be him, could it? He had never mentioned anything about being in the FBI, and she had no reason to doubt his word.

"Damn it," she cursed under her breath, frustration mounting as the questions multiplied. "What the hell is going on?"

Morgan knew that she couldn't let this mysterious photograph distract her from the case at hand. Lives were on the line, and she owed it to the victims – and herself – to see this through. But as she stared at the photo, a dark suspicion began to grow in the pit of her stomach, one that she couldn't shake.

"Who sent you?" she whispered, her voice barely audible as she clutched the photograph to her chest. "And why now?"

Morgan's fingers trembled as she held the worn photograph, her eyes scanning the faces of the young agents standing in formation. Her gaze

settled on one man, his stern expression softened by a hint of a smile. Staring back at her, with eyes that mirrored her own, was a man who looked so much like her father that it made her breath catch in her throat. She could hardly believe what she was seeing.

"Is that... Dad?" Morgan muttered, feeling an unsettling mix of anger and confusion washing over her. How could her own father have been involved with the FBI and never tell her? And why would Mueller hide this connection?

Morgan's fingers trembled as she held the photo, her heart pounding in her chest like a jackhammer. She stared at the image, her father's face unmistakable even amongst the row of stern-looking agents. He had always been an enigma to her, but discovering he was an FBI agent felt like a betrayal that cut deeper than any knife.

Is this my life? she wondered, feeling a sudden wave of nausea. *A carefully constructed lie?*

The silence seemed to close in on her, suffocating her with its emptiness. She flipped the photo over, scanning the faded words written on the back. The message was cryptic, but it promised answers if she dared to seek them out.

Come alone where it all started, the note read. *The place of the incident ten years ago.*

Morgan pressed her lips together, her mind racing. Ten years ago, she had been framed for murder, and her life had been forever changed. Whoever sent this photo knew about her past, knew her secrets, and wanted her to confront them.

"Who are you?" she murmured, her eyes drawn back to the faces in the photograph. Her father, Mueller...how many others had known the truth and kept it from her?

She paced the room, her thoughts a swirling vortex of anger, confusion, and fear. What would she find at the place where it all began? A trap? A reunion with her long-lost father? Or perhaps the truth that had eluded her for so long?

Determination surged through her veins, pushing aside the doubts and insecurities that threatened to consume her. She slipped the photograph into her jacket pocket, feeling the weight of it against her heart.

With that, Morgan grabbed her keys and strode out of her house, her every step fueled by a desperate need for answers. The shadows of her past loomed

large, but she refused to let them define her any longer. It was time to confront the ghosts that haunted her and finally learn the truth about her father, her life, and the lies that had shaped her destiny.

Morgan's hands gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white as she barreled down the backroad highway. The sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of blood orange and deep purple. Her heart hammered against her chest, adrenaline coursing through her veins as she pushed her car to its limits.

A sudden flash of headlights in her rearview mirror caught her attention. Another car was racing after her, closing the distance at a terrifying speed. Panic clawed at the edges of Morgan's mind, but she forced herself to stay focused, her eyes darting between the road ahead and the approaching vehicle.

The car drew closer, its engine roaring like a beast from the depths of hell. Morgan's instincts screamed at her to swerve, to avoid whatever danger was bearing down on her. But she knew she couldn't afford to lose control now, not with so much at stake.

She gritted her teeth, flooring the accelerator, and felt her own car respond with a surge of power. The other vehicle matched her speed, weaving through the darkness mere feet behind her.

"Get off my tail!" Morgan snarled, her gaze flicking to the rearview mirror once more.

The mysterious car seemed to be toying with her, edging ever closer before falling back again. Morgan fought to keep her fear in check, focusing on the road ahead and the secrets that awaited her at her destination.

Morgan's heart raced as she pulled her car over to the side of the road, gravel crunching beneath the tires. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles turning white. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for the confrontation to come. As the other car came to a stop behind her, she recognized the familiar shape of Derik's vehicle.

"Derik?" she muttered under her breath, confusion and relief warring for dominance within her. She opened her door, stepping out into the night air. It was cooler now, the sun having dipped below the horizon, leaving only faint traces of color in the sky.

Derik emerged from his own car, looking simultaneously sheepish and determined. He approached Morgan, hands raised to show he meant no harm.

"Cross," he said, his voice strained. "I need to talk to you."

"Talk?" she scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "You nearly ran me off the road! What the hell were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry," he replied, genuine remorse in his eyes. "But it was me. I sent you those messages."

"Messages?" Memories of the cryptic notes and the unsettling photograph flashed through her mind. The phone call--it really was him. But why? Morgan's head hurt from the confusion of it all. "Why?" she asked. "What are you trying to do?"

"Listen, I know how this looks," he continued, rubbing the back of his neck. "I had a plan, but I changed my mind last minute. I realized I couldn't go through with it, and I had to stop you before you went any further."

"Go through with what, Derik?" Morgan demanded, her voice thick with frustration and hurt. "What could possibly be so important that you'd do all this, mess with me like this?"

"Please, just hear me out," Derik pleaded. "I can explain everything. But not here, not now. We need to get somewhere safe, where we can talk without being overheard."

Morgan hesitated, torn between her curiosity and her desire for answers and the nagging feeling that she couldn't afford to trust anyone — not even her partner.

After all this time--all these mind games--she was done playing around. She didn't even recognize Derik anymore. He was a stranger, and now, he'd gone too far.

Morgan's hand shook as she gripped her gun, pointing it at Derik's chest. His eyes went wide, his hands up. She steadied her voice, trying to maintain an air of authority despite the storm of confusion raging within her. "You have two minutes, Derik. Start talking."

"Alright, alright," he began hurriedly, raising his hands in surrender. "I... I was tasked to lead you into a trap, Morgan. I didn't want to do it, but they had me cornered. They knew things about me, things that would ruin my life if they got out. They said they'd expose everything if I didn't help them take you down."

Morgan's mind reeled as she tried to process his words. Her finger twitched on the trigger, the weight of betrayal heavy in her heart. She focused

on the cold metal of the gun, using it as an anchor to keep herself anchored in reality. Of course, she wasn't going to gun down Derik, but if the threat made him finally talk, then so be it.

"Who are 'they,' Derik? Who's been blackmailing you?"

"I don't know," he admitted, his face paling. "I never saw their faces. They contacted me through burner phones, dead drops... always one step ahead of us, always hidden. But they knew about my past mistakes, things I'd done that I thought were buried forever. And they made it clear they'd use those secrets against me if I didn't cooperate."

"Then why change your mind?" Morgan asked, struggling to reconcile this desperate figure with the steadfast partner she'd known for years.

"Because... because I couldn't do it, Morgan. I couldn't betray you like that. Even though I felt trapped, like I had no choice but to obey them, I couldn't bring myself to lead you to them. I don't know what they were going to do, but—" His voice broke, and for a moment, Morgan saw a glimpse of the man she'd come to trust implicitly. "I would never forgive myself."

Morgan took a deep breath, the air stinging her lungs as she focused on the man she'd once called her partner. "Derik, what are you talking about? What else is there?"

Derik's gaze dropped to the ground, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "When you were in prison, my ex-wife gave birth to a son. I've never been in his life, but these people found out about him. They threatened to kill him if I didn't help them take you down."

The words hit Morgan like a sucker punch to the gut, forcing her to reevaluate everything she thought she knew about Derik. The anguish in his voice was genuine, and she could see that he was caught between wanting to protect his child and his loyalty to her. If Derik really was a father, then she had to understand why he might want to protect his son. But she also knew by now that there were little words Derik could say that would make her trust him.

"You're lying," she said. "You don't have a son."

"I do!" He went to reach into his jacket, and Morgan held her gun firmly on him. "Cross, come on, you know me," he said. "It's my wallet. Can I get it out?"

Reluctantly, Morgan nodded.

Derik took out his wallet and removed a photo, then flashed it to Morgan. It was a picture of an infant, one who had Derik's blue eyes.

"This is him," Derik said. "Cross, I'm telling you the truth."

For once, Morgan believed him. She hated herself for it, but she did.

"Is the photo you sent me real? Was my father really an FBI agent?"

Morgan asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Derik hesitated, his eyes searching hers for understanding. "I shouldn't answer that, Morgan. You'll discover your father's secrets in your own time. But I swear to you, I never wanted any of this to happen."

A heavy silence settled between them, filled with the weight of unspoken apologies and years of trust now hanging by a thread. Morgan's thoughts raced as she struggled to process Derik's revelation, the betrayal she felt now tempered by the knowledge that he, too, had been backed into a corner.

Morgan's fingers clenched into fists, her knuckles turning white. The feeling of betrayal still burned like a hot coal in her chest. "Who are these people, Derik? Tell me their names."

Derik shook his head, a mixture of frustration and helplessness etched across his face. "I told you, I don't know all the details, Morgan. They've been very careful to keep their identities hidden."

"Convenient," she snapped, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"Look," he said, raising his hands in a placating gesture, "I want to help you, Morgan. I never wanted any of this to happen." He paused for a moment, his jaw clenching as he fought the emotions threatening to spill over. "Let's go somewhere private, and figure out our next move."

Morgan stared at him, struggling to reconcile the man she had trusted for years with the person who now stood before her. As much as she wanted to believe him, as much as she understood his desperation, she couldn't shake the nagging doubt that something else was going on.

"Thanks, but no thanks," she said finally, her voice cold and distant. "I need some time alone right now." She turned away from him, walking back toward her car with determination in every step.

"Please, Morgan," Derik called after her, desperation lacing his voice. "You don't have to do this alone."

"Maybe not," she replied without turning around. "But for now, that's exactly what I'm going to do."

As Morgan slid into the driver's seat, she took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm of emotions raging inside her. The truth about her father and the looming threat of those hunting her felt like an unbearable weight on her shoulders. But she would face it head-on, just as she had faced everything

else in her life.

With a determined twist of the key, Morgan started her car and drove away, leaving Derik standing on the side of the road, his face a study in anguish and regret. For now, she would face this battle alone. But as the miles stretched out before her, she couldn't help but wonder if she was making the right choice.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The evening sky was a canvas of dark purple and orange streaks as Morgan pulled her car into her driveway. The familiar sight of her house offered no comfort tonight; instead, it seemed to be suffocating her with its quiet and stillness. She didn't want to go inside and sit there, not even alone with Skunk.

She needed a drink.

So, she got out of the car and set out on foot, her mind swirling with the night's events. Derik. Her father. It was all too much.

Morgan found herself outside the dimly lit entrance of a local bar. The neon sign above the door flickered weakly, casting an eerie glow over the worn brick walls. She hesitated for a moment before pushing open the door, bracing herself for the noise and chaos of the world inside.

"Evening, Morgan," greeted the bartender, his face lined with age and experience. "What can I get you?"

"Whiskey," she replied curtly, sliding onto a stool at the far end of the bar, away from the laughter and chatter of the other patrons.

"Rough day?" he asked, pouring her drink and placing it in front of her.

"You could say that," she muttered, raising the glass to her lips and knocking back the amber liquid in one swift motion. The burning sensation in her throat briefly distracted her from the storm of emotions raging within her, but it wasn't enough.

"Keep 'em coming," she said, her voice low and steady. The bartender nodded and refilled her glass, leaving her to her thoughts as he turned his attention to the other customers.

Morgan stared into the depths of her drink, the golden swirls reflecting the dim light overhead. Her mind raced with questions about her father, her past, and what it all meant for her future. Could she really trust anyone at the FBI? Was Derik truly on her side or just another pawn in this twisted game?

"Damn it," she cursed under her breath, downing another glass of whiskey. The warmth spread through her chest, reaching its tendrils out to numb the pain and uncertainty that plagued her.

"Hey, you okay?" a voice asked from beside her. She glanced over at a man sitting nearby, his face creased with concern. Morgan shook her head slightly, trying to remember the last time someone had genuinely asked her

that question.

"Fine," she lied, forcing a tight-lipped smile as she signaled the bartender for another drink. "Just a long day."

"Seems like we all have those lately," the man sighed, raising his own glass in a silent toast. Morgan clinked her glass against his before turning her attention back to the amber liquid that was becoming her best friend tonight.

As she continued to drink, the world around her began to blur and sway, the noise of the bar fading into a dull hum. But no amount of alcohol could truly drown out the memories and questions that consumed her thoughts.

"Can't run away from it all, can I?" she whispered to herself, gazing at the now-empty glass in front of her. For a moment, she almost wished she could simply disappear into the hazy comfort of oblivion, leaving behind the twisted web of lies, betrayal, and murder that seemed to follow her wherever she went.

But deep down, she knew she couldn't escape it - not now, not ever. And so, with a heavy heart and an unsteady hand, she reached for the bottle of whiskey one more time, desperately seeking solace in the bottom of the glass.

The burn of the whiskey in Morgan's throat momentarily numbed her emotional pain, but the haze of liquor couldn't completely erase the weight of failure that clung to her like a second skin. She slouched on the worn barstool, idly tracing patterns in the spilled liquid with her finger, as the cacophony of the bar enveloped her.

"Did you hear about the latest one they found?" a gruff voice asked from her left--a man talking to one of his friends. "Same as the others, hands tied, drowned."

"Fourth girl this month," another man chimed in, his words slurred by alcohol. "You'd think the FBI would have caught the sicko by now."

Morgan tensed at their words, instinctively eavesdropping on the conversation between the two men. Their faces were blurred by her alcoholic fog, but their discussion pierced through, each word stinging like a thousand tiny needles.

They were talking about *her* case.

"Real grisly stuff," the first man said, shaking his head. "Makes you wonder what kind of monster could do something like that."

"Whoever he is, he's got some nerve," the second man added. "I tell ya, this city is getting more and more dangerous."

As the reality of her situation settled into her bones, Morgan felt a cold

dread tighten around her chest. It was true - she hadn't caught the killer yet, and women continued to die. The pressure weighed upon her, threatening to crush her beneath its ever-growing burden. It was all too much - the mounting body count, the secrets, Derik's betrayal...

"Do you remember that girl who drowned while scuba diving a few years back?" one of the men said. "They say it wasn't no accident."

"Really?" The other man, eyes wide with interest, leaned in closer. "You think it's the same guy?"

"Could be," the first man shrugged, taking a swig of his beer. "Crazy world we live in."

Morgan's ears pricked up at their words, an icy shiver running down her spine. Another drowning? Could there be a connection? She strained to listen, trying to catch any further information or clues, but the men moved on to another topic, leaving her with more questions than answers.

It felt like fate that she'd overheard this conversation, and Morgan steeled her resolve. She pushed everything that happened with Derik—about her father, the FBI, all of it—aside.

Maybe it was nothing, but she had to follow every lead.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Rather than go home, Morgan went straight to the office.

Wincing at the harsh glow of her computer screen, Morgan navigated her way through the database, searching for any information related to the drowning she had heard about at the bar. As the search results populated, her heart raced in anticipation. This could be it - the connection she needed to finally catch the killer that had been haunting her dreams.

Morgan's fingers flew across the keyboard as she delved deeper into the database. Sweat beaded on her furrowed brow, her mind racing with the possibilities of what she might uncover. As the search results loaded on the screen, she leaned in closer, scanning each line of text for any relevant information.

"Got it," she muttered under her breath, her eyes locking onto a case file that matched her lead. Kelly French, just twenty-one years old, had drowned while training at an upscale scuba academy in Dallas called Scuba Life. The instructor present during the incident was a man named Harry Richmond.

"Harry Richmond," Morgan whispered, committing the name to memory. She clicked on his profile and studied his photo, taking note of his dark hair and piercing blue eyes. There was something unsettling about him, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Faulty equipment and negligence, huh?" She frowned, reading through the case summary. The investigation had concluded that Harry's carelessness led to Kelly's untimely death, and the subsequent lawsuit forced the scuba school into bankruptcy.

Morgan leaned back in her chair, exhaling deeply as the gravity of the situation bore down on her. Was this Harry Richmond somehow connected to the current string of murders? Or was she grasping at straws, desperate for any lead that might help her put an end to the nightmare that had consumed her?

Her tiredness hit her. She had come straight here from the bar, and it was late. After all the drama with Derik, too, her body was now betraying her, and she could feel her eyelids growing heavy.

Come on, there has to be something here, she thought, her frustration mounting as she searched for any shred of evidence to support her theory, before she lost her will to keep going without a blink of sleep. She could feel

the weight of the victims' unavenged souls pressing down on her, urging her to find the truth and bring their killer to justice.

Morgan's eyes flicked across the computer screen, her heart pounding with a mix of excitement and dread as she scrolled through the online forum. A post caught her attention, written by someone claiming to be a former student at Scuba Life. They had their suspicions about Harry Richmond, believing he intentionally drowned Kelly French.

"Harry was obsessed with Kelly," the anonymous poster wrote. "I saw him watching her all the time, like a predator stalking his prey. When she died, it just felt off. I can't shake the feeling that he had something to do with it."

Determined to find answers, Morgan pushed through her tiredness and dove deeper into the FBI database, searching for any information related to Harry or the case involving Kelly French. She found the trial records, confirming that it was only ever about negligence - no murder charges were ever laid. The company went under, but Harry never spent time in prison.

"Unbelievable," she muttered, frustration seeping into her voice. *How could they let him go?*

She leaned back in her chair, staring blankly at the screen as she processed the information. Her gut told her there was more to Harry than met the eye, but with no concrete evidence linking him to the murders, she couldn't act on her instincts alone.

But as she leaned back, she felt the weight of the day press down on her, even heavier than before. Morgan's eyelids fluttered shut, and before she knew it, darkness...

Morgan's eyes popped open to sunlight filtering through her blinds. She awoke with a start, her office materializing around her. She blinked as she recalled last night's events—Derik, the bar, then coming here...

Harry Richmond!

Recalling the suspect she'd been looking into, Morgan sat upright and turned her computer back on. It loaded right to where she was last night. Fuelled by adrenaline, Morgan's fingers danced over the keyboard as she entered Harry Richmond's name into a search engine. The first few results were articles about the old scuba diving accident and the ensuing trial, but her eyes widened at a new thread on an online forum with his name in it.

"Harry Richmond - Connected to Recent Murders?" the title read. Curiosity piqued, she clicked on the link and began scrolling through the comments.

"Seems like he's got a thing for drowning girls," one user wrote. *"Wouldn't be surprised if he's involved."*

"His obsession with Kelly French always gave me the creeps," another commented.

Morgan leaned back in her chair, her heart pounding in her chest. She wasn't alone in her suspicions, and that only fueled her determination to uncover the truth. Yet, she needed more than speculation - she needed evidence. And a second opinion on all this wouldn't hurt either.

Her mind wandered back to Derik yesterday. As much as she loathed to admit it, she'd finally felt like, for the first time, he was being honest with her. Maybe Derik wasn't her enemy after all, and maybe he really was just trying to do the right thing.

Either way, if he was still her official partner on this case, she needed to see him.

She stood up from her desk, her legs aching from hours of sitting, and made her way through the maze of cubicles to Derik's office. To her dismay, his chair was empty, and there was no sign of him anywhere.

Her gaze shifted toward Assistant Director Mueller's office, the blinds drawn, and the door slightly ajar. Though their last interaction had been strained, Morgan knew that she couldn't let personal feelings get in the way of catching this murderer. With a deep breath, she knocked on the door before pushing it open.

"Mueller?" she called out tentatively.

"Come in, Cross," Mueller replied.

Morgan's heart stuttered as she crossed the threshold of Mueller's office. The air was dense with tension, and she couldn't help but recall the old photo that had been sent to her – the one featuring a young Mueller standing alongside her father.

"Sir," she managed, her voice steadier than she felt. "I wanted to discuss Harry Richmond with you. The guy from the scuba academy case a few years back."

Mueller looked up from his paperwork, his steely gaze pinning her in place. For a moment, Morgan lost herself in questions about him and her father. But she shook off the distraction; this wasn't the time for personal

matters. Lives were at stake.

"Richmond?" Mueller asked, raising an eyebrow. "What about him? I remember that story."

"Online forums have been discussing him in connection to these recent murders," Morgan explained, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "I think it's worth looking into."

"Harry Richmond?" Mueller repeated, leaning back in his chair. He steepled his fingers together, eyes narrowing in thought. "We've been keeping tabs on him since the scuba diving incident. I can find out where he's staying if you'd like."

"Please," Morgan said, nodding. "I have a gut feeling that there's more to this story, and we can't afford to let any leads slip away."

"Alright," Mueller agreed, reaching for his phone. "I'll get that information for you. Sit tight, Cross. We'll find him in no time."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Morgan stepped onto the weathered wooden dock, her eyes scanning the line of houseboats bobbing gently on the water. A soft breeze rustled through her long, dark hair as she tightened her grip on her badge. The sun glinted off the metal, casting a slight glare into her eyes. She squinted and looked down at the information she had scribbled on a small notepad. "Harry Richmond," it read, underneath an address for a marina. This was the place.

She walked along the row of boats, her shoes tapping against the wood, each sound echoing slightly in the quiet marina. Seagulls cried overhead, their wings beating against the blue sky. The smell of saltwater filled her nostrils, bringing back memories of her childhood on vacation with her dad. But this wasn't a time for reminiscing; she had a job to do.

Her gaze landed on a faded green houseboat with chipped paint and a name that was barely legible: "The Drunken Sailor." She could feel her pulse quicken as she hopped onto the deck, steadying herself with one hand on the railing. It creaked under her touch, hinting at years of neglect. This had to be Harry's boat – there was something about it that just felt right.

Time to face the music, Harry. She approached the door and raised her hand to knock, but before her knuckles could make contact, a loud crash made her jump back. A bottle flew out of a nearby window, shattering against the dock and sending glass shards skittering across the planks. Her instincts kicked in, and she ducked, narrowly avoiding the flying debris.

"Hey!" she shouted, her voice laced with authority. "I'm with the FBI! You throw another bottle, and I'll have your ass in cuffs!"

Inside the boat, she could hear movement – the sound of furniture scraping against the floor and muffled curses. She hesitated for a moment, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Go away!" a slurred voice shouted from within the boat. "I ain't talkin' to no damn press!"

Morgan gritted her teeth, frustration mounting as she watched another object – this time, a half-empty bottle of whiskey – come flying out of the broken window. It narrowly missed her head, splashing into the murky water below.

"Listen," she called, raising her voice to be heard over the sound of the waves lapping against the hull. "I told you, I'm not the press. I'm Special

Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI."

She paused, waiting for a response. The only sounds were those of the marina: gulls crying overhead and the creaking of boats swaying in their moorings. Morgan's thoughts raced, wondering if Harry would believe her or if he'd continue his drunken tirade.

"Throw one more thing and I won't hesitate to charge you with assaulting a federal agent," she warned, her tone icy.

The silence stretched on, tension knotting itself in Morgan's chest like a malignant growth. She clenched her fists at her sides, the wind whipping her hair into her face as she strained her ears for any sound from within the boat.

And then, just like that, she heard it: footsteps echoing hollowly through the houseboat's interior, growing louder until they reached the other side of the boat and disappeared. Her eyes darted to the left, and she caught a glimpse of a gaunt figure fleeing down the marina, his movements frantic and unsteady.

"Harry Richmond!" Morgan shouted, her voice carrying over the water as she sprinted after him. "Stop! FBI!"

As she ran, she struggled to maintain her footing on the rain-slicked boards, each stride sending her heart pounding against her ribcage. Her thoughts raced, too, wondering why Harry was running if he was innocent – or was it simply the fear of being caught?

"Stop, damn it!" she yelled again, her breath coming in short gasps.

But Harry paid no heed, his thin legs pumping with surprising speed despite his frail appearance. He weaved between moored boats, knocking over a stack of empty crates in his haste. The cacophony of crashing wood echoed through the marina, but Morgan was undeterred, vaulting over the debris without breaking stride.

"Harry, there's nowhere to run!" she called out, desperation creeping into her voice. "You're only making this worse for yourself!"

Still, he didn't stop, his wild flight taking them both further away from the relative safety of the houseboat. As Morgan chased him, her mind churned with questions. Why was Harry so terrified? Was it the guilt of his past crimes, or was there something more sinister lurking beneath the surface?

She couldn't help but feel a flicker of sympathy for the man, even as she pursued him relentlessly. If he was truly innocent, his life had been utterly destroyed by a tragic accident – an accident that had left him a shattered, broken shell of a man.

But if he was guilty...

"Stop, Harry!" Morgan shouted once more, her voice cracking with determination. "You can't run from this forever!"

And with those words echoing through the marina, she pushed herself harder, refusing to let him escape justice.

The sun glinted off the water as they raced down the marina, casting shimmering reflections that danced along the hulls of the boats. Morgan's breaths came in sharp gasps as she darted past vacationers and dock workers, each step pounding against the unforgiving wood beneath her feet.

"Stop!" she shouted at Harry, her voice strained from exertion. "I can help you if you just stop running!"

He only picked up speed, his bony arms flailing wildly as he tried to maintain balance while weaving around the obstacles in his path. A group of children playing by the water's edge scattered in alarm as he barreled through, nearly knocking a young girl into the water.

"Watch out!" Morgan warned, veering to avoid the child. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she silently cursed herself for not being faster, for not anticipating Harry's desperate flight.

"Get out of the way!" she yelled to the people ahead, praying that they would heed her warning and clear a path for her pursuit.

For a brief moment, time seemed to slow as she locked eyes with Harry. She could see the fear etched across his gaunt face, the wild desperation that drove him to keep moving despite the pain and exhaustion that must be coursing through his body. He was a man on the edge, his life hanging in the balance – and it was up to Morgan to save him from himself.

With renewed determination, she pushed forward, closing the gap between them inch by agonizing inch. The salty sea breeze stung her eyes as she sprinted, but she refused to blink, refused to let him slip away.

"Harry, please," she panted, her voice barely audible over the pounding of her own heartbeat. "I don't want to hurt you."

And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the chase came to an end. Harry stumbled, his legs finally giving out beneath him as he collapsed onto the rough wooden planks of the dock. Morgan lunged forward, her arms wrapping around him in a desperate bid to keep him from tumbling into the water.

"Got you," she breathed, relief washing over her as she held him tightly. She could feel the sharp angles of his bones beneath her hands, the frailty of

his body painfully apparent. The stench of alcohol emanated off him, and it was clear that this man was no stranger to drowning his sorrows in the bottom of a bottle.

But as she stared down at him, panting and broken on the sun-drenched marina, Morgan couldn't help but wonder: was it possible that this shattered shell of a man was truly responsible for such horrific crimes? Or had she just captured an innocent victim, forever haunted by the ghosts of his past?

"Harry," she whispered, her voice soft with uncertainty. "I need you to tell me the truth."

With Harry securely in her grasp, Morgan pulled out her FBI badge and held it in front of his face. The sunlight caught on the golden emblem, making it shimmer like a beacon of authority. "Stay calm, Harry," she said firmly. "I'm an FBI agent, not here to hurt you. I just need to ask you some questions."

The tension in Harry's body seemed to dissipate slightly, though he still appeared wary. He nodded weakly, his eyes never leaving the badge as if it were some sort of lifeline.

"Alright," Morgan began, adjusting her grip on Harry to help him sit up on the dock. She could feel the warmth of the sun on her skin and the cool breeze that ruffled her hair. "You know about the recent murders of women being thrown into lakes and drowned, right?"

Harry's eyes, bloodshot and haunted, met hers. "Yes," he replied, his voice hoarse. "I've heard about them, but I swear, I have nothing to do with it."

Morgan studied his face carefully, trying to discern any hint of deception or guilt. His eyes darted around the marina, perhaps searching for an escape route, or maybe simply too anxious to focus on anything for too long. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of saltwater and seaweed that permeated the air.

"Harry," she said, her tone gentle but firm. "I need you to be completely honest with me. Tell me everything you know about these murders."

As she spoke, she noticed a seagull perched on a nearby piling, preening its feathers before launching itself into the sky with a raucous call. In that moment, she couldn't help but feel a pang of envy for the bird's ability to simply fly away from the horrors of the world below.

"I told you," Harry insisted, his voice trembling. "I don't know anything about them. I've been holed up here, drinking myself into oblivion. My life's a mess, but I'm not a killer."

Morgan paused, her eyes narrowing as she weighed the honesty of his words. As much as she wanted to believe him, years of experience had taught her that appearances could be deceiving, and even the most unassuming individuals could harbor dark secrets.

Morgan studied Harry's gaunt frame, his skin stretched taut over the sharp angles of his bones. It was difficult to imagine someone in his condition overpowering and kidnapping women. But she couldn't afford to discount him based on appearances alone. His past held enough darkness to keep her on edge.

"Alright, let's say I believe you didn't commit these crimes," Morgan said cautiously. "How do I know you're not covering for someone?"

"Look, I'm telling you the truth," Harry pleaded, his hands shaking slightly as he gestured around the disheveled houseboat. "You can check the marina's cameras. I hardly ever leave this floating hellhole, just to get more booze. I haven't been out in a week."

The musty smell of alcohol permeated the air, mingling with the briny scent of the harbor. Morgan glanced at the cluttered mess of liquor bottles scattered across the floor, evidence of Harry's self-destructive lifestyle. She couldn't help but feel a twinge of pity for the man before her – once respected in his field, now drowning in guilt and shame.

"Is that all there is to your life now?" Morgan asked quietly, trying to suppress her empathy. "Just this boat and your booze?"

Harry's eyes flickered away from hers, settling on a frayed photo pinned to the wall – a younger version of himself, grinning brightly beside a group of fellow divers. "After Kelly died, everything went to hell. My career, my reputation... I lost it all. People blamed me for what happened to her, and I couldn't handle the guilt or the accusations. So yeah, this is it for me now."

Morgan observed the haunted expression on Harry's face, feeling her skepticism slowly giving way to sympathy. Her own years in prison had taught her the crushing weight of being labeled a criminal, even when innocent.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the stale air that reeked of alcohol and desperation. "Harry," she began, forcing herself to maintain eye contact with the man whose life had crumbled around him, "tell me about Kelly French. What really happened?"

Harry hesitated, his fingers nervously picking at the fabric of his worn-out shirt. "It all started with this older guy who joined our diving class," he

admitted, his voice barely audible above the lapping waves. "He was in his late thirties, I guess. He had this... obsession with diving. You know, breathing underwater, safety procedures, all that stuff."

"Did he have a name?" Morgan asked, her mind racing as she tried to put the pieces together.

Morgan watched Harry's eyes well up with tears as he stared down at his trembling hands. "His name was Bill," he choked out, finally breaking the silence. "He messed with Kelly's equipment before our dive... that's why she drowned."

Morgan felt a pang of sympathy for Harry, but she needed to stay focused on gathering information. "So you're saying Bill sabotaged Kelly's gear? Why would he do that?"

"Who knows?" Harry replied bitterly. "Maybe it was some twisted game to him, or maybe he had it out for her... or me." He looked up at Morgan, desperation in his bloodshot eyes. "Everyone thought I killed her because I had a crush on Kelly. But I loved her, Agent Cross. I never could've hurt her."

She studied his face, searching for any sign of deception. While she couldn't be certain, everything about Harry's demeanor suggested he was telling the truth.

"Did you ever report this Bill character to the police?" she asked. It seemed odd that he hadn't tried to clear his name by bringing up the mysterious student.

"Of course I did!" Harry exclaimed, suddenly animated. "But he disappeared after the incident and had used a fake name when he signed up for the course. The cops didn't believe me – they thought I was trying to pass the blame onto someone else."

Morgan considered this new information, her mind racing as she pieced together the puzzle in front of her. If they could find Bill, it might lead them closer to catching the killer. But with nothing more than a first name and a vague description, locating him would be near impossible.

"Harry, I need you to think back," she urged, her voice gentle yet firm. "Is there anything else you can remember about Bill? Any small detail could be important. Any peculiar habits or traits?" Morgan pressed, unwilling to give up on the possibility that there might be some clue hidden within Harry's recollections.

Harry hesitated for a moment before replying. "There was one thing,

actually. He never dived, not even once. He'd come to the classes, talk about it all the time, but he never got in the water. It was like he was terrified of it."

"Terrified?" Morgan echoed, her interest piqued. There was something about this detail that resonated with her instincts. "Thanks, Harry. I'll see what I can find. In the meantime, stay put and lay low."

As she left the marina behind, Morgan couldn't shake the thought of Bill's apparent fear of water. It was an odd quirk for someone who had enrolled in a scuba diving course, and it made her wonder if there was more to his story than met the eye.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Back at FBI headquarters, Morgan settled into her office chair and opened her laptop. She was determined to uncover any records from the scuba academy that could lead her to the mysterious Bill. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she began her search, fueled by a potent mix of determination and frustration.

"Come on," she muttered under her breath, willing the screen to reveal a long-lost piece of evidence that would bring them closer to identifying the killer. But her initial queries were met with dead ends, as the company had gone bankrupt years ago, leaving behind a trail of forgotten files and outdated contact information.

"Damn it," Morgan cursed softly, her eyes scanning the screen, hoping for a breakthrough. She knew the odds were slim – after all, this wasn't her first rodeo. But she couldn't ignore the nagging feeling that there was something crucial waiting to be discovered, lurking just beneath the surface. She couldn't afford to let another lead slip through her fingers. Not when lives were at stake.

As she delved deeper into the digital maze, Morgan's thoughts kept returning to Bill and his fear of water. It was an incongruity that gnawed at her, a puzzle she felt compelled to solve. And she would not rest until every piece had found its rightful place, and justice was served for those who had suffered at the hands of a ruthless killer.

Morgan's fingers hesitated above the keyboard as her focus was suddenly ripped away by the sound of hurried footsteps. Her eyes darted to the doorway just in time to see Derik rush past, his usually immaculate hair disheveled and his face pale. It seemed as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Derik?" she called out, concern lacing her voice. But he either didn't hear her or chose to ignore her, disappearing around the corner with a sense of urgency that set off alarm bells in Morgan's mind.

Abandoning her search for the Bill, she pushed back from her desk and followed Derik at a distance, watching him make a beeline for Mueller's office. The door stood slightly ajar, and through the gap, Morgan caught a glimpse of the stern visage of their boss.

Something's wrong, she thought, her gut tightening with anxiety. She

knew better than to barge into Mueller's office uninvited, but the nagging worry for her partner gnawed at her resolve. As angry as she was with Derik, she needed to know what was going on.

With a sigh of frustration, she turned back towards her own office, her heart heavy with concern. As she sat back down, her thoughts raced, trying to piece together what could have rattled Derik so deeply. Their partnership had been tested recently, but they'd managed to find common ground again. Or so she thought.

Back in her office, Morgan's fingers froze above the keyboard. Derik had been in Mueller's office for nearly an hour, and he still hadn't come out. And Morgan was still no closer to the truth.

Just then, she caught a glimpse of Derik hurrying past her doorway once more. His face was ashen, his eyes hollow.

"Derik!" she called out, rising from her chair with sudden urgency. The mystery surrounding him could no longer be ignored.

He didn't turn back; only quickened his pace. Morgan followed, her heart pounding with every step as she tracked him down the sterile corridor. Her mind raced with possibilities, each more distressing than the last.

"Derik, wait!" she shouted as he disappeared through the door of his office. She stormed in after him, her breath catching in her throat at the sight that greeted her.

"What are you doing?" she asked, taking in the scene before her. Derik stood amidst a whirlwind of scattered paperwork and disheveled files, frantically emptying the contents of his desk into a battered cardboard box.

"Nothing," he muttered without looking up, his voice strained. "Don't worry about it."

"Like hell, I won't." Morgan crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing. "You're clearing your desk, Derik. That doesn't look like 'nothing' to me."

"Listen, Morgan," he said, pausing in his frenzied packing to meet her gaze. There was an unspoken plea in his eyes, a desperate vulnerability she'd never seen before. "I appreciate your concern, but this is something I have to do."

Morgan's heart clenched as the realization dawned on her. He'd resigned. She'd spent so much time wanting Derik away from her, but now that the

possibility was right here, she felt herself panic. There was still so much she didn't know. There were still things she needed from him.

And in a sick, twisted way, he was still the closest thing she had to a friend.

"Explain yourself, Derik," she demanded, her tone wavering despite her best efforts to keep it steady. "Tell me why you're doing this."

Derik let out a bitter laugh, his hands still working to empty the remaining contents of his desk into a battered cardboard box. "Isn't it obvious, Morgan? I betrayed your trust. I broke my own moral code. How am I supposed to forgive myself for that?"

Morgan clenched her jaw, fighting back the tears that threatened to blur her vision. She refused to let him go without a fight. Pushing herself off the doorframe, she marched forward and began snatching items from the box, returning them to their rightful places on the desk.

"Stop it, Morgan!" Derik snapped, his frustration boiling over. But she ignored him, continuing her defiant act of resistance.

"Listen to me, Derik," she said firmly, her eyes locked onto his. "I won't let you ruin your career over this. I understand why you lied—you did it to save your son. That doesn't make what you did right, but it means something. Maybe--maybe we can work through this."

For a moment, Derik just stared at her, his eyes searching hers for any hint of insincerity or doubt. Slowly, the anger drained from his expression, replaced by a vulnerability that made Morgan's heart ache. He looked away, struggling to find the words he needed.

"Maybe you can forgive me, Morgan," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "But I don't know if I can ever forgive myself."

Morgan's hands stilled on the desk, her breath catching in her throat as the weight of his words settled over her. She knew he needed time and space to come to terms with his actions and find a way to move forward. But she couldn't let him face that journey alone.

"Derik, you need my help more than ever," Morgan said, her voice soft but firm. "Your son isn't safe, and neither are you." She looked around the room, taking in the scattered files, the overturned chair, the half-empty bottle of whiskey on the floor. This scene was all too familiar to her—a life spiraling out of control, threatening to destroy everything it touched.

"Maybe I'm better off just leaving," Derik shot back, his fists clenched at his sides. The lines of tension etched into his face betrayed his internal

struggle, the war raging inside him between wanting to stay and fight for redemption and wanting to give in to the darkness that threatened to consume him. "Maybe I deserve this."

Morgan studied him for a moment, her heart heavy with concern. She knew what it felt like to be lost, to believe that the only way to survive was to cut ties and walk away. But she also knew that sometimes, the hardest battles were the ones worth fighting. And she refused to let Derik lose himself without putting up a damn good fight.

"Derik, listen to me," she pleaded, stepping closer and forcing him to meet her gaze. "If you leave now, you'll drink yourself to death. You know I'm right. I need you as my partner. We can work on building our trust back up, and we can do it together."

His eyes, filled with pain and regret, met hers. For a moment, the silence between them seemed to stretch on forever, a chasm threatening to swallow them whole. But then, slowly, almost imperceptibly, she saw something shift in his expression. A flicker of hope, perhaps, or the first spark of determination.

Derik stared down at his hands, fingers trembling slightly as he considered Morgan's words. The weight of his past mistakes pressed heavily on his chest, making it difficult to breathe. He could feel the familiar urge to run, to escape from the harsh reality of his actions, but there was something in Morgan's eyes that held him steady - an unspoken plea for him to stay and face the consequences together.

"Alright," he said quietly, accepting the lifeline she offered. "I'll give it a shot."

"Good," she replied, her voice softening with relief. "We'll figure this out, Derik. Together."

Before they could say anything more, the shrill ring of Morgan's phone cut through the tense silence. She glanced at the screen, noting the caller ID before answering. Belinda--the woman from Stacy's AA meeting. Morgan's heart stalled.

"Belinda," she greeted. Morgan gripped her phone tightly, her knuckles turning white as Belinda's voice came through the line.

"Special Agent Cross, he was there again, at the AA meeting," she said, panic laced in her words. "I saw him leave with two other women from our group."

The fluorescent lights of the office seemed to flicker ominously, casting

eerie shadows on the walls. Morgan's heart pounded in her chest, a sinking feeling settling in the pit of her stomach. She could almost see the man, his predatory gaze locked onto his unsuspecting prey.

"Do you know the woman?" Morgan asked.

"I do, yes, their names are Sarah and Jessica," Belinda said. "I can forward you some information on them, as much as I have."

"Thank you, Belinda," she replied, forcing herself to remain composed. "I need that information ASAP."

"Will do, Agent Cross," Belinda responded, and the call ended.

Morgan lowered her phone, her vision blurring momentarily as her mind raced with dark possibilities. Two women, potentially walking straight into the hands of a killer. She couldn't shake the image, their faces twisted with fear and betrayal as they realized the truth too late.

"Derik," she said, her voice cracking slightly. "We've got to move now."

He blinked at her, expression a mix of concern and determination. "What happened?" he asked, taking note of the urgency in her tone.

"It was the woman from Stacy's AA meeting," she explained, her words tumbling out in a rush. "The man we suspect might be behind the murders was seen leaving an AA meeting with two women. We need to find them before it's too late."

"Let's go," he agreed without hesitation, the weight of their earlier conversation momentarily forgotten in the face of the potential danger.

As they hurried out of the office, Morgan couldn't help but feel a faint glimmer of hope amidst the dread. With Derik by her side, perhaps they stood a chance of stopping this monster once and for all.

But only if they could reach the two women in time.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The man gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white with anticipation as the van hummed along the highway. In the back, the two women chatted animatedly, their laughter filling the air like a sweet symphony. He glanced at them in the rearview mirror, taking note of one woman's golden hair cascading down her back, while the other's dark brown curls framed her pale face.

"Hey, thanks again for the ride," the redhead called out, her bright green eyes meeting his in the reflection of the mirror.

"Of course," he replied smoothly, flashing a charming smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "It's not every day you meet such lovely company."

As he drove, he couldn't help but feel a thrill run through him at the thought of what was to come. He had never taken two at once before, but something about these women had awakened a hunger inside him, a desire to see if he could pull it off. And what better way to prepare them than with a lavish meal, a night they'd never forget – or even see coming?

"Where are we going, anyway?" the blonde asked, her voice bubbly and excited.

"Ah, well, that's a surprise," he responded slyly, making a mental note of the perfect spot to take them. A restaurant right on the water, where darkness would envelop them, and the sound of the waves would be the perfect backdrop to their final moments.

"Oooh, I love surprises!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. Her friend chimed in agreement, and he couldn't help but smile at their enthusiasm, knowing they were completely unaware of what was in store for them.

As the van continued down the dark road, he allowed himself a moment to bask in the satisfaction of his plan. The two women, so unsuspecting and vulnerable, would soon learn the true meaning of fear and desperation. And as their laughter continued to fill the air, he couldn't help but think that there was no better sound to accompany the journey to their doom.

"Almost there," he whispered under his breath, a wicked grin spreading across his face, his heart pounding with anticipation. The night had only just begun.

The moon hung heavy in the sky, casting an eerie glow on the water's

surface as he drove along the coastline. The rhythmic sound of the waves crashing against the shore seemed to keep time with the beating of his heart, a steady reminder of the night's dark purpose.

"Look at that moon," the brunette said, her eyes wide with admiration. "It's so beautiful tonight."

"Perfect for a romantic dinner," the blonde added, winking at him through the rearview mirror.

His grip tightened on the steering wheel as he forced a smile, all the while thinking of the tides. The full moon would bring high tide tonight, and with it, the perfect opportunity to carry out his twisted desires. He could feel the thrill building within him, an electric current that coursed through his veins, igniting a fire deep within his soul.

"Did you know that the tides are influenced by the moon?" he asked, feigning casual interest as he navigated the winding road.

"Really?" the brunette replied, leaning forward with genuine curiosity. "How does that work?"

"Well, the gravitational pull of the moon affects the water in the oceans, causing them to rise and fall," he explained, his voice taking on a sinister edge as his thoughts turned to what awaited the women at the end of their journey. "When the tide is high, it can be quite powerful. Almost...overwhelming."

"Wow, I never knew that," she said, clearly impressed by his knowledge. "You learn something new every day, huh?"

"Indeed," he murmured, his mind already envisioning the scene that would soon play out before him. The sensation of watching the air leave their lungs, the panic in their eyes as they realized there was no escape from the watery abyss – it was intoxicating, mirroring the very fear and helplessness he had experienced in his youth. Those memories, once a source of anguish, had now become his twisted muse.

"Hey, are we almost there?" the blonde asked, her voice cutting through his dark reverie.

"Almost," he replied, his heart pounding in his chest as they neared their final destination. "Just a bit further."

The van continued to slice through the darkness, the unsuspecting women laughing and chatting in the back, completely unaware that they were mere moments away from taking their last breaths. And as the moon continued to cast its ominous glow upon the world below, he knew that tonight would be

one he would never forget.

The chilling fog rolled in, wrapping its tendrils around the dark van as it sped down the desolate road. The laughter of the two women in the backseat faded into the background, drowned out by the haunting memories that played like a broken record in his mind.

"Remember to breathe," his mother's cold voice echoed, sending shivers down his spine. The lake behind their house was where she'd take him, her icy fingers gripping his arms as she submerged him beneath the water's surface.

"Mom, please!" he gasped, bubbles erupting from his mouth as he thrashed against her iron grip. She held him there, waiting for the precise moment when his body would convulse in a desperate attempt to draw breath.

"Only when you learn your lesson," she whispered as she finally released him, allowing his head to break through the surface. He choked on the air, lungs burning with the agony of near-drowning.

"Sometimes I wish I could breathe underwater," he'd murmured one day, staring at the murky depths that had nearly claimed him so many times before. His mother only scoffed, dismissing the idea as childish nonsense.

"Life isn't that kind to those who misbehave," she spat, grabbing his wrist and dragging him back to their house, leaving him wondering what it would be like to escape into the water, free from her cruelty.

"Hey, are you okay up there?" the brunette called out, her concern puncturing the veil of his recollections. "You've gone awfully quiet."

He blinked away the ghosts of his past, forcing a smile as he glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror. "Yeah, just lost in thought. We're almost at the restaurant, I promise."

"Good," she grinned, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "I'm starving!"

"Me too," the blonde chimed in, her laughter ringing through the van like a siren's song.

He gripped the steering wheel tighter, the specter of his mother still looming in the shadows of his mind. The women continued to chat, oblivious to the sinister thoughts that brewed inside him.

"Almost there," he whispered under his breath, the memories of his past fueling the dark desires that burned within. And as the fog continued to thicken, enveloping everything in its ghostly embrace, he knew that tonight would be one for the ages.

The van's headlights pierced through the fog, casting eerie shadows on the

road ahead as he drove. The two women in the backseat were a cacophony of laughter and chatter, their voices blending together like the notes of a macabre symphony.

"Hey, have you ever tried scuba diving? It's so amazing," the blonde enthused, her excitement palpable.

"Never had the chance," the brunette replied, her eyes filled with curiosity. "But it sounds incredible."

He clenched his jaw, the memories of his mother's twisted punishments bubbling to the surface once more. But it wasn't himself he longed to see submerged in water anymore; no, that fantasy had long since morphed into something much darker. He'd found solace – and power – in watching others gasp for breath, their eyes wide with terror as they struggled against the crushing weight of the water.

"Maybe we should try it sometime," the blonde continued, her smile infectious. "I'm sure our friend here could join us too, right?"

"Of course," he said, forcing a smile as he glanced back at them. Their innocent faces held no hint of the fate that awaited them tonight. They had no idea that their final swim was just hours away.

"Great!" the blonde clapped her hands together, her blue eyes shining with anticipation. "You won't regret it, I promise."

"Sounds like a plan," the brunette agreed, her expression equally eager.

His heart raced as he imagined their panic when they realized there would be no escape from the watery abyss. The thought sent shivers down his spine, igniting an insatiable hunger within him.

"Almost there," he muttered under his breath, his grip on the steering wheel tightening. The fog outside seemed to mirror the haze of his thoughts, shrouding everything in uncertainty and darkness. But one thing was clear: tonight, he would be the one holding the power, watching as they fought to take their final breaths.

"Did you say something?" the brunette asked, her brow furrowed in concern.

"Nothing," he replied, his voice betraying a hint of impatience. "We're almost at the restaurant."

"Good," she said with a sigh of relief. "I'm starving."

"Me too," the blonde echoed, her laughter ringing through the van like a death knell.

As the fog continued to thicken, swallowing the world outside in its

ghostly embrace, he knew that soon, their laughter would be silenced forever. The anticipation was intoxicating, and he couldn't wait to watch the light fade from their eyes as they took their final swim into the abyss.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Morgan paced the floor of the FBI headquarters, her brow furrowed in concentration as she clutched her phone to her ear. The hum of activity around her barely registered; all she could hear was the pounding of her own heart. Her eyes flickered between the monitors on the wall and the photographs of Jessica Smith and Sarah Johnston, two ordinary girls who were now at the mercy of a cunning killer. Time was running out.

"Nothing," Derik said, his voice strained as he hung up another call. "No one's seen them. No one knows anything."

Morgan clenched her jaw, frustration gnawing at her. She had fought hard to rebuild her life after being framed for murder ten years ago, but the ghosts of her past still haunted her. Now, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was somehow responsible for these girls' fate. If only she had pieced together the puzzle sooner...

"Keep trying," Morgan urged her partner, hanging up her own fruitless call. "We have to find them."

Derik nodded, his expression grim. They both knew their chances of saving Jessica and Sarah diminished with every second that passed. But they refused to give up. They couldn't let another life be lost on their watch.

As Morgan dialed another number, she allowed herself a moment of silent introspection. She thought about the bars of her prison cell, the cold metal against her skin, the slow passage of time. She had survived that hell, but it had hardened her, made her more determined than ever to bring justice to those who had none.

"Hello?" a voice answered on the other end of the line, snapping Morgan back to the present.

"Hi, this is Special Agent Cross with the FBI," she said, her voice steady despite the turmoil within her. "We're looking for any information on two missing women: Jessica Smith and Sarah Johnston. Have you seen or heard anything?"

"Uh, no," the voice replied hesitantly. "I don't think so. I'm sorry."

"Thank you for your time," Morgan said, her voice flat as she hung up. Another dead end. They were running out of options, and hope was fading fast.

"Derik," Morgan said, her voice strained with urgency. "We need to do

something. We can't just sit here waiting for a lead that might never come."

"I know," Derik agreed, his eyes mirroring her own desperation. "But what else can we do?"

Morgan didn't have an answer, but she knew one thing: she wouldn't stop fighting until Jessica and Sarah were found. She owed it to them and to herself to see this through to the bitter end.

Morgan stared at the photographs of Jessica and Sarah, pinned to the bulletin board. The brunette and blonde girls smiled back at her, their eyes filled with innocence and life. They were just average girls, faces you'd see in any crowd - which only made it harder to find them.

"Damn it," Morgan muttered under her breath. Her hands clenched into fists, nails digging into her palms. She could feel the weight of every second that slipped away, each one taking a part of Jessica and Sarah with it. Their chances of survival were dwindling, and she couldn't bear the thought of failing them.

"Derik," she said, forcing herself to look away from the pictures, "I need to get out there. I can't sit here anymore."

"Where are you going?" Derik asked, concern etched on his face.

"Every lake, pool, and dock in the city," Morgan replied, determination setting her jaw. "It's a fool's mission, but I have to try."

"Are you sure about this?" Derik hesitated. "It's a big city, and we have nothing to go on."

"Ten years ago, while I rotted in that cell, all I wanted was someone to fight for me," Morgan said, her voice laden with emotion. "These girls don't have anyone else. So if I have to search every damn body of water in this city, then that's what I'll do."

"Alright," Derik relented, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Just be careful out there, Morgan."

"Always am," she replied, flashing him a thin smile before grabbing her jacket and heading out the door.

Morgan's fingers tightened around the steering wheel, her knuckles turning white as she prepared to embark on her impossible mission. Her heart raced in anticipation, the adrenaline fueling her resolve. Just as she was about to pull out of the parking lot, Derik appeared at the passenger window, rapping

his knuckles on the glass.

"Wait!" he shouted, his face a mix of urgency and relief. "We've got something you need to see."

Morgan hesitated for a moment before rolling down the window. "What is it?" she asked, her breath catching in her throat.

"Let me inside," Derik said, motioning towards the car door. "I'll explain on the way. We need to get down to the east precinct."

Morgan let Derik in, and he slammed the door behind her. She began driving toward the east precinct. "Well, what is it?"

"A woman came in," Derik said. "I just got a call from an officer. The girl claims she and her friend were kidnapped by a man and that he was going to drown them."

Morgan's heart pounded in her chest. "Could it be one of the girls Belinda warned me about?"

"I think so," Derik said. "There's only one way to find out."

Morgan pushed hard on the gas pedal, speeding through the city as fast as she could. Although she tried not to think about it, being alone with Derik in the car stirred up strange emotions in her. She had so many questions now. And if they were going to keep working together, she wanted answers to them.

"Why didn't you tell me you had a son?" she asked him.

Derik let out a heavy sigh. "It's complicated," he said, resting his hand on his lap. "I... I was ashamed that I decided not to be in his life. But I thought it'd be better for him. My ex and I were broken up, and I was still drinking, and as an FBI agent... I couldn't exactly be a present father."

Morgan nodded. She could understand that. "What's his name?"

"Luke," Derik answered, his voice barely above a whisper. "He's eight now."

Morgan's heart softened at the mention of Derik's son. She couldn't imagine how hard it must have been for him to stay away from his own child.

"I'm sorry," she said, placing a hand on his arm. "That must have been really difficult for you."

Derik gave her a small smile.

"It was," he admitted. "But I've learned to live with it. And now, I have something to fight for - to make the world a better place for my son and all the other kids out there."

For a second, Morgan's respect for Derik deepened. She knew what it was

like to fight for something bigger than oneself, to make something good out of something bad. It was what drove her to become an FBI agent in the first place.

But Morgan quickly remembered that Derik wasn't the same partner she'd always had. Things were different now that he'd betrayed her and lied to her. She still felt there was information he was withholding, but with so many lives on the line, now wasn't the time to talk about it.

She focused on the road, driving the rest of the way in silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Morgan's heart pounded in her chest as she entered the dimly lit interrogation room. She found Jessica huddled in a corner, wrapped in a gray blanket and clutching a steaming mug of hot chocolate as if it were her lifeline. The young woman's eyes darted around the room nervously, her body trembling like a leaf caught in a storm.

"Jessica?" Morgan asked gently, taking a seat across from her. She could see the raw fear etched into the girl's face and knew she had to tread carefully. Every second mattered, but they couldn't afford any missteps. "My name is Agent Cross, and this is Agent Derik. We're with the FBI, and we're here to help you."

"Please," Jessica whispered, her voice hoarse from crying. "You have to find Sarah. He's going to kill her."

"Tell me everything that happened," Morgan urged, her tone soft yet decisive. "Start from the beginning. We need every detail."

Jessica hesitated for a moment, then took a shaky breath and began to speak. "We...we met him at our AA meeting. He seemed really nice, you know? Charming. He offered to buy us dinner, so we said yes. We thought he was just being friendly." She swallowed hard, her eyes filling with tears. "But then he started acting weird. Scaring us. And before we knew it, he'd tied us up and told us he was going to drown us."

"Can you describe him? Anything that could help us identify him?"

"Dark hair, kind of tall," Jessica said, her voice steadier now. "He had a creepy smile, like he was always hiding something."

"Did he say anything about where he was taking you?" Derik asked, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"No, just that it would be somewhere far away," she replied, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "I don't know how I managed to escape, but I just knew I had to get away and find help."

"Jessica, you're incredibly brave for coming forward," Morgan told her, her voice filled with admiration. "We'll do everything we can to find Sarah and bring her home safely."

"Can you tell me how you managed to escape?" Morgan asked gently, watching Jessica's trembling hands clutch the blanket around her shoulders.

Jessica took a deep breath and slowly began to speak. "I... I managed to

loosen the ropes on my hands while he was driving. When he slowed down, I saw my chance. I opened the door and just... jumped out."

"Jumped out of a moving vehicle?" Derik questioned, both impressed and concerned.

"Y-yeah," she nodded, her voice barely audible. "I hit the ground hard, but I knew I had to keep running. I couldn't let him catch me again." Tears streamed down her face as she continued, "I feel terrible, though. I left Sarah behind." Her voice cracked, and she buried her face in her hands.

Morgan could see the guilt weighing heavy on Jessica's shoulders, and her heart went out to her. She couldn't imagine the strength it must have taken to make that decision. "You did what you had to do, Jessica. Your bravery helped lead us to your captor. Now we need to focus on finding Sarah before it's too late." Morgan leaned in closer to Jessica, her eyes full of sympathy and determination. "Jessica, I need you to think back to when you were with him. Do you have any idea where he was taking you and Sarah?"

Jessica's eyes searched the room, as if trying to find the answers hidden in the sterile walls. Her voice trembled as she replied, "I don't know exactly... We were on the outskirts of town, but everything was moving so fast. I just remember running and running until I found help."

"Can you recall anything about your surroundings?" Morgan pressed gently, knowing that even the smallest detail could be crucial.

"Mostly just trees and fields and a lake," Jessica said, her voice barely audible. "But there was a highway nearby. A stranger picked me up and drove me into town."

"Okay," Morgan nodded, filing away the information in her mind. "Now, I need you to try and remember something else for me. Did the man who took you ever tell you his name?"

Jessica hesitated, her brow furrowed in concentration. "He called himself Seth," she finally said, though her expression made it clear she wasn't certain. "But I doubt that's his real name."

Morgan leaned in, her eyes fixed on Jessica's face. "One more thing," she asked softly, "can you tell me anything about the vehicle he was driving?"

Jessica's gaze grew distant, as if trying to summon the memory from a faraway place. "It was a construction van," she said slowly, her voice faint. "There was a saw logo and a slogan – 'let us work for you.' I didn't catch the name of the company, but I remember the slogan."

"Good, that's very helpful," Morgan said, giving Jessica an encouraging

nod. "You've been incredibly brave, Jessica. We're going to do everything we can to find Sarah."

"Thank you," Jessica whispered, looking both grateful and terrified.

Morgan rose from her chair and exited the room, her mind racing with the new information. Derik was waiting for her just outside, his brow furrowed with concern. She could see the same determination etched into his features that she felt burning within her.

"Derik, we have a possible lead on the vehicle," Morgan said without preamble, her voice low and urgent. "Jessica described it as a construction van with a saw logo and the slogan 'let us work for you.' It might be our best chance at finding this guy before it's too late."

Derik's face hardened as he processed her words. "Alright, let's get on it. We don't have a moment to waste." He pulled out his phone, ready to coordinate their efforts with the rest of the team.

As they walked briskly through the bustling police station, Morgan couldn't help but feel the weight of responsibility bearing down on her. The image of the two girls haunted her – the brunette, Jessica, now safe but traumatized, and the blonde, Sarah, who could be anywhere, her life hanging by a thread.

Morgan clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. Time was slipping away, and every second that ticked by felt like another nail in Sarah's coffin. But she wouldn't let it end this way. She couldn't.

"Derik," Morgan said, a steely edge to her voice, "we're going to find this van, and we're going to save Sarah. I won't let him take another innocent life."

"Neither will I," Derik replied, his eyes meeting hers with fierce resolve. Together, they set off on their desperate mission, each fully aware of the stakes – and the deadly consequences if they failed.

The APB was out, but without much information on the vehicle, Morgan had little hope they'd find it. She hunched over her laptop in the briefing room at the precinct, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she searched for any trace of the van Jessica had described. The dim glow of the screen illuminated her furrowed brow, casting eerie shadows on her determined expression.

"Come on..." she muttered, trying to connect the slogan 'let us work for you' to construction companies in Dallas. But her search turned up dozens of possibilities – none of which seemed to fit the bill. Frustration bubbled up inside her chest, threatening to boil over. Time was running out, and with each passing moment, Sarah's chances of survival grew slimmer. Morgan knew that if they failed to find the van soon, it might be too late.

Morgan's fingers raced across her laptop keyboard, the frantic tapping a stark contrast to the stillness of the briefing room. Her eyes were red-rimmed and focused, scanning the screen for any useful information. The clock on the wall ticked away seconds like a metronome, each beat a reminder that Sarah's life was slipping through their fingers.

"Custom logos," she whispered to herself as if it were some sort of sacred mantra. She quickly changed the direction of her search, looking up businesses in Dallas that specialized in adding logos to vehicles. Dialing the first number she found, Morgan held her breath, praying for a breakthrough.

"Hi," she began, her voice steady despite the pounding in her chest. "This is Special Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI. I'm trying to locate a van with a specific logo – a saw and the slogan 'let us work for you.' Has anyone brought their van in for that kind of work recently?"

The man on the other end hesitated before responding. "No, ma'am. I haven't seen anything like that."

"Thank you for your time," Morgan said, trying to hide her disappointment.

She hung up and immediately dialed another establishment. She wasn't about to give up, not when something in her gut was telling her she was finally on the right track.

"Hello," she greeted the man who answered, her voice urgent but controlled. "This is Special Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI. I need to ask if anyone came in recently with a request to add a saw logo and the slogan 'let us work for you' to their van?"

"Um," the man hesitated, his uncertainty permeating through the phone. "Yeah, actually. Now that you mention it, someone did come in with that request, just a couple weeks ago."

Morgan's heart skipped a beat, her mind racing. "Can you tell me anything about the person who brought it in? Anything at all could be helpful."

The man racked his brain, trying to recall the details of that particular customer. "He was tall, maybe around six feet. Dark hair, looked to be in his

forties. Seemed like an ordinary guy, to be honest."

Morgan's heart raced. If that was true, then this guy could match the description of the man from the AA meeting and the church.

"Really?" Morgan gripped the phone tighter, her voice barely concealing the urgency of the situation. "You're sure about that?"

"Positive," the man replied. "I remember because it was such an odd request. I don't get many folks asking for a saw logo and that slogan."

Morgan took a deep breath, steadying herself. "Can you forward me the customer's information? It's crucial that we find him as soon as possible."

"Uh, I don't know..." The man hesitated, his voice wavering with uncertainty. "It's not really company policy to give out customer details like that."

"Listen." Morgan leaned against the desk, her knuckles turning white as she clutched the phone. "I understand your concerns, but I'm an FBI agent, and I'm fairly certain a woman's life is on the line here. I can come down with a warrant if necessary, but time is of the essence, and I would really appreciate your cooperation."

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening. Morgan held her breath, waiting for the man to respond. She could practically hear the gears turning in his head as he weighed his options.

"Alright," he finally relented, his voice heavy with resignation. "I'll send over what I have. But please, make sure this doesn't come back to bite me or my business."

"Thank you," Morgan said sincerely, relief washing over her. "You're doing the right thing."

Morgan's heart pounded in her chest, her fingers hovering over the keyboard as she waited for the man on the other end of the line to make good on his word. She glanced up at the clock on the wall, each tick echoing like a gunshot in her ears. Time was slipping away, and with it, the chances of finding Sarah alive.

"Alright," the man sighed, his voice thick with reluctance. "His name is Greg Folger, and he paid with this credit card number." He rattled off the digits, and Morgan typed them into her computer, her fingers moving with lightning speed.

"Thank you," she said, her voice strained but sincere. "You may have just saved a life."

"Hope so," he murmured before hanging up.

As soon as the line went dead, Morgan pulled up the FBI database, her fingers flying across the keys as she searched for any information on Greg Folger. Breathing hitched in her throat, she scanned the screen, her eyes widening as she found him—a man with a criminal record, his mugshot displaying a gaunt, handsome face framed by dark hair. This was him; he matched the description.

"Got you," she whispered under her breath, her determination steeling her resolve. She leaned back in her chair, taking a moment to study the man staring back at her from the screen. If this Greg Folger was indeed their kidnapper, he had made a mistake—a crucial one that now put him within Morgan's reach.

A chill ran down Morgan's spine as she skimmed Greg's file in the database. The words seemed to leap off the screen, taunting her with their twisted revelations. She couldn't shake the image of young Greg, his head held under the water by the very person who was supposed to protect him. The horror he must have felt then, she thought, might be a mirror image of what Sarah was experiencing now.

"Damn," she whispered to herself, feeling the urgency knot tighter in her chest. She couldn't afford to waste any more time. Snapping the laptop shut, she grabbed the printed mugshot and hurried back to the interrogation room. Her heart hammered in her ears, drowning out the buzz of activity around her as agents and officers scrambled to follow leads and coordinate efforts to find Greg Folger.

Bursting into the room, she found Jessica still huddled in the corner, clutching her blanket like a lifeline. Her wide, fearful eyes fixed on Morgan, searching for some glimmer of hope.

"Jessica, I need you to look at this," Morgan said, holding up the picture of Greg. Her voice was low but firm, the tone of someone used to getting answers. "Is this the man who took you and Sarah?"

Jessica hesitated for a moment before reaching out with trembling fingers to take the photo. She stared at it, her breath hitching as her eyes filled with tears.

"Yes," she choked out, her voice barely audible. "That's him."

"Thank you, Jessica," Morgan replied, trying to keep her own emotions in check. She forced herself to stay focused on the task at hand. "I promise you, we're going to find Sarah and bring that bastard to justice."

As she turned to leave the room, Morgan couldn't help but feel the weight

of responsibility pressing down on her. The lives of two innocent women rested in her hands, and every second that ticked by brought Sarah closer to a fate she couldn't bear to imagine. She knew the stakes, and she knew the odds were against her, but failure wasn't an option.

Now that they had his identity, they could get the plate and put out a proper APB.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

The golden light of the setting sun glinted off Morgan's windshield, momentarily blinding her. She squinted against the glare, gripping the steering wheel tighter until her knuckles turned white. Her foot pressed down hard on the accelerator, sending the car hurtling down the highway at a dangerous speed.

"Come on, come on," she muttered to herself, her eyes darting back and forth between the road and the rearview mirror, searching for any sign of the van. "Where are you?"

As the miles flew by, panic began to set in. Had they lost him? Was Sarah still alive? She couldn't bear the thought of losing another innocent person to this monster—not after everything she'd been through herself.

In moments like these, memories of her time in prison would surface—memories of dark, cramped cells and the sickening smell of fear that clung to the air. It was those experiences that had made her who she was today: a fiercely determined woman who refused to let the darkness win.

As Morgan pulled into the rural lakeside community, the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the narrow streets. Her hands were clammy on the wheel as she scanned the area for Greg's van. The quietness of the place was eerie, as if every resident had locked themselves away to escape the terror lurking outside.

"Come on, come on," she muttered under her breath, squinting through the fading light. She could feel the pressure mounting; every second that passed could mean life or death for Sarah.

"Where the hell is he?"

Just then, a cacophony of sound filled the air—choppers sweeping low overhead, their searchlights slicing through the darkness. Morgan felt a brief surge of hope. They were closing in on him; she could feel it. But where?

As Morgan ventured further, the quaint lakeside houses gave way to vast expanses of open land. She found herself on the outskirts of the community, surrounded by nothing but rolling fields and the distant glimmer of the lake.

A crackling static noise broke through the tense silence, and Morgan's radio sprang to life. "Agent Cross, do you copy? We have a potential sighting of the van near the north side of the lake. Proceed with caution."

"Copy that," Morgan replied, her heart racing. This was it—the moment

she'd been waiting for. With renewed determination, she floored the accelerator, her car speeding toward the lake and the showdown that awaited.

Morgan's eyes darted back and forth, scanning the landscape for any sign of the van. Sweat trickled down her forehead, the result of both nerves and the oppressive heat. The sun was setting, casting long shadows across the fields and painting the sky in hues of orange and pink. Time was running out.

"Come on, come on," she muttered under her breath, her voice taut with frustration.

And then she saw it—a flash of white through the trees, a glint of metal reflecting the dying rays of sunlight. The van.

Finally. She breathed, relief flooding her veins as she steered the car to the side of the road.

Adrenaline pumped through her body as she leaped from the driver's seat and sprinted toward the van. Her heart hammered against her ribs, each beat echoing her desperate need to find Sarah alive.

"Please be okay," she whispered as she reached the van, her hand trembling as she yanked open the door. "Damn it!" Morgan hissed, her hopes dashed in an instant. The van was empty, devoid of any trace of either kidnapper or victim. Greg had already taken Sarah somewhere else.

Think, Morgan, think, she urged herself, her mind racing as she scanned the area. There had to be a clue here—something that would lead her to Sarah.

"Agent Cross, what's your status?" The voice crackled through her radio, jolting her back to reality.

"Found the van," she replied, struggling to keep the bitterness from her voice. "It's empty. He's moved her."

"Understood," the voice replied, somber and grim. "We'll send backup to your location. Keep searching."

"Copy that," Morgan said before clipping the radio back onto her belt.

Where are you, Greg? she thought, her gaze sweeping over the desolate landscape. *And where the hell have you taken Sarah?*

She paced around the van, her eyes raking over the ground for any clue that might help her find them. "Time to get creative."

As the last remnants of sunlight faded from the sky, Morgan Cross knew that the clock was ticking louder than ever. And she wouldn't rest until she'd found Sarah Johnston and brought Greg Folger to justice.

Panic gripped Morgan's chest like a vice as she sprinted toward the lake,

her breath coming in ragged gasps. She could hear her heartbeat pounding in her ears, drowning out the distant hum of the choppers overhead. The waning light cast eerie shadows through the trees, making it difficult to see anything clearly.

As she burst through a final clump of trees, the scene that greeted her was both breathtaking and terrifying. A rocky crag loomed above the lake, far higher than she'd anticipated. Jagged rocks jutted out from its unforgiving surface, and below, the dark waters churned ominously.

"Sarah!" Morgan called out, her voice barely audible over the roar of the wind. "Can you hear me?"

But there was no response. Only the howl of the wind and the foreboding echo of the lake answered her desperate plea.

She knew Greg was unstable, unpredictable, but there had to be a reason he'd chosen this spot for his twisted game.

"Agent Cross, any sign of them?" a voice crackled through her radio, snapping her back to reality.

"Negative," Morgan replied, her eyes scanning the crag for any hint of movement. "I'm at the lake now. It's...he's taken her up there, on the cliff. I just know it."

"Alright, be careful," he warned. "We've got your back, but remember, he's dangerous."

"I know," Morgan said, her knuckles white around the radio. "But I can't just stand here and wait. I have to try."

With that, she began her treacherous ascent up the rocky crag, every step a calculated risk as she searched for any signs of Greg and Sarah. Her heart pounded in her chest, fear and adrenaline fueling her determination.

And then she heard it – a scream, shrill and terrified, slicing through the chilling wind. It spurred Morgan into action, her muscles screaming in protest as she pushed herself up the last few feet to the edge of the cliff.

As she crested the ridge, her eyes locked onto the horrifying scene before her. There, at the edge of the precipice, stood Greg Folger. He was holding Sarah by her wrists, her body dangerously close to the edge of the cliff. The wind whistled through the air, whipping Sarah's hair around her face, her wide eyes filled with terror.

The deafening roar of the helicopter blades drowned out Morgan's frantic heartbeat as she crouched low behind a boulder, her eyes locked on Greg and Sarah. The voice from the chopper crackled through the air, announcing

Greg's imminent capture. "You're surrounded! There's nowhere to run!"

Morgan watched as Greg's gaze snapped upward, momentarily distracted by the sudden intrusion. She seized the opportunity to examine the scene before her. With a sickening realization, she saw the weight tied to Sarah's ankle - he was ready to send her plummeting into the water below.

"Stay back!" Greg shouted, his voice cracking under the strain. "I'll do it!"

"Greg," Morgan whispered to herself, her mind racing as she tried to formulate a plan to save Sarah. She couldn't let this man take another life. But how could she reach Sarah without risking them both?

"Let her go!" the voice from the helicopter continued. "This doesn't have to end like this!"

"Like hell it doesn't!" Greg screamed, his eyes blazing with madness. "This is the only way!"

"Think about what you're doing, Greg," Morgan murmured under her breath, inching closer to the pair. Her fingers tightened around her gun, knuckles turning white. "There has to be a better way."

"Shut up! All of you, just shut up!" Greg yelled, his free hand clenching into a fist. "You don't know anything about me or what I've been through!"

"Actually, I think I do," Morgan thought, trying to tap into the empathy that had once guided her actions as an agent. She knew pain, loss, and fear intimately - but she also knew that they didn't have to define a person forever.

"Enough!" Greg roared, his grip on Sarah's wrist tightening to the point where it looked like he might break her bones. "I'm done playing games!"

"Please!" Sarah whimpered, tears streaming down her face. "I don't want to die!"

"Neither do I," Morgan thought, her heart aching for the young woman who had been caught up in this nightmare. She couldn't stand by any longer - she had to act.

"Greg, listen to me!" she shouted, her voice cutting through the chaos as she stepped out from her hiding place. She had one chance to save Sarah's life, and she wouldn't let it slip away.

Morgan's heart pounded in her chest, the wind whipping her hair around her face as she tried to focus on the scene unfolding before her. Her thoughts were a whirlwind of desperation and determination, but she knew she had to maintain control. She quickly raised her hand to the radio clipped to her shoulder.

"Chopper One, stand down," she ordered, her voice steady despite the

turmoil inside her. "I can handle this."

"Are you crazy, Cross?" came the incredulous response from the officer in the chopper. "He's got a hostage!"

"Trust me," Morgan said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. She slowly approached the edge of the cliff, holding her hands up to show she was unarmed. Sarah's screams rang in her ears, igniting a fire within her that burned away any doubt or fear.

She couldn't let another innocent life be lost.

Steeling her resolve, she prepared to make a move.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

"Greg!" Morgan called out, her voice carrying over the howling wind. "Look at me!"

Greg's wild, crazed eyes found Morgan, and for a moment, time seemed to slow down. The pure hatred and madness in his gaze sent a shiver down her spine, but she forced herself to hold his stare, refusing to back down.

"Let her go," Morgan demanded, hoping to appeal to whatever shred of humanity might still exist within him. "You don't have to do this."

"Stay back!" Greg snarled, tightening his grip on Sarah's arm. "Or I'll throw her off right now!"

Morgan's mind raced, searching for a way to save Sarah without putting her in further danger. She needed to keep Greg talking, to give her an opening to act. Taking a deep breath, she willed herself to remain calm as she continued to inch closer.

"Talk to me, Greg," she said softly, trying to make a connection with him. "Tell me what's going on inside your head."

"Stay out of my head!" Greg screamed, his voice cracking with the strain of his emotions. "You don't know anything about me!"

Morgan knew she was walking a thin line between saving Sarah and pushing Greg over the edge. But with each step she took closer to them, she felt more certain that this was a risk she had to take. Inside her chest, her heart pounded furiously, but she refused to let fear control her. She had come too far to give up now.

"Greg, listen to me," Morgan called out, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart. "You're surrounded. There's nowhere for you to go. Let Sarah go, and we can work this out."

The wildness in Greg's eyes seemed to flicker for a moment, as if considering the possibility. Morgan could see the sweat on his brow, glistening beneath the fading light. Desperation clung to him like a second skin.

"Alright," he said slowly, his voice trembling. "I'll let her go, but only if you promise me one thing."

"Name it," Morgan replied, trying to keep her tone neutral.

"Promise me you won't try anything," Greg demanded, his grip on Sarah tightening. "If I see you move, I'll drop her right now."

"Okay, okay," Morgan agreed, her mind racing with the implications of her promise. She knew she couldn't let Greg walk away from this, but she had to save Sarah first. "I promise not to make any moves. Just let her go."

"Swear it," Greg hissed, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"I swear," Morgan responded, forcing herself to lock eyes with him, even as she mentally prepared herself for the necessary deception.

"Alright," Greg said, his voice barely audible over the roar of the helicopter blades above them. He pulled Sarah back from the edge, just slightly, enough that her screams turned into gasps for air. "Now, stay where you are. Don't come any closer."

Morgan froze, her muscles tensing at the sudden command. Her instincts screamed for her to act, to rush in and save Sarah before it was too late. But she knew she couldn't risk it, not yet. She needed to wait for the perfect moment, one where she could save Sarah without endangering her further.

As she stood there, her entire being focused on the scene before her, Morgan couldn't help but think of all that had led her here. The pain, the loss, the betrayal – it all culminated in this one moment. And she knew, with absolute certainty, that she would do whatever it took to save Sarah and put an end to Greg's reign of terror.

"Greg," Morgan called out, striving to keep her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart. "I know what your mother did to you."

"Then you know nothing," he spat, gripping Sarah more tightly. Her choked sobs punctuated the tense silence between them.

Clutching at straws to stall for time, Morgan thought desperately about ways to keep him talking. "Your past... all those women who left you, didn't they?" she ventured, watching his jaw clench and unclench.

"Shut up," he snarled, but she could see a flicker in his eyes that told her she was getting to him. She needed to push further, to unravel him enough so that she could seize the opportunity to act.

"Couldn't bring yourself to do it, could you? To end your own life?" she asked softly, her eyes never leaving his face. "You were afraid to die alone, Greg."

He barked a laugh, the sound harsh and bitter on his lips. "You think I'm afraid of dying? Hell, I've been terrified of the water my whole life. And yet here I am, standing on the edge of this godforsaken cliff." His gaze shifted briefly to the churning waters below.

"Is that why you drown them?" Morgan asked, her mind racing as she

tried to piece together the puzzle of his twisted psyche. "To feel what it's like, without actually facing your fear?"

"Something like that," he admitted with a twisted smile, the glint in his eyes speaking of a deep-rooted madness. "Each time I watch them struggle, gasp for air... It's like I'm experiencing it through them."

Morgan felt a chill run down her spine as she absorbed his words, the cold calculation behind them. This man was beyond redemption, she realized, and she had to find a way to stop him before more innocent lives were lost.

"Is this the last time, Greg?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the roar of the helicopter blades above them. "Will Sarah be your final victim?"

"Maybe," he mused, his eyes flickering between her and Sarah. "Or maybe she's just the beginning."

Morgan gritted her teeth, her hands balling into fists at her sides as she fought to maintain control. She had to act soon before it was too late - but how? What could she do that wouldn't put Sarah in even greater danger?

"Enough talk," Greg snarled suddenly, his patience clearly wearing thin. "This ends now."

As Morgan watched helplessly, her mind racing for a solution, she knew the time for action was upon her. One way or another, this nightmare had to end - tonight.

"Greg, please," Morgan pleaded, her voice barely a whisper as she took a slow, calculated step forward. "You don't have to do this."

"Stay back!" he warned, his grip on Sarah tightening as the terrified girl sobbed uncontrollably. The wind whipped around them, drowning out the sound of the approaching chopper that was just close enough to make out its searchlight, casting eerie shadows across the rocky landscape.

Morgan's heart raced as she racked her brain for something - anything - that could save Sarah. She knew time was running out as Greg's eyes darted wildly between her and the edge of the cliff. This was it - her last chance to make a difference.

"Think about what you're doing, Greg," she said, trying to keep her voice steady despite the fear clawing at her insides. "Is this really how you want your story to end?"

"Enough!" he screamed, the madness in his eyes flaring dangerously. "I won't listen to your lies anymore!"

And with a guttural snarl, Greg pushed Sarah off the cliff.

"NO!" Morgan cried out, lunging forward in a desperate attempt to reach

for the falling girl. But it was too late - Sarah was already plummeting towards the dark, unforgiving waters below.

The world seemed to move in slow motion as Morgan stared in horror at the empty space where Sarah had once stood. Her mind refused to accept what had just happened, even as the cold reality of it seeped into her bones.

Then, suddenly, the silence was shattered by the crack of a gunshot. The shot fired off from the chopper above, an officer managing to hit Greg squarely in the shoulder. He staggered backward, a look of shock and pain etched onto his gaunt features as blood began to stain his shirt.

Morgan snapped back to reality, her instincts kicking into overdrive. This was her moment - her opportunity to end this, once and for all.

Morgan's heart pounded in her chest as she sprinted past Greg, his agonized groans barely registering in her ears. All that mattered now was reaching Sarah before it was too late. Without a moment's hesitation, she leaped off the cliff and plunged into the icy waters below.

The chilling embrace of the lake enveloped Morgan as she broke through the surface. Her lungs screamed for air, but she couldn't afford to waste even a second. Gritting her teeth against the numbing cold, she pushed herself deeper, diving towards the sinking figure of Sarah.

Morgan's fingers grasped at the water, propelling her closer and closer to the girl. She could see Sarah's wide eyes staring back at her, terror etched across her young face. The rope binding her ankle trailed behind her like a sinister snake, dragging her helplessly toward the abyss below.

Finally, she reached Sarah, her hands closing around the girl's arm. With a quick nod of reassurance, Morgan whipped out her knife, its blade glinting ominously beneath the water's surface. She maneuvered herself beneath Sarah, the weight of the girl pressing down on her as she positioned the blade against the thick rope.

Morgan internally urged herself forward, feeling the strain of holding her breath. Her lungs begged for oxygen, but she couldn't allow herself to give in. Not yet.

She sawed at the rope, her fingers numb from the cold and adrenaline coursing through her veins. Each stroke felt like an eternity, but finally, she could feel the rope beginning to fray. One final push, and the razor-sharp blade sliced through the last of the fibers.

She gave Sarah a forceful shove towards the surface, praying that the girl would find the strength to swim up on her own.

As Morgan propelled herself upward, her thoughts turned back to Greg. He was wounded and cornered, but she knew he was far from defeated. She couldn't let her guard down yet - not until Greg was safely behind bars, and Sarah was out of harm's way.

Almost there, she repeated in her head like a mantra, her lungs burning with the need for air. "Just a little bit more."

Just as Morgan began her ascent, she caught a glimpse of Greg plunging into the water, blood trailing from his shoulder. His eyes locked onto hers, a man driven by obsession and rage, determined to finish what he had started.

Greg lunged at her, his long fingers stretching out like claws, desperate to bring her down. Morgan evaded his grasp, her training kicking in despite the weight of the water and exhaustion threatening to consume her.

Greg's desperation only grew. He swiped at her again, managing to grab hold of her ankle. Morgan felt herself pulled downward, the air in her lungs rapidly diminishing. She kicked at his hand, adrenaline fueling her strength, but Greg held on tight.

With one last push, she wrenched herself free from his grip, sending Greg spiraling further down into the murky depths. The fury in his eyes quickly turned into panic as he realized the truth behind her words - he couldn't swim, and his body was too weak to fight the current.

"Help...me," Greg mouthed silently, looking up at her with a mixture of fear and regret. Morgan hesitated for a moment, torn between the desire to save him and the knowledge that he had brought this upon himself.

But she couldn't bring herself to watch him drown. With one final glance toward the surface, hoping Sarah had reached it safely, Morgan made her decision and dove deeper into the darkness, reaching for Greg's outstretched hand.

But Greg only stared back at her, his eyes filled with bitterness and resignation.

With one final push, Greg managed to break free from her grasp, his body sinking deeper and deeper into the darkness.

Morgan's heart ached with a mixture of relief and sorrow as she watched him disappear. In the end, he had chosen his own fate - and there was nothing more she could do for him.

She kicked toward the surface, the weight of everything that had happened crashing down upon her. But even in the midst of her grief and exhaustion, Morgan knew that she had done everything she could.

The nightmare was finally over.

EPILOGUE

Morgan stood in Mueller's office, her gaze fixed on the wall lined with framed photographs of esteemed agents, each one adorned with medals and accolades. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever make it onto that wall - or if she even wanted to. The room was quiet, save for the ticking of the clock, its hands inching toward the top of the hour.

"Cross," Mueller began, his stern voice snapping her back to reality. He held a small velvet box in his hand, flipping it open to reveal an honorary medal nestled inside. "I want you to have this for your heroic rescue of Sarah."

The weight of the world seemed to bear down on Morgan's shoulders as her eyes locked onto the gleaming metal. To accept such an honor, it didn't feel right. She had saved Sarah, yes, but at what cost? Greg, the man responsible for all the pain and suffering, had slipped through their fingers and met his end without facing justice. A surge of remorse washed over her.

"Thank you, sir," she said, swallowing hard. "But I can't help thinking about Greg. If only I could've saved him too, he could've been put on trial, faced the consequences for his actions."

Morgan looked down at her hands, clenching them into fists to stop them from shaking. The memory of that night remained etched in her mind, the screams of terror, the smell of blood heavy in the air. It haunted her, reminding her of how close she'd come to losing everything.

"Sometimes, Agent Cross, we have to make difficult choices," Mueller replied, his tone softened slightly. "You did what you had to do to save Sarah, and that's what matters most."

Deep down, Morgan knew he was right. Sarah was alive because of her actions, and that was something she could hold onto amidst the darkness that threatened to consume her. The thought of Sarah's grateful smile brought warmth to her heart, a small spark of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape.

The weight of the medal in Mueller's outstretched hand felt heavier than any burden Morgan had carried during her time in prison. She looked at the gleaming metal, reflecting back the fluorescent lights of the office, and found herself unable to accept it.

"Sir, I appreciate the gesture," Morgan said, her voice steady despite the turmoil within her. "But I can't accept this medal. It would be a constant

reminder of everything I've been through, and I don't want that attention."

Mueller's eyes searched hers, as if trying to gauge the depth of her resolve. He gave a slow nod, understanding etched into the lines around his eyes. With a sigh, he withdrew the medal and placed it back in its velvet-lined box.

"Very well, Agent Cross," he replied, giving her a small smile. "I understand your decision. Instead, how about some time off? You've more than earned it."

Morgan contemplated the offer for a moment, feeling the exhaustion tug at her bones. Time away from the bureau, away from the lingering ghosts of her past, sounded like exactly what she needed. The thought of escaping, even just for a short while, held an undeniable allure.

"Thank you, sir. I think I could use some time to process everything," Morgan finally agreed, her heart lighter than it had been in years.

"Take all the time you need, Morgan," Mueller said, his voice warm and sincere. "When you're ready to return, we'll be here."

As Morgan turned to leave the office, she couldn't help but pause for a moment and glance back at Mueller. There was genuine concern in his gaze, a rare glimpse of humanity that had been buried beneath years of duty and obligation. For the first time since her release, she felt as though someone truly understood her struggle.

With a grateful nod, Morgan left the office, her steps echoing through the empty halls as she made her way towards the exit. The world outside awaited, vast and full of possibilities. It was time for her to confront her demons and begin the long journey of healing.

"Take care of yourself, Morgan," Mueller said, his voice softening with genuine concern.

"I will, sir." She hesitated, the question about her father lingering on the tip of her tongue. But she swallowed it down, deciding now wasn't the time to pry into the past.

With a final nod, Morgan turned and walked away, feeling the oppressive atmosphere of the FBI headquarters slowly lifting from her shoulders as she stepped out into the parking lot. The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the pavement and bathing the world in shades of twilight. A cool breeze whispered through the trees, carrying the scent of damp earth and the promise of a fresh start.

"Morgan!" a familiar voice called out, pulling her from her reverie. She turned to find Derik standing by his car, his eyes filled with remorse. "I just

wanted to say... I'm sorry, again. For everything."

Morgan studied him for a moment, taking in the sincerity etched in the lines of his face. Time had worn away the sharp edges of her anger, leaving only a dull ache in its place. She allowed herself a small smile, acknowledging the apology without giving voice to her own regrets.

"Derik, listen," she said softly, her gaze steady. "You have a son, right?"

He nodded, his eyes widening slightly at the change in conversation.

"Yeah. He is my son, even if I haven't been in his life."

"Stay close to him," Morgan urged, her voice firm yet gentle. "Keep him safe. And don't worry about me." A sad smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "I just need some time to go off the radar for a while, sort out my life, you know?"

"Of course," Derik agreed, though his expression turned pleading. "But Morgan, can't you stay? We could help each other heal. You don't have to go through this alone."

Her heart ached at the sincerity in his words, but she knew she had to walk this path on her own. Morgan shook her head, her resolve unwavering. "I appreciate the offer, Derik, but this is something I need to do for myself."

Before he could say anything else, Morgan continued walking towards her car, feeling the lingering stares of her colleagues from the windows above. The darkness enveloped her as she moved further away, embracing the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

He watched her from afar as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the quiet suburban street.

He was parked a few houses away from her residence, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel as he scanned the area through a pair of binoculars. The man's eyes narrowed, taking in every detail of the scene unfolding before him.

She emerged from her home, her movements purposeful as she carried a couple of suitcases out to her car. Her dog trailed behind her, his tail wagging with enthusiasm. The man observed as she deftly loaded the luggage into the trunk, the muscles in her arms tense with effort. He couldn't help but admire her determination; even after everything she'd gone through, Morgan still carried herself with unwavering resolve.

"Good girl," the man murmured under his breath, a trace of satisfaction in his voice. "You're stronger than they realize."

As Morgan closed the trunk and patted Skunk affectionately on the head, the dog's tongue lolled out, panting happily. She whispered something to him – perhaps a promise of adventure or comfort – before turning her attention back to the house. The man watched as she locked the front door, an air of finality settling around her like a cloak.

"Where are you going, Morgan?" he wondered aloud, his dark eyes never leaving her form. "What are you running from?"

Her hands lingered on the doorknob for a moment longer, as if saying goodbye to a life she was leaving behind. Then, with a deep breath, she turned and made her way back to the car, Skunk trotting at her side.

The man's gaze followed Morgan as she walked back to her car, the gravel crunching beneath her boots, each step leaving a faint imprint behind. He observed the rhythm of her breathing, a silent metronome ticking in tandem with her heart. The dark streaks of her hair caught the sunlight, reflecting the fire that burned within her.

He saw her pause, looking around, and for a moment, he held his breath, wondering if she'd sensed him. But then she shrugged it off and continued to her car. Skunk jumped into the backseat, his tail thumping against the upholstery.

He started his car, the engine purring to life like a predator waiting to strike. His fingers drummed on the steering wheel, tapping out a familiar tune that only he could hear. The anticipation built inside him; it was a game of cat and mouse, and he was more than ready to play.

"Time to go, my dear," he said softly, watching Morgan pull out of her driveway and onto the street. "Let's see where this road takes us."

As her car disappeared around the corner, he allowed himself a brief smile, the corners of his lips curling in wicked delight. With a flick of his wrist, he shifted gears and followed her, the distance between them closing like a noose.

"Wherever you're going," he thought, his eyes locked on the fading taillights, "I'll be right there with you, Morgan Cross. Every step of the way."

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FOR US

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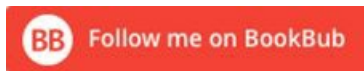
(A Morgan Cross FBI Suspense Thriller—Book Six)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising thirty-one books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising twenty-one books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting), of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), and of the new FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

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