

A CAMI LARK MYSTERY--BOOK #10

**J U U S T**

**T O N I G H T**

**B L A K E P I E R C E**

# JUST TONIGHT

(A Cami Lark Mystery —Book Ten)

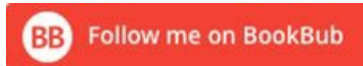
BLAKE PIERCE

## **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-five books (and counting); 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; of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books; of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books; of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books, of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising ten books; of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting); of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books; of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the new SHEILA STONE suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); and of the new RACHEL BLACKWOOD suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting).

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## PROLOGUE

It wasn't often that Lisa Court felt scared in her usually quiet, suburban neighborhood. But she had to admit, tonight, coming back from her walk in the dark, she was spooked.

Maybe it was the weather. The wind, with its late-winter chill, was blowing fiercely, howling through the trees, making everything flap and rattle and creating so much noise she could barely hear her own footsteps on the sidewalk.

It could also be that her husband was away, in Australia for two weeks on business, and that she always felt jumpier when she was alone.

Maybe it was made worse by the fact that she'd been reading up on crime statistics in the local Boston area for one of the articles she was doing for the online publication she worked for. She usually focused more on personality pieces and events, but this was a policing article that had overlapped, and she was astonished to realize how much crime there was, on a daily basis, in her part of Boston, Massachusetts. It was scary. It was making her think that going for a walk in the dark after work wasn't a good idea, even in her local area.

Within a few miles, according to these stats, there had been break-ins, muggings, numerous burglaries, even armed robberies. And more serious crimes that she didn't even want to allow her mind to dwell on.

Now, on the home stretch of her walk, wrapping her down jacket tightly around her and noting how empty the street was, she shivered.

Those statistics were refusing to budge from her mind. Perhaps it was that which was making her feel as if she was being watched.

But she knew there was another reason, too. One that she didn't even want to think about, one that was making her sleep badly at night and wake up, anxious and alert, at the smallest noise.

Turning, she checked behind her anxiously, for at least the third or fourth time since she'd headed along the homeward stretch of her usually quiet and peaceful road.

Nothing there, she thought. The sweeping branches of the elm tree on the corner made it difficult to tell, though. There could be somebody waiting behind it. Was that running footsteps?

She tensed, listening, but wasn't sure. It could be just branches banging on



a roof. At any rate, standing here alone in the middle of the darkened sidewalk wasn't exactly sensible. She needed to get home and get inside.

Turning again, and wishing she could uproot this irrational fear from her mind, she headed on, keeping her head low. Wearing a simple, navy blue jacket and a black knit cap, she was hopefully not conspicuous. Not a *target*, like she'd read about in some of those scary crime stories.

She hurried past the house on the corner, which didn't have any lights on - she guessed the owners must be away on vacation somewhere warmer. Past the next house - with kids, dogs and a busy lifestyle, they were usually always on the go, but this time of the night, the only sign of life was a muted light from the upstairs window.

And then the following house, the one next door to hers, with a neighbor that kept to himself and kept the blinds closed.

Just a minute more, and she'd be inside.

What could happen in a minute? Surely nothing, she reassured herself, as she speeded up, walking as fast as possible, but refusing to run.

Running would mean giving in to panic. She wasn't ready to do that. She wasn't panicking!

Even so, as she took the last few steps along the sidewalk and up to her back door, she felt her heart pounding loudly in her chest.

She was using the back door, which had a key, because her keypad entry wasn't working properly on the front door. That was one of the things causing her to feel unsettled and unsafe. She'd thought it was fixed, until it had started malfunctioning again tonight, as she set out for her walk.

Even the light above the back door seemed to be faulty. It was flickering on and off, as if it was about to fail, even though she knew the bulb had been replaced just a month ago.

Maybe the wind had caused a loose connection. She didn't know. She wasn't an electrician, just a forty-five year old woman whose husband traveled at least two weeks out of every month, and who wanted a safe house where things worked properly.

And they weren't, despite everything she'd done, in her increasing desperation to fix things.

She didn't feel secure stepping inside her house anymore. Now, her spine prickled as she opened the back door and walked in.

The kitchen light was on. Had she left it that way? As she was trying to remember, she heard a sudden hiss of static and a blare of voices from

upstairs.

She froze, swallowing down her fear, before remembering that the television had been malfunctioning, turning itself on at random times and needing resetting. That was the cause of the sound, but it didn't stop her feeling thoroughly spooked.

What on earth was happening here?

This was enough, she decided. This was enough. Robert was due back the day after tomorrow, and when he came back, she was going to tell him they needed to get some sort of additional security in place. Maybe internal cameras, and a different alarm system that worked.

She locked the back door and went through to the hall, intending to go upstairs and turn off the damned television.

But as she entered the hall, she stopped, gasping.

There was a man standing in the hallway, watching her silently. How had he even gotten in, she wondered, panic overwhelming her. He was tall and strong. Wearing a black balaclava and gloves. When he saw her, he took a giant step toward her.

Lisa gave a high, terrified scream. She knew she should do something – run upstairs, try to fight him off, scream louder - but her legs had turned to water and fear had paralyzed her.

Finally, too late, she turned and tried to run, tried to head for the back door, needing to get away from this terrifying, impossible presence in her home.

But those strong, gloved hands grabbed her shoulder, dragging her backward.

And then, they closed around her neck.

# CHAPTER ONE

"What do I do?" Cami said aloud, again.

She'd been saying it a lot over the past couple of days. Nonstop, in fact. Not only to herself but also to Kieran, the twenty-three-year-old man whose apartment she'd moved into a few weeks ago and now, whose bedroom she was sharing.

She'd fallen for Kieran, hard. They were boyfriend and girlfriend now. And confiding in him, getting his advice, felt like a lifeline for her now. It felt as if she wasn't alone.

Kieran's face was serious as he sat cross-legged on the bed opposite her. He was holding her hand in his own, in a long-sleeved plaid shirt ready for his working day as an engineer who worked in construction and maintenance.

Her hand, with silver rings on three of the fingers, black nail polish, and a tattoo visible on her arm below the three-quarter sleeve of the dark gray top she wore, looked small in his.

She wasn't built strongly, she wasn't tall and she wasn't powerful. But on a keyboard, her fingers could be her lethal weapon. IT and hacking was where her skill lay.

"Cami, it's time," Kieran encouraged her. "You really need to tell Connor what you've found out."

Cami swallowed, hard.

She knew he was right. It was time. But the thought of doing it was petrifying to her.

"Look, he knows a lot already. Probably more than you think he does," Kieran urged her.

Squeezing his hand tighter, Cami nodded. "I guess so," she admitted.

"After all, this all started when your sister went missing, and that was what - six years ago, now?"

"Yes. I was sixteen at the time, Jenna was eighteen," Cami said, her mind going back to her sister's disappearance, the way that her police officer father had refused to believe it was anything but an act of rebellion and that Jenna was a runaway. It had been so traumatic. The FBI had been called in - eventually, and in Cami's opinion, only after her father had finished his blustering and criticism about her sister's attitude and her refusal to listen and that this was just another reason she'd never amount to anything.

Meanwhile, traumatized and confused, Cami had just wanted her found! This was urgent. Jenna would never, ever have run away without telling Cami.

The FBI case had come to nothing, and that had always rankled deeply with Cami. It was the reason why, at the end of her final year studying computer science at MIT, she'd hacked the FBI's homepage.

Unfortunately, she hadn't covered her tracks sufficiently. The FBI, in the form of agent Connor, had come looking for her, and she'd been offered an ultimatum - to avoid prosecution, work for us when we need you for a year.

The year was more than half over now, and Cami trusted Connor a lot more than she'd done at the start.

At the same time, she'd realized that the trouble in the FBI ran far deeper than she'd thought.

Liam Treverton, the ex-agent who'd been in charge of Jenna's case until he'd been told to drop it, had recently been murdered. And Kieran's brother, FBI agent Ethan Myers, who had found out that there were irregularities within the FBI and who'd been trying to uncover them, had been shot and had died from his injuries.

That was what had originally brought Cami and Kieran together.

Since then, she'd discovered a senior agent who was still working in the FBI and who all of this traced back to.

His name was Bill Oertel.

He'd forced Liam Treverton to hand over the case.

He'd been in communication with unknown individuals at key times just before Liam and Ethan had been killed. Bill Oertel was a bad guy, and he had been pulling the strings to make sure this happened. That, she now knew for sure.

Bill Oertel was corrupt, and was doing something highly illegal within the FBI.

Worst of all, Bill Oertel now knew who she was.

And that meant she could no longer delay. Every minute meant she was in bigger danger - and not just her. What if the connection to Ethan meant that Kieran was also at risk?

Cami still blamed herself for Ethan's death. No way could she allow Kieran to be hurt or killed. No way.

"You're right," she said. "I do need to speak to him. And I need to do it now."

"It's for the best, Cami," he urged her. "Connor will know what to do, and I know you can trust him."

"I know I can. And it doesn't matter who he tells now," Cami said. "Because Oertel is going to be ready to blow this all the way out of the water anyway."

"Exactly," Ethan agreed. "It's reached a head. Now you need to move before he does."

Cami swallowed. She didn't want to think about what his move would be.

She looked around the bedroom. Living here, with Kieran, was beginning to feel like home. She loved the apartment. She loved being with Kieran. Coming home every night, cooking together, drinking a glass of wine, discussing their days - it was incredible. After years of loneliness and a conflicted relationship with her parents, Cami finally felt like she had the chance at happiness again.

She deserved it. Kieran deserved it. Some greedy, corrupt criminal had no right to rip all of it away. And based on what she suspected that Bill Oertel and his connections had done so far, Cami knew he wouldn't hesitate to do it.

This was her fragile life, it was everything that was important to her, and no way could she lose it.

"Yes. I do need to get in there first."

"So pick up the phone. And call Connor."

Cami let go of his hand and reached for the phone.

Her mouth felt dry, and her hands were cold as she grasped it. This was scary. She'd come so close to telling Connor the truth, so many times. Each time she'd delayed - wanting to wait, wanting to do more research. Now, she found herself hesitating again, and this time, it was simply wanting all of this to go away. A forlorn hope that if she kept her head down, maybe somehow all of this would go away.

But she knew she could no longer afford to think that way.

She unlocked the phone and scrolled through her contacts until she reached Connor's cellphone number. The apartment felt very quiet. There was a sense of expectation in the air. The morning traffic hadn't yet started, outside was cool and still and mostly dark.

She pressed the screen to bring his number up.

And then, frightening the life out of her with the sudden noise at such a tense moment, her phone began ringing loudly.

She stared at in consternation. It was Connor calling.

She suspected strongly that this was not synchronicity but rather trouble. Dry mouthed, she swiped right and took the call.

"Connor?" she said, hearing the stress in her own voice.

His was as sharp as he'd ever heard it.

"Cami. Are you home?"

"I am. I -" she began, but he didn't give her a chance to say anything more.

"I'm going to be outside your apartment in five minutes. I need you to be waiting. It's urgent."

He didn't even need to say that this was trouble. From the tone of his voice,

Cami could already tell.

## CHAPTER TWO

Cami hung up, adrenaline surging.

"Connor knows!" she said to Kieran.

"Did I hear him say five minutes?" he asked.

"Yes." Erupting from her position on the bed, Cami began dashing around the bedroom, pulling on her clothes, dragging a brush through the side of her black-dyed hair that wasn't shaved.

"What's this about? Does he need you on a case?" Kieran asked.

"I don't know if it's a case. I don't think so, from the way he sounded and what he said," she explained, shoving her laptop and phone into the bag. Case or not, she'd need them regardless, and she might need the FBI jacket that was hanging in the hallway, too. She didn't want to go unprepared, even though five minutes gave her no prep time at all.

She pulled on her Doc Martens, doing them up as best she could.

Fastening the laces of her ankle boots were a time consuming chore. Maybe there'd be time, in the car, to tighten them properly. Even though Cami didn't think that 'in the car' was something she was going to be looking forward to.

"Good luck. Let me know, okay?" Kieran sounded as anxious as she felt.

She rushed over to him. She kissed him, felt his hand warm on her back for a moment, and then she grabbed her laptop bag, her jacket, and her phone and raced out of the apartment, worry flaring inside her, hoping that she didn't trip over her still-dangling laces as she raced for the elevator.

She had to wait for it to come down two floors, shifting impatiently from foot to foot. Inside the elevator, she put her bag down, quickly slipped her jacket on, and managed to tackle one of her laces before it reached the lobby. She burst out of the doors and onto the street, feeling a chilly wind tug at her hair - and then, there was Connor, rounding the corner and pulling up outside her apartment building.

Cami jumped in the car, feeling so choked up by anxiety and by the rushed preparation, that she was breathless for a moment.

"Morning, Cami," Connor said, filling the silence as she caught her breath and collected her thoughts. The words were innocuous enough, but his tone of voice was as hard as she'd ever heard it.

She glanced at him, but he was looking ahead, already pulling onto the road and joining the now-worsening traffic. His face looked stern, with its

firm, hard jaw and its cropped brown hair, with a hint of gray at the temples.

"Morning," she finally got out.

She thought that Connor would talk to her, that he'd say something, that he'd explain what was happening. But he didn't. And, as he indicated and turned down a side road, she saw to her consternation that he was not taking the usual route to the FBI offices.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

He turned again, accelerating down a side road.

"We have work to do," he said.

Work? What work? Why wasn't he saying anything? It was exceedingly unlike Connor not to say anything.

Cami stayed quiet, biting her lip with anxiety, as Connor accelerated along a side street.

Worst case scenarios flooded her mind, chief among which was that Bill Oertel had gotten his side of the story in first, and been believed, and Cami was on her way to some kind of disciplinary hearing as a result. This was scary. Knowing you were up against somebody so powerful and so lethal, even though she'd taken such a tiny step, was scary.

And he'd seen her.

She remembered vividly what had happened before her meeting with the FBI agent, Jacinta, who was acting as her 'parole officer' during her cases. They'd walked into the boardroom, and he'd been there. She'd recognized his name, of course, when Jacinta had innocently introduced her boss's boss.

And worse still, he'd recognized hers.

That meeting hadn't gone well. Cami had intended to finally tell Jacinta everything. But after seeing Oertel, she was unable to say a word. She'd sat in miserable silence for ten long minutes before saying she couldn't do it, getting up, and bursting out of the door. She'd left the FBI offices feeling like a hunted woman. She'd felt so ashamed to have broken her promise that she was going to talk and finally give the details of what had been going on.

But after seeing Oertel in that office, and discovering the bombshell that he was Jacinta's boss's boss, and that from her tone, Jacinta clearly respected him and didn't suspect him of any wrongdoing? Nope. She couldn't do it. She couldn't sit in that same office and explain to Jacinta that her boss's boss was likely involved in some seedy and deadly business.

She might not be believed. And then what?

So she'd left. She hadn't even answered the phone when her parole officer



had tried to call her, and she hadn't answered the messages Jacenta had left for her either. She'd been paralyzed with fear and uncertain of what to do.

She'd called the FBI offices two days later, from a friend's phone – that was how paranoid she was already feeling – and asked to speak to Connor. But she'd been told that Connor was out of state. He'd flown to Atlanta to assist with another case and would only be back on Tuesday.

Today was Wednesday, and that was why she'd been plucking up the courage to call him. But he'd called her first.

Now, what was going on?

Connor was turning again, this time down a road that led to a small group of buildings. There was a supermarket, and a dry cleaners, and a hardware store - and, next to them, a police station.

A police station? Was this where they were going? It had to be, Cami guessed.

Sure enough, he parked in the small lot behind the building and climbed out. Still without saying a word to her, he led the way inside, greeting the officer in the lobby and heading straight down the corridor, as if this had been prearranged.

Had it, Cami wondered. And if so, what did it mean?

Connor opened the door at the end of the corridor, which led to a small office. It was the type of place that they would sometimes borrow from the local police while on cases, to look through evidence or do research or even interview a suspect, rather than going all the way back to the FBI office. Only they weren't on a case right now. Were they?

Cami didn't know. She felt confused, and now also scared. This was unlike the usual routine she'd ever had with Connor and he was acting totally differently, and because he wasn't talking, all she could do was keep her own mouth shut and try to appear calm, although the racing of her pulse was far beyond her control.

Connor closed the door behind her. The small office was silent, and quite warm. There were plug points in the middle of the desk, and Cami also noticed a flask of coffee on the side table, and a few sachets of sugar and long-life cream had been placed in a saucer. It seemed like this office was expecting to have people come and work in it. Had they been expected here, and had this little place been set up especially for them? If so, why? Why were they here, and why was Connor behaving so weirdly?

At least, Cami thought, she'd get answers now. She would surely have to,

because they'd gotten where they were going, and the door was now closed. There was nothing to do but discuss what was going on – surely? Or were there more surprises in store?

He sat down on one side of the desk, and Cami sat on the other.

"You're probably wondering what this is all about," he said at last.

"Wondering?" Cami blurted out the word before she could stop herself. "I've been - well, I've been stressing, to be honest, Connor. What's happening?"

"We can't work from my office today," he said slowly. "There are circumstances preventing that from being possible, for now."

"Why's that?" Cami thought of the familiarity of the FBI offices. Having been there so many times, she could find the way to Connor's office blindfolded. She was even on friendly terms with the security guard who usually manned the entrance. Why couldn't Connor go there today? Or maybe it was to do with her?

"Following a few developments last week, which I kept track of while I was away, and which I'll tell you about in more detail now," Connor began, "I asked for a sweep of my office yesterday."

He looked at her, his face serious, as her heart rate hit the stratosphere.

"Long story short, they found my office was bugged," he told her.

## CHAPTER THREE

Cami stared at Connor, wordlessly.

Whatever she'd expected him to say, it wasn't that.

*Bugged?*

Questions flooded her mind, and she finally managed to get the first one out.

"Do they know who it is?" she asked, her voice small and hoarse.

He nodded. "They strongly suspect."

"And – who?"

He gave her a knowing look. "Why are you asking when you were on the brink of telling?"

Cami now gaped at him. This had something to do with what had happened last week. With Jacenta? It seemed so. But how had Jacenta known when she hadn't said a thing? How had Connor known?

"I don't understand how this happened," she said huskily.

Connor didn't answer immediately. Instead, he got up and he walked over to the side table, and he poured two cups of coffee, fixing Cami's just the way he knew she liked it. A touch of cream and one sugar. He brought the coffee over.

"Cami, I don't think you have realized how seriously we have taken everything you've said and hinted at. We lost a good agent, Ethan, because of what was related to this. The fact that you, who are clearly an outspoken person, were too scared to talk about this was extremely worrying to us. So rather than pressure you, we started looking extremely closely at everything surrounding you. Everything you were involved in, and everything you didn't say."

"I – er – well, I meant to tell you everything," Cami mumbled, now feeling worried that all her clandestine activities, of which there were quite a few, were being tracked. Would Connor be mad about this – if not now, then down the line?

"Of course you did. But there were things you couldn't tell us. We looked into those – when I say, 'we', I mean Jacenta and me. Nobody else. We knew that we could not trust anyone except ourselves. So we did our best, pooling our information and also looking into your background. Into the disappearance of Jenna. And the weird way that case was handed over and

then disappeared.” His voice was sympathetic.

Cami was astounded. She hadn’t known or guessed that he would ever look into that. She felt utterly stunned that he’d even known about it in such depth. It had been a private pain point for her that she’d never chosen to speak to him about, firstly because she hadn’t trusted him and then when she had, it felt like too little too late. Rather, she’d believed she needed to prove herself to him for what she was, not what lay in her past.

But Connor had been looking and researching, and he’d found out. And in turn, he’d also kept that to himself and had never told her. There had been things going on behind the scenes that she’d not had the faintest idea of. That Connor had been feeling his way carefully into her past, knowing that important things might be concealed there.

“You found all that out?” Stating the obvious, she knew.

“Yes. Not all at once. Over time and very discreetly. Jacinta was absolutely insistent on the need for that. Even when I just thought you were being stubborn, she was the one who picked up that you were terribly scared.”

The things she hadn’t known! The compassion with which people had treated her! Cami felt lost for words yet again as Connor continued.

“So we found out that there was definitely someone within the Bureau who had gone bad. We picked up on a few related cases that had been dropped. We realized that this person must still be in the Bureau and that they were clearly still involved in this. We started searching for people who’d known Liam in particular. But although we got a shortlist of people, we couldn’t find the name we needed.”

“Until?” For some reason, Cami thought that word might be hovering in the air, and so it proved. Connor nodded, his gaze fixing hers.

“Until last week, when you went into the meeting with Jacinta.” He paused. “She didn’t realize immediately. Not at the time. She was frustrated and thought you were just shutting down again in the way you’d done previously. It was only after you’d left, and she went back to her office, that she started putting two and two together. And even then, it was difficult.” Connor’s voice was now resonating with an emotion that Cami weirdly recognized as stress. “Such a senior agent? It seemed impossible.”

Cami took a deep breath. “Maybe it was just as well you were in Atlanta,” she said.

Connor nodded. “Considering that my office was bugged, it was just as

well.”

Cami couldn't believe it. It was impossible that an office – maybe more than one – within the FBI itself had been bugged. That just blew her mind. It was so strange, so surreal.

“What about Jacenta's office?”

“Also bugged. She's supposedly been sent to Delaware to help with a financial case. That's the story we've put out. She's not in Delaware. She's still here. Because now we've realized that Bill Oertel must be the agent behind a network that is bigger and more powerful than we've ever thought. And it's not going to be easy to pin this on him. Plus, seeing our offices were bugged, he's already alert and aware.”

“How are you going to do it?” Cami asked.

“We've set some traps,” Connor said. “I won't say more. But we've been very careful. We've made sure that only the people we implicitly trust, at the highest level, are involved. And we're taking it slowly. Very slowly.”

“Of course,” Cami said. Something like this, she guessed couldn't be done in a day. Much as she would have loved for a team of agents to storm Bill Oertel's office and arrest him and lock him up, she could see that would be vastly premature. He had covered his tracks incredibly well. Uncovering them would take time.

“Is he in the office at the moment?” she asked.

“Called in sick yesterday. He's going to fight this hard. He's probably working on this at the moment, but so are we. And if we can, we're going to get him. But it'll take time. We can't try to force his hand. But we can create a situation where he incriminates himself.” Connor's voice was as iron-hard as Cami had ever heard it. Listening to the resolve in his tone gave her hope and confidence.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked, thinking of her IT skills and that they might make a difference here.

But Connor shook his head. “For the time being, we don't want you involved at all. The first thing Jacenta and I agreed is that we do not want you in danger. That's partly why we are not doing anything that might alert Oertel.”

“What if he knows already?” Cami's first thought was for Kieran. “What about Kieran, Connor? He's Ethan's brother and Oertel might target him!” Anxiety surged inside her. She wasn't nearly as worried for herself as she was for him.

“That was one of the first precautions we took,” Connor said to her relief and surprise. “There’s an undercover agent posted outside his workplace. We’ve had one outside your apartment also.”

“So – is that why we’re here now?” she asked hesitantly. “So that you can update me on this without Oertel overhearing us?”

Connor shook his head. For a moment, his grim demeanor lightened slightly.

"No. I didn't have time to tell you yet because this update came first. But there's a case on the go. As of this morning."

“A case?”

"Yes. And that's why we're here. So that we can investigate it and do our work without being overheard. Even if people are maneuvering in the background, what we do comes first. And this case is a strange one." Connor took a deep breath, as if renewing his focus on what they had to do. “There’s no proof yet that the murders are linked, but they’re very similar and they’ve taken place within a short timeframe,” he said. “And, if it’s a serial, there’s a risk this killer will strike again.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

It was eye-opening to Cami that even massive politics, corruption, and potentially dangerous backlashes within the FBI branch itself could not be allowed to stop the agents from doing what they needed to do.

“What is the case?” she asked Connor.

“Two murders, both women on their own at the time, both strangulations. Both are in fairly wealthy areas of Boston. One was last week, one was last night. There's no proof as yet that the murders are linked, but with the MOs so similar and the crimes so close together, the police have flagged it as a suspected serial, and the case was handed over to the FBI this morning, and it came to my desk. Or rather, my temporary desk,” he admitted wryly. “There's very little evidence available in terms of how entry was gained in both scenes, and it seems that the killer might just have walked in through an open door, opportunistically.”

Cami shivered at the thought.

“You think there might be some camera evidence?” she asked, making sure that her brain was on track with an investigator’s mindset.

“I’m hoping so, and since that is your forte, it’s a reason for you to come on board.”

Cami felt glad there was an opportunity to get to work. After what she’d been told, she needed something to take her mind off what was happening.

“So, both the homes had some security in place?” she asked.

“I’m hoping we can find some camera footage at the homes or on the streets. So far, there don’t seem to be any links between the two victims, but that’s something we need to look at more closely, because there might be connections that we only find out when we explore their phones.” Connor reached up to a shelf and took down a new-looking folder. “I’ve put all the paperwork so far in here. I’m not sure if the crime scene is still open, but if it is, we can go around and take a look. I’ll make a quick call and check while you read up.”

Cami flipped through the folder as Connor spoke.

She saw photos of the two women. One, Lisa Court, was in her forties. The other, Debbie Maynard, looked younger, in her mid-twenties, perhaps. The women had both been alone at the time – Debbie lived alone and Lisa’s husband was overseas, which gave Cami cold shivers, thinking of the horror

of flying back because of such a terrible reason.

There was no obvious similarity between the two women physically. Lisa was dark-haired, slim, sporty looking. Debbie had been taller, blonde, curvaceous, carrying a few extra pounds of weight and with a round, cheerful face. Reading on, Cami learned that Lisa worked in media and that Debbie had been a waitress at a local diner.

Lisa had owned her house for years, while Debbie was relatively new to the area and was renting a place, having moved from a small town into the big city just a few weeks ago. So definitely no immediate similarities there, either.

Lisa's body had been discovered the same evening by pure chance. A neighbor, who was disturbed when her kitchen light was left on at night, had started calling irritably to remind Lisa to turn it off. Getting no answer, the neighbor had gone over and knocked. To her surprise, the front door had been ajar, and she'd found Lisa's body in the living room.

Debbie had only been found the day after her murder – she hadn't arrived for her shift, and the diner where she worked had investigated.

The printed words on the pages did not convey the horrors of the scene or the terror of the victims. But Cami could vividly imagine that. This trouble with Bill Oertel was bringing the sense of threat close to home. She knew what it must feel like to have had an aggressive killer burst in. The terror, the helplessness the women must have felt. She shivered.

"Right," Connor said. "The second scene is still open and police are there. So let's get moving and see what there is to find there."

He stood up and shouldered his bag before heading out of their temporary office. Cami followed him as he strode out of the police station and headed for the car.

But as she followed him, her phone rang. It was a number she didn't recognize.

Curious, she hung back and picked up the call in the lobby.

"Am I speaking to Cami Lark?" The man speaking sounded brisk, confident, businesslike.

"Yes, you are," Cami replied, instinctively adopting the same tone, while wondering who on earth he was.

"Cami, this is Steve Billings. I got your number from MIT. Is it a good time to talk?"

Cami glanced at Connor, who was now standing by the car and looking



back at her.

"I'm going into a meeting," she hedged, by way of explanation, "but I can talk quickly."

"I head up Rushmore Ventures. You might have heard of it. We're making waves in the tech industry. We have three successful startups in place, and I'm looking for IT talent. You were top of class at MIT. I'd like to speak to you, Cami. We're one of the industry's top payers, and for talented techs, promotions are stratospheric."

"That – that sounds very exciting," she said. "I'd love to hear more and to set up an interview." Even though she felt conflicted by saying the words, there was no way she could turn down the chance to find out what this was about.

It was a door opening for her, and maybe at exactly the right time. Did she want to work for the FBI after what was playing out now? It could be an opportunity to rethink her career and to go someplace safer.

Her year's tenure being on call with the FBI had been a stumbling block for Cami, but the year was more than halfway over now. It seemed a lot different in terms of the timeframe than it had done at the start.

"Great," Steve said. "I'll email you some more information on the company and a couple of alternative interview times. Just pick the one that suits you best and we can get face to face at our Boston offices."

"Thank you," Cami said. Now seeing that Connor was staring at her impatiently, she politely concluded the call, hung up, and raced for the car, ignoring his inquiring look.

She couldn't tell him what this call had been about, and that after being tempted by the FBI, she was now seriously considering an alternative career choice. She got inside without saying a thing, and he sped away.

As they drove, Cami tried to keep the excitement about the call and the opportunity – being head hunted, straight out of university – out of her mind, and made sure her thoughts were focused on the case ahead.

Rush hour was now ebbing, and since Connor was heading out of town, the drive was quicker than Cami had thought it would be. She stared at the scenery passing by – rain-swept roads, sidewalks still with traces of snow, bare trees. It was a bleak panorama.

Connor swung the car off the main road, headed up a hill, and drove down a tree lined road to where Cami saw the bright lights of police cars were flickering in the gray morning gloom.

Cami had been on the lookout for cameras, but she hadn't seen any on the way into this secluded and upscale suburb. It might not be so easy to get visual evidence of this killer.

Connor stopped the car and got out. Now that she was at the scene, Cami found that focusing was surprisingly easy, and all her thoughts were on what happened here, and what she could discover.

Connor walked up to the police at the scene and introduced himself and Cami.

"Forensics has already finished up," the cop explained. "They spent a few hours here last night and came back again early this morning. There's unfortunately no obvious trace evidence picked up so far."

"What about the entry point?" Connor asked.

The cop shook his head. "Both the front and the back doors were unlocked. There were two sets of keys on the counter near the back door – car keys and house keys – so we assume that the victim might have come in through the back. But maybe she left the other door open for some reason, and the killer got in through the front?"

Cami was staring at the flashing keypad by the front door. It looked as if it was electronically controlled, but it also seemed as if it wasn't working correctly and was offline.

"Had she come from work?" Connor asked.

"She was wearing jeans and old trainers, and there was a pair of smarter boots in the kitchen. So she could have changed shoes when she got home, or maybe even gone for a walk. The neighbor who found the body told us that she did sometimes go for a walk in the evenings."

Cami listened intently to what was being said. It sounded as if Lisa had had a predictable schedule – going for a regular walk late at night would have allowed the killer to dovetail with her movements.

Feeling angry with herself, she quickly stopped wishing that Lisa hadn't been so foolish as to walk alone at night. In this safe and cloistered suburban neighborhood, a woman should be able to go for a walk locally after dark, without threat or fear. Lisa's actions were not the problem. The killer's actions were.

So he'd been waiting. Either inside or outside. He'd planned this. But maybe he hadn't planned it well enough, and there was a way she could pick up some evidence of him.

As Connor talked with the other cops about the placement of the body –

face down – and the violence of the kill – extremely quick, powerful hands – Cami looked around to see what cameras there were on site. She could already see that this home had some smart features. There was a control keypad near the front door, but it, too, was blinking erratically in a way that made Cami think the controls might have been faulty or offline. Moving to the screen, she saw it was completely blank, as if the keypad had had a factory reset and was waiting to be reprogrammed.

However, there was a front door camera. Her hand went instinctively to her phone. Where was it linked to? Was it just there to give the homeowner a peek at who was outside? Or was it connected up to a security company?

Quickly, Cami started up her program that she hoped would give her access to the home's operating system and wifi.

She let the program run, and while it was running, she tuned back into what Connor was saying.

“So the husband is on his way back now?”

"Yes. He's on the second of his connecting flights and will be home tomorrow. He was in a remote town in western Australia, so that's the fastest he can get back here."

“Any other family?” Connor asked.

The cop nodded. Lisa has a daughter, Harriet, who's twenty-three years old. She lives nearby. She came around earlier this morning and was in a very traumatized state. We sent her home, together with one of the officers. If she's calmed down now, we still need to interview her.”

“That's a job we can do. We'll go there, from here. It can be our next stop,” Connor said.

Cami glanced down at her phone again anxiously. It sounded as if they'd be getting ready to go at any minute, and she hoped that before then, she could get a look into the wifi and see what was there.

But to her consternation, when she stared down at the screen, she saw a result that she'd never expected.

“Connor,” she said, her voice urgent. “Look here, quick. Something's very wrong.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“What’s wrong?” Cami could hear the same urgency in Connor’s voice as there had been in hers.

“I’m getting nothing here. No wifi at all. No cameras. Not even the phone. It’s like everything in this smart home was disabled. Why would that be?”

“Could this killer have sabotaged it?” Connor asked.

“I don’t know,” Cami replied.

Had this killer done such a thing? That was the first dark suspicion that lurked in Cami's mind. Had he somehow managed to wipe the entire system? But without the basic wifi, she couldn’t even see what was there.

“It would depend on his level of expertise,” she said. “It might just not be working, they might have disconnected it. Some control panels get put in and never used. But if it wasn’t working, then other people would know. And surely, she’d at least have the wifi working?”

She didn’t know how it had been disabled so completely. It hadn’t had wires cut. It had been wiped. Everything!

Even if people got angry with their home’s control systems, everyone used wifi. Didn’t they?

This killer might be somebody with expertise in tech. Cami now thought that was a strong possibility.

“I guess her daughter would know if the wifi had been operational?” Connor asked.

“Yes, I'm sure Harriet would know if she'd visited recently," Cami said.

Connor nodded. “I hope that she will have had a chance to calm down by now. Let’s see if she feels ready to talk.

\*\*\*

Ten minutes later, Cami and Connor pulled up outside the apartment building where Harriet, Lisa’s daughter, lived.

The presence of a police car outside showed Cami that there was still an officer on site, and she felt glad that this traumatized woman hadn’t been left alone. Connor checked the address of the apartment, rang the bell, and in a few moments the policeman answered.

“Come on up,” he said.

The apartment was on the third floor, and the policeman, a kindly looking man in uniform, with a graying mustache, met them at the front door.

"I've been sitting with her this past hour," he briefed Connor quietly. "She's settled down a lot, but I haven't mentioned her mother at all. I haven't asked her anything. I thought it would be better to wait until you arrived."

"Appreciate it," Connor said. "Yes, probably better."

Walking in, Cami saw this apartment was a small but cozy place that reminded Cami a lot of the current place she shared with Kieran. A tiny hallway, a small living room with a kitchenette beyond, and a closed door that she guessed led to a single bedroom.

Thinking of Kieran, Cami couldn't control her worry, and her own predicament surged into her mind again. The concerns about Bill Oertel rushed back, and with them, this time, came a flash of additional worry for Kieran.

Would he be okay? She must ask Connor if he thought there was a possibility Oertel might target him or try to. After all, he'd targeted Ethan – or, at any rate, Cami was sure he had. What if he went after his brother, too?

Worry was uppermost in her mind as she headed into the living room, which contained a few pieces of furniture that looked worn and very comfortable, and Cami guessed it was from a second-hand store. "So very sorry about this, Miss Court."

Huddled on the couch, Harriet looked small and forlorn. She was a petite woman with shiny brown hair and narrow shoulders and a lean face that was tearstained and blotchy looking.

"This is just so – so unreal," she stammered. "My mother? Why her? She was so gentle! She was a really good person. There's nobody who would want to kill her, nobody."

Cami sat down beside her. She wasn't much of a physical person and didn't feel comfortable with these gestures – usually. But right then she sensed that Harriet might need her hand held, so she clasped the other woman's fingers in her own.

"When did you last see your mother?" Connor asked.

"The day before yesterday. I try to visit her a lot when my dad's away."

She gulped as if surprised she had managed to get all those words out.

"He travels quite often, doesn't he?"

"Yes. Often."

"And tell me, was everything okay in her life? Did your mother mention

any fights, any problems?” Connor asked.

Harriet stared at the wall blankly as if grappling with this question.

“No fights. She had moved into a new role at work, she had more reporting to do in her job, but she was enjoying it.”

“Did she get on with everyone at work?”

“Yes!” Harriet sounded agonized. “She got on with everyone just fine. It’s a lovely company. She’d worked there for years.”

“Anything going on in her life that she was the least bit anxious about?”

Cami wondered if Connor had sensed something in Harriet’s body language and was pushing her to think. She thought perhaps he had. And sure enough, Harriet took a sobbing breath.

“Well, the house itself was driving her mad. She thought – this is going to sound stupid.”

Clearly, she was remembering something her mother had said or done, and this prompted a fresh bout of tears. Connor waited patiently.

“She thought what?” he asked.

“She was thinking the house was haunted. That there was, like, a ghost or a spirit. Because of all the things malfunctioning all the time.”

Cami felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up as Connor continued.

“What things?”

“Lights not working. Issues with the front door. All sorts of problems. The television suddenly turning itself on in the night. She had this idea that there might be a spirit in the house, that maybe somebody had died there in the past and was haunting it. And she actually went and got someone who could deal with those things.” Now that she was talking more freely, Harriet seemed to have left her tearfulness behind.

“I guess you don’t mean an electrician? You’re talking about someone different?” Connor asked, and she grimaced.

“My mom tried a few electricians, but everyone was blaming everyone else and nobody seemed to be able to fix it, so she started thinking it was something deeper.”

“Understandable,” Connor said encouragingly.

“I thought it was probably just a bad electrical connection somewhere, but then again, who knows? I do believe in ghosts. I thought, if it sets her mind at rest, and she feels like at least that’s ruled out, then it was all good.”

“Absolutely,” Cami said supportively.

“So, yes, she went and got an exorcist a couple of weeks ago. It was just

after my dad left on his business trip. She didn't want him to know because he would think she was mad, she said."

"And how did that pan out?" Connor asked.

Cami also felt eager to know. An exorcist? What had he done? Was he the problem?

Lisa's next words told her that this fleeting thought might be correct.

"He didn't do a good job, and she wasn't comfortable with him at all. In fact, she said he'd made things worse and that it might have been a bad decision. And She thought he was a creepy guy. There was some issue with payment, I've forgotten what it was."

Cami saw Connor's eyes narrow, and knew what he was thinking.

A creepy guy in the house who had left on bad terms, followed by a murder? In calling the wrong person in to solve one problem, Lisa might unwittingly have created a deadlier one.

"Who is this exorcist?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," the daughter said. "But I know she called him recently." She paused. "You don't think – you don't think he could have done this?"

"We need to make sure," Connor said in a noncommittal way. "Did you ever see him? Do you know what he looks like?"

"Yes, I - I saw him." She scrubbed a hand over her eyes. "And she told me his name, but I've totally forgotten it. I was rushing at the time, wanting to be out of the house by the time he started working. And then when we had dinner again, she told me all about it but still didn't mention his name."

"What did he look like?"

"He was tall, dark-haired, and maybe about forty years old. He definitely looked like an exorcist should look, if that's any help?" Lisa offered.

Even though they didn't know his name, the fact that Lisa Court had contacted him so recently gave them a lead, Cami knew. She would surely have called him to set up the appointment?

If she got hold of Lisa's phone and could open it, then they could track him down.

## CHAPTER SIX

As soon as they'd left the apartment, Connor got on the phone. Cami knew he was going to track down Lisa's cellphone. She was guessing that the phone might have been processed at the local police station where the crime had first been called in, and that if it was ready and had been taken into evidence, they could get to it immediately.

But when he started speaking, Cami heard there was a problem.

"You've done what?" Connor asked, sounding incredulous. Then he sighed, shaking his head as they strode to the car. "No problem. You weren't to know. I'll organize for it to be taken back again."

Climbing into the car, he turned to Cami. "The two victims' phones have already been processed and released and were sent straight to the Boston FBI office. Seems the local police were a step ahead, at the wrong time for us."

"Oh, that doesn't help," Cami said, knowing that for now, the FBI office was a no-go area. The police's efficiency had worked against them, in a surprising twist.

"I'm going to ask my office to send them back to the local police station where we've just been. That'll allow us to locate this exorcist, hopefully. And in the meantime, let's go to the Hunger Stop, the diner where Debbie Maynard worked. The case report didn't give us enough information on her, but she was new in town and lived alone. Seems like her workplace is a good place to start."

Cami nodded. That made sense. In fact, the workplace might be where Debbie had met the killer. Perhaps there was already a person in common. Exorcists had to eat somewhere, right, Cami thought, feeling encouraged. Maybe Debbie had met this creepy guy, too, in the course of her work. The diner wasn't far away from where they were now.

Connor started up the car, and they headed out to the Hunger Stop.

The diner seemed to be in the mid-morning lull between the breakfast trade and the lunchtime arrivals. When Connor pulled up outside, Cami saw the parking lot to the right of the low brick building, with its large windows and neon signage, was only about a third full.

They headed inside, where the aroma of deep fried chicken and percolating coffee immediately hit Cami's nose. The place seemed like a homey, local establishment, with red-uniformed waiting staff and white



aproned chefs bustling to and fro. Cami guessed that the gray-haired woman at the till, who had an air of authority and was calling out something to one of the waiters, might be either the manager or the owner.

“FBI,” Connor said, showing his ID to her. Instantly, the woman’s face changed, tightening into grim lines.

“I’m the manager here and can help you. This is in connection with Debbie, isn’t it?” she asked.

“That’s correct, ma’am. We’re looking for information,” Connor said.

“Well, I’m glad it’s being taken so seriously,” she declared. “The poor young woman – new in town, and just starting a new life for herself.”

“Do you know why she was starting afresh?” Connor asked, instantly homing in on the salient point.

Cami was hoping there would be a reason that might link up to the crime, but the manager’s answer left her disappointed.

“She moved here to study. Her course was starting in March, and she was working until then for something to do and to make some friends in the area.

“What was she studying?”

“It was an accounting course, I think. Something in the financial sector that I do recall. She had a good head for figures, and she was also a very good waitress. Attentive, you know, with an eye for detail.”

“She was young and pretty. Did any customers cause trouble, or try to harass her?” Connor asked.

The manager frowned. “We’re a family diner. We don’t have problems like that here.”

But Cami could see what Connor was thinking: that the words might be reflexive and that they represented an automatic denial rather than the truth.

“Perhaps there was something small?” he questioned. “Maybe a complaint or even something you heard about from someone else? Any problematic customers? It would be better to tell us if you do remember. Always helps to avoid trouble later.”

Faced with the prospect of trouble if she didn’t remember, she was frowning more deeply.

“Look, there were one or two customers who – you know – used to flirt a bit. She was new, so she got more of the attention than our longer-term servers.”

“Can you give their names?” Connor asked.

Now she was backtracking. “They’re good people! I don’t want to slander

them, especially for something like that. To tell you who they are – well, it's like implying they're a stalker or a pervert!"

"Remember, what we have here is a dead woman," Connor reminded her with an edge to his voice. "Being questioned and cleared of a crime is a very minor problem in comparison. And what I always suggest that people say, if anyone asks you about it later, is that the FBI arrived on site and demanded to look at the records. We don't mind looking like the bad guys if it helps you to smooth things over with your regulars."

That was a very convincing argument, Cami thought. Clearly, the manager thought so too. She sighed. "I guess I can give you the names, but in my opinion, they're decent folk," she insisted.

"Absolutely," Connor said. "Like I said, just ruling them out."

"There's Derek Corrigan," she said thoughtfully.

"Approximate age? And what does he do for a living?"

"Maybe late thirties," she said. "I don't know what he does for a living. I think he's a freelancer of some kind. I do know he always pays the servers a lot of attention, sometimes asks them about their personal lives, and I did hear him asking Debbie a few questions, but in a friendly way."

"The other?" Connor asked.

"The other is Samuel – what's his last name again? She shook her head. "This is very stressful. Samuel Cotton. He's a younger man. Maybe in his twenties. He works for an extermination company. And I did hear him asking her on a date a week or so ago. But I mean, why not? He's a regular here, and you do have to meet people some way, don't you?" She stared at him anxiously. "I think she said no, but he didn't seem angry."

"Exactly. More than likely, it's just a case of ruling them out. Thank you," Connor said to the worried manager.

Cami felt encouraged as they left. They had two names, two leads. One was close to the age that Harriet had mentioned, and the other worked for an extermination company – but maybe that was what exorcists called themselves. Exterminators. It would be more socially acceptable, Cami thought.

Armed with these new leads, they could now go to the police station office and await the arrival of the phones.

Cami felt as if things were starting to come together. A man who'd targeted Lisa, maybe when she was out walking, could easily have stopped by the diner and seen Debbie there. If they were looking for somebody who

was using this local area as his hunting ground, she felt sure they were on the right track.

But, as they arrived at the police station, and Cami was ready to head in and get to work, Connor's phone rang.

"Yes?" he answered it. He paused, and then his voice changed.

"Really?" he said, now turning away from Cami as if he didn't want her to overhear the conversation. But she couldn't help picking up on the next words.

"Where is he? Do they know?"

A surge of fright went through her. This was the FBI office, she knew it. And this call was about Oertel – she strongly suspected it.

It sounded as if he was on the run.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It was like a drug. That's what Boy had realized, like a drug. Once he'd gotten it into his system, there was no going back again. He needed more.

It wasn't just the moment itself, but the build up to it. The excitement. The preparation. A succession of days and hours where he felt his focus sharpen and his eagerness soar, ready for the finale.

But he couldn't overlook the fact that it took a lot of hard work to get there. He was still in the preparation stages, and he knew that he could not skimp the hard work. Failing to plan is planning to fail, after all, he reminded himself.

Be well prepared. He remembered his father saying that to him, in his harsh childhood years, always with a grin on his face that was strangely mirthless, and usually shortly before he found something wrong with what his son had done.

He'd received many beatings, and his mother had not once stepped in or intervened. She'd never tried to save him. No wonder he distrusted women so much. No wonder he felt there should be some punishment due to them. Maybe that was why he had started doing what he did – quite suddenly, one day, after both his parents were finally dead.

Finally dead. His poor, cowardly mother had died in a car crash. As for his father, well, that might have happened a little sooner than nature would have intended. Luckily, Boy's planning had been excellent, and nobody had suspected he'd been involved. But after that, it was like a switch had been thrown. Suddenly, he realized what he needed to do to set the balance right. That was how he thought of it.

He walked along the sidewalk, heading for the place where he could watch his next target. He didn't have to do too much here. His main task, after all, was at her home. But he needed to be sure where she was now. Her whereabouts was important, because that would give him an idea of her routine.

There she was. He paused, drawing in a sharp breath, standing very still as he saw her. So innocent. So uncaring. So uninvolved, just like his mother had used to be.

At first, when he'd begun following her a day ago, he hadn't known if this target would be suitable, but as he'd watched for longer, it had become very

clear to him that she deserved to die.

He could see the similarities to his mother in this pretty red-haired woman who seemed to be in her early twenties. He could see the casualness in her attitude. It was clear to him as she turned to serve a customer in the convenience store where she worked. That carefree smile, the way she didn't seem worried or concerned at all, as if she was ready and willing to turn her back on a man in trouble. Just like his mother had done.

Anger flared inside him as he saw that smile. He would change that attitude. And then he would strip the life from her without hesitation. And that would make him feel just a little better about his own past, his own history.

“Setting the balance right. That's what I'm doing.”

He said it aloud, and laughed at his own words, because his mission was so simple and so perfect.

A man, walking by, swathed in a scarf and coat, gave him a curious glance, but there was no suspicion in the gaze, and Boy knew that was because he was ever so ordinary. There was nothing about him that attracted attention, nothing that would set him apart or make him memorable. He was a little taller and stronger than average, but he'd developed a stooped posture that concealed that well.

He'd been made for this. His ordinary face, his average appearance that hid the scars he carried inside. His low, almost monotonous voice that contrasted so wildly with the thoughts he had – oh, those thoughts. How they excited him. It was as if he had another person within him that controlled the outer shell.

Although now he felt a flash of fear as the man who had passed him turned back.

“Excuse me,” the man said, and for a dreadful moment, caught up in his memories, he wondered if he was going to call him by his secret name - if he was going to call him Boy. But he didn't. Instead, he said, “Can you tell me where I can find the nearest print shop? I was told there is one in this street.”

Boy could have laughed aloud. A print shop. That was how innocent he'd looked – innocuous enough that a passer-by had just consulted him for help in finding a local business.

“You must walk to the end of the road, and it's the last shop on the right,” he said, pointing. He would have liked to mislead the man. That person who capered and cavorted inside him would have adored to cause some mischief

that way, but Boy knew it wasn't wise. If he misdirected the man, then he might think back and remember him. If he gave him the correct directions, then he would go on his way and never think about him again.

He watched as the man walked away, and then he turned his attention back to the brightly lit window that was across the street. That was where she'd be for a while longer. He thought her shift was finishing at about six p.m.

He needed to head for her home now.

It was time to plan her welcome. His face, unused to smiling, stretched into a cold grin as he strode swiftly down the road.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Anxiety surged in Cami as she picked up the words Connor was saying. But she didn't pick up very many of them because he hastily lowered his voice. Connor didn't keep much from her, but it was obvious that this conversation was not for her ears.

That made her even more worried. What was happening?

And why was it being kept from her?

Connor hung up and turned back to her.

“Right,” he said, just as if that call had never come through at all. “We have two suspects, and we have two phones that may contain additional information. So, let's get inside and start working.”

Cami followed him in, her mind racing. Maybe the fact he hadn't said anything meant that it wasn't a problem, and she didn't need to worry. She should probably just go along with that and trust that if it was serious, he would have said something.

At any rate, he was now leading the way into the police station and back to the small office where they had based themselves earlier. Walking in, Cami was struck once again by its impersonality. Connor's office at the FBI, though not filled with personal touches, had a few of them that she enjoyed, and which made her feel grounded. Cami had become used to seeing the relatively new photo of him and his fiancé, which he kept on his desk, as well as several photos of their adopted cats, which always made her happy to look at them.

It felt unsettling to be kicking off a case in this small, plain room.

“So, the phones,” Connor asked. “Can you get into them?”

Cami opened the evidence bag and took a look at the two. Both iPhones, one older and one very new. Both could be hacked using patience and, with the newer one, some luck. She'd assumed for some reason that the newer one would belong to Lisa Court, seeing she had her own house and a better job, but she was wrong. The newer model belonged to Debbie Maynard.

So, of the two, Debbie's would be more difficult to hack and Lisa's would be easier. That was good, she thought, because they did have some information on Debbie already, but they needed the exorcist's number from Lisa's phone.

The exorcist, she thought again with a shiver. This case was weird.

Using her phone, as well as her laptop, she set up her password-hacking programs and waited patiently to see if they were going to get results. Or rather, with Lisa's older phone, not if but when. Debbie's one would be more of a challenge. Not impossible, but time consuming, and she'd need to get lucky with it.

While she waited, she used the time to look up more information on the two men that the manager at the diner had mentioned. Derek Corrigan and Samuel Cotton. They had been very friendly toward Debbie, although the manager had vehemently protested that they'd acted innocently. What did their social media say? Were there any red flags there?

She went and looked, getting a literal picture of their appearance, as well as an insight into their lives. Well, for Samuel Cotton anyway. Cami was slightly disappointed to see that he was a real exterminator. He worked for a company that did pest control in and around the Boston area.

"I'm looking up Samuel's profile," she said to Connor, updating him as he peered over her shoulder.

"And?"

"He's not the exorcist, unless he does it in his free time. Also, he's younger than what Harriet described. But I'm taking a look here," Cami pointed, "to see if I can pick up anything about his movements on the days of the crimes. If we know his movements, we might be able to clear him?"

"What can you pick up?" Connor asked.

Cami looked, scanning the media carefully. He was a chatty, gregarious seeming man, and he was very transparent about his activities. She took a look at his check-ins his appointments, and his report backs.

"I've got something here," she said, surprised. "Connor, I think we can clear him. Last night, from six p.m. to nine p.m., he was at a karaoke evening with friends. There's actually a video of him online, singing a really bad rendition of "The Sounds of Silence." And several photos of the evening. I've checked, and it's a legit event. He was there.

"If he was there, singing badly, then he definitely was not waiting to murder Lisa Court," Connor said. "Good work. It helps to rule suspects out at the start. What about Derek Corrigan?"

"Derek, I'm having more difficulty finding information on," Cami said. "His profiles are less open. I can't see where he works, but I'm still looking."

At that point, though, she had a different lead. Lisa's phone beeped. Cami had gotten into it, and now, at last, she could access the calls. Leaving her



research on Derek Corrigan for the time being, she switched eagerly to the phone.

What could she find? A lot, it seemed.

Lisa Court had used her phone for everything. She'd used it nonstop for work, she'd messaged friends, she'd arranged dinners and meet ups, she'd kept in touch with her husband. She'd checked into various places in the last few weeks. Several restaurants, several local bars. Cami made a note of their names, mindful of needing to find a common thread.

Not all the information was accessible. For instance, Cami couldn't see the emails. The way that this phone was set up, they were on a separate passcode that she couldn't crack. She was lucky to have gotten into the main system so quick. And surely if you were going to get out an exorcist, you'd call or text?

Cami was hoping so as she scrolled through the list of recent calls, taking a quick check back at the timeframe that Harriet had mentioned and then looking at the numbers that were called and who called Lisa in the preceding days.

Then, she had the job of working out who those numbers belonged to. For that, Connor was ready to help.

"Pass me the list," he said. "I'll check up on the database. If there are any unknown ones, we can look for a different way."

Cami checked the calls, going back as far as the phone's memory would allow, which was two weeks, because Lisa made a lot of calls. She didn't want to cut off the timeframe too soon. What if she'd arranged the exorcist to arrive well in advance?

She added number after number to the list, and Connor checked number after number.

It was a tedious process, because after identifying the names, they then had to look them up and see who they were, but there were ways of making it quicker. Cami had a program that she'd written especially for research work like this, which was able to search a few basic databases and social media sites.

So, at least, it was faster than it could otherwise have been, even though to Cami, it felt endlessly slow. There were a few names she wasn't sure about, and those went into a shortlist for further research.

She took the next number. Sent it to Connor, like the others. It was a cellphone number that Lisa had dialed about four days prior to her death.

And, when Connor looked up the number, Cami heard him made a

surprised sound.

Immediately, her focus sharpened and she swung around from her workstation. It meant he'd found something. She was sure of it.

"You will be interested to hear this, I'm sure," he said slowly, his eyes moving between the screens, and Cami knew that whatever it was, he was double-checking it. Triple checking, to make certain that it was correct before he told her about it.

"What?" she asked, unable to take the suspense anymore.

"At five p.m., six days before her death, Lisa made a call."

"Who?" Cami asked. "Who did she call?"

"She called a number that's registered in the name of Derek Corrigan," Connor said. And I see here, on this database, that he's listed as a spiritual consultant."

Cami leaned back in her chair, feeling triumphant.

They'd found a man with a common connection between the two victims. And better still, he was the exorcist that they already suspected.

He could be their killer – and now, they needed to prove it.

## CHAPTER NINE

Cami rushed out of the police station, hot on Connor's heels, and bundled into the passenger seat. They were heading straight for Derek Corrigan's recorded address, and if everything tied up in the way she was hoping, they might have the killer in custody within the hour.

The exorcist lived in a remote part of Boston, on the outskirts of the city, but not bordering any attractive farmland or countryside. Rather, the satnav led them to a tumbledown-looking suburb, where dilapidated office parks and light industrial buildings were separated by tracts of shabby-looking homes. The whole area gave off a sense of neglect, and even though it was midday and the sun had pierced through the clouds, Cami felt that the place seemed strangely gray. She wondered if this was an indication of what they would find there,

After all, an exorcist would surely choose to stay in a tumbledown place that was infested by spirits, wouldn't they? That was what this place felt like, and as she and Connor approached number fourteen, she saw it was characteristic of the neighborhood. The paint on the walls was peeling, the front door was scuffed. The windows were dirty. But on the bright side, the old Chevy parked outside told Cami that the exorcist was definitely home.

Or, at any rate, somebody was home. Cammy reminded herself not to jump to conclusions. But she could see the intent in Connor's body language as he approached the door.

He knocked, and Cami tensed as she heard footsteps approaching the door. There was a hesitation as if the person on the other side was wondering who was there. But then the door swung open, and they were face to face with a man fitting the description of Derek Corrigan. He was taller than Cami had expected, with a face so lean it looked skull-like and a mop of wild dark hair. If Cami had been casting for somebody to play the role of an exorcist, this man would have gotten the part for sure.

Derek did not look pleased like to see them there. His gaze swiveled from Connor to Cami and back again, and his heavy brows lowered in a scowl. For a panicked moment, she thought he might slam the door in their faces. But the thought had no sooner crossed her mind than Connor shoved his foot into the gap.

"Mr. Corrigan?" Connor asked.

His frown deepened. He peered down at Connor's FBI badge.

"What the hell are the Feds doing on my doorstep?" he asked aggressively.

"It's in connection with a couple of recent crimes in the area." Connor's voice was easy, but his eyes were hard. Cami wondered if Derek already guessed why they were there. His demeanor was swiftly becoming too defensive for somebody innocent.

"Why are you harassing me about local crimes?" Derek wasn't giving an inch.

"Why are you so sensitive about being asked questions?" Connor retorted.

"My profession is unusual," Derek stated. "And it sometimes means I get unwanted attention when something does go wrong. I'm very misunderstood."

"It seems you had dealings with both the victims," Connor said. "The name Lisa Court? Does that sound familiar? How about Debbie Maynard? Do you remember her?"

Now Derek looked very taken aback.

"Yeah. I knew them. But I didn't know they were victims. Victims of what?"

His voice resounded with innocence.

"Murder victims." Connor was obviously going for shock value. He wasn't hedging around the topic. And although she didn't know if Derek was guilty, he definitely did look shocked. His eyes widened and his face tautened. But surprised or not, it wasn't enough to make him spill any information, and he was still clinging to his denial.

"I know nothing about that," Derek protested. "This feels like nothing more than an attempt to frame me. People do it all the time. It's because of my work."

"Yes," Connor said. "Your work is a topic of interest to us, and I'd like to ask you more about it. It's cold out here. Perhaps we can talk about this inside."

"I don't see why I should let you in," Derek grumbled. But Cami could see that he was cold, too. Clearly not having expected the police to arrive on his doorstep, he was wearing no more than a black tightly fitting T-shirt with a strange emblem in white on the chest, and scuffed blue jeans. So, Connor's logic having penetrated, he reluctantly stepped aside and allowed them in.

The place might be tumbledown looking from the outside, but Cami was

surprised by it when they walked in, turning right to go into a small living room. The interior was well maintained and well furnished, if in a darkly unique style. Plush leather couches in black. The far wall painted a vivid red. A shelf full of books that looked to be on the subject of his profession, old tomes with scuffed spines. A massive modern art painting in black and gray dominated the wall opposite the window. Was that a Ouija board on the coffee table?

Cami didn't have time to look more closely, because they sat down on the couches, and with Derek still looking uneasy, Connor started his questioning.

"So. I believe you provided exorcism services to one of the victims, Lisa Court, recently? How did she hear about you?"

"I – I advertise my services online," he said.

"Not on your own social media though?"

"I keep my personal and professional life separate," he said haughtily.

While he spoke, Cami was looking at his hands, which were strong and long-fingered. Had he used them to strangle the two women? He definitely was physically capable of it, and she could see that he was being very cagey in this questioning.

But that question of Connor's had got her mind working, and quickly getting out her phone, Cami went looking. Trying this angle, a search for 'exorcism services' did bring up a different profile. "Defeat the Dark Spiritual Services" seemed to be the most high-profile of the local services she found, and just after she'd seen it online, Derek confirmed.

"DTD Spiritual Services," he said, using the abbreviation that was in his logo.

"How did you know Debbie?" Connor asked.

He frowned. "That waitress at the diner? That's my nearest local restaurant, and I'm there all the time. I'm friendly to everyone, they serve the neighborhood, and I get a lot of word of mouth connections and personal referrals – from people who want a cleansing, or even to speak to somebody who has crossed over. I can do that too."

"Did you interact with her outside of work?"

"I don't even know where she lives!" he said, now sounding aggrieved. "This is all being overblown! Like I said, all the servers at the diner are my friends and my ambassadors too, if you like to call it that."

So he'd used the diner to drum up business? Cami didn't know if she believed his denial about the interaction with Debbie, but Connor was

moving on with the questioning.

“And you came and exorcized Lisa Court’s house recently?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“She found you online?”

“Yes. She was not a word-of-mouth referral.”

“What did you find?” Connor asked.

“There was some negative energy there. I don’t know if it was causing the problems, but it needed to be gotten rid of. I did that.” He folded his arms and pressed his lips together, clearly resenting the pressure to disclose what he had done.

“But the faults still persisted?” Connor said. “Was she unhappy about that? How did she feel about your services?”

“She was happy that the negative energy was expelled,” Derek explained. “Although she questioned why everything wasn’t perfect the minute I left, we ended our business relationship on good terms. I even gave her a discount as I couldn’t find anything that required a full exorcism. I haven’t been back. Why would I?”

“Your movements yesterday evening?”

“I was at work! I was communicating with a soul who'd crossed over. From five p.m. to about nine p.m. I was in a trance at the client's house. My work in the spiritual realm is very demanding. It's highly skilled, and there's no time limit on what I do. It can take an hour, or it can take a day. And yes, the client was happy.”

“I’ll need proof of that appointment,” Connor said.

“And I can provide it!” he flashed back. “Just keep it confidential? I deal with people who are sensitive and emotional and who are looking for answers. You seem to think I'm some kind of charlatan, and I'd like to assure you that I am not.”

Cami was curious about something. She cleared her throat, hoping that this question wouldn’t derail the interrogation of the clearly sensitive and defensive Derek, as he looked through his phone to provide the necessary proof of the appointment.

“This negative energy,” she said, and he looked up, his dark gaze meeting hers. “Where did it come from, do you think?”

He raised an eyebrow ever so slightly.

“Finally an intelligent question,” he said, with a disparaging glance at Connor, who was guilty of all the unintelligent ones. “That bad energy came

from Victor Tyrone.”

Victor Tyrone? Who was he, Cami wondered, as Connor asked the same question.

“Tell us about Victor Tyrone, and why you sensed his energy in the house?” he asked.

Derek nodded darkly. "Victor is the boyfriend of Lisa's daughter, Harriet. I know Lisa didn't like him much. He was there with Harriet when I arrived, and I could tell instantly. But I sensed a very malevolent aura about him. That's a man, for sure, who's obsessed with death."

## CHAPTER TEN

Obsessed with death?

Cami turned to Connor as soon as they were out of the house.

“Who on earth is Victor Tyrone? Harriet didn’t even mention him! Now we find out he was there with her at the house when the exorcist arrived, and full of bad energy?”

“We need to look into that, and into him, urgently,” Connor confirmed, as they headed for the car. “When they got inside, he continued. “It’s raising a big red flag for me that Harriet never mentioned him. She might have just been distracted and traumatized by what had happened to her mother – but it makes me wonder how much friction there was between Victor and Lisa, and even between Victor and Harriet. Things don’t sound like they’re going well on either front.”

“You’re right,” Cami said, surprised. “A boyfriend – she should have mentioned his name, at least. Referred to him in some way. Or else, he should have been there with her, instead of a policeman.”

"All sorts of reasons to look at him more closely," Connor agreed. "So yes. That's where we need to go now."

As soon as he was in the car, he got on the phone to his office. This time, the conversation was for Cami's ears, and it was all about where Victor Tyrone would be. Whoever was working that side, Cami had to admit, was as sharp and focused as Ethan had been. Within five minutes, they had the information they needed. They had a home address, and also a work place.

Cami was even more surprised that Victor hadn't rallied around to help his girlfriend when she saw that he worked at a bar. The City Vibe bar and grill. Surely that meant he worked nights?

His home address told them that he lived in a cottage on a farm that was further out of town. But Cami noted that the farm was along the same road as the diner where Debbie had worked. Just a few miles further away. So, if he'd stopped off for a meal on the way home or the way out, then he could easily have met the other victim at that friendly diner. Geographically, there was the likelihood of a connection.

To save time, so that they knew where to start looking for Victor, Connor called the City Vibe first, while they were sitting in the car.

“Victor Tyrone. Is he on shift now?” he asked, without introducing



himself or saying he was the police. He waited, listened, thanked the person on the other side, and hung up.

“Well,” he said, turning to Cami, “he’s not on shift now. So that means he must be at home.”

Again, Cami wondered why he hadn’t been with Harriet, consoling her. Something seemed very wrong with this scenario. Harriet chose a policeman to be with her over a boyfriend.

Cami’s mind flicked back to Kieran again. They hadn’t known each other that long, but they’d gotten close. They’d had some very serious conversations about life, and about death, about their relationships with their parents – hers distant and conflicted, his close. She’d even met his parents the other night for a restaurant dinner and she felt really pleased that she liked them, and that they had liked her, too.

Cami knew that as new as their relationship was, Kieran was the person she would have called first if tragedy had struck.

And Harriet hadn’t called Victor?

Engrossed in her thoughts, she’d barely noticed that Connor’s car had been eating up the miles, heading out of town, and that now they were in a bleak, empty looking area, with bare trees and small farmhouses. If snow blanketed everything it would be pretty, Cami thought. When summer came and brought its greenery, it would probably look delightful. But now the area looked muddy and desolate, caught between two seasons.

Connor checked the house numbers as they drove down the narrow lane, stopping outside number thirty.

They climbed out.

Cami guessed Victor must be home. He had a large, new-looking Ford pickup parked under the rickety carport next to the house. Looking at the car, parked there, and thinking of Harriet, crying in her apartment with the police officer sitting next to her, she couldn’t help another flash of dislike for the man.

As they got out and approached the house, she noticed something interesting. On the roof was a satellite dish and a signal booster. So, Victor loved his TV and most likely he loved his internet too.

Given that he sounded like a shady character, Cami wondered whether it would be an idea to see if she could log into his wifi.

As Connor approached the house, Cami started her program, knowing that it would be a race against time whether Victor answered the door first, or

whether Cami's hacking software managed to crack the wifi code. She'd recently fine-tuned it and was impressed with its speed. It was able to simultaneously run a trio of brute-force attempts, which condensed the time significantly. Especially seeing most people had pathetic passwords on their home internet. People were forgetful, and they didn't like to have to look up a complicated password every time they logged into their own setup. It was definitely one of the easiest targets for a hacker.

Connor knocked, and Cami glanced down at the screen. This time, she thought, it was probable that Connor would get his answers before she did.

Although, maybe not.

Because there didn't seem to be any response to his knocking. Nobody was coming to the door. Even though the presence of the car showed them that there surely must be somebody inside, that somebody was staying put.

"Maybe he's gone out with a friend? Taken a walk?" Connor muttered to himself, checking his watch, and then knocking again.

Cami knew that was possible, but there was something about this house that made her think he was inside. Maybe it was the lack of footprints in the mud heading toward the car. Maybe it was the fact the curtains and blinds were all wide open, even though she wasn't at the right angle to peer inside.

And, at that moment, her software did its job.

It cracked the code, and with a faint ping, Cami found herself with access to the home's wifi.

"I'm in," she said to Connor quietly. "Do you want to give me a minute and see what I can find?"

"Go for it," Connor said. "Seeing he's not answering the door, we need to figure out if he is in there, and if so, what he's doing."

While Cami accessed her phone again, Connor began walking around the house slowly, looking in those open windows.

Victor was inside. That, she saw instantly. There was activity on the wifi. There were two different devices in use. One was a phone. A phone in the house was a definite sign that somebody was home. And the other was a laptop. There were connections to the living room, that weren't currently active, and also separate connections to a basement room. She guessed that was where he must be, and maybe that was why he hadn't heard the knocking.

Both phone and laptop were downloading fast, eating up the bandwidth from what she guessed was fiber. So, what was he so busy downloading? She

wondered if she could take a look. It would only involve one further step, and although it was a technical one, she thought she could do it.

If she could access his laptop, which would be easier than the phone, then she'd have a way in. And that might tell her a lot.

She tried, but her first attempt got nowhere. Undeterred, Cami tried again, this time using a slightly different protocol, riding on the backbone of the home's wifi itself.

And she found a loophole. Now, she was in his machine and could see what he was doing.

As she saw, Cami's blood began to curdle. She stared down at the screen, knowing that she was watching what he was watching now, and feeling utterly shocked by what she saw.

For a few moments, the footage was so dreadfully hypnotic that she could not tear her eyes away. And then, movement from the house got her looking up with a gasp. No way did she want to be face-to-face with him now. Not after seeing this. But she knew they would have to, and felt grateful that Connor would lead the charge.

To her relief, it was Connor, striding back from the other side of the house, having done a full circuit.

"There's a French door at the back that looks unlocked," he said thoughtfully. "I think we could find a way in if we needed to. Have you picked up anything?"

Cami turned her phone toward him, showing him the footage that mirrored what she guessed Victor himself was watching now.

"Yes, I have," she said, her voice tight. "He's in the basement, and I've just found this. Take a look. It's unacceptable. Connor, we need to get in there, fast."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“What the hell?” Cami could hear that Connor’s voice was soft and astounded as he stared down at the footage. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s a horrible hate speech video,” she said, rage rising. “I can’t watch it. I don’t know who that guy is he’s listening to, but what he’s saying about – about a minority group and what should happen to them – it’s terrible. How can people think that way and share it?” She had torn her eyes away from the footage as soon as she had confirmed what it was. And it Connor was also not in a mind frame to delay another moment.

“We’re going inside,” he said. “If Victor is watching this in his basement, it’s more than enough cause to enter. Come to the back, Cami, and let’s see if my gut feeling about that French door is correct.”

Cami was still shaking as she put her phone away. The fact that sentiments like that were being shared, to deliberately turn people against each other and make them hate each other, was deeply disturbing. How could anyone – anyone – watch such a thing?

At least it proved beyond doubt that the exorcist’s gut feeling had been right on the money. Obsessed with death? Well, he was definitely on a dark road with that footage, which was claiming others who were different should be killed.

Still shaking with anger, she followed him around the house, traversing stepping stones that acted as islands from the untended sea of muddy grass around them.

At the back, Connor gave the French door a considering look, as if challenging it to make this harder for him. Then, he pulled down the handle and tugged it firmly.

He was right. Cami was astounded that the door opened with a shrill scream of hinges. The sound made her jump. He’d ignored the knocking – but down in his basement, had Victor Tyrone heard that?

They would soon find out. Connor rounded the corner and found a set of stairs going down.

His footsteps on the wooden stairs would attract attention for sure, Cami thought, even if Victor had earphones in, which she thought must be the reason why he hadn’t heard that knocking.

And sure enough, as Connor headed downstairs, Cami heard a scuffle of

footsteps. And an agonized, outraged cry.

“Geez! What the hell? What the absolute hell are you doing here?”

Cami hung back because there wasn't room for her to go any further. Connor was filling the basement doorway, and he was confronting a wiry-looking man with close-cropped brown hair and an aggressive gleam in his hazel eyes. He wore an old, shapeless fleece jacket and jeans, but her initial impression was that he looked fit and strong.

The basement itself was like a man cave gone wrong. Posters of fight scenes were on the wall. There was a big screen nearby. He was clearly a lover of violent footage.

He could be the killer, and could be acting out some of what he'd heard. Hate speech could inflame people that way.

Victor did indeed have earphones in, which now he was ripping out.

“What are you doing here? You've broken into my house!” His voice was shrill.

“You're watching illegal footage,” Connor's voice was harsh. “Turn it off, now. And then we're going to talk. Not in here. Upstairs.”

Victor slowly and reluctantly made his way upstairs, with Connor following close behind, his hand on the other man's arm.

Cami thought he was starting to realize the seriousness of what he'd done. Especially when he said, in a muffled-sounding voice, “Look, I can explain.”

She was waiting for an explanation. She didn't think it would be a good one, but she thought it would happen. But it didn't. Instead, showing a startling turn of speed, Victor ducked to the right as he reached the French door and twisted his arm out of Connor's grasp.

Before either of them could make a countermove in his direction, he was out, racing across the untended lawn, as Connor let out a surprised shout.

With his long legs working at full speed, Victor charged down to the bottom of the garden and there, he leaped over a low fence. Beyond it was countryside - woods and fields and long untended grass.

Letting out a heartfelt oath, Connor muttered to Cami, “You stay put.”

And then, Connor raced after him, jumped the fence, and set off in pursuit.

Cami stared in consternation.

In the space of a few moments, their investigation had been derailed. Their suspect had bolted, and thanks to that surprise move, he'd disappeared. He had sprinted straight for a thick knot of trees that led to a large tract of forest beyond.

Should she defy Connor's instructions, and join the chase? Fidgeting anxiously, she stared out of the French door, considering her options.

Probably, she accepted, it was already too late to try to join in the chase.

Running wasn't her forte, and running through uneven, muddy ground with lots of cover for a suspect to hide, still less. She wouldn't be a help out there and might even be a liability. She'd seen the way his eyes had scanned her, briefly, before he'd ducked out of that door.

He knew she was no threat. And clearly, this was a man who could think on his feet and seize opportunities. Cami didn't want to become one of those opportunities herself.

But hanging back – that felt like the coward's way out. She needed to try to do something to help Connor catch him.

Maybe it was the thought of hiding that put the idea in her mind.

Had Victor taken his phone with him?

It had obviously been downstairs. And a guy like that, who had compromising evidence on his computer, might have even worse material on his phone, so he would surely not have left it there. Connor might even have told him to bring it up. Or else, it could have been in his pocket.

Cami really didn't want to go downstairs again, into his lair, with that gruesome video playing. The thought made her skin crawl. But she needed to. It could help Connor. And they couldn't risk the case being stalled.

Cami crept down the stairs, going slowly at first and then taking the last few fast because she wanted to get it over with.

She arrived downstairs in a rush.

The screen was on a generic homepage with a plain black background. That horrible, hate filled, violence inspiring video had finished. Remembering it strengthened her resolve to find him.

Taking a look around, she saw that the phone was nowhere in sight.

Victor must surely have it with him. It made sense that he would have taken it.

And that gave her an opportunity.

There was no way for Connor to have set up a trace on Victor's cellphone. They didn't even know his number yet, as it hadn't been on his official records. And even if they had found it out, Connor was using all his time racing through the woods in pursuit. He couldn't call the office and set up a trace on it – which, in any case, would take a few minutes to organize at least.

What if she could do it quicker from here?

What she needed to do was to find out how closely the laptop and the phone were linked. Was there a way of locating the phone from the laptop? This was possible with a lot of smart setups, and given the fact he was playing illegal videos and that he had a big wifi booster on his roof, she suspected that he would have a smart setup to go with the rest of his technology.

Quickly, she accessed his laptop, making sure to stay away from any videos. What links were there to the smartphone? Was there anything that could help to pinpoint his location?

Her mind raced as she navigated the menu. What could she use that was downloaded? Installing something new would take time.

What about this?

It was a fast food delivery app that was linked to her computer. And if she activated it, and started the process of ordering food, then the app would find the phone and would start tracking it to get a delivery point.

Now feeling hopeful, Cami activated the app.

There it was!

She could see the pin drop on the screen. She couldn't tell from the map exactly where it was. But she could see it was moving slowly.

Cami took a shot of the pin drop's location. And then she quickly messaged it to Connor, hoping that he would read it and would be able to work out where Victor was if he'd lost him. Maybe that was the reason why he'd told her to stay here at all.

The pin drop was moving, but slowly, in a vaguely easterly direction. Looking at its slow and erratic progress, Cami was imagining a man moving carefully through the woods, picking his way, choosing his route, and staying very aware of anyone following.

He probably knew these woods like the back of his hand and thought that he would be able to hide out there. He might have hiding places or escape routes in mind. Most definitely, he would not expect someone to be able to track him via his phone at such short notice.

Cami took another screenshot and sent it again. She could see Connor had read the first one. Hopefully, that meant he was en route. She was starting to get hopeful. Victor's progress was at a snail's pace. He was really feeling his way through these woods. It all depended on where Connor was, she guessed. Hopefully he was close enough to be able to navigate to that pin drop fast, even given the thickness of the trees and the muddy terrain.

And then, she lost the pin.

It disappeared from the screen and Cami stared in consternation, her heart now accelerating. Had he realized that his phone could be used to locate him and turned it off?

She watched the screen wide-eyed, willing it to come into view again.

And a few moments later, to her utter relief, it appeared once more, a little further east.

The problem was that signal in these woods was patchy. She imagined in the rough, remote, challenging terrain that it would continue to be this erratic.

Now, it blinked off the screen again, and just as she was starting to panic, the icon flickered on the screen again. It had moved far to the east. Much further than she'd guessed. He must have been running. Maybe speeding up had confused the signal. He was back now, but for how long? And he was moving faster. Cami was guessing that he'd now found a track or a path and that he was going to use it as his escape route. And although she didn't know where Connor was, she knew that he couldn't have caught up yet.

Now, more than ever, she needed to try to help Connor. If this man had found a path or a trail through the woods that Connor was still casting around for, then he would be getting a serious lead on them. They ran the risk of losing him again... unless she could think of something else.

Cami suddenly had an idea, enlarging the map and taking a look at his direction and examining the terrain intently.

If she could work out where Victor was heading to, it might be possible to direct Connor to a convergence point.

But if she got it wrong, then she would be leading Connor on a wild goose chase through the woods that might mean they lost this man completely.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Victor Tyrone was creepy, super sneaky, and he knew the area. Those were the thoughts uppermost in Cami's mind as she enlarged the map and took a look at it. The map itself was no more than a series of lines with a pin drop that was moving across them. But technology could help her here.

Working as fast as she could, in the cramped basement office that smelled faintly – and unpleasantly, Cami thought – of the suspect himself, she used her own phone to call up a topographic map of the area, as well as an earth view, one that better showed the forest and the contours, and gave her more of an impression of what was there.

Once that was done, she switched between screens, staring from one to the other, minimizing the map now so that she could look at the surrounding terrain. She plotted his course so far, seeing where he'd run from.

And then, working as fast as she could, Cami looked ahead, assessing what lay in front of him and where he was running to.

The woods got thicker and deeper in the direction he was running, and looking at the topographic lines, she saw that the area became a deep valley. The drop was precipitous. What was he thinking, going into such challenging terrain, she wondered. There was a river running through the steep valley there! An actual river? No way was he going to be jumping into a river in Massachusetts at the end of winter. He'd die of cold within a minute.

And then another thought occurred: what if there was a way through? What if he knew where to find it, and he was heading for it?

She enlarged the map again, peering more closely, looking for what she was now expecting to find.

And, hissing in a victorious breath, she saw it.

There was one roadway that led over this ravine, one place where they must have constructed a bridge. Whether it was made of concrete or wood, she didn't know, but she could now see that his speedy route was taking him directly toward the bridge. That out-of-the-way crossing was where he planned to get over the ravine. On the other side, the woods thinned and there was a network of roads and buildings. Maybe that was where Victor was hoping to lose his pursuer.

Cami messaged again.

*“He's making for the bridge. It's here.”*

She then sent a pin drop to Connor of the exact spot where the narrow roadway joined the bridge.

He read it.

Now, the only thing that Cami could do, holed up in this office, was watch the pin drop that represented Victor. She couldn't see Connor at all. But she imagined him, moving purposefully toward that convergence point, moving fast, going on a course that might even be parallel to where Victor was running, and not just blindly chasing after him.

Digging her nails into her palms, she fervently hoped she was right.

What if she was wrong? What if she'd caused this chase to fail?

No, Cami told herself firmly. Don't think that way. It's perfectly obvious that he's going to the bridge. What else is he going to do – scramble down a rocky slope and end up in a river? The pin drop was moving fast. It seemed to be speeding up. Now she imagined the sneakily unpleasant Victor, going for his escape route, doing his best to outfox the agent that he knew was following him.

Watching that pin drop, Cami willed him to slow down. Let him stumble and twist his ankle, let him start tiring. He couldn't run forever, and surely he wasn't as fit as Connor? She'd seen how fit Connor was. He could outrun almost everyone. He wasn't the fastest, but he didn't slow down either.

The pin drop moved. Then it went out of range for a while. When it came back in range, it was much further. Much closer to the bridge.

And then, it stopped.

“Please,” Cami breathed. “Please, let him be caught!”

She waited, staring at the screen, feeling taut with tension.

And then, after what seemed like an interminable time, a message came through.

*“Got him. Bringing him back here.”*

Cami let out a thankful breath. She'd done it. With her predictions and Connor's speed and skill, they'd caught the elusive Victor.

Now, to find out how far-reaching this obsession with death really was, and to what lengths he'd taken it.

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It was half an hour before Connor returned, and Cami guessed it had been a rugged march back, especially since he'd been holding the handcuffs of his

suspect all the way. Victor was shambling ahead of him, looking mutinous, as if his rights had been infringed.

Connor walked him back into the living room and waited while he sat down on the couch – somewhat clumsily thanks to the handcuffs. Then, Connor closed and locked the French door that he'd run out of earlier, and turned on his phone to record the interview.

“My arms hurt!” was the first piece of conversation that Cami guessed the recording would have picked up. Yup, Victor was seriously aggrieved.

“Just a tip for the future,” Connor advised. “If you want your arms not to hurt, it’s better not to bolt out of the door when police arrive to question you. However, since we’re too little too late on that, let’s move ahead, right?”

Narrowing his eyes, Victor gave him a poisonous stare. Connor returned it calmly.

“You were watching an illegal videos down in that basement room. Hate speech is against the law. Calling for people to be killed eradicated, and tortured is highly illegal. Do you realize that just by downloading or sharing or watching one of those, you’ve participated in something criminal?”

“I didn’t know that,” he mumbled. “I didn’t even know what the video was. A – a friend just sent it to me. I mean, I was shocked by it.”

“Then best you give me the details of your friend,” Connor said. “Videos like that, we trace back to the source, and we arrest the perpetrator. So that’s something we’ll need to do when the police arrive.”

Victor paled. “The police?”

Connor nodded. “Yes. That was who I called when we were walking back. Did you think I was just speaking to a friend? They should be here any minute and they’re going to seize all the evidence down there relating to that video.”

Cami could see he wasn’t bluffing. He really had called the police. They weren’t here yet, and she wondered if that was because Connor had asked them to wait – that he wanted to question Victor first.

That turned out to be correct, because Connor then said, in confidential tones, “Look, you didn’t make those videos, I understand that. You just watched them. So I’m sure you don’t want to get into worse trouble than you deserve, do you?”

“No, no, of course I don’t!” he protested.

“Good. I might be able to put in a word for you there.” Connor emphasized the ‘might’. “But I now need you to be very truthful with me.

You probably ran because you thought we wanted to arrest you for the videos and slap the maximum charge onto you. Which might still happen," he said thoughtfully. "But in the meantime, I want to speak to you about something else."

"What?" Now, Victor looked seriously wary.

"Your girlfriend," Connor said.

"Harriet? We – we're not really dating so seriously. We were, but she – she backed off last week. Seems like her mother didn't approve of me," he said resentfully.

"When's the last time you saw her mother?" Connor asked.

"Last week. She had some weird guy in her house who was cleansing the place. I thought it was a load of rubbish. Smoke and mirrors, you know? The problem was clearly in her electrics."

Cami raised her eyebrows internally. She'd been convinced – for a short while – that Victor must be guilty. But this last comment was making her wonder. He'd said it with such authority, as if he knew better – and he'd said it in a disparaging way that seemed to indicate to her that he thought the mother was still alive.

"You know she was murdered last night?" Connor asked.

The effect of his words was electric. Victor gasped, sitting bolt upright in his chair in horror, and for the first time, forgetting to wiggle his arms in a martyred way, showing how very painful and unnecessary the handcuffs were.

"What?" he said incredulously. "Who, Mrs. Court?"

"Yes. Lisa Court."

"But that – that's terrible! I mean, who would do such a thing?"

The words babbled out of him, and in them, Cami detected truly genuine shock.

"We came here to find out if you were involved," Connor said harshly.

"Given the type of footage you watch, that's a reasonable suspicion, isn't it?"

"No! Look, I mean, I guess I am kind of – curious about death. I really was also shocked by that video, I never expected to be listening to somebody saying those things. I'm not that kind of guy myself, and like I said, I just got it forwarded! I would never kill anyone! And particularly not Mrs. Court. I was trying my best to get on her good side again so that I could carry on dating Harriet. Harriet's a great person, you know."

"And how exactly were you getting on her good side?"

“Well, I sent her a text apologizing for my behavior and that I’d been rude and arrogant. She never replied, but I know she read it,” he said hopefully.

That was interesting to Cami. She hadn’t yet looked at the texts on Lisa’s phone. But now, while Connor undid Victor’s cuffs, he got his phone out of his pocket.

“Show us the message,” Connor said.

He scrolled through it and showed them that he had, indeed, sent an apology for having ‘an attitude while the ghost buster was there.’

Cami personally thought his apology could have been better worded. But maybe it showed he had tried.

"And what were you doing last night?" Connor asked. "Can you account for your time?"

"I was here with a friend. We were in the basement together playing a war game. We started at about six and played till midnight. The friend's name is Michael. You can speak to him if you want. He'll confirm it." His face lit up. "And also, the neighbor can confirm it. She knocked on my door at about seven to say that he'd parked in the wrong place and must move his car because it was blocking her way in. So she spoke to me, too."

Cami knew that Connor would diligently check these statements to make sure they were true. But for now, it did seem as if Victor, though a dodgy individual, had an alibi.

There was the sound of a car arriving outside, and Connor glanced out of the window. He went to the door, and a moment later, two policemen walked in. Connor headed over and quickly greeted them, having a muttered conversation with the taller one, who was clearly the man in charge.

“Cooperate, and they’ll go easy on you,” he said, turning back to Victor. “That kind of material, you’re not the one we want to prosecute. So, like I said – you have the choice. You can stay out of trouble now and not do it again, or otherwise.”

Then he got up, and he and Cami walked out.

She felt despondent that this very strong seeming lead had gotten them nowhere. But then again, she thought, maybe it had.

In fact, maybe this suspect himself had reminded her about something that had been simmering at the back of her mind. What he’d said was solidifying a theory.

“Connor,” she said. “Would it be possible to go to the first crime scene? I want to take a look at Debbie Maynard’s house. I may have a theory about

how the killer's doing this – and it could just lead us to who he is.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Hey, Boy! Hey, Boy!”

Mocking and cruel, the words resounded in his head, feeling so real that for a moment, he looked around him in fear.

But there was nobody nearby on the street, which was quiet in the gloomy late afternoon. The words had existed only in his mind. Thankfully, he was hearing them less and less. Boy felt sure it was thanks to his own actions. With every kill he successfully carried out, he was killing the voices, too.

Putting that taunting voice out of his mind, he focused on what was important as he walked the last few steps to his lookout point. Now, he was in place and ready. This was his new lookout point. He'd made adjustments to his plans, and the need to do that had been surprising to him.

He'd found a lookout point a few days ago that he had thought he was going to be able to use. But quickly, he realized that it would not be enough. It was too far away from the home that was his next target.

It was odd, because he had measured it carefully and he had realized it was exactly the same distance as the first point was. His mind cast back to that first woman, the very first one he'd targeted. Oh, what excitement that had been. What enormous satisfaction he'd felt as he had created a nightmare world for her.

Well, it was the same as the world he'd had to endure. He vividly remembered how his father had tortured him. How he'd turned the lights out, suddenly and without warning, while Boy had been in bed at night, so that he'd had to fumble around in the dark, his mind swarming with fears and terrors that hidden monsters were waiting to grab him. He'd locked the door to his bedroom randomly so that Boy had never been quite sure if he would be able to get out – or if he would be able to get in.

The fear, the uncertainty, the sense of disorientation – they all flared in his mind again and he pushed them firmly back. They were in the past now. And he was moving into the future, This was his time, now. His time to use, his time to create a new narrative for his life. This time, he would be in control.

And he wanted to be more involved, to become an intimate part of the scene. So he'd chosen a new lookout place. One that was riskier, with more chance of being noticed, but it gave him a magnificent view into the open plan area of his next target's living room. Being open plan, there was a

kitchen beyond that was also clearly in sight.

There were blinds, of course, but they were installed high on the wall, and they were electrically operated.

It was very unfortunate that when she arrived home tonight, the blinds would be open, and when she tried to close them, she would not be able to. He'd see the fear in her face as she struggled with them.

Ultimately, she might succeed, or she might give up in despair. It didn't matter because she would only have a few more minutes of life.

But that scene, that intimate scene, watching her struggle – warmth filled him as he thought about it. It was going to be so special. If he hadn't been scared of giving away his hiding place, he would have wriggled in sheer anticipation.

However, caution came first, and he kept statue still in his hiding place in her backyard which offered him a street view down the side of the house, as well as a view to the park beyond where he would make his escape. The cold was not unbearable – he had on a thick jacket and gloves, of course – and the anticipation kept him warm.

He watched as the neighbor arrived home. That was a potential complication as these houses were close together, and there was a chance that somebody observant might hear or see something.

In fact, there had been a couple of places – a couple of targets – that he'd reluctantly crossed off his list for exactly that reason. He'd wondered if this would be the case here, but he had closely monitored the circumstances and decided it was safe.

Today, his decision was only confirmed. The neighbor, as always, looked preoccupied and was tending to her small child. He didn't know how old the kid was. But it was noisy. A screaming, shouting, crying little boy who already, in the short distance from the car to the front door, tugged her in three different directions, loudly demanded something that he couldn't make out, burst into tears, and then tried to break away completely.

“What a little monster,” he muttered to himself. He knew what his own father would have done when faced with such behavior. That behavior would not have persisted for long, no, it would have been nipped in the bud very soon. An expression he'd almost forgotten: nipped in the bud. That was what his father used to say, with that manic smile in place, as he was about to address one of Boy's faults or inadequacies.

And that bud had been effective. Behavior nipped in the steel claws of his



father's punishment had never reemerged. Boy had learned discipline. The hard way, which was the best way, although it had left him with scars. But of course, it was clear that this woman was raising her child alone. She had nobody to help her, and was as ineffectual as his own mother had been.

If her home had met the necessary specifications, he'd have delighted in killing this neighbor, too, but it didn't, so it wasn't on his list. He was simply glad that she wouldn't be a problem.

A cold smile wreathed his face as he watched the stressed single mother try to keep track of her rogue boy. This was exactly what he needed. She would be exhausted, overwhelmed, and focused on her own little world. The perfect neighbor for his needs. No way did he foresee a problem.

He would have his target alone, and she would be his, for his exclusive attention. And how he looked forward to giving her every moment of that inexorable focus. Checking his watch, he felt his anticipation sharpen.

The woman who occupied this chosen house would be home in just half an hour.

And then, it would be show time.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It had taken them half an hour to drive from the muddy, wintry, rural setting where Victor had lived, to the apartment where Debbie Maynard had lived. Cami felt impatient as Connor drove. With her idea firmly in mind, she wanted to prove it right. If she did, she was sure it would open up a new direction in this case.

The drive hadn't taken place in silence – they'd spoken about the case, about the traffic and the weather. Connor had made sure to ask how Cami was doing living with Kieran, and in turn she'd asked the polite formalities about his life and family that they hadn't yet had time for. That had all been as expected, but then, something very disturbing happened.

“The cats are well. They're enjoying the winter sunshine on the new patio we invested in. They go out there every day and lie next to the plants. It's a matter of time before they destroy them,” Connor said with a grin.

Cami laughed, feeling as entertained as she always did by the antics of the felines.

But then, Connor's phone rang. Feeling slightly triggered by anything unexpected at the moment and especially so after that last strange phone call he hadn't taken in front of her, Cami tensed, her gaze going immediately to the screen on the car's console where she could see the incoming caller ID.

But before she could look, Connor killed the call. He did so immediately, before Cami could even see whose name was on the screen.

That wasn't like Connor. He always answered his phone, even if it was an unknown number that Cami thought was likely to be a telemarketer. Connor was polite to everyone. Cami had never heard him be rude.

Killing the call was highly uncharacteristic, and the tense silence that followed for a few beats felt loaded. Cami now felt extremely nervous. She strongly suspected that it was to do with Bill Oertel.

Connor wasn't saying, though, and she didn't have a chance to ask because they turned into the road where Debbie's apartment building was located, and she was sidetracked, all her focus now sharply centered on whether her theory would be correct.

The building was an old, gracious one, set in a more historic part of Boston, and as they went in – checking with the security guard who was now stationed downstairs – Cami was wondering if Debbie had family money.

This wasn't your typical student accommodation. She guessed that she must have had some support in place. She was lucky. Cami's thoughts went back to her own parents and the conflicted relationship she'd had with them ever since Jenna's disappearance. Some things couldn't be healed. Perhaps that relationship never would be. At any rate, she'd cut ties with them and had paid her own way for everything she'd needed over and above her scholarship.

"We're here to view number five," Connor told the guard, presenting his FBI credentials. "Were you here at the time of the murder?"

The security guard, wearing a smart black jacket, shook his head.

"They had a remote access system in place, but straight after the murder, the residents decided to put in physical security as well, and got hold of our firm," he explained.

"Can we get the key, then?" Connor asked.

"Here you are," he said. "The family was here yesterday from Atlanta, asking when they would be able to go in and collect her belongings. I refused them entry because the crime scene tape is still up."

"We hope to have made progress in a day or two," Connor said. "I'm sorry for inconveniencing the family. I'm sure they're dealing with the local police on this, and if I feel we've seen enough today, then I'll clear it for them to go in."

But he sounded dubious, and Cami knew that was unlikely to happen. Until this case was solved, who knew what evidence could prove important? Connor would want it preserved. But maybe, now, she would achieve a breakthrough.

They headed upstairs. This apartment was on the second floor, first one after the stairway. The crime scene tape was still stretched across the door, and Cami's stomach clenched as she saw it. That tape had associations for her. She'd seen – too many times – what lay beyond it.

But surprisingly, she found that she was no longer put off by this. Instead, she felt motivated by it. How weird was that? When, exactly, had her emotions changed from utter terror and denial, to this intense urge to hunt the killer down?

Even though she knew that the scene would be clean, sterile, a lonely place where no body lay and only the victim's belongings remained, Cami still felt that same strong determination to hunt this man down, as she and Connor walked inside. Surprised, she took a moment to acknowledge how

much she had changed and what she had become

The apartment was tidy and it looked to be partly furnished, because what was inside matched up so well with the building. A big bed with an ornate brass frame, wingback chairs in the living room.

And there was what she'd been looking for, something that was ultra modern, but yet aligned well with the effortless luxury of this apartment.

A small control panel is located in the kitchen. The kitchen had been left as it was, all the way down to the dirty coffee cup still in the sink and the pot that had been knocked onto the floor. Cami couldn't help wondering, with a shiver, if the pot on the floor represented evidence of a struggle that must have played out. But there was no time to think about that. The panel was what she needed to focus on.

"Look at this," she said. She stepped forward, examining it closely.

"It's a smart home?" Connor asked.

"It's a smart home, but that's not all it is. It's a smart home that's offline. Non functional."

"Just like the other one was?"

"Yes. And this apartment has the same type of control panel as we saw in Lisa Court's house. There has to be a connection, Connor. This is no coincidence. It's not that common a control panel, and I haven't seen it in many places in Boston."

There were a couple of smart home companies that she'd job shadowed during her university degree, and who'd let them look at the functionality of their setups and even allowed them to do some of the installations. So Cami had some hands-on experience with the more established ones.

"What would it have controlled?" he asked.

She shrugged. "There's a lot it could have done. This kitchen is set up for partial automation. The coffee machine, the toaster. The bathroom might be connected. It's likely that the home's overall functions, such as heating and aircon, are hooked in, and there will probably be security linked to it. The front door lock, the blinds, the outside gate to let visitors in. Maybe even a link to the cameras at the end of the corridor."

"That's a lot."

"It is."

But Cami thought she knew what she would find.

And as she took out her phone and took a look at what was available for her to connect to, she saw she was right. There was nothing available at all.

No wifi. It was all switched off. That blank screen meant that nothing was available.

They'd been looking for a person in common, somebody linking these two victims, but maybe the technological common factor was more important still. Maybe these crimes were linked up to the actual command console of the smart homes that the victims lived in.

"How do we find out who the supplier is?" Connor asked.

"We can look inside it. Where can I find a screwdriver?" She looked around. The tip of a steak knife would work as well.

"Here you go." Seeing the direction of her gaze, Connor moved over to the knife rack. He took out one of the steak knives and passed it to her.

Cami inserted the tip of the serrated blade into the screw. She turned it carefully. It slipped once, but she tried again, even more slowly and cautiously. The screw turned. She did the next one, then the next, and then the last, placing each screw carefully on the counter. One of the rules of being a hacker was that when you were dealing with any hardware, you absolutely needed to keep track of every last screw and chip and cable. The puzzle had to be replaced the way you found it.

She eased the cover off and took a look underneath. The implementation was well done. Wires had been neatly positioned and carefully connected. It was professionally done, and there had been room left for further additions in the future. This was no fly-by-night company. Someone who knew what they were doing had done this. But who?

What was this? It was right at the bottom of the console, half hidden behind a cluster of wires. Gently, using the handle of the knife, Cami eased them aside.

A tiny name was printed there.

Steadfast.

"I think we've got it," she said. "Steadfast."

"That's the company name?"

"I'm checking now."

Right there, standing by the counter, she opened her phone and went looking.

"Steadfast Electronics. Small boutique firm that was started up just four years ago from a splinter competitor of a larger firm. They specialize in smart home technology in the Boston area, and they are growing fast, now with clients in other areas of Connecticut and in five other states on the east coast.

They now total more than a hundred employees.” That was a lot, Cami thought. But maybe they could narrow it down.

“Where’s their headquarters? Who’s their CEO?”

“His name’s Barney Sutherland and he’s here, at the Boston head office.”

Nodding decisively, Connor turned to the door.

“Barney Sutherland may have the answers we need,” he said. "But we need to get there fast because we're running out of time."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Do you think their head office will still be open?” Cami asked Connor, realizing what he meant. It was already after five. The day had flown by. With all the driving they had done, with all the leads that hadn’t panned out, office hours were over, and Barney Sutherland might not be available.

Getting face to face with him might not be as easy as they had hoped.

“The sooner we know, the better,” Connor decided. He didn’t wait. Standing right there in the hallway, he made the call to Steadfast’s offices.

Cami made a disappointed face as she heard the automatic voicemail service kick in for the after-hours messaging, but Connor wasn’t giving up. He hung on, listening to the recording, and right at the end there was an emergency number.

“Let’s give this a try,” he said calmly.

He dialed it, waited, and then took a breath as it was answered.

“Yes,” he said. “You can help me. It’s agent Connor here from the FBI. We urgently need to speak to your CEO in connection with a case. Can you help me with his number?”

Listening to the clacking voice that replied – Cami couldn’t make out the words – she realized immediately that this was not going to be easy. Connor was going to have to use all his persuasive powers, and even then, the power of the corporate machine and its strict rules could prevent this person from giving out the number, assuming they knew it in the first place.

But she might have a quicker way. Although CEO’s phone numbers were usually off the record for obvious reasons, Steadfast had only started four years ago. They were a newcomer to the market, and because of that, the CEO might still have his number somewhere out on the internet.

While Connor was engaged in a battle with the emergency operator, Cami looked up Barney Sutherland and immediately found a few hits. He had a business profile that told her he was forty years old and had worked for a few other technology companies before moving into the smart home space. He sponsored a few charities. Here was a hit on a sporting site – he was a runner. He ran marathons.

Cami’s eyes narrowed. This represented her best possible chance, she thought. A marathon runner would have his personal cellphone registered on the race sites. It would be in the record, together with all the other

information. So now all she needed to do would be to find a way into one of the sporting sites.

Not the bigger ones. Those would take far too long. They had security and firewalls already in place because they were going to be constantly bombarded by hacking attempts. Everyone would love to hold a big organization ransom, with the threat of publishing all the personal details of its customers. So she wasn't going to join the queue.

She thought the smaller sites might be more promising. Like this one, for instance. This was the Boston Chargers, the local running club of the area where Barney Sutherland lived.

As she was researching it, Connor hung up, sighing.

"Well, after a full ten minutes of begging, I have got as far as the phone number of a minor secretary," he said. "I'm going to call her now. Every minute that goes by is a wasted opportunity."

"I'm trying another way," Cami said, causing Connor to raise his eyebrows as he dialed.

"Good," he said. "Hopefully, one of us gets there."

While Cami listened to the phone start ringing as Connor dialed the secretary, she worked on the running club site, patiently trying to access it by a few different methods. Thinking it would work faster, she quickly got her laptop out of her bag and set it up on the hall table.

She felt like an intruder, standing there and turning the murder victim's apartment into a makeshift office. It felt somehow disrespectful, but Cami had to remind herself that Debbie would most definitely want them to do whatever was needed to catch her killer.

The program on the laptop was faster than the one on the phone. While it ran, Cami listened to Connor, who'd now gotten hold of the secretary and was speaking to her.

"Yes," he said. "It's very important. Critical, in fact. We need to get hold of him tonight."

He waited, listened. Sighed softly. "I understand your company regulations are strict, but this is police business and we're dealing with serious crimes."

He waited again. Spoke again. "How about you give me the name of your boss, then, and his number?"

Cami guessed that this secretary was just junior enough not to want to get into any trouble by giving out anyone's number, because Connor seemed to



be getting pushback there as well. He wasn't getting the answers he needed and was getting blocked at every turn.

"Your boss won't mind, I promise," Connor said in his most persuasive tones. "He might even be angry if he found out you didn't help the police."

But then, as the secretary started arguing back yet again, Cami got into the Boston Chargers website.

Her program had managed to access the list of runners on the local club's database. Now, she needed to see if Barney Sutherland was among them.

Quickly, she scrolled down, going through the names, looking for the list of S names. She didn't have much time that she knew. This software was very slow, it was clunky, and every few seconds it paused to have a security update. Cami knew that the security update might be only the equivalent of a man with a flashlight in a large forest, but the fact remained that a man with a flashlight could still find people if he was lucky.

She bit her lip as the security check ran again. Just now, out of sheer inevitability, it would spot her. And then she was pretty sure this program would do what it seemed to do best. It would freeze, and she'd be stuck in it.

It released again and she scrolled forward as fast as she could, knowing that there might only be a few seconds to spare, wishing that the damned software would work just a little faster. And then, quickly rethinking her irritation and sending nice thoughts its way.

Good little program, she encouraged it silently. Go on, you're great. You're a real help. You're wonderfully written.

Flattery would get you everywhere. Cami was convinced she felt it speed up just a little.

She reached the screen she needed. And there was Sutherland. Two of them. Andrea and Barney.

And a cellphone number attached to the name of Barney Sutherland.

With a huge sigh of relief, Cami quickly copied the number and exited the system, sending a silent thank you to the little clunky piece of software for having allowed her to flit in and out.

"I've got it," she mouthed to Connor, who sounded like he was wrapping up his call.

"Okay," he was saying. "Okay, fine. That's great. Thanks."

He hung up, too.

"Just as well you went at it from a different angle," he admitted wryly.

"That was one time where the human angle produced nothing but frustration.

Now, let's see if we can get hold of Mr. Sutherland and if he's willing to tell us all about his company and why two of his control consoles have seemingly been overridden.”

He dialed the number, and Cami held her breath. This information had been hard won, and it would be all for nothing if Sutherland didn't answer his phone. Every ring ramped up her tension as she put her laptop back in her bag.

And then, a voice crackled from the other side, sounding surprised and a little annoyed.

“Sutherland here?”

“Mr. Sutherland, it's agent Connor, FBI,” Connor said.

“FBI?” Sutherland repeated, sounding surprised.

“We've had a link to your home systems come up in a serial crime. There's a possibility someone from your organization might be involved.”

His response was instant and reflexive. “From Steadfast? Absolutely not, I'm sure of it.”

“Can we at least discuss this face to face? It's extremely urgent,” Connor said.

Now, Sutherland sounded decisive. “It'll have to be next week. I'm on my way to the airport, flying to Honolulu,” he said.

Cami's heart sank, but Connor simply asked, in an even firmer voice, “Good. What time can we meet you there, and where would you like to meet?”

That was checkmate, she realized. There was no way of not answering it.

“The coffee shop near airport security,” Sutherland said reluctantly. “I'll be there in twenty minutes. But I must warn you, I'm already late. This will have to be extremely quick.”

Connor was already heading for the door as Cami picked up her bag.

“We're on our way,” he said.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Evening traffic was still dense, and the rows of immovable headlights and taillights on the main road gave Cami a flash of doubt as she and Connor raced for the car. But Connor was keeping positive.

“We might make it in time,” he said. “I’ll put the siren on. And once we’re clear of this snarl-up, we’ll be able to move.”

Cami wasn’t so sure. The crimson flood of taillights ahead of them seemed like an endless river. She thought Connor might be being highly optimistic. They had to get all the way to the airport? If Barney Sutherland was past this jam already, he’d be far ahead of them. He might have lost patience by the time they reached that coffee shop, or else, he might have been called to board, and had to go.

She used the first few yards of the stop-start journey to message Kieran. All day, she’d been feeling anxious about him after what Connor had said.

*“Hey! You okay?”* she texted.

A moment later, the reply came back. *“I’m fine. Just got home, all good. Going to have TV dinner and early night. Unless I should wait up for you? How’s the case?”*

*“Complicated,”* she texted back. *“Not sure when I’ll be back. Don’t wait up. Hope to see you later tonight.”*

*“Stay safe. Love you.”* The words hit her right in the heart.

*“Love you too,”* she replied, warmed by their words, and relieved that he was safely home and that an FBI agent would be watching their place.

Then, Connor put on the flashing lights, and activated the siren, doing his best to navigate through the banks of traffic in a zigzag, stop-start way, grabbing opportunities wherever he could see them, taking risks, swerving and braking as he fought for headway.

Now, Cami was doing her best to find alternative routes, scouring her phone for them, but she had to admit it was a pointless exercise. She didn’t have any special powers in that regard. Everyone in Boston was trying to do the same thing, using the same information and apps, and as a result, every route was jammed.

Nope, finding a sneaky alternate route was not workable. But Connor’s lights and siren were proving effective. Traffic was edging aside for them, and they were able to make a more steady progress as they reached the

highway. Her eyes were fixed on the clock as they drove the excruciatingly slow miles and then, finally, peeled off in the direction of the airport.

Connor drove up to the departures terminal, parked right outside on a yellow line with his light still on, and they got out and hustled inside. At a run, they headed through the bustling, impersonal space, past people wheeling carry-ons and texting on their phones and dawdling along with giant cups of coffee and sodas clutched in their hands.

“Coffee shop near security. That must be it,” Connor said, pointing to the bright red and yellow signage.

Was Barney Sutherland still there? It had already been nearly twenty minutes. The possibility of somehow hacking into the airport systems and delaying the flight popped into Cami’s head as they rushed to the coffee shop but she discarded it immediately.

It would be an incredible challenge. She wouldn’t mind trying just to see if it was possible. But it would bring a world – no, a universe of trouble down on her head, and it might put people in danger. Even accessing the systems might create glitches that had knock-on effects. There were things that ethical hackers just could not do. And although hacking the FBI’s homepage with a few choice words of criticism, and replacing the director’s photo with a cat’s face, had felt okay to Cami at the time, interfering with airport systems did not.

But as they reached the coffee shop, they saw a tall man, wearing chinos and a suit jacket, stand up from the round table he’d been occupying. It looked as if he’d been intending to leave, but he swung around as they approached.

“Barney Sutherland,” he said.

“Agent Connor, and Cami Lark, IT specialist,” Connor introduced them. Sutherland was already glancing uneasily at the airport security line, which was just as long and slow moving as the traffic on the road had been.

“Listen, it’s going to take me ten minutes to get through there. And my flight boards in twenty. So I’m in a rush. I don’t think I have the time to get into a conversation now.” He looked stressed and impatient, just the way Cami felt.

“Appreciate you waiting,” Connor said. “Let me get to the point, and I can also get you to the front of the security line, which will save some time.”

“You sure about that?”

Connor nodded. “I promise you that if I tell airport security we were

interviewing you, they'll let you through that side door on the left, and take you to the front of the line."

"Okay," Sutherland agreed, still frowning.

He sat back down, and Connor brought over two more chairs from other tables. Nestled together in the busy coffee shop environment, around the small table with an empty espresso cup on it, Connor explained the background.

"We have had two murders occurring at homes where your company's smart systems were installed," he said.

Immediately, Cami could feel the atmosphere sharpen. Defensiveness was bristling from Sutherland, just from those few spoken words. It made her instinctively feel suspicious. Why would he be so defensive? Was there a weak point in the systems that he'd known about?

"I can't help that," he shot back at Connor. "We have thousands of clients – literally, our users now number in the thousands. If there are murders at one or two of the sites, it's tragic, but I don't see how it's my fault. How is it possibly anything to do with me?"

"Tell me about your company," Connor said, ignoring the way that Sutherland was bristling at them. "Tell me who works for you who does the installations, and what the protocols are. Who does the services and who accesses the smart home operations if things go wrong?"

"So you want me to give away all my company secrets to you?" Sutherland accused, causing Cami to feel even more flummoxed about why, exactly, he was arguing back so much.

"We need to know who to look at," Connor said.

"We have a team of installers who work in various states, and we use about ten or fifteen different specialists. Then our service and maintenance team is probably about twenty people," he said, reluctantly, but at least they were getting the answers. "The rest of our workforce is made up of onsite admin staff, salespeople, marketing, accounts people, and then some janitors and maintenance workers. Nobody but our installers and service team has access to client login details. I guarantee that."

"And how does the installation work?" Connor asked. Just as Sutherland took a clearly annoyed and argumentative breath, Connor continued. "The reason I'm asking is that these homes were nonfunctional. Your keypads were not working when we arrived at the crime scenes. Nothing was linked. And at least one of the homes had problems in the past. One of the clients had

called in a couple of electricians to try to sort it out, and even other specialists as well.”

“That’s impossible,” Sutherland argued, but Connor shook his head.

“We saw it for ourselves. And in due course, when the media starts researching the crimes, these facts are going to come out. Everyone in your company could be under suspicion.”

Now, Cami saw his face change. At last, he was understanding what the full implications might be.

Connor continued, stern and assured. “It’s going to create a massive amount of bad publicity for you. Murders terrify people. Dysfunctional smart home systems that might have allowed a killer to access them are going to be something they latch onto. Now, if your company's name comes to light as a common factor, what do you think the consequences will be?”

“Yes, okay,” Sutherland capitulated. “I can see the consequences would be very serious for us.”

“Let’s start with you. Where were you yesterday evening?”

He sighed. “I was in a conference, on site at a hotel, with three of my senior crew members, and two new clients who want to use us in a roll-out of new developments they’re planning. The meeting went on for the whole afternoon and only wrapped up when we all had dinner. So I guess I’m cleared, right?”

Listening to the conversation, Cami was starting to put two and two together in her head. Now she had a question for the CEO, based on what he’d said so far, and also on what he hadn’t said.

“Please, Mr. Sutherland,” she said politely, causing his head to turn sharply and for him to fix her with his dark, and rather intimidating, stare. “I have a question.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Can the whole operating system be remotely accessed? I mean, you say you work in a number of states on the east coast. And actually, your repair team is quite small. No way could twenty people keep track of more than a thousand installations over such a wide area if they had to go there physically, could they?”

She knew she was right. The logic dictated it. And sure enough, he gave a nod of assent.

“Yes. Most of our problems can be fixed remotely.”

Cami glanced at Connor. “So, how’s that done? Is there an override code,

something that they can key in to take control of the system and go through it and test it?"

Again, he nodded. "Yes. There's an override code. But it's unique to each system. And it's a complex code."

Cami felt a surge of triumph. They were getting closer to the breakthrough they needed. It surely had to be one of the technicians who had either installed or managed the home systems, who knew the override code, and who worked in the Boston area. One of them had to be the killer.

"We need the details of all your implementation team and all your techs who work here, in Boston," Connor said.

Now, Sutherland looked briefly panicked. He glanced at his Rolex.

"My airplane is literally taking off in twenty minutes. I have to get to the gate!"

"Anyone been fired in the past few months?"

"No! Nobody's been fired in the past year. And if people are fired, we revoke their access to the system immediately. We're not stupid."

"What about people who quit?"

"Yeah, we've had a couple quit last year, but not for the past few months, and in any case, we do the same. Access is revoked when people leave."

"What about wiping the system completely?"

"That's only possible by being on site. You enter the code manually and then hold down two particular numbers on the keypad for thirty seconds. It's very complicated. Only our techs and installers would know how."

"Okay. Then I need the list of your current techs and installers. By the time that plane takes off, I want the details in my inbox." Connor handed him his business card. "Because otherwise, as soon as tomorrow, I might not be able to prevent the wave of bad publicity that's going to take you under."

"I'll send it. Promise." Reluctantly, but in a firm voice, Sutherland agreed.

Connor got up and strode with him to the security gate. There, he went to the side door and spoke to one of the security staff, who took Sutherland straight through. The last that Cami saw of him, he was sprinting in the direction of his boarding gate.

"He'd better send us the information." Connor turned, heading out of the airport, checking his phone as he went. It began ringing, and Cami glanced at him hopefully. Was this the call they were waiting for?

But looking down at the screen, Connor frowned.

"I'll be a minute," he said. Yet again, he strode a few paces away, taking

the call at a distance where Cami couldn't hear him.

Something – something that involved Bill Oertel, she suspected – was going very wrong.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Connor moved away from Cami to take the call, feeling deeply troubled. This situation was escalating – fast, and way out of his control. It was Jacenta calling. She was keeping track of the situation at the FBI as best she could.

He knew she felt responsible, that it was because of her that Cami’s name had come to Bill Oertel’s attention. It wasn’t her fault, of course. But in any case it had happened now, it might be exploding, and they had to try to contain it and prevent any collateral damage.

Particularly to Cami Lark. No way did she deserve this. Not when all the evidence was pointing to the fact her sister had been one of Oertel’s victims. He could not let this man hurt Cami too.

“Any sign of him?” he asked quietly.

“No sign,” Jacenta said, giving Connor the news he hadn’t hoped for. “His house is empty, he hasn’t been there. We have an agent outside and another one inside. They’re searching through his files, but there’s not much to be found. It looks as if he’s sanitized the place.

Grimly, Connor acknowledged the fact. Of course, he was going to do that. He was an FBI agent who knew his betrayal had been discovered. They had a lot of facts stacked up against him already. Maybe they had what they needed, although more would always be helpful. That was not the main concern, though.

The main concern was that they needed him to get to his network. All they had so far were cut-off points. Whoever the others were, they had been very careful. Connor acknowledged that they’d been lucky to get to Oertel at all.

They needed to capture him for the intel he possessed, but also for something that troubled Connor even more – what he might do if he remained at large.

One rogue agent who'd gone bad a long time ago might already have been responsible for organizing several deaths, including Ethan’s. He seemed to have the attitude that dead people were the most effective cutoff there was. Which Connor had to admit, had worked for him so far. Several deaths, several murders over the years, a few disappearances, and Oertel had been able to operate within his dark and illegal framework, undetected, while maintaining a high level position.

The thought gave Connor goosebumps. It was absolutely chilling.

“And his phone?” he asked Jacenta. “Any updates, any progress there?”

“We have two different teams waiting for any signal or any GPS location,” Jacenta said, her voice stressed and frustrated. “Fraser is monitoring them,” she added, referring to Connor’s boss. “But there’s nothing. Nothing at all. We don’t know where he is.”

“Okay. Let’s keep hunting tonight. For now, I want those undercover agents to remain in place where they are.”

“I’ll organize that.”

“And please, keep me up to speed. As soon as you know anything, I want to know it too.”

Connor hung up and headed back to Cami. She was looking at him strangely, and he knew that she knew what that call was about. He wasn't ready to tell her yet, but it was creating a tension between them that hadn't been there since the early days of their partnership. Connor disliked it intensely. He hated that it was there, and he loathed the reasons for it.

One corrupt agent, and a whole world of trouble descended.

She stared at him, with an intense expression in her green eyes. She was determinedly not going to take silence for an answer any longer.

“Connor,” she said firmly. “I need to know. What on earth is –”

But he was saved by the bell – literally.

His phone beeped loudly, and he saw an email had come through. Thankfully, the angry Mr. Sutherland had taken the potential consequences seriously, and he’d sent the information through.

“Listen, I’ll talk to you about it later. I promise. But for now, we have names,” he told Cami. “We really need to get ahead with this case. We need this killer in custody – tonight if possible.”

Her eyes narrowed mutinously. She wanted to know more, but she also accepted that the urgency of this case took priority.

“Where shall we go to check them?” she asked.

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Twenty minutes later, after a much faster ride back from the airport, they were back in the same police station room that Connor had borrowed last time. There, he took a look at the list of names that Sutherland had sent. He would have to trust that it was a full list and that Sutherland hadn’t left anyone out.

There were only six names on the list, which got his eyebrows raised. He guessed with so many states to cover, and people working remotely from elsewhere, it did make sense that they might only have six on-site employees in Boston itself. Sutherland had also included employee addresses and phone numbers.

“Okay,” Connor said, looking through the list. “I see that we can immediately rule out three of these names. Because he’s stated in this email that the three techs at the top of the list are the ones who were with him in that meeting last night.”

“So they’re all cleared,” Cami said thoughtfully, her gaze going to the last three names.

Connor nodded. “If one of these employees has been accessing the systems, then it’s one of the last three. So, who’ve we got?”

Cami read them out. “Jason Jones, Miriam Callow, and Boyd Langdon.”

Connor’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Given the brute strength with which those murders had been committed, he felt that it was more unlikely to have been done by a woman, but he wasn’t going to take Miriam off the list just yet.

“We need to find out more about them,” he said firmly. “About all of them. Let’s do some intensive research here, and see how much we can uncover about every one of these techs.”

While Cami went straight onto social media and local chat boards, Connor first ran all the names through the records, just in case one of the three proved to be a repeat offender. But all of them were clean.

Then he checked other details. They were all Boston residents. Miriam was married with two children. There was no information available on marital status for Jason or Boyd, but he found current addresses for all of them.

Cami took a breath, looking up from her work, where her fingers had been flying.

“Connor, I’m seeing here, on social media, that Miriam was in the emergency room last night. Her six-year-old son broke his arm. It’s all over her pages, with X-ray photos and messages of sympathy. So she couldn’t have done it. We can rule her out.”

Connor nodded, feeling pleased to have narrowed down the list, even if slightly.

“What about the others?” he asked.

"Jason Jones – I'm looking now, but I think I'm getting something on him here."

She turned to her laptop, which she was using to multitask. "Yes. I've got something on him. He was installing smart home software at a client's house last night. Seems like he was on site until late, finishing everything up. She was very happy with the installation and actually tagged him on social media. He was on a job so it could not have been him."

"And how about Boyd? Anything on Boyd?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm not getting a thing on Boyd. His social media is set to private, and I can't see anything on it. Well, I could, given some time, but not at a glance." She paused. "But I'm looking further. I've found a few links to different groups and different comment boards that he's on, and I might be able to get into one of them. It's one that I've accessed before. It's usually private but..."

She raised her hands off the keyboard briefly, scanning the screen. "Wait a sec. Maybe not so private. Maybe there's something that slipped through here that I've been able to find."

She paused, her eyes narrowing as she read what was there.

"Now, this is interesting. He broke up with his girlfriend three months ago. Seems it was very acrimonious – she cheated on him and then moved out of town to be with the new boyfriend. I've found a misguided comment from him here, on this supposedly private chat board, only the privacy levels seem to fluctuate. You know, you really should not put things like this out in the public domain. Even if you're not a killer, saying something like this is going to come back to bite you."

Connor didn't know what Cami was going to say next, but from her voice, he guessed it was going to be something important.

"Read the comment?" he encouraged, leaning closer to have a look.

Cami read it out, and he could hear a wealth of suppressed anger in her tone.

"He says here, 'Women are users, he's been badly hurt by two of them now, and he's going to make sure that someone suffers, just as he's done.'"

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cami couldn't get those vengeful words out of her mind as they drove. It was getting late now – already nearly eight p.m., so Connor was going straight to Boyd Langdon's home address. That was where he might be – assuming he wasn't out stalking some other woman, preparing to make sure they suffered like he thought they should.

Those words filled her with anger. How could anybody want to commit such sadistic, terrible crimes just because they thought they'd suffered themselves and wanted somebody to do likewise? She couldn't wait to get face to face with Boyd, and for her and Connor to work together and force him to spill out the truth.

Boyd lived in a quiet suburban area – just the sort of place, Cami saw, where his victims had also lived. This was a well treed part of Boston, with small houses and a few apartment buildings, and a couple of restaurants on the main street that were already busy.

His house was just a couple of blocks away, and within another minute, Connor was pulling up outside. But Cami frowned. The home's windows were dark compared to the houses on either side. Either this man had blackout blinds installed – a possibility, she guessed – or he was having a really early night, or he wasn't home.

Connor got out in any case, walked up to the front door, and knocked, looking around him at the homes on either side. He looked again at these darkened windows, and shook his head. Cami heaved a big sigh. He was out.

But Connor wasn't giving up.

"I'm not letting this go," he said, sounding determined. "And I'm not walking away now, not when he's the only one of the technicians that could have done this. We need to speak to him tonight. I'm going to ask the office to give me a GPS location on his phone."

He headed back to the car, with Cami following, glad that they were going to be able to do this. It might take a few minutes to set up, but if his phone was on, it would be a lot easier than tracking him using a food delivery app.

Connor was on the phone before he even got into the car.

This conversation, of course, he had no problem in having in front of Cami. It made her even more frustrated about what he was keeping from her. Why the need for secrecy? He was treating her like a child. This was taking

their dynamic all the way back to where it had been when she'd joined, and Connor had partnered with her so reluctantly, not liking or trusting her and only disclosing information on a need-to-know basis.

Did he think she was in danger? If so, didn't she deserve to know that so she could take precautions?

What precautions she would take, that would hold up against what Bill Oertel could do, she had no idea. Maybe, she reasoned somberly, it was actually better not to know.

"Right. Thank you," Connor said, hanging up. "They're going to have it ready in about ten minutes, maximum. The phone is turned on, and it's on the network."

During that time, Cami took the opportunity to check her own emails. She hadn't had a chance to do that today. Now, scrolling through, she was reminded of the conversation she'd had earlier, during that surprise phone call with Steve Billings from Rushmore Ventures.

Connor was not the only one who was keeping secrets, Cami knew. She was, too.

He'd sent an email with some alternative meeting times – three different days next week. He was keen to talk, that was for sure. And looking at that email, with its smart corporate footer, reading the summary of what they were doing and what she would be doing – gave her a flare of excitement.

Maybe this was going to be the right decision. After all, she'd always assumed that she'd end up working for a tech startup. And the list of activities, her potential job description, sounded engaging and challenging. Writing code, innovating new programs, testing solutions, brainstorming new frontiers. She liked that.

Tomorrow, she'd write back to him and pick one of the times. She was interested to get face to face with him and find out more.

And it would be safer than working for the FBI. She wouldn't feel like there was danger simmering in the background that might explode at any minute.

"Right," Connor said, interrupting her thinking. "The tracking's come through. We can go."

A moment later, Connor's phone beeped with a location pin. He grabbed it, homing in on it, and Cami saw with a thrill of intent that this location was close by. Boyd Langdon might not be home, but he wasn't far from where he lived. And that meant that they could hopefully get to him tonight.

“It’s those shops up on the main road,” Connor said, and Cami’s eyebrows rose. They’d driven straight past him on their way. Straight past. If only they’d known.

“And it seems like he’s at the bar on the corner,” Connor said, enlarging the map still further. “Which is good,” he added calmly. “If he’s at a bar, he’s not going to be leaving in a hurry. Let’s go and meet him there.”

Cami took a deep breath as Connor drove back to the main road, turned left, and stopped in the first available parking space near the bar. Like the other places on the main road, it seemed like an upscale place. Called The Cosmopolitan, it had a neon sign with a picture of a cocktail glass, and inside, the décor was dark wood and plush red leather.

Walking in, she realized it was much bigger than she expected. It was multi-level, spanning three floors in total and including a basement area.

Where was he in this big, busy and bustling place? Cami recalled, from his social media, what he looked like. Boyd was twenty-nine years old, he was tall, he had spiky brown hair, and a face that was long and lean. Cami thought that his mouth looked spiteful, but she admitted she might be putting her own emotional interpretation on the photo.

They didn’t know whether he was here alone or with friends, she realized, as Connor said, “Let’s take an unobtrusive walk through here, and see if we can spot him.”

Although Connor was not in uniform, his jacket had the FBI logo on it and he looked distinctly like law enforcement, with his short haircut and his disciplined bearing. Cami knew that with her tattoos and her partially shaven hairstyle, she didn’t look in the least like police. The only thing that made her look like she was with the FBI was the baseball cap and the jacket she wore. It made her smile when she remembered Connor’s disgusted insistence that she cover up her edgy hair. Now, she honestly thought he’d stopped noticing it.

Since they’d gotten in without being stopped, there was no reason for her to take off her FBI clothing to blend in. She’d done that from time to time before when they’d needed to get into a place. But just because they had gained access to this bar didn’t mean that it would be plain sailing from here. They still had to find Boyd, and then they had to get him to talk.

Connor moved easily through the bar, and Cami tried to copy his actions, becoming a chameleon like he was doing, not drawing attention to himself as he wove his way between the tables, glancing at all the patrons without

obviously seeming to be looking. The thumping music and the babble of background voices were deafening. It meant they had to communicate by glances. But even though Cami worked her whole way around her section of the bar, glancing frequently at Connor, she didn't see him and nor did he.

That meant going down a level to the basement. Connor was heading there first, and Cami followed. The basement level seemed to be busier. There was a dance floor in the center of the room. The tables surrounding it were crowded. Down here, people were partying hard. It was much more difficult to see their faces in the flashing lights, interspersed with near darkness. Cami stood by the wall, watching people on the dance floor twist and turn, waiting for the moment when the moving disco lights illuminated their faces.

She looked away to give her eyes a respite from the constant lights. Their movement was dazzling and disorienting, and it could make you miss things. She didn't want to miss a glimpse of him if he was on the dance floor. Although, she was starting to think that he might not be on this level at all, and might actually be upstairs on the top floor.

And then, with a pounding of her heart, she saw him.

He was on the far side of the basement area, sitting at one of the tables near the wall, and he was alone. His spiky hair stood up like a signal, making it easy to spot him. And as she homed in on him more closely, Cami saw that he was on his phone. He was doing something, very busily, on his phone.

Alone, in a place like this, working so intensively on his phone, she wanted to know what, exactly, he was up to. He looked utterly absorbed. A glass of beer stood half empty by his elbow, but he wasn't paying it any attention. He wasn't looking around at all. A pretty blond woman dressed in a skimpy outfit – a mini skirt and sleeveless top – passed by his table and, as she did so, inadvertently jostled it.

“Sorry,” Cami saw her mouth in his direction, but he never even looked up.

He was up to something – she was sure of it.

She grabbed Connor's sleeve, pointed discreetly, and hissed into his ear – louder than usual thanks to the thumping of the music, “He's there.”

Connor looked, he saw, and his body language tautened. But she didn't want Connor to go over to him yet. Seeing he was there all alone, in his own world, and so furiously busy with his phone, she wanted to find out exactly what he was up to.

And in this place, there might just be a simple, time-honored hacking



technique that allowed her to do it.

She put her finger to her lips and whispered to Connor, “Wait.”

Then, Cami moved forward, staying out of Boyd’s sight, and heading for a spot behind him.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Shoulder surfing was not always as easy as it sounded, Cami acknowledged, as she maneuvered into place behind her target, looking ultra casual, angling her body so that she appeared to be watching the dance floor while she was, in fact, giving herself a view of Boyd's phone.

Shoulder surfing was literally what it sounded like – peeking at someone's phone or device when you were behind them. But it was not simple to get right. Now, for instance, although she was at the correct angle to see Boyd's phone, she was much too far away to make out what he was doing on the screen.

Technology could help her there. Cami took out her phone, set it to record, enlarged the picture, and pointed it in Boyd's direction.

And now, with a steady hand and a keen eye, she could see exactly what he was up to, squirreled away at that small table.

Her eyes narrowed. He was working on something. A map, she saw. He had the map enlarged, and he had one particular house highlighted, and he was busy plotting a route there. Several routes. The maps app was working hard.

Why was he doing that? Was he busy targeting another victim, figuring out the way in and the way out, and alternate escape routes that he could use if things went bad? That was how it seemed to her, she thought darkly. She didn't like the look of this at all. It was incriminating, to her. Especially given his comments about suffering.

She watched a few more minutes. More of the same. He was only focusing on one house. She couldn't see where it was, and she didn't recognize any of the road names.

Turning away, she headed back to Connor.

"He's got a map open," she hissed. "He's looking at routes in and out from a particular house. I've got some of the footage on my phone. That's all I can see, but it seems suspicious to me?"

"To me, too. Let's go and find out."

Connor headed toward the man.

But, as Connor neared him, Boyd Langdon looked up in alarm. She saw him take in Connor's intent, and his eye contact, and that FBI badge on his jacket.

It was too late for Cami to wish that she'd taken off her cap and gone in first and got close to him so as not to arouse his suspicions. Because Boyd leaped frantically to his feet. With a shove, he flung the table over in Connor's direction. It landed on the floor with a crash, blocking his way. The glass shattered on the floor and beer sluiced across it in a foamy fountain.

And then, Boyd was gone, hot-footing it through the basement bar and disappearing through a side door that Cami hadn't even seen.

"Quick!" But now, the panicked rush of people who were trying to move away from the upended table and the smashed glass, were causing a problem. From somewhere, a woman shrieked, and that triggered other anxious cries from the customers. People obviously thought a fight had started. Maybe it wasn't the first time, she wondered briefly. Maybe fights did break out down here in this basement bar, and it was a rougher place than she'd first thought.

At any rate, it took them way too long to struggle through the press of people and to get to that almost invisible doorway in the black painted wall.

Connor was on the phone again.

"We need a trace again. Quick!" he snapped out. But Cami wasn't holding out much hope for that. Because if Boyd had been paranoid enough to run the moment he saw the FBI approaching him, he would also be smart enough to turn off his phone to avoid being tracked.

She needed to outthink him. Not the easiest thing to do in a place that he knew well, his local neighborhood bar, and that she'd never been in before. But, as Connor burst through the door, heading in the direction of the exit, Cami decided that the best route for her to take would be to go the other way. Upstairs.

Just in case, he was trying to outwit the FBI. After all, where was there for him to go if he ran out? Home? Nope, that wouldn't wash. He'd know they would track him, and he seemed to have been at the bar alone. No friends could rally round and help him, and if he called a cab, he'd need his phone.

So, Cami was going to assume that he'd shut off his phone and that he'd fled the way that they wouldn't expect – upstairs.

And this time, as she ran, she peeled off her FBI cap and jacket so that all he'd see would be a woman with an edgy hairstyle, a stylish steel gray top, and a coat tied around her waist. That wouldn't spook him, and he wouldn't run. He hadn't even seen her when they'd first approached him. All his attention had been on Connor.

Cami pounded up the flights of stairs. She decided to go all the way to the

top. Maybe he'd figured that truly was the last place they'd look for him.

Exiting the bar, she saw that the top area was a games floor. There were all sorts of games in progress. A few pool tables were set up along the side of the room, and she immediately heard the clacking sound of pool cues. There were dart boards in the corner, and in the center of the room, card tables were set up – poker and blackjack.

Had he sat down at one of the games? That would require icy cold nerves, Cami thought, but maybe he possessed them. In which case, knocking over the table downstairs and making a run for it would have been a calculated move.

Cami sidled around the room, looking carefully, keeping an ear out for the soft buzzing of her phone that would mean Connor had cornered him. But there was no call, so Connor was still looking. Was that Boyd, at the poker table over there, that guy with the black baseball cap pulled down low over his eyes?

That wasn't him, but as she reached the table, her heart skipped a couple of beats, because Boyd Langdon was next to the man she'd noticed. He was slouched so low in his chair, with his shoulders hunched, that he looked half his height. And he'd pulled his jacket's hood up. It effectively covered the hair, and it made him all but unrecognizable.

With her pulse pounding, Cami sat down at the table. She now needed to urgently alert Connor to his whereabouts. But that wasn't going to be easy, because the dealer, glancing at her with a sharp but unsuspecting gaze, said, "Phones to be turned off and visible at the table, please."

The phones were all on the table, face down. And she was going to have to do the same. Clearly, no collusion or unfair practices were going to be allowed here.

"I'd like some chips, please," she said, buying time, not daring to look at Boyd.

"How much?"

Her heart sped up. She didn't have much.

"Twenty dollars," she said. It was all she had. But, while getting out her wallet with her left hand, and putting it on the table, she was sending the quickest message ever to Connor, on her cellphone, with her right.

*"Upstairs. Poker table."*

Then, hoping it had gone through, she took her chips and turned her phone off and placed it on the table. Time to play the game for all she was worth.

Her job, now, was to keep Boyd's attention on the game for long enough that Connor could get here.

And that was not going to be easy. Slumped down he might be, but she saw that he was tense, braced on his feet, and clearly ready to run again. If Connor came in from the basement stairway entrance, which was on his right, then he could get up and bolt out of the other door before Connor had crossed the room.

Unless she could distract him.

Hmmm, Cami thought. Best way of doing that?

There was only one way to get the table's attention, and that was to play recklessly and aggressively. That made people mad, but it also captured their focus. She'd had much more experience of online poker than of live, but she guessed that the basic logic was the same.

She could see herself losing twenty dollars very fast.

The dealer dealt. Cami glanced at her hand. A jack and a nine, unsuited. Not a great hand, in fact, a very average one. At an online table of eight, she'd have folded it, but now, she had to play. In fact, she had to do more than that. She had to bet.

"Four dollars," The laconic words came from the guy on her right.

"I'll call that," the baseball wearer said. Boyd hesitated.

"Call," he said, and pushed the chips in.

Cami took a deep breath. "Raise you!" she said, and pushed in eight dollars' worth of chips.

Now, she had the table's attention. And in particular, Boyd's.

"Reraise you!" one of the other guys said, taking it to twelve.

Out of the corner of her eye, Cami saw Connor appear in the doorway. And she could see that Boyd was just about to glance around again. Only one way to delay this. She needed to make the most aggressive move she could.

"All in," she said, and shoved all her chips into the table's center.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“Wow.”

“What a move.”

“You got pocket aces there baby, or you just looking to lose twenty dollars, fast?”

Comments – some admiring, some scornful, resounded from around the table.

Everyone’s attention was on the cards as the dealer prepared to deal. Even Boyd was too distracted to look around as he’d been intending to do.

And then, Connor was there. At the table, grasping his shoulder in a tight grip. Boyd shouted out a cry of alarm. He tried to scramble up from the table, but Connor's grasp was tight. And this poker table, unlike the drinks table, was way too solid to be tipped over.

“A word, please, Mr. Langdon?” Connor’s voice was polite.

His grasp was inexorable. Boyd was practically hauled to his feet and then Connor, grasping his arm, marched him outside.

Cami got up to leave, but to her surprise, the guy sitting next to her grabbed her elbow.

“Hey, wait!” he said urgently. “Don’t walk away! You got two calls on your all-in, and look there. Three Jacks on the flop. You got four jacks, it’s unbeatable, you can’t abandon your hand.”

“I can,” Cami said, pulling her FBI cap onto her head again. “If I win, take the money on my behalf. Donate it to – to an animal charity, or a refuge for battered women, or something like that. I’ve got to go and help my partner.”

Turning her back on the undoubtedly winning hand, with all her focus on the interview ahead, Cami got up and left.

Behind her, the only gasps were of admiration now, but she barely heard them. She hurried through the door where Connor had gone. He was waiting for her outside.

"We're going to bring him in," he said, still holding Boyd's arm firmly, except now, Cami saw, he had handcuffs on. "He's tried to run for it twice. I'm not letting go of his arm until the cops get here."

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The look of the suspect, sitting across the table from them half an hour later in the interview room, was familiar to Cami. Boyd was hostile and defensive looking. He was glowering at them in a way that told Cami they were not going to get the information they needed quickly or easily.

Connor didn't seem to be worried by that, and calmly regarded Boyd for a few minutes, letting the silence build. Gradually, Boyd began to fidget. Swiftly, he started looking less defiant and more uneasy.

It was astonishing, the effect that silence had. Cami had seen it before, and she couldn't help but be impressed by it all over again. It wore even the angriest person down. It was a very powerful weapon. She remembered her own experience on the wrong side of the desk at the FBI offices and how uncomfortable it had made her. It was a chance for your imagination to start running away with you.

Eventually, Connor spoke.

"You seemed very eager not to chat to us when we approached you in that downstairs basement bar, Mr. Langdon. You went to serious effort to get away, and then hide from us. I'm wondering why you ended up doing all of this?"

Boyd looked down.

"I don't have to tell you a thing," he said through gritted teeth.

"You don't," Connor agreed conversationally. "We can sit here all night. I'm happy with doing so. I've done far more before. I'm a patient person, as you'll find."

Now, Boyd was starting to look alarmed.

"However, it might be quicker and easier for us to get to the point. That being: why did you act so guiltily when you saw us arrive?" He paused. "We're investigating a very serious crime. So if it happens that you are not, in fact, guilty of a very serious crime, then I'd recommend you tell us. It'll save time. Minor offenses, right now, we're not interested in pursuing."

That was like a lifeline. Cami saw, to her astonishment, that Boyd was looking as if he'd just been given a chance he'd never expected to have. For the first time, his face looked less dislikeable, less closed in, and defensive.

Could it be that he was only guilty of a minor offense?

Surely not, Cami thought, feeling a flash of panic because they had no other suspects. He was the only employee who was in the area, worked with the smart homes, and would have had the opportunity to commit the crimes.

"I – I was, maybe, guilty of a minor offense," he mumbled. "You see, my

girlfriend, she recently broke up with me, and I was planning to get back at her in a petty way. I was figuring out if I could reprogram one of the apps she had on my computer, to order her a whole stack of different pizza deliveries that she and her new boyfriend would have to pay for.” He sighed. “But I felt really guilty about it, and then the app malfunctioned and said I had made an illegal move on it. I was trying to reconfigure the setting, and then you arrived and I guess – I guess I overreacted and thought you’d come looking for me because the app had reported me for fraud.” He bowed his head.

That? That was the revenge? That was the suffering he’d planned? Pizza?

Cami nearly spluttered out loud in astonishment. She’d imagined it to be something so much worse. What he’d said did fit in with actions she’d seen – but she’d been viewing them in a far more suspicious light.

“Do you know who Lisa Court is?” Connor asked.

Cami watched him closely, but his face didn't even twitch at the name. However, she told herself not to get too excited about that because he'd been very poker-faced when they'd been sitting in that game. He clearly did know how to control his expression.

“Why are you asking me?” he said. “Is she a – a victim or something?”

Connor nodded. “Yes. She’s a murder victim. Do you know Debbie Maynard?”

To her surprise, some light dawned in Boyd’s face.

“Yeah,” he said. “Debbie, I know about. She was on my list for following up. She called me and said there were things going wrong with her smart home functionality. That was last week.”

Now, Cami’s eyes were wide. She was the one who’d lost her poker face.

“And did you help her?” Connor asked.

“Yeah,” Boyd said. “I reset the system and checked it was all working correctly. She was happy, so we ended the call. I did it all remotely, but I was due to call her – not tomorrow, the day after, I think – to make sure it was working.”

There was a silence. Cami felt sure that Connor, too, was taking in this puzzling twist of circumstances.

“When was this?” he asked.

“It was last week. Thursday or Friday, I think.”

So the smart home had been giving problems for a couple of days. Then Boyd had fixed it, but it clearly had not stayed fixed. Because it had been nonfunctional when Cami had seen that screen. Her mind racing, she



wondered how on earth this was possible. Assuming Boyd was not the killer – which was not yet established, but was now looking more likely – how was this murderer managing to interfere with the workings of the smart homes.

Even after it had been fixed? He'd broken it again, and Cami was sure he'd done that so he could get into the house. That was why he was sabotaging them. It gave him an easy way in, and more than that, it would scare his victims.

“Who knows the codes?” Connor pressured Boyd. “Who'd be able to get into the system and do such a thing? How would it happen?”

“Well, we all have access to the master codes,” he said. “They are specific to each house. Some of the homeowners change theirs, but because it requires coming on site and doing an actual physical reset, most people leave theirs the way they are when we install them.”

“And how easy are they to hack into?” Connor said, with a glance at Cami.

“Not the easiest,” Boyd said. Now that the topic was work, he was talking with enthusiasm. “We make the codes very hard to crack. You could hack them, but unless you had seriously top-grade software, it would take a very long time. Security is something we're really concerned about.”

There must be something she was missing, Cami thought. The codes were individually allocated and securely kept, and they required an on-site visit to change.

Connor, meanwhile, was pressing forward.

“Tell me,” he said, “can you account for your movements yesterday evening?”

Boyd grimaced in an apologetic way.

“I can't,” he admitted. “I was with a client until about four p.m., and then I went home. To plan my pizza revenge,” he added, now looking shamefaced.

Cami felt sorry for him, an emotion she'd never expected to feel. And she also had no idea how Connor was going to handle the lack of an alibi. That was serious. People couldn't help being alone if they were innocent, but right now, there were no other suspects.

And then, Connor's phone started buzzing.

He picked up and made for the door. Cami glanced at him, suspicions surging, triggered all over again by that sound, and by him then leaving the room. It might be just a routine call that he didn't want to take in front of the suspect. But if it was something more serious – well, this time, she wasn't

going to let it go.

She got up too, and went outside, following him.

He was speaking in serious tones, and as soon as the interview room door closed behind them, Cami realized with a clench of her stomach that this was something different from what she'd expected. Something worse.

"Where is it?" Connor asked, his voice tense. He hung up and turned to Cami.

"There's been another murder just a couple of hours ago. Same MO. It's on the other side of town. We need to get there – fast."

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Cami felt her stomach twisting as Connor sped across town to the scene. Crossing a bridge, she saw the lights of Boston spread out before her, the city twinkling and vast. It was intimidating to think that somewhere in this massive network of suburbs and streets, this killer was hiding away. Lurking, planning, and now- striking again.

Regret filled her that they had been too slow.

The drive had been silent. After issuing quick, sharp instructions at the police station that Boyd Langdon could be released and taken home, Connor had been quiet. He seemed more stressed than usual. Connor was normally calm. And he still was, but Cami sensed an edge to it. As if, right now, there was way more on his plate than he wanted to be there.

Cami tried to breathe deeply and to prepare herself for what she would find at the scene, but it was difficult. She felt a sense of desperation that they were too many steps behind this killer and might never catch up. It was not helpful to feel that way, but right now, she couldn't counteract the sense of discouragement.

"Cami." Connor's voice was stern, and her head jerked around.

They were stopped at a traffic light heading into the suburb where the new victim, whose name she didn't even know yet, lived. And he was staring at her with an expression as serious as his voice had been.

"Yes? What is it?" she asked.

"Don't let negative thoughts get the better of you."

"I – I wasn't –" she protested, but feebly, because she knew he was right. She had been mired in a feeling of hopelessness.

"I know it seems like this guy's going to get away with this. I know that going to this scene, at this time, when we feel we've exhausted all options, feels difficult. But there will be answers. We will find something at this scene. Trust me."

It was difficult not to trust what he said, because she could hear the determination and assurance, firmly in his voice.

"I just don't see what angle we can use now," she explained, sharing the helplessness she felt, but Connor shook his head.

"Maybe we've been looking at it from the wrong angle all along. The smart homes might be coincidences, and we might need to look for more

links between the victims themselves. That's likely, isn't it? It's a possibility we might need to look into more deeply?"

"Yes," Cami admitted. The delay in opening Debbie's smartphone had meant they hadn't yet explored that angle. Now, with a third victim and hopefully a whole new set of information, they could explore it. It could be that somebody had targeted the victims and also happened to have the set of hacking skills that made it possible to bypass the smart home system. That would create a new angle for them to explore.

Connor's words reminded Cami that it was sometimes important to dig deeper. Look harder, and find what was hidden.

"We'll find something," she said, and the positive words helped her feel better about the situation – much better – as Connor wove his way through the narrow streets, heading up a hillside to a row of small houses with a view.

The flashing lights told Cami where the crime scene was, and they had to ease their way past a knot of concerned bystanders, being kept at a distance by police, before parking behind the coroner's van. As they edged their way past, she saw their faces. Shocked, nervous, disbelieving. The killer hadn't just destroyed one life. He'd created fear in an entire neighborhood. Now, anger and resolve were replacing the discouragement she'd felt earlier. He needed to be stopped. And he would be stopped.

It occurred to Cami, as she climbed out of the car and followed Connor up to the home's front door, that all these kills had taken place in upscale neighborhoods. She guessed that the owners could afford the smart home functionality, and she immediately wondered if she would find the same evidence inside, the same flashing console, the same disconnection from the control panel that she'd noticed in the other two places.

The cop at the front door – in his forties, with a round face, an air of efficiency, and tired eyes, greeted Connor in a friendly way.

"Glad you were able to get to the scene so fast," he said.

"Who's the victim? Who found the body?" Connor asked.

"Well, it's an unusual situation," the cop said. "Apparently the homeowner, Ms. Linda Caddy, is out of state for a fortnight, and she wanted somebody to stay in the house while she was away. That's what happened, and the victim, Miss Amber Timms, age twenty-five, is the house sitter. She's been here a few nights, according to neighbors."

Cami felt shocked. Only a few nights? This was not the home's usual resident or owner but a house sitter who'd come in for a temporary time.

The cop continued. “I believe, from the witness report, that she ordered a takeaway delivery, and the driver who brought it half an hour later, was the person who found her.”

Cami shook her head, taking in the bustle of the crime scene, the crackle of radios, the policemen in their forensic gear, already checking the scene.

“We told him to stay in case you wanted to speak to him,” the cop said, pointing.

“Let’s do that,” Connor said, and Cami nodded. She felt a tiny flicker of relief at not having had to go into the crime scene itself, where the body still lay. Instead, they turned away and headed for the dark blue Mazda that was parked on the opposite side of the road, lights still on – and Cami was sure, engine and heater, too. From the window, she could see the stunned expression of the driver, who only looked about twenty years old. He was gripping the wheel, wearing the red and white branded hat of the delivery company, and clearly still trying to get to grips with how a routine food delivery had turned into a nightmare.

Connor walked up to the car, and the man quickly fumbled to open the window.

“FBI. Can we have a word?” Connor said, and his eyes widened. He unlocked the door and scrambled out of the car, unfolding his lanky frame to stand in front of them.

“We can talk in the car if you like. If it’s warmer?” Connor suggested, but the driver shook his head.

“Outside is fine. I’m not – I’m not really thinking about the cold at the moment,” he said in a shaky voice, his breath misting in the air as he spoke.

“Tell us what happened?” Connor asked.

He shifted from foot to foot.

“Well, it seemed like – like a normal delivery. I mean, I just got the notification on my phone. One veggie burger and Greek salad to be delivered to Amber Timms at this address. I went and picked it up, and then I came here. I stopped right here,” he said, now breathing faster.

“Go on?” Connor asked. Cami listened intently, hoping that something this driver had seen or heard, or some of the information he gave, might provide a breakthrough.

“I walked across the road and rang the customer’s doorbell, but I didn’t hear a chime. I thought perhaps it wasn’t working,” he explained.

Already, on hearing this, Cami’s mind was starting to race. The same

situation? Failed electronics? This was the scenario that they'd found in the other two homes, playing out all over again.

"So, then, what did you do?" Connor asked.

"Then, I knocked hard on the door." He paused. "And as I did, I heard something, some noise from inside. I don't know what it was. Like a banging or a thumping noise."

Listening, Cami felt horror crawl down her spine. Had he actually heard the noise of the murder being committed? The body hitting the floor? The killer making a hasty departure out the back?

"The lights were on inside," the driver continued, "so after waiting another little while and knocking again, I got worried. You know, I've been to homes before now where the owner has been on the way to let me in and has taken a fall, hurt themselves. That happened in the past, a lady tripped on the stairs on the way down and knocked herself out and I had to call the ambulance, and now I started to worry about it. So I called out, and then I tried the door and it opened. It wasn't locked at all. And I saw – I saw her legs. She was lying half in the hall, half in the living room, dead. You could see – you could see the marks on her neck, but I didn't touch her. I just ran out and called the cops."

"You did the right thing there," Connor said. "And you take care. Don't drive if you're feeling shocked. It might be better to go home and not continue working tonight," he advised.

The young man nodded. "Yeah. My shift boss has said the same. He also said I must head home and take it easy. I think I'll do just that."

Connor thanked him, before turning back to the crime scene.

This killer had committed his murder and then, from the sounds of it, he'd fled right out of the back door.

This hadn't gone the way he'd planned, though. The knock at the door had been a shock to him, Cami thought. He must have been surprised by the arrival of the delivery, as he surely couldn't have known about it. And in a hurry, mistakes might have been made.

Now, she needed to find out what they were.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

As she and Connor put on foot covers and gloves, and hurried through the house to the back door, Cami's mind was in a spin. She barely noticed the gurney set up in the living room, onto which the victim's body was being carefully transferred.

"First thing first, let's see if there's any trace of his getaway," Connor said.

Connor reached the back door and headed out. As Cami followed, she saw the beams of flashlights coming from the backyard. The cops on the scene had already begun the hunt. She hurried down the cool, dew-damp grass to the garden fence.

It was a low, wooden fence that backed onto a small park. Was that where he'd fled? Cami guessed he must have done. Were there any cameras that might have picked him up if it was a route he hadn't expected to take?

"Evening, agent," one of the cops said. "He clearly went this way. Back door was open, we found traces of footprints in the grass, and a scuff mark on top of the fence. But there's nothing in the park. We've combed it, and there's no sign of him or his footprints."

"What about cameras?" Connor asked.

The cop shrugged. "Seems like there are no cameras in the park. There are some on the main street beyond." He pointed in the direction of faraway lights. "We'll get that footage, but I think it's a long shot."

Cami agreed. The park was a wide stretch of treed, grassy terrain, and it seemed to provide a central point to the neighborhood, with numerous quiet roads, lanes and tracks feeding into it. If he'd got that far, then he could have left the park undetected and would have had time to lay low and plan his way. So that idea, though full of potential, was going to lead nowhere. He'd gotten lucky again.

No point in trying to track a killer who was long gone, and who'd had his choice of escape routes. Now, she needed to try to get into his mind and his thinking, and how exactly he'd used technology to help him with his deadly deeds. The first step in doing that was to look inside the house.

Turning around, she saw that the living room blinds were up, exposing the brightly lit room to the backyard. One of the blinds was tugged askew as if the victim had tried to close it manually after the automation had failed.

Cami knew what she expected to find. Another keypad, the same type as the others.

She was beginning to theorize that this man was targeting the homes. Maybe he was choosing homes where women lived because he perceived them as weaker or had a grudge against the female gender. But since a house sitter had been killed here, and not the home's usual owner at all, she was sure that first and foremost, he was targeting the houses. Because he could access them.

But then, a thought occurred to her.

In the other homes, the killer would have had time to cover his tracks – not just physically, but electronically as well. He would have had time to completely deprogram that console, and to leave them with what they had seen at the other crime scenes – that flashing, blank keypad.

"He might not have had time to do it here," she said aloud, and now, she suddenly felt more hopeful. One small mistake might be all she needed. Maybe Connor's determined optimism was going to prove well-founded after all, and this crime scene would give them their breakthrough.

Now feeling intent on finding whatever there was to discover about this keypad, Cami headed back into the house. The other keypads had been located in the kitchen. Was this one there, too?

She took a look, but couldn't find it there, so retraced her steps to the hallway.

There! There it was. Right in the hallway, next to the hall table. That was a bad spot for him. With a delivery man knocking on the front door, he would not have been able to get to it in time.

Sure enough, with a flash of hope, Cami saw the keypad was still active. It had not been wiped. Now, she could look back – as far as was possible – and see if the device carried any clues in its history that might help her.

"Okay. So someone was accessing it for the past few days," she said, pressing the button with her gloved hand and going back into the control history. "I'm guessing remotely, because there are a whole bunch of override commands here." She shook her head. Having the home behave this way would have been enough to make anyone mad, scared, and thoroughly jumpy.

"Override lights. Override front door lock. Override lights again. That might mean they flickered, or refused to work. Override stove. Override water heater." So she'd come home to no hot water. "Boil kettle, activate



heating.” Maybe that was Amber Timms herself, cooking, or heating up water. “Override front door lock, and override phone. Those are the most recent commands.” And those, she knew, would be the deadly ones that he’d put in to allow him to work.

Cami shivered. It was chilling to look at this console and realize what this man had been able to do, working remotely. But how had he been able to do it? The console was giving her some answers, but not enough of them. She’d seen his input, but she had not yet discovered how he’d been able to do it. She lowered her hand, trying not to let herself feel discouraged, but trying instead to think about what else this keypad could tell her.

Unless – how far back did this history go? When was the last time the master password was accessed? Could she see from here?

Maybe that would tell her something.

Cami flicked back through the history, switching from its current memory to its recorded memory, which she found on a chip within the system. Standing by the keypad, she scrolled back through days and weeks of commands, looking for what she needed – a moment in time when the master password had been accessed.

And she found it.

It was exactly six months ago. Six months ago, the console informed her, the master password had been accessed. Now, she could see what it was. She stared at the complex jumble of numbers and letters.

This was their breakthrough. She knew it.

“Connor, it was accessed six months ago,” she said. “That’s when he got this information. We’ve finally gotten a timeframe, and now, we need to find out from Barney Sutherland, who was working with these keypads at that time.”

“You think it was somebody who quit that long ago?” he asked.

Cami nodded. “Six months? That’s a long time. Barney Sutherland was thinking of recent staff. But I now think that what we’re looking for is somebody who left a while ago. He said there were a few people who quit last year. This killer has been planning this for months. He could have gotten the access codes of many houses, discreetly, waiting a while so he wouldn’t be suspected, knowing that after he’d left, he would have a chance to use them.”

“Barney Sutherland is on an airplane at this point,” Connor said. “His phone is going to be turned off. So we’ll have to wait until tomorrow

morning, and then get hold of the company itself to ask about the techs who quit six months ago.”

But Cami didn't want to wait. Not now that she'd had an idea that could propel this case all the way forward. She didn't want to go home and try to sleep with everything that had happened in the last few hours. Home didn't even feel like a safe place. Right now, if she went back to the apartment, she would feel scared she was putting Kieran in danger.

“I want to work,” she said. “And if you want to carry on for another hour or two, then I can see if I can find a way into Steadfast’s systems. Because if I can, then we can look for ourselves, without waiting for Mr. Sutherland at all.”

Connor gazed at her thoughtfully for a few moments.

“This could work against us,” he argued. “What if they pick up there’s been interference and shut down their systems?”

Cami shrugged. “They won’t know it’s me. Especially since Sutherland has been cooperating. Why should he suspect us? If he notices it, he might just think it was a random security breach. And if I manage it, we could get this killer tonight, instead of waiting till tomorrow. By which time he might be targeting somebody else,” she added anxiously.

Connor thought some more. She could see he wasn't in love with the idea, but nor was he happy about the alternative. This killer was speeding up his interval, and waiting would give him a chance to kill again. These cases were going to attract a mountain of publicity and criticism for the FBI in not moving faster. These were safe, well-to-do neighborhoods that were being left shaken and traumatized by the crimes.

“Okay,” he agreed. “But be careful. I don't want this to go wrong or to backfire on us.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The boy was breathing hard. He was still trembling after the unexpected twist that had almost derailed his plans completely. At least he'd done the kill, he told himself. At least he'd done that. This banging on the door, that had sent his heart into the stratosphere, hadn't prevented him from finishing what was the most important, and delightful, part of his mission.

But otherwise, it had been disastrous. He hadn't been able to finish things off or tidy them up as he needed to. That control keypad, by the hallway. He hadn't dared to go back to it, not with somebody knocking at the door, not for the full thirty seconds of pressure on two alternate keys that it took to wipe the system completely.

Maybe they wouldn't notice, he told himself, but that idea brought scant comfort to his paranoid mind. He couldn't soothe himself with that possibility when he himself was such an overthinker, when he tried so hard to predict, and avoid, anything that could go wrong.

At least the escape route had been the one he'd already planned. It had been close to his lookout point in the backyard, from where he'd overridden the home's controls and watched her fear. The only mistake that he'd made had been to disable the stove.

He saw now that this was why she'd ordered the takeaways, so as not to risk having to go without a hot dinner again. He'd heard the man's faint voice, "Food delivery, ma'am," just as he'd fled through the house, out the back door, and sped along his getaway route.

No, he thought, pacing up and down the well-polished floor of the small cottage where he lived. He had to assume the worst. Hope for the best, but assume the worst. The worst case would be that they knew what he had done and that they were going to close in on him. Maybe not fast, but inexorably.

He'd have to flee the state – he'd worked on a plan for that a few months ago, a plan for an alternative identity. Those plans would need to be brought forward, and he could not delay.

In the meantime, there was another target that he thought he could reach. One more, at least, before it was time to run. This one, he'd seen in his research, activated the home controls late at night and in the early hours of the morning. She must work at a bar, or maybe the late shift at a clinic or hospital. He didn't know. He hadn't had time to follow her to work, although

he had crept around to watch her a few times at night, at times when her home was activated. She was a middle aged woman who didn't seem to have any husband in her life, but who had a boyfriend that had been there once when he'd been watching.

The presence of a boyfriend was a risk. It gave him pause, and his mind raced again, with nervousness and resolve and the deadly need to continue his work. No, he thought, satisfied with the logical evidence that his memory had provided. The boyfriend was only there on weekends. Not during the week. So there was no big danger that he would be there tonight. Now, all he had to do was get to her.

Get to her, and then do something to cause a disturbance, to raise her terror. Late at night, that would be easy, but he'd need to use caution, because too much noise might alert the neighbors.

A flickering bedroom light would work. If the house was quiet enough, the snap of the toaster popping up could provide a frightening sound. Hopefully, if he got there in time, she wouldn't be in bed yet and would still be moving around.

He thought he could do it. In fact, no. He knew he could do it. He could take one last victim. Revel in one last glorious moment of triumph, and then he could pack up and leave, put his plans into action, flee the state.

Nobody was going to deny Boy this last moment, he thought, clasping his hands tightly together, feeling the wiry strength in his fingers.

Nobody! Not the police, not some stupid delivery man knocking on the door to derail his plans. This woman might not have been his next choice – he was planning on saving the late-night owl for last – but since she was now the best choice, he was going to take the chance.

In any case, he was a clever man. He knew that. It was possible that in a different state, and under a new name, he could start again.

A fresh, intense delight thrilled through him at the thought, making his arms prickle and his hands feel clammy as he considered its vast reach. What potential lay ahead! He needed to stop thinking that this was almost over, because it wasn't.

He could map out a new life, and pinpoint new victims, and start a cycle all over again.

This might not be the end at all. It might just complete the first chapter of a deadly story.

“I'm coming for you,” Boy muttered, and now at last, the tension that had

filled him earlier began to abate. “I’m coming for you, and you’re going to have the night of your life. I’m going to give you a rollercoaster ride. Shock you, thrill you. And then, of course, you will die.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Sitting in the back office of the closest police station, Cami had gotten to work immediately. At this hour, although there was some activity in the lobby and down the corridor, the back office was hushed and quiet. She and Connor were there alone, under the bright overhead lights.

She located the Steadfast smart home company site. Now, how to get into a site that even the CEO had boasted was well secured? At this hour, there was no chance to use the human factor by sending an email or message with a tempting link. The CEO was on an airplane, and almost all the other staff would be asleep.

Did they have a twenty-four hour maintenance line? Cami looked, but although she found a few after hours emergency numbers, they all seemed to link up to people's cellphones. So, they had employees on duty who would keep their phones open and be ready to help if any customers needed it.

That meant attacking the systems and servers directly. It would work on the principles of an SQL attack, as it was called in security terms. SQL – or structured query language – would allow her to try to gain control of the database remotely. If she was able to do that, she could access the information inside, and if that happened, then they could see what was there, and who had left Steadfast last year.

She needed a way in, though. Lost in thought, Cami stared at her screen, her mind racing as she tried to figure out what the best angle of attack would be.

“I’m going to get us some food,” Connor said. “You need to eat.”

Cami looked up, surprised. It was late, and they hadn’t eaten all day. She suddenly realized she was hungry – and with any luck, some calories and energy would also provide brainpower.

“Thank you,” she said to Connor gratefully.

Remembering Kieran, who’d also be wondering where she was by now, she sent him a message, too.

*“Still at work. Hunting a criminal. Might be pulling an all-nighter here,”* she texted.

A couple of moments later, she got a quick *“Good night, stay safe, missing you,”* in return.

Then, Cami turned her mind to the problem at hand, puzzling over it,

turning it over and over in her mind, needing a way to get at least partially into the database so that she could find a route inside.

Cami tried a few possibilities, experimenting with various programs that she'd run. In a system this big and this complex, none of them were going to work fast. But if she could just find the right one to work well enough to allow the unique code to open up that online record, then she was confident she could get back in from there.

“There are always security loopholes. Always,” Cami said. It was just a case of finding them. There could be gaps in the defenses, or software that wasn't completely up to date.

And also, with a sense of excitement, she realized she might have a different way.

She now had the unique code of the home they'd just left, the one where the house sitter had been murdered.

Now, if she could use that in the online client login form, and inject some code to bypass the password requirement, she might have her gateway.

“Here you go,” Connor said, returning with two paper bags. “I got us chicken burgers and sodas.” The bags crackled as he set them down on the desk.

The smell was making Cami's mouth water, but she was far too intensely involved in her research to take her eyes off the screen for as much as a moment. What code would work? Her fingers flew, tweaking the program, adjusting the parameters, searching for that entry point that would allow her program to trickle in, and then spread itself around the system, capturing all the data she needed.

She didn't have it – she couldn't get it – and then, she did. She was in.

Letting out a huge breath of relief, Cami sat back in her chair, taking her eyes off the screen for the first time in what felt like eons. At last, she had a way into the system. The screen in front of her was still blank, but she could see from the progress graph on the side that it was populating fast. With any luck, they would soon have an accurate picture of the workings of Steadfast and be able to get into at least some of the records.

It would take five minutes. Cami reached for her burger, unwrapped it, and took a grateful bite.

“You got something?” Connor asked.

She nodded. “Yes. I managed to find a way in. So we can see their systems, but that's only the first challenge. We're going to have to keep it

very, very fast to avoid their security sweeps. And of course, we've got no idea how their records are organized, and how easy it will be to find it."

"Can Steadfast trace this security breach back to this police station? Or to us?" Connor asked, his frown deepening again as Cami checked the progress of her software.

"No. They won't be able to do that because I'm doing it through the dark web. They will be able to see which control console was used in the login, but that won't necessarily point back to us. Not when the killer has also, clearly, been accessing it himself." She took a deep breath. "And if we manage to solve the crime, of course, then it's a moot point. Then I'm sure they won't ask too many questions, and will just be very glad that their company's name won't be associated with any more murders."

Connor nodded. "So, first step is to get into the systems?"

"That's where I am now," Cami said. "I don't know how much I'll be able to see. But we just need to find that one technician. Just that person. It's not much, but it might be more difficult than it seems because of the security sweeps. If they detect me there, then they are going to shut down everything and revert to backup. That will mean I can't see anything anymore. So, I'm going to have to keep my full focus on this. It'll be like crossing a floor while there's a moving searchlight in operation. I'll need to keep clear of the beam as it sweeps by."

She took one more giant bite of burger and a huge gulp of soda.

And then, Cami turned all her attention to the screen in front of her, ready for the start of the process.

"Right," she said, through tight lips, as the screen populated. She gazed at it intensely, taking it in, trying to figure out where the best place to move would be.

"Records," she said to herself, navigating there.

The place was a complex minefield. Sutherland had said that his security was top-notch, but Cami wished he'd paid the same attention to keeping a tidy set of records. These were all over the place. They were in higgledy-piggledy order according to date, state, and also activation of the home – if they were an upcoming, current, or ex-client.

She breathed for a moment, taking it all in. It was a hot mess, but no more so than some of the coding she'd had to help students with when she did her coaching sessions.

Date was the most important parameter. She needed to get back to that



time six months ago when that record had been accessed. Then, once she was back in time, she could start to search for that particular area and for that client's name and address.

Linda Caddy, of Ridge Road. That was who she was searching for.

“Where are you, Linda? Where are you?” she muttered to herself, fingers flying, remembering to glance at the alert she’d set in the top right hand side of the screen which would hopefully give her a few moments’ warning of a security sweep. “Come on, Linda, help us here.”

Here! She’d got into the right group of records, more by fumbling luck than by change, because it was in the wrong order. And then she hissed in a breath, quickly exiting the entire system again as the security sweep flashed onto the screen.

She lay low for twenty seconds. Thirty. Only then did she think it was safe to go back in, and to retrace her steps. Thankfully, it was a little easier this time around. There was the set of records she needed, there was the one she wanted. She clicked on it, glancing at the user details and then going quickly back into the history.

The machine hung, and she dug her nails into her palms, worry filling her. Was it going to kick her out? Was there another layer of security in place here?

No, there wasn’t. She was in and through. And here was the exact date of the unique number access. In black and white on her screen.

Cami stared at it in astonishment. This wasn’t what she had expected at all. And the fact weighed heavy on her shoulders now that Sutherland must have lied. He hadn’t told the truth to them at all. She had no idea why that was.

“Look here, Connor,” she said, in a soft, perplexed voice. “I’ve got it. But what it’s showing is impossible.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

"Impossible? Why?" Cami scooted aside as Connor moved to stare at the screen. She glanced at the box on the top right-hand side, feeling worried because time was running out. It would soon be time for another security sweep, and she'd have to take evasive action once more.

"Because this code was changed by – look here – this person." Cami raised a finger and pointed at the screen. "And this person has an employee code. They are still working for Steadfast."

Connor drew in a sharp breath. "You sure about that?"

"Yes. I'm sure. But I'm not sure why Sutherland didn't tell us." Quickly, Cami got out her phone and photographed the employee code, just in case the next security sweep changed the parameters and they couldn't get back in.

"So somebody employed at Steadfast logged in and changed a bunch of codes in the Boston area? And they weren't on Sutherland's list?" Connor sounded as incredulous as she felt. "Why would Sutherland not have told us that?"

"I'm going to have to get out of here," Cami said. "These security sweeps are coming way too frequently, and I can't predict them." Hastily, she exited. Now she wasn't in the main records, but she was still within the system itself. It could still catch her. Just not so easily. But no way was she ready to leave, not when she had discovered this much, but still had no idea why it could have happened.

"Maybe it was a remote employee," Connor said. "He accessed these systems, changed the code, and then he took leave from work and he came here to do the killings."

"Maybe it was," Cami said, but she felt doubtful. The way these murders had been done, the way this killer had been able to disappear, it felt to her as if he was familiar with the area, or else, had spent a long time here doing his homework.

"We can check that," she stated. Now, keeping an eye on that ticking clock of the security sweep, she went back in the system again. This time, in a different direction. She was going to see if she could access the personnel records. She needed to know who that employee number belonged to.

That random row of numbers belonged to the killer. Cami knew it had to.

"Where can I find it? Oops!" Teeth gritted, she beat a hasty retreat. These

security sweeps were coming more frequently, and she had a nasty feeling that they were doing so for a reason. Perhaps any activity within the system, outside of normal working hours, triggered them. And if that was the case then the whole system might lock itself just now, as a precaution, if the activity continued.

“I’m going back in now,” she said. “Employee records. Here you are.” She sighed. “Of course, they are organized by alphabetical name. I can’t reconfigure that. We’re going to have to go into each record to see the number.”

“If you’re ready, I’m ready,” Connor said, staring at the screen. “I’ll be your second pair of eyes. Together, I’m sure we can work almost as fast as you can type.”

“Ready?” Cami knew that her job was to move the mouse, access the records, and get in and out as fast as possible while checking the security. She didn’t even have to look for the number. Connor would do that, while she worked on the logistics.

She started. First name. Second one. Third. She worked like clockwork, in and out, relying on Connor’s eyes to pick up the number as it flashed onto the screen and see if it was the one they were looking for.

She reached ten. Working in a rhythm. It was becoming easier, but then they had to escape the system twice because of the security sweeps. They were definitely coming faster. She reached fifteen, then twenty. Then twenty-two and then twenty-four.

They’d just accessed every single one of the technicians, and that number didn’t belong to anybody working here. It was impossible!

Cami felt as if this situation had landed them in a nightmare. Frustration seethed inside her, momentarily paralyzing, before she realized the obvious solution.

“He’s not a current employee and he’s not an ex-employee either, Connor. But there’s a third category. Look here. It’s a very short list. Employees from last year who’ve gone AWOL, or who are on compassionate leave, or who have taken long leave. That’s why Sutherland didn’t think to include them. Because they haven’t had access to the systems for a while, and although they’re not ex-employees, they’re not active.”

“There!” Connor shouted, and Cami grabbed her phone, quickly photographing the screen, so that they had every detail of this employee record. Triumph filled her as she saw what she’d captured. This employee

was named Miles Ferguson. He was twenty-nine years old. And he lived in Boston.

He'd gone on extended long leave after a family tragedy in September last year and had still not returned to work. That was convenient, Cami thought.

Because of that, Sutherland had clearly not even thought to mention him. His focus, and theirs, had all been on the current employees, the ones that they had thought would be able to log into the records and access them in real time. It had been a stroke of luck that they'd found out about this six month window, and that it had allowed them to pinpoint this man, who'd flown all the way under the radar.

Now, they had the ex-employee's name at last. But they needed more.

"Connor, there's one last thing we need to do," Cami said. She didn't know if she'd have the time for it. These security sweeps were now occurring on an almost continual basis. She had the feeling there was probably some kind of code or protocol that could stop them, and if this was not followed, they would intensify and the system would end up freezing.

"What's that?" he asked.

"We need to find out which other people could be targeted," Cami said urgently.

Connor nodded. "You mean, who else had their override code changed? Who else he's got on his list?"

"Exactly," Cami said.

"I'll see if there's a police car anywhere near his house in the meantime," Connor said grimly. "We can't waste time. We have to get this man. He lives ten miles away. If there's a car in the area, they might be able to get there quicker than we can. But it's an out-of-town address." He sounded doubtful. "I don't see any police stations closer than this one."

While Connor made his urgent calls, Cami searched through the online system, looking for the information that might help them to identify his next victim.

There had to be a way of finding his activity. That way, if he wasn't at home or they had to hunt for him, they could warn the remaining people whose records he'd accessed.

Cami had no idea how many of them there would be. He could already have finished his killing spree, or it might just have begun. But they had to try to look.

"Where can I go? Daily activity log. That's the one we need."

But when she clicked on that, Cami saw this was going to be a difficult job. The software didn't differentiate. Every single transaction from every single technician was logged in chronological order, from minor repairs to testing to updates. It was a jumbled and chaotic system. She guessed it could be fine-tuned and sorted through, but she was just as sure that doing so would create an alert and shut the system down.

She would have to go back manually and look at the activity from that date, and near that date, done by that employee number.

Cami raced back, scrolling through the months, gritting her teeth at the slowness of the system. She was getting there. She was there! There was the first access point. There was the home they'd just been to, on Ridge Road.

Was she going to be able to see any other transactions?

She hoped so, but as she tried to scroll back further, the screen froze.

The security shutdown she had expected was now in progress. The system had frozen and would probably automatically reboot after a while. Maybe half an hour later for a thorough check to be done.

Despite all her efforts, she felt she'd failed. She couldn't warn anyone else he might be planning to target. Now, the only option was to find the killer himself.

"There are no available police cars in the area, Cami. We need to get to Miles Ferguson's house ourselves. Now," Connor said, and Cami jumped to her feet. The race was on – and she prayed they'd be in time to prevent another kill.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

No police nearby – it was them, or nothing. That reality weighed on Cami’s mind as Connor raced through the streets, now dark and empty. It was nearly midnight and heading out of town, through suburban quietness, to the countryside, it seemed that most of Boston was already asleep.

But Cami felt a cold fear that the killer wouldn’t be sleeping.

Although she didn’t want to share her thoughts with Connor, that control panel kept on nagging at her mind.

The killer hadn’t reset it, he hadn’t had the chance. That had been an important step for every one of his kills so far. He must know that this step hadn’t been done and that it could result in his undoing. If he knew he didn’t have time left, then somebody like this would move faster.

That was why she’d been so anxious to access the other records.

Because Cami was very, very scared that he was going to speed up his killing interval now, trying to take as many victims as he could in his efforts to outrun the police. He was clever and careful, and the mistake he’d made had been due to a coincidence that he couldn’t have planned for. Lucky for them, but unlucky for him.

But it was going to motivate him to do even more, even faster, than he might have been intending to do.

As he drove, Connor was on the phone and on the radio.

"I'm trying to cover all eventualities here," he said to Cami, in between his communications. "Yes," he said to the man in his office. "I want a phone track for the number on the screenshot I sent. And I need any other updated details for Miles Ferguson that you can find."

The time couldn't pass fast enough for Cami. Connor's car sped along tree-lined roads, through a tiny suburban shopping center, past a school and a church, and then they were heading out of town, with darkened fields on either side of them and only a glimmer of lights from the small, scattered dwellings beyond.

The phone rang again, and Connor grabbed it up.

“The details you have given me are the same ones on my system,” his assistant replied. Cami bit her lip. That meant that if they were wrong, there was no other address for them to try. But hopefully, they were right.

The pin drop was getting closer and closer, and in another minute, Connor

swung the car into the driveway. The place looked dark and quiet. Cami crossed her fingers tightly as the car jolted to a stop, and the headlights flashed onto the simple, single-story home with white-plastered walls and a neatly tiled roof.

Connor didn't hesitate. He jumped out of the car and raced up to the house, hammering hard on the door. Beside him, Cami tensed as she saw a light flicker on.

There was a pause, punctuated by the rapid beating of her heart.

Then footsteps, fast and urgent, pounded to the door and it was wrenched open.

"What in the name of hell is going on?" the man who appeared in the doorway declared dramatically. "What is it? Is there a fire somewhere? Accident?"

He looked to have been jerked from sleep – disoriented, with wide eyes and tousled hair and wearing blue pajamas with a faint gray stripe. And he was most definitely not Miles Ferguson, Cami saw to her consternation. He was at least twenty years older.

"FBI," Connor replied, showing his ID. "We're looking for Miles Ferguson. This is his last recorded address."

The confusion in the man's eyes caused Cami's stomach to clench.

"Miles Ferguson?"

He didn't know who he was. This was a disaster. It was going to mean a dead end and a delay that might take days or weeks – or longer – to solve. But then, as Connor spoke, Cami realized he'd picked up on a small but important intonation.

When this sleepy man had repeated Connor's words, he'd emphasized the first name. *Miles* Ferguson?

As if maybe the name Ferguson did ring a bell.

"Do you know of anyone by that name?" Connor asked. "Is the last name familiar to you?"

"It is. It is. That was this home's old owner. Mr. Ferguson. But he was killed months ago."

Killed? Shivers cascaded down Cami's spine. This was getting more complex, more scary than she'd thought.

"Tell me about Mr. Ferguson?" Connor asked, in an easy voice, as if he had all the time in the world for this late night conversation. Stressful as the situation was, Cami knew that this approach would help this man to regroup

faster after his shock awakening. No point in piling on the pressure and causing him to panic.

Well, he was panicking slightly, as you would after a bang on your door when you were fast asleep, but Cami could see that he was calming down now. He was nodding his head thoughtfully.

“We got the house after he died. He’d been renting it, but he was killed in a random robbery when he was getting home. Bashed over the head, and never woke up. Then it was sold, and my wife and I bought it. We reckoned it wasn’t random,” he said. “The guy carried cash around on him all the time, and he worked at a pawnbroker. So somebody must have thought he had something valuable, and followed him.

Perhaps, Cami thought. And perhaps not. He could have been killed for another reason. People might just have assumed otherwise.

“Did he have any family?” Connor asked carefully.

“Yes, I believe his son also lived here,” the wild-haired man explained. “But I never met him. He moved out a month or two before the old man died, and I don’t think they were on such good terms.”

“You know where the son went?” Connor answered. Now, Cami felt as if her mind was fracturing with anxiety. This was such an important question. Would this man know?

“I’ve no idea,” he said apologetically.

“You sure?” Connor wasn’t giving up. “Sometimes, people hear things and don’t realize it at the time. If you think back – take your time – maybe you might remember some mention of him. We can wait,” he said, in a voice that Cami would never have connected with such a serious case. Connor sounded so encouraging. It was amazing how he did it. And now, this pajamaed man was looking thoughtful.

“My wife!” he said. “She might know. I gotta go wake her though. She’s a sound sleeper.”

“Please, apologize on our behalf,” Connor said. “We do need to find him tonight, or we’d come back.”

Now actually looking keen and motivated to help the kind FBI agent on his doorstep, the man hurried away. Cami shook her head, a tiny movement. She felt a sense of amazement that Connor was just so very good at what he did. Who else could jog the memory of a man woken from sleep, and answering the door in his pajamas? It was a serious skill.

There were hushed voices coming from down the corridor now. One



irritable, one persuasive. Cami strained her ears. Please let this have a good outcome, she thought. Please. Because there was no other option. It gave her a sense of intense anxiety to think that all their hopes might rest on what this couple could remember about the old tenant here, who'd been so strangely murdered.

Footsteps returned, and she held her breath.

"Well," the wild-haired man said, "it seems that when the son moved out, he didn't go far. My wife, who usually knows what's going on in these parts, says that he went just down the road. There's a farm called Valley Rest. And that's where he's staying, in the cottage there."

"I appreciate that," Connor said.

Valley Rest. He'd moved after the death of his father. And now, they could find him.

Connor thanked the man. He turned away. And as soon as the front door closed, he broke into a run.

He got on his phone at the same time. "Valley Rest. I need coordinates, fast."

They leaped into the car, and Connor started driving in the direction that the wild-haired man had indicated. The coordinates beeped into his phone a moment later. Valley Rest Farm wasn't far. After just a couple of minutes, the signboard came into view.

Cami clenched her hands into fists as Connor blasted his way down the drive.

The farm itself was very much like the rest of the rural scene. Muddy, overgrown, a little rundown, and waiting for spring.

But the cottage, set about a hundred yards away, was not.

It was scrupulously neat. The grass was trimmed. The lights were on, and Cami could see an enormous signal booster jutting from the roof.

This was where they needed to be. Where they would find their killer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

As she and Connor climbed out of the car and sprinted toward the house, Cami felt nervous and terrified and determined all at once. Please, let him be home, she begged inwardly. Let him be home.

Connor did the same as he'd done earlier. He strode up to the front door and knocked hard. Cami waited, knowing instinctively that their welcome would not be as quick or as helpful as it had been at the farmhouse earlier.

The house was silent. Nobody was home. While Connor paced around the farmhouse, looking through windows, Cami reached for her phone. This man had a massive booster aerial on his roof. Would his wifi be accessible, and if so, could she pick up anything from it?

Connor's shoes scrunched on the neatly swept paving as he returned to the front door.

"No sign of him," he said. Cami bit her lip, staring down at her phone.

"I'm seeing if I can log into his wifi," she said. "Connor, I have a bad feeling about this." Time to spill her fears. She might as well get them out while her program was trying hard to break into Miles Ferguson's wifi. "I think that he meant to reprogram that control keypad at the last house, and because he didn't manage to do it, he's planning on killing again more quickly."

"Yes," Connor said. "That's been on my mind, too. I'm also very worried about it. What's your program telling you?"

Cami checked. And she caught her breath. If there was ever a time she had needed some luck and some speed, it was now. Her program had found a way through.

"I'm in," she said, hearing the amazement in her own voice. "Connor, I'm in!"

"What can you find?"

"I'm looking. There's a laptop still hooked up. He must have left it online. I think he's been rushing now and making mistakes."

She knew she was babbling in her excitement and hope, trying to fill the silence as her program accessed what was on that machine.

"Okay. He has a couple of random apps open," she said, sifting through the trash on the machine, which was a little messier than his front yard, to find what she needed to. "And he has a maps app. I think he's been

researching his next victim. I can't see anything on it, though!"

The app was blank. Cami stared at it. What was going on? Had he cleared it? Had he been so careful that he'd erased his tracks? Surely she couldn't stumble now that she was so close. There must be a way through, a way to see what he'd been doing. There must!

"Wait! I know! I'm going to go back through his history. He's cleared the map itself, but maybe he didn't clear his history. Maybe if I go back, I can see what he's been doing."

Gazing down at her phone, Cami pressed the back button. And just as Connor kept a brisk, friendly, upbeat demeanor when dealing with his witnesses and anyone he needed information from, Cami found herself doing exactly the same with her own phone. Relaxed, positive, sending it out the good vibes, encouraging that search history to peek out from wherever it was and let her take a look.

There it was. She caught her breath. She could see exactly where he'd been now. He'd been tracing routes, and looking at them, she saw that they formed a series of concentric semi circles. And if she looked at where all those rough semi-circles started and ended...

Focusing furiously, concentrating on the start points and end points, and getting a sense of what he had looked for, Cami narrowed it down. Closer, closer. It was this block, this half of the block. He'd mapped a route from behind here, too. If she took that into account, then it meant – it meant this house. It could only be this one.

"Connor!" she said. "I've got it."

"How accurately? Where is it?" he asked urgently, taking his own phone out.

"It's number four Rockpool Avenue."

But as she spoke the words, checking the map once more, she realized the futility of their mission. This house was at least twenty minutes' drive away. He had a twenty minute lead on them, minimum. Most probably, he was much further ahead. If she was going to save this woman's life, then she had to think of something else. Just running there blindly would not be enough.

"What about the code?" she said aloud.

"Cami, we need to go." Connor's voice was urgent.

"Wait," she said. "Connor, wait. I just need to see if I can get this smart home's access code. Because we can't do much, but if we can find it, we might be able to intervene."

Shifting from foot to foot, stressed and impatient and feeling as if every decision now would be the wrong one, Cami checked through the records, searching the machine as fast as she could.

There was something here. A file that seemed like it didn't belong.

"It might be this!" she said. "Let me check."

"We have to go!" Connor's voice was sharp.

"Okay, I'm in!" Cami turned away, clutching her phone and rushing back to the car. "I'm in, and I've got the code. Whatever he's doing now, in that house – we can try to do something to counter it."

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Sylvia Edgecombe had had a long day, and she was tired. Working the late shift at her veterinary clinic was more of a calling than a job, but it was exhausting when things ran over time, which they almost always did.

Who could ever turn away a traumatized owner who arrived as she was locking up the door, with a sick animal, or a stray cat found, or an injured dog? Not her. Her soft heart and her willingness to help were why the clinic that she co-owned had such a good reputation and was loved by all the neighborhood.

It was also the reason why she seldom, if ever, got home on time. She was half an hour late tonight, which wasn't bad for her, and at least it had meant that the stray cat, cold and hungry, now had a warm cage to sleep in for the night and a square meal inside her. Maybe she'd take her in, if nobody claimed her. Sylvia had a special love for calicos. They were one of her favorites.

She pulled up in the driveway and activated the garage door. She waited, tried again, gave an annoyed sigh. She had gotten this automation installed just so that she could come home on a cold night and drive straight into the warmth and safety of her garage. Now it wasn't working?

Annoyed, shivering in the cold, she got out, rushed to the door, hauled it up manually, climbed back in her car and drove in. After getting the door down again, she headed into the house, automatically turning on the lights as she reached the passage that led to the kitchen. Late as it was, she was starved, and wanted to fix herself a quick, late dinner.

But as she reached the kitchen, the lights flickered again. On, off, on again. She froze. What was happening? Was there a loose connection? This had never happened before. The electronics usually worked perfectly in this cozy, double-story home.

She rummaged in her purse, took out her phone, activated the flashlight and set it on the counter. At least now, she'd have some light.

As she opened the refrigerator, looking at the sparse but healthy options of salads, luncheon meats and diet sodas that were stacked in there, her heart nearly stopped.

From behind her came a blare of static. It was the television. It had turned itself on – not just on, but up. It was blaring at full volume, and the shock of

the noise had scared her half to death. What was going on in this house tonight? It was really disturbing. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought there was a poltergeist or something on the loose.

She didn't believe in ghosts or spirits, but right now, she thought she might just be open to changing her mind.

Trembling, now feeling unnerved and wishing she didn't live alone or that she at least had a pet with her – her two elderly dogs had both reached the end of their lives a month ago and she hadn't felt ready to replace the beloved pets yet – she switched the television off.

“Behave yourself now,” she told it sternly, but hearing the wobble in her voice. These electrics were seriously all over the place. Despite a crazy busy day tomorrow at the clinic, she was going to have to find the time to contact the smart home system provider – she had bought the house a year ago with the infrastructure in place, and had simply transferred everything over to a new account, so she wasn't even sure now who to get hold of. At any rate, she'd have to look it up and find them and see if they could fix things.

And then, she froze as the lights flickered again. Her gaze swung to the big plate glass window, appalled. She'd just realized that the living room blinds were up. She'd closed them before she left. She always closed them. Never, ever, did she like pottering around in a room that overlooked the street, with people watching. She had a thing about her privacy.

This was more than just malfunctioning. She felt sure of it. This was – it was like somebody was targeting her.

Don't mess around, Sylvia screamed inwardly. Don't mess around. Take action!

And yet, as she shut off the television, there was a part of her mind that was refusing to accept this was true, that it couldn't possibly be so bad. That she was being a hysterical woman who was having a panic attack just because a couple of things were going awry with her home's control system. She'd never wanted to be that person. She should just go to the keypad, calmly reset the system, and see if it worked.

But then, she heard a click. It was a click she knew well. One of the things she was blessed with was exceptionally good hearing. She needed spectacles to read, but her ears were like a bat's, as they always joked at the clinic.

She knew that click, she knew what it meant. There was absolutely no doubt in her mind what that sound was.

It was the front door, separating from its lock, and opening, the exact way

it had done a few minutes earlier when she walked inside.

Terror rushed through her, so powerful that it felt paralyzing. It was exactly as if she'd been caught in a pair of headlights, feeling trapped, as if the inevitable was going to happen and there was nothing she could do but freeze.

Then, again, her brain clamored for her attention, wrenching her out of her paralysis.

“You’ve been through training on what to do if there’s an armed robbery at the clinic, if people break in to try to steal money or veterinary drugs while you’re there. Remember your protocol! Grab your phone. Scream for help. And get to safety.”

Grabbing her phone was impossible because it was doing duty as a flashlight in the kitchen. Screaming was possible, theoretically, but as she let out the cry, she was horrified by how weak and thready it was. And already, she was running. She was flying across the living room, knowing she had to get past the hallway and up the stairs, to the home's second floor, to be able to lock herself in, and barricade the door, and lean out of a window, and scream and scream.

But the door was already swinging wide, and there was no time to get upstairs. A figure was silhouetted in the doorway, dark and threatening, moving toward her with a speedy and ferocious intent.

“He’s done this before!” she thought, and her mind veered back to those murders she’d heard about, mentioned by clients at the clinic, in different parts of town. He was not here to rob, he was here to kill. And there was no way she was going to make it upstairs. Only one place she could go, and that was the tiny guest cloakroom at the foot of the stairs.

She wrenched the door open, leaped in, twisted around, slammed it, and with hands shaking so badly that the latch and key were rattling, she managed to turn the key.

It wouldn’t help her for long, that she knew. This door was flimsy. With her heart accelerating, she realized she was in the worst possible place to scream. Hidden away under the stairs, with only an extractor fan in lieu of a window, this little room was practically soundproofed. Nobody would hear her.

A moment later, he crashed against the door, so hard it shook, and now, she did scream, a high, terrified yell, giving it everything she had, as loud as she could.

He laughed. As she drew breath to scream again, she heard it. It was a low, breathy sound, and she had never heard anything so evil in all her life.

"You're mine now," he whispered. "I'm coming in to get you. I'm going to break this door down, and you're not going to stop me. Scream all you like. I love the sound." His breathy giggle was the scariest thing she'd ever heard. "I love it," he said.

"You're not going to get me," she said. Her voice was high and terrified, and there wasn't a trace of defiance audible in the words. But she was going to fight for as long as she could. Even though she knew it was futile, she braced her legs against the toilet base and her shoulders against the door, feeling the impact crash through her body as he tackled the door again.

It splintered, and in horror, she realized that the flimsy door was literally going to split in two if he continued his assault on it.

She let out another scream, loud, shrill, praying that somehow, somebody could hear.

Another crash saw a fist-sized hole appear in the door. He could get through it, she thought, terror now surging again. He could get through it, and one more blow like that would mean he would.

And then, abruptly, the lights went out.

The only thing she could hear was her own ragged breathing and his on the other side of the shattering door.

She didn't know how it had happened or how he could have done it right then. But now, the house was plunged into utter darkness.



## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

This was a breakneck ride. Cami braced herself against the car's door as Connor flew around a bend, siren blaring, tires wailing. They were heading for the house where she knew the killer was at work.

Other police were on their way too, converging from other areas, in response to Connor's urgent pleas over the radio. But he was there now, Cami knew it. If this woman was not already dead, he was going to be commandeering her smart home, taking over its functionality, creating a terrifying scenario that would disorient her – and then, letting himself in for the final deed.

“No,” Cami muttered.

She had the code. Surely there was something she could do to stop him? She could control the smart home just the same as he could, with that master code. Cami managed, bracing herself even more firmly against the seat, to get the code in.

Now she had to ping the code, and that would set up a communication gateway via the app. Cami did it. It took a long moment, and then she was there. Now, what could she find? She hung onto her phone, trying to keep it steady as Connor whipped around another corner.

No internal cameras in the home, so she couldn't get a look at what was happening inside. But, taking a look at the controls, she saw with a sick feeling that the front door was open. He was in. This could take seconds to play out.

What could she do?

Disorient him, just the same way he's doing with her, she thought. Get him off balance, make it harder for him, do whatever you can to make him hesitate.

She snapped off all the lights, hoping it was the right decision, that it would slow him down and not harm her. Without being there, she didn't know what would be the best – but she had to do something.

What else? What could distract him? The television she knew he'd already done, but she stabbed her finger down on it again. Let it blare out, let him think someone else was already here.

Sprinklers? Fire sprinklers?

She activated those as well. Make the house scary for him, make him

believe someone else is inside. The words ran through Cami's mind like a mantra. That was her only hope. Slow him down. Mess with his mind.

She flashed the lights off and on again. Off and on, then off. If a neighbor saw this disco show, then so much the better. Anyone arriving at the doorstep now would be good.

Then they were swerving into the road where she lived, veering along it, racing to the house. Headlights blazed in the opposite direction. Another car was arriving. Police were on the scene. Cami couldn't even breathe, she felt so tense, and she was begging to herself again and again, Please, let us not be too late.

Connor slammed on brakes, jumped out of the car, and raced for the house.

"Stay there!" he shouted to Cami.

She watched him power up the path to the front door, closely followed by one of the cops. As he got there, she turned the lights on, the sprinklers off. No way could she stay in the car. She walked tentatively toward the house. Was that a scream coming from inside?

Still holding her phone, Cami walked around the house, staring at the windows, trying to see what was happening. There were cops in the living room, milling around downstairs. She couldn't see Connor. Where was the killer?

Cami was feeling edgy about this. This man was so sneaky, and when he didn't prepare well, he still thought on his feet. She didn't think he was out of options. She might be in the way inside, and more of a liability than a help, but outside, she could surely provide another set of eyes?

Cami walked around the house, staring anxiously at the windows.

And then, she froze, staring up.

One of the upper windows was opening. It was a sash window on the side of the house, facing the neighbor's garage opposite, and with a walkway in between. Now, she could see the bottom half rising, and a dark figure beyond. He was making his getaway from upstairs, and was going to scramble out! He was going to shimmy down the drainpipe and disappear along the paved path leading behind the house, and he was going to be gone, disappearing into the forested hills that formed the backdrop to these elegant houses.

The stealth with which he was moving left Cami in no doubt that he had a plan of action and he was executing it. If he escaped the police now, what if

they didn't catch him again? She had no idea what car he drove or where it was right now. There was still a lot they didn't know about him, and a lot of chances for him to become invisible.

What could she do?

She couldn't call the police. They were all around the front. She was sure in a few moments they'd storm upstairs to search for him, but by then, he'd be gone.

Upstairs window? Had she seen that on the console?

Could she shut him in?

Cami's attention whipped back to her phone screen. There was something there. Upstairs Blinds – and then yes. Upstairs Window. The home was automated in that regard.

She stabbed the button as hard as she could, anxiety flaring, but it was too late. He had his leg over the sill, and he was already moving his foot to rest on the drainpipe.

Upstairs lights? She had to delay him.

Cami snapped off the light, throwing the upper level abruptly into darkness.

And he hesitated – for long enough that the window lowered further. It lowered onto him.

Cami wished it would crush him in two, but knew that the automated safety sensors would prevent that happening. However, now, the climb out was more difficult. He was thrashing around, trying to get through the smaller gap, trying to squeeze his body through it. Now, he was the one who was panicking, and he was the one who was realizing that the home was being operated in ways beyond his control.

Nice feeling, Cami thought, narrowing her eyes grimly as she watched his struggles. She had an idea that might just work.

As Miles Ferguson fought the window, heaving against it with all his strength, Cami raised it abruptly. It was all she could do, her only remaining chance to jolt him.

If she'd timed it right, then it might just work.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

The window jerked upward, more suddenly and awkwardly than Cami had expected it to. Maybe that was because he'd damaged it, she thought. At any rate, with surprising speed, the sash window rose.

With nothing to push against, committed to the path he'd taken, the killer overbalanced. He'd been struggling too hard to save himself from the sudden lurch of the window, and now, she saw his weight tip too far out. He scrabbled with his hands, grabbing for the top of that window, trying desperately to grasp at something to get himself back inside, but it was too late.

His weight toppled him out and she watched him give one last, desperate grasp, crying out hoarsely, but his fingers closed on nothing but thin air. His limbs windmilled as he fell, tumbling down the sheer wall to land on the bricks below with an audible thump.

He lay still. Twitching, but still.

"Help!" Now, Cami saw that police were in the upstairs room. She yelled out, pointing, needing them to come and handcuff this man before he woke up enough to get going.

"On our way!" the voice from above called back.

Cami wasn't going to risk it. She ran over to the man, who was lying face down and groaning. She grabbed hold of his arm, holding him tight, clamping her fingers around the wrist of this evil man, who'd done so much harm.

He tried to pull away, but feebly, as if he was still stunned. Gritting her teeth, she held on. She held on until she heard footsteps racing around the corner, and two police officers arrived.

Only when the police were by the killer's side, did Cami dare to let go. She stepped away, breathing hard.

"You're going straight to a guarded hospital bed," the cop told the killer, who was groaning violently. He must have broken something in the fall. As they radioed for an ambulance to take him in, Cami felt a huge sense of relief. He was finally in the hands of the police – but what about his victim?

Taking a deep breath, she ran back to the front door. Now that the killer was in police custody, Cami couldn't see why she had to stay out any longer. She needed to know if this woman was alright, even though she didn't want to know, based on the killer's deadly speed.

But an amazing sight awaited her.

The woman – still dressed in her work clothes, looking pale and stressed, but unhurt, was being led by Connor across the soaked carpet of her living room, toward the equally flooded kitchen.

“Here’s your phone, Ms. Edgcombe,” he said. “Flashlight’s still on, so it’s in working order.”

At that moment, he turned around and saw Cami.

“I sent the police upstairs, and just heard they arrested him outside. That was up to you, wasn’t it? You delayed him?”

“Between the window and I, we conspired to help him fall out,” Cami admitted, and saw a satisfied look replace the shock in the woman’s eyes.

“Good work,” he said. And then, to the woman, “This is Cami Lark. She’s the one who interfered with your home’s electronics and delayed him.”

“It saved my life,” she said, grabbing her phone and then turning to Cami with an expression of deepest gratitude. “He was about to break the door down. When the lights went off and the sprinklers went on, he panicked. He ran back to the control panel to try and reset everything, but he couldn’t do it, and then, I heard the sirens outside.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay, and I’m sorry about the house,” Cami said, realizing that she’d moved from squelchy carpet to drenched tiles.

“It’ll be easy to fix,” the woman said. Though shocked, Cami could see she had a core of steel and was regrouping fast. She would be okay. She was safe, and a dangerous killer was in custody.

“We’re going to get you to a hotel for the night,” Connor said. “We’ll be here another couple of hours, and then we’ll station a police guard here until you can get the insurance company in to inspect it tomorrow.”

Cami headed back to the car, deciding to keep out of the way and write her own statement of events, while Connor wrapped up the case.

It wasn’t all finished, though. Despite the case being solved, there were still things she needed to discuss with Connor. Important, urgent matters. The case might have delayed these issues, but it didn’t make them any less serious. Or deadly.

There were no more excuses for Connor to avoid telling her what she had to know. And as soon as he’d wrapped up the paperwork, she was going to ask him about Bill Oertel.

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They were done faster than Cami would have expected.

Within an hour, local police had taken over the processing of the scene, and Connor had wrapped up some of the admin on the case. As he climbed into the car, she knew it was time. Now, she had to ask him what was happening. She needed to know.

She was filled with exhaustion, the adrenaline from the case having ebbed away. Her brain felt as if it had worked in overdrive all day and was now checking out, leaving her drained, and without the mental agility that she would have wanted and knew she needed for such a conversation.

Groping for the words she needed, she wondered how to broach the subject at last, and how to drill through his defenses if he refused to tell her.

But as Connor closed the car door, he turned to her.

"It's been a long day," he said. "I should have spoken to you about this before now. I guess I was hoping for developments, and more clarity, and some good news. But there isn't – yet. So, Cami, I need to tell you about Bill Oertel."

The name sent a shockwave through her. She tried her best not to show how it jolted her.

"Yes," she said, her voice husky. "I know. We do need to talk about him."

Connor sighed, cranking up the heater, dispelling some of the early morning cold that was making her shiver. It was two a.m., she saw.

"He's missing. He's AWOL. There's a hunt out for him. He's not at home, phone's not on. All his devices are missing, too, or we wouldn't have hesitated to see if you could track them. But he's incommunicado, completely. We don't know if he's skipped the country somehow or if he's laying low."

Cami swallowed. This was sounding much more serious than she'd thought.

"What will happen if he's found?" she asked. Then she corrected herself hastily. "When he's found, I mean?"

"When he's found, he's going straight to jail. You're going to be a key witness in all of this. Kieran, too. We're going to get a solid case against him, and we're hopefully going to be able to get the names of the others that he was in league with."

"Do you know –" Her voice sounded even smaller now. "Do you know what he did?"

Connor's lips tightened. Cami could see he knew, and she could also see that he didn't want to tell her. That telling her was going to be hard.

"Trafficking," he said. "That's what we've surmised from the faint trails we've found so far. Young women, mostly. High end, taken on demand, to order. A very sophisticated network. In the country and out of it. Unfortunately, the maximum lifespan of the women seems to be four or five years. They – they are disposed of after that time."

Disposed of. That meant killed. Cami felt tears flooding her eyes. She didn't want to cry in front of Connor. That was showing weakness, and she wanted to show him she was strong. But this was so sad, and so unfair, and she was so tired, that she couldn't stop her eyes from overflowing as the news hit.

Jenna had been gone six years. Her lifespan was over. Finished.

He sighed. "I wish it was better news, Cami. It's hit all of us hard. And I know for you, with your sister having been missing – this must be unbearable for you. The most we can do is to make Oertel and the others pay the full price. The maximum penalty for the suffering they've caused."

A thought occurred to Cami, penetrating her grief. "Connor, I've barely said anything about Bill Oertel. How do you know so much about this already, and so many details?"

He paused before replying, and his voice sounded as hard as she'd ever heard it.

"Because Bill Oertel was in charge of the top secret unit that was supposed to be investigating this, Cami. He's been in charge for seven years. For seven years, we're guessing, he's been corruptly involved. And in that time he's fabricated the odd arrest, he's tossed us some scraps, but the network has grown. The tentacles have spread. He wasn't there to destroy it at all. He was there to expand it."

Cami couldn't speak for a while. She felt suffocated by horror. Connor didn't say a word but just sat quietly, letting her take in the bombshell.

"So – does he know who I am?" she asked.

Connor nodded.

No wonder the FBI had posted guards already, Cami thought with a shiver, thinking of the building's dark lobby, and how quiet it was late at night, with nobody around. And the flimsiness of the front door, which Kieran had wanted to upgrade with a deadbolt and a thick security chain. But he hadn't done it yet.

“I won’t soft-soap this,” Connor said. “It’s a dangerous, volatile situation. But you’ve got the FBI watching your back, and we’re intensifying the hunt for Oertel.”

He paused, glancing at the car clock. "And now, we'd better get back. You need to get some rest. You've done a damned good job today, Cami. So – let's hope this is all in the past soon and that a lot of people who never deserved to be caught up in the business with Oertel get closure. And when you've had a few days to rest, we need to talk. About the FBI. About your future. No rush. And no pressure."

The offer from Steve Billings loomed in her mind again.

She had options for her future, but after feeling sure about the offer from Steve earlier, she now felt conflicted all over again, feeling that her loyalty lay with Connor and the FBI.

They sat for a few minutes more in silence, and then Connor started the car and drove her home. They didn’t speak during the drive. Exhaustion was weighing heavy on Cami. But she felt grateful to Connor for explaining the situation at last, and she felt relieved to know that the plainclothes officers would be looking after her and Kieran, and that they would be safe.

When Connor pulled up outside the building, he didn’t drop her off, but insisted on walking her inside and riding up with her in the elevator. And when they reached her floor, Cami was surprised to see the undercover agent nearby. Dressed in dark cargo pants and a black sweatshirt, with a gun on his belt, he was standing at the junction to the corridor, looking alert and competent.

“Evening,” Connor greeted him quietly as they passed, with Cami doing her best not to turn and stare. A real, live, undercover guard? More than anything, this brought home the danger of the situation to her.

“Evening, Agent Connor,” the man greeted him. “Evening, Ms. Lark.”

“All okay here?”

“All quiet, yes.”

“You look after things, then.”

With her door in sight, Connor waited and watched with the guard while she walked toward it, unlocked it, and got safely inside.

She locked the door quickly and breathed out. What a night. What a stressful time. The grief she felt about Jenna was still raw and real, but she didn’t even feel ready to process it.

Cami tiptoed through to the bedroom, trying to feel her way in the semi



darkness, and not to wake up Kieran, but he was already awake.

“Hey, Cami,” he said. “Everything okay?”

In a whisper, she updated him. “The case is over, but we’ve still got problems. Bill Oertel is at large. There’s a guard outside our apartment tonight in case he comes here.”

She’d felt okay when Connor had told her that, but watching Kieran’s eyes widen in astonishment, the fear hit her suddenly, right in the solar plexus. This guy was a brutal sadist who had engineered the trafficking and deaths of many. And she and Kieran were key witnesses.

Trying to breathe deeply, Cami quickly went to the bathroom, showered, got dressed in her pajamas, and climbed into bed. She knew she needed to sleep, she knew the guard would be alert, and she knew that Connor was doing his best to keep her safe.

But she felt as if she’d never sleep again. It was as if every noise, every tiny rustle, every car engine she heard outside, was being magnified in her mind as she lay in bed, tension in every muscle. Kieran relaxed, his breathing softening, sleeping again.

She couldn’t, though.

Was that a footstep by the front door? She thought it was a footstep outside. But she tried to convince herself that a footstep didn’t matter because the guard was patrolling. She was being looked after, and there were people nearby.

She told herself that, very persuasively, until she heard another sound.

This one got her sitting bolt upright.

It was the faint but unmistakable sound of the latch turning.

## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Cami's panic was threatening to choke her. Images were swirling in her mind of Oertel, overpowering the guard, leaving him trussed or dead somewhere that he couldn't make a noise, and coming for her. Coming to destroy the key witnesses before they could destroy him.

Doing it stealthily, quietly, so discreetly.

Cami opened her mouth to scream. That was the immediate, instinctive reaction. Scream loudly, make a noise, bring people running.

But he might still get inside too fast if she screamed. It might not help her to do that at all.

Or else, worse still, the scream might just chase him away, and he might disappear and go into hiding, and they would then have to wait for this entire scenario to replay again.

No, Cami decided firmly. This time – no. She was going to wait for him to come in, and then, she was going to ambush him.

There it was, the soft squeak of the hinge as the door opened. He was working so slowly, so quietly. Almost soundlessly. If she hadn't been wide awake and quivering with adrenaline, she'd never have heard him.

Kieran was still asleep. He'd had an exhausting day, she guessed, and now he was in the midst of a deep sleep.

An idea was starting to form in Cami's mind as she scrambled softly out of bed, shaking all over but absolutely determined to see this through.

A weapon. She needed something with weight to it. The only thing heavy and solid enough was her gaming laptop. She grabbed it off the wire. Then, holding it, she padded to the bedroom door and stood at the ready, waiting for it to open. When it did, she'd be behind it. Whoever was walking inside wouldn't see her immediately, and she would have a chance.

Adrenaline flooded her veins. Her head was swimming with it, her heart was racing, but she felt strangely focused, and now that she was in place and waiting, she was surprisingly free from fear.

The glint of a muted flashlight cut the dark. She barely heard his footsteps as he moved across the floor. It was more the apartment itself, she heard. That tiny creak that the floorboard nearest the door made, the soft rustle of a heavy sole landing on the knotted rag rug that she'd bought to decorate the living room.

He was treading over it on a deadly mission.

Now, the bedroom door handle eased downward, and Cami felt horror fill her. For a moment, she didn't know if she'd have the strength and the will to do what she needed to. If she messed up, this was all over. All over. She and Kieran would both die.

She edged back as the door opened so slowly. He was being so very careful. Cami held her laptop tightly in a two-handed grip. Raising it above her head, her arms were shaking.

An outline appeared in the door – a pistol, its barrel looking long and unwieldy looking because of the silencer attached. Her heart was banging in her throat. He stepped inside. His focus was on the bed, on the sleeping form there. He raised the flashlight, and in its muted beam, she saw him note that there was only one person there. Only one, when he needed two.

He froze.

And with all her force, Cami brought the laptop down on his head, edge first. She drove it into his skull with all the strength she possessed, knowing that she had to take him down, had to stun him at least, because otherwise, they would die.

It hit his head with a loud, solid crack.

And Bill Oertel's knees buckled. The gun pointed downward and then slipped from his grasp as he slumped to the floor. In the bed, Kieran was now awake, bursting out with a yell, rushing toward her. She was shouting now, with relief and reaction. They grabbed makeshift ropes – a belt, a dressing gown cord. Tied his hands behind him. Cami kicked that heavy, silenced gun all the way to the other end of the room. She called 911. And then, she called Connor.

“We've got him,” she said breathlessly. She was sobbing now, collapsed on the bed, Kieran holding her hand, both of them staring at the unconscious Oertel. “He came in to try to kill us and we've got him!”

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It was a month later, and Cami Lark was getting dressed for work. The choice of clothes was fairly easy. She picked an outfit from the large, overstuffed closet that she and Kieran shared, that had been much like yesterday's one.

Black pants, Doc Martens, a plain, form-fitting top, and a jacket. Simple

and unpretentious. Her hair, freshly shaven on the side and freshly dyed jet black, swung shinily over its shoulder.

She liked working in a job where she could wear her hair the way she wanted it, even though using her skills was what inspired her the most.

She kissed Kieran goodbye and headed out, going down to the basement and getting behind the wheel of the nippy little red Fiat that she'd bought brand new. It was seven-thirty a.m. and already light. Spring was in the air, and the breeze had a light feel to it. The trees were wreathed in bright green leaves, and there were flowers in the gardens and along the grassy sidewalks.

It wasn't far to go to her work. Only a few miles, and she was there.

Walking in the offices she'd come to know and to like so well. Greeting the security guard, who knew her by name.

And then, walking upstairs. Not to Connor's office any longer. She had her own office on the third floor, adjoining Jacenta's. The office of Cami Lark, IT Special Agent. She had her own desk, with a photo of herself and Kieran on it, and another of their new cat, Ginger.

There had been no choice at all. When the chips were down, and she'd thought about where her heart lay, Cami had turned down the astonishing salary that Steve Billings had offered her, and she'd taken the role that Connor and the FBI had created especially for her.

Her diary was extremely full. Next week, she'd be traveling out of state to help with a case. This week, most of her focus was still on wrapping up the loose ends in the Bill Oertel case. He was in a maximum security cell. The network had been tracked down, the kingpins arrested, and some of the victims found. The more recent ones. Traumatized and abused, they would need months of therapy to reintegrate with society.

Each time that she'd heard about a new rescue, Cami had felt her heart leap with hope. But as the days had gone by, she'd realized that there was no more hope, that her sister was gone.

It was a sadness in her life that she knew she'd have to live with, and perhaps one day she could put behind her. But for now, she was doing what she loved – using her IT skills to track down the bad guys and help put them behind bars. She didn't want any other victim to suffer the way she knew Jenna must have done. She didn't want any other family to suffer the way she and her parents had done.

“Good morning!” Jacenta was also an early bird, and gave Cami a welcoming grin as she walked in.

“Morning,” Cami replied.

“Busy day today?” Jacinta asked. Cami nodded.

“Yes. But I’m going to leave early this evening, hopefully, and take my parents out to dinner.”

She felt a sense of wonderment that she was even saying such a thing.

“They’re going to meet Kieran?”

“Yup. They’re excited about it,” Cami admitted. “And it makes for some positive topics of conversation, at least. My mother’s happier than I remember her being. And my dad? Well, now that I’m with the FBI, it’s as if he respects my opinion a little more,” she said thoughtfully.

“Arrest him if he doesn’t,” Jacinta warned with a twinkle in her eye.

Cami put her laptop on the desk, and while she waited for it to boot up, she went over to the coffee machine.

Sadness about Jenna still came in waves, and at unexpected times.

But for the rest of it, she was happier than she’d ever thought she would be. She’d found her niche as an FBI IT special agent, and truly loved the work that she was doing. Every day was different, outsmarting and outfoxing the bad guys. There was nowhere she’d rather be.

And happiness, as Cami knew, was fragile and never guaranteed. She reminded herself continually to live every moment of her life and to be thankful for what she had.

There was a lot, after all, to be thankful for – and an exciting future ahead.

## EPILOGUE

She walked into the building, staring around her at this interesting, complex, and slightly intimidating space.

The security guard had a mixture of surprise and puzzlement on his face as he checked her in. There was nothing to go through the machine – she didn't have much, and had brought less with her. Just herself, in old trainers, blue jeans, and a green top that brought out the color of her eyes.

But she felt a mix of heady excitement and trepidation to be here at last.

As she was shown the way, memories coursed through her.

That night, six years ago, when she'd been on her way back from an illicit drink with friends in the next town, heading for the late night bus to take her on the fifty mile journey home. The scene she'd stumbled upon. She hadn't even known what it meant. There had been a car, and they'd been dragging a girl into it, on a quiet street corner, near the abandoned house by the woods. The girl had been screaming and struggling, her arms tied behind her, terror in her voice. A dark-clad man behind her, shoving the girl into the trunk.

She'd run forward shouting, "Hey! Hey! What are you doing?"

And realized, instantly, that it was a bad idea when another man had emerged from the car and the gun had swung around toward her.

She'd fled, racing across a park, her long legs and her sheer terror somehow giving her the speed she needed to outrun her pursuers. And she'd jumped onto the bus, feeling shaky with terror because they'd seen her and chased her. They'd seen her pale blond hair, her long legs, they'd seen her red jacket and her big chunky boots.

She'd thought she was safe, but then, on the bus, she'd noticed the headlights draw level, and she'd seen them.

Seen them seeing her. More men, in another car.

The terror all over again. The car had settled in behind the bus. They'd been following her relentlessly, and she knew that would have been the end, except for a crazy piece of luck.

The black car had accelerated through a red light to keep pace with the bus. And a drunken driver – she guessed – without looking, had recklessly accelerated on the crossroad. The car had clipped the dark vehicle and sent it spinning, and watching in fear from the bus window, she had felt a rush of relief. They had lost her, but she knew it wouldn't be for long, because she'd

seen what they had done. They would find out who she was.

She hadn't gone home, she'd been too scared to. She'd spent the night hiding out in the old church, and when it was morning, she'd contacted the only person she knew who could help.

His name had been Liam Treverton, and he'd dated an older friend of hers a while back. He was with the FBI. She wasn't going to go to the local police. Her dad was part of them, and he disapproved of her, and she knew that this was serious.

And when Liam had heard about it, and she'd described what she'd seen, he'd done something unexpected.

He'd gotten scared.

"This is big. And I'm very worried there's a cover-up going on. Maybe even within the Bureau, although I'm not sure. People have been killed." He'd sounded panicked, which had made her even more frightened. "I don't know what's happening. We need time to get to the bottom of it, and until then, you're in danger. Big danger. They're everywhere, and we don't know who they are!"

"What must I do?" she'd asked, feeling like there were no options left, like that black car would be pulling up any moment. Coming for her.

"You need to – okay." He'd breathed deeply. "You need to go missing. You need to disappear. You can't be you anymore. I've got – I've got an old ID, from another missing person case, an orphan who turned runaway and left it behind. Take it. Use it. And go far away. Far. Other side of the country. Find a small town and stay the hell away from the big cities, they've got cameras. Don't come back, please!"

"But – but my family. My sister!"

"No!" he'd said. "No, no, no. Try to contact her, and she will die. I mean it. They'll be watching, and they'll be listening. Do not try, please, I'm begging you! You have to disappear. Until this all blows out the water." His voice had dropped. "You'll know when it does. It'll be headline news."

"But when will that be?" she'd asked, her voice quivering, now on the point of tears.

"It could be years. I'm going to give you a ride to the train station. I've got some cash on me. Use the other ID. That's who you are now. Find the smallest town you can. Don't leave it. Until it's safe."

Her mind jerked back to the present as she headed along the corridor toward the office that she'd inquired about. Again, excitement and nerves

battled with each other in her stomach as she tapped on the door.

A smartly dressed woman with dark braids opened it.

And stared, shock and recognition transforming her face as she took her appearance in.

“I’m here to see Cami Lark,” she said. “She doesn’t know I’m coming. I’m back in town again, and it’s a surprise visit.”

Already, she could hear a commotion from the adjoining room, a gasp, and the hurried sound of a scuffle and quick footsteps, as if someone was erupting from their chair and heading her way.

“I’m her sister,” she explained. “Jenna Lark.”



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With her Olympic dreams in tatters, Sheila, 28, struggles to find her place back home. She is surrounded by reminders of what could have been, stuck inside the shadow of her older sister: the golden child, the respected sheriff.

But when her sister persuades her to join the local police force, Sheila's life and career start anew.

As she hunts serial killers, Sheila notices clues that others miss and offers a perspective that no one else has. She realizes she has a talent outside of fighting, and that she has a chance to embrace a new life in Salt Lake—a life outside the ring.

This is a different kind of ring, though. Sheila quickly realizes that to survive, she will need more than just her strength—she'll need a brilliance to match that of even the most diabolical killer.

Can Sheila win this match? Or will she finally lose it all?

A page-turning and harrowing suspense thriller featuring a brilliant and tortured protagonist, the SHEILA STONE series is a riveting mystery, packed with suspense, twists and turns, revelations, and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you flipping pages late into the night.

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—Reader review (Her Last Wish)

“A strong, complex story about two FBI agents trying to stop a serial killer. If you want an author to capture your attention and have you guessing, yet trying to put the pieces together, Pierce is your author!”

—Reader review (Her Last Wish)

“A typical Blake Pierce twisting, turning, roller coaster ride suspense thriller. Will have you turning the pages to the last sentence of the last chapter!!!”

—Reader review (City of Prey)

“Right from the start we have an unusual protagonist that I haven't seen done in this genre before. The action is nonstop... A very atmospheric novel that

will keep you turning pages well into the wee hours.”  
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“Everything that I look for in a book... a great plot, interesting characters, and grabs your interest right away. The book moves along at a breakneck pace and stays that way until the end. Now on go I to book two!”  
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**SILENT GIRL**  
**(A Sheila Stone Suspense Thriller—Book 1)**

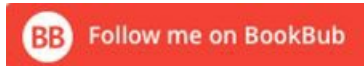
## **Blake Pierce**

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-five books (and counting); 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; of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books; of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books; of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books, of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising ten books; of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting); of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books; of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising eleven books (and counting); of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the new SHEILA STONE suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); and of the new RACHEL BLACKWOOD

suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery--Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1), [NEXT DOOR](#) (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 1), [THE PERFECT WIFE](#) (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book One), [IF SHE KNEW](#) (A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 1), [MURDER \(AND BAKLAVA\)](#) (A European Voyage Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [LEFT TO DIE](#) (An Adele Sharp Mystery—Book One), [A MURDER IN PARIS](#) (A Year in Europe—Book 1), [CITY OF PREY](#) (An Ava Gold Mystery—Book One), and [HER LAST WISH](#) (A Rachel Gift FBI Suspense Thriller—Book One) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

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](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.



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