

LET  
HER  
BE

A FIONA RED MYSTERY--BOOK #2

BLAKE PIERCE

# LET HER BE

(A Fiona Red Mystery —Book Two)

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 twenty-eight books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising fourteen 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 ten books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), and of the new FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

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## PROLOGUE

Ryan laughed coyly as he grabbed Sarah's small hand, pulling her through the woods as the sun began to set. He'd been waiting for this moment for too long—his one chance to take Sarah to Love Hill, which was actually known as "Hookup Point" to all the guys at school who were in on it.

Sarah, of course, had no idea. Love Hill sounded way more romantic. But Ryan was looking to score, and taking a girl to Hookup Point had never failed him.

Of course, this was Sarah Rivers he was talking about here. Shy, reserved... no one had ever been able to hook up with her, not that he was aware of.

He wanted to be the first.

"Come on, I think it's this way," he said.

Sarah tugged on his hand, and Ryan looked back to see her with an apprehensive expression on her face. The sun was dimming even more, coating the forest in darkness.

"What's wrong, baby?" Ryan asked.

Sarah bit her lip. "It's just... it's getting dark, Ryan. Should we really be walking through the woods?"

He laughed a little. "C'mon, babe. I told you, the hill's just like, a five-minute walk through the woods, it's no big deal. Then it opens up to a cliff, and we'll have the best view of Portland's skyline."

"Yeah, but it's just..." Sarah's voice trailed off as she looked around.

"Sarah, c'mon. It'll be fine. I'll protect you."

After a brief hesitation, Sarah smiled and nodded. "Okay, alright."

Ryan couldn't believe it. He smiled as they began to walk again, their hands still clasped. This was going to be so much

easier than he thought. Still, he could sense Sarah's nervousness as they walked. Hopefully it wouldn't hurt his chances. He knew she'd love the spot once he got her there.

"Oh wait, did you hear that?" Sarah said, stopping in her tracks.

Ryan stopped too. He hadn't heard anything. "What?"

"I heard something just now," Sarah said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ryan's eyes scanned the darkness, searching for any sign of a threat in the shadows. He swept his gaze over the trees and undergrowth, peering into the depths of the unknown. The air was heavy with dampness that clung to Ryan's skin, and a musky odor of wet earth, pine needles, and dead leaves filled his nostrils.

But as he listened, he heard the rustling of leaves in the wind, the chirping of birds in the trees overhead, and the occasional call of an owl in the distance. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"See? It's fine—"

Suddenly, a twig snapped.

Ryan's head jerked to the right. Okay, that one, he did hear.

Sarah grabbed his arm, and he felt her trembling. "What was that?"

"I don't know," Ryan said, his voice a low whisper. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he squinted through the darkness. "I'll take a look. Stay here."

He slowly let go of Sarah's hand and began to take a few steps forward into the darkness. He figured it was nothing, but he also wanted to show Sarah that he could be strong, that he could protect her.

As he stepped closer, he saw two beady eyes gleaming from the shadows. A raccoon was rummaging through a pile of leaves and sticks, looking for something to eat.

Ryan chuckled and looked over his shoulder. There was barely any light left in the forest now, and he hadn't realized how many steps he'd taken away from Sarah. He called back, "Babe, it's just a cute little raccoon."

Sarah let out a sigh of relief and ran over to join Ryan. He could hear her footsteps crunching through the forest floor as she approached, but then, all of a sudden—a scream. Ryan froze in place as the raccoon scurried off into the woods. He looked around for Sarah, but he couldn't make out her shape.

"Sarah?" he called out. "Sarah!"

"R-Ryan!" she shouted.

Fear pumped through his heart. Now this was getting real. With bated breath, Ryan navigated the forest, following the direction Sarah's voice had come from.

After a few moments of searching, Ryan finally spotted her—tripped over a long, black bag. He rushed to her side and helped her up.

"Are you okay? What happened?" he asked.

Sarah looked up at him with tears in her eyes, but she managed to nod bravely. "I'm alright," she muttered, dusting off some dirt from her clothes as she stood up carefully. "I tripped over... that."

She pointed down at the black bag. It was strangely long, almost... human-shaped?

Ryan immediately had the gut feeling they should just go. But what was inside that bag that was heavy enough to trip Sarah? There was barely any light left from the sky, so he took out his phone and turned on the flashlight, pointing it right at the bag. Sarah grabbed onto his arm, and Ryan's throat tightened.

The bag had a zipper along it.

Ryan slowly reached for it and pulled. As the zipper came undone, he heard a low creak, like something was being released from inside. He unzipped the bag all the way, and his stomach sank.

As he dropped his phone in horror, the flashlight landing on the ground and blinding him, all Ryan could hear were Sarah's screams, echoing on repeat, as he realized what he had seen for that too brief moment, now etched into his head forever: there was a woman inside.

A pale, very dead woman.

# CHAPTER ONE

FBI forensic specialist Fiona Red paced about her apartment, her hand on her forehead, feeling as though the heat was blasting right at her on high. Was she really thinking of doing this? *Could* she do it? It would certainly bring up old wounds, but as much as Fiona loved to stay positive and believe in herself, this seemed like too much.

Opening up her missing sister's cold case was serious work. It was no laughing matter. Sure, she'd recently teamed up with two incredible FBI agents—Jake Tucker and Lauren Price—to put a deranged killer behind bars, but Fiona's sister, Joslyn, had been missing for ten years.

Gone without a trace.

And now, Fiona was thinking about looking into it herself, now that she was an adult.

She took a breath and sat down on her couch, trying to calm herself. Fiona gazed out her apartment window; she lived in a low rise, so she could only see the building across from her, bathed in the darkness of night. Sometimes, she wished she lived in a skyscraper, so she could see all of Portland from the comfort of her own home. Maybe if she were high up, it'd be easier to look out and imagine where Joslyn might be.

Fiona looked down at her cell phone on her coffee table, next to a decorative succulent. In that phone was a number... the number of an old friend. Someone Fiona knew she could talk to about getting her hands on Joslyn's case files, but something inside was still stopping her.

Fear. Doubt.

She was scared of what she might find, and if it would be too much for her to handle. She had seen a lot in her line of work, but this was personal. This was her own family—her own flesh and blood. What if she wasn't prepared? What if she couldn't cope with the truth?

In her mind, Fiona rehearsed all of the steps it would take to investigate. She'd have to review evidence, go through court documents, talk to witnesses—anyone who was around during her sister's disappearance—but even with all that, there were still no guarantees of finding any answers. The more she thought about it, the more daunting it seemed.

No—she was getting ahead of herself. Chances were, Fiona wouldn't find anything at all.

So what was the harm in simply looking?

Fiona snatched up her phone and closed her eyes for a moment. *Breathe*. One, two... she could do this.

Without another thought, she opened up her phone and looked up her childhood best friend—Erica de Leon, who happened to work for the Portland PD.

Fiona had been estranged from Erica for years; as kids, they were close, but they lost touch in high school when Erica became more of a popular type, and Fiona became progressively more nerdy. However, they still kept in touch, albeit mostly in secret, and when Fiona went to Harvard, Erica went into the police academy. They checked in with each other now and then, and Fiona felt like they'd always have a bond. Erica was probably the only friend she ever really had.

Now, Fiona needed a favor.

She called Erica's number and bit her thumb as it rang and rang. Then, at long last, a voice:

"Fiona?"

Fiona let out a breath. She'd answered. "Erica. Hey."

"What's going on?" Erica asked into the phone. "Why are you randomly calling me on a Wednesday night?"

"Erica, I..." Fiona swallowed hard. "I'm sorry to bother you. But I have a favor to ask."

Erica paused. "Go on..."

"It's a big one," Fiona said. "It's about Joslyn."

Tension filled the air. Fiona bit her thumb harder, bracing herself for Erica's response.

"Fiona..." Erica trailed off. "Your sister's case is cold. It went cold before we even graduated high school."

"I know," Fiona said. "But I work for the FBI now and I just—I want to see if I can apply anything I've learned to the case. I want to see if, just maybe, I can spot anything in the information the police logged. Joslyn's disappearance never made it to the FBI's hands, Erica... it stayed with the police."

Fiona's heart sank just thinking about it. It hurt that her sister didn't seem important enough for FBI intervention. But maybe if Fiona could find something, she could change that.

"I understand," Erica said finally. "But I can't just give you the files, Fiona. This isn't like a library book."

Fiona sighed. "Of course not." Her heart sank even lower. She knew this would be tough—she hadn't expected to get the files without any kind of resistance.

Even so, she wasn't ready to give up yet. She still felt like her best chance at finding anything was through these police reports—and if that meant getting Erica's help to do it, then she was willing to try anything.

"Erica, please," Fiona pleaded desperately into the phone. "I know it's a lot to ask, but this is really important to me—it could mean finding answers about my sister and bringing closure for our family."

The silence on the other side was almost unbearable as Fiona waited for Erica's response. Erica had been there for Fiona after Joslyn had gone missing; it was one of the things that brought them back together after they'd been apart for some time.

"Fiona... I'm not sure if this is a good idea," Erica said slowly. "You know how these cases can be—how they can sometimes dredge up painful memories and truths." She paused before continuing, her voice softening slightly. "I don't want to see you hurt."



Fiona sighed. She had expected as much from Erica. After all, it was why she had called her in the first place; she knew Erica would understand, even if it meant having to say no.

But still—having someone tell her that she shouldn't look into her sister's disappearance only made the urge stronger.

"I know," Fiona said quietly in response. "But I just have to try. If the case is cold anyway, does it really hurt to share the files with me?"

"Technically, you are FBI," Erica muttered.

Hope leapt in Fiona's heart. That sounded like Erica might be having a change of heart.

"You know I'm not going to do anything reckless with them," Fiona said, her voice filled with earnestness. "I just want to see if I can find anything—anything at all that could help me learn what happened to my sister."

Fiona paused, suddenly feeling the weight of her request. She knew she was asking a lot of Erica—but she also knew that if anyone could sympathize with her plight, it would be Erica.

"I'll take responsibility for whatever happens," Fiona said finally, her voice strong and sure. "Please... let me try."

Erica was quiet for a few moments before finally responding. "Alright," she said softly. "I'll send the files over."

Relief flooded through Fiona as she heard those words come out of Erica's mouth. She had been hoping and praying for this chance—and now it seemed like her prayers had been answered.

"Thank you so much," Fiona breathed into the phone, tears forming in her eyes as relief overwhelmed her.

"Don't thank me yet," Erica said. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into—but if there's even a chance that you might be able to get some answers about your sister's disappearance, then I guess I can't stop you."

"Thank you, thank you!" Fiona exclaimed, both nervous and excited.

“Don’t mention it,” Erica said. “Are you at home? I’m at the station, so I can bring them over soon.”

“Yes, I’m here,” Fiona said. “I’ll see you soon.”

With that, Fiona ended the call. She was filled with a strange mix of emotions—nervousness and excitement, anticipation and dread. She wasn’t certain of what she would find in those files—but it felt like the first step toward understanding what had happened to her sister, and finally finding some closure for her family.

All she could do now was wait.

\*\*\*

The moment Fiona heard a knock on the door, she flew off the couch and whipped it open. And there was her childhood best friend, Erica, holding the files. With her tanned skin and long brown hair in a ponytail, police uniform on, she looked nothing short of professional—except for the flat expression on her face.

Fiona reached out to snatch the files, but Erica held them back.

“Before I give you these,” she warned, “I want you to be absolutely certain this is something you should be looking into.”

“Come on, Erica,” Fiona muttered, flustered. “You know I work for the FBI, right? I was examining dead bodies and crime scenes last week.”

Erica sighed and handed over the file folder. Eager to see what was inside, Fiona said, “Come in!” and rushed back into her apartment and plopped down on the couch. She did a quick scan of the files to ensure they were correct, and when she skimmed past several mentions of Joslyn, she knew Erica had truly come through.

Fiona looked up at Erica, who stood in the doorway, hands hooked to her belt.

“Thanks, Erica,” Fiona said. “Really. I mean it.”

“Don’t mention it,” Erica said. She hesitated. “I really hope this works out for you, Fi. I really do.”

Fiona smiled, grateful that even though their friendship was estranged, Erica was still there for her.

“And hey,” Erica said, “what’d you mean when you said you were actually on crime scenes? I thought you were always in the lab.”

Fiona smiled to herself, remembering the case that had ended only a few days ago. Working alongside two FBI agents, getting onto the field—and nearly dying.

She shuddered as she remembered how close she’d been to death, when she’d gone to confront a potential suspect herself—only for him to actually be the killer. And he was going to make Fiona his next prize.

But as she’d been tied up and bound in the basement, waiting for death, Agent Jake Tucker came in to save her. It was a strange and exhilarating experience, to say the least, but Fiona had been inspired by it. Inspired to push herself further—and to look into Joslyn’s case.

That was too much to tell Erica right now, though, and Fiona had files to read.

“I’ll tell you some other time, maybe over a drink?” Fiona offered.

Erica smiled. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

With that, she waved goodbye and stepped out of the apartment. Fiona watched with a smile, grateful for her friend’s help, as Erica closed the door behind her.

Taking a deep breath, Fiona opened the first file—and began her journey to understanding what had happened to her sister all those years ago.

Joslyn had disappeared from the beach in broad daylight. Fiona knew that much, because she had been there.

As she flipped through the files and read police reports, the circumstances of Joslyn's disappearance didn't become any clearer. Because the police still didn't know what happened to her.

There were the theories, of course—a runaway theory, the theory that someone took her, and the theory that she had gone into the water and was taken by the undertow.

But Joslyn was an expert swimmer, and Fiona hadn't seen her go in. And there was no way her sister would just run away like that, leaving everything behind.

No... someone had to have taken her.

Apparently, the police had conducted interviews with everyone they could locate who was at the beach that day. Joslyn had been wearing a pink bikini, and some people reported seeing her walk toward the bathrooms. Fiona herself remembered Joslyn being there one minute, and then gone the next.

But no one had seen anything else. No one remembered seeing her get into a car, or walk away with someone—nothing.

Fiona sighed and kept going through the reports, hoping for something new. There was nothing about any suspicious people, no reports of strangers hanging around, nothing that could help Fiona find her sister.

But she hadn't given up yet. She knew there had to be something out there—some clue that the police missed or overlooked. Something that would lead her to Joslyn.

So Fiona kept reading and searching for any little detail that could point her in the right direction—even if it was just a piece of lint from Joslyn's beach towel. But as she read through report after report, she started to doubt if she'd ever find an answer to what happened to Joslyn all those years ago.

She supposed there was a reason the case had been declared cold. Fiona closed the file and rubbed her temples, feeling defeated by this lack of information.

There had to be someone, somewhere, out there who knew something.

The question was: How could Fiona find them?

And more importantly: Was Joslyn dead or alive?

## CHAPTER TWO

Special Agent Jake Tucker rolled over in his bed as morning sunlight seeped in through the windows of his skyscraper apartment. He yawned, stretching as his consciousness returned to him—only to feel a warm body next to his.

Jake flinched as he realized Lauren was still here, in bed with him, her blonde hair splaying down her back as she faced away from him. Memories of their previous night pooled into his mind; he was supposed to make a decision about the future of his and Lauren’s relationship—and partnership—but they’d had a bit too much wine to drink, and then the... other stuff happened.

Jake sighed at himself and rested his arm behind his head, and his movement was enough to cause Lauren to stir. She rolled over and faced him, resting her arm across his bare chest. Her green, catlike eyes looked up at him, and he couldn’t help but smile at her familiar beauty. This was the only time he ever got to see Lauren so vulnerable. At the same time, a seed of doubt grew in his chest...

They hadn’t talked about his decision yet.

“Morning,” Lauren murmured, her voice thick with sleep. “Last night was, wow...”

Jake laughed, his face warm. “Yeah, it was.”

“I guess that means you’ve made your choice?” Lauren asked tentatively.

Jake stiffened. He and Lauren been on-again, off-again with their romance for years, but their partnership in the FBI had been consistent, and Jake couldn’t imagine anyone else by his side at work.

But a few days ago, Lauren had given him an ultimatum.

No more hot and cold with their romance. She wanted all in. Or else she couldn’t be with him anymore—not even as his

partner.

Jake took a deep breath and carefully looked into Lauren's eyes. He knew he had to make the decision, but he was scared of what it could mean for their future.

"I don't want to lose you... not as my partner," Jake said slowly. "But I think I'm ready to take the leap and be with you, if that's what you want."

Lauren smiled at him, her face lighting up with joy. She moved closer and snuggled against his chest, her warmth comforting him like a blanket of safety.

"Yes," she whispered in his ear softly. "That is exactly what I want."

Jake wrapped his arms around her tightly, feeling relieved that he'd made the right choice. He closed his eyes and breathed in the sweet scent of her hair, allowing himself to feel contentment and joy for the first time in a long while. This was where he wanted to be—with Lauren by his side—and finally they were both on the same page about it.

Still, there was that small pit of doubt in Jake's stomach. They'd been hot and cold for so long... could they really make it work in the long term? The commitment felt real, and final, but Jake couldn't predict if he and Lauren would be fighting again next week.

On top of that... he'd have to disclose their relationship to everyone at HQ.

To the chief.

It wasn't a crime for FBI agents to date, even if they were partners, but still. Jake had always been afraid of how it might look for his professional image.

But then he felt Lauren's warmth against his skin, and it was enough to push away the doubt. He looked down at her with a smile, and he knew that whatever happened, they would be able to face it together. They'd have to...

Jake didn't want to lose Lauren, he knew that much. If being in a real, committed relationship could save them, then

wasn't that all he'd ever wanted?

Lauren must have sensed his hesitation, and she pulled away from him to look into his eyes.

"Jake, we can make this work," she said, her voice strong and confident. "I know it won't always be easy, but this is right for us."

Jake smiled at her reassuring words and ran his fingers through her hair. He reminded himself that Lauren was worth any risks he might have to take in order to keep her by his side. He leaned forward and kissed her passionately, ignoring the doubt that continued to gnaw at him.

She pulled away, tracing circles on his chest with her finger. "And Jake," she murmured, "we should talk to the chief about it today. The sooner we disclose it, the better."

Jake swallowed hard. He would rather the chief hear it from him first. "Yeah, let me talk to him. Man to man kinda thing."

Lauren lifted up, giving him eyes. "And you'll actually do it?"

Jake nodded, although his gut twisted at the idea. "Yeah, Laur. I'll do it."

This was starting to feel too real.

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At the Portland FBI headquarters, Jake raised his fist up to Chief Harold Whittaker's door, ready to knock. But the tightness in his throat stopped him. It wasn't like he thought the chief would react poorly to his and Lauren's relationship, it just felt so... final. After all these years of hesitating to make themselves public and official, they were finally here.

Jake had to admit, it scared him.

He was afraid that making it public would only make their relationship worse, not better. And this time, if they did break up, now everyone would be able to see it. If they continued



their hot and cold dance in the public eye, it would reflect poorly on them, and Jake knew people would question if their relationship was a distraction. Maybe they'd even be split apart.

He supposed the answer was to just make things work with Lauren. No hot and cold. No messy breakups. Just efficient partners who happened to date.

He took a deep breath. He had to be strong.

He knocked on the door, and when he heard the chief's gruff voice call out "Come in," Jake stepped into the office.

The chief was seated behind his desk, looking at Jake intently from under his bushy eyebrows. "Special Agent Tucker!" the chief exclaimed.

"Hey, Chief, I wanted to talk—"

"Just the man I was hoping to see," the chief cut in, as if he hadn't heard him. "I was just about to call you in to have a one-on-one chat."

Jake raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You did, sir? Oh, I \_\_\_"

"Have a seat, Tucker." The chief gestured to the chair in front of him, and Jake obediently sat down.

Chief Whittaker leaned forward, clasping his hands together. Jake held his breath; did Lauren already tell the chief? They'd agreed Jake would tell him first, but—

"Jake, I wanted to follow up with you about the proposition I made a few days ago," the chief said, and Jake relaxed. Right. The proposition.

Chief Whittaker had suggested that Jake—and Lauren—make Fiona Red, forensic analyst and entomologist, a more integral part of their team. Lauren was leery of the idea, but Jake didn't see the harm in it. He liked Fiona. They'd worked well together on their last case, and she had really been the brains behind it all. They could use her help.

"Now," the chief said as Jake thought on it, "I haven't talked to Ms. Red herself yet. I wanted to make sure we were

all on the same page first.”

Jake nodded. “Well, I think bringing Fiona on board could be a great idea,” he said. “She’s smart, she knows her stuff, and she has a good eye for detail.”

The chief smiled. “Good. I’m glad you’re open to this idea, Agent Tucker. It could be the start of something great for the bureau.”

Jake had to admit, he was starting to warm up to the idea as well. Fiona was smart and capable; why not bring her in? He could see how it would benefit them all in the long run, and besides, she was a friend. Lauren hadn’t said no when Jake had brought it up, so it seemed like they were all good to go.

“Anyway,” the chief said, “you were trying to talk about something when you came in. What is it, Tucker? Sorry I cut you off—I’m just eager to see this partnership through.”

Jake’s face burned, and he sank in his seat. He had to tell the chief he and Lauren were dating.

But the words wouldn’t come out. He hadn’t told anyone yet, and he was scared of what the chief’s reaction would be.

The question hung in the air for a few long moments, until Jake finally said, “It’s nothing, Chief. I’ll tell you later.”

The chief nodded and smiled, but it seemed to Jake like he could see right through him. He knew there was something more going on here.

But thankfully, he didn’t push it any further. Jake felt like a coward; why couldn’t he just say it? Lauren was going to be livid with him. She’d probably go ahead and tell the chief herself. No, he couldn’t back out of this one—he had to tell the chief.

“Actually, Chief,” he began, “I wanted to—”

Suddenly, the chief’s phone rang. He held up a finger. “One second, Tucker.”

Jake shut his mouth as the chief answered the phone.

“This is Chief Whittaker... yes... okay. I understand. Yes, send the files over now. I have just the agents.”

The chief hung up, and his eyes flashed on Jake's. Based on what he'd just heard, Jake had an idea of what had just transpired.

“Well, Tucker,” the chief said, “I think we have our first case for your new team.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Fiona's head was spinning as she stirred her morning coffee at her apartment, watching the dark liquid whirl into a creamy brown. She'd barely slept a wink, having been too obsessed with reading Joslyn's files, even though they truly brought her no new information at all. She was grateful she had the day off work, because her head was killing her—but at the same time, she had no idea what she was going to do with herself all day.

She'd known it was unlikely that the cold case files would tell her anything new—it was a cold case for a reason—but she was still heavy with disappointment. If there had been a tiny hope she could find her sister... it would probably have been in those files.

And so, Fiona decided to give it a rest.

Now that it was morning, she picked up her warm mug of coffee and went into her living room, plopping down on the couch. Joslyn's files were in a neat pile, organized and put away, on top of her coffee table. She would return them to Erica soon; they weren't hers to keep. Fiona gazed out the window at the morning sun, reflecting off the building across from her apartment.

She wished she could talk to someone about this, but it would only dredge up bad memories for her parents, and Erica had already done enough for her.

No... Fiona was alone.

She sighed. Working that case with Jake and Lauren had been the most alive she'd felt in years. She hadn't been called back in or contacted by them since, but had resumed her usual lab work. Part of her wished, every day, that Jake would come by and see her—but why would he? Their work was over, and he was probably busy on another case.

Plus, it wasn't like they were anything to each other. They'd only just met, and Jake was clearly with Lauren. Still,

Fiona couldn't deny that she'd developed a bit of a crush on the special agent, as much as she wished she hadn't. Athletic, good-looking guys like Jake had never been interested in Fiona for her whole life.

She was being silly even thinking about it.

Of course, almost dying recently had been a wakeup call for Fiona. She'd signed up at her local gym to try to get more in shape—even if she hadn't exactly *gone* yet—and she'd started to think about how she was twenty-six now, and had still never had a real relationship. Jake and Lauren's relationship seemed tumultuous at best, but it was something. Fiona had never experienced that kind of bond.

But... part of her wanted to.

Her phone was lying on the couch beside her. One idea that had always floated on her mind was, well...

Online dating.

She blushed just thinking about putting herself out there like that. At the same time, she had to weigh the pros and cons.

What harm could it do? She'd heard all the success stories, and maybe it was time she gave online dating a try. She'd never really considered it before, but as Fiona thought about it more, she realized that if she wanted to find someone special, this could be the way. It was relatively risk-free. She didn't have to meet anybody. Just... see if anyone might be interested in her.

Fiona took a deep breath and thought about it for a few more minutes, before deciding to take the plunge. She grabbed her phone, opened up the app she'd heard so much about, and created an account.

After setting up her profile, Fiona knew the most important part was her photo. But she couldn't take one looking like this—in her pajamas with her red hair all frizzy.

She got up off the couch, grabbed her phone, and went into her bedroom. She took out her makeup kit and started to apply some light foundation, blending it in until her pale skin was

smooth and slightly more defined. Next, she put on some mascara to make her eyes pop, then chose a nice ruby lipstick that complemented her complexion. She took a step back and looked at herself in the mirror—she had to admit, she looked good. She hadn't put this much makeup on since she'd graduated from Harvard.

Fiona grabbed her phone and took a couple selfies, trying to find the best one for her profile. She finally chose a picture of herself smiling at the camera, her hair cascading in natural curls down her back. She uploaded it to the app, but the moment she did, her anxiety returned in full force. Oh God—she'd actually done it!

A strange mix of excitement and nervousness coursed through her as she held her phone. She had to come out of her shell a bit more, and this was the first step. Fiona sat on the edge of her bed and began scrolling through potential matches, reading their profiles carefully and swiping “yes” on them based on that, not just on looks alone. She hoped they would give her the same courtesy.

Some of them sounded nice. But as Fiona kept swiping, and the minutes dragged on... she found herself getting no matches.

Fiona tried to push her disappointment away, telling herself that she had just joined and that maybe it would take more time. She couldn't expect to just magically find love by uploading a semi-nice photo of herself.

Still, as the adrenaline wore off, she felt disheartened. This probably was a stupid idea.

Just as she was about to open her phone, delete the profile, and call the whole thing off, Fiona's phone rang.

Chief Whittaker's name appeared on her screen.

Fiona's heart jumped. Why would he suddenly be calling her? Taking a breath, she answered.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Fiona Red?” the chief's gruff voice sounded. “This is Chief Harold Whittaker.”

“O-oh, hello, Chief!” Fiona exclaimed. “It’s so nice to hear from you!”

“Right, so listen, would you mind coming in? I wanted to talk to you about something. It’s about a case.”

Fiona’s heart thrummed. A case. Was this really happening?

They wanted her on another case?

She didn’t want to get ahead of herself—maybe it was just a consultation. Either way, Fiona was happy to take it on. It would be a heck of a lot better than sitting around here, pathetically waiting for matches on a dating app.

“I’ll be right there, Chief.”

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Fiona drew a breath outside of Chief Whittaker’s office, preparing herself to knock. She’d been antsy on the drive over, eager to find out what the chief wanted to see her about—and if she’d see Jake on the way. She had navigated through headquarters without seeing him, though, and now, here she was.

Fiona took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” a gruff voice called from inside.

She stepped inside, her heart pounding in her chest as she saw Chief Whittaker sitting behind his desk.

But he wasn’t alone.

Both Jake and Lauren sat in front of his desk, and they looked back at Fiona as she entered. There was a third chair right beside Jake, and Fiona glanced at it. Was it for her?

And what was this all about?

“U-um, hello,” she managed.

“Ms. Red, please come in!” the chief said heartily.

As intimidating as he was, Chief Harold Whittaker was also oddly nice to Fiona. Trying to appear confident, she ducked into the room. Jake shot her a slight smile as she sat down beside him, adjusting her skirt below her, while Lauren had turned her gaze to the chief.

“Thanks so much for coming in, Fiona,” the chief said. “And great work on the William Harrell case. You really helped Special Agents Tucker and Price out.”

Fiona shot Jake and Lauren a nervous look. She didn’t want to take the spotlight away from them. Jake had been the one to save Fiona’s life, and they’d done all of the legwork. Fiona had just cracked the insect angle. Of course she was proud her intuition had been correct, but still. Jake offered her a warm energy, but she felt a chill from Lauren, and it made her shrink.

Still. She was given a compliment, and she had to take it with grace.

“Thank you, Chief Whittaker,” Fiona said. “Special Agents Tucker and Price really did all the leg work.”

“You were the brains, though,” the chief said. He took a breath. “And so, Fiona, I’ve been talking to Jake and Lauren here. And we think it might be a good idea if you team up with them again on another case.”

Fiona’s eyebrows shot up. Team up? With them? She glanced at Jake and Lauren, who were both watching her expectantly.

“I-I don’t know what to say,” Fiona mumbled, still in shock.

The chief chuckled and leaned forward in his chair. “Well, I think it would be a great opportunity for you to gain more experience and work with two of our best agents here.” He gestured toward Jake and Lauren, who both nodded approvingly.

“We’d be thrilled if you joined us, Fiona,” Jake said with a smile.



Fiona gulped, her head spinning with possibilities of the case they might take on—and what this meant for her career at the agency if she did get assigned to it. It was an offer that could not only make her career, but also change her life forever—but could she really do it? Working the William Harrell case had made her feel more alive—and useful—than ever before. It had been thrilling, challenging, terrifying... and satisfying.

In that second, she made up her mind. It was like every atom in the universe had aligned for her, bringing her to this moment.

She was meant to do this.

“I’d love to,” Fiona said. “It’d be an honor to work alongside Special Agents Tucker and Price again.”

“It’s settled then!” the chief announced.

Fiona smiled at Jake and Lauren, feeling a wave of relief wash over her. “Thank you for this opportunity,” she said gratefully. “I won’t let you down.”

“We know you won’t, Red,” Jake said.

Fiona’s face burned as he shot her a smile. She had to forget the small crush she’d developed on Jake Tucker—it was wildly inappropriate (and totally pointless too). Still, she couldn’t fight the butterflies that swarmed in her chest at being so close to him, and smelling the slight cedarwood on his cologne...

Fiona caught Lauren’s steely eyes past Jake, as though Lauren had somehow read Fiona’s thoughts and was now death-glaring her.

“Th-thank you,” Fiona said, to mask her nerves. “I’m excited to work with you both. I think I can learn a lot from you, especially, Lauren.”

Lauren grunted slightly and nodded.

“I think that’s enough formalities,” the chief said. “We’re all excited Fiona’s on the team.” His eyes landed on Fiona.

“But we already have a case, and I think you’re the perfect team to tackle it.”

Fiona’s heart raced. She had hoped she’d get to work another case, but she hadn’t expected one to appear so soon after the William Harrell case.

“Special Agents Tucker and Price will explain everything on the ride,” the chief said. “You three should head out ASAP.”

Fiona nodded, standing along with Jake and Lauren. It felt strange—and surreal—to be working with them yet again, but it had gone so well last time—aside from her near-death experience, of course. Fiona reminded herself not to worry.

She wasn’t alone in this. Jake had already saved her life once, and she knew she could count on him to guide her through this if she got overwhelmed. And Lauren—well, Fiona might have to work a bit harder to get Lauren’s approval, but that was okay.

Fiona didn’t know what she was dealing with yet, but she wouldn’t let them down. Another killer was lurking in the shadows of Portland. But they could stop him before another life was lost.

At least, Fiona hoped so.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jake steered his car through Portland with Lauren in his passenger seat, Fiona in the back. Every now and then, he would catch a glimpse of Fiona's nervous face in the rearview mirror. She'd bite her lip and pat down her red hair, as though trying to calm her nerves. He couldn't help but feel slightly amused by her joining the team. The girl seemed more nervous than anything, but there was a determination—a fire—in her as well.

As Jake drove, Lauren reviewed the case files in the passenger seat. Jake had already been briefed by the chief, but he didn't fully know what they were getting into. There were two bodies. One had just been discovered last night, and there was a crime scene waiting for Jake and Lauren to tackle. Another body had been discovered two nights ago, and was with the coroner. Originally, the cops were set to tackle this one, but when the second body dropped, they requested immediate help from the FBI. But Jake didn't know who the victims were yet, or the circumstances of their deaths.

As they got closer to the coroner's, Jake realized he hadn't fully established the plan. "So, here's the plan," Jake said. "Fiona, we're gonna drop you off at the coroner's so you can examine the first victim. Lauren and I are heading down to the latest crime scene to see what we can gather, then we'll all reconvene."

Fiona nodded in the backseat. "Got it."

Jake turned his attention to Lauren as he turned a corner. "Anything notable in the files?"

Lauren nodded, her eyes still on the papers. "The victims are both female—one is a twenty-three-year-old student named Marissa Mason, and the other appears to be a nineteen-year-old girl, Sarah Johnston."

Fiona gasped in the back seat. “They’re so young,” she said softly.

Lauren nodded. “That’s why we need to move quickly. The killer could be out there right now, looking for their next victim.”

“How do you guys do it?” Fiona suddenly asked. Jake shot her a perplexed look through the rearview, but Fiona had a bright look in her eyes now. “How do you keep going, knowing you can’t save everyone?”

Jake exchanged a look with Lauren, then said, “We stay strong for the ones we can save. We do our best to catch the bad guys, so no one else has to go through what these women went through.”

Lauren nodded in agreement. “You focus on the task at hand, and you remember that even if you can’t save them all, you’re still doing something to help. That’s why we do this—to make a difference. Sometimes, it’s the only thing we can do.”

Fiona smiled, nodding in understanding. “I hope I can be strong like that.”

Jake glanced at Fiona in the mirror. There was something different about her... was she wearing lipstick? Her lips were a darker shade than usual, and her amber eyes were rimmed by thick dark lashes that were normally pretty short. She almost looked dolled up.

“Hey, Red, are you wearing lipstick or something?” Jake asked, focusing back on the road.

“W-what!” Fiona exclaimed, and Jake caught sight of her trying to wipe it away.

Crap—he wasn’t trying to make her feel bad, just an observation. Jake couldn’t help it—it was his job to look for changes, for tiny details. “Hey, don’t worry,” he said, “it looks nice!”

Lauren shot Jake a look, but said nothing.

“Ah, I don’t usually wear this much,” Fiona murmured.

Just then, Jake pulled up to the coroner's. He put the car in park and turned around to face Fiona. "Okay, Red," he said, "they know you're coming, so just go inside and work your magic."

She nodded, determined, then got out of the car. Jake watched until she disappeared inside, then shifted his gaze back forward as he pulled away from the curb, heading toward their next destination—the latest crime scene.

As he merged back into the busy streets of Portland, he could feel a simmering tension coming from Lauren, who just flipped through the files and didn't speak. He hadn't gone through with telling the chief about their relationship earlier, and he knew he was going to have to deal with it eventually. Might as well rip the Band-Aid off.

"So, Laur," he began, and she barely looked up. He swallowed his nerves and braced himself for her reaction. "I didn't get a chance to tell the chief about us earlier."

Her silence was somehow more terrifying than her reaming him out. Jake held his breath, waiting for the blow to come. Then:

"I know that," Lauren said bitterly. "I could tell when we were with him. He would have said something before Fiona arrived. He didn't."

Jake exhaled slowly, his chest heavy with remorse. He had let Lauren down and he knew it. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice low. "I should have told him."

Lauren nodded slowly, her gaze still on the files in her lap. "If you don't tell him today, I will."

Now it was Jake's turn to be silent. He knew she was right—they had been putting it off for long enough, and they both knew that the longer they drew it out, the more unprofessional they'd look.

He reached over and grabbed her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I get it," he said softly. "We'll figure something out."

Lauren nodded again, but didn't look convinced. She pulled away from him and stared out the window instead, her body tense with worry. Jake sighed and focused on the road ahead—the next few hours were going to be nerve-wracking for them both.

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Jake pulled up to the edge of the forest, which was built into a suburban neighborhood just on the outskirts of town, elevated above Portland. There were cop cars swarming the area and crime scene tape cordoning much of the woods. Jake parked and stepped into the warm day, along with Lauren.

Officers were milling about, and he scanned for someone who could be in charge. Then he spotted him: Chief George Williamson, a big, gruff man with a belly that hung over his belt. Jake knew him well; they'd worked together before. George was directing some of his officers as Jake and Lauren approached.

“Chief Williamson?” Jake began.

George looked over, then his eyebrows went up. “Well shit, it's you two again,” he said. “I didn't know who they'd be sending.”

“We're here to see the crime scene,” Jake said.

George nodded, then waved them over. “Come on then—I'll show you what we've got.”

He motioned for Jake and Lauren to follow him into the woods, where the sun was blocked out by the thick canopy of trees above them and the ground was covered in leaves and pine needles that crunched beneath their feet as they walked deeper in. The smell of moss and earth hung heavy in the air, mixed with something else—something metallic and strange that made Jake's skin crawl.

“A lot of history in this forest,” George explained as they walked. “If you cut all the way through, you reach a cliff that

overlooks town, and the high school kids often go out there to, you know, do what high school kids do.”

Jake nodded, listening along. He remembered his high school days well; drinking in forests like this, attempting to sneak girls around.

“So that’s how our witnesses found the body,” George continued. “I guess they were on their way to the cliff and happened upon it. It’s definitely a strange scene, so brace yourselves.”

Nerves grew inside Jake. The files had told him that the last scene was exceptionally clean, with a woman inside of a body bag and left in the forest. Now, there was a second woman. Jake held his breath as they continued on their way until finally, they reached a clearing deep within the forest.

And there it was: the crime scene. Officers swarmed around a body bag that was partially unzipped, taking photos, and Jake couldn’t see inside it.

“Witnesses opened up the bag,” George muttered grimly. “They didn’t know what they were gonna find inside.”

He motioned for Jake and Lauren to come closer, and they both stepped forward. Jake paused and glanced at Lauren, who nodded back.

Jake took a deep breath and peeked inside the bag. And there it was: a pale young woman with her eyes closed, her skin almost translucent in color. Her hair was long and dark, and it hung around her shoulders like a curtain of night. She wore a simple dress that was slightly askew from when the witnesses had opened up the bag—the only sign that someone else had touched her since her death.

But that wasn’t the strangest part. The more Jake took in her appearance, the more he noted how clean she was. No blood. No dirt. She looked like an embalmed corpse, ready for a viewing.

Jake stepped back, feeling a chill run down his spine. He glanced around the clearing, noting the tape barring off much of the woods and the officers who were still taking photos and

collecting evidence. He tried to picture the forest without any of them in it—he tried to picture a faceless killer, making his way through these woods with a body bag and a victim inside. He could have come from any direction. Even if there had been footprints, they were all muddied up from the police walking through.

Jake shivered and looked back at the body bag. Whoever had done this was a cold, calculating killer. They had been careful to ensure that the victim was left in a pristine state, with no evidence of a struggle or any signs of life. The killer had planned this out perfectly, down to the last detail—and it made Jake uneasy.

The last scene had been eerily clean like this too, but Jake had only seen photos of that victim. Right now, Fiona should be performing her examination.

Maybe she'd be able to find something he couldn't see here.

“We better go see what Fiona uncovered,” Jake said.

Lauren looked at him with a scowl. “No, we should go talk to the families first.”

Jake nodded. “Oh, okay. I just wanted to—”

“Actually, you know what?” Lauren shot back suddenly. “That sounds good, Jake. You go talk to Fiona. I'll borrow one of the police cars and go talk to the families.”

Jake paused, trying to figure out if he'd taken her tone correctly. Why did she seem pissed? “Are you good?” he asked her. “We don't have to split up.”

“We're fine, Jake,” Lauren muttered, turning away. “We don't have to be attached at the hip all the time. Go ahead.”

Jake hesitated, but he decided to take her word. She was right—they didn't always have to be together. Still, he could tell there was something off about her attitude, but he didn't want to push it.

“Okay,” he said. “I'll head over to Fiona and see what she's found.”



Hopefully it would be good. Because there was a killer out there, and Jake didn't want to see any more lives lost.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Fiona made her way through the hallway of the coroner's, looking for the room the receptionist had sent her to, where apparently, the coroner was waiting for her. As much as she'd tried to act calm, Fiona's anxiety mounted by the second; she hadn't been expecting to be sent off on her own, and she was nervous to meet the coroner and examine the body outside of her comfort zone.

She'd been even more mortified when Jake had commented on her lipstick. What kind of idiot was she? She had totally forgotten to take it off after her ridiculous online dating attempt, which she was hoping to forget all about. She'd delete her profile later, but for now, she had to work.

Fiona eventually found the door she had been looking for and stopped outside of it, her heart beating quickly. She took a few moments to compose herself before knocking. She could hear muffled voices from inside, and then silence. After a moment, the door opened and an older man with a stern face looked down at her. He was dressed in a white lab coat and had a stethoscope slung around his neck. He had salt and pepper hair, and his sharp eyes cut through her almost immediately as he surveyed her from head to toe with a look of disapproval.

"You must be Fiona Red," he said gruffly as he stepped aside to let her in. "It's about time you showed up."

Fiona stepped into the room, taking in her surroundings; there was a long metal table in the middle of the room with a body lying on top of it covered by a white sheet, and various medical equipment scattered around it.

Facing the coroner, Fiona said, "Is this the right body here?" She swiftly approached, ready to get started.

"Slow down, girl," he cut in. Frowning, Fiona faced him.

"I'm sorry—what?"

He shoved past her as he put latex gloves on, his face now covered in a mask with safety glasses. “I’m performing this examination. You may stand back and watch.”

Flustered, Fiona took a moment to process what he’d just said. Then the frustration—and offense—struck. Did he think she was incapable?

“I was sent here to help,” Fiona said. “I’m with the FBI, remember? This is my case—I need to view the body.”

“I don’t want you taking over my job, girly,” he shot back.

Fiona’s fists balled. “I am not taking over your job, I want to work together.”

He hesitated, and Fiona could tell he was considering her words. She took a deep breath, trying to remain calm.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I just want to help out in any way I can. I promise that I won’t step on your toes—I just want to find out what happened.”

The coroner sighed and looked away for a moment before finally meeting her gaze again.

“All right,” he said reluctantly. “Let’s work together. I’m Dr. David McDaniel.”

Fiona smiled in relief, glad that they had managed to come to an understanding; if they worked together, they would be able to catch the killer faster.

“Go on, then,” David told her. “Go get suited up, and we’ll perform the examination.”

Fiona nodded and quickly got to work. She put on a pair of latex gloves and a face mask, making sure that it was securely fastened around her head before she stepped up to the metal table. She could feel her heart pounding as she looked at the body lying there, covered in a white sheet. Taking a deep breath, she slowly pulled back the sheet, revealing the corpse beneath. The immediate smell of formaldehyde cut through Fiona’s mask; she had her mother’s overly sensitive nose.

The sight of the dead body sent chills down Fiona’s spine. It seemed like just yesterday that this person had been alive

and breathing. Now, she was here in front of her—cold and lifeless. She recalled what Lauren had said. This was a twenty-three-year-old woman named Marissa Mason. Fiona felt a wave of sadness wash over her as she looked at the corpse. No one deserved to end up like this.

Fiona took a few moments to compose herself before turning to Dr. McDaniel for instruction, not wanting to step on his toes.

“We already examined this body thoroughly,” he told her, “but as you know, with another body being found, we are giving it another go. I doubt you’ll be able to find anything my team missed, but go ahead and try.”

Fiona nodded. With his permission, she began her examination of the body, tracing her eyes along the girl’s pale, clean skin.

“Were there any insects found with her?” Fiona asked.

“Insects?” McDaniel raised an eyebrow.

“I’m an entomologist as well,” Fiona said. “I often look at insects first. I know she was found two days ago, but surely you kept samples of anything found on her? I know she was found in the woods, so there must have been some blow flies, at the very least?”

“No,” McDaniel said. “She was found exactly like this, there was nothing to clean off her.”

“What?” Fiona frowned. That didn’t make any sense. “How \_\_\_”

“A body bag,” McDaniel said. “Didn’t they tell you anything? This woman was found dead in a body bag in the woods, and I have to say, she’s the cleanest murder victim I’ve ever encountered.”

Fiona was perplexed. Most of the victims she’d worked hands-on with had been left carelessly somewhere for long enough to at least attract some insects. But Marissa was so clean—intentionally clean, it seemed. Fiona’s mind raced with questions and theories, but no matter how she tried, she

couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation. She couldn't help but feel like something was off about the whole situation.

As Fiona continued to scan the corpse for any clues, her mind began to race with possibilities. Who was Marissa Mason? Why did someone go through so much trouble just to kill her? Was it personal or random? And why put her in a body bag after she died? These were all questions that needed answers, and Fiona knew that if she wanted them answered, she would need to start piecing together every tiny detail until they formed one big picture.

"There are no visible injuries at all," Fiona noted, moving to the girl's face. She stopped at her slack jaw, slightly ajar. She held out her hand and said, "Flashlight, please?"

McDaniel grunted, but then passed it to Fiona, allowing her to work freely. She had tunnel vision now, anyway, and could not care less if he was frustrated with her or not. She had a crime to solve.

Using her gloved hand, Fiona peered beyond the eyelids. Nothing to note. But as she gently pulled open the mouth, she pointed the flashlight inside and illuminated the inside of her mouth and throat. And there she saw it—red chemical burns on the inside of the trachea.

Fiona pulled away, feeling remorse for the way this woman's life ended. It must have been awful.

"We ran toxicology reports on her," McDaniel said, as though he could read Fiona's mind. "She had ingested copious amounts of bleach."

Fiona's stomach sank as she imagined what this poor girl must have gone through.

"And the formaldehyde?" Fiona asked. "I can smell it on her skin."

"Whoever put her in the body bag applied it," McDaniel explained.

Fiona looked down at the body. It was almost like the killer had wanted to... preserve her. Not only had he killed her in a way that would show no visible marks, but he had even put

formaldehyde on her skin. What kind of evil, twisted individual could do such a thing?

She pictured the killer. Who he could be. Perhaps he was a mad scientist, a man who had been driven insane by his own experiments and who was now seeking revenge on the world. Maybe he was a psychopath, someone who enjoyed killing and wanted to make sure that all of his victims were remembered for eternity. Or maybe it was something simpler—maybe the killer was an obsessive-compulsive individual with an unhealthy fascination with death who wanted to make sure Marissa’s body stayed in pristine condition even after her death.

He could be someone with a medical background, either a doctor or nurse. He would be meticulous, organized, and patient. He had to have been methodical in his approach to killing Marissa, as evidenced by the way he had put her body in the body bag and applied formaldehyde to her skin. She thought of her parents’ funeral business; Fiona had grown up seeing embalmed bodies, and this one reminded her just of that.

The killer could be someone who knew Marissa personally, as well. A neighbor? Family member? Friend? Maybe even a romantic partner? Whoever it was must have been close enough to her that they knew of her daily routine and whereabouts—otherwise, how else would he have been able to commit such a heinous crime without being noticed?

Fiona shuddered at the thought of it all. There was something sinister about this case. She needed to tell Jake and Lauren before it was too late.

## CHAPTER SIX

Fiona stood outside of the coroner's office, but even with the sun on her skin, she was shivering and had goosebumps. This coldness would follow her all day. She was haunted by the image of the girl back there, even though she'd seen so many bodies in her lifetime. As the child of two parents who ran a funeral home, Fiona was not new to death, but even then, it was rare to see bodies so... young. Most people who passed through her family's funeral home were elderly or at least sick.

A murder victim was something else entirely. And though Fiona had seen her share of those at this point too, it still left her feeling hollow. That could have been her only days ago, if Jake hadn't come to save her.

She just hoped Jake and Lauren had found something useful at the latest crime scene.

Fiona looked up as she heard a car pull into the lot. Jake's car, a sleek black sedan, pulled up to the curb. Fiona expected to see Lauren in the passenger seat, but it was empty.

Her mind raced; she didn't know what to do—get into Jake's passenger seat, or the back as always? Her anxiety won, and she instinctively went for the back seat. As she opened the door, Jake looked back and said, "Hey, what are you doing? Front seat's empty."

Face flushed, Fiona slipped into the front seat beside Jake and did up her seatbelt. "S-sorry, I didn't realize Lauren wasn't here," she lied, not looking at Jake.

It felt strange to be in this spot. This was Lauren's spot. Fiona belonged in the back. Didn't she?

"Where's Lauren?" she tentatively asked.

Jake began driving out of the parking lot, their destination unknown to Fiona. He had sunglasses on, which trapped the sunlight as he geared back to the main road, merging with

traffic. “She’s talking to the families of the victims to see if they have anything in common. Normally I’d go with her, but she thought we should split up. Can cover more ground that way.”

Fiona studied Jake’s profile. His expression was tight, as though something was bothering him.

“Is... that all?” she tentatively asked.

He shot her a frown. “Yeah. Why?”

“No reason,” she murmured, not wanting to step out of line. Of course, just on their last case, she had talked to Jake about his relationship with Lauren and how it seemed like it could be a distraction to him. She wondered if anything had changed between them—were they still together? Or doing that on-again, off-again thing they apparently always did?

It was really none of Fiona’s business, she concluded, reminding herself not to be too nosy. Still, she got a strange vibe from Jake and Lauren’s relationship sometimes. She just felt like it wasn’t going to end well.

Pushing that aside, Fiona refocused on the case. They had more pressing matters at hand. “How was the crime scene?”

“Brutal,” Jake admitted. “Very cold. Calculating. The woman was found just like the last—in a body bag, completely sterile. What did you find?”

Fiona nodded, thinking over her examination with Dr. McDaniel. “Nothing that the coroner hadn’t already discovered. It seems that she died from extreme bleach poisoning, and it seemed like it was poured directly down her throat. There was also formaldehyde on her body that seemed to have been put there by the killer.” A chill ran down Fiona’s spine. “It’s as though he is trying to... preserve them.”

Jake’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Yeah,” he muttered, his voice grim. “It’s like he doesn’t want them to decay or decompose. Like they’re trophies to him.”

Fiona nodded slowly. The killer was smart—and organized. It seemed as though he had a plan and wasn’t afraid of getting caught. If they could figure out what that plan was, then



maybe they could finally catch this monster before he continued his reign of terror on Portland.

“Do you think we’re dealing with a serial killer?” Fiona asked, voice trembling slightly.

“I don’t want to jump to conclusions,” Jake said slowly, but Fiona could see the wheels turning in his head as he put together pieces of the puzzle. “But it looks like it could be possible. We need to find out who this person is before anyone else gets hurt.”

Fiona bit her lip and nodded, feeling the weight of their task pressing down on her shoulders. She knew that if they didn’t act fast, more innocent lives would be lost—and that was something she couldn’t bear to think about.

She brought her attention to the city outside the windows as Jake drove. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“Lunch break,” he muttered. “I’m starving, and I figured we could trade theories as we eat.”

Fiona nodded, relieved to have a moment of respite. She was exhausted, and the thought of a good meal sounded like heaven right now. Of course, the idea of spending even more alone time with Jake made her palms sweaty.

Jake pulled up to a small coffee shop downtown. The sun shone brightly off its windows, and Fiona could see that it was bustling with people inside. She took a deep breath, feeling her spirits lift as they stepped out into the fresh air. It felt good to be outside, in public again after being cooped up all morning.

As they walked toward the entrance, Fiona noticed a few people sitting on benches outside, enjoying their drinks and snacks in the sunshine. A couple of dogs were playing near an old oak tree in the corner and she smiled at them fondly as she passed by. It was nice to see the people of Portland happy, enjoying their days. Inside the shop, there were cozy tables scattered throughout the room with bright yellow curtains hung over each window letting in streams of sunlight that lit up the room with warmth and cheerfulness. There was an inviting aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the

air along with mouth-watering pastries displayed behind glass cases that made Fiona's stomach rumble with anticipation for lunch. Sometimes it was hard to eat on the job, but she needed to fuel her brain. She'd learned the hard way when she was at Harvard that starving oneself does not improve productivity.

They went up to the counter and ordered—Fiona grabbed an omelet with feta cheese, while Jake asked for a sandwich. After receiving their food, Jake led her to a private booth in the back corner of the shop, away from the hustle and bustle of the other customers. As they sat down, Fiona couldn't help but admire how cozy it was. The walls were painted a soft lavender, and there were yellow tulips in a vase on the table that gave off a sweet scent. There was also a small lamp that illuminated their corner with its warm glow, which helped ease Fiona's anxiety as she sat directly across from Jake.

“So,” Jake began, taking a bite of his smoked meat sandwich on rye, “where do you think the killer is doing all this? The bodies are clearly well-maintained, and we haven't found a speck of evidence on any of them. So this guy must know what he's doing.”

Fiona thought on it as she took a tiny bite of her food. She pictured who the killer might be—someone who had access to body bags and formaldehyde. They weren't exactly hard to find, and any person could realistically obtain these things with some perseverance, but Fiona couldn't help but feel like they were looking for someone in the medical field. A doctor, a coroner, a mortician, maybe even someone who worked at a funeral home, like her parents.

Either way, it was clear to Fiona that this person had gone to great lengths to ensure the bodies were spotless. They must have killed the women in an extremely sterile location, or, at the very least, moved them to one to clean them up after killing them.

“I think,” she began, her eyes narrowed in concentration as her mind worked to piece together all the evidence they had, “that our killer has some kind of medical expertise. They must have access to body bags and formaldehyde, which suggests that they work in a medical field or have access to one. It also

explains why the bodies are so clean—they know what chemicals to use and how to properly preserve them.” Fiona paused for a moment and took another bite of her omelet before continuing. Jake simply nodded along, listening. “It could be anyone from a doctor or coroner to a mortician, or even someone who works at a funeral home,” she said thoughtfully. “But whoever our killer is, it’s clear that they plan their murders carefully and know exactly what they’re doing.”

She looked up at Jake, noticing his expression as he mulled over her theories. She couldn’t help but feel proud of herself for being able to come up with such an educated guess and not be immediately dismissed.

“That’s good thinking, Red,” he said. “If you had to choose any profile at the top of that list, who would you choose?”

Fiona thought. The level of cleanliness on those bodies had immediately reminded her of her parents’ funeral business.

“Honestly, the mortician,” Fiona confessed. “My parents run and own a funeral home and my father is a mortician. What I saw at the coroner’s reminded me of that. Like the killer wanted the bodies to appear embalmed and ready for a funeral viewing.”

Jake nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “It’s definitely something to consider,” he said. “That’s why I wanted you on the team. You have a keen eye, Fiona.”

Fiona blushed, feeling her cheeks heat up. She never expected Jake to be so impressed by her insight, and it made her feel more confident in their mission. “You wanted me here?” she asked. “I figured the chief just... put it together.”

“He did,” Jake said, taking a bite of his sandwich, “but he also asked me how I felt about it first. Then we ran it by Lauren. I was into the idea of having you on board off the bat. You’re a hard worker.” A smile suddenly split his face. “Just please don’t throw yourself into danger again, okay?”

Fiona couldn’t help but smile back. She held up her fists. “Hey, I’ll have you know, I signed up at my local gym.”

Jake lifted an eyebrow. “Really? Have you gone yet?”

Fiona deflated jokingly. “Well, not yet. But I totally will. I know I’m not exactly fit like you and Lauren, but I could get there.”

Jake smiled and shook his head. “You seem like the type of person who could accomplish anything you set your mind to, so yeah, I could see you suddenly becoming jacked.”

Fiona laughed, feeling a warmth inside her that she hadn’t felt in a long time. It was nice to have someone who believed in her.

Just then, Jake’s phone buzzed, and he quickly reached into his pocket to answer it. Fiona felt a twinge of disappointment as the moment came to an abrupt end. She suddenly realized how much she had enjoyed their conversation; it felt... light.

“Hey, Lauren, what’s up?” Jake said into the phone. He listened for a few moments before nodding and saying, “Got it.” He hung up and looked at Fiona apologetically. “Sorry,” he said, standing up and gathering his things. “We gotta go.”

Fiona stood too. “What’s going on?”

“I’m gonna drop you back off at the coroner’s—the new body should be there soon,” Jake said. “I need to meet with Lauren. She thinks she might have a lead.”

Fiona nodded. As nice as this had been, their work was nowhere near over. She knew Jake and Lauren were used to the danger of this job, but it still stirred up anxiety for Fiona.

Working for the FBI could be more than sitting in a lab—it could also mean life and death. And she’d experienced that before, on their last case. Part of her longed to get back out there and join the danger—at the same time, the coroner’s office was safe.

She just hoped Jake and Lauren would be safe too.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Jake pulled his car outside of the police station, where Lauren was waiting for him outside. She'd borrowed one of the police cars to drive and talk to the families, and so Jake had agreed to pick her up at the station after she returned the car. That was one of the benefits of being an active FBI agent; the police would normally play nice and give them the same perks they'd give to their own men. Most of the time, anyway. While the Portland police had a pretty good relationship with the FBI, Jake had encountered some small-town cops who didn't take too kindly to feds getting involved in their work.

He saw Lauren standing at the side of the road and pulled his car out front. She went straight for the passenger seat, where only minutes ago, Fiona had sat.

Their short lunch together flitted through his mind. He'd found himself surprisingly relaxed in Fiona's presence; he was getting to know her more, and it turned out she had a bit of a sense of humor too. Plus, whatever she'd done with her makeup made her look pretty. Not that she wasn't pretty already—she was. Just not really Jake's type. He'd always gone for the sporty blonde girls, like Lauren. But either way, being around Fiona had been strangely magnetic.

He slapped the thought from his mind. What was he thinking? He didn't have a thing for Fiona—he only had eyes for Lauren. At least, he'd only had eyes for her for about five years now...

Lauren opened up the passenger door and slipped into the seat, cutting Jake's reverie short.

"Hey," she said, buckling up.

Jake swallowed, strangely nervous. "Hey. You said you have a lead?"

"Yeah, turns out the two girls do have a connection—someone in their neighborhood they both had a date with."

Jake's brows shot up. "Wait, seriously?"

"Yep," Lauren said, popping the "p." "His name's Phil Thomas, seems like they both met him online and he took them each out. Sarah's mother talked about meeting him as he came to pick her up, and she said he seemed way too old for her daughter and definitely creepy. So I asked Marissa's roommates about a guy matching that description, and bingo. A match."

Jake was stunned. It seemed too good to be true, but definitely worth looking into. At the same time, he couldn't stop thinking about Fiona's mortician theory. They weren't just looking for anyone—they were looking for someone who had access to body bags and preserving chemicals.

"What's his job?" Jake asked.

"He's a fast food manager," Lauren said. "Why?"

Jake thought on it. A fast food manager? That didn't seem to fit. "Where the hell would he get body bags and formaldehyde?"

"I don't know," Lauren said, blinking at him like he was stupid. "The internet?"

"I guess so, but..." Jake trailed off. He couldn't shake the feeling that they should be looking into morticians before anyone else. "It's just, Fiona had this theory that the guy we're looking for could be a mortician. Did you know her family owns a funeral home?"

Lauren was silent for several long moments, taking it in. "So you think we should avoid this lead because of a hunch Fiona had?"

"No, but—"

"Let's just go with my lead," Lauren said coldly. "We can look into Fiona's theory after we investigate Phil Thomas. Just drive."

Her words bit him, but Jake shut his mouth and put the car in drive.

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Jake pulled his car up to Phil Thomas's house. The house appeared to have been neglected, with peeling paint and an unkempt lawn, even though quiet neighborhood was tidy and well-kept in comparison. Jake put the car in park and sighed. In truth, he was still annoyed at the way Lauren had ordered him around earlier, but he hadn't said anything about it, not wanting to add fuel to the fire. He'd learned better over the years.

Times like these reminded him why he and Lauren weren't exactly the "perfect" couple. They just... annoyed each other sometimes. He could tell she was pissed off at him for whatever reason, and he was pissed off at her for a more obvious one. They were partners, and he'd never tell her to "just drive."

He pushed it away, remembering Fiona's more-than-accurate theory that Jake's relationship with Lauren could be a distraction at work sometimes. The victims of this crime deserved better, and so he had to stay professional.

He got out of the car and Lauren followed, her face grim. Not sharing a word, they walked to the door, and Jake rang the bell.

They waited for what felt like forever before they heard footsteps coming down the stairs inside. The door opened and Phil Thomas appeared, looking tired and disheveled. He was wearing a faded blue T-shirt with stains on it and his hair was greasy and unkempt. It seemed like he hadn't shaved in days.

"Yeah?" he said.

Jake flashed his badge, along with Lauren. "Special Agent Jake Tucker with the FBI. This is my partner, Special Agent Lauren Price. Are you Phil Thomas?"

Phil scratched his head. He was a conventionally good-looking guy, with stubble and a square jaw, but he also looked unclean, and an odor permeated from inside his home. "Uh, yeah? Can I help you?"

Jake tried to picture Phil as their guy. It just didn't seem right. Behind Phil, Jake could see the stack of pizza boxes and plates piling up.

The person they were looking for was meticulous and clean. A perfectionist, most likely. Jake had a hard time seeing this messy, stinky guy being capable of cleaning up those murder victims and leaving them the way they were. At the same time, portraying himself as a slob would be a hell of a cover, and the fact that he'd allegedly met with both girls was too important to ignore.

Jake took out his phone and flashed a photo of Marissa Mason. "Do you recognize this woman?"

Phil blinked, then gave a lazy shrug. "I dunno. Don't think so."

"What about this one?" Lauren asked, showing him a photo of Sarah with her phone.

At that, Phil smiled. "Oh yeah, I remember her. She's a bit too young for me—we didn't exactly hit it off."

Jake paused. He was admitting he'd met with Sarah? "So you went on a date with this woman," he said. He held up the photo of Marissa again. "Are you sure you didn't also go out with this one?"

Phil looked at her, squinting, then nodded. "Oh, yeah... yeah... I think I have her on here." He showed his phone quickly. "Online dating. You know how it is, man." He kept his eyes on Jake. "Sometimes you just lose track of them, right, man?"

Jake didn't so much as crack a smile. "Right. I'm sorry to report this, but both of these women have been found dead. Murdered."

Phil's face suddenly became ashen, his mouth agape in shock. "Holy shit, really? That's messed up, man. Who did it?"

The agents exchanged a glance, then Jake said, "We don't know yet." He paused for a moment before continuing. "It



would really help us out if you could tell us anything else about either of the women.”

Phil shook his head slowly, still in shock. “No... no, I don’t remember much,” he stammered. “I mean, we talked a bit but nothing more than that...” He trailed off. “That Sarah girl was way too young... and that other chick... what was her name... Mary?”

“Marissa,” Lauren said.

“Right! Marissa,” Phil said, snapping his fingers. “She was just too much of a prude. I’m working the scene, y’know, and I make that clear on my profile. Been out with a different chick every night this week.”

Phil kept looking at Jake, as if Jake should be impressed by it. Really, he was just disgusted. Guys like this were slimy.

“Well, Phil,” Jake said, “two of the women you’ve now been on a date with are dead.”

Phil’s face suddenly became pale. He seemed to realize what they were implying and he backed away slowly, his eyes wide with fear. “Wait,” he stammered. “You can’t think I had anything to do with this?”

“You knew both of them,” Lauren cut in, “and now they’re dead. Their bodies were left in a forest not far from here.”

“Bro, I did not kill anyone,” Phil said, holding up his hands. “No way, that’s not cool.”

“Where were you last night?” Jake asked, stepping up.

“I told you, I was with a chick! I scored with her and everything, she stayed the night at my place, had to freaking pay for her cab a couple of hours ago just to get her to leave.”

Jake and Lauren exchanged a glance. They had their doubts about Phil’s alibi, but it was worth investigating further. Jake gave a curt nod and said, “We’ll need her name and contact information.”

“Yeah, no problem, man.”

Phil took out his phone and typed away for a moment, then turned the screen to Jake. The contact card for a woman named Brittany was on the screen. Jake quickly programmed in the number.

“You can talk to her if you want, she’ll tell you I was with her all night,” Phil said. “I rocked that chick’s world.”

Jake took the information, giving it a quick once-over before looking back at Phil. He didn’t understand how he was getting women to stay in this filthy house, but he supposed that was their business, not his.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Phil,” Jake said. “We’ll be in touch if we need anything else.”

Phil nodded, seemingly relieved that his involvement was over. He stepped back and waved as Jake and Lauren walked back to the car.

Jake got behind the wheel as Lauren slid into the passenger seat, a stiff expression on her face. Jake sighed.

“I really don’t think it’s him.”

Lauren’s eyes flashed. “We haven’t even confirmed the alibi yet.”

“No, but we will, and also, did you see that guy’s place? Maybe it’s a cover, but... I really can’t picture him being the meticulous clean freak of a killer we’re looking for.”

Lauren sighed, frustrated. She crossed her arms and looked out at Phil’s house. “I know, Jake. He’s far too messy.”

“Then this is a dead end.”

Lauren shrugged. “It looks like it.”

Jake started the car, and they drove away from Phil’s house. It was clear that he wasn’t the killer they were looking for, but there was someone out there who was responsible for these deaths.

They had to find them before anyone else got hurt.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Perfection.

That was all he'd ever desired.

As he prepared the table for its newest addition, he smiled to himself, running his finger along the smooth stainless steel. *This* was perfection. Cleanliness. Not a germ could survive in here.

It was the perfect place to prepare the next girl he'd take. And this one wouldn't disappoint him.

The last two had been duds. They had looked perfect from afar, but when he'd taken them in, he'd noticed the little flaws on them; the mole in the wrong place, the dent in the one girl's nose. Not good enough. Not for him.

At least they could still be perfect in death, thanks to him. He had left them in the cleanest, most perfect state they had ever been in. Really, they should have been thanking him instead of begging for their lives. Without his artistic touch, they would have died as imperfect beings.

He made his way across the room and to his supply closet. He had to ensure he had everything he needed—the bleach, the formaldehyde.

Yes, all was in order.

He chuckled, feeling a sense of pride. Perfection. It was all he ever wanted, and now he had it. And soon, the newest addition to his collection would be just as perfect.

All he had to do was wait for the sun to set. He already knew who his next choice had been; he'd spotted her from afar downtown, and he had big plans for this one. Big plans. She looked so perfect that he could have sworn she was a mannequin come to life.

And she was young, so young. Only twenty-one, according to the profile he'd met her on. He had recently turned thirty, a disgusting age he didn't care to think about, as it was only bringing him closer to his own state of decay, where his own perfect features would begin to sag and rot. The process had already begun, and he was growing to hate his own reflection in the mirror.

But with her, he'd be able to freeze time, at least in his own mind. She'd never age, she'd never become anything less than perfect.

He smiled, the thought of her already ensnaring his mind. Soon, his newest addition would be home. Soon, he'd have his own personal collection of perfection.

And she'd be the most perfect of them all.

It was his job—no, his duty—to take her, and make her more beautiful than she could ever possibly be without him.

She needed him. They all needed him.

And he was more than happy to provide them with the perfection they deserved.

Through the windows of the van, the day was finally merging into late afternoon. He checked the clock. Only a few more hours, and it would be dark. He glanced into his front seat, where the body bag waited. Waited for its newest addition.

He couldn't help but smile. The Egyptians believed that preserving the body would lead to immortality; if the body was destroyed, then the soul would die too. He wasn't sure he believed in any of that, but he did believe in something: perfection. Preservation. The art of beauty. Of life after death.

It was his mission to create perfection, and for that, he would do anything he had to.

For now, he just had to wait.

The night was coming, and with it, his newest masterpiece.

## CHAPTER NINE

Fiona let out a breath and covered the woman's body with the sheet.

Her full examination was complete, and it was the same story, yet again. This was the latest victim, and Fiona was disturbed to find she had also been left in an embalmed-like state.

No insects. No sign of any DNA, evidence, or even a speck of dirt.

Only scarring on the inside of her throat, indicating she had also been force-fed bleach.

Fiona shuddered just thinking about it.

"All done for the day?" Dr. McDaniel asked, and Fiona turned to see him enter the room in his lab coat. He'd warmed up to her slightly over the course of the day, and even backed off to let her work in peace, which she appreciated.

"Yes, I think I've collected all the data I can for now," Fiona said. "Thank you so much for your help."

Dr. McDaniel nodded. "I admit, you're nicer than some of the other people I've dealt with from the FBI. You did good work today."

Fiona smiled and nodded, taking off her gloves and going over to the sink to wash up. She hadn't realized how many hours had passed; she had just been working away, taking samples, testing them using the facility's equipment, and waiting on toxicology reports. Although they had done a lot of work, Fiona couldn't help but feel like nothing had been accomplished; they were still no closer to catching the killer.

"I'm just not sure what else we can do," Fiona said, and Dr. McDaniel nodded.

“I know, it’s a difficult situation. I’ve been collecting all the information I can to help you, but I’m afraid it’s not enough.”

Fiona sighed. “I know, and I appreciate your help. I just don’t know what else to do at this point. I feel like we’re running in circles.”

Dr. McDaniel patted her shoulder. “It’s okay. We’ll get there. We just have to keep looking. Don’t give up just yet.”

Fiona smiled, feeling a little better. “Thanks, Doctor. I’m sure we’ll find something soon.”

Dr. McDaniel nodded. “Yes, I’m sure we will. You look like you could use some rest, girl. Go get some.”

Fiona nodded and made her way out of the lab, feeling a chill wash over her. She was tired and frustrated, but she was determined to keep going. They had to find this killer, and soon. Before he could take another life. But she had nothing to work off at the moment. She just hoped Jake and Lauren had other plans. She hadn’t heard from Jake in some time, although he mentioned coming to pick her up from the coroner’s at six.

It was later now, and the sun would set within a couple of hours. Fiona looked up at the sky; the smell of summer drifted into the air. It was June, and she always felt nostalgic when this time of year came along.

Just then, a car pulled up in front of the building, and Fiona’s heart jumped. Jake had come for her, just like he said he would. She walked over to the car, and sure enough, there was Lauren in the passenger seat. Fiona got into the back.

“Hey, Fiona,” Jake said, “any news?”

He immediately began driving as Fiona pulled her seatbelt on.

“Same story as before, unfortunately,” she said. “I didn’t find anything new on the latest victim.”

Jake nodded, his expression solemn. Lauren was oddly quiet.

“We don’t have much either,” Jake said. “Lead was a dead end, and we’ve been looking into morticians or anyone who could seem suspicious, but nothing yet. The day slipped away from us.”

Fiona nodded, fighting the urge to sink into her seat. She wanted to do something, anything, to get closer to finding this killer. But right now, all she could do was hope.

“We’ll find something soon,” she said, more to herself than anyone else.

Jake smiled reassuringly. “We will. Don’t worry, Fiona. We’ll find this guy.”

Lauren nodded, her expression still grim. “I hope so. I don’t want to see another victim.”

Fiona took a deep breath. That was all they could do. Hope. Pray. Wait.

And, hopefully, find some answers.

“Anyway,” Jake said, glancing back at Fiona, “Lauren and I are gonna grab a hotel so we can stay in the area. I can drive you home if you want, or you can grab a room too. Your call.”

Fiona considered for a moment. She hated the thought of leaving the investigation, but she was exhausted. She needed rest, and a place to stay for the night might be nice.

“I think I’ll get a room,” she said. “I don’t want to leave until we have some answers.”

Jake nodded. “I understand. We’ll find something soon. I promise.”

Fiona smiled and returned her gaze to the window, watching the city pass by. She wanted to believe him, and yet, she couldn’t help but feel a little hopeless.

But she had to keep going. They all had to keep going. For the victims, and for the other potential victims.

The night crept closer, and Fiona held onto her faith. Soon, they would find something. Soon, they’d have an answer. Soon, they’d have justice.

Until then, they'd keep searching.

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Fiona felt out of place as she stood behind Jake and Lauren in the hotel lobby. It was a nice enough hotel; the lobby had a faint, yet pleasant smell of fresh coffee and baked goods, as well as a light aroma of citrus from the air freshener used to keep it smelling clean.

“Two rooms,” Jake told the receptionist. “Only one bed in each. A queen for ours, preferably.”

Fiona's cheeks flushed. Of course Jake and Lauren would share a bed; they were a couple, after all, as doomed as Fiona couldn't help but feel they were. The receptionist handed Jake the keycards, and he handed one to Fiona.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

The three of them took the elevator to the second floor, and Fiona suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her. She wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed and sleep for days on end.

But she had promised herself she would find answers, no matter how long it took. She had to stay strong and focus on her goal.

Jake and Lauren stepped out of the elevator first, leaving Fiona alone with her thoughts as they moved down the hall toward their room. She stepped out after them and followed in their direction. Jake tapped his keycard against the door right across from the number written on Fiona's card.

“Well, I guess this is me,” Fiona said.

Jake and Lauren looked back at her. “We'll be in touch if we need anything,” Lauren said, turning into the room and leaving Fiona in the hall with Jake.

He rubbed the back of his neck, looking strangely nervous. “Feel free to keep researching, let us know if you get any



ideas. We'll do the same, okay?"

Fiona nodded, biting her lip. With that, Jake gave her one last smile before the room to his door closed, and Fiona faced hers.

When she opened the door to her room and stepped inside, she was pleasantly surprised. The room was spacious, with a king-size bed, a window overlooking the city, and a large desk with a lamp on it. On the wall was a flat-screen TV, and next to it on the opposite wall was a small sofa with a coffee table in front of it. Fiona dropped her backpack on the bed and unzipped it, taking out her toiletries and setting them on the bathroom counter. She undressed and placed her clothes in the dresser, taking out a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. On the bathroom counter, she found a small bottle of shampoo and body wash. It was all very luxurious and comfortable. She couldn't help but feel grateful and relieved.

In a way, she was glad to have some time alone to collect herself. Today had been busy, and there was a lot of pressure with Jake and Lauren being so close to her. Fiona also couldn't help but feel that Lauren really did not like her.

Putting that thought aside, Fiona went over to her bed and sat down on the plush comforter. This case was hitting a bit close to home, and she wondered what her father might think of it—being a mortician, and all.

She took out her phone and dialed his number, lying back on the couch. She had a good relationship with her parents. Especially after Joslyn disappeared, they all grew very close as a family and had only grown stronger over the years. Fiona always knew she could trust them to be there for her when she needed it.

Of course, she also didn't want to tell them that she had been looking into Joslyn's case again. There was no point in bringing up bad memories for them, not if there was no resolution, and Fiona was pretty sure she wouldn't suddenly discover something in Joslyn's case.

The phone rang, and after the third ring, her dad's voice came on the line. "Fiona? Is that you?" he asked, his voice

brightening with warmth.

“Hey, Dad,” Fiona replied softly. She breathed in deeply and smiled as she smelled the faint aroma of coffee coming from the room’s complimentary Keurig machine. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“Where are you? Are you okay?” her father asked quickly, a note of worry in his tone.

“I’m fine,” she reassured him. “I’m currently at a hotel in South Portland, doing some research for a case I’m working on.”

Fiona had briefly informed her parents about the fact that she’d gotten to work closely with two FBI agents on a case. She left out the part about almost dying, as she knew that would just make them worry—but did mention the fact that Special Agent Jake Tucker saved her in a moment of need.

“Actually, Dad, I have a bit of a weird question,” Fiona began. She’d never been one to involve her parents too closely in her work, but this was a bit of a unique situation. “I was hoping you could provide some... insight into the case I’m working.”

“Well, sure, Fiona, I can try to help,” her dad said.

She took a deep breath. “Okay, well... we have two victims so far. And both of them have been found zipped up in body bags in a forest. I performed examinations on both of them, and it turns out they had formaldehyde on their skin. Their cause of death was ingestion of bleach.”

“Oh my, that sounds awful, Fi,” her dad said. “Those poor girls. What do you need from me?”

“Well...” Fiona paused. “The thing is, it seems almost like the killer is trying to, well, embalm them. They look so pristine in the bags, with no insects on them at all. I suspect we may be looking for a mortician, or someone else who might have easy access to body bags and formaldehyde.”

“Hmm,” her dad said, and Fiona held her breath, eager to hear what he had to say. “Well, you could be looking for a coroner too. They have access to body bags and embalming

fluid, and could have some knowledge of how to preserve a body. It also could be someone who works in a funeral home, or someone with medical training who knows how to deal with bodies after death. It's possible that the killer is just trying to recreate the process of embalming in an attempt to play God."

"Play God?" Fiona asked. That part stood out to her.

"Well, there's something to be said about preserving life after death, Fi," her dad said. "A lot of cultures believe that the body holds the soul, and if the body dies, the soul dies with it. So they will try to preserve them in time. It's all quite morbid, really, but then again, so is dressing up our dead before we bury them."

Fiona considered her dad's theory. She had to admit, it was an interesting perspective. It was possible that the killer was trying to artificially preserve life after death, a process which many cultures have done throughout time and still do today. Embalming could be seen as a way of playing God and holding onto life, even if it wasn't real life anymore.

Someone might attempt to recreate this process in order to keep their victims in some sort of eternal limbo state—neither alive nor dead, just stuck somewhere in between. It was an eerie thought, but one she couldn't ignore, either. It helped her build a profile in her mind; an image of this faceless man and his psychology.

"Thanks, Dad," Fiona said. "That helps."

"No problem, sweetheart," her dad said. "I'm glad I could help. You take care of yourself now, okay?"

"I will," Fiona promised. "Love you."

"Love you too," her dad replied, and with that, the call ended.

Fiona hung up the phone and sat back in her chair, taking a few moments to collect her thoughts. It was always great to talk to her parents.

When she was younger, they had so many great holidays together, when Joslyn was still around. She remembered her childhood fondly, especially her memories of her sister.

She'd never forget the time her dad had been making Christmas dinner, and Joslyn had insisted on helping out. Fiona had been so proud of her sister that day, watching her expertly chop celery and carrots with a big smile on her face. She was always so full of life and joy, even when things weren't going well.

Fiona smiled at the memory, feeling a warmth in her heart as she remembered what it felt like to have her sister around. She wanted to remember Joslyn as she was before the tragedy—happy and carefree, with a bright future ahead of her. It made Fiona feel like she could keep going too, if only for the sake of keeping Joslyn's memory alive.

They'd shared so many Christmases and holidays, so many birthdays, so many joyous memories.

Of course, there had been the fights too.

She remembered the first time Joslyn had caught Fiona stealing one of her T-shirts.

"Fiona, you idiot!" Joslyn had exclaimed. They must have been eleven and twelve.

She remembered the tears of guilt she'd shed that day, as well as the lecture Joslyn had given her.

"I'm not mad, Fiona," Joslyn had said. "I'm just disappointed. You know I love you, right?"

"Of course," Fiona had replied.

"I love you more than anything," Joslyn had said. "Why would you do something like that?"

"I was just trying to make myself feel better," Fiona had admitted. "The girls at school... they said I have no style. But you always look so pretty and—"

Joslyn had hugged her for that, and Fiona remembered the warmth of her sister's embrace.

"I love you, sis," Joslyn had said. "So much. And those girls are stupid. I can totally kick their butts if you want."

“No, don’t do that,” Fiona had said, feeling the ache of tears in her eyes. She had expected Joslyn to be mad at her, but her sister had her back.

It had been one of the most heartfelt, remorseful moments in Fiona’s life. She had been so young and frightened back then, and Joslyn had been there for her. They’d always been close, but that was the moment when Fiona had realized just how important Joslyn was to her.

Snapping back to the present, she reminded herself that she had work to do here and now, not in the past. She wanted to know what Jake might think about this, but she also wasn’t about to go knock on his door... not when he was in there alone with Lauren.

She took out her phone and sent him a text:

*We might be looking for someone who wants to play God... preserving life and beauty after death... thoughts?*

Moments later, Jake texted back:

Looking into it.

## CHAPTER TEN

Mia quickly checked her appearance in the camera of her phone, appreciating the way her makeup looked under the streetlamp she was passing under as she walked. She'd put on subtle makeup and did her hair nice to impress her date, Ralph, who'd asked to meet her at a park on the outskirts of her neighborhood. Ralph had visited her earlier at work today, and he was such a sweet guy—a little older than what she usually went for, but that was what she needed in her life.

At twenty-one, Mia had dated a handful of guys around her age, and, well, they were always so immature. But Ralph was thirty, even though he really only looked like he was at most twenty-five. He didn't have a wrinkle on his face and was always clean-shaven.

Really, he was such a good-looking guy. She couldn't wait to see him again. This relationship was new, but something about it felt... real.

And he'd wanted to meet her at the park, which was so romantic. They could spend some time alone under the stars... all of it sounded like a dream.

Mia continued her walk to the park, feeling a little bit of excitement as she approached it. She saw the benches and the trees, but it was too dark to make out any details. There were no streetlights here, only the faint light of the moon and stars above her.

As Mia kept walking, she noticed the trees lining the streets becoming thicker and fuller—she must be getting close to the park. As if to confirm her suspicions, she soon saw signs pointing toward it from different directions.

When Mia finally reached the entrance of the park, she took a moment to take in its beauty. There were tall oak trees with branches that seemed to stretch up into eternity, each one illuminated by moonlight that cascaded down like silver

raindrops all around them. The grass had been freshly cut and smelled sweet and inviting.

The stars shone brightly above like tiny diamonds twinkling against an inky black sky—a perfect backdrop for what promised to be an unforgettable night with Ralph ahead of her. Taking a deep breath, Mia stepped further into the park.

The air was still, and the only sound Mia could hear was her own footsteps on the path. It felt like time had stopped for a moment. She looked around for Ralph, but he wasn't there yet. He'd said he'd be waiting for her by the bench next to the lamp post. The air was cool and refreshing, perfect for a romantic evening stroll, so she hoped she'd see him soon.

Then, something caught her eye—a figure in the distance, sitting on one of the benches. And there was the lamppost too. It looked like something was beside him—a black object, maybe a jacket? But it was too warm out for that. As she walked closer, she realized it was Ralph—his eyes twinkling with anticipation as he watched her approach him from afar. He stood up, leaving whatever he had with him on the bench beside him.

Mia waved and trotted over to him. Once close enough, she could make out his handsome features. He was wearing a hat tonight, concealing the top part of his face.

“Hi, Ralph!” Mia exclaimed, smiling.

“Good evening, Mia,” Ralph said with a smirk. “You're looking especially perfect tonight.”

“Thank you,” Mia said happily. “You look great too.”

“I wanted to dress up for you.”

Mia blushed. She was glad she'd worn a nice dress. “I like it,” she said. “It's a nice change from your usual... style.”

Ralph chuckled, and his laugh was deep and warm. “I thought you might.”

Mia smiled, feeling at ease. “So, where are we going? Are we just going to walk around the park?”

“That’s the plan,” Ralph said. “But... I have a surprise for you first.”

Mia’s heart began to race at hearing those words. A surprise? Her eyes widened with anticipation. “Oh, really? What is it?”

“Come a little closer, love,” he said, gesturing for her to step closer to the park bench.

The air in the park seemed to stand still. Suddenly, Mia was struck with a feeling of unease. Here they were, completely alone in this remote park... and something about Ralph seemed off... different. He wasn’t as laid-back and charismatic as he’d been earlier and the last time they’d met. He seemed to be staring at her intensely, and his voice came out more excited and strange.

Still, he was a nice guy... and she had liked him so much... she didn’t know why she was suddenly sort of freaked out by him. She decided to brush it aside. Must just be anxiety.

Mia stepped closer to the bench. Ralph kept his eyes on her as he reached over and picked up the object he had with him. It appeared to be a giant bag of some kind with a long zipper down the front. Was there something in it? A dress?

“I think it will fit you very nicely,” Ralph said.

“What is it?” Mia asked, still fighting off her unease.

“Come a little closer.”

She did.

Ralph unzipped the bag.

Inside, it was empty.

Mia staggered back slightly. Was this some sort of joke?

Ralph’s eyes darkened as he looked at her. “It’s time, my perfect girl,” he said in a low, raspy voice.

Before Mia could react, Ralph lunged forward and grabbed her by the shoulders. She screamed, but the sound seemed to get lost in the night air as she suddenly found herself being



dragged away from the bench and into a dark corner of the park.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jake's eyes fluttered open to sunlight through the hotel window, with the warmth of Lauren's body at his side. Memories of the previous day slowly crept in. After getting into the hotel, they'd ordered in a quick dinner and spent the rest of the night researching potential perps. They had found only one who stood out—an ex-doctor with a criminal record—but the suspect didn't seem to fit the bill perfectly, especially since he lived on the other side of the city. Still, Jake and Lauren had decided they'd go talk him at some point today. Just in case.

Jake crossed his hands behind his head and thought about the text Fiona had sent last night. They hadn't met back up with her, but what she'd said interested him—the potential God complex of the killer. He wondered if this was the type of guy who idolized ancient religions or something along those lines.

Lauren stirred beside him, and Jake nudged her to wake her up. She grumbled and rolled away from him.

Last night, they hadn't slept together—they'd just focused on work, but Jake had felt that coldness from her all night. He hoped she'd be over it soon. He really did have to tell the chief about their relationship... and he would. Soon.

“Lauren, we gotta get up,” Jake said. “It's nearly six a.m.”

Lauren groaned, but finally opened her eyes. The sight of Jake seemed to brighten her mood, and she smiled at him.

“Good morning,” she said, stretching her arms above her head.

“Morning.” Jake smiled back at her and kissed her on the forehead. At least he got to wake up to her smile. Maybe she'd be more relaxed with him today. He hoped so.

Just as Jake was about to swoop in for a kiss, his phone started to buzz on the nightstand. He reached over and grabbed it, only to see the chief's name on his screen.

"Shit, it's Whittaker," he said, then answered. "Chief, what's going on?"

"Tucker," Chief Whittaker said, "are you with Price and Red?"

Jake glanced at Lauren. "Uh, yeah, we all grabbed a hotel. What's going on?"

"You three better get your asses up and get ready," the chief said, his voice stern. "They found another body. Same MO."

Jake's stomach fell. He exchanged a tense look with Lauren and swallowed hard. "On it, Chief. We'll be there stat."

Jake hung up the phone, and both he and Lauren ripped out of the bed. Their short comfort together was over.

As Jake rushed to throw his clothes on, he couldn't help but feel like this case was already toppling over on his head. If they'd searched harder yesterday... if they hadn't wasted time going to Phil's house... would they have found someone faster?

He didn't know. But he needed to make up for this, and he needed to do it fast.

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Jake ripped his car up to the curb of the park, his wheels screeching. It was still dusk, and the dim light of the sun bathed the park in a dimensionless light, silhouetting the trees. It was a remote park on the outskirts of a neighborhood far south, even farther than where the last victims were found... but still, the same general area.

The killer was hunting here. That much was certain.

Jake and Lauren got out of the car and slammed their doors shut. The park was swarming with officers, and crime scene

tape barred off much of the property. Jake and Lauren jogged in as fast as they could, holding up their FBI badges so curious officers would let them pass without a fuss.

Jake spotted Chief Williamson standing near the first bench, smoking a cigarette and talking to two officers.

“Chief,” he panted, running up to him. “What do we got?”

The area where the body was was completely cordoned off. Past that, a small group of officers were gathered. Jake could make out a lump in the distance.

The body bag.

He knew what would be inside of it.

“Jake, Lauren, thanks for coming in so fast,” Chief Williamson said. “We’ve got another one... same MO as before. The witness is still here—a guy out for a walk came across it and, well. You know how it goes.”

“Great,” Jake said, taking a deep breath. “Where is he?”

The chief pointed over to a man sitting on a park bench, being consoled by two officers. He was in his late seventies, with a large bag of groceries next to him. “He’s the one on the bench over there.”

Jake and Lauren looked over to where the chief was pointing. The man on the bench was hunched over in his seat, seemingly staring at the ground. He looked pretty old, and Jake couldn’t help but wonder if he would be able to offer them any useful information.

“Well,” Jake said, “guess we better go talk to him.”

Lauren nodded and followed Jake as they both walked over to the bench. The two officers who had been talking to the old man saw them approach and stepped aside.

The old man didn’t look up as they approached, and his face was expressionless. He was obviously still in shock from what he had seen.

“Sir,” Jake said softly, giving a slight nod of his head in greeting. “My name is Special Agent Tucker, and this here is

my partner, Special Agent Price.” He motioned to Lauren next to him. “We understand you were the one who found the body?”

The old man nodded slowly, still not looking up at them. His voice was shaky when he spoke. “Y-yes... I... I just came for a walk, like I do every morning since I retired. And then... then I saw it...” His voice broke off into sobs, and he wiped at his eyes with a trembling hand.

Jake exchanged a concerned glance with Lauren before crouching down in front of the old man so they were on eye level with each other. “It’s okay,” he said gently. “Take your time. Tell us how it happened.”

The man coughed into his arm. “I was walking home through the park with my groceries and I saw that... bag there. I thought maybe it was a prank by the local teenagers, and something compelled me to open it. God only knows what made me think that was a good idea.”

Jake felt for the guy. On one hand, he was glad the body had been discovered so quickly, but at the same time, this man would be haunted by this for the rest of his life.

“I’m old,” the man said. “I’ve seen a lot of people put into the ground. But they’re always old like me. It seems right, to see a wrinkled old body in a casket, you know?” He laughed morbidly and shook his head. “But she’s... so young. It just isn’t right.”

A chill ran through Jake’s core. At the man’s words, he couldn’t stop the mental images.

Flashes of blood.

His mother’s body, dead on the kitchen floor. Murdered by an intruder.

And Jake had been the one to find her.

His heart squeezed as he remembered what had happened to her. He had been a teenager, but his mom had Jake and his brother young—she was only in her thirties when she died.

He remembered thinking it didn’t look right, either.

He snapped himself from the memory. Jake had to stay in the moment. These women needed him now, and his mother was long dead—long beyond saving.

“It’s awful,” Jake told the man. “We’re with the FBI. We see a lot of people taken before their time, but that’s why we’re here. To try to stop it from happening again.”

“Did you see anything else?” Lauren chimed in. “Anyone suspicious around?”

The old man shook his head. “No. The park was so empty. The bag was just... alone. I don’t know who did it.”

Jake gave the man an understanding nod. He could tell the old man was in shock, but he had done the right thing by calling it in. “Thank you for your help,” Jake said sincerely, standing up and offering his hand to shake. “You did a brave thing.”

The old man smiled sadly and shook Jake’s hand gratefully. He was obviously still shaken up from what he had seen, but he seemed glad that someone was taking notice of it and trying to put an end to it.

“If there’s anything else you remember or want to share,” Jake said, giving him a business card with his contact information on it, “please don’t hesitate to call.”

The old man nodded solemnly as he took the card and tucked it away into his pocket.

Jake and Lauren turned toward the crime scene tape just a few feet away from them. They exchanged somber looks before walking over together and ducking under the yellow tape. Jake couldn’t help but feel an odd mixture of emotions. Anger, sadness, and determination all coursed through him as he thought about what had happened to this young woman, and all the other women out there who were still in danger. It was his job to help them... and yet he had failed this girl by not catching the killer in time.

Still, he wasn’t going to let them down. He was going to do whatever it took to make sure no more innocent lives were taken too soon.

He and Lauren slowly approached the body bag that contained the woman's remains. Jake took a deep breath to steady himself before looking inside the unzipped bag.

And there she was... a young woman. But even in death, she looked peaceful; it was almost as if she knew the horror of what had happened to her was now over, and that someone was finally taking notice of it. Her dark hair fanned out around her head, and her skin was so pale that it seemed almost translucent in the light. But that wasn't all. This girl, unlike the others, still had color to her face.

If he had to guess, this crime was fresh. It had potentially only been committed hours ago.

He wished Fiona were here to add some insight, but they'd rushed out without thinking to bring her along. Jake and Lauren were used to working alone, and in that moment, all Jake had cared about was getting to the crime scene.

Well, now they were here. And it looked just the same as the others.

This guy was on a rampage.

And Jake was sure he wouldn't stop anytime soon.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Fiona paced her hotel room, her hand on her sweaty forehead. Here she was, up and ready for the day, thinking she would be meeting with Jake and Lauren first thing—only to discover they were not even in the building.

They'd left her.

They'd woken up and left her.

Twenty minutes ago, Fiona received a text from Jake saying only: *On my way. Sorry we didn't wake you. New crime scene... new body. Talk soon.*

Fiona couldn't help but feel frustrated she'd been left behind. She'd thought that working with Jake and Lauren would mean she'd get more hands-on action, but so far, she'd only been where she always was: either in a lab or in an examination room.

Maybe she was being childish, but was she part of the team or not?

But Fiona knew she couldn't stay angry for long. She had to focus on the task at hand: finding this killer before he could find another victim.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. Fiona opened it to find Jake standing outside—no sign of Lauren.

"Hey," Jake said, his voice soft as he looked at her. He then pushed into her room, and Fiona jumped back, startled. Jake slid into the desk and pulled out his laptop, like he was in a huge rush.

Flustered and confused, Fiona stood over him. "Agent Tucker, what is going on?"

Jake's fingers flew across his keyboard as he logged into his laptop. "Lauren's talking to a guy we found last night who



we think might be a person of interest. Right now, you and I need to find any more suspects to add to that list, going off the very limited data we have.”

Fiona was quiet and Jake continued to work. She didn't know what to say. She felt confused, and like she wasn't sure what to do with herself, which made her feel very foolish. Of course, if she'd been at the crime scene to investigate with them, perhaps she'd feel differently. “Well, was there anything notable at the crime scene?” Fiona asked. “I... would have liked to be there.”

Jake finally stopped typing and flashed her an apologetic look. “Sorry, Red. Muscle memory. Lauren and I just bolted as soon as we heard. We should've woke you up.”

Fiona sighed, feeling the tension in her shoulders relax. She knew that Jake was sorry and that he was only trying to do what was best for the case. She sheepishly smiled at him and nodded her head. “It's okay,” she said softly. “Let's just get to work then.”

Jake returned the smile as he started typing again, this time with Fiona beside him, ready to help in any way she could. She grabbed her own laptop and set up across from him, trying not to think about the fact that they were alone in a hotel room together.

“And to answer your question,” Jake said, eyes on his screen, “we didn't find anything new at the scene, at least not yet. The victim was ID'd as twenty-one-year-old Mia Phearson. She was last seen alive walking alone down Grace Street on someone's security camera. The body's being sent to the coroner's. We can have you go over again later. Till then, I say we try to crack that theory you had going yesterday—that we should be looking into morticians and people like that. People with easy access to body bags and embalming fluids.”

Fiona nodded and started typing away at her own laptop. “I was thinking we could do a deeper search on that. Maybe look into embalming fluid suppliers, or see if any mortuary schools in the area have had security breaches. With some luck, we can see if any other mortuary schools have had any problem

students. The girls were all pretty young, although only Sarah was in school.”

Jake nodded, his eyes already on his screen. “And I’ll see who I can get on the coroner’s side. Maybe they can look up their records to see who’s been buying embalming fluid in the area.”

Fiona nodded and they started to work. Fiona surfed the internet, checking every mortuary school she could find in the area, while Jake searched the coroner’s records. The room was quiet save for the clicking of keys and the beeping of the computer screens. They were both intent on their own screens, and on the task at hand.

“We’re looking for anyone with a criminal record of any kind,” Jake said, “or even a history of intensive psychiatric care. We can’t rule anyone out. Whoever’s doing this is calculating, and I’d bet there were some warning signs somewhere in his life.”

Fiona nodded. She could agree with him there. With the help of the FBI database, she was able to access personnel files. The schools so far seemed clean.

Her mind wandered back to her conversation with her father last night. A mortician... that seemed like the most likely culprit. Somebody who already knew how to embalm. Then again, it wasn’t like the work was necessarily perfect.

Now that she thought about it, only formaldehyde was found on the women’s skin. But an experienced embalmer would likely be using a mixture of formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde, and methanol. She knew a lot about this thanks to her family’s business.

The killer was such a perfectionist, and yet that could be considered a misstep.

So... maybe she was not looking for a mortician, but someone else.

She thought of her mother. In the funeral home business, Fiona’s mother was the funeral director. She planned them out and organized them, she watched from afar as they played out.

But working hands-on with the bodies was not something she did. She would often comment on how good Fiona's father's work was, how lifelike he kept the deceased.

A thought struck Fiona. Perhaps they were looking in the right area, but not coming to the exact right conclusion.

"Jake..." Fiona began. "You mentioned you and Lauren were researching last night. Did you look into funeral home directors?"

Jake frowned. "I don't think we got there, no. I was focused on doctors, morticians, people like that."

"I was thinking maybe we're looking for an amateur, someone who is interested in embalming, but not quite a pro... perhaps someone who watches from afar."

"So, a funeral home director?" Jake asked.

Fiona's cheeks warmed and she sank in her seat. "It was just an idea..."

"No, I like it," Jake said with a newfound vigor. "Let's narrow our search down. Funeral home directors with records."

Fiona was already typing away on her laptop. She opened up a new window and started looking into the backgrounds of funeral home directors in the area. She cross-referenced them with police reports, medical records, and any other information she could find. It was slow going, but soon enough, Fiona found something that caught her eye.

Paul Jensen. Forty-eight years old. A funeral home director in South Portland, not even that far from the killer's hunting grounds. His records revealed he'd been caught by the police a few years ago during a party with a bunch of teenagers, whom he'd been buying alcohol for, and had been sent to a psychiatric facility for observation after pleading insanity for his charges of attempting to solicit sex from minors. He seemed like a nasty person, Fiona thought, and he clearly had a taste for young women since so far, all of the victims had been below the age of twenty-five.

Fiona read through Paul's psychiatric reports. It detailed a long history of intensive psychiatric care, and it was clear that he had severe issues with impulse control, aggression, and a tendency to act out his violent fantasies. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia and prescribed multiple doses of antipsychotic medications every day.

But the more Fiona read, the more she became certain that this man could be their killer. Despite being on medication to control his impulses, Paul had refused to take them faithfully; he would often go days without taking them and then having a relapse into psychosis. She suspected that during these lapses in his mental health, he was committing the murders they were seeing now. If they could find evidence linking him to any of the victims or locations where bodies were found, then Fiona knew they would have their man.

"Jake," she said, her voice low, "I... I think I have someone."

"What?" Jake stood up and came over to Fiona's side of the table. Her face flushed as he leaned over her, and she caught an unintentional smell of his cedar cologne. Fiona held her breath as Jake read the files she had open. When he let out an impressed laugh, her confidence rose a notch. "Red, this could be him," Jake said. "I've gotta go talk to this guy."

Jake went to go close his laptop. Fiona stood up. This was her suspect, she should get to go too. At least, that was how she felt.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

Jake stopped and gave her a look. "No, I need you here."

Her heart sank. "What? Why?"

"I need you looking for more perps," Jake said. "If this isn't our guy."

Frustration coursed through her. She got the strong sense that he just wanted to keep her locked up. She supposed she couldn't blame him, after what had happened the last time Fiona had gone to talk to a suspect. She'd nearly died, and Jake had to risk his life and come save her.

Still. Fiona had wanted to get more field experience. She didn't want to be locked in a hotel room all day.

But Jake was the FBI agent, and he was the one ultimately in charge of her—both him and Lauren. Fiona knew her place; she was on this team to assist them, and didn't have the authority to call shots.

"I understand," she mumbled. "I'll be here."

Jake sighed, then offered her a small smile. "Chin up, Red. You did great work. You're doing great work. We need you here, okay?"

Fiona nodded, trying to stay optimistic. "You're right," she said, "I can do more. I will do more."

"Good. I'll be back as soon as I can."

With that, Jake left. Fiona sighed. She'd wanted to come with him—to be a part of the action, to do something. But she understood. She'd be of far more use behind the scenes, researching and organizing information. She could help them solve the case, rather than potentially causing problems.

Still, Fiona couldn't stop herself from dreaming about what it would be like to get out there in the field again.

She just hoped her tip would prove useful. And if Paul Jensen was the killer, she hoped Jake was prepared to face him.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jake's car pulled up to a small building set back from the street. The dark brick walls were stark against the clear blue sky, and the sign out front read "Jensen's Memorial Services" in bold, black letters. The entrance was flanked by two large columns, and the windows were covered in a thin layer of fog. Despite the somber setting, there was an air of anticipation as Jake parked his car.

Thankfully, there didn't seem to be a funeral in session today, at least not at this time. The parking lot only had three other cars in it. There were a few people walking slowly through the graveyard, their heads bowed down in quiet reflection. The sun shone down on the various headstones and memorials, casting long shadows on the grassy paths. Jake had to admit, it was an impressive funeral home.

He wished he wasn't alone on this one, but it was what it was—he still hadn't heard from Lauren, and he hoped that everything was going okay with the other suspect. As for Fiona, he'd felt bad having to shoot down her request to come, but after the way things went down last time, he wasn't totally comfortable getting her out in the field. She didn't have proper training with a gun. She wasn't exactly a fighter.

Really, she was the most useful right where she was: at her computer. If Paul Jensen was a dud, then he hoped Fiona would have some more ideas in mind.

Taking a deep breath, Jake stepped out of the car and walked up to the entrance. It was quiet, almost eerily so. He could feel the weight of the moment bearing down on him as he opened the door and stepped inside.

The lobby was small yet cozy, with a few armchairs around a fireplace in one corner and some simple paintings adorning the walls in another. There were two doors leading off from it: one to the office, and one to what appeared to be an exhibit hall.

Jake went up to the reception desk and cleared his throat. A middle-aged woman with graying hair looked up from her paperwork and gave him an expectant look. “Can I help you?” she asked politely.

“Yes,” Jake replied, pulling out his badge. “I’m looking for Paul Jensen.”

The woman’s lips pursed. She gave him a once-over, then, unusually loudly, exclaimed, “Mr. Jensen is not in right now.”

Jake was taken aback by her sudden rise in voice. Instinctively, he looked to his right, through another doorway that led to a funeral hall—and there, he spotted a man.

Paul Jensen.

Jake had seen his photos in his file. He was a tall, decrepit-looking man, and this guy fit the bill perfectly.

Paul had obviously heard the receptionist and immediately became aware of Jake’s presence. He spun around on his heel and began sprinting away in the opposite direction, disappearing into a side door.

Jake didn’t hesitate—he was already sprinting after him. He jumped over chairs and pushed past a table being set up, past a memorial photo of an elderly woman—right toward doors that led outside.

Jake squinted in the sun as he bolted outside, finding himself in the graveyard.

Jake could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he chased after Paul, but he kept pushing on, determined to catch up with him. He knew that if Paul got away, they’d be back to square one. The spindly man was shockingly fast and had a good head start on Jake—he could see him dashing through gravestones up ahead.

Like a jackrabbit, Paul hopped from one tombstone to the next, clearly trying to lose Jake. He was heading for some sort of large tree, perhaps in an attempt to climb it.

Jake had to raise his voice now to be heard. “FBI! Stop!” he shouted.

Paul didn't respond, and he was making progress. Jake knew he was dangerously close to losing him.

"FBI!" Jake shouted again, and Paul suddenly stopped short.

He made a sharp left, then a right, then ducked behind a headstone.

Jake could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he rounded the headstone—and there, he realized they had reached a fenced-in area that was too tall to climb. He saw a young woman clutching a purse and a small child, their eyes wide in fear.

Jake shot them a look. Wordlessly, the woman pointed behind Jake. He whirred around, only to see Paul making a run for it in the opposite direction.

Damn it! He'd tricked Jake into following him this way, but he'd had an escape route all along. This guy was a cockroach, but Jake was done playing around.

He was going to catch him.

He ran after Paul as fast as he could, hurtling down the path between headstones. He was getting closer, and he could see that Paul was beginning to tire out.

Paul had reached a small clearing near the fence, and he was planning on making a break for it again. He was going for a gap in the fence that led down to an alleyway between two buildings.

"Stop!" Jake shouted again. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins, and he could feel his heart beating in his ears. His feet were pounding on the ground, his legs burning with every step.

Paul had almost reached the gap in the fence. It was now or never.

Jake lunged forward, snatching Paul by his shoulders and pulling him back. He had caught him.

Paul stumbled back and fell onto the ground, out of breath. Jake quickly pulled out his handcuffs and cuffed him up.



“Unhand me!” Paul exclaimed. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Jake scoffed. “I know that you just tried to run from a federal agent. Paul Jensen, you’re under arrest.”

Paul squirmed beneath Jake, but had no choice but to comply as Jake read him his rights.

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Fiona had been looking for more funeral directors with shady pasts, but no one seemed quite as perfect as Paul Jensen. It had been an hour, and Fiona still hadn’t heard from Jake, but she hoped he was okay. She wasn’t even sure why she was worrying—he was the FBI agent, and the one who’d saved her life. He was a strong, capable man, and definitely didn’t need her worrying about him.

Still, it was in her nature.

A sudden knock at the door broke Fiona’s reverie, and she stood up from her table and went to the door, expecting to see Jake. But when she opened it, it was Lauren standing on the other side with an ice-cold expression. The moment Lauren saw Fiona, she pushed past her, into her room. “Is Jake here?”

Okay, I guess everyone can just burst into my room, Fiona thought bitterly. “No, he isn’t,” she said. “He went to interrogate a suspect.”

“Shit,” Lauren muttered. “That’s why he didn’t answer my call. He’s probably talking to the guy now.”

Silence spread between them. Fiona didn’t know what to say. But she recalled Jake mentioning that Lauren was talking to a suspect too.

“How did yours go?” Fiona asked timidly. Around Lauren, she felt like she was walking on glass, afraid to say the wrong thing.

“Dead end,” Lauren said shortly, crossing her arms. “I did find one thing out, though. All three of the women have been on dating apps over the past several months.”

Dating apps. Fiona suddenly remembered that she still had a profile up, and the thought mortified her. She hadn’t opened it to see if she had any messages, and hadn’t activated push notifications. If one of her colleagues saw that, she would be horrified.

But dating apps were very common these days. Fiona wondered what Lauren was thinking, so she asked, “Do you think the killer is meeting them on there?”

“It’s possible,” Lauren said. “All three girls were officially single. A lot of these dating apps work by deleting messages after a certain period of time, and apparently once they’re gone, they’re gone for good. Makes our lives a bit harder, and it’s something I’ve had to deal with before.”

Fiona nodded. Surely, Lauren had dealt with many things in her time as an agent. Fiona wasn’t sure if Lauren was even three years older than her—probably twenty-eight or twenty-nine, while Fiona was twenty-six—but Lauren exuded an air of experience, like she was much older.

“Another issue,” Lauren said, “is that the girls used a lot of different dating apps. Some of them were removed from their phones. It’s hard to track—there are so many of those stupid things these days.”

Fiona’s cheeks warmed, and she bowed her head. “That’s true.”

“I’m still trying to get access to what I can,” Lauren said, “but we need subpoenas. This dating angle seems to be the best lead we have.”

Fiona didn’t want to overstep, but she felt like the funeral director angle was stronger—especially with Paul Jensen being such a prime suspect. She also felt like they were already looking in the right direction—at people with easy access to the killer’s chosen supplies. She also wondered where the killer might be taking the women to clean them up.

It must have been an obscenely sterile location, and as the director of the funeral home, Paul could surely gain access to a place like that.

“Well,” Fiona said, “the man Jake is talking to—he sounded promising.”

“Yeah?” Lauren said, turning to Fiona and lifting a brow. “What’s his deal?”

“A funeral home director with a past involving minors. He’s forty-eight with a long history of psychiatric illness.”

“Hm,” Lauren said, nodding. “Not many young women would agree to go out with a forty-eight-year-old man. But if he was faking his profile...”

“Like a catfish?” Fiona suggested. Perhaps both she and Lauren were right—there was a chance Paul Jensen could be using dating apps to lure young women to him.

“Yeah, exactly like that,” Lauren said. “He could be pretending to be someone else, a younger man.” She shook her head. “I’ll put a tech on that too, see what we can find. But if he’s using a fake profile, he’s not going to be stupid enough to tell us who he really is.”

“Well,” Fiona said, “I’m sure Jake will find out. He’s very good at his job.”

“Yeah,” Lauren said, her expression darkening. “I’m sure he’s having a blast with his suspect right now.”

Fiona felt a flash of worry. They still hadn’t heard from Jake... she hoped he was okay.

Suddenly, Lauren’s phone started ringing. She turned away from Fiona and took it out, answering with a serious expression. It was hard to picture Lauren ever lightening up or joking around. With her blonde hair pulled back tight, she always seemed so serious. Fiona respected that. In many ways, she herself often came across as clumsy and inelegant, but Lauren was so... pristine.

Fiona could understand why Jake was so drawn to her, even if their relationship was rocky.

“Jake,” Lauren said into the phone, and Fiona perked up. “You have him?” Lauren asked. “Good. Fiona was just filling me in. I’ll come meet you... what?”

Fiona watched as Lauren’s expression became even tighter. After a moment, she sighed.

“Whatever you want. Okay. Bye.”

She hung up. Fiona held her hands together and looked to Lauren in anticipation.

“He says he can handle the interrogation on his own,” Lauren said, annoyance all over her face. “You and I will stay here and keep going over evidence. We should be getting reports from the coroner’s soon, if we don’t have them already.”

Fiona nodded, but she couldn’t help feeling a bit of trepidation. Being alone with Lauren was intimidating. She had an aura of power that went beyond her job title.

But Fiona was also sure there was a lot to learn from Lauren. Putting her anxieties aside, she sat down and got ready to work. This was her chance to get to know Lauren a bit more as they worked together.

“So...” Fiona began. Lauren didn’t even look up, but Fiona wanted to fill the silence with something—anything at all. “Um, what made you want to become an FBI agent?”

Lauren sighed and clicked her tongue. “Really, Fiona, we don’t need to chat.”

Fiona’s face flushed, and she instantly felt foolish. “Sorry, I won’t bother you.”

Another heavy sigh, and Lauren said, “My dad was in the FBI. It’s always been something I wanted.”

Fiona smiled, grateful Lauren was opening up a bit. “Your dad? That sounds nice. Is he still an agent?”

Lauren’s expression shifted, and Fiona immediately knew something was wrong. She felt her heart sink as she realized the answer.

“He died,” Lauren said plainly, focusing on her laptop. “On duty.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Fiona regretted bringing it up. She could only imagine how painful that had been for Lauren.

Lauren nodded and cleared her throat. “It’s okay,” she said, her voice wavering slightly. Fiona could tell she was trying to keep herself composed as she continued. “I just wanted to make him proud.”

Fiona smiled sympathetically. “I’m sure he is,” she said softly.

Lauren looked up at Fiona and gave a small nod before turning back to the laptop screen.

Lauren’s father’s story was a reminder of how dangerous the job could be. Fiona had nearly died too. If Jake hadn’t saved her...

“I’m really lucky Jake was there for me on the last case,” Fiona said without thinking, then instantly realized it could be taken the wrong way.

But Lauren just nodded. “Yes, you were reckless. Jake is a good agent.”

Fiona flushed and turned away as Lauren’s green gaze bored into hers. She wondered if Jake had told her that Fiona knew about their romantic involvement. It was definitely none of Fiona’s business, but she felt more comfortable talking to Jake in general than Lauren.

“You admire him, don’t you?” Lauren suddenly said.

Fiona paused, taken aback. Of course she admired Jake. But she sensed Lauren had a bit more of an agenda with that statement.

“Well, of course,” Fiona said. “He saved my life.”

“Hm.” Lauren turned back to her laptop and didn’t say another word.

But Fiona felt some heat from her. She hoped it was all in her head.

She needed to get back to work and focus on finding more suspects. There were bigger things to worry about—like a killer being loose in Portland.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jake faced off against Paul Jensen in the interrogation room at the local police station. Paul really did have a mug on him—he was glaring at Jake like he wanted to kill him, but all Jake could think about were those charges in Paul’s past. Trying to solicit sex and sell alcohol to minors was a whole other kind of evil, and frankly, Jake couldn’t care less if this guy rotted in a cell forever whether he was the killer or not.

“So, Paul,” Jake said, leaning forward, “why don’t you start by telling me why you ran from me?”

“Look, I don’t know anything,” Paul said, “so just leave me out of it. I don’t know why the hell you chased me down so hard. It’s not even me you’re looking for.”

Jake lifted an eyebrow. He had no idea what this guy was on about. “Explain,” he said.

“You already know everything, don’t you?” Paul said. “Why’d you even need to chase me down, huh? I was minding my own business, but when I see you cop types...”

None of this was making sense. Jake’s teeth clenched, and he tried to bite back his annoyance. Maybe it was best to just cut straight to the chase with this guy.

Jake pulled out a file, full of information on all three victims. He locked eyes with Paul once before he opened the file, then placed the three images out on the table: one of Sarah, one of Marissa, and one of Mia. All of them alive, smiling, and well. Paul looked down at the photos, but didn’t react.

“You’re right, Paul,” Jake said, “I do know everything. I know what you did to these girls.”

Paul shook his head and looked away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, but Jake could see the sweat beading on his forehead.

“The evidence speaks for itself, Paul,” Jake said, pushing the file forward. “You can deny all you want, but I’m gonna find out the truth sooner or later—it’s just a matter of time.”

Paul was silent, looking down at the table. Jake wasn’t sure if he believed him or not. He had seen it too many times in this line of work: criminals denying their crimes until they had been caught red-handed. But with no other leads to follow up on, he had no choice but to question Paul and hope he would say something that tied him to the murders.

“I don’t know who these chicks are,” Paul eventually said. “Did Robbie steal from them too?”

“Robbie?” Jake asked, completely thrown off guard. There was no one named Robbie anywhere involved in this investigation.

Paul blinked at him. “My son, Robbie,” he said. “You already know what he’s been up to. I had to run because he’s my kid. I’d do anything to protect him.”

Jake was completely clueless, but played along. “Right. Of course we know what Robbie has been doing.”

“He’s got a problem,” Paul said. “A real kleptomaniac.”

Bingo. That was the Robbie thing—he was stealing.

“Right, he’s a thief,” Jake said.

Paul sighed and shook his head. “Stealing from our dead clients, no less,” Paul muttered in shame. He looked down at the photos. “But these girls—I’ve never seen them at the funeral home before. No idea who they are.”

Jake eyed Paul up. Was this all a ruse? He had to admit, it didn’t feel like one. It was time to lay all the cards out.

“I’ll be honest with you, Paul,” Jake said, interlacing his fingers on the table. “This isn’t about Robbie. Not at all.”

Paul said nothing, only looked at Jake with interest.

“You see these three women?” Jake said. “They’re dead, Paul. Murdered. All placed in body bags and covered in



embalming fluid, not much different than the deceased you lay to rest at your funeral home.”

Paul’s expression suddenly paled. “You aren’t seriously suggesting I did this.”

“I’m not suggesting anything,” Jake said. “I’m just saying that the evidence is pointing in one direction—towards you. So why don’t you tell me what really happened here? Who killed these women?”

“How the hell should I know?” Paul shot back. “And I’d like to see any shred of evidence you have on me here. You know what? Forget it—I want my lawyer!”

Shit. Jake couldn’t have that. He sat down, calming himself. “Are you sure about that, Paul? Needing a lawyer suggests you’re pretty guilty. If you are innocent, how can you convince me of that?”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Paul asked.

“Tell me what happened,” Jake said. “Everything you know. Leave nothing out. And I’ll do everything I can to make sure you get out of this.”

Paul took a deep breath before looking Jake dead in the eyes. Jake could see the tension in his shoulders, but he could also see that something else was on his mind. He had no idea what it was, but he knew he had to get this guy to open up.

“You have my word, Paul,” Jake said, hoping he didn’t sound too desperate. “I’ll keep you out of this for now. Just tell me what you know.”

“I will tell you this one more time,” Paul said, “I know nothing about any of this. I come to work every day, I live with my wife and my teenage son, and I know I’ve been a piece of shit in the past, but it’s all behind me now. I’m an honest man. I work hard. I give families peace. I have no desire to kill anyone. Other than you, right now.”

“Funny,” Jake said. “Then you should have no problem confirming your whereabouts for the entirety of last night.”

“Easy. Talk to my wife. She’s a light sleeper. If I get up to scratch my ass, she wakes up. I didn’t go anywhere.”

Jake clenched his teeth. Paul was an abrasive asshole, but if his wife really could corroborate his story, then he was nothing more than another dead end.

A waste of time.

Meanwhile, the real killer was still out there, hunting.

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Jake sighed as he walked down the hallway of the hotel, feeling like a failure. Paul had seemed so promising, but his wife had confirmed Paul had been home all night, and the truth was, Jake had no other reason to hold him.

Sometimes, he just had to accept when he was wrong. Paul wasn’t their guy, and trying to prove he was would only give the real killer more time to kill again.

Still, he wished he was bringing better news back to Lauren and Fiona.

He knocked on Fiona’s door, and within moments, she whipped it open. Inside, Jake could see Lauren sitting at the table. He was glad to see they were working together—hopefully, Lauren had warmed up to Fiona, and not been cold to her.

“Hey,” he said, sighing. Fiona’s face dropped, and Jake knew what she was thinking before she said it. “I know, I know,” he said, stepping into the room. “Paul was a dead end. Sorry, Fiona. It really was a good lead.”

Lauren looked up from her computer. “Fiona discovered the lead?”

“She did,” Jake said. “Was a close one, but the guy had an alibi. We’ve gotta keep looking.”

Fiona sighed and ran her hand through her hair. “I was so hopeful,” she said. “It felt like he was the one.”

Jake nodded in agreement. He felt the same way, but it wasn't meant to be. He could see Fiona's disappointment, and he wished he had better news for her. But his work was never done—they would just have to keep looking until they found something that stuck.

“Well, I was thinking,” Fiona began, “the killer—he must be cleaning the women up in a very sterile location. I still think we're looking for someone in or related to the medical field. If we can find out where he is cleaning them, then we can find out who he is.”

That was good thinking. Jake wasn't sure where to begin; there were a lot of places that could fit that bill. Just as he was about to ask if Fiona had any ideas, Lauren spoke up.

“Actually,” she said, “I think all three of us need to focus our efforts on the dating app angle.”

“Dating app?” Jake asked.

“I wasn't able to call you,” Lauren said, “but all three of the women have been on different dating apps in the past several months. As you know, getting those messages can be hard. But I think that's how he's finding his victims. We need to get multiple subpoenas.”

“Those aren't easy to get, even in a case like this,” Jake said. “And there are multiple apps?”

“That we know of,” Lauren said.

Jake thought. Things were different now than when he was younger. He was only thirty, but culture shifted fast. Dating apps were more prevalent now than ever before. “I don't know, Laur, that could be like finding a needle in a haystack. Plus, everyone under the age of twenty-five and above the age of seventeen is on a dating app these days. Don't get me wrong, we need to look into it, but we don't need all three of us on it. We should look into Fiona's theory too.”

Lauren's face turned red. Uh-oh. Jake knew that look. She wasn't happy with him, just like she was never happy with him when he went against one of her plans.

“Fiona,” Lauren said. “Can you work with Jake on that?”

Fiona nodded. "I can."

Jake resisted the urge to sigh. He could feel Lauren's disapproving glare on the back of his head.

"What about you?" Jake asked. "What are you going to do about the dating app angle?"

"Let me handle that," Lauren said. "You and Fiona should run down your angle. I'll stay here."

Jake didn't want to argue, so he just nodded. He turned to Fiona.

"Any idea where you wanna head next?"

She nodded, biting her lip. "I think we need to prioritize finding out where he is taking the bodies. I want to examine the third victim and ensure we didn't miss any crucial clues."

Jake nodded, heading toward the door. "I'll drive."

Fiona followed after him. Jake stole one last look at Lauren, still glued to her computer, as he headed out.

It looked like he and Fiona were continuing this thing without her for now.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

This time, he really had found the one.

The smell of coffee in the shop tantalized him, but not nearly as much as the lovely date across from him did. That luxurious blonde hair, the red lipstick, those big, straight teeth—yes, this date was perfect.

Finally.

The sunlight beamed in through the window of the café, and he smiled charmingly at his date. What was her name again? Alicia? Erica? It didn't matter. In his mind, she would be Zoey.

No one had been close enough to perfection to earn her name yet. They had come close, but just not quite there.

His Zoey had dyed her hair many different colors. She would be a blonde sometimes, then a redhead the next day. But usually, she'd be a brunette again. And this girl had the exact same shade that was Zoey's favorite.

She looked so much like her it was making his head spin.

“So, anyway,” Erica—Zoey—said, taking a sip of her sugary latte, “it's so great to finally meet you in person, Derek! Of all the people I talk to online, you're like, the best conversationalist.”

He clenched his teeth. What did she just say? A flare of anger touched him. “All the people you talk to?”

“Yeah...” She blinked at him. “I mean, my friends, you know.” She laughed and waved her hand. “I'm not like, talking to any other guys on any apps. Just you.”

He narrowed his eyes, unsure if he believed her. She might look like Zoey, but the words coming out of her mouth were starting to leave a sour taste in his mouth.

But he couldn't give up yet. There was simply too much potential here.

"Well," he said, taking a sip of his coffee, "I'm glad to hear that."

"You're such a sweetheart," Erica—Zoey—said, reaching across the table and taking his hand. "You know, I think I've fallen for you."

And he nearly fell for her.

But then he looked down at her hand. Her ring finger was bare.

Tears stung his eyes.

Her hand was cold, but his was hot. He pulled away from her, trying to regain his composure.

"I think I can feel the love," she said, and giggled. "Oh my god, it's just so funny to say! Love. Love."

He nodded and forced a smile. He hated that word.

She continued to ramble on, but he was having a hard time following her.

"So..." Erica—Zoey—said, touching the rim of her cup with her red nails. "Why did you pick me? I mean, over the millions of other girls on the internet?"

"You were the first one to strike up a conversation with me," he said, still holding onto hope. "I didn't want to talk to a lot of girls online. I wanted to meet someone and see how it went. You were the first one to talk to me," he said, his voice rising in pitch. He had to convince her of his sincerity. "I believe in the power of first impressions. You were there at the exact right moment. And I knew we'd hit it off."

"I was just lucky?" She smiled, her teeth glinting from the light pouring in. He felt his heart flutter. It was Zoey's smile. It had to be. "That makes me sound like I'm lucky."

"No," he said, his eyes drifting around the coffee shop. "Just that we're lucky. We should both feel lucky."

A few cars drove by in the street outside, the passing vehicles letting out a few honks. Erica—Zoey—smiled again, this time at the passing cars. Then she turned her attention on him. He couldn't explain it, but he was finding himself more agitated by her. She looked perfect... so why did he feel so conflicted?

“You're such a poet,” she said, smiling longingly at him. “I always love the cute messages you send me. They make me feel so special.”

Special. Yes. That was one way to put it.

The more this woman talked, the more he started to loathe her very existence.

She was not Zoey.

She was an impersonator. An imposter. Zoey would never sound so vapid.

And yet, he was still here. He had his fingers wrapped around the coffee cup, and his eyes fixed on her. The smell of the coffee was strong.

He had to admit it. The coffee really smelled good. He wanted to have a sip.

As she innocently talked, he tried to summon the feeling he had before. The feeling of being with Zoey. He could very faintly feel them... but they were covered up by the caffeine and sugar.

He needed more. He needed to feel like he was with Zoey.

And he didn't feel that here.

That could only mean one thing.

She looked perfect, but she was no such thing.

He could make her perfect.

He could take her... preserve her... it would be more than she deserved.

At that moment, a blissful feeling took over him. She continued to yap like an annoying dog, but he could take that

voice from her. Make her perfect.

“Hey,” he began, cutting her off mid-sentence, “why don’t we meet tonight? Somewhere quiet, somewhere romantic. How does that sound?”

She gasped in surprise and her eyes lit up with joy and excitement. “That sounds wonderful!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “Where should we go? What should we do?”

“I know of this beautiful pond,” he continued, “where we can watch the stars together.” His voice was soft and gentle, as if he were telling a bedtime story to a child. “It’s very peaceful there; you can hear nothing but the sound of the wind rustling through the trees.”

“Really?” she asked, leaning closer to him. “That sounds so perfect! I can’t wait to go! What should I wear?”

He gave her a slight smirk.

“Whatever makes you comfortable,” he said, his voice lilting. He ran his fingers through his hair and grinned. “I don’t care about clothes. I just want to be with you.”

“Oh, you’re so sweet,” she said, reaching across the table and taking his hand. “I don’t know how you can be so perfect.”

He flashed her a smile.

“I’m glad you think so,” he said, and took a sip of his coffee. Yes, he thought triumphantly. This coffee was just what he needed. Now he could feel ready to meet up with her tonight. It was perfect. Everything was perfect.

“You’re the perfect guy,” she said, and winked at him.

He smiled back. He would indeed show her perfection.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fiona tensed up in the passenger seat of Jake's car as he drove them through Portland. She hugged herself and tried to wipe her anxiety away. They had a case to work, but at the same time, Fiona couldn't help but feel like her general presence on the team was creating tension. Lauren had seemed less than enthused that Jake was more keen on investigating Fiona's angle than hers, only adding to the feeling that Lauren wasn't Fiona's biggest fan.

She stole a glance at Jake as he drove. He'd been a bit more quiet than usual too, and she wondered if he was thinking about Lauren. In a weird way, Fiona felt like she'd been wedged between them, even though that wasn't her intention at all. Fiona respected both Jake and Lauren and wanted to learn from them.

She also felt certain that her lead needed to take priority. Lauren's lead was good, but Jake was right; they didn't need three people on it.

So, here they were, split up.

Jake's car pulled up to the coroner's office. When he slowed, Fiona looked at him. It occurred to her that while she had a plan to go examine the third victim, she wasn't sure what Jake's plan was.

"What will you be doing while I'm here?" she asked. "Did you want to come into the examination?"

"Nah, I'm gonna go around and talk to some people," Jake said. "Do things the old-fashioned way. I was thinking of trying the other funeral home in the area the girls were found in."

That was good thinking. There were only two funeral homes, and they'd already cleared one.

"Sounds like a plan," Fiona said, unbuckling her seatbelt.

Jake nodded. Fiona opened the door of the car and stepped out, a wave of nervousness washing over her. She took in a deep breath and walked up to the coroner's office. With each step she felt her heart beating faster, but she didn't turn back.

As Fiona made her way into the coroner's office, it was almost as if something had shifted in the atmosphere around her; she could feel the gravity of death all around her and it brought with it an eerie sense of stillness. She paused for a moment and briefly closed her eyes, pushing away any fear or discomfort that threatened to overtake her. After taking a few moments to steady herself and collect her thoughts, Fiona opened the door and stepped inside. It was a daunting prospect to go inside and see yet another body, but she could do this.

The air was cold and sterile, with a faint odor of formaldehyde wafting through the room. She waved to the receptionist as she passed and made her way directly to the examination room—Dr. McDaniel was expecting her.

Fiona stepped through the doorway and into the room. There was yet another body on the examination table, covered in a white sheet. Dr. McDaniel was standing by the table at the back, and he turned to Fiona when she entered.

“Ms. Red, there you are,” he said. “I haven't had the chance to finish this one up. Busy day. We'll need all the samples we can get.”

Fiona nodded. “Thank you. I can handle it.”

With that, Fiona washed her hands and put on her latex gloves, mask, and safety glasses. Dr. McDaniel left the room, giving her privacy to work. Fiona stepped up to the body and took a breath before she unveiled it.

It was a sight, just like the other.

A young woman, pale and clean, with no visible signs of trauma. The smell of formaldehyde stung Fiona's nose yet again.

Fiona carefully moved the woman's body, searching for any signs of a struggle or trauma. She examined her arms and legs, but there were no marks. She took out her flashlight and

inspected the woman's face, neck, chest, and abdomen. Still no marks or bruising. Fiona wondered how the man was able to get them trapped in the first place. They hadn't found any other drugs in their bodies, and yet there were no signs of a struggle. Lauren's theory crept into her mind; it was entirely possible that he had been luring them out willingly... that he was known to them...

Fiona looked at the woman's face and felt a pang of sorrow for her. She felt like she didn't have any right to be examining this woman, although she knew that in this case there was no other way.

She took out her notebook and began to record her observations, noting the details of the woman's body as accurately as possible. Her skin was cool to the touch, indicating that death had occurred some time ago. Her hair was a light brown color and Fiona could see faint freckles scattered across her cheeks—remnants of a life cut short too soon.

Mia. That had been her name. Fiona did her best to dehumanize the bodies she worked with—it was more productive to view them as work, and not real people—but it wasn't always an easy thing to do. As Fiona examined Mia's body, she wondered what her final moments were like.

Predictably, there was scarring in her throat, evidence of bleach ingestion.

Fiona took samples from under her nails and from the affected area, as well as swabs of her mouth and throat. She carefully placed them all in evidence bags and labeled them with Mia's name.

Fiona looked at Mia one last time before she put the sheet back over her body. It was a somber moment—the realization that this woman would never get to live out her dreams or see her family again. Fiona bowed her head in respect and then moved on to the next task—taking photos of the body for documentation purposes.

Once she finished, Fiona stepped back out of the room, feeling both satisfied that she had done all she could to help

bring justice, yet also intensely saddened by the loss of life before her.

With all the samples prepared, Fiona took off her gloves and washed up, then went to bring the samples out in a container. She paced down the hallway, toward the lab, where she would drop them off. But as she was passing by one room, she overheard Dr. McDaniel's voice.

"Yes, it's just awful," he said, and Fiona stopped to peer into the room. Dr. McDaniel was consoling a young woman in a lab coat. Fiona had seen the girl in the lab, but wasn't sure of her name.

She trembled as she held herself and cried. Dr. McDaniel put a hand on her shoulder. Fiona realized she was peeping in on a private moment and was about to leave, until the girl said —

"It's just not every day you see someone you know pass through here."

"I'll do my best to ensure you don't have to see the body," Dr. McDaniel said. "That FBI examiner is handling it."

Fiona frowned. They were talking about Mia's body?

This girl knew her?

"I just don't know how it happened," she said. "Mia was so smart. She didn't walk around at night alone, like, ever, so how did this happen?"

"Well, she was near Grace Street," Dr. McDaniel said. "That's such a safe area. I'm sure she thought nothing of it."

Grace Street...

Fiona remembered what Jake had said earlier. He said that Mia had last been seen on Grace Street through someone's security camera on their home.

Her stomach dropped.

How could Dr. McDaniel know that?

It was never released to the public. And Mia didn't live on Grace Street.

Fiona's heart fluttered with nerves. No... this couldn't be...

She ducked away from the door and pressed her back to the wall.

The pieces were starting to fit together in her mind. Dr. McDaniel had access to a morgue and the lab, a clean, sterile place, and formaldehyde. He was a clean, meticulous worker.

Fiona felt sick to her stomach at the thought of Dr. McDaniel being a murderer. She wanted to confront him right away, but instead she forced herself to take a breath and calm down. She couldn't accuse someone without proof. She needed to find out what kind of alibi he had for the night Mia was killed before she went accusing someone with such serious charges.

But still, this was a development that Fiona hadn't anticipated when she started working on this case...and one that could change everything if it turned out to be true.

She couldn't handle this on her own.

She needed to tell Jake.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jake pulled up to the curb outside of the coroner's, his mind racing. Fiona was there waiting for him, and she hurried up to the car as soon as it stopped. He didn't know what was going on, but she'd called him in a panic and said she'd explain everything in person. Whatever it was, it seemed urgent.

Fiona got into the car and looked at Jake, her eyes wide behind her glasses. "Thank you for coming so fast. Sorry for the anxious call."

"It's cool," he said, wiping his palms on his jeans, "but what the hell happened?"

Fiona took a breath and glanced at the building. Then she leaned over and told him, "I overheard the coroner say something very strange, Jake. He said... he said something about Grace Street, and how Mia had been there."

Jake sat on it for a moment. Grace Street. How would the coroner know that?

That information had never been released to the public.

"Do you think he's involved in Mia's death?" Jake asked, feeling his heart run cold.

Fiona bit her lip. "I'm not sure yet," she said. "But I can't help but feel suspicious...I mean, it doesn't make sense, and why would he know that if he wasn't involved? It was very specific, which I found too odd."

The more Jake thought about it, the more it made sense. Of course a coroner could be the perfect person for this crime. He had access to everything he'd need to sterilize a body and, of course, an unlimited supply of body bags.

"What's your impression of the guy?" Jake asked her. "You've been working with him. What's he like?"

“He was very rude to me at first,” Fiona said. “He didn’t seem to want me involved, and thought I was trying to take his work from him. He eventually warmed up to me and has been pleasant enough since.”

Jake parked his car right at the curb and unbuckled his seatbelt.

“What are you doing?” Fiona asked anxiously.

“I’m gonna go talk to him,” Jake said, getting out of the car.

Fiona chased after him as he made his way to the building. “W-wait, I’m coming too!” she exclaimed.

This time, Jake didn’t fight it. Fiona knew this guy more than he did, so she could prove useful when talking to him.

They both entered the building and made their way down the corridor to Dr. McDaniel’s office. Jake could feel his heart rate increasing with each step he took, not knowing what they would find out once they got there.

When they got to the coroner’s office, they were both surprised to find it empty.

“Where is he?” Fiona asked, her eyes scanning the empty room. “I thought he said he’d be here all day.”

Just then, a loud clatter came from the back of the room. Jake and Fiona exchanged glances and quickly made their way toward the sound. They found Dr. McDaniel rooting through a box in the corner, his glasses slipping down his nose as he squinted at them with an annoyed look on his face.

“What are you doing here?” he asked gruffly, not even looking at them directly as he dropped the box. “Aren’t you supposed to be working, Ms. Red?”

“David McDaniel,” Jake said. “I’m Special Agent Jake Tucker with the FBI. I wanted to ask you a few questions.”

Dr. McDaniel moved to his desk, looking for something. “Okay, what is it?”

“What are you looking for?” Fiona asked him.

“A damn pen,” he muttered. “You’d think we’d have more around here.” He sighed and gave up, sitting at his desk. “What do you want?”

“You seem to know a lot about Mia Phearson, so I’ve heard,” Jake said.

McDaniel scowled. “What? What are you talking about?” He glanced at Fiona, who drew in a breath.

“I... I heard you, Dr. McDaniel,” Fiona said. “I heard you tell that girl about Grace Street, where Mia was last seen alive before her murder. How did you know she was seen there?”

Dr. McDaniel laughed. “Are you joking? I heard it from one of Ms. Phearson’s coworkers—did you realize Mia worked at the coffee shop just up the road? One of our girls here, Katie—the one you were eavesdropping on, Ms. Red—was friends with Mia. I talked to the coworker earlier today, who said she heard where Mia had last been seen from a cop who came in for breakfast.”

Jake didn’t know what to make of Dr. McDaniel’s story. It seemed too convenient, too easy for him to have such a direct answer at the ready. He narrowed his eyes and studied the man, trying to read any subtle changes in his body language or facial expressions. But there was nothing; if McDaniel was hiding something, he was very good at it.

Jake wanted to give the man the benefit of the doubt—he was a trusted worker here, after all, but this all felt too off. The idea of someone like him being the culprit made Jake’s skin burn.

Jake cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Dr. McDaniel, why don’t you tell me the truth?” he said firmly, his gaze locked on the coroner’s face for any hint of deception or guilt.

“Agent Tucker,” he said gruffly, “I can assure you that I’m just as interested in finding out who did this as you are.”

Jake clenched his fists and glared at the man. Fiona looked at them both nervously. David McDaniel leaned forward and shook his head. “I don’t know what you think you heard,” he said darkly, “but you’ve got the wrong idea, Agent. Go talk to



the girl at the coffee shop, her name is Beth. She'll tell you what she told me. Check the security cameras. I'm no murderer, and frankly I'm offended you'd even come into my office and call me such."

Jake hesitated, still unsure what to make of Dr. McDaniel's words. He was tempted to press the man further, but something held him back—a feeling that there was more to this story than met the eye. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then nodded his head in agreement.

"Okay," he said finally. "I'll go talk to the girl at the coffee shop." He glanced at Fiona, who gave him an encouraging nod.

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Jake pushed open the door of the coffee shop and was greeted by the smell of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods. It was midday and fairly busy, with baristas rushing around behind the counter. With Fiona behind him, Jake made his way to the cash counter, where a young woman with sad eyes tried to force a smile at him.

"Excuse me, miss," Jake said, subtly flashing her his FBI badge. Her eyes widened. "I'm looking a girl named Beth."

"T-that's me," Beth said. "Is this about...?"

"Mia," Jake said. "Can we talk somewhere more private?"

The girl's face fell with sadness. She nodded slowly and gestured for them to follow her to a nearby table. They all sat down, Jake and Fiona on one side, Beth on the other. She fidgeted with her long, curly hair.

"I worked here with Mia... we were friends." Tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke about her late friend, but she forced them back and continued speaking in a soft voice. "I don't know why I'm even at work today. I guess I just went into autopilot."

“I was told you spoke to a coroner earlier, here in the shop,” Jake said. “Is that true?”

Beth nodded. “Dr. McDaniel? Yeah, he’s a regular...”

Damn. McDaniel’s story was checking out so far. “And you might have told him something about where Mia was last seen alive?”

Beth swallowed, her eyes widening. “Should I not have said that? About Grace Street? Oh my god, a cop told me that, I probably should’ve kept my fat mouth shut—”

“It’s okay, Beth,” Jake cut in. “We just needed to confirm.”

He couldn’t help but be disappointed. McDaniel had seemed like a good lead, but they had no real reason to think he was involved when his story checked out perfectly. But now that they were here, talking to one of Mia’s friends and coworkers, this seemed as good of a time as any to learn more about her.

Jake was about to ask a question when Fiona chimed in. “Did you ever see Mia with any strange men? Was she into online dating at all?”

Jake shot her a look, surprised she’d ask that. The online dating angle was Lauren’s idea, after all, and they’d wanted to focus their attention elsewhere.

Beth thought for a moment, her face scrunching up in concentration. Then suddenly her eyes lit up.

“Actually... there was this one guy. He was good-looking. Mia never told me his name but she said they met online and he seemed really interested in her. He actually came in and visited her the other day, but he seemed really nice. He said something about meeting her at a park on a bench next to a lamp post or something.”

Jake shot Fiona a look. Judging by the urgent expression on her face, she was thinking the same thing.

A man who asked her to meet in a park...

She was killed in a park. Or at least, she was found dead in one.

“Beth,” Jake said, “you are aware Mia was found dead in a park.”

Beth’s face went pale. “W-well, yes, but—”

“This is very important information, Beth,” Jake said. He didn’t want to sound frustrated with the girl, but he couldn’t understand why she hadn’t come forward with this information. “You should have told the police immediately.”

“I’m sorry,” Beth stammered, “it really didn’t occur to me, I was still in shock...”

“It’s okay, Beth,” Fiona offered. “You told us now. That’s all that matters.”

“Did you get a good look at him that day?” Jake asked. “The man who came to visit Mia?”

Beth nodded. “I saw them talking, but I didn’t think much of it. I thought it was just a guy trying to hit on her.”

“How did he seem?” Fiona asked.

“Normal,” Beth said, shrugging. “He was wearing a nice suit so he looked a bit out of place here, but he was smiling and laughing with Mia. He looked pretty young, maybe in his mid-twenties.”

Jake’s mouth became dry with anticipation. This guy could very well be the one they were looking for. “What did he look like?”

“Tall, pale, blond hair... he was wearing a nice suit and had a fancy watch on his wrist. I remember thinking he looked like a doctor, like a surgeon or something. He looked good in a suit, to be honest. I didn’t get creep vibes.”

Jake’s mind was racing. The detail about the lamp post seemed significant, and he pictured the crime scene in his head. There had been benches, but had there been a lamp post? Was her body found near one?

More importantly—who was this man?

“Can you remember anything else about who he might be?” Jake pressed. “Do you have security footage? Did he buy

anything?”

“No cameras, I’m afraid,” Beth said, “and I don’t think he ever bought anything. He just came in to talk to Mia.”

Jake nodded. He had enough to go on. “Thank you, Beth,” he said, standing up. “We’ll be in touch if we have any more questions.”

Beth watched as Jake and Fiona left the store, greeted by the midday sun, reflecting off the streets of Portland. Jake sighed and faced Fiona, who looked up at him apprehensively.

“We should go back to the crime scene,” Fiona suggested. “Maybe there’s something we missed. I never got to look, so maybe...”

“You’re right,” Jake said. He had to admit, Fiona was doing a great job of helping him with this case, and he trusted her intuition. She’d been right before—surely, she could be right again. “Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Fiona stood in front of the park where Mia Phearson's body had been found, feeling strangely cold, as though she could feel what happened here in the air. The park was on the outskirts of a neighborhood, far back past a field, but before a forest, so it was remote. The type of park only locals in the area would be familiar with.

The midday sun was bright, shining down on the eerie quietness of the park. With its yellow barrier tape stretching between trees and bushes, the place seemed desolate and full of emptiness. The only sound was the wind rustling the leaves and an occasional bird call. A sense of sadness and fear hung in the air. A couple of officers remained by the scene, likely only to keep people out.

Fiona looked up at Jake, who nodded at her. "I think we need to look for that lamp post," he said. "If the guy really did tell Mia to meet him by a bench with a lamp post, then that could be the exact location he took her from."

Fiona scanned the park. She could tell where the body had been found due to the concentration of crime scene tape. There were many benches, but she didn't spot the one with the lamp post.

"Let's keep walking," she said to Jake.

They began to walk slowly through the park. Fiona was careful not to step too close to any of the crime scene tape, or touch anything that could have potential evidence on it.

As they walked through the park, Fiona noticed a large stone fountain off in the distance.

They began to walk around the perimeter of the park, looking for anything that might be out of the ordinary. Suddenly, Fiona noticed a lamp post standing by itself in some tall grass on one side of the park. She pointed it out to Jake, and they made their way toward it.

As they got closer, Fiona could see that there were two benches next to it, and she immediately knew this was where Mia had gone missing from. She felt a chill run down her spine as she thought about what must have happened here that night.

Jake's face looked solemn as he also realized what they had found. He walked up to one of the benches before turning back to Fiona with an intense look in his eyes.

“We weren't checking this part of the park, because she was found so far from it.” He took a breath. “I better get forensics down here.”

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A gust of wind blew in, and Fiona hugged herself, watching from afar as the forensics team scoured the park for evidence. Jake was briefing them on where to look and what to look for as they systematically moved around the park, searching for any sign of what could have happened to Mia.

The team worked together seamlessly, checking bushes, lifting up stones, and picking through the grass. The wind had picked up now, rustling the tall grasses surrounding them and adding an extra layer of eeriness to the scene. Fiona watched as one of the officers bent down and carefully collected something from the ground near where Mia had been found. As he stood up and put it into a baggie for further analysis, she felt a chill run down her spine once again.

She shivered and looked away as Jake walked over to her. “We might be able to get some answers soon,” he said softly, his voice full of hope but also fear at what those answers might bring.

Fiona nodded solemnly before turning back toward the crime scene one last time before they left. She knew that this case was far from over, but she also felt like maybe—just maybe—they were getting closer to finding out who had taken Mia's life away from her so cruelly on that fateful night.

The forensics team moved quickly and efficiently, each one doing their part to make sure nothing was left unnoticed. They were so precise, so thorough in their work—it was amazing to watch from a distance. Fiona was always the one in the lab, not in the field, but she knew she would be able to do this job efficiently as well, as she was familiar with all the tools and techniques required.

Fiona took a couple of steps closer, feeling compelled to get a better look at what they were doing. As she got closer, she noticed that one of the team members had set up some sort of UV light near the lamp post, and was carefully examining it for any traces of blood or other evidence that may have been left behind. One man, wearing heavy gloves and equipment so as not to taint any potential DNA, picked up something from near the bench.

“I think we have a hair sample here,” he said.

“Good,” Jake called out. “We’ll run that through the lab. The guy we’re looking for is allegedly a blond, so keep an eye out for that. It hasn’t rained, people, so keep your eyes peeled—we could find something.”

Fiona had to admit, the way Jake could take charge of a situation was admirable—and a very attractive trait. She just hoped she could prove herself to be as useful. It was difficult, considering this case had no insects and she was most useful as an entomologist, but she was trying not to let that discourage her too much.

She thought about what Beth had said; that the man at the shop had seemed like a doctor or surgeon or something...

Fiona was sure her initial theory was still right. That they were looking for someone along those lines. However, she had been picturing the wrong type of person. She had imagined a creep... a night stalker...

But maybe that wasn’t the case at all.

If what Beth said was true, then they could be looking for someone charismatic and handsome. Someone capable of luring young women out into dark places, where he could then

quickly assault them, which would explain the lack of physical injury. If the girls were at ease, he could have perhaps been able to subdue them in a way that didn't show any marks.

But how was he choosing and finding these victims?

Fiona swallowed, her mouth dry as the realization set in. Beth had said Mia had met the man online.

Lauren was almost certainly right.

He was using online dating apps to find victims.

He had probably lied about who he was and created an attractive profile, a persona that could easily draw in young women. He would then lure them out with the promise of a good time—only to have his real intentions revealed too late.

Fiona shuddered at the thought, feeling sick to her stomach. It was so depraved, so cruel and yet so easy for him to get away with it over and over again.

Fiona shuddered, thinking of all the other unsuspecting women out there who could be potential targets. The thought was both terrifying and infuriating at the same time. But they had to find him before he hurt anyone else.

She looked up at Jake as he surveyed the scene. “Jake, I...”

He looked down at her, his brows pinched. “What is it, Red?”

“It's just—I think Lauren was probably right,” she said. “About the catfish theory.”

Jake nodded, his jaw tight and tense. “I was thinking the same thing. Beth said Mia met the guy online. And all the other girls were on dating apps.”

Fiona swallowed hard. “If they were all online dating, that means the killer could be someone they've been talking to. Someone they thought they could trust. Someone who seemed innocent enough that they wouldn't have been suspicious of him. It would fit Beth's description; sometimes people are distracted by a person's looks...”



Jake nodded, his eyes widening. “You’re right. That’s exactly what we have to look for.” He looked around the area one more time before turning back to Fiona. “We better go see what Lauren found out.”

Fiona nodded in agreement. She hoped Lauren would have something to work with.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jake hesitated before his hotel room. He and Fiona had just checked her room, where Lauren was last working, but Lauren wasn't there. Jake could only assume she'd gone back to the room they were sharing together, and he had a feeling she was going to be pissed off at him.

He shot a glance at Fiona, who was standing behind him, waiting to follow him in. But he felt like this was something he needed to deal with on his own first.

"Give me a sec, Red," he told her. "I need to talk to Lauren alone."

Fiona's face dropped, but she nodded. He watched as she went back into her room, closing the door behind her. With a breath, Jake faced his hotel room door, then tapped the keycard to get in.

And there was Lauren, sitting at the table, working away at her laptop. She barely looked up when Jake came in.

"Hey," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. He figured it was best to just cut to the chase here. Without another word, he slid in front of Lauren at the seat. "Listen, Fiona and I discovered a few things, and we think you're right."

Lauren sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. "Oh, really? Now you think I'm right? What changed?"

"I never thought you were *wrong*, Lauren, I just thought we should look elsewhere too." He couldn't help his annoyance; he was trying to work with her here, and she was still being hostile. Lauren just lifted an eyebrow. Jake knew he wouldn't win here, but against his better judgment, he went on. "Look, I'm sorry if you feel like I blew you off, but that wasn't the point. We still got valuable information, so why does it matter?"

Lauren clicked her tongue and turned back to her laptop. “What was the information, Jake?”

He sighed. At least they could try to focus on work. “Mia’s coworker said a guy came in to see her before she died. Blond guy, good-looking, she said twenties but he could be in his thirties for all we know. It’s hard to tell sometimes. You come across anyone like that in your search?”

“Probably,” Lauren said, “but that’s way too vague.”

Jake clenched his jaw. “I know it is. But we’re gonna have to look through every single name and photo. It’d help if you could narrow it down.”

“I’m doing the best I can,” Lauren said, her tone sharp and harsh. “The only people I can be sure are single are the ones registered at the dating sites. The rest, I’m not so sure about. And it’s not like any of those sites are heavily monitored, so who knows how many people are just using fake names.”

Jake’s brows furrowed. “They really should be monitoring these things more heavily. Catfishing is becoming more and more of a problem.”

Lauren shrugged. “People lie about who they are all the time, Jake. Especially on the internet, knowing there’s no real way to be held accountable for who you are or what you say.”

Jake’s mouth was dry, his mind whirling. The internet was a big place, and finding the right person online was hard enough, but there was so much information, and it was all so easy to manipulate and fabricate.

Jake tried to think of what to do next. Lauren was giving him the cold shoulder, and he couldn’t help but think that everything was going to shit fast. He was frustrated that they still had no concrete leads. Lauren being mad at him didn’t help at all.

At least one of these things, he could try to make right for the time being.

“Lauren,” he said, and she looked up at him. “Are you seriously still pissed off at me?”

She scoffed. “Just let it go, Jake. You clearly trust Fiona’s gut more than mine. It is what it is.”

At that moment, it became clear to him. This wasn’t just about the case. Or even Lauren believing they should all be focusing on her lead.

This was about Jake “choosing” Fiona over her.

This was jealousy.

“Lauren, none of it was personal,” Jake said. “I wasn’t trying to put Fiona over you.”

Lauren gave him a look that was both indignant and hurt. “I know you weren’t, Jake, but it still felt like you were choosing her over me.”

Jake sighed. He could tell this wasn’t going to be easy. “Look, Lauren, I don’t know what else to say except that I’m sorry. It was never about picking one person over the other; it was about working together as a team and trying our best to find out who killed Mia and the other women.”

He looked at her expectantly, hoping she’d accept his apology, but instead she just crossed her arms and glared at him. The silence between them stretched on until finally Jake spoke again.

“You know,” he said softly, “I think we should try to get back on track here. We have a lot of work to do and not much time to do it in.”

He tried his best smile at her, hoping she would see how earnest he was being, but instead she just turned away from him with a huff of annoyance before returning to her laptop. She began typing furiously. There wasn’t a sound in the room apart from the clicking of keys being tapped out on the keyboard.

Jake knew there was nothing more he could do for now—all he could do was wait for Lauren’s anger to subside.

Sometimes, being in a relationship really was a distraction for them.

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Fiona was sure there was something they'd missed. As she sat at her laptop in her hotel room, she tried to think of what other leads they could hunt down. Jake had just texted her with an update—that they had no solid leads with the dating apps, but were looking, and that she should keep doing her own thing. Fiona intended to do just that.

The problem was, she wasn't sure where to go from here.

So, they were looking for someone who likely used online dating apps. But also someone who had a clean appearance and was a very clean person, with an immaculately clean place to clean the bodies and put them in body bags.

It would be quite the ordeal, Fiona considered.

First, the killer would have to lure the women into a private place.

Gain their trust.

Then assault them.

But none of that would be clean. There would be dirt involved. The girls kicking at the ground, dirtying themselves up.

He would have to take them to the location to clean them, then come back. He would be doing that somehow... in a vehicle...

A vehicle...

A thought popped into Fiona's head. With a van or truck he could easily transport the bodies and have access to a large enough area to clean them without anyone noticing.

He would be able to stay off the radar too—no one would suspect that he was in a truck, let alone involved in any kind of suspicious activity.

Fiona sat back in her chair, her heart racing. She felt like she was on the brink of something big—something that could potentially solve this case for good. But before she could get

too excited, Fiona reminded herself to stay focused—after all, it was still just a theory.

She quickly did some research into possible vehicles that might fit the description and came up with several possibilities, but one that stood out more than the others.

There was a morgue here in Portland that utilized work vans to transport bodies. Those large, white vans that could easily be transformed into a mobile home for some people. A camper.

A van like that could also be converted into a sterilized location to clean up dead bodies.

It seemed too good to be true. Could this really be what they'd been searching for all this time? Fiona thought back to her conversation with Jake earlier. She wanted him to know that her theories weren't wrong and that they should trust her instincts more often. This could do just that. Finding the location of where the girls were killed would be a huge step forward—it would give them a place to start looking for more evidence, for more clues.

But she needed to be sure. Fiona went to text Jake, but stopped herself. If she told him her theory, he'd only ask her not to come. And this wasn't the same thing as going to a suspect's house—this was a public building.

Fiona would be fine on her own.

She took a deep breath before she closed her laptop and headed out the door. She had made up her mind—she was going to the morgue.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Fiona stepped out of the cab and looked up at the building before her. The morgue was a large, gray-stone building with tall windows that stretched from one end to the other. It had an air of mystery about it, as if it were hiding something deep within its walls.

She walked toward the entrance, taking in the details of her surroundings. The sun cast shadows on the ground, making it feel even more eerie than before. She noticed a few people walking around inside and outside of the building, but no one seemed to be paying her any attention.

The entrance doors opened with a loud creak when she pushed them and Fiona stepped into a long hallway illuminated by dim lights hanging from the ceiling. Everything seemed to be in order. There was no mess or clutter anywhere and everything was spotless.

The interior of the morgue was even less inviting than the outside—cold, antiseptic-smelling hallways with metal doors leading off into examination rooms or storage areas. Fiona stopped at a desk where a middle-aged woman sat typing away on her computer.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked without looking up from her work.

“Yes,” Fiona replied hesitantly. Feeling silly, she fished into her blouse for her lanyard, which identified her as FBI. Of course, she did not have an agent’s badge or anything like that, and there were very few situations in her career where she’d needed to show her lanyard to gain access to an area. It made her feel like an imposter.

The woman lifted an eyebrow at her. “FBI?”

“Yes,” Fiona managed. “I’m here to look around.”

“Look around for...?”

Reminding herself to stay strong and act confident, Fiona said, “Um—the vehicles you use to transport bodies,” she said. “I heard that you use vans here.”

“We do,” the woman said. “Transport trucks too, depending on how many bodies we need to deliver and where.”

A transport truck wouldn’t fit. No, it had to be more inconspicuous, like a van, something people may not notice driving through the streets. Fiona assumed the killer would park his van near where he’d leave the bodies, so it couldn’t be a transport truck.

No, she was certain of it. It had to be one of those vans.

She cleared her throat. “Yes, would you mind showing me one of them?”

The receptionist looked at Fiona skeptically, as if she was trying to decide whether she should believe her. After a few moments of silence, the woman finally sighed and nodded. “All right,” she said. “I’ll take you to the parking garage.”

Fiona felt relieved—the receptionist had agreed.

Fiona followed the woman out of the morgue and into an underground parking garage. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead. Here, there were several vans parked in neat rows, each one marked with a number on its side. Fiona walked around them, inspecting them closely.

“May I see inside one of them?” Fiona asked.

The woman shot her a look before she pulled at the back of one of the vans, opening the door to reveal a wide, open area, lined with shelves on either side. It was immaculately clean and smelled of disinfectant—and yet, a sense of death lingered in the air too.

One of these could easily be used by the killer.

Fiona’s heart beat faster. She could feel it in her bones—she had found what the killer was using. It could be any of these vans, and there were clearly a lot of drivers. They would need to look at all of them and see if any one of them matched the description Beth had given.



“Ma’am, can you do me a favor?” Fiona asked. “Do you have photographs of all your employees on record? The FBI will need a full list of people employed here.”

The woman glowered at her, making Fiona sweat, before she grabbed Fiona’s lanyard. “Do you have the clearance to ask for something like that? It says right here, ‘Fiona Red, Forensic Specialist.’ You’re not an agent, girl.”

Fiona’s face flushed in embarrassment. She felt like an idiot. But she was here now, and she had to stand her ground. “I will have the agent I’m working with call you,” she said. “I promise you, this is an official investigation. He is very busy. It would mean a lot if you could compile the list, so I don’t have to waste Special Agent Tucker’s time.”

The woman sighed. “I suppose I can do that for you,” she said with a weary voice. “But I’m warning you—if this turns out to be something else entirely, and it’s just a waste of my time, then there will be consequences.”

Fiona nodded in understanding. She knew she had to tread carefully and not push too hard, or the receptionist would refuse her request altogether.

“I really, really appreciate it,” Fiona said.

This seemed like their biggest milestone yet.

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Jake had been hard at work with Lauren for what seemed like forever, cross-referencing dating profiles with guys who could fit the profile they were looking for. He had a few maybes... but none who seemed quite perfect.

He wondered what Fiona was doing. With how tense things were with Lauren, Jake didn’t want to push his luck by leaving to go check on her. The chief had put Fiona on this team for a reason, and Jake had to put some trust in her—she could do work on her own. He just hoped she didn’t throw her life in danger again.

Jake couldn't stop thinking about how quickly things had gone sour with Lauren, and how easily. Things like this were a huge part of why he'd been so hesitant to make things official with her for so long. And now that they were official, nothing was different.

He could still back out.

He could just not tell the chief.

They could call it off.

The thought made him sweat. Lauren had made it clear that if they didn't make their relationship official, she'd leave him, not only as his girlfriend, but as his partner in the FBI too. He hated the thought of working without her. When they were actually getting along, they were getting along great.

But even when they were fighting, he still couldn't help admiring her strength and how hard she worked. She was relentless in pursuit of justice, and it made him so proud of her. She was a true force to be reckoned with, and that made him want to be a better man too.

He missed the way she laughed, the way her eyes would light up when they were talking about a case, how easily they could go from talking business to talking about their lives. He thought of all the moments they had shared together and he knew that if he ended things with her, he'd be losing something special.

And so Jake sighed and tried to focus on the task at hand. It was what was best for them both—for him to stay focused on work, and let Lauren do the same. He just hoped that in time, things between them would get back to normal again.

But what even was “normal” for them? Fighting and then making up? It was exhausting.

Jake felt confused, lost, and hurt, and even worse, none of his leads were turning into anything.

Then Lauren said, “I think I have someone.”

Jake looked up. Lauren's eyes were focused on her screen.

“The girls’ cell phone records all have used this one app called GatorDate. It’s a relatively unknown app, and almost exclusively used in Portland. They all talked to a guy on there, and I was able to get his phone records too. Jake, it’s the only app he’s used.”

Jake came over beside Lauren. She had the guy’s file open.

Bradley Spanos.

A Portland resident. No criminal record. Passport showed an average-looking guy, slightly overweight, taken within the last year. He did have blond hair, which would line up with Beth’s description.

But he worked as a garbage man for the city. Not exactly the clean, orderly person they wanted.

“I don’t know,” Jake said. “I think we’re looking for someone who works in a sterile environment and is obsessed with cleanliness. This guy’s a garbage man. He might clean up the city’s trash, but that’s still a dirty job.”

Lauren shook her head. “That doesn’t necessarily mean he’s not our guy. He works in sanitation, Jake. Maybe he enjoys cleaning what’s already dirty. Maybe that makes him feel complete, like he’s doing something good.”

Jake nodded slowly in agreement, feeling more convinced by the second that maybe this Bradley Spanos was their guy after all. But something still nagged at him—he wanted to know for sure that they were doing the right thing here before making any moves.

He took out his phone and called Beth, the girl they’d spoken to earlier—Mia’s coworker. He put it on speaker phone, and after a few rings, Beth timidly answered.

“H-hello?”

“Beth, this is Special Agent Tucker,” Jake said. “We spoke earlier.”

“Oh, Agent Tucker! Yes! Is everything okay? Did you find out what happened to Mia?”

“Not yet. Listen, Beth, if you saw a picture of the guy who came in to talk to Mia, could you identify him?”

“I mean, maybe,” Beth said. “I never talked to him and only really saw his profile. But he was in pretty good shape and I could tell he was good-looking.”

Jake smiled. “Okay, Beth. We have a picture of the guy we think is behind Mia’s disappearance. Could you take a look and see if it looks like him?”

“Sure,” Beth said.

Jake quickly sent the photo to Beth’s phone and waited for her to respond.

“Did you get it?” he asked.

There was a pause, and then Beth replied, “Yeah, I got it.” Another pause. Then, quietly: “Well... if that guy lost some weight... could be him... is that an old photo?”

“Within the last year,” Jake said. He’d been thinking the same thing. Bradley looked too overweight to match the apparently fit description of the guy Mia met with.

“Well, it’s hard to say,” Beth said. “It might be him... sorry I can’t help more.”

“Not at all, Beth,” Jake said, exchanging a look with Lauren, who had a smug “I told you so” expression on. He ignored it and looked away. “You were great, Beth. Thanks.” Jake hung up the phone and looked at Lauren. “Well, I think we should go talk to Bradley.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The sun was beginning to sink lower in the sky by the time Jake's car pulled up to Bradley's house. Lauren sat in the passenger seat, still holding that smug air about her. Jake chose to ignore it.

He still had doubts. Beth hadn't been entirely confident, and besides, he'd just driven halfway across town to get here. Considering all the girls had been found dead in a similar area, he assumed the killer might be a local, considering he had to take the bodies back to wherever he cleaned them before bringing them back. Driving across the city—twice—seemed like a big risk for somebody so meticulous.

Still, he couldn't deny that Bradley could be the one. He wasn't about to doubt Lauren too much again, and it wasn't like he had anything better.

Bradley's house looked nice from the outside—that wasn't a huge surprise, as garbage men were compensated well for the hard work they did. The house was a neat two-story building with a light brown painted exterior and white trim. It had a garden in the front and there was a small shed in the back flanked by two tall trees that provided shade. The windows were bright and inviting, the driveway clean and well kept.

The warning bells started going off. He was, at least from the outside, a clean guy.

Jake and Lauren got out of the car and walked up to the door. Jake held his breath, waiting for a response.

Nothing happened. There was no sound from within the house—not even the creak of a floorboard or the shuffling of feet. It was like the entire house had gone quiet, as if it were holding its breath, too.

Jake tried again, this time pounding on the door with more force. Still nothing happened. He looked back at Lauren, who

just shrugged her shoulders in response.

“Maybe he’s not home,” she said with a frown, looking around them cautiously as if expecting Bradley to jump out from around one of the trees and attack them both at any moment.

Jake sighed and turned away from the door, ready to go back to his car and consider other leads, when suddenly there was movement inside the house—the sound of footsteps coming closer to the door before stopping once again, followed by dead silence once more.

He looked back at Lauren with wide eyes; she seemed equally surprised by this sudden turn of events. They both stood still, listening intently for any further noise coming from within Bradley’s house. He must be looking at them through the peephole.

“Bradley?” Jake called out, knocking again. “Bradley Spanos?”

After a moment, Bradley answered the door, poking a head out.

He looked different from his passport photo.

As theorized, he had lost weight. He looked tall and surprisingly muscular, although his posture still lacked the confidence Jake had envisioned when Beth described the man Mia met. But that didn’t mean anything. It could all be a ruse.

Jake held out his badge, along with Lauren. “Special Agent Jake Tucker, FBI. This is my partner, Special Agent Lauren Price.”

Bradley nodded, scanning them. “Can I help you?”

Jake peered into the house behind Bradley. It was spotless. His throat tightened as he looked into the man’s eyes, wondering if behind that apprehensive blue gaze was the mind of a killer. A serial murderer who had taken three innocent lives and left their bodies semi-embalmed in body bags.

“Mind if we ask you a few questions?” Jake asked.

Bradley opened the door more. “What about?”

Jake exchanged a look with Lauren, who nodded. She took out her phone and held up a picture of Mia. “Do you know this woman?”

Bradley looked at the photo, no emotion crossing his brow. “No?”

“Are you sure?” Jake asked, putting his hands in his pockets. “You two matched on a dating app called GatorDate?”

Bradley’s face suddenly fell. Then, before Jake could react, he attempted to slam the door shut.

Jake didn’t think—he just held out his hand, preventing the door from closing.

Holy shit.

This could really be their guy.

But surprisingly, Bradley didn’t run away. He just shot them a look.

“Hey, you can’t just like, do that,” he said.

“What are you hiding, Bradley?” Jake asked. “Why’d you try to close the door on us?”

“Because this is creepy, man,” Bradley said, his face getting red. “What the hell is this, huh? You think you can just knock on someone’s door and ask about private apps on their phone? How’d you even know I used that stupid thing?”

“We have our sources,” Lauren said. “Is it a problem that we know?”

“It’s an invasion of my privacy!” Bradley exclaimed.

Jake stepped closer, attempting to calm him down. “Look, Bradley, we don’t mean any harm. We just need to ask you some questions about Mia.”

Bradley’s face contorted with anger and it seemed like he was about to erupt. He stepped forward and jabbed a finger in Jake’s chest. “You know what? I’m not answering any of your questions.” He took a deep breath and then said more calmly,

“I don’t know anything about Mia and if you don’t leave my property right now I’m going to call the cops!”

Jake glanced at Lauren, who shook her head in frustration before looking back at Bradley.

“We can’t do that,” Jake said firmly. “We’re here on official business and if you don’t cooperate we could take other measures. Did you not see our badges? The police work with us.”

“Screw you, man!” Bradley exclaimed, and before Jake could react, Bradley shoved him hard in the chest.

Jake staggered back, shocked by Bradley’s strength.

Lauren stepped forward, her hand on her gun. “Bradley, don’t do anything stupid.”

But Bradley wasn’t listening. He balled his fists and lunged at Jake. Jake braced himself, preparing to fight.

Bradley threw a wild punch, but Jake was ready. He blocked and countered, using the momentum of Bradley’s attack to his advantage and sending him flying into the wall with a grunt. Bradley went to dive at Jake again, but suddenly, Lauren sprang into action. She ran up to Bradley, grabbed his arm, and twisted it behind his back. He yowled in pain. With her free hand, she pulled out a pair of handcuffs and secured them around Bradley’s wrists.

“You’re under arrest for assaulting an FBI agent,” Lauren said sternly. “Anything you say or do can be used against you in a court of law.”

Jake backed off, his heart pounding and his breathing heavy. He was damn glad Lauren had gotten him in cuffs, because Bradley was stronger than he’d expected. Hell, if Jake didn’t know any better, he’d think Bradley was doing steroids.

But they had him.

He couldn’t hurt anyone else now.

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Jake sat across from Bradley in the local police station's interrogation room with Lauren beside him. Bradley was cuffed across from them, and he spat on the floor, looking at them with a scowl.

"You know, I let the woman arrest me," he spat, looking at Jake. "No matter what you might think of me, I don't hit chicks. You really think that tiny girl could take me down so easily?"

Jake leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. He couldn't care less about Bradley's ego right now. But considering Bradley's dilated pupils, his expanded muscles, rage issues, and protruding veins in his arms... Jake had a feeling this guy really was on steroids.

"How long have you been juicing, Bradley?" Jake asked.

Bradley scowled. "Shut the hell up, man. You don't know shit."

"I know plenty," Jake replied.

"Like what?" Bradley snapped.

"Like you're connected to a murder," Jake said.

"Oh, is that it?" Bradley said with a laugh. "Because of that stupid app? I told you, I don't know the chick."

"Why didn't you want us to know that you hooked up with Mia?" Lauren asked. "Why'd you try to close the door on us?"

"I didn't try to close the door on you!" Bradley exclaimed. "I was just... surprised. I didn't know what to say."

"You don't seem too surprised to see us now," Lauren noted.

Bradley glared at her. "And you don't seem to care that you're crushing my wrist like a damn can."

Lauren rolled her eyes, but eased up on the handcuffs a little. "Are you going to cooperate now that we've got you in cuffs?"

“It’s not like I had much of a choice,” Bradley retorted. “You seem to forget I’m a law-abiding citizen, unlike you. How could I even know you were really FBI agents, huh? You seemed like two power-trippers to me, so I stood my ground. Is that really such a crime?”

“Yes, Bradley, it is a crime,” Jake said with a sigh.

He truly didn’t want to waste time on this guy. It was looking like an open-and-shut case; Bradley had connections to all three girls, and he seemed like he could fit the profile.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. An officer poked his head in.

“Sorry to interrupt, but there’s a very eager woman here to see you two,” he said. “Red hair, glasses...?”

Jake exchanged a look with Lauren. What was Fiona doing here? Jake had sent her a quick message to let her know they had a suspect and were coming down to the station, but he hadn’t had a chance to check his phone beyond that.

And now she was here. And it was apparently important enough to interrupt an interrogation.

“That girl...” Lauren muttered bitterly. She shoved away from the table. Jake shot Bradley a look before he followed her out into the hallway.

And there was Fiona, looking as eager and determined as ever. Her eyes were wide, her lips pressed into a thin line, and she had an intensity that Jake hadn’t seen in her before. She ran up to him and Lauren with a sense of urgency.

“I know who the killer is!” she exclaimed breathlessly. “It all makes sense now! I can explain it all.”

Jake glanced at Lauren before looking back at Fiona. “What do you mean?” he asked warily. He wasn’t sure if he should be nervous or impressed. Nervous, because what if she was wasting their time? But also impressed, because it seemed she’d been hard at work since they split up.

“Guys, I went and did some investigating,” Fiona said. “I found a morgue in town that transports bodies in these

extremely sterile vans. The killer could be traveling on wheels and cleaning up the bodies in them.”

Jake was intrigued. Fiona had a point; it did make sense. It could explain why there hadn't been any physical trace of the killer at the crime scenes. If the killer had a vehicle like that, he could clean the bodies up right at the crime scene instead of having to take them to another location.

“That’s an interesting theory,” Jake said slowly, trying not to seem too impressed. “But why do you think you know who the killer is?”

Fiona smiled triumphantly, as if she'd been waiting for that question. She took out a piece of paper and showed it to them. On it, a photocopy of somebody's employee card—a driver for the morgue, along with some information from his file, which Fiona must have printed off alongside it. Jake grabbed the paper and read it thoroughly.

Justin Everett.

Age: thirty.

His medical records indicated he had a lot of Botox, and it was obvious based on his employee card; his face looked stiff, yet youthful for a thirty-year-old. Jake thought of what Beth had said, that the man looked like he could be young. He also had the clean-cut look Beth had described, like he could be a surgeon or something; his jaw was completely shaved bare, and he had wide, soulless blue eyes.

He had no criminal record, but his personnel file said his wife had died a year ago.

Jake had seen this before. A person loses someone, and within a year, they lose their minds too.

That could be what they were looking at here.

“No,” Lauren cut in, backing off. “No. The man we have in there is the killer, Fiona. We have proof he spoke to all of them, and he matches the description. The eyewitness said it could be him.”

“We could check with her again,” Jake said. “She wasn’t able to fully ID him.”

“Which means she can’t fully ID this guy either,” Lauren said.

Jake saw where this was going. If he sided with Fiona, Lauren would be enraged with him again. He had to make it work.

“You’re right,” Jake said, “you should stay here and talk to Bradley. We can’t rule him out. I’ll go find this Justin guy and see what he has to say. Just to be extra thorough.”

Lauren nodded, and Jake felt a wave of relief wash over him. He looked at Fiona, who had been standing quietly the whole time.

“Come on,” he said to her. “Let’s go find this Justin guy.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

He drove the van through the city as the sun began to set. It was a little early for him to meet up with her—earlier than he'd usually choose—but this meeting spot was even further out than the others... it was a private spot.

A private spot he used to take Zoey.

No one would see them. In all the years he was with Zoey—from high school until her death—no one had ever caught them there.

They'd made love there for the first time.

He'd proposed to her there.

By that lovely pond in the woods outside of town.

It would be perfect.

A perfect place for this new girl to die.

Erica... that was her name. He'd given her specific instructions on where to meet. She was such a stupid girl, agreeing to meet a man she'd only met up with a few times in such a remote place. Zoey would never have been so foolish.

No... Zoey was perfect.

But he could make Erica perfect too, in the only way he knew how.

He pulled off into the woods, stopping at the entrance that led to the pond. He had no idea what he'd do if another car pulled up beside him.

Maybe he'd have to kill them too.

But it was a good thing he didn't have to worry about that. The parking lot was empty. Erica had followed instructions like a good girl and come alone.

He stepped out of the van, watching as the sun continued to sink. He could see Erica's car parked along the road.

She was waiting for him.

And he wasn't going to keep her waiting any longer.

He opened the door, and the interior of the van glowed from the twilight outside. He stepped out into the cool air, and without even glancing at the spot where he and Zoey had shared so many tender moments, he walked toward the back of the van.

He reached the back door and paused, taking in a deep breath. Soon, Erica would see that she was not Zoey. She was an imposter... nothing more than a cheap imitation.

Images of his time with Zoey flashed in his mind. He remembered their wedding day. God, that was the best day of his life. The sun had been shining and everything had been perfect. He remembered the way Zoey's eyes sparkled with excitement, the way she'd told him she loved him...

Zoey, walking up the aisle. That beautiful white dress.

He remembered the way his heart raced as they exchanged vows. The way they shared their first kiss as husband and wife.

The reception that followed was filled with the laughter of their friends and family, all of them celebrating this new union.

The music, the food, the dancing... It was better than he ever could have imagined. He remembered how happy he and Zoey were, how in love they felt...

It felt like it was just yesterday. He smiled to himself, feeling a warmth inside him that he hadn't felt in so long.

He knew that no matter what happened next, no one would ever take away those memories from him. No one could take away his special day with Zoey... his perfect wedding day.

But that was all in the past now. Zoey was gone forever. She was never coming back.

He looked into the woods. If Erica followed his instructions—which he knew she would—she would be waiting for him

by the pond. He smiled, imagining how it would feel to drain her life force away.

He would have to be quick. He remembered how easily the first girl died. It was so easy to drain her of her life.

But he didn't want to make a mistake. He wanted to enjoy this.

A slight breeze blew through the trees along with a soft rustling. The leaves were beginning to change.

Erica had waited long enough.

He opened up the back door and pulled out the body bag, rolling it up to be easily carried. He imagined Erica's confused face when she saw it. She might think it to be a present for her. He grinned.

He supposed in some ways, it was a present.

A present only for her.

He smiled, envisioning the look on her face when she discovered her fate. She would be confused, at first—but then she would realize that she wasn't Zoey.

She never would be Zoey.

She never could be.

And he would be the one to show her exactly how deep the difference between the two of them ran.

He would kill her, take her life from her, and turn her into a corpse. A forever young, beautiful corpse.

He would take her life, and he would take her.

He smiled at the thought.

He wanted to savor this moment.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Fiona held her breath as Jake whipped the car up to the curb outside of Justin Everett's house—a small bungalow on the south side of town, not far from where the bodies were discovered.

The sun was setting, its last rays of the day filtering through the clouds and casting a deep red glow across the sky. The light illuminated the roof of Everett's house, making the tiles look like they were made of molten lava. The whole world seemed to be painted with this vibrant hue, like an old master's painting. Or like blood.

Jake got out of the car, and Fiona followed. Jake jogged up to the doorstep, but stopped before they got there.

"Listen, Red," he told her, gently grasping both of her arms as he looked deeply into her eyes. Fiona blinked up at him—the moment didn't feel real. Jake was touching her, looking at her like he truly trusted her. It made her heart flutter, even in these dark circumstances. "I believe you've got the right guy. I don't think the guy Lauren's interrogating is the one, at least not anymore. You should just stay in the car in case this gets ugly."

Fiona understood why he'd want her to stay behind. She was a liability. But... he was risking his life too. No, this time, Fiona was going to be stubborn.

"I'm coming," she told him. "I won't do anything reckless. I promise."

Jake sighed, but nodded. "Alright. Let's go."

He let go of her arms and Fiona followed him to the door. She watched with bated breath as Jake reached out and knocked—once, twice, three times. No one answered. He tried again—still nothing. He stepped back, looking around for any signs of movement or life within the house before motioning for Fiona to follow him around back.



Fiona followed closely behind him as he crept around the side of the house and peered into a window. It was dark inside, and there were no signs of activity in any room that he could see from this angle. He turned toward Fiona and she shrugged—Fiona supposed they could expect this kind of silence in a home where someone was expected to be living alone. It was dead. Like a crypt.

Justin wasn't here.

Which meant...

He could be anywhere. Fiona pressed her hand to her forehead. With how fast his timeline was escalating, there was no doubt he could be hunting again.

“Maybe we can get a hit on his cell,” Jake said, taking out his phone to make a call. Fiona went up to the kitchen window and peered inside. It was dark, but she could make out the shapes of what was inside: kitchen table, chairs, and a refrigerator in the dim light coming from the window. She could see cabinets and drawers against the walls in the kitchen. She saw a dishwasher and what looked like a stovetop, as well as various other appliances.

All immaculately clean.

Not only that, but something was on the kitchen table.

Fiona's heart raced as she stepped closer to get a better look: it was Justin's cell phone.

“Jake, stop,” Fiona said before he could start his call.

He frowned at her. “What?”

She pointed inside. “His cell phone... he left it.”

Jake peered inside. His face twitched. “Damn it. He must've left it to avoid being tracked. Of course he did.”

Fiona nodded, her heart sinking. It seemed like Justin had thought of everything—including how to avoid being tracked. She wondered if that meant he was even more dangerous than they had initially thought.

But then a thought struck her.

Justin's cell phone was here, in his empty house...

But what about the van from the morgue?

If he were truly out hunting, then he would be in that van. And that, they could track.

She looked up at Jake and excitedly grabbed at his shirt sleeve. Catching herself, she quickly let go, her face flushing. He gave her a quizzical look, and she said, "His work van. We can check and see if it's at the morgue. If it's not... we know what to track."

Jake nodded. "That's good thinking, Red. I'll call and we can head there."

Fiona took a deep breath, her heart hammering in her chest.

Fiona glanced back into the kitchen and let out a shuddering breath. She stepped back up to the window, watching the shadows as they moved around. She wished she could see Justin Everett. Where was he? Was he hunting at that very moment?

If they were right about Justin and he was the killer... then it was going to be up to them to catch him.

Fiona tuned in to Jake as he talked to someone on the phone. "Yeah... that's right, Justin Everett's van. It's not there? Can you tell me the license plate number?" Jake typed something into his phone, then put his phone back to his ear. "Got it. Thanks."

He hung up and faced Fiona. But she already knew what he was going to say. Her jaw clenched, and this became too real, too fast.

"His van's gone," Jake said. "Let me call my tech and see if they can track it. Let's go back to the car."

The sky was getting darker as Fiona followed Jake back to the car. Jake got behind the wheel, and Fiona sat in the passenger seat. Even though it was warm, her teeth chattered as Jake made the call to track the van's GPS.

"Yeah, I need you to track a van. It's registered to Justin Everett. Here's the license plate number." He rattled off the

numbers, and Fiona heard a confirmation from the other end of the line.

As she sank in the seat, she stared out at the world outside the car. A sudden thought hit her; she wondered if the people in charge of her sister, Joslyn's, disappearance cared as much as Jake did. She couldn't imagine Jake ever giving up on a case, but in many ways, Fiona felt like the police had given up on Joslyn way too soon.

Fiona's sister had been too young to simply vanish. Only seventeen. It didn't feel fair. So many years had passed since that day at the beach, and yet it haunted Fiona. Maybe trying so hard to solve this case was her way of compensating.

Fiona shook her head, clearing away the thoughts. She had to stay focused and not let her emotions get in the way of the case. She needed to find out what happened to Justin Everett.

Fiona swallowed hard, taking a deep breath. She looked over at Jake, who was still talking on the phone. He nodded his head and hung up, then put the car into drive.

"We got a lock on it," he said. "Let's go."

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Fiona and Jake barely spoke as Jake ripped the car southbound, shredding through the outskirts of the city. There was no space in their silence for words—they were both lost in their own thoughts, focused only on the task ahead. Fiona didn't know exactly where they were going, but she trusted Jake. He was an experienced FBI agent, and he knew what he was doing.

Fiona was simply along for the ride.

Finally, they pulled into a wooded area. Jake drove slowly, weaving through the trees as the sun set. The shadows of the woods stretched out in front of them, and Fiona felt her heart beat faster.

But Jake didn't seem fazed at all. She could see a renewed sense of purpose on his face as he focused on driving. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, as if he had done this a million times before—like it was second nature to him.

The sky transitioned from orange to dark blue as they continued down the dirt path. Finally, it opened up into a clearing again.

A parking lot.

And in it, two vehicles.

A car.

And a large white van.

Fiona's heart nearly stopped. This was it. The van the killer was using.

Justin's van.

It was here. And he was the one they were looking for.

Jake pulled the car into a parking space, and they both hurried out. He held his hand up as Fiona chased after him.

"Fiona, no," he said. "I'm serious. This time, you stay behind."

"I'm not staying behind!" she exclaimed.

"Fiona, he's dangerous. This is a dangerous situation. I've done this a million times. Trust me. We just have to be careful. I'll call for backup, but it's going to take some time before they get here."

His voice was firm, and he crossed his arms, waiting for Fiona's response. Her heart was racing in her chest, and she knew he was right. He was an FBI agent, and she was only a lab rat. The entomologist and forensic analyst. She had no idea what she was walking into.

But before Fiona could respond, an ear-splitting scream sounded from deep within the forest.

Jake looked at Fiona with panic before he darted into the forest.

Fiona didn't think. She just ran after him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Jake's feet pounded the forest floor as he ran, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He prayed to God Fiona wasn't following him, but he could hear her faint footsteps behind him and knew she was doing it again—being reckless.

But he didn't have time to think about it. He had heard the woman's scream, loud and clear, and he knew exactly who was assaulting her.

Justin Everett.

The murderer they were looking for.

He had to make it in time. If he lost another woman tonight, he didn't think he could handle the guilt.

The trees blurred together as Jake ran, his breath coming in short gasps. He could still hear Fiona's footsteps behind him and wished he could tell her to stay back, but there was no time. He had to get there. But these dark, menacing woods seemed to go on forever. He dodged over roots as he ran as fast as his legs would take him.

Jake pushed himself faster and faster, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he leapt over fallen logs and dodged bushes. He had to get to the woman before it was too late.

He could see a clearing up ahead—the source of the screams—and he charged forward without hesitation. As he emerged from the trees, he came up to a pool of water—a pond.

The pond was large and still, its glassy surface reflecting the light of the stars and the moon like a mirror. Its edges were lined with tall reeds, swaying gently in the night breeze. It was surrounded by a grassy area which was bordered by a thicket of trees and shrubs. The smell of algae was damp in his nose.

Jake looked forward, and there, he saw it.

A man, attempting to shove a woman into a black bag.

A body bag.

There he was. Justin Everett.

*Bastard.*

Without a moment's hesitation, Jake charged forward. He threw himself into Justin, tackling him to the ground. The woman screamed as she stumbled away from them, shock and terror on her face.

Justin let out a guttural scream as he fought back, and before Jake could react, he felt something stab him in the arm. A sharp, piercing pain.

He looked down.

A scalpel stuck out from his forearm.

Jake gritted his teeth and reached out, pulling the scalpel out of his arm. He threw it to the side, not wanting to risk another attack.

Justin scrambled back, a look of rage in his eyes. He stood up and began to circle Jake like a wild animal, as if he were sizing him up before attacking again.

Jake felt fear rise inside him, but he refused to show it. He was an FBI agent—he had been trained for this kind of thing. He stood tall and confident, ready for whatever Justin was about to throw at him. Justin looked at him with those soulless eyes, circling him at the shore of the pond. Jake wanted to reach for his gun, but he could tell Justin would pounce at any moment, and Jake didn't know what kind of nasty weapons he had on him.

But it was a gamble he had to take.

Jake's hand shot to his side to grab his gun.

All at once, Justin charged him, letting out a primal scream. "You can't take her from me! You can't take my Zoey again!"

Justin tackled Jake with a shocking strength that knocked the wind from Jake's lungs. He gripped the gun firmly as Justin tried to wrestle it from him.

Jake was determined not to let go. He pushed back, gritting his teeth against the pain in his arm.

But Justin shoved him, and Jake's feet slipped out beneath him. He landed in the wet, cold water of the pond, and Justin tried to grab the gun again—only for it to slip from Jake's hand and fly back to the shore.

Justin scrambled to grab the gun, but Jake pulled at him with all his might, dragging Justin back into the pond.

Justin spluttered and screamed, but Jake was determined. He used every ounce of strength he had to keep Justin from getting the gun, even as his own body began to give out from exhaustion.

The fight was on.

Jake and Justin wrestled in the pond, their splashes echoing through the night air. They were both determined to win, each of them trying desperately to take control of the gun. But neither could gain the upper hand—until Justin grabbed a rock from the bottom of the pond and hit Jake over the head with it.

For a moment, all Jake could see were stars.

Pain reverberated through his skull, and everything became light. So light...

Images flashed through his mind.

Lauren. Her smile. Her love...

Her coldness, too.

She was colder than the pond water that he now felt all around him.

Images of his family. His father. His brother. They were both firefighters. Heroes.

His mom. She had been a firefighter too...

Before she was murdered.

Jake's head was dizzy as he thought about the killer. How he'd never been caught. How he'd gotten away.



Why was Jake thinking about this now, of all times? He didn't know. He let out a sigh as he struggled to stay above the water. Was this it for him? Would he die at only thirty years old? He'd thought he'd see so much more than that. Do so much more than that...

"Jake!" he heard someone screech. "Jake!"

He snapped out of it.

Delirious, he opened his eyes as the forest materialized around him again.

He looked forward.

Fiona.

Her red hair. Her terrified face.

Her thin arms trembling as she pointed the gun in his direction.

No, not at him...

Justin.

It all came back in a wave, and Jake snapped out of it. He wasn't dead—probably just concussed.

And now Fiona Red had the gun.

Justin stood nearby, looking like he was about to pounce on Fiona if she didn't shoot. Jake might not make it in time. His head was killing him, but he had to save Fiona.

"Red, take the shot!" he yelled.

Fiona's arms trembled.

She looked at Jake, her eyes filled with fear. She was frozen.

Jake could see the fear in her eyes as she looked down at the gun, and he knew she wasn't going to take it. She was too scared of what might happen if she did. He wanted to tell her it would be okay, that everything would work out in the end, but he couldn't get the words past his lips.

Fiona shouldn't have had to go through this. It was Jake's job as the trained agent to control the situation, and he'd

failed. He watched helplessly as Justin stepped closer and closer toward Fiona, raising his arm to strike her. Jake tried to yell something—anything—but nothing came out.

Then came the gunshot.

Jake held his breath, afraid to see what had happened. Afraid Fiona had somehow been hit—afraid that they'd lost.

But when his eyes adjusted, he saw Justin fall to the ground, holding his arm.

She'd hit him.

In the arm, at least.

It was enough to snap Jake out of it.

He ran forward and stopped just short of the cowering Justin. His hands were shaking from the close encounter. He pulled on the cold, hard metal handcuffs and felt their unyielding strength. A shudder ran down his spine as he secured Justin's wrists behind his back.

"That's it, buddy," Jake said, "you can't hurt anyone else."

"No! Let me go!" Justin screamed, writhing, but it was over for him.

They got him.

Fiona got him.

No, more than that—Fiona had saved Jake's life.

Jake then turned to Fiona, who was still trembling with fear. Her skin was papery white, and she seemed in total shock from what she'd done. She was still holding the gun.

"Fiona, it's okay," Jake said, slowly approaching her. He held out his hand. "I can take the gun now. It's okay."

"I... I shot someone," Fiona managed.

"Yes, you did," Jake said softly. "And it was the right thing to do. You saved my life." He gently took the gun from her and pocketed it.

Fiona's breathing slowly return to normal, and he knew she was beginning to process what had happened.

“Fiona, you did it,” Jake said, both shocked and amazed.  
“You saved us.”

Fiona nodded, her eyes wide and red from crying. He couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement, a thrill that they had survived this.

“You're amazing,” he said.

Her eyes snapped to him. “I—I am?”

“Yeah.” Jake chuckled. “You took the shot, Red.”

Fiona smiled, wiping away the tears. “I guess I did.”

Fiona was safe. The victim was free.

For now, that was all Jake could ask for.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Jake held an ice pack to his head as he sat in Chief Whittaker's office, nearly laughing at how everything had gone down. Fiona was supposed to be in the lab, behind the scenes. She was a scrawny girl with no training, and yet she'd managed to save his life this time.

He guessed it was time to stop underestimating her.

Sitting in the chief's office with both Lauren and Fiona, Jake waited for Chief Whittaker's final report. He cleared his throat and looked at all of them before he let out a chuckle.

"Well, it looks like you had some hiccups along the way, but you three really do make a good team," the chief said.

Fiona and Jake both laughed. Meanwhile, Lauren was quiet.

"Thanks, Chief," Jake said. "I'd say the three of us did a pretty good job."

"Aside from that head injury, of course," the chief said. "Tell me, Special Agent Tucker, how's it feel to have a lab rat save your life?"

Jake laughed to hide his embarrassment, and Fiona jokingly exclaimed, "Hey! I'm a little more than a lab rat now, aren't I?"

The chief chuckled with good nature. "Yes, Ms. Red. You've earned your place with Special Agents Tucker and Price."

Still, Lauren was quiet. Jake glanced at her, trying to give her a smile, but she just turned away from him. He knew it burned that she'd been wrong about who the killer was and Fiona was right. He felt for Lauren, he did, but he wished she didn't take this so personally. It was silly to be upset at a time like this. All that mattered was that the killer was caught and behind bars.

“That Justin Everett guy,” the chief said, “was a real piece of work. He’ll be spending the rest of his life in jail. Turns out he was preying on young women as some sort of strange fantasy about his late wife, who died of cancer only a year ago. Very young lady, a sad story indeed... but there was no helping that guy. Good job, you three.”

Jake smiled, feeling a wave of relief. “Thank you, Chief.” He stood up and shook the chief’s hand before Fiona and Lauren did the same.

Chief Whittaker nodded his head in approval. “You three can go now,” he said. “I know it’s been a long few days. Take some time off, relax for a day or two. As soon as I have a new assignment fit for your team, I’ll be in touch.”

Jake nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He, Fiona, and Lauren all made their way out of the office, and Jake couldn’t help but feel a sense of accomplishment. They’d done it. The case was solved.

It felt good to have done something right for once. He glanced at Fiona, who was still trembling from the events that had transpired yesterday, yet she wore a look of pride on her face as well. He only wished Lauren was in a better mood. Yet despite her grim face, Jake knew she had to be glad they’d solved the case and brought justice to those affected by Justin Everett’s crimes.

“Well, you guys,” Jake said, “celebratory lunch?”

“I’m good,” Lauren said coldly. “I’ll see you later. Good work, you guys.” With that, she took off down the hall before Jake could even stop her.

Now alone with Fiona, he awkwardly looked down at her. Fiona sighed, seemingly aware of the situation with Lauren. There was something wise about the young woman.

“You should go after her,” Fiona said.

Jake rubbed the back of his neck. He had enjoyed working with Fiona on this case again, and the truth was, she’d been the brains of the operation—yet again. But she was right, as

usual; he did have to go after Lauren and try to make things right with her.

Of course, he was starting to see things a bit differently now too.

Working alongside Lauren wasn't always perfect.

Sometimes, when they got mad at each other, it was nothing more than a distraction at work. Still... he couldn't stop caring about her. Not after all they'd been through.

He smiled at Fiona. "Thanks again," he said. "You know, for everything."

Fiona smiled back and nodded. "Anytime," she replied.

Jake took a deep breath and turned away from Fiona to go after Lauren. He had to make things right with her, even if it meant eating a bit of humble pie.

He made his way down the corridor, his heart pounding in anticipation of what might come next.

But when he turned the corner, he froze in place. There she was, standing inside the elevator, looking coldly past him. It looked like she was about to press the button for her floor when he saw his chance and ran toward her.

"Lauren!" he shouted, but it was too late.

The elevator doors had already started to close on them.

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Jake stood with his hands tucked into his pockets, his gaze taking in the sprawling metropolis of Portland from his apartment window. He was mesmerized by the twinkling lights that stretched across the horizon and the tall buildings that soared high above them. The soft glow of streetlights glimmered in the night.

Lauren was supposed to be there any minute.

He had texted her, asking if they could meet up at his place. She had responded with a simple *OK*, and he couldn't help but wonder what was going through her mind.

He sighed, feeling the anticipation of their meeting build in his chest. He wanted to make things right with Lauren; he wanted them to be a team again, like they were before all this happened.

He silently prayed that she would forgive him and take him back so that they could continue working together.

Jake waited by the window in silence for what felt like eternity until he finally heard the distant sound of footsteps echoing through the hallway outside his door. His heart leapt with excitement as he quickly ran to open it, to find Lauren standing there looking as beautiful as ever.

"Hey," she said softly, not meeting his gaze.

Jake smiled and stepped aside so that she could come in. He gestured for her to take a seat on the couch while he made them two cups of tea from the kitchenette nearby. When he came back, Lauren was sitting quietly, still not looking at him directly.

He handed over one cup of tea and slowly sat down beside her on the sofa, hoping that she would speak first and break the ice between them. But it fell on him.

"Lauren, I—"

"Save it, Jake," she said. "I can tell you don't want to do this anymore."

"What?" His heart sank. "No, that's not true at all."

Her green eyes met his, full of pain. "You still didn't tell anyone about our relationship. It was my condition, Jake. I said we needed to make it official. Instead, you doubted my instincts and went with Fiona's, and that would be fine if you weren't also avoiding our relationship."

Jake didn't know what to say. It was true that he didn't have the guts to tell anyone yet.

"Lauren," he said, "we caught the killer—"

“And I wasn’t there to help you,” she said. “She was.”

Jake didn’t know what to say about that. Lauren hadn’t trusted his instincts, either.

“What’s happening to us?” she said. “Our teamwork. We normally have each other’s backs on everything. But with Fiona here, I feel like we’re just... out of sync.”

“But we caught the killer,” Jake said. “She helped do that. Hell, she basically did all of it.”

Lauren frowned. “I know. I know she did. But... I feel like she’s a bit too attached to you, Jake. I’m a bit worried that she might have feelings for you that she’s not revealing.”

Jake felt his jaw drop. “What?”

Lauren stared at him in silence. “It’s just... I’ve seen the way she looks at you. It’s hard to explain, but you feel it too, don’t you?”

Jake turned away, his face growing red hot. He didn’t know how to respond to that. Could Lauren be right? Was Fiona more attracted to him than she let on? He was fairly certain Fiona wasn’t interested in Jake’s type.

“Is that what this has all been about?” Jake asked. “You think she’s a threat to us?”

“She is,” Lauren said, “even if it’s not like that. She’s changing our dynamic, and I don’t like it.”

Jake was speechless. On one hand, he understood Lauren’s feelings. But that was why it was an issue. They were FBI agents. Feelings should not be affecting their job performance.

“Lauren... we’re professionals... we can’t let our feelings interfere with our work...”

Lauren frowned. “It’s not like that for me,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes. “I care about you, Jake. I don’t want to lose you because I’m worried about her taking you away from me. I don’t want to lose our partnership.”



Jake looked at Lauren, tears already streaming down her face. It felt like a punch to the gut. Jake didn't know what to do. On one hand, he didn't want to lose Lauren either. On the other, this felt like the biggest distraction of his career as an agent. And Lauren's.

How much more of it could they withstand?

"I'm going to be honest," Jake said. "I didn't think this was going to happen. I didn't think you'd have any problems with Fiona. She's so... reserved, I didn't think she'd have any effect on you. But she does. And I'm not saying that's a bad thing. It's not. I think it's important that we're both aware of this. I don't want you to think I'm not taking your feelings into account. I am. I'm not about to abandon you. We're partners, and we'll figure this out. I promise."

Jake's words were genuine. He had no desire to lose Lauren as a partner, and he cared about her more than he cared about anything else. But maybe a part of him liked having Fiona around, and he didn't want to jeopardize that. And he wasn't sure how to handle that.

There was a pause, and the two of them both seemed to be waiting for the other to speak.

"We should tell the chief we want her off the team," Lauren said.

Jake paused, taken aback.

That just didn't seem fair. Let alone professional.

"Lauren... Fiona likes this job, and it's good for her career. I'm not interested in her like that. You're really going to do this?"

Lauren stared back at Jake, her face hardening. "Yes."

That's when Jake realized this was going to be a bigger issue than he'd anticipated. Lauren was really worried about Fiona. More than he had realized.

Now, he found himself in a bigger moral dilemma than he'd signed up for. He cared about Lauren, but Fiona's words kept

ringing in his head. About how being with Lauren romantically was a distraction to their work.

That was obviously true.

Forcing a partner out because of personal feelings—whether perceived or real—was wildly unprofessional.

Jake wasn't okay with this request.

But then Lauren rested her head on his shoulder, causing his heart to hurt.

He wanted to make this work.

But things were getting more complicated, and he wasn't sure if they could withstand much more.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Fiona's apartment had never felt so lonely.

She let out a sigh as she flopped down on the couch. She was exhausted and had barely slept lately, and she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd somehow messed up Jake and Lauren's relationship.

Part of Fiona knew it was probably for the best if those two just broke up, or at least stopped being partners. They clearly had a high emotional impact on each other, and Fiona could see the way it distracted Jake at work.

But still, she wouldn't wish loneliness on anyone. If Jake and Lauren found solace in each other, then who was Fiona to judge that? She was just a girl, sitting alone in her apartment, with no matches on a dating app...

She shot upright on her couch. The dating app!

Fiona had totally forgotten about her profile. She needed to delete it now.

Fiona quickly grabbed her phone and opened the app, a feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. She expected to be greeted with an empty screen, but instead she was surprised to see that she had a match.

The profile picture of her match showed a ruggedly handsome man with a wide smile and sparkling eyes, standing in front of a lake. His bio said he was an avid hiker, who loved exploring new places and meeting interesting people. Fiona felt something stir inside her as she read it.

She snapped out of it. What was she thinking?

Online dating just wasn't safe. There were too many creeps out there, and after this case, how could she ever feel safe meeting someone?

Then again, she supposed that could be applied to all facets of life.

Fiona had always been an introvert, hiding in her shell. That was why she'd made the bold step to make a dating profile. She'd never even had a real boyfriend, and she could count how many times she'd gone "all the way" on one hand.

Still, it didn't feel right. Fiona needed to delete the app.

Just as she was about to remove it, a message popped up from the handsome guy. Mark.

*Why did the mushroom get invited to the party?*

Fiona paused, her finger hovering over the delete button. She didn't know what was more surprising—Mark's cheesy joke or his timing. The corners of her mouth slowly curled up into a smile as she thought about it.

Fiona shook her head as she looked down at her phone, deciding to take a chance on Mark. After all, he had given her an excellent first impression by being so witty and bold with his message. She quickly replied back: *I don't know! Why did the mushroom get invited to the party?*

Mark responded instantly with a grinning emoji and a reply: *"Because he was a fungi!"*

Fiona chuckled at this corny joke and felt some of her worries melt away. Maybe she wasn't ready to jump into meeting someone...

But some harmless jokes wouldn't kill her.

\*\*\*

Fiona walked into the police station where her childhood friend Erica worked. She had the cold case files from her sister's case with her, ready to return them to where they belonged.

Fiona had attempted to read the files and find new information, but nothing had come up, and so she knew it was

better to leave them in the cold case department's hands.

She spotted Erica up the hallway and jogged over to her. "Erica!"

Erica turned to Fiona, wearing her officer's uniform, and frowned. "Hey, Fi... you're here."

Fiona stopped in front of Erica and smiled, holding out the folder on Joslyn's disappearance. Erica looked at it knowingly.

"Ah," Erica said. "Don't need this anymore?"

Fiona sighed and shook her head. "I didn't find anything new."

"Sorry, Fi," Erica said. "I wish I had better news for you. Here, follow me. I'll go put this back."

Fiona followed Erica as she wound her way through the police station, taking a few turns until they arrived in a small room filled with countless files and boxes. The walls were lined with shelves full of case folders, some with notes sticking out of the top. In the center of the room was a large table with an old rotary phone on it, and against one wall was an ancient-looking filing cabinet that had seen better days.

Erica placed the folder onto one of the shelves and sighed. "This is where all unsolved cases come to rest," she said softly, glancing around at all the forgotten stories that surrounded them.

Fiona couldn't help but feel a chill in the air as she looked around at all the dusty old files that contained tales of lives lost, unsolved mysteries, and tragedies never solved. She shivered involuntarily as Erica gently patted her shoulder before leading her back out into the hallway.

Fiona's sister's case was just another one of these. Fiona had wished it could be different, but that was just how it was.

Erica put Joslyn's file away on one of the shelves, then turned to Fiona with a sad smile on her face. "I'm sorry you couldn't find anything," she said softly, squeezing Fiona's shoulder gently.

Fiona nodded slowly, feeling her throat tighten up as tears prickled at her eyes. She wanted to tell Erica not to worry about it—that it wasn't her fault for getting her hopes up—but all she could do was give her friend a tight hug instead. Erica patted Fiona on the back.

Fiona pulled away with a sigh. "I don't get to talk about her much these days. Joslyn, I mean... not many people in my life know about her, and my parents would rather not talk about it."

Erica offered a sympathetic smile. "Well, I remember Joslyn really well. She was amazing. Seriously, your sister was so magnetic... I remember being so jealous of her in high school."

Fiona gasped. "Really?!"

Erica chuckled. "Yeah, Fi. Joslyn just had that... energy, you know?"

Fiona smiled, feeling a wave of warmth wash over her. It was nice to hear someone talk about Joslyn like she wasn't gone. "Yes," she said softly. "She could light up a room with her presence."

Erica nodded in agreement. "Exactly! She had such an infectious personality, and was always so kind and generous. I remember how she'd offer to help anyone who needed it, even if they were complete strangers."

Fiona felt tears welling up in her eyes again as the memories of Joslyn filled her mind. Despite all the sadness and grief that had followed since Joslyn's disappearance, Fiona couldn't help but smile at the thought of her sister's strength and resilience.

"I miss her so much," Fiona said softly, wiping away a tear from her cheek.

Erica wrapped an arm around Fiona's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I know. That was so hard on you and your family. I remember feeling bad that we'd grown so far apart."

"I always knew you cared," Fiona said. "That meant something to me."

Erica smiled. “It did? Well... I’m glad you felt that way. It was so hard to see you go through that, you know? But I’m so glad you pulled through.”

Fiona smiled. “I’m glad too. I’m still not the same, but... I don’t think I would’ve been able to handle it if I wasn’t able to do something productive with my life. I’m really glad I went to Harvard.”

Erica nodded in agreement. “Me too. You were always a brainiac. Joslyn was the sporty one, but you were destined for something like Harvard. Working in a lab for the FBI is so you, too.”

Fiona smiled. “Well... I do a bit more than lab work now.”

Erica lifted an eyebrow. “You do?”

Fiona laughed. “I actually saved an agent’s life. Special Agent Jake Tucker. He didn’t want me to come along, but I went anyway, and I ended up actually helping!”

Laughing, Erica shook her head. “Wow, you’ll have to tell me the full story over a drink.”

Fiona chuckled and brushed her hair behind her ear. “Well, it wasn’t that impressive. Jake had saved my life before too, after I was a total idiot, so... I owed him one.”

Erica leaned back and crossed her arms. “Do you like this Jake guy?”

Instantly, Fiona’s cheeks went up in flames. “What?”

But it was too late—Erica was onto her. An amused smile tugged at her lips, and she playfully punched Fiona’s arm. “What the hell, Fi? You *never* like a guy. But you’re into this Jake Tucker?”

“No!” Fiona exclaimed, flustered. “He... he’s with someone else, Erica. It’s nothing. Really.”

She rolled her eyes. “Like hell it’s nothing. You were practically drooling over him.”

“I was not!” Fiona cried, her face going even redder. She had been, and she knew it.

Laughing, Erica nudged Fiona. “You were totally drooling. Fine, I won’t tease you about it.”

Fiona smiled, grateful. She didn’t mind Erica teasing her, but she didn’t want her to be right. “Thanks.”

Liking Jake was not on the table. Ever. Fiona knew that. Maybe it was a good thing she’d started talking to that Mark guy on the dating app—he could distract her from this crush on Jake, because that could never happen.

“Anyway, let’s get out of here,” Erica said.

Fiona nodded with a smile.

As Fiona turned away, she noticed a file folder sticking out of the box beside Joslyn’s case file. She peered at the file and saw the word MISSING GIRL.

Her breath caught in her throat as she realized she was looking at a file on another missing girl, just like Joslyn. Fiona felt a wave of sadness wash over her as she brushed her fingers across the folder and opened it up. Inside were pictures of a young woman with bright eyes and dark hair, just like Joslyn’s. Fiona looked at the file, feeling an ache deep within her heart.

It was a reminder that there were still so many other families out there who hadn’t found closure yet.

“Interested in that one?” Erica asked.

“I’m... just looking,” Fiona said, flipping through the file.

It was about a girl, a sixteen-year-old, who had been abducted about three years before Joslyn. The case had been cold for even longer than Joslyn’s. Apparently, the girl had vanished under mysterious circumstances from a mall, leaving only her flip-flop behind.

But that wasn’t all.

There was an entomology report attached.

Fiona frowned. Entomology, but no body? Why?

Curious, she looked deeper. Apparently, the girl had left behind a flip-flop, and on that flip-flop was an insect.



Fiona's eyes widened as she read the report.

The insect they found on the girl's flip-flop...

It was not endemic to Portland, where the girl went missing.

Fiona frowned. Then where did it come from?

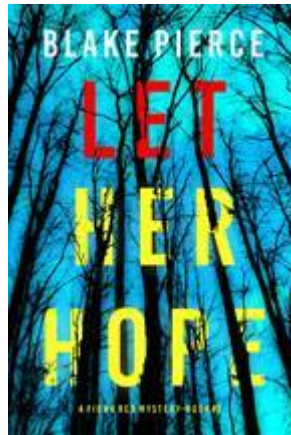
And why was it in the report?

It seemed like a strange, insignificant detail, but to Fiona—an entomologist—it stood out. It was probably insane for her to think these cases could somehow be related.

But the investigator in her wanted to know more.

“Hey, Erica,” she said, “do you mind if I take this file with me?”

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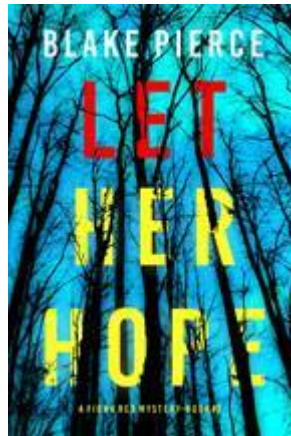
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