



THE  
COUPLE  
NEXT  
DOOR

A.J. RIVERS

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*The Couple Next Door*

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## CHAPTER ONE

The place was a mess, covered in rust and dust under the sweltering sun. Little sprigs of scrub grass fought valiantly for little slivers of light between deep fissures of the cracked and pitted concrete. Cigarette butts and discarded debris littered the entrance to the covered concrete breezeway, as if magnetically drawn there.

It was as nondescript as a place could possibly be: an ugly, squat block of an apartment building painted a dull yellow that had immediately faded. Rusted bars covered whatever windows weren't already taken up by ancient window units already working overtime even in February. What little greenery surrounded the parking lot was already brown, dried out, and parched under the unrelenting heat, even despite the wind carrying a thick blanket of humidity.

Ava brushed the sweat off her forehead and followed two agents toward the building. Two more followed behind. A tip from the local police had taken her all the way down to the Gulf Coast. Kingsville, Texas, to be precise. A certain Mike Avery, known drug trafficker, had taken up residence here. Not what they had expected, but perhaps they should have. He was rich and dangerous; she'd expected him to hide out in a luxury beachside condo or in a private bungalow.

Instead, he was here, in a place that had seemingly started falling apart the moment it had been built. It was extremely rare that he would be anywhere without an entourage of armed men, but she was glad he was. They could sort out the why of it all after taking him into custody.

And she had a few select questions to ask him about human traffickers that he was in business with. Namely, a man who specialized in transporting the victims to South Africa.

As always, her heart hammered as they neared the door. A light, warm breeze blew over the third-floor breezeway, bringing in the pungent odor of spent gasoline and hot pavement from the main road nearby.

The agent in front knocked and announced them. From inside, there was a deathly still silence. No television, no rustling around, just nothing. They had watched their target, only moments before, close the blinds in the front room on the other side of the unit. They knew he was inside.

Figueroa banged on the door again, and Ava stepped to the side, checking the position of her fellow agents as she gripped her gun. A twinge of nervousness settled down her spine. She looked around. Nothing out of place. Her pulse quickened and her palms grew damp as that twinge became a full surge of unease coursing through her midsection.

“Something’s not right,” she whispered to him.

“Yeah, I know. We’re about to bust a big-time drug trafficker with the greatest of ease because he let his bodyguards off for the day,” Figueroa quipped.

“No, seriously. Something’s wrong. I can feel it.”

Both agents in front of the door laughed. “Didn’t they tell you to tuck that female intuition into the bottom drawer of your dresser before reporting to work every day?”

Agent Figueroa lifted his arm to knock again. “Get the ram ready,” he told Reynolds, the agent holding the battering ram.

Figueroa's knuckles touched the door, and he was in mid-word when he was cut off with an airy thunk. He grabbed his throat, his eyes bulged, and he staggered back into the other two agents. Ava darted to the side, training her gun at the door. Reynolds gave her a quick look, and he swung the ram into the door. It was a two-man tool, but with the amount of adrenaline surely pumping through him, the door crashed open.

Ava swung around, putting her body between that of the other agents and the open doorway. She caught a mere glimpse of Mike Avery's back as he turned a corner and disappeared.

The agents with Figueroa were already calling for medical backup as Ava flew into the apartment after Avery.

"FBI!" she yelled, though the time for announcing herself was long over.

Reynolds joined her. They heard the distinct and unmistakable sound of a window being opened in the next room. Without a word, both agents bolted into the room, guns leveled toward the window and the suspect.

Reynolds yelled once, then fired, hitting the man in the leg. Avery stumbled, yelped in pain, and fell against the railing of the fire escape. Ava thought he would fall over, but he righted himself as she and Reynolds made their way to the window. Reynolds leaned out. Avery fired from above him, striking him in the shoulder.

Reynolds cried out from the impact and fell to the ground, his gun clattering away from him. Ava rushed to help him to his feet, cursing under her breath that their quarry had already downed two agents.

"Dropped my damn gun," Reynolds grumbled. "Wait for backup. He's crazy."

Ava didn't have time to explain why she couldn't wait for backup and allow Avery to escape. She quickly assessed that Agent Reynolds was wounded, but not fatally, and she darted her head out, looking up.

"James, don't do it. I mean it," Reynolds warned.



Her breathing was shallow and fast as she eyed him. She darted her head out again. “He’s almost to the roof.”

“Backup will be here in five,” Reynolds said as he pushed away from the wall and tried to position himself in front of the window so she couldn’t get out. But his injury slowed him. Before he could fully block her passage, Ava scrunched up and stepped out in one fluid motion. She was up the ladder before he could try to stop her again.

The ladder ended at a sixth-floor window. She grabbed a wide ledge and hauled herself up, crouching and looking over the top of the wall to the roof. Avery had tucked his gun in the back of his pants and was trying to force open the roof access door. The noise from his frenzied attack covered the sound of Ava climbing over the wall and landing on the roof.

She drew down on him. “Avery! Don’t move.”

Avery stopped and turned to her, his right hand slipping to his own gun.

“Stop! I will shoot if you make me.” She advanced, staying close to an air duct in case she needed it for cover. “Take out the gun very slowly and kick it over to me. Very slowly,” she instructed, still advancing.

He took the gun out and held his arms in the air. The gun dangled from his forefinger by the trigger guard.

“Drop it and kick it to me now.” She took two more measured steps, putting her about twenty feet from him, then stopped, keeping her gun trained on him.

He moved his arm forward, dropped it slowly to shoulder level, and then seemed to stumble forward. Before she could react, he had righted the gun in his hand and fired at her. Ava lunged behind the air duct, the heated concrete painfully biting into her hand and forearm. She rolled to her back and instinctively raised the gun.

Avery wasn’t there, but she heard his footsteps coming in her direction from behind. He was dragging one foot badly. Reynolds’ shot had badly wounded him.

“Avery, stop!” She got to one knee and readied to put a bullet in his good leg. She could just see his legs through a curve in the duct.

Avery stopped.

Ava slowly rose back up to her feet, keeping her body tense and ready to throw herself back down to the ground. “Throw away the gun.” She popped her head over the duct and saw that he had the barrel pressed to his temple.

His chest heaved, his eyes were squinted, and his teeth were bared. His face was a rictus of pain. Ava’s heart leaped into her throat. She couldn’t let him die. Not with what he knew. She’d never talked a suicidal person down before, but she had to try.

She couldn’t afford to let this trail go dry. Not again.

“Don’t be foolish, Mike,” she said. Using someone’s first name made a better connection than being formal or calling them only by their last name. She eased her gun downward but kept both hands on it. “There’s no need for you to die. We can settle this without any more violence. I can help you.”

He shook his head. “There’s no helping me now. I shot two agents already.” His eyes rolled down to the road below. “You hear that?”

Ava nodded. “Sirens. There’s an ambulance coming to take care of the agents downstairs. Come on, drop the gun and let’s get this settled.”

They stood there for a long moment; the wind blew, the sirens approached, and the world below them felt like a still moment in time.

“We just need to talk,” Ava tried again.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Avery replied. “It’s too late for me.”

The sirens came to a stop. The heavy slam of doors and the hurried voices of paramedics drifted up to the roof, but it was far away, as if happening somewhere else.

“We can figure this—”

Suddenly, his gun was pointed at her again. Avery gave an inarticulate scream and pulled the trigger. Once. Ava ducked again and brought her gun up. Twice. Three times. And then, the telltale click. He was out of ammo.

Thinking quickly, Ava holstered her gun and ran toward him, meaning to tackle and cuff him. Even wounded, he bobbed and weaved just enough to avoid her taking him down.

Then he was on the ledge, laughing maniacally. It echoed into the sun, twisted and rose into the air to be caught by the seagulls.

“No! I need you!” Ava demanded.

He stopped. His laughter died. “What the hell? What do you mean? Why would you need me?”

“South Africa. I need some information. I told you that I could help you, Mike.” She walked slowly toward him. The last thing she wanted to do was to get too close too suddenly and have him take the plunge over the side.

“I don’t know anything about South Africa,” he scoffed.

“You do. Rutger von Helberg. You help me and I’ll help you.”

He shook his head. “No, you won’t. You’ll get me killed, you stupid bitch. I don’t know that name. Never heard of him.”

“Yes, you do. Please,” Ava said, extending a hand toward him. “Just come down and talk to me. I’m sure I can help you. Those two agents downstairs? They’re wounded but not dead. I can get you a deal. Even for the drug trafficking.”

“FBI! Don’t move, Avery!”

Avery’s head jerked up and he looked to the other side of the roof where Ava had come over. Agent Miller stalked toward them with his weapon trained on Avery.

“Miller, I have this under control.”

Miller scoffed. “You don’t even have your gun drawn, James. Move aside. We’re taking this dirtbag in.”

Ava turned to Avery and gave him a pleading look. His eyebrows shot up and he shrugged, as if brushing off the last of the weight of the world from his shoulders. He fixed his eyes to the horizon as he leaned back and held his arms out.

“Avery...”

But Ava’s words didn’t reach him. He simply stared at that horizon, trying to will himself to see the bay. The sparkling blue expanse somewhere out there. And then he toppled back.

A scream echoed through the air as he fell over the ledge. It took until she pounded her palms on the ledge that Ava realized that it had come from her own throat.

She turned on Miller, rabid with fury. It would do no good to have an altercation with a fellow agent, though. She glared at him.

“Well, hell’s bells, he wasn’t supposed to do that,” Miller muttered. He holstered his weapon and shook his head. He looked over the side and made a face. “I would say that’s one less scumbag on the street, but he’s on it for sure.”

His chuckle infuriated Ava. He slapped her on the back. “Come on. Let’s get downstairs and make sure those crank medics are doing what they’re supposed to be doing for Figueroa and Reynolds. Oh, yeah, and someone’s got about two tons of paperwork to fill out for this.”

“I told you I had it under control, Miller.” She stepped away from him.

“And you’re not my superior. I’m only here helping you out for the time being. Don’t worry, though. You’ll have your own team to boss around soon enough, right?”

“So, that’s what’s eating at you? That I’m getting a transfer and you’re not?”

“What do you think?” Miller stalked toward the roof access door.

After a moment, someone pushed the door open from the other side. A middle-aged man held the door and let Miller past. He was the property manager. She recognized him from earlier. The man looked askance at Ava, and she headed toward him.

Back at Avery's apartment, Ava was surprised to see three local officers waiting for instructions. They were there to assist, and she thanked them.

She called Miller and Fernandez to join her inside the apartment. "Forensics is on their way. I'm staying until they're done. You two go on back and get started on the paperwork."

She'd been so close. She'd spent weeks' worth of searching and sleepless nights gathering all the information she could about Avery and tracking him down to this ratty place. He not only knew Rutger van Helberg, he worked with him. She knew it. She alone had seen the tenuous thread connecting his drug business with Rutger's human transport business.

And now Miller had cost her all of it.

The only thing she could do now was to make sure the apartment was thoroughly searched and that she had access to everything that came out of it. There had to be some kind of further information in it. Information that Avery was apparently willing to die for rather than give up.



The next day, Ava, Miller, Fernandez, and Reynolds flew back to DC. Figueroa was being medically transported home later in the week when he was more stable. The bullet had done major damage to his neck.

As soon as the plane landed, Ava got on the phone with Uncle Ray. If anyone could work with the scraps of information that she'd found, it would be him. She was convinced that she'd stumbled on the same breadcrumbs that her mother had found just before her disappearance. Something had made Elizabeth feel the need to go silent and

completely off-grid in South Africa, and Ava was nearly certain that it was information about Rutger—or perhaps the people he answered to.

“Uncle Ray, I wanted to ask you if you could please look into a lead for me. I think it might lead to Mom. Or at the very least, it might tell us why she took off.”

“I can’t promise how soon I can do it, but you know I will,” Ray told her.

“I’m emailing you the information now. Before you dismiss it, keep Mom and Molly in mind.”

“Why would I dismiss it, Ava?”

“Everyone else did. They said I was reaching with this one, but I really don’t think so.”

“I’ll check it out and get back to you as soon as I can. How’s it going with the move and the new assignment?”

She groaned. “I’ll let you know when it’s done and over with. Can’t be any worse than dealing with some of the agents I already call a team.” She thought of Figueroa’s scathing quip only seconds before he got shot. Then Miller’s mini-rant on the roof of the apartment building. She shook her head and sighed. If nothing else, she was glad to be transferred to a new team. She’d never have to deal with them again.

“You’re a tough woman, Ava. I have every faith that you’ll get through all this and come out the other side golden. That’s what you always do.”

“I hope you’re right, Uncle Ray. I hope you’re right.” She smiled despite feeling like crap.

“Ain’t I always?” Even through the phone, she could see the grin on Ray’s face as clear as day.

“Don’t let Kay hear you say that,” she chuckled.

“Oh, I’d never hear the end of it.”

“How’s she doing?” Ava asked.

“Things have gotten better,” he told her. “The Avilion Foundation is still picking up the pieces of what all went down back at that gala. But it seems they’ve been able to convince some of the more loyal donors to stick with them in the hard times.”

“That’s good,” Ava said. “They do a lot of really great work. I hope they can get back to how they used to be.”

The foundation had been rocked only a few months ago by a tangled web of deceit and murder. Parts of the organization had been used as a front for an international organized crime network. Ava had upturned the plot, but many suspects were still at large.

Ava was grateful she didn’t have to deal with the particulars of that case any longer—that was for senior agents in other departments to take. She couldn’t help being a bit miffed, though, that while others had gotten to follow up on the case she’d solved, she’d been thrown into the Cold Case Initiative over the last several months. Her supervisor, Max Fullerton, had never really given a satisfactory answer as to why he’d abruptly reassigned her, but Ray had assured her that sometimes in the Bureau, the only constant you can truly expect is change.

At least a window of opportunity had recently opened to her. Ava had gladly taken her reassignment the moment it had come in, and after this one last mission with her old unit—unsuccessful at that—she was ready to begin yet again. She’d spent far too much time sitting behind a desk, staring at a computer screen and talking on the phone and shuffling papers from one file to another.

She hung up with Ray and looked over the assignment letter for the hundredth time. She didn’t know what to expect from the names listed as her new co-workers and teammates. She didn’t know them and had no way to judge them except from what was in their files. But the name at the top of the paper was a comfort.

Ava had been personally requested by none other than Sal Rossi to join this new unit. The two had met working in Hidden Cove, Kentucky, on a bizarre case that had involved two murders and two cover-ups at the same house, five years apart. Ava was grateful for her steady, level-headed guidance—very different from her previous mentor, the hotheaded yet brilliant Emma Griffin—and the two had made a solid team. Now, they would be partnered together in a little town on the coast called Fairhaven, and Ava was more than ready for the challenge—as well as the salty air of the Chesapeake Bay. She felt like her tenure in the Bureau had had a rocky start, but now she was finally starting to forge her own path.

It hadn't all been bad in Cold Cases. She'd grown to respect the job much more than at the outset. Giving families closure they so desperately needed, in its way, was just as important as pounding the pavement and taking down criminals.

But that wasn't what got her blood pumping. That wasn't what sent the electric surge of adrenaline pulsing through her body. That wasn't what had made her want to join the Bureau.

That wasn't what would help her find her mother.

Or her best friend.

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## CHAPTER TWO

*Kara*

In Clear Branch, Virginia, Kara Davis stood staring through the partially closed blinds of her parlor. Her front yard wasn't really a yard, but that didn't matter. She wasn't looking at the yard. She also wasn't looking at Cloudland Avenue, the gently winding and tree-lined road that wended its lazy way through the new upscale suburb.

"Well, semi-new suburb," she said aloud as if the sidewalks and trees could hear her. "Fifteen years ago, when Patrick and I bought this house, the place was new."

She continued to stare out through the horizontal slats without remembering what she had been looking at. What had she been studying so intently? The new construction across the road? The Carvers' house?

"The mailbox," she said, smiling. "That's what it was, silly."

Going to the mailbox every day was a perfectly normal thing to do, Kara tried to reason with herself.

"People all over the world do it every single day," she told herself. "Except maybe third-world countries. They might not have mail service. I should look into that." She furrowed her

brow and leaned closer to the blinds. Her nose brushed against the tan sheer. Standing straight, she sighed with relief. “Nothing and no one out there. This should be easy. Off the porch. Thirty-two steps there. Thirty-two back.”

She knew it was only thirty-two steps to the mailbox because she had counted them hundreds of times over the last fifteen years. People said it was weird that she counted steps, but she’d done it for as long as she could recall. It gave her a measure of comfort. The world was stressful. She needed little comforts to help her get through it.

At the door, her hand gripped the knob but didn’t turn it. She willed her hand to just turn the stupid knob. But it refused.

Kara squeezed her eyes shut tight and counted to thirty-two, paused for a few seconds, and then counted again. In her mind, she imagined she was walking to the mailbox and back. When she opened her eyes again, the hand on the knob seemed to be alien to her. It didn’t even feel like it was attached to her any longer.

Horrified, she stepped back, and the hand let go of the knob. Afterward, it did everything she ordered it to do. Everything but turn that knob.

“Probably for the best, anyway. No telling who might be lurking out there on the other side of the fence or in those shrubs at Joan and Dan’s house. It’s not like robbers and serial killers announce themselves. They hide and wait. Opportunity seekers. That’s what they are.” She turned from the door to face the stairs, and almost instantly all thoughts of the mail left her.

She opened her mouth to yell to her husband that she was going to get dressed for the day. Then she shut her mouth. Tears prickled at the backs of her eyeballs as she gripped the walnut handrail he had loved so much.

Patrick was dead. He’d been dead for months, but she couldn’t get used to him being gone. He’d always been there.

Letting the tears run silently down her cheeks, she went upstairs and drifted into the bedroom that she used to share with her loving husband. The tears ran faster as she went into the bathroom and shut the door.

After a shower, Kara used a small towel to wipe the condensation from the mirror. Leaning close to her reflection, she studied her eyes. The left one was a crystalline blue with a tiny brown speck at the bottom. The right one was dark brown.

“Like sweet hot chocolate,” she murmured. Patrick had always said it that way just before he ran his finger lightly over her brow and down her cheek. Kara closed her eyes and puckered her lips, wishing he were there to finish out the scenario. He always kissed her after he ran his finger down her cheek. Always.

But that wouldn't happen anymore.

Her single brown contact lens stared up at her from its solution bath. She plucked it up and made both her eyes sweet, hot chocolate brown. Not that it mattered anymore. Patrick wasn't there to like or dislike it.

Sirens wailed far off in the distance. The fine hairs on the back of Kara's neck stood at attention and her ears homed in on the terrifying sound. She hated sirens. All of them. And alarms on clocks meant to wake people in the mornings.

They brought danger and chaos where there should have been serenity. They brought fear when there should have been silence.

Gripping the edge of the sink, she waited for the sound to stop and her guts to relax enough that she could move again. After too long, the sound stopped. She breathed slowly, making each inhalation a bit deeper until she could at last take a deep breath without almost fainting.

As she passed through the bedroom, she caught sight of her naked body in the full-length mirror and stopped short, shocked that she hadn't even noticed she had no clothes on. Covering herself with her arms, she bolted to the walk-in

closet and stepped inside. She punched the button for the overhead light. Relieved that no one had seen her, she grabbed a sweater off one shelf and a pair of joggers from another, considered stepping out to get a bra and panties, decided against it, and pulled on the pants.

“No need to take chances,” she said in reference to the undergarments. “What if someone is outside looking in and I just can’t see them?”

As she strode out of the closet, Kara refused to look at the bed where Patrick used to lay.

The house was silent as she descended the stairs. She almost wished for a creaky floorboard or a noisy neighbor. It might alleviate her loneliness. Or not. Hearing other people going noisily about their lives might only serve to exacerbate her own sad situation.

She turned right at the foot of the stairs and into the grand living room—she’d always preferred it be called a Great Room, but Patrick thought it too old-fashioned. It was only through luck that she’d talked him into allowing her to put in the sitting parlor across the entry hall. That was her favorite room, by far. It was a total throwback to Victorian times, from the elegant rug and vintage chairs to the hand-painted wallpaper. But the living room was her second favorite with its luxurious, thick, beige carpet, white, overstuffed, oversized furniture, and very expensive collectibles. The trinkets had been Patrick’s idea. It started out being antique Hummel figurines, and then moved on to what she called semi-precious paintings, and ended a comprehensive variety of milk glass Easter eggs from the 1800s and German kugeln, which are hand-blown glass balls decorated and used as Christmas ornaments from the same period.

Humming a nameless tune, she went about cleaning the knick-knacks in the living room and then moved on to the floors and furniture. The room was in perfect museum-quality condition by the time she was finished.

In the kitchen at the end of the hall, she searched the cupboards and fridge for something to eat and finally settled on chicken noodle soup with crackers. As she tossed the can in the bin, she was confused by the sheer number of the exact same cans in there already. She didn't remember eating that many cans of soup over the last week.

The phone trilled, cutting sharply through her confusion and refining it into a low anger. She spun and snatched the offensive thing off the receiver.

"Hello?" she spat angrily. Not necessarily at whomever was on the other end of the line, but at the noise that was so reminiscent of sirens, which reminded her of violence. Violence just plain scared her out of her wits.

"Sis? What's wrong?" It was Daphne. Kara's older sister.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Daphne. The phone just startled me. Is it Monday already?" She'd been doing Saturday's housework. She was sure of it. Saturday was always living room cleaning day.

Daphne chuckled. "It is. I know, the weekends go by so fast. I won't keep you. Just calling to check that you're okay and that you have what you need until Wednesday. You know, like food and stuff?"

She'd just gone through the cabinets and fridge. "There's a whole supermarket in my kitchen. You should know, you brought most of it here for me."

"That was mostly just soup, sandwich stuff, and that horrible canned spaghetti and meatballs that I cannot figure out how you eat." Daphne laughed again.

Kara didn't think any of that was funny, so she didn't laugh. Besides, there were lots of other things in her cabinets, too. She couldn't really remember if she and Patrick had bought that other stuff before he had his heart attack or if her sister had brought it to her.

"Well, there's plenty here in my cabinets. I'm good on food for a while."

“Kara?” Daphne’s tone changed. She sounded apprehensive.

“What is it?”

“Did you go get the mail over the weekend?”

“Sure. Not today’s yet, though. But I will,” Kara lied.

“Are you sure? Or is this like last time?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Daphne. I have so much to do today. I really need to go before I burn my soup.” Kara thought she heard someone laugh in the living room. She froze. “Bye, sis.” She hung up, not wanting the line to be tied up in case she needed to call the police.

With the receiver gripped in her hand, Kara sneaked toward the living room, taking care not to make a sound. A man’s voice came from the other end. Soft, muffled, words indecipherable. But very recognizable.

“Patrick?” she asked breathily. She felt as if she might faint at any moment. She stood there tense as a piano string, willing the answer to come from the other side of the room. She waited for what may have been a few seconds or may have been a few hours or may have been a few days, she couldn’t tell, before she realized she wasn’t breathing. She forced herself to do so quietly.

The man’s voice didn’t answer her. In fact, when she stepped around the corner fully expecting to see Patrick sitting in his favorite spot on the small sofa, there was no one there at all.

Confused and frightened, she peered behind and over and under all the furniture. No one. She was completely alone.

A shrill beeping pierced her ears. It seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once. She dropped the phone and it clattered to the floor harshly, only furthering her panic. Kara slapped her hands over her ears and screamed as she made her way back into the entry hall. A tiny, brilliant light flashed just over the kitchen doorway.

“Dammit! My soup,” she cried.

Running into the kitchen, she flipped off the burner and grabbed the scorching soup pot. The handle was also scorching hot. Out of pure instinct, she released the burning hot handle. Noodles and sludge splattered over the floor tiles.

The smoke detector was relentless in its warning. It was mounted too high for her to reach and shut off manually, so she grabbed a cookie sheet to fan the smoke away from it. When the shrieking finally stopped, Kara slumped against the wall and laughed. She didn’t know why. Perhaps it was because when things got so bad she had cried until she couldn’t anymore, and now there was nothing left to do but laugh.

As she was cleaning the mess up from the floor, something about it reminded her of a particularly horrible nightmare she’d suffered.

Was that last night, or the night before? she wondered.

She couldn’t remember. Memory was a sly a devil, and hers had been extra-sly since Patrick’s death.

“Lots of things have been extra-sly since you left me here all alone, Patrick,” she muttered as she scrubbed.

She had dreamed that her house, instead of being the beautiful and bright statement of love between her and Patrick that it had always been, was a run-down, dark and broken thing full of filth. It was a cave of mystery and despair. It was a shadow so dark that no light could possibly shine again. And something else had been there.

But it was just a dream.

She stopped scrubbing and concentrated. “What else? Something else was in the house with me.” She stood and tossed the paper towels in the waste bin. “I was running from it.” She turned on the hot water and waited for the steam to rise before she stuck the cloth under the stream.

Steam swirled up from the sink as she wrung out the cloth. She stared at it. In its midst, the wretched face of a haggard man appeared. She screamed, dropped the cloth, and covered her eyes.

“A ghost! It was a ghost chasing me through a haunted house!”

She sobbed until she was too tired to cry, and then she retreated to the sitting parlor and closed the pocket doors behind her.

The nightmare came back to her so vividly that she could feel the grunge and decay of the house all around her. She could hear the agonized screams of the ghostly man right on her heels no matter where she ran or how fast.

Kara sat in her chair looking out the window to the blank side yard and the wild growth of uncleared land just beyond. Sometimes she rocked, although her chair wasn't a rocking chair.

“It wasn't real. My house is immaculate and I'm fine,” she repeated over and over.

And just like that, it wasn't.

Her house was immaculate.

She was fine.





## CHAPTER THREE

Ava arrived at the office early, expecting to be the first of the team to arrive, but was somehow not at all surprised to see Sal Rossi already at work setting up the office space. Ava was glad to see her.

“Sal!” she grinned and extended her hand, greeting Sal as if she was an old friend. In a way, she guessed they were old friends. “I can’t thank you enough for choosing me for this.”

“Think nothing of it, Ava,” the older woman smiled, shaking the extended hand. “You did great in Hidden Cove and I’ve been wanting to work with you again.”

“Well, I’m appreciative,” replied Ava.

“It’s good that you say that,” said Sal. “You may not be so appreciative when you hear what I have for you next.”

Ava raised a nervous eyebrow. “Um. What did you have in mind?”

With an enigmatic grin playing on her face, Sal turned to her briefcase on the desk next to her, lifted the lid, and started rooting through it. “Here we go,” she said after a minute.

She pulled out a small rectangular plaque, the kind meant to slide into an office door. It read, Special Agent Aviva

James.

“It’s for your office,” she explained.

“Thank... you?” Ava asked tentatively. She took the plaque and furrowed her brow. She looked up and around the office space—a mostly open floor plan with tall glass windows and an array of cubicles. Outside of supply closets and bathrooms, there were almost no doors in the place. “Um. What office?”

Sal pointed over to the center of the floor opposite the elevators, where two large offices were set against the wall. The thick wooden doors each had a pane of frosted glass in them.

“Mine,” she pointed to the first, then moved to the second. “And yours.”

Ava still wasn’t sure how to respond to this. “You’re giving me an office?”

“I’m asking you to be my partner,” Sal clarified. “And I’m asking you to help me lead this team.”

Ava blinked once, twice, three times. It still didn’t feel quite real. Barely a year ago, she’d been assigned to Harlan to clean up various cases there and work under Emma Griffin. And now she was being asked to help lead a team. Just as her uncle had said, she was making her way. She was moving forward.

The move was another story, though. Harlan was comfortable. She knew people there; she knew places. It was familiar. With familiarity comes a measure of comfort. Familiarity can also breed contempt, though.

Did she feel contempt toward anyone or anything in Harlan? She decided that was a worry to mull over another day.

Ava brought her thoughts back from the runaway train they’d gone on to the present. “I... I’m honored,” she finally managed. She looked down at the plaque in her hand and back

up at Sal's confident smile. She reached out her hand to shake Sal's again.

"So that's a yes?" Sal asked.

"Yes!" Ava nodded fervently. "Yes. Thank you. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't."

The twin tendrils of nerves and excitement went to war in Ava's stomach, but she forced them down. Now was not the time to get in over her head.

As if reading her thoughts, Sal dispelled any notion of being a harsh boss with an easy, confident smile. "So what do you think of Fairhaven?"

Ava shrugged. "It's pretty nice so far. Still moving in. It's nice to be a little closer to home, and my new place has a pretty nice view of the bay, so I'm pretty happy."

"Is DC home for you?"

Ava nodded. "Born and raised. What about you?"

Sal gave her a grin. "One of the perks of being given your own team is you can relocate pretty much wherever you want. This is my hometown. Hidden Cove is nice and all, but..."

Ava chuckled. "I can imagine you were wanting to get back after a decade out that way."

The older woman nodded. "Let me tell you, the seafood there is lacking. That's what I've missed most. There's nothing quite like fresh lobster from the bay."

"You'll have to show me the best spots sometimes."

"Count on it."

Ava checked the clock. There was still fifteen minutes before the official start of the day and none of the others had shown yet.

"So, Special Agent James," Sal started. "As my partner and second-in-command, here's your first test: tell me all

about my very own team members. I know you did your homework.”

“I did. Um, we’ll start with Wayne Metford. He’s only twenty-nine, but he’s been an agent for five years. His file is impressive.”

Sal nodded. “You say that as if your file isn’t just as impressive and you’re years younger than him.”

Ava shrugged, neither confirming nor denying the assertion.

“He spent time in Violent Crime and in SWAT. Seems like a good pick for the team.”

Sal nodded, but her expression was odd. A hint of a smile played on her face that hadn’t been there before.

“What? Is there something I need to know about him?”

“Wayne Metford is definitely more than capable of holding his own in the field, but he’s also hard to get along with. He’s made the rounds through different departments and locations for that very reason,” she smirked.

“Well, that sure wasn’t on his file,” Ava said. “Are you sure about this guy?”

“I’ve already brought him on. We’ll test the waters with him, but if he’s too much to handle or if he disrupts the team’s work, we’ll send him packing.”

“That sounds like a lot of work for a brand-new team,” Ava noted.

Sal shrugged. “I think the higher-ups like him. They hope he’ll grow out of his ways, mature a bit, and become an asset to a team somewhere. Eventually.” She grinned. “Don’t let me bias your perception of him, though. The man could’ve changed over the last couple of years.”

Ava nodded and hoped Sal was right.

A tall, toned woman with short black hair knocked at the door.

“Ah, that would be Jillian Santos,” Sal whispered. “You’ll like her, I think.” She opened the door and motioned Jillian inside.

“Agent Jillian Santos, present and accounted for.” She beamed a wide smile and held out her hand.

Ava shook it. “Great to meet you, Agent Santos. Aviva James, but my friends call me Ava.”

Jillian raised an eyebrow from behind her sunglasses. “And am I a friend?”

“Here’s hoping.”

“Same here,” she responded, and they all took seats at the table to await the men.

Sal readied the files and queued the videos to the screen, allowing Ava and Jillian to talk. Jillian was tough as nails and didn’t take to any form of intimidation, but she was as disciplined as any other agent. More disciplined than most, in fact. She also had a penchant for wearing sunglasses. At first, Ava had thought they were only part of her macho air, but later found out that she suffered from migraines and that bright lights set off the headaches.

Wayne Metford and Dwight Ashton arrived at the same time. Ava went through the short, perfunctory introductions as Sal began handing out the files for their first case. Sitting just off the head of the table gave her a sense of pride. She was happy to have the chance to really prove herself in the Bureau.

And, as was always in the back of her mind, she thought one day she could gain high enough rank to get her own team. She could follow whatever cases she wanted. Such as Molly’s case. One day, she would be able to follow leads that were getting shot down by superiors at present.

The case Sal had chosen for the first one with the new team was relatively simple—though Ava knew better than to think that it would be easy. A woman had taken her five-year-old son and crossed the country trying to avoid detection by law enforcement because she had lost her rights when the

child's father, her ex-husband, had filed for divorce and proven her to be unfit. She had been in and out of drug rehabs ever since before the child was born.

The mother was in a rural area of Georgia with her young son. They were hiding out on an abandoned farm. She was not considered a threat, but they couldn't count anything out. Not when the life of a young boy was on the line.

After going over the case, Sal stood. "If there are no more questions, we're headed straight to the airport."

"Do you think we'll be there more than a day?" Metford asked with a crooked grin.

"You never know with these sorts of cases. If you're asking whether you should pack extra clothes, I would say that you should. Just to be on the safe side."

Ashton snickered and shook his head. "Always take a bag, man. Always."

Metford shot him a sideways look. "Well, alrighty. I'll be sure to remember that." His tone was heated and his words clipped.

Ava stiffened and waited to see what Ashton's reaction would be. To her great relief, Agent Ashton offered Metford a big smile and nodded even though there was a bit of anger in his eyes.

At least one of them has some self-control, she thought.

"Alright. Wheels up in twenty."

Ava already had her bag packed and ready to go. It was standard to keep a bag with extra clothes and such at the office. She hoped the others knew that, too. Of course, Metford might not have a bag ready, but if he didn't, she would bet he wouldn't overlook that little bit of forethought and preparation again.

Forty minutes later, the plane took off. Ava hoped they would be able to get a feel for each other on this case, but she feared it might be a bumpy ride for a while.

Metford had been ten minutes late. He complained about the plane not taking off immediately when he finally did get aboard, and Agent Santos was pretty quick to shut him down.

“You make everyone including the pilot wait while you ran out and bought a bag and clothes at Wal-Mart, but now you’re in a big rush? Sorry, that’s not how the world works. You get what you give. Next time, you should have your go-bag ready.”

Metford’s cheeks burned red, but he said nothing more. Maybe he had changed from when Sal knew him. Maybe he was trying to practice self-control. Ava held out hope that her team members would gel better in the coming weeks and months. They would have to.

Conversation was still a little awkward in the short flight as the five of them waited for their first mission. Sal was the only one who knew all four of the others, and she was busy trying to generate icebreakers, but Ava’s mind was far from fun facts about herself or listing out three words that described her. She’d taken a quick liking to Santos, at least, and Ashton seemed generally pleasant enough to work with. It was Metford who was the only question mark hovering above them like a dark cloud.

After an hour and a half of stilted attempts to describe what food best described them (Ava had shamelessly stolen the idea from Xavier Renton, but still found it difficult to come up with her own food, even though it had been her idea), they mercifully landed at the airport in Athens, GA. Two black SUVs were already waiting for them to head out to Penfield. It was time to find a lost boy and bring him home.

Ava only hoped she wouldn’t have to hurt his mother in the process.



## CHAPTER FOUR

The three-story farmhouse was a large old Victorian goliath that had seen its better days around fifty years ago. The paint cracked and peeled to reveal the bare wood underneath, which was weathered to the point of having holes straight through in some spots. The roof swagged over the front porch. It was so low that anyone other than the little boy would have to duck to pass under it and to the front door. The porch boards were warped, and Ava could hear the loud groans and creaks in her mind before they even parked.

The team members gathered outside Sal's vehicle for instruction. Ava took a deep breath as Sal gave their instructions.

"Metford and Ashton, cover the back and sides. Watch for her to make a run for it from any doors or windows. Remember to look up. She's not listed as being violent, but you can never tell when a mother and child are on the run. She may feel that she's protecting her son, and she could be armed. We don't know."

Metford and Ashton exchanged a quick look and nodded.

"James and Santos with me," Sal went on. "We've got the front and the barn. Keep your eyes and ears open. Our goal is the safety of the little boy. Let's go."



Metford and Ashton circled around the side of the house while Ava, Sal, and Jillian headed for the front. Ava stopped short of climbing up the steps and onto the rickety porch. She had no intention of being in such a cramped position.

“Ms. Pembroke! Sally Pembroke! FBI. Come out and let’s talk this thing through,” Sal shouted.

Ava waited with bated breath just above her shoulder. It wasn’t lost on her that this was the exact position in front of the door that she’d been in only a couple weeks before, down in Kingsville. Her hand rested near the butt of her gun. She hoped she wouldn’t have to draw it.

“I don’t hear anything,” Jillian whispered.

Ava nodded as she scanned all the visible windows. There was no movement, but she knew the woman could just be sitting still and keeping her son quiet in hopes that they would go away. “Nothing on my end, either,” she reported.

“Any movement back there?” whispered Sal through the earpiece.

“Nothing,” Ashton answered. “We can see in several windows. No one’s in the rooms we can see. She could be upstairs or in the basement. Want us to open the bulkhead?”

“Yes. Just keep sharp.”

Moving in perfect tandem, Ava moved toward the windows on the left side of the porch and peered inside while Jillian went to the windows on the right side and did the same. Each of them turned back to Sal and shook their heads.

“Boss, nothing here but water. It’s flooded completely,” came Metford’s voice over the earpiece.

“We’re going to move inside,” said Sal. “Ashton, go check the barn. Metford, you enter the house through the back door and meet us in the middle.”

The door opened easily, swinging inward to reveal a crumbling interior that matched the exterior. Sal and Jillian confidently stepped inside, keeping hyper-alert and slowly

scanning back-to-back as they made their way into the living room. Ava took up the rear, cautiously keeping her eyes peeled for anything possibly lurking in the shadows. The place was a shambles. Trash and debris were strewn everywhere and the stench of cigarette smoke was so thick Ava had to hold her breath.

“Sally Pembroke! FBI. We’re inside the house. You really need to come down and talk to us about this. We don’t want anything to get any worse for you or your son, ma’am.”

Metford swept the rooms as he passed them and met Ava and Sal at the foot of the stairs. Jillian finished checking the rooms at the front of the house and joined them.

“Nothing down here, but I did find a newer kid’s blanket in there,” Jillian said, pointing to the living room. “SpongeBob.”

“She’s here, then,” Metford said.

“Ms. Pembroke, we’re coming up. If you’re up there, you need to announce yourself for your own safety and that of Tristan.”

They ascended the stairs, covering all angles as they went. Ava was glad Metford and Santos seemed to be getting along well while in the field. She didn’t know that they would be on good terms outside of work, though.

They searched the upstairs rooms and found clothes belonging to the mother and son.

A tiny scraping sound came from overhead. Ava motioned for the other two to be quiet.

“Rossi,” she whispered and pointed up. Sal followed her gaze and nodded. She mouthed for Santos to find the attic access.

“Ms. Pembroke? Is that you up there in the attic? We’re FBI, and I really need you to announce yourself,” she called out again.

Muffled, childish sobs came from overhead. Ava nodded to Metford, and they both stepped into the hallway. Santos stepped from a room at the end of the hall and motioned that she'd found the door.

The access door could've been mistaken for a closet door. Santos pointed it out. "These old houses had armoires, not built-in closets."

Ava nodded, impressed. She opened the door cautiously. "Sally," she called out, trying a lighter demeanor than Sal's authoritative calls. "We'd like to speak with you."

Once again, it wasn't her who made a sound. It was little Tristan, and he sounded terrified.

"Tristan? Is that you?" Ava called. She waved the others over to her and mounted the steps. They were fiercely narrow. She turned sideways and drew her gun.

Metford caught up to her before she could ascend the rickety steps. "Wait. I'll go first," he offered. Whether he was volunteering to possibly put himself in danger or simply trying to wrest control of the situation from Ava, she couldn't tell. He'd played nicely so far, but she still wasn't sure how much she could trust him.

She tried to push that thought out of her mind. Of course, she could trust him. Sal had chosen him for this team, after all. If she was going to be taking a leadership role, she couldn't afford to doubt her own teammates like this.

Sal came over and whispered lowly to them. "Santos, go up with him. James, you cover the bottom of the stairs."

Ava relented and took a step back so Metford and Santos could climb up. The wait felt like an eternity. The boy's crying grew louder. Santos called out his name and asked if he could answer.

"No," he said in a watery, broken voice. "Mama said to be quiet and not to talk to strangers. Go 'way!"

The agents moved into the attic. Without waiting for Sal's approval, Ava was on their heels, anxious to see if the mother had left the boy alone in the attic. Why would she have done that? It was too dangerous to leave him there alone.

Ava's mind raced as she saw Santos go to the frightened boy. He backed up all the way to the wall and began to wail. Metford and Ava scanned the huge attic for signs of someone hiding among the tumbled old furniture and steamer trunks and decaying boxes full of God-knew-what.

Ava motioned for him to go down the far side while she went down the side closest to where they stood. Sal moved into position at the foot of the stairs below her, and Santos could handle the boy.

The attic was completely silent except for the slow creaking of their footsteps and Tristan's heavy, panicked breathing. Santos squatted low and tried to soothe him in a low voice.

"Hey, kid," she whispered. "My name's Jill. I'm one of the good guys. A lot of people have been very worried about you..."

The kid sniffled and wiped his nose, still too terrified to speak. Ava wrenched her eyes from the situation to focus on her search.

When she had made it about halfway back to the entrance, someone stepped into view at the top of the stairs. A haggard, skinny woman with lank, brown hair. She was dressed in baggy, worn joggers and a spaghetti strap tank top. Her collarbone was extremely pronounced, as were her cheekbones. She looked like she was the barest shell of herself.

The woman waved and smiled at the boy.

"Mama," he wailed. Santos prevented him from dashing to his mother.

"Sally, stop and put your hands up." Ava held out one hand, the other rested on her gun.

Sally only glanced at Ava and then at Metford. She looked back to her screaming son. “Mama loves you, Tristan. Forever and always.”

That sent the boy’s wails to the ear-splitting level.

Sally turned her teary eyes on Ava and simply shook her head. Then she turned and bolted down the stairs.

“Stop!” Sal was shouting, but Sally’s momentum was already carrying her down the stairs quick enough that she collapsed into Sal in a tangled heap of legs and arms. They tumbled over in a heavy crash. The boy screamed.

Somehow, Sally scrambled to her feet and took off in an instant as Metford and Ava clambered down the steps.

“Sal—” Ava started.

Sal shook her head. She was already struggling back to her feet.

“I’m fine. Go after her!” she yelled.

Metford was right behind her, and Ava right behind him. He yelled for Sally to stop, but she slammed the door and kept running. Down the hall. Down the main stairs, and out the front door. She moved with a swiftness and agility that Ava would’ve never thought possible for the shape she seemed to be in.

Metford gave chase, whammed the side of his head as he followed her across the porch, and then leaped from the top step toward her, catching her upper arm. The velocity of his movement slammed them both to the ground. The hit was hard enough that Ava heard Sally’s breath being expelled forcefully from her lungs.

The woman fought like a wounded mountain lion. She clawed Metford’s face just under his left eye. She bit his forearm and drew blood. She kicked him in the thigh as he tried to pin her on her back.

Ashton ran from the barn, gun drawn, to see what was going on, but Ava waved him down.

Ava yelled for Sally to stop resisting, but she might as well have been talking to the wind for all the acknowledgment the woman gave. It was as if she hadn't heard a syllable.

Moving in to assist if she could, Ava caught a foot to the ankle and stumbled. Before she could catch her balance and head in again, Metford grabbed the woman's arm and flipped her over in one harsh motion. He immediately slammed his knee into the small of her back and wrenched her hands behind her back.

"Metford! Take it easy, man," Ashton yelled.

Ava held up a hand to quiet Ashton and moved in. "Metford, calm down. You got her. There's no need to be so rough now."

He grimaced and nodded. "Sorry. Can you cuff her, please?" he grunted as she wriggled and writhed underneath him.

Ava cuffed her and nodded for Metford to get off her. They helped her to her feet. Ashton was directly in front of her about three feet away. Just as he smiled, relieved that they'd caught the woman, Ava supposed, Sally jerked free from Metford and ran wildly into Ashton. The direct hit took him off his feet, propelled him back a foot, and Sally trampled him as she tried to run.

Ava darted after her. Fortunately, despite her quickness, Sally was pretty winded and beaten up. It didn't take much for Ava to pump the gas and quickly overtake her. She wrapped up Sally in a football-style tackle and brought her to the ground. This time, Sally stopped resisting as Ava marched her back to the house.

"Now you see why I was being rough, Ashie-boy," Metford said as he extended a hand to him.

Ashton scoffed and got up without the proffered help. "You got her riled up, man. That's probably why she still tried to run even though she was cuffed."

"Whatever," Metford said with a shake of his head.

Sal and Santos came out of the front door now, each of them holding Tristan's hand. The boy was crying, and looks of regret were displayed on each of the womens' faces, but at least he was safe.

In the end, the case was closed with only minor injuries. No weapons were involved. And the team seemed to work well together, even with the obvious friction between the men. Ava thought they'd work it out on their own.

If they didn't, she knew she would have to step in. It was always best if the team figured out dynamics on their own.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

*Kara*

The soft tune of the front doorbell drifted through the house. Kara perked up from writing in her journal. She wasn't expecting anyone. Laying the pen aside, she closed the book, her mind racing.

What if it was a bad person? What if it was a burglar?

She shook those thoughts out of her head with a grin. "Silly, I don't think a burglar would ring the doorbell," she said.

The sound of her voice in the quiet room did nothing to alleviate her nerves. She looked at the window and thought about peeking out, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Whoever was down there might be standing on the walkway looking up. If they saw her, she would feel obligated to let them in, and she didn't feel like having company.

It had been a bad day since she'd rolled out of bed. Literally rolled out of bed. The nightmare she'd been having bled over into reality. Even when she had opened her eyes, the monster had still been there, still had hold of her neck, and she had been suffocating. She'd tossed and turned, fighting desperately to break the grip on her throat. Eventually, she'd



tumbled right off the side of the bed and landed badly on her right hip and wrist.

The aches were still there to let her know that part, at least, had not been in her imagination. Otherwise, she might have thought it was all part of the bad dream. These days, the demarcation lines between dreams and reality were fuzzy and warped, no longer a bright line of separation but porous. It started not long after Patrick had died. It seemed to Kara that the line had become more difficult to see as time passed.

The doorbell's bonging, echoey tune wafted to her again.

Hurrying down the stairs, she stopped and tried to recall if her sister was supposed to come that day. She couldn't remember, but she didn't think that was for another few days. Maybe quite a few. She'd have to check her fridge to be sure.

If it wasn't Daphne ringing the bell, then it could be anyone.

"I wish it was no one," she whispered.

But it was someone, because they pushed the doorbell button again.

Kara tiptoed into the parlor and to the farthest window. She peered out to see if there was a recognizable vehicle outside.

A silver Saab sat at the curb as if it belonged there. But it didn't belong at the end of her sidewalk. It had absolutely no business being there.

Upon a second examination, she decided it did look a bit familiar, but she couldn't be sure.

The doorbell rang out again, and Kara's palms became damp. So did her upper lip and forehead. She hated perspiring. Fanning herself, she moved toward the entry hall. She decided she would just have to peep out the side window or the peephole to see who was so adamant about gaining entry. After all, if they just kept ringing the bell, they probably weren't there to do harm. They already would have tried to

force their way in through a window or something, she reasoned.

At the door, she darted her head up and quickly put her eye close to the hole, then ducked back away from it. It was just common knowledge that anything could happen when you stuck your unprotected eyeball too close to peepholes, keyholes, or any other kind of hole. And she liked her eyes just fine.

The man on the porch was her doctor. He made house visits once a month to keep a check on her. He'd been especially kind to her after Patrick's passing, and she had a soft spot for him because of that.

The realization calmed her frantic heartbeat, but she still didn't feel quite normal as she turned the deadbolt and unlatched the door. To be fair, she hadn't felt normal in some time now.

"Dr. Hyder," she said with a smile as she opened the door.

"Well, Kara. I was about to give up and leave. You had me a bit worried, I must say." He entered, took off his hat, and hung it on the wall rack.

"I'm sorry. I was busy upstairs and I didn't hear it, I guess." Kara was confused. Unsure why he was there before their scheduled appointment time, she didn't immediately show him into the living room. "I'm sorry. Why are you coming here today? I mean so long before our usual appointment."

Dr. Hyder eyed her a moment. "Kara, today is the second Monday of the month. That is when our appointments are scheduled. I've been seeing you on the second Monday of the month for several months now. Are you feeling okay lately?"

Astonished, Kara couldn't speak for a moment. She tried, but her mouth just moved and she knew she looked like a fish out of water. She always hated that phrase, but nothing else came to mind. It was like she was flopping around, desperately

seeking purchase, trying to find familiarity, but coming up with only air.

How can it already be the second Monday? He just came for his last visit about two weeks ago, she wondered. He could be lying to me. Trying to trick me so he can say I'm sick and then he can put me on medicine I don't really need.

"And that's how the government controls you," she finished her thought aloud.

"Excuse me? What's how the government controls you?" Dr. Hyder put his hand on her shoulder. His eyebrows drew toward the center of his forehead and left three deep crevices above the bridge of his nose.

It makes him look inhuman, she thought, turning her eyes away.

"I'm fine. I just meant that, you know." She tucked hair behind her ear. It was a tic she had always hated. It made her look like trailer-trash flirting with the old man doctor. She forced her hand down and crossed her arms. "I've just been so busy. It seems like you were just here a couple of weeks ago." She motioned for him to go into the living room. "Would you like a glass of water?"

He turned after only two steps. "Why, yes, thank you. I'll go get it. You can sit and get comfortable before our appointment." He started past her.

She stuck her hands out and stopped him. Why was she so fearful of him going into the kitchen? Because it's a horrible mess in there, she reminded herself.

"What is it? I've been to your kitchen before, Kara. On my last visit, as a matter of fact. You look stressed. I just wanted you to be able to sit and relax a moment."

"No, no. I'm fine. Really. I can't let you go in the kitchen, Dr. Hyder. It's a mess in there." She turned to go get the water.

"A mess anywhere in your house? I doubt it," he called as she walked away.

“Oh, it happens from time to time. I’d die of embarrassment if someone saw it, too.”

“Well, I definitely don’t want that.”

She stepped into the kitchen. There was no mess even though she’d been positive there had been one. In fact, it was spotless. The counters gleamed and the tile floor smelled fresh. Taking a glass from the cabinet, she turned on the tap and filled it. All the while, she looked around in search of the big mess. If it had been there, she had cleaned it up already.

But she didn’t remember doing that, either.



After Dr. Hyder left, Kara stood at the front door staring down at the messily scribbled prescriptions. She might have them filled, but she would have to wait for Daphne to visit because Kara simply could not force herself to drive to the pharmacy and do it herself.

The doctor had told her that it was very important that she start the new medication immediately and take it strictly as directed until his next visit.

She pushed the paper into her pocket and sighed. She had known he was going to put her on medicine. It wasn’t necessary, she knew. How could it be? She wasn’t even sick. She was just going through a rough patch.

Back in the living room, she bent and righted the throw pillow she had used while lying down to talk to him. Her head ached, and when she had headaches, she liked to lie down and speak with him. His calm nature helped her, and usually, her headaches went away. But not today. As soon as she had closed the door behind him, it had ramped up again.

Giving the pillow a light fluff, she looked around to see that everything else was in place before leaving and heading back to the kitchen. She plucked a pineapple magnet from the fridge and stuck the prescription to the surface with it.

The phone rang. It was Daphne.

“Yes, Daphne. Dr. Hyder left just a few moments ago. He’s probably not even out of the neighborhood yet.”

“Did he change your medicine?”

“Yep. I have the prescription hanging on the fridge.”

“It needs to be filled, Kara. You need to be taking it by day’s end, or in the morning at the latest.”

Something sinister, something like fear, splintered through her chest, branching off in fractals through her veins and lungs and bones. She could practically feel it moving through her blood. “Daphne, you know I can’t go into the city. I just can’t. It’s not like I’ve not tried; I just cannot do it.”

There was a heavy sigh from the other end of the line. Daphne was exasperated, and Kara wished her sister knew just how difficult it was to even open the door and step onto the porch.

“Fine. I’ll be there to take it in about an hour.”

“Okay. Thank you, Daphne. I love you.”

“You should,” Daphne said with a hint of laughter in her voice.

She didn’t say it back, though. She just made that quip. Was she being sarcastic? Was she just trying to lighten her own mood?

Kara put the phone back on the charging cradle and walked to the front door again. She opened it and stood there looking out at the world in which she could no longer be comfortable. Not that she was very comfortable in it to start with, but with Patrick gone...

She lifted her foot over the threshold and let it dangle over the porch floor.

“See? Nothing bad happened,” she told herself with a nervous chuckle.

She put the foot on the porch but didn’t put her weight on it. Her vision doubled and then trebled as her eyes welled with

tears.

“You can do this, Kar,” she said forcefully.

After a few more seconds or minutes or hours of hemming and hawing about it, she finally brought her second foot to join her first out on the porch. And there she was. Standing on the porch. On the porch.

The doorknob was gripped tightly in her hand, and her knuckles had turned white, but the fact remained that she was outside the house and the world hadn't collapsed down around her ears.

She laughed. It wasn't so bad. Not so bad at all.

Letting go of the doorknob, she turned her back to the house. The mailbox caught her wandering eye, and perspiration oozed from her forehead and upper lip. She swiped angrily at them as she homed in on the mailbox. Thirty-two steps. That was all it would take.

Suddenly, Kara vaulted down the steps and ran down the sidewalk with her hair flying crazily in the wind and a maniacal laugh emanating from her mouth. Already her head was rattling away.

One, two, three, fourfivesixseveneightnine....

She didn't slow down before reaching the mailbox but grabbed the edge of it and skidded to a stop just long enough to thrust her hand inside and grab the envelopes.

With her heart hammering high up in her throat, she sprinted back toward the house. Her mind was screaming now to catch up with her feet.

Twenty-seventwenty-eight-twenty-ninethirty—

The toe of her right shoe caught the edge of the top step and she went sprawling onto the floor. Mail fluttered out in every direction like little paper snowflakes.

She grabbed the mail, clutched it to her chest, and scrambled to her feet. She could see her heartbeat in her field

of vision. Wavy, ghostly horizontal lines that pulsed in time with her heart. Her body had gone numb the split second before she crashed to the floor, and it was still numb as she pushed through the door and into the safety of the house.

With her back against the door, still clutching the mail to her chest, Kara Davis slid to the floor crying and laughing simultaneously. She had made a huge stride in her own recovery from the fear that had incapacitated her since Patrick's death. Sure, she had fallen and banged up her leg pretty badly, but she was alive. There were no hidden burglars, murderers, rapists, or hooligans out there.

It was still just her old neighborhood. Same as when she and Patrick had moved there, except for the newly constructed house across the street.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing.

And that's where she still was when Daphne rang the doorbell.

She excitedly told her about going out for the mail, but Daphne wasn't nearly as happy as Kara had thought she would be.

"Daph, maybe you're the one who's sick, honey. You don't look so good, and you don't even seem excited that I finally went out. Now I know there's not much to worry about out there. I went out there, look!" She held up the envelopes haphazardly. A couple of bills fell from her hand. "I got the mail!"

Daphne gave her an expression somewhere between exasperation and pity.

"Kara, seriously, you used to go out and get the mail every day. You even used to go do the necessities to keep your household in order and yourself healthy. Now," Daphne began as she shook her head and tossed up her hands before turning her back and snatching the prescription off the fridge, "if you were really trying to get better, you'd at least hop in the car and go with me." She turned to face Kara again.

“What?”

“You heard me, sis. This isn’t easy for me to keep doing. You want to know why I look like hell? I’ve got a husband and three kids at home. I work a full-time job outside the house. And now I have to take care of you all the way out here. It’s not like you live close to me or anything. If you’d consider moving in with us, it would be a hell of a lot easier on me. On you, too, probably.”

“I’m fine right here. This is my home, Daphne. No one should ask me to give it up. Patrick worked too hard to get it paid off early. He was supposed to retire at fifty-five, and we,” she sucked in a ragged breath, “we were supposed...”

Her voice broke and she bawled for the next five minutes.

Daphne sighed sadly and gave her sister a pleading look. “Listen, I know things have been rough for you. But you’re set for life. Your house is paid for, you don’t have kids to take care of. Hell, you don’t even have a pet. All you have to do is take care of you. I just worry about you, Kar. It just... seems like you’re not even trying sometimes. I mean, look at this kitchen. It was spotless the other day when I was here, but now it looks like a bunch of stoners ransacked the place, high out of their minds. What did you even do to make this kind of mess?”

Kara scanned the room and was horrified to see that the floor had smudges and streaks all over it. High piles of dirty dishes sat in stacks along the counter, syrup had overturned on the kitchen table and dripped into a chair, and nasty clumps of paper towels were strewn around everywhere.

Kara began to scream in terror. She covered her ears with her hands and slumped to the floor on her knees, keening loudly and rocking side to side.





## CHAPTER SIX

**D**ay two at the new office was much less exciting than their first day, but it gave them a chance to set up. The building itself was a huge tower of glass—if six stories could really count as “huge” in a place like Fairhaven. Ava and her team were on the fourth floor. The only non-transparent walls in the unit were around the two offices that Sal and Ava occupied. Everything else was all floor-to-ceiling windows, showcasing a lovely view of the pier, where people were bustling about to and fro.

The team moved right in and each person took a desk in the open space in front of her office. Ava walked into her office with a box of her personal items—and items that she hadn’t wanted packed in with the rest—and looked around. Bare brick walls and two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves stared back at her. At least she had a window overlooking the water.

She didn’t know how to feel about having the door closed and being cloistered away from the rest of the team. It didn’t feel right. She felt like she’d barely started at the Bureau at all—and she had the least experience of any of the team—but now it felt official.

She spent a half-hour setting up her office, moving the desk and chairs until they were where she liked them best, and

then she called her father.

Hank answered on the third ring. His forced tone made Ava wonder what was up with him.

“Dad, what’s up? Are you okay? You sound tense,” Ava said.

“No. I’m fine.” He sighed. “I talked to Ray earlier. Your uncle says you’ve come across another lead. Or was this something else you didn’t want to tell me?”

Ava cursed silently. She had kept leads from him before, but it was to protect him from getting his hopes up. Also, she didn’t want him to worry needlessly, as he was prone to. Putting up a good front was kind of his thing, but Ava knew he wasn’t as strong-willed as her mother. When she got her teeth in something, she held on with her entire self. All the way to the very core of her being, actually. But not Hank. He was tough on the outside and that was about the extent of it. Especially when it came to his wife and daughter.

“Dad, listen—”

“Not this time, Aviva. I don’t want you keeping things from me about your mother’s case. Do you understand? I’m not as fragile as you think. If I was, I certainly wouldn’t be in my line of business, and I would have never survived being married to her for so long. The worry would have put me in the grave already. So don’t keep things from me about this case. Who knows? I might even be able to help. But you have to talk to me about these leads. No matter how small or insignificant you might think they are.”

Feeling properly admonished, Ava sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry. From now on, I won’t hide things from you.” What else could she say to him? Knowing that she was the reason for him being upset wasn’t a good feeling at all. He was all she had left of her little family.

Until we get Mom back, she corrected herself.

That didn’t change the fact that she sometimes thought the worst about her mother’s disappearance. It had been months

since her last communication. The case had gone stagnant, and the detectives were still working just as diligently as they had in the beginning. The Bureau had pulled one of the detectives and two team members from that group, though. Ava knew what that meant. It was never a good sign when they started trying to conserve resources on a case.

But she tried to remain hopeful about her mother, the same way she tried to remain hopeful about Molly. In her heart, she truly believed they were both still alive. Maybe not under the best of circumstances. Maybe not even under fair circumstances, but alive nevertheless.

“Promise me, Aviva.”

His voice had a note of authority and sternness she hadn't heard since she was a freshman in high school and had taken it in her head to skip a class that she had considered boring. Who needed to learn about boring, old history? Then her father had told her that the past is the launching pad for the future and that everyone needed to know where they'd come from so they would know where they were going.

After several weeks of being grounded in which time Ava had a lot of time to think, she had figured out what he had meant. And it had changed her life.

“I promise, Dad. I won't do it again.” She had to wonder what she had just signed up for, and if she would be able to keep that promise. She wasn't in the habit of breaking promises, but...

“Now, tell me about your team and how you're liking your new job.”

And, for the next quarter-hour, she did just that. She did most of the talking. At the end of their conversation, he congratulated her and asked when she was coming for another visit.

“I'm not sure when I'll have a clear day again just yet. I'm still drowning in boxes at my new place. Let me get the feel of all this and see what I can come up with. I'll keep you

updated, and I'll still call you three or four times a week just to bug you and check on you, though."

He laughed. "Alright, that sounds good to me."

They finished their call, and Ava stood to assess the room again. She didn't like it any better than before. The closer she got to the window, the more she realized that the angle was so different from where she'd seen it before. This close, it mainly looked down on the nondescript parking lot they shared with the other tenants in the building, most notably a medical supply office and an insurance agency. A couple of sad little picnic tables stood just out front, absolutely covered in bird crap. On the other end of the parking lot, there was a tiny strip of greenery that sectioned it off from the main street, and just across that stood a gas station that served to perfectly block her view of the water.

Sal stepped to the doorway and knocked.

Ava turned, smiled, and motioned her inside. "You don't really have to knock, you know. You're the boss."

"Um... yes, I do. I may be the boss, but this is your space. I'm not going to just waltz in unannounced and uninvited." Sal chuckled as if it were the silliest thing she'd ever heard. "So, how do you like your office?"

Ava grinned and patted the windowsill. "I like the window, I guess."

"Uh-oh. Not to your liking?" She moved to the side and craned her neck to look out the glass. "Oh, there's not much of a view, that's for sure. Mine's not much better."

Ava shook her head. "I don't like it much at all. The office, I mean. I should be out there with them."

Sal shook her head. "Take my word for it, when you start in with all the endless, tedious paperwork that comes with this role, you will very thankful you have that door to shut. Besides, if you get really lonely, there's plenty of space out there. You can always dock your laptop at any of those stations."

“Good point,” Ava laughed.

Ava liked Sal. She hadn’t had a real friend since Molly. She’d been so focused on getting into the Bureau, learning all she could, and trying to find Molly—or at least the people who had kidnapped her—that she had almost forgotten how to make friends.

“You’re probably right.” Ava propped her butt against the desk and looked out where the others were setting up their own workstations. “I might get used to it, but it’s going to take a while.”

“Always does,” Sal said, following her gaze. “But you’ll get the hang of it.”

She turned back around and dropped a file folder on Ava’s desk.

Ava frowned as she looked down at it. “What’s this?”

“Our next case,” Sal informed her. “And this time, I’d like you to take the lead.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re full of surprises?” Ava groaned.

“It’s been mentioned before,” Sal grinned. She got up and headed back out to the floor. “Take a few minutes to look over it and call up a briefing whenever you’re ready.”

Bellyaching aside, Ava took a seat and looked over the file folder. Unlike their last case, this one was a doozy—money laundering, kidnapping, and possibly several murders.

“Wonderful,” she muttered under her breath.

After an hour or so of studying and taking notes, she finally felt ready. Thankfully, Sal had already told the team she would be taking the lead on this case. She made her way to the front of the office and passed out casefiles. The others looked at her expectantly and she tried to shove down the nerves. Here was her chance to prove she belonged here. She could be a leader every bit as much as Sal.

“We’ve got a lot on our plate here, so let’s start at the top,” Ava started. “We’re looking for Kenneth Delgado. Also known as Deke, after his initials. Rap sheet longer than a CVS receipt.”

That led to a smattering of chuckles around the room, and she cleared her throat to continue. “As you can see, he’s wanted for more than a couple murders, several drug charges, and he’s got links to several known crime networks. And that’s just scratching the surface.”

“Sounds like a bad guy,” Metford quipped.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Ava nodded. She turned to Sal. “Boss—”

“You’re in charge here,” Sal reminded her.

Despite herself, Ava felt the telltale flush of red heating up her cheeks. “Right. Agent Rossi, I’d like you to find out everything about this man’s financials—banks, creditors, ATM, and credit or debit card trails. Search for anything and everything. We need to know where he was over the last year so we have a better idea where he might be headed.”

“I’m on it.” Sal opened her laptop right there at the table and started hammering away. Ava noted the excited expression on her face as she did so.

“Metford, I need you and Santos to go to the house and search it top to bottom, inside and out. Every building, every structure on the property. We’re looking for clues of any kind. Did he vacation in certain places? Which restaurants did he frequent? Who were his friends? Look for planners, calendars, notes scribbled on napkins, electronics. Our next move will be to interview everyone he ever spoke to.”

Metford scowled at Santos. “This should be fun.”

Ava’s hackles shot up at the comment. Her mind raced to come up with a way to prevent the situation from getting out of hand, but thankfully, Sal jumped in to help her.

“I can have you sit here and trace every move he made via social media, if you’d rather do that,” Sal said matter-of-factly. “I took you to be an agent who likes being out in the field and not at a desk. Was I wrong to assume that?”

Ava exhaled a silent breath in thanks. Part of being a leader was having to deal with conflicts like these. She was still learning the ropes and was grateful that Sal had her back.

“No, boss. You were absolutely right to assume that.” He glanced back at Santos and opened his mouth to say something, decided against it, and closed his mouth again. He nodded and crossed his arms as he shifted from his left foot to his right.

“Good. Do you have a problem with the legwork, Agent Santos?”

“Absolutely not, boss.” Jillian smiled and it looked to be only a degree above a smirk.

“Good. Back to you, Agent James.”

Ava nodded. She hoped the two wouldn’t have more problems, but if they did, she had every confidence that Jillian could hold her own in a way that wouldn’t breach any of the Bureau’s numerous and rigid rules of conduct. Wayne, she wasn’t so sure about.

“Ashton, I need you to trace our guy’s movements online. All of them. Every platform he ever used, who he talked to, chatrooms he was in, everything.”

“You got it,” he nodded.

“I’m going to be looking into any properties he might own under his own name, and any assumed names we know about. Sal, if you see anything in the financials that would suggest he owns a property anywhere, let me know, please.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Alright. You have your assignments. Let’s get this thing rolling. Keep me updated.”

Metford and Santos left without speaking to each other. Sal and Ashton were already clacking away at their computers.

Ava stepped to Sal's desk. "Thank you," she whispered.

Sal shrugged. "You're second-in-command. They need to treat you with the same respect they'd treat me. Let's try to nip this in the bud before it gets out of control."

"Agreed."

In her new office, Ava tried to work, but found that she couldn't. She was reminded of the broom closet makeshift office she'd occupied at the Hidden Cove PD in Kentucky not too long ago, and a sense of exile and claustrophobia set in.

She finally gave up and took her notes to sit at Metford's desk, facing Ashton's. Feeling better made her work go smoother, and she was much more productive. Within three hours, she had located at least eight properties owned by their man. Those were under his real name. Just before she stopped for lunch, another possible two properties popped up. One was under a known alias. The other was under his youngest daughter's name.

Ava stood and stretched. She'd had to force herself to stop working. When she got into a case, it was difficult to stop even to eat.

"Are either of you taking a lunch break?" She looked between Ashton and Sal.

They exchanged a slightly confused look and then turned back to her.

"What is it? Do I have something on my face?" She ran a hand over her face.

"No. We already took a lunch," Sal told her.

"About an hour and a half ago, actually," Ashton added.

"Oh. Guess I didn't notice." Ava was a bit shocked that she'd not noticed them being away for an hour. That was either a very good sign about her ability to adapt to a new job



and a new building, or it was a very bad sign. She knew her own tendency for burying herself in work. Was she only trying to solve the case as quickly as possible? Did the thrill of the hunt still get her that excited? Or was she simply hiding from the worries and stresses of her own life?

Unsure which was true, or if any of them were true, she sighed and walked to the door. “Well, I’m going now, but my phone is on. If you need me, just call. I won’t be far.”

They nodded in unison, and she left. She didn’t intend to go far. The vending machines and a picnic bench outside were the extent of her travels for lunch.

Armed with extra-strong black coffee and a bear claw, Ava went downstairs and out the side door nearest the tables to mull over the information she had found. Even when she wasn’t working, she was still working.

She could hear her mother telling her that was the very reason she was on an upward path. The very reason she was going to be a phenomenal success within the Bureau.

She smiled, but the thought of her missing mother brought her a great deal of pain and worry that she had no way to vent. She couldn’t talk to her father about her fears and nightmares and sleepless nights. Sometimes, she wanted to tell someone. Anyone. But when it came right down to it, she never did.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Kara*

Over the last two weeks, Kara had made great strides. After her initial meltdown in the kitchen, she was terrified of what was happening to her, but with the combination of her sister's unconditional love and devotion, Dr. Hyder's care, and her new medication, there was an almost instant improvement in her quality of life. Her ability to properly care for herself—something she hadn't realized had slipped away from her—was returning. Every day was better than the day before.

Upon Dr. Hyder's suggestion, she had also started journaling regularly. Twice a day. In the morning just after rising from bed to log any nightmares or dreams, and again in the evening before bed to just go over the day and make any special notes about how she felt. Of course, it wasn't uncommon for her to add short entries when something happened that she thought was significant. In the last three days, she had seven entries for each day. Morning, after breakfast, before lunch, after lunch, before dinner because something always seemed very significant during that time, after dinner, and before bed.

The journaling kept her busy, too. It gave an added sense of responsibility and purpose that she liked.

Daphne helped her move bedrooms during the first week. She had said it would be a good change. Getting out of the room she'd shared with Patrick for fifteen years already made a marked improvement in the quality of her sleep. The nightmares had decreased in frequency and intensity. She was sleeping at least four solid hours each night, which was far more than she could count on before.

The new room overlooked the garage and shed part of the large backyard. There was a tree close to that window where she could watch the birds flitting about during the day. It was peaceful and helped keep her calm and grounded.

That room also gave a good view of the empty house next door. The Johnsons had lived there until two years ago. They sold it and moved to California for the husband's job. Patrick had liked them. Kara had been close to the woman, and they had often shared dinners at each other's homes. When they left, Patrick and Kara had missed them severely for several months. But, as with any other wound it seemed, time at first smudged and rubbed the sharp edges off, and finally, over the course of six months, all but erased the pain.

The only wound time had not healed for Kara was the passing of her husband. Nothing seemed to take the edge off that pain. Nothing eased her grief every time she almost called out to tell him something. Nothing lessened the loneliness of rolling over in the middle of the night and not finding him there with her, warm and sleeping, offering comfort just by his presence.

That seemed significant.

Kara walked upstairs to the little antique writing desk she had set up to overlook the backyard and the tree. She sat to write at half-past nine in the morning, and soon lost track of time. What had started out being a short entry ended up several pages long.

Only when the sound of a large truck rumbled outside did she raise her head from the writing exercise. Her forearm

burned from the extended time spent wielding the pen. It was almost eleven.

She moved to the window overlooking the neighboring property and was shocked to see a moving van and a huge box truck. They were just sitting there idling. Five minutes passed while the drivers simply sat in the vehicles with the engines rumbling. Kara had time to feel a twist of nostalgia and a pang of something akin to anger at knowing another family would be living in the house that used to belong to her friends.

Would they be nice? Civil? Good and upstanding citizens who took pride in their lives and home? Would they greet their neighbors with fresh-baked pie and cheerful smiles? Or would they be dangerous and uncouth?

“You know it’s probably city folk moving in there. If that’s the case, there’s no telling what they’ll be like,” she muttered and then sighed heavily.

Her breath fogged the window pane a bit, and she drew a heart in the condensation quickly. She used to draw a big heart in the condensation on the bathroom mirror after showering. She would draw an arrow piercing the heart and write I Luv U in its center. When Patrick took a shower and the mirror fogged, he thought it was sweet and would usually answer her back in the same fashion. It was one of those things that husbands and wives do that seems strange to other people.

Before the drawing faded completely, a Mercedes pulled into the driveway and a man stepped out of the driver’s side. He was handsome. Kara squinted and leaned close to the pane again, holding her breath.

The man was tall. She thought he stood a little over six feet, judging by how high the car roof was when he stepped to the passenger’s side and opened the door.

A beautiful young woman stepped out of the car. Her wavy blonde hair reminded Kara of cornsilk. It hung a few inches below her shoulders and was thick and lush. She had

dainty, angular features that enhanced her beauty. Her body was long and lean like the body of a professional dancer.

The man, presumably her husband, looked to be older than the blonde woman. She was bright and her smile infectious, in stark contrast to his dark features. His face was deeply tanned and his hair was almost black—the bright sunlight revealed it to be in truth a deep, rich brown. It was cut sensibly short, but not as short as most professional businessmen would have it. She surmised from the Mercedes and the tailored look of his dark suit, and the expensive, glittering jewelry she wore, that he was indeed a very successful businessman.

As he started escorting the woman around the front of the car, his gaze turned toward Kara's house. Her heart skipped a beat and she quickly stepped away from the window, placing her back against the wall beside it and giggling.

Pressing a hand to her chest, she giggled again. "Oh, my. He's so handsome. Would have been really embarrassing if he'd caught you ogling him that way," she chided herself.

As she pushed from the wall, a pang of guilt seized her. What was she doing eyeing another man that way? She had no business doing such things. Patrick had been the love of her life. Still was, as far as she was concerned.

"What's even more important, you dolt, is that man is married." She scoffed and shook her head as she walked out of the room.

A voice in her mind said, You don't know he's married, Kar.

She stopped short, unsure if the voice had been her own internal voice or that of another. It was unfamiliar. At the same time, she was certain it had been her own internal voice.

"Who else's voice could it be?" She chuckled to cover her fear and walked downstairs.

She had to plan out a cake for the next day. It was only proper to welcome new neighbors with a gift of some sort.

Although out of practice, she thought a cake and a bottle of wine would do nicely.

After an hour, she found a recipe she thought would be nice. A double-layer strawberry cake that she had made for a Christmas dinner at Daphne's house a few years ago. Everyone had raved over it. It was time-consuming, but it would be worth it to make a good impression on the new neighbors.

New neighbors, she thought with a big grin. New neighbors and possibly new friends.

She couldn't wait to tell Daphne. Instead of waiting for her sister's scheduled call on the next day, Kara took the phone and dialed. Her sister was concerned at first that something had gone wrong, but Kara assured her that everything was fine. Everything was wonderful, actually. She gushed for fifteen or twenty minutes before Daphne told her that she was at work and that her break time was over. She had to go.

"Joan!" she said, rushing to the parlor where she could see Joan and Dan's house across the street.

If anyone would be nearly as excited as Kara, it would be Joan. She and Dan were in their late sixties. They had no family to speak of, and Joan often lamented that they were lonely. She often said she wished she had kids, but she and Dan had always been so busy with their careers that they kept putting it off. One day, she told Kara with a deep frown and deeper lines in the center of her forehead, she had awoken to realize she was too old to have kids.

Kara and the Carvers had always been on friendly terms. However, Kara had never been as close to them as she had been the Johnsons. They had been close to her and Patrick's ages. The Carvers were twenty-plus years older, and Kara had always felt uncomfortable if Joan tried to get too close.

Kara and Daphne's mother had sullied the mother-daughter relationship for both girls. When Joan acted motherly, it pushed Kara away. She hadn't liked her own

mother, though she had longed for her love and acceptance. The only thing her mother ever seemed to love more than men was her alcohol and drug of choice, which changed as often as her bedmates did.

Those thoughts brought with them a wild rush of emotions. Kara yanked herself away from them before being taken on that ride.

“Nope! Not today,” Kara said as she dropped the curtains back into place and turned away.

She shook her arms and hands then her body and finally her legs and feet, one at a time as if shaking the bad thoughts from her head to her body and out her toes.

On the occasions when Kara had spoken to Daphne about their mother and the things that happened when they were growing up, Daphne had told her that many of those memories were wrong. She’d even gone so far as to suggest some of them were nightmares similar to the ones Kara suffered from now.

But her sister was wrong. They had happened. All the memories were just that—memories. They comprised a whole plethora of things she couldn’t talk about to anyone. She confided in Dr. Hyder only sparingly with those bad thoughts and memories for fear that Daphne would somehow find out. She would undoubtedly tell him that they were false, too. Better to keep it to herself than to be thought a liar by her doctor.

Two hours later, after she had done her afternoon chores and finished journaling about the new neighbors, but mostly about the super-handsome man, Kara’s phone rang.

It was Joan.

“Did you see?” she asked excitedly.

“The moving trucks?” Kara couldn’t suppress her smile any more than she could keep her eyes from drifting toward the windows that looked onto the neighbors’ property.

“Isn’t it exciting? Finally, someone bought that magnificent house. You think they have kids? They looked young enough to have little ones.”

“Oh, I doubt it. I don’t think that woman has ever given birth. Did you see how lean she was?”

“And simply gorgeous,” Joan added with a sigh. “He’s either a very lucky man, or a very miserable man having a wife that beautiful.”

Kara was confused. She tried to think of a downside to having such a pretty wife and couldn’t. “What do you mean?”

“Honey, honey. She is so good-looking I bet every man who lays eyes on her wants her for his own. At least for a little affair. Her husband would have to have great patience and self-control. If he was a jealous sort, he would be miserable trying to keep the men from wooing her at every opportunity.”

That hadn’t occurred to Kara. That such a beautiful couple might be unhappy was staggering to her. She walked to a mirror and looked at herself closely while Joan went on and on about how nice it would be to have another neighbor.

Compared to the new neighbor, Kara thought her own reflection looked dull, even a bit grey. Her hair was lackluster and lank as she ran her fingers through it. She didn’t understand how it could have changed since she’d taken her shower and brushed it that morning. It had looked fine then. And her face had been pretty. Not as beautiful as the neighbor’s—anyone would be hard-pressed to rival her good looks—but still pretty enough.

“Joan, I think I have to go now. I need to start prepping for dinner, and I have something I need to do.”

“Oh. Alright, Kara. I’ll talk to you later. Maybe tomorrow. I plan on taking the new neighbors a little gift to introduce myself and Dan. I’ll stop by on my way back home and we’ll have tea.”

“Alright. That sounds good.”



Kara hung up and walked back to the mirror. Maybe it was the lighting. The mirror in the bathroom would be better. She went in there and turned on the vanity lights. Big, round, elegant bulbs ringed the mirror and threw soft white light on her.

“Ah, there you are,” she said to her reflection, which had been much improved by the flood of light.

She stared at her reflection without blinking until the reflection started to seem as if it might not be hers. Then it began to shift slightly and big black holes replaced her eyes. Squeezing her eyes shut, she fumbled for the switch to turn off the lights and then fled the bathroom.

“I need to journal that. I need to log what just happened. It was not right, but it was significant. I need to journal, I need to journal,” she repeated all the way back to her writing desk.

The next time she looked up, the sun had dipped low in the west, and she’d written several pages again. She didn’t read over them, even though she was curious about what she had written that would have taken so long.

Instead, she went to the kitchen. She hadn’t had dinner, and her stomach was growling in a very unladylike fashion.

As she sat at the table to eat her soup and sandwich, she saw her pillbox in the center of the table. She had missed the dose she should have taken between four and five. Now she would have to wait and just take the bedtime dose. Dr. Hyder had emphasized that she should not double-up on doses. It could be dangerous. Her dosage was pretty high anyway and needed to be evenly spaced out to remain safe. After eight weeks, he was going to start tapering her back to a milder dose. She couldn’t wait for that. Remembering to take three pills a day was a pain in the neck.

“You didn’t even make it three weeks without missing a dose,” she complained to herself as she placed the little box back on the table.

Thoughts of the handsome man next door filled her head as she began eating, and soon, the missed pill was forgotten again. She imagined the couple next door was there eating with her. Of course, they were not dining on soup and sandwiches. They would have a fancy, proper dinner replete with wine and plenty of dessert. The conversation would be witty and cultured, her home would be warm and inviting, and everyone would compliment her amazing double-layer strawberry cake.

Yes. That was what they'd do.

It turned out to make her dinner a more pleasant and less lonesome affair. At bedtime, she crawled under the covers with a relaxed smile on her face. The next day, she would get to meet the new neighbors.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

**D**oyle's Irish Pub had the best burgers in town. It had only taken one week of Sal raving about their onion rings for Ava and the others to try it out, and soon enough, all five of them were hooked. The atmosphere was just right for agents who had worked hard over the last few weeks on a case and then closed it successfully.

Ava joined them happily for burgers and beer and a college basketball game on the TV. She had joined other coworkers at similar bars, but in some ways had always felt like the outsider. Like she'd never been authentically welcomed into the groups. This was different, however. The team members were all getting on friendly terms—even Metford and Santos. It was great. It offered her the camaraderie that she had been missing out on for so long.

“Here's to putting away the bad guy and closing the case successfully,” Metford announced loudly, holding his beer high toward the center of the table.

Everyone joined the toast. Smiles and laughter were the order of the evening. While they ate, they discussed the case, the high moments, the adrenaline rushes, and the low points. Ava wondered if that was how normal people who worked in

careers other than law enforcement celebrated achieving goals as a team.

She put the question to the group, and immediately there were scoffs and laughs.

“Nope. Not at all,” Santos said. She sat forward and clunked her beer bottle onto the table. “When’s the last time you saw a group of maids or waitresses sitting in a pub to celebrate something they did at work?”

Ava laughed. “Okay. You’re right. You got me. Not that I think it never happens. I’ve just never seen it, I guess.”

“It’s true,” Metford told her. “Law enforcement feels the need to celebrate every little win, because every little win means a murderer, drug dealer, rapist, kid-snatcher, or someone like that has been taken off the streets. It makes the world a safer place for everyone. We’re like pro athletes who have to unwind and have fun after a win.”

“Well, waitresses and maids make the world a safer place every day, in my humble opinion,” Santos said.

“How’s that?” Metford scoffed and turned up his beer.

“Can you imagine customers trying to pick up their own food from the kitchen? Or put in orders? And maids? Oh, God. Where do I even start? They clean up rooms after slobs like you, Metford.” Santos punched his shoulder and threw her head back laughing. “Now, if that’s not making hotels, motels, and the world safer for everyone every day, I don’t know what is. We’re just a bunch of egomaniacs that revel in the adrenaline rush of our jobs. You know I’m right. Don’t even try to deny it. We just feel the need to announce our achievements over the loudspeakers every chance we get.”

Metford relented with a shrug. “Well, we deserve to.”

The waitress came and dropped off their beers as well as the various burgers and sandwiches the team had ordered, along with a few side dishes for the table. They hooted and generally sounded and acted like a bunch of rowdy teenagers with slightly more self-control.

For the most part, Ava enjoyed the friendly, fun atmosphere. She began to understand why so many of the other teams went to the bars after work together several times a month, and always after closing cases.

After several long, difficult weeks, they'd finally put Kenneth Delgado behind bars. He had committed murders, laundered money for drug lords and cartels working in the United States, facilitated routes for human trafficking, and had kidnapped at least two people over the last year.

The case was a terrible report on the declination of morals. But it also offered Ava hope. They got him before he could hurt anyone else. His arrest, along with evidence gathered from several of his properties, would already lead to the prosecutions of more of his network, and they'd saved more than a few lives. One of the kidnap victims had been a seventeen-year-old girl. Ava had found her alive. The girl had been on her way out of the country in a shipping container along with several other victims. All but one was alive and making recoveries.

If not for their efforts, those victims would have been gone, probably with no way to ever find them. The cherry on top was that they even seized guns and drugs from a warehouse in Arizona. The evidence gathered there pointed to the man having ties to the Middle East and Ukraine. She had her fingers crossed that her and her team's work would lead to several more rescues and subsequent arrests even in those countries.

And best of all, if all those human trafficking victims were found alive, there was hope yet for Molly. There was also a better understanding of how the traffickers transported victims out of their countries.

It had been a grueling, difficult time, but when she'd thrown open the door to that container and seen the brief flicker of hope on that girl's face, she knew it was all worth it.

It was days like that one that gave Ava hope. She couldn't imagine doing anything else for the rest of her life. This was a

case she would follow. The people involved might have connections to the ring that had taken Molly. For all Ava knew, those victims might have been en route to the very people who'd taken Molly. She wanted to stay abreast of further developments so she could look into leads as they came in.

With her second beer, Ava lost some of the excitement of the evening. It was getting later and later, and her mind began to wander as the others engaged in what they called 'friendly fire.' They ribbed each other, insulted each other, and laughed louder with each successive round of beers. Ava stopped with her second drink. Not because she was getting drunk, but because her mind wanted to latch onto her mother's case, and guilt tried to consume her for not knowing where her mother was or how to reach her.

Because I'm not smart enough to figure out where she's at and what she's doing, Ava thought miserably. If I were a better agent, I could've already found her.

She couldn't talk to her team about her mother's case. They didn't need to know her most personal vulnerabilities, in her opinion. She was already the youngest of them by a fair shot. She didn't need to come off as vulnerable or weak, especially after such a huge win. It had taken a lot to get them to respect her, and she didn't want them to backslide now.

Sal would gladly listen, though. Ava was grateful to have a mentor who encouraged her. Ava came close that night to asking if she would mind discussing it, but after all was said and done, Ava kept quiet about it all night. This wasn't the time or place for it.

"I have some things to take care of before hitting the bed tonight, so..." Ava stood and smiled at the team members. "I'll see you all on Monday."

"Aw, come on, Ava," bellyached Ashton. "One more beer?"

She broke out into a grin. "I've got an early start tomorrow. You wouldn't believe how many boxes are still

piled up in my living room.”

That set a round of chuckles through the table. She raised a hand in parting and left them to continue their celebration as long as they liked.

Once she was home, Ava carried her phone and paced from one room to the other, deftly avoiding said boxes piled up against the walls. She wanted to call her father, but didn't want him to pick up on her state of mind and worry. And she didn't want him to try eliciting any more promises from her. As soon as she knew anything for certain, he would be the first person she would call. Until then, it was best to keep some things to herself and not worry him.

On the flip side of that, he had a point. He was far from being dumb about what was going on. He knew Elizabeth as well, if not better, than Ava did. If she engaged him in conversations about what she thought, he might be able to offer invaluable insights. But the fact remained that she didn't want him to worry more than he already did.

It wasn't a diagnosis from a doctor that scared her but her own conviction that his heart no longer functioned at peak performance. She wouldn't mention it to him because he would adamantly deny any problem he knew about and start hiding what symptoms he could, yet she was unwilling to deny what she'd seen and how she felt. Ava knew he was in a weakened state and worried that he might have a heart attack.

Huffing frustratedly, she tossed the phone to the couch and continued pacing. The clock's tick seemed too loud in the dark silence of the house. It wore on her already frazzled nerves. The next pass by the clock, she took it from the wall and flipped out the double-A battery. Both clock and battery ended up on the entry table next to the antique glass bowl that held her spare change, small wallet, a ring of keys to the house and car, and other mundane clutter.

Finally, she went to the sofa and grabbed her phone. She had to talk to someone or risk not being able to sleep at all. Her mother's case and Molly's were tangling up in her mind,

demanding that she see the threads that connected them. No matter how hard she studied the facts she knew, Ava couldn't connect the two. It was her heart, her gut, her instincts, and possibly only her hope, that connected the two cases.

The phone rang three times. Ray didn't answer. His voicemail came on, and she left him a short message asking that he call her as soon as he could. She disconnected the call, slid the phone into her back pocket, and walked to her window to stare out at the ghostly cone of amber light thrown onto the sidewalk at the end of her yard.

The mist crept in and lay over the land like a ghostly death shroud. She could almost make out the street, and she caught glimpses of cars every now and then. Peering down at the ground nearest her window, she could easily make out the grass, shrubs, and flowers. The farther away she looked, the less she could see, and what she could glimpse seemed like disjointed fragments of the neighborhood she knew well. Somewhere out there was the water. She could barely see it, but she could feel its presence, and that would have to be enough.

After a few moments, she drew the connection between the scene out of her window and her mother's case and Molly's case.

"I need to look closer. If I look closer, I'll see something familiar that makes the bigger, fragmented picture easier to decode and make sense of," she said out loud.

Her phone rang and she jumped. Her hand whipped to her back pocket and the phone.

"Hey, kiddo. Everything alright?" Uncle Ray asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for calling me back so quick. How are you doing?" She walked to the couch and flopped down.

"I'm fine. You sounded like something might be wrong. Are you sure you're okay? It's late."

"Yeah. We closed that big case I was working on. I was just out with the team at Doyle's Irish Pub celebrating," she



said, suddenly unsure how to tell him what had been on her mind. Ray had to be the one who'd told her father that she was keeping things from him. Not that she thought Ray would do such a thing maliciously. He'd probably said something by accident, a slip of the tongue so to speak, that had tipped off her father. If he asked Ray an outright question, he wouldn't have lied, and she never expected that. But if she wanted to keep anything else from Hank, she would also need to be very careful what she discussed with Ray.

“Hey, that's great. You're making a great impression from what I'm hearing. They say you're making a name for yourself.”

“Is that what they're saying?” She couldn't suppress the surge of pride that went through her and made her smile. “And what name am I making for myself?”

Ray laughed. “If you keep up the work you're doing, they're probably going to dub you Bloodhound. You really know how to dog a lead and wring useful information out of it even when most people would have given up and moved on to another lead.”

Her chest filled with pride, and her smile stretched wider. “I can be persistent.”

There was a moment of silence from his end before he spoke in a somber tone. “Out with it, kiddo. I can literally feel your anxiety seeping out of the phone. What's going on?”

“It's Mom and Molly. Mom, mostly. I just can't get her off my mind tonight. Have you gotten anything yet from the lead I gave you?”

“I'm sorry, but no, I haven't. I'm having to fly under the radar and do this on my own time. Right now, I don't have much time to myself, either. I'm busier than I have been in a while, but I did put out some feelers, and some people will be getting back to me within the next few weeks, I'm sure.”

“How did you put out feelers if you're having to go under the radar?”

“The longer you’re in the Bureau, the more cases you work. The more cases you work, the more people you come into contact with. Not just law enforcement, either. Some are the kind of people you wouldn’t want to hang around with in your free time. But lots of times cases are solved, really bad men are put away all because of a favor you did for one of those people, and later, they owe you one. Always remember that. Turns out if you scratch enough backs out there, guys will be lining up to scratch yours in return.”

“You called in favors from criminals?” Ava asked, astonished. She knew how the system worked, but she had never really thought about her family working with bad guys to catch worse bad guys.

“Course, I did. This is my sister-in-law we’re talking about. I’m not gonna sit by and do nothing. I called in quite a few from different people. As soon as I hear anything, you’ll be the first to know. Unfortunately, these things take time. I need you to be patient with me, okay?”

Ava let out a heavy, frustrated sigh. “I’ll try.” For the most part, she meant it.

“Well, that’s about the least I can expect,” Ray chuckled. “I promise you and your dad will know what’s going on the instant I do. We’re together on this.”

“Thank you, Uncle Ray.”

“Don’t sweat it, kid. We’ll find her, okay?”

For a minute, Ava didn’t feel like a confident and capable FBI agent who had just solved a major case. She felt like a kid needing reassurance from her family. Everything in her wanted to ask him to promise. But she knew better not to ask that of him.

She could only hope that Ray’s favors would help them find something, anything. That didn’t mean that if she came across another clue, she would file it away and just wait. She would follow it until it became impossible to follow it further.

After ending her call, Ava put her phone on the charger and stared out the window into the fog a little while longer, willing her mind to settle and let go for a few hours so she could rest.

She could almost make out the neighborhood past her yard, but not quite. The fog had become so dense that the tree in the middle of her small yard was nearly invisible. Again, she thought of her mother's case. Molly's case.

She could almost see the connection, but not quite.

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## CHAPTER NINE

*Kara*

**K**ara stood at the window overlooking the new neighbors' property, hoping to catch another glimpse of the beautiful couple. After a half-hour of standing there and only catching a glimpse of the man as he passed by an uncovered upstairs window, Kara sighed and went to sit at her writing desk.

She had been diligent in keeping up with the journaling as Dr. Hyder had suggested. Sometimes, she worried that he would ask to look at what she'd written. If he did, she knew she wouldn't let him see her most personal pages. Those, she kept in a separate journal that she locked in a drawer at the end of each writing session.

Both journals lay on the desk.

Pulling the mundane journal to her, she tried to remember what she'd decided to put in it for the morning entry. She had gone out to get the mail without incident. In fact, she'd done so without giving the activity much thought at all. That was a huge thing for her, so she wrote about it.

Afterward, she had even taken the car and gone to the little market a few miles away. Her heart had thudded hard, and she had perspired something terrible after parking in the small,

empty lot facing the store. Once she entered and began picking items off shelves and putting them in the cart, though, she fell in line as if she'd shopped by herself for decades without a problem.

Her newfound ability to depend more and more upon herself gave her a sense of freedom, too. She didn't feel as if she were bound to the house, the memory of her husband, and the life she used to have.

The phone rang. The new cell phone had been a gift from her sister, but Kara had yet to use it, fearing she would never understand how to operate it properly. She'd had a cell phone before, but found no need for it after moving to the suburb with Patrick. As far as she was concerned the landline was plenty, and she preferred not having to keep up with the smaller mobile phone. After all, she had been a housewife. A regular little Happy Holly Homemaker. She rarely left the neighborhood without Patrick.

But her sister had insisted on at least giving her a basic phone with texting capabilities, even if she'd never become the type of person to post every waking thought on social media or broadcast cheery pics of her lunches. That way, Daphne had pointed out, even when she did venture out of the home, she'd never be too far away to call her if she needed anything. The logic was sound, and Kara relented. She had no desire to become glued to it the way some people were, but as an option, it made her feel safe. And that's what counted.

"Hello, Daphne. How are you this fine, fine day?"

"Well," she answered with a chuckle, "I'm great. How about you, sis? How are you feeling? If I had to guess, I'd say you're having a pretty good day."

"I am, indeed. I've been up and going since about seven this morning. I've gotten so much done already that you wouldn't believe me if I told you." Kara didn't miss the sound of relief in her sister's voice. It made her feel good that Daphne was relieved. It meant that her sister really loved her

and had been worried for her wellbeing for a long time, and now found that she didn't have to be.

“Really? Well, do tell. What have you done today?”

Daphne didn't sound as if she were challenging Kara or calling her out on an untruth. She was just genuinely curious.

Kara told her about getting the mail, making necessary phone calls, and writing out her grocery list for the next four days.

“You are really improving by leaps and bounds, sis. I'm so proud of you. Have you been journaling?”

“That's what I'm doing as we speak,” Kara replied. “Keeping the journals has been a great help to me. I find that when something happens, or when bad thoughts plague me, if I write them down, they just go away. At least for a long while. I'm more peaceful. Dr. Hyder said it was very important for me to keep up with the journaling. He told me that after a while, it wouldn't feel so much like a chore anymore; that it would eventually become a daily habit just like drinking morning coffee or going out to get my mail from the box. And sure enough, I've been writing up a storm.”

Kara hadn't told her sister about the personal journal and never would. For the first time in her life, she felt the need to have some secrets. It was exciting to have something that was only hers and that no one else had access to.

“It already doesn't feel like a chore. It didn't take long before I found it a wonderful meditative exercise,” Kara said, keeping her most exciting accomplishment of the day to herself just a bit longer.

“That's really great, Kar. Really great. What about your pills?”

“What about them?”

Kara fought to keep the defensiveness out of her tone, but she despised being questioned about her medication. That was something she wished was one of her personal secrets. She

didn't like that Daphne even knew about it. If she didn't know about it, she couldn't keep questioning her about it and counting the pills when she came to visit. Daphne thought she was counting the pills surreptitiously, but Kara knew she did it, and she knew why.

“Are you taking them correctly, sis?”

“Of course, I am. How could I be improving so much if I wasn't?”

“Okay, don't get upset. I'm only asking because I worry about you.” Daphne was silent for a moment. “Oh, did you go meet the new neighbors yesterday like you mentioned?”

Kara was thankful for the subject change. “No. I needed some things from the store so I could bake the cake. I'll go this afternoon if they're home. If not, I'll take it first thing in the morning.”

“You said you made your list for groceries. Do you need me to take you to the market, or do you need me to pick up the stuff?”

Kara stood and headed for the stairs, her mouth beaming in secret pride. She felt as if she were walking on clouds. “No, there's no need for you to come all the way out here.” She curled her bottom lip inward and clamped it between her teeth gently, barely keeping the excitement from spilling out.

“But you need things, right? I need to know if I need to come out so I can get my own things done today, too. Not being grumpy, it's just that I have quite a bit I need to get done.”

“I don't need anything, though. I already got everything I needed.”

The silence was longer this time. She knew Daphne was grinding her gears trying to figure out what she'd just heard and whether it was true. Kara went to the kitchen where she could see the items she'd brought in and congratulate herself a bit more.

“You went and got the stuff you needed. Okay, what do you mean? Did Joan take you to the store or something?”

Kara laughed and covered her mouth with a hand quickly. “No, silly. I drove myself and went shopping. It was really scary to start with, but I did it. After five minutes in Stokey’s, I felt like I’d been doing the grocery shopping all by myself for my whole life.”

“Are you pulling my leg, Kara?”

“No! I’m dead serious. I didn’t even forget anything. Of course, I took my list. I told you I’m doing great, didn’t I?”

Several seconds of complete silence passed.

“You there, Daph?”

“Yeah—yeah, I’m here. I don’t mean to sound distrustful, but could you take a picture of the food and send it to me? I just have to see the proof. It’s been forever since you went anywhere by yourself. And you drove?”

“I did. I swear it. My driving wasn’t very good, but I didn’t crash, so I assume I’ll get the hang of it again with a little practice. Hold on for the picture. I’m still slow with this thing.” Kara opened the fridge and snapped a shot, then the cabinet over the dishwasher, and finally inside the pantry. It took her another few moments to send the pictures.

“Okay. The thing says the pictures have been sent,” Kara walked to the living room and pulled up the blinds so she could see the neighbors’ front yard and short driveway.

“I have to admit that I am shocked, amazed, and unbelievably thrilled with you, Kara. This is awesome.”

“Thank you. Now, you can go ahead and get all your stuff done today. No need to babysit me anymore.”

“You know I don’t mind doing anything you need. Sometimes I’m tired. Exhausted even, and I’m sure I seem aggravated, but it’s not at you. You know that, right?”



“I know. But now you can get back to living your life, and I can get on with mine. Finally. You don’t have to call me every other day and come out here once or twice a week. That should make life easier, right?”

“Well, yeah. But don’t you ever hesitate to call if you need me. That’s why I got you that phone. Always take it with you, and I’ll always be only a call away.”

Kara talked to her sister for a few more minutes and then told her she needed to go.

During the last few minutes of their conversation, Daphne kept telling Kara that she was getting back to being the same way she was before. By before, she meant before Patrick’s death, of course. The longer she talked, the more Kara wanted to tell her that she would never be the same as she was back then. Her life had changed so dramatically that she could never go back to being the Kara she had been. But that wasn’t what Daphne wanted to hear. Just like Dr. Hyder, Daphne wanted agreements, so that’s what Kara made sure to do—agree.

Time was slipping by and she wanted to finish her journaling before she baked that cake and made her lunch.

As she sat back to her mundane, everyday journal, thoughts of what her life had been like in years past wouldn’t leave her mind. Before she realized it, she was writing about how she’d felt when she first met Patrick. They were both so young, so hopeful, so full of dreams.

Two pages in, she saw that she was still writing in the everyday journal, and she stopped, ripped out the two pages, and put the date on the top of each before stuffing them into her personal journal. She continued writing about Patrick in that little private book.

They’d met in high school when Patrick had transferred to her school near the end of her sophomore year. He’d been so handsome. Most girls she knew went for the jocks. Kara had never cared for their attitudes, licentious stares that made her

uncomfortable, or their tendency to showboat and demand to be the center of attention.

She preferred quieter, more intelligent, and gentlemanly guys. Her girlfriends had often joked and called her old-fashioned for it, but she didn't care. She had never been able to envision a future on the arm of one of those juvenile, hormone-riddled jocks—no matter how cute they were.

So Patrick had walked into her life. Shy, easily embarrassed, super smart, and he had stepped aside at the end of that first class to let her pass through the doorway in front of him. Often, Kara wondered if that was the moment. The one in which she lost her heart to Patrick Davis.

They had exchanged looks, each blushing deep red upon making eye contact. This went on for well over a month. The week before school was out for summer, Patrick finally introduced himself to her and asked if she would like to go out for a burger the next weekend.

After that first, tentative, anxiety-filled date, they were practically inseparable.

Their graduation gift had been a promise ring. It hadn't been much, but Patrick promised her he had big things in the works. He went to college while she waited tables at an upscale restaurant. She'd taken naturally to being a server, and the substantial tips she'd earned were stashed away into their savings. It was all part of the plan.

Patrick's awkward demeanor hid his shrewd, calculating genius for investments. He'd been saving up for years from his part-time jobs in high school and had ended up with a significant nest egg, which he put into the stock market, trading and selling with surgical precision. Though he had no interest in the products themselves, he'd been able to see the way the winds were blowing and invested in several start-up Internet companies that now, all these years later, were household names.

They rented a cheap apartment, had no luxuries, and refused to ask for help from their families even when they knew they needed it. It didn't hurt that neither of them felt the need to splurge on expensive televisions, game consoles, computers, or other devices like others their age. All they needed was their books and each other.

Kara never wanted for anything. Patrick made sure she was taken care of right down to having her favorite brand of perfume—even though he could only afford to buy a couple of bottles a year while they lived in that tiny apartment.

Once he graduated, he gave her another ring—this time, a real one. Kara was overjoyed. And six months later, they were married. It was like a fairytale, especially as the housing market collapsed around them. Kara knew they were fortunate to not have lost everything in the crash, but Patrick always insisted that fortune had nothing to do with it. It was all thanks to his deft planning. He'd pulled out of stocks right before the critical moment, netting them a sizable dividend, and was already climbing the ladder at an elite brokerage firm. They found themselves with a six-figure windfall. And with that money, he had found, and purchased, their first home.

He had called it their forever home.

Looking up from her journal, Kara smiled and wiped the tears from her cheeks. They weren't tears of sadness, just nostalgia.

She had taken to the life of a housewife like a bird to the air. She had flourished in her role, just as Patrick had flourished in his role of provider and protector. He had never failed her even once, and no matter how hard she thought about it, she couldn't find anything about him that garnered a complaint. Their love had been total and all-consuming.

When they wanted to start a family and she didn't fall pregnant the first year after they'd moved in, she had offered to have a test to see if it was her fault. He had told her that it didn't matter. They didn't need to know which of them was

sterile. It just wasn't meant for them to have kids, and that was fine with him.

Eventually, it was fine with Kara, too. She had worried that she wouldn't know what to do with a kid, or that she would be a terrible mother.

They filled their time with charities, volunteering to help kids in any capacity that presented the opportunity, and went home each evening happy and content.

Patrick spoiled her, and she tried to spoil him.

Her life had been perfect, even in retrospect. She had no regrets.

When she had finished writing, Kara was disturbed to see that the morning had turned into late afternoon. Checking her watch, she saw that it was already a little after four.

Closing her journal, she put it in the drawer and locked it before rushing downstairs to get something to eat. As she walked by the kitchen table, she saw her empty pill box and the bottle of pills sitting by it.

She heated up soup and sat to eat.

"Once upon a time, there was a princess named Kara," she said. "Princess Kara had everything she ever wanted and life was perfect."

She fingered the partially full bottle of medicine and sighed. And this princess, she felt, was still locked away in a tower of her own.

"Once upon a time," she repeated as she stood to put her bowl in the sink.



## CHAPTER TEN

Ava was home for the weekend, but that didn't mean she could stop working. She couldn't just turn it off the way everyone else seemed to be able to do. If she tried to force herself to stop and relax, it seemed as if the constant barrage of thoughts and considerations about her mother's case and Molly's case got worse.

Before the sun even crested over the horizon that Saturday morning, she was out for a run along the beach while her team members were probably still sleeping off the previous night at Doyle's. A few others joined her, but for the most part, she was alone on the long stretch of sand.

She pushed her body until she was dripping sweat and all her muscles trembled. It felt good to move, to hear the plaintive calls of seagulls, to feel the sand and salt on her skin, to watch the tide slowly drift in and the tiny hermit crabs scuttle into their holes.

Once the sun was firmly up into the sky and the sleepy little beach began to wake up, she headed back home, feeling more centered.

She showered, made breakfast, and cleaned up the kitchen. She looked at the clock. Nine-fifteen. Glancing at the kitchen table, she saw the stack of open cases sitting there, calling to

her, tempting her to just sit down and skim over them for a bit. Who knew? Maybe there was something in one of them that would jump out at her and tell her which one to focus on during the following week. Or weeks, if it happened to be like the last one.

“No,” she told herself. “I’m going to put away all these damn boxes. My refrigerator is scandalous, and the cabinets are bare.”

As if to drive the point home that she’d been neglecting her home life completely, she flung open a cabinet door and stared at the lone can of sweet peas on the bottom shelf. The shelf above held a half-empty jar of creamy peanut butter, and the rest was empty. She shook her head and looked to the trashcan where she’d just tossed the egg carton.

But that stack of casefiles was calling to her still.

If I make a list, I can go to the store and be back well before lunch, she thought. Then I could spend the afternoon unpacking, and get to the casefiles this evening.

“Plenty of time to work on my day off,” she mused as she grabbed a notepad.

She slapped the notepad on top of the stack of files and began hastily scribbling a list of essentials she needed. Before long, the list filled the page and she was starting another column. It had obviously been too long since she’d been to the store.

After finishing the list, she stood and pushed her chair to the table. The top file slid from the precariously stacked pile and its contents fanned out over the floor. Trying to keep on track for her much-needed shopping trip, she scooped up the contents and shoved them back into the folder, cursing herself for a fool. She should have dropped them into a box to prevent accidents like that from happening, but as usual, she’d been in a hurry.

Taking her list, she nearly jogged from the house to keep from being sidetracked by the wayward file. She made a

mental note to straighten it up when she sat down to examine the files later. There was no need to worry about it at the moment. It wasn't like the file was going anywhere, after all.

All her efforts to divert her attention away from the open cases were wasted. By the time she reached the store, she already wanted to be back home and going through them.

Fifteen minutes after arriving at the store, Ava was pushing her cart into a checkout lane. She'd only gotten the items that would be quick to fix and quicker to eat. She had no intention of cooking an actual meal and sitting down to it. There was no one there to share it with, so what was the point? Soups, sandwiches, stews, and frozen microwave burritos were the extent of her food purchases. She also put a metric ton of protein bars in her basket, so she could quickly eat on the run.

One day she would have to consider proper nutrition. But today was not that day.

After dumping a can of beef stew into a small pot, which she set on the stove, she turned her attention where it had wanted to go all day: to the damnable stack of files.

The boxes would have to wait as well.

Halfway through the stack, she sniffed the air and almost panicked. She ran to the stove and grabbed the sizzling pot from the burner. The stew had scorched to the bottom of the pot, and the smell was terrible.

With a groan, she dropped the pot into the sink, where it sizzled even louder. She had been immersed in the casefiles for about forty minutes without even realizing it. It had only felt like five or ten minutes had passed.

But there was something interesting in the last case she'd examined. It was about a drug-running ring that operated out of Tennessee. The base of operations had been pegged in the mountainous region of Upper East Tennessee bordering Virginia and North Carolina.

“Good location for nefarious, interstate activities,” she mumbled as she sat again, her burned food forgotten for the moment.

Farther into the file, she came across a name that seemed familiar, and another that was definitely familiar. Neither name was of a definite suspect in the case but were listed as persons of interest who needed to be watched.

“So, they’re suspects without actually being named as suspects,” she mused, tapping the paper. “If they’re operating in Tennessee, and Ash Patterson and Jack Kearns are under the watchful eye of whoever’s watching them, they could be tied in with the Cornbread Mafia.”

Of course, she knew Ash was in with them. He’d told her so when she’d talked to him in jail. If he was under surveillance, he had somehow gained his freedom from that prison sentence. Turned on someone, she figured. Maybe even broke down and gave up the leader’s name. She wanted to talk to him again and find out.

Jack Kearns had also been involved with the Cornbread Mafia according to Ash, and some other people. The Bureau was pretty sure he was aiding in their trafficking affairs, too.

If the new case was tied in with the Cornbread Mafia, they could be tied to a much larger, wider-reaching ring. Maybe even the one responsible for kidnapping her and Molly in Prague.

The girls hadn’t been targeted, per se. She didn’t think someone had specifically chosen them to be grabbed from the streets. But someone was giving the order to grab young women, and sometimes men, from streets all over Europe and deliver them to a holding spot where they would be sorted and sent in different directions.

The someone who was at the top of that particular chain of authority would be a great catch, but the ones that person took orders from were the ones she really wanted to get into custody. They were the ones who decided which victims went



to which region. The girls were chosen to go into sex slave work, or to be hunted like big game, or to be killed in ways that would scar most people for life and leave them shuddering in a corner.

A few were sold into actual domestic slavery, and a few were sold to human organ markets. The healthiest of the lot would be restrained, branded with the letter of their blood type on both heels, and sent on like a load of cattle going to slaughter.

Yes, Ava needed to follow the leads in that case until they completely ran out. She desperately wanted to lay hands on those monsters and bring them to justice.

And it was in the back of her mind that she could possibly find Molly. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that she could also locate her missing mother along the way. Especially if her hunch about Elizabeth going off-grid to search for Molly was correct.

She dug out her phone and dialed the number of Dean Steele. He had helped before, providing footage and documentation she'd requested from international contacts. The two had seemed to feel something like a spark, but it had been a while since they'd spoken. Their paths had diverged and neither of them had figured out what that meant for their friendship—if anything.

Dean answered on the second ring, sounding out of breath.

"I'm sorry. Did I catch you at a bad time?" Ava asked.

"You're good," he grunted. "Just stepped off the treadmill. Beastly thing will be the death of me yet. What can I do for you, Ava?"

"Would you mind looking into a lead for me?"

"You know I never do."

"Thanks. I can't do it without drawing too much attention from the Bureau, but I think it's important."

“Does it have to do with Molly’s case, or your mother’s?” he asked.

“Possibly both.”

“You know if you’re caught looking into your mother’s case, the Bureau will do more than frown on it, right? They’ve told you to stay away from it.”

Ava raised an eyebrow. “Would you be giving Emma this lecture?”

“I mean, sure, if I wanted my head chopped off while I slept,” he chuckled. “Hold on, gotta re-rack the barbell.”

The phone filled with the distant sounds of clanging metal and Dean’s grunts.

“Sorry about that,” he exhaled as he came back to the phone. “Trying to set a new personal best today.”

“Let me guess. Four hundred pounds?”

“What am I, Superman?” he scoffed. “I’ll have you know it’s no more than three-fifty, thanks. Anyway, tell me about this case. Did you get any more info from that footage I sent?”

Ava sighed. “Not quite. It’s just from an open case I’ve already got on my desk.

“So, it’s not even a direct lead?”

“No, it isn’t. If it ties back to Mom or Molly, it’s going to take a long, meandering, and scenic path to do so. But it’s relevant. I’m sure of it.”

There was silence on the line. Ava knew Dean hadn’t disconnected. The phone hadn’t dropped the call either because she could hear him breathing heavily in the background, straining to lift the barbell.

“Dean?”

“I’m thinking, Ava. I’ve got a lot on my plate right now. Several cases I’m working.”

Silently, Ava prayed that he would find an opening to just take a look at what she suspected. Dean gave one last grunt and then the sound of metal on metal rattled through the phone so loud she had to hold her ear away from it.

“All right. Meet me tomorrow at the Wishbone diner in DC. You know it?”

“I do. I will. What time?” she asked.

“Two. Bring the information and I’ll take a look when I have some free time. No promises, though.”

“You’re the best, Dean. Thank you. I owe you one, or two, or however many it takes.”

“You’re starting to run up a tab, you know.”

“I can live with that. See you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

Ava agreed and hung up. She had notes to take. Many notes, in fact. She really wanted Dean to see the possible connection between all the cases as she did. Even if it was spider-silk thin. If he could just see a hint of a connection, she knew the possibility of it would be enough to set him on the trail.



At ten before two, Ava pulled into the parking lot at Wishbone. Dean’s car was there and empty. He’d already gone inside.

“Always super early,” Ava muttered.

Parking near his car, Ava picked up her notes. She spent a moment just scanning the lot. There were a few cars there, but not enough for the place to be anywhere near full. Wishbone was more of a dinner restaurant. There were never many customers present until around six in the evening.

“Here goes nothing,” she said.

Somehow she already knew exactly where Dean would be sitting: in a booth against the far wall, near a small fire exit door. He could see the dining area and the front entrance. Anyone coming into the establishment would be on display from the moment they approached the doors and were seated. No surprises, no way of being caught off-guard. Safety first.

Ava joined him with a grin. She held up the file as she settled in her seat. "Here it is," she said, pushing it across the table toward him.

"That's a fine hello," he quipped as he reached for the folder.

Ava felt chagrined. "Sorry. I forget my manners sometimes, I guess."

He shook his head. "It's a hazard of the career." He opened the file and pulled out the papers, skimming over them hurriedly. "You ordering food?"

"No, I'm not hungry, but I'll take a tea if the waitress ever comes over."

Dean laid out the map of Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, and part of North Carolina that Ava had labeled by hand. He gave her a quizzical look.

"Oh, I thought that would give you a nice visual of the connections I was seeing. The labels will make more sense when you read the notes."

He said nothing, just nodded and put the map back into the file with the other papers.

"Well?" Ava asked.

"I'll give it a thorough read-through when I get back home. Even if there's nothing there, it seems that you believe there is. It's enough for me to give it a look."

"There is a connection there. I know there is. I just can't go off on my own and check it out. I have to stick to the main case. But by the time I can draw physical, tangible, believable connections, these leads will likely have gone cold. These

people are smart enough to keep moving around just enough to make them hard to track.” She swallowed hard. “I think Mom figured something out about Molly’s case. I also have reason to think whatever it was ties back into this ring.”

“The Cornbread Mafia?” Dean asked.

Ava nodded. “And, as the notes show, I know at least two people who are involved with that group for sure. One of them, I can talk to again if I can locate him.”

“Hold off on that until I’ve gone over all this. Don’t need you setting off alarm bells unnecessarily. If they get spooked, they’ll be in the wind. That means that I won’t have a chance to conduct my own investigation.”

Ava smiled and her heart leaped. “That means you’re going to—”

“That means I’ll look over your file and let you know, Ava,” Dean interrupted. “That’s all. I said no promises and I meant it.”

“Right. Well, thank you for looking over it.”

He nodded and gave her a small smile. “How’s your dad?”

The conversation turned in the complete opposite direction from there. No more talk about the case or work in general. They spoke about the weather, the food at Wishbone, which Ava had decided to order after all, and about family.

It was a nice conversation. Dean told her all about what Emma and the others had been up to lately, including putting Xavier undercover in federal prison. He even showed her pictures of the crocheting projects he’d been making behind bars, which gave Ava a hearty chuckle.

At four, Ava left Wishbone and headed back home feeling much better all the way around. She had been so caught up in her work that she’d forgotten how important it was to have normal interactions with normal people in normal settings. She was always in agent mode, it seemed, and now she understood

that was not a good way to be all the time. Sometimes, even an agent needed a break.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Kara*

The doorbell rang for the second time. Kara checked her appearance in the mirror one final time before she went to answer it. Daphne had stopped by. Usually, she called before she left home, giving Kara at least an hour to prepare. This time, she had called as she sat at the red light just before the turn that would take her into Clear Branch. That had given Kara less than five minutes to prepare herself.

Thankfully the house was in order, and she hadn't shirked any of her chores lately. Daphne didn't always come right out and say that she noticed things, but she always had a look when she noted that some chore had been left undone. She was afraid Kara was slipping back into her illness. That didn't make it any easier to deal with. For either of them.

Tugging her blouse straight, Kara trotted to the door and pasted on a happy smile.

"Daphne! Come in," Kara greeted her sister, opening her arms for a hug. Unsure whether she was acting over the top, she cranked the wattage down on the smile and kept the hug brief.

“Gosh, sis, you’re looking great. Did you get a haircut?” Daphne fluffed the hair hanging in soft curls over Kara’s left shoulder.

“I did. I think it looks a lot better, even if it is still a bit too long.”

“No, it’s not. I think it makes you look ten years younger.” Daphne chuckled and flapped a hand as she stepped into the living room. “Not that you ever looked a day over twenty-five, but you looked...” she trailed off, turning to her sister. “I don’t know, you just looked...”

Again, she couldn’t find the words.

“Sickly,” Kara finished for her. It was the truth. She’d seen it every time she had looked in the mirror for months. And, yes, she had looked older, too.

Daphne nodded. “Yes, that’s what it was. You didn’t look healthy. You practically radiate good health now, though. Whatever you’re doing, keep it up, and give me your secret.”

Not wanting to pursue that path of conversation—it would lead around to the subject of her medicine and doctor visits, which she didn’t care to discuss right then—Kara motioned for her sister to follow her to the kitchen.

“But I was just about to flop my butt onto your super-fluffy, extremely soft couch for a sit-and-stay,” Daphne said with a fake pout.

“Tea. Have tea with me. I never have anybody to drink my afternoon tea with anymore.”

Kara had to hand it to Daphne, she was laying it on thick. She never played around, never joked, and certainly never fake pouted. Once upon a time, before she had married Robby and had kids, Daphne had been a goof through and through. She could pull pranks with the best pranksters and joke with the best, but not anymore.

Not since she had a family, and certainly not since Patrick had died. Since Patrick’s death, the best she could do was walk



around as if she were walking on eggshells as she opened cabinets and nosed through the fridge and freezer when she thought Kara wasn't paying particular attention.

"That sounds absolutely delightful, dear sister," Daphne said in a horrible British accent.

Kara stopped and looked at her sister. "Are you drunk, Daphne?"

"Nope." She laughed and headed for the table. "And I won't be for the next, oh, let me consult my watch." She looked at her watch. "It'll be approximately thirteen years before I have the free time to get drunk again." She scoffed. "And probably another year added onto that just so I can recuperate from raising the kids enough to have the strength." Voicing a wordless groan, she flopped into the chair and made a face. "Definitely not as comfy as that big sofa in your living room."

"Would you prefer a glass of wine to the tea? Sounds like you might need it." Kara thought she might also prefer the wine. It would settle her nerves at least.

Daphne's spur-of-the-moment decision to visit had caused Kara's insides to clench and knot unpleasantly.

"No, no. I have to drive home. It's been so long since I've had any sort of alcohol that sniffing the cork would probably give me a buzz. Besides, I'm just being dramatic. I feel like a dog chasing its tail. I keep rushing around doing the same things day after day, but I never seem to get any closer to finishing."

"Ah, that explains the sudden impulse to stop by," Kara said before thinking about her words. She glanced at Daphne to see if her words had insulted her at all.

"Yes, it does. I needed to just stop by and see my older sister before going home and jumping into that demolition derby for the evening."

Kara snorted laughter. It was perhaps the first time she'd heard her sister refer to her family life as anything other than

great, or just perfect.

Lifting a finger, Daphne pointed toward the counter. “Is that a cake I’m smelling?”

Kara nodded. “Not just any cake, though.”

Daphne grinned. “Double layer strawberry cake, by any chance?”

“It is. And it’s not for us, either. You’ll have to make do with the cookies I baked for me yesterday. They’re in the tin on the table.”

“Oh, that’s for your new neighbors, right? I thought you were doing that days ago, though.”

Kara shrugged. She had been spending most of her time at the upstairs window watching and waiting for the moments when the man came out of the house to do things outside. She loved watching him. On occasion, his wife would join him, and Kara marveled at how perfect they were. The two of them were like movie stars or supermodels. Always so well-dressed and never with a single hair out of place. They were always coming and going in the evenings in glamorous outfits, presumably to party the night away. They seemed so unlike how Patrick and Kara had been, but almost like mirror images of them, as if this was how their lives could have turned out.

The couple was perfect together, too. Every single time they entered or exited the car, the husband would go around and open the door for her. Sometimes he’d even kiss the back of her hand before helping her into the car. It was obvious that they were deeply in love.

That didn’t stop her from sometimes wishing she could get her hands on him, though. She would sometimes dream of running her fingers through his hair, of his soft hands caressing her, of him kissing her hand and looking at her with that smoldering intensity in his bright green eyes. Afterward, she would always feel ashamed, but as the days wore on, she felt less and less guilt.

Patrick was dead, but she wasn't. While he'd been alive, such carnal thoughts never entered her mind about any other man. Never.

But since he had passed away and left her alone... No, she corrected herself, since the neighbors moved in.

Kara poured their tea and joined Daphne at the table. She was simultaneously happy that she had a visitor and on edge wondering what the true meaning behind her sister's visit was.

"I can't believe total strangers are getting that cake, and I'm stuck with cookies."

"Well, you don't have to eat them, either," Kara replied, reaching for the tin.

Daphne hooked it and drew it close as she shook her head and laughed. "Oh, no. I do have to eat them. I'm not going to get any cake, so I must eat the cookies."

They spoke for a few minutes before a long silence stretched between them. To Kara, the silence seemed pregnant. As if some major, life-changing thing would burst forth from it at any moment.

"What's on your mind, Daphne? I know you. You don't just pop by for a visit like this."

"I just wanted to stop by and see how you were doing. You sounded so much better on the phone—manic almost—that I just had to see it with my own two eyes. And I really did need to stop by and just chat with you for a while before going home. It's been a rough day, and I needed a few minutes before I had to deal with all the chaos there."

Kara nodded. It was definitely an odd feeling having her sister need her instead of the other way around.

"Well, you can stay as long as you like. And, as you can see, I'm doing fine. I told you I was." That plastered-on smile returned, and Kara wondered if she looked psychotic wearing it. She dialed it down again.

Daphne nodded. “You are, and you did.” She finished her tea. “Now, can we please go sit in the living room, or even your parlor? I just want to relax for a few where the furniture is clean and soft, and there aren’t a bunch of yelling kids trampling everything in their path.”

Laughing, Kara stood. “Yes, we can. Any room. It’s your choice.” She set her teacup and saucer in the sink.

Daphne followed suit.

As she stepped into the living room, Kara gasped and stopped short. Patrick was sitting in his corner of the little sofa shaking his head slowly and frowning at her.

Daphne turned to her. “What is it, Kara?” She stepped closer with a worried look.

The vision of Patrick faded away, and Kara tore her eyes away from the sofa. They were burning and filling with tears. Raising a hand to her face, she shook her head and then faked a stifled sneeze. She thought it was a pretty good imitation and saw that it had been executed well enough to fool her sister.

“Gesundheit,” Daphne said and chuckled. Flopping down on the sofa, she stretched languidly. “I thought something was wrong when you stopped and made that noise. Sounded like you gasped. You looked like you’d seen a ghost or something.”

Kara smiled. Her bottom lip trembled, and her eyes kept shifting to the side to take in the spot where she’d seen her late husband. “Apparently, I need to dust a little more thoroughly.”

“God, you’d go into seizures at my house.” Daphne laid her head back and closed her eyes. “How do you stand all this quiet? I think it might make me a little crazy.”

“Oh, no. I enjoy the quiet. It’s peaceful.” It was never as quiet as it seemed for Kara. The thoughts in her head were loud most of the time. But she didn’t quite dare tell her sister that. She doubted Daphne would understand. But then again, maybe she would.

“Would’ve never known it growing up. You were always the one putting on all that loud music.”

“I guess you just grow out of some things. You have that to look forward to with your kids. Whatever they do now that’s really annoying, they’ll eventually grow out of.”

Daphne snorted. It was a sound between a straight-up scoff and a laugh. “Not before they kill me.”

Kara fell quiet. She didn’t know how to talk to Daphne when she was sitting there with her eyes closed and seeming on the brink of falling asleep.

She peered over at the little sofa and thought she could see the faintest glimmer of an outline sitting there. The shape was unmoving and unmistakably that of her late husband. She would recognize him anywhere. What had he been displeased about? That she was entertaining Daphne? She didn’t think that would have been the problem. He loved Daphne, Robby, and the kids.

Maybe he was unhappy that I’ve been having certain thoughts about the neighbor.

A chill swept over her, raising goosebumps on her forearms and making the fine hairs prickle on the nape of her neck.

She had her answer.

Something close to a light snore emanated from Daphne. Kara sat there another minute or two just to make sure she had dozed off. Satisfied that Daphne was napping, Kara slipped out of the living room and went upstairs to journal about the appearance of Patrick and his upset expression toward her.

As she wrote in her personal journal, she kept her ears tuned to the sounds in the house. She didn’t want Daphne to sneak up behind her and read anything she was writing. Fifteen minutes passed without a sound in the house other than the scratching of pen against paper, then the unmistakable creak of a door roused Kara from her writing.

The journal was locked up within seconds, and she was out of the bedroom, listening for the squeak again. When it came, she knew it was the large pantry door in the kitchen. She hurried down the steps and into the kitchen.

Daphne spun away from the open fridge door, her eyes wide and her mouth working as if she were trying to speak.

“What are you looking for?” The stilted smile Kara wore was as close an imitation as she could manage to the real thing. She hated it when anyone snooped through her things. Even her sister. Maybe especially her sister.

Pushing the door shut, Daphne pursed her lips and bumped her shoulders up in a half-hearted shrug. “Okay, you caught me. I was just checking, sis.”

“Checking for what?” The smile fell away, and her tone deepened.

“That you had food, you know, and just stuff that you need.”

“Can’t you see that I’m fine, that I have what I need and what I want? Why do you feel the need to sneak and rummage through my kitchen? You could’ve just asked me.”

“Well, forgive me for worrying about you. Everything here just seems a little too perfect, Kara. It almost feels fake. I just don’t want you to have a setback. You’ve come so far.”

Kara nodded, unable to say what she was really feeling. She just wanted Daphne to leave. She was angry at her. Very angry. All the laughing, all the joking about, it had been a cover so she could hide her doubts and go snooping at the first opportunity.

“I’m glad you got to set your mind at ease. That makes me so happy for you.” She might be able to fake a smile to an extent, but she had never mastered keeping her feelings from her voice.

“I did, Kar.” Daphne’s expression changed, turned more serious. “I only have one question.” She walked toward the

table.

“Could we just move this along? I don’t want to be rude, but I do need to take the cake and wine over and welcome the neighbors to Clear Branch.” Kara removed the little net tent from over the cake, folding it neatly.

The sound of pills rattling in the pillbox drew her attention. Before she turned, she knew what the question was. She also knew her answer.

“Have you been taking your medicine correctly? I couldn’t help noticing that your pill box has several still in it. Surely, they aren’t all from one day.”

“Of course not. Those are my extras. I take my doses from the bottle. I keep it upstairs because that’s usually where I am when it’s time to take them.”

Daphne stared hard at her for several seconds. She nodded slowly and set the pillbox on the table. “Alright, sis. I’m sorry I made you mad, but I hope that one day you’ll understand that it all comes from a place of love and concern.”

Again, Kara nodded, clamping her jaws tight to keep in the hateful words she wanted to spew at Daphne.

“I guess I’ve worn out my welcome for the day, huh?”

Kara smiled tightly and gave a short nod.

“Okay, then. Thanks for the tea and cookies.” She headed for the door and stopped just shy of it. “I really did need to stop by and just chill for a while, though. I really needed that. Thank you for letting me.”

“Sure,” Kara managed, not moving from her spot at the counter.

“Bye. I’ll call you on Monday. Same time as usual, okay?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll answer.”

Daphne stared at her for a pause and then turned to walk down the hallway.

Kara didn't move until she heard the click of the bolt lock on the front door, then she only stepped to the hall to make sure Daphne had really left.

Locking the door behind her sister, Kara stomped back to the kitchen and put the cake and wine in a basket she'd also bought on her trip to the market. It was a replica of a vintage picnic basket. The red-and-white-checkered cloth inside was a cute addition, and she thought it looked nice when she placed her items inside.

By the time the basket was ready to go, the anger had disappeared. Nothing was going to delay her meeting the neighbors any further.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

Instead of Ava being able to choose her next case, one was handed to her. Sal told her in no uncertain terms that it took priority over the other open cases. She didn't like it because she felt the others had been open longer, and some were more diabolical in nature, but she had no choice but to obey orders.

That was something else she wished to discuss with Uncle Ray at her first opportunity. When was it okay for her to start standing her ground, and how far should she push? There were tons of rules governing the life of any agent, and she tried her level best to adhere to all of them. But she also knew there were even more unwritten rules that determined whether an agent rose through the ranks or remained in one position, stagnating and wondering why they'd been passed over and pushed aside.

The case was about a nameless burglar that had been striking all up and down Virginia. The description of the man was so vague that it could've described a third of all the men in the United States. There had been a rash of similar break-ins and burglaries across the eastern half of the state in the last four months. Twenty-three according to the file, but the last home invasion was the one that brought the case to the attention of the FBI via the governor. The victim had been the

governor's daughter, and he wanted the suspect apprehended swiftly and at any cost.

The burglaries had all been committed against young, single women living on their own. And the man always broke in when the women were home, after they'd gone to bed for the night. A dozen of the women had been unharmed. The other eleven had not been so lucky.

At first, the perpetrator had simply been a petty thief. But soon, he had progressed to restraining his victims. Then to brutalizing them, then to raping and maiming them in horrific ways. In Ava's opinion, it was only a matter of time before he escalated to serial murder.

Governor Hammond's daughter, Rosie, had received the worst of the treatment so far. She was in the ICU and her recovery was uncertain.

Ava waited with a heavy heart and sour stomach as Sal took her position at the head of the room, in what the crew had dubbed the bullpen.

"We've got another case, so let's listen up. This case takes priority over everything else until we apprehend this guy. Governor Hammond has only one child. Her name is Rosie Hammond. Rosie is now lying in the ICU at Central Memorial Hospital, and they don't know if she'll live or die."

"Holy crow, I guess no expense will be spared in getting whoever did it, huh?" Metford asked with a bit of a smirk. It was all Ava could do not to roll her eyes. She was beginning to think that was his default setting.

"As a matter of fact, no. He said to pull out all the stops and don't take a break until he's behind bars," Sal replied.

"Has the perpetrator done anything like it before?" Santos asked.

"Yes. Twenty-two other times."

"Jesus," she muttered.

Sal motioned for Ava to pass around the copies of the case file she'd made. They passed them around the table until everyone had one and was staring down at the documents.

“Our guy went from being a creepy thief who liked to steal from sleeping women, to brutally raping and trying to kill Rosie. He stabbed her thirteen times in the torso, arms, neck, face, and back. She fought hard, but it didn't do much good,” Ava informed the team. “This pattern of escalation is sick.”

Sal nodded. “Agreed. We need to put a stop to this guy before he ends up murdering someone. Now, let's brainstorm a little. What do we know from all this?”

Ashton's fingers flew across his keyboard, and pages flashed and changed quicker than Ava could keep up with them.

“There, boss. Rosie. She's not a tiny waif of a girl. She's five-foot-nine, and she was on the swim team. She runs three miles every morning. And look here,” he pointed to an article. “Says here that she was an advocate for women's health. She headed a group that encouraged girls and young women to work out, be strong, and stay healthy. That's a quote.”

“So she lifted weights, too? Like, bodybuilder?” Sal asked.

“No. She was healthy but not a bodybuilder. Nevertheless, she wouldn't have been an easy target. She wouldn't have been easy to overpower.”

“The guy had to be confident that he was stronger than Rosie, then,” Santos commented.

“That means he was probably bigger than her,” Ava offered.

“Okay, we're looking for a bigger, probably fit man. Now, he wasn't seen by anyone after he broke into Rosie's house. If he was seen, no one took any special notice of him,” Sal continued.

“He would've had blood all over him, though,” Metford pointed out. “Even in the middle of the night, he would've

stuck out. Someone would've noticed a guy covered in blood.”

“Unless he cleaned up before he left the house,” Ashton countered.

This time, Ava shook her head. “Look at the photos in the file. He clearly didn't clean up, there was still blood everywhere. The murder weapon was still there, too. He didn't try to hide what he'd done. He wasn't picked up on any traffic cameras, but he was caught on a doorbell camera just after sunrise. He was walking out of Rosie's neighborhood.”

“Good observation, James,” said Sal. “Anyone want to pick up that thread?”

Metford snapped his fingers loudly. “He was staying there. Somewhere. Either with someone, which is unlikely given that he was a repeat offender and wouldn't want to worry about roomies knowing when he was coming and going, or he was renting a place close by.”

“Seems unlikely given his pattern of movement. He's been going back and forth all through the state. Our perp has a broad enough area that I doubt he has a home base specifically in that county. We should be looking for abandoned, or temporarily empty houses, barns, or other structures in the area,” Sal stated. “That's what I'll get started on.”

“I'll check to see if the doorbell camera footage gives a clear visual on his face and get it into facial recognition,” Ashton said. “I'd also like to run the description through the system and see what pops up.”

“That description is going to give you about a million hits,” Ava pushed back. “It's vaguer than vague. Practically useless except that we know we're looking for a tall man who's fit. Add that medium-length brown hair, and voila! Look around here. How many agents fit that very description?”

Ava hated sounding like little Debbie Downer, but she wasn't looking forward to this case. She felt as if they had nothing to go on, and the one person who could help them was

unconscious in the hospital and might die before she could give them anything more than what she'd muttered before passing out.

Ashton nodded. "Won't hurt to give it a shot, though."

"There were fingerprints, too," Sal told him. "Local cops already ran them, but I want you to see what they could possibly bring up. I'll admit, they could belong to anyone. She's a young woman, and her friends would've been coming and going often."

"On it."

"What do you want me to do, boss?" Santos asked.

"You, Metford, and James, I want you three canvassing the neighborhood. See if anyone saw or heard anything."

"Wouldn't the cops have already done that?" Santos asked.

"Yes, they did, but sometimes it helps to do it our way with our resources," Sal confirmed. "Already sending the address to you now and I'll keep you appraised of any properties of interest I might find within a twenty-mile radius."

Metford looked down at his phone and grumbled, clearly not looking forward to the long drive down to Richmond. Ava couldn't blame him—she wasn't particularly keen to be trapped in a car with those two.

"Anything else? Any other ideas?" Sal pressed.

With a chorus of nos around the table, they were dismissed. Ava told Metford and Santos to meet her at the car in fifteen minutes while she returned to her office and prepared for the trip.

She was still putting together her notes when a knock at the door interrupted her.

"I said you don't have to knock, Sal."

"Don't say that or I'll start holding you to it," Sal joked. "Just want to come in and tell you I'm proud of how you

handled the last case. You're really starting to get the hang of leadership and I'm grateful to have you on this team."

"And I'm grateful to be here," Ava replied. She paused for a second, trying to figure out what Sal was after. "But?"

Sal sighed. "I'd like you to keep an eye on those two," she admitted. "I want to know how they act when I'm not there to keep them on task.

Ava gave her a slow nod. Things had been much better between Metford and Santos over the last few weeks, but this would be the first time they'd be partnered alone together without Sal's watchful eye over them. They still traded shady gazes and snide comments far more often than was necessary.

"I guess I can do that," she said. "Let's hope they can keep it upstairs."

"I'd appreciate that. You're doing great work, James."

Ava wanted to respond, but she was suddenly distracted. Upstairs. She went still for a second, her thoughts running rapidly to reach their conclusion.

"If he was going into the houses at night, he had to be really quiet or risk waking up the women. How would he have done that in Rosie's case?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"She lived in an upstairs apartment. The building has a night doorman," Ava told her.

"Well, now. That's opening up a whole lot of other questions. Why didn't you say this out there?" Sal jerked with her thumb back to the bullpen.

"Because I just realized that's what the file said. He was gaining access and hiding until the women fell asleep. Figure out where a big guy like him could've been hiding, and we might pick up some fingerprints that do hit in the system."

"I'll go back and check all the other places he robbed if I have to," Sal nodded. "There has to be something that will tell

us who he is. If we can't figure that out, we have no way to track him down. All we can do is wait for him to strike again."

"How do they know the other burglaries were done by the same guy?" Ava asked.

"They're working on tying something together in those cases. It was just the similarity. Nighttime, lone female occupant who was asleep, and they were all living in middle-to upper-class neighborhoods. Meaning they had money, implying to him that they would have things worth stealing.

"It also means he was comfortable in that class of neighborhood. Knew he wouldn't look like an outsider. Oh, God. We might be looking for a rich guy," Ava said, feeling the fist of dread tighten around her stomach. "Maybe a co-worker? She's an intern at a law firm, so there's certainly no shortage of rich white men to look into. Or maybe someone she went to college with?"

Sal nodded. "Already running records for those," she said. "In the meantime, I need you to pound the pavement. Let's get this guy off the streets."

"Here's hoping," Ava mumbled, feeling less than stellar about the prospects of this case—not to mention her clandestine babysitting operation.

"Don't worry. We'll catch him." Sal turned and left.

Ava hoped she was right.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**M**etford and Santos were already waiting by the SUV when Ava walked onto the lot, her go-bag in tow. She pressed the button on the fob and unlocked the doors.

“Shotgun,” Metford yelled, already scrambling for the front seat.

Santos shook her head and looked as if she’d taken a bite out of a lemon as she opened the back door.

Ava filled them in on her and Sal’s ideas.

“If he fits into these neighborhoods, and he didn’t worry about Rosie’s strength being a problem, maybe we should check some of the gyms she taught her classes at. Not only gyms that cater to the wealthy, either. Rosie wanted all classes of women to take the initiative; she visited a lot of gyms,” Santos said, wagging her cellphone. “There are a ton of articles about her.”

“That would explain how he chose her as a victim. If he was stalking her at all, he knew who she was and that her family had money,” Ava said.

“But then it doesn’t make sense that he raped her and tried to kill her. If he wanted money from her family, he wouldn’t



have done either thing. What did he steal from her place?" Metford asked.

"Just the few hundred Rosie had in cash in her purse and a pair of diamond earrings. That was the only expensive jewelry she had there. The rest of it could be picked up at any big-box store for fifty bucks or less."

"Then he knows the valuable stuff when he sees it," Santos said. "This ain't just a regular B and E freak we're looking for."

"Yeah. He's smart enough to stay away from credit and debit cards, too," Metford added. "That means he's seasoned; he knows he can be traced by the withdrawals or purchases."

"Okay, we need to check pawn shops. If he was after cash, he might've pawned the stolen items."

The two-and-a-half-hour drive to Richmond was filled with more and more clues that the three of them kept coming up with. There were so many that Ava had put Santos in charge of making a list so they'd be sure to cover them all.

They arrived at the apartment building, and Ava whistled low. "Wow. Rosie was living the high life."

The building rose seven stories and was a sleek, modern style of architecture that made it stand out. It was trendy and modern, but unlike most of the apartments of this style, this one screamed luxury.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable walking up in that building, and I guarantee someone would peg me as an outsider before I got ten feet through the door," Santos commented.

"Tough finding your niche, huh?" Metford asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Especially when the world is full of ginger smartasses like you, Mettie," Santos fired back, reaching between the seats to pat his shoulder before getting out.

"Don't call me Mettie unless you want me to call you Jilly." Metford stepped out and shut the door.

Santos opened her mouth to respond, but thought better of it and closed it. She pushed her sunglasses closer to her eyes and pulled the bill of her hat down.

“Nice look, Santos. Sexy,” Metford said, laughing.

“Alright, let’s remember why we’re here,” Ava said, cutting the banter short before it devolved into juvenile rivalry.

She’d already seen that Metford bordered on juvenile most of the time and wondered if that was going to pose a problem within the team. He and Santos had worked well together on the last case and in the field especially, but she didn’t want to take any chances until she knew them better. Sal had placed the responsibility for them and their actions on her shoulders. That thought was never far from her mind.

The apartment was still sealed with the police tape. Ava broke the seal with her key, and they entered the unit. Flipping on the lights, they all stood with their mouths hung open for a few seconds. The place was much bigger than she had expected, and everything in it was white or very light-colored, except for the bloody shoeprints on the floor that led toward the door. Elegant, tasteful décor and furniture lined the room. It practically looked like a Swedish department store.

They stared at the footprints, then looked at the door.

“He went out the friggin’ door?” Metford wondered aloud.

“Were there prints in the hallway, too?” Santos asked, leaning out and looking in both directions.

“It wasn’t in the reports if there were prints outside the door,” Ava replied, leaning down to have a closer look. “He removed his shoes.” She pointed to a spot near the door where a print was badly smudged.

“How can you tell that?” Metford asked, squatting beside her and eyeing the smudged print.

“Santos, do me a favor and shut the door,” Ava said. “Now, take off your left shoe with your hand, not your other foot.”

Santos did as she was told without question.

“There. Did you see how her right foot moved when she shifted her balance to be able to take off the shoe and not fall?”

Metford nodded. So did Santos.

“You’re saying he carried his shoes out?” Santos asked with a look of disbelief.

“I’m saying, he might not have gone out that way at all. He stopped there and took off his shoes. The prints lead us toward the door, but what if he went out the window?”

“Too high. He couldn’t have jumped without injuring himself.”

Metford had a valid point, but Ava thought she did, too. She walked to the opposite wall and pulled back the curtains over the glass patio doors. Pulling on gloves, she opened the doors and stepped out. “Fire escape ladder right there. Doesn’t look like it’s been dusted for prints.”

“Cops aren’t going to be happy if you call them out on that one. Especially if it turns up something,” Santos said with a grin.

Ava mirrored it back to her. “Boo-hoo for them. Let’s see if we can find a place he could’ve hidden inside,” Ava said.

“The place is huge. He could’ve hidden anywhere,” Metford said.

There was a small guest bedroom, replete with a closet. It was likely that Rosie didn’t often go into that room. Her room boasted a closet on either side of the bed—both with ample room to provide a comfortable nook for their suspect. There was a tiny room off the kitchen that housed a washer and dryer. He could have sat on either machine and waited until Rosie fell asleep. Although it was unlikely because of the possibility of making noise that would have roused her.

“I’m going to call about getting these closets fingerprinted today. You two go ahead and start knocking on doors and

asking questions.”

“You might wanna lose the shades and hat, Santos. Nobody will open the door if you’re standing there looking like a Hell’s Angels reject,” Metford commented as he swung the door open and stepped in front of Santos.

“And after you open your mouth, they’ll shut the door in your face,” Santos retorted, pulling the door closed as she stepped out and went in the opposite direction.

Ava sighed, wondering what to do about the friction between them. Given time and space, they might work it out on their own. Or it might get worse. She didn’t want their bantering to suddenly flare into an altercation, and she worried that’s what would happen if it was left unchecked.

If a flare-up did happen, could she handle it well? What would Sal think? Would she have to go so far as to recommend one—or both of them—being removed from the team?

She had no experience in settling disputes between agents. As a matter of fact, she realized that she had no experience settling differences between adults at all. On her previous teams, she hadn’t been subjected to in-house tensions that were bad enough that the supervisor had to step in.

Another worry, she thought as she dialed the phone and pressed it to her ear.

Another worry to talk to Uncle Ray about, she added with a sideways grin. She figured he might get annoyed with all the questions she was going to throw at him when they talked again.

Her father was the lawyer. He might have better advice on the subject of settling disputes. She would have to decide whether to discuss it with him or not, but for the moment, that seemed like a wise choice. And it would help him, too.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Kara*

**K**ara stood at her door with the basket on her arm, trying to battle the nerves threatening to bubble up and spill over. Ever since her early twenties, she'd always been a bit shy and reserved. She didn't know why, but she had just stopped meeting new people very well. It wasn't a problem, then it was. That hadn't changed since she'd grown older.

In fact, at that moment, she thought the problem had grown worse. Her heart pounded and her body trembled as she determined that she was going to meet the neighbors. She had to. It was exciting that a young couple had bought the house next door, and she wasn't that old—she could still try to connect to them, even if she was now edging closer and closer to forty.

All she wanted was a friend. Or at least someone to confide in and talk to about everyday things. It was companionship that she hoped for. Was it too much expectation to pin on the couple before ever meeting them? She had to find out.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door. The sun was warm and spring had finally bloomed. The birds were singing overhead and the grass was finally bright again. Her light

clothes allowed the slight breeze to cool her overheated body as she stepped outside. At the bottom of the porch steps, she had to stop again and reassure herself that she was going to be fine. She wouldn't make a fool of herself.

It was fine. Everything was fine.

The same uncertainty had plagued her when she'd parked outside the grocery store, and just like then, she was determined to push through. After she actually went into the store, she felt as if she had never stopped doing the shopping all by herself.

Surely a little meet and greet with the new neighbors would be the same. After all, she had met the Johnsons, who had lived there before, in the same way. Only Patrick had been at her side that time.

Looking back at her house a final time, Kara wished for the umpteenth time that Patrick would walk out the front door wearing his usual smile and join her.

Of course, he did not.

Kara shrugged the basket higher on her forearm with a sigh and started walking again. At the neighbor's porch, she put on the smile as she had practiced, and rang the doorbell.

The woman answered. She was taller than Kara by at least five inches, and Kara had always thought herself to be of average height at five-foot-four. She had to look slightly up at the blonde woman. Her hair hung in soft, perfect waves just below her slim shoulders. Her smile was instant and lit up her pale, grey eyes. Her features were dainty and angular. She was so effortlessly gorgeous.

The exact opposite of me, Kara thought with a pang of jealousy.

The woman's gaze went from Kara's eyes to the basket on her arm, and her smile grew wider. "You must be our neighbor." She nodded toward Kara's house.

“Yes. I’m sorry.” Kara held the basket out toward the woman. “I just wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood. I should’ve done it days ago, but I’ve been so busy. I’m Kara Davis.”

Stepping aside and pulling the door wider, the woman motioned Kara inside. “Please, Ms. Davis, come in. My name’s Sophie Walker, and the man you probably have seen drifting around the property aimlessly is my husband Charles.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Please call me Kara. Ms. makes me sound old.” Kara held out the basket again.

Sophie took it and opened a flap. “Oh, wine and cake! Thank you so much! Is that homemade?”

“It is indeed. I hope you like strawberries,” Kara said.

A funny thing happened then. Kara wasn’t having to force the practiced smile any longer. The one she wore resided there of its own free will. Comfortable. Genuine.

“This is so lovely and so thoughtful.” Sophie moved toward the kitchen. “Come on. Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?”

“Tea would be wonderful, actually.”

Another tea-drinker, Kara thought happily. I won’t have to take my afternoon tea alone all the time anymore.

“Charles prefers coffee and so do most of his friends, but I like tea. It’s not nearly as harsh on my system,” Sophie said, placing the basket on the counter by the sink. “We’ll have tea and a slice of cake.” She smiled at Kara. “We can pretend we’re two British Society women having our tea and planning the next big ball.”

Kara laughed despite trying to remain completely poised. Apparently, it wasn’t necessary with Sophie. Although beautiful, graceful, and elegant, her personality wasn’t stiff at all. Kara decided that Sophie Walker met, and exceeded, all her expectations. She liked the woman.

“If times were like that now,” Kara sighed. “The Victorian Era holds me in its grasp, wraps me in its romance, and I love anything and everything connected to it.”

Sophie chuckled and nodded. “It was a rather intriguing period, wasn’t it?”

“When my husband and I moved into our house, we designed it. He let me have a Victorian parlor. It’s my little sanctuary when I want to escape the modern world.”

“That is awesome! I would love to have something like that, but Charles wouldn’t mess up the modern, open, airy style he loves so much. He’s such a boor when it comes to such things, but,” Sophie said, shrugging and rolling her eyes dramatically, “I love him.” She turned to face Kara. “Is your husband working? He and Charles could—”

“No, they couldn’t.” Kara lowered her eyes. “He’s no longer with me.”

“I’m sorry. Divorces are terrible, honey. Just about everyone I know—”

“He died,” Kara said flatly, raising her eyes.

“Jesus! Listen, I’m really sorry. You should just tell me to shut up and mind my own business.” She made a motion as if she were zipping her lips and tossing away the key.

After a moment, Kara recuperated and regained her composure. “It was months and months ago. It’s okay, really. You didn’t know. But, yeah, it’s just me over there now.”

Sophie removed the cake and the bottle of wine. She grinned over her shoulder at Kara and waggled the bottle. “How about a glass of this instead of tea?”

Giggling, Kara considered it, then shook her head. “I better not. I get headaches sometimes.”

“Are you sure?” Sophie took down two wine glasses. “Don’t make me drink alone. Just a taste?”



“Alright,” Kara relented. A wave of giddy happiness washed over her, and she was amazed at how easily she had taken to Sophie—and how she seemed to like her as well.

Charles came down the stairs, calling out to Sophie repeatedly.

“I’m in the kitchen!” she called in response. “Come meet our lovely neighbor. She’s brought cake and wine.”

“Ooh, wine,” he grinned, stepping into view.

His smile was charming and disarming. If he had been beautiful from her windows, Kara thought he was positively gorgeous up close and in person. Her heart stuttered and then sped along like a galloping horse. Each beat was a bass drum in her ears.

Charles moved forward. He was much taller than Sophie. He also had a deep tan, luminous green eyes, and dark brown, wavy hair. They made a striking pair as he leaned over her shoulder and snagged her glass of wine.

“Kara, I’d like you to meet my husband, Charles Walker. Charles, this is Kara Davis. She lives just there.” Sophie pointed to the house.

Charles stepped forward and stuck out his hand. For a moment, Kara couldn’t move. She was rooted to the chair, and her tongue was cemented to the roof of her mouth. When she didn’t move to take his hand, Charles cleared his throat.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Kara. Thank you for the welcome gifts, too. Very thoughtful.” He presented his hand again.

After what seemed to be a hundred years, Kara nodded. The movement broke the paralysis, and she smiled. She took his hand and nodded.

“As I told Sophie, I should have done it days ago. I’ve just been really busy. It’s great to meet you, too, Mr. Walker.”

“Nope,” he said, withdrawing his hand and holding up a finger. “That just sounds terrible. Reminds me too much of a

character on a TV show that I'm not fond of."

"Oh, pshaw!" Sophie cut in. "It brings to mind images of a rugged man, a cowboy even." She mimed putting on a cowboy hat and mounting a horse.

"That's exactly why I don't like it." He turned to Kara. "Charles. Just call me Charles."

Sophie leaned forward and cupped her hand to her mouth as if whispering a secret. "Never Charlie, never Chuck. Just Charles. Or Doctor Charles. I think he's pretty fond of that moniker."

"Doctor?" Kara's eyes widened.

She had imagined him as many things over the last days, but a doctor had not been one of them. He didn't fit her preconception of a doctor.

Shooting a slightly irritated look at Sophie, he shook his head. "I'm a chemist, actually. I'm not a surgeon or family practitioner or anything like that. I work in a lab."

"But you do wear the white coat," Sophie added, winking at Kara. "And he looks so handsome in it."

"Well, since my wife has made this introduction as awkward as she possibly could, I am going to go back to my office now. Kara, it was great to meet you. I hope my wife entertains you but doesn't scare you away." His eyes twinkled with laughter at the comment.

"It's always nice to have new friends," Kara replied to him, a little more awkwardly than she'd meant.

Sophie rolled her eyes as he left the room. She turned up her glass and drained it. "I think I need a refill. You want one?"

"No. I'm fine, thank you. You two make a great couple," Kara said.

"Thanks." Sophie didn't sound overly appreciative of the remark. "So, how long have you lived here, Kara?" She sat

with her fresh glass of wine.

“Fifteen years.”

“Wow, that’s a long haul. I’ve never been in the same house more than a year or two. We’re always moving, it seems. Even when I was a kid.” She drank some wine. “You would’ve known the people who owned the house before us, then.”

Kara nodded. “The Johnsons. My husband and I were friends with them.”

“Are they the ones who put up that busy, busy wallpaper in the room beside the master?”

Kara laughed. “They were. It was going to be an art room for Trish, but she never really used it after she decorated it that way. It just kind of sat there and gathered dust.”

“That’s sad. If you have a passion, you should always follow it. That’s my philosophy. A rule I live by, actually. I was going to redo that room and transform it into a mini-dance studio, but I changed my mind. There’s a much larger room at the back of the house with a lot of windows. I think it would be a much better choice.”

“That’s the room Trish called her solarium. She kept about a thousand plants in there, I think, but it was nice. Do you dance?”

“I was a dancer for years. Ballet. I miss it.”

“Why did you stop?”

“Knee injury. It keeps me from being able to perform on stage, but I can still do it for my own enjoyment. And it sure beats rambling around the house alone like some old maid while Charles is away working in his little cloistered lab.” She waggled her fingers in the air.

“Goes and performs his woo-woo chemistry experiments and leaves me here with nothing.” She looked around and then laughed. “Listen to me. Giving that poor little rich girl speech. I’m really grateful that we can afford this house, but we moved

here without me knowing anyone. All my friends are in other states. My family lives in California, Washington, and Colorado. And here I am.”

Kara looked at her watch. She didn’t want to overstay her welcome on her first meeting. “Well, maybe we can visit each other again. I’m alone, too, and I don’t work either.”

“That sounds fun, Kara. I think I’d like that very much. How does tomorrow sound? I could come over and see your place. I would love to see that parlor.”

Laughing, Kara stood. “That sounds great, Sophie. Teatime in the parlor, then?”

“I’ll be there.”

Kara returned home with a warm glow in her chest. It had been a long time since she had felt so happy. The prospect of having another woman to talk to and share things with was delightful. She wouldn’t have to put on airs for Sophie. Wouldn’t have to pretend that she was doing, or not doing, certain things to keep from worrying her, as she had to do with Daphne.

She spent the rest of the evening cleaning and arranging the parlor so that it would be perfect for tea the next day.

That night, she thought she would sleep more peacefully than she had in six months or longer.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ava turned onto a side street. Her father gave her a knowing look from the passenger seat.

“River’s Edge?” he asked with a grin.

“You bet. Remember when we used to come here on weekends?” Ava laughed. “It was always my favorite, and unless I miss the mark, it was yours, too.”

“It was. Your mother was none too fond of it, though,” he said, turning his attention to the changing scenery.

“I know. That’s why you got stuck taking me out there. She said it smelled bad.” Ava chuckled again.

“She never liked the smell of greasy food cooking.” He fell silent.

Ava hoped he was just lost in memories of when she was a pre-teen and teenager when they’d eat at River’s Edge. It was Ava’s go-to restaurant when she had a say in where they were going to dine. She got tired of the fancy restaurants where they had to call and make reservations days in advance and then had to dress up as if they were royalty to actually go in and eat one meal. She had thought it was such a waste of effort and time—and now, ever since growing up, she also thought such

places were a huge drain on finances. Such fine eateries should be reserved for special occasions.

Besides, absolutely nothing in the world beat their crab cakes.

River's Edge wasn't far off the side of the road. There wasn't an actual road to turn onto, she just gave her signal and veered off the shoulder of the road and she was in the parking lot. The long, squat building looked exactly as it had when she had last been there with her dad. The same lettering painted on the side was more faded than before, but otherwise, it was just as she remembered it.

Just beyond the building was the titular river they were at the edge of. It was more of a creek, really, extending inland a few miles off the main Potomac. There was a little park where people could sit out and eat on the water, or have a picnic.

Only a couple of cars sat in the lot, but she recalled that the busiest times had been during the summer and fall when the kids were out of school. This place was always crammed full of loud, rowdy teens during summer evenings.

"Looks like we pretty much have the place to ourselves," Ava said.

"Yeah, we got here before spring break starts. That's a good thing. When you said we were going out to celebrate that cold weather was finally gone, I had no clue we'd come here." He shook his head and smiled.

His expression seemed full of nostalgia, but there was a touch of melancholy there, too. Ava had told him the story about celebrating the changing of the seasons, but that wasn't the real reason behind her visit. Hank had been short on the phone for over a week. He sounded so sad and alone that she couldn't dismiss it.

When she had arrived at his house earlier, she had been shocked and a little scared. He had lost a lot of weight. His eyes were sunken and had dark bags underneath. His face was

drawn. He'd never been heavy, which she supposed made the weight loss all the more noticeable and startling.

There was food in the cupboards and the fridge, but he had still lost weight. She asked if he had been eating, and he was adamant that he had. If he was telling the truth, Ava worried that he had an underlying health problem. How would she get him to agree to a doctor's visit?

Her father was a notorious avoider of doctors. Even when she was a little girl, he always held out until Elizabeth practically dragged him into an office visit. She had to call and set up the appointments then badger him into actually keeping them.

Ava recalled her father having a bad stomachache for months when she was in high school. He never made a big deal out of it, claiming it was just a bug. It would go away in a few days. But a few days turned into a week, and a week turned into a few weeks as it hung around, getting worse and worse until he couldn't eat at all. She heard him retching in the bathroom sometimes, and she always worried that she would catch the bug from him and not be able to go to a dance at school that she and Molly had been looking forward to.

After a full month of Hank dragging himself to work and coming home even sicker, Elizabeth had had enough. She called the family doctor the next day, then stormed into Hank's office personally and raised such a fuss that he had no choice but to leave with her.

It turned out to be a very good thing that Elizabeth had made that appointment. Hank had a very bad ulcer that ended up requiring surgery to correct. All told, he suffered for a little over a year with that stomach ulcer. The doctor said he could've died from it if it had gone untreated for another month or so.

Now that her mother was missing, it was up to Ava to determine if and when her father should see a doctor. It was also up to her to get him to any appointment.

She worried that it wouldn't only be an ulcer acting up this time. What if it was his heart?

They walked through the door of River's Edge and the wonderful, rich smells of roasting and frying meat filled the air. Heavily seasoned vegetables added a fullness to the aroma, and Ava wondered why such greasy smells gave her such a sense of content calm and happiness.

"Still smells like heaven," she remarked as she slid into the same booth they sat in every time they came.

"Anything that smells so good cannot be healthy, Aviva," he said.

She shook her head. "I don't know about you, but I think I'm in the mood for something deep-fried." She knew she should probably get into the habit of eating healthier, but now wasn't the time. Who went to River's Edge just to order a salad?

"I think I want the seafood platter—shrimp, crab cakes, flounder, hush puppies—I think the only thing not deep-fried is the coleslaw." He laughed.

"All that grease won't hurt your stomach?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Why would it?"

She shrugged. "It's just that you've lost some weight and I thought maybe you were having problems with your stomach again."

"My ulcer. Yeah. It flared up right after your mother went missing, but it feels better now. It hasn't bothered me since she —" he coughed then cleared his throat noisily. "Excuse me. Don't know where that came from," he said, pulling the menu up to block his face.

Ava sat there a minute and then pulled his menu down slowly. "Since she what?"

"I'm sorry?"

She had to give it to him—he was putting on a superb act.



“You said your ulcer felt better since she... what?”

His gaze flitted but couldn't find a suitable place to land on for more than a couple of seconds at a time. “Since she got in touch with you the last time. Yeah. That's when the ulcer started getting better. You know, since I figured out she really had gone off of her own free will.” He nodded and gave her a crooked smile.

Ava was certain that was not what he almost said before the coughing fit. As a matter of fact, the coughing fit, in her opinion, was just his way of cutting off his words without seeming as if that's what he was doing.

She stared closely at him and nodded. “Oh. Okay. That's good. I'm glad you're feeling better, but I would've liked it if you had told me that you were having problems.”

“Nah. Why worry you? I'm fine. I knew I would be. I always am. You're busy, I'm busy, no need to spend time worrying for nothing.” He waved at a waitress. “Let's order.”

He just kept changing the subject. Did he really believe that Ava wasn't picking up on it? If he thought he was being slick, he was wrong. Ava wondered why, though. What was he trying to hide?

They placed their orders, and Ava continued to wonder what her father was trying to hide. The waitress returned and set their plates on the table. In the center of the table, she placed a boat of extra hushpuppies.

“God bless the man who invented deep-fried bread,” Hank said, reaching for one.

“Who says it was a man? It might've been a woman.” Ava took one and enjoyed it as an appetizer. She moaned at the delectable warmth of the hushpuppy. “Oh, it's been too long since we've been here. I've missed this.” She took a second one.

“Is it just me, or did these used to be a lot bigger?” He also took another one.

She laughed and shook her head. “I think that’s just what we tell ourselves to justify eating so many of them.”

They laughed and carried on a conversation, but Ava watched him surreptitiously as they ate. She tried not to make it too obvious, but even her finest observation skills couldn’t detect any signs that would alert her to Hank suffering from any stomach ailment, and definitely not from an ulcer.

“Are you sure you’ve been eating, Dad?” She raised her eyebrows and looked pointedly at his empty plate.

“Yes, Aviva. The food I have at home isn’t nearly this good, though.”

She nodded and pursed her lips. Whatever was going on with him, she wouldn’t be getting it out of him that evening.

It hit her while she was driving back toward her father’s house that he was going out of his way to avoid speaking about Elizabeth’s case. It was uncharacteristic of him to do that. Usually, that was one of the first things he wished to talk about when they met up. Sometimes, if they were on the phone, he would lightly dodge that conversation, but nothing like that night in the car.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Ava signaled and turned onto the street to the house.

He sighed in irritation. “Why do you keep asking me that, Aviva?”

“Well, just like that. You just sounded like the world’s guiltiest teenager. What’s going on? Don’t make me wonder.” She parked in the driveway but didn’t get out.

He laughed, but the laugh only made him sound guiltier. As if he’d been caught in some embarrassing lie. “Nothing’s wrong, honey. Come in and stay for a while. Can you?”

“I would love to, but I have a really early day tomorrow. Are you going to come clean?”

His expression sobered and he seemed to consider the option. Eventually, he just shook his head. “I’m fine. My

appetite is fine. Stop worrying. Your mother wouldn't want you worrying so much. She would want you to just concentrate on your new role and do the best job possible. She's okay, too, you know."

Ava's eyes flew wide and she felt as if someone had just punched her in the gut. "What? She's okay? How do you know that, Dad?"

Hank rubbed his cheeks vigorously and turned to look out the window. "She has to be, Aviva. I couldn't take it if she wasn't. She has to be." He put his hand on the door handle. "Are you sure you won't come in for a while?"

"I really can't."

"Alright. I'm going to let you go, then. It's getting late. Thank you for having dinner with me."

"Anytime. I really had fun tonight."

She watched until he got inside, then she backed out of the driveway. All the way back to her place, Ava couldn't shake the feeling that he had heard from her mother and was keeping it from her.

Had Elizabeth contacted him directly? Had she told him to keep it secret? How had she done it? Phone? Letter? In person?

"Or a freaking infomercial at three in the morning?" Grunting in frustration, she thumped the steering wheel with the heel of her hand. She hated wondering.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Kara*

After her manic straightening and preparing of the parlor the previous night, Kara sat at the breakfast table pushing and pulling her spoon through the bowl of oatmeal that she had thought she wanted. She needed to eat so she could take her medicine without getting an upset stomach. The toast had already gone cold, and with its layer of once-appealing butter, now lay untouched on a small plate.

It seemed too great an effort to even hold herself in the chair straight without slouching and propping against the table. She propped her head on her palm and stared at the oatmeal as if doing so would arouse her appetite.

Soon, the steam stopped swirling up from the bowl, and the oatmeal began to congeal. When she pulled her spoon through the bowl, the food looked like something that had already been eaten and yakked back up.

Kara gagged and dropped the spoon. She pushed the bowl away and plunked the plate with the toast on top so she didn't have to see the oatmeal anymore.

Pulling her glass of juice closer, she sighed and popped open the little pill box. Daphne had been right to distrust her

about the pills inside, but Kara had vowed to herself that she would do better. Daphne had at least convinced her that she had improved. The only thing that could've helped that much was the medication. She hated to take any medicine, but she could at least admit that.

She put the pill between her index finger and thumb then laid it far back on her tongue. It didn't taste as bad that way. The grape juice washed the pill down easily, and Kara set the glass on the table, satisfied that she'd done the right thing.

If it starts making me feel weird, I'll just stop taking it altogether, she thought.

If Patrick had still been there, she wouldn't need the pills. She'd never had to take pills when he was alive.

She stared at his empty seat, and tears filled her eyes as memories of his funeral filled her mind.

He had been smiling as he stood in front of the shelf in the living room. They were going to have tea on the back patio together that Saturday. It had been one of his rare Saturdays off, and they had intended to enjoy it together. She remembered they were as giddy as schoolchildren, laughing, touching, just so happy to have an extra day together.

Kara had left him in the living room to go make their tea and make his favorite finger sandwiches—homemade chicken salad—and the cherry dollop cookies. She placed everything on the tray and carried it to the back patio, even taking the time to pluck a rose from the bush and put it in the little vase.

She remembered distinctly that she had been humming "Tea for Two," and she'd had a happy little bounce in her step.

Then she stepped into the room, and her brain couldn't quite process what her eyes were seeing. Patrick was lying on the floor, one hand clutching a handful of his shirt just over the left side of his chest. His eyes were comically wide, and his mouth was hanging open in a silent scream.

Her feet continued to carry her closer. Her brain screamed for her to turn away. Run. Get out of there. But her feet

persisted, and she was standing over him. Was he playing some kind of weird joke? Would he leap up and start laughing because he'd scared her?

He didn't move.

She called his name. Screamed his name. Then she simply screamed as her legs betrayed her and she crumpled to the carpet beside him.

Frantically, she pushed her ear to his chest, felt for a pulse in his neck, slapped his face, and even blew in his mouth and hit his chest the way she'd seen people on TV do.

At some point, she dialed 911, but she couldn't remember any of the conversation. Strobing lights filled the world along with a bunch of random faces with moving mouths and big worried eyes. She had floated in one direction, then was pushed in another, and then another, until she blacked out.

When she opened her eyes again, she was back home in her bed, thinking it had all been a nightmare. She got up and went around the bed. Patrick's house slippers were tucked just under his side. She shut the bathroom door, and his robe was hanging where it always hung on the hook.

She had smiled, relieved that the nightmare was over.

Then she had heard her sister's voice calling her name and asking if she was alright.

The real nightmare began after that. The images were distorted, disjointed, and seemed unreal. She was speaking with a long-faced man in a room who was showing her where to sign paperwork, several different types of coffins propped up along a display wall, her handing Patrick's best suit and tie to another man who took it silently and turned away. Daphne helped her up from a chair, and they walked to the front of a crowded room filled with funeral music and sprays of flowers.

That's when something went wrong. Terribly wrong. Patrick was on his back in a coffin. He looked peaceful. Like he was sleeping. She knew it was a cliché, something people always said, but he really did look like it. She almost believed

it. She almost believed that any minute now he'd stretch and yawn and wake up. For a brief flicker of a moment, she convinced herself that's what would happen. He was just asleep.

But she knew he wasn't.

She heard a shrill scream. It was so loud she thought it was going to split her ears. Even in the replay of that memory all this time later, she still had the urge to cover her ears. She learned later that she had been the one wailing so loudly. At first, she doubted Daphne, but then Robby had agreed with her, and so had Joan and Dan from across the street. They had no reason to make up things like that, so she had to believe it, didn't she?

In her memory, the weeks following Patrick's funeral were a madman's patchwork of random images and alien feelings. There was nothing tangible there for her to grab onto.

Her sobs brought her out of her painful reverie and back to the present. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"Well, I must look a fright sitting here bawling." Almost angrily, she grabbed another napkin and rubbed her face.

She closed the little pillbox and slid it across to the other side of the table. Her chin quivered with the onset of more tears, and she forced herself to think about Sophie and the tea date they had planned for later. She couldn't let Sophie see that she'd spent her morning crying.

"Did we set a date for tea today?" she asked, suddenly unsure.

Memories of Patrick had a way of muddying the waters every time she allowed them free reign. Of course, this time she hadn't allowed it. The memories had simply snatched the reins and kicked the horses into an out-of-control gallop. Her only option had been to hang on for the duration of the ride.

She was certain Sophie was due in the afternoon for tea. If not, what would it hurt for her to have everything set up? Smiling, she shook her head.

“Of course, she’s coming for tea. You didn’t just dream it up, silly,” she told herself.

But she had dreamed the night before. She had worn herself out with her manic preparations for Sophie’s visit, which proved to her that Sophie was coming over, and had gone to sleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Dark things chased her through a densely wooded, pitch-dark forest. Every now and then, moonlight broke through the dark, heavy clouds, sending rays of silvery light down to cast an ethereal glow over the land. The ground was knotty and tried to suck her shoes off each time she took a step. Bugs crawled over her bare legs and arms, up her neck, and onto her face. They got tangled in her hair and thrashed about. The skittering motions and sickening sensations sent her into a frenzy, and she batted at her face and body, tore at her hair, and screamed. She tried to run, but she couldn’t move properly. The harder she worked, the slower she went. The dangerous thing, the bloodthirsty thing, was gaining on her. Sniffing her out.

When she could hear its hot, rancid breath at her side, she tried to be still and silent, hoping it wouldn’t find her in the absolute darkness. Then the clouds parted. Bright moonlight shone down like a spotlight on her. An excited snuffle escaped the beast, and Kara moaned as she opened her eyes to tiny slits.

The dangerous thing was familiar. She would have recognized the hairline and the shape of those brows anywhere. Patrick stood before her with his flesh hanging in tatters that flapped raggedly in the stiff breeze. His mouth opened and bugs poured out of it and onto her arm. He stretched out his arms and leaned toward her. He was going to take her back with him. She understood that, but she didn’t know where he had come from and wasn’t sure she wanted to know. The bugs wriggled and writhed over her flesh. She screamed until she feared her lungs would explode.



She had awoken with that scream lodged in her throat as she struggled to get away from the clutches of the comforter.

Shuddering, Kara pulled the uneaten bowl of oatmeal and the toast toward her. It was time to get up, snap out of it, and throw open the curtains. Nothing could burn away nightmares quicker than a good dose of bright sunlight.

Standing slowly, she picked up her juice glass and balanced it beside the toast on the little plate. “Just a dream, Kara. Everybody has dreams. Journal it and forget it,” she said in a chant-like rhythm.

Journal it and forget it. Journal it and forget it.

She walked softly to the sink and put the bowl on the counter. She was thinking about her personal journal. Sophie would definitely make a big appearance in it after she cleaned up breakfast. She couldn’t wait to write that entry, and then another after they had tea together.

“I’m coming, Kara!” a voice screamed from behind her.

She spun toward the voice so fast that her hand sent the bowl, plate, spoon, and glass flying off the counter and past the table to crash and shatter on the floor.

No one was there. Kara’s heart beat hard enough that it shook her whole body with each thud.

“Who’s there?” she asked barely above a whisper. Seconds ticked by in silence. Her heartbeat went back to a semblance of normal. She repeated her question in a stronger voice, but there was no answer.

“Who’s there?”

But she already knew who it was. She couldn’t mistake his voice any more than she could have mistaken his hairline and brow shape. She’d heard his voice as he’d spoken to her for all those years that she’d heard his voice more than any other person’s.

“Patrick?” she asked but wasn’t sure if she had asked aloud or not. Her ears were ringing, and she couldn’t hear

anything else.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ava had hoped they'd be able to conduct the legwork of the Rosie Hammond case on their own, but her mind changed when she realized just how much time it was taking to move from one person to the next.

She'd balked at the idea of having the police knock on doors again, as the first round of questioning had already been done by some of the same officers. But considering that, counting herself, there were only three agents in the building, she estimated that it would take them roughly twelve hours to speak with everyone. And that's if everything went according to plan, which it rarely ever did in her experience.

The property manager, Richard Purnell, had offered to help, but she couldn't involve a civilian. So she requested a small team of officers to meet her. She briefed them, gave them a rundown of what questions to be sure to ask, and sent them on their way while she helped finish clearing the top floor.

Twice, she heard Santos snapping at Metford. She was certain that he had said or done something beforehand that caused it, but she couldn't have that kind of behavior in that setting. She didn't want that kind of behavior anywhere,

anytime, but knew it was inevitable when there were personality clashes between teammates.

At the end of the last hallway, she walked toward them. Each was in a doorway, speaking with tenants. She waited while they were invited inside, noting that Santos looked as if she dreaded stepping into the unit, whereas Metford grinned and walked in like he owned the place.

She pressed her fingertips to the center of her forehead. She'd worked with people with similar personalities in the past, but this was different. Now she was in charge of keeping them on task before it caused problems. The last thing she wanted to do was report back to Sal that their experiment had been a failure.

Metford returned first, grinning and swaggering his way toward her.

“Hey. Make any progress?”

“I called in the officers to clear the bottom floors, or we would've been here all night,” Ava told him. “There are other avenues I need to explore today. What about you? Get anything helpful?”

“Well, if you count the woman down here. She's a little wacky, in my opinion, but she says she heard a woman scream downstairs about two that afternoon.”

“Downstairs? Did she ask anyone about it?”

“She asked a woman who lives on the second floor, but she didn't hear it and didn't know what it could have been about.”

“Did she give you the woman's name that she spoke to?”

He nodded and handed her a piece of paper. “All her pertinent info.”

“Wait here for Santos. You two come down and help the police when she gets out. Tell her about this. Be sure you ask everyone about it when you get down there. The officers need to know, too.” Ava left, wondering if Metford and Santos

would be at each other's throats in front of the local cops. She turned the corner, turned back, and motioned for him.

"Yeah?" He trotted to her.

"And... can you two try to keep it adult when we're in the field? I don't know what's going on between you two, but we need to fix it. I don't want to have to tell Sal that you two couldn't behave yourselves."

His cheeks flared red, but he nodded. Ava noted the muscles of his jaws clenching as she turned away. While they were her responsibility, she couldn't waste time babysitting them.

Ava descended the stairs quickly and made her way to room 212. She knocked on the door and was quickly welcomed by a middle-aged woman of average height and stature, but with perfectly manicured nails, makeup, and hair. She opened the door with a smile, but suspicion was still behind her eyes.

"May I help you?" Her Southern accent was thick.

Ava badged her and asked about the screaming at two on the afternoon of Rosie's attack.

"I already told the cops I didn't know anything because I didn't hear anything. If I had, I'd tell you. I want this bastard caught just as badly as you all do."

"Have you ever heard anything like that from any of your neighbors?"

The woman shook her head. "We're all pretty quiet around here. There are arguments from time to time, but nothing that ever gets out of hand, and certainly no screams that I've ever heard."

"Alright. Thank you for your time." Ava took out a card and handed it to the woman. "My card. If you think of anything, or remember anything, please give me a call anytime."

The woman took the card. “Will do, honey. I hope you catch that rat. He needs to fry.”

Ava wanted to tell her that the system didn’t fry people anymore, but decided against it. She nodded and left.

As she passed the next door, she paused and listened. There was no sound from within. She knocked on the door. Nothing. She knocked again. Nothing. She headed back to 212 and knocked again. This time the woman’s face was distinctly sourer.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Your neighbor there,” Ava said, indicating the next door. “Where is your neighbor? Do you know?”

The woman shrugged. “Not the faintest idea.” Her brows tugged down in the center of her forehead. “You know, come to think of it, I haven’t heard her at all in several days. Maybe she’s away on vacation or something.”

Ava took the neighbor’s name, thanked the woman again, and headed down to the lobby to ask the property manager about her. He looked up the tenant’s information and handed it to Ava.

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to do that without a warrant or not, but I don’t want to be responsible if something’s happened to her and I stalled an investigation, either.” He wrung his hands agitatedly. “This better not come back to bite me, though.”

“Don’t worry, sir. Perfectly legal. I just need to know if she’s out of town, or if we should be worried.”

Using her information, Ava located the woman’s workplace and confirmed that the woman had not been to work for several days, had no time off, no vacation time accrued, and wasn’t answering her phone, texts, or emails.

Ava hung up and found the property manager again. “Mr. Purnell, I need you to unlock Michaela Wallins’ unit.”

The hyper little man went bug-eyed for a second. “Oh, God, she’s missing, isn’t she?”

“Why would you say that?” Ava squinted at him.

“I’ve been reviewing the security footage from the lobby from the day you’re asking about,” he explained. “Michaela was on it entering the afternoon before with what looked like a carryout bag from Chang’s. She was alone.”

“Did you see her on any footage after that day?”

He shook his head nervously. “I’d have to look again, but I don’t think so. I haven’t seen her.”

“She hasn’t been reporting to work, either. We’ll call this a welfare check.” Ava’s gut told her that the story wouldn’t end well for her. By all accounts, she had been a dependable woman, trustworthy, and stuck to her routines like ‘flies to flypaper,’ as her boss so eloquently stated.

Metford and Santos stepped off the elevator just as Richard slid the key in the lock of room 210. Ava beckoned them over to join her.

“We might have a situation here. We’re going to go in and see if Michaela Wallins is in there, or if she’s been here recently. No one’s heard from her since the afternoon of the attack.” She turned to Richard. “Go ahead and turn the key, then you can step away. We’ll take it from there.”

He nodded and looked as if he might be sick. He turned the key and then ran to the end of the hall to stand with his hand over his mouth.

Ava looked to the agents. They nodded. She turned the knob and opened the door a crack. There were no lights on inside, and apparently, the curtains were closed. It was dark inside.

“Michaela Wallins! FBI. We’re coming inside. Announce yourself if you’re in here.” Ava pushed the door wider, and immediately a rancid, rotten smell assaulted her sinuses. As a human, her first instinct was to close the door and call

someone else to take care of it. As an agent, she pushed the door completely open and flipped on the lights. She fully expected to see the decomposing corpse of Michaela Wallins lying sprawled on the floor, but she didn't.

Guns drawn, all three agents entered the unit. Ava called out again as they crossed into the spacious living room.

"Look," Ava whispered, giving a nod of her head to the coffee table in the center of the room. A plastic bag lay on the table, its logo emblazoned in bright red text: Chang's Takeout.

There was still food inside. It had long gone cold. The familiar smell of sweet and sour sauce tried—but failed—to overwhelm the rancorous odor permeating the apartment.

The further they stepped into the apartment, the fouler the stench got. They spread out. She headed for the master bedroom, Metford and Santos headed for the kitchen and dining area.

The bedroom was immaculate, and the smell wasn't as offensive in there. Ava went toward the bathroom and could see that it was empty. The large mirrors reflected the opposite wall. She stepped inside and turned on the lights anyway.

There it was: blood. Gallons of it, it seemed. It was splattered in and around the sink, pooled and dried on the white marble of the vanity, even dripping onto the floor and in the bathtub.

She turned to yell for Santos, but Metford was calling out for her to join them.

"James! Think we found her."

The young woman had been laid on the sofa on her side with her back facing the room. She looked as if she'd laid down for a nap—except for the blood soaking into the cream-colored fabric all around her neck and head. Her hair was matted with it.

Ava immediately called it in and ordered Santos and Metford to secure the scene. Forensics arrived thirty minutes



later to process it.

On the way to a hotel, Ava told Metford and Santos her theory. “The bathroom was covered in blood. It was on almost every surface, but not like it had been splattered by the victim being murdered. It was more like it was from someone maybe cleaning themselves up after a murder. I think that’s where our perpetrator cleaned up before he legged it out of the neighborhood the morning after.”

“You mean he went in there, killed Michaela, hid out until he could get to Rosie’s apartment, and then attacked her and went back to 210 so he could take a shower and clean up?” Metford shook his head. “That’s crazy.”

“Maybe Rosie wasn’t targeted. Maybe he’s an opportunity criminal. He could’ve surprised Michaela. She had gone out to pick up Chinese takeout and returned. He probably wasn’t expecting her to come back so soon. He was in there robbing the place, and then she pops back in. He kills her. When the police don’t show up right away, he thinks he’s gotten away with it, so he sees which other units he can get into. Somehow, he got into Rosie’s apartment in the middle of the night, but he wanted more from her. Perhaps he saw her and thought he’d rob and rape her, then run. Or, more likely, he intended to kill her because he’d already gotten away with it. Hit me with your theories. Trust me, I’m all ears at this point.”

Metford grimaced. “To be honest, I don’t know. He’s a sicko. What makes them do anything they do? Why do they choose to rob, rape, kill?”

Ava liked that she was at least making him think. Using his brainpower for something other than a sarcastic remark. “Santos? Any ideas?”

“Well, he had to have killed Michaela. That’s a no-brainer.”

“That’s why you thought of it all by yourself, huh?” Metford chuckled.

“Screw you, Metford,” Santos said, turning in her seat to glare at him.

“You got something to say?” he fired back, his face twisted in anger.

Santos struggled against her seatbelt. “Oh, I’ve got something,” she growled, raising her fist.

“Hey! That’s enough from you two,” Ava snapped harshly, gripping the wheel tighter. “Get it under control. Stop arguing with each other. We have to work together as a team, or this team will never work. Do you understand me?”

Nobody said a word, but Santos dropped back against her seat and crossed her arms. Metford scoffed and shook his head before staring angrily out his window.

Ava bit her tongue, not wanting to be drawn into a heated debate with either of them. She may have been younger than them, but she was in charge. For the time, that would have to be enough. She needed time to figure out how to settle the friction the right way. In a way that would keep the team together, if that was possible.

She didn’t want to be the one to break the team apart. But she didn’t know what to do.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Kara*

At noon, Sophie and Charles knocked on Kara's door. She hadn't been expecting both of them. And teatime was always around four. Flustered from her ordeal at breakfast, Kara had failed to tend to her normal routines. She hadn't dressed in a proper outfit, preferring to remain in her sweats and oversized shirt. Nothing could be done about the messy bun at the back of her head, either. She'd failed to even brush her hair that morning.

Running her tongue over her teeth, she groaned. She hadn't even seen to that yet.

The doorbell rang.

"Coming," she called, wishing she had five minutes to dart upstairs and arrange herself better.

There was no time, though. She had little choice but to answer. Especially after she'd called out and let them know that she was there.

Pulling the door open, Kara tried to smile even though she wanted only to curl in on herself and disappear. "Hi, Sophie, Charles."

“Hi, Kara,” Sophie beamed. “I didn’t want to be rude and stand you up this afternoon, so I made Charles come with me to tell you that I can’t come over. I really wanted to, but he’s dragging me off to this charity thing.” She chuckled, but the smile that came with it never reached her eyes. “Isn’t that right, honey?” She nudged him with her elbow.

“All the other wives are going to be there, Sophie. I didn’t realize you hated big fancy dinner parties with a bunch of glitzy women who will undoubtedly fawn over you all evening.” He looked to Kara. “I am sorry, but maybe she can come join you another day. I really do need her to go with me today. I didn’t know about it until this morning.”

“Yes, he did. He knew about it two months ago, actually.” Sophie smirked prettily.

“And I forgot until Dave called this morning.”

She waved a dismissive hand at him and nodded. “Fine, fine. Whatever.” She leaned toward Kara. “I’ll keep the next date. You just name it.” She let her gaze swiftly go from Kara’s face to her feet and back. “Of course, not right now. Just come over, or whatever, in the next few days. Are you feeling okay?” She glanced at Kara’s clothes and hair again.

Self-consciously, Kara put a hand to her hair and nodded. “Just a little headachy. It’s okay. Enjoy your charity dinner party.”

“Bye,” Sophie said, twiddling her fingers and smiling a smile that did reach her eyes.

Kara, however, wasn’t as focused on Sophie’s smile as she was on Charles’ gorgeous face. She could barely force her gaze back to Sophie. Returning the cutesy wave, she shut the door, but not before locking eyes once more with Charles.

She put her back against the door and bit her bottom lip. He had been staring at her without the slightest hint of shyness. And, if she did say so herself, what she saw in his eyes was more than just a friendly gesture.

Their voices faded as they went down the walkway toward their car. It sounded as if Sophie was still voicing her displeasure at having to attend the function on his arm.

“I’d go with him. I’d feel plenty safe enough to go anywhere on his arm,” Kara said as she pushed away from the door.

Charles’ openly interested stare had sent tingles through her body that didn’t dissipate until she had reached the kitchen. She wondered if a man like him could ever be interested in a woman like her. Compared to Sophie, Kara was homely at best.

She drifted through the kitchen as she prepared a turkey and Swiss sandwich for lunch. Fantasies about attending one of those fancy dinner parties with Charles kept her mind occupied far longer than she intended. Her appetite had been stunted by the butterflies in her stomach, and she only ended up eating half of the sandwich.

Pressing her hand to her belly, she laughed. “Why do I have butterflies from just thinking about him?”

It was time to journal about the teatime cancellation—and about Charles. She thought it was a good idea to write down her feelings about the situation. It would flush them from her system, and she could get on with her day. She knew it wasn’t good to dwell on things. She had a way of losing time when she did that. Losing time was scary.

After only a short writing session, Kara walked to her closet and flung the doors wide. All her best dresses were in the other bedroom, but she had a few in the new bedroom’s closet. Pulling a particularly clingy yellow and white side-spiral dress, she held it up to her chest and examined her reflection in the full-length mirror.

Yellow used to be one of her best colors, but with the unbrushed, wiry mess on her head and the dark circles under her red-rimmed eyes, she just looked sick. Jerking the dress away from her, she shoved it back in the closet and took out a

mauve dress. Its flowing material floated on the air the way she imagined a fairy's dress might.

Checking her appearance, and ignoring the tangled hair and horribly eyes, she still looked sickly. The mauve was dark enough that it only drew out the dark rings under her eyes.

Disgusted, she shoved that dress back in the closet and slammed the door. She could never compete with Sophie in the looks department.

“Not unless you go into the bathroom and start doing something about your looks,” she told her reflection in a matter-of-fact tone.

After a shower, she brushed her hair and stood staring at her face under the bright, merciless lights. She lifted a few wet strands of hair and let them fall again. She repeated the action.

She could hear Patrick telling her there was absolutely no need to dye her hair; he thought it was beautiful just the way it was.

“But it would be prettier if it had a few blonde highlights, Patty. Not many. Just a few around my face to soften my features a bit,” she said as if reliving their discussion about it. Those were the exact words she had told him.

But I like it all brown, Kar. Just like your sweet hot chocolate eyes, he'd said as he pulled her close and ran his thumb over her eyebrow.

Her eyes closed, and she could almost feel his touch.

When she opened her eyes, he still wasn't there, and she was still alone.

She practiced applying makeup for the rest of the afternoon, and by teatime, she was pretty much satisfied with the outcome. The makeup felt a bit odd on her skin because she hadn't worn any in years, and on the rare occasion when she had, it had consisted of mascara and a dab of lip tint.

She lifted a few thin strands of hair and let them fall again. It was silky and soft since it was dry, but it still needed

something.

“A new style?” she asked the mirror. “Those highlights I always wanted?”

Both, a voice in her mind prodded. Why not both?

The hairs on her arms stood erect and the air suddenly felt cold. She exhaled and watched for the cloud of condensation, but there was none. The temperature hadn't dropped. If the voice hadn't belonged to a ghost, though, whose was it?

“Well, it was in your head,” she told her reflection, “so, it stands to reason that it was just your own voice.”

But she didn't think it was. It had sounded so different than her normal internal voice. It didn't even sound like her mother's, which she heard sometimes as the voice of reason.

Spritzing her hair with a bit of spray, she hurried out of the bathroom.

“Looks like I'll be having tea alone again today,” she sighed as she started down the stairs.



Over the next few days, Kara rose before sunrise so she had plenty of time to do her makeup, have breakfast, and stand watch at one of the living room windows. She watched for movement at the Walker house after the mail had been delivered. It hadn't taken much expertise to get her timing just right so that when Sophie went outside to collect her mail, Kara was also retrieving hers.

It gave them an opportunity to have a polite conversation, and for Sophie to notice that Kara looked better than when she'd seen her on previous occasions. Every morning, it seemed that Sophie and Kara bonded a bit more, got a little closer, and shared more of their lives with each other. It was a grand way to start her day.

Kara would go back inside with a smile that lasted for as long as she could stay busy. If she was idle for even brief

periods, her mind would dredge up remnants of her very worst nightmares and turn shadow corners into monsters, closed doors into portals to hell, and her food into dead flesh and worse.

Wake up, get the mail, journal. Wake up, get the mail, journal. She held onto it like a mantra.

If she deigned to sit and relax at the piano in the parlor, she would hear Patrick in the living room. Sometimes he would be laughing. Other times, gurgling as he died on the carpet.

Wake up, get the mail, journal.

One night, she spent more time than planned playing Chopin's Nocturne—it had been one of Patrick's favorite classical melodies—and the sun had set by the time she finished.

The music made her feel content, even if a bit more nostalgic than usual, when she stood up and left the parlor. And as she passed the living room doorway, she glanced in against her better judgment, only to find the room empty. Thinking that her playing had somehow made the horrible images go away, she continued upstairs and crawled into bed.

Sometime shortly after dozing off, she was awakened by the subtle shifting of the bed and covers. In her sleep-fogged state, she rolled to her side and threw her arm over the familiar form of her husband. Before her arm touched down, her brain was screaming at her, but it was too late.

Her arm lay against the body. The body shifted, and suddenly she was staring at the twisted and desiccated face of her long-dead husband.

Screaming, she backpedaled and fell off the edge of the bed. In her panic, she couldn't get her feet under her, so she just kept slipping and sliding centimeters at a time as she screamed. Patrick rose to his hands and knees, smiled grotesquely, and began laughing. His bloated body jiggled and bits of him fell away. The sound made by those bits was the



worst part, and she passed out. Her brain and body refused to deal with it any longer.

The next morning, she awakened on the floor cold, stiff, and with several bruises. It was the first time Patrick had come to her in the new bedroom.

Wake up, get the mail, journal.

As she got ready for bed that evening, she made sure to keep her mind off those nightmares. She recited poetry about butterflies and flowers. Anything but death, love, heaven, or hell.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she finished reading a poem, closed the book, and laid it on the bedside table. Taking a quick drink of water, she pulled her feet under the covers. Then it was lights-out, and she snuggled into her pillow with the poem lingering in her heart like a little ray of sunshine.

Realizing she had forgotten to take her medicine even though it was sitting beside the glass of water, Kara huffed and pushed the covers down to her waist. As she started reaching for the switch on the lamp, she heard shuffling just beyond the little table and jerked her hand instinctively back.

No, no, no! Go away, she thought, squeezing her eyes shut. I read poetry, I was happy, leave me alone!

Surprisingly, the shuffling stopped and the feeling of foreboding disappeared. She opened one eye just a crack and saw nothing but the familiar shape of her lamp and the tiniest glimmer of the water glass.

Her pills were right there. She needed to take her nighttime dose. No matter how hard she advocated for it, her body refused to send out her hand again. Instead, she pulled the covers close to her chin and snuggled back into the pillow.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ava slept fitfully in the hotel that night. Somehow all the cases were running together in her mind. She was standing above Rosie Hammond in the hospital, when the bruises on her face shifted and the soft hospital bed gave way to the cold metal of the morgue, and she was instead looking at the body of Michaela Wallins. Before she could even react or respond, the face twisted again. The eyes that had been closed now shot open, blue and terrified, and the tips of her icy blonde hair dripped blood on the floor in a steady beat.

“Ava,” Molly whispered, her voice shaking from the terror. The drip turned into a steady stream and the steady stream turned into a flood. Blood was overflowing now, filling the room and washing her away like a dark tide. Ava lurched forward, tried to grab Molly before she was swept up in the maelstrom, but it was too much. It sloshed and swirled around, threatening to drag Ava under, but somehow she effortlessly stayed afloat. She moved through the blood like air, but it was never enough. She swam, Molly sunk.

Her mother went under, leaving only her arm outstretched—when had she turned into Elizabeth? Ava didn’t know, but she pressed forward anyway. She strained and pushed as fast as she could, rocketing through the blood as fast as her

muscles would allow, but it was like something was pulling her mother away from her, dragging her along more quickly than Ava could approach.

Ava took a deep breath and plunged into the murky darkness, giving it everything she had. She reached for the outstretched hand, hoping it wasn't too late, and somehow wasn't surprised when she took it and the face staring back at her was her own.

She didn't even scream. She had come to expect dreams like these.

The sun had not even yet deigned to rise before she was up and out of bed, brushing her teeth and getting dressed. Her thoughts were whirling about the case. Despite her irritation with Metford and Santos, she appreciated their insights the day before. But she wasn't sure how much longer she could deal with their incessant bickering.

Ava hesitated for only a minute before deciding to text Sal about it. She didn't want to blow them up or get them in trouble, but she'd promised her boss she'd keep an eye on them.

Me: You mind talking for a minute? Not urgent—just when you're up.

To her surprise, a response popped back up within only a couple minutes. It wasn't even seven yet.

Sal Rossi: Of course. Give me a call in 15.

Those fifteen minutes felt endless. The team had agreed to meet back down in the lobby at eight o'clock to get started on the day, but she didn't want to risk catching sight of either Metford or Santos in the lobby grabbing a continental breakfast, so she waited, pacing back and forth in her hotel room, trying to figure out what to say.

The exact instant the clock on her phone changed over to fifteen minutes from the time she'd received the text, she snatched it up and called Sal, anxiety ratcheting through her.

“Morning, Ava,” Sal greeted her, sounding a little sleepy but still chipper as ever. “I presume you’re calling to tell me you caught our suspect?”

Ava let out a chuckle. “I only wish.”

“Then what’s on your mind?”

Sighing heavily, Ava sat in her bed and leaned her head back to stare at the ceiling. “It’s Metford and Santos.”

Sal groaned. “Ugh, I should have known.”

“Yesterday was really bad at the apartments. They couldn’t even make it one day without bickering. I had to literally tell them to act like adults while they were interviewing the neighbors. And then in the car afterward they seemed about two seconds from coming to blows.”

Sal gave a wordless noise of acknowledgment. “That bad, huh? You don’t think this is something they’ll get out of their systems and work out on their own given a little time?”

Ava shook her head. “It’s hard to tell,” she admitted. “I... may have had to snap at them in the car to get it together. It shut them up, at least.”

“Hey, that’s something. Let me know if it gets any worse. If they can’t respect you, they’ll have to answer to me. Those two need to straighten out whatever shit they’ve got between them. At this rate, I’m concerned it could really harm our team morale. I don’t want to have to impose disciplinary issues, but they may not leave me with any choice.”

“Jeez, you really think it could come to that?”

“To tell the truth, I don’t know, Ava. But I don’t particularly feel like waiting to find out. I’d hoped that they’d come to an understanding, like more field time together would help them develop a trust and bond, but I may have been wrong. It may just be getting worse.”

“Well, you definitely can’t risk them getting into a fight. Words are bad enough because they damage any future bonding that could happen. There will always be those

lingering memories of past insults and jibes that hinder one or both from fully committing to the level of trust you need in a successful, trustworthy team.”

“And you thought you couldn’t think like a leader yet,” Sal joked. “You’re on the money. We’re going to need to have a serious talk about this as a team.”

Ava hitched her breath. “Do you think we’ll have to transfer one of them and find a replacement?”

“Is that an official recommendation?” Sal pressed.

“I... no. I don’t know. I don’t want to break up the team.”

“Just think of it as an exercise,” Sal told her. “Let’s evaluate this. What are their good and bad points?”

Ava sighed. “Santos is great in the field. She takes direction like you wouldn’t believe and follows orders precisely. She knows her stuff, and she’s not afraid to put her knowledge to work. She’s also not afraid to face the bad guys. She’s steady, and I like that.”

Sal nodded. “What are her bad points?”

“She’s a little hot-tempered when it comes to Metford. She’s just as apt to bite his head off and spit it at him as to let his sarcastic remarks slide. I just never know which she’ll do, or where she’ll be when she does it.”

“What about Metford? How do you feel about him and his work so far?”

Ava bit her tongue, not wishing to fire off the first things that popped into her mind about him. She didn’t want to do that because with Metford, first impressions were skewed. He made sure of it, and she had seen that from the start. It didn’t make him much less annoying to deal with, though.

“He’s good in the field. Very good. He’s an ass, but I think the hot-headed temper of his is what makes him effective. He’s always on high alert, even if he looks like he’s slacking, he’s not. He came up with a couple of really brilliant observations yesterday that both me and Santos couldn’t figure out—which,

of course, he immediately rubbed into her face. He is very aware at all times and ready at the drop of a hat to rush in to help a teammate. Even Santos. Sometimes, especially Santos. But he's equally eager to rile her up." Ava tossed up her hands. "I'm at a loss. Seriously."

"Definitely have our hands full with those two. If you had to transfer one of them, which would you choose to go?"

"Metford. No, Santos." Ava shook her head with a frustrated groan. "My gut instinct tells me Metford, but he clashes with everybody on the team except you. Santos gets along with everyone better. Much better. And nobody seems to have a complaint about working with her."

Sal gave a grunt of acknowledgment. "Metford doesn't get a rise out of me. And, I'm older than he is. By a few years. I don't give him that instant payoff he's looking for. He wants someone he can get a rise out of. It makes him feel powerful and in charge. Santos is young enough that she falls into that trap. From what I've seen, she does it easily, and Metford knows that. Ashton isn't as likely to bite back unless he's pushed, but Metford would wear him down if they had to do field or office work together."

"Can I ask you something?" Ava asked. She felt nervous asking her boss something so candidly, but it was something she had to answer.

"Always."

"Why did you choose Metford for this team, knowing what you did about him? It seems like he's the odd man out in all this."

Sal took a moment to consider her answer. "Remember when I said the higher-ups liked him? I will give him credit: he really has changed a lot in the last couple years since I last worked with him. I think they were hoping I'd instill some better habits into him, but I can't do that if he insists on acting like a toddler all the time."

“It’s a shame we can’t send him back to preschool to learn some manners,” Ava joked. “That might do the trick.”

She was greeted with a long silence on the other end of the line. “Sal?”

“You’re brilliant, Ava,” she finally said. “Keep them on task today. I’ll be on my way down to Richmond shortly.”

“Why?”

“Oh, you’ll see,” Sal crowed. “You’ll see.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Kara*

Timing her outings to the mailbox had become routine for Kara. Sophie and her husband made Kara's days brighter each time she spoke with them. It didn't matter if it was only a simple round of small talk about the weather, or if it happened to be a deeper conversation that lasted several minutes, each encounter made her smile and eased her nervousness.

Sophie was a bit late coming to collect the mail this day, but Kara didn't worry. She merely stood there with the stack of envelopes and a bunch of junk mail, sorting through it as if she were really interested. Soon enough, the familiar squeak-thud of the Walkers' front door signaled that she would soon have one of the neighbors joining her out in the lovely spring morning. After the nights she'd been having over the last two weeks, she needed a good dose of Sophie's brightness, joy, smiles, and beauty to cheer her up.

"Morning, Kara," Sophie called out as she walked toward her mailbox.

"Good morning, Sophie." How does she manage to look so elegant all the time? Even walking to the mailbox, she seems ready to step onto a stage and start a ballet routine.



“Ooh, looks like you got a load of mail this morning.”

“Mostly junk, I think,” Kara said, fanning out the flyers and shaking her head.

Sophie retrieved her slim stack of equal-sized envelopes and flipped through them with her long fingers. Kara noted how perfectly manicured her nails seemed with their French tips and high gloss polish. They didn't look garish like some women wore their nails. No ridiculously long nails slathered with weird colors and stickers for Sophie Walker. Kara was glad of it. If she'd had that type of nails, it would have ruined Sophie's air of perfection that Kara was so drawn to.

Sophie looked up and shrugged. “All bills. No big surprise there. I think I'd rather have the junk mail.” She laughed. Her face lit up. For a few short seconds, she seemed like an artist's rendition of the ideal woman instead of like a real woman.

Kara shook her head to clear the illusion and looked down at her mail.

Sophie walked closer. “Hey, are you doing anything this evening? Say, about seven or so?”

Kara looked up at her. A wide smile bloomed on her face and in her heart. She was going to be invited over to their house, she just knew it.

“No, I have nothing planned beyond eating dinner.” Kara's heart raced as hope built in her mind.

“Would you like to come over and join us for drinks at seven, then? We can sit around and do a little chatting. Maybe play a game or something.”

Shocked and very pleased, Kara nodded. She hoped it didn't look as if she were desperate, but she was. “I'd love to have drinks with you. That would be a very nice way to end the day.”

“Great,” Sophie exclaimed. “I'll see you at seven.”

“That you will,” Kara said. As she watched Sophie walk toward her own house again, everything became dreamlike.

She had difficulty discerning if she was really standing on the sidewalk holding her mail, or if she might still be lying in bed having an exceptionally vivid and pleasant dream.

The wind blew. Her hair tickled her cheek. Honeysuckle tinted the air with its high sweet smell. A rather fat fly buzzed and lumbered slowly toward the house. Kara scrutinized the fly, turning to watch its progress. If this is a dream, that fly will turn into some horrible, scary monster any minute.

But it didn't. And the wind kept blowing her hair just enough that the tips of it caressed her cheek. The early morning sun was warm on her back and shoulders as she moved toward the house.

It's not a dream at all. Sophie really did just invite me to have drinks with her and Charles tonight.

Shutting the door behind her, Kara touched her hair, then her face. She examined her hands and nails. A small panic ran through her.

"I've got to do something about the way I look. I must be presentable tonight," she said as she headed upstairs to look for a suitable outfit.

Three hours later, she emerged from her room. In the course of her time searching through clothes, she had come to the realization that almost all her clothes were frumpy. Compared to Sophie's wardrobe, Kara's looked like it belonged to a small-town librarian-turned-cat lady.

However, she had chosen the best-looking pants and shirt she owned. Or, the outfit that made her look least like some frumpy old schoolmarm from the 1800s.

Thoughts of the upcoming visit consumed the entire day. Kara went about her chores with a light step and a smile on her face.

At five, she put a record on the antique player in her parlor and then ascended the stairs once more to start getting ready.

As she peered into the bathroom mirror, she was struck by her mousy, faded appearance. The classical music wafted gently up to her, and she inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. She was convinced that she didn't look as bad as she thought. She was merely comparing herself to Sophie, and that would've been bad for any woman around. Sophie was that beautiful and that perfect. She needed to stop comparing herself to her new friend.

"Friend?" she muttered to the bathroom. "Is that what she is already? Is it too soon to consider Sophie Walker my friend?"

She opened her eyes and was pleased to see that she no longer felt quite as faded and mousy as she had only moments before. Bolstered by her newly adjusted self-esteem, Kara plugged in the curling iron and set out the hairspray.

At six-fifty-seven, Kara knocked on Sophie's door.

Charles answered with a charming smile that made Kara's heart skip a beat or two as he took her hand and ushered her inside.

"Sophie is pouring the drinks. I hope you like fruit and cheeses with your wine because she has a whole spread laid out for us." Charles kept a light grip on Kara's hand as he led her into the sitting room.

"I love grapes and cheese with wine, actually."

They stepped into the sitting room. A soft, pulsating electronic beat drifted through the air without a definitive source. Kara thought the speakers must be installed in the walls throughout the house and hooked up to a main player somewhere. It wasn't her normal choice of music, but it certainly set the mood to be upbeat and stress-free.

"Kara!" Sophie left the mini bar and embraced Kara. "I'm so glad you came over. Come, come. Sit wherever you want." She motioned toward the plush but super-modern furniture set about a large Persian rug.

Kara chose a chair that put her back to the interior wall. She could see the entire sitting room, part of the entryway, and one of the staircases. In the center of the Persian rug sat a sleek chrome and glass table with a single flower in a vase for a centerpiece. That all-permeating elegance that was Sophie.

Who else could pull off such a modern room paired with a huge Persian rug? Kara mused.

The working fireplace had been replaced by a crackling fire on a flat-screen insert. The flames flickered prettily in oranges and yellows. The background was shimmering hues of purple and blue tones.

Sophie returned and placed the cheeseboard and three-tiered fruit bowl on the table.

“That’s so pretty. Where did you find it?” Kara asked, letting the tips of her fingers trace the ornate rim of the topmost bowl, which held her favorite red grapes.

Stopping between the rug and the mini bar, Sophie laid a finger beside her mouth and looked upward as if thinking. Finally, she shrugged and went to the bar for the drinks and bottle of wine. “Oh, this old thing? We’ve had it for a while. Charles, where did you say you found that?”

“It came from London, dear. I bought it during your last performance there, remember?”

He shook his head even though he was smiling. He dropped a wink at Kara as if there’d been some sort of joke. If there had been a joke, she hadn’t caught onto it, so she smiled a bit and reached for a grape.

“That’s right. My last performance in the foggy, rain-soaked, grey-skied London.” She shivered. “I was so glad to have that opportunity, but also so glad to get the heck back to warmer climes. That trip taught me that I am not built for cold weather. No skiing trips to the Swiss Alps for me.” She laughed.

To Kara, it sounded like delicate glass tinkling in a musical concoction. Maybe a lovely windchime swaying in a

light breeze. She chuckled and nodded. “London sounds awfully nice, though.” She looked at the super-modern furniture with a renewed understanding. Sophie was worldly even though she was young. Between her dancing career and her sophisticated scientific husband, she’d been thrust into places that Kara could only see in magazines and on TV. Places she could only daydream about visiting.

One simple question about the fruit bowl had set the course for the entire evening. It was a wonderful time in which the Walkers regaled Kara with funny tales from their vast travels. The Walkers led a charmed life. As cliché as that sounded to her, Kara could think of no more suitable way of describing it.

Once upon a time, Kara’s life had been perfect and pretty, too. They had been charmed, in their own way. But those days were behind her and she had no hope of regaining them again. With Patrick gone, so too were her dreams of... well, of anything spectacular. Mundanity. That was the word that described her life now. Faded could have been another word.

Watching as Charles draped an arm over Sophie’s shoulder and they laughed together, Kara wondered if she and Patrick ever looked that beautiful to anyone else. Surely they had. She’d certainly felt that beautiful.

By the end of the evening, Kara was a bit tipsy. She giggled far too much. Sophie did, too. Sophie walked to the front door with Kara, one hand thrown clumsily around her waist. Their hips bumped each other as they wobbled toward the entry, and they laughed even harder.

Charles followed at a gentlemanly distance. Not close enough to be encroaching creepily on the ladies, but close enough to dash forward a couple steps if one of them happened to stumble.

Having a fake stumble crossed Kara’s mind, but she kept her poise and dignity by not doing it. The more wine she’d imbibed, the more handsome he’d become over the course of

two hours. Only the thoughts of her beloved Patrick and being respectful toward her new friend kept her from it in the end.

After a couple of clumsy half-hugs at the door, Kara was on her way back to her own house. To her own less shiny, less modern, and much less perfect life.

It was difficult for her not to compare her current situation to that of the Walkers. Once upon a time, she and Patrick had a perfect life together. He was the most wonderful man in the world. He doted on Kara the way Charles doted on Sophie. He had bought trinkets from other countries to decorate their home. Though they weren't souvenirs from some vacation, or stage appearance that she'd been on, they were thoughtful and exotic to her. Unlike Sophie, Kara could point at each item in her house and know exactly where it had come from and why it had been purchased.

"So maybe my life was even more perfect than theirs at one time," Kara murmured as she walked by the displays in the living room.

Instead of making her happy, the thought made her sad. If her life had been more perfect, it meant that it had slipped further than she'd first imagined. It meant that she was pretty close to being at rock bottom.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“A trust-building class?” Metford sputtered.

“Come on,” Santos griped. “That’s not fair.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” replied Sal, doing her best to make it look like a fun team-building exercise instead of a punishment. “It’ll be good for productivity and morale.”

“Can’t we just work on our case?” Metford asked.

“That depends, Wayne. Are you going to actually work on the case, or are you going to be picking fights the whole time?”

Santos chortled, but Sal quickly turned on her as well. “And don’t think you’re off the hook either, Jillian. The both of you are acting like high schoolers. I expected better of you.”

Ava sat back with the hint of a grin on her face, amused at all this going on. Part of her felt bad for essentially being a snitch, but it was better than letting the tension build up even further. She’d been just in time, too—when she’d finally descended the hotel steps and headed toward the continental breakfast area, the two of them had already been sniping at each other over their cereal bowls and little muffins.

Ava had no idea how she'd done it, but Sal had roused Ashton and sped down to Richmond before they'd gotten started on the case for the day. And now the five of them sat around a table in the hotel's conference room in an impromptu meeting.

Sal passed out a packet to each of them as she laid down the law.

“Yes, these will take place outside of your normal work hours. No, you don't have to pay for them out of your pocket because I already did that. No, it's not mandatory, but I sincerely hope that each of you will prove that you want to be a part of this team and show up to these classes. And, finally, no. This is not a form of punishment. It's eight classes over the course of four weeks, and each class lasts only about an hour. Give or take fifteen minutes. All you have to do is finish filling out the paperwork and bring it back to me. I'll submit it and print out your receipt as proof that you're enrolled and paid for.”

Metford shrugged. “What kind of classes are these, anyway?”

Santos leaned over and jabbed her finger at a line on the top paper. “Says it right there, genius.”

He glared at her, but seemed to think better of voicing the scathing reply undoubtedly on his lips. “Like yoga with a partner? That just sounds so touchy-feely and New Age. Is this for real?” He dropped the packet on the table in front of him.

“As real as it gets. The classes aren't New Age or touchy-feely. They promote the natural formation of trust between you and your coworkers. When you are out in the field, you have to be able to trust each other, to know that someone is always watching your back. You have the lives of every person here in your hands when you're out there. That goes for each of you. But on the flip side of that, everyone here has your life in their hands when you're out there. We have to trust each other to be successful. I'm just doing what I think is in the best interest of the team.”



“I just don’t think it’s fair—” Metford started, but Sal silenced him with a raise of her hand.

“Look, I have to find some way to make this team get along. I don’t really care about what’s fair. I care about making sure my agents carry themselves in a professional manner. Now it’s either this or group therapy. So what do you decide?”

Metford let out a groan but finally relented. “Classes.”

“Santos?”

“Classes,” she mumbled.

“Any objections?” Sal pressed to Ava and Ashton.

Dwight raised his hands above his head. “No argument from me.”

“Same here,” Ava added. She was grateful that Sal had let the fact that this had essentially been Ava’s idea in the first place slip under the radar.

“But seriously, the trust-building classes do work a lot of times. I’ve seen it firsthand. It was two female agents I watched go through it, and they came out the other side not just as agents who got along, but as friends, too. To this day, they’re still besties, but they both still have their same attitudes and quirks. And if it makes you feel better, I’ll also be taking part. It’s not like I’m sending all of you into the lions’ den while I sit back and watch. Besides, I think I might actually benefit from them, too.”

The room stayed silent for a long moment, like nobody knew what to say. Ava regarded them one by one. Ashton would sign up, no question about it. He didn’t seem to want to rock the boat. Santos, too, seemed at least willing to give it a shot—not necessarily out of a desire to help the team, but because her boss had told her to. It was better than nothing, Ava guessed.

As always, it was Metford she had misgivings about. The expression on his face said that he did not take the classes seriously. He might choose not to show up. And if so, that was

his choice. She truly hoped he would show up. It would be a shame for his talent to continue being wasted as he was tossed from department to department, team to team because no one wanted to take the time to try to figure out the problem and put some effort into fixing it.

Ava decided she would do what was necessary to help the team. If that meant recommending Metford be transferred out, that was just what she'd do. The onus was on him to prove himself, and everyone knew it. She just hoped she wouldn't get any blowback from him about it.

"Come on, guys, it'll be fun," Sal pressed. "Now let's get started on this case, alright? The sooner we catch this guy, the sooner we can get these classes done."

She gave everyone their assignments and they headed out one by one to get started. Ava was the last to get up, and when she crossed over to the door, Sal reached out a hand to stop her.

"You look stressed, Ava."

"Really?" Ava frowned. "I feel fine. Just didn't sleep great, is all."

"How long's it been since you had dinner with a friend? Or a drink?"

"When we all met over at Doyle's. So, what? That was a while ago, I guess. Why?" Ava hadn't had dinner with a friend since she and Sal had eaten at that little mom-n-pop diner in Hidden Cove, Kentucky months ago, but she wasn't about to say as much without prompting.

"That's the team. That's work. I mean, just you and a buddy. Someone you can have dinner with and not feel the need to talk about work."

"Oh, I took my dad to a little restaurant we used to frequent when I was a kid. It was a great time. Brought back lots of memories. Mom never really cared for the place, so it just kind of became special to me and Dad. Father-daughter date nights and stuff."

“That’s great. You need to go out every now and then with someone who’s not going to want to talk about work, who doesn’t want to try to sweet talk you into his bed, and who’s not family. Widen that social circle. It’ll do you a world of good.” Sal turned toward the door.

A friend, she thought, mulling over the possibilities. Molly was my best friend, and she’s gone. I left her and can’t find her again. Mom was my friend, and now she’s gone, too. Maybe I’m just not good at the friend thing.

She and Sal were friends, or at least they had a bond. It had developed in Kentucky as they worked together. They just clicked, and Ava knew that if they’d met anywhere else, under totally different circumstances, they still would have had that connection.

Was she hinting that we have a girls’ night?

Ava bumped her forehead with her palm, feeling like a dolt. She made a mental note to ask Sal if she wanted to grab lunch when the case was over. They were good at not talking about work when they were having lunch or dinner together. They just talked about regular stuff, everyday life at home with family and pets and neighbors.

Ava had been so focused on the others that she hadn’t even realized that they might be watching her too—making sure she was okay for the sake of team cohesion. She hoped it wasn’t too obvious that so many other things had been on her mind lately; that she’d been distracted. Even their big win had felt a little hollow when she couldn’t tie it back to her mother’s case. She needed to stay focused in the moment, on the assignment, not on her personal issues.

She sighed. Maybe these team-building classes would be even better for her than she’d thought.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Kara*

The kitchen was pristine again. Kara had spent far too much time concentrating on the Walkers and their invitation to have dinner with them the next night. For a few days after having drinks with them, she was floating on a high that couldn't be deflated.

"Seriously, sis. I think you're going through something here," Daphne said. She turned and raised her hands to indicate the sparkling clean kitchen.

Kara nodded and laughed. "Well, yeah. I went through everything in the kitchen. Wasn't it you who pointed it out to me just yesterday how I was neglecting my housework? You were worried then that I was going through something. I'm not really sure what you thought I was going through, but I assure you that I am fine." She tossed a worn and dirtied sponge into the trash bin and then grabbed the broom.

As she moved across the kitchen sweeping, Daphne took hold of her arm and stopped her progress.

"Would you stop? I need to get the kitchen finished so I can do the rest of my housework." She tried to pull away, but Daphne held on insistently.

“You stop for a minute. Just stand still.”

With a huff, Kara did as Daphne asked. Glaring at her sister, she gripped the broom tightly. All she wanted to do was finish sweeping and then mop the kitchen floor. Daphne was interrupting. Holding her up.

“I’m standing still. How long do you plan on holding me up?”

“I’m not trying to hold you up. I’m trying to figure out what’s going on with you today. I’m afraid you’re going through a manic phase.”

Kara rolled her eyes. “My goodness. Can’t I just be happy? Is that so wrong? For the first time since Patrick died, I’m happy. There’s more to life than housework, just in case you’ve forgotten that.”

Daphne crossed her arms and looked at the broom pointedly. “You’re the one who was always so diligent with her daily chores. You’re the one who couldn’t leave the kitchen after a meal until the place looked like it does right now. You never would have let the kitchen get in the shape it was in yesterday.” Daphne pointed to a chair. “Sit down for a minute. Let’s just take a breath and talk about this.”

Kara shook her head. “I don’t feel like sitting down. And, yes, my kitchen was in very bad shape not that long ago, if you remember.” She broke eye contact with her sister as she recalled her meltdown that day. “I was sick then. I’m not sick now, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Have you been taking your medicine correctly?”

“Yes, I have been taking it. Exactly as prescribed.” Anger bubbled up in Kara’s chest. She didn’t like the feeling. She’d been so happy since the night at Sophie’s. And now, she was happier because they had invited her back again. That was something she had hoped for but not really expected. Maybe she wasn’t as boring as she’d feared. If she was boring and plain, they wouldn’t have invited her for dinner so soon.

“Where’s your bottle? The one from the pharmacy.”

“Where it always is,” Kara answered, feeling that anger grow. She fought to control it. She didn’t need, or want, Daphne to see her blow up or have another meltdown.

She’s causing all the trouble in your life.

Kara stopped and a cold chill traced her spine as she turned to see if someone else was in the room. She’d thought that was one of her internal voices, but it didn’t sound like her own.

“Kara? What’s wrong?”

She was here during your last episode, and now she’s trying to make you have another one. She doesn’t want you to be happy. She’s just trying to run your life.

Kara pinned her sister with a furious glare. She was suddenly so angry at Daphne that she wanted to hit her. Hard.

“Nothing’s wrong, Daphne. Nothing at all,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Okay. Where’s the medicine bottle? I need to see how many pills are in it.” She held out her hand and looked slightly perturbed.

“You look like you might be in a hurry, sis. And I know I’m in a hurry. Why don’t you just go on home and tend to your husband and kids so I can finish what I’ve started here?”

“I would like nothing better right now, but I also need to know my sister is okay.” She held her hand out again. “Just show me the bottle, Kara. Then I’ll leave you to your cleaning.”

If you don’t stand up to her now, she’ll be running your life forever. She’s acting like you’re one of her damn kids. You want her to have her nose in your business forever?

“No, I don’t,” Kara answered that strange voice.

“What?” Daphne looked at Kara as if she might have been speaking a foreign language.

Realizing her mistake, Kara shook her head. “Nothing. I’m not getting the bottle. I’m busy and I’m tired of you telling me what to do all the time. I’m not one of your kids, you know.” She started sweeping again.

After staring at Kara for a moment with a puzzled expression, Daphne nodded. “Fine. I’ll get it myself.”

“You do that, Daph. And then you can just show yourself right out the door.”

Without responding, Daphne walked out, presumably to find the medicine bottle.

Are you going to let her go through your things?

“Yes, I am. I’m not fighting with her. I’ll just tell her that she doesn’t have to come back anytime soon. That will keep her out of my business for a bit.”

Kara couldn’t cut her completely out of her life without raising questions from Dr. Hyder—and she didn’t want him questioning more than he already did.

By the time Daphne returned, Kara was almost finished mopping.

“Kara, you’ve missed more than a few doses. Are you forgetting?” Daphne held out the bottle as if showing evidence at a trial.

“Maybe.”

“That’s not really an answer. Let’s try another way. Did you know you were skipping doses? Were you not taking the pills on purpose?”

Kara’s brain raced for the right answer. Yes, she knew. Yes, she’d done it on purpose. But could she tell her sister that? Would that make trouble for her with Dr. Hyder?

“I might’ve forgotten a few doses, but others, I skipped. I don’t like how the pills make me feel. If a problem arises from skipping doses, I’ll start taking them all again. Now please, go away. You’re starting to piss me off with all this acting like my

warden. And you don't have to come back anytime soon either. Believe it or not, I can take care of myself."

The blood in her veins pounded through her midsection and rushed through behind her eardrums. It was so loud she couldn't hear anything but the thrum of her own heartbeat.

She finished mopping and Daphne was gone. Putting away the mop, Kara tried to remember if they'd argued, if she'd walked her sister to the door, and if they'd agreed to a time for her next visit.

Nothing came.

A bit disoriented because of the lost time, she went to the living room to do some light cleaning in there. Surely she'd remember what had happened in a little while.

But she didn't.

Light, bubbly laughter pulled her from her reverie. Kara gasped. She was sitting at the Walkers' dining table. Charles sat to her left and Sophie sat directly across from her. Sophie laughed again.

"Kara, would you like dessert now? I'm ready for it," Sophie asked as she stood.

Looking down at her plate, Kara saw that she had eaten part of her chicken parmigiana and a Caesar salad. Her wine was gone, and the bottle was nearly empty.

"I don't know about our delightfully entertaining guest, but I am ready for dessert, Sophie," Charles said, smiling and winking at Kara.

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. I zoned out there for a minute. I'm always ready for good pie." She didn't know how she knew dessert was pie.

"I'll be right back!" Sophie trotted excitedly into the kitchen, leaving Kara and Charles alone.

"I must say you look magnificent tonight, Kara. The new hair color suits you perfectly, as do the new clothes. Not that



there was anything wrong with your other clothes, but I think this new look is a new you emerging. Like a beautiful butterfly emerging from its cocoon. Such a nice metamorphosis,” Charles said in a low voice as if he didn’t want Sophie to hear his compliment.

Heat raced to her face and her cheeks burned with what she knew was a deep blush. She ran a hand down her hair and tried to see the color without being obvious. Had she colored it without remembering? Looking at her blouse and slacks, she was horrified to find that it was nearly an exact copy of an outfit she’d seen on Sophie when they’d first moved in. The colors were different, but that was all.

Her heart pounded and her palms sweated. When had she bought the clothes? Where had she bought them? She hadn’t had time after Daphne left earlier to go to a store to buy the outfit, and she knew for sure that it wasn’t from her own wardrobe.

Charles leaned toward her and brushed the back of her hand with his. She inhaled sharply and pulled her hand into her lap.

“You know, I might be a stuffed-shirt scientist as Sophie likes to call me, but I’m pretty handy around the house, too.” He let his gaze drift down from her face.

His gaze had a strange weight and heat that Kara could feel on her body. She shifted uncomfortably and looked toward the kitchen.

“Don’t worry about her. She’s fine. Everything takes her forever. Three pieces of pie... she’ll be gone for another five minutes at least.”

Kara nodded.

“I said I’m handy around the house, Kara.”

He looked at her as if expecting some sort of meaningful response, but Kara couldn’t figure out what it was.

“That’s great.”

He nodded and sat back in his seat looking crestfallen. "Alright. I just thought I'd throw that out there since you said you needed some things done around your house."

"Thank you," she replied, unable to recall mentioning anything she needed done.

Sophie entered with a chrome rolling cart. The top shelf held two pies and the second held three plates with two small slices each.

"Mixed berry, which is my all-time fave, and apple. What's more American than apple pie, right?" Sophie chirped happily as she lifted her glass of wine and drained it.

"So, Kara, this is the fifth time you've been over. When are you going to have us to your place for a night of cooking and drinking and talking and laughing?" Sophie seemed more than merely tipsy.

"Fifth time?" Confused, Kara stared at her friend.

"Yes, silly. Sixth if you count the first night when we just had drinks. I'm dying to see your place."

"I think one of us has had too much wine," Kara laughed it off. That was the only explanation.

Sophie tittered and reached for the bottle to refill her glass. "Well, that's the order of the evening, I guess. But seriously, when are we coming to your house for dinner? Your cooking is wonderful, and I think it'd be fun for us to fix a meal together. Maybe Charles could even invite one of his buddies to join us. A single buddy, if you know what I mean."

"Okay, Sophie. I think that's enough of that talk tonight," Charles grumbled.

Kara, would you like more pie?"

"No, thank you. I think I need to go home and sleep off all this wine," she said, laughing nervously.

"Two glasses?" he asked with surprise.

Resisting the urge to run, Kara stood. To her surprise, she wasn't even tipsy. "I'm not feeling well."

It was dark except for the soft glow of her bedside lamp. Kara closed the poetry book and looked around the room. She was dressed in her gown, it was dark outside, and her clock said it was just before midnight. Her glass of water sat untouched beside the bottle of medicine. Struggling to understand the day she'd had, she turned off the lamp and curled up on her side, pulling the cover to her ear.

I didn't take my pill, she thought, huffing in frustration.

Remember what was over there the other night? It might be there again, just waiting for you to reach your hand out into the darkness, said that other voice.

The unknown voice no longer startled her. She simply accepted its advice and nodded. She wasn't going to reach out there into the pitch black and risk that thing touching her hand. She could imagine its touch would be the touch of cold bones, or maybe slimy instead.

Kara shuddered and pulled the cover tighter around her.

The phone rang. Kara rolled over to answer it, and she was standing in the kitchen over the sink, phone to her ear. Had someone said something? Had she said anything? There was only silence, then the sound of kids in the background.

"Hello?" she asked almost timidly. Hadn't she just been in bed?

The clock on the wall said it was three. Her eyes moved to the window over the sink. Bright sunlight. Mid-afternoon. Where had the time gone? Maybe she'd had more than the two glasses of wine that Charles had said.

"Kara?" It was Daphne.

"Yes, it's me. Is something wrong?"

"I've been calling for an hour. I was getting worried. Are you okay?"

No, she definitely was not, but she wouldn't tell her sister that. "I told you yesterday that I was fine. I told you that you don't need to come over so much, and I meant that you don't have to call every day that you're not here, too." She started to hang up.

"Yesterday? Kara, I haven't been to your house in two weeks, and I haven't called you in the last seven days."

With only one overhead light on, Kara watched the water in the sink. The stopper was out, but the water didn't go anywhere. It was clogged. She wished Daphne would just go away. She was always there, always nagging about something, and now Kara couldn't think straight enough to know what to do with her sink. It was dark outside again, and she looked at her reflection in the window.

The ghostly visage shimmered as she moved to one side. Her cheeks were slimmer than she remembered, and she wore another blouse that she had no idea where it had come from. And when had she started wearing makeup? Charles had been right about her hair. It did look better blonde and wavy.

"Where's your pill bottle, sis? I need to get back to my husband and kids sometime before he's in a retirement home and they're having kids of their own, you know. Just because you don't have a life, doesn't mean I don't," Daphne grumbled from the stove where she'd propped up.

"I do have a life. Just get out, go home to your perfect little family, and leave me alone!"

"Perfect? Are you crazy?" Daphne laughed harshly and without humor. "You have a perfect life. Hell, no kids to worry about all day every day and no husband to deal with—you don't even have to go to the doctor; he comes here! I come here. All just to make sure Kara's life is perfect." Daphne's voice rose to a fever pitch as she yelled.

Kara pressed her hands to her ears, but she could still hear her sister's hurtful words. "Stop it. Shut up, shut up, shutupshutupshutup!" She turned and flung a teacup toward

the stove. It hit the ceramic tile wall above the stove and shattered.

Shards of glass flew over the stove, counter, and floor.

Daphne wasn't there.

No one was.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

One week passed, then another, and Ava's team made little further progress identifying either their burglar or Michaela Wallins' killer. Both cases had been utterly silent ever since they'd started investigating. At this point, Ava wasn't even sure whether they were part of the same case or if it had been just a coincidence that Rosie Hammond and Michaela Wallins had been so brutally attacked in such close proximity on the same night.

She didn't believe in coincidences—she'd had enough mentors drill that into her head in her short time in the Bureau—but she at least had to have something to go on, something concrete. And right now, she had nothing.

At least the team-building classes were going well. They'd returned from Richmond after the first week and had already spent two afternoons in an empty community center that smelled like a high-school gymnasium, passing around rubber bouncy balls and loudly announcing their feelings. It had been awkward and silly at first, but soon enough the team was erupting in genuine laughter—laughter that seemed to remain even after they'd left the gym.

It was a bright, sunny morning, and Ava had just pulled into the office building when her phone buzzed in her hand.

“Hey, Ray. How’s it going?” Ava answered her phone with a smile.

“Hey to you, too, kiddo. It’s going. Listen, when are you going to be free for lunch or dinner?”

Ray didn’t sound like himself. Ava’s heart double-hitched and dread shot through her. “Uncle Ray, what’s wrong?” She turned and walked away from the building and toward her car.

“Nothing is wrong, Ava. I just...”

He paused and she could hear that he was moving around outside. Traffic noises in the background grew louder, then softer. She heard shuffling and more movement, then the slam of a car door.

“Uncle Ray?” Her heart raced nearly as fast as the worries flying through her mind.

“Okay. I’m in the car now. Listen, I have some information about your mother’s case, and possibly Molly’s, too. I just found it out this morning. No one else knows about it, and I wanted to give it to you before anyone else.”

“Oh, God, is she dead?” Ava’s voice drifted to her ears from Mars as the ground turned to marshmallows. She leaned heavily against her car.

“No! At least that’s not my information. I still have no idea exactly where she is, but I think I might know where she’s been.” He lowered his voice more. “And maybe where she’s headed.”

Ava inhaled deeply and the world seemed a little more stable under her feet. She pressed a hand to her forehead and closed her eyes as she exhaled. “You scared the life right out of me.”

A tear slipped down her cheek as she stood straight again and opened her eyes. She swiped it away quickly. The sudden bout of nausea seemed more determined to hang around, though.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t want to say a whole lot because I’m at the office. Lots of ears around.”

“Have you not told the investigating team what you’ve learned?”

“Not yet. But I will. After we talk face to face. Can you meet me at El Greco’s for lunch or dinner today?”

“I can head there for lunch. I just need to give the team their assignments first. I’ll meet you at the restaurant in what? An hour?”

“Make it two. It’s going to take me a little while here.”

“Two hours. I’ll be there.”

They hung up. Ava took several more minutes to regain her composure then rushed into the office for the morning meeting. Her nerves were jangled, but she held it together admirably as she stepped through the doors and faced her team.

Her mother had left some evidence of what she was up to, and she was going to be the first one with the information. She would have to tell her father. That was a given. Elizabeth James was still alive.

Ava smiled broadly. Too broadly for that early in the morning, but there it was and there was nothing she could do about it. After a few strange looks from the team, she settled in on her usual spot and waited for Sal to get started.

Her mind wouldn’t let go of the fact that her mother was alive. She couldn’t wait to speak with Ray. The why of the secrecy hadn’t really entered her thought processes. If there was evidence for Molly’s case, also, that meant she was probably still alive. Ava was almost certain that her mother was on that case. Going it solo for some reason known only to her.

All through the meeting, Ava kept glancing at her watch and calculating. It would take an hour to drive to El Greco’s unless the traffic was super congested, which could make the



drive ninety minutes. The meeting started just a few minutes before nine. She needed to leave no later than a quarter to ten to be sure she could get there at their designated time of eleven.

The meeting went smoothly and quickly with no interruptions for once—maybe those team-building exercises had worked even better than she'd thought. It was over at half-past nine and everyone left the room with their assignments. Ava went to her office to check that nothing more needed her immediate attention and then told Sal that she had a meeting and would be back in a few hours.

Traffic was a bit congested. Ava looked down at the speedometer needle jiggling at just over fifty and pounded the wheel with the heel of her hand. "Come on, people. Move," she grumbled under her breath.

Twice she passed when it wasn't completely safe to do so, and she felt guilty for it. If the situation hadn't felt so desperate maybe she wouldn't have.

With five minutes to spare, she pulled into the crowded parking lot of the Mediterranean restaurant and circled slowly looking for Ray's car. He wasn't there yet. She parked at the bottom of the lot nearest the road. When he came in, she would see him.

At ten after, she punched his number into her phone but didn't hit send. She waited another ten minutes as she recalled traffic was getting pretty dense. Maybe he was just caught up in it and running a little late. Just as she hit the send button, she spotted his car making the turn off the main road. She hung up, crammed the phone into her pocket, and nearly jumped out of the car.

He parked beside her. He wasn't smiling. In fact, he looked rather drawn and worried. That did nothing to ease Ava's own feelings of unease.

"I was getting worried," she said, offering a small smile as he got out.

He shook his head. "Traffic's a beast today from my end."

"Wasn't great my way, either. It'll be worse on the return, I'm sure." Ava glanced at the building. "Are we going in or staying out here?"

"Inside. I'm starved." He grinned for the first time, and that did help Ava feel a little better about the situation.

"I'm not starved, but I could eat something. So, what have you learned?" Too anxious to wait, Ava turned to face him, stopping them between two rows of cars.

He shook his head. "Once we're inside. We have to look as if we're just having a nice lunch and catching up. Nothing serious. And if I stop talking, you do the same. This has to be kept quiet, but I think some people know I have the information, so just follow my lead. Okay?" He was ushering her on with a big fake smile on his face as he nodded.

"Sure," she replied, imitating his expression and trying to look relaxed and happy.

Who could know about it if he hadn't told anyone? Where had the information come from? Dangerous people? Did someone in the FBI know he had information he was keeping from them?

They were seated at a back booth with a view of the entire dining area and the access doors. Ava chuckled when the waitress left.

"What's funny?"

"Seating choice. No wonder people can spot FBI and cops from a mile away. If our clothes don't give us away, our actions must."

He nodded and scanned the room. "I think we're okay to talk here."

Ava nodded. "I think so."

"And I'm pretty darn sure you'd say that even if we were sitting in an interrogation room with the whole of the Bureau

on the other side of the mirror listening to us.” He laughed.

Ava shrugged. “Quite possibly. I won’t deny it.”

Ray cleared his throat and gave Ava a meaningful look. Here it was. She hitched her breath, ready for anything. But what he said didn’t exactly shock her.

“Was your mother in Texas before she went to South Africa?”

Ava’s face fell. “Wait, that’s it?”

“What do you mean that’s it?”

“Yeah, I’ve known they went to Texas. It was before the gala. Dad had some meeting or conference in Dallas and she went with him. They stayed at some little dude ranch. I thought you knew about this already?”

Ray shook his head. “That’s not what I mean,” he said.

“Then what is this about?” she snapped.

She hadn’t meant to sound angry, but she did. She was angry. Very angry. There was no reason her mother should still be lost with the FBI looking for her.

“Hey, hey. Smile. Remember we’re just having a nice lunch and catching up. Family time and all that jazz.”

Ava forced another smile and nodded as she tucked hair behind her ear. “This sucks.”

Ray laughed and nodded. “Harder than it seems when you’re watching others do it, huh?”

“Yeah. Exactly. Now, what is all this about Texas?”

“Let me show you the latest photo of your Aunt Kay. She looks so good with her new haircut. She really misses you. We’d love for you to come see us when you can.”

Puzzled, Ava nodded and made sure to keep smiling as Ray took out his wallet. “I’d love to. My schedule should lighten up some in a few weeks. Maybe. You know how it is, though.”

He flipped the wallet open and in the photo section, there was a tiny memory card from a phone.

“Wow,” she said, nodding. “Aunt Kay looks beautiful. Maybe a bit square, but beautiful just the same.” She lowered her voice. “Is that hers?”

He shook his head. “No. She left it to be found, though. I have a flash drive, too.”

“In the same place?”

He shook his head again and glanced around the room. “The memory card is evidence I received legitimately from conducting my own search at the ranch. The flash drive, not so much.” He leaned toward her and lowered his voice to a tense whisper. “I paid a great deal of money and risked a lot to secure it and am still figuring out how to present it in a way that will keep my informant out of it and keep me out of so much trouble.”

“What?” Ava felt her smile slip and couldn’t bring it back.

He nodded. “The information on the memory card is like a catalog of women and, sick as it is, kids. With the image data and information, I found out where most of the photos were taken and went there. Small town in Texas. One-horse town kind of place where corruption is easy to hide if you know who to cut in on the profits. That’s where I went undercover and found a man who was willing to be a snitch for the right price. After I showed him how to use the flash drive, he got me the information. I gave him the money, and he left town. Won’t be hard to find later, if I need him, but I hope I don’t.”

“Can’t you just tell the Bureau what you did? I mean, this could break the case, right?”

“This is going to open a whole can of worms. Not just your mom’s case or Molly’s, but the information on a human trafficking ring that operates from the US and spans the globe.”

“I don’t understand. If the man didn’t even know how to use a flash drive, how’d he get you that kind of information?”

Ray laughed, and this time, it was genuine. “It was his general lack of knowledge, I think, that caused it. He downloaded compressed files that contained bank transactions, ring locations, safe houses, victim storage locations, and more.”

“Can I see them?” She nodded toward the wallet he was putting away.

“Not yet. But I’ll tell you what’s on them. Don’t look so wounded and angry, either. It’s for your own good that I keep them. It’s not like I have extra copies just lying around.”

She nodded. She didn’t like it, but she nodded because she wanted to hear whatever information he would volunteer. That was better than no information.

For the next hour, he told her about the little Texas town, but wouldn’t give her a name or tell her how close it was to the ranch where her parents had stayed. It was one of those cheesy western ranches that advertise by telling people they will teach them how to be real wild west cowboys. They had asked if Ava wanted to join them, and she had declined immediately. She’d just gotten back from Windsor Island and had been in no mood to go on any more adventures, even fake ones.

As she sat in the bustling restaurant listening to Ray, she wished she had made a different decision. At the time, it had seemed as if it was of little consequence. She wasn’t a western type of person, and had simply declined. Her parents hadn’t acted any different when they had returned from that trip.

Or had they? Her father had remained the same. But hadn’t her mother become a bit distant? Hadn’t she seemed preoccupied for weeks? And she had found ways to go off and be alone for stretches of time even when Ava was visiting. Elizabeth had looked strained and tired just before her South Africa trip, also. At the time, no one thought much of it. She had a stressful job. It was nothing to raise red flags if she seemed a bit more tired than usual and a little more strained than normal. The jetlag alone would do it.

“What about the phone card? Where did you find that again?”

“At the ranch. It was on the lip of the railing underneath.”

“And you’re certain Mom left it there?”

“Yes. I lifted two partial prints. One from the card, the other from the railing. They both match hers.”

“I thought you said you just received this information this morning.” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“I did say that. I did get more information this morning, but I have had the other for a while.”

“What did you get this morning, then? And how long have you been sitting on this other?”

“Don’t get worked up, Ava. I’ve told you everything as soon as I possibly could. This morning, I received another partial fingerprint.”

Ava’s heart raced. “Mom’s?”

He nodded.

“Oh, God, where?”

“It was in Italy. A hostel. One of the cheap, scary ones that we’re always warning people to stay away from. No security, no cameras, and no staff to speak of except maybe Scary Larry at the check-in desk.”

“She stayed in a hostel? In Italy? Why? She’s been so careful to keep from leaving any trace so far.”

“Because she knows we’re looking for her, and she wants us to follow her. Just not too closely. My bet is that she wants you and Hank to know she’s alive and okay.”

“Where was the fingerprint lifted from in the room? I mean, it’s a hostel, there must be thousands of partials all over everything.”

“Lip of the bedrail, just like in the Texas ranch. It’s an old-school technique we were taught to use about a million years

ago. Way before your time.”

“Why the lip of the railing?”

“Think about it. Who ever touches those things?”

Ava grinned. “Nobody.”

He clicked his tongue, winked, and nodded. “Exactly. I guess your mom knew about the technique and hoped someone would find the prints.”

“So, the information on the memory card led you to the small town in Texas. The information you got on the flash drive led you to Italy?”

He nodded. “Close enough. I’ve been waiting on the confirmation in Italy for weeks. Anyway,” he looked at his watch, “we best be clearing out now. You can tell your dad, but no one else. I know you’ve been meeting with a Dean Steele—”

“How the hell do you know that?”

He tapped his temple. “I’m keeping an eye on all of us these days.”

“Should I be doing the same?”

Ray gave it a long moment of thought. “I won’t say no to that. In any case, do not give him this information. The next people to hear about it will be the team investigating your mom’s disappearance. Got it?”

“I’ve got it.”

On her drive back to the office, Ava called her dad.

“Dad, we should really get together tonight. What do you say?”

There was a pause. “I’m really tired today, Aviva, and I have a ton of work that will have to be done at home long after I leave the office. Can we meet up tomorrow?”

Ava thought about it. By then, Ray might have told the team about the evidence. She couldn’t risk her father finding

out from anyone else. “Dad, this really needs to happen tonight. I promise you’ll feel better after a quick visit from your favorite daughter.”

He chuckled. “Ava, you’re my only daughter.”

“That must be why I’m your favorite then. Come on. Seriously, I can’t take no for an answer on this one. I’m coming by this evening.”

“Ava, please. Wait until tomorrow. I’m about neck-deep in trial prep right now. We have a murderer on the stand who’s about this close to walking. Again. I can’t let that happen.”

Biting her lip, Ava shook her head. “No. It’s about Mom. Now stop being stubborn. I’m coming over this evening.”

Silence from his end. Then a sharp intake of air. “Elizabeth?”

“Can’t talk about it over the phone. Besides, I’m driving. See you this evening.” She hung up before he could fire his barrage of questions.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

*Kara*

The journals took up most of Kara's time every day. When she wasn't watching for Charles to emerge from his house so she could finagle her way to being with him alone, she was journaling about him and his unending charm. His obvious crush on her was her inspiration every day.

She had episodes of missing time, but she couldn't be bothered by such a trivial matter when the object of her obsession lived just next door. After all, the missing time had caused her no real grief so far. A few awkward moments when she was put on the spot by her sister or by one of the Walkers were the only times she gave the missing time much thought anymore.

Obviously, she and Charles had gotten to know one another quite well. For the most part, she didn't remember those times with him, but she knew things about him and had no other way to explain the knowledge.

She figured it must have been during the five times she'd apparently had dinner with Charles and Sophie. She didn't recall each one individually, but they must have happened. How else would she know Charles so well?

Sitting at her writing desk, Kara fantasized about being Charles' wife. She could name a thousand reasons why she would make him a better wife than Sophie. For starters, Kara was a bit older than Sophie. That made her closer to Charles' own age, and would give them references from the past that Sophie just couldn't relate to. She wasn't, however, old enough to be considered aged. After she'd cut and dyed her hair and started wearing makeup, she thought she had a pretty good handle on the looks department. Then there was all the attention she would willingly shower Charles with. She would cook for him, clean for him, do anything he asked no matter what time it was or how busy she was. She would stop and do his bidding. That was the power of his animal magnetism. His hold over Kara was exhilarating and frightening. Nothing had made her feel so alive in years.

After detailing a day in her fantasy life as if it were real, Kara read over her words with a smile. The thoughts she had brought to life on the pages made her giddy, full of energy and a desire to be close to Charles again.

She stood and went to the window. For the next two hours, she remained at the window. When she grew bored or her hope began to flag, she reminded herself that she was standing there to clear her head, observe the beauty of the day, and plan her activities so she didn't get sidetracked. She wasn't just standing there waiting for Mr. Walker to appear so she could race outside like a brazen harlot.

Even though that's exactly what she was doing. She'd been doing it for days on end now. Sometimes, it's easier to assign more mundane and innocent meanings to actions than to admit to the full truth of the situation, even to oneself.

She waited and waited, for minutes or hours or days, she waited. Then he appeared like a vision walking over the side lawn toward the back. She sucked in a breath and held it as she fought the urge to raise the window and call down to him. No, it was best if he didn't realize she was watching him. Observing him while he was unaware made him all the more desirable to Kara.

Voyeurism isn't a good thing to add to your file at Dr. Hyder's office, said the voice of the stranger who wasn't a stranger any longer.

"Oh, shush, you. I'm just looking. No different than watching birds," Kara answered aloud.

One last look at her reflection in the mirror, and Kara rushed downstairs and out the side door. Sophie couldn't see her going out that door. If she was even looking, which Kara doubted. Sophie rarely cared where Charles was, only that he wasn't in her way or keeping her from going somewhere that she wanted to go.

"Oh, hi, Charles," Kara called out when she was a few yards from him. "Isn't it lovely out today?"

Charles turned to her. Kara was shocked at the angry look on his face. But then the hateful expression melted into the most wonderful smile.

"Kara, so good to see you again." Charlie pushed the gate open and stepped into her backyard. "Yes, absolutely lovely day, indeed. You know, Charles is just so... formal. Charlie is fine."

Charlie. A flock of butterflies panicked in her chest as she walked toward him. He hadn't been in her yard alone with her.

At least not that you remember, that voice said sarcastically.

Clearing her throat, Kara shook her head and pushed on toward Charlie. "What are you up to today?"

"Well, you said there was a tree back here that had dropped a branch on your fence. I thought I'd take a look and see if I couldn't fix it for you." He nudged her with his elbow and winked. "I told you I'm pretty handy around the house. If it's broken, I can usually fix it."

Kara nodded, feeling the blush light up her face. "Thank you. That's very sweet. I'm afraid I just don't know the first thing about fallen trees and broken fences."

“Good thing I do. What about that sink? Ever have anyone look at it for you?”

Had she told him about the sink? She’d only noticed it yesterday, she thought. She shook her head.

“Excellent. I’ll have a look at the damage back here, and then I’ll have a look at that sink, too.”

Kara was breathless. He was going to go into her house. With her. The two of them alone. It would be just as though they were a couple. A real couple.

“I’ll go put on some tea. Just come on in when you’re done out here,” she told him, suddenly wanting to give the place a thorough going-over to make sure it was in tidy order.

“Will do.”

Back in the house, Kara squealed with delight as she went into the kitchen and put on the kettle. The house looked fine, and so did she. The only thing she needed to do was put her medicine in the pantry. Out of sight, out of mind. She didn’t want him questioning her health if he noticed the little pill holder. When she opened the pantry, she noticed that she had also put her prescription bottle in there, but couldn’t recall when.

Then she was pouring their tea, and Charlie was sitting at the table smiling at her. She placed a small plate with cookies in front of him, then set the tea beside it. He was still smiling up at her and looking at her as if she were the most intriguing woman he’d ever met. It sent a shiver of delight up her spine.

She chuckled as she sat. “What? Why are you smiling at me like that?” Self-consciously, she ran a hand over her hair.

“Because you’re just so damn beautiful, Kara. I can’t get over how pretty you are with your hair, and the makeup. Just beautiful.”

She giggled and looked down at her tea, brushing a strand behind her ear. “Thank you, Charlie,” she said in a low, coy tone.

“Kara?” Charlie’s voice was very loud and coming from behind her.

She spun in her chair to see him standing in the doorway giving her a worried look. She looked back to the empty chair. There was an empty plate and cup there as well. Her own teacup was empty. Confused, she shot out of her seat.

Something was making a terrible high-pitched noise in her ears. It got louder and louder, overwhelming her senses, threatening to split her head open. She could barely hear anything else.

Charlie stepped to the stove and yanked the screaming kettle from the hot burner. “Kara, are you okay?” He moved to her, putting his hands on her shoulders.

She nodded but wasn’t sure if that was the truth.

“That kettle was screaming for some minutes. I got worried and came in. You were,” he stopped and looked at the table. “You were talking to someone just then. Who was it?”

She shook her head and felt a jab of fear run through her chest. “No one. I was just practicing how to say thank you to you. Properly. I wanted you to know how grateful I am that you’re helping me out.”

He let his hands fall away and eyed the empty plate and teacup again. “Don’t worry about that, sweetie. I’m just glad to be helping someone who truly appreciates it.” He turned to the sink and started evaluating its drainage problem. “It’s no secret that Sophie doesn’t put much effort into being grateful for much, but that’s my fault. I’ve always spoiled her rotten.” He opened the cabinet underneath the sink and knelt down, doing something to the pipes.

“Uh-huh,” Kara said as she began making the tea that she thought she’d already made and served. She was thankful that Charlie was being a gentleman about the strange incident. At least he wasn’t questioning her to the ends of the earth the way her sister would have been doing.

He grunted and wiggled out from under the sink. “Good news. It’s just a clogged drain trap from the looks of it.” He stood. “I’ll get some plastic and old towels to put under there to catch the worst of the mess. Should have you back in business in less than an hour.” He smiled brightly, but Kara could see the glimmer of un-asked questions lingering in his eyes. In his beautiful eyes.

“That’s terrific.” She motioned to the table. “Tea’s ready. I have cookies, too.”

“Homemade?”

“Indeed,” she confirmed and smiled.

As he drank his tea, he chatted idly about lots of things. Kara listened intently, soaking up every ounce of information she could about him. As she was serving his second cup and laying out more cookies, she knew by the look on his face that the conversation was getting ready to take a turn.

Steadying her nerves, she sat and braced for the questions. Eventually, anyone who was around her had them. That didn’t make it any easier to answer them, though. She hated feeling as if people judged her based on some of her actions. Or based on her illness. But her illness did not define her.

“Kara, why didn’t you just have the plumber come out and fix that? He could have come in and had that fixed in twenty minutes and you wouldn’t have been dealing with it for over a week now. Are you having financial troubles?”

She gawked at him.

He held up both hands. “I don’t mean to pry. I’m sorry. I just thought...” He shrugged. “I just don’t like to think you’re suffering only because of finances when that’s something I can help you with. You’re my friend, and I want you to know that I am very generous with my friends.”

“I’m not having money trouble, Charlie. Not at all.” She looked anywhere but directly at him.

“Then why?”

She shook her head. "I have a few quirks that not everyone understands. Let's just say that bringing people here from the city is out of the question for me."

He considered her answer for a long moment. "What about someone from the small town right here where you live? I'm sure there are plumbers closer to home."

She shook her head. "Not certified. And most of them are the sort of people you don't want in your house. Especially if you're a woman living alone. Do you get my meaning?"

He nodded. "Unfortunately, I understand exactly what you mean. I just don't understand about the city. Is there something about it that I don't know?"

Sighing heavily, she shook her head. Charlie liked her. He didn't judge her, and he'd said they were friends. At that moment, she made a decision and knew it would change her life forever. She was going to come clean with Charlie. How else was she ever going to know how he truly felt about her? If he ran from the house and never came back, it would be for the best to have it done now rather than later.

"Charlie, I'm afraid of the city. I'm fearful of the cramped spaces, the hulking buildings, and the sardine-packed sidewalks. I'm afraid of the people in cities. They're all half-crazy and just looking for opportunities to hurt and steal and kill. That's why I don't go there, and never have anyone come here from there."

"Okay. That's not so bad, but I can assure you that there are a lot of good people in the city, too."

She shook her head. "Nope. I don't believe it. My Patrick thought the same thing and look what it got him. Dead far too soon. It was because he had to deal with city people every day." She nodded and thumped the table with her hand for emphasis.

But Charlie is from the city, too, Kara. He and Sophie both. You don't mind him being in your house, do you?

“No, I don’t, because he lives here now,” Kara answered angrily.

“Excuse me?” Charlie asked.

Gasping, she put a hand over her mouth. “See what you’ve caused now. Why don’t you just go away and leave me alone?” she muttered behind her hand.

Charlie looked stunned and stood. “Alright. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you, Kara.”

“No, no, no! Not you, Charlie. Did I say that out loud? I don’t want you to leave, really.” She stood and held out a hand to stop him.

Staring blankly at her for a moment, he nodded. “Then who were you talking to, Kara? Was it a ghost? I need to know who’s here with me or I’ll never be able to stay.” He spread his arms and tilted his head. There was a gleam in his eyes that Kara couldn’t understand.

“No ghost. Just...” she sighed and lowered her eyes. “It’s just a voice I hear sometimes, Charlie. I guess by now you know I’m ill.”

He sat again, looking intrigued. “I didn’t. Not until just now. I think I understand, though.”

She looked up with hope filling her heart. She knew he would understand. She knew he wouldn’t be judgmental. “You do?”

He nodded. “Do you sometimes see things as well as hear them? Things that turn out to be unreal?”

Her heart leaped into her throat and she nodded. “Yes. That doesn’t make you want to run away and never see me again? It doesn’t make you uncomfortable that I have... schizophrenia?”

Chuckling, he shook his head. “My goodness, no.” He leaned forward and took one of her hands in his. “Do you have a doctor? I just want to know that you’re getting the treatment you need to manage your illness.”



She nodded. Her tongue seemed to have taken a vacation from work. It just stuck to the roof of her mouth like a dumb, blind, and dead thing.

“Excellent. Do you have to go to appointments often? If you do, I wouldn’t mind driving you. Or Sophie could even take you. I know you dislike driving.”

“No!” She gripped his hand and leaned toward him. “No, you have to swear to me that you won’t tell Sophie. Don’t breathe a word of this to her. Promise me, Charlie. Promise!”

“I won’t tell her if you don’t want me to, but she’s as understanding—”

“Maybe so, but she’s also the only female friend I’ve had in a long, long time. She is perfect and lovely, and I do not want her to know I’m broken in any way. I want our relationship to remain just as it is. Please.” She pleaded to him with her eyes. Her heart thudded sickly against her ribs. Had she made a mistake in telling him?

He gave a slow nod. “Okay. It’s totally your choice, Kara. If you ever want to tell her, you can. I’ll never say a word, though.” He acted as if he were zipping his lips.

Relief washed over her and she let his hand go. “Dr. Hyder comes here once a month to see me. I don’t see him because his office is at the edge of the city.”

“Once a month? Doesn’t need to check on you more often?”

She shook her head proudly. “He says I’m doing great, even though my sister Daphne thinks otherwise.” It took all she had not to spit her sister’s name with all the bile she could muster. “She’s just treating me like one of her kids, though. As if I have anything in common with her troublesome rugrats.” She chuckled and wondered where that had come from. She had never called those kids names. She loved them.

They sat in silence for a few moments while Charlie finished his tea and cookie, and Kara did the same. Was it a fluke of nature or did the cookie seem sweeter than ever

before? She couldn't answer for sure, but it was delicious. It had been a while since she'd tasted any food so thoroughly. The sweetness of the sugar and the tang of the cherry center permeated not just her tastebuds, but seemed to filter into every fiber of her being. It was a lovely feeling.

"Look, I'll come back in a few minutes to work on the sink. Is that okay? I just need to grab some tools and that plastic and the towels before I start."

"Yes, that's fine. Whatever you need to do. The side door will be unlocked, just let yourself in if I'm not down here."

He nodded and left.

An hour later, Charlie had spread the plastic and laid out the towels. Kara nibbled at her thumbnail as he sprawled on his back and shimmied under the sink almost to his waist.

"Do you need me to do anything?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, do you have another towel? A really thick one that you don't mind ruining."

"Yes. I have a few upstairs that I never use. Just one?"

"Better make it two, just in case. Take your time, though. No hurry. It'll take me a few minutes to get this loose."

"Alright. I'll go on up and get them now."

"Thank you," he said in an almost crooning tone that traced a tingly trail over her skin.

Kara rushed up the stairs and then forced herself to slow down. She couldn't believe how wonderful Charlie was. Could they ever be together? Would Sophie ever understand? Her heart grieved at the thought of hurting Sophie. She really was a talented young woman; so worldly, fun, energetic. A bright light in a world of darkness. It would be a terrible thing to hurt her.

Just have an affair behind her back. That's how everyone does it.

“No, it’s not. Some people get divorces to marry other people. I just don’t know if she’d ever understand if that happened. She might never like me again.”

Do you value her friendship more than Charlie’s love?

“Shut up,” she hissed. “You’re just trying to confuse me.”

You’re already confused. You don’t need me to do that.

Kara shook her head violently. “Go away.”

I’m not even here. See, that’s how confused you already are.

Kara spun and struck out toward no one. She was alone, and she had known that on some deeper level. That level didn’t have much influence on her perception while she was hearing the voice, though.

As she descended the stairs with the towels, she heard the distinct sound of her pantry door shutting. She stopped and listened, but heard nothing more out of the ordinary. She went on into the kitchen, and Charlie was sitting cross-legged in front of the sink waiting for her to bring him the towels.

“I’ve got it loosened up now. This is where it’s going to get messy, but it has to be done.” He smiled, winked, and reached under the sink and pulled the trap loose.

Kara cringed as dark muck glopped onto the towels. There was very little clear water. Charlie made a face and wrinkled his nose. A moment later, the foul odor hit Kara. Putting a hand over her mouth, she fled from the kitchen.

“Sorry, should’ve warned you,” Charlie called.

“It’s okay. I just wasn’t expecting that,” she answered from the hallway.

“I think I heard Sophie come home just a minute ago. You can go sit with her and have some tea until I’m done, if you want to. She’d enjoy the company, I’m sure.”

“That actually sounds like a good idea right now.” Even though she had misgivings about leaving anyone alone in her

home, she never gave a second thought to leaving Charlie there.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

As her dad took another slice of pizza, Ava raised an eyebrow at him. “Should you be eating pizza?”

He shrugged. “Probably not, but don’t tell on me.” He winked and grinned. “Besides, you just told me that my wife is still out there and somewhat—relatively—safe. That alone added a few years to my lifespan.”

“Dad,” she frowned.

“Aviva, I appreciate your concern for me, but trust me, I’m okay. I’ve just been stressed lately. And so have you.”

“I think it’s a little more than stress, Dad.”

“Well, I was thinking about what you said—really, I was—and so I went to the doctor the other day.”

Not even an industrial crane could have lifted Ava’s jaw from the floor at that moment. “You what?”

Hank winked. “Shocking, isn’t it? But I did. They’ve put me on a couple new medications that aren’t so bad and he said I need to eat more fiber. This is the first meal I’ve had all week that wasn’t split pea soup.”

Now that she looked at him, Ava couldn’t help noticing that her father looked more robust and less worried. Ever since

she suspected he had heard from her mother, he had progressively gotten better, and was no longer so tense and withdrawn. He was even gaining a bit of his weight back.

“Really, I’m more concerned about you, Aviva. I don’t remember the last time you took a break.”

“You’re one to talk,” she countered.

“And I have the ulcer and heart trouble to prove it,” he said. “What I’m saying is, you get it from me. And I don’t necessarily want you to go down that path. I’m so proud of you. I’m proud of everything you do. But you can’t just throw your entire being into a case. It took me a long time to get to the point where I could even sleep through the night when my mind was racing about a case.

“You know, when you were a baby, I never minded when you’d cry in the middle of the night because it gave me an excuse to get up and look over my files again while I was putting you back to sleep. I was obsessed. It was only until you got a little older and started going to school that I realized I was missing out on memories. I was missing out on so much of life, real life, because I was so focused on work. And we do good work. We put away horrible people. We really make a difference out there. But we do ourselves no good—and it makes the work suffer—if we lose sight of what’s important to us. And that’s something I’ve struggled to keep in mind over the years. I still struggle with it a lot. Ever since your mom disappeared, I’ve been trying to resist the temptation to just throw myself into work. Like if I just put my head down long enough that by the time I lift it up she’ll be back. And I can see you doing the same thing. We’re going to need to rely on each other to get through this thing. I don’t want you to end up, well...”

He ran a hand from his heart to his stomach with a wry smile. “Well, like this.”

Ava nodded, feeling the emotion brimming up in her eyes. She blinked it away.

“So tell me about this case that’s got you so focused.”

It was like whiplash. Ava frowned. “I thought you didn’t want me to obsess about work.”

“And I don’t. But it’s clearly on your mind. Let me know what’s going on and we can work through it. You’ve clearly been stewing on it. Time to take it off the heat and let it cool.”

“I don’t think that’s how the metaphor works,” Ava laughed.

“Well, humor me,” he insisted. “Serve me a bowl.”

“It’s just this Hammond case. None of it seems to really add up. We didn’t find anything stolen from the unit of our murder victim, so I’m not sure if they’re connected at all. And murder doesn’t seem like our burglar’s M.O., even though he has had a pattern of escalating violence over the last several victims. It’s like we’re looking at two separate cases that sort of overlap, but not quite. I just can’t bring myself to believe it’s a coincidence that both happened on the same evening.”

“I heard about that. How is Rosie? Is she okay?”

“Last I heard, her condition is stable at the ICU, but the attacker really did a number on her. They say she should be okay, but it’s going to take some extensive physical therapy for her to get back to her life again. She still hasn’t really been well enough to talk to investigators yet.”

“Jesus,” he muttered with a shake of his head. “Such a shame. She’s a good kid.”

“She’s my age, Dad. Not a kid.”

“I know, but still,” he protested. “I’ve met her a couple times, you know. At some of these mixers and social events and such. You’d like her.”

The reminder that Ava was still so young and yet already taking up the beginnings of leadership in the Bureau knocked against her brain like a paperweight.

“I just don’t know what connects these cases, and I won’t have anything further to go on until we can finally talk to Rosie. So it’s like we’re sitting here twiddling our thumbs until she’s well enough to speak. And in the meantime, whoever did this is out there, waiting to strike again.”

Hank considered thoughtfully and took another slice of pizza. “Sounds like there’s not much you can do,” he offered. “Scene’s been processed, you’ve looked over it ten thousand times, you’ve got a team on it, and you’re following up with witnesses and other victims to put together a more complete profile.”

“I just keep thinking there’s something I’m missing. Like I’m staring right past it, missing the forest for the trees,” she replied.

“The answer will come to you, Aviva. Sometimes you have to look away for a little while to see the full picture. That’s another lesson I had to learn the hard way. There’s some little part of the back of your brain that’s going to just keep at it like the Energizer bunny. And when that answer comes to you, it’ll come. It might wake you up at two A.M. with a sudden revelation, but it’ll get there. You just have to leave it alone to work.”

“I guess,” she grumbled as she grabbed another slice and shook some cheese and pepper onto it. “It still doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“It never really does. But that’s part of this line of work. The waiting is the worst part.”





## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*Kara*

**K**ara woke at dawn. The first thing she noticed was the smell of body odor on her covers and pillow. Grimacing, she sat up and pulled the covers up to sniff again. It was definitely coming from the covers. Disgusted with her lack of attention to her housekeeping lately, she flung the covers back and got out of bed.

She looked out the window and saw that cobwebs had begun to form in the corners of it. Dust covered the slats of the blinds. Her eyes traveled up, and she was horrified to see that thick cobwebs were forming on the ceiling, too. Mostly in the corner, but also between the vanity mirror and the wall and from top to bottom in the nearest corner.

How long had she been neglecting her chores? This was surely more than a day or two. This looked like weeks.

“I’ll spend the whole day cleaning. Have to get the house back into shape. This is unacceptable.” She shook her head and walked into the bathroom. The bright white of the bathroom seemed more of a cream color. At least the mirror was clean. She couldn’t say the same for the towels that had been folded and placed on the shelf, or the rugs on the floor, or the floor itself for that matter.

Does the rest of the house look this bad? she wondered.

Eyeing the closed toilet with some trepidation, she moved toward it. If it was filthy, she thought she might faint. She held her breath as she tentatively reached out to lift the lid, preparing for the worst. Thankfully, it wasn't nearly as dirty as she'd feared. With only one person using it, she guessed the mess was naturally going to be minimal.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she turned on the water and stepped into the grungy tub to take her shower. She kept her eyes closed most of the time and avoided touching the walls. She hurried through the shower and stepped out. Since all the towels were dirty, she went back to the bedroom nude and shivering.

She dried off with a clean cotton shirt and then dressed. She had a lot of work to do and didn't delay getting started. As she scrubbed at the bathroom sink, she noted the makeup stains. She couldn't recall wearing makeup. Then again, she hadn't recalled cutting or dying her hair, either. She made a mental note to speak to Dr. Hyder about those things and the episodes of missing time.

After the bathroom, she started on the bedroom. She stripped it bare of linens and lugged the basket into the laundry room. She didn't dare look too closely at the rest of the house as she went, fearing what condition it would be in.

As she ascended the stairs again, she wondered if the doctor had noticed that her house was dirty. He didn't go upstairs on his visits, so he might not have seen it. And, she usually only had appointments in one room, and that's where the doctor stayed until he was finished, then it was straight back out to his car.

What about Daphne? She made it a point to go upstairs and be nosy. It was her nature. Why hadn't she said anything? Why hadn't she made a big deal of it?

Because you practically ran her off.

Kara stopped and grabbed the handrail for balance. It was not her normal internal voice. It was deep and distorted. She felt as if something deep inside her brain was being torn in two. She groaned loudly and sank to her knees, gripping her head.

Kara came to on the stairs. She was unsure what had happened. She was dressed in joggers and an oversized shirt, definitely not her choice. Charlie and Sophie might visit. She couldn't have them seeing her in something like that. She went to her room and changed into a more suitable outfit.

Sometime later, Kara had no idea how long since the staircase incident, she was at Sophie and Charlie's. She and Sophie were on the back patio having a glass of wine. She knew time had passed because her clothes were different.

"I just can't believe you wore contacts all those years to hide your heterochromia," Sophie was saying. "Your eyes are absolutely stunning. You could have a career in modeling with those peepers." She reached out and stroked a finger down Kara's cheek.

It seemed something else was different, too. When had she stopped wearing her contacts? She felt as if she might just be going off the deep end. She had to consider it. She never went about showing off her screwed-up eyes.

"No. I seriously doubt that. It's like looking at two different people. I don't like it. Patrick preferred the sweet hot chocolate brown." She chuckled and shifted her gaze.

"Well, all I can say is that I wish my eyes were that pretty. I'm so jealous," Sophie said, tossing a linen napkin at Kara.

It was pitch dark in the bedroom. Kara had awakened from a nightmare. The monster was after her, closing in on her, and she barely escaped. Panting for breath and wiping sweat from her face, she reached toward the lamp. Before she could flip it on, something cold and dead caressed the back of her hand.

Screaming, she fell out of the other side of the bed. The desiccated form of her dead husband appeared on the bed. The

lamplight flickered and sizzled behind him.

“Where’s my Kara?” he rasped as his prune-like eyes shifted in the oversized sockets. He pointed one gnarly finger at her as he leaned over the edge of the bed.

“I—I—I’m right here,” she stammered, her voice trembling.

“You’re not my Kara. Give me my Kara back!” he roared as he lunged forward, landing squarely on top of her.

She and Patrick were sitting in the living room. He was watching the news and she was reading a book. The room was lit in an ethereal glow. Something felt wrong. Just what it was, she couldn’t tell. Maybe just the weird lighting. That was probably the way the setting sun was shining through the remnants of the storm clouds from earlier.

She smiled at Patrick and dipped back into her book, relishing the quiet and peaceful moments with her husband.

Then she was in the kitchen. She had a fried egg and one piece of bacon on a plate. The sun was bright, the birds were singing, and Patrick was waiting for his breakfast. It was almost time for him to leave for work.

It was mid-afternoon, and Kara was pouring her tea when she heard a woman sobbing. She followed the sound to the front door. Peeking out the window by the door, she saw Sophie there. She was crying but wasn’t hysterical.

“Sophie,” Kara began as she opened the door swiftly. “What’s wrong? Come in here. Are you alright?” She put an arm around her friend’s shoulders and led her to the living room.

“Thank you. I didn’t know where else to go. I’m just so exhausted, Kara.” She sobbed and leaned in for another hug.

Kara hugged her. “What’s happened?”

“It’s an argument. Charles and I are arguing again. I’m just so damned tired of arguing over stupid things.”

“What was it about? Talk it out. You’ll feel better for it.” Kara nodded and smiled, trying to soothe her friend, but her mind kept slipping. She was with Patrick one moment and back with Sophie the next.

As Sophie started explaining the nature of the most recent argument, Kara’s mind wandered into a beautiful fantasy. A dream.

It started out simple enough: Sophie and Charlie would divorce. It would be a big deal with lots of drama, but it would happen. Afterward, Charlie might be sad and lonely. That’s where Kara would come in. That would be the beginning of their relationship. They would become the best of friends. Inseparable. Then love would happen, and it would be happily-ever-afters for as far as she could see.

Kara was sitting in her parlor listening to a record when she realized it was dark outside. She jumped from her seat and rushed to the living room. Sophie wasn’t there. The door was locked, and the lights were on over at their house.

Even though she couldn’t remember anything after Sophie started describing the argument, everything must have turned out okay.

Drifting back to the parlor, Kara did something she hadn’t done until then. She sat in her chair and willed the fantastic delusion to come back. She closed her eyes and saw his smiling face.

“Charlie,” she whispered, as if she would be saying his name for the rest of her life.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ava woke up the next day with a renewed sense of vigor. Her conversation with her dad had really helped. She may not have yet gotten any ideas thrusting her awake in the middle of the night, but she knew they were on the precipice of cracking this case wide open. The sun was shining high and big puffy clouds drifted lazily in the air.

Despite herself, Ava grinned as she stepped into the office. They were going to solve the case. She just knew it.

So when Sal met her at the door to the bullpen and handed her a new folder, she was completely flabbergasted.

“This is—what—what about Michaela Wallins? What about Rosie Hammond?”

“Orders from up top,” Sal shrugged. “That one’s stalled out. Richmond PD is handling the interviews until we’ve got something more solid to work on. In the meantime, this takes priority.”

“Wonderful,” she muttered.

“Look this over. Morning meeting’s in ten.”

Ava took the extremely thin file and hustled over to her office to review it. Thankfully, there wasn’t much to it. A

woman named Sophie Walker had been missing from her home in a little suburb called Clear Branch for fifty-two hours. Since she was the wife of a renowned chemist who had significant political influence, the case needed to be closed as quickly as possible and with as little fuss as possible. Senators and governors and judges would be upset otherwise. That much was easy to glean from the hastily-pieced-together documents.

Sal ran a quick morning meeting, outlined all of their roles, and stressed the importance and urgency of the case. Lots of eyes were on them to find Ms. Walker and bring her back safely.

“Just like the last one,” Metford scoffed. “Politics, politicians.”

Ava turned to him. “If you were looking for endless rum drinks and having your toes in the sand, maybe you should’ve been a beach bum instead of a federal agent.” She gave him a half-grin and was happy to see that he took it in stride. At least for the moment.

“Might take you up on that, Ava,” he said. “A beach day sounds nice right about now.”

“We’re wasting daylight, people,” Sal announced as she slung her bag over her shoulder. “Ava, you’re with me.”

They strode out into their SUVs and turned up the highway to head for Clear Branch. They arrived at the pristine suburb within the hour and turned onto the idyllically named Cloudland Avenue.

Sal gave a low whistle as they passed the large estates and mansions filling the road. “Real nice out here. Surprised there isn’t a gate.”

Ava nodded and started toward the house. “I thought the same thing. If I had this much money, I think I’d want to live behind a gate and know there was security making regular rounds while I slept.”

“I don’t think either of us will ever have to worry about that. If a burglar broke into my house, I’d ask to follow him around just in case he found any money.” Sal laughed but kept it short and very low.

They pulled over on the side of the road, not wanting to simply waltz up the Walkers’ driveway. Metford, Santos, and Ashton followed suit and they formed an impromptu huddle.

“You three, go around and see what you can find out about Mrs. Walker, who saw her last,” Sal told them. “Ava and I will question Mr. Walker.”

Everyone nodded and turned to their tasks. Without even needing to be told where to go, the three of them put their heads together and mapped out a route. They were still hammering out logistics when Ava and Sal turned to the Walker residence.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Ava commented. “Wonder how the drive was.”

“Don’t you start jinxing us now, James,” Sal replied. She stepped up and knocked on the door.

A man came up to open the door quickly. He looked distraught. He was tall, and handsome, and he was clearly the sort of man who cared a lot about appearances—but right now, he looked rough. His clothes were disheveled, he had a five-o’clock shadow, and his eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, though he held his composure well.

Ava and Sal badged him. “Mr. Walker, we’re Agents Rossi and James with the FBI. We’re here to talk to you about—”

“My wife, Sophie. Yes, I know why you’re here. Come in, please.” He motioned toward the living room. “We can sit there or in the dining room.”

“This is fine, Mr. Walker.”

“Charles,” he corrected them as he pulled up a chair.

“Well, Charles,” Sal smiled tightly. “We just need to ask a few questions and then we’ll be out of your way.” Ava and Sal



took a seat opposite him. Ava glanced around quickly, taking in the elegant surroundings, while Sal kept her gaze trained directly on him.

“If it would help bring her back to me safely, I would ask that you stay in my way as long as needed. I just want to know what happened to my wife.” Unshed tears shimmered in his eyes.

To Ava, he looked like a man who had cried about as much as he could. She nodded. “Hopefully we’ll find her soon for you. Would Sophie have left without telling you?”

“You mean, like to go shopping or visit a friend? No. She always told me when she was leaving.” His chin quivered and a tear fell. He swiped at it quickly and inhaled deeply.

“No, Charles. What I mean to ask is...” Ava cleared her throat. “Mr. Walker, how was your relationship with your wife?”

Charles blinked at her mutely for a moment, and then he chuckled dryly. “How is our relationship?”

Ava nodded.

“We’re not trying to imply anything, Mr. Walker,” jumped in Sal. “We have to ask these questions. Were you two fighting recently, or was everything normal for you two?”

“Everything was going fine. At least, I thought so.”

“We’re going to need all the information you can give us about her family and friends. We need to rule out that she simply left of her own accord,” Sal told him.

“She wouldn’t have done that. Not Sophie. Look around, agents. Why would she leave when she had everything she wanted right here? Including a doting husband who would gladly do anything for her?”

Ava thought that was confidence mixed with a bit of male chauvinism mixed with a lot of conceit. She nodded. “I understand how you feel, Mr. Walker, but we have to check every angle, and that means ruling this out at the beginning.

That way we can shift all our resources into the active search for a missing person who's in danger.”

“I just want her back as soon as possible, agents. That's why I'm telling you this avenue is a waste of time.” Mr. Walker dropped his gaze and sniffed loudly as he stood and turned away. “I'll be right back. I'll get the contact information you asked for.”

When he was out of the room, Sal mouthed, “Wow.” Now it was her turn to glance around the room at all the expensive modern furnishings and décor with a shake of her head. Leaning close to Ava, she said, “The man has a point, Ava. Who'd leave all this willingly?”

“Someone who isn't happy would be my first guess. Who knows how they really got along?”

“You don't think his reactions are genuine?”

Ava thought about it for a moment then nodded. “I don't want to, but I do anyway. He presents as a distressed and distraught husband should.”

Sal silenced her with a nearly imperceptible shake of her head as Charles returned to the living room.

“Here it is. That's all I have. If she had other friends or contacts of any kind, I don't have their information. That's just what she had in the digital files.”

“May we take these with us?” Ava asked.

“Yes. I can print off more. They're in a digital file.”

Ava pursed her lips and nodded, feeling like an ass for a second. “Thank you, Charles. Just a few more questions and we'll leave. Did your wife have any medical conditions that we need to be aware of?”

“No. She's healthy. Her doctor's number is in there. Feel free to check that out, but I don't think she'd hide anything like that from me.” He rubbed his cheek and frowned. “No. She wasn't sick, and nothing had come up. She would've told

me if she'd been sick." He turned away and the hand went from his cheek to the back of his neck as he sat on the sofa.

"Have you noticed anything missing? Anything valuable?"

He shook his head. "Just my wife, Agent James. She is the most valuable and precious thing in my life."

"The report says her purse, identification, and cell phone are all gone, too. Is that correct?"

He nodded. "Everything that she carries in her purse is gone." He scowled at the floor and shook his head.

"Mr. Walker, your wife took her purse and her car, then disappeared. Do you know where she was going?"

"No. I was in the city. Overnight. She was gone when I got back."

"Is that why it took so long for the report to be filed?" Sal asked.

"Yes. I thought she was just out with her friends. They go to spas and writers' retreats, to the movies, and whatever. I thought she'd be back that night. I woke up the next morning. Still no Sophie, so I called her cell and didn't get an answer. If she goes out with friends and has too much to drink, she stays with one of her girlfriends. I called her friend and got no answer until much later. She hadn't seen Sophie at all. That's when I reported her as missing. That's when I knew something was... wrong." His voice cracked and his breath hitched as if he was getting ready to have another crying bout.

"Okay, Mr. Walker. That's understandable," Sal said. She looked to Ava and raised her eyebrows in question.

Ava nodded. They were done.

Sal stood and handed him her card. "Mr. Walker, if you think of anything, please call us right away. No detail is too small. As soon as we have any further developments, we'll let you know."

He nodded. His chin was quivering as he stood. He flopped back down and covered his face.

“We’ll show ourselves out. If we need to ask you any further questions, we’ll give you a call,” Ava said.

He nodded and motioned for them to leave without looking up.

In the car, Sal looked over her notes, adding entries as she went. “So, you think he’s legit?”

“Yep. Haven’t changed my mind, although I kind of wanted him to seem guilty. What does that say about me?” Ava chuckled and shook her head.

“It says you were looking for an easy close on this one. We’re all guilty of it from time to time.”

Did it also mean she was slacking in her duties as an agent? Did it imply she was getting burned out so soon after taking on her new role?

“I’ll put Ashton and Santos on the contact list back at the office. For now, let’s see if the neighbors are home.”

Ava nodded and they got out of the car again.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ava checked her paper and nodded toward the house beside the Walker residence. “Closest neighbor.” She looked around. “Where did the others go?”

“I think they went farther afield. The paper says there are more houses farther on that way.” Sal nodded in the opposite direction.

“Wonder if they even knocked on this door or the one across the street?”

Sal shrugged and grinned a little. “Guess we’ll know in a minute.”

Ava nodded and they approached the house slowly. There were three windows on the second story that faced the Walker residence and eight on the ground floor. The lower ones would have partially blocked views because of the fence that separated the properties. The fence stretched the length of the border and had a gate in the backyard. Ava supposed even super-rich and elite neighborhoods had their little barbecue get-togethers. Or parties. Why else have a gate that opens onto both back yards but keeps the rest of the property separated?

Sal knocked on the door and then rang the doorbell, while Ava hung back. Craning her neck, she looked up to the second

floor, stepped back, and noted that there was at least a partial third floor as well.

A woman peeked out the window beside the door, eyeing Ava and Sal suspiciously.

Sal held up her badge and smiled. “Hello, we’re Agents Rossi and James from the FBI. We’d like to ask you some questions about your neighbor, Sophie Walker.”

Her gaze shifted between the two women several times before she finally nodded and opened the door a crack. “What about Sophie? Has something happened?”

“We’re not sure. That’s what we’re trying to find out. May we come in?”

After a long pause, she nodded and opened the door wide. “Please, take a seat in the parlor on the right.”

Ava and Sal exchanged a shocked look when they stepped into the parlor. It seemed as if it had been ripped right out of the Victorian era and plunked down smack in the middle of the suburbs. It was so out of place, yet so charming.

“Now, what’s happened?” the woman fretted as she headed toward her seat.

“I’m sorry. Could we get your name first?” Ava asked.

“Kara Davis. What’s going on? You’ve got me worried about my new friend.”

“So you and Sophie Walker were friends?”

“Yes,” Kara said, shifting in her seat. “She’s really sweet. Terrific personality. She used to be a dancer, and she tells me about it. Those stories are so intriguing.”

Ava and Sal both took notes.

“She’s been an inspiration to me ever since she moved in next door. So perfect.” She touched her hair. “She’s why I cut and dyed my hair. I like it so much better.” She smiled. “She also told me how she loved my eyes because of the heterochromia. I always thought it was a defect, but she told

me it made me unique and that I should stop hiding it.” She fanned her face with her hand. “I’m sorry, agents. I’m just blabbering away and you still haven’t told me what’s going on.”

Ava nodded. “Mrs. Davis—”

“My husband died a while back. Just Ms., please.”

Ava nodded and cleared her throat. “Of course, Ms. Davis. Mr. Walker filed a missing person report for Sophie. When was the last time you saw her?”

Kara furrowed her brow.

“You said you two are friends, right?” Sal asked to help urge her toward a reply.

“Yes, we are. I was trying to remember when exactly I saw her last, though. Not today, not yesterday, but maybe the day before. I think that’s when I saw her last.” She looked down at the floor and laced her fingers in her lap.

“Ms. Davis, where and for how long did you see Mrs. Walker?” asked Sal. “Please, no detail is too small. Tell us everything you can recall.”

Kara shifted in her seat and made brief eye contact again.

“It was here. I was in the kitchen and heard a woman crying softly. Being here alone, I admit, it freaked me out. I followed the sound and found Sophie sitting on the front porch crying into her hands. She came in and told me that she and Charlie had argued. She was upset and cried for a little while, but when she’d cried it out, she... went...” Kara pointed in the direction of the Walkers’ house, “back home.”

Sal looked to Ava briefly before turning back to Kara. “Did she say what they’d argued over?”

Kara seemed to consider that for a long time before shrugging. “She never said specifically. She just said it was the normal stuff that all married couples argue over. She has a flair for being a bit dramatic, but I suppose that’s because she was a dancer. On the stage, in the spotlight, living larger than life up

there in front of thousands of people. I'm sure it would make you a bit dramatic. She calmed down pretty quickly, so I didn't give it much thought one way or the other. She seemed fine when she left me."

"Did Mr. Walker initiate the argument?" Sal pressed as Ava jotted down the details.

Kara shrugged. "I have no clue. She didn't say. I'm sorry. That's really all I know."

"And you're sure you don't have any idea why they argued? I mean, did she say anything like he left the toilet seat up or left dirty dishes in the living room, anything at all?"

Kara shook her head. "That all sounds plausible, but she said nothing to that effect at all. I'm really not the person to ask what she meant by normal married couple arguments, either. Patrick and I never argued. If our tempers got heated, we always just walked away for a while. He'd watch something on the television, and most of the time I'd come in here and read while I listened to my records. When we met up again, everything was better, and we didn't argue. Of course, he never was thoughtless enough to leave the toilet seat up, and he wouldn't have dared to take food into the living room."

Ava looked up from her notebook to glance back over at Sal. Could she tell that something wasn't exactly right about Kara Davis?

"Alright, thank you. If we need anything else, we'll call back around." Sal handed her a card. "In the meantime, if you think of anything else, please don't hesitate to call me. Day or night."

"I will, Agent Rossi. Please find Sophie and bring her back. She's so lovely. She only deserves the best. Such a gentle soul."

"Speaking of the best. Did Mr. Walker feel the same about that? Did he ever say?" Ava asked as they were leaving. She watched Kara intently, looking for any sliver of emotion, any



slight twinge that might provide an answer that Ms. Davis herself might not mean to provide.

“Oh, Lord. That man doted on her all the time. That I know of, he never denied her anything and never even raised an eyebrow when she wanted really expensive things. He seemed proud to be able to give them to her. Bought gifts for her from foreign countries.” She sighed and smiled. “Wonderful man. They’re such a beautiful couple.”

Nothing.

“Okay, thank you, Ms. Davis.” Sal stepped outside.

Ava followed her. “Thanks again for your time.”

Kara nodded and closed the door slowly.

As Ava and Sal went back to the car, the rest of the team pulled up in the other vehicle.

“You know something was strange about her, right?” Sal asked Ava.

Yeah, something wasn’t exactly right with the way she acted. She may be medicated. Maybe she’s just rich and spoiled. Who knows?”

“Boss,” Metford called over and waved.

Sal nodded and went to them. “What did you find out?”

Santos shook her head. “Not much at all. Most of the neighbors didn’t even know the Walkers.”

“They were pretty new to the neighborhood,” Ashton added.

“Everybody lived too far away to see anything that might have happened down here. There are hills and woods between this section and the others up closer to the lake,” Metford added.

“Alright. We’ll just have to work with what we’ve got. We need to go question the neighbors across the street. We’ll regroup after,” Sal said.

“Won’t do you any good. The staff said they were gone on vacation to Europe for two weeks,” Metford scoffed. “Must be nice to be rich. I wish I’d been born rich instead of so damn good-looking.”

Santos scoffed. Everyone rolled their eyes.

“Alright. Let’s head back to the office. It’s getting late.”

Ava couldn’t get Kara out of her mind on the drive back. She almost had herself convinced that the woman’s strange actions and mannerisms, mixed with her different-colored eyes, just made her seem stranger than she really was.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*Kara*

Pacing the length of the hallway, Kara tried to force her memory of Sophie's last visit. They wouldn't surface no matter what she tried. Sophie was okay, though. She had to be. She'd gone home and maybe argued again with Charlie and then decided to spend a few days with a friend in the city to teach him a lesson. That sounded like something Sophie would do.

She hadn't liked the agents being in her house. It felt like an intrusion. She liked even less that she'd been questioned about Sophie's disappearance. It felt as if they were accusing her softly of knowing something.

And she didn't.

At least, not that she could recall. If Sophie had revealed anything, it was lost in the haze of a blackout. That blackout fantasy was vivid in her memory. Why couldn't Sophie's conversation be as vivid?

Because it wasn't important, that's why. She was mad at Charlie and that was enough to fire up your imagination. Now you might be withholding important information in a federal investigation without even realizing it.

“Shut up. Go back wherever you came from,” Kara hissed at the bothersome voice.

I am where I came from, dummy.

Clenching her fists, Kara stepped into the living room and looked longingly at Charlie’s house. Had Sophie really left him? If she had, there was a chance Charlie would soon begin to see Kara as his next romantic interest.

If the FBI were investigating, did that mean there was really a possibility that something bad had happened to Sophie? Kara didn’t believe so. The universe was finally smiling on her and making her fantasies come true. That’s exactly what it was. This was the culmination of incidents that had been set in motion with Patrick’s death, she just knew it.

With a gasp, she put a hand over her mouth and turned from the window to look at Patrick’s sofa. A soft, shimmering outline of his form sat there, legs crossed, head resting on hand, looking depressed. She was sorry to see him that way, but didn’t know how to change it.

“I’m sorry, Patrick. It seems that you were a casualty of the universe’s changing plans for me. You were lovely, honey. I loved you more than anything in the world and your death brought me low. Really low. But I can’t stay that way. I can’t hide away from...” She turned to look at Charlie’s house again. “I’m supposed to be with him now.”

The glimmering outline looked up and shook its head sadly. Then it disappeared, twinkling away like sparkling sand brushing across the shore, catching the light in kaleidoscope twinkles of red and white and yellow. Kara put a kiss on her fingertips and blew it toward her husband’s fading apparition.

Maybe he’ll stay gone now and I can concentrate on Charlie and our blossoming love, she thought happily.

Sometime later, a knock at the front door pulled her from her fantasies. She drifted toward the entry hall and ran a hand over her blouse, straightening it.

Why wasn't her visitor ringing the doorbell? The agents had knocked and rang the doorbell.

Stopping at the door, facing it, Kara waited to see if the person would knock again. She really didn't want any more guests. The agents had been more than enough for the day, and she didn't know if she could handle answering more questions about Sophie. The woman was fine. She was just angry with her husband. Possibly angry enough to leave him.

Kara smiled. She didn't like the thought of her friend being upset, but she also couldn't see any way around the situation. Every person had their own path in life, after all. Sometimes that path led straight through pain and heartache; other times, it led through fields of paradise.

The knock sounded again. It sounded male, confident, strong, but not irritated. How she knew what the knock sounded like, she didn't know, but she did. As she reached for the knob, she knew Charlie would be standing there. He was the only man who would be knocking on her door.

Pulling the door open, she put on her best smile.

"Hello, Charlie," she said, immediately motioning him inside. "Come in."

"Hi, Kara. Thank you. I don't mean to drop in on you unannounced like this," he said.

Kara quickly shut the door and shook her head. "Don't worry about it a bit. A visit from a friend is always welcome. Would you like some tea? Refreshment of any kind?"

"No, no. Thank you. I just wanted to ask you about the last time Sophie was over here, if you don't mind."

"Of course. I don't mind at all. Anything for a friend, Charlie." Kara smiled softly and put her hand on his arm to gently lead him into the living room. "We can talk in here."

Kara guided him to the larger sofa, and she sat beside him less than an arm's length away. She turned toward him with one leg under her and one on the floor. Her full attention was

on him, and she didn't want him to doubt it. Draping her arm along the top of the cushions, her fingers were only an inch from his shoulder.

“Now, what did you want to know?”

She saw the way his eyes moved. The way they looked her up and down, paying particular attention to the swell of her breasts against the blouse. As she watched his gaze, she wished she had left another button undone.

“The last time Sophie came over to see you... what was the visit about?” He shifted and turned slightly to face her better.

“She was upset and crying. Not hysterical crying, just sobbing. She came in to talk about it, but to be honest, I don't really remember much. She told me that you two had argued. Said it was married couples' stuff and that it was normal, she guessed. Then,” Kara shrugged, holding up her hands, “I had an episode and I don't remember what happened after that. She was just gone, next thing I knew.”

“And she never said what we were arguing about?” He turned a bit more and leaned into the corner of the couch, placing his arm along the top of the cushions. The tips of his fingers barely brushed hers. He pulled them back a couple of inches and smiled.

Kara shook her head. “If she did, I don't remember it.”

“Is that what you told the agents today?”

“Yes. Except I didn't tell them about the episode. That stuff is so hard to explain to people who don't understand the condition the way you do.” She stretched out her finger, let it run over the tips of his as she smiled invitingly at him.

His eyes drifted to their hands. His smile was slow, sexy, and his eyes registered a bit of smoldering heat when he made eye contact with her again.

“I do understand, Kara. Some people are simple-minded at best and don't even try to understand.” He moved his hand so

that it covered hers. He gave her hand a little squeeze. "I'll always understand, or try to."

His smile was lovely. His expression, heart-wrenching. The air was suddenly heavy and hard to pull into her lungs. The ambient temperature seemed oppressively hot. It was much the way Kara felt during the nightmares and night terrors she suffered.

Composing herself to the best of her ability, she dipped her chin, lowering her face coquettishly. "Thank you, Charlie. That means more to me than you'll ever know."

He sat silent for a moment, and Kara was unable to break that silence. Her mind raced with hopes, desires, fears, and confusion.

After several moments, Charlie removed his hand and scooted forward onto the edge of the sofa. Kara panicked a bit. He was getting ready to leave, and she wanted him to stay. Just a little longer. But her mind didn't work fast enough for her to stall the inevitable.

"Kara, are you certain Sophie didn't mention in any detail what was going on, or maybe where she was headed when she left here?"

She shook her head. Hearing his concern for Sophie set her anger in motion. She fought to keep it tamped down, knowing it was only the route their relationship had to take so it could be ultimately fulfilled.

"No, she didn't. And I assumed that she returned home. Where else would she go? It was my logical conclusion that she returned to your house."

"But you have no memory of her leaving?"

"No!" She put a hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry, Charlie. I didn't mean to yell. I've wracked my brain, tried everything I know to try, and still the memories won't come. If, sometime in the future, they do resurface, I promise you'll be the first to know." Silently, she cursed herself for nearly losing her

temper. Under normal circumstances, she would never have raised her voice to Charlie.

He patted her knee twice before he stood. “That’s fine, Kara. I know you’ve been questioned heavily already today, and I didn’t mean to add to the stress you must be feeling.” He moved toward the door. “I’ll leave you alone now. I need to get back, anyway. If you hear from her, would you let me know immediately?”

Kara joined him and they walked into the hallway. “Of course, I will, Charlie. I don’t know why she would contact me rather than you, though. I would think you’d be her first call. I bet she just got angry at you and went to stay a few days with one of her girlfriends in the city to make you worry.” She wanted to add that Sophie would probably be back soon, but she didn’t want to voice something she hoped wouldn’t happen.

You’re being such a good friend, Kara. With friends like you, Sophie doesn’t need any enemies.

Kara tensed, willing the voice to shut up before it ruined her moment with Charlie.

He was looking at the floor and nodding. He seemed sad, and Kara longed to comfort him.

“I hope you’re right.” He turned to the door. “I have to go now. Thank you again.”

He was out the door and hurrying off the porch and down the steps before Kara could stop him, or even respond. She watched him go. It was dusk outside. Taking in the deep purple and crimson colors of the sky, which would be only blackness in a few moments, Kara tried to recall if it had been dark when Charlie had arrived. She was certain it had been daylight, but it was definitely dark when he left.

She stepped back into the house and shut the door quickly. What had they spoken about during all that time? Had they remained in the living room sitting so close to each other for so long?



You did something for all that time. It's a shame you can't recall, the voice said sarcastically. Maybe you had another blackout and spent hours fantasizing about him when he was sitting right there with you all the time.

She didn't argue with the voice. Instead, she ignored it as she pried at her memory of the last few hours. All their talking that she could remember would have only taken a few minutes. Probably not even twenty. She ran a hand over her lips. Her lipstick was still intact, so they hadn't been kissing. Her clothes weren't ruffled, so that ruled out petting.

Shaking her head, Kara headed for the stairs. She wanted to journal. Every now and then, journaling would bring forth memories that she'd thought lost to one of her episodes.

After opening the desk drawer, Kara stared at the journal. It was face down in the drawer and the spine faced the kneehole. That was exactly the opposite of how she placed the book in the drawer after each writing session.

She blinked and tried to make sense of it. No one had been on the second floor except her, and she wouldn't have moved the book in such a way. For a moment, she feared that it was the beginning of one of her nightmare episodes. Any moment, a monster would pounce from a shadowy corner and try to maim her.

But that didn't happen.

Satisfied that she must have turned the book the wrong way during one of her blackouts, Kara turned her mind back to Charlie's visit. Taking out the book, she sat with a smile and picked up her pen.

The entry into her journal put a different slant on Charlie's visit. He had been flirting with her. In her mind, it was becoming the truth with each new line written about it. The more real she could make it in her mind, the more real it would become in her life.

Charlie was definitely interested in her. He was obviously waiting an appropriate amount of time after Sophie absconded

to make his feelings known.

If it were up to her, Kara would encourage him not to wait. But he was an elite professional known in political circles all the way to the White House. Within that echelon, she knew there were strict rules of conduct to which he must adhere or risk destroying his reputation. If that happened, he would be cast down through the ranks of his profession, lose his job and career, and be a ruined man for the rest of his life. Once a reputation is gone, it's unlikely the man can ever win it back again. In fact, future generations will have to live with the shame of his failure.

Kara didn't want that for him. She would be patient. She had to be patient.

As she readied for bed, she carried her glass of water to the bedside table where her poetry book lay. Something was missing, and she stared hard at the table for a long time trying to figure out what it was that should be there but wasn't.

"Pills," she muttered in irritation. "Should I bother? It's been a while since I took a pill and I still feel fine."

The prescription bottle had been relegated to the pantry where the pill box was. She thought it had been there for quite some time, but couldn't remember for sure.

Deciding that she should probably take a pill and at least try to do better with her medication schedule, Kara huffed and went downstairs.

The pantry door squeaked distinctly, and she stopped. A memory tried to surface. It niggled just below the surface of her consciousness. It had something to do with Charlie and the sink.

She took out the pill bottle and shook it. With the lid off, she saw that she hadn't neglected to take her pills nearly as often as she'd thought she had. There were only six pills. She grabbed her little pill box and popped it open. No pills. She had taken all of them.

Chuckling, she closed both containers and placed them back on the shelf. “Well, if I’ve been taking them and having blackouts, maybe I should stop taking them.”

She went back to the bedroom and read several poems by the dim light of the lamp. When she slipped under the covers that night, she wondered about her friend. Sophie was okay. She had to be, but something deep in Kara’s mind hinted that Sophie was not okay. Worse still, she worried that she somehow had something to do with it.

“No, I didn’t. She’s fine.” She flipped to her side and yanked the covers over her shoulder.

Where did that come from? I know if something bad did happen to her that I had absolutely nothing to do with it. I’d never hurt her. She’s my only friend.

The sinister little voice returned. Are you sure of that?

She wasn’t. She wasn’t sure of almost anything, actually. Except for one thing:

Charlie had been flirting with her. And that made her heart happy.



## CHAPTER THIRTY

Ashton sat bent over his computer ignoring Metford, who seemed to be determined to talk about some baseball game from his childhood. Ava thought it sounded a whole lot like Metford making up a tale to highlight his glory days. He didn't seem to notice that his audience of one was not paying attention to him. Ashton's ability to cope with Metford was admirable, as their personalities seemed to be nearly polar opposites.

Metford was just about to explain the intricacies of the infield fly rule when Ava decided to cut in.

"Anything come up?" She pointed at the monitor, where Ashton had been typing away.

"Nope. No charges to any of her credit cards or debit cards. No withdrawals from her very substantial bank account, nothing. Absolutely nothing since her disappearance."

Sal rolled her chair close to them. "I've tracked Sophie's card use over the last couple weeks and developed a timeline of her movements. We even have some traffic camera footage that shows she was out and about looking just fine the day before she was seen at Kara Davis' house. She wasn't one to sit at home much, from the looks of it." Sal stood and walked

to the printer, grabbed a stack of papers, and handed them to Ava.

“Color me impressed,” Ava noted as she flipped through the papers.

“This should give us a better idea of her normal movements. Mrs. Walker doesn’t seem like the type of woman who would simply go off-grid. If she was mad at her husband, she would still have had to buy something, and she had her own bank account, her own way to take care of herself.”

“I made a list of the places she frequented,” Santos chimed in. “We could cross that with your list. Go to those places and talk to the people there. Maybe someone saw her around the time she went missing.”

Metford thumped the desk with his hand. “And someone would know if she and her perfect husband were arguing or not. Women don’t keep things like that bottled up for long. They always have at least that one friend who they tell everything.”

Santos glared at Metford and shook her head, but Ava was pleased to see that she only bristled and didn’t say anything to him. He definitely held views about women in general that were irritating. What was worse, in Ava’s opinion, was that many of his outdated and offensive stereotypical beliefs about women were true. Whether women liked it or not, most of them did have that one friend who knew everything about them and their lives, right down to their darkest and most shameful secrets that no one else in the world would ever know.

“Her best friend, Melanie Hill, lives in Baltimore,” Ashton offered.

“Is Melanie really her best friend, or is that who she wanted everyone to think was her best friend?” Metford pushed.

“Melanie seems to think they’re best friends.” Ashton scrolled through more information on his screen, pointing out

photos and social media posts of the two together.

“Did you talk to her?” Sal asked.

Ashton nodded. “I did, boss. She said she didn’t have a clue where Sophie was, but she was supposed to show up for a visit soon. They apparently visited each other regularly. Once or twice a month depending on their schedules.” He glanced around at the others. “That qualifies as best friends, in my opinion.”

“Maybe. She could have been using this friend as an excuse to get away from her husband for a few days every month, too.” Metford grinned. “Especially if she was having an affair. What better way to hide it?”

Shocked, Ava looked at Metford. Why hadn’t that thought crossed her mind? Why hadn’t any of the team thought of that before? It had been days that they had been running around, chasing their tails, trying to figure out where this woman had gone, and none of them had even considered that she might be having an affair.

Ava groaned. “That would open up a great big nasty can of worms. I hope that’s not what was going on.”

“But now we sorta have to check that angle, don’t we?” Metford asked.

Sal nodded. “Yes, we do.”

In unison, the others groaned.

“Come on, now. Just because Mr. Walker says they were doing fine on all points of the relationship doesn’t mean that was true. Make a list of all the places like spas, salons, whatever that she visited over the last two weeks, and get the best friend on the phone again,” Sal told them.

“Are we going to go to the places she went to?” Ava asked.

“Yes. You, me, Santos. You guys, keep digging around and see what else you can stir up. If anything comes up, call me.”

“Really?” Metford asked.

“Really, what?” Sal asked in confusion.

“You’re taking just the women and leaving the men here.”

Sal and Ava shared a look, and Ava grinned. “Well, Metford, we won’t ruffle as many nerves walking into the places where there are mostly women patrons. And believe it or not, we might have better insights into actions by these women. But if you really want to go, I can stay here and take you to the spa, the nail and hair salon, the writer retreat that catered to mostly women who wrote romances.” She raised her eyebrows.

Looking unhappy, Metford shook his head. “That sounds pretty foreign to me. I probably wouldn’t be much help in those settings,” he grumbled, promptly returning to his paper files.

“Got it,” Ashton said as he began entering information into the computer.

“Ready?” Sal asked the two women.

Santos nodded. “Whatever gets me out of the office for a while.”

“Where are we going first?” Ava asked.

Sal and Jillian put their heads together as they walked outside.

“She visited a hair salon three days before she was reported missing,” Santos pointed out. “I say we start there. Hairstylists hear all the gossip.”

“And all the truths,” Ava added knowingly.

“Alright. Let’s go to the salon,” nodded Sal. “Ava, shotgun. Give me directions as we go.”

Twenty-five minutes later, the three of them turned onto the avenue where the salon was located. Sophie clearly didn’t mind driving for long periods in terrible traffic to visit the salon. It must have been her favorite.

Such determination implied that Sophie and her stylist would have had some sort of connection. Maybe they were even friends.

And maybe she would know some of her secrets.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*Kara*

The next day, Kara arose from bed feeling light and energized for once. She was glad that she'd had a decent night devoid of nightmares and living visions of terror. Leaving off the medicine had helped, she thought.

Dr. Hyder was due for his visit in a few days, and she wanted to be sure the house was in order. Whether or not she would mention the missing time episodes and the blackouts remained a question in her mind that she had no definitive answer to. If fixing her troubles was as simple as stopping the medication, there was really no need to bring it up. He would want to try her on another medication, she was almost certain of it.

When a knock sounded at the front door, Kara was surprised a second time in as many days to find Charlie there. It was a pleasant surprise. She was only slightly less giddy as she opened the door. He was obviously hooked on her. Why else would he have come to her again so soon? This time, she was feeling a bit more risqué, and she undid the second button on her blouse. The amended neckline plunged just low enough to give a hint of her cleavage, but not low enough to come off as trashy.

“Charlie, hi. Is everything okay?” Kara opened the door wide.

“That depends on how you look at the situation, I suppose.”

Charlie stepped inside. He moved by her close enough that she could feel the heat of his presence against the bare skin of her forearm. Her heart thrilled instantly and her senses heightened.

“Would you like to sit and talk about it in here?” Kara moved as gracefully as she could toward the living room.

“Would it be possible to sit in the kitchen? I think I’d like a cup of tea. If it’s not too much trouble. I tried to make some earlier and botched the job so badly that I had to dump it down the drain.”

“Poor dear,” Kara frowned, reaching to touch his arm lightly and lead him to the kitchen. “It’s no trouble at all. Come on. I’ll get you a slice of pie and some tea.”

“You’re the best, Kara. I couldn’t ask for a better friend,” Charlie said, answering her smile with his own.

He’s testing my prowess in the kitchen and as a host, Kara thought happily. He wants to see if I’m willing to accommodate his needs even under stressful circumstances.

“Have you had breakfast or lunch? I know it’s late for the former and early for the latter,” she said with a small laugh that she’d patterned after Sophie’s laughter. She liked the way it made her sound more sophisticated.

Charlie took the chair that allowed him to face her. He wanted to watch her work, and that was just fine by her. The idea of his eyes on her was exciting and sexy.

“Not really, but I don’t really have an appetite. That piece of pie will be perfect, but only if you’re having one as well. I hate to eat alone.”

Kara turned to him. Was he dropping a hint that he wanted her to cook for him? Did he still want the invitation to eat at

her house? Even with Sophie missing? She smiled and had to turn away from the expression on his face. Closing her eyes for a moment, she held his image in her mind, examining that warm expression.

Oh, what I'd give to have him look at me that way all the time, she thought, gripping the counter to contain her excitement.

"I will have some pie with you, Charlie. And I don't mind preparing something more substantial for you, either. You can't go all day just on a slice of pie." Her hands shook as she placed the pie on the plate.

He took the plate with a warm smile. His fingers brushed hers and he smiled broader before averting his gaze and clearing his throat. Kara took her pie and joined him at the table. She didn't know how she was going to eat when her stomach was in knots. Charlie had no trouble digging into his.

"Aren't you going to eat yours? Should I be worried?" He grinned and eyed the pie on his fork with suspicion.

"Why would you be worried? I'm only waiting for the tea," she said, buying herself time enough to calm her nerves so she could eat.

Laying his fork down, he dabbed the corner of his mouth with the napkin. "Of course. I'll wait, too."

Time seemed to slow down to a crawl. Their eyes locked across the table, and Kara's heart swelled with love for him. She was more certain than ever that he was her soulmate. They were destined to be together.

The kettle whistled and broke the magic of the moment. Kara moved to rise from her chair, but Charlie reached over the table and put his hand on her arm.

"I'll get it. It's the least I can do," he told her, moving around the table and heading for the stove.

"Well, alright," Kara said in confusion. She had thought he wanted to watch her work, maybe she had been wrong. In the

back of her mind, she hoped that he wouldn't ruin the tea as he had ruined his own before coming to visit.

But how could such a perfect man ruin anything?

After what seemed to be far too long, Charlie brought their tea to the table. He seemed proud. Maybe that's what he needed. He needed to do for someone the way he was used to doing things for Sophie. That was part of his nature, and she was helping him fulfill that deep-seated desire to pamper someone.

"It's delicious. Thank you, Charlie," Kara said, taking another sip.

They talked about Sophie for a few minutes, going over what Kara thought were the best possibilities surrounding her disappearance. Charlie agreed with her on most points. They discussed the weather and the backyard fence, which still needed mending. Charlie had removed the fallen tree branch from it, but he hadn't had time to mend the broken and bent section of fencing.

"You've got so much on you already with your job and Sophie missing. Don't worry about that fence." Kara waved a hand in the direction of the backyard.

After they had finished their tea, Charlie stood and gathered their dishes against Kara's protests. He placed them in the sink and held out his hand to her. She let him take her hand and pull her to her feet. He pulled her closer to him. Then a bit closer as he stared into her eyes. She was mesmerized.

Then his arms were around her. She was leaning into him, her arms around his neck, the tantalizing roughness of his second-day beard growth tickling against her neck and cheek. Electric tingling sensations raced through her, made her feel giddy, made her feel a rush of emotion she hadn't felt since... since... what was his name again?

He pulled back after a very long and drawn-out moment of holding her close and running his hands over her back. "Kara?"

“Yes?” she asked.

Stepping back, he dropped his arms to his sides. “Kara, it’s just...” he sighed and looked longingly at her.

“Just what, Charlie?” She stepped forward and put her hands on his chest. “Tell me.” She wanted to hear him say he wanted her. She needed to hear it from him. It was evident in the embrace, but she wanted more. Hearing him say the words would solidify what she already knew he felt for her.

Shaking his head, Charlie looked to the floor and ran a hand over the back of his head and down his neck. “It’s just this thing with Sophie. It’s really put the spotlight on me at work. I have to be careful how I proceed until someone figures out what happened to her, where she went and why. Do you understand what I mean, Kara?”

She nodded. “I do, Charlie. I understand completely.”

Yes, she definitely took his meaning. He felt the same way about her as she did about him, but this thing with Sophie was making it impossible for him to progress their relationship. It would surely raise some eyebrows and maybe even taint his good name.

“Don’t worry, Charlie. I’m not going anywhere.”

He smiled at her and looked relieved. “Thank you. As I said before, you’re the best.” He shot forward and hugged her again. It was a fierce and brief embrace. “I have to be going. Wouldn’t want any tongues to start wagging about how I’m spending so much time with you right after my wife disappeared.” He moved into the hallway and quickly to the door.

Kara had difficulty catching up to him. “The side door will be unlocked. Any time you want to come over without being seen by Joan, Dan, or the construction crew working on the other house, just use the side door. I don’t mind.”

“I don’t want to get shot for an intruder,” he said, laughing.

“Oh, you! I don’t have a gun. I don’t believe in them.”

“I’ll keep that door in mind, then.” He opened the front door and stepped out. “See you later, Kara.”

“See you later, Charlie.” The way his name rolled off her tongue was lovely. It was as if she were tasting him, rolling him over her tongue like a piece of candy. “Forbidden candy,” she muttered as she stepped back inside and shut the door.

Patrick. That was his name. Silly her. She’d almost forgotten. But she was sure even Patrick had never made her feel like this.

That evening, Kara opened her journal and started writing. Once she had the entry started, the words flowed from her like a waterfall.

She wrote of Charlie’s visit and of her certainty that he was falling in love with her. Then her journaling turned toward Sophie. Kara wished more than ever that her friend would at least call Charlie and tell him that she wanted a divorce. After all, Kara and Charlie couldn’t really have a relationship if Sophie remained silent and hidden.

Once again, she wondered about all the possible things that could’ve happened to Sophie. The list was endless because there were no leads, no evidence that pointed in any certain direction. For all Kara knew, aliens could have zapped up her friend, or just as likely, demons could’ve snatched her. Between those two scenarios lay innumerable others. Kidnapping, stabbing, shooting, human trafficking, the list was terrible and she stopped considering it after a few moments.

What happened when she was here? Why was she crying? Kara closed her eyes and replayed the part of the visit to which she had access. It was fragmented at best and caused her head to ache the more she scrutinized it.

By the end of her writing session, Kara knew no more than she had previously.

Kara had no idea what had happened in her own home the day of Sophie’s last visit. It was scary, and Kara didn’t like to

dwell on it for too long.

But that was okay. All she needed was the soothing sound of Charlie's voice in her memory, and she knew that one way or another, it would all work out.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Ava paced back and forth in Sal's office, which was a good deal nicer than her own. The view wasn't any better, but the desk was antique mahogany and the rug was soft—Ava made a mental note to bring in her own rug someday.

So far, there had been no evidence of Sophie Walker's movements since a couple of days before her husband reported her missing. Nothing at all. Even the lead from her best friend Melanie hadn't amounted to much.

"I just don't know how nobody's seen her. No friends, no acquaintances. She was a popular woman. It's like she disappeared into thin air."

"What about that doctor?" Sal prodded. "Did you get any indication of her medical conditions?"

"I've placed a couple calls but couldn't get through yet," Ava told her. "Might have to show up myself."

Sal rested her elbows on her desk, deep in thought. "Did anyone say the Walkers might have been having problems?"

"A few of her girlfriends didn't like him. Said he seemed to hover too much, wouldn't leave her alone if they were out together. If she wanted to do something without him over her shoulder, she had to do it while he was at work."



Sal sighed. “That isn’t much to go on, though. Lots of husbands are clingy. Heck, lots of wives are clingy.”

“That’s not our Sophie, though. Everyone said she had an independent streak that was two miles wide and ten long.”

“So, that could have been something they would have had disagreements over recently?”

Ava nodded. “Money wasn’t a problem for either of them. They were each independently wealthy, and very little of their money was in an actual joint account. From what we can find out, that was only to pay for the household expenses. Cars, clothes, spas, retreats, everything else was paid from their personal accounts. That seems odd to me. Don’t married couples typically have at least some sort of joint account together?”

Sal shrugged. “I guess when you’re rich in your own right, you aren’t so eager to share your money with anyone else. Not even the love of your life.” Sal scoffed and shook her head again. “Just to be honest, I’m glad I don’t have to worry about being rich.”

Ava nodded. “I know what you mean.”

The phone rang and Sal answered. She scribbled notes, thanked the man, and hung up. “Good news. Local police have located a car matching the description of Sophie’s.” She stood up and headed for the door.

“Where? Have they positively identified it yet?” Ava followed closely.

“Just a few miles past her house in that same suburb. They haven’t identified it for sure because it’s currently underwater. It’s in the lake at the end of the suburb and they’re working to get it out now. We have to go. Santos and Metford are meeting us there.”

“Right behind you,” Ava said.

They scurried out to the SUVs and hit the road. The drive seemed much shorter this time, and before Ava knew it, they

turned and drove past Kara Davis' house, then Sophie Walker's house. The road beyond was winding and narrower, forcing her to slow down.

"How many miles of this?" Ava groaned, feeling greener than she'd have liked to admit.

"Almost two-and-a-half miles. Lovely, right?"

"You might have to pull over soon. What did they do, follow a drunk snake when they were cutting this road?"

Sal laughed. "You think this is bad, you should have been with me on some of my other cases. Some roads were so bad that you had to have four-wheel-drive or just get out and walk. At least this one's paved."

"Okay, I've been behind a desk for too long. I'll try not to puke on the floorboard."

Sal slowed even more. The speedometer needle hovered just above forty-five, which was ten over the posted speed limit. The forest opened to reveal tall, stately mansions on either side of the road. If Ava had thought the Walkers' home was large, she didn't any longer. The wealthier part of the neighborhood lay far enough into the suburb to make it a hassle to get to, but it was there. She supposed if she looked up the addresses for some of the high-profile political operatives that Charles Walker was involved with, she'd see they lived there.

The cluster of houses disappeared into the rearview, and the woods took over the landscape on both sides of the road again. The curves were steeper as was the climb after that posh section of the neighborhood was behind them.

Ten minutes later, they crossed the first sign for Tanley Lake. "Almost there, finally," Sal announced.

"Thank God," Ava said, holding one hand against her stomach. "I might just hike out of here. I don't know that I can take much more of this."

"That bad?"

“You know, it’s really just the winding roads. Boats, planes, anything else is fine. I get it from my aunt, I think.” Aunt Kay had always been super sensitive that way. She always carried medication with her anytime they went on a trip. Ava was thankful she didn’t feel this way often.

After what seemed like an eternity, they pulled off the side of the road, grimacing as pine branches scraped along the top of the SUV.

“They’re pulling it out of the water now,” Sal said, shutting off the engine and getting out.

Ava got out a bit more slowly and inhaled deeply as she walked around the front. “There’s Santos.” She pointed up the road a bit. “Where’s Metford?”

Sal shook her head. “Probably telling somebody how to do their job.”

Ava chuckled. “He’s doing better, I think, though. At least he’s trying.”

“He is. And Santos has learned how to cope with him, which helps.” They joined the officers and rescue workers and Sal stepped forward with Ava close on her heels. “Rossi and James, FBI,” she told the suit overseeing the operation.

He turned and nodded brusquely. “Steiger. Chief.” He offered his hand for a quick shake and then turned back to the work going on twenty feet below. “Looks like she drove off the edge here.”

Ava looked along the roadway. The guardrail wasn’t hurt anywhere. “If she went over the railing, she didn’t touch it,” she said doubtfully.

Without turning, he pointed farther up the road. “There’s a spot there where there’s no rail. We think she missed the turn and went over there. It’s a straight drop-off into a very deep lake. The car could’ve floated down several yards before sinking completely right here.”

Ava peered over the edge of the embankment as the car was lifted trunk-first out of the water. The tag number matched. “It’s Sophie Walker’s car. That’s her tag number.”

Steiger nodded and motioned to the crew to move farther to the right to avoid heavy tree limbs. “Jesus, they’re going to give me more ulcers than I already have. It’s like babysitting a bunch of kindergarteners,” he grumbled as he walked toward the lift truck.

“Body in the car,” a man yelled up to Steiger.

That heavy, leaden feeling settled in the pit of Ava’s stomach that she always got when faced with a dead body. She no longer shook or felt sick when she saw a body, and she didn’t know whether that was a sign that she was becoming a better agent, or a sign that she was becoming a cold human being.

Once the car was clear of the water and settled on the bed of the hauler, Sal shooed everyone else away from it so the team could investigate.

Metford popped up behind them. He was wet as if he’d been in the lake.

“What happened to you?” Ava raised an eyebrow.

“They needed another set of hands getting the car hooked and moved.” He shrugged as he looked down at his clothes.

Ava nodded. He had gone into the water shirtless and shoeless, but his pants might be ruined. “You know you didn’t have to volunteer, right?”

“I know. I also know it was going to take them another hour to get someone else out here, so...” He shrugged again as he pulled his shirt on and began buttoning it.

She had to commend him on that much, but she didn’t want to encourage him to do things like that in the future. She gloved up and climbed up the hauler’s bed alongside Sal and Santos.

Sophie was in the driver's seat with the seatbelt still fastened. Her once beautiful face was bloated. Fish and other marine wildlife had been at her. Ava was sorry for the woman. Whatever she'd done, she didn't deserve this. By all accounts, she was glamorous, beautiful, beloved. A good friend. One of her fake eyelashes was missing; the other hung down from the outer corner of her left eye. For some reason, that was the most disturbing thing to see.

"Her seatbelt is still buckled. Her hands are in good shape. Looks like her nose is broken and there's a shadow of damage across her forehead. Maybe where the airbag deployed when she hit the water," Ava said aloud.

"Her purse is back here," Santos said, pointing into the back passenger window. "Still zipped."

"I don't see a cellphone," Sal added as she moved from window to window.

"Maybe in the purse. Bag and tag it, Santos." Ava concentrated on the driver's seat scene. What had been going through her head as she drove over the cliff? Had she even realized it before it was too late? Or at all? Had she been distracted for a moment? Possibly by a ringing cellphone?

Ava put her hands on the door, wishing she could open it and check the scene more thoroughly. "How long before the M.E. gets here?"

"Said ETA was approximately twenty minutes. That was five minutes ago," Metford called.

Ava stared into the one cloudy eye that remained. She felt the urge to reach in and pluck that damnable strip of eyelashes from Sophie's cheek. It was a totally human emotional response, she supposed. Sophie's hair reminded Ava of Molly's hair. It was about the same color and length.

Shaking off the memories and the feelings that were cropping up, Ava inhaled sharply, closed her eyes, and hit her internal reset button. When she opened her eyes again, she was staring at a case, a mystery that needed to be solved. What had

happened to Sophie Walker? That was the only thing she needed to think about.

She scrutinized every part of the woman that she could see. There didn't seem to be any wounds that would imply she had been shot or stabbed. There were no signs of domestic violence, either. That didn't mean there was none, just no traces of physical abuse.

"Don't touch the body, I have an idea," she announced as she jumped down from the hauler. She walked to the spot where Sophie had gone over the cliff. There were no skid marks of any kind, only tire tracks in the dirt. There was a gap of at least twelve feet between the large rock and the guardrail, maybe more. It would be measured and put in the file, but Sophie's car could have passed between them easily, even at an angle. The gap was in the worst possible place. The curve was extremely sharp. Sophie had been coming from the other direction, which would have placed that gap right in her path if she didn't turn the wheel. She would simply have rocketed straight over the edge.

With a sad shake of her head, Ava walked back to where Steiger stood.

"What's farther up that way?" she asked, pointing past the gap.

"Just an access road that comes out behind a strip mall in town. There aren't any other houses, if that's what you're asking."

"No, I just wanted to know where she might've been coming from."

"What difference does that make? It won't change the outcome."

"Just covering all our bases, Chief Steiger." She turned away from the man and returned to the scene.

Metford propped against his car, looking thoughtful.

"What's on your mind?" Ava asked.

He shook his head and looked toward Sophie's vehicle. "It can all be over that fast. Just driving down the road, heading home, and wham. You're dead. And then it takes people over a week to find you."

"You're not getting soft on me, are you, Wayne?" she asked, giving him a half-smile.

"Not at all." He stood a bit straighter and stuck out his chin. "You think she was on something? Drinking maybe? Bored housewife syndrome, you know?"

"Drinking maybe, but everyone said she was straight. Didn't use drugs. The tox report will tell the tale, though."

He nodded. "Didn't look like she even tried to get out. She didn't hit the brakes, either. Like maybe she'd dozed off."

"Or was distracted and ran over the edge," Ava suggested. "If she tried to answer a ringing cellphone as she started into that curve, it could've distracted her just enough to miss the turn. Again, though, we'll have to wait on the M.E. report for time of death and all that. We can access her cellphone records to find out if she was possibly receiving a call at that time."

Sal and Jillian came up and joined them, climbing carefully up the hill back to the road.

"Who's going to tell her husband?" Santos was asking as they removed their gloves.

"Do you want to do that?" Sal asked her.

She shook her head. "Not particularly. If you tell me to do it, I will, though."

Sal gave a pointed look to Metford, who didn't even look up. But Ava didn't shy away. She couldn't look away. Not when a woman was dead.

"I'll come," she said.

The look Sal gave her was somewhere between pride and pity. Ava hadn't yet had to tell a grieving spouse that their life partner was dead. That she'd never be coming back. Her time

in Cold Cases had insulated her from it; the families of the victims she'd spoken to had had time to grieve, to come to terms with the loss.

The pain never really went away, but at least they'd been able to come to terms with it. They no longer held the hope somewhere in them that their loved one was still out there somewhere, that they could put this horror behind them and resume the life they'd once known. It wasn't fresh and desperate, still holding onto anything it could, like a tiny, fragile spark, still daring to dream that things might turn out okay.

Now she would have to extinguish Charles Walker's hope. She would have to put an end to his dreams and break his heart. But it was necessary.

"You two follow the car," Sal told Metford and Santos. "Once the M.E takes the body, make sure that car is gone over with a fine-toothed comb. As soon as forensics releases it, I want to know."

Ava was already waiting in the passenger seat when Sal climbed in and started the car. "Take the road that way," she pointed. "Steiger said it's an access road that lets out behind a strip mall in town. I just want to see where Sophie was coming from."

"It can't be any worse than what we came up already," Sal nodded.

Ava thought driving the same route might give her some insight into Sophie Walker and her life. It was just a hunch, but she had learned to follow those hunches. They usually meant something even if she couldn't see what it was right away.





## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

*Kara*

Charlie came to visit Kara again. It had been a few days since his last visit, but she had gone to his house twice only to find that he was gone. She didn't ask him about those days, figuring he had gone to take care of some business for his job. He was a very important man, and she respected that about him. The way he wove together the threads of his personal life and his career, holding it all with grace and poise, was one of his best characteristics.

To know him on a personal level, he didn't come across as a snob or as if he looked down on anyone. He was a down-to-earth man with a gentle nature that just pulled her in, lured her the way a bright sunflower lured a bee.

He stepped inside and quickly embraced Kara with one arm before moving toward the kitchen with tears in his eyes. "Could we make tea again? I could really use some. Maybe with a splash of whatever liquor you have sitting around."

Kara shut the door and followed him to the kitchen. It wasn't weird to follow him; in fact, she liked that he was making himself more at home. If they did get together in the future, she thought she would be more comfortable if he moved in with her instead of the other way around. She simply

wasn't a woman who would fit in such a modern house with modern things all around. She preferred her older-style house, with its long hallways and its darker, brooding atmosphere. And, of course, there was her parlor to think about. She couldn't leave it, and she didn't think it would be a good fit in Charlie's shiny house.

"I only have a little brandy in the cabinet. I'm sorry, but I don't keep much liquor as a rule. I do have wine, though. If you would prefer, we could have wine instead of tea," she suggested as she headed for the pantry while he filled the tea kettle at the sink.

"No, no. The brandy will be fine. I just need something to calm my nerves and soothe the pain a bit."

"I saw those FBI agents come by earlier. Is that what's wrong?" She pulled the brandy out of the corner. Embarrassed at the thin layer of dust on it, she ran her hands over the entire bottle to wipe it away.

"Yes. They brought me terrible news, Kara. Terrible." He turned and set the kettle on the stove, then crumpled to the floor crying.

"Oh, my God, Charlie," Kara gasped as she rushed to him. "What's happened?"

But she didn't need to ask. Her stomach dropped. It was bad news. Sophie was gone; she knew it before he said anything.

Gasping for breath, he threw his arms around her. "She's gone, Kara. Really gone. They found her at the lake." His voice broke with sobs again, and he was unable to speak for several minutes.

It was best to let him cry it out. Kara cried with him. She couldn't believe Sophie was gone. She'd thought for sure the woman had gone to stay with a friend, or that she'd been hiding out somewhere because she was mad at her husband. But in the back of her mind, she had to think that perhaps it was for the best that Sophie was dead. That was the sort of

final curtain call that she couldn't come back from. That meant she couldn't pop up in the future and tear her and Charlie apart.

Feeling terrible for her thoughts, Kara pulled Charlie close and said things she hoped would comfort him. She told him everything would be okay and that Sophie was in a better place and that she was sorry. All the usual things that she'd heard after Patrick's death.

He was mostly settled by the time the kettle started whistling above them.

"Come on. Let's get you in a chair. Poor dear," she said, hauling him up with his arm around her shoulder. It took a bit of effort, but she finally managed to get him positioned over the seat, and he plopped into it, slumping toward the table. She handed him one of the linen napkins stacked on the counter.

"Thank you," he mumbled, sounding stuffy and miserable.

"You just sit there and gather yourself. I'll make the tea and you can pour the brandy in it."

He nodded.

As she sat to her own tea, Charlie turned the brandy up and splashed some into his cup, then turned the bottle up and took a long swig. When he set the bottle aside, something in his eyes no longer seemed so sad. His face was red and puffy, but his eyes looked just as they had ever since she'd met him. Alluring, piercing, and magnetic. She was glad to see it. That meant this episode of grief wouldn't last an overly long amount of time.

"Accidental drowning. That's what they're calling it." He tipped the teacup and sipped.

"I thought she could swim," Kara frowned, shocked.

"Like a fish. But she wasn't swimming. They said she drove her car over a twenty-foot sheer drop-off straight into the deep side of the lake."

That news hit Kara like a brick fist in the gut. Sophie had been crying the last time she'd seen her. Had she been so completely upset that she wasn't fit to drive? If Kara hadn't been smack in the middle of an episode, she might have realized her best friend had been in no shape to drive. She might have been able to stop her at least long enough for her to settle down and be able to drive.

But she hadn't. She'd slipped happily into her own little fantasy world, and when she'd had the chance to fight it off, she had not. She had wanted to check out of reality for a while.

That respite from the real world might have cost a woman her life.

Kara shuddered but remained silent.

"Kara, would you be a dear and go wet a washcloth for me? A big fluffy one, if it's possible?" He motioned toward his eyes.

Kara nodded and nearly leaped from her seat. "Yes, I'll be right back. I'm sorry. I don't know where my manners are lately."

"Thank you," he said, sounding more like himself.

Kara rushed to the downstairs bath and quickly went through her stack of washcloths to find the softest one. As she ran cold water over the cloth, she checked her appearance in the mirror above the sink. Seeing that her own eyes were puffy and red and that her mascara had smudged badly at the corner of her left eye, she grabbed a cloth for her own face.

Back in the kitchen, Charlie had poured more tea in both cups. "Want a splash of brandy in yours?" he asked.

"No. I'll have a glass of wine in a bit." She handed him the cloth.

"Drink up. I'll just be a moment," he said as he stood and turned his back.

Giving him some privacy, she turned toward the window and lifted her cup. She couldn't get over the fact that her friend

had been ripped from the world so suddenly. She was torn between grieving the loss of her friend and celebrating her relationship with Charlie.

“Okay. That’s much better.” Charlie folded the cloth and placed it at the corner of the table.

Kara felt woozy and pressed a hand to her forehead.

“Are you okay?” he asked, reaching across to take her hand.

She nodded. “I just got really dizzy and sleepy all of a sudden. Too much emotion all at once, I suppose. It’s just drained me a bit. I’ll be okay if I just sit still for a while.”

“Finish your tea. Maybe that’ll help, too.” Charlie lifted her cup and placed it in her hand, urging her to drink.

She finished the tea and set the cup down. Her hand felt clumsy. Like it wasn’t attached correctly. The room started spinning and she was struck with motion sickness. “I think I need to lie down, Charlie. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

He rushed to her side and put an arm around her waist. “Don’t worry about that now. Let’s just worry about getting you to the living room.”

Kara distinctly remembered telling him she would rather go to her parlor, but when she awoke later that afternoon, she was in her bedroom and Charlie was gone. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she tried to remember how she’d gotten upstairs.

The bed was badly rumped because she’d been lying on top of the covers. The clothes she had worn earlier lay in a pile beside the bed and she had on joggers with an oversized shirt again. When had she changed? Had Charlie helped her? Or did she have another episode?

The last thing she could clearly recall was being in the kitchen with Charlie and him putting his arm around her waist. After that, everything went black, exactly as it had the day of Sophie’s last visit.

Her final visit.

It was half-past four in the afternoon and she was alone in the house. It was closing in on time to start dinner if she planned on having it done in time to eat at a decent hour. She wandered into the living room and looked toward Charlie's house. The curtains were open on the first floor. She wondered if he was there crying behind closed doors. There was no one there to cook for him to make sure he was okay. He would have to make funeral arrangements, too. All alone.

"Nope. I can't stand the thought of that. No one should have to go through that alone."

Kara marched out of the house and to Charlie's front door. She didn't even bother changing her clothes.

Charlie opened the door after she knocked, shocked when he saw her. "Kara? What are you doing here?"

She didn't understand the expression on his face. She thought the shock was unwarranted. She stared at him in confusion, unable to speak for a moment. He'd been so happy to be with her earlier. What had changed?

Opening the door wider, he put a hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry, Kara. It's just that I wasn't expecting anyone, least of all you. You seemed to be resting so peacefully earlier. Are you feeling better?"

She nodded. "Yes, I'm fine." She wanted to ask if he'd helped her change clothes and get upstairs but didn't. Not in light of his odd reaction. Perhaps he had, and that's why he was acting strangely. "I don't know what came over me. Thank you for everything."

He nodded. "That's what friends are for, right?"

She chuckled, feeling suddenly nervous. "I was just coming over to ask if you would have dinner at my place tonight. It's the least I can do, and you shouldn't be alone right now."

“Oh, I don’t want to trouble you. Especially after your... episode today. You should rest.”

“It’s no trouble. I’d feel much better if you said yes. At least I would know you weren’t alone trying to face all this without anyone to lean on.”

He looked over his shoulder then back to her and nodded. “Okay. You win. I really don’t want to be alone tonight. Could I ask another favor from you?”

“Absolutely,” she answered, smiling despite her misgivings only moments before.

“Funeral arrangements,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion.

She put a hand on his arm and shushed him gently. “Of course. That’s always the hardest part. Come over around seven and we’ll have dinner. We’ll discuss everything else afterward; after I know you’ve eaten at least once today.”

“I’ll be there.” His smile was a bit too bright and a bit too wide.

Kara assessed him for a moment longer then waved and told him goodbye.

His clothes weren’t ruffled. Every hair was in place. The redness and puffiness around his eyes had disappeared. And Kara was almost certain he smelled of some expensive cologne.

As dinner cooked, Kara journaled at the kitchen table. She tried to accomplish the entries with all the happiness that she usually felt, but the feeling wouldn’t hold. It kept slipping into melancholy as she thought that she must have had something to do with Sophie’s death. Her feelings for Charlie aside, she had loved Sophie and never would have hurt her on purpose.

As seven o’clock drew closer, she eventually closed the journal and took it back to the desk upstairs. If she couldn’t enjoy it, there was no need in doing it.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

**F**or the third time in as many days, Ava and her team went back to Clear Branch. The suburb was massive and Ava was sure someone must have seen something out of the ordinary. It's not like people flocked to the place. Even the lake was only for the residents. It had been manmade especially for them. So anything going on should have been noticed by someone.

“We’re taking the back route into the place, right?” Ava asked sheepishly.

Sal chuckled. “We are. It’s closer that way.”

Ava produced a small, plastic cylinder and gave it a shake. “I brought these just in case. They help my aunt.”

“Good thinking.”

As they pulled onto the access road that cut across the empty lot behind the strip mall, Ava shook her head. “This looks like the part of town where a rich woman like Sophie would avoid. Are we sure she wasn’t taking drugs of any kind?”

“Not until the reports come back. By all accounts, though, she did not take any sort of recreational drugs. She used to be a ballerina. She was all about the healthy lifestyle, I guess.”



“Except for drinking, right?”

Sal nodded. “And I don’t think she was the type to be drinking and driving. Unless she was leading some double life and doing a great job hiding it from everyone she knew.”

“Even her bestie in Baltimore,” Ava added.

“Yep. I’m holding off on drawing any conclusions until we get the autopsy and other reports back.”

Ava considered things for a moment. “I’ve been thinking... This just doesn’t feel like a route she would have taken very often. It’s a ways away from her home and there isn’t much to this road.”

“Maybe that explains why she had the accident, then. If she wasn’t familiar with the route, she could have simply misjudged the curve and gone over.”

“Definitely a possibility. Or that someone may have dumped her here.”

“Are you thinking this was foul play?”

“I don’t know,” Ava admitted. “We definitely can’t rule it out, though.”

Sal turned to face Ava, already sharing their unspoken thoughts. “How did you think Mr. Walker took the news of his wife’s death?”

“I thought he took it like a man who had been dreading hearing the worst. How did it seem to you?”

“Like a man who was almost relieved that it was finally out. Totally different than the first day we saw him. Maybe I’m jaded, though.” Sal turned to face front again.

Thinking about her own evolving reactions to seeing dead bodies, Ava nodded. “I can see how you’d become jaded. Seeing the worst of humanity all the time tends to do that.”

“Yes, it does. This time, it just feels as if there are too many political people involved, too many of the so-called untouchables. It makes me want to dig deeper, I guess.”

“Corruption,” Ava said, following it up with a heavy sigh. “It reaches from the lowest thug on the street to the highest offices in the land. Not just here, either. It’s all over the world.”

“Just wish we could stamp it out with lead boots and no mercy,” Sal said, sounding more like the old Sal that Ava had first met in Kentucky.

They parked at the gated drive of the first house and Ava chuckled. “Well, let’s put away the lead boots for now. I think around here we’d do better in kid slippers.”

Sal scoffed in response. “No way. You start bowing to powerful people, and pretty soon they expect it from you.”

“Are we considering them as suspects?” Ava asked.

Sal gave her an enigmatic smile. “May as well.” She pressed the buzzer on the gatepost. “Why don’t you get out and walk, get a view of the property from all angles. They might have been able to see more than we think.”

Ava nodded and opened the door, craning her neck left and right. She couldn’t see much from here, but she needed more time to search.

After a moment of crackling, the intercom came to life.

“State your business.”

“FBI,” Sal announced. “We’re canvassing the neighborhood and would like to speak with the homeowners.”

“What’s this concerning?”

“The death of Sophie Walker. She lived farther down the road.”

“Hold your credentials in front of the camera so I can see them clearly.”

Ava scowled at the hateful little box. She marched back up to the gate and held her badge up, side by side with Sal’s. After what seemed like an eternity, the voice came back and told them they could enter when the gate was opened.

The gate slid back on its track and Sal went forward while Ava took a slow, measured sweep of the property. She barely kept herself from rolling her eyes at the pompous attitude in that voice. The fact that it had given them permission to enter as if they were entreating entrance to the king's chambers back in the Dark Ages made it worse.

Two hours later, the team met up again at the site of the crash. No one had seen anything.

“Nothing? Nothing at all?” Ava asked incredulously as she looked out over the lake.

Everyone shook their heads.

“Should we go back to Charles Walker and question him some more, or the neighbors?” Metford asked.

“No. The neighbors across the street still aren't back from vacation. The construction crew wasn't even working during the timeline, and Kara Davis has voluntarily answered every question we've put to her,” Santos added.

Ava put her hands on her hips, wondering where to go from there.

“There was something really off about her,” Sal spoke up.

Ava nodded.

“The look in her eyes was half-mad, half something else, and not at all normal. And parts of the house seemed immaculate, while other parts looked as if she hadn't touched them in months.”

Ava shook her head and flapped a dismissive hand. “She lives there alone now, and she doesn't keep staff the way her neighbors do. Maybe she simply can't keep up with the work.”

“I wonder if she works a job outside the home?” Sal asked.

Ava shrugged, not seeing that it mattered one way or the other. Kara had freely admitted that her friend had visited that day and then had gone back home. She even admitted she

didn't think anything was wrong other than Sophie's little upset with her husband, which was probably nothing serious. It never was. That was the consensus from all of Sophie's friends.

"Well, I guess we can mark this off the to-do list. Nobody saw anything, and if they did, they're not saying anything," said Metford. "I'm kind of at a loss.

Sal nodded in agreement. "We can't do more here today. Let's head back to the office. I want to make a few calls."

The team turned to head back to their vehicles, but Santos hesitated for a moment. "Can I ask something? Why are we still investigating this case, boss? I know it's not my call, but the case will be closed, right? It was labeled as an accidental death. Mrs. Walker has been found. Isn't that all we were supposed to do?"

"The autopsy report isn't back, and we can't officially update the case to accidental death until it's back," Sal explained. "Until then, we have to keep looking into this. Something seems off about the whole thing to me."

Sal gave Ava a look as if communicating mentally. This time, it was Ava's turn to respond. She stalked back to the gap between the rock and the guardrail and waved the team to follow her.

"Look at this. She had to have felt the pavement change to gravel and then dirt before she went over. If she was only distracted, wouldn't she have still hit the brakes? She came straight off the road and directly between the rail and the rock. That's all possible, but then she didn't even try to get out. She was in pristine condition except for the damage done by marine life and being submerged in water for days. Her makeup was still on, false eyelashes, her nails weren't even chipped."

"But that doesn't necessarily mean anything, Ava," pressed Santos. "That could all be a coincidence.

“That’s the thing, Jillian. I know I don’t have a ton of experience, but I don’t believe in coincidences. I just have a hard time believing that she disappeared, went up a route that was way out of her way, and then went over with zero foul play involved. She didn’t seem like a careless person according to those who knew her best. Even her family stressed that she was dependable, a straight arrow, and cautious all her life. I can’t imagine she’d just hurtle over a cliff.”

“That’s why they call them accidents,” Metford offered.

Ava nodded. “That’s exactly why they call them accidents. I just wish I could figure out how all the stars aligned so perfectly to allow this accident to happen.”

Ava went back to the car and got in. There was no use pounding her head against a brick wall. There wasn’t really a reason to stay on the case the way she was doing, either. But she could feel it prickling at the back of her neck that she was missing a piece of the puzzle. That there was more to the story here.

She had to find out what that was. Even if it was an accident, Sophie Walker deserved it. It was the least Ava could do for her.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

*Kara*

**K**ara had been too worried to properly grieve Sophie's passing until Charlie returned to her house the day after he'd had dinner with her. That had been a very hard night. All the decisions to be made, he wanted to do in one sitting. In the end, he had decided on cremation, a small ceremony, and then doling out her ashes to her family members.

Sophie's mother and father were on their way, and he had no way to get ahold of them while they were on the road. They refused to fly, stating that they were far too distraught to be in the company of strangers for the duration of a flight. Their driver was going to bring them, and they were going to stay at a hotel in the city.

Kara thought it was odd that they wouldn't answer their cellphones even though they weren't driving, but she figured to each their own. If everyone was the same, the world would be a boring place, she supposed. When Patrick died, she could barely get off the phone with his crying mother, and once she arrived, Kara thought she would never leave. Maybe Sophie and her family weren't as close-knit as other families.

Charlie came back from the restroom looking a bit better than before, but still a little more on the haggard side than she

liked to see him. The dark circles under his eyes didn't suit him at all. And she could swear that he'd lost weight that he didn't really have to spare.

In one way, it seemed like she'd gone through the same thing only days ago with Patrick's death. In another way, it seemed a lifetime ago. Sometimes, the memory of his face had faded so badly that she had to look at pictures of him to recall the details. The monsters in her nightmares were more readily available for recall than the face of her late husband. But how could she tell Charlie that his pain would fade along with the face of his wife? All it took was time.

"Do you remember the first dinner you came to at our house? Sophie was so excited that you were coming over that evening. She had every second planned out. She didn't want you to think we were boring rich people like the rest of the boring rich people who lived in Clear Branch." He chuckled, but tears sparkled in his eyes as he turned to look out the window into the sunset.

In all honesty, Kara could barely recall any of the dinners at their house. She didn't mention that, feeling that it might be insulting to Charlie. "She was afraid I'd think you two were boring? That's just laughable. You two have traveled all over the world. She was a ballerina, for the love of lambs." She held out her hands. "Look at me. What have I ever done? I was a pampered housewife for fifteen years. Now, I'm a pampered widow. My husband's money is still taking care of me. It always will. I'll never have a job, or a career, or anything else that will take me outside of this little patch of ground I call home."

"That's okay, too. Sometimes, that's the link between such good friends. They're polar opposites on almost every level. It makes one intriguing to the other. She loved you, you know. In her way, she loved you very much. She often commented that she admired your strength to be able to stay here alone after your husband passed." A tear trickled down his cheek. "I don't know that I'll even be that strong. How can I stay in the house

I bought for her?" He cried quietly as he watched the sun sink lower.

It tore at Kara's heart to hear that Sophie had spoken of her and loved her so much. It exacerbated the guilt and the pain she already harbored in her heart and soul at the thought she might have caused Sophie's death.

"I still can't believe she's gone forever. I honestly believed she'd be back sooner or later," Kara said with a hitch in her voice as tears threatened.

"I'm sure we'll all feel this way until after the funeral. Maybe even a little longer than that, but I've heard that the funeral is more for the living than for the dead. It's closure for us. I just don't understand why she had to die." He covered his eyes with one hand.

His chin quivered, and Kara's heart broke anew. Her own tears fell and she sniffled. She couldn't tell him that she cried mostly because some part of her, some shadowy corner of her brain thought she might be the reason he was going through all the pain and grief. She couldn't tell him that her tears were heavy with guilt. She could tell no one. So she cried.

He stood. "Do you mind if we have a glass of wine in here?"

Her eyes widened and she shook her head. "We can have wine in the kitchen or in the parlor, but not in here," she said. "Patrick wouldn't approve of that at all."

His face went straight and he nodded. "So you still only do things that he approved of?"

She thought about it for a minute. "Old habits, maybe. But this is the room where I bring guests. I don't want to risk it getting stained up."

And if she did anything in the living room that Patrick didn't like, he might come back and start haunting her again. She didn't want that. Someone like Patrick might laugh at the idea of a haunting, but she had experienced it firsthand. She knew it was real. Real enough to knock her out of bed. Real



enough to choke her. Real enough to leave bruises. The living room had been Patrick's sanctuary. She thought she would always leave it just the way he liked it.

"Well, alrighty, then." He motioned toward the parlor. "Shall we have a glass of wine in the parlor?"

She nodded. "That would be lovely."

Charlie started down the hallway toward the kitchen and Kara followed. He turned and shook his head.

"No, no. I want you to go to the parlor and get it set up for us. Put on one of your favorite records and turn on the lights. Close the drapes. Whatever it is that you do to make it comfortable for you. I'll worry about the wine."

"Alright," she said reluctantly.

His mood changed so often that she couldn't keep track of how he was feeling from one minute to the next. As he had ducked into the kitchen, there had been no sign of the tears he'd shed only a few short moments before.

Charlie came into the parlor with a serving tray. He had the bottle of wine, their glasses, sliced hard cheese, and some red grapes. Kara was shocked that he'd gone to so much trouble under the circumstances.

He's just showing me that he really cares. He'll make his move as soon as the appropriate amount of time has passed since Sophie's tragic death, she thought.

She took the wine and thanked him. She sat in her favorite chair and closed her eyes as light music filled the room. Authentic gas lamps burned low in the corners behind her and on the wall sconces in front of her. It was a soft, ambient glow that she loved. Nothing about the parlor was harsh. It was all soft, rounded, warm, and inviting. Each time she sat in her chair, she could feel the stress slide right out of her muscles and her mind would drift, carefree for a while.

The next thing she knew, she was waking up in her bed. It was pitch dark, and she felt as if she weren't alone. Timidly,

she stretched her hand out to the other side of the bed.

Nothing.

Fearing the dead thing's touch again, she darted her hand under the lampshade and flicked on the light, jerking her hand back almost before the bulb came on. Her heart beat in her throat as she clutched the covers to her chest and leaned to look on the other side of the table, into the corners where the light didn't quite wash away all the darkness.

Nothing.

It took her several minutes, but she finally managed to get off the bed. Flipping on lights, she went from room to room calling for Charlie. She was sure someone else was in the house—or had been very recently.

All the doors and windows were secure. She turned off the lights and made her way back upstairs. As soon as she stepped into the room, she realized why she'd felt as if someone was there. The room held the scent of Charlie's cologne. It was a faded scent, but it was there nonetheless.

Looking around, she saw that her journal was lying open on the desk. Confused, she went to shut it and realized that she'd been writing without remembering doing so.

As she read the last entry, dated for that day, she felt a cold stone settle in her stomach. In the journal, she had written that she hoped the medicine she had given Sophie that evening she'd come crying on her doorstep had not contributed to her death.

The numbness started at the crown of her head and worked its way slowly down her entire body.

“My pills that I can't remember taking,” she muttered.

She ran downstairs with abandon. Flinging the pantry open, she grabbed the bottles and the pill box from the shelf. At the table, she slammed them all down before turning on the low-hanging light.

The pills were gone. Only those few strays at the bottom of the bottle remained. Her prescription sleeping pills, which she had stopped taking almost as soon as they were prescribed, seemed untouched. She couldn't recall how many she had taken before stopping them, but it looked about right. She counted them anyway.

Twenty even. It was a thirty-day supply, so that meant ten were gone. Her mind simply wouldn't go back that far and pull out the memory of how long she had taken them. Thinking it sounded correct, she put the lid back on the sleeping pills and put it back into the pantry, pushing it back to the corner where the brandy used to sit.

The pill box was empty, and she was sure she'd had her extra medicine in it. Just a few pills to have downstairs in case she forgot to take her morning dose before coming down. The prescription had sat on the bedside table until she'd stopped taking them.

It hit her that she had stopped that medication, also. That was the reason it was in the pantry instead of on her nightstand. She had stopped taking it weeks prior.

No, if you'd done that, you'd be having worse episodes than you already are.

"You don't know, and if you do, you're not telling me. You're no help, so shut up," she hissed at the voice that had chosen to lay silent for so long, only returning to torment her when she felt at her lowest.

How long had she been having blackout episodes? She could recall the one on the day Sophie visited, possibly only because of all the fuss surrounding her friend's death.

She was upset and you gave her a pill to calm her down. It worked and she asked for a few to take with her. You weren't taking them, so you agreed. Bad, bad friend.

Kara couldn't argue because she simply could not be sure if she had been a bad, bad friend or if her mind was playing tricks on her.

Maybe she'd been the worst kind of friend of all: the kind that kills another.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Ava was in her office when the tox report came in. It was interesting, to say the least. For a woman thought to be a straight arrow, she had quite a mixture in her system. The most prevalent drug in her system was a powerful sleep medication. Triazolam. There were also trace amounts of psilocybin mushrooms, the kind that induce hallucinations. And to top it all off, there was lysergic acid diethylamide—LSD. In Ava’s mind, that was a recreational drug, which meant that Sophie was leading a life separate from the one she presented to her friends and family. Or, every single person they’d interviewed had lied to the FBI. She didn’t think that was a plausible idea.

She pored through the file, glumly noting that her suspicion had possibly been right. This wouldn’t be listed as an accidental death. It would be updated to possible suicide pending further investigation.

The only possible way that Sophie wasn’t using recreational drugs was if someone had put the sleeping pills in something she was drinking or eating just before the accident. There was no alcohol in her system, so she probably wasn’t at a bar. The contents of her stomach were listed as meticulous ingredients, but what she could make of it was that Sophie had a simple ham and cheese sandwich with a few vegetables on it

and a soda. It was the kind of meal that one could pick up at any sandwich shop.

It was her job to find out if Sophie was abusing medication, if her doctor prescribed the sleeping medication, and if she was associated with anyone who could have given her the mushrooms anytime during the week before her death.

Where had she been that day? Who had she been with?

Ava updated the digital files and made a list of who she needed to talk to next. First on her list was Sophie's husband. She hoped she wouldn't need a warrant to search the house. If he had nothing to hide, he would agree to it. If not, she would have to get the order. And she would, because then she would have more reason to suspect him.

The next person would be Sophie's doctor, who still hadn't gotten back to her, citing legal and procedural hurdles. She needed to know if Mrs. Walker was on medication for any reason. She also wanted to know if Sophie had perhaps been diagnosed with anything recently. It wasn't completely unheard of for someone to be diagnosed with cancer or some similarly terrible disease, and instead of taking the normal route, they just decided to go to sleep and not wake up.

As she was finishing her notes, she got a knock on her door. It was Ashton. She frowned.

"Did you get any more from her bank statements?"

Ashton shook his head. "No, it's not that. I got a call asking for you."

Ava frowned. "Why would they call you and not just my direct line?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. It was really weird. He told me to take down everything he said verbatim and give you the note." He held out the legal pad on which he had written.

Stunned, Ava reached for it. She read the first line and frowned.

“Um.” She looked back up at Ashton. “Not a word goes out about this.”

Ashton nodded. “Not a word.” He headed back out and shut the door behind him. Ava waited until he was all the way back at his desk before looking back down at the paper.

Agent Aviva James of the FBI, I hope this finds you doing well. I thought you would be interested to know that the Cornbread Mafia has ties to a much larger trafficking ring than even you imagined. They have a dedicated route through the world, and I know the specific one right here in the good old United States of America. It’s in the South, in case you didn’t already know that. The victims are first sent to Georgia, then they do a little backtracking and send them to Florida. That’s where the whole big group of people stays until those in charge make up their minds in which directions to send which ones.

Some will head to southern California and others will go to the Bahamas, Virgin Islands, and US outliers in the area. Nice warm places where there’s a lot of sunshine. Think about it and you’ll be able to figure out the routes from Florida. They have to make a few stops along the way, sometimes they hide their ‘goods’ for weeks until any heat from cops or investigators dies down. Then they move them on.

Look for the stops in the route and you’ll have them. They don’t like to change up those places, unlike the places they keep them in Georgia and Florida. Trying to find them in either of those places is akin to trying to catch a tornado with a butterfly net. The network is too vast. Remember, too, that not all their victims are domestic. For some, this is just the latest chain in a long link of imports from Europe.

Best of luck to you, I guess.

Ava’s blood ran icy through her veins. That was a very long note. It would’ve been easier for the man to be transferred and speak directly with Ava, but he had opted for a proxy. Why? It wasn’t because he was in such a hurry. She looked over the note again. He definitely wasn’t in a hurry.

The only possible explanation in her mind was that the man was afraid she would recognize his voice. The only person she could think of who knew she was looking into the Cornbread Mafia was Ash Patterson. She was sure that some other people knew, but they were on the side of law enforcement. Whoever had dictated the note to her was not. He had information that only someone in that circle would have.

She picked up the phone and called the head agent investigating Molly's case. Fitzpatrick answered.

"Fitzpatrick, this is Agent Aviva James. I'm calling because I have just received some information that I think is relevant to one of your older cases."

"Don't make me guess what it is or which case it relates to, Agent James. It must be information for Molly's case. I haven't forgotten who you are just because you got this fancy new team. I am busy, you know." His usual gruff, short, and grumpy nature shone through.

"A man called my office but didn't want to speak to me directly. He made the man who answered take down what he said and give me the note. I can scan and send it over right now, or I can deliver it. It might help save a lot of trafficked people if it's properly checked into. He said that some of the victims are from Europe, so they're not all local people. This isn't something small we're talking about. And I think I know who sent it."

"Don't tell me that I need to check into anything properly or not. I'll be the judge of that. And who do you think sent the information? Is there even a reason to believe it's legit?"

"Ash Patterson. He was in jail in Kentucky while I was there investigating cold cases. The things he references are directly related to what we spoke about when I visited him."

Fitzpatrick sighed, making it known that he was being interrupted and imposed upon. "Okay, scan it, send it, and



don't call back for updates twenty-four hours from now. If there are developments, I'll call you." He hung up.

Ava read over the note several more times before scanning it and sending it. She happily kept the original and would place it in the files she kept at home pertaining to Molly.

It had been so long, she didn't like to let herself hope. But something flared up inside her anyway. Maybe soon she'd have some answers.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*Kara*

The phone rang, yanking Kara out of her moment of peaceful thought. She startled and lunged for the phone, angry that someone would disturb her in the middle of such a beautiful moment.

“Sis?”

“Daphne,” Kara sighed, only slightly less ruffled at the interruption. She was just getting to the good part of her fantasy where Charlie dashed through the front door and announced his undying and unconditional love for her. Then he would kiss her. It would be a passionate kiss. But no, not today. Daphne had to call and ruin it.

“Well, don’t sound so happy to hear from me. Dang. What’s got your knickers in a wad today?”

“Nothing, Daphne. Nothing,” she replied, biting her lip. She should tell her about Sophie. If she didn’t, Daphne would find out anyway, and then she would wonder why Kara had kept it from her. It would make her look guilty or out of touch because it was known that she and Sophie had become good friends.

“You sure? Seriously, you don’t sound like yourself.”

You should hear the voice in my head, sis. It doesn't sound like anyone I know, she wanted to say, but bit her tongue. "I'm really tired. There's something I need to tell you. I'm actually glad you called," she lied as she took a seat in her parlor.

"Kar, you're scaring me. What's happened?" Daphne's tone rose sharply.

"Do you remember Sophie? My friend next door?"

"Well, yes, of course, I do. I only met her briefly on the lawn that once, but she seemed nice. I was so glad you two were friends. What's happened? Did the Walkers move?"

"She went missing a few days ago. A week ago, actually."

"And you didn't tell me? Kara! Why would you not tell me? I would've come over to be with you."

"She's not missing anymore, Daphne. She's dead." Kara couldn't ignore that cold stone in the pit of her stomach or the shame she felt. She closed her eyes and let the tears fall that she didn't even know were close to falling.

"Kara, I'm so sorry. What happened? Tell me all about it. Do you want me to come over? I'm coming over. I'll be there in an hour."

"No! Daphne, just stop for a minute. I don't need you to rush over here. I'm okay. Really. I'm grieving of course, but okay. She ran her car off a cliff and into the lake. She drowned. Her poor husband is almost mad with grief. I've been trying to help him through it. After all, I know how devastating it can be to lose a spouse. I had family to help me through it, though. Charlie doesn't have anyone except Sophie's parents, who don't seem to want to help at all."

"You're helping him? Really?" Daphne sounded as if she didn't believe her sister.

"Yes, I am. I've been making sure he eats at least once a day and that he doesn't drink too much. I even helped him with all the funeral arrangements. He said he's going to wait for approval from her mother and father, but they still haven't

arrived. They won't even take a call from him while they're being driven here. Can you believe that? Then they're not going to the house, they're going to stay in a hotel in the city."

"Wow, really caring lot, aren't they? You're not forgetting to take your meds during all this, are you?"

Daphne knew how to push Kara's buttons, and for some reason, she always insisted on doing so. "No, Daphne. I am not forgetting to take my meds. Why can't you lay off with that? You ask every time we speak."

"Because I care, sis. That's the only reason. I'm not accusing you of anything, I'm not saying I distrust you. I just know that sometimes you forget when you're under stress."

"I think helping Charlie has helped me, too." Just thinking about him made her smile.

"You're probably right about that. I'm glad you two have each other. I'm sure he appreciates your help and your friendship right now. Even the richest, smartest chemist in the world needs a friend in times like this."

As she talked to Daphne, Kara noticed that her fingernails were dirty and some had been chewed badly. There was a big reddish stain on the front of her blouse. It looked like red wine. She lifted the front of the blouse and noticed that the wine had gone through and stained her bra, too. She must have slept in her slacks, they were so wrinkled. She stood, trying to keep the growing panic out of her voice. There were grass stains on her white sneakers and tracks of mud smeared all over the floor.

She headed to the living room. Thankfully, it was relatively clean. It needed a light dusting, but otherwise looked good. The same couldn't be said for her parlor, though. It looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in a year. Even the mirrors had smudges that she couldn't explain.

Upstairs, she pulled back the cover on the bed and saw the faint smudgy outline on the side where she slept. How long had it been since she'd washed the linens?

Putting her fingers through her hair in frustration, she almost yelped as her hand caught on tangles in the back. In the bathroom, she laid out her brush, meaning to have a go at the tangles once she was off the phone with her sister. That's when she looked into the mirror and she did yelp in surprise and a bit of horror.

Her hair looked unwashed. The makeup on her face was caked and smeared as if she'd applied several layers and then slept in it for a couple of nights.

"What's wrong, Kar?" Daphne sounded genuinely scared.

"Oh, uhm... it's just..."

"What? Spit it out, for chrissake! Do I need to come over? Or call an ambulance?"

"No, I'm fine. I wish you'd stop acting like that. I scared myself in the mirror. I turned the light on in the bathroom and saw myself. It's stupid. I just startled myself," she reiterated slowly.

"Oh, hell's bells. I scare myself every morning when I turn on the bathroom light," Daphne said and laughed.

"Listen, I need to go. I'm supposed to cook for Charlie, and I think he wants to go over the funeral plans again—like what the preacher will say and all that. I need to take a shower, too." She looked in the mirror and thought it was going to take a bit more than a shower to fix herself.

"Alright, then. I'll call you again in a day or so, just to check that you're okay. I'm really sorry about your friend. You know that you can call me anytime, right?"

"I know, Daph. Thank you."

"I don't mind coming over and staying if you need me. You just have to let me know. I don't want to intrude, but I'm here if you need me."

"Thanks again." Kara ended the call and stood staring at her garish and slightly terrifying appearance.

Had Charlie seen her this way? Had he noticed and not said anything? She didn't like to think he would do that. Maybe he'd noticed and hadn't known how to confront her with it.

She leaned closer to the mirror. Her face looked painted instead of enhanced. She'd never seen makeup so thick and caked. Even clown makeup didn't look so awful. And when had she stained her clothes? Her shoes?

The biggest question was why hadn't she been able to see any of it before Daphne called? Since hearing her sister's voice, she had fallen from Cloud Nine all the way to rock bottom. Sadness and fear prevailed, and not just because of her appearance or the state of her house. She still had the sinking feeling that maybe she had given Sophie part of her pills. That would explain why there were so many missing.

There was going to be an autopsy, too. Surely, they would find the medication in her system. Eventually, they would be around to ask her a bunch of really uncomfortable questions about it.

Instead of dwelling on things she couldn't change, Kara focused on things that she could change—starting with a shower and clean clothes.

Her sister had successfully done what no amount of medicine could do. She had whipped Kara right out of her fantasies and back into the cold harshness of reality without even trying.

Kara wasn't so sure she liked it, either.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Charles Walker didn't answer his phone. Ava checked the clock. It was a quarter past eight in the morning. Being a chemist, he was probably used to getting up early to go to work. Maybe she had missed him. The last she understood, though, he had taken a leave after finding out his wife was dead instead of missing. Perhaps she had misunderstood that.

She called Mr. Walker's work to find that he had taken a leave. He'd come in the day before to do something in the lab, but the man on the phone wasn't sure what. Walker had been there only about forty-five minutes and had left without speaking to anyone.

Ava thanked the man and hung up. She tried Walker's cellphone again. This time, she left a message for him to return her call and that it was urgent.

She stared at the toxicology report. If they had found pot in her system, Ava wouldn't have thought much of it. But magic mushrooms? That was an order of magnitude more esoteric. Where would she even get those? She knew the substance had recently been decriminalized in Washington DC, but that was just the city, far from the suburb in which she lived. It wasn't like Sophie could have just popped into a

dispensary for a professionally-packaged bag of mushrooms with a cute logo and clever branding.

Who was her dealer? Had her chemist husband obtained them for her?

The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. If he had access to those types of drugs, perhaps he had snuck some away from the lab. Perhaps he had also lied about using recreational drugs. Was there a way she could get him to take a drug screen to see if it was in his system, too? And would it change anything about Sophie's case? There had only been a trace amount. It's not like the mushrooms killed her. Ava suspected the sleeping pills had done that.

The coroner's report stated that it was highly likely that Sophie had fallen asleep and hadn't revived after hitting the water. The impact could have knocked her unconscious, though. The airbag broke her nose just as Ava had thought. She had suspected that the damage to her forehead had been caused by the steering wheel in some way, but the coroner stated that it was also from the airbag. The force had driven the bones in her nose upward.

Ava grimaced. The amount of triazolam in her system was enormous. The pills alone should have killed the woman. Sophie Walker should've never made it to sit behind the wheel.

She had gone into town and grabbed a sub with someone. They most likely had spiked her soda with crushed sleeping pills. She had fallen asleep on the short drive home and gone off the cliff into the lake.

Whoever had slipped her the pills had not intended for her to get far.

The question remained: Why would someone do that to her?

The coroner thought it was probably suicide. He had labeled the death probable suicide.

"Probable suicide," she huffed. "More likely, homicide."



She put the file away and left only the autopsy report on her desk as she called Mr. Walker again. When there was no answer, she hung up and dialed Sophie's doctor.

The receptionist was nice enough as she put Ava on hold so she could go get the doctor. He was with a patient, and the receptionist warned Ava that it might be a lengthy wait.

"That's fine. I'll hold. If I have to hang up, I'll definitely call back in a bit."

"Alright, sweetie. Oh, I'm sorry, I mean, Agent James."

Ava grinned but said nothing. The woman had a deep Southern drawl that sounded so provincial and how she imagined the old-time Southern Belles sounded.

Five minutes in, Ava realized she was really in for a wait. Her phone beeped, signaling an incoming call. She recognized the number as Mr. Walker's. She clicked to answer it but didn't disconnect the other call, choosing instead to put the doctor's office on hold. Turnabout was fair play, after all.

"Mr. Walker," she started. "I'm glad you called back."

"Yes. I was driving and didn't want to answer while I was in traffic. I called as soon as I got back home. I'm sitting in my driveway now. Is there a problem?"

"We've just received your wife's autopsy report, Mr. Walker. Would you prefer to come into the office and see it, or do you want me to come by your house?"

After a long pause, he cleared his throat. "Can we do it over the phone?"

"Over the phone? Are you sure?" She'd never had a family member take an autopsy report over the phone before.

"Please. I don't want to wait." His words were rushed.

Ava wondered where he had been, but didn't ask. Not yet, anyway.

She gave him the summarized version, only the highlights, which was to say that she told him about the mushrooms,

LSD, and Triazolam. She also told him that the airbag had broken her nose. She hadn't been assaulted, as he had suggested when he'd identified her body.

"I don't understand. My wife didn't take drugs. At least not that I know of. Nor did she take sleeping pills. The only help she ever used for sleeping was an extra shot or an extra glass of wine in the evenings."

"Did any of your wife's friends mingle with the high-end drug scene?"

He chuckled. "Have you met her friends?"

"Well, not personally, no."

"That explains why you asked that. No, her friends weren't mingling with anyone in the drug scene. If they want anything of that sort, they're all rich enough to have it brought to them. Sophie only went out with friends to eat or see a movie or have a day at the spa. She didn't party with them."

"What about the writers' retreat? Who went with her there?"

Even though they weren't face to face, Ava sensed the immediate tension in Mr. Walker's voice.

"She went to that alone. Every time. It's kind of the whole idea of a writers' retreat. Was there any other news, any more surprises about my wife's death?"

"No, Mr. Walker. And I must say that you sound really broken up about what you have learned."

"Agent James, until this very moment, I thought I knew my wife. It's only after her death, after all my grieving, that I find out she might not have been who I thought she was at all. So, excuse me if my actions do not align with your preset ideations of a grief-stricken husband. If that's all, goodbye, Agent James."

"That's actually not all," she said, trying to catch him before he hung up. "What about your line of work?"

“The lab?” The tension was replaced with genuine confusion.

“I just have to ask. Do you think she may possibly have gotten some of those medications or chemicals from any samples you may have kept at home?”

“I don’t see how that could be possible,” he replied. “I don’t take samples home. They’re locked up and secured with a ton of security protocols.”

Ava listened intently for any hint of evasiveness in his response, but she couldn’t find anything there. “Of course. You’re right—I heard as much from the lab. Well, thank you, Mr. Walker.”

He gave a wordless grunt and disconnected the call. The jaunty hold music of the doctor’s office was still streaming from the other line.

“Well, miracles never cease,” she muttered.

She let it play for another minute or so before disconnecting that call, too. She didn’t feel up to the task of negotiating the byzantine framework of laws and regulations regarding medical records of the deceased—especially when she had a sneaking suspicion she already knew exactly what the doctor would tell her.

She strongly doubted that Sophie Walker had been prescribed such a harsh benzodiazepine. Which means someone had definitely spiked her drink.

After Walker’s actions on the phone, Ava had to wonder what caused him to change up his act so quickly. It happened after she mentioned the writers’ retreat. She made a mental note to check that lead a little more thoroughly. And she still needed to know who Sophie had her last lunch with.

None of the friends had owned up to it, and most of their stories had checked out. They weren’t even near the town. Dear hubby had said he was at work, and his story had checked out, too. The lab had a sophisticated keycard system that logged exactly who entered the building and when.

Charles had entered at seven-forty-nine and had not left until well after five.

It seemed that all she had was answers. She knew what had killed Sophie, and when it had happened.

But the questions still lingered: Who? And why?

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

*Kara*

**K**ara had just finished cleaning up the kitchen when Charlie knocked on the door. She let him in, shocked at his obviously agitated state.

“What’s going on, Charlie? You look a mess,” she frowned, shutting the door behind him quickly.

“I’ve just had a call from that agent again.” He ran both hands through his hair and turned toward the living room, changed course, and headed for the kitchen.

Kara was left to follow him, rushing to keep up. “Well, what did she say? Charlie?” She rounded the corner into the kitchen. He had already paced to the other end of it and was looking out the patio doors, his bottom lip curled between his teeth. “Charlie? What did she say?”

He shook his head. “They found drugs in her system, Kara. Drugs.” He spun on her, eyes wild. “Can you believe it? My Sophie had drugs in her system.” He shook his head again and curled his fingers into his hair like he wanted to yank it out.

Kara felt sick to her stomach as she rushed to him and pulled his hands down and away from his hair. “What kind of

drugs? There could've been an explanation. Her doctor might've prescribed her something."

"No, not those kinds of drugs. She had LSD in her system. And mushrooms. The kind kids take to get high and have visions."

"My God," she whispered.

Charlie nodded. "They said it was a trace amount and probably hadn't been ingested recently, but the sleeping pills..." He scrubbed at his face. "She asked me if my wife or her friends mingled with anyone in the drug scene. Can you believe that? As if she were some lowlife junkie." He slumped into a chair at the table with his head down on his crossed arms.

Kara was frozen in place. Sleeping pills. They couldn't be her sleeping pills, though. She'd counted them and thought for sure the only ones missing were the few she'd taken. Her tongue felt numb and disconnected. "Sleeping pills?"

"Yes. Triazolam. It's a benzodiazepine—not exactly the kind of thing you can just pick up over the counter. They said she had enough of them in her system to tranquilize a horse. They suspect someone crushed them up and put them in her drink just before she... just before... dammit!" He thumped the table with his hand.

Kara jumped and her paralysis was broken, but her mind wouldn't focus on Charlie for once. It kept leaping back to the day Sophie visited. Had Kara offered her a drink? Had Sophie accepted? Even if she had, Kara knew she wouldn't have crushed up sleeping pills and put them in her drink. There was no way. Not even during a blackout episode. They were mostly filled with fantasies about a life with Charlie—or with visions so black and terrifying that all she could do was huddle in a corner and scream and thrash.

And how would you know that? You don't really know where you go or what you do when you black out.

"I didn't—" she whispered, but the voice roared.

You killed her.

Kara's stomach lurched into her throat and she gagged. Rushing from the room, she heard Charlie yell after her as if he were yelling from another galaxy. Falling to her knees in front of the toilet, she lost everything she'd eaten that day, and then dry heaved several times before getting herself back under any semblance of control.

"My God, Kara, are you okay?" Charlie asked from the doorway.

You killed her!

Humiliated, she nodded without turning to face him. "I'll be out in a minute."

Instead of leaving, he walked into the bathroom and reached across her to get a washcloth. She wanted to die. If the floor opened up and swallowed her whole, it would be a relief from her embarrassment.

After wetting the cloth, he held it down to her. "I remember not too long ago that you did the same for me." He dropped a hand to her shoulder and squeezed. "Need help up?"

She shook her head.

Thankfully, he left her alone.

She cleaned herself up and splashed cold water on her face. Staring at her reflection in the mirror, she leaned close and looked deep into her own eyes. Was there a maniac hiding in there? She didn't think so. Certainly, she didn't see it if there was. Was she batshit crazy? Couldn't see that either. She decided she was worrying over nothing. She loved Sophie, and wouldn't have hurt her. How many other people could get a prescription for the same exact sleeping pills?

She went back to the kitchen, her cheeks still burning with her embarrassment. "Sorry about that." She tugged at her blouse and turned toward the stove. Charlie had put the kettle on again. "Tea?" she asked.

He nodded. "I thought it would do us both a world of good. I didn't mean to get you so upset, Kara. I was just so keyed up by the way that agent presented the news to me. Over the phone," he scoffed and shook his head.

"That doesn't seem right, does it? Don't they usually do that sort of thing in person?"

He nodded. "I thought so, but apparently I thought wrong. She just rattled it off as if she were rattling off nothing more important than an old grocery list. Disturbing to say the least. I plan to report her to her superiors as soon as my head is on straight again."

"I can't say that I blame you there." Kara couldn't stop wondering where Sophie had gotten the sleeping pills. She'd never known that Kara even took them, so she wouldn't have known they were in the house. That ruled out the possibility of her stealing them to commit suicide. Or possibly only intending to use them to get some sleep. Accidental overdoses happened all the time.

"Honestly, I thought I knew Sophie so well. Now I have to wonder exactly what kind of person she really was. Not the person I thought she was. That much is obvious. It's a shame that I had to find out like this, though. If I had known she had a problem before, I could have gotten her the best help in the country. I could've helped her get clean." Tears slipped down his cheeks just as the kettle whistled. He stood and hurried to it.

"Do you think she had an addiction problem? I mean, is that a real possibility? Or do you suppose she was only experimenting with the stuff and accidentally took too much?" Kara hoped he would agree with the last suggestion. That would alleviate some of her worry.

"I just don't know for sure. I just don't know, Kara."

He brought tea to the table.

"This is all so terrible. Such a shame," she muttered, sipping the tea and hoping it would calm her stomach.



“Such a waste. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t have done for her. She had to know that by now.”

The phone rang and Kara startled, sloshing some tea onto the table.

“You get the phone. I’ll wipe that up,” Charlie told her, urging her to grab the trilling phone.

“Hello?”

“Sis? I was just calling to check on you right quick. I’m at work, but couldn’t get you off my mind.”

“I’m fine, Daphne. I’m having tea with Mr. Walker right now.” She wanted to hang up on her sister, but if she did that Daphne would drive straight there thinking something was wrong.

“Okay, I won’t keep you. Don’t forget about Dr. Hyder’s visit. It’s the day after tomorrow. I plan on coming by, too. Just to see you and be there for you,” Daphne told her. She sounded genuinely concerned.

“I won’t forget. I promise. I’ll see you then.” Kara hung up the phone and joined Charlie at the table again. “Sorry. That was my sister. She called to check on me. She knew Sophie and I were friends.”

“That’s nice of her. Must be nice to have family who cares enough to check in on you. Sophie didn’t really have that with her family. They were always cold and distant. Her friends were more like family in that respect. Always calling and taking her out. I appreciated them for that. I knew she was in good hands when I had to work and couldn’t take her out like she wanted.”

Kara nodded and drank more tea. He had refilled it. “Thank you for the tea, Charlie.”

Kara came back to awareness sometime later. She was still sitting at the table. Her tea had gone cold. She turned and saw that it was past dinner time. Nine at night. Her stomach didn’t

feel empty, but she saw no trace that she had fixed any sort of food. There was no sign that Charlie had been there, either.

She stood too fast and had to grab the edge of the table for balance. Her legs lit up with pins and needles that were dipped in fire. She let out a startled gasp and dropped back into her seat and moaned until her legs were awake again.

Truly waking up is a painful experience, isn't it, Kara?

“Shut up. I don't need you making things worse right now,” she grumbled as she stood again. “Charlie was here and I know it. I even told Daphne I was having tea with him.” She looked in the sink for his teacup and saucer. There was nothing there. As if it had never been there. An icy finger traced her spine and the fine hairs all over her body stood on end.

You killed your only friend, Kara. Do you really think Dr. Hyder and Daphne won't realize you've done something terrible? They always see through you.

She shook her head and opened the pantry. Taking out the bottles again, she wondered if she could have done it. Nausea swept through her once more and she ran to the bathroom. Dropping to her knees, she cried. If she was innocent, why was she so sick at the thought of hurting Sophie? If she didn't have anything to do with it, why was she so worried?

You killed her.

“No, I didn't.”

Yes, you did.

“I swear I didn't!”

But it felt like a lie.



## CHAPTER FORTY

Ava and Sal returned to Clear Branch yet again once Joan and Dan Carver made it back into town. They lived directly across Cloudland Avenue from Kara and the Walkers. Just like the rest of the houses in the neighborhood, it seemed like a mansion somehow crammed into a residential street.

Ava knocked on the door and a woman answered. She was obviously staff and not the owner. Her slacks and blouse were nice, but looked professional, as if she was working. And the woman was only in her thirties at the most. Ava knew the Carvers were into their late sixties.

“Agents James and Rossi. We’re with the FBI. Are Mr. and Mrs. Carver here? We were supposed to talk to them.”

“Did you call and arrange a meeting already?” The woman didn’t look impressed by the badges, nor did she look surprised. She was merely doing a job.

“Yes, I did. This morning as a matter of fact. I spoke to Mrs. Carver.”

The woman nodded and motioned them inside. “Please, sit in here. Mrs. Carver will be right with you.”

Ava and Sal stepped into a large room with semi-modern furniture. Everything was expensive.

“Not sure I want to sit on the sofa. I might get it dirty,” Ava noted. The couch was blindingly white. Who put white furniture in any room?

Sal shrugged and smiled as she sat and made herself comfortable. “I’m not standing. She told us to wait in here, so I’m going to sit.”

Ava sat, but felt the need to perch on the edge of the thing. The room didn’t feel as if it belonged in a home, but rather in a professional building somewhere in the city.

Mrs. Carver entered the room and smiled as she extended her hand. “I’m Joan Carver. My husband will be along in a moment. He’s in another part of the house.”

Ava introduced herself and Sal.

“That dear, beautiful young woman is dead?”

“If you are referring to Sophie Walker, I’m afraid so,” Ava said. “How well did you know the Walkers?”

“Oh, not well at all. We’d only spoken to them a couple of times. They just moved in recently.”

Ava asked about the last time she’d seen Sophie.

“The last time I saw her she was going into Kara’s house. They’d gotten quite friendly, I believe. I remember that day because I heard someone crying and looked out to see Sophie crying on Kara’s porch. Seemed rather distraught.”

Mr. Carver entered the room and nodded a greeting. “I saw it, too. Joan called me into the sitting room there. Kara opened the door and Sophie went in. She left a little while later, headed back up the road.”

“Did she go back home?” Sal asked.

“No, she kept going. There’s an access road past the lake, and lots of times residents use it to get to town and avoid traffic,” Joan told them.

“Yes, I’ve seen it. Now, did you actually see Sophie get into her car and leave, or did you just see the car leaving?”

The couple exchanged a look and then shook their heads in unison. “We only saw the car leaving. It was her car, though,” said Dan.

“And you didn’t see her after that?” Sal asked.

They shook their heads again. “We left for our vacation right after that,” said Dan. “Sorry we can’t be of much more help. It’s a shame what happened though.”

“We’ll have to check on the husband,” Joan said, more to her husband than to the agents interviewing him. “What was his name again? Chris? Carl?”

“Charles,” Ava supplied for them.

“Thank you,” she nodded. “Well, officers, is there anything else we can do?”

Ava and Sal shared a brief look. “That’s actually all we needed. Thank you for your time.”

Once they made their way back outside, Ava let out a sigh. “Officers?”

“I know. You get used to it, though. Better to pick your battles.” Sal nodded toward the Walker home. “I think it’s time to go ahead and ask if we can search his house. Call the others and get them out here.”

Ava made the call, and they waited in the car until the others showed up. They walked to the front door in a group and Sal knocked.

Mr. Walker answered the door. “Hello again, agents.”

At least someone was referring to them with their proper titles.

“Mr. Walker, I’d like to ask you if it’s alright for us to search your house.”

“For what?” he asked, nonplussed.

“For the sleeping pills. Maybe she had them here and hid them from you. Maybe she had the other drugs here, too. We’d

just like to see if there's anything that can further our progress so we can close this case as soon as possible."

He opened the door and ushered them in. "Search all you like. If you find anything, hooray. If not, join the club."

"You've searched the house for the drugs?" Ava asked.

He nodded. "I have. Several times, in fact. I still can't believe she was hiding something like that from me."

Sal gave the nod for Metford, Santos, and Ashton to start the search while the two of them questioned Charles. The three of them fanned out while Ava and Sal followed Charles to the living room.

"You know, I feel like I need to tell you that Sophie and I had argued," he started, unprompted. "I didn't mention it before because I thought she just got mad and went somewhere to stay long enough to make me worry. Then she was dead and I was in shock, and then you hit me with the drug revelation, and I've only now got my head screwed back on straight again."

"Well, I'm all ears, Mr. Walker. You just go right ahead and tell me about the argument." Ava really was all ears. And very interested in his story, which he should've told them from the very beginning.

"This isn't easy. There's no gentle way of putting it, either. Sophie had been having an affair. I confronted her about it, and she was very upset. Understandably so. I had also found out that she planned on leaving me. I begged her to change her mind and to stop seeing whoever this other man was. She demanded to know how I'd found out. We kept arguing, and in the heat of it all, I told her Kara had told me all about it. I thought we could work things out. I really did. She stormed out to go confront Kara, and I stormed out and went to work." He threw up his hands. "Now, all this. I should've stayed home that day. She might still be alive if I had." He wiped tears and turned away.

“You should have told us this a lot sooner, Mr. Walker,” Sal frowned. “This could change the entire course of the investigation. You have to know that.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry. I was just so upset and kept getting blindsided by all the findings. I’m telling the truth, though. I’ll even take a lie detector test if you want.”

“So, your wife was at Kara’s house when you left for work that day?”

He nodded. “She was walking to the front door when I drove by. At the time, I didn’t know which of them to be angrier at: Sophie for betraying me, or Kara for telling me about it.”

The team regrouped. “Nothing anywhere, boss,” Ashton announced.

Sal nodded to them. “Mr. Walker, thank you for allowing us to search. We’ll be in touch about the statement you just gave. I’ll write it up and have you sign it so that it’s official.”

“Alright. Sorry for any trouble.”

He saw them out and shut the door.

“The house was clean?” Ava asked the team as they walked back to their cars.

“As clean as Grandma’s kitchen table,” Santos said. “Almost too clean for a man’s house. Especially one that hasn’t had a woman in it for over a week, and he’s supposedly been in such a deep state of mourning.”

“Strongest thing I found anywhere was a bottle of aspirin in the bathroom medicine cabinet,” Metford offered. “I agree with Santos. It was almost too clean.”

Ava understood what they meant. Just like Walker’s changed story. It was too convenient. He conveniently threw a shadow of suspicion onto the neighbor. A widow with a mental problem of some sort. Ava didn’t know what the mental problem was, but she was sure she would find out after this encounter with Mr. Walker.

If Sophie had gone to confront her friend, there could have been a bad blowup and Kara could have dosed her. There were several ways she could have manipulated the situation to be able to get Sophie to drink a spiked drink.

At least Metford and Santos were finally getting along. That had to be worth something.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

*Kara*

**T**here was a knock on the door, followed by the sound of the doorbell. Kara stepped off the bottom riser of the stairs and looked at the front door. It wouldn't be Charlie. He never rang the doorbell. The doctor and Daphne only used the doorbell, never knocked.

She walked to the door and peeked out. A trickle of fear coursed through her as she saw not one or two FBI agents, but five. There was a whole team of agents standing on her front porch wanting to come in. They'd figured out something. Most likely that she'd had something to do with Sophie's death.

You did.

Kara thought it wouldn't be as bad if she could only remember what role she might have played in her friend's demise. The not knowing was hell.

The knock and the doorbell again. Insisting. They knew she was in there. They knew she was home. Her car was there and she had no friends; where else would she be?

Bracing herself, she pulled the door open. "Yes? May I help you?"

One of the agents—Agent James, she thought—held out a piece of paper. Kara didn't reach for it. She didn't want to touch it.

“Ms. Davis, we have a warrant to search your house and property.” She shoved the paper toward Kara and pushed the door wider, allowing her team to file in.

“I don't understand. What's going on? Why are you searching my house?” Kara still didn't take the paper.

“Because the last place several people saw Sophie Walker alive was when she was entering your residence,” said another female agent—Rossi, she thought she remembered. “There were drugs in her system, and we need to know where they came from.”

Agent James pressed the paper into Kara's hand and she finally looked down at it.

“I don't use drugs, agents,” Kara insisted. “But feel free to look all you want.”

“Thank you, Ms. Davis,” Agent James said as she passed by.

Kara was faint. She went into the parlor to sit until two agents entered—a brutish meathead of a man and a woman who wore sunglasses inside. Sunglasses! Kara wanted to scoff at such impropriety, but didn't want to anger them. They asked her to leave, and she moved to the living room.

Several minutes later, Agents James and Rossi entered and took a seat uninvited. “Ms. Davis,” James started. “About the last visit you had with Sophie. Why don't you go over it with me one more time?”

“I told you everything I could remember.”

“The last time we spoke, you didn't mention that Sophie was having an affair and that she was planning on leaving her husband,” chimed in Rossi. “Why would you hold that back from us? You had to know it was pertinent to the case.”

It felt like the two of them were tossing her back and forth like a tennis ball. She shook her head and she could feel the memories surfacing. It was unpleasant; like digging up things that didn't want to be dug up and they were fighting to remain hidden. Her stomach roiled and her mind tumbled through the memory of her last visit with Sophie.

“Oh, no. I must've had an episode and forgot.”

“An episode?” asked Rossi with a raised eyebrow.

Kara gulped. “Yes, well. Sometimes I have these little... lapses. But I assure you it's nothing serious.”

“I understand, Ms. Davis,” said James sympathetically. “Why don't you tell us what you do remember?”

You killed her.

Kara took a rattling, slow breath and ignored the voice.

“To be honest, until you mentioned it, I couldn't recall what she had been saying after telling me that she and Charlie had an argument. But now I remember. She thought I had told him about her plans and the affair, but I didn't. I had put it out of mind. It was something she told me while she was pretty drunk, and I just thought it was one of her dramatic stories. I didn't even think it was true. I wouldn't have told him anyway. Her business is hers, after all. She thought I outed her, and she was so upset, but I eventually got her calmed down, and she went back home. She was going to try to work it out with Charlie, or that's what she told me.”

Another agent stepped into the room with a large plastic bag containing her prescription bottles. “Found these in the pantry, boss,” he said, passing the bag to Agent Rossi.

She read the labels and looked up at Kara. “Ms. Davis, are these your medications?”

Kara leaned toward the bag, saw the bottles, and nodded. “Yes, Dr. Hyder prescribed them to me. I have...” she swallowed hard, “schizophrenia.”

She was almost certain that one word had sealed her fate. They would pin Sophie's death on her simply because she had a mental illness that they didn't understand.

"Is that the nature of your episodes?" asked James.

"Yes," she admitted.

They know, raged the voice in her head. They already know, and you don't. They know what you did.

Rossi nodded. "Thank you, Ms. Davis. We are confiscating them for testing. We'll get a statement to your doctor and he can write you an emergency script."

Kara nodded mutely.

"Ms. Davis?" Agent James asked.

"Yes?"

"Don't leave town."

Kara nodded and watched them leave. She didn't even bother locking the door behind them.

Leave town? Where would she go? She had nowhere to turn. Not now. Not since the FBI thought she was guilty of murder. And she couldn't remember enough to know for sure that she didn't do it.

The next day, the doctor and Daphne would be showing up. She didn't want to try explaining any of it to either of them.

There was only one thing she could do.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Ava was sitting at her desk in the office she wasn't sure she would ever get used to when Sal came and knocked on the door frame lightly, her face tight.

"More good news?" Ava asked.

Sal nodded. "Ain't it always?"

Ava sighed. Between the Walker case and follow-ups to the Hammond and Wallins case, she'd been slammed all morning. "What is it now?"

"Just got a report of a suicide in Clear Branch."

"You don't mean...." she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Our friend Kara Davis," Sal confirmed with a heavy sigh.

Ava hated suicides. Of all the nasty things people could do to each other, she thought the worst was when a person decided to kill themselves. It was completely unthinkable to her, and her heart twisted to think what state of mind a person had to be in to take their own life. She couldn't imagine the misery someone could be in to believe they were better off dead. She hoped that she never would feel that way, nor would the people she loved. It wasn't fair. She had been through

enough to know that life wasn't fair at all, but even still, that didn't mean it was any less of a tragedy.

Knowing that Kara suffered from a mental illness made this particular call harder to hear.

The team arrived at Kara's house. The police tape was up and the perimeter set. Neighbors and rubbernecks had gathered on the sidewalks and in the street to gawk at the house. Ava wondered what morbid sense of curiosity always seemed to draw people to a crime scene.

As soon as she stepped into the house, Chief Steiger handed her a bagged and tagged note. "Suicide note. Found it with the body. We found out you were investigating her in connection with the Walker case, which I only just found out wasn't what we thought it was, and I had my man call. M.E. is on the way. Scene's secure. She's all yours."

"Thanks," she said, not really paying attention to him.

He nodded and walked away.

Ava read the note through the plastic.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all the trouble I've been. I'm sorry I was sick. I'm most sorry that I gave Sophie sleeping pills. I don't know why I did it. I loved her. Please tell my family I am very sorry for all of this—especially my sister, Daphne. Tell Dr. Hyder that I appreciate all he did for me and that I'm sorry I failed him.

Sophie Walker—I am so sorry. I truly loved you.

Charlie Walker—no words can take away your pain, but I am sorrier than I can ever say for taking your lovely wife away from you.

Please forgive me, everyone.

God forgive me.

Ava's stomach churned. She'd never seen a suicide note like that. Kara had put a lot of time and thought into writing that note. Plenty of time to change her mind, find another way

to deal with the situation. But she hadn't changed her mind. She had gone ahead and hanged herself. Tied a rope around the railing on the second-floor landing and hanged herself.

The team surveyed the scene. After forensics finished, Ava asked about the specifics.

“Do you think it was suicide or did someone help her over that railing?”

“She did it alone, from the looks of it. She didn't jump, just sort of lowered herself down and then dangled. Looks like she had a change of heart after it was too late, though.”

“What do you mean?” Ava peered around the corner to where the body had been laid out on top of plastic for the coroner.

“Rope burns on her palms, like she struggled to pull herself back up and kept slipping back down,” explained the tech.

“Is that how you know she didn't jump?” Ava averted her gaze from the bulging eyes of the victim.

“Yeah. It's hard to get rope burns when you're dead. If she had jumped, her neck would have snapped. Most likely, anyway. That would've been instant. But not this. It took a while. Poor woman.” He shook his head as he walked away.

After they wrapped up at the scene, Ava and the team made the long drive back to the office. It was long past the time when normal people with normal jobs were heading home to their normal families. Sometimes Ava wondered what that would be like. Then she remembered Molly and what had happened to them in Prague all those years ago, and thoughts of a normal life of any kind slunk away and hid in the shadows again.

Ava stared hard at the case file. It would have to be updated to a homicide. She updated the file and closed it out as solved. Not only did Kara go into that case file, but she also had one of her own. It seemed that was the end of that.

Ava fixed all the files, shut down the computer, and stared out into the empty bullpen. Something was swirling in the back of her mind. She couldn't quite figure it out.

She supposed all she could do was take her father's advice and wait for her brain to get to work.

The waiting was the hardest part.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

A week after closing the Walker case, Ava was busy rearranging existing information in her mother's case and in Molly's. She wanted to see where the connection was; see if she could predict her mother's movements by what was in the files already.

The Walker case kept intruding on her thoughts, holding her back, and keeping her slightly off-center.

She had gone to Mr. Walker and told him about Kara's suicide note confession. Whatever reaction she had expected from him, it wasn't the one she actually got.

He had smirked. "Poor deluded Kara. She just couldn't live with the guilt of killing my Sophie."

There had been other words exchanged, but that was the only important part to Ava. It wasn't so much what he had said as how he had said it. That smirk. Why a smirk? He should have been sad and grief-stricken to learn that a good friend had murdered his wife. Instead, there was that little smirk that reached his eyes.

She could understand a part of him feeling vengeful, lashing out against the person who'd taken his wife from him,

but this sudden turn on a dime was wrong. Everything about it was wrong.

And as he had turned to walk away, telling her she could let herself out, she could have sworn there was a little bounce in his walk. She had stood there glaring at his retreating form, wondering what kind of cold-blooded ass could smirk when he had just lost his wife and friend.

He was narcissistic, she had known that from their first meeting. Every hair and fiber was in place. Every movement seemed measured for maximum effect, and he still thought he was the most handsome man in the room, no matter if he had been crying for the past hour or if he had been grieving the loss of his wife. He was good-looking, smart, and rich, and he wanted everyone to know it.

Manipulative. She should have seen it sooner, but it took her a few meetings to realize how he could turn a situation to his favor without anyone taking much notice of how he was doing it. A good manipulator will always leave people thinking they are the ones in control and making decisions, when in fact, he's manipulating feelings to get the desired outcome from each person. She thought it must be exhausting work.

She pulled up the autopsy report on Sophie Walker. She went through the list of chemicals again, and finally, that lightbulb that had been waiting for her Energizer bunny lit up in her brain.

She thought she knew what it was, but she called the M.E. to be sure there was no misunderstanding.

“I have a few questions about Sophie Walker's autopsy report.”

A heavy breath came from the other end of the line. “I thought that case was closed already.”

“It's a simple question. You found the psilocybin and LSD in Sophie Walker's blood results, correct?”

“No,” replied the tech. “Both of those chemicals flush out of a patient’s blood within a few hours. It’s virtually undetectable. But we did find them in her hair.”

“In her hair?”

“Yes. Hair follicles. It indicates long-term use, which isn’t typical for drugs of this nature.”

Ava frowned. “What do you mean?”

The medical examiner sighed. “I’m not paid to determine the typical usage of these substances, Agent James. I’m paid to put down the facts of what I find, and that’s what I put in the report.”

“But is there anything you can tell me about them?” Ava pressed. “Anything particular about the way it was present in her results?”

The man hesitated for a moment and finally relented. “Her dosage didn’t seem consistent with a regular user.”

“How so?”

“Generally, this just isn’t the type of drug one can take for a sustained period. The user needs a longer period to come down between trips to prevent a tolerance buildup. Sometimes you see people microdosing, which could account for the long buildup in her system, but that’s not consistent with the sheer dosage, either. And there’s another thing: typically, users of LSD or mushrooms tend to use one or another at a time, not both. Mixing the two substances can cause some pretty scary hallucinations or bad trips.”

Ava thought about it for a moment. “If she was microdosing both mushrooms and LSD at the same time, what would the effect on her system have been?”

“It’s hard to say. But based on these results, the mixture would be a fairly intense experience. She would be more sensitive to external stimuli, more likely to say or do things she normally wouldn’t, and it would greatly affect her stress

and anxiety levels—both positively and negatively. A negative stimulus could easily lead to erratic, wild decisions.”

Everything was finally clicking. “One more favor to ask of you,” she said. “Can you pull up the autopsy for Kara Davis?”

“Wasn’t that ruled a suicide at the scene?” he asked.

“I’d like you to do a tox report on her hair,” Ava told him. “I know we’ll find the triazolam she was prescribed, but I’d like to see if you can find any similar results to the Walker case. I’ll take any heat from this if it comes to it.”

“It’ll take me a couple hours, but I’ll let you know what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

Ava’s mind raced, but it was on a round track, and at the center of it was Mr. Walker.

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## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“So she had no triazolam in her system?” Sal asked with a frown. The two of them sat in the car at the bottom of Cloudland Avenue, just out of Charles Walker’s sight if he happened to look out his living room window.

“Apparently, she hadn’t been taking her meds in quite some time,” Ava told her. “But what they did find was LSD and psilocybin. The same as Sophie’s results.”

“Something tells me you’re about to say that you don’t think they did those drugs together,” Sal said.

Ava shook her head. “The medical examiner confirmed that if they had, they’d have been practically suffering paranoid delusions with this level of dosage. Now, I don’t know how many users you know, but that can’t be a typical use case, can it?”

“So you think they were drugged?”

Ava nodded. “But now I’ve got to figure out how to prove it.”

“And let me guess—that’s where the others come in.”

Metford, Ashton, and Santos had gone to Charles Walker’s workplace, a high-end lab that had transformed a no-name,

fairly good chemist into one of the best in the country and backed by many politicians who all called him by name.

“They’ll probably find LSD and psilocybin there, but that’s to be expected,” Ava said. “They’re research chemicals. What I’m more interested in is the bookkeeping.”

Charles hadn’t lied when he’d told them that his lab had extensive security protocols preventing even him from taking home unauthorized samples. The lab had been open and completely forthcoming as such. They’d turned over the records for all the substances in question to show that none of it had left the lab without being accounted for.

What she’d sent her team to find had to do with the security cameras.

Ashton drove up beside Ava and Sal. He smiled as he handed Sal the warrant. “There it is, boss. It’s all there.”

Sal accepted it, looked it over quickly, and then handed it to Ava. “Actually, I feel like you should do the honors. Good work.”

Ava grinned. “Let’s roll up.”

They all walked to the door again, and Charles opened it with the same attitude he’d had last time. As if he was slightly annoyed but knew he should look sad, so that’s the emotion he tried for.

“Hello, again, Agent James. I have to say, we shouldn’t keep meeting like this. Everyone will start to talk.”

“Mr. Walker, I have a warrant for your arrest,” she stated as she held up the paper and motioned for Metford and Santos to cuff him.

The haughty look faded from his eyes fast when he saw the two agents rushing toward him. Fury settled on his face and hatred poured from his eyes.

“This is ridiculous. What are you arresting me for? My neighbor, my friend killed my wife. Don’t you think I’ve been

through enough nonsense for one lifetime?” He thrashed, but it was only half-hearted.

“I truly am very sorry for your loss,” Ava started. “But we’re actually here for an entirely different reason. You’re under arrest for the theft of a controlled substance.”

Charles was so taken aback that he stopped. “What?”

“The mushrooms, Mr. Walker. And the LSD,” Sal clarified. “We have security footage of you removing several samples of each from your lab without returning them, as well as evidence from your very own lab’s IT that you falsified the checkout records.

“That’s—this is—I can explain,” he sputtered. “It was for her writing retreat!”

Ava already knew that, of course. She read off the charges and then Mirandized Mr. Walker. As they escorted him to the car, he thrashed for real. He was like a rabbit in panic mode trying to get away from the predator. It took three agents to get him under control.

“I’ll sue you. Each and every one of you. I’ll sue you right down to your underwear!” he yelled.

As he jerked away again, his elbow caught Santos in the cheekbone. She flew backward, and Walker made a break. He meant to go right over the top of her. Metford stuck out his foot and Walker tripped. He landed hard on the pavement, his chin slamming down hard enough that Ava heard his teeth clack together.

Metford bent to help him up. He leaned close to Walker and whispered, “Looks like Walker is a tripper in more ways than one. Watch your step, Mr. Walker. So sorry you fell.”

Metford helped Walker into the backseat of the car. Walker’s chin was badly scuffed and gouged from the rough pavement. “You okay, J?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she replied, even though a nice-sized knot had already popped up on her cheekbone.

“Let’s just get him back without any more incidents,” Ava said.

They took him back to the interview room and he seemed like a changed man. The cool, confident exterior had given way to a nervous, jittery man. He’d been convinced that he had gotten away with it. That it had all gone according to plan. But now the totality of his decisions lay open in front of him and he was faced with the fact that he hadn’t gotten away with anything at all.

Ava went in to speak with him. She wanted to be the one who got his confession, to break him.

“Let’s talk about writers’ retreats, Mr. Walker,” she said, not bothering to even open the file on the table. “Oh, sorry. Charles.”

“She just wanted me to sneak out a little something for her,” he pleaded. “She said it helped relax her, helped her creativity. When she was out in the woods, she said it helped her get in touch with the nature of the divine feminine, or whatever. I never wanted her to touch the stuff, but she insisted. How could I say no?”

“So you provided your wife with illegal substances?”

He jerked angrily against the cuffs holding him to the table. “That doesn’t mean I killed her!”

Ava smiled. “I didn’t say you killed her, Charles. We’re only talking about the drugs you stole from your lab. After all, I get it. Brilliant chemist with an IQ that would probably rival that of any genius in the world. Why would you kill your beautiful, loving wife and frame your friend for it? Just because your wife wanted to leave you? You could have just about any woman you wanted. I don’t think you’d do something so rash as that.”

His smile flickered and almost fell away. He was seething, and Ava could see it. Seething was good. His temper would be his downfall.



“I wouldn’t think a man as smart as you would be inclined to fits of passion very often, if ever. Chemists, from what I know, are pretty meticulous and calculated. Is that true of chemists and scientists, Mr. Walker?”

He nodded. It was nearly imperceptible, but it was there. His smile had fallen to a straight slash across his grim-set face.

“I imagine that if you were to kill your wife—hypothetically, of course—it wouldn’t be in a typical way. It would never be something so dramatic and forceful, like a gunshot or a car crash, right? It would be something more intricate. Something less easy to detect.”

“Where are you going with this?” he grumbled.

Ava gave a big fake shrug. “Oh, I’m just theorizing here. I don’t think you killed her. It’s just such a shame that Sophie died in such a condition. The medical examiner said that the combination of mushrooms and acid, in the way she consumed it over time, would have possibly made her erratic. Nervous. Overresponsive to stimuli—especially negative stimuli. But what am I saying? You’re a chemist. You already know all this.”

“I swear, I didn’t kill her,” he growled.

“We’ve established that, sir. I just can’t figure out how you never noticed her behavior shifting.” Ava finally flipped open the folder and turned the tox report to him. “I assume you know how to read this, correct?”

Chares squinted at the paper and scoffed. “Of course, I know how to read it.”

“Look here at the elevated levels of both those drugs in her system. Seems to me it wasn’t a couple of one-off doses she took at a writers’ retreat a few months back. Seems to me this is an indication of long-term use over time. Way bigger than microdosing.”

“So she was taking drugs under my nose,” he grumbled. “Of course, she was.”

Ava frowned. “Oh, I’m sorry. I seem to have mixed up the papers.” She pulled the top sheet away and revealed a near-identical second lab report to Charles. “I just got a bit mixed up—that was Kara Davis’ lab results. Not your wife’s. I must have thought the one with triazolam was Kara’s because she’d been prescribed it. But it’s funny—it seems she hadn’t taken it in weeks. Months, maybe. There was almost none in her system at all. And she seemed to have very similar levels of mushrooms and LSD in her system. She didn’t go to those writers’ retreats, though, did she? By all accounts, including her doctor and her sister, she’d become a reclusive homebody ever since her husband died.”

“So she gave Sophie her pills, then,” he snapped, conveniently refusing to answer the second half of Ava’s implication. “I don’t know what it has to do with me.”

“So you mean to say that Sophie went over next door, borrowed enough benzos to sedate an elephant, took them all at once, and then somehow ended up with her car in the lake?”

“I never killed anyone. You don’t understand.”

“Then enlighten me.” Ava’s voice rose in volume to match Walker’s.

He glared at her for a long time. She glared back, daring him to prove her wrong.

“I was at work—”

“But you weren’t at work all day, Mr. Walker,” Ava cut him off. “My agents watched the security tapes from that day. They saw you swiping someone else’s keycard to leave, so your own would seem like you had never left. You left for lunch and showed back up an hour later. So there’s a pretty substantial hole in your alibi.”

Walker blanched. “I didn’t kill her!”

“You could do anything in the lab, create great things that wowed your peers, got your name in all the right papers, but you couldn’t control your wife, could you? You couldn’t satisfy her enough to keep her at home with you, could you?”

Such an accomplished man in your work, and such a failure at home.

“You’d been slowly drugging her for weeks. Trying to make her more suggestible. More manipulable. You tried to fix your failing marriage by microdosing her. But that didn’t work because you’re a miserable, arrogant person. You upped the dosage. More and more, until she got paranoid. She got unpredictable. And even still, I bet she never realized what you were doing. She had no idea you were slowly poisoning her.

“You found out Kara Davis’ condition and figured the perfect way to frame her. You knew what medicines she would have been treated with, and concocted a friendship with her so you could steal them without her noticing, knowing she was already having episodes. And you started microdosing her, too, making sure you could line up all the events perfectly.

“That day, you called Sophie and she left Kara’s house to meet you in town. That’s why she took that access road. The neighbors saw her pass up her house and keep going. You and Sophie had a cute little lunch at the sandwich shop in the shopping mall. That’s when you dumped the crushed sleeping pills into her drink.”

He shook his head. “Everything is so cut and dried for you, isn’t it, agent?”

She nodded. “Usually, it is.”

“How do you know where we ate?” he snapped.

And there it was. He may not even have realized what he’d just admitted to, but Ava nodded, trying not to draw too much attention to it.

“She used her debit card to buy an extra soda. The cashier remembered you two because you looked out of place, not like her regulars.”

“Sophie is the only woman I ever wanted. When we said our vows, I meant mine, and I thought she did, too. Maybe she was too young, but that still didn’t excuse her behavior. She

was having an affair. At that writers' retreat. She made a fool out of me, made me a laughingstock. Then she planned to further humiliate me and drag my reputation through the mud by divorcing me."

"Oh, what happened to communing with the divine feminine?" Ava asked. "Was that a lie she told you, or was that a lie you told me just now? To try to get you off the hook for stealing the drugs?"

"I gave her every opportunity to come clean, to work it out, to come back to her senses. She brought it on herself!"

"What about Kara? What did she do to you?"

He laughed then. It was an ugly laugh, maniacal, like the laugh of a man knowing he was rapidly careening over the edge of his life and knowing he'd never climb back up. He stretched his chest in a boastful position. "That woman was the perfect specimen for my experiment. I had no idea how easy it would be to befriend her, gain her trust, and then plant false memories in her scrambled mind. I seriously thought they would only hold for a day or two at most, but no! Those memories held on until the end. It was brilliant. I was brilliant."

"Clearly not, Mr. Walker. Maybe you just were never as smart as you thought you were."

He raged against the cuffs holding him to the table, but Ava was done with him.

"You know the worst part, Charles? After all that worrying about your reputation, about dragging your name through the mud, I'm going to see to it that your name is stricken from the records. No one will know your name as a great and brilliant chemist. You'll just be another crazy, homicidal maniac who killed his wife and caused the death of a woman you barely knew only because she trusted you. And I want you to live so that you have to bear witness to your own downfall. I think that will be much worse for you than any death sentence. I

want to wipe that smirk off your face, take away your pride, make you powerless.”

“I have powerful friends,” he sneered, but the fire was already going out of him. He had lost, and he knew it.

“And so do I,” Ava replied.

That shut him up for a moment. She was grateful for it.

“There’s just... one more thing I’d like to ask you. One more piece of the puzzle I can’t quite figure out.”

He stared at her hatefully, his brow furrowed with inhuman rage. “What?”

“I understand how you slowly drugged your wife... but what about Kara? How did you get the drugs into her?”

His brilliant green eyes sparkled with malice. “It was in the tea.”

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## EPILOGUE

Ava sighed and sorted through the last of the paperwork for the Walker case. Sal would be checking over it first thing the next morning and she wanted it to be perfect—no blank spaces, no spaces filled out wrong, all the evidence logged properly. She'd thought it would only take an hour or so, but the sun was already well on its way below the horizon. She rubbed her eyes and sighed.

Part of it was because she was still nervous about making mistakes that only a rookie would make. She desperately didn't want to seem like a career underling who almost made supervisory special agent. And the other part was that she really was still a rookie. Not being familiar with all the paperwork made a huge difference, and there was nothing to do about that except to do it enough that it became familiar.

Finally, she was sure enough about the file that she slid it into the paper tray on the edge of her desk and sat back. Would she ever truly get the hang of all the new job entailed? After only a few seconds of debate, she abolished that way of thinking. Of course, she would get the hang of it. She would work harder than ever to make sure of it. Self-doubt would have to take a leave of absence. Her career had been her choice, her obsession, and she wouldn't let self-doubt, or the doubts of others, impede her progress.

“Failure is not an option,” she reminded herself.

Too many people out there needed good agents who could offer them protection when they needed it most, and still others deserved justice. She held no illusion that she was the only good up-and-coming agent in the Bureau, but she knew full well that she was adding to the pool of good agents. That mattered. That meant something.

It wasn't lost on her that Metford, Santos, and Ashton were still somewhat frosty with her despite their own growing camaraderie ever since the team-building classes. She still wasn't sure exactly why Sal had chosen her in a leadership role over the three of them, all much older than her, but she was doing her best to not let that get to her. In time, it would all work out. She was sure of it.

It was time to leave for the night. Once again, she had remained at the office long after everyone else on the team had left for the evening. She didn't mind, though. After shutting down and securing her computer, Ava walked to the door to leave and found that she really didn't want to go just then. There was nothing left to do, and nothing she could come up with to justify being there any longer. A long moment passed with her standing in the doorway mentally reviewing everything she'd just completed. Nothing had been forgotten.

She didn't even make it all the way through the bullpen before her work phone started ringing. She looked down at it and frowned. It was an unknown number from Richmond. Who would be calling at such an hour?

“Agent James speaking,” she said.

She was greeted by nothing but silence. Ava waited a long moment, with bated breath. At first she'd thought it might have been some scammer calling about her car's warranty, but nothing came.

And then—it was faint, but it was there—came the faint sound of someone breathing. It sounded a bit ragged, as if the

caller had been running and was trying to breathe quietly to mask the fact that they had just been physically active.

“Hello?” She pressed the phone to her ear harder and used her finger to plug the other one.

The faint sound of a train in the background drew her attention and she focused on that sound. How far away was the train from the caller? Was the caller in some sort of distress?

“This is Special Agent Aviva James of the FBI. Is anyone there? Are you having an emergency? Hello?”

“Shhh!”

A chill ran down Ava’s back. It was the sound of a frustrated woman shushing a child.

“Please, wait a minute,” the woman whispered.

“Are you having an emergency, ma’am?” Ava whispered.

“He’ll hear you. Please hold on until he’s gone.” The voice was barely audible.

Ava held her breath and listened more closely. The train’s horn sounded in the distance. The rumble faded until it disappeared altogether. Then the woman’s breathing stopped and Ava could hear a man’s muffled voice.

“Where’d you go, little mouse?” the man asked in a sing-song tone, almost as if he were playing a game. The hair on Ava’s arms prickled at the sound. “I saw you come in this house. The little mouse is in the house, and I’m going to find her before the sun comes up again.”

Ava’s heart lurched into her throat. She was stuck and didn’t know what to do. How had the woman gotten her number? Why was she calling when a man was obviously hunting her down? Why hadn’t she just called 911?

A door slammed loudly, but Ava could tell it was in the background and not close to the woman. A few seconds later, the man voiced a wordless scream from even farther away.



“Please, listen to me. The man who killed Michaela Wallins just struck again. She was my friend. I got your card from her neighbor, Jenny Orlon. You gave it to her when you talked to her that night. The man who killed Michaela just broke into my neighbor’s house and killed her. I ran but he knows I saw him.”

Ava was already whipping out her personal cell and frantically dialing emergency services.

“Ma’am. Give me your name and address. I’m going to dispatch the police to your location.”

“Monica Foster. One-one-four Piedmont Drive, East End of Richmond. My neighbor is Jessica Long. Twenty-five. He killed her with a knife as he was raping her. I saw and screamed and then I just ran.” The woman devolved into a blubbing, crying mess that Ava could no longer understand.

“Monica! Keep your voice down.” Ava quickly told the police the information she had while keeping her other ear pressed to the other phone. Monica made great efforts to lower her voice and silence her sniffling, but her breath hitched loudly every few seconds. Ava’s heart was hammering so loud she almost thought the killer would hear it through the phone. “Monica, the police are on their way. I want you to stay where you are, remain hidden, until they get there and apprehend the man. Can you give me a description of him?”

Ava could only hope the police would get there in time.

“I can, but I can also do better than that. His name is Jamie Black.” She sobbed again. “He’s my brother,” she nearly wailed into the phone.

Ava hushed her again, and only moments later, the police arrived at the house. Ava reminded Monica to remain hidden until they had cleared the house.

“They want me to go with them now,” Monica said in a weak voice that resonated with relief.

“Yes. You go with them, and I’ll be there tomorrow. You did great. Now, just do exactly as the officers tell you and

you'll be fine."

Ava hoped she was right.



### *UNKNOWN PERSPECTIVE*

"She knows too much. She should be eliminated immediately." The man pressed the phone to his ear and gritted his teeth in frustration at the bull-headed silence from the other end of the secure line. "She could bring down the whole thing. Do you want your dirty little world crumbling around your head?"

"For now, it's only her. I must know how much she knows and who she has told. Keep your Russian friend on her tail a little longer. She's searching for something down there," the soft, elegant voice informed him.

"That's even more reason she should be eliminated. The longer she's alive, the more opportunities she has to ruin all of us."

"Nonsense. We're at the top of this particular food chain. People like us never get ruined; we simply reimagine our lives and start over. Now, do as I say."

"Or what?" He knew not to test her too much, but he was angry.

"Have a look at your chest." The woman's voice had gained an icy edge that made his skin tighten.

Looking down, he spied a red laser dot in the center of his shirt. His heart skipped a few beats, sweat popped out over his forehead, and a wave of nausea flooded through him. If he'd been standing, his legs might have gone to rubber and dumped him sprawling on the floor.

"Fine, but if this goes south, I blame you," he muttered in a voice that was too breathy to be intimidating.

She chuckled into the phone and then hung up.

The red dot disappeared, and he bolted from his chair and out of the room. Frantically, he looked around for a place in his mansion, any place, that didn't have windows. There was nowhere he could feel safe except in the bathroom, and he couldn't live the rest of his life in there.

He pulled out his phone and dialed the number that only he in all the world knew. Somewhere in South Africa, a cell phone rang, and on the other end, a very large, very emotionless, and very driven Russian man rose to answer.

“I want you to get up close and personal with her. Find out what she knows and who she's told, and for the sake of all you hold dear, don't you dare pull that trigger until you know for sure she's telling the truth. Do you understand me?”

“Da. But it will be expensive to keep me in hell's antechamber.”

“Money is no object.”

And it never was.

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Thank you for for reading book 3 in the *Ava James FBI Mystery* series. I hope you get more immersed in this series with each book. I can't wait for you to read all the thrilling books I just got finished planning!

If you can please leave me a review for this book, I would appreciate that enormously. Your reviews allow me to get the validation I need to keep going as an indie author. Just a moment of your time is all that is needed to ensure Ava James' series can continue. Ava and the team are counting on you! Yours,

A.J. Rivers

P.S. If for some reason you didn't like this book or found typos or other errors, please let me know personally. I do my best to read and respond to every email at <mailto:aj@riversthillers.com>

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