



BLAKE PIERCE

FOR

WRATH

A MORGAN CROSS MYSTERY--BOOK #4

FOR WRATH

(A Morgan Cross FBI Suspense Thriller
—Book Four)

BLAKE PIERCE

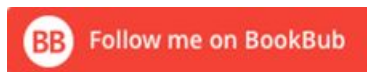
Blake Pierce

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

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



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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

Sheryl's head throbbed, a dull ache pulsating behind her eyes. She tried to lift her arm to massage her temples, only to find that she couldn't move it, and a strange pain radiated through her face. Panic surged through her veins like liquid fire, momentarily overriding the fog of drowsiness that weighed down her mind. Her surroundings swam into focus: white walls, sterile equipment, and an unsettling smell of antiseptic. A clinic?

How had she ended up here?

She blinked against the flickering fluorescent lights above her, their harsh glare blinding her. Her breaths came in shallow gasps, and she fought the urge to hyperventilate. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

"Ah, you're awake," said a man's voice, laced with a sinister tone that made her blood run cold. He approached from the shadows, his face obscured by darkness. "I must say, your contribution has been invaluable."

"Who are you?" Sheryl croaked, struggling to keep her voice steady. "What do you want with me?"

"Want?" The man chuckled, a sound devoid of warmth. "I have already taken what I wanted. You've given me back years, my dear. I look and feel so much younger now, all thanks to you."

Her heart thundered in her chest as she strained against her restraints, but they held firm. How had this happened? The last thing she recalled, she'd been at home alone. Her daughter, Amelia, had gone out with her friends for the night, and Sheryl had stayed home, spending a nice, cozy night in.

That was the last thing she remembered.

This had to be a nightmare. It had to be.

“Let me go,” she demanded, trying to muster as much courage as possible.

“Alas.” The man sighed, feigning disappointment. “That’s not possible. You see, our little arrangement isn’t quite finished yet.”

“What arrangement?” Sheryl asked, her voice trembling despite herself. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead, and she braced herself for whatever horrors this man had in store. The darkness still hid his face, but she could feel the weight of his gaze upon her.

“Patience, my dear,” he said. “All will be revealed soon enough.”

Sheryl’s heart raced, but she knew she couldn’t afford to panic. She needed to stay calm, to find a way out of this nightmare.

“Patience,” he whispered, his voice like the scraping of rusted metal. He leaned in closer to Sheryl, but his face was covered by a surgical mask. Still, the sight of his cold, dead eyes was enough to make bile rise in her throat, and the *smell*—it was awful, penetrating her senses. Like disinfectant mixed with decaying flesh.

“Please,” she choked out, trying to recoil from his grotesque face. But the constraints held her firmly in place, immobile and vulnerable.

“Ah, I see you don’t appreciate my new youthfulness,” he sneered, a cruel mockery of hurt in his voice. “I thought you’d be pleased to know your sacrifice has not been in vain. That’s okay, though—I’m still recovering. This is certainly not the final product...”

“Wh-what?” Sheryl stammered, her confusion mingling with the terror gnawing at her insides.

“Your face, my dear,” he said, taking a step back and allowing the shadows to swallow him once more. “It’s given me a new lease on life. Quite literally.” His laughter, a hoarse cackle, echoed through the room, sending shivers down her spine.

“Please... let me go,” she begged, her eyes darting around, searching for an escape route, a weakness in her restraints – anything to free her from this nightmare.

“You don’t like what you see?” the man said, his eyebrows pulling into a scowl. His eerie voice took on a more hardened edge. “Well, that can’t be helped now. You’ve already fulfilled your purpose. But don’t worry; I won’t let your sacrifice go to waste. Your old life is no more, but I’ll make sure your new one is... fulfilling.” He slowly stepped towards her again, his hand reaching out to touch her cheek. But she realized then that her face was completely numb, and she felt nothing.

Still, Sheryl recoiled as far as she could, her heart pounding against her chest. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping that this was all just a terrible nightmare that she’d soon wake up from.

But when she opened them again, the man was still there, his cold eyes leering at her.

“Here, let me show you,” he said.

Sheryl was paralyzed as the man stepped out of her line of sight. He picked something up and returned moments later holding a hand mirror.

“All you ever wanted was to be young and beautiful,” he said. “We’re the same, aren’t we? Always chasing that memory...”

“No!” Sheryl had no idea what he was talking about. “Please, just let me go.”

He laughed once as he raised the mirror in front of Sheryl’s face. She didn’t want to look. She was terrified of what she might see.

But she had no choice.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, and what she saw made her blood run like ice.

Her face was destroyed. Cut. Pulled back. Hideous. She couldn’t even process it.

“Oh god, what have you done?” Sheryl screamed, clamping her eyes shut. “What have you done to me!?”

The man lowered the mirror, his eyebrows tugging together in a tight scowl. “You don’t appreciate my work?”

Sheryl shook her head frantically, tears streaming down her face. The man chuckled darkly, placing the mirror on the tray next to her.

“Don’t worry, my dear,” he said, taking a step back. “If you’re unhappy with it, I can always try some more treatments.”

“No!” Sheryl exclaimed. “Please, don’t touch me!”

But the man wouldn’t stop. Sheryl watched in horror as he returned with a syringe, holding it up to her.

“Calm down, dear,” he said, “this will only hurt a little...”

CHAPTER ONE

The rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor filled the sterile hospital room as Morgan sat in the uncomfortable plastic chair, her eyes fixed on Derik's sleeping form on the bed. His chest rose and fell slowly, a peaceful expression gracing his face, despite the IV line snaking down from his arm to deliver vital fluids. She couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for harboring suspicions about him when he was so vulnerable.

As much as she wanted to trust him, the evidence she had found in his house gnawed at her conscience. The file containing information on Darren La Roux—the ex-con who had tried to kill her only days before—was hidden in Derik's study. Her fingers unconsciously traced the bruise that still marred her skin from their encounter, reminding her of the fear she'd felt when she'd accidentally killed him in self-defense. That secret weighed heavily upon her, but it was one she had no choice but to keep to herself for now.

She didn't know who to trust. Certainly not Derik.

"Derik," she whispered under her breath, debating whether or not to wake him. *We need to talk.* But the words caught in her throat, unable to take flight. How could she confront him about this without giving herself away? They had just started to mend their relationship, and now this new revelation threatened to unravel everything they had worked towards.

Morgan closed her eyes for a moment, trying to quell the turmoil raging inside her. Why would Derik have information on Darren? Did he know that the ex-con was going to come after her once he got out of prison? It didn't make sense; surely Derik would have warned her if he knew she was in danger. Unless the Derik she had always known wasn't who she thought he was.

Unless Darren had come to Morgan's house that night *on Derik's orders.*

She had been gone for a long time. After all, she had been framed for murder ten years ago, and while she had paid her dues with hard prison time, the experience had left her hardened and fiercely independent. She never wanted to open up again, to rely on anyone, and she'd let Derik back in.

She'd grown to care about him again.

Part of her was furious. Most of her is paranoid. But a part of her still cared about him too and wanted an explanation that didn't end in him betraying her. The thought of Derik sending Darren to her house was insane. There had to be another explanation. Maybe he did know more than he had been letting on, but that didn't mean he would go that far... right?

"Derik," she tried again, louder this time. She needed answers, and as much as it pained her to disturb his rest, she couldn't let this fester any longer. But as her fingers reached out to nudge his shoulder gently, the words died on her lips once more.

Is this what our relationship has come to? she thought bitterly. A never-ending cycle of suspicion and doubt? It wasn't fair to either of them, but how could she move forward without knowing the truth? The room seemed to grow colder as the weight of her decision settled upon her.

The shrill ring of a phone pierced the heavy atmosphere in the room, jolting Derik awake. Groggy and disoriented, he fumbled for the device on the table beside his hospital bed. Morgan's heart pounded as she watched him answer the call, her questions still burning in her throat.

"Mueller," Derik acknowledged, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. "No, she's here with me."

Morgan's ears perked up at the mention of her name, but she remained silent, trying to piece together the conversation from Derik's responses. She studied his face carefully, looking for any sign of deceit or ulterior motives. His brow furrowed as he listened intently, and when he spoke again, there was a note of urgency in his voice.

“Understood. I’ll talk to her.” With that, he ended the call and set the phone back down.

“Mueller has a case he wants you on,” Derik said, turning to face Morgan. She could see the worry etched in the lines around his eyes, but her own emotions were too tangled to offer him any reassurance. “I’m obviously incapacitated, and we’re low on personnel—he needs you on this one.”

“Derik, I can’t go back to the FBI after my suspension,” she replied, her voice tight with frustration. “I just can’t.”

It didn’t make any sense to her. The last time she’d talked to Mueller, it hadn’t exactly gone well. She’d been suspended before and then kept working the case anyway, ultimately catching the killer and saving Derik’s life. When she’d talked to Mueller after, it had been tense. She’d told him to leave her alone. He’d told her to stay out of trouble. Not shutting her out completely, but Morgan hadn’t intended on going back so soon. She’d been suspended for being spotted talking to a criminal, conducting an investigation of the books into the framing of her own imprisonment, and as far as Morgan was concerned, she’d been well within her rights. But the FBI didn’t like it.

“Listen, Morgan,” Derik said, “this is something only you can help with. We’re short on staff, I’m trapped in here, and apparently it’s one of the most disturbing cases they’ve seen in a while, according to Mueller. A woman has been found all... mutilated... like a bad facelift, he made it sound.”

Morgan shuddered involuntarily, the image of the victim creeping into her mind like a poisonous vine. She hated to admit it, but it intrigued her.

“A facelift?”

“That’s all I know,” Derik said. “You should go see Mueller, and he’ll give you the low-down. I’m on the case too, but I need you to be my legs.”

Morgan knew she had the skills and experience to help bring the killer to justice, but the thought of returning to the

Bureau filled her with dread. The walls she had built to protect herself threatened to crumble under the weight of her decision.

Can I even trust you, Derik? she thought, her eyes flicking to his face. It was a question she couldn't voice aloud, not without revealing the evidence she had found in his house. But it gnawed at her like a hungry beast, consuming her from the inside out.

"Look, I wish I could be there myself," Derik said, wincing as he tried to sit up a little straighter in the hospital bed. His face was still pale, and the dark circles under his green eyes revealed the extent of his exhaustion. "But I'm not well enough yet to leave the hospital. It's only been a couple of days since that bastard nearly bled me out."

Morgan felt a familiar pang of guilt as she remembered Derik in that movie theater, nearly dead on their last case. It had been her quick thinking that saved Derik's life, tying a makeshift tourniquet around his wound before he lost too much blood. The memory of that night, with its crushing weight of fear and helplessness, still haunted her.

"Can you take on this case?" Derik pleaded, his voice hoarse from pain and fatigue. "At least for now, until I can join you? I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't important, Morgan. You know that."

He paused, swallowing hard as he sought the right words. "Please, consider it a personal favor. And try to forgive Mueller for now. We need to focus on catching this psychopath."

As much as Morgan didn't trust Derik at the moment, she also knew it was in her best interest to stay close to the FBI and gather as much information as possible. Her heart raced with anxiety, but she took a deep breath and met his pleading gaze. At the very least, she could talk to Mueller and get more details.

"Alright," she said hesitantly, her hands trembling in her lap. "Look, I'll meet with Mueller and get the details about the case from him. Then maybe I can take the case if he really wants me on it."

Derik's eyes widened before he nodded, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Thanks, Cross. Mueller's at HQ. I'll let him know you're coming."

"Get some rest," she told him, her voice firm but gentle. "I'll handle this for now."

As she walked out of the hospital room, her mind was a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and emotions. She dreaded seeing Mueller again, but if he really wanted her back on the case, then she was willing to hear him out. Something about keeping her enemies closer rang in the back of her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

The harsh lights of the FBI headquarters in Dallas flickered overhead as Morgan stepped into the sterile lobby, her heart heavy with dread. She couldn't believe she was back here again after her suspension, but it seemed fate had a twisted sense of humor.

She walked past the reception desk, her footsteps echoing on the cold linoleum floor. The air conditioning sent a chill down her spine, reminding her of the icy cell where she'd spent a decade for a crime she didn't commit. Even though she was free, the scars of her time in prison never faded.

"Special Agent Cross," a familiar voice called out from behind her. She turned to see one of her colleagues, Agent Daniels, approaching with an awkward smile. "Haven't seen you around in a few days."

"Good to see you too, Daniels," she replied, forcing a smile of her own before turning away and continuing down the hallway. More faces appeared like phantoms from her past, some offering cordial nods, others avoiding eye contact altogether. She acknowledged them briefly, her jaw clenched and her eyes fixed ahead.

Morgan's thoughts raced back to the rumors and whispers that had circulated during her suspension. She knew many still doubted her innocence despite her exoneration, but she couldn't blame them. After all, she had been a respected agent once – until the world turned against her. She'd managed to salvage much of her reputation since she'd gotten out, but with her recent suspension, she could tell rumors were circulating—no thanks to Mueller. She begrudged herself for agreeing to even come meet him but had to remind herself why she was in this. It wasn't for Derik, or Mueller, or the FBI, but for the victims of this apparent murderer.

She navigated the maze-like corridors, each turn bringing her closer to Mueller's office. She could feel the weight of her

colleagues' stares, their thinly veiled curiosity, and judgment pressing down on her like a vise. But she refused to let them see her falter. She had survived far worse.

Finally, she reached the door marked "Assistant Director Mueller" and paused, taking a deep breath to steady herself.

As Morgan stood before Mueller's door, her mind wandered to the years she had spent building a reputation as a top-notch FBI agent. The late nights spent poring over case files and the adrenaline-fueled chases through dark alleys were all distant memories now, swallowed by the decade she'd lost to false accusations and imprisonment. She had clawed her way back into the public's good graces, but the damage was done. Her colleagues' whispers and sidelong glances reminded her that her once-pristine image would never be fully restored.

It doesn't matter, she thought to herself, steeling herself for what lay beyond the door. *You don't need their approval to do your job.*

With that final thought, she knocked firmly on the door, the sound echoing through the hallway like a gunshot. A moment later, Mueller's voice came from within, cool and detached. "Come in."

Morgan took a deep breath and opened the door, stepping into the familiar office. The air was thick with the scent of stale coffee and old leather, a smell she both loathed and longed for during her suspension. She avoided looking directly at Mueller, focusing instead on the rows of case files lining the shelves behind him and the framed commendations that hung proudly on the walls.

"Cross," Mueller greeted her, his tone strictly professional. "Please, have a seat."

"All right," she replied curtly, not bothering with professionalism as she took the proffered chair, feeling its worn upholstery beneath her fingertips. She sensed the tension in the room, an invisible barrier between them, and found herself wishing she could just get this over with.

“Let’s get straight to the point,” Mueller said, clasping his hands together on the desk. “I’m sure Greene mentioned that we need you back at work.”

Morgan’s eyes met his briefly, a flicker of defiance in her gaze. “I didn’t ask for this, Mueller. You know that.”

“Regardless,” he continued, undeterred by her interjection, “you’re here now. And we could really use your help. Judging by the fact that you came, I can tell some part of you is interested.”

Morgan’s jaw clenched involuntarily as she considered his words. She didn’t want to be back in this world, but the thought of diving headfirst into another dark and twisted mystery ignited a spark within her that she couldn’t ignore.

“Frankly, I’m not sure if I want to be back on a case,” Morgan replied, her voice steady despite her reservations. She stared at the edge of Mueller’s desk, avoiding his probing gaze. “And you suspended me, remember?”

“Understandable,” he conceded. “But for what it’s worth, I’d like to cut your suspension short. I think you should hear this out before making a decision.”

Morgan swallowed hard. A huge part of her wanted to tell Mueller to go screw himself, but she bit her tongue.

He went on, “This morning, forty-five-year-old Sheryl Stewart was found dead in her home by her daughter. Her face... it was mutilated as if someone had given her a makeshift facelift. I’ve never seen anything like the crime scene photos.”

Morgan’s brows furrowed as she processed the information, an unsettling feeling settling in her stomach. She didn’t need to see the photos to understand the horror of the scene; her imagination painted a vivid enough picture.

“Her daughter... How old is she?” Morgan asked, glancing up at Mueller with concern.

“Eighteen,” he answered solemnly, and Morgan clenched her fists in her lap, the nails digging into her palms. Despite her reluctance to return to this line of work, her heart went out

to the young girl who'd just lost her mother in such a brutal fashion.

"The crime scene is still active," Mueller continued. "We could use your expertise, Cross. I know things have been difficult for you lately, but we need someone with your skills and experience on this one."

Morgan's mind raced, weighing the potential consequences of stepping back into the fray against the burning desire to help bring justice to those who needed it most. As much as she wanted to tell Mueller off, she couldn't ignore the fire that still burned within her, the drive to uncover the truth and ensure that no more innocent lives were destroyed.

"So you'll take it?" Mueller asked.

Morgan clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms as she took a deep breath. "Hold on," she said, her voice strained with the effort of keeping her emotions in check. "I never said I'd take the case. Why do you want me back so badly? You could find someone else."

Mueller leaned back in his chair, his eyes locked on hers, gauging her resistance. "We're short-staffed at the moment, and I think you're perfect for the job. You have a unique way of seeing things that others don't."

"Really?" Morgan scoffed, raising an eyebrow. "Because I thought you didn't trust me. I spent ten years in prison, remember? And then there was my recent suspension."

"Look," Mueller said, spreading his hands out in a conciliatory gesture. "I know what I said before, and I also know you're a damn fine agent who produces results. This crime is too twisted to ignore, and we need the best on it."

Morgan stared down at her hands, the ghost of her past still haunting her thoughts. She fought the urge to storm out of his office, knowing that it wouldn't help her situation, but the bitterness was hard to swallow. Still, this was probably the closest thing to an apology she'd ever get from Mueller.

"Fine," she relented quietly, her jaw tight. "I'll take the case." But as she looked up into Mueller's eyes, she couldn't

shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right. "But I'm doing this for the victims, not for you or the Bureau."

"Understood," Mueller replied, his gaze never wavering. "Now, I suggest you get to the crime scene. Time is of the essence."

With one last piercing look, Morgan stood and walked towards the door. She knew this case wouldn't be easy; nothing ever was in her line of work.

But if there was even a chance that she could bring the monster responsible for Sheryl's death to justice, it was a risk she was willing to take.

CHAPTER THREE

Morgan stepped out of her car and onto the gravel driveway of the sprawling mansion. The bright sunlight illuminated its beige brick, casting crisp shadows from the nearby trees across the manicured lawn. Morgan squinted at the afternoon sun, feeling its heat on her skin as she stepped out of her car. She tugged at the collar of her shirt, already feeling the oppressive Dallas heat.

“Special Agent Cross,” one of the officers greeted her as she approached. “You got here quick.”

“Time is of the essence, Officer,” Morgan replied curtly, her eyes scanning the scene for any possible clues. Ten years behind bars had hardened her, but she’d worked a few cases now and was starting to get back into the swing of being an FBI agent. “What do we have here?” Morgan asked.

“Victim is Sheryl Stewart, age forty-five,” the officer began, leading her toward the entrance of the mansion. “No sign of forced entry.”

“Any known enemies? Or a motive?” Morgan asked, her mind racing with possibilities.

“None that we’re aware of right now,” the officer admitted. “But she wasn’t exactly a nobody, Special Agent Cross.”

The grand foyer of the mansion spoke for itself – elegant marble flooring, a crystal chandelier hanging above, and priceless works of art adorning the walls. It was clear that Sheryl Stewart lived a life of luxury, and sometimes, wealth bred envy.

“Who found her?” Morgan questioned, taking in her opulent surroundings. She couldn’t help but feel a twinge of envy at this life she’d never know; it was people like Sheryl who lived in mansions while she had spent a decade rotting in a cell for a crime she didn’t commit. She cursed herself for even having the thought. She was sure Sheryl would trade

places with Morgan in an instant if it meant she'd still be alive, and Morgan chastised herself for being so jaded.

"Her housekeeper discovered the body this morning," the officer informed her, his voice wavering slightly. "You'll want to brace yourself, Agent Cross. It's... not pretty."

"Few crime scenes ever are." Morgan's words were cold, detached. She'd seen things that would make most crumble, but she had long learned to steel herself against the horrors of her job.

As Morgan followed the officer deeper into the house, she couldn't help but wonder what dark secrets lay hidden beneath the surface of Sheryl Stewart's seemingly perfect life. Luxury and wealth could only mask the truth for so long, and Morgan was determined to uncover it, no matter how ugly it might be.

The living room was a stark contrast to the rest of the house. While the rest of the mansion exuded elegance and sophistication, this room was marred by the grotesque scene that greeted Morgan as she entered.

Sheryl Stewart's body sat upright on the pristine white couch, her face mutilated beyond recognition.

The sight sent a shudder down Morgan's spine. Mueller hadn't been kidding. Morgan had imagined the scene, but what she'd envisioned had nothing on the real thing. This was something else.

"Jesus Christ," Morgan muttered under her breath, forcing herself to maintain her composure. The sight was horrifying, but she couldn't afford to let it faze her. Not now. There was work to be done.

"Whoever did this had a sick sense of humor," one of the medics commented, his voice shaking slightly. "Her face... it's like they tried to give her a makeshift facelift."

Morgan's eyes were drawn to the swollen, distorted features of the victim. It was as if the killer wanted to make a statement, to mock the woman's vanity, even in death. "Do you think she was killed here?" Morgan asked, trying to piece together the events that led up to this grisly discovery.

“Actually, no,” another medic chimed in, looking up from where he was crouched beside the body. “There’s not enough blood at the scene and the way her body is positioned... it’s likely she was moved here after being killed elsewhere.”

“Someone went through the trouble of bringing her back here just for this sick display?” Morgan mused aloud, anger bubbling within her. She clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms. The injustice of it all threatened to overwhelm her, but she forced herself to focus on the task at hand.

“Seems that way,” the medic confirmed, his expression grim. “We’ll know more after we’ve completed the autopsy, of course.”

“Keep me informed,” Morgan said, her voice tight with barely suppressed rage. As she surveyed the room one last time, she vowed to herself that she would bring Sheryl’s killer to justice – no matter what it took.

She couldn’t change the past or erase the years she’d lost, but she could make damn sure that Sheryl Stewart’s murderer paid for their crimes. As many issues as Morgan had with the FBI, this was the part of the job that kept her here. It wasn’t about whatever corruption might lie beneath the FBI’s surface—it was about saving lives and getting madmen off the streets.

Just as Morgan was about to ask the medics another question, the front door to the mansion burst open. A distressed young woman with tear-streaked cheeks and wild, desperate eyes pushed her way past the officers stationed at the entrance. They tried to restrain her, but she screamed, “This is my house! That’s my mother!”

Morgan’s heart twisted. She moved towards the distraught girl. *Sheryl’s daughter shouldn’t have to see her mother like this.* Morgan thought of her own father, who had died while she was still in prison. At least the last image she had of him was him alive, visiting her in prison, never giving up on his belief in her innocence. She didn’t want this girl to remember her mother that way.

But it was too late. The moment the young woman caught sight of her mother’s mutilated face, she froze, her gaze

locking onto the horrific scene before her.

“Hey, come on,” Morgan gently urged, stepping forward and putting an arm around the girl’s shoulders, guiding her away from the living room. Once they were in a quieter part of the house, Morgan led her into a small study and closed the door behind them. She turned to face the girl, who stood there as if in a trance, her eyes glazed over with shock.

“Look at me,” Morgan commanded firmly, placing her hands on the girl’s shoulders and giving her a slight shake. The contact seemed to snap her out of her catatonic state, and she looked up at Morgan, her eyes swimming with tears.

“Th-thank you,” she whispered, her voice shaking. “I... I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t been here.”

“Of course,” Morgan said softly. “I’m just doing my job, trying to help.” She paused for a moment, considering her next words carefully. “What’s your name?”

“Amelia,” the girl replied, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. “Amelia Stewart.”

“Amelia,” Morgan repeated, nodding. “I’m so sorry for what’s happened here. But I promise you, we’ll find out who did this to your mother.”

“Thank you,” Amelia whispered again, her eyes flicking back towards the door that separated them from the grisly scene in the living room. “I... I don’t know what to do now. How am I supposed to go on without her?”

“First things first,” Morgan said gently, squeezing Amelia’s shoulders reassuringly. “We need to figure out what happened, and we’ll need your help with that. But for now, let’s just focus on getting through today, okay?”

“Okay,” Amelia agreed, taking a deep breath and wiping away another tear. She looked up at Morgan, her gaze filled with determination. “I’ll do whatever it takes to help you find my mom’s killer.”

Morgan studied Amelia’s face, noting the mixture of fear and determination in her tear-filled eyes. She knew that despite

her shock, Amelia would do whatever was necessary to help find her mother's killer.

"Amelia," Morgan began, her voice soft but firm. "I know this is incredibly difficult for you, but I need to ask you some questions about last night."

"Of course," Amelia replied, nodding. Her chin quivered slightly as she tried to maintain her composure.

"Where were you last night?" Morgan asked, watching Amelia closely for any reaction.

"I... I went out with my friends," Amelia answered, her voice barely above a whisper. "We went to a movie and then hung out at a friend's house. I didn't come home."

"Did your mom know you were going out?" Morgan inquired, trying to piece together the timeline of events.

"Yes," Amelia said, sniffing. "She told me to have fun and not to worry about coming home too early."

Morgan silently noted the detail, her mind already working on potential theories. Maybe the killer broke into Sheryl's home and grabbed her when she was least expecting it. There were no signs of forced entry, so it was also possible he was known to her.

Morgan studied Amelia's face, noting the shadows beneath her eyes and the way her fingers gripped the edge of the nearby table. "Did your mother have any plans last night?" she asked gently. "Was she expecting visitors or going out?"

Amelia shook her head, her gaze distant as she tried to recall any details that might be relevant. "No, I don't think so," she said slowly. "I thought she was just going to stay home and read all night."

"Any reason you think someone would want to harm her?" Morgan pressed, watching for any flicker of recognition in Amelia's eyes.

"Look," Amelia said, her voice suddenly firm. "You don't need to waste your time looking into other people. I know who

did this.” Her eyes filled with tears again, but there was a fire in them now, too – a burning determination.

Morgan frowned, taken aback. Her heart pounded in anticipation. “What do you mean?”

“Her ex-husband, Trevor Swanson,” Amelia spat, choking on her words as fresh sobs wracked her body. “He’s a gold-digger, and he never loved my mom. He’s way younger than her. He runs some personal training business downtown, and he was only after my mom for her money so he could start his stupid business.”

Morgan felt a surge of anger at the mention of Trevor’s name. She knew the sting of betrayal all too well and could understand Amelia’s pain. She took a steadying breath, forcing herself to remain focused on the task at hand.

“Tell me more about Trevor,” she prompted.

“They had problems,” Amelia admitted, her body trembling as she fought to regain control. “I figured he would do anything to get to her money, but I never imagined... I never thought he could do this.” The last word came out as a choked sob, and Morgan felt her own eyes burn with unshed tears.

As Amelia cried, Morgan’s mind raced. Trevor Swanson was now their prime suspect, and she couldn’t help but feel a sense of urgency to bring him in. She knew all too well the pain of having someone you love ripped away from you, and she would do everything in her power to ensure Amelia didn’t have to suffer any longer than necessary.

“Amelia, I promise you, I’ll find Trevor,” Morgan said, her voice filled with determination.

“Thank you,” Amelia whispered.

With a final glance at the distraught young woman, Morgan steeled herself and left the mansion. She had a job to do, and she wouldn’t rest until Sheryl’s killer was brought to justice.

CHAPTER FOUR

Morgan sat in the driver's seat of her car, the sun casting angular shadows across the dashboard. The heat of the day had turned the car into a sweltering oven, and she could feel beads of sweat trickling down her forehead as she typed on her laptop. It wasn't the most comfortable situation, but she had learned to adapt during her time in prison. Besides, finding Sheryl Stewart's killer was more important than personal comfort, and she wasn't about to waste fuel idling.

"Alright, Trevor Swanson, let's see what you're all about," Morgan muttered under her breath as she navigated through the FBI database, pulling up files on the man who had been named a potential suspect by Sheryl's daughter, Amelia. The gruesome image of Sheryl's mutilated face was still fresh in her mind, fueling her determination to get to the bottom of this case.

As she scanned the information on Trevor, one detail immediately caught her eye: he was twenty years younger than Sheryl. "Huh," Morgan mumbled, her brow furrowed in thought. "Gold-digger much?" She continued reading but was surprised to find that Trevor didn't have a criminal record. This certainly complicated things; if he had a history of violence or fraud, it would be easier to pin him as the prime suspect. Still, Amelia's statement was more than enough to fuel Morgan's investigation.

It was not uncommon for criminals to keep a clean record strategically, and she knew better than to underestimate anyone – especially after being framed for murder herself.

Morgan leaned back in her seat, rubbing her temples as she contemplated her next move. Her gut told her that there was more to Trevor Swanson than met the eye, and she was determined to uncover it. In the distance, she saw a group of teenagers laughing as they exited an ice cream shop, blissfully

unaware of the darker side of life that she had become all too familiar with. For a moment, she envied their innocence.

Focus, Morgan, she chided herself, shaking her head to dispel the distractions. She knew she couldn't afford to waste any more time – Sheryl's killer was still out there, and every second counted. With renewed resolve, she continued digging into Trevor's background, determined to find any shred of evidence that might lead her closer to the truth. Morgan's fingers danced across her laptop's keyboard, searching for Trevor Swanson on various social media platforms.

Well, if there was one thing Trevor liked almost as much as money, it was himself.

“Look at you,” Morgan muttered under her breath, scrolling through an endless stream of selfies and gym pictures showcasing his chiseled physique. She couldn't help but feel a pang of disgust at his vanity; the man seemed to have no sense of humility or self-awareness. “All those muscles, but does your brain work just as well?” she wondered aloud, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

In between the photos of him flexing and working out, she found several posts where he vehemently argued with other users about topics ranging from politics to nutrition. It quickly became clear that Trevor was not only vocal but also highly opinionated. Morgan raised an eyebrow, taking note of this new information. A heated temper combined with a bruised ego could be a dangerous cocktail.

She shifted her attention back to the FBI database. As she dug deeper, a startling fact surfaced: Trevor had been married to Sheryl for a mere six months before filing for divorce. And, in a move that screamed gold-digger, he had managed to walk away with a hefty sum of her money – enough to open his own gym.

Six months? Really? Morgan shook her head in disbelief. She could practically hear the gears turning in Trevor's mind when he saw an opportunity to cash in on Sheryl's wealth. But was that enough to make him a murderer?

Short marriage, big payout, and a brand-new gym, Morgan mused, weighing the evidence before her. She knew she'd need more than this to prove Trevor's guilt, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was on the right track. It was time to gather more intel, and she knew just where to start – the gym.

She checked the gym's hours online. It was currently open and during prime hours at that. She didn't hesitate for a moment, turning on her car and revving the engine. It was time to pay Trevor Swanson a visit.

As she weaved through traffic, Morgan's mind raced with possible scenarios of what she might find at the gym. Would Trevor be there, flexing his muscles and reveling in his newfound wealth? Or would he be cowering in a corner, fearful that someone might uncover his secrets?

She took a deep breath to steady her nerves. She couldn't let her anger cloud her judgment or compromise the investigation. This needed to be done by the book – no room for error.

The Texas sun beat down mercilessly on Morgan as she stood outside Trevor's gym, a sleek, glass-fronted building in the heart of downtown Dallas. This place must have cost a pretty penny to build, and Morgan could easily see Trevor taking advantage of an older, wealthy woman like Sheryl just to achieve his dreams.

The sound of clanging weights and grunts of exertion filtered through the door as a muscular man in a tight tank top walked out, and for a moment, she hesitated. Morgan had spent a lot of time in the gym in prison, but it was a lot different environment than this. It was hardened and cold, but this aspect of gym life seemed to prioritize vanity and shallow pursuits. But now was not the time for judgment. She reminded herself that somewhere inside that gym was a man who might hold the key to solving this grisly murder.

Taking a deep breath, Morgan pushed open the door and stepped into the air-conditioned oasis. Immediately, she was struck by the energy of the place – men and women huffed and puffed on treadmills, their faces contorted with effort, while others grimaced through repetitions of bicep curls and squats. The smell of sweat hung heavy in the air, a testament to the hard work being done. But it was so colorful and bright, whereas the gym Morgan had used in prison had been dark and cold.

Morgan scanned the room, her eyes flicking from face to face in search of Trevor Swanson. As she moved further into the gym, she couldn't help but notice how out of place she felt in her tailored suit and polished heels, surrounded by people clad in tight leggings and muscle-hugging shirts.

“Can I help you?” A tall, muscular man approached her, his brow furrowed in concern as he took in her attire. He had the air of authority, and Morgan guessed he was an employee.

“Actually, yes,” Morgan replied, flashing her FBI badge. “I'm looking for Trevor Swanson.”

“Uh, sure,” the man said, clearly surprised but recovering quickly. “He's over there, talking to a client.” He pointed towards a corner of the gym where a lean man in his early thirties stood, animatedly explaining something to a woman in workout gear.

“Thank you,” she said, nodding at the man before making her way over to Trevor.

As Morgan approached, she took in the details of the man who Amelia believed killed her mother. He was attractive, with short-cropped dark hair and an easy smile that seemed to charm his client. She watched as he gestured enthusiastically, his hands flying through the air to emphasize whatever point he was trying to make. Could this charismatic man really be responsible for Sheryl's brutal murder? Morgan could see it. The vanity she'd seen on his social media translated directly to real life.

“Excuse me,” Morgan interrupted, her voice steely and professional. “Trevor Swanson?”

The man turned to face her, his eyes wide with surprise. “Yes, that’s me,” he replied cautiously. “Can I help you?”

Morgan’s gut clenched, and her resolve hardened. This was the man Amelia believed had killed her mother, and now it was time to find out if she was right.

“Special Agent Morgan Cross,” she replied curtly, flashing her FBI badge. “I need to talk to you about Sheryl Stewart.”

“Sheryl, who?” Trevor feigned ignorance, attempting to appear nonchalant as he stepped away from his client. “Uh, hold on a minute, Jenny, I just have to grab something from the back.”

His client, Jenny, blinked cluelessly as Trevor took off. Morgan lifted a brow. Was this guy stupid?

He then made a beeline for a door labeled “Staff Only” at the back of the gym.

Morgan wasn’t fooled for a second. She quickened her pace, easily keeping up with him as he ducked into the back room.

“Hold on, Trevor,” Morgan said.

“Look, I don’t know any Sheryl Stewart,” Trevor insisted, looking increasingly nervous as he backed further into the brightly lit room. Morgan was losing patience fast.

“Wrong day to test me,” Morgan growled, advancing towards him. Her jaw tensed as she fought the urge to grab him by the collar and shake the truth out of him. “You were married to Sheryl Stewart. You remember now?”

He hesitated for a brief moment before shaking his head, trying to maintain his act of denial. “Never heard of her.”

Morgan’s inner rage simmered, threatening to boil over. Amelia’s tear-streaked face flashed in her mind’s eye, spurring her on. How dare he continue to lie?

“Your ex-wife, Trevor,” she spat, her voice barely restrained. “The one who ended up mutilated and dead on her living room couch.”

Trevor's face paled, but he still wouldn't admit it. Morgan could see the wheels turning in his head as he searched for an escape route. She had him cornered now, both physically and mentally. And she wasn't about to let him slip away.

"W-what do you mean, dead?" Trevor asked.

Just as Morgan was about to lose her patience entirely, a young woman with a lithe figure and dark curls entered the room. Trevor's eyes darted towards her, relief flooding his features for a moment. "Natalia," he said urgently, trying to regain control of the situation. "This is a private conversation. You need to leave."

"Who is she?" Natalia demanded, eyeing Morgan suspiciously.

"Shut up, both of you," Morgan snapped, her voice cold as ice. She glared at them—now wasn't the time. "I'm not playing games here. One more word from either of you, and I'll arrest you both for conspiracy to murder."

The room went still, the air heavy with tension. Trevor's eyes widened in genuine shock while Natalia stared at Morgan in confusion. "Murder?" Trevor choked out, his voice barely audible.

"Sheryl Stewart is dead," Morgan confirmed, watching their reactions carefully. "Someone mutilated her face and left her sitting on her living room couch like some twisted work of art, and I think you know something about it, Trevor."

Trevor and Natalia exchanged horrified glances before gasping simultaneously. Their reactions seemed genuine, but Morgan knew better than to let her guard down. People lied all the time, and she had learned the hard way that even the most innocent faces could hide the darkest of secrets.

"Look, I didn't have anything to do with it," Trevor stammered, sweat beading on his forehead. "We had our problems, sure, but I never wanted her dead."

"Then you'd better start talking," she warned, her eyes narrowing as she locked her gaze onto his. "Because right

now, you're my prime suspect, and I won't hesitate to put you behind bars if I find any reason to believe you're guilty."

Trevor swallowed hard, the fear evident in his eyes. But as much as he tried to hide it, Morgan could see a flicker of defiance in his expression. He wasn't going to give up without a fight.

"Fine," he muttered, finally breaking eye contact. "But I'm telling you, you've got the wrong guy."

Morgan nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line. She had no way of knowing whether Trevor was telling the truth or not, but one thing was for certain: she was going to find out who had killed Sheryl Stewart, and she wouldn't rest until justice was served.

"Start talking," she demanded, her voice unwavering. "And don't even think about lying to me."

Trevor held up his hands defensively. "Alright, I was married to Sheryl," he finally admitted, his voice cracking under the intensity of Morgan's unwavering stare. "But I didn't kill her, I swear! I didn't even know she was dead!"

"Then why were you lying before?" Morgan asked. She didn't buy his whole clueless act.

"Because... I never loved her," Trevor confessed, looking away in shame. "She was too old for me, and after all those plastic surgeries, I couldn't even stand to look at her anymore. All I wanted was some cash to start this gym, which I got out of the divorce."

Morgan stared at him, disgusted. Trevor was pathetic, willing to lie and manipulate others for his own gain, with no regard for the consequences. But was he capable of murder?

"Okay, so where were you last night?" she demanded, not quite ready to rule him out as a suspect.

"Here, at the gym," Trevor replied, wiping sweat from his brow. "I was here all night, I swear."

Natalia, who had been standing silently in the corner, suddenly spoke up. "Wait, what?" she said, her voice thick

with suspicion. “I thought you went to your mother’s last night.”

Trevor paled, his eyes darting between Morgan and Natalia as beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He had been caught in a lie, and Morgan could see the panic setting in.

“Look, I didn’t go to my mom’s, alright?” Trevor stammered, trying to regain control of the situation. “I stayed here, at the gym. I can prove it.”

Morgan crossed her arms, her instincts telling her that something wasn’t adding up. Part of her wanted to believe that Trevor wasn’t the killer, but another part—the part jaded by years behind bars—warned her not to trust him.

“Alright,” she said finally, her voice a mix of skepticism and determination. “Show me your proof.”

“Fine,” Trevor muttered, his face a mix of dejection and shame. “I was here with Jessica, one of my employees. We have security footage to prove it.” He glanced at Natalia, who glared back at him, her eyes filled with hurt and betrayal.

“Of course you were,” she spat, her voice dripping with disdain. With a huff, she stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

“Show me the footage,” Morgan demanded, her voice firm. She knew that Trevor’s infidelity had nothing to do with Sheryl’s murder, but if he was lying about this, what else was he hiding?

“Alright, follow me,” Trevor said, leading Morgan through the gym and into a small, cluttered office. He clicked through several screens on the computer before finally pulling up the security feed from the previous night.

“Here,” he said, gesturing to the screen, where he and another woman—Jessica—could be seen entering the gym together. “This is us arriving around 9 PM.” Amelia had last seen her mother after nine, she had mentioned, which meant if Trevor was here at that point and never left, then he couldn’t have killed Sheryl.

Morgan watched the footage closely, noting how Trevor and Jessica seemed comfortable with each other – perhaps too comfortable. They laughed and joked as they walked around the gym, occasionally stopping to demonstrate exercises to each other.

As the night went on, their interactions grew more intimate. Trevor quickly skipped past a few moments where he and Jessica were clearly more than just friendly coworkers. Morgan raised an eyebrow but didn't comment; she was focused on finding evidence that could clear or condemn Trevor, not judging his personal life.

“Look,” Trevor said, pointing to the screen. “We fell asleep on the couches in the break room around 3 AM. We didn't leave until the morning when the gym opened again.”

Morgan studied the footage, weighing the implications of what she saw. Her gut told her that Trevor was telling the truth, at least about his alibi.

Morgan's gaze lingered on the screen for another moment, a sour taste in her mouth as she tried to reconcile the man before her with the brutal crime scene she had witnessed earlier. She sighed, accepting that despite being a real piece of work, Trevor was not responsible for Sheryl's death.

The real killer was still out there, and time was of the essence.

“Alright,” Morgan finally said, tearing her eyes away from the footage. “It seems you have an alibi, but that doesn't mean you're off the hook completely. I'll be in touch, and I'd advise you not to leave town while the investigation is still ongoing.”

Trevor swallowed, his face pale and sweaty. “Yeah, sure. Whatever you say, Agent Cross.” He looked like a man who knew his life was unraveling, and Morgan couldn't help but feel a pang of satisfaction at the thought. She made a mental note to follow up on Amelia's accusations; if Trevor wasn't directly involved in Sheryl's murder, he might still know something valuable.

Just as she turned to leave, her cell phone rang, the sound cutting through the noise of gym patrons grunting and clanking weights. She glanced at the caller ID, recognizing the number as Mueller's.

"Excuse me," she said to Trevor, already moving toward the exit as she answered the call. His eyes followed her, a mixture of relief and fear etched onto his face.

Morgan stepped out of the gym, squinting against the harsh midday sun that glared off the pavement. The summer heat hit her like a wall, and she could feel beads of sweat beginning to form along her hairline. She sighed as she answered the call, not particularly eager to hear Mueller's voice again.

"Cross here," she said, irritation seeping into her tone.

"Cross, it's Mueller."

"I know," Morgan said. They hadn't spoken since their last sour conversation, and Morgan wasn't thrilled to talk to him again. But it was for the case, she reminded herself.

"We've got some new intel on Sheryl Stewart's murder." His voice was strained. "You're not going to believe this."

"Go ahead," Morgan replied, her impatience mounting.

"Alright," he said. "The coroner just finished examining the body. Cause of death? Silicon injections in all major nerves. The victim had already undergone successful plastic surgeries, but these injections were recent."

Morgan's brow furrowed as she processed the information. Silicon injections? It didn't make sense. She glanced back at the gym, her mind racing with possibilities. If Trevor wasn't the killer, then who was?

"Silicon injections?" she echoed, incredulity creeping into her voice. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," Mueller confirmed. "Looks like someone injected silicon directly into her nerves. It must have been excruciatingly painful."

Morgan felt a cold shiver run down her spine, despite the heat. This wasn't the work of an average killer; this was

something far more sinister. “This means our perp has surgical expertise,” she mused aloud, the pieces slowly falling into place.

“Seems that way,” Mueller agreed. “We’re dealing with someone who knew exactly what they were doing – and how to inflict maximum pain before killing their victim.”

Morgan stared at the bustling street, suddenly feeling very alone. A doctor or a surgeon would have easy access to silicon and the knowledge of how to use it. But who would want to kill Sheryl in such a horrific manner? And why?

“Alright, Mueller,” Morgan said, determination creeping into her voice. “I’ll find out who this monster is.”

“Roger that, Agent Cross,” Mueller replied. There was a quiet pause on the other end. “And thanks for doing this.”

With that, he hung up.

Morgan stood there on the street, clenching her phone in her hand. She wanted to tell Mueller not to thank her—she wasn’t doing this for him, or the FBI, or even Derik. She was doing it for the victims.

But this new piece of information helped build up a profile in her mind. She had an idea of who to look for now—someone with surgical expertise. As much as she didn’t trust him right now, she needed to run this by Derik. He was technically still her partner, so she set out toward the hospital.

CHAPTER FIVE

Morgan's heels clicked against the sterile linoleum floor as she approached Derik's hospital room. Her mind raced with thoughts of the crime scene she'd left behind earlier, unable to erase the image of Sheryl from her thoughts. Morgan had seen a lot of crimes, but something about this one truly chilled her to the core. Sheryl's face was sliced and stretched into a grotesque facsimile of a facelift. It was disturbing.

But with her gold-digging ex-husband eliminated as a suspect, Morgan had to look forward. The coroner's report only deepened the mystery. Silicone injections in all of Sheryl's major nerves – Morgan was certain they were dealing with someone who had a surgical background.

Her confidence faltered as she neared the door. Seeing Derik again stirred up a whirlwind of conflicted emotions. The trust had been the foundation of their partnership, but lately, it had crumbled beneath the weight of unspoken secrets. She couldn't shake the memory of finding files on Darren La Roux – the man who'd tried to kill her, who she'd killed in self-defense – hidden in Derik's house. She needed to confront him, but how could she? Derik didn't know Morgan had killed Darren, and she couldn't let him find out.

Morgan took a deep breath, her fingers curling around the cold metal handle of Derik's hospital room door. The faint smell of disinfectant and stale air seeped into her nostrils as she pushed the door open. Her eyes immediately found Derik lying on the bed with an IV drip attached to his arm. Though his face was still pale, a hint of color had returned to his cheeks. He had lost a lot of blood on their last case, but he seemed to be recovering well.

"Hey," he said weakly, attempting a smile. "You made it."

"Of course I did," Morgan replied, forcing herself to return the smile. "I promised I'd keep you updated, didn't I?"

“True,” Derik acknowledged, then winced as he shifted in the bed. “What have you got for me?”

Morgan hesitated for a moment, remembering her earlier thoughts about telling him what she found in his house. But now wasn't the time for that. Instead, she focused on the case at hand. Sitting down in the chair by his bedside, she pulled out her phone and opened the gallery containing photos of the crime scene.

“Sheryl Stewart,” she began, her voice low and steady. “Her face was mutilated, cut up, and stretched into a makeshift facelift. The coroner confirmed the cause of death to be silicone injections in all her major nerves. We think we're dealing with someone who has a surgical background.”

“Show me the photos,” Derik said, his eyes darkening with determination. Morgan sensed his longing to be part of the action again, despite his weakened state. She handed him her phone, watching his expression as he scrolled through the gruesome images.

“God, this is sick,” he muttered after a few moments, “We need to find whoever did this and make sure they never hurt anyone again.”

“Agreed,” Morgan nodded, her thoughts echoing his resolve. But in the back of her mind, the nagging question about Derik's connection to Darren La Roux still lingered, casting a shadow over their partnership.

Morgan watched as Derik's eyes flickered between the photos and her face, searching for answers. The dim light from the bedside lamp cast eerie shadows across the room, heightening the tension that hung in the air. Derik handed the phone back to Morgan, and Morgan tucked it away.

“Sheryl looks young for her age,” Morgan commented. “Even with all those surgeries. Her ex-husband claimed she was too old, but in life, she certainly didn't look it.”

“I guess that's what money can buy you,” Derik said.

Morgan furrowed her brow, thoughts racing. She had been so focused on the gruesome state of Sheryl's face and the

surgical precision of her killer that she hadn't considered the implications of her appearance. If the motive wasn't financial, then why would someone do this to her? And why take the time to ruin her face like that?

"Whoever killed her must have a different motive," Morgan murmured, mostly to herself. "If it were about money, they wouldn't have gone through the trouble of disfiguring her so brutally."

"Exactly," Derik agreed, visibly wincing as he adjusted himself in the bed. "We need to look at people in different circles, not just the ones who stand to gain financially from her death. Our perp obviously has some kind of medical background, given the MO, like you said."

"Right," she said, taking a deep breath. "So we're dealing with a killer who seems to be sending some sort of message. They have surgical knowledge and aren't afraid to use it. This is definitely someone who will strike again."

Derik nodded, his gaze never leaving her face. "It's possible they're trying to make a statement about vanity or the lengths people will go to maintain their appearance. But we can't rule out jealousy or revenge either."

Morgan clenched her jaw, feeling the weight of the case bearing down on her. She couldn't shake the unease that gnawed at her, fueled not only by the grisly crime scene photos but also by her own doubts about Derik and their partnership.

"Okay," she said finally, stuffing her phone back into her pocket. "I'll start looking into people connected to Sheryl who might have a history in the medical field. Surgeons, nurses, even hospital staff – anyone who could've had access to the tools and knowledge needed to do this."

"Good," Derik replied. His eyes, though still pale and tired, locked onto Morgan's as he sensed her lingering reluctance. "Morgan," he said softly, raising a hand to touch her arm. "Why don't you stay for a while? We can hash this out together."

Morgan hesitated, feeling the warmth of his touch seep through her jacket sleeve. A part of her yearned to confide in him, to seek solace in their partnership. But the memory of Darren La Roux's files, hidden within Derik's home, cast an unwelcome shadow over her thoughts.

"Thanks, Derik," she replied, gently pulling away from his grasp. "But I need to head home for the night. It's been a long day."

"Are you sure?" Derik asked, his concern evident in the furrow of his brow. "You seem... off. Is everything okay?"

Morgan stared into his green eyes, wavering between the desire to confront him about her discovery and the fear of what it might mean for their relationship. She thought of all they had been through together, the trust they had built, despite her own dark past. Could that bond withstand the weight of such damning evidence?

"Everything's fine," she lied, forcing a smile onto her face. "I'm just tired, that's all. I'll be back tomorrow, okay? Get some rest."

"Alright," Derik conceded, looking unconvinced but too weak to push further. "Take care of yourself, Morgan. I'll see you tomorrow."

As Morgan left the hospital room, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was leaving behind more than just her injured partner. The truth, like an insidious parasite, gnawed at her insides, threatening to devour everything they had built together. And yet, she knew that revealing it now would only serve to weaken them both in the face of a dangerous and cunning adversary.

"Goodnight, Derik," she whispered, her hand on the cool metal door handle. And with that, she stepped out into the dimly lit hallway, alone with her thoughts and the burden of truth.

CHAPTER SIX

Bethany paced her opulent living room, the soft soles of her slippers barely making a sound as they kissed the imported floor. The grandfather clock in the corner ticked away the seconds, its rhythmic cadence serving only to underscore the emptiness of the grand house. She felt the weight of her loneliness pressing down on her, like an oppressive fog seeping into every corner of her luxurious but hollow life.

Her gaze wandered to the ornate mantle above the flickering fireplace, the flames casting shadows that danced around the room. There, amidst the collection of gilded frames and treasured memories, she spotted a photo of herself and her sister, Mary, taken years ago when they were both still young and carefree. The sepia-toned image showed the two sisters with arms wrapped around each other, their laughter frozen in time.

“Remember when we used to be inseparable, Mary?” Bethany whispered to the photograph, her voice cracking with a mixture of nostalgia and regret.

The realization that it had been far too long since they last spoke settled like a stone in her stomach. In those days gone by, they shared secrets, dreams, and a bond that seemed unbreakable. But now, as the years stretched out between them, the distance between the sisters had grown from more than just miles.

She traced a finger along the edge of the frame, feeling the cold material beneath her fingertips. It was a tangible reminder of the gulf that now separated them. Their lives had diverged so drastically over the years – one filled with glamour and excess, the other rooted in simplicity and contentment.

“Would you even recognize me now, I wonder?” Bethany asked the smiling face in the picture, her eyes clouding with unshed tears. She put down the photo and took out her cell phone. Bethany’s fingers hesitated over her phone as she

contemplated calling Mary. She could almost hear her sister's voice, warm and familiar, like a comforting embrace after all these years. But the uncertainty held her back. How would Mary react to her call? Would she even want to speak with Bethany?

"Mary doesn't understand me," Bethany murmured to herself, shaking her head. "She never understood why I chose this life."

She glanced around her lavish living room, taking in the ostentatious display of wealth and luxury that surrounded her. The opulent house was a far cry from the humble home they had shared as children, and she knew her sister would disapprove of her choices.

Mary always thought my pursuit of beauty and status was shallow, Bethany mused, her mind drifting back to their years when she first started dabbling in cosmetic procedures. *But she never had to worry about losing her looks, did she?*

A bitter smile played across her lips as she recalled the stark contrast between them. Growing up, Bethany had been the beautiful one, turning heads everywhere she went. Mary, on the other hand, had always been plain – not unattractive, but certainly not blessed with the same stunning features as her sister.

Time has been kinder to you than it has to me. You had nothing to lose while I've been fighting against the inevitable.

The countless surgeries and treatments she had undergone flashed through her mind, each one a desperate attempt to hold onto the fleeting beauty of her youth. In her own eyes, she still looked good, but the reflection staring back at her seemed more like a stranger with each passing day.

The silence of the empty house echoed her thoughts, reinforcing the loneliness that had become her constant companion. And as she looked at her sister's smiling face in the photograph, she couldn't help but wonder if maybe, just maybe, Mary had found something far more valuable than beauty and wealth.

“Enough,” Bethany murmured, shaking her head. “Forget about Mary.” She strode away from the mantle, the dim glow of the fireplace casting long shadows across the opulent room.

The plush carpet whispered beneath her feet as she approached an overflowing bookcase, its shelves lined with leather-bound volumes and gilt-edged tomes. Her fingers ghosted over their spines, feeling the embossed titles as she searched for something to occupy her thoughts. The familiar scent of aged paper filled her nostrils, offering a fleeting comfort amidst the emptiness of her home.

“Ah, there you are,” she said, selecting a worn copy of “Rebecca” by Daphne du Maurier – one of her old favorites. But just as she started to withdraw the book, an unfamiliar noise echoed through the house.

Her heart skipped a beat, and the book slipped from her trembling fingers. It thudded to the floor, stirring up a cloud of dust motes that danced in the firelight. Bethany held her breath, straining to listen past the blood pounding in her ears. It was a faint scratching sound, like nails on wood. She didn’t have any pets, and she lived alone – so what could be making that noise?

It was probably just the wind, she reminded herself. But despite her attempts at rationalization, a cold shiver of dread slithered down her spine.

Gathering her courage, she left the sanctuary of the living room, her hand trailing along the wall as she navigated the darkened hallway. She hesitated for a moment at the entrance to the kitchen, her eyes scanning the moonlit space for anything unusual.

The stainless-steel appliances gleamed under the silvery light filtering in through the window, and the granite countertops seemed to absorb the darkness, creating a stark contrast. It was as if the room had been dipped in shadows, all color leached away by the night.

“Nothing here,” Bethany whispered, her breath misting in the chilly air. “See? You’re worrying over nothing.”

She leaned against the doorframe for a moment, trying to shake off the unease that still clung to her like cobwebs. Glancing out the window, she noted how impossibly dark it was outside – as if the world beyond her home had ceased to exist. The blackness seemed to press against the glass, eager to breach the barrier and swallow her whole.

Stop being so dramatic, she chided herself, pushing away from the doorframe. *It's just your imagination*. And with that, she turned to leave the kitchen, determined to let go of her fears and lose herself in the pages of her book.

But somewhere deep inside, the disquiet remained, whispering that something was amiss. And as Bethany struggled to ignore it, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was no longer alone in her lonely house. A shiver ran down her spine, and she couldn't shake the sensation of eyes watching her intently from somewhere within the darkness.

“Okay, enough. This is ridic—”

Her words were suddenly cut off as a black bag was yanked over her head, plunging her world into darkness.

Panic surged through her veins, and her lungs felt as if they were constricting, making it difficult to breathe.

“Help!” she screamed, her voice trembling as her hands clawed at the fabric, desperate to free herself from its suffocating embrace.

“Shh,” a gravelly voice hissed in her ear, the sound sending chills down her spine. “Not a word.”

Bethany's heart raced, thoughts of Mary and their estrangement momentarily forgotten as fear consumed her. As she struggled against her unknown assailant, she couldn't help but wonder if this was the price for the life she had chosen – a life full of riches but devoid of love and companionship.

And now it was all about to end.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The first light of dawn was still hours away as Morgan stepped out of her house the next morning, Skunk bounding by her side. They walked in silence through the quiet neighborhood; the only sound the distant hum of traffic and the occasional rustle of wind-blown leaves. The world seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the sun to bring it back to life.

Morgan had spent all of last night looking into Sheryl's medical files, but the woman had seen a lot of doctors and a lot of plastic surgeons; narrowing down just one was going to be difficult. Morgan had selected a few from the pool and looked into them, bringing up no criminal records or anything to suggest they could be the killer. At some point, Morgan had fallen asleep on the couch, and now it was morning again, and she had more work to do. But first, Skunk needed a walk.

As they entered the secluded park, the shadows grew darker and deeper. Yet Morgan felt no fear. She knew that she was more than capable of handling any threat that might emerge from the gloom. Hell, she was probably the most dangerous thing out here.

Instead, it was the nature of the case that sent a shiver down her spine – another deranged individual who would likely strike again.

More than that, she couldn't shake Derik's possible betrayal from her mind. She had no one to talk to, no one she could trust.

"Skunk, buddy," she said softly, reaching down to scratch his ears. "I don't know what to do about Derik. I found something... something bad. And I can't stop thinking about it." She sighed, her breath clouding in the chilly air. "Should I tell him?"

Skunk let out a single bark, his eyes bright and trusting in the darkness. Morgan smiled ruefully. "Yeah, you're right. I

need to trust my instincts. But how can I face him, knowing what I know?" Her voice was barely audible above the whispering wind.

"Maybe I'm wrong," she continued, kicking at a small stone, sending it skittering across the path. "Maybe there's a good explanation for it all. But if there isn't..." She trailed off, unable to voice her worst fears.

They wandered deeper into the park, the shadows swallowing them up. Morgan's thoughts churned, battling with the ever-present weight of the truth. Skunk trotted along beside her, his wagging tail a silent reminder of the simple loyalty she longed for in her own life. In truth, she couldn't think of a reason why Derik would even betray her in the first place. Had she done something to slight him? Did he somehow blame her for his failed marriage? Because they had kissed once, before she went to jail, while he was still with his ex-wife? It didn't make sense.

"Derik's my partner," Morgan whispered, her voice breaking. "I have to believe in him, don't I? Even when it feels like I'm walking straight into a trap?"

Skunk barked again, and Morgan knelt down to wrap her arms around his sturdy neck. "Thanks, Skunk," she murmured into his fur. "You always know just what to say."

In the darkness of the park, surrounded by secrets and shadows, Morgan held onto the one thing she knew she could trust – the steadfast loyalty of her dog. And as they walked together through the still night, she began to believe that maybe, just maybe, the bonds between them all would be enough to see them through whatever lay ahead. With that, they keep going.

The park was eerily silent, save for the distant rustling of leaves and Skunk's soft panting. Despite the darkness, Morgan's instincts kept her alert and focused, every step calculated and steady.

A prickling sensation crawled up her spine, making her hairs stand on end.

She couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched.

"Skunk, you picking up anything?" she whispered, scanning their surroundings carefully.

The dog simply wagged his tail and sniffed at a nearby bush, wholly uninterested in her paranoia. Morgan's heart pounded in her chest, her breathing shallow, as she played through the possibilities in her mind. Ten years ago, someone had tried to frame her for murder – someone who could still be working within the FBI.

They wanted her gone then, and maybe they still did.

Maybe that was why Darren La Roux had shown up on her doorstep.

Maybe it wasn't just for his personal revenge. Maybe he'd been sent there.

"Alright, let's pick up the pace," she murmured, quickening her stride.

As she guided Skunk along the winding path, Morgan couldn't help but glance over her shoulder every few moments, searching for any sign of an unseen threat. The shadows seemed to shift and twist, taking on sinister forms that preyed on her already frayed nerves.

"Get it together, Morgan," she muttered to herself, attempting to stifle the fear that threatened to take hold. "You're stronger than this."

And just as she was about to put distance between herself and the unsettling atmosphere of the park, her phone buzzed in her pocket, making her jump. Her heart raced as she fumbled to pull it out, her hands shaking.

"Cross," she answered, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Morgan, it's Mueller," came the familiar voice from the other end. "We've got another victim. I need you at the crime scene ASAP."

Her blood ran cold, thoughts of Derik and the mysterious watcher momentarily pushed aside by the urgency in Mueller's

tone. There was another evil out there lurking on these streets, one even more sinister, and just as she'd feared, he had claimed another life. She grits her teeth.

"Understood," she replied, her voice hardening. "I'm on my way."

Morgan pulled up to the victim's house, a sprawling mansion nestled behind an imposing wrought-iron gate. It was eerily similar to Sheryl Stewart's home – the same immaculate lawn, the same ostentatious display of wealth. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were dealing with more than just a coincidence.

"Special Agent Cross," greeted Officer Davis as he approached her car. Morgan stepped out and shook his hand firmly, her eyes still scanning the property. "Sorry, we're meeting again under these circumstances. The victim is Bethany Good, fifty-one."

"Thanks, Officer Davis. Let's go inside."

As they walked through the open double doors, Morgan couldn't help but notice the art adorning the walls – expensive abstract paintings and intricately carved sculptures, each placed with meticulous care. But there were no family photos, no snapshots of laughter or love. The lack of personal touch made the opulent home feel cold, almost sterile.

"Seems like an oddly lonely place for someone so well-off," Morgan mused aloud, her voice echoing through the empty halls.

"Money doesn't always buy happiness, I suppose," Officer Davis replied, leading her further into the house, where more officers and personnel were milling about, their expressions grim. "Apparently, she didn't have any close family."

"Or friends, it seems," Morgan muttered under her breath. As they continued their walk, she couldn't help but compare

this new crime scene to the last one. Sheryl and Bethany were both wealthy, both alone, and now both dead. The similarities were too striking to ignore. Morgan could feel the familiar tightening in her chest, the pressure of needing to find answers before another life was taken.

Officer Davis led her to the living room, where other officers were busy collecting evidence. Morgan took a deep breath, preparing herself for the gruesome sight she knew awaited her. The face of the last victim flashed in her mind, the mutilated remains haunting her even now. She steeled herself and stepped inside, determined to find justice for both women.

Morgan's eyes were immediately drawn to the center of the living room, where Bethany's lifeless body lay. The victim was sprawled out on the pristine white carpet, her limbs limp and askew. Morgan couldn't help but wince at the sight before her. Like Sheryl, Bethany's face had been mutilated in a grotesque imitation of a facelift. The skin around her eyes and mouth stretched unnaturally tight, leaving her features distorted and barely recognizable.

"Definitely the same killer," Morgan muttered under her breath, her fingers curling into fists at her sides.

Anger bubbled beneath her cool exterior, but she forced herself to focus on the task at hand.

"Any sign of a struggle?" she asked, turning to Officer Davis.

"Nothing obvious," he replied, shaking his head. "It's almost like she let him in willingly."

"Or didn't have time to react," Morgan added, scanning the room for any possible clues. Her gaze landed on the fireplace mantle, where an assortment of expensive knickknacks and vases were displayed. Among them, one small framed photo caught her attention.

Morgan stepped closer, reaching out to pick up the photograph. In it, a younger version of Bethany stood arm in

arm with another woman. They shared a striking resemblance, their smiles wide and carefree as they posed for the camera.

“Could be a sister or a close friend,” Officer Davis suggested, observing the photo over Morgan’s shoulder.

Morgan carefully slid the photo from its frame and flipped it over. Scrawled on the back in neat handwriting were the words ‘sisters Bethany and Mary.’

“Mary,” Morgan whispered, her brows furrowing in thought. She knew she needed to find this sister and see if she could shed some light on Bethany’s life and, ultimately, her death.

Morgan continued to study the photo, trying to glean any further insight into the sisters’ relationship. But the only way she could know for sure was if she talked to Mary herself.

Morgan slid into the driver’s seat of her car, the image of Bethany Good’s lifeless body still heavy on her mind. She couldn’t shake the image of the once-beautiful woman, now marred by a twisted facelift from hell. The similarities between Sheryl and Bethany were undeniable, and Morgan found herself gripping the steering wheel tightly, her knuckles turning white.

“Focus,” she muttered under her breath, letting go of the wheel and opening her laptop. As it whirred to life, Morgan pulled up Bethany’s public records, scrolling through page after page of information. Wealthy, well-connected, and no immediate family to speak of - no children, no spouse, only her sister, Mary, who lived in Montana. A cold feeling settled in the pit of her stomach as she realized how alone Bethany had truly been.

“Mary,” she whispered, typing her name into the search bar and finding a phone number for her. With a deep breath, Morgan dialed the number, bracing herself for the conversation that was about to unfold.

“Hello?” came a cautious female voice on the other end.

“Hi, is this Mary? Mary, uh, the sister of Bethany Good?”

“Yes, this is Mary. Who is this?” The voice was guarded, and Morgan could practically feel the tension through the phone.

“Mary, my name is Special Agent Morgan Cross. I’m an agent with the FBI,” she said, trying to keep her tone steady and professional. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I need to ask you a few questions about your sister.”

“Is something wrong? What happened?” Mary’s voice wavered with concern, and Morgan found herself hesitating for just a moment before answering.

“Mary, when was the last time you saw or spoke with your sister?” she asked, deciding it was best to gather as much information as possible before breaking the news.

“It’s been years, actually,” Mary admitted, her voice tinged with sadness. “We grew apart. Why?”

Morgan steeled herself, knowing that there was no gentle way to deliver such tragic news. “I regret to inform you that your sister Bethany has been found dead. It appears to be a homicide.” She paused, allowing Mary a moment to process the information.

The line went quiet, and for a brief second, Morgan wondered if Mary had hung up. But then she heard a soft, anguished sob on the other end. “Oh, God,” Mary whispered, her voice choked with tears. “Who would do such a thing?”

“We’re working on finding that out, Mary,” Morgan assured her. “I promise we’ll do everything in our power to bring her killer to justice. In the meantime, if you can think of anything that might help our investigation, please don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Thank you, Special Agent Cross,” Mary managed to say, her voice barely holding together.

“Mary, I understand this is difficult, but can you tell me more about your sister?” Morgan asked, her voice gentle but

firm. “What was it that drove you two apart?”

There was a pause, and then Mary answered with a tremor in her voice. “Bethany became addicted to plastic surgery. It consumed her life, turned her into a vain, reclusive woman. We lost touch, but I had been planning on reaching out soon.”

Morgan could hear the regret in Mary’s voice and felt a pang of sympathy for the woman. Morgan wished she had been able to see her father again before he died. If she’d known he was going to die, she would have asked him to stay longer during his last visit to her in prison. There were a lot of things she would have said.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Morgan said, meaning every word. “I’ll do everything I can to find out what happened to Bethany.”

“Thank you,” Mary replied, her voice steadier now. “It all went wrong when she met that damn consultant in Dallas.”

“Consultant?” Morgan’s interest was piqued. She gripped the steering wheel with one hand while holding the phone to her ear with the other. This could be a lead.

“Who was this consultant?” she probed further, her mind racing with possibilities.

“His name was Dr. Lance Friedman,” Mary shared hesitantly, as if unsure whether or not to trust Morgan. “He’s a plastic surgeon, and he convinced Bethany to undergo more surgeries than she needed. She got hooked.”

Morgan’s gut clenched with anger at the thought of a doctor taking advantage of someone’s vulnerability for personal gain. But she kept her emotions in check, knowing that she needed to focus on the task at hand.

“Could you tell me more about this plastic surgeon?” Morgan asked.

“Sure,” Mary replied, her voice wavering slightly as she collected her thoughts. “Bethany started out with minor surgeries, but a few years before we lost touch, she met this man who convinced her to get more and more procedures done. He was like a drug dealer, feeding her addiction. I

remember she told me he was the only surgeon she'd trust with her face."

Morgan's eyes narrowed as she processed the information. She could practically hear the gears turning in her head, fitting together pieces of the puzzle.

"Thank you, Mary. You've been very helpful." Morgan's words were sincere, and she knew that the call must have been incredibly difficult for Mary. "I'm going to look into Dr. Friedman. Please take care of yourself, and if I have any further questions, I'll be in touch."

"Of course, Agent Cross," Mary said, her voice stronger than before. "Thank you for telling me all this."

As soon as the call disconnected, Morgan felt an urgency to act. Dr. Lance Friedman was now a person of interest, and she needed to find out more about him. Her instincts told her that he might be the key to solving this case – or at least a vital piece of the puzzle.

She wasted no time in powering up her laptop, quickly searching for any information she could find on him. His practice had many five-star reviews—it seemed legitimate enough, although she was curious to know if there was more hiding under the surface. She filtered down to the one-star reviews, and there were only a few. The most recent was anonymous, and it said: *This guy will pressure you into getting expensive and dangerous surgeries you don't need. Avoid!*

Morgan frowned. That lined up with Mary's statement about the way Lance allegedly manipulated Bethany.

Morgan went into the FBI database and looked up Lance Friedman's file. Her search revealed that Lance had attended medical school at the prestigious University of Chicago, graduating with honors. He had no criminal record and a spotless professional track record, aside from those few allegations that he pressured clients.

Well, one of his clients was now dead. Morgan shut her laptop and turned on her car. It was time to pay him a visit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sun was setting, casting an eerie glow on the pristine white exterior of Dr. Lance Friedman's plastic surgery clinic as Morgan pulled into the parking lot. She couldn't help but notice how the building stood out against the darkening sky, seemingly untouched by the chaos and horror that had been plaguing Dallas.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the shrill ring of her cell phone. Glancing at the screen, she saw it was the coroner.

"This is Cross," she answered.

"Special Agent Cross, I've just finished examining Bethany Good's body. The cause of death has been confirmed as heart failure, likely as a result of the trauma the victim was going through."

So it wasn't injections this time, Morgan thought. Maybe Bethany had died before the killer had the chance to inflict more pain upon her.

"Thanks for the update," Morgan said, her brow furrowing in thought. She wondered if the killer had caused the heart failure or if it had been a tragic coincidence that had occurred before their macabre handiwork began. But deep down, she doubted it was that simple.

"Keep me posted if you find anything else," she told the coroner before hanging up. Her gaze returned to the clinic, determination settling over her like a cloak. It was time to confront Dr. Friedman.

Stepping out of her car and into the fading light, Morgan approached the glass doors of the clinic. As she entered, she was struck by the sterile brightness of the reception area. The walls were adorned with unsettling photographs of smiling people, their faces unnaturally smooth and taut, a testament to the work done within these walls.

“Good evening,” a chipper receptionist greeted her from behind a sleek desk. “How can I help you?”

“Hello,” Morgan replied, flashing her FBI badge, gaining a surprised look from the girl. “I’m Special Agent Morgan Cross. I’d like to speak with Dr. Lance Friedman, please.”

“Of course! Let me check if he’s available.” The receptionist typed something into her computer, her fingers flying across the keyboard with practiced ease. “Dr. Friedman is in his office. I’ll take you there.”

“Thank you,” Morgan said, her eyes scanning the unsettling images on the walls as they walked down a pristine hallway. The place seemed almost too clean, too perfect - just like the faces that stared back at her. As the receptionist led her to Dr. Friedman’s office, Morgan steeled herself for the confrontation ahead. There was a chance she was about to come face-to-face with a killer.

The door to Dr. Friedman’s office opened with a soft click, revealing a spacious room devoid of the unnerving photographs that adorned the hallways. Instead, it was filled with an array of diplomas and awards; each displayed prominently on the walls. Morgan stepped inside, her gaze sweeping over the sterile environment before settling on the man behind the desk.

“Dr. Lance Friedman?” she asked, her tone authoritative as she flashed her FBI badge.

“Y-yes, that’s me,” he stammered, his pale face gleaming under the fluorescent lights, his blond hair almost too perfect to be real. His skin was pulled tight across his face, making it difficult for Morgan to guess his age. It was clear he’d had his share of work done as well.

“Agent Morgan Cross, FBI,” she introduced herself, studying him closely. “I have some questions I’d like to ask you.”

“O-of course,” he said, trying to sound composed but failing to hide the nervousness in his voice. He gestured at the chair opposite his desk. “Please, have a seat.”

Morgan sat down, her eyes never leaving him. She reached into her bag and pulled out two photographs. “Do you recognize this woman?” she asked, sliding the image of Sheryl Stewart across the table.

Friedman picked it up, scrutinizing the face in the picture. “No, I don’t believe I’ve ever seen her before.” His words were hesitant, but Morgan sensed no deception in them.

“Alright,” she said, setting the first photo aside and presenting him with the second one, a photo of Bethany Good. “What about this woman?”

Recognition flickered in his eyes, and he nodded reluctantly. “Yes, she’s a client of mine.”

“Was,” Morgan corrected him gravely. “She was found dead in her home yesterday. Much like the first woman I showed you, her face had been mutilated in a grotesque facelift.”

Friedman’s eyes widened in shock, and Morgan saw a hint of genuine concern beneath the façade that his own surgical alterations had created. “I... I had no idea,” he whispered, his hands trembling slightly.

“Tell me about your relationship with Bethany Good,” she pressed on, watching his every reaction carefully.

“Of course,” Friedman said quietly, his voice barely audible. “Bethany was a loyal client for years. She came to me for various procedures but always trusted my judgment when it came to the specific treatments.”

“I see,” Morgan replied, her mind racing with questions and doubts. Though he claimed not to know Sheryl Stewart, there was something unsettling about Dr. Lance Friedman. And as the pieces slowly began to fall into place, she knew she would need to dig deeper to uncover the truth behind these gruesome crimes.

“Dr. Friedman,” Morgan said, her tone serious but not unkind, “I have information suggesting that you may have pressured Ms. Good into undergoing more surgical procedures than were necessary.”

“Pressured?” Friedman exclaimed, indignant. “No, absolutely not! I only ever did what Bethany wanted, what she felt would make her happy. She was very particular about her appearance, Agent Cross. But I never forced her into anything.”

Morgan studied his face, the unnatural smoothness of his skin, and the too-perfect curve of his eyebrows. It was hard to gauge his true emotions under the mask that surgery had provided him. She knew she couldn’t let her guard down; she had to push for the truth.

“Dr. Friedman,” Morgan began, choosing her words carefully, “your work is certainly impressive. But I have to ask: are there any procedures you recommended to Bethany that might have been... excessive? Anything that could have put her in danger?”

“Agent Cross, I assure you, everything I did for Bethany was within the bounds of professional ethics and with her best interests at heart,” he insisted, his eyes darting nervously around the room. “I’m a doctor, after all. My priority is my patients’ well-being.”

Morgan took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the investigation pressing down on her. She’d seen the carnage left behind by this killer, and she knew that if she didn’t find the truth soon, more lives could be lost. But as she looked into Friedman’s eyes, she found it difficult to ascertain whether he was being entirely truthful or if there was something more sinister lurking beneath the surface. Sheryl wasn’t one of his clients, but Bethany was. She wanted to talk to someone else who knew him.

“Before I go, Dr. Friedman,” Morgan said, her voice steady and assertive, “I’d like to speak with one of your current clients. Could you provide me with a list?”

Friedman hesitated for a moment, his eyes narrowing as he considered her request. Finally, he relented. “Very well,” he said. “My receptionist will print you off a list. You can grab it on your way out.”

“Thank you,” Morgan replied. “And remember, don’t leave town.” Her tone was more warning than request.

“Understood,” Friedman murmured, his gaze locked onto hers.

On her way out of the office, Morgan stopped by the receptionist’s desk. Lance lurked behind her and said, “Please print the agent off a list of our most recent clients, the past six months or so.”

The receptionist quickly did as she was told, typing on her computer before the printer behind her buzzed to life. Morgan watched as a sheet rolled out, and the girl handed it to her. Morgan took the warm paper, glancing down the list of clients with their names, phone numbers, and addresses. The top one was a woman named Patty, who had come in just yesterday.

Morgan shot Lance and his receptionist a look before she nodded and left the clinic, her mind buzzing with thoughts and theories. The pressure was mounting; she could feel it in every tense muscle and furrowed brow. Sliding into her car, she started the engine and began driving toward Patty’s address.

As she weaved through the traffic, the radio announcer’s voice cut through her thoughts. “In breaking news today, authorities have confirmed that two women have been murdered, both victims found with their faces mutilated in a gruesome fashion that has prompted the name ‘the Plastic Surgeon Killer.’ Police are urging anyone with information to come forward.”

Morgan gripped the steering wheel tighter, her knuckles whitening. The story was out, and now there would be a media frenzy. The killer needed to be stopped before more lives were lost, and she couldn’t help but feel the weight of that responsibility bearing down on her.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. *Focus*, she thought. *Find the connections, find the motive, and you’ll find the killer.* That’s what her training had taught her, and she had to trust in herself now.

As she pulled up to Patty's house, Morgan steeled herself for the conversation ahead. She needed to gather as much information as possible and quickly. The clock was ticking, and the killer was still out there.

"Alright," she whispered under her breath, "let's do this."

Morgan stepped out of her car and took a moment to assess the modest, well-kept home in front of her. The lawn was freshly mowed, and the cheerful yellow siding seemed to defy the seriousness of the investigation at hand. This house wasn't like the opulence of Sheryl or Bethany's homes. She straightened her jacket, preparing herself to face yet another person whose life might have been touched by this killer.

As she approached the door, she could hear the faint sound of laughter coming from inside. This simple, happy sound struck a chord within her—it had been a long time since she'd heard such carefree joy, and it reminded her just how much was at stake here. With a determined knock, she waited for an answer.

The laughter stopped abruptly before the door swung open, revealing a woman with wavy brown hair and a tentative smile. "Can I help you?" she asked, eyeing Morgan's badge with curiosity.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. My name is Special Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI," she introduced herself, meeting Patty's gaze with a solemn intensity. "Are you Patty?"

"Uh, yes, that's me," Patty replied, her eyes widening slightly in surprise. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm investigating a case, and I understand you're a client of Dr. Lance Friedman's." Morgan kept her voice steady, watching Patty's reaction carefully.

"Uh, yeah, I am," Patty confirmed, her brow furrowing as she tried to figure out where this was going.

"May I come in? It's important."

"Of course," Patty said, stepping aside to let Morgan enter.

Just then, a man appeared in the hallway behind Patty, his brow creased with concern. “Hey, babe, what’s going on?” He looked from his wife to the agent, trying to piece together the situation.

“Dom, this is Agent Morgan Cross from the FBI,” Patty explained, her voice wavering slightly. “She’s here about... Dr. Friedman?”

“Dr. Friedman? The ‘whack job’ surgeon?” Dom’s face darkened, and Morgan took note of the anger simmering beneath his words.

“Whack job” might have been a bit strong, but Morgan couldn’t deny that something about Friedman had put her on edge. However, she needed to stay focused on the task at hand. “I’m investigating a series of crimes, and I’d like to ask you both a few questions about your experiences with Dr. Friedman.”

“Of course,” Patty agreed, her voice barely above a whisper. “Whatever we can do to help.”

“Is this about the murders?” Dom asked. “I heard about it on the news.”

Morgan’s eyes widened in surprise as she processed Dom’s words. “You heard about the murders on the news?” she asked, her mind racing with the implications of this information. “And it made you think of Dr. Friedman?”

“Exactly,” Dom replied, his expression grim. “I mean, I know it sounds crazy, but when they described what happened to those poor women... it just reminded me of that surgeon Patty had a consultation with a while back. The guy was really pushing for her to get a facelift, even though she’s only thirty-four.”

Patty squirmed uncomfortably in her seat, avoiding Morgan’s gaze. “He didn’t seem like a bad person, though,” she insisted, her voice barely audible. “In the end, I only got some injections. No facelifts or anything like that.”

Morgan studied the couple, taking in their body language and the tension in the room. She could sense Patty’s

embarrassment and reluctance to discuss her experience with Dr. Friedman, and Dom's protective nature, his concern for his wife clear in every word he spoke.

"Still, it's not every day you hear about women being killed and their faces mutilated like that," Dom continued, his voice tight with anger. "When I heard about it, my first thought was that sketchy surgeon who wanted to cut my wife open for no good reason."

As Morgan listened to Dom's words, her gut instinct told her that there was more to this story than met the eye. Something about Lance Friedman was off, and if these victims were connected to him in any way, it was crucial that she followed up on every lead. She couldn't let another woman suffer at the hands of this brutal killer.

"Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me," she said, her tone sincere. "Your insights could prove invaluable to our investigation."

"Absolutely," Dom said.

The conviction in Dom's voice was enough to convince Morgan that Lance Friedman was a viable suspect. She nodded her thanks to the couple, standing up and adjusting her coat. "I appreciate your candor," she said. "You've given me a lot to think about."

"Stay safe," Dom called after her as she left their home. The door clicked shut behind her, and Morgan allowed herself a moment to process everything she had just learned.

"Time to pay Dr. Friedman another visit," she muttered under her breath, reaching for her phone to call for backup as she walked towards her car. Her fingers tapped nervously on the steering wheel as she drove back to the clinic, her mind racing with the possibilities. Were Patty and Sheryl simply isolated cases, or was there something more sinister at play?

CHAPTER NINE

Morgan arrived at Lance's clinic to find it empty, the bright atmosphere tainted by the suspicion now clouding her thoughts. Police officers combed through the sterile environment, examining the unsettling photos of unnaturally smooth faces that adorned the walls. The receptionist sat behind the front desk, her hands clasped tightly in her lap as she watched the activity around her.

"Where's Dr. Friedman?" Morgan asked, her eyes scanning the room for any sign of him.

The receptionist shook her head, her voice trembling slightly. "He left right after you did earlier, Agent Cross. He seemed... agitated."

"Did he say where he was going?" Morgan pressed, trying to suppress her growing sense of urgency.

"No," the receptionist admitted, biting her lip. "But he took his laptop and some files with him. It looked like he was in a hurry."

"Damn it," Morgan cursed under her breath. The pieces were starting to fall into place, but she needed to find Friedman before she could confirm her suspicions. She turned to one of the officers nearby, her voice firm. "I want eyes on every airport, train station, and bus terminal in the city. Friedman can't have gone far."

"Understood, Agent Cross," the officer replied, immediately relaying her orders to his colleagues.

As she watched the flurry of activity around her, Morgan couldn't shake the nagging feeling that they were running out of time. The killer had already claimed two victims, and if Lance Friedman was involved, he would likely strike again. She needed to find him – and fast – before another woman's face became his twisted canvas.

Morgan's gaze lingered on the empty doorway of Dr. Friedman's office, a chill running down her spine as she considered the implications of his sudden disappearance. The receptionist fidgeted nervously under Morgan's scrutiny, wringing her hands in her lap. Morgan got the sense that the girl knew more than she was letting on.

"Are you sure you don't know where he went?" Morgan asked.

The receptionist wrung her hands more, nervousness written all over her face. "I... well..." She sighed. "I think there's something you should know."

"Go on," Morgan urged.

"Dr. Friedman asked me to book him another flight to Mexico," she confessed, her eyes downcast. "He seemed really desperate to leave like he was trying to escape something. It was strange because he just got back from a trip last night."

"Mexico?" Morgan repeated, her mind racing. "Did he mention why he was going there?"

"No, but I've overheard him talking about plastic surgery practices on the phone with people I didn't recognize," she continued, her voice barely above a whisper. "I... I hate to say it, but I suspect he might be taking bribes to send clients to Mexico for dangerous surgeries that are illegal here in America."

"Last night, you said?" Morgan asked, gears turning in her head. If Lance had been in Mexico last night, then he couldn't have been in the country when Sheryl Stewart died. Then again, maybe he was never in Mexico. Morgan needed to know more.

The receptionist nodded. "Yes, he came back late last night. I thought it was odd that he wanted to leave again so soon and right after your visit, no less."

Morgan clenched her fists, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. She needed answers, but it felt like every new lead only led to more questions.

“Thank you for your help,” Morgan said, forcing her voice to remain steady. “We’ll find Dr. Friedman and get to the bottom of this. In the meantime, stay safe and let us know if he tries to contact you.”

Morgan stormed back outside just as her cell phone rang again. She took it out and answered promptly, propping a hand on her hip as she took in the street around her.

“This is Cross,” she said.

“Cross, we’ve got eyes on Friedman,” the officer on the other end said. “We’ve spotted his car, and it looks like he’s heading straight to the airport.”

Morgan grits her teeth. It was like she’d suspected—Lance was trying to make a run for it.

Not on her watch.

“I’m coming right now,” Morgan said.

Morgan’s heart pounded in her chest as she burst into the Dallas airport, eyes scanning the sea of people before her. The adrenaline coursed through her veins, igniting a fire within her as she searched for Lance Friedman. Her gaze fell upon the illuminated departure board, and there it was – the flight to Mexico City, now boarding.

“Dammit,” Morgan muttered under her breath, clenching her fists. A decade ago, she could have been one of those people boarding a plane to escape the life that had been stolen from her. But instead, she’d spent ten years biding her time, hardened by the cold walls of prison. It was a fate she wouldn’t wish upon anyone.

“Listen up!” Morgan barked, locking eyes with her police team. Their faces were etched with determination, a reflection of her own fierce resolve. “I want every inch of this place searched for Lance Friedman. If he so much as sneezes, I want to know about it.”

“Understood, Agent Cross,” replied one of the officers, his voice steady despite the urgency of the situation. He signaled to the rest of the officers, who immediately dispersed, eager to leave no stone unturned.

As her team fanned out across the airport, Morgan’s mind raced with possibilities. What if Lance had already boarded? What if he slipped away right under their noses? She shook her head, refusing to entertain such thoughts. They had come too far to let him escape now.

Morgan’s gaze darted between the countless faces milling about in the bustling terminal, her heart pounding in her chest. She scanned the crowd with laser-like focus, searching for any sign of Lance Friedman’s distinctive blond hair. The flight to Mexico had begun boarding, and the cacophony of voices, announcements, and footsteps only heightened the tension gnawing at her.

“Where are you, you bastard?” she muttered under her breath, frustration simmering as she pushed past a group of tourists snapping photos, their laughter grating on her nerves.

“Excuse me,” she said, approaching an older man wearing a fedora pulled low over his face. “Have you seen anyone matching this description?”

The man shook his head, his eyes obscured by the brim of his hat. Morgan thanked him and moved on, the sinking feeling in her gut growing heavier with each passing moment.

A thought struck her like a bolt of lightning. What if he was wearing a disguise? Her mind raced through the possibilities - wigs, glasses, hats - anything to mask his appearance. With renewed determination, she began examining the people around her more closely, scrutinizing each one for any telltale signs that they might be Lance in hiding.

“Hey, you there!” she called out to a tall man with dark sunglasses and a hoodie pulled up over his head. “Can I have a word?”

“Sure, ma’am,” the man replied, his voice thick with a Southern drawl. “What can I do for you?”

“Sorry, wrong person,” Morgan said, unable to shake the feeling that time was running out. She surveyed the sea of faces once more, her pulse quickening.

Morgan’s eyes darted from one face to another, her frustration mounting as she tried to remain alert, focused on finding any trace of Lance Friedman. The murmur of the crowd and the drone-like announcements over the PA system threatened to drown out her own thoughts, a cacophony of sounds that did little to quell the anxiety clawing at her chest.

It was then that she saw him – or rather, someone who seemed oddly out of place in the bustling airport. A man wearing a beige trench coat and dark sunglasses, his head lowered as he attempted to blend with the sea of travelers around him. But there was something about his posture, the way he moved with furtive glances around him, that sent Morgan’s intuition into overdrive.

“Hey!” Morgan shouted, instinctively pushing her way through the crowd, her strides lengthening as she closed the distance between them. “Stop! FBI!”

The man glanced back, his eyes widening in surprise as he realized he’d been spotted. In his haste to escape, his hat fell off, revealing his blond hair.

Lance Friedman.

“Freeze!” Morgan yelled. She pulled her badge out for everyone to see, trying to make it clear she wasn’t messing around. “Lance Friedman, you’re under arrest!”

But Lance had no intention of going down without a fight. He began pushing people out of his way, knocking over suitcases, and causing general chaos in an effort to evade capture. His movements were frantic, desperate, clearly displaying the panic that had taken hold of him.

“Stop! FBI!” she screamed again, her voice carrying across the crowded terminal.

Morgan’s legs pumped furiously as she pursued Lance through the bustling airport terminal. Her breath came in short, ragged gasps, yet she refused to let up. The sea of people

parted before her like a river splitting around a boulder, their expressions a mix of confusion and fear at the sight of a desperate chase unfolding before them.

“Out of my way!” Morgan barked, her eyes locked on the back of Lance’s head as he disappeared into the throngs. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, adrenaline coursing through her veins with each determined step.

“Get back!” a voice shouted, catching her attention. A security officer had joined the pursuit, his uniform crisp and authoritative. Others soon followed suit, forming a veritable army of enforcers dedicated to apprehending the fleeing fugitive.

“Corner him!” Morgan commanded, her voice hoarse from exertion. She could sense Lance growing more desperate by the second, weaving erratically through the crowd as his options dwindled.

“Gotcha!” one of the security officers exclaimed triumphantly, lunging forward to tackle Lance around the waist. His momentum sent them both crashing to the ground, causing a nearby luggage cart to topple over in a cacophony of clattering suitcases.

“Stay down!” the officer ordered, his knee digging into Lance’s back as he struggled to catch his breath. “You’re under arrest!”

“Finally,” Morgan panted, her hands resting on her knees as she caught her breath. Her gaze bore into the prone figure of Lance Friedman, the man who had eluded her for so long.

A flurry of thoughts raced through her mind – the years of injustice, the prison cell that had once been her home – and she knew that this was her moment of retribution.

“Good job,” she told the security officer, her tone firm but appreciative. “Now, let’s get him out of here before he causes any more trouble.” As they dragged Lance to his feet, Morgan couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction, knowing that she was one step closer to redemption.

CHAPTER TEN

Morgan eyed Lance as he sat across from her in the cramped airport security room. Morgan leaned against the cold metal table that separated them, her eyes never leaving his. The air was thick with tension, each breath punctuated by the distant hum of airplanes taking off.

“Alright, Lance,” she began, crossing her arms over her chest. “Why were you running?”

“Running?” he scoffed, feigning innocence. “I was just going on a trip to Mexico.” His voice trembled slightly, betraying his attempt at nonchalance.

Morgan studied him for a moment, trying to find a crack in his facade. She thought about the pain he had caused, the lives he had destroyed, and felt her resolve harden. She wouldn’t let him slip away again.

“Cut the crap,” she snapped, slamming her hands on the table. “You think I’m stupid? You don’t book a one-way ticket to Mexico in the middle of an investigation unless you’re trying to escape. So why don’t you save us both some time and tell me the truth?”

Lance’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. He hesitated for a moment before shaking his head, his voice barely a whisper. “I didn’t do it, I swear.”

“Didn’t do what?” Morgan pressed, narrowing her eyes. “Kill Bethany Good?”

“Look, I know how this looks, but I didn’t kill anyone!” Lance exclaimed, desperation seeping into his voice. “Please, you have to believe me!”

“Your word isn’t good enough,” she said coldly, her gaze unwavering. “Why were you trying to flee the country, Lance?”

“Agent Cross, please,” Lance pleaded, his eyes welling up with tears. “I don’t know who did it, but it wasn’t me. I was just... I was scared, you know? I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life behind bars for something I didn’t do. You have to understand...”

Morgan let out a frustrated sigh, struggling to maintain her composure. She needed to remain objective to pursue the truth no matter where it led – that was her duty as an FBI agent. But for now, all she could think about was the injustice she had suffered at the hands of men like Lance Friedman and the countless others whose lives had been irrevocably changed by their actions.

“Understand?” she whispered, her voice trembling with rage. “You want me to understand? I spent ten years rotting in a cell for a crime I didn’t commit. So don’t you dare talk to me about understanding? You were trying to run. If you were truly innocent, then you’d stay and fight, like I did.”

Lance fell silent, his gaze shifting downward, unable to meet Morgan’s stare. She had been right: Lance had believed he could escape from his crime, that it would be easy to run and avoid the consequences.

“You don’t understand,” Lance said. “I didn’t kill anyone. I would never... that’s not what this is about.”

Just as Morgan was about to respond, a knock at the door interrupted her. She looked up, momentarily jarred from her intense focus on Lance. The door opened slightly, and a police officer poked his head into the room.

“Agent Cross,” the officer said urgently, “I need to speak with you. Right now.”

“All right,” she replied tersely, casting one last suspicious glance at Lance before stepping out of the room and closing the door behind her.

Morgan met with the officer in the hallway. Her heart pounded in anticipation; had they found new evidence that could seal Lance’s guilt? Or was this another dead end?

“What is it?” Morgan asked, trying to maintain her composure.

“Ma’am, we’ve just confirmed something with airport security that you need to hear,” the officer began, his face etched with concern. “Lance Friedman couldn’t have killed Bethany Good or Sheryl Stewart.”

“Excuse me?” Morgan snapped, feeling her blood pressure rise. “What are you talking about?”

“Airport security provided us with flight records,” the officer explained. “Friedman was on a flight back to America from Mexico yesterday. It’s impossible for him to have been around to kill them.”

Morgan’s mind raced, trying to piece together this new information. If Lance truly wasn’t responsible for the murders, then who was? And how could she have been so wrong? She took a deep breath, forcing herself to swallow the bitter taste of frustration and disappointment.

“You’re sure about this?” she asked.

“I have all the records for your viewing,” he said.

Morgan grits her teeth. “Have them transferred into the database,” she said, but she already knew what was happening: she’d hit another dead-end. She was wasting more time.

Fuming, Morgan clenched her fists at her sides. “Deal with Lance,” she barked at the officer, her voice edged with anger. “I’ve wasted enough time on him.”

“Understood, Agent Cross,” the officer said, nodding.

Morgan stormed away from the interrogation room, her eyes scanning the bustling airport around her. The cacophony of noise – the endless chatter of passengers, the announcements over the PA system – only served to fuel her frustration. She needed to clear her head, to figure out her next move.

As she made her way through the throngs of travelers, Morgan couldn’t shake the feeling of being back at square one. She had been so sure that Lance was the key to solving the

case – but now, with that lead slipping through her fingers like sand, she felt directionless and lost.

“Dammit,” she muttered under her breath, gritting her teeth.

She thought about the crime scenes, envisioning them, walking through them again in her mind. It was clear that the women had not been killed where they’d been displayed, so the killer had taken them somewhere else, then brought them back. A bold—and stupid—move. But it didn’t tell Morgan anything about where to go next.

She sighed, leaning back in her chair. She was stumped.

Maybe it was time to bring Derik back in on this again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The sterile scent of antiseptic invaded Morgan's nostrils as she stood in Derik's hospital room, the sunlight filtering through the partially closed blinds, casting a pattern of lines on the white linoleum floor. A heart monitor beeped steadily in the background, providing an unsettling rhythm to their conversation.

"Thought I'd be outta here by now," Derik said with a weak smile, his voice strained. "But they want me resting a while longer."

"Doctor's orders, huh?" Morgan replied, trying to sound casual. Internally, she was relieved. Having Derik in one place meant she could keep a closer eye on him, especially with the newfound suspicion swirling in her mind.

"Yeah," Derik sighed, settling back onto his pillows. "Anyway, let's talk about the case."

"Right," Morgan agreed, pulling out her notepad and flipping it open. "So far, we have two victims: Sheryl Stewart and Bethany Good. Both over forty, both wealthy, and both with a history of plastic surgery." She tapped her pen against the pad, her brow furrowing in thought. "There's a clear profile here, but we need to figure out how the killer picks his victims."

Derik nodded, his eyes clouded with concern. "Have any leads turned up so far?"

"Nothing concrete yet," Morgan admitted, feeling the weight of the unsolved case pressing down on her. "We're digging into their backgrounds, looking for any connections or patterns that might give us a clue."

"Keep at it, Morgan," Derik encouraged her, his determination evident despite his weakened state. "We'll find this guy."

“Thanks, Derik,” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady. “I won’t give up.”

Morgan couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that there was still something she wasn’t seeing, something just out of her reach. She needed to find the missing piece that would bring everything together and lead them to the killer. But it was hard to focus on the case when her thoughts kept drifting back to Derik and their complicated past. Morgan had to admit, it hurt to think the bonding they’d been doing lately had all been a lie. They had come such a long way, and she had just been learning to trust again, and now it all seemed futile.

“Hey,” Derik’s voice broke through her reverie. “You alright?”

Morgan forced a smile. “Yeah, just thinking.”

“Thanks for being here, Morgan,” he said softly, reaching for her hand. She hesitated for a moment before allowing him to grasp it.

“Of course,” she whispered, her heart pounding in her chest as she looked into his eyes. But the lingering suspicion wouldn’t allow her to fully embrace this tender moment. She had to keep her guard up, at least until she could be sure of Derik’s innocence.

Morgan’s eyes scanned the sterile hospital room as she pulled her hand away, the beeping of monitors providing a constant reminder of Derik’s condition. She clenched her fists, forcing herself to focus on the case.

“Derik,” she began, her voice low and serious. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you about this case. The killer... he returns the women to their homes after he kills them. But it’s clear they’re not being killed there.”

“Really?” Derik frowned, his brow furrowed in concentration. “That’s a bold move. He’s bound to make a mistake if he keeps doing that.”

“Exactly,” Morgan nodded. “We just have to be ready to capitalize on it when he does.” Her mind raced with possibilities, each more gruesome than the last.

“Maybe we should look into all the local plastic surgery clinics,” Derik suggested, shifting uncomfortably in his hospital bed. “Both victims had a history of plastic surgery, right?”

Morgan looked at him, nodding. “Yeah. We’re in Dallas, so there are plenty of clinics to investigate. We’ve already cleared Bethany Good’s surgeon, but I’ll make sure to look into every surgeon Sheryl ever visited. I already checked out some and didn’t get any immediate suspicions, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any.”

“Good,” Derik said, his eyes flickering with determination. “I wish I could be out there helping you.”

“I know,” Morgan replied softly, watching his face. A wave of protectiveness surged through her, quickly followed by doubt and confusion. Was it possible that the man she was growing close to again was the same one who had betrayed her all those years ago?

“Stay focused, Derik,” she whispered, pushing the doubts to the back of her mind. “Your job is to get better. Mine is to catch this killer.”

“Deal,” Derik agreed, wincing as he settled back against the sterile white pillows. “Just promise me one thing, Morgan.”

“Anything,” she replied, her heart pounding.

“Promise me you’ll be careful out there. Don’t be reckless with your life.” The concern in his eyes was genuine, and for a moment, she allowed herself to believe that maybe, just maybe, Derik wasn’t the one who had set her up.

“Of course,” she whispered, feeling the weight of his gaze as she turned away. “I promise.”

Morgan glanced out the window, noting the gray clouds that hung low in the sky, reflecting her own turbulent emotions. The sterile smell of the hospital room was suffocating, and she desperately wanted to be outside, breathing fresh air and chasing down leads. She turned back to Derik, who was sitting up in his bed, the IV drip a stark reminder of his vulnerability.

“Hey,” Derik said softly, tentatively reaching for her again. His fingertips brushed her forearm. “I just wanted to say... thanks for taking this case, Morgan. I know things are complicated with the FBI and Mueller right now.”

His touch sent an unexpected shiver through her body, and she pulled her hand away, rubbing it against her pant leg as if to erase the sensation. “It’s my job, Derik.”

“No, I mean it.” He met her gaze, his eyes filled with gratitude and something else – a tenderness that caught her off guard. “You didn’t have to do this, especially not after everything you’ve been through.”

Morgan felt her face heat up, the memory of her time in prison still a raw wound. “I can handle it,” she mumbled, avoiding his eyes.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” Derik asked, his voice laced with concern. “You seem... distant.”

Of course, I’m distant, she thought, but all she said was, “I’m just tired, Derik. This case is getting to me.” She forced a smile and patted his arm. “Get some rest, okay? We’ll talk later.”

“Alright,” he agreed, though his eyes searched hers for any signs of deception. “Take care of yourself, Morgan.”

As she walked out of the hospital room, Morgan’s thoughts swirled like the storm clouds outside. Derik had been her rock before her life fell apart, and now that she was finally putting the pieces back together, she was terrified of losing him again. But she couldn’t let her feelings cloud her judgment – not when a killer was on the loose and not when she still didn’t know if she could trust the man who had once meant so much to her.

Morgan stepped into the dimly lit above-ground parking lot of the hospital, the scent of exhaust fumes and rain hanging in

the air. Her heels clicked against the cold concrete as she made her way to her car, each step echoing through the vast expanse. She absently twirled her car keys around her finger, her thoughts consumed by Derik.

Maybe he's genuinely trying to help, she mused, remembering his sincere gaze. But doubt gnawed at her insides like a persistent itch she couldn't quite reach. *Why would he have files on Darren La Roux? What isn't he telling me?*

She searched for her car among the rows of parked cars, raindrops speckled on their surfaces, shimmering under the fluorescent lights above. The weight of uncertainty pressed down on her shoulders, making it hard to breathe. Trusting Derik could be life-changing, but if she misjudged him again, it could cost her everything.

Damn it, Derik. I want to believe in you; I really do.

Just as she turned a corner, a scuffling sound caught Morgan's attention, causing her to freeze in place, every muscle in her body tensing. Her eyes darted back and forth across the parking lot, searching for the source of the noise.

There, reflected in one of the round convex mirrors placed strategically throughout the lot, she saw him – a shadowy figure clad in a dark hoodie, lurking by her car.

Morgan's hand tightened around the grip of her gun as she inched closer to her car, her heart pounding in her ears. The man remained motionless as if he hadn't noticed her approach, but she knew better. He was waiting for something – someone.

Her.

Every fiber in her was shocked to life. Every instinct told her to protect herself from this mysterious stranger.

Morgan drew her gun and crept up, kneeling low. The figure didn't notice her, remaining still.

“Freeze! FBI!” she yelled, leveling her gun at the figure and watching his shoulders tense under the fabric of his hoodie. She held her breath, the air stinging her lungs as her finger hovered over the trigger. Morgan couldn't shake the

nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach that this man held the key to unraveling the mystery that had haunted her for years.

“Turn around slowly, hands where I can see them,” she ordered, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. There was no response, only deafening silence as the man seemed to weigh his options.

The man finally moved, though not in the way she’d hoped.

In one swift motion, he pivoted on his heel and took off running, his footsteps echoing through the parking lot. Morgan cursed and gave chase, her heels clacking against the concrete as she leaped over cars and obstacles in her path. She knew she couldn’t just shoot him without cause—she was already in hot enough water with the Darren situation.

“Stop!” she shouted, her breath fogging up in the frigid air. “Federal agent!”

Every fiber of her being screamed at her to catch the man, but he was faster than she’d anticipated. As they raced through the maze of parked vehicles, Morgan’s mind whirred with questions. Was he connected to whoever had framed her, or just another pawn in this twisted game? And what if he was the one who had framed her all those years ago?

“Stop!” she gasped, her legs burning from the exertion. “I need to know the truth!”

But her desperate plea fell on deaf ears as the man continued his frantic sprint, weaving between cars with an agility that belied his bulky frame. Morgan gritted her teeth and pushed herself harder, refusing to let him escape.

“Stop!” she screamed one last time, her voice hoarse from the strain. “I won’t let you get away!”

Despite her determination, the man remained just out of reach, his hooded figure growing smaller in the distance. As he disappeared around a corner, Morgan felt a wave of despair crash over her, threatening to consume her entirely.

Morgan’s eyes locked onto the fire exit door as it slammed shut, her instincts screaming at her not to let the man escape. She sprinted towards the door, her heart pounding in her chest

like a caged animal desperate for freedom. She felt the cold metal of the fire exit handle against her palm and swung it open with all her might.

“Stop right there!” she yelled, bursting out into the harsh sunlight of the street below.

Her eyes scanned the bustling scene around her, trying to catch a glimpse of the hooded figure among the crowd. But it was as if he had vanished into thin air, swallowed up by the city itself. As the adrenaline began to fade, frustration and disappointment coursed through Morgan’s veins.

“Damn it,” she muttered under her breath, clenching her fists tightly at her sides. The cacophony of the city streets – honking horns, distant sirens, murmured conversations – seemed to mock her failure.

“Hey lady, you okay?” a passerby asked, looking concerned at Morgan’s labored breathing and clenched expression.

“Fine,” she snapped, quickly holstering her gun and straightening her jacket. “Just... lost someone.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. Good luck finding them,” the stranger said, offering a sympathetic smile before continuing on their way.

“Thanks,” Morgan replied tersely, her thoughts racing a mile a minute. How could she have let him get away? What if this was her only chance to find the truth?

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Now wasn’t the time to wallow in self-pity or dwell on her mistakes. She needed to regroup and keep pushing forward. This setback was just another challenge to overcome. For all she knew, the hooded man was simply a stranger, but Morgan couldn’t shake the feeling that he was much more than that.

Either way, he was gone now. Her personal matters could wait.

She had a serial killer to catch.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ella's heart pounded in her chest, the metallic taste of fear coating her tongue. Her wrists ached from the tight straps that held her to the chair, and her body trembled with the effort of trying to break free. The harsh glare of the overhead lights burned her eyes, making it impossible for her to see anything beyond the blinding white.

"Please," she gasped, her voice hoarse from screaming. "I'll do whatever you want. Just don't hurt me."

Her plea was met with silence, leaving her to wonder if anyone was even there or if she'd been abandoned in this hellish place. But then, a figure emerged from the shadows, his footsteps echoing on the cold concrete floor. As he stepped into the light, Ella could see that he wore a surgical mask, only his eyes visible.

They had no soul.

"Finally, we reach an understanding," the man said softly, his voice devoid of emotion. "You will offer your youth freely, won't you?"

Ella's stomach churned at his words, her mind racing as she tried to make sense of what he was asking of her. She knew she had no choice but to comply, despite the revulsion that clawed at her insides. "Yes," she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes. "I promise."

"Good," the man replied, a hint of satisfaction creeping into his tone. "My work so far has ruined the material, yielded little results. I need to harvest something pure this time." He paused, studying her face intently, and Ella fought the urge to shrink away from his cold gaze.

"Please, just let me go," she begged, her voice barely audible. "I won't tell anyone, I swear."

But the man in the surgical mask merely shook his head, his expression unreadable behind his sterile disguise. “You made a promise, remember?” he said softly, and Ella knew that there would be no escape, no reprieve from the nightmare that had become her reality.

Ella’s heart raced as she watched the man reach for a gleaming scalpel, its razor-sharp edge glinting under the harsh lights. Desperate panic surged through her, and she couldn’t help but let out a whimper of fear. She had never felt so helpless, so utterly at the mercy of another person. It was something out of a nightmare. She was too young to die—she had her whole future ahead of her, so many plans... her followers, all the money she was supposed to make. Was that really all she cared about now?

No. It was her parents she wished to see again. Her little brother. She wished she’d never moved to Dallas. At least she had her girlfriend here, but even she couldn’t save Ella now.

It was over for her.

“Please,” she whispered again, her voice trembling uncontrollably. “Don’t do this.”

The man ignored her plea, studying the blade with a sort of morbid fascination before turning his attention back to her. Slowly, deliberately, he removed the surgical mask from his face, revealing a visage that made Ella’s blood run cold.

His skin was mangled as if it had been stretched and pulled until it became unrecognizable. It was pitted and scarred, with deep lines furrowing his face and abnormal bumps growing along his lips and nose. The edges of his eyes were discolored, making them seem to vanish into the paleness of his skin.

“Tell me I’m young and handsome,” he commanded, his voice soft but deadly. “Tell me what I want to hear.”

Ella swallowed hard, her throat tight with fear. “You’re... you’re young and h-handsome,” she stammered, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. But even as the words left her lips, she knew they rang hollow - and so did he.

“Liars don’t fare well in my company,” he hissed, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “Why would you lie to me?”

“I-I’m sorry,” she cried, tears streaming down her face. “I didn’t mean to. Please, I’ll tell the truth, I swear.”

“Too late for that now,” he replied coldly, raising the scalpel high above his head. “Time to find out what happens to liars.”

“No!” Ella yelled, but it was too late.

The masked man’s ritual had begun.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Morgan pulled up to a sleek, modern house on the outskirts of Dallas. The sun glinted off the glass façade, a stark contrast to the traditional mansions she had visited earlier in her investigation. The house was smaller but still radiated wealth and power. She took a deep breath and stepped out of her car, feeling the weight of her past in every step.

Another victim had been claimed.

As much as Morgan had tried to find answers, she had been too late, too off. And now someone else was dead.

She cursed herself for not acting fast enough.

“Agent Cross,” a uniformed officer greeted her as she approached the entrance. “I’m Officer Reynolds. Let me show you inside.”

“Thank you, Officer,” Morgan replied, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear as she followed him through the front door.

The interior of the house was as different from the previous victims’ homes as its exterior. Soaring ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows filled the space with natural light, highlighting the bold, modern art adorning the walls. Morgan’s eyes were drawn to a giant photograph dominating one wall; it depicted a young woman with an intense, piercing gaze.

“Who’s that?” Morgan asked, subtly gesturing towards the photo.

“Ah, that would be Ella Van Sant, our victim.” Officer Reynolds paused, taking a moment to study the self-portrait before continuing. “She was quite the influencer. She had a large following online and was known for her artistic talents.”

Morgan studied the photo, trying to connect the vibrant young woman staring back at her with the lifeless body she would soon examine. Despite having seen countless crime

scenes over the years, the thought still sent a shiver down her spine. She couldn't help but wonder what could have possibly led someone to target such a young woman like Ella. Was this really the same killer? Both Sheryl and Bethany had been over forty. Ella was wealthy, but she was still a deviation from the profile.

“Let's see the body,” she said, steeling herself for the gruesome scene that awaited her. As she followed Officer Reynolds deeper into the house, her mind raced with possibilities, but she knew better than to let her imagination run wild. Facts and evidence would lead her to the truth – even if the path was a dark and twisted one.

Officer Reynolds led Morgan into the living room, where Ella's lifeless body lay sprawled across the floor. Even with years of experience under her belt, Morgan couldn't help but flinch at the sight before her. Ella's once-beautiful face was twisted and mutilated, pulled into a grotesque, makeshift facelift that bore an eerie resemblance to the previous victims.

“Jesus,” Morgan breathed, swallowing the bile that threatened to rise in her throat. She crouched down beside Ella's body, careful not to disturb any evidence as she examined the horrifying scene. “This is definitely our guy – same MO as the other two. Except for her age.”

“That's right,” Officer Reynolds said, his voice tight with tension. “From what I understand, Ella Van Sant was only twenty-three. The other two victims were over forty.”

Morgan frowned, her mind racing with questions. Why would the killer change targets so drastically? Did they know Ella personally, or was this simply a matter of opportunity?

“Did Ella ever get plastic surgery?” Morgan asked, hoping to find a connection between her and the other victims.

“According to our records, no,” Reynolds replied, shaking his head. “We looked into it, based on your running theory, but there's no indication she ever had any work done.”

“Then why her?” Morgan mused aloud, her brow furrowing in frustration. The pieces weren't fitting together. She glanced

around the room, taking in the lavish surroundings and expensive art that adorned the walls – none of which seemed to offer any answers.

“Maybe it’s a message,” suggested Officer Reynolds hesitantly. “You know, like he’s trying to tell us something.”

“Or maybe it’s just random,” Morgan countered, her voice edged with bitterness. She’d seen enough senseless violence in her time to know that sometimes, there was no rhyme or reason behind a killer’s actions. But these killings were not random crimes of passion. They were deliberate, staged. There was definitely a message here, something to do with women’s faces, but Morgan failed to see what it was. Both Sheryl and Bethany had work done, but if Ella didn’t... then why her? The change in MO made Morgan’s head spin.

As she stared at Ella’s mutilated face, Morgan felt an unshakable sense of dread wash over her. She could almost see the killer’s twisted grin as he cut into his victim, savoring every moment of her pain and terror. Whoever this monster was, he clearly wouldn’t stop until he was caught.

“Let’s get this crime scene wrapped up,” Morgan said, pushing herself to her feet. “I want to find this bastard before he strikes again.”

Morgan stepped outside of Ella Van Sant’s house, the harsh sunlight cutting through the gloom that had settled in her mind. The crime scene’s grisly images lingered, but she shook them off, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand. She couldn’t afford to let her emotions cloud her judgment.

As she crossed the immaculate lawn, a distraught woman approached her, tears streaming down her face.

“Excuse me, are you with the FBI?” she called out, her voice strained by grief.

Morgan turned to her with a frown. "I am. You shouldn't be here." Behind them, the house was being caution taped off, and officers were milling about.

"I'm Maggie, Ella's girlfriend," the woman said. "We live here together."

Morgan studied the woman, noting her red-rimmed eyes and trembling hands. Her heart went out to Maggie, but she also knew this woman could potentially hold crucial information.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Maggie," Morgan said. "Can I ask where you were last night?"

"Out of town," Maggie choked, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Ella was home alone. If I'd been here, maybe I could've done something. Maybe she'd still be alive."

So far, all three victims had been home alone at the time they were taken and killed. That was another common thread.

"You can't blame yourself for what happened, Maggie. It's important we focus on finding the person responsible."

Morgan's eyes narrowed as she noticed Maggie fidgeting with the sleeve of her sweater, a clear indication that there was something else on her mind. Even through the wall of grief and shock, Morgan could see that this woman held a secret. And there was one thing she needed to know that would clearly link this murder with the others.

"Maggie," Morgan started, "did Ella ever have any work done?"

"Work?" Maggie asked hesitantly.

"Cosmetic surgery," Morgan said.

Maggie went quiet, averting her eyes. "No... no, of course not."

"Are you sure?" Morgan lifted a brow. She couldn't help but feel like Maggie was hiding something. "It's important that I know this, Maggie. The other two women targeted by this killer got cosmetic surgery."

Maggie bit her lip, hugging herself. “It was so important to Ella to keep it a secret,” she whispered. “No one can know.”

Morgan’s heart raced. Finally, she was getting somewhere. “Go on,” Morgan said.

Maggie took a breath. “She’d been secretly having miniature facelifts—threads pulled into her forehead to lift her eyebrows and make her look more like an influencer.”

The unexpected detail caught Morgan off guard. Ella was far too young to be getting facelifts, but Morgan was also unaware of the specific procedure Maggie was talking about. It sounded like it wasn’t about looking younger but looking different.

Either way, this information changed everything. Because even though Ella was much younger than the other women, they all had something in common: they all got plastic surgery.

“Did anyone else know about these surgeries?” Morgan asked, trying to piece together the puzzle.

“Only me,” Maggie whispered, looking down at her trembling hands. “Ella trusted me with her secrets. Even now, I feel bad telling you, but... I also saw that there were other women being killed like this on the news.”

Morgan stood facing Maggie, the sun casting long shadows on the lawn. The faint scent of freshly cut grass filled her nostrils as she took a deep breath, preparing herself for what might come next.

“I don’t know if it’s relevant or helpful at all,” Maggie said, “but here.” She pulled out her phone and scrolled through a series of text messages. “This is from Ella to me.” She handed the device to Morgan, who read the conversation with growing concern.

“Stopped going after things went wrong,” Morgan read aloud. “What went wrong?”

“It was at Vitality Clinic,” Maggie replied hesitantly. “I don’t know a whole lot, but a guy there agreed to work on Ella off the record and under the table for extra money. I always thought it was sketchy, but Ella insisted.” Tears welled up in

her eyes once more. “I don’t know the name of the doctor or if he was even legit.”

Morgan’s heart pounded in her chest. This could be the lead they needed to catch the killer. But first, she needed to determine the clinic’s connection to the previous victims. She handed the phone back to Maggie, her resolve hardening.

“Thank you, Maggie,” Morgan said, her voice firm and steady. “You’ve been a huge help. I’ll do everything in my power to find justice for Ella.” With a nod, she left Maggie standing on the lawn, tears streaming down her face.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Morgan sat in her car, the leather seat sticking to her skin as the afternoon sun beat down. She glanced over at the imposing glass and steel structure that housed Vitality Clinic. The pristine exterior and well-manicured landscaping did little to ease her growing sense of unease.

“Let’s see what we can find before we go knocking,” she muttered, flipping open her laptop. Her fingers danced across the keyboard as she navigated through the FBI database.

“Alright, Ella Van Sant was definitely here,” Morgan whispered to herself, her eyes scanning the screen. “But what about the other victims?” She knew Bethany Good had only ever gone to one surgeon, who had been cleared. She focused on Sheryl Stewart’s financial records instead.

“Come on, give me something...” Morgan’s heart raced as she scrolled through the long list of clinics Sheryl had visited. The woman had a penchant for plastic surgery, it seemed, but there was no clear connection to Vitality Clinic.

“Damn,” she muttered under her breath, frustration mounting.

Morgan leaned back in her seat, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. A bead of sweat trickled down her temple as she stared at the clinic. If there was a link, it was hidden beneath layers of deception. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that this place held the key to solving the case.

Alright, new plan, she decided, her jaw set with determination. She began researching any lawsuits or issues surrounding the clinic, anything that might hint at illegal tools or practices. Maggie’s words echoed in her mind, making her gut twist with anticipation.

“Someone here has a secret,” she whispered, her eyes narrowing as she focused on the clinic’s entrance. “And I’m going to find it.”

Morgan's fingers flew across the keyboard, her eyes scanning the screen with laser-sharp focus. She could feel the pressure mounting as she sifted through pages of search results, each click bringing her deeper into a web of deceit and deception.

"Come on," she muttered to herself, her jaw clenching in determination. "There has to be something here."

And then, like a bolt of lightning, she found it. A small but damning collection of complaints against the clinic. Women who had undergone procedures at Vitality Clinic, only to have their lips grotesquely swollen and distorted, forcing them to seek corrective surgeries at other establishments.

"Gotcha," Morgan whispered, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She knew in her gut that one of the doctors at the clinic was responsible for the horrifying murders. But the accusations never led to any legal action, leaving the clinic unscathed and still open for business.

Someone's protecting them, she thought, her heart racing. But I won't let them get away with this.

Morgan slammed her laptop shut, the sound echoing in the confined space of her car. Her mind raced as she considered her next move, her instincts urging her to confront the doctors directly. But she knew she needed more than just her gut feeling to bring them down; she needed hard evidence to prove their guilt.

"Alright, think, Morgan," she said to herself, her hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. "You've got the connection to the clinic, the victims, and the botched surgeries. Now you just need the final piece of the puzzle."

As she stared at the imposing façade of Vitality Clinic, her resolve hardened further. She wouldn't rest until the person responsible for the brutal killings was brought to justice, no matter how deep she had to dig into the darkness lurking beneath the surface.

It was time to pay these doctors a visit. And find out once and for all who was behind these murders."

With that, Morgan exited her car, her every step filled with purpose as she approached the clinic's entrance. The cold, sterile interior beckoned her in, promising secrets and revelations just waiting to be uncovered.

Let's see what you're hiding.

The wind whipped at Morgan's hair as she stormed through the glass doors of Vitality Clinic, her eyes narrowing in on the only person occupying the room. A young man, no older than twenty, sat behind the reception desk, his nametag reading 'Matt.' He looked up from his phone, startled by her sudden entrance.

"Can I help you?" Matt asked hesitantly, clearly taken aback by her intense gaze.

"Special Agent Morgan Cross, FBI," she announced, flashing her badge. "I'm here to speak with the doctors who work here." Her tone was firm and left no room for argument.

"Uh... well, they're not in right now," Matt replied nervously, his fingers fumbling with a pen. "Can I take a message or something?"

Morgan leaned across the counter, giving him a cold stare that probably sent shivers down his spine. She could sense his apprehension and decided it was time to push him further. "I'm investigating three murders linked to the world of plastic surgery," she said, her voice icy. "I believe someone here may be involved."

It was like a switch had been flipped. Matt's eyes widened in terror, and he began to stammer out his words. "I-I didn't know anything about that! I just started working here a few months ago. I swear I don't know anything!"

Morgan studied him for a moment, his fear radiating off of him. It wasn't often that she found herself intimidating others, but she'd learned over the years how to use it to her advantage

when necessary. With this newfound leverage, she pressed further. “Then tell me about the doctors who work here. Who should I be looking into?”

“Alright, alright,” Matt conceded, his voice shaking. “There are two main doctors here - Dr. Sanders and Dr. Kim. They’ve both been working here for years, but I don’t know much about them. I just handle appointments and paperwork.”

“Are there any other doctors affiliated with this clinic?” Morgan asked, her mind racing with thoughts of the victims and their connection to this place.

“Um, well,” Matt hesitated, swallowing hard. “There was another guy who used to work here, but he left a while ago. I didn’t really know him. His name was Dr. Blanchard, I think.”

Morgan’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of the name. The pieces were starting to come together, but she still needed more information. She could feel herself getting closer to uncovering the truth behind these brutal murders, and she couldn’t let up now.

“Tell me everything you know about Dr. Blanchard,” she demanded, her eyes never leaving Matt’s face.

“Like I said, I didn’t really know him,” Matt repeated nervously. “He was here before I started, and I only heard some stories from the other staff. I think he did some procedures under the table, you know, for extra cash. But that’s all I know, I swear.”

Morgan’s mind raced as she tried to piece together what Matt had just told her. Dr. Blanchard had left the clinic but was rumored to perform illegal procedures for extra money. Could he be the one responsible for the murders?

“Oh, man,” Matt murmured, his head hanging low. He was clearly cracking, and Morgan needed to know what he was hiding.

“You don’t have to protect him,” Morgan said. “Or anyone else who works here. Matt, if you tell me what you know now, I promise you won’t get in trouble.”

Matt took a breath. “You promise?”

Morgan held heads. “Sure. I promise.” But it depended on what he told her, of course.

Matt shook his head, sighing. “Damn it. Okay. I lied; I’ve worked here for a long time. But, the incident—it was an accident,” Matt blurted out suddenly, his eyes widening in fear. “We didn’t know she would die.”

Morgan’s brow furrowed as she studied the young man before her. His face had gone pale, and beads of sweat dotted his forehead. “Who are you talking about?” she asked, her voice low and dangerous.

“Casey Waters,” he replied, swallowing hard. “Isn’t that why you’re here? To investigate her death?”

Morgan frowned, taken aback by this unexpected revelation. Casey Waters wasn’t one of their victims, and she’d never heard of her. She wondered if this was another lead or just a lie meant to throw her off track.

“Casey Waters is not one of the victims I’m investigating,” Morgan said slowly, her mind racing with questions. “But tell me more about her. What happened to her?”

Matt shifted uncomfortably in his seat, avoiding Morgan’s piercing gaze. “I don’t know all the details,” he admitted, wringing his hands. “She came here for a treatment last year, some kind of filler injection. But something went wrong, and she ended up dying from complications.”

“Did Dr. Blanchard work on her?” Morgan asked, her voice tense as she tried to piece together the puzzle.

“Y-yes,” Matt stammered, clearly intimidated by Morgan’s intense focus. “He did the procedure, but like I said, it was an accident. We didn’t know what would happen.”

Morgan took a deep breath, trying to process this new information. If Casey Waters had died under Dr. Blanchard’s care, it added another layer to the already complex case. Her instincts told her there was a connection between Blanchard and the murders she was investigating, but she needed more evidence to prove it.

Morgan's heart pounded in her chest as she considered the implications of Matt's revelation. She could feel the weight of the case pressing down on her, threatening to crush her if she didn't find answers soon. The sterile smell of the clinic seemed to intensify, suffocating her as she stared at Matt expectantly.

"Tell me more about Casey Waters," Morgan demanded, her voice firm and unwavering.

Matt shifted nervously in his seat, biting his lip before replying. "Casey came to us last year for a treatment – something minor, I think. But she insisted on paying under the table, said she didn't want anyone to know. Well, things went wrong, and she ended up with sepsis. She died not long after."

Morgan's eyes narrowed as she processed this new information. "And you're sure Dr. Blanchard was the one who performed the procedure?"

"Y-yes," Matt stammered, swallowing hard. "He was responsible, but it was an accident, Agent Cross. We had no idea that would happen. We let him go afterward, but I've been terrified ever since that it would come back to haunt us."

"Blanchard's name has come up in connection with other victims, too," Morgan revealed, her thoughts racing ahead as she tried to piece everything together. "People have complained about him before?"

"Uh, yeah," Matt admitted, looking even more uncomfortable. "There were a few complaints from clients, saying he botched their procedures or something. But nothing like what happened to Casey."

"Did you report any of this to the authorities?" Morgan asked, her tone accusatory.

"Agent Cross, please understand – we didn't want to bring further attention to the clinic. We were afraid of losing our business," Matt replied, anguish in his voice. "But I'll do whatever it takes to help you now."

"Good," Morgan said, her voice icy. "Because I need everything you have on Dr. Blanchard – files, records, client

lists, anything that can help me find him.”

“I’ll get it for you right away,” Matt assured her, practically sprinting to the back office.

As she waited, Morgan’s thoughts whirled around Casey Waters and Dr. Blanchard. If he had caused her death, whether by accident or not, what else was he capable of? And what role did he play in the string of recent murders?

“Here’s everything,” Matt said breathlessly, handing her a file folder filled with papers. “I hope it helps you catch him, Agent Cross.”

“Thank you, Matt,” Morgan said, her eyes scanning through the documents as she prepared to dive deeper into the twisted world of Dr. Steve Blanchard.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Morgan's fingers tightened around the steering wheel as she stared at the address listed for Dr. Steve Blanchard. The afternoon sun cast long shadows over the pristine lawn, giving the suburban home an eerie quality. She knew better than to trust appearances, but the quiet façade did little to reveal the secrets that lurked within.

"Time to see what you're hiding, Dr. Blanchard," Morgan muttered to herself, stepping out of her car and squinting against the sunlight.

As she approached the front door, she couldn't help but notice the sound of children playing in a nearby yard – a stark contrast to the grim business that had brought her here. She took a deep breath, steeling herself before rapping firmly on the door.

A woman with a kind smile and warm eyes opened the door, confusion etched across her features. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"Ma'am, my name is Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI," Morgan said, flashing her badge. "I'm looking for a Dr. Steve Blanchard. Is he here?"

The woman's confusion only deepened. "I'm sorry, there must be some mistake. No one by that name has ever lived here."

Morgan frowned, glancing down at the photo of Blanchard she'd obtained from Matt. The pale, bald man with a beard bore no resemblance to anyone she could see in the house. "Are you certain? This is the address I have for him."

"Positive," the woman replied, shaking her head. "My husband and I have lived here for years, and we've never even heard of a Dr. Blanchard."

As they spoke, the sound of footsteps approached, and a tall man appeared behind the woman, his expression a mix of concern and curiosity. “What’s going on?”

“Sir,” Morgan said, turning her attention to him and extending the photograph, “do you recognize this man—Dr. Steve Blanchard?”

The husband studied the image, then shook his head. “No, never seen him before. Who is he?”

“An individual of interest in an ongoing investigation,” Morgan replied cryptically, her frustration simmering beneath the surface. She couldn’t afford to waste any more time on false leads.

“Thank you for your time,” she said, pocketing the photo and stepping back from the doorway. “If you hear anything about Dr. Blanchard or anyone matching his description, please contact me immediately.”

“Of course,” the woman said, still looking bewildered. “Good luck with your investigation, Agent Cross.”

As Morgan walked back to her car, her mind raced with the possibilities. If Blanchard had gone to such lengths to conceal his true identity and location, it only made her more determined to uncover the truth. But where could she begin?

She gripped the steering wheel tightly as she pulled away from the curb. The road ahead stretched out before her, but the path to finding Blanchard felt as if it were shrouded in shadows. With only a fake name, a false address, and an ever-growing list of potential victims, Morgan knew she had her work cut out for her. And the longer it took to unravel this twisted mystery, the more lives hung in the balance.

“Damn it,” she muttered under her breath, her determination fueling her resolve. She wouldn’t let this killer claim another life, but so far, she’d had no damn luck in finding him. Steve Blanchard was a ghost, but Morgan had tracked ghosts before. She could do it again.

At least, she hoped she could.

Morgan sat in her car as the chill of the air conditioner seeped into her skin, replacing the oppressive heat of the Texas sun. She powered up her laptop, feeling the urgency of her task pressing on her shoulders like a heavyweight.

Where are you hiding, Blanchard? she wondered, her fingers flying over the keys as she logged into the FBI database. Her search for Steve Blanchard came up empty, confirming her suspicions that the name was nothing but a fabrication.

“Damn it,” she muttered, her frustration flaring. He wasn’t going to make this easy.

Her eyes scanned the screen, searching for any clue, any connection that might lead her closer to the truth.

Then it hit her - his client list. Maybe there was something there that would reveal a pattern or even just a single piece of information that could help her track down this elusive killer.

“Okay, let’s see who you’ve been treating, ‘Dr. Blanchard,’” she said to herself, opening the file containing the names of his former clients. Ella Van Sant and Sheryl Stewart were both there, their names standing out like neon signs. But there were others too; women whose lives had unwittingly become intertwined with a monster.

Who else had he heard? Morgan wondered, her heart aching for the potential victims. She knew she had to act quickly before any more lives were destroyed by this madman’s twisted obsession with beauty.

As she scrolled through the list, her mind raced with possibilities. Were these women all connected in some way? Did they share a common thread that made them targets? Or was it simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time?

But as the minutes ticked by, the connections remained elusive, and Morgan felt as if she were chasing shadows. And time was running out.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Morgan began to delve deeper into the lives of the women on Blanchard's client list, searching for any detail, no matter how small, that might lead her closer to the truth. She knew that she was racing against the clock - not only to uncover the identity of the man behind the mask but to save the lives of the innocent women who had become entangled in his twisted web.

Maybe some of these women on the list still saw him and still got work done by him, wherever he is now.

Morgan's fingers tapped impatiently on the steering wheel, her gaze locked onto the digital glow of her laptop screen. She needed to make a move and fast. Her heart raced as she dialed one of the numbers from the client list - a woman named Lucy.

"Hello?" a hesitant voice answered on the other end of the line.

"Lucy?" Morgan asked in a low, urgent tone, her eyes scanning the shadows outside her car. "This is Agent Morgan Cross with the FBI. I need to ask you about Dr. Steve Blanchard."

"Dr. Blanchard?" Lucy repeated, confusion lacing her voice. "Yes, I saw him last month, but I haven't heard from him in a while. He's not returning my calls." She paused for a moment before adding, "I even went to his clinic recently, and it looked like it had been abandoned."

Morgan's grip tightened on the phone, her knuckles turning white. "Where is the clinic located?" she demanded, her voice edged with steel.

"Um, it's at 928 West Elm Street," Lucy replied, the uncertainty in her voice growing more pronounced with each passing second.

"Listen to me, Lucy," Morgan said, her voice firm and commanding. "Two of Blanchard's clients are dead. I need you to lock your doors and not let anyone in. Do you understand?"

"Dead?" Lucy gasped, her voice trembling. "Yes, yes, I understand."

“Good,” Morgan said, her tone softening slightly. “Stay safe, and if anything happens, call 911 immediately. We’re working to find this man before anyone else gets hurt.”

As Morgan disconnected the call, her mind churned with grim determination. She couldn’t shake the image of Ella Van Sant’s mutilated body, her youthful beauty twisted into something grotesque. This monster had to be stopped, and Morgan vowed that she would be the one to bring him down.

But there was one more thing she had to do first.

Morgan’s fingers flew across her phone screen, selecting Derik’s number without hesitation. The call connected, and she heard the faint beeping of hospital machines in the background.

“Morgan—”

“Derik,” she said, her voice urgent. “I have a job for you while you’re in the hospital.”

“You serious?” Derik said. “Lay it on me, Cross. I’m ready.”

“Good. It’s important.” Morgan’s eyes scanned the street as she spoke. “I’m sending you a list of names and numbers. I need you to call them all and warn them about a man named Dr. Steve Blanchard. He might be dangerous.”

“Whoa, hold on,” Derik said, his voice suddenly serious. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t have time to explain everything now but trust me, it’s urgent,” Morgan insisted, her grip tightening on the steering wheel. “Can you do this for me?”

“Of course,” Derik agreed, his voice filled with determination. “Just send me the info, and I’ll get started right away.”

“Thanks, Derik,” Morgan said before ending the call. She snapped a photo of the client list and texted it to Derik, but not before he sent her a text that read: *Hope you can explain this soon...*

She would, soon enough. But she had to focus on finding Blanchard, and his abandoned clinic was the first place she had to start.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The abandoned plastic surgery clinic loomed before Morgan. Its windows were dark, the glass reflecting back the hazy image of Morgan's car as she parked out front. Morgan stepped out of her car, her shoes crunching on the concrete beneath her feet, littered with stones. As she approached, she couldn't shake the sense of dread that settled over her like a heavy fog.

Peering through the dusty windows, she saw only darkness, the ghostly outlines of medical equipment shrouded in shadow. Yet, despite the emptiness, she couldn't shake the feeling that something sinister lurked within.

With a deep breath, she steeled herself for what lay ahead. The abandoned clinic may have appeared lifeless, but Morgan knew that there was more to this case than met the eye. And she wouldn't rest until she had unraveled every last thread of the twisted mystery.

Circling around to the back of the building, Morgan spotted a door that appeared to have been forced open before. The worn and splintered wood seemed to beckon her in, a silent invitation to explore the secrets hidden within.

"Here goes nothing," she muttered under her breath, pulling on a pair of gloves to protect her hands from any unseen dangers. She wedged her fingers into the small gap between the door and frame, using her strength and determination to force it open with a low groan.

Once inside, Morgan was immediately struck by the cold sterility of the abandoned clinic. The air was thick with the scent of disinfectant and dust, a mixture that sent a chill down her spine. The darkness engulfed her, adding an eerie sense of foreboding to the already unsettling scene.

Was this where the killer was working?

Was he *here*?

Okay, Blanchard. Where did you run off to?

As she carefully stepped through the darkened halls, her eyes slowly adjusted, revealing the clinic's true nature. Abandoned medical equipment lay strewn haphazardly across the floor as if left behind in a hurried escape. The faint echo of her footsteps seemed to emphasize the emptiness of the place, a reminder that she was truly alone.

His patients were paying him good money for these procedures, Morgan thought, trying to make sense of the situation. Why would he just up and leave everything like this? There had to be something more going on.

As she continued her exploration, a wave of unease washed over her. It felt as though the very walls of the clinic were hiding some terrible secret, one that she was determined to uncover. The thought of what could have driven Blanchard to such desperate measures gnawed at her mind, propelling her forward despite the growing sense of dread.

The weight of the possibility settled heavily on her shoulders, making it difficult to breathe. But Morgan knew that she couldn't let herself be swayed by fear or doubt. She had a job to do, and she wouldn't let anything stand in her way.

Morgan crouched low, her eyes adjusting to the darkness that enveloped the clinic. She crept forward, scanning the room with a keen eye. Her heart pounded in her ears as she navigated the abandoned space, every shadow threatening to conceal some unseen danger.

She had to find something. Anything that would give her a lead. Morgan couldn't stomach any more failures.

As she moved deeper into the clinic, Morgan's fingers grazed the cold metal of an empty file cabinet. She pulled open the drawers one by one, hoping to discover a hidden clue or a forgotten document that might reveal Blanchard's true identity or his whereabouts. But each drawer was just as barren as the last, offering her nothing but the echo of her own disappointment.

“Damn it,” she hissed, slamming the final drawer shut with a satisfying clang. “He really wiped this place clean.”

She turned her attention to the abandoned equipment that littered the room, her gaze falling on a discarded scalpel that glinted menacingly in the dim light. The memory of Ella Van Sant’s mutilated face flashed before her eyes, sending a shiver down her spine.

“God, what did you do to those women?” she asked the empty room, her words swallowed by the silence. “And why, Blanchard? Why?”

A sense of urgency welled up inside her, fueling her determination to bring this guy down. She refused to let him slip through her fingers, to hide in the shadows while others suffered at his hands.

With a deep breath, she plunged back into the darkness of the clinic, her eyes scanning every corner, her mind working overtime to piece together the puzzle that was Dr. Steve Blanchard. The truth was out there, lurking in the shadows, and she wouldn’t stop until she dragged it into the light.

Just then, Morgan’s pulse quickened as she registered the sound of shuffling coming from the adjacent room. A mixture of adrenaline and dread coursed through her veins as she quietly drew her gun, her fingers gripping the cold metal with practiced ease. Years of experience told her that in moments like these, hesitation could be fatal.

She advanced cautiously toward the source of the noise, her footsteps silent on the cold linoleum floor. The sound was clearer now – glass bottles clinking together, drawers being rifled through.

Someone else was here.

As Morgan peered around the corner into the next room, she caught sight of a man crouched by an overturned supply cabinet. His back was to her, but it was evident that he wasn’t Steve Blanchard; this man had a full head of hair. Morgan’s initial assumption was that he was a meth head scavenging for

supplies, but something about his movements seemed too deliberate, too methodical.

“Freeze!” Morgan barked, leveling her gun at the intruder. “FBI! Put your hands where I can see them!”

The man jerked in surprise, and as he turned to face her, Morgan took note of his most striking feature: a mask that obscured his features, leaving only his eyes visible. This was no desperate drug addict – this was someone with purpose, someone who didn’t want to be recognized. But his form was also very different from the man she’d seen lurking by her car earlier—wasn’t him either.

“Who are you?” Morgan demanded, her voice steady even as her heart hammered in her chest. “What are you doing here?”

The man’s eyes darted around the room, searching for an escape route. Morgan tightened her grip on her gun, ready to give chase if necessary. She couldn’t let him get away; he might have information on Blanchard or even be an accomplice in his crimes.

“Answer me!” Morgan growled, taking a step closer. “You have one chance to explain yourself before I bring you in.”

The man’s gaze flicked back to Morgan, a glint of defiance shining in his eyes.

Then, the masked man bolted, his footsteps echoing through the abandoned clinic like the sharp crack of a whip. Morgan’s blood surged with adrenaline as she gave chase, her gun raised and her senses on high alert. She had no time to dwell on who he was or why he was here; all that mattered now was capturing him before he slipped through her fingers.

“Stop!” she shouted, her voice straining with the intensity of the pursuit. The man only increased his pace, ducking around corners and weaving through the maze-like corridors of the clinic. Frustration gnawed at Morgan’s resolve, but she refused to let it slow her down.

“Last chance!” she called out, her finger hovering over the trigger. When the man showed no signs of yielding, Morgan

fired a warning shot, the bullet ricocheting off a metal cart and grazing the man's forehead. He yelped in pain but continued running, desperation fueling his every step.

"Damn it," Morgan muttered, her breaths coming in short, controlled gasps as she sprinted after him. Her muscles burned, but she couldn't afford to falter now – not when so much was at stake.

As they neared the clinic's exit, the man shoved a bookshelf across Morgan's path, sending a cascade of medical supplies crashing to the floor. She skidded to a halt, her eyes narrowing as she assessed the obstacle. There would be no getting around it quickly, but she refused to give up.

The fresh air hit her like a slap in the face as she burst out of the clinic, her gaze sweeping the area for any sign of the masked man. But he had vanished, swallowed up by the shadows that lurked just beyond the reach of the flickering streetlights.

"Son of a bitch," she cursed, clenching her fists in frustration. Her heart still hammered in her chest, but the adrenaline was beginning to ebb away, leaving her with nothing but an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

Who the hell was that? she wondered, her mind racing as she tried to piece together the puzzle that had just unfolded before her eyes. He wasn't Steve Blanchard – or whoever Blanchard really was – but he had to be connected somehow. And now, he was gone, slipping through her grasp like water through a sieve.

She'd failed yet again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

With the masked man gone and the abandoned clinic yielding no useful information, Morgan had nowhere to turn, so she found herself going back to Derik. They had cracked seemingly impossible cases before, and even though she didn't trust him right now, he was also all she had.

Morgan's heart pounded in her chest as she hesitated outside Derik's hospital room. She could feel her anxiety rising like static electricity before a storm. Every time she wanted to talk to him, she felt this way; on edge but also vulnerable.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door and stepped inside. The sterile scent of disinfectant filled her nostrils, bringing back memories of her time in prison. She shook off the sensation, focusing on Derik instead. He looked pale, almost fragile, propped up against the pillows. Morgan felt a twinge of guilt seeing him in such a vulnerable state.

"Hey," she said softly, forcing a smile onto her face. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I got stabbed," Derik answered with a weak grin. "But, considering I actually did, I guess that's to be expected. Just thought the weakness would start to wear off by now, you know?"

Morgan hesitated for a moment, unsure how to broach the topic she'd come to discuss. "I found something," she began, taking a seat in the chair beside his bed. Derik raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued.

"An abandoned clinic," she continued, her voice low and urgent. "There was a plastic surgeon working there under a fake name – Steve Blanchard. He's connected to our case. I broke in to track him down, but all I found was a masked intruder in the building. I couldn't tell who he was, but he wasn't Blanchard."

“Damn it, Morgan,” Derik sighed, running a hand through his messy black hair. “You shouldn’t have gone in there alone.”

“I couldn’t just sit back and do nothing while you were stuck in here. I had to try.”

“Trying is one thing, but risking your life is another.” Derik’s tone was gentle yet firm. “You’re a great agent, Morgan, but you can’t keep doing this. You need someone watching your back.”

Morgan clenched her jaw, fighting the urge to snap at him. She knew he was just trying to help, but his concerns felt suffocating. Instead, she focused on the facts, pushing her own emotions aside.

“Steve Blanchard, or whoever he really is, could be the key to solving this case,” she said resolutely. “We need to find out who he is and what he knows before anyone else gets hurt.”

Derik’s green eyes flashed with anger. “You should have called for backup, Morgan.” He jabbed a finger in the air to emphasize his point. “The killer could’ve been there! What would you have done then?”

Morgan bristled, her hands balling into fists at her sides. Was he still on this? Now, it was starting to tick her off. “I can handle myself, Derik. I don’t need you to babysit me.”

“Handle yourself?” he scoffed, pain in his voice. “You’re putting your life in danger like this again after everything we’ve been through? You can’t keep visiting these locations without a partner, Morgan.”

“Back off, Derik,” she snapped, frustration boiling over. “I never asked you to vouch for me to the FBI. I never even wanted this case!”

“Then why the hell are you on it?” Derik shot back, his voice strained and vulnerable.

“Because you insisted!” Morgan’s voice cracked, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. “You were the one who said I needed to take it, and now you’re throwing that in my face?”

“Look, Morgan...” Derik sighed, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. “I just want you to be safe. I can’t lose you, not after... everything.”

She bit her lip, feeling the weight of their shared history bearing down on her. Her heart ached as she looked at him, lying there in the hospital bed, battered and bruised from his own brush with death.

“Derik, I know you care,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “But I can’t let you hold me back. I have to see this through, no matter what.”

“Even if it kills you?” His voice was barely audible, and the vulnerability in his eyes tore at her heart.

Morgan’s hands trembled as she clenched them into fists, her nails digging into her palms. The anger that had been simmering beneath the surface finally boiled over, and she couldn’t contain it any longer.

“Derik,” she said, her voice cold and sharp as ice. “I found something in your apartment when I was looking for your damn clothes to bring here for you. Why do you have files on Darren La Roux?”

Derik’s eyes widened, and for a moment, he looked like a deer caught in headlights. His mouth opened and closed as if he were struggling to find words to defend himself. “Morgan, I can explain—”

“Explain?” she spat, cutting him off. “You’ve got files on an ex-con who ended up dead. Do you know how that looks?” Her chest heaved with each breath, her fury making her feel almost lightheaded. She couldn’t, under any circumstance, signal that she knew more about Darren’s death than she did.

She sure as hell couldn’t signal that she had been the one to kill Darren.

She knew where his gun was. She’d buried it herself, hid the evidence.

“Of course I do,” Derik said, his voice taking on a desperate edge. “But I swear, it’s not what you think.”

“Then tell me what it is!” Morgan shouted, her face inches from his. “Tell me why I should trust you when you’re hiding things like this!”

“Trust me?” Derik echoed, his own anger flaring. “You went through my stuff, Morgan! How can you talk about trust when you’re snooping around behind my back?”

She could see the hurt in his eyes, but it only fueled her rage. “You’re the last person who should be talking about trust, Derik. You’ve been keeping secrets from me and God knows what else. And now you’re lecturing me about being reckless and putting my life on the line? What kind of partner are you?”

“Dammit, Morgan,” Derik hissed, clenching his fists as well. “I’m trying to protect you! Can’t you see that?”

“Protect me?” she scoffed, disbelief etched across her face. “By hiding things from me? By treating me like I’m some fragile little doll, you need to keep safe? I don’t need your protection, Derik. I need the truth.”

Silence hung heavily between them, a chasm of unspoken words and unshed tears. Morgan’s heart raced in her chest, her emotions a tangled mess that threatened to choke her. She stared at Derik, willing him to say something, anything, to make sense of the chaos.

But he remained silent, his gaze dropping to the floor as he struggled with his own demons. And in that moment, Morgan realized that whatever trust they had shared was shattered, possibly beyond repair.

“Get out,” Derik said, his voice low and cold. “Just get out, Morgan.”

Morgan hesitated, her fury momentarily eclipsed by surprise at the harshness in his tone. She had never heard him speak to her like that before. But as she looked into his eyes, she saw no warmth, no understanding – only a wall of stone.

“Fine,” she spat, turning on her heel and storming from the room. The door slammed shut behind her with a resounding echo, leaving Derik alone in the sterile hospital room.

Good riddance, Morgan thought. She'd rather be alone than have a partner she couldn't trust.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Derik stared at the blank white wall across from his bed, his heart pounding in his chest. The fight with Morgan replayed over and over in his mind, every word and gesture etched into his memory.

He felt a mixture of anger and fear churning in his gut. How could she have gone through his things? He thought he could trust her, but now he didn't know what to believe. And as much as he hated himself for it, part of him wanted to tell her everything – about Darren La Roux, about the secrets he'd been keeping.

But he couldn't. Not when there was so much at stake. Not when revealing the truth could put both their lives in even greater danger than they already were.

“Damn it, Morgan,” he muttered under his breath, clenching his fists in frustration. He knew she was just trying to get answers. She had every right to look for them. Derik knew that Morgan had lost ten years of her life locked behind bars. Her own dad had passed away, and she hadn't been able to attend his funeral. It haunted Derik too.

But she didn't understand the consequences of digging too deep, of unearthing truths that were better left buried.

As Derik lay there, trapped in his own thoughts, he couldn't shake the feeling that their partnership – and perhaps their friendship – was irrevocably damaged. And though he desperately wanted to fix it, he had no idea how to begin.

The silence of the room seemed to press in on him, suffocating and oppressive. But it was nothing compared to the weight of the secrets he carried, the burden of knowing that his silence might be the only thing keeping Morgan alive.

And so, Derik stared at the wall, willing himself to find a solution, a way to mend what had been broken. But as the

minutes ticked by, his hope dwindled, and the room remained as cold and lifeless as the secrets locked away in his heart.

Derik's eyes remained fixed on the sterile white wall, his mind a whirlwind of emotion and unresolved conflict. The sound of his own heartbeat filled the room, each thump echoing louder in his ears than the last. He couldn't shake the image of Morgan storming out of the room, her fury as palpable as the cold air that now enveloped him.

The sudden shrill of his phone jolted him from his thoughts. He hesitated for a moment before reaching out to answer it, his hand trembling slightly.

He knew that number.

No, I don't want to talk to him...

But I have to...

"Hello?" Derik said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Derik," he replied, its tone cold and detached. "You know what you have to do."

"Please," Derik pleaded, clenching his jaw. "I won't do it. I can't."

"Your loyalty is commendable," the man said with a sigh. "But misplaced. This isn't about you, Derik. It's about protecting her. You remember our deal, right?"

Derik's chest tightened, the weight of his secrets pressing down on him like a vice. He knew the man was right – there was a price on Morgan's head, a threat that loomed over her like a dark cloud.

"Goodbye," Derik said through gritted teeth, hanging up the call. He threw the phone onto the bedside table, its impact reverberating through the empty room.

As much as he wanted to deny it, he couldn't ignore the truth any longer. Things had gone too far; drastic measures would need to be taken if he wanted to keep Morgan safe. And wasn't that the very reason he got involved in this case, to begin with?

“Damn it,” he muttered, his hands balling into fists at his sides. He stared at the ceiling, willing the answers to come to him, but all he found was the same suffocating silence that filled the room.

He could feel it in his bones – the world around them was closing in, and Derik knew he couldn’t keep running from the truth forever. He needed to act, and soon.

“Forgive me, Morgan,” he whispered as a single tear escaped his eye. At that moment, he made a silent vow to himself: no matter the cost, he would do whatever it took to protect her... even if it meant sacrificing everything they had built together.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Evening light filtered through the blinds, casting a hazy glow over Morgan's living room. She sat on her couch, fingers tapping away at the keyboard of her laptop. Skunk, her loyal dog, lay curled up beside her, his head resting on her thigh.

Morgan's mind kept drifting back to her confrontation with Derik earlier that day. The hurt in his eyes when she accused him of keeping secrets gnawed at her conscience. And yet, she couldn't shake the feeling that he was still hiding something from her.

As she continued her search for Blanchard, a nagging thought crept into her mind: Derik didn't know that she had accidentally killed Darren La Roux. He only knew that the ex-con was dead. Had she given herself away during their argument? Would Derik put two and two together?

"Damn it," she whispered, rubbing her temples. It was impossible to focus with all these doubts swirling in her head. For all she knew, maybe Derik had been aware that Darren was coming after her that night.

The room felt claustrophobic, closing in around her like a vice. She knew she couldn't take this information to the FBI – they'd never believe her over Derik.

"Stupid, stupid!" Morgan berated herself, slamming her fist down on the couch cushion. Skunk stirred, lifting his head to look at her with sleepy, concerned eyes.

"Sorry, boy," she murmured, scratching behind his ears. "I just can't get my head straight."

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to steady her racing thoughts. Steve Blanchard was still out there, and she needed to find him before he struck again. That had to be her priority now, not her fractured relationship with Derik.

“Alright, let’s try this again,” she told herself, opening her eyes and refocusing on the laptop screen. She scanned through pages of search results, determined to find a lead on Steve Blanchard, no matter how tenuous.

Morgan began to feel the weight of her exhaustion pressing down on her. Morgan’s heart hammered in her chest, threatening to break free. Her hands shook as she scrolled through endless search results on her laptop.

“Get it together, Morgan,” she muttered under her breath, pushing away the anxiety and paranoia that had taken hold of her. She needed to focus on finding Steve Blanchard’s true identity.

Skunk let out a soft whine, sensing her distress. She reached down and gently stroked his fur, seeking comfort from his warm presence. “I’m okay, boy,” she whispered, but her voice wavered, betraying her uncertainty.

She re-focused on finding Steve. Morgan sat hunched over her laptop, the blue glow of the screen casting eerie shadows across her face. Her fingers danced across the keyboard as she scoured through plastic surgery clinics’ websites and social media accounts.

“Come on,” she muttered under her breath, her eyes scanning page after page for any sign of a new hire. The photograph Matt provided was burned into her memory, that face haunting her every waking moment. She knew she had to find him, but he was proving to be an elusive ghost in a sea of well-groomed faces.

“Skunk, buddy, we’re looking for someone who’s hiding in plain sight,” she said softly, reaching down to stroke the dog’s soft fur. He responded with a gentle snuffle, his tail thumping against the couch cushion.

Her search continued, growing more frantic. Morgan’s frustration mounted, her jaw clenched tight as she fought back the urge to hurl her laptop across the room. But then, something caught her eye - a post from a clinic called ‘Be You Beauty Clinic.’

“Welcome to the team, Dr. Terrance Reid!” the caption read, accompanied by a photo of a man with a clean-shaven face, a full head of brown hair, and piercing blue eyes. For a moment, Morgan’s heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t be sure, but there was a nagging familiarity about him.

Morgan studied the photo of Dr. Terrance Reid; her brow furrowed in concentration. There was no denying the resemblance between him and the man in the photograph Matt had given her. But with a full head of brown hair, blue eyes, and a cleanly shaven face, he looked so different from the bald, brown-eyed, circle-bearded Steve Blanchard they were hunting.

Could it really be him? she wondered, her fingers tapping an anxious rhythm on the edge of her laptop. She couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that something about Dr. Terrance Reid was familiar, as if she had seen his face before but couldn’t quite place it.

“Alright, let’s dig a little deeper,” Morgan muttered to herself, pulling out the photograph Matt had provided. Holding it up to the screen, she compared the two images side by side, searching for any similarities that could confirm her suspicions.

“Look at those eyes,” she whispered, noticing the same intensity in Dr. Reid’s gaze that she saw in Steve Blanchard’s. And the curve of that jawline... it was subtle, but it was there.”

Her heart raced as the pieces began to fall into place. This was him; she was sure of it now.

Steve Blanchard has rebranded himself as Dr. Terrance Reid.

“Skunk, we finally have a lead!” She looked at her dog, who wagged his tail excitedly, sensing her enthusiasm.

But what was their next move? Morgan asked herself, her mind racing through various scenarios. She knew she needed to act quickly, but she also had to be cautious. If this really was Steve Blanchard, he was a dangerous man who wouldn’t

hesitate to harm anyone who got too close to the truth. And it was late. The best bet was to contact him and pose as a client so she could meet him in person, catch him off-guard.

“First things first, I need to make sure Derik knows about this,” she decided, reaching for her phone. But as she dialed his number, her thoughts turned to their recent argument at the hospital, and she hesitated.

She didn’t need to report to him.

Morgan’s fingers flew across her keyboard as she navigated the clinic’s website, seeking a way to make contact with Dr. Terrance Reid. The sterile white background and cheerful images of well-rested, glowing patients did little to put her at ease. If anything, they stood as a stark reminder that beneath the veneer of healing and beauty was a man who dealt with pain and death.

She found an online form to schedule a consultation. Using the alias “Lacy Callahan” and providing a burner email address, she typed out her inquiry. *“I’m interested in discussing potential facial rejuvenation procedures with Dr. Reid. Please let me know when he has availability for a consultation, ideally first thing tomorrow.”*

With a final click, Morgan sent off her message into the digital void, hoping it would be the first step in drawing Steve Blanchard – or rather, Dr. Terrance Reid – out into the open. If she didn’t get a timely reply, she’d just storm in first thing in the morning anyway.

As she leaned back on her couch, her gaze drifting over to Skunk curled up beside her, Morgan’s phone rang, jolting her out of her thoughts. She glanced at the screen: Derik. Her jaw clenched involuntarily, recalling their last heated exchange.

“Hello?” she answered, her tone guarded and weary.

“Morgan, we need to talk,” Derik said, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

“About what, Derik? More secrets you’ve been keeping from me?” she snapped, the bitterness clear in her voice.

“Please, just hear me out,” he pleaded.

“Derik, I don’t have time for this right now,” Morgan said, her frustration mounting. “I need to focus on the case.”

“Then let me help you!” Derik insisted, desperation creeping into his words.

“Like you helped Darren La Roux?” she shot back, unable to stop herself from bringing up their earlier argument.

“Damn it, Morgan!” Derik hissed. “That’s not fair.”

“Fair? You want to talk about what’s fair?” Morgan’s voice was laced with anger and hurt. “You’re the one who pushed me into this case. And now that things are getting difficult, you want to back out, pretend nothing happened?”

“Is that really what you think?” Derik asked, his voice wavering.

“Right now, I don’t know what to think,” she admitted, her voice softening slightly. “But I do know that I need to focus on catching this killer. So, if you’ll excuse me, I’m getting back to work.”

And with that, Morgan hung up the phone, leaving Derik’s unspoken words hanging in the air between them. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to push him out of her mind and refocus on the task at hand. There would be time to deal with their complicated relationship later, but right now, she had a murderer to catch.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Derik was getting damn sick of the smell of the hospital. It burned his nostrils as he stared at the white ceiling tiles above his hospital bed, listening to the steady beeping of the heart monitor. The phone call with Morgan still echoed in his mind, her words like daggers that pierced through him. He could feel her anger and frustration even through the cold, digital connection.

He knew he was keeping things from her, and the guilt weighed heavily on his chest, making it harder to breathe with each passing moment. But how could he tell her? How could he admit to betraying the only person who believed in him when no one else did? She'd been through so much already – framed for murder, spending a decade in prison for a crime she didn't commit. This would break her, and he couldn't bear to see that happen.

“Damn it,” Derik muttered under his breath, his hands balling into fists as he tried to push away the overwhelming guilt. He wanted to make it right, but he didn't know where to begin.

The hospital room suddenly felt suffocating, the walls closing in on him and threatening to crush him under the weight of his secrets. He had to get out of here.

Gritting his teeth, Derik swung his legs over the side of the bed, feeling the cold linoleum floor beneath his feet. His head swam with dizziness, but he ignored it, focusing instead on gathering his belongings. He wouldn't stay in this place any longer than necessary.

He reached for the clothes that Morgan had brought him, a simple pair of jeans and a black T-shirt. The fabric felt foreign against his skin after days in the thin hospital gown, but it was a welcome change. He could feel a semblance of strength returning to him as he dressed, the familiar garments serving

as a reminder of who he once was – an agent who had faced down danger and always emerged victorious.

Derik stealthily eased open the door to his hospital room. He peered into the dimly lit hallway, ensuring he was alone before stepping out. The scent of antiseptic and sterilized linoleum filled his nostrils as he crept along the corridor. He knew that if he were caught, it would only make things worse for him – and for Morgan. With every step, the weight of his betrayal hung heavily on his heart.

He reached the stairwell, pausing to steady himself against the cold metal railing. He could hear the distant echoes of footsteps and murmured conversations, but they seemed distant and unimportant compared to the storm of guilt raging inside him. As he descended the stairs, his thoughts circled around Morgan, how she had been framed for a murder she didn't commit and the role he had played in her ordeal.

The night air was cool and crisp as Derik emerged from the hospital, the darkness punctuated only by the occasional streetlight. The moon cast a pale glow over the deserted streets, illuminating his path as he trudged toward Morgan's neighborhood. Every step felt like a struggle, his muscles protesting after days of inactivity, but he forced himself to keep moving. He couldn't afford to falter now, not with so much at stake.

His backpack, stuffed with his belongings, weighed heavily on his shoulders, almost as though the burden of his secrets was physically manifesting. He tightened his grip on the straps, determined to carry them all the way to Morgan and face whatever consequences lay ahead.

As he walked, the quiet suburban houses gave way to the urban landscape of Morgan's neighborhood, the darkened windows and silent streets a stark contrast to the vibrant community he remembered from their time working together. It was as if the shadows mirrored his own guilt, reflecting back at him the darkness he had caused.

"I'm sorry, Morgan," he whispered to the night, his breath visible in the cool air. "I'll make this right, I promise."

Determined, Derik continued on, each step bringing him closer to the reckoning he knew awaited him – and the hope of redemption that lay beyond.

Just then, the neon lights of a bar flickered in the distance, an oasis amid the desolate landscape. Derik paused, his mouth watering at the thought of having a drink. His sobriety had been hard-won, and breaking it now would be yet another betrayal – not just of Morgan, but of himself.

But the weight of guilt threatened to crush him, and he needed something to steady his nerves before facing her. Just one drink, he told himself.

He hesitated for a moment longer, then exhaled sharply and crossed the street toward the bar.

Just one drink.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

That night, Morgan's dreams were haunted by the slicing sounds of a scalpel, the cold metal table underneath her, and the heavy breathing of a faceless killer.

The prison cell she was in had been transformed into a makeshift surgical room filled with crude instruments and dim lighting. She tried to scream, but no sound came out, her body pinned down by unseen hands.

"Let me go!" she wanted to shout, but the words were trapped inside her throat, unable to break free. The faceless figure loomed above her, his gloved hand wielding a razor-sharp blade. With each swooping motion, Morgan could feel her skin being pulled tighter and tighter across her skull, the pain intensifying as he continued his gruesome work.

"Stop!" she finally managed to scream, the sound echoing through the cell. "Please, stop!"

Morgan awoke from her nightmare, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. Sweat-soaked sheets clung to her trembling body as she sat up, gasping for air. The oppressive darkness of her bedroom seemed to close in around her, the remnants of her dream still lingering in the shadows.

"Shit," she muttered under her breath, throwing back the covers and stumbling towards the bathroom. Flicking on the light, she squinted against the sudden brightness, her eyes struggling to adjust.

As she looked up at the mirror, her reflection stared back at her—deformed and botched, her face grotesquely pulled back tight, a nightmarish caricature of her former self.

"NO!" Morgan screamed, her voice shrill and panicked. She blinked rapidly, her heart hammering against her ribcage.

Just then, her eyes popped open—and she was yet again awake, lying in her bed, but this time, early light filtered

through the blinds, casting a soft glow on Morgan's face. She stirred, feeling the lingering effects of her nightmare like a heavy weight on her chest. Was she truly awake this time, or was this another extension of the dream? She looked at the clock—four a.m.

Just then, knocking.

Someone was knocking at her door.

Morgan, she groggily blinked her eyes open.

“Who the hell...?” she muttered, glancing at the clock on her nightstand. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stumbled to the front door. Her heart raced with an icy sense of dread – was it the FBI? Or worse?

“Coming!” she called out, trying to sound more composed than she felt. As she unlocked and opened the door, she braced herself for the worst.

“Derik?” she gasped, her surprise momentarily outweighing her fear. He looked awful – his black hair was a tangled mess, his green eyes dull and bloodshot, and his skin had taken on an ashen hue.

“Hey, Morgan,” he croaked, leaning against the doorframe. “I got discharged early. I needed to see you.”

“Jesus, Derik, you look like shit,” she said, unable to hide her concern. This wasn't the man she'd seen just last night, recovering in the hospital. This was someone who seemed utterly broken.

“Can we talk?” he slurred.

“About what?” she demanded, her patience wearing thin. She crossed her arms defensively, feeling a mix of frustration and concern churning inside her.

“About...everything,” he said, his eyes searching hers as if seeking forgiveness. “I know I haven't been completely honest with you.”

“Damn right, you haven't,” Morgan snapped, her anger flaring at the memory of their last conversation. “You've been

keeping secrets from me, Derik. What's going on?"

"Please," he pleaded, his voice barely above a whisper.
"Just hear me out..."

As Morgan gazed into Derik's weary eyes, she realized that this was more than just about secrets or the case – this was about trust and the fragile bond they'd built over the years. She knew he had his reasons for keeping things from her, but could she find it in herself to forgive him?

"Derik, I think it's best if you leave," Morgan said firmly, her eyes narrowing as she regarded him with a mix of concern and frustration.

"Please, Morgan... I just need to—" Derik started to protest, but his words were cut off as he swayed dangerously on the doorstep, his face turning even paler than before. Instinctively, Morgan reached out and grabbed his arm to steady him, her anger momentarily forgotten in the face of his obvious distress.

"Okay, okay," she relented, guiding him into her apartment with a sigh. "Come inside, but we're going to talk about this."

As she helped him across the threshold, Morgan couldn't help but notice the strong smell of alcohol that clung to him. She frowned, confused by this sudden change in behavior; as far as she knew, Derik had been sober for years. What could have possibly driven him to relapse now?

"Sit down," she instructed, steering him toward the couch. He practically collapsed onto the cushions, his green eyes glassy and unfocused.

"Thanks," he mumbled, rubbing at his temples as if trying to clear his head. In spite of her lingering anger, Morgan felt a surge of pity for him; whatever was going on, it was clearly tearing him apart.

"Derik," she began, her voice firm but gentle, "you need to tell me what's going on."

He looked up at her; his expression clouded with pain and desperation. "You don't understand, Morgan," he slurred,

struggling to string his thoughts together. “There’s so much at stake here...I can’t let you get hurt.”

“By keeping secrets from me?” she asked incredulously, feeling her anger flare once more. “How is that supposed to protect me, Derik?”

“Trust me, it’s for your own good,” he insisted, his gaze pleading. “You have to promise me...promise me you’ll leave the past behind. Do it for me, Morgan.”

His words hung heavily in the air between them, their meaning painfully clear. He was asking her to let go of everything that had happened - all the lies, the betrayals, and the heartache. But could she really do that? Could she put her faith in a man who had kept so much from her?

No, she couldn’t.

She needed answers.

She deserved them.

“Derik,” she said slowly, weighing her options, “I don’t know if I can make that promise.”

“Please,” he begged, his eyes filling with tears. “I’d do anything to keep you safe, Morgan. Anything at all.”

“Derik, I need you to explain,” Morgan demanded, her frustration evident in her voice. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Can’t...it’s too...dangerous,” he mumbled, struggling to focus on Morgan’s face. His speech was disjointed, and his words seemed to slip away from him like sand through his fingers.

“Derik!” she snapped, losing patience. “I can’t help you if you won’t tell me what you’re talking about!”

“Help...me?” he echoed, confusion plastered across his features. He appeared disoriented as if he couldn’t quite remember what they had been discussing.

Morgan sighed, feeling a mixture of emotions as she looked at Derik in his current state. He was vulnerable, clearly in pain, and she couldn’t deny the feelings that still lingered for

him, despite everything that had happened. But she was also angry - angry at him for keeping secrets and putting her life at risk.

“Fine,” she relented, her voice softening. “We’ll talk in a few hours when you’re more coherent. Get some rest, Derik.”

“Wait,” he slurred, reaching out for her hand as if to stop her from leaving. “Need to...protect you, Morgan.”

“Protect me from what?” she asked, but he had already slipped into unconsciousness on her couch, his grip on her hand loosening.

Morgan gently extricated herself from his grasp, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear as she sighed heavily. Her thoughts were a whirlwind of confusion and uncertainty, and she knew that sleep would be difficult to come by. As she climbed back into bed, she stared at the ceiling, her mind racing with questions she had no answers for.

What was Derik hiding? What danger was he trying to protect her from? And could she really trust him again after everything they had been through? She didn’t know, but one thing was certain: tomorrow, she would get to the bottom of it all. With that thought in mind, she finally closed her eyes and drifted off into a fitful sleep, her dreams haunted by shadows and secrets.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The man exhaled deeply as he felt the rejuvenation surge through his veins. His latest harvest had been a success, though not without its challenges. He could still hear her muffled screams from the other room in his memory, a chilling reminder of his pursuit of immortality - but it fueled him nonetheless.

“Almost there,” he whispered to himself, savoring the newfound energy. “Just a few more.”

As he stood in the dimly lit basement, the smell of disinfectant hung heavy in the air. A single lightbulb flickered above, casting eerie shadows along the walls. He knew no one would find them here, tucked away beneath this secluded house where only darkness thrived.

“Damn,” he muttered, looking at the dwindling supply of tools on his workbench. “I’ll need more than this if I want to keep going.”

He ascended the creaky wooden stairs, each step echoing through the hollow chamber below. As he emerged into the main living area, he was met with an unnerving sight. The once pristine home now resembled a haunted house, every shiny surface and mirror concealed by white sheets - a necessary precaution, for he couldn’t bear to see what he’d become.

Is it really worth it? he questioned himself, running a hand over the smooth fabric that hid his reflection. *It has to be. There’s no turning back now.*

“Only a few more,” he repeated to himself, tightening his grip on the door handle as he prepared to venture out into the night. “Then I’ll have everything I need.”

Stepping out into the warm, moonlit night, the man was greeted by the gentle rustling of leaves and the chirping of crickets. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and

blooming flowers. It would have been a perfect evening if it hadn't rained earlier that day, leaving an unwelcome humidity in the air.

He made his way across the backyard, carefully navigating around unkempt shrubbery and overgrown grass until he reached the dilapidated shed. As he began to open the creaky door, a puddle of water shimmering in the moonlight caught his eye. He couldn't help but glance at it.

"Ugh," he groaned, seeing his distorted reflection staring back at him from the water's surface. "Hideous. Is this what I've become?" he whispered, holding a trembling hand up to his disfigured face. "For all that I've done, I'm still... this?"

No, he couldn't think like that. *Keep it together*, he admonished himself, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his chest. *It's worth it. Soon, you'll be young and beautiful forever. No more pain, no more fear.*

"Only a few more," he repeated as though saying it aloud would make it true. "Then, I will have everything I need. Eternal beauty, eternal youth... it's all within my grasp."

But he was running low on supplies again. He needed more. He'd been thwarted earlier. The empty shed only proved that to him. He hadn't realized how low he'd gotten.

With a renewed sense of purpose, he stepped out of the shed and closed the door behind him. The warm night air clung to his skin as the moonlight cast shadows on the ground. He glanced back at the shed, shrouded in darkness, and knew it was time to continue his work.

"Only a few more," he muttered under his breath, the words invoking both excitement and trepidation within him. "Then I'll finally have what I've always wanted."

As he made his way back inside, his thoughts drifted to the woman whose screams still echoed through the basement. He could feel her terror like a tangible force, but it only fueled his desire to finish what he had started. He knew that deep down, she would understand the necessity of his actions – after all, who wouldn't want eternal youth?

He approached the workbench, his eyes scanning the remaining tools. His gaze lingered on the scalpel, its stainless steel blade glinting in the dim light. He knew what he had to do – he had to venture out into the night, find someone, and harvest what he needed to keep going. It was a risk but a necessary one.

The man grabbed a coat from the closet, slipped it on, and made his way outside. The darkness enveloped him, suffocating him with its thickness. He looked around, searching for any sign of life, but the streets were empty. It was as if the world had gone to sleep, leaving him alone in the dark. That was good. He wasn't sure who that woman had been earlier, but she wouldn't be back. He would return to Mark's, get what he needed, and then it would all be fine.

Mark...

What a fool.

His best friend had once been his closest confidant, but now he was like a shapeshifter, always changing names and faces, always trying to escape him.

But he never would.

He didn't know why Mark feared him so much; he didn't have anything he wanted. He looked old and ugly, not young and beautiful, although... his wife had some work done and would make a good harvest. But he was saving her. The best for last. Maybe that time was finally coming.

First, he needed to focus on his tools. Then he could worry about who he'd harvest next.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Sunlight crept through the blinds, casting a warm glow across the living room. Morgan stirred in her bed, her body aching from the uncomfortable position she had slept in. She blinked away the sleep, glancing around the room as she remembered the events of last night. She dragged herself out of bed and hurried to the living room.

Derik lay sprawled on her couch, a bottle of whiskey still in hand, snoring loudly. Skunk sat vigilantly by his side, eyeing him with suspicion.

“Derik,” she muttered, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “Wake up.”

He didn’t move or respond. With a sigh, she pushed herself up and walked over to him, nudging his foot with her own. “Derik, come on,” she urged more forcefully. Still, no reaction.

“Useless,” she mumbled under her breath, turning away from him. There was no time to waste in trying to rouse him. She had work to do, a killer to catch.

Morgan picked up her phone from the coffee table, noticing several missed calls and messages. Among them was a confirmation for an appointment she had scheduled with Be You Beauty Clinic for a consultation with Dr. Terrance Reid. She glanced back at Derik, passed out on her couch, knowing that if he were awake, he’d insist on accompanying her. But she couldn’t risk it; this was her chance to get close to the man who might be behind the recent string of murders.

“Sorry, Derik,” she whispered, stroking Skunk’s head as the dog continued to watch him warily. “This one’s on me.”

As Morgan prepared to leave, she made sure her FBI badge and gun were securely hidden beneath her jacket. It was essential that she maintained her cover, playing the part of a potential patient. If Dr. Reid was truly the killer, she needed to

catch him off guard, and the element of surprise was her best weapon.

“Take care of him, Skunk,” she instructed her loyal dog, nodding at the still-unconscious Derik. With that, she left the apartment, determination set in her eyes. This was a lead she couldn’t afford to miss - for the victims and for herself.

The morning sun streamed through the large windows of Be You Beauty Clinic as Morgan walked in, the sound of her heels clicking on the polished marble floor. The clinic was bustling with activity - staff members in crisp white uniforms scurried about while clients chatted excitedly about their upcoming treatments.

“Good morning! How can I help you today?” The friendly receptionist greeted her with a warm smile.

“Hi, I’m Lacy,” Morgan lied smoothly, returning the woman’s smile. “I have an appointment with Dr. Reid.”

“Of course! Please have a seat, and Dr. Reid will be with you shortly.”

Morgan nodded her thanks and took a seat in the waiting area, trying to blend in with the other clients. She looked around at the impeccably designed space, with its glossy magazines showcasing flawless models and shelves lined with high-end beauty products. It was a world completely foreign to her.

As she flipped through one of the magazines, Morgan couldn’t help but feel detached from this realm of beauty and vanity. At forty, she had more important things to worry about than the latest anti-aging creams or the newest cosmetic procedures. And yet, here she was, undercover and on the hunt for a cold-blooded killer.

She absently rubbed the bridge of her nose, feeling the weight of her years in this place filled with youth and

perfection. But that didn't matter; she had a job to do, and she would see it through to the end.

"Dr. Reid is ready to see you now, Lacy," the receptionist said, interrupting Morgan's thoughts. Her heart began to race in anticipation as she stood, preparing herself for the confrontation that might lie ahead.

"Thank you," she replied, forcing a gracious smile while mentally steeling herself for what was to come. This was it - the moment she'd been waiting for.

As she followed the receptionist down the hallway, Morgan couldn't help but think of Derik, who passed out on her couch. Would he be disappointed in her for going rogue? Or would he understand her need to bring this killer to justice?

She pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on the task at hand. She was here to catch a killer, and nothing else mattered.

"Good luck with your consultation," the receptionist said as she showed Morgan into a small room. "Dr. Reid will be right in."

"Thank you," Morgan replied, taking a deep breath. It was time to face the man who might be responsible for so much pain and suffering. And she was ready.

The door clicked shut behind her, leaving Morgan alone in the small examination room. She took a seat on the paper-covered table, her eyes scanning the pristine space. The sterile smell of disinfectant and latex gloves hung heavy in the air. Beside her, an array of gleaming instruments lay neatly arranged on a tray, their sharp edges glinting beneath the fluorescent lights.

"Hello, Lacy," Dr. Reid said as he entered the room with a warm smile. "I'm Dr. Terrance Reid. It's very nice to meet you."

Morgan studied him briefly, her heart pounding against her ribcage. In front of her stood Steve Blanchard, his face shaved clean and topped with a toupee. Colored contacts hid the cold, calculating eyes she had seen in countless photos. His disguise was good but not good enough.

“Nice to meet you too, Doctor,” she replied, feigning interest. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

“Of course. Now, what brings you here today? What kind of work are you interested in having done?”

“Actually,” Morgan said hesitantly, “I’ve been doing some research about cosmetic surgery, and I came across an article about a clinic that used to be in this area. I was wondering if you might have any information about it. It was called... Rejuvenation Aesthetics, I think?”

Dr. Reid’s smile faltered ever so slightly, his eyes narrowing just a fraction. “I’m not sure what that has to do with your consultation,” he said, trying to maintain a friendly tone. “But I suppose I can try to answer your questions.”

“Thank you,” Morgan said, pushing her advantage. “I’m just curious about the history of the place. Apparently, they shut down rather abruptly, and I’d like to know why. I mean, if it’s something I should be concerned about before committing to a procedure...”

“Ah, well,” Dr. Reid stammered, the color draining from his face. “I’m not sure where you heard that, but I don’t know much about it. I’m afraid I can’t help you with that information.”

“Surely you must have heard something?” Morgan pressed, keeping her tone light and inquisitive. “It was quite popular at one point, wasn’t it? And then just... gone.”

“Like I said, I really don’t know anything about it,” he repeated nervously, clearly desperate to change the subject. “Now, let’s get back to discussing your needs and how we can help you achieve them, shall we?”

Morgan nodded, feigning defeat. But as Dr. Reid began rattling off various procedures they could perform, her mind raced, piecing together the puzzle before her. She was closer than ever to catching this killer, and she had no intention of letting him slip through her fingers.

Morgan’s patience had reached its limit. Dr. Reid was hiding something, and she knew it. She glanced around the

small room, noting the sterile white walls adorned with posters of perfectly airbrushed models, their flawless skin gazing down at her in silent judgment. The irony wasn't lost on her.

“Actually, Dr. Reid,” she began casually, stepping between him and the door, effectively blocking his only exit. “I think we've discussed enough about my needs. It's time to talk about yours.”

“Excuse me?” He blinked in confusion, his composure slipping for a moment.

“Your need to hide behind a fake name and a new look,” Morgan clarified, her voice now cold and assertive. She pulled out her FBI badge and gun, holding them up for him to see. “And what, exactly, you're running from.”

Dr. Reid's eyes widened, all pretense of calmness gone as he stared at her badge. “I-I don't know what you're talking about,” he stammered, but the fear in his eyes betrayed him.

“Drop the act,” Morgan snapped, her hardened gaze never leaving his face. “I know who you really are, Steve Blanchard, or whatever your real name is. And I'm not leaving until you tell me everything.”

To her surprise, he broke down easily, tears pooling in his eyes as he slumped against the examination table. “Okay, okay,” he sobbed, his hands trembling. “I'll tell you what you want to know. Just... please don't hurt me.”

“Let's start with Casey,” Morgan said. “You killed her, didn't you?”

“No!” he exclaimed. “No—that was an unfortunate accident, really, it was.”

“So why are you in hiding? Start talking,” Morgan demanded, her tone unyielding. Every instinct told her to remain guarded, but part of her couldn't help but be intrigued by this sudden vulnerability.

“Twenty years ago, I opened a practice with my childhood best friend,” he began, his voice barely above a whisper. “We were like brothers, inseparable. But things changed... he changed.”

“Who is this friend?” Morgan asked, her curiosity piqued.

“His name is John Pesci,” he confessed, tears streaming down his face. “He became obsessed with staying young and started experimenting on himself. It went horribly wrong, and now... now I’m running from him.”

Morgan’s mind raced as she processed this new information. Could it be possible that the real killer was someone else entirely? She had to know more. “Why are you running from him? What has he done?”

“Every time I change my name and appearance, he finds me,” he sobbed. “He’s dangerous, and I’m scared for my life and for my wife, Harriet. I just want to escape from him and start over.”

Morgan lowered her gun, feeling the weight of the situation settle heavily on her shoulders. If what he said was true, then they both had a common enemy in John Pesci. Then again, of course, this guy would lie to save himself. She couldn’t trust a word he said.

Morgan’s eyes narrowed, her grip tightening on her gun as she studied the man before her. He seemed genuine in his fear, but she couldn’t afford to let her guard down. She had been wrong before, and it had cost her dearly. “Tell me your real name,” she demanded, her voice steady and unwavering.

“Mark... Mark Holland,” he stammered, wiping away tears with the back of his hand. “I started changing my name and appearance when John threatened to hurt my wife, Harriet.”

Morgan’s thoughts raced, trying to piece together the information. Could this man really be a victim himself? Or was he simply playing her for a fool? She couldn’t ignore the possibility that he was still the killer she was hunting.

“Tell me more about this friend,” Morgan said.

“We’ve known each other since we were kids. We opened our first practice together,” Mark explained, his voice trembling. “But he changed, became obsessed with staying young, and now he’s dangerous... I’m sure of it.”

Morgan's mind churned, evaluating every word, every nuance in Mark's expression. Despite her reservations, she found herself drawn into his story. There was something about the way he spoke, the desperation in his eyes, that made her consider the possibility that there was more to this case than she'd initially thought.

As she looked at Mark, she recalled her own past, the betrayal and pain she had endured. The memory of being framed for murder ten years ago still haunted her, leaving her hardened and distrustful. But if she wanted to catch the real killer, she would have to take some risks, even if it meant putting her trust in someone who could very well be lying to her face.

"Alright, Mark," Morgan said finally, her voice softening just a fraction. "Tell me everything you know about John Pesci. And don't leave anything out."

Mark nodded solemnly. "John was always the more successful one," Mark continued, staring down at his hands. "He had this charm about him, always surrounded by beautiful women. But as we got older, he became obsessed with staying youthful. He began experimenting with extreme surgeries, testing them on himself. The results were... horrific."

Mark shuddered, his eyes haunted as he looked up at Morgan.

"His face, it was like something out of a nightmare. He tried to fix it, but each time he just made it worse. I can't get the image out of my mind."

"Every time you change your name and appearance, he finds you?" Morgan asked curiosity piqued despite her instincts telling her to tread carefully.

"Exactly," Mark nodded, his eyes filled with fear. "I've left many clinics because of him. I'd find security footage showing him lurking around, watching me. I don't know how he does it, but he always manages to track me down."

Morgan considered this new information, her mind racing as she weighed its credibility. Was Mark Holland simply a

frightened man on the run from a dangerous former friend? Or was he using this elaborate story to cover up his own guilt? She couldn't be sure, but one thing was certain: she needed to find out more about John Pesci.

Mark's voice trembled as he continued, "I'm terrified of John, Agent Cross. And I'm even more terrified for my wife's life. When I learned about the serial killer who'd been cutting women's faces on the news... it scared me to the core. I can't help but think that it might be him."

Morgan crossed her arms, her brow furrowed as she processed Mark's words. The room seemed to grow colder, the sterile walls closing in around them with each revelation. She clenched her fists, anger, and frustration churning within her. How could this man have evaded them for so long? She glanced at Mark, noting the genuine fear in his eyes. It was either an impressive act or the desperate plea of a terrified man.

"Are you saying you believe John is the killer?" Morgan asked, unable to hide the incredulity in her voice.

"Yes," Mark whispered, almost too softly to hear. "He's become obsessed with youth, with beauty. He'd do anything to hold onto it, even if it meant hurting others. I... I think he was stealing files from my office to find victims. People are looking for ways to look younger, to erase their imperfections. They were perfect targets for someone like John."

Morgan felt her chest tighten, her heart pounding against her ribs. The implications of what Mark was telling her were staggering. If he was right, then they had stumbled upon something far more sinister than they had ever imagined. But she couldn't let herself get carried away by conjecture – not when there were lives at stake.

"Alright," she said, her voice steely and determined. "We'll look into this John Pesci character. But if I find out that you're lying, Mark, or if you're withholding any information... I promise you; there will be consequences."

Mark nodded vigorously, gratitude and relief etched across his face. "Thank you, Agent Cross. I just want my wife to be

safe.”

“I’m going to set you up with a police escort who will pick you up here and send another officer to go check on your wife. Is she at home?”

“She might be,” Mark said. “She likes to go out during the day—walks to the park, grocery store... I can call her right now.”

“Good, do that,” Morgan said. “And don’t leave. Your escort will be here soon.”

Morgan stood up, her mind already racing with possible leads and strategies. She couldn’t afford to waste any time – not when the killer could strike again at any moment. As she exited the room, Mark’s desperate words echoed in her mind, fueling her resolve to uncover the truth and bring justice to the victims.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Mark huddled under the clinic's awning, his heart hammering in his chest. His eyes darted left to right, searching for anyone or anything that seemed out of place. A police escort was supposed to arrive any minute now, but the seconds dragged on like an eternity.

"Harriet, please pick up," he murmured into his phone, his breath fogging up the screen. No response. He tried her number again, but it went straight to voicemail, just as it had the last four times he'd called. Panic gnawed at the edges of his mind. Where was she? Was she safe? "Dammit, Harriet, where are you?" he whispered, anxiety making his voice tremble.

His phone buzzed in his hand, jolting him out of his thoughts. An unknown number. Heart pounding, he hesitated a moment before answering.

"Hello?" he said with a shaky voice.

"Mark, old buddy!" The voice on the other end was chillingly familiar, sending a shiver down Mark's spine. "It's been too long."

"John." Mark's throat tightened, bile rising in his gut. How could he forget that voice? The man he once considered a brother now turned into a cold-blooded killer.

"Surprised to hear from me?" John's voice oozed with false sincerity, each word twisting the knife deeper into Mark's gut.

"Wh-what do you want?" Mark stammered, gripping his phone so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"Relax, Mark. I just wanted to catch up." Even through the fear, Mark could tell John was lying. There was something else, something sinister simmering beneath the surface. "I saw you, you know," he said. "That FBI agent walked right into your clinic... something tells me she wasn't getting work

done,” John’s voice taunted, a wicked undertone that made Mark’s skin crawl. “She seems... interesting.”

Mark’s pulse quickened as he realized how close John had been watching him. He imagined John’s cold eyes following his every move, and it sent a shudder down his spine. “What do you care? Just stay away from me!” he snapped, rage simmering just beneath the surface of his fear.

“Or what, Mark?” John laughed, the sound echoing in Mark’s ears like the peals of a demonic bell. “You think you can scare me? You’re nothing. You’re old and disgusting looking now. You were always jealous of me.”

The anger boiling inside Mark threatened to spill over, but he knew he had to keep it in check. Losing control wouldn’t help Harriet. He clenched his jaw, swallowing back the bile that threatened to rise in his throat. “Leave us alone, John. We haven’t done anything to you.”

“Ah, but you see, Mark... That’s where you’re wrong.” The menace in John’s voice was palpable, sending a jolt of terror through Mark’s body. “You betrayed me. And now, your precious Harriet will pay the price.”

“John, please,” Mark pleaded, desperation seeping into his voice. “Don’t hurt her. She has nothing to do with this.”

“Too late for that, old friend.” John’s voice was cold, devoid of any warmth or empathy they once shared. “She’s next. Goodbye, Mark. Enjoy what little time you have left.”

As the line went dead, Mark’s world seemed to collapse around him. His breathing came in short, ragged gasps, his heart hammering in his chest. Hands shaking, he dialed Harriet’s number once more, praying that she would answer.

“Please, Harriet,” he whispered into the empty air, fear seizing him like a vice. “Please be safe.”

But she never answered.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Morgan stepped into the precinct, the heavy door clicking shut behind her. The familiar cacophony of ringing phones and hushed conversations washed over her, but she barely registered it – her thoughts were consumed by the unsettling conversation she'd just had with Mark.

To her surprise, she spotted Derik talking to one of the officers. His eyes flicked up as she approached, but he made no move to greet her. Instead, he seemed distant, distracted, and his expression was unreadable. Morgan couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment – after their shared vulnerability the night before, she had hoped that they might be able to find some sort of common ground.

“Derik,” she said, trying to catch his eye. “We need to talk.”

He looked up finally, his gaze cool and guarded. “Of course. What did you find out?”

Before Morgan could respond, the precinct's doors burst open, revealing a frantic Mark. His face was pale, his eyes wide and wild. Panic radiated off him in waves as he stumbled towards them, gasping for breath. Behind him, a police officer—the escort Morgan had assigned to him—stumbled in after.

“Agent Cross!” he cried, grabbing Morgan's arm. “I need your help. Please, you have to do something!”

“Mark, what happened?” Morgan asked, her professional demeanor snapping back into place as she tried to calm him down.

“John... He called me,” Mark stammered, his voice trembling. “He knew I talked to the police. He knows everything!”

“Slow down,” Derik interjected, concern etched on his face despite his earlier detachment. “What did he say? What did he want?”

“John said my wife is next,” Mark whispered, tears streaming down his cheeks. “He’ll kill her—you need to do something! Harriet isn’t answering my calls!”

Morgan’s heart clenched at the terror in Mark’s voice, and she felt her resolve harden. Whatever doubts she might have had about his story, it was clear that John Pesci – or whoever he really was – posed a very real threat. The fact that Mark came here to the police station showed her that he was willing to risk it all to protect his wife and prove his innocence. And to catch John.

So often, Morgan had to rely on evidence, but this moment felt human. She could see the human in Mark, and she believed him.

“Alright,” she said, her voice steady and strong. “We’ll help you protect your wife, and we’ll do everything we can to bring John down. But we need you to trust us, Mark. We need you to be completely honest with us.”

“Of course,” Mark choked out, nodding vigorously. “I’ll tell you anything you need to know. Just... please save my wife.”

As Morgan looked at the terrified man before her, she knew she couldn’t afford any more missteps. Lives were at stake, and time was running out. She glanced over at Derik, his eyes now filled with determination and concern, and felt a flicker of hope.

Morgan leaned against the cold wall of the precinct briefing room, her eyes fixed on Derik as he scribbled furiously on a stack of forms, a trembling Mark in front of him. The fluorescent overhead lights cast a harsh glare on the paperwork and reflected off his sweat-slicked forehead. Mark stood beside him, wringing his hands, his pale face a stark contrast to the dark shadows that haunted his eyes.

“Have you found my wife yet?” he asked.

“No,” Morgan said, “the officer went to the address you gave us, and we haven’t found her.”

“But she might be okay, right?” Mark said. “I mean, she has to be, right?”

“We hope so,” Derik said. “Now, give me a detailed description of John Pesci.”

“Sure,” Mark stammered, swallowing hard. “He’s about six-foot, dark hair, but... but that could change. He might be wearing wigs or disguises; I don’t know. What I do remember is his face... God, his face.” He shuddered involuntarily.

As Mark recounted the gruesome details of John’s deformed visage, Morgan felt a chill creep down her spine. She had heard this description before, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss.

“Wait,” Mark said suddenly as if recalling a crucial detail. “There was one more thing... when I saw him earlier today, he had a fresh wound on the side of his forehead, like someone shot him.”

At those words, Morgan’s heart leaped in her chest, and she felt the pieces of the puzzle snap into place. Her blood ran cold with realization as memories from the night at the old clinic flashed through her mind: the shadowy figure rifling through the supplies, the gunshot echoing through the dark room, and the fleeting glimpse of their attacker as he slipped away.

“Derik,” Morgan breathed, her voice tight with urgency. “It was John at the clinic that night – I almost had him, but he got away. That wound... it must be from when I shot at him in the dark.”

Derik’s eyes widened, and he looked up from the paperwork, his pen pausing mid-sentence. “If that’s true,” he said slowly, “then we know he’s been in the area recently, and that means we have a lead to follow.”

“Exactly,” Morgan replied, her mind racing with determination as she processed this new information. “We need to act fast – John won’t rest until he’s found Mark and his

wife. We've got to find him before he can strike again. I know how we can catch John."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "What's your plan?"

"We stake out the old clinic," Morgan explained, gesturing towards a map of the city on the wall. "He's bound to return for supplies again, but he won't expect me there."

"Good idea," Derik nodded, "but it sounds dangerous. I'm coming with you."

Morgan frowned, clenching her jaw. Her heart raced as she weighed the risks and the potential consequences. "No, Derik, this is my case now. You'll only slow me down."

"Slow you down? Morgan, I'm fine. I'm not sick anymore." Derik's voice grew stern, his eyes filled with concern. "You don't have to do this alone."

"Maybe I do," she muttered, her gaze drifting back to the window. "And you are still sick. I can see it all over you. Not to mention hungover."

Derik bristled at her words, his hands clenching into fists. "Damn it, Morgan, you can't do everything on your own. We're partners, remember?"

Morgan sighed, her resolve weakening at the desperation in his voice. She knew he was right, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something was holding him back. "I know that, Derik. But this is different. John is dangerous, and I don't want to risk anyone else's life."

Derik stepped closer to her, his eyes boring into hers. "And I don't want to risk losing you, Morgan. You're not invincible."

Morgan felt a jolt of emotion at his words, a warmth spreading through her chest. She immediately wiped it away, reminding herself that she had no idea if she could trust him anymore or if she ever could.

"I've got a plan," Morgan said. "Just hear me out."

Derik nodded, turning his attention to Mark. “Let me just finish the paperwork to get Mark and his wife in witness protection.”

Morgan stared intently at the map spread out on the table, her finger tracing the route they would take to the old clinic. The tension in the room was palpable, and she could feel it tightening around her chest like a vice. Her heart raced as adrenaline coursed through her veins, sharpening her senses. She knew this was her shot at redemption, but the fear of failure gnawed at her insides.

“Are you sure about this?” Derik asked softly, concern etched on his face. “It’s a dangerous plan.”

“Would you stop second-guessing me?” Morgan snapped, her patience wearing thin. “We’ve been over this a thousand times already. It’s our only option.”

“Alright,” Derik relented, holding up his hands defensively. “I just... I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Nothing will,” she insisted, forcing confidence into her voice. But deep down, she knew that going after John alone was risky – and that risk weighed heavily on her mind.

In the charged silence that followed, Morgan could feel Derik’s eyes on her, the intensity of his gaze almost tangible. There was something unspoken between them, an unresolved tension that hovered in the air like static electricity. And suddenly, with a fierceness that took them both by surprise, Derik closed the distance between them and pressed his lips against hers.

Her initial shock gave way to an unexpected wave of relief as her defenses crumbled. She had been lonely for so long – the isolation of prison and the stigma of her past still haunting her – and the warmth of Derik’s embrace was a balm to her battered soul. Their kiss spoke volumes, a promise of understanding, of shared burdens and unbreakable bonds.

But as their lips parted, reality came crashing down on her.

It was like her body still wanted to trust Derik, but her mind knew better.

She pushed him away.

“Derik, we can’t,” she whispered, her voice hoarse with emotion. “Just... stop.”

“I know,” he breathed, his eyes searching hers. “I’m sorry. I just... I needed you to know how much I care about you.”

“Stop,” she said again. “Just stop it.”

“Let me come on the stakeout,” Derik said. “Let me be your partner.”

Morgan hesitated, her mind racing with conflicting thoughts and emotions. She knew that bringing Derik along would be risky, but she couldn’t deny the comfort of having him by her side. She wanted to trust him again, to believe that he had truly changed and was committed to their partnership. But the memory of his betrayal lingered like a poison in her mind, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that he was still holding something back.

“Fine,” she said, at last, her voice tight with reluctance. “But you have to follow my lead, no questions asked. And if anything goes wrong, you back me up and get out of there.”

Derik nodded, his eyes gleaming with determination. “I won’t let you down, Morgan. I promise.”

Morgan forced a small smile, trying to push away her doubts as she grabbed her bag and headed for the door. She knew that the stakes were high and that John was a dangerous adversary with nothing to lose. But she also knew that she couldn’t give up, not after everything she had been through. She had to make things right.

As they prepared to leave for the stakeout, Morgan couldn’t shake the lingering warmth of Derik’s kiss or the certainty that everything was irrevocably changed between them. But as long as John remained at large, nothing else mattered. With

single-minded focus, she steeled herself for the confrontation to come, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

The stakeout had begun. Morgan and Derik sat in the unmarked car, its engine purring softly as they watched the old clinic across the street. The building seemed to loom menacingly in the fading twilight, its secrets locked behind boarded-up windows and a crumbling façade.

“Hey,” Morgan murmured, breaking the silence that had settled between them. “About last night... when you showed up at my place drunk...”

Derik tensed visibly, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. He stared straight ahead, avoiding her gaze. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Derik,” she insisted, her voice soft yet firm. “You said you’d been sober for years. What happened?”

He sighed, finally turning to face her. His eyes were haunted, shadows of unspoken pain lurking beneath the surface. “I was just... really distressed that night. I needed to see you. I missed you, Morgan.”

The words hung heavy in the air, and Morgan found herself unable to look away from him. She felt a strange mix of emotions: concern for her partner, anger at his lapse, but also a warmth in her chest at his admission. She didn’t know how to respond, so she focused on what she knew best – the case at hand.

“Alright,” she said quietly, her eyes returning to the abandoned clinic. “Let’s focus on the task at hand. We need to catch this guy.”

“Agreed,” Derik replied, his jaw set with determination. “We’ll get him, Morgan. I promise.”

Morgan couldn’t help but replay the previous night’s events in her mind. Derik’s unexpected vulnerability, his longing for

connection – these were feelings she understood all too well. In many ways, they were reflections of her own inner turmoil. And yet, despite the undeniable bond that had formed between them, she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something was off.

Morgan's gaze remained fixed on the old clinic, its crumbling façade bathed in the afternoon light.

Even though she knew she had to stay focused, Morgan couldn't help but steal glances at Derik sitting next to her. His face was illuminated by the dim dashboard lights, highlighting the lines etched on his forehead – an atlas of worry and regret. Morgan bit her lip, realizing how much she had missed him during their time apart.

“See anything?” Derik asked, catching her off guard.

“Nothing yet,” she replied, forcing her attention back to the clinic. “But we have to be patient.”

“Right,” Derik agreed, his voice tight. “We'll get him.”

Morgan wanted to delve into the deeper emotions they shared, but it wasn't the time or place. They needed to catch this monster, and she couldn't afford any distractions. She took a deep breath to center herself and tried to ignore the warmth in her chest whenever she looked at Derik.

Just then, her phone vibrated in the cupholder, the screen lighting up with an incoming call. Mueller's name flashed across the screen, immediately setting off alarm bells in Morgan's mind. She snatched up the phone and answered it, her voice tense. “Mueller, what's going on?”

“Agent Cross, we've got a problem,” the chief said grimly. “Mark Holland's wife, Harriet, is still missing. We think the killer got to her first.”

“Damn it!” Morgan cursed, slamming her fist onto the steering wheel. “How did this happen? Weren't there officers assigned to protect her?”

“Apparently, the killer managed to slip past our surveillance. We're still trying to figure out how he did it. But right now, our priority is finding Harriet before it's too late.”

“Understood,” Morgan said, her voice icy with determination. “We’ll head back to the precinct and regroup. Any leads on the killer’s location?”

“None yet,” Mueller admitted. “But we’re working on it. Get back here as soon as you can.” The line went dead, leaving Morgan and Derik in tense silence.

“Harriet’s been taken?” Derik asked his expression a mixture of shock and fury.

Morgan nodded, her jaw clenched. “Yeah. We need to get back to the precinct now. This bastard has gone too far, and he’s not going to get away with it.”

“Let’s go,” Derik agreed, the anger in his eyes mirroring Morgan’s own. As they sped off into the night, their shared mission burned in their minds – to save Harriet and bring this killer to justice, no matter what it took.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Morgan's grip on the steering wheel tightened, her knuckles turning white as she pushed the accelerator to the floor. The car roared through midday Dallas traffic, weaving in and out of lanes as she raced towards the precinct. Derik clung to the door handle, but his eyes never left her face.

"Slow down, Morgan," he urged, concern etched in his features. "I know you're angry, but we can't help Harriet if we don't make it there in one piece."

"Angry?" she spat, her voice dripping with venom. "Damn right, I'm angry! This is happening because we couldn't protect her!" Her thoughts drifted back to the countless victims she couldn't save – each face a reminder of her failures. She wouldn't let Harriet join their ranks.

"Look, I get it," Derik said, trying to keep his voice steady. "But we can't afford to lose our heads now. We need to be smart, focused. We'll find her, Morgan. Together."

"Like we found all the others?" she shot back, her eyes narrowing in fury. "We're always one step behind, Derik. Always reacting, never preventing. And now another innocent woman is in the hands of that monster because we weren't good enough."

"Enough!" Derik shouted, startling her with the intensity in his voice. "We are doing everything we can, Morgan. Don't let your anger blind you to the fact that we're still the best chance Harriet has."

Her jaw clenched, Morgan stared straight ahead, focusing on the road as they sped closer to the precinct. He was right, of course – they were Harriet's only hope. But that thought brought her little comfort as the weight of their responsibility settled firmly on her shoulders.

"Promise me something," she said quietly, her voice barely audible above the roar of the engine. "Promise me we'll find

her. Promise she won't die because of our incompetence.”

Derik hesitated for a moment, then met her gaze with unwavering determination. “I promise,” he said firmly. “We’ll find her, Morgan. And we’ll make that bastard pay for what he’s done.”

As they raced through the bustling streets of Dallas, Morgan held onto that promise – and the hope that this time, they wouldn’t be too late.

Morgan slammed the brakes, coming to a screeching halt outside the precinct. Her heart pounded in her chest as she yanked the keys from the ignition and threw open the door, Derik scrambling to keep up with her furious pace. The two agents stormed into the building, their entrance cutting through the low murmur of voices like a thunderclap.

“Where is he?” Morgan demanded, scanning the room for Mark. She spotted him at one of the desks, his face buried in his hands as he sobbed uncontrollably. A wave of guilt washed over her, but it only fueled her anger further.

“Mark!” she called out, striding toward him. “What happened?”

“His wife, Harriet,” Derik interjected quietly. “She’s been taken.”

“I trusted you!” Mark wailed, looking up at them with red-rimmed eyes. “You were supposed to protect my family! You said you’d catch him, and now...now Harriet will suffer and die because of your incompetence!”

Morgan’s jaw tightened, swallowing the bile that rose in her throat. She knew they had failed, but hearing it from the victim’s husband made it all the more unbearable. Before she could respond, Mark’s phone rang, its shrill tone slicing through the tense atmosphere. He glanced down at the screen, his face draining of color.

“It’s...it’s John,” he stammered, holding the phone out to Morgan as though it burned his hand. She snatched it from him without hesitation, answering the call with a clenched fist.

“John, you son of a bitch,” she spat, her voice cold and hard as steel. But even as she spoke, her mind raced with thoughts and strategies, calculating how best to use this opportunity to save Harriet and bring the killer to justice.

“Agent Cross, right?” came the chillingly calm reply, a slight chuckle underlying his words. “So nice to finally speak with you.”

“Where is she?” Morgan demanded, her grip on the phone tightening as she fought to keep her emotions in check. “If you hurt her, I swear I will—”

“Ah-ah,” John interrupted, his tone mocking and cruel. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, shall we? I believe it’s time for us to meet face-to-face, don’t you?”

Morgan’s eyes narrowed, her instincts screaming that this was a trap. But what choice did she have? If there was even the slightest chance that meeting with him could save Harriet’s life, she had to take it.

“Put Mark on the phone,” John demanded, his voice cold and devoid of emotion.

“Not a chance,” Morgan shot back, her voice equally icy.

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter who I’m speaking with as long as my message gets through.”

“Which is?” Morgan asked impatiently, her eyes darting from Derik to Mark, both of whom stood nearby, their faces etched with concern and fear.

“Meet me somewhere,” John said, his voice taking on a more sinister tone. “I want to show you my work, Agent Cross. Perhaps you’ll even learn to appreciate it.”

Morgan’s stomach churned at the thought, but she knew she had no choice. She needed to play along if she wanted any hope of saving Harriet. “Fine. As long as you don’t harm your hostage, I’ll come alone.”

“Excellent,” John replied, sounding almost pleased. “But remember – come alone, or the consequences will be... unpleasant.”

The line went dead, and Morgan stared at the screen for a moment before lowering the phone. Her heart pounded in her chest, a mix of adrenaline and dread coursing through her veins. She exchanged a glance with Derik, who seemed to understand her unspoken agreement to John's terms.

"I have to go alone," Morgan said.

"Absolutely not," Derik said, his voice firm and unyielding. "You're not going in there alone without any backup."

Morgan looked at him, her eyes pleading. "Derik, I don't have a choice. We both know that if I go in there with a team, he'll kill Harriet."

"You can't let him!" Mark shouted.

"Which is why we're going to use a tracking device," Derik insisted. He held up a small pin-like gadget, its metallic surface gleaming under the precinct's fluorescent lights. "You wear this, and we can follow you without alerting John. It's our best shot at getting in there and rescuing Harriet."

Morgan hesitated, knowing that any slip-up could cost Harriet her life. But she also knew that Derik was right – she couldn't face the killer on her own. With a sigh of resignation, she nodded her agreement. "Alright, let's do it. But we have to be careful not to tip him off."

"Agreed," Derik said, relief evident in his eyes. "Let's get this plan into motion."

"Listen up, everyone," Derik called out, commanding the attention of the assembled team of police officers. Morgan stood beside him, the tracking device now clipped discreetly to her blazer. Underneath her clothing, her heart raced with anticipation and trepidation, her thoughts consumed by the danger she was about to face.

"Agent Cross will be heading into John Pesci's location alone," Derik continued, outlining the plan. "She'll be wearing

a tracking device so we can monitor her movements. Once she's inside and has determined that it's safe for us to move in, she'll activate a silent signal. That's when we'll swoop in, secure the hostage, and apprehend the suspect.”

Morgan felt a surge of determination as she listened to Derik's words, her focus sharpening on the task at hand. She knew that she was walking into a lion's den, but she couldn't let fear or doubt cloud her judgment. A woman's life was on the line, and it was her duty to save her – no matter the cost.

“Let's go over this one more time,” Derik said, his intensity matching Morgan's. “It's imperative that we get this right. The moment you give us that signal, Agent Cross, we'll be right behind you. But we have to play by the rules for now; we can't risk alerting John to our presence.”

“Understood,” Morgan murmured, her gaze never wavering from Derik's face. She silently prayed that their plan would work, that they could save Harriet and bring John Pesci to justice. For the first time in a long while, she felt as though she was part of a team – and that thought both comforted and frightened her.

“Alright,” Derik said, clapping his hands together with finality. “Let's get ready to move out. Stay sharp, stay focused, and most importantly, stay safe.”

As the officers dispersed to prepare for the operation, Morgan steeled herself for the confrontation ahead. With a deep breath, she vowed to herself that she would do whatever it took to ensure that John Pesci's reign of terror came to an end – even if it meant putting her own life on the line.

Morgan glanced around the room, her eyes lingering on each member of the assembled team. Their faces were a mixture of determination and steely resolve, but she couldn't shake the gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach. What if John sensed the trap? What if he hurt Harriet before they could get to her?

“Derik,” Morgan whispered urgently, pulling him aside as the officers continued their preparations. “I need to talk to you – privately.”

“Of course,” Derik replied, his voice low and serious. They stepped into an empty office, closing the door behind them.

“Look, I’m worried that John might pick up on the police presence,” Morgan confessed, her words tumbling out in a rush. “If he realizes we’re onto him, he could hurt Harriet or worse. I know we have to follow protocol, but...”

“Listen to me, Morgan,” Derik cut in, his gaze intense and unwavering. “I understand your concern, and believe me, I share it. But we can’t throw caution to the wind. We have to play this by the book, or else we risk compromising the entire operation.”

“I know,” Morgan sighed, running a hand through her hair. “It’s just... I’ve been down this road before, and I don’t want to see another innocent life lost because of our mistakes.”

“Neither do I,” Derik said softly, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “But we can’t let fear guide our actions. We have a solid plan in place, and I trust every single person in that room. We’ll get Harriet back, Morgan. I promise.”

For a moment, Morgan allowed herself to take solace in Derik’s words. She knew he was right – they had to follow procedure, even if it meant risking everything. With a deep breath, she nodded, steeling herself for the task ahead.

“Alright,” she said, her voice steady and resolute. “Let’s do this.”

As they rejoined the team, Morgan couldn’t help but feel a flicker of hope amidst the uncertainty. No matter the outcome, she knew they would face it together – as a united front, ready to take on whatever challenges lay ahead.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Morgan stared at the abandoned warehouse, its decaying façade looming in the afternoon. The wind whipped strands of her dark hair across her face as she heaved a sigh, steeling herself for what was to come. She knew that John Pesci, the killer they were hunting, had given her this location for a reason. He'd made it clear that she needed to come alone, or his hostage, Harriet Holland, would suffer the consequences.

“Are you sure about this?” Derik’s voice crackled in her earpiece, his concern palpable even through the static.

“John won’t hesitate to hurt Harriet if he thinks I’m not alone,” Morgan replied, her heart pounding in her chest. Apprehension gnawed at her gut. But Derik had insisted on doing this by the books, and so she was here, wearing a wire and followed by police despite every instinct telling her otherwise.

“Stay sharp, Morgan,” Derik said, his tone serious. “We’ll be listening.”

Morgan nodded, knowing full well that Derik couldn’t see her. She took one last deep breath before stepping into the shadowy embrace of the warehouse. The darkness seemed to swallow her whole, leaving her feeling claustrophobic and paranoid.

As she moved cautiously through the warehouse, the eerie silence was suffocating. Every creak of the wooden beams overhead and every gust of wind howling through the broken windows set her nerves on edge. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she strained her ears for any sign of movement.

A sudden skittering sound echoed through the gloom, causing her heart to leap into her throat. She whipped around, gun raised, only to find a rat darting away from an old box. She exhaled sharply, cursing under her breath.

Daylight filtered weakly through the shattered windows, casting eerie shadows on the walls and floor. Despite the faint illumination, the warehouse remained cloaked in darkness, amplifying the unsettling atmosphere. Morgan knew that somewhere in this decaying labyrinth, John Pesci was waiting for her. And every step she took brought her closer to him.

Morgan's heart hammered in her chest as she pushed deeper into the decrepit warehouse, clearing one room after another. She tried to focus on the task at hand, but her mind kept drifting back to Harriet Holland, the woman who was depending on her to come out of this alive.

“Where are you, John?” Morgan muttered under her breath as she scanned each room for any sign of him or the macabre surgical equipment he used to mutilate his victims. But there was nothing—just dust and decay, remnants of a time long past.

As she moved through the warehouse, she couldn't help but feel like she was being watched. That feeling sent shivers down her spine, her instincts screaming at her to be on guard. But every corner she turned revealed nothing but empty rooms and darkness.

Finally, she entered a room that seemed different from the others. It was bare, save for a single table standing in the center, illuminated by a shaft of daylight streaming through a broken window above. The light cast an eerie glow over the table, making it seem almost otherworldly.

She approached the table, her eyes narrowing as they caught sight of something resting on its surface—a note. Her stomach twisted with apprehension as she reached out and picked it up, scanning the hastily scrawled words:

YOU SHOULD HAVE COME ALONE.

Morgan clenched her jaw, furious at herself for falling into John's trap. She should have known better, trusted her instincts. But no, she had let Derik convince her to go by the book, and now John knew she hadn't come alone.

“Stupid, rookie mistake,” she muttered under her breath, crumpling the note and tossing it onto the table with a mixture of disgust and frustration. Her hand trembled slightly as she lifted her phone to her ear, punching in Derik’s number with more force than necessary.

“Derik, it was a test,” she said as soon as he picked up, not bothering with pleasantries. “John knew I didn’t come alone. He left a note saying I should have.” She could hear her own voice shaking slightly with anger and fear—anger at her own naivete and fear for Harriet’s safety.

“Damn it, Morgan,” Derik cursed on the other end of the line, his voice heavy with concern. “Where are you now? Are you okay?”

“Still in the warehouse,” she replied, her gaze sweeping over the room once more as if John might suddenly appear from the shadows. “I’m fine, but there’s no sign of him or Harriet.”

“Alright, call off the backup. We need to regroup and figure out our next move,” Derik ordered, his tone all business. “Meet me back at the precinct. We’ll go from there.”

“Fine,” Morgan agreed, her voice terse. She hated that she’d given John the upper hand, and the frustration simmered beneath her skin like a caged animal.

“Be careful, Morgan. Watch your back,” Derik warned before hanging up, leaving her standing in the empty room, the silence pressing in around her.

“Watch my back, huh?” she whispered to herself, bitterness lacing her words. “Little late for that.”

Furious, Morgan stormed out of the warehouse and towards her car, the gravel crunching beneath her boots. The sun had dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the desolate landscape. Her heart pounded with a mix of anger and embarrassment—anger at John for being one step ahead of her and embarrassment that she’d let him manipulate her so easily.

“Damn it,” she muttered as she yanked open the car door, her chest heaving with each breath. She slid into the driver’s

seat, gripping the steering wheel tightly, trying to regain control over her emotions. “Get a grip, Morgan. You’ll find him.”

As soon as she started the engine, a sudden movement in the rearview mirror caught her eye. Before she could react, a hood was pulled over her head, plunging her into darkness. Panic surged through her veins like ice water, but she forced herself to remain calm, focusing on her training.

“Let go!” she growled, struggling against the unseen assailant. Her arms flailed in an attempt to free herself, but then she felt something cold and metallic press against the side of her head. A gun.

“Stop moving,” a voice hissed in her ear. It was distorted, unfamiliar, but she knew instinctively that it belonged to John Pesci. He’d been here all along, watching her from the shadows while she blundered around like a rookie. The realization made her sick to her stomach.

“Where’s Harriet?” she demanded, her voice barely concealing the fear that threatened to overwhelm her. She cursed herself for letting Derik talk her into wearing the wire and being followed by the police. If only she’d trusted her instincts, maybe she wouldn’t be here right now, blindfolded and at the mercy of a psychopath.

“Quiet,” John snapped, tightening his grip on the gun. “Do exactly as I say, and maybe, just maybe, you’ll both make it out of this alive.”

Morgan swallowed hard, weighing her options. She knew she couldn’t overpower him while blindfolded, and if she made any sudden moves, he might pull the trigger without a second thought. For now, she had no choice but to comply.

“Fine,” she spat, her voice laced with venom.

“Good. I’ll take it from here. Just scoot on over to the passenger seat and buckle up.”

She hesitated for a moment, her survival instincts screaming at her to fight back, but she knew there was no winning in her current state. Swallowing her pride, she

followed his command, fumbling blindly to shift into the passenger seat.

“Good girl,” John drawled mockingly as Morgan groped her way across the car seats and buckled herself in. “It’s always easier when you cooperate.”

“Where are you taking me?” Morgan demanded, trying to keep her voice steady. She could feel the anger rising within her – at John, at herself, at the whole twisted situation.

“Ah, patience, Agent Cross,” John replied with a chuckle, starting the engine. His sick amusement made Morgan’s skin crawl. “You’ll see soon enough.”

As the car pulled away, Morgan tried to focus on what little sensory information she had. The sound of the tires on the road, the direction they seemed to be turning – anything that might give her a clue to their destination. Yet with the hood blocking her vision and her surroundings unfamiliar, it felt like trying to piece together a puzzle while blindfolded.

“Think, Morgan,” she told herself, attempting to suppress the panic clawing at her chest. “You’ve been through worse than this. You can outsmart him. You just need a plan.”

“Enjoying the ride?” John taunted, interrupting her thoughts.

“Go to hell,” she shot back, gritting her teeth. It was a small act of defiance, but it gave her some semblance of control.

“Feisty,” John remarked, a sinister smile audible in his voice. “I like that. But remember, Agent Cross, I hold all the power here.”

Morgan’s jaw clenched as she nodded, choking back any further retorts. She knew he was right – for now, at least.

Despite the sound of the engine and the wind rushing through the open window, Morgan could hear John fumbling with something at her chest. The sudden absence of weight told her everything she needed to know – he had removed the tracking device.

“Can’t have any unwanted guests, now can we?” John said nonchalantly, rolling the window down further. Before she could react, Morgan heard a faint *thunk* as the device hit the dirt, abandoned just like her hope for backup.

Damn it, Derik, she thought bitterly. *Your insistence on protocol might have cost me my life.* She knew she was truly on her own now, and fear mixed with anger began to bubble within her. But she couldn’t let him see that. She had to stay strong, even if her heart hammered in her chest like a caged bird desperate for freedom.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Patience, Agent Cross,” John replied, his tone almost sing-song. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

The car eventually came to a stop, and Morgan braced herself for whatever horror awaited her. The door opened, and she felt rough hands pulling her out of the vehicle, guiding her until they reached their destination.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

A few moments later, the hood was yanked off Morgan's head.

Morgan squinted against the harsh, blinding light above her. As her eyes adjusted, she realized she was in a sterile, white-walled room tied to a surgical chair. The smell of antiseptic filled her nostrils, making her stomach churn.

"Welcome," John said, his voice dripping with false hospitality. He turned away from her, hiding his face, but there was no mistaking the gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. His scrubs were pristine, providing a stark contrast to the darkness of his soul.

"Let me go, Pesci," Morgan demanded, her voice strained from the tight restraints. "You've done enough damage already."

"Ah, but we haven't even started yet," John replied, his voice filled with a sickening glee. "I have so much planned for you, Agent Cross. You won't be leaving here until I'm satisfied."

Morgan's mind raced as she struggled to think of a way to escape, a plan to save herself and Harriet Holland. But with every passing second, her panic grew, threatening to consume her.

John busied himself around the room, picking up various surgical instruments and placing them on a rolling cart. The metallic clanking of each tool contributed to the sickening atmosphere. Morgan's head was tied back, preventing her from looking down and seeing what he was preparing. Her heart raced, but she refused to let fear show on her face. She had faced down countless killers in her career – this would be no different.

"Your skin," John said, pausing for a moment to admire her arms. "It's so smooth, so young. Such a shame those tattoos

mar its perfection.”

Morgan gritted her teeth at his words, trying to ignore the shiver that ran down her spine. “You’re one to talk about perfection, Pesci. I’ve seen your handiwork.”

He laughed a cold and hollow sound. “Oh yes, I’m quite proud of my work. But your tattoos...they’ll have to go. The ink is poison, you see, and it will tamper with the essence I plan to extract.” His voice was almost giddy as he spoke of his twisted plans.

Essence? Morgan thought, confusion momentarily overriding her fear. *What the hell is he talking about?*

“Whatever you’re planning, it won’t work,” she spat, her voice firm despite the fear that clawed at her insides. “I won’t let you win.”

“Ah, such bravery,” John mocked, resuming his preparations with renewed vigor. “But you’re not in control here, Agent Cross. I am.”

As he moved around the room, Morgan’s mind raced, searching for any weakness, any opportunity to escape. She had endured so much, fought through so many dark moments in her life – she couldn’t let it end like this, at the hands of a madman.

A soft whimper broke through the sterile silence, drawing Morgan’s attention away from John and his twisted plans. She strained her eyes, trying to glance around the room without moving her head. In her peripheral vision, she spotted another surgical chair occupied by a figure barely visible through the dim lighting.

“Harriet,” Morgan whispered, realization dawning on her. The hostage they had been trying so desperately to save was right there, tied down just like her. A new wave of determination surged through Morgan. She couldn’t let Harriet suffer at the hands of this madman.

“Ah, you’ve noticed our guest,” John said, turning to face Morgan for the first time since she had been restrained in the chair. His deformed, wrinkled visage loomed over her, but she

refused to flinch, determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her fear. “She’s been eagerly awaiting your arrival, Agent Cross.”

“Get away from her, you sick bastard,” Morgan spat, her voice steady as she maintained eye contact with John. He smiled at her defiance, clearly amused.

“Such protective instincts. Admirable, really,” he mused, his eyes never leaving hers. “But misplaced. You see, I have no intention of harming dear Harriet. At least, not yet. First, we have some unfinished business to attend to.”

Morgan glanced sideways at Harriet, who shook uncontrollably in her chair, tears streaming down her face. The sight fueled Morgan’s resolve, pushing aside the terror that clawed at her insides. She had to find a way out of this nightmare, not just for herself, but for Harriet too.

“Whatever you think you’re going to do to us, it won’t work,” Morgan said, her voice low but unwavering. “Someone will find us. They’ll stop you.”

“By then, it will be too late,” John replied, his tone chillingly nonchalant. “But don’t worry, Agent Cross. I promise you’ll enjoy the process.”

“Go to hell,” Morgan shot back, her anger momentarily overpowering her fear.

John chuckled, savoring her defiance as he continued to prepare his instruments. Morgan’s mind raced with plans of escape, each more desperate than the last. She knew that showing fear would only feed John’s twisted desires, so she clung to her anger and determination, praying for a chance to break free and save Harriet from the same gruesome fate that had befallen John’s other victims.

“Let’s begin, shall we?” John said, a sinister smile playing on his lips. “I’ll start with Harriet here to demonstrate what you should expect.” He turned and walked over to the trembling woman, a scalpel gleaming in his hand.

“Extracting your essence, your youth, will help me prolong my own vitality,” he explained as if lecturing an apprentice.

“Isn’t it wonderful? To be able to live longer, stronger, more beautiful?”

Morgan clenched her jaw, trying to keep her voice steady. “You’re insane, John. Do you think stealing someone’s life force will make you younger? It’s pathetic.”

John merely scoffed, completely unfazed by her words. “You’ll see soon enough, Agent Cross. You’ll feel the power for yourself.”

“Power?” Morgan spat. “What you’re doing is disgusting. It’s monstrous, and it won’t save you from your own twisted reflection.”

For a moment, she thought she saw a flicker of doubt in his eyes. But it vanished almost instantly, replaced by cold determination. With a swift motion, he raised the scalpel towards Harriet, who whimpered and squirmed in her restraints.

“Stop!” Morgan shouted, straining against her own bindings. She had to distract him, keep him talking while she searched for a way out. “John, listen to me. This won’t give you the results you want. The pain, the suffering you inflict on others... that’s the true ugliness inside you.”

“Silence!” John snapped his grip on the scalpel tightening. “Your words mean nothing. I’ve heard them all before, from the other women who begged for mercy. They didn’t sway me then, and they certainly won’t now.”

“Those other women weren’t FBI agents, John,” Morgan said, her gaze locked on the scalpel as it hovered over Harriet’s pale skin. “They didn’t have a backup on the way or a team of people searching for them right now.”

“Empty threats won’t save either of you,” John sneered, drawing the scalpel closer to Harriet’s throat. “It’s just you, me, and sweet Harriet here. No one is coming for you.”

Harriet’s eyes widened with terror as she caught sight of John’s deformed face, and she instinctively recoiled from him. Her reaction seemed to strike a nerve deep within John as his

face contorted in rage, and he dropped the scalpel, clattering to the floor.

“Stupid girl!” he snarled, his voice shaking with fury. “You think you can judge me? You have no idea what I’ve been through!”

Morgan saw her chance—John’s weakness was his own twisted appearance. She knew that beneath the layers of scarred flesh, he longed for the beauty he believed he could steal from others. As he raged at Harriet, Morgan shifted her head subtly, working to loosen the restraints holding her in place. From the corner of her eye, she spotted another scalpel resting on a nearby table, tantalizingly close.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The sun dipped low in the sky, casting long shadows across the abandoned warehouse as Derik stepped out of his car. His heart pounded in his chest, and a sick feeling gnawed at the pit of his stomach. Morgan was supposed to be back at the precinct by now, but she'd never shown up. The tracking device on her shirt said she was there.

"Dammit, Morgan," he muttered under his breath, scanning the desolate area for any sign of her. He couldn't shake the sinking feeling that something had gone terribly wrong.

Derik's eyes locked onto a small glint of light in the dirt, and he quickly made his way over to it. Kneeling down, he brushed away the soil to reveal the tiny, blinking tracking device. It was no longer attached to Morgan's shirt, just lying there discarded and useless.

"Shit," he whispered, balling his fists tightly. He knew he shouldn't have let her go alone. Even if John Pesci demanded it, they should have found another way. Now, she was missing, and he was left with nothing but a cold, empty warehouse and a growing sense of dread.

"Where are you, Morgan?" he asked aloud, frustration seeping into his voice. "What happened to you?"

He scanned the warehouse one more time, looking for any clues or signs that might lead him to her. But there was nothing—just the hollow shell of a building and the distant rustle of wind stirring up dust.

"Think, Derik. Think," he urged himself, his mind racing as he tried to piece together what could have happened to her. Was she still inside, hiding from Pesci? Or had she gone off in search of him on her own?

"Damn it, Morgan," he growled, kicking at the dirt beneath his feet. "Why didn't you wait for backup?"

He knew she was stubborn and fiercely independent, but this was different. This was life or death, and Derik couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible had happened to her.

“Okay,” he said, taking a deep breath and forcing himself to focus. “You need to find her, Derik. You can't let her down again.”

With renewed determination, he gripped the tracking device tightly in his hand and began to search for any sign of his partner. He refused to give up on Morgan—she was out there somewhere, and he would find her, no matter what it took.

The wind picked up, sending a shiver down Derik's spine as he stood in the empty lot outside the warehouse. A sense of dread began to gnaw at him, feeding on his growing fear for Morgan. He couldn't shake the horrible feeling that she had gone to face the killer alone - or worse that John Pesci had gotten to her first.

“God damn it,” Derik muttered under his breath, clenching the tracking device so hard his knuckles turned white.

His heart raced, thoughts spiraling out of control. He knew what Morgan was capable of, but he also knew the monster they were up against. John Pesci was a cold-blooded killer who took pleasure in causing pain and suffering. What if...?

“Focus, Derik!” he scolded himself, forcing his mind back to the present. Panic wouldn't help Morgan now. What would, however, was finding her.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Morgan's heart thundered in her chest as she strained against the ropes binding her hands. Sweat beaded on her forehead, the effort to free herself leaving her muscles trembling. All the while, John Pesci approached Harriet with a needle, his deformed face twisted in cruel anticipation.

Come on, damn it! Morgan thought desperately. She could feel the rope starting to give way, but she needed more time. Time she didn't have.

"Please don't hurt me," Harriet whimpered, tears streaming down her face as she stared into the eyes of her tormentor.

"Shh," John cooed, an unsettling smile curving his lips. "This will only hurt for a moment, my dear."

"Hey, Pesci!" Morgan shouted, hoping to buy herself those precious few extra seconds. "Why don't you come over here and deal with me instead?"

John hesitated, glancing over at Morgan with a look of irritation. "You're not going anywhere, Agent Cross. I'll deal with you in due time."

"Your time's running out," she spat back, her fingers finally finding purchase on the knot.

With one final, desperate tug, she felt the rope give way. The sudden release sent a surge of adrenaline coursing through her veins, and she seized the opportunity.

"John," Morgan interjected, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. "She didn't mean anything by it. Don't take it out on her. Focus on me."

The distraction seemed to work as John turned his attention back to Morgan, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. "What are you playing at?"

“Nothing,” she replied, her heart pounding. “I just know that whatever you’re going through, hurting Harriet won’t help.”

“Save your pity,” he spat, taking a step closer to Morgan. “I don’t need it.”

“Maybe not,” Morgan conceded, her fingers twitching toward the loosened restraint. “But there’s something else you do need, isn’t there? Something you’ve been chasing all this time.”

“Shut up,” John growled, but Morgan could tell she had struck a nerve. She continued, her voice gaining strength as she spoke.

“Beauty, John. That’s what you want, isn’t it? You think these... experiments will make you beautiful again. But they won’t.”

“Enough!” John roared, but Morgan pressed on, knowing she was close to freeing herself.

“You can’t steal beauty from others, John,” she said, her fingers brushing against the cool metal of the scalpel as she finally wrenched her hand free from its restraint. “No matter how many women you hurt or how much youth you try to extract—it won’t change who you are. Your actions have made you monstrous, and it won’t save you from your own twisted reflection.”

“Silence!” John shouted. Good. It was working. She needed him away from Harriet. Once he got close enough, she’d get him.

“You’re an ugly piece of work; you know that? You look old, wrinkly, disgusting. No wonder you’re so obsessed with youth.”

John stopped in his tracks and turned away from Harriet, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he focused on Morgan. She smiled smugly, knowing she had successfully diverted his attention from his hostage.

“Excuse me?” he snarled, taking a menacing step towards her. The needle in his hand gleamed under the harsh overhead

lighting.

“Face it, Pesci,” Morgan taunted, her heart racing as she fought to maintain her composure. Her mind raced, devising a plan to free herself from her restraints and save Harriet.

“You’re hideous. All this time, all these lives you’ve destroyed... and you still look like something crawled out of a sewer.”

“Shut up!” John roared, his face contorting in rage. The veins in his neck bulged as his fury grew.

Morgan’s palms were slick with sweat as she discreetly worked on loosening her bonds more, using John’s distraction to her advantage. Her fingers ached as they fumbled with the knot, but she couldn’t afford to waste any more time.

“Can’t handle the truth?” she goaded, her pulse pounding in her ears. “No amount of stolen youth will ever make you beautiful, Pesci. You’ll always be a monster.”

“Enough!” John bellowed, advancing towards Morgan with murderous intent. His deformed features twisted into a snarl, casting grotesque shadows across the room.

As he loomed over her, Morgan’s hand finally slipped free of the rope. Suppressing a triumphant grin, she flexed her fingers, feeling the blood rush back into them with a tingling sensation. She had to time her next move perfectly.

“Go ahead,” she taunted, meeting his gaze unflinchingly. “Do your worst. But just remember – you’ll always be ugly on the inside and out.”

“Shut up!” he screamed, and then he lunged toward Morgan.

With a surge of adrenaline, Morgan’s hand shot out, and her fingers closed around the cold handle of the scalpel. In one swift movement, she jabbed it into John’s face.

“Argh!” he screamed, stumbling backward as blood spurted from the wound. His hands flew to his face, trying in vain to stem the flow.

Seizing the opportunity, Morgan quickly freed herself from her remaining restraints, her heart hammering in her chest. She had only seconds to act before John regained his composure.

“Harriet,” she whispered urgently, “I need you to stay calm, okay? I’m going to get us both out of here.”

But even as the words left her lips, Morgan knew she hadn’t been fast enough. John snatched up another scalpel from the table, his eyes burning with rage as he moved swiftly towards Harriet.

“Stay back!” he snarled, pressing the sharp edge of the blade against Harriet’s throat. The young woman whimpered, her eyes wide with terror as she looked helplessly at Morgan.

“Please!” Morgan shouted, fear constricting around her heart like a vice. “Don’t hurt her!”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t,” John spat, his voice thick with venom. “She doesn’t mean anything to me. But you – you’re something special, Morgan.”

“Then let her go, and take me instead!” Morgan implored, struggling to keep her voice steady despite the panic rising within her. “She has nothing to do with this! It’s always been about you and me, right?”

John regarded her for a long moment, his gaze flickering between Morgan’s desperate eyes and the trembling form of Harriet. Finally, he gave a low, humorless chuckle.

“Nice try, Agent Cross,” he sneered. “But you’ve already proven that you’re not as smart as I thought you were. You think I’d let her go just because you ask nicely?”

“John, please,” Morgan whispered, her stomach churning with dread. “She’s innocent.”

“Are any of us truly innocent?” he mused, the scalpel pressing tighter against Harriet’s throat, drawing a thin line of blood. “No matter. I’ll deal with you later, Morgan.”

Inwardly cursing her failure, Morgan’s mind raced, searching for a way to save Harriet without putting them both in even more danger. She had come so far, but now she was

out of time and options. Her best bet was to play with his twisted mind.

“Fight me instead, John,” Morgan challenged, her voice firm and unwavering. “Leave Harriet out of this. John, if you kill Harriet like this, you’ll destroy her essence. What good will that do for you? Face me instead.”

John hesitated, his grip on the scalpel tightening. The crazed look in his eyes flickered momentarily as if he was considering Morgan’s proposition.

“Alright,” he finally agreed with a sinister grin. “Let’s see just how good you really are, Agent Cross.”

As he slowly backed away from Harriet, Morgan’s gaze swept the room, searching for any advantage she could use against him. That’s when she noticed the unusual décor – all the mirrors and shiny surfaces in the room were covered in white sheets. A realization struck her like lightning: John hated his own reflection.

Her eyes darted around until they landed on a small hand mirror lying face-down on the floor. An idea began to form in her mind, but she needed to play it cool.

“Fine, let’s do this,” Morgan said, her heart pounding with both fear and determination. She stepped away from the table, keeping her movements slow and calculated. As she moved closer to the discarded mirror, she silently prayed that her plan would work.

“Are you ready?” John taunted, brandishing the scalpel menacingly. “Or is the great Morgan Cross too afraid to face me?”

“Bring it on,” Morgan replied, her voice steady despite the turmoil raging inside her. She had faced countless horrors in her time, and she wasn’t about to let this monster win. Not today.

As John stalked toward her, Morgan forced herself to remain calm, calculating the distance between them and the hand mirror lying face-down on the floor. She only had one chance at this – she couldn’t afford to miss.

“Is this your idea of being a man, John?” she taunted, watching his every move. “Hiding behind innocent women and torturing them to make yourself feel powerful?”

“Shut up!” John snapped, his rage only fueling Morgan’s determination. “You don’t know anything about me!”

“Maybe not,” Morgan countered, inching closer to the mirror. “But I know enough to see that you’re nothing more than a pathetic, twisted monster.”

With a roar, John lunged at her, his fingers outstretched and grasping for her throat. Just as he reached her, Morgan sidestepped, quickly bending down to snatch up the hand mirror in one swift motion. Before he could react, she thrust the mirror into his face, forcing him to confront his own grotesque reflection.

“Take a good look at yourself, John,” she hissed, holding the mirror steady even as he writhed in agony before it. “This is what you are – a hideous abomination.”

“NO!” he screamed, the sound raw and guttural, his hands clawing at his face as if he could somehow rip the ugliness away. Morgan watched him, her heart pounding in her chest, but she refused to let herself feel pity for the man who had caused so much pain and suffering.

“Face it, John,” she said softly, her eyes never leaving his tormented figure. “You can’t escape what you’ve become.”

As John sobbed uncontrollably, Morgan knew that she had won. She had exposed the truth and, in doing so, had stripped him of his power. It was time to put an end to this nightmare once and for all.

Morgan’s grip on the mirror tightened, her knuckles turning white as John’s anguished cries filled the sterile room. She knew she had to act quickly before he could regain his composure and lash out again.

Taking advantage of John’s momentary vulnerability, Morgan lunged forward, grabbing a coil of rope that lay discarded on a nearby table. Her heart raced as she rushed towards him, the weight of the rope heavy in her hands.

“Enough!” she shouted, wrapping the rope around his wrists, binding him. John struggled against her, but the pain he was feeling from seeing his own reflection weakened him, allowing Morgan to secure the knots tightly.

As John writhed on the floor, his face contorted in agony; Morgan stared down at him with a mixture of disgust and pity. “You think you’re some kind of artist,” she spat, her voice laced with contempt. “But all you’ve done is destroy lives.”

“Please... please stop...” John whimpered, unable to look away from his grotesque reflection in the mirror Morgan still held.

Morgan’s gaze hardened, and she leaned closer to him, her voice cold and unforgiving. “You’ll never hurt anyone again, John. I’ll make sure of that.”

With a sudden surge of determination, Morgan yanked the mirror away from John’s line of sight, leaving him gasping for breath on the floor. As he shook with sobs, she couldn’t help but feel a grim satisfaction knowing that he would never escape the reality of what he truly was – a monster.

“Listen closely,” she told him, her voice barely above a whisper. “When you’re locked away, I’ll make sure your cell is filled with mirrors. You’ll be forced to confront your ugliness every single day, just like your victims had to endure the horror you inflicted upon them.”

John’s eyes widened in terror, and he began to sob even harder. Morgan knew she had gotten through to him, and the thought filled her with a cold satisfaction.

“Goodbye, John,” she said, turning away from the broken man on the floor. As she walked towards Harriet, Morgan couldn’t help but feel a sense of relief wash over her; it was finally over. The monster would be caged, and the women he had tormented could be avenged. And as for herself, maybe now she could start to put the past behind her and find some semblance of peace.

EPILOGUE

Morgan stepped into AD Mueller's dimly lit office, the glow of the city skyline casting shadows across his face. She had never liked the man; perhaps it was the condescending tone he always seemed to reserve for her or the lack of trust that hung like a dark cloud between them. As she moved closer to his desk, she couldn't help but feel the weight of her recent triumph on her shoulders.

"Agent Cross," Mueller greeted her, his gruff voice betraying a hint of surprise. "I must say, I didn't expect to see you here tonight."

"Neither did I," Morgan replied, her voice steady and confident. "But I've got news about John Pesci."

"Ah, yes," Mueller leaned forward in his chair, the light catching his graying hair. "You managed to apprehend him, as I understand it. Quite impressive, considering your... history."

"Is that your way of saying 'good job,' sir?" Morgan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Let's just say I'm glad you proved me wrong," Mueller admitted, bitterness tinging his words. "I didn't expect much from you after what happened ten years ago. But you've shown me that you're still a capable agent."

"Thank you, sir," Morgan said, biting back a retort. "Harriet Holland is safe now, and Pesci won't be hurting anyone else."

"Good," Mueller replied. "That's what we need - agents who can get results. We want you back on full-time, Cross. You've earned it."

"Really?" Morgan asked, taken aback. "Just like that?"

"Of course," Mueller said, studying her closely. "You've proven yourself, even if our trust in each other isn't fully restored. You have my apologies for misjudging you before."

She wasn't sure how to feel about Mueller's sudden change of character toward her. Was he just acknowledging that she was a capable agent, or was it another trick? It was in Morgan's best bet to keep the FBI at a close reach. But she also needed to gauge Mueller.

"Sir, there's something I need to ask you," Morgan said, her voice steady despite the nerves knotting in her stomach. She fixed her gaze on Mueller, searching for any signs of deceit in his face.

"Go ahead," he replied, his brow furrowing slightly as he leaned back in his chair.

"Derik," she began, swallowing hard. "Do you know anything about what he's been hiding from me?"

Mueller's expression shifted from curiosity to confusion. "I'm not sure what you're talking about, Cross."

"Are you sure?" Morgan pressed. "Because Derik admitted he's been hiding things from me—he just hasn't told me what."

"Cross, I assure you, I have no idea what you're talking about." Mueller frowned, clearly thrown off by her question. "As far as I'm concerned, Derik is a loyal and reliable agent. And he cares about you, Cross. Are you sure you want to push him away?"

Morgan studied his face, trying to discern whether he was telling the truth or simply playing dumb. After a moment, she decided it didn't matter; either way, she couldn't trust him completely.

"Alright," she said finally, her voice betraying a hint of disappointment. "Thank you, sir."

"Is there anything else?" Mueller asked, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

"No," Morgan replied, her jaw set. "That's all."

"Very well," Mueller said with a curt nod. "Goodnight, Agent Cross."

"Goodnight, sir," she echoed, turning to leave his office.

As the door closed behind her, Morgan couldn't shake the feeling that she had just walked away from a potential ally - or perhaps an unwitting pawn in a much larger game. It was impossible to tell which side of the line Mueller fell on, but one thing was certain: she would have to tread carefully in the days ahead. Trust, after all, was a luxury she could no longer afford.

The darkness of the parking lot enveloped Morgan as she stepped outside, her heels clicking against the pavement. The cool night air was a welcome relief from the oppressive confines of the FBI office. She took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind and shake off the uncertain tension left in Mueller's wake.

"Morgan."

Morgan stopped in her tracks, recognizing Derik's voice coming from somewhere behind her. He stepped out of the shadows, his expression unreadable beneath the dim glow of the streetlights.

"Derik," she said, her voice colder than she intended. "You've got some nerve showing up here."

"I owe you an explanation," he admitted, running a hand through his hair. "I should have told you sooner."

"Damn right, you should have," Morgan snapped, anger surging through her veins. "So, what is it? What's going on?"

Derik hesitated for a moment, looking down at the ground before meeting her gaze. "It's complicated, Morgan. But I promise you, everything I did was to protect you."

"Protect me?" Morgan scoffed, folding her arms across her chest. "By keeping me in the dark? By hiding things from me? That's not protection, Derik. That's betrayal."

"Look, I know how it seems," Derik pleaded, taking a step closer to her. "But there are things you don't understand."

Things I couldn't tell you."

"Try me," she challenged, her eyes narrowing. "I think I deserve to know the truth after all this time."

Derik sighed, the weight of his secrets pressing down on him. "Alright," he conceded. "But not here. Let's go somewhere we can talk privately."

"Fine," Morgan agreed, her jaw clenched with determination. "But this better be good, Derik. I'm done with lies and half-truths."

As they walked side by side towards her car, Morgan's thoughts raced with anticipation and trepidation. She had given Derik a chance to come clean, but she couldn't help wondering what his explanation would reveal - and whether it would be enough to repair the trust that had been shattered between them.

Morgan slid into the driver's seat of her car, and Derik eased himself into the passenger seat. The dashboard cast a dim glow over their faces as they sat in silence for a moment, the air between them heavy with unspoken words.

"Alright," Derik began, his voice cracking slightly. "You remember Darren La Roux, the guy whose file you found at my place?"

"Of course," Morgan said tersely, her hands gripping the steering wheel tightly. "I've been trying to figure out why you had it ever since."

Derik exhaled slowly, rubbing the back of his neck. "After you were framed for murder, I was approached by the people responsible. They knew I was close to you, and they tried to use me to get to you."

"By threatening me?" Morgan's voice was ice-cold, her expression unreadable.

"Yes," Derik admitted, his gaze flickering away from hers. "They threatened to hurt you again, lock you up if I didn't drop the case. I couldn't risk putting you in more danger, so I complied."

“Then why did you keep the file?” Morgan asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Because they mentioned something about Darren La Roux being involved, and I wanted to find out why. I kept digging into his past, trying to piece together what he had to do with your framing,” Derik explained a note of desperation in his voice. “But I couldn’t tell you, Cross. I couldn’t risk them finding out I was still looking into it.”

Morgan stared at him, her mind racing with anger and confusion. She wanted to yell, to scream at him for keeping this secret, but instead, she forced herself to remain calm. “Names, Derik. Give me names.”

“I can’t,” Derik said quietly, his eyes filled with regret. “I just... can’t.”

“Convenient,” Morgan muttered under her breath, her fingers drumming against the steering wheel.

“Cross, I’m telling you the truth,” Derik insisted, his eyes pleading with hers. “I’ve been trying to find out who’s behind this, but they’ve covered their tracks too well. I couldn’t risk telling you until now when we finally have a lead.”

Morgan clenched her jaw, battling the storm of emotions raging inside her. She wanted to believe him, but trust was not something she could easily give anymore. Not after everything that had happened.

And all the affection he’d been showing her—the kissing, the romance... it was all fake, wasn’t it? Emotions he’d faked to manipulate her. He was a liar, and she couldn’t trust a word he said. But part of her believed there was some truth to his story, that he really did talk to the people who had framed her—and that he knew who they were.

But it didn’t help her because he wasn’t telling her anything.

Morgan stared at Derik, her eyes narrowing into slits as she processed his words. The moonlight cast flickering shadows on the pavement, painting a picture of deception and betrayal

that mirrored her thoughts. Her voice was laced with ice as she spoke.

“You’re a coward, Derik. You should’ve told me the truth from the beginning. But you didn’t, and now... I’m done with you.”

“Please, Morgan, reconsider,” Derik’s voice cracked with desperation. “I did this to protect you. I couldn’t bear the thought of them hurting you again.”

“Protect me?” Morgan scoffed, her anger bubbling up like lava ready to explode. “By keeping me in the dark? By letting me think I was crazy for believing someone was still after me?”

“Cross, please,” Derik pleaded, reaching out to grasp her arm. She jerked away, her gaze never leaving his tormented eyes.

“Get your hands off me,” she hissed, stepping back. “From now on, I work alone. I trust no one.” With that, she turned on her heel and stormed away, her footsteps echoing through the empty parking lot.

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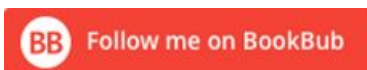
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