

BLAKE PIERCE

LET

HER

BELIEVE

A FIONA RED MYSTERY--BOOK #8

LET HER BELIEVE

(A Fiona Red Mystery —Book Eight)

BLAKE PIERCE

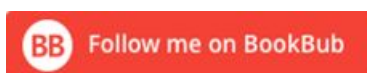
Blake Pierce

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

of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), and of the new FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery—Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1), [NEXT DOOR](#) (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 1), [THE PERFECT WIFE](#) (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book One), [IF SHE KNEW](#) (A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 1), [MURDER \(AND BAKLAVA\)](#) (A European Voyage Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [LEFT TO DIE](#) (An Adele Sharp Mystery—Book One), [A MURDER IN PARIS](#) (A Year in Europe—Book 1), [CITY OF PREY](#) (An Ava Gold Mystery—Book One), and [HER LAST WISH](#) (A Rachel Gift FBI Suspense Thriller—Book One) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

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



Copyright © 2023 by Blake Pierce. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Jacket image Copyright Andrus Ciprian used under license from Shutterstock.com.

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

FINN WRIGHT MYSTERY SERIES

WHEN YOU'RE MINE (Book #1)

WHEN YOU'RE SAFE (Book #2)

WHEN YOU'RE CLOSE (Book #3)

WHEN YOU'RE SLEEPING (Book #4)

WHEN YOU'RE SANE (Book #5)

MORGAN CROSS MYSTERY SERIES

FOR YOU (Book #1)

FOR RAGE (Book #2)

FOR LUST (Book #3)

FOR WRATH (Book #4)

FOREVER (Book #5)

FOR US (Book #6)

FOR NOW (Book #7)

JULIETTE HART MYSTERY SERIES

NOTHING TO FEAR (Book #1)

NOTHING THERE (Book #2)

NOTHING WATCHING (Book #3)

NOTHING HIDING (Book #4)

NOTHING LEFT (Book #5)

FAITH BOLD MYSTERY SERIES

SO LONG (Book #1)
SO COLD (Book #2)
SO SCARED (Book #3)
SO NORMAL (Book #4)
SO FAR GONE (Book #5)
SO LOST (Book #6)
SO ALONE (Book #7)
SO FORGOTTEN (Book #8)

FIONA RED MYSTERY SERIES

LET HER GO (Book #1)
LET HER BE (Book #2)
LET HER HOPE (Book #3)
LET HER WISH (Book #4)
LET HER LIVE (Book #5)
LET HER RUN (Book #6)
LET HER HIDE (Book #7)
LET HER BELIEVE (Book #8)
LET HER FORGET (Book #9)

DAISY FORTUNE MYSTERY SERIES

NEED YOU (Book #1)
CLAIM YOU (Book #2)
CRAVE YOU (Book #3)
CHOOSE YOU (Book #4)
CHASE YOU (Book #5)

AMBER YOUNG MYSTERY SERIES

ABSENT PITY (Book #1)
ABSENT REMORSE (Book #2)

ABSENT FEELING (Book #3)
ABSENT MERCY (Book #4)
ABSENT REASON (Book #5)
ABSENT SANITY (Book #6)
ABSENT LIFE (Book #7)

CAMI LARK MYSTERY SERIES

JUST ME (Book #1)
JUST OUTSIDE (Book #2)
JUST RIGHT (Book #3)
JUST FORGET (Book #4)
JUST ONCE (Book #5)
JUST HIDE (Book #6)
JUST NOW (Book #7)
JUST HOPE (Book #8)
JUST LEAVE (Book #9)

NICKY LYONS MYSTERY SERIES

ALL MINE (Book #1)
ALL HIS (Book #2)
ALL HE SEES (Book #3)
ALL ALONE (Book #4)
ALL FOR ONE (Book #5)
ALL HE TAKES (Book #6)
ALL FOR ME (Book #7)
ALL IN (Book #8)

CORA SHIELDS MYSTERY SERIES

UNDONE (Book #1)
UNWANTED (Book #2)

UNHINGED (Book #3)

UNSAID (Book #4)

UNGLUED (Book #5)

UNSTABLE (Book #6)

UNKNOWN (Book #7)

UNAWARE (Book #8)

MAY MOORE SUSPENSE THRILLER

NEVER RUN (Book #1)

NEVER TELL (Book #2)

NEVER LIVE (Book #3)

NEVER HIDE (Book #4)

NEVER FORGIVE (Book #5)

NEVER AGAIN (Book #6)

NEVER LOOK BACK (Book #7)

NEVER FORGET (Book #8)

NEVER LET GO (Book #9)

NEVER PRETEND (Book #10)

NEVER HESITATE (Book #11)

PAIGE KING MYSTERY SERIES

THE GIRL HE PINED (Book #1)

THE GIRL HE CHOSE (Book #2)

THE GIRL HE TOOK (Book #3)

THE GIRL HE WISHED (Book #4)

THE GIRL HE CROWNED (Book #5)

THE GIRL HE WATCHED (Book #6)

THE GIRL HE WANTED (Book #7)

THE GIRL HE CLAIMED (Book #8)

VALERIE LAW MYSTERY SERIES

NO MERCY (Book #1)

NO PITY (Book #2)

NO FEAR (Book #3)

NO SLEEP (Book #4)

NO QUARTER (Book #5)

NO CHANCE (Book #6)

NO REFUGE (Book #7)

NO GRACE (Book #8)

NO ESCAPE (Book #9)

RACHEL GIFT MYSTERY SERIES

HER LAST WISH (Book #1)

HER LAST CHANCE (Book #2)

HER LAST HOPE (Book #3)

HER LAST FEAR (Book #4)

HER LAST CHOICE (Book #5)

HER LAST BREATH (Book #6)

HER LAST MISTAKE (Book #7)

HER LAST DESIRE (Book #8)

HER LAST REGRET (Book #9)

HER LAST HOUR (Book #10)

HER LAST SHOT (Book #11)

HER LAST PRAYER (Book #12)

HER LAST LIE (Book #13)

AVA GOLD MYSTERY SERIES

CITY OF PREY (Book #1)

CITY OF FEAR (Book #2)

CITY OF BONES (Book #3)

CITY OF GHOSTS (Book #4)

CITY OF DEATH (Book #5)

CITY OF VICE (Book #6)

A YEAR IN EUROPE

A MURDER IN PARIS (Book #1)

DEATH IN FLORENCE (Book #2)

VENGEANCE IN VIENNA (Book #3)

A FATALITY IN SPAIN (Book #4)

ELLA DARK FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

GIRL, ALONE (Book #1)

GIRL, TAKEN (Book #2)

GIRL, HUNTED (Book #3)

GIRL, SILENCED (Book #4)

GIRL, VANISHED (Book 5)

GIRL ERASED (Book #6)

GIRL, FORSAKEN (Book #7)

GIRL, TRAPPED (Book #8)

GIRL, EXPENDABLE (Book #9)

GIRL, ESCAPED (Book #10)

GIRL, HIS (Book #11)

GIRL, LURED (Book #12)

GIRL, MISSING (Book #13)

GIRL, UNKNOWN (Book #14)

GIRL, DECEIVED (Book #15)

GIRL, FORLORN (Book #16)

GIRL, REMADE (Book #17)

GIRL, BETRAYED (Book #18)

GIRL, BOUND (Book #19)

GIRL, REFORMED (Book #20)

GIRL, REBORN (Book #21)

LAURA FROST FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

ALREADY GONE (Book #1)

ALREADY SEEN (Book #2)

ALREADY TRAPPED (Book #3)

ALREADY MISSING (Book #4)

ALREADY DEAD (Book #5)

ALREADY TAKEN (Book #6)

ALREADY CHOSEN (Book #7)

ALREADY LOST (Book #8)

ALREADY HIS (Book #9)

ALREADY LURED (Book #10)

ALREADY COLD (Book #11)

EUROPEAN VOYAGE COZY MYSTERY SERIES

MURDER (AND BAKLAVA) (Book #1)

DEATH (AND APPLE STRUDEL) (Book #2)

CRIME (AND LAGER) (Book #3)

MISFORTUNE (AND GOUDA) (Book #4)

CALAMITY (AND A DANISH) (Book #5)

MAYHEM (AND HERRING) (Book #6)

ADELE SHARP MYSTERY SERIES

LEFT TO DIE (Book #1)

LEFT TO RUN (Book #2)

LEFT TO HIDE (Book #3)

LEFT TO KILL (Book #4)

LEFT TO MURDER (Book #5)

LEFT TO ENVY (Book #6)
LEFT TO LAPSE (Book #7)
LEFT TO VANISH (Book #8)
LEFT TO HUNT (Book #9)
LEFT TO FEAR (Book #10)
LEFT TO PREY (Book #11)
LEFT TO LURE (Book #12)
LEFT TO CRAVE (Book #13)
LEFT TO LOATHE (Book #14)
LEFT TO HARM (Book #15)
LEFT TO RUIN (Book #16)

THE AU PAIR SERIES

ALMOST GONE (Book#1)
ALMOST LOST (Book #2)
ALMOST DEAD (Book #3)

ZOE PRIME MYSTERY SERIES

FACE OF DEATH (Book#1)
FACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
FACE OF FEAR (Book #3)
FACE OF MADNESS (Book #4)
FACE OF FURY (Book #5)
FACE OF DARKNESS (Book #6)

**A JESSIE HUNT PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE
SERIES**

THE PERFECT WIFE (Book #1)
THE PERFECT BLOCK (Book #2)
THE PERFECT HOUSE (Book #3)

THE PERFECT SMILE (Book #4)
THE PERFECT LIE (Book #5)
THE PERFECT LOOK (Book #6)
THE PERFECT AFFAIR (Book #7)
THE PERFECT ALIBI (Book #8)
THE PERFECT NEIGHBOR (Book #9)
THE PERFECT DISGUISE (Book #10)
THE PERFECT SECRET (Book #11)
THE PERFECT FAÇADE (Book #12)
THE PERFECT IMPRESSION (Book #13)
THE PERFECT DECEIT (Book #14)
THE PERFECT MISTRESS (Book #15)
THE PERFECT IMAGE (Book #16)
THE PERFECT VEIL (Book #17)
THE PERFECT INDISCRETION (Book #18)
THE PERFECT RUMOR (Book #19)
THE PERFECT COUPLE (Book #20)
THE PERFECT MURDER (Book #21)
THE PERFECT HUSBAND (Book #22)
THE PERFECT SCANDAL (Book #23)
THE PERFECT MASK (Book #24)
THE PERFECT RUSE (Book #25)
THE PERFECT VENEER (Book #26)
THE PERFECT PEOPLE (Book #27)
THE PERFECT WITNESS (Book #28)
THE PERFECT APPEARANCE (Book #29)
THE PERFECT TRAP (Book #30)
THE PERFECT EXPRESSION (Book #31)

CHLOE FINE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

NEXT DOOR (Book #1)
A NEIGHBOR'S LIE (Book #2)
CUL DE SAC (Book #3)
SILENT NEIGHBOR (Book #4)
HOMECOMING (Book #5)
TINTED WINDOWS (Book #6)

KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES

IF SHE KNEW (Book #1)
IF SHE SAW (Book #2)
IF SHE RAN (Book #3)
IF SHE HID (Book #4)
IF SHE FLED (Book #5)
IF SHE FEARED (Book #6)
IF SHE HEARD (Book #7)

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE SERIES

WATCHING (Book #1)
WAITING (Book #2)
LURING (Book #3)
TAKING (Book #4)
STALKING (Book #5)
KILLING (Book #6)

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)
ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)
ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)
ONCE LURED (Book #4)
ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)

ONCE PINED (Book #6)
ONCE FORSAKEN (Book #7)
ONCE COLD (Book #8)
ONCE STALKED (Book #9)
ONCE LOST (Book #10)
ONCE BURIED (Book #11)
ONCE BOUND (Book #12)
ONCE TRAPPED (Book #13)
ONCE DORMANT (Book #14)
ONCE SHUNNED (Book #15)
ONCE MISSED (Book #16)
ONCE CHOSEN (Book #17)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)
BEFORE HE SEES (Book #2)
BEFORE HE COVETS (Book #3)
BEFORE HE TAKES (Book #4)
BEFORE HE NEEDS (Book #5)
BEFORE HE FEELS (Book #6)
BEFORE HE SINS (Book #7)
BEFORE HE HUNTS (Book #8)
BEFORE HE PREYS (Book #9)
BEFORE HE LONGS (Book #10)
BEFORE HE LAPSES (Book #11)
BEFORE HE ENVIES (Book #12)
BEFORE HE STALKS (Book #13)
BEFORE HE HARMS (Book #14)

AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES

CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)
CAUSE TO RUN (Book #2)
CAUSE TO HIDE (Book #3)
CAUSE TO FEAR (Book #4)
CAUSE TO SAVE (Book #5)
CAUSE TO DREAD (Book #6)

KERI LOCKE MYSTERY SERIES

A TRACE OF DEATH (Book #1)
A TRACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
A TRACE OF VICE (Book #3)
A TRACE OF CRIME (Book #4)
A TRACE OF HOPE (Book #5)

CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY NINE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY ONE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY TWO](#)

PROLOGUE

The sun dipped low in the Nevada sky as Julian, a docent at the Silver Sage Museum of Natural History, made his way through the dimly lit insect wing. His footsteps echoed against the polished stone floor, mingling with the soft murmurs of the few lingering guests. The museum's closing time had arrived, and though Julian was eager to finish his shift and escape the suffocating stillness of the insect displays, he maintained a friendly demeanor as he approached each visitor.

"Thank you for coming," he said with a practiced smile, gently guiding an elderly couple toward the exit. "We hope to see you again soon."

"Such a fascinating place," the old man replied, his eyes twinkling with genuine appreciation. "We'll definitely be back."

Julian nodded and ushered them out, his mind already racing ahead to his plans for the evening. Going home, relaxing on the couch... yes, that sounded just perfect.

Just then, one of the security guards came over, a somewhat distressed look on his face. "Julian, did you see any shady characters around here?" he asked. "A customer mentioned they saw someone odd milling about."

Julian frowned, racking his brain for the information, but came back empty-handed. "No one that stood out."

The guard nodded. "It was probably nothing then. I'll leave you to it." With that, he took off. Julian thought nothing more of it; they were a busy museum, and sometimes people came in to steal or something, and that was probably all it was.

Julian focused his attention on clearing out the remaining guests. As the heavy doors swung shut behind the final couple, the silence in the wing seemed to deepen. Julian paused for a moment, listening to the faint hum of air conditioning and the rustle of wings in the live butterfly exhibit.

“Is anyone else here?” he called out, raising his voice just enough to carry through the shadowy corridors. When no reply came, Julian allowed himself a sigh of relief. He could finally close up. It had been a long, arduous day tending to the exhibits and greeting guests, and he couldn’t wait to go home.

As he turned to head back to the front desk, however, something caught his eye. On one of the benches nestled between the glass cases of beetles and moths, a man lay sprawled out, his back turned to Julian as if asleep. Julian frowned, annoyance prickling at the edges of his thoughts. How had he missed this straggler?

“Sir?” he called, approaching cautiously. “The museum is closing. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

The man didn’t stir, his body stiff as a board on the bench. Julian’s heart began to beat a bit faster, his unease growing. Was the man drunk? Ill? He drew closer, noting the pallor of the man’s skin and the unnatural stillness that seemed to surround him.

“Sir?” he asked again, his voice wavering slightly. “Are you alright?”

As Julian reached out a hesitant hand to shake the man’s shoulder, he couldn’t help but wonder what kind of strange twist of fate had led this particular visitor to fall asleep in the insect wing, surrounded by the creeping, crawling creatures that inhabited the displays. And more importantly, he wondered how he was going to handle the situation if the man refused to wake up.

With a deep breath, Julian steeled himself and reached out to shake the man’s shoulder. “Sir, wake up,” he urged, his voice firmer this time. As he touched the man’s arm, an icy chill shot through him, freezing the words in his throat. The man’s skin was like marble – cold and unyielding.

“Hey, mister!” Panic edged Julian’s voice as he shook the man more vigorously, but it was no use. There was no response, no rise and fall of the chest. Julian pulled at his shoulder, and the man limply fell to his back, revealing his man’s eyes – wide open, staring glassily at the ceiling.

And that was when Julian noticed the blood.

A pool of it through the man's shirt, as though he'd been stabbed in the chest.

Julian screamed, his hand instinctively flying to his mouth as he stared in horror at the lifeless figure before him. At that moment, a grotesque detail caught his attention: a small, dead caterpillar lay on the man's forehead.

"Wh-what's going on?" Julian stammered, his mind racing with questions. How had this happened? Who had done this?

As the realization set in, Julian's chest tightened, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps. He needed help. Now. Fumbling for his walkie-talkie, he pressed the button to connect with security, his voice shaking.

"Security, this is Julian in the insect wing. I-I need assistance immediately. There's a man here... he's... he's not breathing. He looks like he's been stabbed. Send help now, please!"

"Copy that, Julian. We're on our way," crackled the voice on the other end, only serving to deepen the pit of dread in Julian's stomach.

"Please hurry," he whispered, his eyes never leaving the dead man on the bench. The caterpillar, dead on the man's forehead, seemed to mock him.

And Julian couldn't shake the feeling that he'd just stumbled upon something much more sinister than he could ever imagine.

CHAPTER ONE

The stifling summer air weighed heavy on Fiona's chest as she sat in the passenger seat of Jake's car, her heart pounding in anticipation. A bead of sweat trickled down her temple, but she barely noticed it as Jake steered the car up the winding dirt road towards the dilapidated old house that loomed in the darkness. If their informant was to be believed, it was the place where they might finally find closure for the horror that had haunted Fiona's family for ten years.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Fiona asked, her voice barely audible over the crunching of gravel beneath the tires. She stared out the window at the decaying structure, shrouded in shadows and despair, and tried to push away the image of her sister, Joslyn's, face that flashed through her mind.

"Positive," Jake replied, his grip tightening on the wheel. "The witness said a man named Damien used to come here all the time with a car that matches the description of the one Marcus thought he saw Damien in."

Fiona clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms as a surge of anger coursed through her. If this was the man who had taken Joslyn – who had destroyed so many lives – she would make sure he paid for his crimes. She wouldn't allow him to evade justice any longer.

This was the closest Fiona had ever gotten. Finding out the possible name of the man who had taken her older sister from the beach ten years ago was huge, possibly life-shattering. The tip had come from Marcus, a man who used to work with Marissa—the woman who had apparently been in a relationship with Damien, if that was his real name. Marissa had lured girls into Damien's trap, but then she had taken her own life behind bars before Fiona could get his name from her. Then they'd tracked down Marcus, who used to work with Marissa at a fast food restaurant when they were teenagers.

Marcus was sure that Damien was the name of Marissa's boyfriend, a man he'd seen her arguing with before.

And their research into this possible man, Damien Blackwood, had led them here.

"Stay close to me," Jake said as he turned off the engine and climbed out of the car. Fiona followed suit, the gravel crunching beneath her boots as they approached the house. Its rotting wood groaned and creaked in protest as if warning them not to enter. But Fiona refused to be deterred. She had come too far and lost too much to back down now.

"Watch your step," Jake whispered, pushing open the door with a slow, agonizing creak that sent shivers down Fiona's spine. She took a deep breath, bracing herself for whatever waited inside, and stepped over the threshold.

The darkness was nearly suffocating, seeming to seep into every crevice and corner of the house as they moved cautiously forward, their flashlights cutting through the shadows like knives. The air was thick with the scent of decay and mold, and Fiona couldn't help but feel as though she were walking through the belly of some monstrous beast.

"Spread out," Jake instructed, his voice barely above a whisper. "But don't go too far. We don't know what might be in here."

"Or who," Fiona added, her fear battling with her anger. She knew that every step she took brought her closer to the truth – the truth about what had happened to Joslyn and all the other girls who had been taken by this monster. She wouldn't give up until she found it, even if it meant facing the darkest depths of her own soul.

"Remember, you're not alone," Jake said, his brown eyes flashing. "I'm right here with you, Fiona. We'll get through this together."

Fiona nodded, her heart swelling, grateful to have Jake with her on this after everything they'd been through. They'd gone through highs and lows—when Jake was still taken by his ex-partner, Lauren, and Fiona had an unrequited crush on him, to when Fiona got into her own relationship just as Jake and

Lauren were breaking up, and Jake had realized he had feelings for her. It seemed that the stars were never aligning for them; even when they were both single, Jake had been unable to commit to Fiona at first. But very recently, they had put it all aside and were diving deep into their relationship, something she couldn't be more excited about.

At the same time, she knew that, ultimately, this burden was hers to bear.

With a quiet sigh, she ventured further into the darkness, determined to bring an end to the nightmare that had haunted her for so long.

As Fiona and Jake searched the house, Fiona couldn't help but notice the eerie atmosphere that seemed to cling to every surface like cobwebs. Layers of dust covered the chipped wooden floorboards, which creaked beneath their feet as they moved from room to room. Wallpaper hung in tattered strips, revealing the brittle bones of the house's structure - a testament to the years of neglect it had endured.

"Look at this," Jake murmured, shining his flashlight on a collection of old newspapers piled up in the corner of what must have once been a living room. "The dates... they're from around the time Joslyn disappeared."

Fiona's heart clenched at the mention of her sister, and she forced herself to focus on the task at hand. Rummaging through the debris, she found nothing that pointed to Damien's presence. It was maddening, knowing that they were so close and yet still so far away from finding the answers they sought.

"Let's check upstairs," Jake suggested, his voice laced with determination.

"Stay close," Fiona replied, her voice wavering only slightly as they began climbing the staircase, its steps groaning in protest under their weight.

They scoured the first floor of the house, but it seemed to hold nothing more than the remnants of a lifelong abandoned. Peeling paint and shattered glass littered the floors while mold infested the damp walls. A sense of despair seeped into Fiona's heart, causing her to doubt if they would ever find

anything that could lead them to Joslyn or any of the other missing girls. The newspaper with the decade-old dates intrigued her, but it wasn't enough to prove anything.

“Wait,” Jake whispered suddenly, holding up a hand for silence. “Do you hear that?”

Fiona strained her ears, and then she heard it too – the faint sound of someone breathing, slow and steady. They exchanged a glance, and Fiona's heart pounded as they followed the source of the sound.

“Be ready for anything,” Jake warned as they approached the door to a small bedroom at the end of the hallway.

With a deep breath, Fiona pushed open the door, her flashlight beam illuminating the figure of a man lying on a dirty mattress. Her heart raced as she stepped closer, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She drew a breath and prepared herself to confront the faceless man who had haunted her dreams for a decade. The man who had taken her sister from her irrevocably changed the course of her life.

Fiona exchanged a look with Jake, who nodded. He had his gun ready, and Fiona knew he had her back. But she had to be the one to do this.

“Damien?” she called out tentatively, reaching out to shake the sleeping man awake.

“Wha –” the man croaked, his eyes fluttering open to reveal a face far too old and worn to belong to Damien, a man they estimated to be in his thirties, forties at most. Wrinkles carved deep lines into the man's skin, and a beard matted with dirt and grime obscured most of his lower face.

“This is the FBI—who are you?” Jake demanded, his voice gruff.

“Name's Frank,” the disheveled old man replied, squinting up at them in confusion. “What're you two doin' here?”

“Wrong person,” Fiona whispered. The crushing weight of yet another dead end settled heavily on her shoulders.

Though it wasn't the outcome they had hoped for, something in her refused to let go of the desperate need for

answers. She looked to Jake, pleading for some form of solace. He nodded back at her. Maybe, somehow, someday, this could still lead somewhere.

“Frank, do you have any ID on you?” Jake asked.

“Uh, yeah,” Frank stammered, fumbling in the pocket of his tattered pants. He pulled out a worn wallet and handed it over to Jake, who examined the contents with furrowed brows.

“Frank Lewis,” he muttered under his breath, scrutinizing the photograph that bore little resemblance to the disheveled man before them. Fiona peered over his shoulder, taking it in. The birthdate indicated that Frank was well into his sixties – far older than the man they were looking for.

Fiona’s heart sank. Jake’s warm brown eyes flashed to hers, an apology written in them.

“He’s not our guy, Fiona,” he breathed out.

Fiona stared at the old man, her heart sinking as the weight of Jake’s words sank in. Her fingers dug into her palms as she clenched her hands into fists, the bitter taste of disappointment filling her mouth. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine what it would feel like to finally confront the monster responsible for Joslyn’s disappearance and bring him to justice. But that moment had slipped through her grasp once again, leaving her with nothing but a cold, empty feeling of uncertainty.

“Dammit!” she hissed, kicking the rotting floorboards in frustration. The sound echoed through the abandoned house, mingling with the distant cries of night birds outside.

“Hey now,” Frank protested weakly, his face creased with fear and confusion. “I didn’t mean no harm. Just lookin’ for a place to sleep, is all.”

Fiona calmed herself, realizing her out-of-character outburst. Shame settled over her. It wasn’t like Fiona to lash out, but she couldn’t help it—she felt like she was chasing a ghost, wasting so much time. But she felt bad for scaring Frank, who was clearly an innocent homeless man.

“You two lookin’ for someone?” Frank asked.

“Yeah,” Jake said, turning to him, “Damien Blackwood. Have you seen anyone else here?”

“No, just me,” Frank said. “Never seen anyone named Damien here or anyone at all. You two are the first.”

Fiona’s heart sank further as the last ember of hope flickered out. They had searched high and low, and still, there was no sign of Damien or any of the missing girls. Frank’s words confirmed what she had been suspecting - their leads had led them nowhere.

“Let’s go, Fiona,” Jake said softly, placing a strong hand on her shoulder. His eyes conveyed a deep understanding of her pain but also a silent promise that he wouldn’t give up on their search.

As they turned to leave the room, Fiona cast one last glance at the old man huddled on his makeshift bed. She could see the weariness in his eyes, the years of hardship etched into his face. For a brief moment, she considered what it would be like to live her life in such a state – always searching for some semblance of safety, never knowing if she’d find it.

“Take care, Frank,” Fiona whispered, her voice heavy. She couldn’t shake the nagging thought that perhaps Joslyn was out there somewhere, experiencing a similar existence – or worse, no longer alive at all.

“Thanks, Frank,” Jake said, his voice gentle. “We’ll be on our way now.”

Fiona lingered for a moment longer, her gaze fixed on the disheveled figure on the bed. There was something about him that tugged at her heartstrings, something that made her want to stay and help him. The thought of leaving him alone in that desolate place gnawed at her.

But it also wasn’t her business. The best she could do for Frank was leave him in peace.

As they descended the creaky staircase and exited the decrepit house, Fiona clung to Jake’s arm, seeking comfort in his steady presence. The summer night air filled her lungs, but it brought her no relief from the suffocating weight of this

unending search for answers. Would she ever know the truth about her sister's fate?

And if she did, would it bring her any solace?

CHAPTER TWO

The dim glow of the streetlight outside Fiona's apartment window cast elongated shadows across the room. Her heart felt like a heavy stone in her chest as she slumped toward the couch, discouraged and disheartened. As she hit the familiar, comfortable cushions, she closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the weight of failure pressing down on her.

"Hey," Jake said gently. He crossed the room to sit beside her, his warmth an immediate comfort. "We'll find another lead. We always do."

Fiona looked at him, her partner in more ways than one, and nodded slowly. "I know. I just... I thought this was it, you know? The end of the road." She sighed heavily, the ache in her chest deepening. Maybe she'd never find Joslyn. Maybe this was all a waste of time, but how could it be? Would the universe be so cruel? It felt like she kept getting closer and closer, only to have all her hopes ripped away.

Jake wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. His touch was strong yet tender – a constant reminder of why they'd become partners in the FBI and, eventually, lovers. As he hugged her tight, Fiona relished in the feeling of finally being with him after so many months of not knowing if they'd work out. She was grateful to finally have Jake by her side, both on Joslyn's case—and romantically.

"Every time we hit a dead end, it feels like we're starting from scratch," she murmured into his shoulder, tears threatening to spill over.

"Except we're not," Jake reminded her, kissing her forehead gently. "We're getting somewhere, Red. We still have a name to work with, and I know how badly you want this."

Fiona blinked back the tears, letting her gaze settle on his face. Their relationship was still new, but it felt right.

"Damien Blackwood," Jake mused, his fingers tapping on the arm of the couch in a rhythmic pattern. "I'm starting to

think that's not even his real name, but it's still something to work with."

Fiona glanced at him, furrowing her brow as she considered his words. It made sense – if Damien truly was the mastermind they believed him to be, he would have taken precautions to ensure he couldn't be traced.

"Maybe he dropped off the grid completely," Jake continued, his gaze locked on the far wall. "Changed his identity, went underground."

"Then how do we find him?" Fiona asked, the frustration evident in her voice. She clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms as she tried to keep her emotions at bay.

"Let's go over the files again." Jake suggested, determination etched into his handsome features. "Look for patterns, anything that might lead us to him."

They sat down on the floor in front of Fiona's coffee table, their legs entwined beneath them, the scattered files and photographs painting a grim, chaotic picture. There were many missing persons cases—missing girls—across Portland and in the surrounding areas, many of which occurred within the timeframe Fiona's sister went missing. Together, they meticulously scrutinized each document, desperate to find any link.

"Here," Fiona said, pointing at a case file from ten years ago. "This girl's description matches what my sister looked like – same age, same height, same hair color."

"But it looks like they arrested someone," Jake pointed out, quickly scanning the report, "and there's no mention of a man fitting Damien's description. Could be a coincidence."

"Or he covered his tracks well," Fiona replied, her jaw clenched with determination. "He wouldn't want to make it easy for us. But..." She sighed, reading the fate of the man arrested for this girl's murder. Jail for life. No chance of parole. Still behind bars.

He couldn't be Damien.

"True," Jake conceded, rubbing his temple as he stared at the mountain of paperwork before them. "But without more

concrete evidence, we're just grasping at shadows.”

Fiona sighed. This seemed impossible. But she refused to give up – not when her sister's fate hung in the balance. Her eyes roamed over the scattered files, her mind racing with possibilities and connections, each one more tenuous than the last.

“Maybe we're looking at this all wrong,” she muttered, mostly to herself. “Maybe there's something else, something we've missed or overlooked.”

“Like what?” Jake asked, his brow furrowed in concentration as he leaned closer to her, their shoulders touching.

“I don't know,” Fiona admitted, feeling a flicker of hope ignite within her. “But there has to be something, some clue, that can lead us to him.”

As they continued to pore over the files late into the night, the shadows deepened around them, a tangible reminder of the darkness they were fighting against. And though the answers remained elusive, Fiona knew one thing for certain – she would never stop searching.

The clock on the wall ticked away the minutes, a somber metronome counting down the hours of darkness. Fiona's eyes flicked from the scattered papers to Jake's concerned face, her exhaustion warring with her determination. They had moved from the floor to the couch, and Fiona could see the exhaustion written on Jake's face.

“Red,” he said softly, his voice barely louder than the ticking of the clock. “We're not going to find anything tonight. We need to rest.”

Her gaze remained locked on the files, the desperate hope that they held the key to finding her sister burning in her chest. Still, she knew he was right – they were both running on

fumes, and their exhausted minds were unlikely to uncover any hidden truths.

Still, she didn't want to give up, even for a second.

"I can't, Jake," she whispered, her voice cracked and strained. "I can't sleep knowing that every second we waste, she might be slipping further away from us."

He reached out and gently tilted her chin up, forcing her to meet his gaze. The concern in his warm brown eyes was tinged with something else, a fierce protectiveness that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Hey, I get it," he murmured. "But we can't help her if we're too tired to think straight. You've hardly slept at all since we got Damien's name, and I'm worried about you."

His worry for her well-being pierced through her stubborn resolve, and she blinked back the tears that threatened to fall. She knew he was right – she'd been pushing herself to the brink, fueled by a relentless drive to find her sister.

But as much as she hated to admit it, she couldn't keep going like this forever.

"Let me take care of you, Red," Jake whispered, his thumb brushing against her cheek, wiping away an errant tear. "Just for tonight, let me hold you..."

Fiona bit her lip and nodded, unable to resist the thought of being wrapped up in Jake. She finally gave in to the exhaustion that weighed her down like a lead blanket. Jake's arms encircled her, pulling her close as his lips brushed against hers in a tender, reassuring kiss.

"Come on," he murmured against her mouth, lifting her effortlessly into his arms. "Let me take you to bed."

As they crossed the threshold into her bedroom, Fiona felt the crushing weight of her worries begin to dissolve, replaced by the warmth of Jake's embrace. As he laid her down on the soft sheets and drew her into his arms, she let herself sink into the comfort and safety he provided, allowing her body and mind a brief respite from the unending search for answers.

Outside, the night grew darker, and the shadows stretched longer, but within her bedroom, Fiona found solace in the arms of the man who had become both her partner and her lover.

And as sleep finally claimed her, she knew that together, they would bring her sister home, one way or another.

CHAPTER THREE

The fluorescent lights hummed softly overhead as Jake sat at his desk in the small, cluttered FBI office. It was early morning, and the room smelled of stale coffee and fresh ink. He stared at the paperwork from a recent case, but his mind wandered back to last night—Fiona’s downtrodden expression haunted him, her usually sparkling amber eyes dimmed by the weight of disappointment. They had been working tirelessly to find her missing sister, but all their leads had evaporated into dead ends. Jake had tried to keep up an air of optimism, but as much as he hated to admit it, he knew the hope of finding whatever happened to Joslyn Red ten years ago was bleak.

But he had to try, for Fiona’s sake.

For now, he was dealing with the mundane parts of being an agent—Fiona was working somewhere else, and Jake had paperwork to do. Agent Stevens had asked Jake for his help, and although it was monotonous work, he wouldn’t let a colleague down.

“Hey, Jake, you still with us?” Agent Stevens asked, looking up from her own stack of files.

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, forcing himself to focus on the case report in front of him. The words blurred together, meaningless behind the fog of worry for Fiona. She was more than just his partner—the way he felt with her was different even from how he’d felt with his former partner, Lauren Price. His relationship with Lauren had been entrenched in worries and doubts, but with Fiona, he could finally relax. They were right for each other; he was certain of it.

But he hated seeing her sad and wished there was a way to cheer her up that didn’t involve doing the impossible.

Just then, an idea struck him like a bolt of lightning. Maybe what Fiona needed was a break—a night out to clear her head. No casework. No thinking about the past. An actual date. He realized with a pit in his gut that he hadn’t truly taken her on

one. They had gone from close partners to lovers quickly and had been spending most of their time in each other's beds or working on cases. But Jake needed to take Fiona on a *real* date.

He minimized the report on his laptop screen and opened a browser window, searching for local attractions. A myriad of restaurants appeared, but it wasn't enough. He wanted something that would truly lift her up. Fiona was a strange girl, an entomologist and forensic analyst and future FBI agent-in-training. She had a long resume now, but he knew that entomology was where her heart was at.

It was an unusual passion, that was for sure, and Jake didn't share her fascination with insects.

His eyes still scanning the screen, Jake's heart leaped as he spotted an ad that seemed almost too good to be true.

A traveling entomology exhibit was coming to a museum in the city, and it would only be there for one weekend.

The vibrant image of butterflies fluttering near exotic plants screamed Fiona Red, and he knew he'd found the perfect way to lift Fiona's spirits.

"Gotcha," he muttered under his breath, his fingers quickly moving across the keyboard as he clicked on the ad for more information. The exhibit promised a rare and fascinating journey into the world of insects, featuring specimens from all around the globe. He could already picture Fiona's face lighting up at the sight of all those weird bugs. As much as Jake hated bugs, he'd put up with this for her. And besides, he liked seeing her in her element.

"Hey, you still with us?" Stevens called out from across the room, her voice pulling him from his thoughts.

"Of course," Jake replied, forcing himself to focus on his surroundings. The hum of conversation and rustle of papers filled the air, but it all seemed distant and unimportant compared to the task at hand. "I just found something interesting."

"Making good progress?" Stevens asked, her eyes narrowing with curiosity.

“Uh, not exactly,” he admitted, feeling a slight flush creep into his cheeks. “Just...something personal.”

“Ah, got it,” she said, raising her eyebrows with a knowing grin. “Well, I won’t pry. Good luck with whatever it is, but Whittaker wants all this paperwork done, and my ass is on the line if it’s not finished. Thanks for your help, Tucker.”

“Yeah, anytime,” Jake murmured, turning his attention back to the screen. He didn’t have time to explain the situation to Stevens, nor did he particularly want to. This was about Fiona and the bond they shared—a bond he hoped would grow stronger.

With a few swift clicks, he secured two tickets to the exhibit, allowing himself a moment of satisfaction before diving back into the endless paperwork. Fiona would love this. He was sure of it.

Fiona stood in the sterile white environment of the FBI lab, her gloved hands holding a pipette over a glass slide, her brow furrowed in concentration. The air hummed with activity as her colleagues hunched over their own workstations, each immersed in their own world of high-pressure investigations. As the clock ticked closer to lunchtime, the buzz of conversation rose incrementally, like the crescendo of an orchestra.

“Hey, Fiona,” called out one of the techs, a young man named Tim. “Lunch break’s hit. I think your stomach’s been grumbling louder than the centrifuge.”

Fiona chuckled and set down her pipette. “You’re right, Tim. I could eat a horse.” Her stomach rumbled as if on cue, affirming her hunger. She peeled off her gloves, tossing them into a biohazard bin, then untied her lab coat and hung it up on a hook by the door. With a quick glance in the mirror near the exit, she smoothed back her long auburn hair and patted her cheeks to restore some color.

As she stepped out of the lab, the change in atmosphere was palpable. The hallway, dimly lit compared to the bright workspace she'd just left, seemed almost sinister in its quietness. Fiona felt a sudden shiver skitter down her spine, momentarily halting her progress. But she shook it off, chiding herself for letting nerves get the best of her. After all, she was a forensic analyst and entomologist with the FBI; fear had no place in her line of work.

At the end of the hallway, Jake leaned nonchalantly against the wall; his arms crossed over his chest. A coy smile played on his lips, drawing Fiona's attention to the day-old stubble that darkened his jawline. She couldn't help but admire the way his broad shoulders filled out his tailored suit, the crisp white shirt a stark contrast to his dark complexion.

"Hey, Red," he greeted her, pushing off the wall and meeting her halfway. "Thought I'd find you here."

"Hi, Jake." Fiona tried to sound casual, but her heart raced at the sight of him. Every time she saw him, it felt like a new surge of excitement coursed through her veins. "What brings you down here?"

"Ah, well," Jake's eyes twinkled with mischief. "I just thought I'd see if you wanted some company on your lunch break. If you don't mind, that is. Want to join me at the café up the street?"

Fiona suppressed a smile, feeling warmth spread through her chest. "I think I can handle that," she said, adding a touch of playful sarcasm to her tone. "Lead the way."

They stepped out of the FBI building and into the bright sunshine of the city. The warmth of the sun on her skin made Fiona feel alive, as if nothing could dampen her spirits. Jake led her down the street, his hand finding hers, their fingers entwining. Fiona felt a jolt of electricity at the contact, her heart racing.

They walked for several blocks, the bustle of the city fading away as they headed towards a quieter, more residential area.

As they approached a small, quaint café nestled between two brownstone buildings, Fiona breathed in the aroma of

freshly brewed coffee and pastries. The sound of classic jazz drifted out from inside, adding to the cozy atmosphere. Jake held the door open for her, and they stepped inside to find a small table near the window. The café was dimly lit, but the sunlight streaming through the window illuminated Fiona's face, highlighting her stunning features.

They ordered their coffee and pastries, and as they waited for their food, Fiona felt a sense of ease and contentment wash over her. She loved spending time with Jake, especially when they could just relax and enjoy each other's company.

"So, Red," Jake said, breaking the comfortable silence. "I've got a surprise for you."

Fiona's eyebrows raised in surprise. "A surprise? What is it?"

"I was thinking..." he trailed off, a smile playing at his lips. "We've been through so much together, but I haven't taken you on a real date. I wanted to do that after work today."

Fiona's heart skipped a beat at the thought of Jake asking her out on a date. It felt so normal. They were already together, of course, but now that Jake mentioned it, they hadn't been on a real, normal "date."

"I'd love that," she confessed. "Where would we be going?"

"That's the surprise," Jake said with a grin.

Fiona couldn't help but grin in return. She loved surprises, especially when they came from Jake. She sipped her coffee, her mind buzzing with anticipation. She knew Jake would have something amazing planned, something that would make her heart race and her head spin.

She couldn't wait.

CHAPTER FOUR

The sun beat down on the museum steps as Jake led Fiona toward the entrance, her eyes alight with anticipation at the marbled façade. The summer heat brought families and children out in droves, their laughter and chatter mingling with the hum of cicadas as they scurried about the grounds.

“Thanks for taking me here, Jake. I didn’t even know this exhibit was in town,” Fiona said, a genuine smile crossing her face for the first time in days. It warmed his heart to see her like this, even if only for a moment.

“Hey, Red, you know I love seeing you smile,” he replied, his own smile mirroring hers.

Fiona offered him a coy grin and said, “I mean, you must really like seeing me smile because I know how much you hate bugs.”

Jake laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Something tells me it’ll be worth it.”

Inside the cool, brightly-lit museum, the entomology exhibit enveloped them in a world of vibrant colors and alien shapes. Insects from every corner of the globe clung to branches, crawled beneath glass cases, and fluttered behind mesh screens. The air buzzed with the excited voices of kids, pointing and exclaiming over each new discovery. Jake couldn’t help but smile at their enthusiasm. He hoped to have a few kids of his own one day, and he realized that he hadn’t talked to Fiona about it. He would, at some point, but for now, he was just happy to enjoy her company.

Fiona, of course, seemed to blossom, her eyes lit up like jewels, and her face animated as she marveled at the exhibit. He watched her closely, admiring the way she transformed, becoming more alive than he’d seen her in weeks.

“Jake, look at this one!” Fiona exclaimed, her voice full of wonder as she gestured toward a particular display. Inside the

glass case, a large, iridescent beetle glittered under the soft museum lighting.

“Wow, that’s... unique,” Jake admitted, trying to share her enthusiasm, despite the slight shudder that ran down his spine. Really, it just looked like a nasty beetle to him, but what kind of boyfriend would he be if he didn’t try to engage in his girlfriend’s interests? “What is it?”

“It’s a rainbow stag beetle,” Fiona gushed, her eyes never leaving the creature. “They’re native to Australia, and their exoskeletons refract light, creating these incredible colors. And the males have these big, impressive mandibles that they use for fighting and attracting mates.”

“Really? It’s like a little insect gladiator,” Jake mused, finally appreciating the beetle’s strange allure. He had to admit; it *was* kind of cool.

Fiona laughed, her eyes sparkling. “It is! I’ve always wanted to see one in person. They’re so rare and beautiful.” She paused, her gaze lingering on the display. “I suppose there’s a kind of poetry in their lives, brief as they may be. The struggle to survive, to find love, to leave a legacy... it’s universal, even amongst insects.” Fiona took a breath. “I used to drag Joslyn to places like this. She hated them, but she would go with me sometimes.”

Her words struck a chord within Jake, and he watched as her face softened. He knew that their search for Fiona’s sister wouldn’t be easy, but he also knew that moments like these were precious – moments when they could escape from the darkness and remember what it was they were fighting for.

“I know you miss her,” Jake murmured, placing a hand on the small of her back. “For what it’s worth, I’m not gonna stop helping you till we get some answers.”

“Thank you, Jake,” Fiona whispered, her eyes meeting his once more. “This means more to me than you know.”

“Anytime, Fiona,” he replied softly, their gazes locked together as the world around them faded away. Fiona leaned up on her toes and softly shut her eyes. Jake leaned down to kiss her—

Just as a piercing scream shattered the air, causing them—and everyone around them—to jump.

The scream tore through the air like a knife. Jake's instincts kicked in immediately, and he took off toward the sound of the scream, Fiona close behind him.

As they ran through the exhibit, they saw people scattering in all directions, their panicked voices rising in a cacophony of shouts and screams. Jake's heart pounded in his chest as he pushed through the throngs of people, his eyes searching for the source of the commotion. As he neared, he saw a group of people huddled together near one of the dimly lit corners of the exhibit hall, their faces a mixture of shock and horror.

"Excuse me. FBI. Let me through," he barked, pushing past the onlookers until he reached the center of the crowd.

There, sprawled out on the floor beside an elaborate display of jewel-toned butterflies, lay the lifeless body of a man.

A dark stain of crimson spread across his chest, evidence of the stab wound that had claimed his life.

For a fraction of a second, Jake thought it was all a bad dream—until reality settled in.

This was real.

"Everyone back up!" Jake commanded, his senses heightened as he took in the gruesome scene. "Has anyone called 911?"

"I did," a shaky voice replied from somewhere in the crowd. "They're on their way."

"Good," he muttered, crouching down beside the body to get a closer look at the wound. It appeared to be a single, precise strike – the work of someone who knew what they were doing. Yet, there was something strange about it, something that didn't quite add up. The wound seemed... too clean.

Jake felt a shiver run down his spine as he tried to piece together what had happened. The victim's eyes were still open, frozen in a look of abject terror. What had he seen in his final moments? Who could have done this? And why?

Jake couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this than just a random attack. He glanced back at Fiona, who was watching him with wide eyes, her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

This was supposed to be a relaxing date for them, but Jake knew they'd just been thrust into a murder investigation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fiona's heart sank like a stone as she took in the sight of the dead man that laid before her on the museum floor.

"Stay calm, everyone!" Jake commanded, his authoritative tone cutting through the cacophony of gasps and murmurs from the crowd.

As Jake took control of the situation, Fiona pushed past her initial shock and dove into action. She needed to examine the body, see if there were any initial signs of what happened here. Maybe, by some miracle, he was still alive.

Gently, she pressed two fingers against the man's neck, searching for any sign of a pulse. The cold, unyielding flesh confirmed what she already knew—death had already claimed him.

"Jake, he's dead," Fiona announced quietly, meeting her partner's gaze. She could see the gears turning in his mind as he assessed the situation, his eyes narrowing with determination.

"Everyone stay put!" Jake ordered the crowd. "Nobody leaves this area until we have a better understanding of what happened here."

Museum officials rushed over, their faces a mixture of shock and concern. "What happened here?" one of them asked.

Jake flashed his badge. "I'm Agent Jake Tucker, FBI. Backup is on the way," Jake announced. "We need to secure this area. Lock all the doors, and don't let anyone out."

The museum officials nodded and scattered. Fiona focused on the dead man. Although it appeared to be a typical stabbing, something caught her eye then—a small, dark shape on the man's forehead. She leaned in closer, her curiosity piqued.

It was a bug,

A beetle, to be precise.

“Jake,” Fiona called softly, not wanting to alarm the crowd further. “Take a look at this.”

Her partner approached, his expression curious. He stared at the strange beetle, his eyes flicking between it and the wound in the man’s chest. “What do you make of it?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Fiona mused, her mind racing with possibilities. “It’s just a dead beetle on his forehead.”

Jake’s eyes were now fixed on the beetle. “But why would someone put a beetle on a dead body? It doesn’t make sense.”

Fiona shook her head. “I don’t know.”

She noticed that it was a common beetle, one that could be found on any tree in Portland, not a unique species from the museum. Was it just a coincidence that it had died and fallen on this dead man’s forehead? That seemed unlikely, but Fiona couldn’t quite grasp the meaning.

Fiona returned her focus to the body, taking note of the precise angle of the stab wound and the blood pooling around it. Her mind raced, trying to piece together what had happened. Was the killer still among them, lurking in the shadows? The thought sent chills down her spine.

“Police are on their way,” Jake informed her, his expression grim. “They’ll want answers.”

“Let’s see if we can find some first,” she replied. Fiona snapped on a glove and reached into the man’s pocket. She carefully unfolded the man’s wallet, searching for any clue to his identity.

“Daniel Boone,” she read aloud, her voice tinged with sadness. His ID photo showed a much more lively face than the one she was seeing, and he was so young, only in his twenties.

Someone had murdered him here today. Fiona didn’t know why, but what she did know was that the killer was still here—possibly hidden among them.

The scent of formaldehyde clung to Fiona's nostrils, mingling with the faint, metallic tang of blood. She stood at the edge of the roped-off area in the entomology exhibit, her gaze fixed on the lifeless form sprawled on the floor. Daniel Boone, a real person whose life had been cut short. The brilliant colors of mounted butterflies and beetles stared back at her from behind the glass cases, oblivious to the scene unfolding before them.

Jake joined her side, his face set in a determined expression. "The place is locked up. No one's getting in or out."

Fiona nodded. "Good. We need to gather evidence and find out who did this." She glanced at the body, taking a closer look at the beetle on his forehead. "This beetle didn't just fall here by chance," she said, pointing at it. "It was placed here intentionally."

Jake crouched down beside her, his expression curious. "Why would someone do that?"

"I'm not sure," Fiona said, her mind racing with possibilities. "But it could be a message. Maybe the killer wants us to know something."

Jake nodded thoughtfully. "It's possible. We'll have to wait for forensics to confirm. Strange place to kill someone," he murmured, glancing around the room.

"Strange indeed," she agreed, her mind racing through the possible motives for such a bizarre choice of location. Was it truly a random attack? The bug placed on the forehead felt too deliberate. "Something else is bothering me," Fiona said.

"What is it?" Jake asked,

"Despite being surrounded by an exhibit full of rare and exotic insects," Fiona said, gesturing at the glass cases filled with strange insects, "this one is a simple ground beetle. It's common to this area; I've seen hundreds of them."

“So it could be a coincidence,” Jake suggested, but his tone indicated he didn’t believe it any more than she did.

“Perhaps,” Fiona mused, her mind racing. “But it seems too... deliberate. As if someone wanted us to find it.” She straightened up, her eyes meeting Jake’s as the weight of their discovery settled on them. “This isn’t just a random act of violence, Jake. There’s something more going on here.”

He nodded grimly. “We need to find out what that is—before anyone else gets hurt.”

Fiona couldn’t agree more, but the question now was where to start. The museum was in lockdown, and the tension was palpable in the guests, who huddled together and talked. Fiona could feel it in the tightness of her chest as she struggled to take in a deep breath. She glanced over at Jake, who looked equally tense. They had to act now if they were going to find any answers.

“Let’s start with the people Daniel was with,” Fiona suggested, her voice low and controlled. “I heard an officer say he was with friends, and they’re still here. They might know something.”

“Agreed,” Jake replied, his eyes scanning the crowd. “I think those are them over there.”

Fiona followed his gaze, spotting a small group of people huddled together near one of the exhibit’s glass cases, their faces etched with grief and shock. As they approached, a young woman with red-rimmed eyes looked up at them.

“Are you here to help?” she asked, her voice trembling. “Please, tell us what happened to Daniel.”

“First, we need to ask you some questions,” Fiona said gently, trying to sound soothing, despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. “Can you tell us about the last time you saw Daniel?”

The woman sniffled, wiping away a tear that threatened to escape the corner of her eye. “He said he needed to use the restroom. That’s the last thing I remember before... before...”

“Did you notice anything unusual about him before he left?” Jake probed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“No, not really,” another friend chimed in, a young man with a scruffy beard. “He seemed to be having fun at the exhibit, like all of us.”

“Did anyone else leave the group or follow him?” Fiona asked, her mind racing with possible scenarios.

“None of us left the group,” the woman replied, shaking her head. “We stayed here the entire time.”

“Could someone have been watching him?” Jake wondered aloud, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed the room.

“Maybe,” the bearded man replied hesitantly. “I mean, this place is full of people, so it’s possible someone was watching him.”

Of course, it was possible, Fiona mused, but why now? Why Daniel, and why here? His friends seemed genuine, as far as Fiona was concerned. They clearly had no clue what happened here.

“Did he have any enemies? Anyone who might want to hurt him?” Fiona inquired, her heart heavy with the weight of the question. If Daniel had enemies outside of the museum, maybe someone who wanted to hurt him, it was possible that person stalked him here and killed him during a crowded event.

“Daniel was the kindest person I know,” the woman said, her voice breaking. “He didn’t have a single enemy. At least, none that I’m aware of. He was a really loyal guy, never cheated on any of his exes, never dated anyone else’s girlfriend... he really didn’t mess around like that, and he was nice to everyone, so I can’t see why someone would want him dead.”

Fiona nodded, taking note of the information. It was possible that Daniel was the victim of a random act of violence, but the beetle on his forehead and the deliberate placement of it unnerved her. It was too much of a coincidence, and the fact that it was a common beetle made the situation even more unsettling.

“Did Daniel come here often?” Fiona asked.

The group looked at each other, uncertainty flickering across their faces.

“I don’t think so,” the bearded man said finally. “We were all planning on going to the aquarium next.”

“Did he mention anything about why he wanted to come here?” Jake pressed, his gaze flickering between the group members.

“No, he just said he heard about this exhibit and thought it would be cool to check out,” the woman said, her brow furrowed in thought.

Fiona exchanged a worried glance with Jake. Something was off about this entire situation, and it was clear they needed to dig deeper if they wanted to figure out what was going on.

“What about social media?” Jake asked. “Did Daniel post about coming here? Would anyone know to find him here?”

The group looked at each other, and one of them pulled out their phone, quickly pulling up Daniel’s social media profiles. After a quick search, they shook their head.

“No, he didn’t post anything about coming here,” the woman said, her voice soft.

Fiona’s eyes flickered over to the glass cases, taking in the strange and exotic insects inside. “It doesn’t make sense,” she murmured to herself.

“What doesn’t?” Jake asked, turning to her.

“Why would someone choose to kill someone here, with all of these rare and expensive insects around, and then just leave a common beetle on his forehead?” Fiona said, shaking her head. “It’s almost like they’re trying to make us think it’s connected to the museum, but it doesn’t add up.”

Jake nodded, his expression thoughtful.

“Thank you,” she said gently to the group. “You’ve been a great help. We’ll continue to investigate and hopefully find the answers we need.”

With that, Fiona and Jake stepped away from the group of friends and huddled together, their minds racing with questions and possible motives. Fiona couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to this murder than they first thought, and the

beetle on Daniel's forehead was just the beginning of a twisted puzzle they needed to solve.

"Let's check the security footage," Jake suggested, his eyes scanning the room as if seeking out hidden clues. "Maybe we can get a better idea of what happened."

"Good thinking," Fiona agreed, pushing aside her own unease. She knew that in situations like this, time was of the essence. Every second mattered.

CHAPTER SIX

Fiona held her breath as she and Jake approached the museum manager, a spindly man who had been hovering near the front desk, anxiously wringing his hands. It was obvious he was the manager—or at least, a higher-up—judging by his business-casual outfit, which opposed the uniforms of the other employees.

“Excuse me, sir?” Jake asked, and the man lifted his head. A gold-plated nametag read “Crosby.”

“Yes?” Crosby asked, taking them in. “If there’s anything I can do to help, please, I’m more than willing.”

“We need to see the surveillance footage,” Jake said. “Can you show it to us?”

“Of course, I’d be happy to!” Crosby seemed relieved to have a task to focus on and quickly led them through the winding corridors to the security room. The walls were lined with monitors, each displaying a different section of the museum. Fiona couldn’t help but feel an eerie sense of discomfort as they entered the room. There was always something unnerving about watching security footage, getting a bird’s eye view of people as they unwittingly went about their days. But they weren’t here to spy on people—they were here to catch a killer.

“Here’s the footage from today,” the manager said, pulling up the relevant video files. He hesitated, then added in a hushed tone, “I hope you find something that helps.”

“Thanks,” Jake replied, offering a brief smile before turning his full attention to the screens. Fiona leaned over his shoulder, watching as he meticulously examined each frame.

“Cameras don’t cover every inch of the museum floor,” Crosby warned, fidgeting nervously. “But we’ve got most of the public areas covered.”

“Still, it’s better than nothing,” Fiona murmured, her eyes glued to the screen as she watched the events of the day play out in fast-forward. The exhibit had been bustling with people right up until the lockdown, making it difficult to discern any suspicious activity.

“Wait,” Jake said suddenly, pausing the footage. Fiona saw it too—a man wearing the exact same clothing as Daniel. It was him. Jake said, “There’s Daniel. He’s entering the restroom.” They both scrutinized the screen, searching for any sign of the killer.

“Look,” Fiona whispered, pointing to the corner of the screen where a thin, wiry man appeared moments after Daniel exited the restroom. The man’s face was obscured by a black beanie hat, but there was something about his movements that sent a chill down her spine.

On the screen, the man ran into the bathroom. Moments later, he ran out.

Then, Daniel hobbled out of the bathroom, holding his chest. The blood was beginning to seep through his shirt, and it was obvious he’d just been stabbed. Fiona watched anxiously as Daniel limped off screen, where he presumably fell to the ground, where they had found him and died. Fiona noted there was no trail of blood, which was surprising, but it seemed to have all gotten caught in Daniel’s clothes.

Even though Fiona knew Daniel’s fate, she still somehow hoped that it would end differently. But this was no movie. This was someone’s life.

“That guy in the hat, that has to be the killer,” Fiona said.

“Seems like it,” Jake agreed, his jaw clenched in determination. “We need to find this guy before he slips away.”

Fiona knew that time was running out. She couldn’t help but wonder what sinister purpose had drawn the killer to the entomology exhibit and why he had chosen Daniel as his victim. As they left the security room, she felt the weight of unanswered questions bearing down on her, as heavy and suffocating as the air inside the locked-down museum.

“Let’s get back to the main area and inform the police,” Jake said, his voice grim. “Every second counts.”

As they hurried through the dimly lit corridors, Fiona couldn’t shake the image of the thin, wiry man with the black beanie hat from her mind. Who was he? What had driven him to kill? And most importantly, would they be able to stop him before he struck again?

A lingering feeling of anxiety filled the air as Fiona and Jake emerged from the museum hallways, back into the entomology exhibit. The entomology exhibit stretched before them, its glass cases twinkling under the harsh glare of the lighting. The police officers who had congregated in the main area snapped to attention at their approach.

“Any luck?” asked a man in a jacket who Fiona recognized as Detective Abrams, the lead detective who’d arrived with the other officers. His eyes were bloodshot, likely from the stress of it all.

“Maybe,” replied Jake, his voice tight. “We found some security footage that might be helpful. There’s a man we’re looking for – tall, thin, wiry. He was wearing a black beanie hat.”

“Black beanie, you say?” The detective raised an eyebrow.

Jake took out his phone and showed the detective a photo of the security footage.

“You sure this is our guy?” Abrams asked.

“Nothing’s certain,” admitted Fiona, her gaze drifting over the worried faces of the museum patrons, who huddled together like frightened insects themselves. “But it’s our best lead so far. We need to find him.”

“Alright.” The detective sighed, rubbing his stubbled chin. “Let’s start by searching all the people here. I’ll tell my officers to look out for any discarded hats or clothing.”

As the police began to methodically search the crowd, Fiona couldn't help but feel a growing sense of unease. It was as if the killer were watching them, biding his time until he could strike again.

"Jake," she murmured, her eyes darting between the various exits, "do you really think we'll find him in time?"

"I don't know," Jake admitted, his expression grim. "But we have to try. Let's split up."

As the search continued, Fiona found herself drawn to the glass cases that housed the museum's prized specimens. The vibrant colors and intricate patterns of the insects seemed to mock her, a cruel reminder of the simple beetle that had been found on Daniel's lifeless body. But she refused to let herself be distracted. They had a killer to catch.

Fiona kept her eyes peeled for any sign of the man as she made her way back toward where most of the guests were gathered. She spotted one man—who was tall and had a cleft chin—staring at her. Fiona did a double take of him, only to quickly realize he looked nothing like the man in the video. It couldn't be him.

Minutes ticked by with no sign of the suspect. Fiona felt the weight of unanswered questions bearing down on her, as heavy and suffocating as the air inside the museum. Where was he? Was he still in the building, or had he managed to slip away in all of the confusion?

Fiona scoured her surroundings one last time before she finally conceded defeat. There was no sign of him anywhere. With a heavy heart, she joined Jake and Detective Abrams at the center of the room.

"Still no sign of the hat," the detective reported, his voice edged with frustration. "We've checked trash bins, under seats, everywhere we can think of. Nothing."

"Damn it," Jake muttered, running a hand through his hair. "Alright, keep searching. We can't give up yet."

Fiona nodded in agreement, her heart pounding like a moth trapped against a windowpane.

“Look,” Abrams started, stopping Fiona and Jake in their tracks, “Agent Tucker, right? And you’re Fiona Red?”

Both Fiona and Jake nodded, and Fiona wondered where this was going.

“I appreciate your help on this,” Abrams said, “but this case is still under police jurisdiction for now, not the FBI. I’d appreciate it if you’d let me take the reigns.”

Fiona looked up at Jake. His expression was drawn as it bothered him, but he nodded. Jake was a professional, and Abrams’s request was, of course, reasonable. Fiona herself had forgotten that this wasn’t really their case at all.

“Of course, Detective,” Jake said.

Abrams nodded, then turned to the group of officers. “Listen up!” he called out to the officers, his voice steely with determination. “We’re not leaving here until we find this guy. So keep looking, and don’t let your guard down for a second!”

Fiona felt a sense of unease as she watched the officers scatter, their faces taut with grim determination. The entomology exhibit was quiet, the only sound the whisper of footsteps and hushed whispers of the officers as they searched. It was as if the museum had been transformed into a giant spider’s lair, and the killer was the elusive prey they were all hunting.

Fiona just prayed they could find him before it was too late.

CHAPTER SEVEN

With the suspect still at large, Fiona had no choice but to keep looking.

They'd been at it for what felt like hours. Now, as Fiona stood in the hall where most of the guests were, her gaze swept over the group of people huddled together, their faces a mix of fear and confusion. No one was wearing the beanie hat, and it hadn't been located anywhere in the building, but that didn't mean the killer didn't simply hide it elsewhere.

He could still be here.

As Fiona was scanning the crowd, Jake at her side, her gaze settled on one man who seemed to shrink under her scrutiny. He was thin and wiry, clad in clothes similar to those worn by the man they'd seen in the security footage. The black beanie was missing, but he could have easily discarded it.

"Jake," she murmured, nodding towards the man in question. "What do you think?"

"Definitely worth a shot," Jake agreed, his expression grim as he approached the man. Fiona followed him, her heart thudding against her ribs. "Excuse us," Jake said, his tone polite but unyielding as he addressed the suspect. "Could we have a word with you?"

The man's eyes widened, darting from Jake to Fiona, then back again. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, giving away his fear. "I don't know anything," he stammered, his voice cracking like a cicada's call.

"It's okay," Fiona reassured him, trying to keep him calm. "We just want to ask you a few questions."

"Like what?" the man demanded, his fingers twisting nervously at the hem of his shirt. It was white, while the man in the video had been wearing black, but their pants were similar. Still, the man could have easily switched shirts.

"May I have your name and ID?" Jake asked.

Hesitantly, the man nodded and took out his wallet, handing his ID card to Jake. Jake scanned it over, and Fiona caught a glimpse as well. Marc McVey, twenty-six.

“Did you come here alone today?” Jake asked, handing back the ID.

“Y-yeah,” Marc replied, swallowing hard. “Why? What’s this about?”

“Can anyone here vouch for your whereabouts during the time of the murder?” Jake inquired, his eyes never leaving the man’s face.

“No, I... I don’t know anyone here,” the man insisted, his voice trembling. “But please, you have to believe me! I had nothing to do with this!”

As Fiona observed the man’s terror-stricken expression, she found herself torn between suspicion and sympathy. He could be an expert liar, disguising his guilt beneath a mask of fear. Or he could be innocent, caught up in a nightmare, completely out of his own control. Plus, he wasn’t a *perfect* match.

Fiona watched the man’s chest heave with frantic breaths, his eyes darting around the room as if seeking an escape. He seemed more like a trapped animal than a cold-hearted killer, and she couldn’t help but feel her resolve waver. She glanced at Jake, who remained stone-faced, his expression betraying nothing of his thoughts.

“Tell us again,” Jake demanded, his voice devoid of warmth. “What were you doing in this part of the museum?”

“I-I was just—I was just—” the man stammered, sweat pouring down his face. “I was just admiring the exhibits. I’m fascinated by insects; that’s why I came here today. I didn’t even notice anything was wrong until people started panicking.”

Fiona watched the man’s face closely, searching for any signs of deception, but all she could see was raw fear. She couldn’t fault him for that; the entire situation was terrifying, especially if you were innocent.

She had seen her fair share of criminals and liars during her time at the FBI, and this man didn’t quite fit the bill. But she

couldn't let her guard down just yet.

“Is there anything else you remember seeing or hearing while you were in this part of the museum?” Fiona asked, trying to catch him off guard.

The man shook his head frantically, his eyes wide with fear. “No, I swear. I didn't see or hear anything suspicious. I was just minding my own business, I swear.”

Fiona exchanged a look with Jake, both of them silent as they weighed their options. They had no concrete evidence pointing towards this man, but something about him still didn't sit right with Fiona. She wasn't ready to give up on him just yet.

“Please,” Marc begged, his eyes filling with tears. “I swear, I didn't do anything!”

Fiona studied him for a moment longer, then looked away, her heart heavy with doubt. The exhibit buzzed with tension, the air thick with the scent of fear and suspicion. Somewhere amidst the chaos, a killer could very well be hiding, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike again—or perhaps, he had already taken advantage of the confusion to slip away.

“Jake,” Fiona said quietly, her voice barely audible over the murmurs of the crowd. “What if he's telling the truth?”

“Maybe,” Jake replied, his voice low and grim. “Maybe our killer is already gone.”

A shiver ran down Fiona's spine at the thought. The police were doing their best to keep everyone calm and contained, but the atmosphere in the museum was growing more oppressive by the second. If they didn't find some answers soon, panic would surely take hold.

Marc spoke up again, his voice shaky: “Can't you check the security footage or something? I wasn't even near the body when everyone started freaking out. I was by the dragonfly exhibit.”

Fiona exchanged a look with Jake. That was a good point. If they could find footage of Marc from the same time they had footage of the killer, then it would clear him. They needed to find the manager, Crosby, again and re-review that footage.

Jake nodded at a nearby police officer, who came over.

“Keep an eye on this man, please,” Jake said to the officer.

Marc was clearly shaken up but didn't protest as the police officer stood next to him. With that, Jake nodded at Fiona.

“Let's go back to the security room.”

Fiona followed Jake out of the exhibit, the chaos slowly dwindling as they walked. Her mind was racing, trying to piece together everything she had seen and heard so far. The killer was smart, that much was clear. He had planned everything meticulously, from the trap with the beanie to the careful timing of the murder.

But they had something he didn't expect: the security footage. Fiona hoped that they would find something useful in the footage, something that would lead them to the killer.

As they reached the security room, Crosby was inside, still hunched over the monitors. He looked up as they entered, his eyes bloodshot and tired. “Did you find anything?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“Not yet,” Jake replied, his expression grim. “But we need to review that footage again. I'm trying to rule out one of the guests as a suspect. He claims he was by the dragonfly exhibit when the commotion started, so he should be near that area at the same time Daniel went into the bathroom.”

Crosby nodded, rubbing his eyes wearily. “I'll pull up the footage for that area.”

Fiona watched as Crosby's fingers flew over the keyboard, pulling up the relevant footage. It was a jumble of grainy images and flickering lights, with people milling around in front of the dragonfly exhibit. Fiona leaned in closer, trying to spot Marc McVey among the crowd.

“There,” she said suddenly, pointing to a figure in a white shirt. “That's him.”

Jake leaned in as well, squinting at the monitor. “Can you rewind it a bit?”

Crosby complied, rewinding the footage to a few minutes earlier. Fiona watched as Marc walked into the frame, his

backpack slung over his shoulder. He wandered around the exhibit, pausing every so often to look at the various displays.

“That’s him,” Fiona said again, feeling a sense of relief wash over her. “He’s innocent.”

Jake nodded, his expression tired. “Well, I guess that settles that.”

But Fiona was still uneasy. They might have cleared Marc as a suspect, but that didn’t bring them any closer to finding the real killer. They were running out of time, and the longer the killer remained on the loose, the more lives were at risk.

“What now?” Fiona asked, turning to Jake. “We need to find more leads.”

Jake rubbed his forehead wearily. “I know. We need to keep looking through the footage, see if we can spot anything suspicious.”

Fiona nodded, feeling a sense of determination washing over her. They had to find the killer before he struck again. She leaned in closer to the monitor, her eyes scanning the grainy images for any sign of the man in the beanie.

And then she saw him.

There, in the corner of the frame, was a glimpse of a figure in a dark hoodie, moving quickly through the crowd. Fiona’s heart raced as she leaned in closer, trying to make out more details. It took place after the time of the murder, which meant it could be him.

“Jake,” she said urgently, pointing at the screen. “Look.”

Jake leaned in closer, his eyes following her finger. “What am I looking at?”

“That guy,” Fiona said, her voice rising with excitement. “I think that’s our killer.”

Jake stared at the screen for a moment longer, then nodded slowly. “But we still can’t make out his face. It’s just the same as before.”

Fiona bit her lip, frustration building inside of her. She had hoped that they would find something more concrete, but it seemed like they were back to square one.

“Let’s just keep reviewing the footage,” Jake said. “There has to be something else.”

Fiona nodded and settled in beside Jake.

CHAPTER EIGHT

He'd done it again.

The relentless sun scorched the pavement as he darted through the Portland street traffic, weaving between the people who littered the sidewalk, his heart pounding in sync with each frantic step. Sweat trickled down the side of his face as he dodged a car horn blaring its warning. He barely registered it; his mind was focused on escape.

“Hey! Watch it, buddy!” yelled a pedestrian as he narrowly avoided collision, but he ignored them.

His thoughts were consumed by the feeling he'd just had of driving his knife into the chest of a man.

Finding an alleyway, he slipped into the shadows, his chest heaving as adrenaline coursed through his veins. The sudden chill of the shade swept over him, but the thrill of the kill still burned within. He hadn't planned on killing anyone today. It just happened.

He closed his eyes for a moment, recalling how he had enjoyed the exhibit as he always did. The intricate display of beetles and butterflies had held his gaze, their tiny bodies arranged like a macabre mosaic.

But then... that man.

That man had become a murderer before his very eyes.

“Damn him,” he muttered under his breath, his voice ragged. He gritted his teeth, feeling the weight of the knife still tucked in his belt. With a trembling hand, he wiped the sweat from his brow and took a deep breath. Regret was not something he could afford. The man deserved to die. But now he had to deal with avoiding the police.

His thoughts drifted back to the exhibit. Were the bugs okay? Would they be disturbed by the commotion? He longed to return and ensure their well-being, but he knew he couldn't.

The authorities would be swarming the scene, searching for him.

He leaned against the cold brick wall, listening to the distant wail of sirens. They were coming for him, but he had no intention of getting caught. He was not prey. And like all skilled predators, he would slip away unnoticed, waiting for the next opportunity to strike.

“Think... think,” he whispered, his voice barely audible as the sirens grew closer. His mind raced, images of the entomology exhibit and his impulsive kill flashing through his thoughts. The man had deserved it; that much he knew. But now, he needed to vanish like a phantom into the wind. But it was too risky to leave yet.

As much as he had enjoyed plunging the knife into that murderer’s chest, this certainly changed things for him. He wanted to get back to the exhibit and admire the beautiful insects, but when could he return?

It was that man’s own damn fault. Why did he have to disrespect the exhibit like that?

Why did you make me kill *you*?

He clenched his jaw, feeling cold and hot all at once.

He had to come up with a plan and fast. His eyes scanned the alleyway, searching for any means of escape. That’s when he saw it: a rusty fire escape ladder leading up the side of the building. Without hesitation, he began to climb.

The ladder groaned under his weight, but he climbed faster, fueled by fear and determination. He reached the rooftop and collapsed onto the gravel, gasping for breath. The police sirens were getting louder, but he was safe for now.

He looked out at the Portland skyline, feeling a strange sense of calm wash over him. The sun was beginning to sink in the sky. The chaos was all happening below, but he was safe here. He could plot his next move.

He could still feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins, his heart still racing from the kill. The thought of getting caught sent shivers down his spine. He couldn’t afford to be

caught; he had too much left to do. The world needed him, and his work wasn't finished.

Taking a deep breath, he rose to his feet and surveyed his new surroundings. The rooftop was barren, save for a few pigeons scattering across the gravel, their coos filling the air. Then he looked over his shoulder, catching sight of the museum a few blocks over. His precious insects were inside... leaving town wasn't an option, not yet. Not until his bugs left too.

He couldn't—wouldn't—leave. As long as he still drew breath, the bugs - those beautiful, merciless creatures - would never be far from his thoughts.

All he had to do was wait it out. Then, sooner than later, they could be together again.

CHAPTER NINE

The aftermath was chaos.

Jake stood amidst the disarray, his gaze flicking from face to face as the police officers escorted the shell-shocked visitors out of the traveling entomology exhibit in the museum. A cacophony of sirens and voices filled the air as the authorities tried to maintain order.

“Detective Abrams,” Jake called out, catching the attention of the lead investigator. “You’re releasing everyone?”

“What choice do we have?” Detective Abrams replied, a grimace etched on his worn face. “We can’t hold them here indefinitely, can we? None of them match the description of our suspect.”

Jake nodded in understanding, though frustration gnawed at him. The murderer had slipped away like smoke into the wind. After interviewing everyone in the building and reviewing the security footage, Jake confirmed, as well, that the killer had likely slipped away before the lockdown had occurred.

He turned to the people who ran the exhibit, their faces pale and drawn. They were all wearing the same uniform: a green T-shirt with a butterfly on it and cargo pants, and they were all relatively young, ranging from twenties to early thirties. “I assume you’ll be shutting down for the day?”

“Absolutely,” Carson, the guy who ran the exhibit, murmured, his voice tight with anxiety. “We’ll reopen tomorrow once everything’s been sorted out.” His eyes held a haunted look as if he could still see the lifeless body that lay just moments ago on the floor of the exhibit.

“Good call,” Jake replied, feeling the weight of responsibility heavy on his shoulders. He wanted to find the killer, to bring closure to the family of the victim, but it wasn’t his case. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was letting them all down.

“Agent Tucker,” Detective Abrams said, clapping a hand on Jake’s shoulder. “You’ve done enough. You know this isn’t your case. You were just at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Trust me, I know,” Jake said, his jaw clenched. The words tasted bitter and sharp, like swallowing shards of glass. He didn’t want to walk away, to leave this investigation in someone else’s hands, but protocol demanded it. As an FBI agent, he couldn’t overstep his boundaries.

“Go home,” Detective Abrams advised. “Get some rest. You’ve earned it.”

Jake forced a thin smile, though the hollowness inside him only seemed to grow. The drive for justice burned within him, an unquenchable flame that refused to be extinguished. He nodded at the detective and turned to leave, his heart heavy with disappointment.

I should be able to do something, he thought as he walked through the sea of uniforms and panicked faces. *But my hands are tied.*

Jake walked out of the exhibit, the air feeling colder than before. The sun was setting, casting long shadows over the crime scene. He spotted Fiona leaning against his car, her arms crossed over her chest. Her face was a mixture of frustration and disappointment as she looked back at the exhibit.

“Can you believe it?” she asked as Jake approached. “Entomology is my field, and we’re just supposed to walk away?”

“Trust me, I don’t like it any more than you do,” Jake replied, his voice laced with bitterness. He unlocked the car and slid into the driver’s seat, Fiona following suit on the passenger side.

“It just seems so strange,” Fiona mused as Jake began driving through Portland. His eyes focused on the road, but he listened to her soft voice. “The beetle on the man’s forehead, the entomology exhibit... all of it. I don’t want to just walk away.”

“Neither do I, Red. Trust me. But it could have been a single murder, a crime of passion, and nothing more than that. Which means, chances are, the FBI will never have anything to do with it. It’s the police’s job, and Abrams seems like a competent detective. I’m sure they’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Fiona turned her head to look out of the window, letting out a deep sigh. “I guess you’re right,” she said, her voice trailing off. “But it just feels so wrong to leave it at that. That poor man and his family... they deserve to know who did this.”

Jake nodded in agreement, his eyes still focused on the road ahead. “I know, Red. I know. But sometimes, we just have to let things go. It’s not always possible to get the answers we want.”

Fiona was quiet for a moment, her eyes staring off into the distance. Jake’s heart sank. This day was supposed to be an escape for Fiona. He had wanted to see her smile, not caught up in thoughts of a murder investigation.

“I’m sorry, Red,” Jake muttered, and Fiona’s eyes flashed to him. He pulled up to a stoplight, feeling the weight of the day on his shoulders.

“For what?” Fiona asked.

“I wanted to take you on a date,” he murmured, his face warm. “I’d realized we’d never really done that, you know? I wanted to take your mind off Joslyn and...” He sighed. “It all got messed up.”

Fiona’s eyes softened, her hand reaching out to rest over Jake’s on the gearshift. “You don’t have to apologize, Jake. Today wasn’t your fault. It’s not like you planned for a murder to happen.”

Jake let out a small chuckle, feeling the tension in the car dissipate. “Yeah, I guess you’re right about that.”

Fiona leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to Jake’s cheek. “Thank you for thinking of me, though. It means a lot.”

Jake smiled, feeling his cheeks heat up. “Of course, Red. Always.”

The rest of the drive was quiet, the only sounds being those of the car and the occasional honk from another driver. As they pulled up outside Fiona's apartment building, Jake turned to her. "The day's not over yet. Movie night?"

Fiona smiled, easing the tension in Jake's heart. "That sounds perfect."

Despite Jake's reminder that this wasn't their case, Fiona found herself unable to stop thinking about it.

It was like an itch, and partway through the movie she was watching with Jake; she couldn't help but take out her laptop. Fiona's fingers flew across the keyboard as she scrolled through articles about the traveling entomology exhibit, an uneasy knot forming in her stomach. The flickering light from the television screen provided a ghostly ambiance to their dimly lit living room. Jake lounged on the couch beside her, his eyes fixed on the movie playing before them.

"Did you know," Fiona murmured, "that this exhibit was founded by Dr. Isaac Black? He's a renowned entomologist and wanted to bring the beauty of insects to people across the country. He founded another exhibit in Nevada, although that one is stationary." She paused, a frown creasing her brow. "He died, though. Cancer."

Jake sighed, his gaze shifting from the screen to Fiona. "Come on, Red, put the laptop down and watch the movie with me. We aren't on this case."

Fiona met his eyes. She felt bad, but her anxiety was too high. "I can't let this go, Jake. I just can't. My instincts are screaming that there's something more here, something we're missing." She bit her lip, hesitating. "Besides, it's hard for me not to feel responsible. This is my world, entomology."

Jake studied her face for a moment, finally relenting with a sigh. He reached over and squeezed her hand, offering a small, supportive smile. "Alright. Do what you have to do. But don't forget we have our own jobs to worry about too."

“Thank you,” Fiona whispered, her heart swelling with gratitude. She turned back to her laptop, her mind racing with possibilities. As she continued to research and read about the exhibit, one question persisted: Why would someone target a traveling entomology exhibit, and what could it mean?

As the movie’s dialogue echoed through the room, Fiona delved deeper into the world of Dr. Isaac Black and his traveling exhibit. There had to be something, some clue, that could help them understand why a killer would choose such a unique setting. Was it truly random?

Or was there a deeper motive behind the murder?

Fiona’s eyes scanned the screen, her fingers typing away. She clicked on an article about Dr. Black’s life, searching for any connections that could explain why someone would target his exhibit. But it seemed likely this had nothing to do with the exhibit’s founder at all.

The dim glow of the television cast flickering shadows across the living room, accompanied by the hushed hum of the movie’s score. Jake’s breathing deepened, steady and rhythmic, as he succumbed to sleep. Fiona glanced at him, his eyes closed and features relaxed. She told herself she’d made it up to him another day and felt bad that she’d neglected the time when he clearly wanted to be romantic between them. But Fiona had always been obsessive like this; when something was on her mind, she had to dig up every possible lead.

She continued her search, navigating through articles and forums that led her further down the rabbit hole of Dr. Black’s history. Just when she was about to give up hope, a headline caught her eye: “Murder at Nevada Museum Insect Wing.”

Fiona clicked on the link, her heart pounding with anticipation. As she read the article, she learned that a man had been found dead in the museum’s insect wing just over a month ago. The victim had been stabbed in the chest, much like the man they had discovered earlier that day.

“Stabbed...chest...insects,” Fiona murmured, her mind racing to draw connections between the two cases. But there

was a key difference: the Nevada victim hadn't been found with a dead insect on his body, unlike the Portland victim.

With a frown, Fiona leaned back against the couch, her fingers drumming on the laptop's edge.

"Is this really just a coincidence?" she wondered aloud, her voice barely audible above the whispers of the movie playing in the background. She thought about the vast world of entomology, the seemingly endless species of insects and their intricate, alien-like beauty. It felt strange that two murders would occur in such settings, but without any concrete links between them, she couldn't be sure.

Or maybe I'm just grasping at straws, she admitted to herself, her words heavy with disappointment. She knew how easily the mind could create connections where none existed, and she couldn't risk jumping to conclusions. It seemed the museum where the man was murdered was not the one Dr. Black founded. There was no connection. It happened states away, and there was no bug on the body...

So why was she still looking into it?

She glanced at Jake, his chest rising and falling with each steady breath, and leaned her head against his shoulder, listening to the comforting rhythm of his breathing. She felt another twinge of guilt for having ignored him all evening, her mind consumed by the mysterious murders. He had been patient and supportive, even when she was neglecting their time together.

"Alright, enough," Fiona murmured to herself, placing her laptop on the coffee table. The room seemed to shrink as the screen went dark. She shifted closer to her sleeping partner, feeling the warmth emanating from his body. The movie played on, its dialogue a distant hum, but Fiona didn't focus on the words or the images on screen. Instead, she listened to Jake's steady breathing, the sound of a tether pulling her back to the present moment.

"Sorry for ignoring you," she whispered, more to herself than to him. It felt natural to apologize, even if he couldn't hear her, as if saying the words aloud could lessen the weight of her guilt. Gently, she nestled against him, her head finding a

comfortable spot on his chest. The faint scent of his cologne mingled with the familiar smell of his skin, soothing her frayed nerves.

As she closed her eyes, Fiona tried to push away the disturbing images that plagued her thoughts—the lifeless body splayed across the exhibit floor, the blood pooling around it, and the dead insect that lay on the man’s forehead. She swallowed hard, her throat tight with the effort it took to keep those thoughts at bay.

Focus on something else, she told herself, fighting the urge to grab her laptop and dive back into her research. She knew there must be some clue, some detail she was missing, but it eluded her, slipping away like sand through her fingers.

“*Give it a rest, Red,*” she imagined Jake saying, his voice firm yet gentle. “You can’t solve this tonight. Not alone, and not on the sidelines.”

He was right – of course, he was always right when it came to matters like these. Fiona knew she needed to let go, at least for now, and trust that the police would uncover the truth. She allowed the sound of Jake’s heartbeat, steady and strong beneath her ear, to drown out the whispers of doubt that gnawed at the edges of her mind.

CHAPTER TEN

Fiona's fingertips grazed the edge of her lab table as she stared at the rows of forensic samples that awaited her attention. The morning sunlight filtered through the blinds, casting shadows on the sterile surfaces of the FBI headquarters in Portland. But despite the routine work ahead of her, Fiona's thoughts were consumed by the case from yesterday.

The traveling entomology exhibit still haunted her - the memory of the beetle found on the body of the victim like an itch she couldn't quite reach. It was all so strange, and it gnawed at her insides, making it difficult to focus on anything else.

"Morning, Fiona," one of her lab colleagues, Aron, greeted her with a smile, oblivious to the turmoil brewing within her mind. "How's it going?"

"Morning," she replied flatly, forcing a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She knew she couldn't share her concerns just yet; she needed more concrete information before bringing it up with her colleagues.

On top of the lingering unease, there was another nagging thought she couldn't shake. In her research last night, she'd discovered a museum in Nevada where someone had been killed over a month ago in a similar fashion: a stab wound to the chest. A chill ran down her spine as she recalled the details, but there was no mention of a bug found on the body.

"Wow, we sure have a lot of samples today," Aron said. "It's good to have you in the lab, Fi."

"Yeah, lots," Fiona murmured, her mind still distracted. "Thanks, Aron."

"Hey, are you okay?" Aron asked, concern painting his features. "You seem a little... off."

"Fine," she lied, waving him off with an unconvincing smile. "Just tired."

“Alright, well, if you need anything, I’m here,” he offered before departing, leaving Fiona alone with her racing thoughts.

As she turned back to her workstation, her hands trembled slightly. Two seemingly unrelated cases, both involving museums and fatal stab wounds to the chest - it was too much of a coincidence for her to ignore. But without concrete evidence, she knew her suspicions would be dismissed as mere conjecture.

Still, Fiona couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something more to these cases.

Fiona glanced around the lab, ensuring that she was alone. Taking a deep breath, she made a decision.

Whatever this mystery was, she would get to the bottom of it.

Fiona stepped into the dimly lit privacy of an empty conference room, her heart pounding in her chest like a caged bird. She pressed her back against the door, trying to still her trembling hands as she pulled out her phone. The Nevada museum’s number was already dialed, waiting for her to summon the courage to press “Call.”

She took a steadying breath and hit the button. The phone rang twice before it was picked up on the other end.

“Hello, this is the Silver Sage Museum of Natural History; how may I assist you?” A cheerful male voice greeted her. “This is Julian speaking.” Fiona pictured a young man with a broad smile; his eyes filled with warmth as he answered the call.

“Hi, Julian, my name is Fiona Red, and I’m with the FBI,” she said, her voice wavering only slightly. “I was hoping to speak with someone who might have information about an incident that occurred there over a month ago.”

“Ah, you must be referring to the murder,” Julian replied, his tone shifting from pleasant to tense in an instant. “I, uh, I

was the docent working that night. I found the body.”

Fiona’s stomach clenched, the reality of what had happened settling heavily within her. “That must have been incredibly traumatic for you,” she said softly. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“Thank you,” Julian murmured, his voice strained. “It was... difficult. I couldn’t sleep for weeks afterward. I kept seeing his face, the blood...”

“Did anything seem off that night?” Fiona asked gently, her instincts urging her to tread carefully. “Anything unusual leading up to the discovery?”

“Everything seemed normal,” Julian admitted, his voice hesitant. “The museum was busy, lots of families enjoying the exhibits that day, but then it was closing time, so I was ushering everyone out. But when I found him...it was like something out of a nightmare.”

“Can you describe the scene for me?” Fiona pressed, her heart racing as she sensed a possible clue on the horizon.

“His body was lying on a bench,” Julian continued, his voice trembling. “I thought he was sleeping at first, but then I turned him over. He had been stabbed in the chest. It was... it was horrific.”

“Please take your time and tell me what you remember,” Fiona encouraged, shooting quick glances at the door, making sure they were still alone. “It’s important that we gather as much information as possible.”

“I understand,” Julian said, taking a deep breath before he continued. “I didn’t want to touch anything, so I called the police immediately. I tried to keep people away from the scene until they arrived, but it was difficult. We weren’t equipped to handle something like this.”

“Of course not,” Fiona agreed, her fingers tapping anxiously on the tabletop. “You did the best you could under the circumstances. Please know that your actions are greatly appreciated.”

“Thank you,” Julian whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “I just wish there was more I could do to help.”

Fiona hesitated for a moment before broaching the subject she knew was delicate yet crucial to her investigation. The dimly lit room seemed to close in around her, amplifying the tension in her voice. “Julian, I noticed in the report that the killer was never found. Was there anything else unusual about that night? Anything at all?”

For a moment, there was silence on the other end of the line. Fiona could almost hear Julian’s thoughts churning as he considered her question. When he finally spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. “Well, it was a normal night, really. But there was one thing... I’m not sure if it’s important or not.”

“Please,” Fiona urged, her chest tightening with anticipation. “Whatever it is, it might help us find a connection.”

“Alright,” Julian said, taking a deep breath. “When I found the body, I noticed something strange: there was a dead caterpillar on the man’s forehead. It was just sitting there as if it belonged.”

The room seemed to grow colder as Fiona’s heart plummeted. A caterpillar? On the man’s forehead? The image sent shivers down her spine, conjuring all sorts of dark possibilities. Her voice trembled as she replied, “That detail wasn’t in the report, Julian.”

“Really?” Julian sounded surprised, even a little hurt. “I told the officers who questioned me. I saw it with my own eyes, but they must not have included it. Maybe they thought it wasn’t relevant.”

Fiona’s mind raced, her thoughts a whirlwind of confusion and dread. They now had two murders in entomology exhibits, a stab wound to the chest with an insect left on the forehead of the victim. They were states away, but Fiona knew, without a doubt, that these cases had to be connected.

She felt a chill creep up her spine as she considered the possibility that they were dealing with a serial killer.

“Thank you, Julian,” she said, her voice barely audible. “You’ve been more helpful than you realize.”

“Really?” Julian’s relief was palpable, even through the static-filled phone line. “I just wish there was more I could do.”

“Talking about it is enough,” Fiona assured him, her mind already racing ahead to the next steps in her investigation. “I’ll be in touch if we need any more information.”

As she hung up the phone, Fiona knew that she couldn’t ignore the mounting evidence any longer. The connection between the two cases was too strong, too bizarre to be mere coincidence. She needed to act quickly, to bring this revelation to light before the killer struck again - and she had a feeling that time was running out.

Panic clawed at her chest, tightening its grip on her heart. She couldn’t let fear paralyze her now; she needed to act fast.

The door to the lab swung open with a bang as Fiona stumbled out into the hallway, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps. She fumbled in her pocket for her phone, her fingers numb and clumsy. She had to call Jake. He needed to know, needed to hear her suspicions about the connection between the Nevada murder and the murder here in Portland. The thought of facing a traveling serial killer chilled her to the bone.

Finally, Jake answered the phone. “Red, what’s—”

“Jake,” she panted into the phone. “I need you to meet me at Chief Whittaker’s office ASAP. I can’t explain right now; just... please trust me.”

“Red, what’s going on? You sound...” Jake hesitated, concern lacing his voice. “You sound scared.”

Fiona swallowed hard, her throat dry and tight. “I am,” she admitted, fighting the tremor in her voice. “But we’ve got work to do. I’ll tell you everything when you get here.”

She ended the call and shoved her phone back into her pocket, her palms slick with sweat. As she strode down the corridor towards Chief Whittaker’s office, Fiona felt the weight of her discovery pressing down upon her. A caterpillar in Nevada, a beetle in Portland. Two seemingly unrelated cases, yet the insects tied them together with an invisible

thread. The more she thought about it, the more certain she became that they were dealing with a killer who traveled, leaving behind a trail of bodies marked by his macabre signature.

Her heart thundered in her chest as she reached the door to Chief Whittaker's office, her thoughts a tangled mess of fear and determination. She raised her hand to rap on the door, then hesitated. What if she was wrong? What if this was all a terrible coincidence, and she was leading them down a dead-end path?

But no, she couldn't afford to doubt herself now. The stakes were too high, the risk too great. With a deep breath, Fiona knocked on the door, trying to steady her shaking hand. The lives of others hung in the balance, and it was up to her to unravel the twisted mystery that had ensnared them all.

"Come in," Chief Whittaker called out, her voice strong and commanding.

Fiona took one last steadying breath and pushed open the door, praying that they'd be able to stop the killer before he claimed another victim.

The chief was on the phone, his brow furrowed in concentration. He gestured for Fiona to take a seat as he finished his call. Fiona sat down, her heart still pounding in her chest as she waited for the chief to finish. Finally, the chief hung up the phone and turned to look at Fiona.

"What's going on, Red?" he asked, his eyes narrowing with concern. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

Fiona took a breath. "It's about the murder that happened at the entomology exhibit."

The chief lifted an eyebrow. "You know that case belongs to the police, Ms. Red. We haven't been called on board."

"I know, but—I think this is a lot bigger than one isolated incident. I found out about another similar murder in Nevada at a different museum. It wasn't the same traveling exhibit, but the MO is nearly identical, sir."

The chief leaned forward, his interest piqued. "What do you mean, near identical?"

Fiona swallowed hard, her nerves getting the best of her. “Both victims were stabbed in the chest and had an insect left on their forehead. A caterpillar in Nevada and a beetle here in Portland.”

The chief’s expression darkened as he absorbed Fiona’s words. “That’s a pretty specific MO. You’re saying we could be dealing with a serial killer?”

Fiona nodded, her voice shaking. “I know it sounds crazy, but the evidence is there. And there’s no telling where he might strike next.”

The chief leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on Fiona. “Alright. I’ll make some calls. But I need more than just speculation before I can justify getting involved in another department’s case.”

“I understand,” Fiona said, her mind already racing ahead to the next steps in her investigation. “There’s a witness who I talked to on the phone—Julian from the museum. He’s the one who found the Nevada body.”

Just then, another knock on the door, and the chief said, “Come in.”

Jake poked his head in, looking flustered. “I’m here. What’s going on?”

“Sit down, Tucker,” the chief said, “I think we might all need to talk.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Fiona held her breath as she sat in Chief Whittaker's office, Jake shifting nervously beside her. She had just explained everything to both of them—the phone call she'd made, Julian's testimony, and how she was certain these two cases were connected.

“And you're sure the man on the phone said there was an insect on the victim's forehead?” the chief said. “Because I've looked over the reports, Ms. Red, and the police didn't include it.”

“He said they must have omitted it,” Fiona said. “But I never mentioned anything about the crime here, and he still brought it up, which tells me he was being honest.”

Chief Whittaker leaned back in her chair, her eyes fixed on Fiona's face. “I see,” she said slowly. “Well, if what you're saying is true, then we might be dealing with a serial killer who leaves insects on his victims' bodies.”

Fiona nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. “That's exactly what I was thinking. And if that's the case, we need to act quickly. We can't afford to wait until the killer strikes again.”

The room fell silent as they all considered the implications of what Fiona had just said. The thought of a serial killer on the loose was enough to make anyone's blood run cold.

Finally, Jake spoke up. “What do we do now?”

Chief Whittaker went quiet for a few moments. Then, he said, “Let me make a few phone calls. You two, wait in the hallway.”

Fiona and Jake stood up and left the office, and Fiona's heart raced with anticipation. As they stood outside in the hallway, Fiona couldn't help but think about the murderer at large. She wondered who he was, why he was doing this. What could drive a person to commit such heinous acts? The

questions swirled around in her mind like a hurricane, and she could feel her anxiety levels rising rapidly.

“So, you really found a connection,” Jake said, and Fiona’s eyes snapped to him. He offered her a lopsided smile. “I can’t say I’m surprised, Red. You weren’t willing to give up.”

Fiona returned Jake’s smile, grateful for his support. “I couldn’t let it go. Too much was at stake.”

“I know,” Jake said, his voice low and serious. “But now that we’ve found a connection, it’s up to the chief what role we get to play in this.”

Fiona nodded, biting her lip.

As if on cue, Chief Whittaker emerged from his office, his face grim. Fiona’s heart raced with anticipation; this was the moment of truth.

“Alright,” Chief Whittaker said, his voice a gravelly baritone. “I just got approval for you two to take on the case.” His tired eyes seemed to gleam momentarily with renewed purpose. “This is your chance to prove you’re right for it.”

Fiona’s pulse leapt. Finally, she could get her hands on this case for real.

“Thank you, sir,” Fiona and Jake chorused. They were itching to leave, to dive into the mystery that had haunted them for so long now. But as they turned to go, Whittaker held up a hand.

“Wait, Fiona. I’d like a word with you alone.”

Fiona blinked, surprised. She nodded at Jake, who gave her an encouraging smile before slipping up the hallway.

“Sir?” Fiona asked, her brows furrowing with curiosity.

Chief Whittaker studied her for a moment, his gaze probing. Then he reached out and patted her on the shoulder, a small yet significant gesture from the usually stoic man. “Good work getting us on the case, Fiona. You’ve shown dedication and initiative, qualities I value highly.”

“Thank you, sir,” she replied, heat creeping up her neck as she fought the urge to squirm under his scrutiny.

“Listen,” he continued, his voice softening with uncharacteristic warmth. “I want you to take the FBI physical fitness test soon. If you pass, we can move on to training you for real. Get you a gun and a badge; make you an official agent.”

Fiona’s heart swelled with pride and determination. This was her chance to truly make a difference.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” Chief Whittaker said, a ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “You’ve got what it takes, Fiona. I believe in you.”

With that, Chief Whittaker dismissed her, and Fiona left the office feeling renewed determination and a newfound sense of purpose. She had always known she wanted to make a difference in the world, and now she had the chance to do so in a way she never thought possible. As she walked down the hallway towards Jake, she knew that their lives were about to change forever. The hunt was on, and they were more than ready to face whatever lay ahead.

Sunlight filtered through the museum’s towering windows, casting a warm glow over the entomology exhibit, and Fiona couldn’t help but admire how beautiful it was, despite the atrocity that had happened there. The air buzzed with anticipation as staff prepared for the day’s visitors, their voices murmuring in hushed excitement. Fiona and Jake strode through the entrance, their steps echoing against the polished marble floor.

“Wait!” Jake called out to the employees, scurrying about. They paused, turning to face him with puzzled expressions. “This crime scene is officially under FBI jurisdiction,” he said, flashing his badge. “We need to shut down this exhibit while we work on the case.”

A murmur of protest rippled through the workers. One man stepped forward, wiping his hands on his khaki pants before crossing his arms defensively.

“Look, our livelihood depends on this exhibit. You can’t just force us to close,” he argued, meeting Jake’s gaze without flinching. “I was here yesterday too—I know how tragic it was—but the police said they gathered all the evidence they could and that we could continue our business as usual. We’re only here for one more day.”

Fiona glanced around the room, taking note of the fragile butterfly displays and the intricate webs woven by spiders. She swallowed hard, knowing that she had to find some sort of middle ground here. They didn’t have a warrant to shut down the exhibit.

“Let’s compromise,” she suggested, her voice steady despite the knot tightening in her gut. “Instead of shutting down the exhibit, why don’t we conduct interviews with your staff throughout the day? Everyone will be accounted for, yes?”

The employees exchanged glances, some nodding hesitantly, others narrowing their eyes in suspicion. They had little choice but to comply.

“Fine,” the man who’d spoken earlier sighed, gesturing toward a nearby conference room. “A lot of people are still in there if you wish to talk to a bunch of us at once.”

“Thank you,” Fiona said, giving him a small smile. As they moved toward the conference room, she couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling in her stomach.

She had a bad feeling about this. The killer was out there, still lurking in the shadows, and they had yet to identify him. She knew that every second counted, but she also knew that they needed to be careful. They didn’t want to spook the perpetrator into going into hiding.

As they entered the conference room, Fiona surveyed the employees one by one. Most of them looked genuinely shocked by what had happened, their faces etched with sorrow and fear. Some of them they had talked to yesterday, others

Fiona hadn't had the chance to speak to. They all wore the same outfit, a pale green t-shirt with a butterfly on it and a mix of beige cargo and khaki pants.

Fiona studied the faces of the employees seated before her, her gaze flicking between them as she searched for any sign of guilt or fear. It was a delicate dance—one false step, and they could lose their only lead. She cleared her throat, trying to project an air of calm authority.

“Did any of you happen to be in Nevada a little over a month ago?” Fiona asked, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart.

A murmur rippled through the room, heads turning and eyes flicking from one face to another. Then, a young woman raised her hand hesitantly.

“Yes, we were passing through on our way to another city,” she confirmed, her voice soft but clear. “Why do you ask?”

“Interesting,” Fiona mused, exchanging a glance with Jake. “The other murder took place at a museum in Nevada around that time. And now, here we are.”

She let the implication hang in the air, watching as understanding dawned on the employees' faces. Could it be?

Was one of their own responsible for these gruesome crimes?

“Does this man look familiar to any of you?” Jake interjected, holding up a printed still from the security footage. The wiry figure in a beanie seemed to leer back at them, his features obscured by shadow.

There was a moment of silence before one employee spoke up. “Sort of looks like Dave, doesn't it?” he said, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

“Dave?” Fiona repeated her pulse quickening. “Tell us more about him.”

“He's one of our guys,” the employee replied, his brow furrowing. “But he wasn't working yesterday. Said he was sick.”

“Convenient timing,” Jake muttered darkly, his jaw tightening. “Where can we find Dave?”

“Last I saw, he was setting up a concession stand near the entrance,” another employee offered, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Fiona’s mind raced. Could this Dave guy really be the one responsible for this?

“Thank you for your cooperation,” Fiona said with a nod, her eyes meeting Jake’s. They had their target, and now it was time to close in. With each step toward the exit, she felt her determination solidify.

She would not let this monster slip through their fingers.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Jake moved cautiously through the dimly lit entomology exhibit, his eyes scanned every corner for any sign of their suspect. The air was heavy with the scent of old wood and delicate insect specimens, and the eerie quiet that hung over the museum only heightened his sense of unease.

“Dave?” he called out softly, not wanting to alert the man to their presence any more than necessary. Fiona’s footsteps echoed his own, her sharp gaze darting between the rows of glass cases that housed the insects.

As they searched for the concession stand—and Dave—Jake couldn’t help but admire how Fiona’s determination had landed them this case. He was grateful to have her on his team, both as his partner and his girlfriend. However, now was not the time to dwell on such thoughts; Dave was still at large, and they needed to find him before he could slip away. It’d make sense that the killer was an employee with the exhibit—he could have timed everything perfectly yesterday, giving himself a perfect getaway before the museum went into lockdown.

Finally, they reached the entrance between the museum and the exhibit, where natural light pooled in from the windows. Jake’s gaze swept over the concession stand, pausing when he saw the wiry figure of Dave. He exchanged a quick glance with Fiona, her eyes filled with determination.

“Dave!” Jake called out, his voice authoritative and commanding. “FBI! Stop what you’re doing and step away from the counter.”

The moment the words left his lips, Dave’s head jerked up in surprise. Panic flared in his eyes, and without a second thought, he bolted towards the back door of the exhibit hall.

“Damn it!” Jake cursed under his breath, and they raced after the fleeing suspect. The chase was on.

Dave darted between the glass displays, his footsteps echoing in the silent museum hall. Jake and Fiona pursued him with equal fervor, their eyes trained on their target as they closed the distance between them. Dave was fast, but they had trained for this. They knew how to take down a target running away from them.

But just as they were closing in, Dave ducked around a corner. Jake darted after him—only to have a glass case come hurling down toward them. Jake ducked back, grabbing Fiona, and they narrowly missed the weight of the case as it fell and shattered all over the tile floor.

“Watch your step!” Jake shouted, and they moved cautiously through the exhibit hall. Their shoes crunched on the shards of broken glass, making them step lightly. Jake knew that Dave was still somewhere in the museum, and they couldn’t let him get away. Not now, not when they were so close to catching him.

As they pushed forward, their ears pricked at the sound of a distant door slamming shut. They exchanged a look, and without another word, they moved toward the direction of the sound. Their feet pounded against the polished floor, echoing through the dimly lit hallways. Cases of insects loomed on either side, their glass surfaces reflecting the fear that coursed through Jake’s veins – the fear of losing Dave, the fear of failure.

Then, up ahead, they spotted him in a hallway.

“Dave, stop! You can’t outrun us!” Jake bellowed, adrenaline fueling his every move. But Dave continued his desperate flight, weaving between displays and knocking aside anything that stood in his path.

“Cut him off!” Fiona called out, veering towards a nearby corridor, hoping to intercept the fugitive.

As Jake rounded a corner, the distance between him and Dave rapidly closed. Reaching out, his fingers brushed against the fabric of Dave’s jacket, only for the man to unexpectedly change direction.

With a sharp intake of breath, Jake lunged forward, his hand wrapping around Dave's arm just as they careened past a delicate case of butterflies. The glass trembled under the force of their collision, threatening to shatter and release its inhabitants.

"Jake, watch out!" Fiona cried, her voice strangled with fear.

In an instant, Jake was forced to make a choice: apprehend Dave and risk destroying the exhibit or save the collection.

He steadied the teetering display. The butterflies fluttered in agitation, their wings a blur of color against the darkness.

"Damn it," he muttered, straightening up and pulling out his radio. "Security, this is Special Agent Jake Tucker. Lock down all exits immediately. We have a fugitive on the loose."

The air in the museum was heavy with tension as Jake took a moment to catch his breath, his chest heaving from the chase. He could feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins, igniting a fire within him that burned with frustration and determination.

"Jake," Fiona panted, her face flushed as she caught up to him, "he has to be here somewhere."

He nodded, his eyes scanning their surroundings for any sign of movement. Every nerve in his body was on high alert as he considered their next move. They were so close to catching Dave, yet it felt like they were miles away from apprehending him.

"Alright," Jake said, his voice low and steady, despite his racing heart. "We need to cover more ground."

"We should split up," Fiona suggested.

Not long ago, Jake would have hesitated to send Fiona off on her own. She still wasn't armed, but he knew now that she was fast, agile, and capable.

He could rely on her to hold her own, at least now, in this situation. He knew there would still be moments where it was too dangerous for her to go alone, but she could handle finding Dave.

“Okay,” he said. “If you find him, call me, okay?”

With a nod, they separated, each taking a different path through the labyrinthine museum. As Jake moved stealthily between the displays, his mind raced with possibilities. Where could Dave be hiding? What would he do if cornered?

“Think, think,” he muttered under his breath, his eyes darting from one shadowy corner to another. Every sound set him on edge. But he had to keep looking.

As he did, Jake thought about the scene from yesterday—the man with the stab wound, the blood slowly leaking into his clothing. He had seen more violent scenes in his time as an agent—and even before that, when he found his mother’s body—but something about this crime scene had gotten under his skin. Maybe it was the sheer brutality of the attack or the senselessness of it all. Whatever it was, Jake knew that he had to bring Dave to justice.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Fiona's heart hammered in her chest as she left the entomology exhibit, her determination fueling her every step. The museum had been locked down after their suspect, Dave, had slipped away from them in the chaos of the crowd, leaving Fiona and Jake to search for him separately. She couldn't afford any mistakes now; they needed to catch him before he vanished into the ether.

As she dashed through a dimly lit wing of the museum, she found herself surrounded by towering dinosaur fossils that loomed overhead. Their massive skeletons cast eerie, elongated shadows across the polished marble floor. Fiona felt small, insignificant compared to these ancient behemoths, but she knew that she had to be tenacious, like the predators they once were.

Though it was still early, there were a few patrons milling about, their murmured conversations barely audible over the steady thrum of Fiona's pulse. She glanced at each face as she passed, her mind conjuring images of what Dave might look like up close – tall and wiry, with a cunning glint in his eyes. But every stranger she encountered seemed innocuous, harmless, and she forced herself to focus on the task at hand.

Suddenly, she stopped dead in her tracks, her breath catching in her throat. Hushed voices drifted toward her from around the corner, and she strained to discern whether one belonged to Dave. Her heart raced faster, and she pressed herself against the cold wall, her fingers digging into the smooth surface.

Cautiously, she peered around the edge of the corridor, her eyes narrowing as they fell upon a small group of visitors engrossed in conversation. Disappointment gnawed at her, but she couldn't let this setback deter her. Swallowing her frustration, she approached the group, her voice steady despite the turmoil roiling inside her.

“Excuse me,” she said, her tone firm yet polite. “I’m looking for this man.” She held up a photo from the security footage. “Have any of you seen someone like that?”

The visitors exchanged glances before shaking their heads in unison, their eyes wide with concern. Fiona knew they must have sensed her urgency, but there was nothing more they could offer her.

“Thank you,” she murmured, forcing a tight smile before turning on her heel and continuing her search.

As she hurried through the maze of exhibits, Fiona’s thoughts raced almost as fast as her feet. Each passing second felt like an eternity, and she couldn’t help but worry that Dave was slipping further and further away from their grasp. Like with the man who kidnapped Joslyn, Fiona felt like she was on an endless chase.

Though she tried to keep her focus on finding Dave, her thoughts inevitably drifted back to that fateful day ten years ago when her sister vanished without a trace. The beach where Joslyn had last been seen was also where the lifeless body of Julia Rowe had washed ashore just a few years prior. Fiona remembered the chilling detail of the live caterpillar found on a dropped sandal at the mall where Julia was last seen alive. Though unrelated to the case she was working on now, the entomology exhibit—and the bugs left behind—stirred up those buried emotions. She had to admit, there was a slight similarity, and maybe that had subconsciousness been why she’d been so adamant to get this case.

Fiona shook her head, forcing herself back to the present as she entered another exhibit. The dim lighting cast shadows across the ancient artifacts, and she felt a shiver run down her spine. Her eyes scanned the room, searching for any sign of movement or a clue to Dave’s whereabouts.

“Where are you, you bastard?” she muttered under her breath, frustration mounting.

A flicker of movement caught her eye, and she froze in place, her heart pounding in her chest. There he was – Dave, the wiry suspect they had been chasing, darting between displays. Adrenaline surged through her veins, and she

propelled herself forward, her every muscle straining as she pursued him.

“Stop!” she shouted, her voice echoing through the museum halls. “You can’t run forever!”

Dave glanced over his shoulder, his eyes wide with fear, but he didn’t slow down. Instead, he seemed to pick up speed, taking advantage of Fiona’s momentary distraction. They raced through several more exhibits, dodging between displays and narrowly avoiding collisions with the few patrons who had ventured into the museum that morning.

“FBI! Out of the way!” Fiona cried, her lungs burning as she struggled to keep up with Dave’s pace.

She could feel the weight of her sister’s memory pushing her forward, urging her not to let another criminal escape. It was a burden she willingly bore for Joslyn and for every other victim who had been denied justice. She would not – could not – let Dave slip through her fingers.

As they rounded another corner, Fiona’s heart lurched in her chest. Dave had disappeared from sight, swallowed up by the labyrinthine halls of the museum. Panic threatened to overwhelm her, but she fought it back. She knew she couldn’t afford to lose him now, not when they were so close to apprehending him.

“Come on,” she whispered to herself, drawing in a shaky breath as she continued her search. “You can do this.”

She kept running and running. The walls of the museum transformed around Fiona, illuminated by ancient hieroglyphics and statues of Egyptian gods and goddesses. Ornate columns and reliefs were inscribed with intricate designs, while colorful tapestries adorned the ceiling.

Then, she spotted him again.

In the dim light of the ancient Egypt exhibit, Fiona finally cornered Dave. He stood with his back against a life-sized stone statue of Pharaoh Ramesses II, his eyes wide and wild as they darted between her and the only exit.

“Got you now,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

Dave's gaze flickered over her body, and Fiona knew what he was looking for. Her heart sank as she realized he could see she wasn't armed. The knowledge seemed to embolden him; his posture straightened, and his eyes gleamed with newfound confidence.

"Looks like you're not packing heat," he taunted, his voice dripping with malice. "What are you going to do now?"

Fiona's mind raced, searching for an answer that eluded her. She knew she couldn't risk letting him go, but without a weapon, she was severely disadvantaged.

"Think you can take me, sweetheart?" Dave sneered, flexing his wiry arms in an attempt to intimidate her. It might have worked on someone else, but Fiona refused to let him see any sign of weakness.

"I can," she spat, taking a step toward him. Sensing the shift in dynamics, Dave hesitated, clearly weighing his options.

Just then, a door burst open, and Jake swooped in, his gun drawn and leveled at Dave's head. Fiona breathed out a sigh of relief. She stood tall beside her partner, offering him a small nod of gratitude. Dave's hands shot up.

"Good timing," she murmured, her voice barely audible even to herself.

"Always got your back," he replied with a wink, then focused on Dave.

"D-don't shoot!" Dave exclaimed. "I didn't do anything, I swear!"

Jake's eyes narrowed as he approached Dave, his gun still trained on the suspect's head. "Save it for the judge," he growled, his voice low and menacing.

Fiona watched in awe as her partner expertly handcuffed Dave, her heart still pounding from the adrenaline rush of the chase. But she also couldn't help but think about how dangerous that could have gotten for her. She really did need to get her gun and badge.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Jake recited, his voice steady and authoritative. “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney—”

Fiona tuned out the familiar words, allowing herself a moment to relax. Dave had been caught, and no one else would have to get hurt because of him.

“Come on,” Jake said, pulling her from her reverie as he led Dave away. “Let’s get this bastard booked.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Fiona stood in the dimly lit interrogation room, her arms crossed over her chest as she studied the suspect before her. Dave sat nervously on the other side of the metal table. His darting eyes shifted from Fiona to Jake, who leaned against the wall beside the door, his face impassive.

“Let’s start from the beginning,” Fiona said, her tone cool and detached. “Tell us where you’re from and how you ended up working for the entomology exhibit.”

Dave hesitated, swallowing hard before he spoke. “I’m from a small town in upstate New York,” he began, his voice shaky. “I’ve always had a passion for insects, so when I heard about the traveling exhibit, it seemed like the perfect opportunity.”

“An opportunity for what?” Jake interjected, pushing himself away from the wall and taking a step toward the table. “To kill?”

“Look, I’m not a killer,” Dave insisted, his voice rising in pitch. “I just love bugs, okay? I don’t know anything about this murder.”

“Then why did you run when we tried to question you?” Fiona asked, her eyes narrowing as she watched him closely. She had seen plenty of guilty suspects in her time, and something about Dave’s demeanor reminded her of them. No one would run like that if they didn’t have something to hide.

“I-I panicked,” Dave stammered, looking down at his hands. “I saw you two coming towards me, and I just freaked out. I didn’t know what you wanted, and I guess I thought maybe you were going to accuse me of something.”

“Like murder?” Jake suggested, his tone mocking.

“Look, I’m not a bad person,” Dave pleaded, his eyes meeting Fiona’s. “I swear I didn’t kill anyone. You have to believe me.”

“Believing you isn’t our job,” Fiona replied, her voice devoid of emotion. “Our job is to find out the truth.”

“Which we will,” Jake added, glancing at Fiona, a determined gleam in his eyes.

Fiona couldn’t help but wonder what Dave was hiding. His desperation seemed genuine, but he matched the description of the possible killer too closely to ignore.

“Let’s say we believe you for now,” Fiona said, trying to suppress her own doubts. “Is there anything else you can tell us about what happened yesterday? Anything that might help us find the real killer?”

“I don’t know,” Dave muttered, rubbing his temples as if trying to summon a memory. “I mean, I didn’t see anything unusual, and I definitely didn’t see anyone get killed. I wasn’t even here! I just want this nightmare to be over.”

“Trust me, so do we,” Fiona said, exchanging a look with Jake. There was something about Dave’s story that bothered her, nagging at the edges of her mind like an itch she couldn’t quite reach. “I understand you were ‘sick’ yesterday,” Fiona said.

“I was puking all morning,” Dave muttered. “I may have had a few drinks in my hotel room the night before, and I couldn’t come into work, but that doesn’t mean I killed someone.”

Fiona studied Dave’s face, searching for a flicker of dishonesty. His eyes were wide and pleading, and his voice trembled with desperation as he spoke.

“I’m not a killer,” he insisted again, his hands gripping the edge of the table.

“Then why did you really run?” Jake asked, his voice low and steady, like the calm before a storm. Fiona couldn’t help but admire his ability to remain composed in even the most tense situations. She aspired to be an agent like him someday.

“Look, I didn’t kill anyone. But...” Dave hesitated, biting his lip. “There is something I need to tell you.” He glanced nervously between the two investigators, weighing his options.

“What is it?” Fiona urged, her arms crossed over her chest. She was growing impatient; each wasted minute felt like an eternity when there was a murderer on the loose.

“Fine,” Dave sighed, slumping back in his chair. “The truth is, I’m a thief. I really was sick yesterday, but I came in later in the day, just as that... thing happened. When I heard the commotion yesterday, I saw an opportunity, and I took it.”

“An opportunity for what?” Jake asked, his brow furrowed.

“Something from the museum,” Dave admitted, his cheeks flushing with shame. “A rare artifact that would fetch a pretty penny on the black market.”

“Is that why you were running?” Fiona asked, trying to piece together the timeline. She didn’t want to buy Dave’s excuse so easily.

Dave nodded. “Yeah, I panicked when I saw you guys coming for me. I thought you knew about the theft.”

Fiona leaned forward, her eyes locked onto Dave’s. “What did you steal?”

Dave hesitated, his eyes dropping to the floor. “It’s called the ‘Jewel of the Rainforest,’” he whispered.

Fiona frowned. She had never heard of the artifact before, but she took out her phone and did a quick search. It was a rare emerald carved into the shape of a beetle that was said to have been blessed by an indigenous tribe in South America. It seemed like it would be worth something to the right collector.

“That sounds like quite a score,” Jake said.

“It wasn’t about the money,” Dave said quickly, his eyes darting nervously between Fiona and Jake. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I don’t even know who I’m supposed to sell it to yet.”

“Right,” Fiona said skeptically. It was possible he was telling the truth - that he was nothing more than a common thief who’d gotten caught up in a murder investigation.

“Let’s say we believe you,” Jake said, his voice edged with skepticism. “How can we be sure you’re not involved in any way with the murders?”

“Check the security footage,” Dave said, his voice confident. “You’ll see that I was nowhere near the crime scene when it happened. I know because I remember exactly where I was going at the time, everyone started screaming.”

Fiona supposed that was the one thing that could absolve him—the security footage. They were already very confident the man in the black beanie hat was the killer, but if that wasn’t Dave, then it must have been someone else.

“Alright,” Jake agreed, standing up from his chair. “We’ll review the footage and see if your story checks up. In the meantime, you’re staying right here.” He gestured to the empty room around them, indicating there would be no escape for Dave.

“Fine,” he muttered, resigned to his fate. As Fiona and Jake exited the room, she couldn’t help but feel a strange mix of emotions - frustration at the potential dead-end in their investigation but also a sense of relief that they might have at least found some answers. If Dave’s story was true, they could focus their efforts on finding the true killer.

The fluorescent lights flickered above Fiona and Jake as they hunched over their laptops in the briefing room. The sterile environment seemed to heighten the tension, both of them intent on finding the truth hidden within the security footage sent to them from the museum. Fiona watched carefully as Jake skimmed through footage from different angles of the museum.

“Here,” Jake said, pausing the video to show Dave standing near a display case of ancient artifacts. “That lines up with what he told us.”

Fiona’s eyes traced the timestamp, noting the exact moment the killer was seen entering the bathroom after the victim. As she compared it to Dave’s position on the opposite side of the museum, her heart sank. There was no denying it - Dave wasn’t their killer.

“Looks like he was telling the truth about being a thief, at least,” she muttered, disappointment lacing her voice.

“Seems so,” Jake agreed, a frown creasing his forehead. “We’ll have to hand him over to the local authorities for the theft.”

Fiona leaned back in her chair, frustration simmering beneath the surface. She couldn’t shake the feeling that they were so close, yet still missing something crucial. Her mind raced through the evidence they’d collected so far, desperate for any scrap that might lead them closer to the truth.

“Are we back to square one then?” she asked, her voice barely audible as she chewed on her bottom lip.

“Maybe not,” Jake replied, absently rubbing the back of his neck. “There has to be something connecting these murders, some clue we’re overlooking.”

“Right,” Fiona agreed. If Dave was a dead-end, then they would just have to keep looking.

Fiona was beginning to feel like this investigation was going to drive her mad.

She and Jake were hunched over their laptops. The hum of their machines mixed with the distant echoes of footsteps, creating an atmosphere of tense anticipation. Fiona’s fingers flew across her keyboard, wanting to leave no digital stone unturned in her search for answers. And yet she wasn’t sure how it all tied together.

She wanted to look at the victims themselves first before she kept going.

“Look at this,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “The first victim, the man the docent found, was Seymour Smith, forty years old, a construction worker from Nevada. No criminal record, single, no connections to anyone involved in the exhibit, it seems.”

Jake glanced over, his brow furrowed. “And the second victim—what do we know about him?”

Fiona scanned over Daniel’s file, disturbed by the memory of his lifeless body from the day before. “Daniel Boone, twenty-three years old. College students visit the exhibit with friends. Also no criminal record. Different states, different profiles.” Fiona sighed, rubbing at the bridge of her nose. “But there has to be something linking them. I can feel it.”

“Could it be the bugs?” Jake asked, leaning back in his chair and running a hand through his hair. “That’s the only connection we’ve found so far between the two victims. Seymour had a caterpillar on his forehead, and Daniel had a beetle.”

“Maybe,” Fiona replied, her mind racing with possibilities. “The bug has to mean something, right? Some sort of signature or message from the killer. Something about a beetle and a caterpillar...”

“Only one way to find out,” Jake said, determination lacing his voice. “This is your world, Red. We have to find the connection. What have you got?”

Fiona nodded, her fingers once again flying across the keys as she delved into the underbelly of entomology. She felt certain that if she could just decipher the meaning behind the bugs, they would finally have a solid lead on their killer. Yet as she scrolled through page after page of information, she found nothing that seemed relevant. There were countless articles on insects and their various uses throughout history, but nothing that connected to their case—nothing about insect placement on people’s foreheads, and nothing about a caterpillar and a beetle meaning anything.

“Anything?” Jake asked, his voice tinged with frustration.

“Nothing,” Fiona admitted, her heart sinking. “There’s just...nothing.”

“Dammit,” Jake cursed under his breath. “What are we missing here?”

Fiona closed her eyes for a moment, attempting to calm the storm of thoughts swirling through her mind. She knew they

were missing something, some vital piece of information that would bring everything into focus. But try as she might, she couldn't see it.

"Maybe we need to take a step back," she suggested, opening her eyes and looking over at Jake. "Reexamine the evidence from a different angle."

"Or maybe we're just grasping at straws," Jake replied, the harsh reality of their situation weighing heavily on his shoulders.

"Either way," Fiona said, meeting his gaze with unwavering determination, "we can't give up. We owe it to those victims to find their killer, no matter how long it takes or how many dead ends we face."

"Agreed," Jake murmured, his resolve strengthening in the face of Fiona's conviction. Together, they returned their focus to their laptops, refusing to let despair win. The answer was out there, hidden somewhere within the depths of their investigation. And they would find it, no matter the cost.

Fiona just hoped they wouldn't be too late.

For all they knew, the killer could already be long gone in another state.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The entomology exhibit had reopened, and he was pleased to be back again.

He stepped into the brightly lit room with a sense of purpose. Around him, security guards and police officers lingered, their eyes scanning the crowd for anything suspicious. But he paid them no mind; they were merely background noise in his quest. He had done well to disguise his appearance and knew now that he was safe to walk freely, even with the police and security presence looking for him. He even smiled at an officer and nodded as he continued into the exhibit.

He moved from display to display, his dark eyes taking in the preserved insects like a connoisseur surveying a rare wine collection. His hands remained tucked behind his back, betraying nothing about the storm raging within him.

“Excuse me,” a woman said, her voice a soft whisper as she edged past him to get a better look at a display featuring several vibrantly colored butterflies. He barely acknowledged her; his focus was on one particular case, one that held the key to unlocking a flood of memories he had long repressed.

“Ah, there you are,” he murmured under his breath as his gaze fell upon the familiar sight of an old friend. Not a human friend, but rather, a dead bug—meticulously preserved and encased behind glass.

“Can I help you with something, sir?” A museum employee approached him, her tone polite but wary as she looked at him intently. He could feel her assessing him, and for a moment, he wondered if she knew. If she suspected it was him who’d driven a knife into a man’s chest here just the day before.

But she kept smiling politely, and he was sure she didn’t suspect a thing. He knew how to play the part of an interested patron, someone who simply appreciated the beauty of nature’s creations.

“Isn’t it fascinating?” he replied smoothly, gesturing toward the display. “I’ve always been captivated by the intricacy of these creatures.”

“Indeed, their complexity is often overlooked,” she agreed, relaxing slightly at his cultured response. “If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you,” he said, nodding to dismiss her. As she walked away, he returned his attention to the glass-encased insect. In another lifetime, they had shared a connection that he had never been able to replicate with another living being.

His heart ached as he gazed upon the lifeless form, his mind racing through the past and its myriad of emotions. The memories were both vivid and hazy, ghostly images that refused to be forgotten. The bond they had formed was based on mutual understanding, a tacit agreement that neither would ever betray the other.

He felt a sudden surge of anger, hot and fierce like a wildfire, at those who had taken this creature from him.

His hands clenched into fists, but he forced himself to remain calm, to not draw attention to himself. Revenge was best served cold, after all.

Still, his eyes misted over, and he blinked back the tears threatening to spill. He knew this bug when it had been alive, a vibrant creature full of life and energy. They had formed an unbreakable bond, an understanding that transcended their differences in species.

“Hello, old friend,” he whispered, his voice choked with emotion.

He recalled how they had met one fateful day in the quiet solitude of his garden. The insect had landed delicately on his outstretched hand, its iridescent wings shimmering in the sun. A sense of awe had filled him as if he’d been chosen for something greater than himself.

“Did you know I named him Azazel?” he asked the stranger, a woman beside him, not bothering to acknowledge any reaction. “We were inseparable back then.”

The woman simply gave him a dirty look and moved away.

But it didn't matter. He remembered their countless hours spent together, exploring the hidden secrets of nature. Azazel would guide him through the undergrowth, leading him to places he never thought existed. They shared adventures, laughter, and, most importantly, trust. But then again, maybe that had just been a dream...

"Such a shame, what happened to you," he murmured, his fingers itching to reach through the glass barrier and caress the fragile wings. "You didn't deserve this fate."

His thoughts darkened, swirling like storm clouds on the horizon. His heart pounded in his chest, a fierce, primal rhythm that seemed to fuel his anger. Anyone who harmed them, who dared to disrupt their perfect harmony, would pay dearly for their actions.

He would see to it himself.

Insects were beautiful creatures. And he was their protector.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Fiona sat alone in the briefing room, the air thick with the stale smell of coffee and old paperwork. She had spent the past while trying to draw a connection between the two victims—anything, even in their bank statements—but nothing showed up.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the shrill ring of her phone, the screen displaying Betty's name - her elderly landlady from her apartment building.

"Hello?" she answered, trying to keep the weariness out of her voice.

"Fiona, dear, I don't want to bother you, but a man came looking for you today," Betty began hesitantly. "Said he had information you might want."

Fiona frowned. Who would come by looking for her? She prayed it wasn't her overly possessive ex, Mark, but passed that off—she hadn't heard from him in a long time now.

"Did he leave a name?" Fiona asked, her pulse quickening.

"Sorry dear, he didn't. But he said you'd asked him to look into something for you."

"Alright, thanks, Betty. I appreciate the heads up." Fiona hung up the phone, her mind racing.

Could it be Marcus, the witness who claimed to have seen Damien before? If so, did he finally have new information on his real identity? These questions swirled around in her head like a dark storm cloud, blocking out any sense of reason. It was exhausting; the endless cycle of hope and disappointment that came with chasing leads on Joslyn, her missing sister. The constant dead-ends were taking their toll, leaving Fiona feeling drained and defeated.

Fiona stared at the blank wall across the room, her mind racing yet paralyzed by the weight of both personal and professional burdens. She shook her head, forcing herself to

refocus on the task at hand. They were running out of time to catch this killer, and she couldn't afford to let her personal life interfere with the case.

"Get it together, Fiona," she muttered under her breath as her fingers tapped restlessly on the wooden table. She needed to review the facts they had to work with on the case rather than try to pull something out of nothing.

They knew Seymour Smith had been killed at a museum in Nevada, entomology wing. And they knew that the traveling entomology exhibit here in Portland had been in Nevada at that time. They also knew that another murder had occurred at this exhibit yesterday. So what they did know was that the killer moved with the exhibit.

"Maybe..." she whispered to herself, "maybe the killer only strikes once at each museum. Targeting one victim before moving on to the next exhibit."

The idea sent a shiver down her spine, but it made sense. It would explain why they were always one step behind, why the trail went cold so quickly. If this theory were correct, then their best chance of catching the killer would be waiting for the exhibit to move again, hoping they'd strike at the new location. But that was far too risky. It would mean letting another person's life hang in the balance like bait. Fiona couldn't condone that.

She knew it was a dangerous gamble, but what other options did they have? It felt like a losing battle, like grasping at straws in a hurricane. But if there was even the slightest chance that her theory was right, Fiona knew she had to take it.

As the determination welled up inside her, Fiona vowed that she would put an end to this nightmare. She wouldn't let the darkness consume her, not when there were lives on the line.

The door to the briefing room creaked open, and Jake reappeared, his arms laden with paper bags of steaming takeout. The aroma of grilled chicken and spices wafted through the air, making Fiona's empty stomach growl in anticipation.

“Finally, sustenance,” Jake declared, setting the bags down on the table with a flourish. “Now, tell me you’ve got some good news to go with this feast.”

Fiona hesitated for a moment, her thoughts once again straying back to her landlady’s phone call. She could feel the heavy weight of her sister’s disappearance resting on her chest, but she knew now wasn’t the time to bring it up. Instead, she focused on her new theory about the killer.

“Maybe,” she replied cautiously. “I’ve been thinking... what if the killer only chooses one victim at each museum?”

Jake raised an eyebrow, intrigued, as he began unpacking their lunch. “And then moves on with the exhibit? That could explain why we’re always a step behind.”

“Exactly.” Fiona nodded, tearing open a plastic fork wrapper as they settled in to eat. “But it also means that we might have to wait until the next exhibit opening to catch him in the act.”

Her partner frowned, considering the implications. “So, we’d have to travel with the exhibit and hope we can stop him before he strikes again.”

“Right,” Fiona confirmed, picking at her salad. Her appetite had been dampened by the gravity of their situation. “It’s not ideal, I know. But it might be our best shot at catching this guy.”

As they ate in silence, Fiona couldn’t help but let her thoughts drift back to the mysterious phone call. Was it possible that the man who had visited her apartment was Marcus, the witness from Damien’s case? And if so, could he finally hold the key to her sister’s whereabouts?

But she couldn’t allow herself to be sidetracked by personal matters. She had a duty to the victims of this heinous killer, and she was determined to see justice served. With renewed resolve, Fiona forced herself to push her private concerns aside and focus on the task at hand.

“Once we’re done eating,” she said, her voice firm and resolute, “let’s go over everything we know about the exhibit

and its creators. Maybe there's something we've missed that could give us a lead."

"Agreed," Jake replied, matching her determination. "We'll find this monster, Fiona. No matter what it takes."

As they resumed their investigation, Fiona couldn't help but feel a sliver of hope piercing through the darkness. She knew the road ahead would be long and treacherous, but with Jake by her side, she felt certain that they would ultimately prevail. And perhaps, in the process, she might just find the answers she so desperately sought regarding her own past.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Despite Fiona's new theory, they had to keep working.

The sun dipped low in the sky, casting long shadows across the precinct's briefing room. Fiona sipped her now lukewarm coffee, feeling the weight of exhaustion press against her temples. The room hummed with the quiet sound of Jake typing on his laptop and the distant murmur of voices from the bustling station outside their door.

"Damn," Fiona muttered under her breath, rubbing her eyes as she tried to focus on the case file spread in front of her. Despite her new theory, time was slipping through their fingers like grains of sand, and they needed to make the most of it. She'd fought tooth and nail to get this case assigned to her and Jake, and she wouldn't let it go without a fight.

"Hey, Jake?" Fiona asked, leaning back in her chair and stretching her tense muscles. "Remember when I mentioned something about the exhibit creators earlier?"

Jake glanced up from his laptop, his brow furrowing as he tried to recall their conversation. "Yeah, you said you read something online about them but didn't have time to really dig into it. What's up?"

Fiona tapped her finger against the edge of the table, her thoughts racing. "I've got a gut feeling that we're missing something important about those people. Something that could lead us to the killer."

"Alright," Jake agreed, his fingers already flying over the keyboard. "Let me look them up again. We'll find everything there is to know about them."

As Jake searched for information on the exhibit creators, Fiona found herself lost in thought. Her mind was a whirlwind of unanswered questions, mulling over the details of the case, attempting to piece them together. Somebody had to have a motive to leave those specific insects on their victims' foreheads.

“Okay, I found something interesting,” Jake said, breaking through her reverie. “I’ve pulled up their backgrounds, and it seems like we overlooked one of them.”

“Who?” Fiona asked, leaning in closer to examine the screen.

“His name is Magnus Weber,” Jake replied, scrolling through the man’s profile. “He was involved in creating the exhibit, but he was let go shortly after its launch due to some... unsavory behavior.”

Fiona’s eyes narrowed as she read the details about Weber’s inappropriate conduct towards female employees. Apparently, he had been known to sexually harass people and make them uncomfortable. Was this merely an unfortunate coincidence, or could there be a connection between him and the killer?

Fiona felt a cold knot forming in her stomach. “Could he be our suspect?”

“Maybe,” Jake admitted, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Only problem is, Magnus lives in Nevada, and we’re in Portland.”

“Wait,” Fiona said, her eyes widening with realization. “Isn’t that near where Seymour Smith was murdered?”

“Exactly,” Jake confirmed. “He could’ve followed the exhibit here to commit another murder.”

Fiona nodded. “What else do we know about him? Any criminal record?”

Jake’s fingers flew over the keyboard as he searched for the answer. After a few moments of scrolling, he paused, his eyes widening with surprise. “It looks like Magnus does have a criminal record,” he said in disbelief. “He was convicted of assault a few years ago.”

Fiona and Jake shared an excited glance. This could be their break in the case they had been searching for. If Magnus Weber was connected to the murders, then it would provide much-needed answers about the killer’s motive and methodologies.

But there was one problem—he was far. Fiona knew they had the resources of the FBI at their disposal, but it was still a long way to go to talk to a suspect when it was entirely possible their killer was still here. If Magnus was the killer, then he wouldn't even be in Nevada—chances were, he'd still be here.

“We can't just sit here while he's out there,” Fiona said.

“I know,” Jake replied without looking up, his voice tense. “We need to find him.”

Fiona drummed her fingers on the table, her mind racing. Every second they wasted felt like a potential missed opportunity to catch Magnus before he struck again. Her thoughts drifted back to Joslyn, her missing sister, and the trail of heartache that had led her to this point. She couldn't let another family suffer that same pain.

“Maybe we should send someone to check out Magnus's home in Nevada,” she suggested, her eyes fixed on Jake. “We could have local PD pay him a visit. If he's not there, then we'll have a clearer idea of what we need to do here.”

“Good idea,” Jake agreed, finally raising his eyes to meet hers. “If nothing else, it'll give us a better idea of what we're dealing with.”

Fiona nodded, feeling a small measure of relief. At least they were taking action, even if it wasn't them going personally. She watched as Jake dialed the number for the Nevada police department, his voice firm and authoritative as he explained their situation.

“Chief Johnson,” he said into the phone, “this is Agent Jake Tucker from the FBI, Portland division. We're investigating a series of murders connected to a traveling entomology exhibit, and we believe we've identified a potential suspect who resides in your jurisdiction. His name is Magnus Weber.”

Fiona studied Jake's face as he spoke, trying to gauge the reaction on the other end of the line. She knew that if they could get the Nevada police to cooperate, it would be a significant step forward in their investigation.

“Could you send a unit to Weber’s address?” Jake continued. “We’d appreciate any information you can gather on him.”

There was a pause, and Fiona held her breath, waiting for the response. Finally, Jake nodded, his expression one of grim satisfaction.

“Thank you, Chief Johnson,” he said before hanging up the phone. He turned to Fiona, his eyes determined. “They’ll send a unit to check on Magnus. Let’s hope this leads us somewhere.”

Fiona nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. They were taking a leap of faith, trusting that the local PD would uncover something crucial. But it was a chance they had to take, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that they were finally closing in on the truth.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The sun hung heavily in the sky, casting a golden haze over the streets. Nick wiped beads of sweat from his forehead as he followed Lisa, his seasoned partner, towards the suspect's house. The dry heat prickled on his skin, and he couldn't help but grumble under his breath about their current assignment.

"Can't believe we're out here 'cause some FBI guy two states away can't handle his own damn case," Nick muttered to himself, adjusting his uniform cap.

"Get used to it," Lisa replied without turning to face him, her voice steady and experienced. "That's part of the job. Besides, we're not dealing with just any ordinary suspect."

"Really? What's so special about this one?"

"Murder suspect," she said simply, maintaining her stride.

Nick felt a shiver run down his spine, despite the sweltering heat. He'd dealt with plenty of petty criminals during his time as a cop, but murder suspects were an entirely different ball game. Just thinking about facing a killer had his heart pounding louder in his chest.

"Murder?" Nick's voice cracked, the word catching in his throat. He stared at Lisa, the color draining from his face. "You didn't say anything about a murderer."

Lisa sighed her expression a mix of concern and irritation. "I wanted you focused, not scared out of your wits. You're still new to this, Nick, and there's no point in psyching yourself out before we even get started."

"Great," Nick muttered, his eyes darting around the desolate street as he tried to quell the rising panic in his chest. "Just great."

"Look, just take a deep breath, okay?" Lisa said, trying to sound reassuring. "We've got each other's backs. We'll be fine."

“Easy for you to say,” Nick grumbled under his breath, but he did as she suggested, inhaling deeply and trying to steady his frayed nerves.

“Come on,” Lisa said, nodding towards the house. “Let’s get this over with.”

Their footsteps crunched on the gravel driveway as they approached the suspect’s home, its peeling paint and sagging porch a testament to years of neglect. The sun cast long shadows across the yard, and Nick couldn’t shake the feeling that unseen eyes were watching them.

As Lisa raised her hand to knock on the door, Nick felt his heart race, pounding in his ears like a drumbeat. He clenched his fists at his sides, fighting the urge to turn and run. This was his job, after all. He couldn’t back down now.

“Here goes nothing,” Lisa murmured, rapping sharply on the weathered wood. They waited, the seconds stretching into an eternity, but there was no response. Just as when they’d tried to call earlier, the house remained silent, its secrets locked away behind the door.

“Guess we’re doing this the hard way,” Lisa muttered, exchanging a glance with Nick before stepping back and preparing to force their way inside. Nick could only nod, his throat dry, as he braced himself for what was to come.

The quiet afternoon air hung heavy around them, charged with tension and anticipation. As they moved to kick in the door, Nick knew that beyond it lay a darkness they couldn’t predict. But there was no choice now; they had to face whatever waited for them inside.

Just as Nick was about to voice his concerns, a faint shuffling sound reached their ears, emanating from within the house. His heart skipped a beat, and he exchanged an alarmed glance with Lisa.

“Did you hear that?” he whispered, unable to keep the tremor from his voice.

“Stay sharp,” she cautioned in response, her eyes narrowing as she carefully unholstered her weapon. “Something’s definitely going on in there.”

Nick followed suit, his palms slick with sweat as he gripped the cold metal of his gun. A creeping dread gnawed at the pit of his stomach, and he couldn't help but wonder what kind of nightmare they were about to uncover. He'd known becoming a cop would come with some risks, but right now, it felt way too real.

“Ready?” Lisa asked, her gaze never leaving the door. He nodded, swallowing hard against the fear that threatened to choke him.

“Let's do it.”

With one powerful kick, Lisa sent the door flying open, revealing the dark maw of the house beyond. They rushed in, guns raised, voices raised in unison.

“Police! Hands where we can see them!”

The words echoed through the dimly lit interior, bouncing off peeling wallpaper and worn-down floorboards. As their eyes adjusted to the gloom, the sight that greeted them was not one of horror or bloodshed but rather one of squalor and despair.

There, slumped against a cracked and stained wall, sat Magnus Weber.

The man was a mess, drunk and incoherent; his eyes glazed over with a toxic mix of alcohol and anger. Empty bottles littered the floor around him, a testament to his self-destructive spiral.

“Get up!” Lisa barked, her voice firm and authoritative. “You're under arrest, Weber. Don't make this worse for yourself.”

“Wha—” The man stammered, his gaze darting between them as he tried to make sense of the situation. “You can't... I didn't do anythin'.”

“Save it for the judge,” she snapped, cuffing him as Nick kept his weapon trained on the suspect.

As Lisa led the now-detained Magnus Weber out of the house, Nick couldn't help but feel a rush of relief. They had done their job, and perhaps in some small way, they had saved

this man from himself. But as he glanced back at the shadowy interior, a chill raced down his spine, an unshakable sense of unease that lingered long after they left the scene.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The faint stench of stale coffee and sweat hung in the air as Jake stood by Fiona in the dimly lit precinct, watching her frantically flip through case files. He could see the tension building in her furrowed brow, that familiar determined glint in her amber eyes. She had lobbied hard for this case, and he knew she didn't want to let Chief Whittaker down.

Jake didn't either. After his track record, he knew the chief's expectations were as high as the expectations he had for himself. Failure was not an option, even when it felt like all odds were stacked against him.

They'd been doing more research on the exhibit and all those associated with it as Jake waited the call from Nevada. He prayed they had some luck and Magnus Weber could be their man. Even if he was back in Nevada, it was possible he had driven down since the murder yesterday.

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and he pulled it out. It was the police chief from Nevada. Jake answered quickly, his voice low and steady.

"Chief, what do you get on Magnus Weber?" he asked, his gaze fixed on Fiona as she continued searching for any clues they might have missed.

"Jake," the chief replied, "two of my officers picked up Weber. But he's just a drunk. We have more than enough evidence to prove he hasn't left town in weeks—including surveillance footage of him at the liquor store just yesterday. There's no way he could've been in Portland to commit your murder."

"Damn it," Jake muttered under his breath. "You're sure about this?"

"I'm positive," the chief replied. "Weber's a dead end."

"Okay. Thanks anyway." Jake hung up the phone, feeling his heart sink. He turned to Fiona, who looked up at him

expectantly.

“Did they find anything?” she asked, her tone urgent.

“No,” he replied, his voice heavy with disappointment.
“Weber’s not our guy.”

Fiona let out a frustrated sigh. “So what now? We’re back to square one?”

Jake shook his head, his mind racing. Jake studied her face for a moment before offering a reassuring smile. “Let’s head back to the museum, Red. Maybe we missed something.”

Her eyes widened slightly at the suggestion, but then she nodded in agreement. “Alright, let’s go.”

As they exited the precinct, Jake couldn’t help but feel a pang of concern for Fiona. She had put everything on the line for this case, and he was determined for them to succeed. He knew they needed a break in the investigation, something to point them in the right direction. But would that break come before it was too late?

The sun was sinking lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the museum’s marble floors. Jake and Fiona entered the dimly lit traveling entomology exhibit, each feeling the weight of the unsolved case heavy on their shoulders. Glass cases housing exotic insects lined the walls, and the air was thick with the scent of old books and preservatives. In all honesty, Jake was growing sick of seeing this place.

“Alex,” Fiona called out, her voice echoing through the cavernous room. The familiar figure appeared from behind a display, his nametag glinting under the pale lighting. He was one of the exhibit employees they’d talked to earlier.

“Agent Tucker, Ms. Red,” Alex greeted them, a hint of concern in his eyes. “What brings you back here?”

“Time’s running out for us,” Fiona admitted, her gaze flickering over the displays. “We thought we had a suspect, but it turned out to be a dead end.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Alex replied, genuine sympathy in his tone. He hesitated before adding, “You should know the exhibit is moving on to another town tomorrow.”

Fiona’s eyes widened in alarm. “Moving? But our investigation is still ongoing.”

“Unless you have any evidence to prove one of the exhibit’s employees is the killer, we have the right to move on,” Alex said firmly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Jake frowned, studying Alex’s face as he processed the information. Inwardly, he knew the man was right; unless they proved the exhibit itself was connected to the murders, then they couldn’t force them to stay. After all, the previous murder had happened in a museum unrelated to the exhibit.

“Okay,” Jake said, “but we’re going to keep looking around here.”

“Do what you have to do,” Alex said. “Frankly, I can’t wait to get out of Portland.”

Fiona clenched her jaw, her frustration palpable, but Jake placed a hand on the small of her back and led her away from Alex’s ears. Once alone, Fiona said, “There must be something here that we’ve overlooked. Some tiny clue that could help us crack this case.”

“Let’s take another look around,” Jake suggested. Right now, it was all they had.

The sun dipped low in the sky, casting a dark hue over the museum’s façade as Fiona and Jake stepped out into the crisp evening air. Disappointment weighed heavily on Jake, like a stone tied around his heart. He had hoped for a breakthrough, but instead, they were left with the sinking feeling that the killer was slipping through their fingers.

“Damn it,” Fiona muttered under her breath, kicking at a loose pebble on the sidewalk. The sound of her frustration echoed through the parking lot. Of all the cases they’d worked

together, Jake could tell this one meant a lot to Fiona. He wished they were closer to the truth, but their search through the museum hadn't yielded any new information, at least not yet, so they had stepped out to get some air and take a break.

"Come on," Jake said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Let's keep an eye on the place from the car. Maybe we'll get lucky."

They crossed the street and climbed into Jake's unmarked cruiser, settling into the worn leather seats. As the engine rumbled to life, Jake angled the car so they could monitor the museum's entrance, hoping that their vigilance would somehow pay off.

"Let's hang here for a bit, then scout inside again," Jake suggested. "We don't know if this guy will show up again, but he might."

Fiona nodded, biting her lip. They fell into silence as Jake cut the lights on the car, turning it off. As the last rays of sunlight faded, Jake couldn't help but feel a growing sense of unease. Time was running out, and with each passing second, the killer was getting further away. He shook off the thought, knowing that he needed to remain focused on the task at hand.

This was an odd case that much was certain. All Jake had wanted was to take Fiona on a date at an entomology exhibit, and now they were chasing a serial killer that potentially crossed state lines. For all they knew, he was already long gone, but they had to keep on him. Many killers returned to the scene of the crime. But the truth was, they didn't know much about this guy or how his mind worked. The biggest piece of the puzzle—why he left insects on his victims' foreheads—was still a mystery.

They sat in silence for some time before Fiona said, "By the way, my landlady called me earlier..."

Jake looked over, confused. "What did she want?"

"She said some guy came looking for me with information but didn't leave a name."

Jake frowned. "Who do you think it was?"

“Maybe Marcus. Maybe he needed to tell me something else about Damien.”

Right. Marcus had been the one to give them a tip about the possible name of the man who had kidnapped Fiona’s sister.

“I know how important it is for you to get answers,” Jake said. “Did you try calling him?”

Fiona shook her head. “No, I need to focus on this case first. I can’t let my own personal case stop me from catching this guy.”

Jake nodded in agreement. Catching the killer was their top priority, but he knew that Fiona was still hurting from the loss of her sister. He couldn’t imagine the pain she must be feeling, the constant weight that must be weighing her down. “We’ll get him, Red,” he said, as much to reassure himself as to reassure her. “And we’ll get Damien, too,” he added.

Fiona gave him a small smile, appreciation glinting in her eyes. “Thank you, Jake.”

They fell into silence once more. Jake held his breath, watching the museum entrance. “I say we go back in and stake the place out from the inside,” he said. “What do you think, Red? Ready to go back in?”

Fiona nodded, resolute. “Let’s do it.”

They slipped out of the car and silently made their way back inside the museum. It was even darker now, the moon casting eerie shadows across the displays. The air was thick with the scent of insect preservatives, and Jake had to fight back a shudder. He hated bugs of any kind; they gave him the creeps. But he put on a brave face.

As they crept through the exhibit, Jake couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. There were many people here enjoying the event. He spotted a couple up ahead, a man throwing his arm around a woman. They smiled and kissed as they walked, looking happy. And for a fleeting moment, Jake wondered what it would be like to be a normal couple with Fiona. No crime scenes, no death, no murder investigations.

It was an odd thought—he loved being an FBI agent and had aspired to be one ever since he’d found his mother’s body

murdered when he was a teenager.

He loved his work. Lived for it.

But he did occasionally wonder what it'd be like to settle down, have children, and just be normal for once.

Then again, he'd tried that yesterday, and look how it turned out. Jake was sure death would follow him, even if he quit the FBI and became something else. It was part of him.

He just hoped that wouldn't affect his future with Fiona.

CHAPTER TWENTY

This exhibit was giving Cole the creeps.

Cole trailed behind Macy, his date for the evening. The romantic gesture had been intended to impress her, but as they shuffled past one grotesque display after another, he found himself bored out of his mind. Insects and arachnids held no fascination for him, and he silently wished that they'd skipped this whole affair. Unfortunately for him, Macy was all into weird stuff like this. Honestly, the things Cole did just for a chance to get a girl into his bed.

“Can you believe this is the last day to see all these amazing creatures?” Macy gushed, her eyes wide with excitement as she examined the intricate details of a beetle’s exoskeleton.

“Uh, yeah.” Cole feigned enthusiasm, his gaze wandering to the clock on the wall. “Time sure flies.”

Macy laughed at his attempt at humor but was quickly drawn back to the displays, her curiosity insatiable. As she marveled at a vibrant butterfly exhibit, Cole glanced around, hoping to find something – anything – to hold his interest.

“Look, Cole, isn’t it incredible how the colors seem to change depending on the angle you view them from?” Macy asked, her voice filled with wonder.

“Sure is,” he replied absently, his attention captured by a fly buzzing around his head. He swatted at it, feeling a pang of satisfaction when it connected. The dazed insect spiraled down, landing on the floor with an almost imperceptible thud. It twitched pathetically, struggling to recover from the blow.

Cole stared at the fallen fly, his dark eyes narrowed. If there was anything he despised more than creepy crawlies, it was pests that had the audacity to invade his personal space. His lips curved into a cruel smirk as he lifted his foot and brought it down on the hapless creature with deliberate force.

Macy's attention was suddenly diverted from the displays as an older man with a bowtie and glasses approached her. They exchanged pleasantries, and Cole seized the opportunity to slip away. It wasn't that he didn't like conversing with strangers – he just couldn't stomach any more bug talk.

“Excuse me for a moment, would you?” Cole said quietly, hoping that Macy would be too engrossed in the conversation to notice his escape. She nodded absentmindedly, her eyes locked on the old man's animated gestures.

Cole wandered away from the exhibit, desperately seeking something more interesting than legs, wings, and antennae. He found himself drawn to a dimly lit corner of the museum where a series of obscure paintings hung. The dark swirls of color seemed to dance across the canvas, offering a welcome respite from the grotesqueries he'd been enduring.

Finally, some peace. He sighed, feeling his body relax.

As he moved deeper into the shadowy alcove, Cole's gaze fell upon the door to a utility closet. A small sign cautioned employees to keep it locked at all times. He smirked to himself, imagining going in there and taking a nap. Maybe Macy wouldn't notice... maybe he could lie and say he was just so caught up in another exhibit that he lost her for a good thirty minutes.

But no, that was stupid. He had to at least pretend to spend time with her if he wanted any hope of her going back to his place after.

Just then, as he passed by the door, it creaked open. Cole turned back with a frown, expecting an employee or something, but no one came out. Curious, Cole pack-pedaled and looked into the dark sliver of the opened door.

“Hello?” he said. “Anyone in there?”

Just then, an arm shot out from the darkness within, wrapping around his arm with startling speed and an iron grip. He tried to call out, to let Macy know he was in danger, but the words caught in his throat.

“Wha—” was all he managed before he was yanked into the shadows, the door slamming shut behind him.

“Let go!” he choked out, attempting to wrestle free from the iron grip that held him captive. But his efforts were in vain – the more he struggled, the tighter the arm constricted around his chest.

“Please,” he gasped, desperation creeping into his voice as he realized the futility of his situation. “I don’t know who you are or what you want, but you don’t—”

His words were cut off by a sharp pain radiating from his chest. It felt like a thousand needles piercing his skin, driving deeper and deeper until they reached his core. His vision blurred, and he fought to stay conscious, clawing at the unseen attacker as darkness encroached upon him.

“Help!” he tried to scream, but the sound was barely a whisper, lost within the confines of the closet.

As the blackness swallowed him whole, Cole felt a final surge of anger, frustration, and fear. If only they’d skipped the damn exhibit.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Fiona stood in the dimly lit hall of the exhibit, her eyes scanning the crowd. She was searching for someone who matched the killer's description, but all she saw were ordinary people enjoying their evening. Families and children were engrossed in the displays, marveling at the intricate beauty of the insects. She had split up with Jake in order to cover more ground.

Her heart raced with anticipation, knowing that the killer could be among them. The air was thick with tension, and she couldn't help but feel a chill run down her spine as she looked from one face to another. None appeared to be the sinister figure they sought, and Fiona began to grow frustrated. She clenched her fists, nails digging into her palms. They needed to catch this monster before more lives were lost.

"Come on," she muttered under her breath, willing herself to remain focused. "Where are you?"

As if in answer to her question, a blood-curdling scream tore through the exhibit, shattering the calm atmosphere. Fiona's head snapped in the direction of the sound, her pulse pounding in her ears. More screams followed, echoing off the walls and sending the patrons into a panicked frenzy.

Fiona pushed her way through the throng of frightened people, her instincts driving her forward. Every second mattered now; the killer was still here, and they had just struck again.

"Stay calm! Everyone stay calm!" she shouted, attempting to maintain some semblance of order while her mind raced. Her thoughts tangled together, a whirlwind of urgency and dread. With a fierce determination, Fiona fought her way through the chaos, her heart pounding like a war drum in her chest. Desperation clawed at her insides as the screams continued to echo around her, making it difficult to pinpoint

the source of the commotion. She rounded a corner and came to an abrupt halt, her breath catching in her throat.

There, slumped against the wall, was the lifeless form of a man. A stab wound pierced his chest, blood seeping through his shirt and staining the floor beneath him. And as if to sign their work, the killer had left a dead fly squashed on the man's forehead.

"Dear God," Fiona whispered, her hands shaking as she approached the body. She knew this kill was fresh - it must have just happened. Swallowing hard, she reached into the victim's pocket and pulled out his wallet. Her fingers trembled as she flipped it open: Cole Granger, twenty-eight. That name rang no bells for Fiona, but she committed it to memory, knowing there must be some connection to the other victims.

"Help! Somebody help!" a voice cried out nearby, drawing Fiona's attention away from the gruesome scene. She looked up to see a terrified museum employee standing a few feet away, her eyes wide with horror. Fiona forced herself to focus, pushing aside her own fear and grief.

"Listen to me," she said firmly, grabbing the woman's arm. Without Jake here, Fiona had to take charge. Wherever he was, he hadn't caught wind of it yet. "We need to lock this place down. No one can leave until we find the killer. Understand?"

The woman nodded, tears streaming down her face. "Yes, yes, I understand."

"Good," Fiona replied, giving the woman's arm a reassuring squeeze. "Now go. Tell security what's happening, and make sure they keep everyone inside."

As the woman hurried off to do as she was told, Fiona took a deep breath and glanced back at Cole Granger's body. She couldn't let this monster get away again. Not when they were so close to catching them. Fiona was left alone with her thoughts for a moment. Her mind raced, trying to understand what had just happened. Another kill had occurred, right under their noses, while they were in the building. Dark emotions rose in her—guilt, shame—but she knew better than to dwell on her frustration; there was a murderer to catch. She could deal with her feelings of failure later.

“Jake,” she said urgently into her phone, her eyes scanning the thinning crowd as people were ushered out of the exhibit. Panic-stricken faces passed by, but none matched the wiry figure from the security footage. “Get here as soon as you can.”

“Already on my way,” Jake replied, his voice tight with concern.

Fiona ended the call and plunged into the sea of terrified museum-goers, instincts guiding her through the chaos. Her gaze darted between faces, looking for anything - anyone - that seemed out of place.

As the exhibit emptied, a tall, well-built man caught her eye. He stood at the edge of the crowd, his expression unreadable. But something about him was familiar. That cleft chin...

Fiona’s heart skipped a beat; she recognized him. He had been there when the last body was found, hovering in the background. She distinctly remembered seeing him yesterday.

Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at him, adrenaline coursing through her veins. If he already saw the exhibit yesterday—and knew what had happened—why would he come back again today?

With a final glance at the grisly scene behind her, Fiona steeled herself and began to weave through the remaining onlookers, determined to confront the man. She had to know - and more importantly, she had to stop him if he was the monster responsible for this.

As Fiona approached, the man’s eyes locked onto hers, sending a shiver down her spine. The game of cat and mouse had begun, and there was no turning back.

Fiona’s heart pounded in her ears as she approached the tall man, each step feeling heavy and uncertain. Her instincts screamed at her to maintain a safe distance, but the need for answers drove her forward. She watched his eyes narrow as she drew closer, and she sensed he knew she was coming for him.

“Hello,” she said cautiously, trying to keep her voice steady. “I couldn’t help but notice you were here yesterday too.”

The man’s brow furrowed, a wary smile creeping onto his face. “Yeah, I was. I love bugs. Always have. Fascinating creatures, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” Fiona replied, watching his face closely for any hint of deceit. “But why would you come back after yesterday?”

He held up his hands defensively. “Hey, I didn’t know it was going to happen again. Like I said, I’m here because I’m into entomology. Nothing more.”

“What is your name?” Fiona asked, shaky with dread. The man held a defensive posture, but Fiona wasn’t buying it. He was here both times. It had to mean something. Was he trying to hide right in their faces?

The man hesitated a moment as if considering his options. Then, with a resigned sigh, he said, “My name is Gavin. Look, I don’t know what to tell you... yesterday got spoiled for me, so I came back today. Believe me, if I’d known this was going to happen again, I wouldn’t have come back.”

“Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts during both murders?” Fiona pressed, refusing to let go of her suspicion.

“Look, agent or officer or whoever you are— I can’t prove I wasn’t involved any more than you can prove I was. I just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Fiona studied his face, searching for any sign of guilt or fear. But all she saw was a calm sincerity that frustrated her even more. He seemed like a nice enough guy, but something about him still set her on edge.

Just then, Fiona turned to see Jake breaking through the crowd, along with a group of officers who were clearing the people away and already boarding off the scene. Jake spotted Fiona, his eyes wide, and ran over to them.

“Jake!” Fiona called out as her partner arrived on the scene, his eyes immediately meeting hers. “

“Hey, what’s going on?” he asked.

“She thinks I killed this guy,” Gavin said, almost too casually.

Jake shot Fiona a frown. “Why, Red?”

Fiona knew what Jake was thinking—Gavin didn’t match the description of the man seen in the footage at all. But still, he was here both times, and Fiona couldn’t let that go. Maybe there was something they’d missed. Or another explanation.

“He was here yesterday, too,” Fiona said. “At the times of both murders.”

“Alright,” Jake replied, eyeing the man with suspicion before approaching him. He extended his hand and introduced himself. “Agent Jake Tucker. Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Of course not,” the man answered, shaking Jake’s hand firmly. “I’m happy to help in any way I can. Like I was telling her, I came again today because my trip yesterday got ruined, and I wanted to make up for it. If I’d known it was gonna happen again; I never would’ve come back.”

Jake nodded, eyeing the man with a skeptical gaze. “Can you tell me what you were doing during the time of the murders?” he asked, his voice stern and commanding.

Gavin shrugged. “Just exploring the exhibit, looking at the bugs. I’m a big fan of entomology. I wasn’t really paying attention to much else.”

Fiona watched the man’s face closely, searching for any sign of a tell. But Gavin’s eyes were steady, his expression affable and open. Something about the man’s calm demeanor didn’t sit right with her. Gavin seemed too relaxed, almost as if he had rehearsed his answers. It was almost like he wanted them to believe he didn’t have anything to do with the murders.

But why would he do that? What was Gavin trying to hide, and why?

“Do you usually come to museums alone?” Jake asked Gavin.

Gavin nodded. “Yeah, I like to take my time and really appreciate the exhibits. It’s hard to do that with large groups.”

Jake nodded thoughtfully. “I see. And have you noticed anything suspicious while you were here?”

Gavin shook his head. “No, not really. Just the usual crowd of people looking at the exhibits.”

Fiona watched Jake carefully, hoping he would pick up on something she had missed. But the man’s answers were too vague, too rehearsed. She couldn’t shake the feeling that Gavin was hiding something.

Fiona stepped forward, her eyes fixed on Gavin’s face. “I’m sorry, but I just can’t shake the feeling that you know something,” she said, her voice low and urgent.

Gavin’s expression remained impassive, but Fiona could see something flicker in his eyes. Was it fear or guilt? She couldn’t tell.

“Just what are you getting at?” he asked, his voice laced with a hint of irritation.

Fiona took a step closer, her instincts telling her that she was on the right track. “I think you’re holding something back from us, Gavin. You seem too calm.”

“Well, I apologize if I’m not shaken up enough,” Gavin said. “I’m just trying to save face. Do you think I like seeing somebody get killed in public? For all I know, that could have been me. Believe me; I won’t be coming back to one of these things.”

Fiona opened her mouth to speak, but she had nothing else to add. Maybe she was grasping at straws here. The footage of the man in the black beanie was their strongest piece of evidence, and Gavin simply didn’t fit.

“Thank you for your time,” Jake said to Gavin. “We’ll let you know if we need anything else.”

Feeling foolish, Fiona followed Jake away toward an empty part of the hall. They ducked behind an exhibit case, blocked off from view of the others. Fiona felt like an idiot like she was so desperate to point fingers that she’d chosen the first

guy who seemed suspicious, but she needed to have better control than that. Maybe this case was getting to her.

“Hey,” Jake said, placing his hands on her arms. “I get why you’d suspect him, but he’s not getting out of here either way. The whole place is being put on lockdown again, so if Gavin does know something, we’ll find out. For now, we need to focus on searching the place again in case the killer’s still in here.”

Fiona nodded, taking a deep breath to steady herself. She knew Jake was right. They needed to keep their heads on straight, no matter how much the case was getting to them. There was still work to be done, and they couldn’t afford to lose sight of their objectives.

“Okay,” she said, her voice firm. “Let’s get to work.”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The exhibit now lay vacant, cordoned off once more as the guests were held in a separate area for questioning. Fiona's footsteps echoed through the empty hallways, bouncing off displays of beetles and delicate butterflies pinned behind glass. This was the non-live section, where deceased bugs were put on display. She scrutinized every detail, desperate to find the link between the victims and their killers.

"Alright, Fiona. Think," she muttered to herself. "What do these murders have in common?"

Her frustration mounted as she paced back and forth, her shoes clicking against the polished floor like a metronome. The clues were right there in front of her, but they continued to elude her grasp.

"Dead bugs on the victims' foreheads. All different, all common insects," she recited, her brow furrowing as she tried to make sense of it all. "There has to be a reason."

Fiona felt the weight of the case pressing down on her once again, threatening to suffocate her in its complexity. Every lead seemed to turn into a dead end, and with each passing moment, the killer remained at large.

"Come on, Fiona. You can do this," she whispered to herself, determination surging through her veins. She refused to let this case go unsolved, no matter how insurmountable the odds seemed. Somehow, she would find the connection and bring the killer to justice. For the victims, for their families, and for herself.

Fiona paused for a moment, her gaze drawn to a display with a plaque that read: "This exhibit is made possible by the generous donation of Bradley Caine." She studied the insects encased in glass, their patterned wings and multifaceted eyes appearing almost lifelike. Fiona couldn't help but marvel at the sheer number of rare specimens that Bradley Caine had provided for the exhibit. There was something about his name

that lingered in the back of her mind, but she couldn't quite place it.

She needed to focus. She tore her eyes away from the display. She knew there was a connection between the murders, and she was determined to find it.

As she continued toward the main area, the muffled voices of the detained guests grew louder, a cacophony of fear and confusion. But Fiona couldn't afford to be distracted; her thoughts were consumed by the killer's motivations.

Dead bugs on the victims' foreheads – why? Seymour Smith with a caterpillar, Daniel Boone with a beetle, and now Cole Granger with a fly... There had to be a reason they were all different but common insects.

Fiona felt the pieces of the puzzle slowly starting to click together in her mind, a tantalizing thread of logic just beyond her reach. As she thought of the dead insects in the exhibit and how each victim had been found with a dead bug left on their forehead, the connection began to solidify.

“Dead bugs in the exhibit... dead bugs left on the victims...” Her voice trailed off as her thoughts raced, propelling her ever closer to the truth. The answer was there, on the cusp of her understanding, and she knew she was close to unraveling the mystery that had plagued her for so long.

“Bradley Caine,” she breathed, the name suddenly taking on a new significance. “Could he be the key to all of this?”

Fiona's heart raced as she came to a sudden stop, a shiver running down her spine. The dimly lit corridor seemed to close in on her as if urging her to solve the mystery. She closed her eyes for a moment, allowing the pieces of the puzzle to fall into place. Her mind flashed with images of the murdered victims and their insect-topped foreheads. The answer was there, within reach.

“Of course,” Fiona whispered, her eyes flying open. The connection... it had been right there all along, staring at them. The placement of the insects on the victims' foreheads wasn't the clue, but the insects themselves. The fact that they were all

different but common... the passionate, seemingly random kills that felt somehow persona...

It struck Fiona like lightning. The victims—maybe they killed those bugs, and maybe the killer had witnessed it. Was it some sort of revenge plot? She spun around and sprinted back towards Jake, her shoes echoing loudly against the museum's cold, hard floors.

As she rounded the corner, she spotted Jake in a quiet corridor; his brow furrowed as he studied the crime scene photos one more time. Fiona skidded to a halt, catching her breath before she spoke.

"Jake, I think I've figured it out," she said urgently, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Figured what out?" Jake asked, raising an eyebrow as he turned to face her.

"Listen," Fiona began, her excitement bubbling over, "I believe the victims are the ones who killed the bugs that the killer has left on their foreheads. That's why they were chosen."

"Killed the bugs?" Jake questioned skeptically, folding his arms across his chest. "That seems like a bit of a stretch, don't you think?"

"No, it makes perfect sense," Fiona insisted, her eyes alight with conviction. "The killer is punishing them for murdering the insects. It's a twisted form of justice."

"Alright," Jake said slowly, still unconvinced but willing to hear her out. "So, let's say you're right. How do we find this killer?"

"Bradley Caine," Fiona replied, the name heavy with significance. "His donations made many parts of his exhibit possible. It looks like he donated almost every deceased specimen, which means he's connected to the bugs, and also this exhibit. I think he might be our guy."

Jake's eyes widened in surprise, and for a moment, he was speechless. Then, he nodded, acknowledging the weight of her words. "Okay, Red. Let's look into it."

Together, Fiona and Jake navigated through the dimly lit museum, their footsteps echoing off the polished floors. A lingering sense of unease prickled at Fiona's skin – the killer was still out there, and time was running out.

They found a group of exhibit staff huddled together near the entrance, their faces pale and drawn with anxiety. Fiona approached them confidently, her eyes betraying none of the turmoil that churned within her.

“Excuse me,” she began, addressing the small crowd. “Can you tell us more about Bradley Caine, the man who donated many of the insects for this exhibit?”

A young woman with dark, curly hair stepped forward. “Yes, Mr. Caine is an avid collector of rare insects. He's been very generous with his donations to our traveling exhibit.”

“Have you ever met him?” Fiona asked.

The employees all traded looks, then shrugged and shook their heads. “Well, no,” they said. “We don't know him. His donations were mailed. We received them all at once a couple of years ago.”

“Where does he live?” Jake asked, his voice tight and controlled.

“He lives in Nevada,” the woman replied, her brow furrowing in concern. “At least, that's where the return address was. Why do you ask?”

“Thank you,” Fiona cut in before the woman could press further. She exchanged a glance with Jake, her pulse quickening at the mention of Nevada.

As they strode away from the staff members, Fiona's mind raced. Images of the dead bodies, each adorned with a crushed insect, haunted her thoughts. She could almost feel the weight of those tiny corpses pressing against her conscience, a grim reminder of her duty to solve this case.

“Jake,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “The first murder happened in Nevada. Bradley Caine could have been there when it occurred.”

“Damn,” Jake muttered, his face hardening with resolve. “We need to find him. He might be the key to solving these murders. But first, we have to search this building high and low. If Bradley is the killer, then he could still be here. If he’s not, then, well, somebody else is doing this, and he’s still on the loose.”

Fiona nodded, her gaze locked on the dark shadows that stretched out before them. The truth was tantalizingly close, but she knew that every moment they wasted brought the killer one step closer to striking again. She couldn’t – wouldn’t – let that happen.

The familiar chill of fear crept up Fiona’s spine, but she pushed it aside, focusing on the task at hand.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face as he stood amidst the terrified crowd, their anxious murmurs echoing within the museum's cavernous hall. He could feel the weight of suspicion heavy in the air – they were all potential witnesses, every one of them. He clenched his fists inside his pockets, trying to suppress the urge to flee.

“Can you believe this?” a woman whispered to her friend as they huddled together like frightened birds. “They said there's a killer somewhere in the building!”

He smiled weakly at them, feigning shock and fear while adrenaline coursed through his veins. He knew he had been sloppy, but it was too late to change that now. All that mattered was blending in, surviving long enough to slip away without being noticed.

His eyes darted around the room, taking in the priceless works of art that surrounded him. It was ironic, really. All these masterpieces, yet none of them could rival the beauty of his own handiwork. If only they knew who was hiding among them – the artist behind the grisly scene that had sent the entire museum into panic.

“Excuse me,” he muttered, edging closer to a group of tourists. “Is everyone all right?” he asked, his voice trembling just enough to make it believable. The tourists exchanged worried glances before nodding hesitantly. He let out a shaky breath as though relieved, then continued. “I heard there's a murderer on the loose. What's going on?”

The tallest of the group, a middle-aged man with a camera slung around his neck, looked at him with wide eyes. “Yes, that's what they say. We were just admiring the exhibit when the alarms went off.”

“Well, stay close to each other,” he advised, his tone heavy with false concern. “We don't know who we can trust.” And with that, he slunk away, leaving them to ponder his words.

As he drifted from group to group, weaving in and out of clusters of terrified museum-goers, he couldn't help but feel a certain thrill at how easily he was able to manipulate their emotions. In the midst of chaos, it seemed, people were more than willing to overlook the possibility that the monster they feared might be standing right beside them.

But for every moment he spent among the crowd, he grew more aware of the danger that lurked just beyond their collective gaze. He could feel unseen eyes watching him, studying his every move, waiting for the slightest misstep to betray him. It was only a matter of time before someone discovered the truth.

The very thought sent a shiver down his spine, and he knew he had to get away – far away from the oppressive noise of the panicked crowd. He needed space to think, to plan his next move. As inconspicuously as possible, he slipped away from the throng of people and ventured deeper into the dimly lit halls of the museum, searching for solace amid the cold, silent beauty of its treasures.

His heart raced as the hushed, fearful whispers of the crowd filled the air, each one a reminder that he was trapped in an all-too-familiar nightmare. He knew that any moment now, someone might notice the oddity of his presence among them – and when they did, his carefully constructed façade would come crashing down.

As if to confirm his worst fears, he caught sight of two uniformed officers weaving their way through the throng of panicked museum-goers. Their eyes swept over the crowd with practiced ease, searching for anything – or anyone – out of place. He felt his breath catch in his throat as the officers drew nearer, until, at last, they stopped right before him.

“Sir,” one of the officers began, his voice firm but tinged with concern, “we’d like to ask you a few questions.”

A bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck, icy cold despite the stifling heat of the crowded room. He forced a smile, though it felt more like a grimace, and replied, “Of course, Officer. Anything I can do to help.”

But even as the words left his lips, a plan began to take shape in the darkest recesses of his mind. He knew he couldn't afford to let these men uncover the truth – not when he was so close to slipping away unseen.

And so, just as the officer opened his mouth to speak again, he doubled over, racked by a sudden bout of coughing that shook his entire body. He clutched at his chest, gasping for air between spasms, every ounce of his considerable acting skill focused on making the performance as convincing as possible.

“Are you alright?” the second officer asked, concern etched across his face as he stepped forward to offer assistance.

He waved him away, forcing a weak smile as he wheezed, “I'm... I'm fine. Just a bit of a cough, that's all. Must be the dust in here.”

“That makes sense,” one of the officers said. “Is this your first time here?”

“It is,” he quickly replied. “But I have to admit, I wish I'd picked a different spot.”

“Alright, take care of yourself,” the first officer called after him, still wearing a concerned expression. The two officers hesitated for a moment longer before turning their attention back to the scene, searching for any clues that might lead them to the elusive killer.

He knew he had narrowly escaped detection, but the close call sent a shiver down his spine. He could feel the noose tightening around his neck, and the fear of capture now hung heavily in the air.

He needed to distance himself from the suffocating noise of the crowd – to clear his head and devise a plan to avoid the fate that seemed to be closing in on him. With deliberate steps, he made his way through the throngs of frightened visitors, slipping unnoticed into one of the museum's dimly lit corridors.

“Okay, think,” he muttered to himself as he walked, the silence of the deserted hallways providing a stark contrast to the cacophony of whispers and murmurs he'd left behind. His footsteps echoed softly on the polished marble floors, the

sound amplified by the high ceilings adorned with intricate plasterwork. He knew that the consequences of his actions were severe; there was no going back now, and he could not afford to let his guard down.

“Excuse me, sir?” A soft voice interrupted his thoughts, causing his heart to leap into his throat. He turned to see a young woman in a museum uniform, her eyes wide with curiosity. “Are you lost? The main exhibit is back that way, and we don’t want visitors wandering off too far while the museum is in lockdown.”

“Uh, no,” he stammered, struggling to regain his composure. “I just... I needed some air, so I wanted to take a walk.”

“Of course,” she replied with an understanding smile. “It can get pretty stuffy in here sometimes, especially with all the people. Please return when you feel comfortable, but don’t wander off too far.”

“Thank you,” he said gratefully, offering her a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I appreciate your help.”

“Of course,” she replied, nodding her head as she turned to leave. “Stay safe, sir.”

As he continued down the dimly lit corridor, the weight of his predicament pressing down on him with each step, he couldn’t shake the feeling that his time was running out. The walls seemed to close in around him, and the shadows that played across the floor appeared to taunt him with their elusive darkness. He needed to find a way out of the museum before someone caught onto him, but with every exit blocked, there was no way out.

He paused for a moment, considering his dwindling options. There had to be a way out, some hidden passage or unguarded door that he could use to slip away unnoticed. He racked his brain, searching for any clues or hints he had missed, but his mind kept drawing a blank. No, he had no choice but to wait it out, but he couldn’t go back to that damn crowded room, not yet.

He kept pacing the hallway, biding his time. Sooner or later, he'd find a way out of this mess.

After all, his insects were here to help him, to watch over him.

Their blessing would protect him, just as he protected them.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Jake's pulse quickened as he scanned the dimly lit corridors of the museum, the eerie silence only amplifying his anxiety. He couldn't shake the nagging feeling that time was running out. Fiona was beside him, her eyes darting from one shadow to another, searching for any sign of their elusive suspect.

"Damn it," Jake muttered under his breath, frustration mounting. "Where is this guy?"

"Keep looking," Fiona whispered back, her gaze still locked on the darkness ahead. "We can't let him slip away."

As they continued their search, Jake couldn't help but feel a surge of admiration for Fiona. Her intuition and quick thinking had led them to Bradley Caine, and he was confident they were on the right track. But as each minute ticked by, his concern grew. If they didn't find the killer soon, they might lose their chance to catch him.

"Over there," Fiona suddenly hissed, pointing towards a flickering light at the far end of the hallway. "I think I saw something move."

Without hesitation, Jake sprinted towards the light, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. As he rounded the corner, he came face-to-face with a janitor pushing a cart of cleaning supplies. His shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"Sorry, sir," Jake mumbled, trying to hide his frustration. "We're looking for someone. The museum is under lockdown, so you really don't have to keep at this."

The janitor looked up at Jake and Fiona with a mixture of confusion and fear. "Under lockdown?" he repeated, his eyes darting nervously around the hallway. "What's going on?"

"We're investigating a series of murders that have occurred here," Fiona explained calmly, her voice steady and reassuring. "We need your help. Have you seen anything suspicious?"

The janitor shook his head, his eyes wide with disbelief. “No, no, I haven’t seen anything. I swear.”

Fiona gave him a small nod of thanks before turning to leave. Jake followed her silently, his mind racing with questions. Who was this killer, and why was he targeting people who had killed insects? Was Bradley Caine really their guy, or was there someone else involved?

“Let’s keep moving,” Fiona said, her voice laced with determination. She wasn’t ready to give up, and neither was Jake.

They moved through the dimly lit museum halls. The shadows of insect displays cast obscure patterns on the walls, but there was no sign of Bradley Caine. Jake’s heart pounded with a mixture of anticipation and dread as if it were trying to break free from his chest.

“Nothing,” Fiona muttered, her voice strained with frustration as she crossed another name off their list. “He’s not here.”

“Keep looking,” Jake urged, his eyes scanning the crowd for any hint of the man they sought. He could feel the pressure mounting, the weight of the unsolved murders bearing down on him like the crushing jaws of one of the insects surrounding them.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out, answering the call without taking his eyes off the search. “This is Agent Tucker,” he said, his voice tense.

“Tucker, it’s Chief Johnson. We checked Bradley Caine’s residence, just like you asked.”

“Did you find anything?” Jake asked, holding his breath as he awaited the answer.

“Negative, sir. Looks like he hasn’t been there in some time.”

“Damn it,” Jake swore under his breath, his frustration boiling over. If Fiona was right, and Bradley was the killer, then where was he? Every second that passed felt like an opportunity slipping through their fingers, and the thought that they might be too late sent shivers down his spine. If Bradley

wasn't in Nevada, then there was a high chance he was here, in Portland, evading capture after these heinous crimes.

"Keep searching the area and keep me updated," Jake ordered, hanging up the call. He turned to Fiona, who had been listening intently. Her eyes met his, filled with concern and determination.

"Bradley's not at home either," he told her, the words heavy with disappointment.

"Then we need to figure out where he is," Fiona said resolutely, her jaw set in a stubborn line. "He has to be somewhere, and we'll find him."

As they continued to search the museum, Jake's admiration for Fiona only grew. It was her determination and insight that had led them this far, and he knew that together, they would uncover the truth. But with each passing moment, the clock ticked down, and the fear of losing their chance to catch the killer gnawed at him. They couldn't afford to let this guy get away. If he escaped to another city, then the risk to the public was far too high.

"Where could he be?" Fiona murmured. They had searched every corner, questioned every person, but Bradley Caine remained elusive.

"Maybe he's left the city," Jake suggested, a sinking feeling in his gut. "We should call in an APB, get the airports and bus stations on alert."

"Agreed," Fiona said, nodding determinedly. "But we can't give up here, not yet. There has to be something we're missing, some clue to where he might be hiding."

As they pressed on, Jake couldn't help but wonder if it would be enough. The shadows seemed to close in around them, the exhibits now bearing an ominous air. In the race against time, would they find Bradley Caine before another life was snuffed out, or would the killer slip through their grasp once again?

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

He made his way through the overcrowded exhibit, shaking with anger. He couldn't escape, not with everything on lockdown, but he also couldn't sit still.

The worn carpet absorbed the sound of his footsteps, leaving only the faintest echo in the air. He had never done two within two days, but what he'd seen tonight had shaken him to his core. It reminded him too much of her. Annie. His ex-wife...

She had been an awful woman. She had despised his precious collection of rare insects with such intensity that it often left him feeling cold and empty inside.

"Choose me or those disgusting bugs," she had demanded one night, her eyes narrowed into slits and her lips thin with anger. He had stared at her for a moment before making his choice without hesitation.

"Annie," he'd said softly, "I choose my insects."

The memory brought a bitter smile to his face, and though he knew he should feel regret, there was only satisfaction. Those creatures were beautiful, delicate, and rare – qualities that had been distinctly lacking in his ex-wife.

But then, one day, when he'd returned home from work, his world had shattered.

"Annie!" he'd called out, dropping his briefcase to the floor, his hands shaking with rage as he surveyed the destruction before him. Every cage had been opened, their tiny inhabitants either dead or released into the unforgiving world. His heart had broken at the sight of their crushed bodies scattered across the floor like discarded trash.

"Look what you've done!" he'd screamed, his voice cracking with grief and fury. He had searched the house for her, desperation mounting with each empty room. As the

terrible truth of her actions settled like a weight on his chest, he realized just how cruel and twisted she truly was.

His heart pounding, he'd stormed through the house, seeking the woman who had desecrated his sanctum. He found her upstairs, lounging in their bedroom, a wicked grin staining her lips. The contrast between the disarray of insect corpses below and the pristine state of this room was staggering.

"Look what you made me do," she taunted, her voice dripping with venom. "All those disgusting little creatures, squished like the pests they were."

"Annie, how could you?" His voice trembled with rage and sorrow, eyes burning with unshed tears.

"Simple, really." Her laughter echoed through the room like the tolling of a funeral bell. "Just a bit of pressure, and they're gone. Poof! Like they never existed."

"Get out," he growled, hands clenching into fists at his sides.

"Or what?" She leaned closer, delighting in his torment. "You going to kill me over your precious bugs?"

At that moment, something inside him snapped. A darkness he never knew existed surged to the fore, eclipsing reason and remorse. Before he even realized what was happening, he had picked up a knife from the kitchen and driven it directly into her heart. When it was over, when her body lay limp and lifeless on the floor, he felt no regret – only a cold determination to ensure her actions would have consequences.

He buried her deep in the woods, beneath the earth that teemed with the insects she had despised. An anonymous phone call informed the police she'd run away to start a new life elsewhere, and as they were already in the midst of a bitter divorce, no one questioned her sudden disappearance. Annie had few friends, fewer still who cared enough to search for her. In time, her name faded from the town's collective memory, leaving him free to carry on with his life.

But he would never forget the woman who had torn apart his world. Nor would he ever forgive her for the senseless destruction she'd wrought. As he stood over Annie's unmarked

grave, a vow took shape in his mind – a promise to honor the memory of his fallen insect companions by meting out justice to those who shared her callous disregard for their lives.

The muted hum of the air conditioning filled his ears as he walked through the dimly lit corridor. The wallpaper, a faded pattern of intertwined vines, seemed almost to wriggle and squirm in the shadows, like countless insects crawling beneath the surface. He had donated his precious collection of rare insects to this traveling entomology exhibit, and now he traveled with them, safeguarding his former companions from those who would do them harm.

He had become something of an avenger – a silent sentinel who struck down the cruel and unthinking, teaching them the same respect for life that Annie had never learned. Each time he snuffed out another existence, each time he watched the light fade from another pair of eyes, he felt a shiver of satisfaction – a sense of equilibrium restored.

He returned to the main room, where most of the guests were crowded around. The feeling of being in a crowd was oppressive and suffocating—he'd had to step away to gather his thoughts, but he also knew it was too risky if he kept wandering off alone. Being in the crowd was his safest bet.

“Gross!” a woman’s voice suddenly exclaimed, causing him to halt in his tracks. She was in a group across the crowd, her face pale with terror as she stared at something on the floor. A spider, he realized, its eight legs splayed wide as it skittered across the tile.

With a shriek, she stomped down hard on the helpless creature. The fragile body crunched under her heel, its life extinguished just as easily as he had snuffed out Annie’s.

A cold fury coiled inside him, tightening his chest until he could barely breathe. This woman, this casual murderer, had callously destroyed a life as if it held no value, no meaning. She had killed without thought or remorse, and it was up to him to make her understand what she had done – to make her feel the same fear and helplessness that she had inflicted on one of the earth’s smallest, most vulnerable creatures.

He watched as the people she was with gave her strange looks, and she shook her head, shaking off her hands, before she said something to him and took off. He could only assume that she was also going to cool herself off with a short walk or maybe a visit to the bathroom.

He could work with this.

He followed her into one of the museum hallways, his footsteps muffled by the plush carpet, as he mentally prepared himself for what must be done. The weight of the task ahead settled heavily upon him, but he welcomed it – for every life he took, he knew that countless others would be spared from suffering.

The fury surged through him, a firestorm ignited by the memory of Annie’s cruel rampage. He couldn’t allow this woman to escape unpunished, not when she had so casually extinguished the life of that small creature. It was in these moments that he most acutely felt the weight of his mission, the sacred duty he had been chosen to fulfill.

“Such a senseless waste,” he murmured under his breath as he trailed behind her, his eyes narrowed and focused. “You’ll learn, my dear. Oh, how you’ll learn.”

Through the narrow hallway, he watched her walk ahead, hugging herself, her shoes padding against the carpet, a staccato rhythm that echoed the pounding of his heart.

This woman would pay for what she’d done.

And so, he followed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Fiona's heart pounded in her chest as the dim glow of streetlights flickered across the windshield. The warm summer night air filtered through the open windows, bringing with it a sense of unease that settled in the pit of her stomach. She sat in the passenger seat of Jake's car, her hands nervously twisting the edge of her blouse as they approached the hotel where Bradley Caine, the prime suspect in their case, was apparently staying.

Jake had put out an APB and made some calls, and they'd tracked Bradley to this location. He'd checked in here using his real name and credit card. They hadn't been able to locate him at the museum, so there was a chance he'd escaped before the lockdown and fled back here. Although with so many faces back at the museum, part of Fiona worried that they'd somehow let him slip through the cracks.

"Are you okay, Fiona?" Jake asked, his eyes flicking between her and the road ahead.

"I don't know," she admitted, swallowing hard. "I just have this... feeling. Like Bradley really is the killer. But what if he's not here?"

Jake nodded, gripping the steering wheel tighter. "Trust your instincts. They've rarely led us astray before. We'll check out the hotel, and if he's not here, we'll keep looking."

As they drove, Fiona had reviewed Bradley's file in the FBI database. Her fingers flew across her tablet, tracing down page after page of information. One significant detail caught her attention: Bradley had an ex-wife named Annie who had, according to him, run away. The police never filed a missing persons report for Annie, but Fiona couldn't dig up any information on what she did after that. The woman had no family and, apparently, no friends who had rallied for her. It seemed as though Bradley was all she'd had.

“Jake, I found something odd in Bradley’s file,” Fiona said, her voice tense. “He had an ex-wife named Annie who supposedly ran away years ago. But there’s no trace of her anywhere. It’s like she became a ghost.”

“Or maybe,” Jake suggested, his voice darkening, “Bradley killed her and got away with it before he began his most recent killing spree.”

Fiona shuddered at the thought. It only served to deepen the sense of dread that had been building since they’d first started tracking Bradley.

“Whatever the truth is, we need to find him before anyone else gets hurt,” Jake said, determination lacing his voice.

Fiona nodded, her resolve strengthening. She was determined to bring Bradley to justice for Annie and the other victims.

“Let’s do this,” she said, reaching across to squeeze Jake’s hand as they pulled up to the hotel.

The hotel’s dimly lit lobby loomed before them, a stark contrast to the warm summer night outside. Fiona’s heart raced as she and Jake hurried through the sliding glass doors, their footsteps echoing off the polished marble floor. Bradley could be somewhere in this very building.

“Stay focused, Fiona,” Jake murmured, his voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through both of them. He approached the front desk with authority, flashing his FBI badge to the startled receptionist. “We’re looking for Bradley Caine. Which room did he check into?”

“Uh, yes, Agent, um...” The young woman fumbled with her computer, her fingers trembling slightly as she typed. “Mr. Caine is in room 614.”

“Thank you,” Jake said curtly, snatching the keycard from her hand. He turned to Fiona, his eyes narrowing with determination. “I want you to wait here in the lobby in case he tries to make a break for it. I’ll go check the room.”

Fiona hesitated, nerves fluttering in her stomach like trapped birds. She wanted to insist on going with him, but she

knew he was right; they needed to cover all possible exits. Swallowing hard, she nodded. “Be safe, Jake.”

“Always.” With a reassuring smile, he disappeared down the hallway towards the elevators, leaving Fiona alone in the cavernous space. She held her breath and prepared for the worst.

Jake’s pulse thundered in his ears as he took the stairs two at a time, leaping up to the sixth floor of the hotel. Every muscle was taut, prepared for whatever might come. He had been chasing leads on Bradley Caine for what felt like an eternity, and now, finally, he stood on the threshold of what could be his last chance to apprehend the suspect.

“Room 614,” he panted, pausing for just a moment to catch his breath before continuing down the hall. The carpet beneath his feet seemed to swallow any sound he made, heightening the sense that he was an intruder in this world of silence. As he drew closer, he couldn’t help but feel the weight of anticipation bearing down on him.

“Here goes nothing,” he muttered under his breath, pulling the keycard provided by the hotel from his pocket. With barely a hesitation, he slid it through the lock, hearing the satisfying click as the door unlocked. In the next instant, he had his gun drawn, ready for anything that might come.

The door clicked open with a soft hiss, revealing the dimly lit hotel room. Jake stepped cautiously across the threshold, gun at the ready. The air was stale and heavy as if it hadn’t been disturbed in days. His eyes narrowed, scanning the space for any sign of life.

“Bradley Caine!” he called out, his voice firm yet hushed. “This is Agent Jake Tucker, FBI. I just want to talk.”

There was no answer, only the hum of the air conditioner and the distant murmur of traffic outside. Jake’s pulse quickened as he moved further into the room, every sense alert

to the possibility of an ambush. He knew that Bradley was clever, that he wouldn't go down without a fight.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath, frustration mounting. "Where are you?"

He glanced around the empty room, taking note of the unmade bed and the disarray of personal belongings strewn about. There was something off about the scene, some subtle clue that eluded him. A half-eaten sandwich rested on the nightstand, the bread curling at the edges as though abandoned in haste.

Think, Jake, think, he urged himself, racking his brain for any detail that could lead him to Bradley's hiding spot. *You're missing something.*

As he searched the room, his attention was drawn to the closet, its door slightly ajar. With measured steps, he approached it, gun aimed and ready. His heart hammered in his chest, adrenaline coursing through his veins like liquid fire.

Here goes nothing, he thought, gripping the door handle tightly.

In one swift motion, he yanked the door open, prepared to confront Bradley head-on. Instead, he was met with the sight of neatly hung clothes and an empty suitcase.

"Son of a bitch," Jake spat, slamming the door shut. "He's not here."

His mind raced, trying to piece together the puzzle that was Bradley Caine. Where could he have gone? Was this all part of his twisted game?

"Dammit," Jake muttered under his breath, his eyes scanning the room for any clue that might lead him to Bradley. A glimmer of light caught his eye from underneath the bed, and he knelt down to find a suitcase partially obscured by the hanging bedspread. It was an old leather piece, scuffed and worn, as though it had seen better days. Jake pulled it out with one hand, keeping his gun aimed at the door, just in case.

"Please let this be something," he whispered, unzipping the suitcase with trembling fingers.

Inside, he found neatly folded clothes, toiletries—and a dark shirt with a large stain on it. The metallic smell hit Jake like a wave, causing him to flinch back. He knew that smell all too well. It was the odor of blood, fresh and unmistakable.

Jake's heart rate spiked as he reached into the suitcase, pulling out the shirt with trembling hands. He examined it more closely and saw that it was covered in dark splotches, which were still wet to the touch. They were crimson in color and unmistakably human.

“Jesus,” he breathed, feeling bile rise up in his throat. “What the hell has he been up to?”

But he already knew. These were some of the clothes he'd been wearing when he was killed.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

As she scanned the hotel lobby, taking note of each entrance and exit, Fiona couldn't help but let her thoughts drift back to Annie, Bradley's ex-wife, who had vanished without a trace. What had happened to her? Was she still alive, hiding in fear somewhere? Or had she met a grisly end at the hands of the man they were hunting?

Fiona clenched her fists, resolve hardening within her. She wouldn't let Bradley slip through their fingers. He had to pay for his crimes—against Annie and all his other victims.

The minutes ticked by like hours, each one stretching out endlessly as Fiona waited in the lobby. She fiddled with her lanyard, spinning it around in her fingers, trying to keep her nerves at bay. The hum of conversation buzzed in her ears, punctuated by the occasional laughter of guests checking in. The hotel, once a place of refuge and relaxation, now felt like a den of vipers waiting to strike.

A family wandered past her, their children giggling and clutching oversized stuffed animals won from a nearby carnival. For a moment, Fiona envied their carefree happiness, but then her mind snapped back to the task at hand. Bradley had caused so much pain and suffering; she couldn't let herself be distracted.

Her phone rang, jolting her back to reality. Jake's name flashed on the screen, and she answered with a clenched jaw. "Tell me you've got him."

"Room's empty," Jake said, his voice tense. "No sign of Bradley. We might have to check security footage."

"Damn it." Fiona's heart sank, disappointment settling like a weight in her chest. They'd been so close, and now he was slipping through their fingers again.

"But there's something else," Jake said. "He's got bloody clothes in here. Lots of them. He's our guy, Red."

Fiona clenched her jaw. She couldn't agree more.

"Stay put. I'm coming back down. We'll figure this out together," Jake reassured her.

"Okay. Be careful," Fiona replied, her eyes darting around the lobby.

Fiona stood near the hotel's entrance, her hands clasped together, as she anxiously waited for Jake. She tried to ignore the trepidation that bubbled in her chest, but it was difficult to push away those nagging thoughts. They had left the museum early, hoping to get some rest and reassess their situation, but something deep inside Fiona told her they should have stayed.

The elevator doors finally opened, and Jake stepped out, his brows furrowed, lost in thought. His tall frame seemed to shrink under the weight of their investigation. As he moved closer to Fiona, his phone rang, shattering the silence of the empty lobby. He fished it out of his pocket, glanced at the screen, and then met Fiona's eyes with a worried expression before answering.

"This is Tucker," he said.

Fiona studied Jake's face as he listened to the voice on the other end. Tension etched itself across his features, and the muscles in his jaw tightened. She knew that look all too well—it meant that something had gone horribly wrong.

"Are you sure?" Jake asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "Alright, we'll be right there."

Jake ended the call and stared at his phone for a moment, the panic in his eyes now unmistakable. Fiona knew something terrible must have happened, something connected to the case. Bradley—their prime suspect and a brutal killer—was still out there, lurking in the shadows like a monster. And if Jake's reaction was any indication, they were no closer to stopping him.

"Jake," Fiona said, her voice cracking with concern. "What happened? Is it Bradley?"

"Someone's missing from the museum," Jake replied, his words curt and rushed. "We need to get back there. Now."

Without another word, they took off. The hotel doors burst open, and Jake and Fiona spilled into the warm night air, their breaths coming in short, panicked gasps. The city's neon lights cast eerie shadows on their faces as they sprinted across the street toward their car.

“Jake, we have to hurry,” Fiona said, her heart pounding in her chest. She could feel it in every fiber of her being—someone was in danger, and if they didn't act fast, it would be too late.

“Get in,” Jake barked, unlocking the doors with a click of a button. They both slid into the vehicle, the engine roaring to life beneath them.

As Jake maneuvered through the bustling nighttime traffic, Fiona gripped the door handle tightly, her knuckles white. She scanned the streets around them, searching for any signs of danger. In her mind, she went over the facts they had uncovered about Bradley, trying to make sense of the twisted web he had woven. It was clear now that he traveled with the exhibit, and his path of destruction was only getting more intense.

“Damn it!” Jake cursed under his breath as they hit a red light. “We're running out of time.”

“Stay focused, Jake,” Fiona implored, her voice tense. “We'll get there, and we'll stop him. We have to.”

“Right,” he muttered, nodding. His eyes never left the road, his gaze as sharp as a razor's edge.

Fiona allowed herself a moment to close her eyes, offering up a silent prayer. *Please, let us make it in time. Let us save that innocent person from becoming another victim of Bradley's sick obsession.*

As they sped past darkened storefronts and streetlights that flicked on like fireflies, Fiona couldn't help but think about what might happen if they were too late. Another life snuffed out, another family torn apart by grief. It was a chilling thought, one that sent shivers down her spine despite the warmth of the night.

“Almost there,” Jake said, his voice strained as he swerved around a slow-moving taxi. The museum loomed before them, its grand facade lit up by spotlights that seemed to cast more shadows than light.

“Let’s go,” Fiona said, ready to face whatever horrors awaited them inside the museum. She knew they couldn’t afford to waste another second. With each passing moment, the possibility of stopping Bradley grew slimmer and slimmer.

As they dashed toward the museum doors, their determination fueled by fear and adrenaline, Fiona could only hope they weren’t too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Lucy's heart pounded in her chest as she paced through the dimly lit museum corridor, her cheeks still flushed from the embarrassment of her outburst. The walls closed in around her, lined with glass cases that housed insects frozen in time. Their tiny legs and segmented bodies seemed to reach out for her, taunting her with their grotesque shapes.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she muttered under her breath, clenching her fists at her sides. She never should have agreed to come to this godforsaken insect exhibit. Why had she let her friends convince her otherwise?

The darkness seemed to press in on her from all sides, the shadows morphing into monstrous forms that danced just beyond the edge of her vision. Lucy wished she could escape the nightmarish tableau, but the lockdown prevented her from leaving the museum altogether. As if being trapped with her worst fears wasn't bad enough, there was the added horror of a potential murderer on the loose.

"Of all the nights to visit an insect exhibit..." she grumbled, cursing her rotten luck. The thought of someone like that killer lurking in the very same building sent shivers down her spine. She couldn't help but glance over her shoulder every few steps, half expecting him to materialize out of thin air.

Get it together, Lucy, she scolded herself, taking a deep breath to steady her nerves. *You're stronger than this.*

But her thoughts continued to spiral, consumed by the horrifying possibilities that lay ahead. What if the killer was watching her right now, waiting for the perfect moment to strike? Would she even stand a chance against someone so cold-blooded and ruthless?

"Get it together, Lucy," she muttered under her breath, forcing one foot in front of the other. "You just need to find your way back to the main area, and everything will be fine."

But as she rounded yet another corner, she realized with a sinking sensation in her stomach that she had taken a wrong turn somewhere along the way. The familiar exhibits were nowhere to be seen, replaced by cases filled with ancient artifacts and weathered scrolls.

She tried to retrace her steps, but each identical hallway only led to more confusion. The walls seemed to close in around her like the jaws of some monstrous beast threatening to swallow her whole. Lucy's heart hammered against her ribs as though trying to escape the terror that gripped her so tightly.

Okay, think, she told herself, taking a deep breath in an attempt to calm her racing thoughts. *If I can just find my way back to the insect exhibit, I'll know where I am.*

But as she continued to wander aimlessly through the labyrinthine halls, hopelessness settled over her like a shroud. Just as Lucy was about to give in to despair, a soft scuffling noise reached her ears. She froze, her breath catching in her throat as she slowly turned around. The dim light from the display cases cast eerie shadows on the walls, making it difficult to discern any figures lurking in the darkness.

"Hello?" she called out hesitantly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Is someone there?"

For a moment, there was only silence, and Lucy began to wonder if her mind was playing tricks on her. But then the sound came again, this time louder and more distinct. Footsteps echoed through the empty halls.

"Who's there?" she demanded, trying to inject some authority into her quavering voice.

A figure emerged from the shadows at the end of the hallway, the weak illumination just strong enough to reveal the outline of a man. Lucy's heart leaped into her throat, remembering the rumors of a killer on the loose.

"Please," she pleaded, her voice trembling with fear, "I'm lost. I just want to find my friends."

The man remained silent, his gaze fixed on her as he took a step closer. She could see now that he was tall and lean,

dressed all in black. The light glinted off something metallic in his hand, and Lucy's blood ran like ice through her veins.

"Stay back!" Lucy shouted, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. "I mean it!"

Her mind raced, frantically searching for a way to escape, but the hallways seemed to stretch on interminably in either direction.

She wondered if this would be the last face she ever saw.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The museum's entrance loomed before Fiona and Jake, swallowing them as they hurried inside. Security guards, faces etched with concern, quickly waved them through the locked doors. The air was thick with tension, and Fiona could feel her heartbeat thrumming in her ears as they entered.

"Can you tell us what's happening?" Fiona asked, her voice strained as she approached a group of young women huddled together near the front desk. Their eyes were wide with fear, their hands wringing nervously at their skirts.

"Lucy—our friend—she just took off," one girl stammered, tears streaming down her cheeks. "We were looking at the insect exhibit when she freaked out and stomped on a spider. She said she needed a moment and would be right back."

"But that was over ten minutes ago," another girl chimed in, biting her lip. "And now, with all this talk about a potential killer in here, we're really worried about her."

Fiona's stomach clenched, her earlier fears reigniting with a vengeance. Could Bradley have taken Lucy? Was she his next target? Her mind raced with terrifying possibilities, each worse than the last.

Fiona's chest tightened, her breath catching in her throat at the thought of Lucy alone and vulnerable. She glanced at Jake, who seemed to share her concern. "We need to find her," she said urgently.

"Of course," Jake agreed, his eyes scanning the room as if trying to spot any potential danger lurking in the shadows. He turned to one of the security guards standing nearby. "We'll need a search team to look for Lucy. Can you make that happen?"

The guard nodded, already reaching for his radio. But Fiona knew time was slipping through their fingers like sand in an hourglass. She couldn't afford to wait for someone else to take action when Lucy's life hung in the balance.

As Jake discussed logistics with the guard, Fiona approached the group of young women again. “Which way did Lucy go?” she asked, her voice barely concealing the panic she felt rising within her.

“Towards the east wing,” one of the girls replied, her eyes wide and frightened. “I think she took a wrong turn somewhere.”

“Thank you,” Fiona murmured, her mind racing as she tried to recall the layout of the museum. The east wing was a labyrinth of exhibits and storerooms, a perfect place for Bradley to hide and strike from the shadows.

“Hey,” Jake called out, his brow furrowed in concern as he noticed Fiona’s sudden departure. “Wait for the search team!”

But Fiona couldn’t afford to wait. Each second that ticked by brought another twist of fear in her gut. She ignored Jake’s plea, her heart pounding as she raced towards the east wing, her determination fueled by a desperate need to save Lucy from the monster that hunted them all.

Fiona’s sneakers pounded the polished marble floor, her breath coming in short gasps as she sprinted towards the east wing, where the corridors became carpeted. The dim lighting seemed to close in around her, casting shadows that danced along the walls. She could hear Jake’s voice fading behind her, his protest swallowed by the echoing hallways.

“Damn it, Fiona, wait!” But she didn’t slow down.

Her heart raced, the adrenaline pumping through her veins as she tried to focus on the mental map of the museum she had studied earlier. If only she had paid more attention to the details, if only she hadn’t been so concerned with catching Bradley, maybe they wouldn’t be in this situation now.

Please, let me find her before it’s too late, she told herself between labored breaths, her thoughts a chaotic whirlwind of fear and determination.

The distant sound of hurried footsteps reached her ears, and she knew that the search team was mobilizing. They would fan out and search methodically, but Fiona couldn’t shake the feeling that she alone held the key to Lucy’s safety.

As she rounded a corner, a faint noise caught her attention. A muffled whimper? Or was it just her imagination, fueled by the mounting terror that threatened to consume her?

“Lucy?” she called out hesitantly, straining to hear any sign of the missing girl. But there was only silence, thick and suffocating like a shroud.

More twists and turns led her further away from the relative safety of the main hall. Fiona knew she was putting herself at risk, but the thought of Lucy’s tear-streaked face and trembling hands propelled her forward.

“Lucy!” she yelled again, her voice bouncing off the cold stone walls. “If you can hear me, answer!”

And then, just as the darkness began to feel impossibly heavy and Fiona’s hope started to wane, she heard it. A soft sob, barely audible over the echoing footsteps of the search party. Her heart leaped in her chest, and she sprinted towards the sound, praying that she wasn’t too late.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Fiona’s gaze snapped to a door just down the hall, ajar by less than an inch. It seemed to beckon her, promising answers—if she dared to enter.

She looked over her shoulder down the hall. She wanted to call out for backup, but she also didn’t want to alert the killer if he was inside.

No, she had to go in herself. There was no time to waste.

As she approached the door, her heart pounded in her chest; each beat a plea for strength and courage. She steeled herself, ready to face whatever nightmare lay beyond that threshold. She pushed the door open. The scene before her unfolded like some macabre painting – there, in the dimly lit room, stood Bradley Caine, his cruel features twisted into a snarl. The woman he held captive struggled valiantly against him, her hands slick with blood as they gripped the knife he was attempting to drive into her chest.

“Stop!” Fiona shouted, her voice filled with rage and terror. Her presence momentarily startled Bradley, causing him to lose focus. Seizing the opportunity, the woman managed to land a solid punch on his face, but her triumph was short-lived. With a snarl, Bradley retaliated, striking her so hard that she crashed to the floor, dazed and barely conscious.

“Leave her alone!” Fiona cried, her eyes locked onto his, willing herself not to flinch under his cold gaze. She tried to steady her breathing, drawing strength from the fury that burned within her. Now was not the time for fear – she needed to act, and quickly, if she hoped to save this woman and bring the monster to justice.

With a swift movement, Fiona kicked the knife from Bradley’s grasp, sending it skittering across the floor. But her momentary victory was short-lived as he lunged at her with renewed fury.

“Should’ve stayed out of this,” he hissed, grappling with her in the confined space of the room. Fiona struggled to keep him at bay; her every move met with brute force and a cunning that left her breathless.

Each blow she landed was returned with twice the intensity, but she refused to back down. Every strike, every parry was fueled by the thought of her sister, Joslyn, who had vanished without a trace years ago. The same sister whom she now knew had crossed paths with Bradley Caine. The knowledge steeled her resolve, pushing her to fight harder, to not let another innocent soul fall prey to his predation.

“Where is she?” Fiona demanded through gritted teeth, seizing an opening to land a solid hit on Bradley’s jaw. “Tell me what you did to her!”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he taunted, shoving her backward onto the bed. Before she could react, he wrapped his hands around her throat, cutting off her air supply.

Panic clawed at the edges of Fiona’s consciousness as she fought for breath, her vision darkening around the edges. Her mind raced, trying to find a way out of her situation, but those thoughts were quickly overshadowed by memories of Joslyn.

Joslyn... I’m sorry, she thought, her heart heavy with regret. *I should’ve found you sooner.*

Fiona pushed aside her fear and focused all her remaining strength on wrenching Bradley’s hands away from the pillow, even as her lungs screamed for oxygen. She would not allow herself to die at the hands of this monster, not when there was still hope for Joslyn.

Think, damn it, she urged herself, her limbs growing weaker by the second. *There has to be something... anything.*

At that moment, Fiona felt a spark of inspiration, a flicker of hope. She knew what she had to do next.

Desperation fueled Fiona’s limbs, her fingers reaching blindly behind her. Her grip closed around the base of something—a lamp that had been knocked over in the break room. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, lending her

strength she didn't know she had. With a fierce cry, she swung it at Bradley's head, connecting with a sickening crunch.

"Ugh!" he grunted as his grip on the pillow loosened, and Fiona gasped for air, the sweet taste of oxygen flooding her lungs.

But it wasn't over yet.

The moment Fiona regained her balance, so did Bradley. He stared at her with predatory eyes.

And Fiona knew she'd have to fight for her life.

The museum's dimly lit hallway stretched before Jake like a menacing snake, daring him to follow its winding path. His heart pounded against his chest as he sprinted down the corridor, his eyes scanning every shadow and corner for any sign of Fiona.

"Where are you, Red?" he muttered under his breath, his voice barely audible over the echo of his footsteps. Panic clawed at Jake's insides; he couldn't bear the thought of losing her, and Fiona had a tendency to throw herself into harm's way if it meant saving someone else. He was just worried that one day, it might go too far.

Her laughter bubbled up in his memory, warm and infectious, filling him with a sense of contentment that he had never known before meeting her. She was his partner in every sense of the word, challenging his intellect, igniting his passion, and anchoring him when the waves of life threatened to pull him under.

Please be okay, he prayed silently as he rounded another corner, the urgency of his mission propelling him forward with renewed determination.

As he ran, his mind raced with possibilities. What if the killer had already found her? What if she was injured or worse? He tried to push away the images that swirled in his thoughts, but they clung to him like shadows, refusing to be

dispelled. It was impossible to measure how much Fiona meant to him, and the thought of losing her was a wound that would never heal.

Just then, he heard a sound—like a whimper. Without hesitation, he veered sharply towards the sound, adrenaline surging through his veins. He couldn't let anything happen to her, not on his watch. Too much was at stake, and he had to make sure that the killer's reign of terror came to an end once and for all.

“Keep it together,” he whispered to himself, drawing on every ounce of strength and resolve he possessed. *You're going to find her. You have to.*

Emboldened by his own words, Jake pushed his legs to move faster, his determination fueling him like a roaring fire. He would not let fear control him; he would not let Fiona down. The thought of her being harmed by the killer was agonizing, but it only served to drive him forward with even greater fervor.

He gritted his teeth, praying that he'd reach her in time. The distance between them seemed to stretch on forever, a yawning chasm that refused to be bridged. But he couldn't afford to give up now. Not when everything hinged on this moment, on finding Fiona and putting an end to the nightmare that had engulfed them both.

Jake rounded the corner, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he almost stumbled over his own feet. The hall seemed to stretch on endlessly, but finally he reached a dead-end - an alcove with a series of doors, some leading to storage closets and another marked “break room.” He skidded to a halt, his heart pounding in his ears.

“Which one?” he muttered, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. The oppressive silence of the museum bore down on him, heightening his anxiety. He knew Fiona was close; he could practically feel her presence, like an invisible thread connecting them through the darkness.

A muffled sound from behind one of the doors caught his attention. Jake's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing as he

tried to pinpoint its source. There - the door that was slightly ajar, revealing only a sliver of darkness beyond.

“Stop!” came the faint, desperate plea again, barely audible.

“Red!” he whispered fiercely, his voice trembling with fear and determination. He lunged toward the door; his hand outstretched to grasp the handle and throw it open.

As Jake stepped cautiously into the dimly lit room, every nerve in his body screamed for him to act, to do something - anything - to save Fiona and the possible victim. Time seemed to slow down, each second stretching into an eternity as he willed himself to move faster, to be stronger.

With a surge of adrenaline, Jake threw the door open, his eyes immediately locking onto the scene before him. Fiona, her face flushed and contorted in anger, struggled against Bradley’s grip on her arm. His other hand clasped her throat, a menacing sneer marring his once-charming features. In the room’s dim light, their shadows danced violently on the walls, reflecting the chaos within.

The room was a whirlwind of chaos. Jake’s eyes swept over the scene, taking in every detail. Fiona, her fiery red hair disheveled and wild, grappled with a wiry man wearing black. Bradley Caine—their suspect—was fighting like a cornered animal, his eyes wide with fear and desperation. In the dim light, Jake could see an unconscious woman sprawled on the floor, her chestnut hair fanned out around her like a halo.

“Red! Get away from him!” Jake barked, his voice thundering through the room.

Fiona hesitated for only a moment, her green eyes searching Jake’s face before she took advantage of Bradley’s momentary distraction to twist free of his grip.

“Bradley Caine! Drop to your knees!” Jake shouted, his gun trained on the man’s heaving chest. “Now!”

“Alright, alright! I’m not going anywhere!” Bradley snapped, raising his hands in surrender as he stumbled back a step, putting distance between himself and Fiona.

Jake held his gun steady, his finger lightly resting against the trigger, ready to pull it at the slightest sign of resistance.

His heart pounded in his ears, but his resolve never wavered. He had sworn to protect Fiona, and he would do so until his dying breath.

“Red, you okay?” he asked without taking his eyes off Bradley.

“I’m fine,” Fiona replied, her voice tremulous but determined. “I saw him dragging the woman into the room. I couldn’t just let him kill her.”

“Stay with the woman, Red,” Jake ordered, his mind racing as he considered their options. They needed to get the woman to safety and apprehend Bradley without putting themselves in more danger. And they had to do it quickly before the situation spiraled further out of control.

“Are you sure you want to do this, detective?” Bradley spat, his voice dripping with venom. “You’ll never get away with it.”

“Shut up!” Jake barked, the fury in his voice laced with icy resolve.

Jake approached Bradley cautiously, his gun still trained on the murderer. The adrenaline coursing through his veins left him hyperaware of every sound and sensation in the room: the shallow breathing of the unconscious woman, Fiona’s breaths behind him, and the subtle shift of tension as Bradley tensed his muscles, ready to strike.

“Put your hands behind your back,” Jake ordered, trying to keep his voice steady. He knew he couldn’t afford a single misstep in a situation this precarious. “Now.”

Bradley smirked, his eyes glinting with malice. “You’re making a big mistake, Agent. You really think you can take me down?”

“Shut up and do what I tell you,” Jake growled, briefly glancing at Fiona, who stood protectively by the injured woman. She had a bruise forming on her cheek, but she held herself with determination. He’d be damned if he let Bradley hurt her again.

“Okay, okay,” Bradley said mockingly, slowly placing his hands behind his back. Jake moved closer, gun still aimed at

the man's head, and reached for his handcuffs with his free hand.

In that split second, Bradley sprang forward. His fist connected with Jake's wrist, sending the gun flying across the room. Pain shot through Jake's arm, but he didn't have time to dwell on it. Bradley lunged at him, fists swinging wildly.

"Jake!" Fiona cried out, panic lacing her voice.

He dodged the first few punches, blocking the others with his forearm. He could feel Bradley's desperation, the frenetic energy of a man with nothing left to lose. But Jake was no stranger to violence, and years of training had honed his instincts to near perfection.

With a swift jab to the solar plexus, Jake forced the air from Bradley's lungs, causing him to double over. He followed up with a crushing right hook, sending Bradley sprawling onto the floor. Jake's heart pounded fiercely in his chest as he stared down at their suspect, momentarily incapacitated.

"Red," Jake called, his voice hoarse from exertion, "get the gun."

Fiona grabbed the weapon and rushed back to his side. Taking a deep breath, Jake stepped forward to pin Bradley's arms behind his back. This time, there would be no mistakes. He locked the cuffs around Bradley's wrists with a satisfying click, securing their killer.

As Jake finally allowed himself to relax, he looked over at Fiona, worry creasing his brow. "You did good, Red. Real good."

She nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears, but her jaw set in determination. "We got him, Jake. We finally got him."

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

The museum lobby was a stark contrast to the chaos that had just unfolded. Golden chandeliers hung from an opulent ceiling, casting warm light onto plush armchairs and polished marble floors. Somewhere in the background, a soft melody of strings played, almost as if to soothe the tremor in Fiona's hands as the remaining guests filtered out of the museum, free to leave in the aftermath of the chaos.

Fiona's eyes followed the gurney carrying the woman who Bradley nearly killed toward the exit. The would-be victim's face was a mess of blood and bruises, but beneath it all, Fiona could see the defiance that had saved her life.

"Excuse me," Fiona called to one of the EMTs, a man with short-cropped hair and kind, concerned eyes. "How is she?"

"Stable," he replied, pausing before he pushed through the doors. "She'll be okay."

"Thank you," Fiona whispered, relief flooding through her. Another life saved, another monster halted in his tracks. But there were still so many more out there, lurking in the shadows.

"Can I check you over?" the EMT asked, turning his attention to Fiona. She hesitated for a moment, wanting nothing more than to chase after Bradley and ensure he never hurt anyone again. But he was caught now, she reminded herself, and it was time to relax.

"Alright," she consented, nodding stiffly.

"Could you follow my finger with your eyes?" the EMT instructed, and Fiona obeyed, her gaze locked on the tip of his glove as it moved from side to side. Her head throbbed at the effort, a painful reminder of the blow she'd taken during the struggle.

"Your pupils are equal and reactive," the EMT noted, shining a small flashlight into her eyes. It stung, but Fiona

forced herself not to flinch. “Looks like you’re going to be okay. Just take it easy for a few days – head injuries can be tricky.”

“Thank you,” Fiona said again, her voice tight with gratitude and something more – something she couldn’t quite name. She wanted to feel victorious, triumphant in the knowledge that they’d finally caught Bradley Caine. But there was still a gnawing sense of unease, a lingering dread that weighed heavy on her chest.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” the EMT asked, his brow furrowing in concern as he studied her face.

“No,” she replied, shaking her head. “I’m just... I’m glad she’s okay.”

“Me too,” he said, offering her a small, sad smile before turning to rejoin his team.

As Fiona watched the ambulance pull away from the museum, she thought about how close they had come to losing another life tonight. And though they had saved one, there were countless others who hadn’t been so lucky. It was a sobering reminder of the darkness that lurked around every corner.

But for now, at least, one less monster walked among them. And with every breath she took, every beat of her battered heart, Fiona vowed to keep fighting until she got answers no what happened to Joslyn and those other girls. Damien Blackwood, or whoever he was, was going to pay for his crimes.

With a steadying breath, Fiona glanced out the museum’s tall windows. Outside, the night air was charged with tension as officers restrained and shoved Bradley Caine into the back of a waiting police cruiser. She watched his face contort with anger as he spat curses at the officers, and for a moment, she reveled in the satisfaction of seeing justice served.

Jake stood nearby, overseeing the arrest with a stoic determination. As the cruiser began to pull away, Jake’s gaze met Fiona’s through the glass, and something unspoken passed

between them. He nodded once, then turned to make his way back inside.

Fiona's heart raced in anticipation, her chest tightening. The nearness of him, the reality of their shared experience – it all threatened to overwhelm her. There would be time later to process everything, to reflect on what they'd been through. But for now, she needed Jake, and she knew without a doubt that he needed her too.

"Hey," Jake murmured when he finally reached her side. His voice was strained the weariness of the long night evident in his posture.

"Hey," she echoed, unable to tear her eyes away from his. They stood there for a moment, silent, simply drinking each other in.

"Are you alright?" he asked, concern etched into every line of his face.

She hesitated, then nodded. "I am now," she whispered, the truth of the words ringing deep within her soul.

"Good." The relief in his eyes was palpable, but even so, he couldn't quite hide the shadows that still lingered. "Fiona, I... When I saw you fighting him, I thought-

"Shh," she interrupted, reaching up to brush her fingertips along his jaw, silencing the words that threatened to spill forth. "We're both still standing, Jake. That's what matters."

"Still standing," he agreed, his voice thick with emotion. "Together."

"Always." Fiona's pulse thrummed in her ears as she leaned in closer, their breaths mingling in the small space between them. And then, finally, their lips met – a tentative, almost reverent brush of skin against skin.

It was a kiss born from the fires of shared trauma. As Jake's arms encircled her waist, pulling her tight against him, Fiona felt the last remnants of her fear and unease begin to dissolve. In their place bloomed a fierce, unyielding determination – a promise that they would face whatever horrors lay ahead together.

“Jake,” she murmured when they finally broke apart, her chest heaving with the force of her emotions. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“For being there. For fighting alongside me.” She hesitated, then added, “For never giving up on me.”

“Never,” he vowed, the intensity of his gaze leaving her breathless. “I’ll always be here, Red. No matter what.”

And as the night deepened around them, Fiona knew that she could face whatever darkness lay ahead, so long as Jake was by her side.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

It was over, and Jake couldn't be more grateful. But he also knew the work was nowhere near done, not for them.

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across Fiona's living room floor, illuminating the dust motes that danced around the trio gathered near the window. Jake studied Marcus closely as they spoke, his eyes never leaving the man who claimed to have information about Fiona's sister.

"See," Marcus said, wringing his hands, "I came here a few days ago looking for you, Fiona. I had some... information."

"Information?" Fiona asked, her voice strained with emotion, but her eyes were sharp and focused. "What kind of information?"

Jake watched as Marcus took a deep breath before continuing. His body language was open and nervous rather than shifty or guarded. He seemed genuine enough, but Jake still couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

"Alright," Marcus began, "so I told this old coworker of mine from the fast food place where I used to work about my memory of Damien—the guy I saw with Marissa. The thing is, my coworker says he knew Damien personally. And, uh... his real name isn't Damien Blackwood. It's Daniel Grove."

"Daniel Grove?" Fiona repeated, her hands clenching into fists at her sides, a determined fire igniting in her eyes.

"Okay, so why did your coworker know this guy?" Jake interjected, trying to gauge Marcus' sincerity. It was hard to tell if the man was simply telling them what they wanted to hear or if he truly believed what he was saying.

"Um, I'm not sure," Marcus admitted, shifting uncomfortably under Jake's intense scrutiny. "He didn't really go into detail, but he seemed pretty certain about it."

Jake watched as Fiona's gaze bore into Marcus, searching for any signs of deception. For a moment, there was only silence in the room, broken by the distant hum of city traffic outside.

"Marcus, can you tell us anything else?" Fiona asked, her voice low and steady.

"Uh, no," Marcus stammered, wiping the sweat from his brow. "That's all I've got."

"Marcus," Jake said, his voice steady, "Who is this old coworker? Why should we believe him?"

"Look, he asked me to keep his name out of it, but I swear the information is legit. I trust him," Marcus replied, his eyes pleading for understanding.

Fiona's gaze flicked between the two men, assessing and calculating. Finally, she nodded. "Thank you, Marcus. We appreciate your help."

He offered her a small, hesitant smile before leaving the apartment, the door clicking shut behind him. The room seemed to close in around them, the afternoon sunlight casting long shadows on the floor.

"Jake, we have to look into this," Fiona said, determination etching her features. "We can't ignore a lead like this."

"Of course not," he agreed, running a hand through his hair. "It's just... are we sure we can trust this Marcus guy? He seems sincere, but..."

"Something feels off?" Fiona finished for him, her brow furrowing. "I know, but we have to follow every lead we can. I owe it to Joslyn."

"Right," Jake murmured, rubbing the back of his neck as he stared out the window. He couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't adding up, but he knew Fiona was right. They had to pursue any and all leads, no matter how tenuous they seemed.

"Okay," he said, turning back to face Fiona. "Let's do some research on this Daniel Grove character. See what we can find."

Fiona nodded, her jaw set with determination, and sat on her couch with her laptop open. Jake sat beside her. Fiona's fingers flew across the keyboard, her eyes darting back and forth as she scanned the information on her laptop screen. The room was filled with the hum of the computer and their quiet breathing. Jake leaned over her shoulder, his own gaze narrowed in concentration.

"Here we go," Fiona whispered as she clicked on an entry. "Daniel Grove, living near Portland."

A passport photo appeared on the screen, revealing a gaunt man with stringy hair and cold, dead eyes that sent a shiver down Jake's spine. He instinctively tightened his fists, his apprehension only growing.

"Something's off here," he muttered, scanning the details of Daniel's file. "No criminal record. In fact, it's too clean. Not even a parking ticket."

"Maybe he's just good at avoiding getting caught?" Fiona suggested, her voice tense but hopeful.

"Or he's hiding something more sinister." Jake's voice was low and foreboding.

"Look at this," Fiona said, pointing to a note in the file. "He lived through a bad apartment fire about fifteen years ago. The Somerset Building."

Jake frowned, a vague memory tugging at the edge of his mind. "My mom worked that building before she was murdered. She was a firefighter."

"Are you sure?" Fiona asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Pretty sure, yeah. She told me stories about that fire when I was a kid. But it's probably just a coincidence."

"Maybe," Fiona conceded, though the uncertainty in her voice betrayed her doubt. They both knew that coincidences rarely turned out to be so innocent.

"Look at this," Jake said, his voice low and deliberate. He pointed to a section on the screen that Fiona had missed. "He's changed addresses several times over the years. And there's an RV registered in his name."

Fiona leaned in closer. “Do you think he’s living in it?”

“Most likely,” Jake replied, his eyes narrowing as he mentally pieced together the information. “It would make sense if he’s trying to stay under the radar, constantly moving from place to place.”

He paused for a moment, and Fiona could see the wheels turning in his head. Finally, he spoke again. “This Daniel guy, or Damien, or whatever he wants to call himself... he’s obviously crafty. And good at not getting caught.”

“Which means we need to be even craftier to find him,” Fiona said with determination.

“Exactly.” Jake took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was to come. “I’ll put out an APB on the RV. Someone has to have seen it recently. We’ll find him, Fiona. I promise.”

“Thank you, Jake.” Fiona looked at him, her eyes filled with gratitude. He seemed so sure of himself, so determined, that she couldn’t help but believe him. And she desperately needed to believe that they would find her sister’s kidnapper.

Jake nodded, and for a brief moment, their eyes locked. The air between them seemed to crackle with intensity as if charged by some unseen force. It was a connection that went beyond mere friendship, a bond forged by their shared determination to uncover the truth.

“Alright,” Jake said, breaking the moment. “Let’s get to work.”

As Jake made calls and coordinated efforts to track down the elusive RV, Fiona couldn’t shake the feeling that they were finally closing in on the man who had haunted her nightmares for the past ten years. She knew that Jake wouldn’t rest until they found him, and that knowledge brought her a level of comfort she hadn’t felt in a long time.

“Stay strong,” she whispered to herself, gripping the edge of the table. “We’re close. We have to be.”

With each passing second, the search for Daniel Grove grew more urgent. And Fiona could only pray that when they finally found him, it would bring them one step closer to discovering what had happened to her sister, Joslyn.

The sun hung high in the sky, casting its bright rays upon the world like a judgmental eye. Fiona squinted against the light as she stared out the car window, her heart pounding with equal parts anticipation and dread. They were driving down a dusty road on the outskirts of Portland, heading towards the location where the old RV had allegedly been seen.

“Are you alright, Red?” Jake asked, his voice tinged with concern.

“Fine,” she lied, swallowing hard. “Just...nervous.”

“Understandable,” he replied, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “We’re close, Fiona. I can feel it.”

“Me too,” she whispered, although she wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or not. Was she ready to confront the man who had kidnapped her sister ten years ago? Would she even know what to say?

The car rumbled to a stop, and Fiona blinked away the thoughts that clouded her mind. In front of them lay a small, makeshift campsite, complete with a fire pit, a few scattered belongings, and the old RV itself. The vehicle looked worn and weathered, like a relic of a bygone era. It seemed almost incongruous amidst the vibrant green trees and the wildflowers that dotted the landscape.

“Come on,” Jake said, opening his door and stepping out into the humid summer air. “Let’s take a look.”

Fiona followed him, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. The heat seemed oppressive, weighing down on her like a heavy blanket. Her throat felt parched, and she wished she’d brought water. Every step she took towards the RV felt heavier than the last as if her feet were sinking into the soft earth beneath her.

“We don’t know for sure if he’s here,” Jake said quietly, moving to stand beside her. “But we have to be careful, just in case.”

“Of course,” Fiona agreed, her voice trembling. She took a deep breath and tried to steady herself, drawing on every ounce of courage she could muster.

As they approached the RV, the hum of insects filled the air, accompanied by the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze. It was a peaceful scene, one that belied the darkness lurking within their hearts. If it weren't for the knowledge of what might lie inside that vehicle, Fiona could almost believe they were simply out for a walk on a beautiful summer day.

“Stay close,” Jake instructed, his eyes scanning the area for any sign of danger. “And if you see anything...anything at all, let me know.”

“Alright,” Fiona nodded, her mind racing with thoughts of what they might find inside the RV. Each possibility seemed more terrifying than the last, and she couldn't help but shudder as they reached the door.

“Ready?” Jake asked, meeting her gaze.

Fiona swallowed hard and nodded. “Let's do this.”

Circling the RV, Fiona's fingers traced the peeling paint on its rusted exterior as she peered through the grimy windows, searching for any sign of life inside. Nothing stirred in the dim, shadowy interior; it seemed abandoned, devoid of any presence. Jake moved to join her, his gaze just as sharp and intent.

“Doesn't look like he's here,” he murmured, wiping away a layer of dust from the window, trying to get a better view. “But we can't be sure.”

“Can we go in?” Fiona asked, her voice barely audible even to herself. The mere thought of trespassing into this man's lair made her stomach churn with unease, but she knew they had to take the risk.

“Let me handle this,” Jake replied, giving her a reassuring smile before moving towards the door. With a few swift movements, he managed to pick the lock, pushing it open with a muted creak. “Stay close, okay?”

Fiona nodded, swallowing hard against the lump forming in her throat. They stepped inside together, the air inside the RV

stale and heavy, thick with the scent of old sweat and dampness. The oppressive atmosphere seemed to weigh down on her shoulders, making it difficult to breathe, but she fought to steady herself, refusing to give in to the fear that threatened to overwhelm her.

The cramped living space was cluttered with an assortment of belongings—a half-empty beer bottle on the counter, a stack of dog-eared paperbacks piled haphazardly by the small sofa, and filthy clothes strewn about without care. Fiona shuddered at the thought of touching anything, but she forced herself to focus, her eyes scanning the space for any clue that might lead them closer to Joslyn.

“Look through everything,” Jake instructed quietly, already sifting through a stack of papers on the small table. “But remember, we’re here to find answers, not destroy his life.”

“I know,” Fiona replied, her voice tight with barely suppressed anger. She could feel the heat of her fury simmering just beneath her skin, threatening to boil over if she didn’t keep it in check.

She began to dig through the disarray, trying to ignore the sickening sensation of violating someone’s personal space. Her hands shook as she opened drawers and cupboards, rifling through their contents. With each new item she uncovered, the reality of what they were doing became more and more tangible—she was searching for evidence that this man had taken her sister away from her forever.

“Jake,” she whispered, her voice strained as she turned to him, her eyes wide with fear. “What if we don’t find anything? What if this is all just a dead end?”

He paused in his own search, meeting her gaze with a solemn expression. “Then we’ll keep looking, Fiona. We won’t give up until we’ve found the truth.”

His words brought little comfort, but she clung to them like a lifeline, forcing herself to continue her meticulous search. Time seemed to stretch on endlessly as they combed through the RV, their silence punctuated only by the occasional rustle of paper or the sound of objects being moved. And then,

finally, when hope had begun to fade into despair, Fiona discovered something that made her blood run cold.

Fiona's pulse raced as she continued her search, the eerie silence hanging heavy in the air. The RV was a chaotic mess, and she couldn't help but feel that every object she touched held secrets and hidden darkness. As she opened the door to a cramped closet, her breath caught in her throat. Inside was a small wicker basket filled to the brim with an assortment of trinkets and baubles.

"Jake," she called out, her voice barely more than a whisper.

He appeared by her side in an instant, his eyes narrowing as he took in the contents of the basket. "What did you find?"

"Look at this." Fiona reached into the basket, her fingers trembling as she lifted out a handful of strange mementos. There were earrings, lipsticks, and even a few strands of hair tied together with ribbon. It was a chilling collection, one that made her chest tighten with anxiety as she wondered what it all meant.

"Maybe they're just... souvenirs?" Jake suggested hesitantly, though the doubt in his voice spoke volumes.

"Or trophies," Fiona countered, her mind racing with the implications. She knew, deep down, that these items belonged to other women—victims, just like her sister. It was a horrifying thought, and it only fueled her determination to find the truth.

Fiona carefully sifted through the remaining objects, her heart hammering in her chest. And then, like a bolt of lightning, recognition struck her. Her hand closed around a delicate silver chain adorned with a butterfly pendant. Tears stung her eyes as memories flooded back—the excited laughter of her sister the Christmas morning she had given her the necklace, Joslyn's genuine delight as she clasped it around her neck.

"Jake," she choked out, holding up the necklace for him to see. "This is Joslyn's. I gave it to her the year before she was taken. It was her favorite."

“Jesus,” Jake muttered, his eyes darkening with anger and determination. “That bastard has been keeping it all this time.”

Fiona clutched the necklace tightly in her fist, feeling the cold metal press against her skin. She felt a new surge of resolve course through her veins, her grief and fear now tempered by a seething fury.

“Let’s tear this place apart, Jake,” she said fiercely, her voice steady despite the tears that brimmed in her eyes. “Let’s find whatever else he’s hidden away and make sure he pays for what he’s done.”

Jake nodded solemnly, his own anger palpable as they resumed their search. They both knew that they had crossed a line, stumbled upon something that could never be unseen or forgotten—but there was no turning back now. They would see this through to the bitter end and bring justice to those who had suffered at the hands of this monster.

And, perhaps most importantly, they would finally uncover the truth about Joslyn’s disappearance.

Fiona’s vision blurred as her pulse thundered in her ears, the cold metal of the butterfly necklace biting into her palm. She couldn’t hear Jake’s words of comfort over the roaring tide of fury that surged through her veins.

“Call this in?” she repeated, her voice shaking with barely suppressed rage. “Jake, I want to kill him.”

“Red,” he said softly, gripping her shoulder and forcing her to meet his gaze. “You know we can’t do that. But we can make sure he pays for this. Let me call it in. We’ll get back up, and we’ll take him down. Together.”

She hesitated, struggling to reign in her emotions. The thought of Damien—no, Daniel—still out there, still free to prey on innocent girls like Joslyn... it almost broke her.

“Okay,” she whispered, the word tasting like ash on her tongue. “Call it in.”

As Jake pulled out his phone, Fiona stared blankly at the grimy walls of the RV. She wondered how many other women had suffered here, how many lives had been destroyed by this monster.

Suddenly, she heard a key turning in the lock. Her blood ran cold as she realized that Daniel was returning home.

“Jake!” she hissed urgently, grabbing hold of his arm. “He’s coming!”

Instinct took over as Fiona sprang into action, positioning herself behind the door. As it creaked open, revealing a stringy-haired man with a gaunt face, her heart pounded in her chest like a wild animal desperate to escape.

“Daniel Grove,” Jake spat, stepping in front of him and blocking the entrance. “FBI!”

“Who the hell are you?” Daniel snarled, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

With a shout, Fiona launched herself at him, fueled by a decade’s worth of pent-up grief and rage. She tackled him to the floor and grabbed him by the neck of his shirt, staring him directly into his shocked eyes.

“Joslyn!” she screamed, her voice raw and broken. “You took my sister!”

“I don’t know your bitch sister!”

Fiona could only see red. She wanted to hurt this man. She had never wanted to hurt anybody, but this was different. It was instinct, an all-encompassing rage that threatened to consume her if she let it.

“Red,” Jake said finally, his voice gentle but firm, breaking the spell. “That’s enough.”

Fiona hesitated, her breathing ragged and her hands trembling. She looked down at the broken man on the floor, the monster who had haunted her dreams for so long and felt nothing but contempt. Daniel Grove, or Damien Blackwood, or whatever he called himself now. The one who had taken Joslyn. It was over for him. Fiona didn’t need to hurt him to stoop to his level. She got off him and returned to Jake’s side.

“Stand up, Daniel,” Jake commanded, pulling out handcuffs from his belt. Daniel complied, still dazed. With practiced ease, Jake snapped the cuffs onto his wrists and hauled him to

his feet. Fiona watched with satisfaction as Jake took him away.

They had him.

They had the man who had taken her sister.

NOW AVAILABLE!



LET HER FORGET

(A Fiona Red Mystery—Book Nine)

A coroner is found dead. Then an EMT. Expert FBI forensic examiner and entomologist Fiona Red senses a pattern, that something connects them, and quickly realizes that her out of the box thinking may just make her the only one brilliant enough to catch this killer before it's too late....

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery.”

—Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone)

LET HER FORGET is book #9 in a long-anticipated new series by #1 bestseller and USA Today bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose bestseller Once Gone (a free download) has received over 7,000 five star ratings and reviews.

Fiona Red, a brilliant but quirky FBI loner, spends most of her time in the lab or at crime scenes. She comes from a family used to being around death and bodies, her parents having run a funeral parlor, and she would have run the family business if not for a tragedy in her past: her sister was abducted when she was a teenager, and never found.

Fiona remains determined to crack her sister's case. But in the meantime, as an FBI agent, she applies her brilliance to catching killers and cracking cases that no one else can, as bugs are the first visitors to dead bodies.

With her FBI partner out in the field, Fiona expects to stay behind the scenes.

But Fiona, obsessed with catching killers, takes it one step too far, and may just find herself in the crosshairs of a killer herself.

A page-turning and harrowing crime thriller featuring a brilliant and tortured FBI agent, the Fiona Red series is a riveting mystery, packed with non-stop action, suspense, twists and turns, revelations, and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you flipping pages late into the night. Fans of Rachel Caine, Teresa Driscoll and Robert Dugoni are sure to fall in love.

Future books in the series will soon be available!

“An edge of your seat thriller in a new series that keeps you turning pages! ...So many twists, turns and red herrings... I can't wait to see what happens next.”

—Reader review (Her Last Wish)

“A strong, complex story about two FBI agents trying to stop a serial killer. If you want an author to capture your attention and have you guessing, yet trying to put the pieces together, Pierce is your author!”

—Reader review (Her Last Wish)

“A typical Blake Pierce twisting, turning, roller coaster ride suspense thriller. Will have you turning the pages to the last sentence of the last chapter!!!”

—Reader review (City of Prey)

“Right from the start we have an unusual protagonist that I haven’t seen done in this genre before. The action is nonstop... A very atmospheric novel that will keep you turning pages well into the wee hours.”

—Reader review (City of Prey)

“Everything that I look for in a book... a great plot, interesting characters, and grabs your interest right away. The book moves along at a breakneck pace and stays that way until the end. Now on go I to book two!”

—Reader review (Girl, Alone)

“Exciting, heart pounding, edge of your seat book... a must read for mystery and suspense readers!”

—Reader review (Girl, Alone)



LET HER FORGET

(A Fiona Red Mystery—Book Nine)

Did you know that I've written multiple novels in the mystery genre? If you haven't read all my series, click the image below to download a series starter!



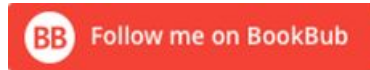
Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising thirty-one books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery

series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising twenty-one books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting), of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), and of the new FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery—Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1), [NEXT DOOR](#) (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 1), [THE PERFECT WIFE](#) (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book One), [IF SHE KNEW](#) (A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 1), [MURDER \(AND BAKLAVA\)](#) (A European Voyage Cozy Mystery—Book 1), [LEFT TO DIE](#) (An Adele Sharp Mystery—Book One), [A MURDER IN PARIS](#) (A Year in Europe—Book 1), [CITY OF PREY](#) (An Ava Gold Mystery—Book One), and [HER LAST WISH](#) (A Rachel Gift FBI Suspense Thriller—Book One) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

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



BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

FINN WRIGHT MYSTERY SERIES

WHEN YOU'RE MINE (Book #1)

WHEN YOU'RE SAFE (Book #2)

WHEN YOU'RE CLOSE (Book #3)

WHEN YOU'RE SLEEPING (Book #4)

WHEN YOU'RE SANE (Book #5)

MORGAN CROSS MYSTERY SERIES

FOR YOU (Book #1)

FOR RAGE (Book #2)

FOR LUST (Book #3)

FOR WRATH (Book #4)

FOREVER (Book #5)

FOR US (Book #6)

FOR NOW (Book #7)

JULIETTE HART MYSTERY SERIES

NOTHING TO FEAR (Book #1)

NOTHING THERE (Book #2)

NOTHING WATCHING (Book #3)

NOTHING HIDING (Book #4)

NOTHING LEFT (Book #5)

FAITH BOLD MYSTERY SERIES

SO LONG (Book #1)
SO COLD (Book #2)
SO SCARED (Book #3)
SO NORMAL (Book #4)
SO FAR GONE (Book #5)
SO LOST (Book #6)
SO ALONE (Book #7)
SO FORGOTTEN (Book #8)

FIONA RED MYSTERY SERIES

LET HER GO (Book #1)
LET HER BE (Book #2)
LET HER HOPE (Book #3)
LET HER WISH (Book #4)
LET HER LIVE (Book #5)
LET HER RUN (Book #6)
LET HER HIDE (Book #7)
LET HER BELIEVE (Book #8)
LET HER FORGET (Book #9)

DAISY FORTUNE MYSTERY SERIES

NEED YOU (Book #1)
CLAIM YOU (Book #2)
CRAVE YOU (Book #3)
CHOOSE YOU (Book #4)
CHASE YOU (Book #5)

AMBER YOUNG MYSTERY SERIES

ABSENT PITY (Book #1)
ABSENT REMORSE (Book #2)

ABSENT FEELING (Book #3)

ABSENT MERCY (Book #4)

ABSENT REASON (Book #5)

ABSENT SANITY (Book #6)

ABSENT LIFE (Book #7)

CAMI LARK MYSTERY SERIES

JUST ME (Book #1)

JUST OUTSIDE (Book #2)

JUST RIGHT (Book #3)

JUST FORGET (Book #4)

JUST ONCE (Book #5)

JUST HIDE (Book #6)

JUST NOW (Book #7)

JUST HOPE (Book #8)

JUST LEAVE (Book #9)

NICKY LYONS MYSTERY SERIES

ALL MINE (Book #1)

ALL HIS (Book #2)

ALL HE SEES (Book #3)

ALL ALONE (Book #4)

ALL FOR ONE (Book #5)

ALL HE TAKES (Book #6)

ALL FOR ME (Book #7)

ALL IN (Book #8)

CORA SHIELDS MYSTERY SERIES

UNDONE (Book #1)

UNWANTED (Book #2)

UNHINGED (Book #3)

UNSAID (Book #4)

UNGLUED (Book #5)

UNSTABLE (Book #6)

UNKNOWN (Book #7)

UNAWARE (Book #8)

MAY MOORE SUSPENSE THRILLER

NEVER RUN (Book #1)

NEVER TELL (Book #2)

NEVER LIVE (Book #3)

NEVER HIDE (Book #4)

NEVER FORGIVE (Book #5)

NEVER AGAIN (Book #6)

NEVER LOOK BACK (Book #7)

NEVER FORGET (Book #8)

NEVER LET GO (Book #9)

NEVER PRETEND (Book #10)

NEVER HESITATE (Book #11)

PAIGE KING MYSTERY SERIES

THE GIRL HE PINED (Book #1)

THE GIRL HE CHOSE (Book #2)

THE GIRL HE TOOK (Book #3)

THE GIRL HE WISHED (Book #4)

THE GIRL HE CROWNED (Book #5)

THE GIRL HE WATCHED (Book #6)

THE GIRL HE WANTED (Book #7)

THE GIRL HE CLAIMED (Book #8)

VALERIE LAW MYSTERY SERIES

NO MERCY (Book #1)

NO PITY (Book #2)

NO FEAR (Book #3)

NO SLEEP (Book #4)

NO QUARTER (Book #5)

NO CHANCE (Book #6)

NO REFUGE (Book #7)

NO GRACE (Book #8)

NO ESCAPE (Book #9)

RACHEL GIFT MYSTERY SERIES

HER LAST WISH (Book #1)

HER LAST CHANCE (Book #2)

HER LAST HOPE (Book #3)

HER LAST FEAR (Book #4)

HER LAST CHOICE (Book #5)

HER LAST BREATH (Book #6)

HER LAST MISTAKE (Book #7)

HER LAST DESIRE (Book #8)

HER LAST REGRET (Book #9)

HER LAST HOUR (Book #10)

HER LAST SHOT (Book #11)

HER LAST PRAYER (Book #12)

HER LAST LIE (Book #13)

AVA GOLD MYSTERY SERIES

CITY OF PREY (Book #1)

CITY OF FEAR (Book #2)

CITY OF BONES (Book #3)

CITY OF GHOSTS (Book #4)

CITY OF DEATH (Book #5)

CITY OF VICE (Book #6)

A YEAR IN EUROPE

A MURDER IN PARIS (Book #1)

DEATH IN FLORENCE (Book #2)

VENGEANCE IN VIENNA (Book #3)

A FATALITY IN SPAIN (Book #4)

ELLA DARK FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

GIRL, ALONE (Book #1)

GIRL, TAKEN (Book #2)

GIRL, HUNTED (Book #3)

GIRL, SILENCED (Book #4)

GIRL, VANISHED (Book 5)

GIRL ERASED (Book #6)

GIRL, FORSAKEN (Book #7)

GIRL, TRAPPED (Book #8)

GIRL, EXPENDABLE (Book #9)

GIRL, ESCAPED (Book #10)

GIRL, HIS (Book #11)

GIRL, LURED (Book #12)

GIRL, MISSING (Book #13)

GIRL, UNKNOWN (Book #14)

GIRL, DECEIVED (Book #15)

GIRL, FORLORN (Book #16)

GIRL, REMADE (Book #17)

GIRL, BETRAYED (Book #18)

GIRL, BOUND (Book #19)

GIRL, REFORMED (Book #20)

GIRL, REBORN (Book #21)

LAURA FROST FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER

ALREADY GONE (Book #1)

ALREADY SEEN (Book #2)

ALREADY TRAPPED (Book #3)

ALREADY MISSING (Book #4)

ALREADY DEAD (Book #5)

ALREADY TAKEN (Book #6)

ALREADY CHOSEN (Book #7)

ALREADY LOST (Book #8)

ALREADY HIS (Book #9)

ALREADY LURED (Book #10)

ALREADY COLD (Book #11)

EUROPEAN VOYAGE COZY MYSTERY SERIES

MURDER (AND BAKLAVA) (Book #1)

DEATH (AND APPLE STRUDEL) (Book #2)

CRIME (AND LAGER) (Book #3)

MISFORTUNE (AND GOUDA) (Book #4)

CALAMITY (AND A DANISH) (Book #5)

MAYHEM (AND HERRING) (Book #6)

ADELE SHARP MYSTERY SERIES

LEFT TO DIE (Book #1)

LEFT TO RUN (Book #2)

LEFT TO HIDE (Book #3)

LEFT TO KILL (Book #4)

LEFT TO MURDER (Book #5)

LEFT TO ENVY (Book #6)
LEFT TO LAPSE (Book #7)
LEFT TO VANISH (Book #8)
LEFT TO HUNT (Book #9)
LEFT TO FEAR (Book #10)
LEFT TO PREY (Book #11)
LEFT TO LURE (Book #12)
LEFT TO CRAVE (Book #13)
LEFT TO LOATHE (Book #14)
LEFT TO HARM (Book #15)
LEFT TO RUIN (Book #16)

THE AU PAIR SERIES

ALMOST GONE (Book#1)
ALMOST LOST (Book #2)
ALMOST DEAD (Book #3)

ZOE PRIME MYSTERY SERIES

FACE OF DEATH (Book#1)
FACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
FACE OF FEAR (Book #3)
FACE OF MADNESS (Book #4)
FACE OF FURY (Book #5)
FACE OF DARKNESS (Book #6)

**A JESSIE HUNT PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE
SERIES**

THE PERFECT WIFE (Book #1)
THE PERFECT BLOCK (Book #2)
THE PERFECT HOUSE (Book #3)

THE PERFECT SMILE (Book #4)
THE PERFECT LIE (Book #5)
THE PERFECT LOOK (Book #6)
THE PERFECT AFFAIR (Book #7)
THE PERFECT ALIBI (Book #8)
THE PERFECT NEIGHBOR (Book #9)
THE PERFECT DISGUISE (Book #10)
THE PERFECT SECRET (Book #11)
THE PERFECT FAÇADE (Book #12)
THE PERFECT IMPRESSION (Book #13)
THE PERFECT DECEIT (Book #14)
THE PERFECT MISTRESS (Book #15)
THE PERFECT IMAGE (Book #16)
THE PERFECT VEIL (Book #17)
THE PERFECT INDISCRETION (Book #18)
THE PERFECT RUMOR (Book #19)
THE PERFECT COUPLE (Book #20)
THE PERFECT MURDER (Book #21)
THE PERFECT HUSBAND (Book #22)
THE PERFECT SCANDAL (Book #23)
THE PERFECT MASK (Book #24)
THE PERFECT RUSE (Book #25)
THE PERFECT VENEER (Book #26)
THE PERFECT PEOPLE (Book #27)
THE PERFECT WITNESS (Book #28)
THE PERFECT APPEARANCE (Book #29)
THE PERFECT TRAP (Book #30)
THE PERFECT EXPRESSION (Book #31)

CHLOE FINE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

NEXT DOOR (Book #1)
A NEIGHBOR'S LIE (Book #2)
CUL DE SAC (Book #3)
SILENT NEIGHBOR (Book #4)
HOMECOMING (Book #5)
TINTED WINDOWS (Book #6)

KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES

IF SHE KNEW (Book #1)
IF SHE SAW (Book #2)
IF SHE RAN (Book #3)
IF SHE HID (Book #4)
IF SHE FLED (Book #5)
IF SHE FEARED (Book #6)
IF SHE HEARD (Book #7)

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE SERIES

WATCHING (Book #1)
WAITING (Book #2)
LURING (Book #3)
TAKING (Book #4)
STALKING (Book #5)
KILLING (Book #6)

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)
ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)
ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)
ONCE LURED (Book #4)
ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)

ONCE PINED (Book #6)
ONCE FORSAKEN (Book #7)
ONCE COLD (Book #8)
ONCE STALKED (Book #9)
ONCE LOST (Book #10)
ONCE BURIED (Book #11)
ONCE BOUND (Book #12)
ONCE TRAPPED (Book #13)
ONCE DORMANT (Book #14)
ONCE SHUNNED (Book #15)
ONCE MISSED (Book #16)
ONCE CHOSEN (Book #17)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)
BEFORE HE SEES (Book #2)
BEFORE HE COVETS (Book #3)
BEFORE HE TAKES (Book #4)
BEFORE HE NEEDS (Book #5)
BEFORE HE FEELS (Book #6)
BEFORE HE SINS (Book #7)
BEFORE HE HUNTS (Book #8)
BEFORE HE PREYS (Book #9)
BEFORE HE LONGS (Book #10)
BEFORE HE LAPSES (Book #11)
BEFORE HE ENVIES (Book #12)
BEFORE HE STALKS (Book #13)
BEFORE HE HARMS (Book #14)

AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES

CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)
CAUSE TO RUN (Book #2)
CAUSE TO HIDE (Book #3)
CAUSE TO FEAR (Book #4)
CAUSE TO SAVE (Book #5)
CAUSE TO DREAD (Book #6)

KERI LOCKE MYSTERY SERIES

A TRACE OF DEATH (Book #1)
A TRACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
A TRACE OF VICE (Book #3)
A TRACE OF CRIME (Book #4)
A TRACE OF HOPE (Book #5)