

BLAKE PIERCE

THE

GIRL

HE

WANTED

A PAIGE KING MYSTERY-BOOK#7

THE  
GIRL  
HE  
WANTED

(A Paige King Mystery—Book Seven)

BLAKE PIERCE

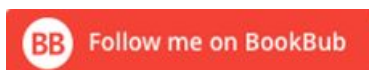
## Blake Pierce

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

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



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## PROLOGUE

Jill looked up at the imposing clock tower, stretching above her as the night rain lashed her face, and felt a pang of fear. She pulled her hand away from Dave's and stood there, staring at him, wondering. She knew that he could be reckless. Yet she also loved him for that adventurousness.

"Come on," he said, coaxing her to follow him. "Don't be scared."

"I don't want to go up there," she replied. It was only partly true. She was afraid of the potential for getting in trouble but also a little excited by the danger of it all.

"It's not like we're scaling the building," he said. "The back door's open. We just walk up a flight of steps. The view up there is incredible. You have to see it. Come on!" he urged.

Still, she felt unsure. She hated heights. Only the possibility of being up there with Dave stopped her from saying no immediately.

He leaned in and kissed her. As he did, she felt her fear melt away. Around Dave, it was easier to be brave, to give in to the sense of excitement that came from being around him. She didn't want to let him down.

"Okay," she said. "But just for a few minutes."

Dave grinned that boyish grin he had and took her hand again, leading her towards the open door. They walked up the narrow, winding staircase, the sound of their footsteps echoing far too loud in the empty tower. Jill felt her heart racing, but she refused to let her fear show.

They made their way up through the clock tower, winding around and around it on the seemingly endless staircase. As they climbed up the steps, Jill's heart raced with a mixture of fear and excitement. The clock tower was attached to Winterly's administration building, so if the two of them were caught here ... the feeling of adventure was exhilarating.

They eventually reached the top. Jill was a little out of breath, but she suspected that it was worth it to be up here. Dave pushed open the door to the observation deck. The view was enough to take her breath away all over again. The city lights glimmered below them, and the rain had subsided, leaving the air fresh and cool. Jill leaned against the railing, taking in the view.

Dave walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She leaned back into him, feeling his warmth and strength. Yes, it was definitely going to be worth coming up here.

“I’m so glad you came up here with me,” he whispered in her ear.

Jill found herself starting to relax, even happy she had come. Then, suddenly, she saw it.

Something outside. A dark shape. On the hand of the clock. Something that seemed impossible, but Jill couldn’t look away.

She stiffened as she realized what it looked like.

It looked like a body.

“What’s that?” she asked Dave in a whisper.

“What?” he asked. His attention was clearly more on her than on anything outside. Jill pushed him off. She approached the window, despite herself, needing to see. To know.

She leaned forward, slowly, barely daring to do it, and looked out.

Her worst fears were confirmed in that moment.

It was a body. A woman’s body to be precise. Her pale face was visible in the glow of the city lights, and her limbs hung limply over the clock hands, tied there, held in place. Her throat had been cut.

Jill gasped, feeling a wave of nausea sweep over her. She turned around, gripping Dave’s arm tightly, desperate for the support. She choked back a scream.

“There’s a body out there,” she said, her voice shaking.

Dave looked at her, his eyes wide with shock. “What?”

Jill shook, unable to speak. She felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes, and she fought to hold them back. She knew she should look away, but she couldn't help it. She looked one last time.

It was a body, perched on the hand of the clock, swaying back and forth in the wind. She felt her stomach churn as she realized that it was a person.

And that person was dead.

# CHAPTER ONE

Paige sat alone in the kitchen of her small apartment, leafing through the old photo album for the hundredth time, wondering how her life had gotten to this point. She found herself thinking back to happier times, before her father had been murdered, before the day she'd found him dead in the woods at the hands of a serial killer.

It was almost impossible in that moment not to be that fourteen-year-old girl again, looking down and seeing the blood. Paige had to force herself to look at other pictures in the album, trying to find enough happy memories to blot out the bad.

She wondered what someone else would see if they had been there to see her now, sitting there, her red hair falling around her slightly rounded face, her green eyes tinged by tears.

She could see that happiness there in the pictures, but it felt distant right now, like she couldn't reach out to touch it.

How had life built up to this empty feeling? The endless stream of killers had a lot to do with it. The cases that never ended. The death of her father. All of it seemed to come back to that moment.

And everything that had happened with Christopher too. Or rather, everything that could never happen. He might have split from his wife, but Paige and he were partners. Whatever they felt about one another, nothing could happen.

She took a deep breath and a deep drink of the glass of wine beside her, leaving her dinner uneaten. It was the right move to request a transfer after everything that had happened with Christopher, Agent Marriott. She was too close to him, and he couldn't be everything that she needed him to be. Not while he was going through a divorce from his wife, Jennifer. She needed something new. A new FBI field office. A new partner. A new everything.

She closed the book of photographs and shut her eyes, trying to calm her racing mind, trying to enjoy the silence. She was still trying when her phone rang, demanding her attention.

She looked down, surprised. It rarely rang these days. It was mostly a series of endless buzzes, of texts, of emails. A call meant something urgent, and as an agent, there were only so many things that could mean.

Heart already speeding, she answered.

“King,” the voice said. It was Agent Sauer of the BAU. Her boss. His tone was curt, impatient.

This was bad, and Paige could only think of a couple of things bad enough to make him sound like that.

“A case?” she anticipated. “A body?”

“Yes,” he said. There was a pause before he said the next part, as if he were worried about saying it. “It gets worse. It’s ... the call came from Agent Marriott’s house.”

Paige’s heart dropped, the glass slipping from her hand and shattering on the ground, forgotten. She couldn’t believe it. No, it couldn’t be.

In that moment, fear filled her at the possibility that something might have happened to the man who was her partner, to the man she had so many complicated feelings for. The idea that he might be ... no.

“Christopher, is he—”

“It’s not Agent Marriott. It’s his wife.”

Paige hated herself for the brief instant of relief that she felt at those words. The thought that Christopher might be dead had simply been too much to bear.

The thought that Jennifer was dead wasn’t much better, though. Paige had met her. Paige *liked* her. She knew how this would hit Christopher. Her mind raced, trying to think of what to say, what to do, but she found herself at a loss for words.

“Agent King?” Sauer’s voice snapped her back to reality. “Are you there?”

She cleared her throat, knowing that she had no time to focus on her emotions. She had to be the FBI agent she'd trained to be in that moment. "Yes, I'm here. I'll be there as soon as possible."

"Good," he said before hanging up.

Paige's heart sank at the news. She had only met Jennifer briefly, but she had seen how much she meant to Christopher. When the two of them had split up, it had hurt him badly. This ... this was going to hit him even harder.

Paige sat there for a moment, trying to process what just happened. She couldn't believe it. Her partner's wife. She had to call him, tell him. She grabbed her phone but hesitated. How did you even begin to tell someone something like that? Paige had trained as a psychologist before she became an agent, but even that didn't give her the answers about how she was meant to do it.

Not over the phone. That wasn't the way to do this. Paige's heart sank. She knew she had to be strong, to keep it together for her partner. She took a deep breath, willing herself to be calm.

She had to get to Christopher's apartment. Paige ran for the door, grabbed her coat, and left her apartment. The night air was cold and crisp, but it did little to calm her nerves.

She had a job to do.

\*\*\*

Paige tensed as she approached Christopher's house, bracing herself as she neared the door, not wanting to see what was behind it. It was hard enough stepping into a crime scene normally, but here, there was an extra personal dimension that made it harder.

All around her swirled the lights of a dozen police cars. All too late to stop the harm that had already been done. Police tape cordoned off the scene, but Paige stepped past it, showing her FBI badge to the uniformed officer guarding the tape.

She steeled herself and opened the door.

She knew that Christopher didn't know the news yet. She dreaded his arrival here. She dreaded having to break it to him. Would Sauer tell him everything that had gone on here when he called him with the news, or would he just tell Christopher to get here as quickly as he could.

Paige didn't know. She needed to get inside and get through the crime scene as fast as she could, to wrap it up before he arrived, so that she could convince him not to come inside. This was one place that Christopher didn't need to be.

The living room seemed to be the center of the investigation, as a team of the coroner's people was already there. As Paige looked inside, she had to fight back a wave of nausea, memories threatening to overwhelm her.

Jennifer lay there on her back, in the center of a pool of blood, held in place by ropes. The truly terrifying thing was how neat, how untouched, everything else about the living room was. There were no signs of a struggle, as if the killer had taken her by surprise.

Paige froze for a moment as she saw it. Paige knew what had happened because it was exactly the same thing that had happened to her father, back in the forest when she was just fourteen. Someone had drugged him, tied him down, and then carefully, precisely, cut open his major blood vessels to let him bleed out.

The Exsanguination Killer had murdered Jennifer.

Paige gritted her teeth, feeling the anger and sadness welling up inside her. She had seen this before; she had lived through this before. But this time, it was different. This time, it involved her partner's wife.

She scanned the room, taking in every detail, every inch of evidence. She noted the position of the body, the ropes used to tie her down, the precision of the wounds that hinted at the scalpel-like blade used to make the incisions. She took pictures, jotted down notes, and made mental connections.

As she worked, she could feel her emotions hardening her resolve. She would find whoever did this, no matter what it



took. And when she did, she would make them pay.

Paige was so engrossed in her work that she didn't hear the sound of the front door opening or the footsteps that followed. It wasn't until Christopher's voice broke through her concentration that she realized he had arrived.

"Paige," he said, his voice thick with emotion, "what's going on? What happened?"

Paige turned to face him, her heart breaking at the sight of him. He looked lost, broken, his eyes red with tears. He must have guessed what was happening. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come.

"Christopher," she said, her voice steady, "don't come in."

It was too late, though. He was already there, standing in the doorway, staring in horror. Christopher was six feet tall and square jawed, with a muscular frame and boyish features beneath sandy hair. Ordinarily, he was so strong, but now, he looked as though he might break down at any moment.

Paige hurried to him, all but pushing him out of the room, determined to get him away from the crime scene so that he couldn't see any more of this.

But Christopher was stubborn. In his grief, he refused to be moved from the spot where he was standing. He was frozen in place, staring at his wife's lifeless body. Paige could see the pain etched on his face, feel the weight of his sorrow. She knew what he was going through, and it broke her heart.

"Christopher," she said, her voice soft, "you don't need to see this. Let's go outside, get some fresh air."

But he wasn't listening. He was fixated on Jennifer, unable to process what had happened to her. Paige knew that she needed to do something to get him out of the house before he became too distraught.

"Christopher," she said more firmly, "we need to go. Now."

That was enough to get him moving, enough to get him out of there.

As she led him to the kitchen, Christopher's hand shot out to grip hers tightly. It was then that Paige realized how much

she had missed this physical contact, how much she had missed him.

“Paige,” he said, his voice choked with emotion, “what’s going on? Who did this?”

It wasn’t quite the question of an investigator looking for a suspect. It was that of someone who had lost a loved one, looking for any kind of answer.

Paige took a deep breath, knowing that she was the one who would have to tell him the harsh truth. She squeezed his hand, the warmth of his skin providing her with a small measure of comfort.

“It’s Jennifer, Christopher,” she said, her voice soft. “She’s gone. Someone killed her.”

He gave her a hard look then, though.

“Not just *someone*. I saw what happened in there. I know what that means.”

Paige swallowed back the urge to dismiss it. She knew as well as Christopher did what had happened there. She had to come out and say it.

“She ... I know it seems crazy, but I think she was killed by the Exsanguination Killer, the same way my father was.”

“Why?” The pain was palpable in Christopher’s voice. “Why would he do this?”

“She,” Paige said. She couldn’t hold back what she knew, not now. “The Exsanguination Killer is a woman.”

A wave of guilt swept through her at that because she knew in that moment exactly what this was about and why this had happened.

“I ... I went to see Adam Riker,” Paige said.

“The serial killer we put back in a secure hospital the first time we worked together?” Christopher said.

He’d been the one to come to her on that investigation, first asking her questions because Paige had been studying Adam for her PhD, then asking for her help.

“He claimed that he knew who the Exsanguination Killer was. He said that he would tell me if I did one thing for him.”

“And what’s that?” Christopher’s expression was stoney.

This was the hardest part to explain. The part that Paige hadn’t been able to agree to.

“He wanted me to kill somebody. Anybody. He still thinks that he can make me be like him. I said no, but I was able to work out two things from what he said: that the Exsanguination Killer was a woman, and that he’d met her there in the St. Just Institute.”

Christopher’s face was a mask of shock. “So, this is all connected. And ... he’s behind this, isn’t he? Riker. You went to talk to him, and now Jennifer is dead. That can’t be a coincidence. He sent the Exsanguination Killer. He contacted her.”

Christopher turned, heading for the door with a determination that was almost terrifying.

“Where are you going?” Paige asked.

“Where do you think? I’m going to go to the St. Just Institute, and I’m going to get the truth out of Adam Riker, even if I have to beat the answers out of him!”

## CHAPTER TWO

Paige had spent a lot of time at the St. Just Institute for the criminally insane when she had still been a psychologist, back before she had joined the FBI. It had been where she worked on her doctorate, where she'd done her residency, assessing patients.

It had come to feel almost familiar to her. Now, though, the sight of it made her shudder as she sat in her car with Christopher.

"We can't go in there," she said. She'd only come this far with him because the alternative was letting him go off alone.

"We have to," Christopher said, his voice grim. "Riker knows something. We have to find out what it is."

"It's too dangerous," Paige said. "He's a serial killer. He's manipulative and dangerous. He won't just tell us the truth. He'll try to use us to get what he wants. We can't let that happen."

Christopher didn't look convinced. Paige could see the anger on his face. "What other choice do we have?"

"We can't just storm in and demand to speak to Adam at this time of night. He'll refuse to speak to us anyway."

"I'll make him talk," Christopher said with a dangerous edge to his tone.

Paige knew that she had to talk him out of this before he did something he couldn't undo. Something that would cost his job, maybe even his freedom. In his grief, Christopher looked ready to storm in there and try to hurt Adam until he gave up what he knew, but it wouldn't work, and it would get Christopher suspended at the very least.

Adam would probably laugh knowing that. He was probably expecting Christopher to react in exactly that way.

She took a deep breath and tried to reason with him. "Listen, I know you want to get justice for Jennifer, but we

have to do this the right way. We can't just barge in there, not if we want information. We have to be smart about this."

"I don't care about smart!" Christopher snapped back.

Paige sighed. "I know. But this isn't about what you want, it's about what's best for the case. We need to do this the right way, or we won't get the information we need."

Even then, it looked as though Christopher might try to go in there. Paige put a hand on his arm.

"They won't let you in, and even if they do, even if you beat Adam, he won't give you anything. He's a psychopath. He doesn't care. He'll play his games with you, whatever you try. Please, Christopher."

Even as Paige said it, her phone started to ring. It was Sauer. A part of her wanted to ignore the call, but she knew she couldn't. She took it, putting it on speaker.

"I'm at the scene," Sauer said. "Where are you?"

Paige took a deep breath before responding. "We're outside the St. Just Institute. Christopher wants to go in and talk to Adam Riker."

There was a pause on the other end of the line before Sauer spoke again. He was obviously trying to take in the implications of that. "And why does he want to talk to Riker?"

Paige hesitated, knowing that she had to come clean about everything, yet worrying about what that might mean. She wasn't meant to be working the Exsanguination Killer case. She didn't have a choice though now, not when Jennifer was dead.

"Adam Riker claimed to know who the Exsanguination Killer is. I went to see him, and now Jennifer is dead. We think he may have something to do with it."

There was another pause before Sauer spoke again. "You found information in the Exsanguination Killer case, but you didn't share it with me, Agent King?"

Paige could hear the anger in his voice, barely held in check. "I wanted to check it out before I passed it on."

“I suspect that you wanted to find the man who killed your father.” Sauer wasn’t quite accusing her of misconduct, but it was close.

“Woman,” Paige corrected him. She might as well tell him the whole truth now that he’d heard some of it. Maybe it would let them actually catch the killer who had done this. “The Exsanguination Killer is a woman. One who met Adam Riker in the St. Just Institute. I looked through the files there, and I believe I have the name of an ex-patient who fits the profile and who could have met Adam.”

Christopher looked at her with something like shock. “You have a name? What name? Tell me, Paige.”

“What name?” Sauer demanded. Paige could feel the pressure from both of them to provide an answer.

She tried to set it out, piece by piece. “Anne Dawson. Her former roommate, Louisa, made her sound like she’s a very likely candidate for this. Very cold, very calculating. Liked having people under control and hurting them.”

There was yet another pause on the other end of the line. Paige suspected that each one was necessary for Sauer to hold his temper in check.

“So, you were conducting an investigation without my approval? Okay, that’s enough. I’m going to need both of you to back off. Right now.”

“What?” Christopher exclaimed. “Back off? You can’t be serious.”

“Agent Marriott, Christopher, you know you aren’t thinking straight right now. You’re too emotionally compromised right now. We can’t risk you doing something reckless. And Paige, you should know better than to encourage this behavior. Your own behavior ... well, I don’t even know what to make of it, right now. I need you both to go home.”

“I can’t go home,” Christopher said, “not when there might be answers right—”

“You have to, Agent Marriott,” Sauer said. “Go home. Deal with the things you need to deal with. I don’t want to see you anywhere near the office. That goes for you, too, Agent King.

For the moment, you're both suspended. Marriott, it's for your own good. King, we'll talk about all this ... later."

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Paige stood in the conference room at the BAU, with Sauer pacing just a few feet away. Sauer was a slender man in his forties with a dark beard, and currently, it did nothing to mask the disapproval in his expression.

It had been a week since the death of Christopher's wife. A week in which Paige hadn't been able to do anything except sit in her apartment hoping that Christopher was all right. He hadn't returned her calls. Paige suspected that he'd been far too busy doing all the things that came with a death: arranging the funeral, notifying family and friends, and trying to deal with the suddenness of the loss.

Paige stood there alone in front of Sauer. She knew that he was anything but happy.

"Tell me again what you held back from the investigation into the Exsanguination Killer," he said.

"That the killer is almost certainly a woman."

Sauer considered that for a second, then nodded. "And you know that because Adam Riker, the serial killer, told you so?"

He sounded as if he didn't quite believe it, but Paige held her ground.

"I know Adam," she said. "I'm the one who helped to put him back inside."

"I've read some of your notes on him," Sauer said. "You say he's deeply manipulative. How can you be sure that he wasn't trying to give you information he wanted you to hear?"

Paige had had plenty of time to consider questions like that over the last week. Plenty of time in which to question her actions. Had they led to the death of Christopher's wife? Had they produced information that might lead to catching her father's killer?

“Adam Riker is very manipulative, but he gave this information away accidentally,” Paige said.

“The information being that the Exsanguination Killer is a woman?”

“And that he had met her in the St. Just Institute. That combination led me to a woman named Anne Dawson, a former patient at the facility.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

“No, sir.”

Paige heard Sauer sigh. “That’s one good thing, at least.”

Paige was about to ask what that meant when the door to the conference room opened, and Christopher walked in.

He looked ... tired. Grief stricken, worn. There were dark bags under his eyes and lines on his face that Paige didn’t remember being there before. Paige wanted to ask him how he was doing, but Sauer was faster.

“Marriott, how are you feeling?”

“I ... want to work,” Christopher said.

Paige knew that grief could affect people in many different ways. Some fell apart, and others buried themselves in their work. It worried Paige that Christopher hadn’t gotten in touch, hadn’t picked up when she’d called. They were meant to be partners, friends.

“Then I have a case for you both,” Sauer said. “If you’re up to it.”

“The Exsanguination Killer?” Christopher said, determination in his voice.

Agent Sauer shook his head rapidly. “You know I can’t let you work that case right now.”

“But we’re the ones who are most motivated on this,” Paige argued. It didn’t get her very far.

“You’re also the one who conducted an investigation behind my back,” Sauer said, “and Marriott, I’m not sure that I can trust how you’ll react. No, it has to be another case.”

“I don’t want another case,” Christopher snapped back.



Paige could understand that. She didn't want to walk away from this either, not when the Exsanguination Killer might be within their reach.

"What you want doesn't come into this. You know that. You can take this case, or you can be given compassionate leave until this investigation is concluded."

It was clear that Sauer wasn't going to let them work on the investigation they wanted.

"What's the case?" Paige asked. She didn't want to work some other case either, but it sounded as though there wasn't any choice.

"It's in a town up by the coast. Winterly. Two bodies have been found, the most recent one by a couple of kids climbing a clock tower. The other was found on a water tower. We have a serial killer who leaves his victims in high places, and the local cops have come to us for help."

Paige paused, considering that. Could she and Christopher really go off to investigate another case when Christopher's wife had been murdered?

But then again, maybe it was exactly what they needed. Something to focus on, to distract them from the Exsanguination Killer case.

When the alternative was suspension, what choice did they really have?

"We'll take it," she said firmly.

Christopher looked at her, surprise written all over his face. "What about the Exsanguination Killer?"

"We'll have to let Sauer handle it," Paige said, her heart heavy. "Christopher, you know he's right. We can't be the ones to investigate this. Any lawyer would tear the case apart, even if we found the killer. It's out of our hands now."

Christopher looked as though he might argue. He looked as though he might shout, or rage, or fight. Instead, though, he nodded slowly, then turned to Sauer. "Fine. We'll take the case in Winterly. But we'll be back."

Sauer just looked at him for a long moment before nodding.  
“I hope so, Marriott. I really do.”

As they left the conference room, Paige couldn't help but feel like they were running away from the Exsanguination Killer. She just had to tell herself to focus on the case at hand.

They had a killer to find in Winterly.

## CHAPTER THREE

Heading to Winterly meant taking a flight along the East Coast, heading north. Paige watched Christopher as the plane made its way across the country, hoping all the while that he was all right.

The loss of his wife was still so fresh, and Paige couldn't imagine how he was feeling. She wanted to reach out and comfort him, but she knew that he needed space to grieve.

Instead, she focused on the case. The killer in Winterly had already claimed two victims, and they needed to stop him before he could take another life. A killer like this wouldn't simply stop until someone stopped him. That meant her and Christopher.

"Are you going to be able to do this?" Paige asked Christopher. He seemed different since the news of Jennifer's death. He was quieter, more withdrawn, seemingly lost in thought. Paige knew that she couldn't force him to open up, but it hurt to see him like this. "Are you going to be able to handle this investigation?"

Her worry was that he would break down in the middle of it or start to lash out blindly in the torment he felt.

Christopher looked at her, his eyes dark and deep with pain. He seemed to be searching for something in her gaze, something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"I have to," he said at last, his voice almost a whisper. "I have to do something, Paige. Anything. I can't just sit around and do nothing. I spent a week trying to do that. It doesn't help."

"You could have called me," Paige said.

Christopher shook his head. "This was something I had to do by myself."

Paige felt a pang of guilt. She could see clearly that Christopher was struggling with the loss of his wife, and she

didn't want to make things worse for him. But she also knew that they couldn't afford to let their emotions get in the way of the investigation. Christopher was a good agent, probably better than her, but she was worried about what his grief might do to him here.

She couldn't do anything to help with that though, not here, not now. All she could do was be there for him if he wanted to talk, and hope that the two of them would be able to solve the case they'd been assigned. Perhaps afterwards, she would be able to do something to help him.

For now, Paige focused on reading through copies of the case files that Sauer had sent to her computer, hoping to find something that would give them a lead in the case.

As Paige scrolled through the documents, she couldn't help but feel a sense of dread building in her chest. The killer had left behind no evidence, no DNA, no fingerprints. There were witnesses after the bodies had been found, but none at the time, and the victims had seemingly been selected at random. The only apparent link between them was that they were both young women.

In the first case, the body had been found by a farmer; in the second, it was found by a couple of teenagers. There had been witnesses nearby in the second case—a woman named Bertha Matthews and a man named Alvin Richards—but their statements showed that they had really just seen “something” from the ground that had turned out to be the body.

The crime scene photographs showed them both still tied in place where they had been killed. Bea Milling had been the first victim, tied atop a water tower. Ellie Kane had been found tied to the hands of the city hall's old clock tower. The two victims in Winterly had been killed in similar ways, both found on high structures with their throats slashed. The killer had also left behind a strange symbol, scrawled in blood, and different at each scene. The local cops hadn't been able to make sense of it.

Paige studied the symbols carefully, trying to see if there was anything familiar about them. One looked like a Greek letter *alpha*, the next like the letter *beta*. She couldn't shake off

the feeling that it was important, that it meant something. But what? Was the killer merely labeling his kills as his first and second, or was there more to it than that?

“Why would the killer murder them in those locations?” Paige asked Christopher.

Christopher looked up from his thoughts, his eyes dark and intense. “Maybe it’s about power. About control. The killer chooses high places because it gives him a sense of power over his victims. And the symbols he leaves behind? Maybe they represent something to him, some kind of personal significance.”

Paige nodded thoughtfully, considering his words. “It’s possible. But how can we use that to track him down?”

“We need to find out more about the victims,” Christopher said. “Their backgrounds, their relationships, anything that might give us a lead. And we need to start looking for patterns. There has to be some kind of connection between the victims, something that ties them together.”

It was both good and strange to hear him thinking so clearly, his voice not even betraying his grief. It was like he’d shut that part of himself away in order to let himself work.

Paige wasn’t sure whether to be grateful for that or worried by it.

The flight landed in the town of Winterly, and Paige and Christopher made their way to the local police station. They were greeted by a weary-looking detective, who introduced himself as Detective Johnson. He was maybe fifty, with dark hair and dark rings under his eyes like he hadn’t slept in a while. He was a little overweight, while his shirt had what looked like day-old mustard stains on it. Paige guessed that with the worry of the case he hadn’t had a lot of time to give over to his appearance. He looked happy to see them.

“Thanks for coming down,” he said, shaking their hands. “I just hope that you’re able to find answers on all of this. We’re at a loss here. We’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Paige and Christopher exchanged a glance. They knew all too well what it was like to be in the midst of an unexplainable

case. They knew how hard it could be for the local PD, trying to make sense of one. They'd investigated plenty of those in the past, and in each case, they'd managed to find the killer. Paige only hoped that they would be able to find answers here in the same way.

"What can you tell us about the victims?" she asked, hoping that the detective could give them something that wasn't in the files.

Detective Johnson sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping. "Not much, unfortunately. Bea Milling was a college student. She was studying architecture at a local university. Ellie Kane, on the other hand, was a waitress at a diner. She graduated high school but didn't pursue further education."

"Have you been able to find any links between them?" Paige asked.

The detective shrugged. "Nothing obvious. Both women were in their mid-twenties, had no criminal records, and were living in Winterly at the time of their deaths. We've looked into their pasts, but there's nothing that stands out as a motive for their murders."

Paige frowned. She guessed that if there had been that kind of clear link, the detective would have solved the case already. "What about their personal lives? Did they have any enemies, or anyone who might have wanted to harm them?"

"We've checked into that as well," Detective Johnson said. "But so far, nothing has turned up. Bea Milling had a boyfriend until recently, while it looks like Ellie Kane was single. We're still interviewing their friends and family, but it's looking like a dead end."

Christopher rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "What about the locations where they were killed? Were they significant in any way other than the height?"

The detective shook his head. "Not that we can tell. The water tower was just a random location, and the clock tower was the only tall building in the area. We're still trying to figure out why the killer chose those specific spots."

Paige glanced at Christopher, feeling a sense of frustration building in her chest. She also found herself worrying about him. He hadn't said much in their conversation with the detective, when ordinarily he might have taken the lead in talking to local law enforcement. Paige guessed that, for all he claimed that he could handle his share of this case, he wasn't going to be able to push aside his grief that easily.

Paige considered the women, figuring that was the best starting point. They both shared the same age, they were both women, and they were both found in high places. But other than that, there was nothing that linked them together.

Paige sighed, feeling frustrated. "There has to be something else. Some kind of connection that we're missing."

"We've questioned everyone who knew them," Detective Johnson said. "Friends, family, co-workers. We haven't found anything yet."

Christopher leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "What about the symbols that the killer left behind? Have you tried to decipher them?"

Paige was grateful that he was engaging more in the conversation.

Johnson shook his head. "We haven't been able to figure them out. We've had a few people look at them, but no one can make sense of it."

Paige hadn't been able to work it out yet either, but she was determined to make some kind of sense of it. Something like that was important enough to the killer that he'd paused to write the symbols in the victims' blood. Understanding why he'd done it might be the key to catching him.

Paige sighed. "Okay, thank you for the information, Detective. We'll start our own investigation and hopefully find some answers soon."

She and Christopher left the police station. She waited until they were both clear of it before she turned to him. "Are you ok?"

Christopher looked at her, his eyes dark and unreadable. "I will be," he said after a moment. "I just need to focus on the

case for now. It's the only thing that's keeping me together."

Paige nodded, understanding all too well the feeling of throwing oneself into work to avoid dealing with personal pain. "Do you want to take a break? Maybe grab a coffee or something?"

Christopher shook his head. "No, let's keep going. We need to find something, anything, that could give us a lead on this guy."

"All right, if you're sure," Paige said. "Where do you want to start?"

She had her own ideas, of course, but right then, she wanted to make sure that Christopher really was focused on the case. She didn't think that she could send him back to DC, and she really didn't want to do this alone, but she wanted to know how much she could trust his judgement when he was so grief stricken. Was she going to have to take the lead here, when before, he'd been the more senior agent calling the shots?

"We'll start where we always start," Christopher said. "With the crime scenes. Come on, I'll drive us to the water tower."



## CHAPTER FOUR

The water tower was a little way to the north of the town, outside its limits, standing alone, solitary in a field. To Paige, its weathered surfaces made it look like it had been there forever.

Christopher parked the car by the side of the road next to the field, and they both got out. The air was crisp, and Paige could feel the chill in her bones. She zipped up her jacket and walked over to the tower, staring up at the top of it.

It was tall, at least forty feet, with rusted metal panels that clanged in the wind, providing the only real noise out here away from the city. Paige looked up, imagining what it must have been like for the victim to be up there. She shuddered, feeling a sense of unease at that thought.

“It’s pretty rickety,” she said. The structure looked as though it should have fallen down years ago.

Christopher nodded. “It’s also a long way outside of town.”

He had a point. This wasn’t anywhere that Bea Milling might have come in the course of her normal day, which meant that the killer hadn’t grabbed her here. This hadn’t been opportunistic. He’d abducted her somewhere else, then brought her here to kill her. Paige tried to imagine the kind of planning and effort that must have gone into something like that.

Did it mean that the killer had targeted her specifically? Was there something about her that had made him decide that she was the victim he was looking for? Or had he merely grabbed a young woman off the streets of the city at random when he saw the opportunity and then driven here?

Crucially, why here? Was the location important?

Paige looked around, taking in her surroundings. There was nothing remarkable about the area, just fields stretching out in all directions. That made her wonder why the killer had chosen

this spot. The city presumably had plenty of high up places. Was it a personal connection to him? Or was it just a convenient location where he could carry out his murderous plan without being seen?

Christopher was already examining the tower, his eyes scanning every inch of it for clues. Paige joined him, taking note of everything around her. She saw nothing that stood out, nothing that might give them a hint of who the killer was or why he had chosen this location.

Paige couldn't shake the feeling that there was some significance to the water tower. It was too specific of a location for the killer to have chosen it randomly. But what was it?

"We'll need to climb if we want to see the spot where Bea Milling died," Christopher pointed out, nodding towards a rusty looking ladder that led up the side of the water tower.

Paige was fine with that. She wasn't scared of heights. But she had to admit that the water tower didn't look like the most stable thing to climb. Still, if it was the only way to get answers in the case, that was what they had to do.

Together, they began to climb the ladder, hand over hand, their shoes clanging on the rungs. Paige could feel her pulse racing with the effort of the climb as they ascended, but she kept her eyes focused on the rungs in front of her and kept going.

Finally, they reached the top, and Paige took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She looked around, taking in the view. They were high up, with a clear view of the surrounding countryside. It was beautiful, in an eerie sort of way. Even so, all Paige could think about was that this was how it must have looked to Bea Milling as her throat was cut by the killer.

Christopher was already examining the area where the victim had been found. Paige joined him, taking note of the small pool of dried blood that marked the spot where Bea Milling had been killed.

Paige took out her phone, calling up the case files on the murder. Specifically, she pulled up the crime scene

photographs, wanting to get a sense of exactly where everything there had been. Paige wanted to get a sense of how things must have happened in case it told her and Christopher anything new about the killer and his methods.

“Bea Milling must have been killed here,” she said, gesturing to the spot on the very edge of the tower where the bloodstain was.

Christopher nodded, his eyes scanning the area. “Yes, it looks like it. The blood spatter pattern matches up with the photographs.”

Paige shuddered, feeling a sense of sadness and horror wash over her. She couldn’t imagine what it must have been like for Bea Milling to be up there alone with a killer, knowing that she was about to die and that there was no one who could help her.

“We need to find something,” Paige said, almost to herself. “Anything that could help us catch this guy. There has to be something here.”

Christopher nodded. “Let’s keep looking.”

Together, they searched the water tower, looking for any sign of the killer’s presence. Paige was beginning to feel frustrated again. There was nothing here that could help them. No clues, no evidence. It was as though the killer had left no trace of himself behind.

Yet, as she searched, a question started to come to her, one that was hard for Paige to ignore.

“Christopher, how do you think the killer got Bea Milling up here? It’s a long way up, and there’s no way that anyone could climb that ladder while hauling a struggling person up with them.”

Christopher looked thoughtful for a moment. “I don’t know. Maybe he had help.”

Paige nodded. It was possible, but it didn’t feel right to her. “I think a killer like this is more likely to work alone. Serial killers ... it’s rare that they work together. And from a practical perspective, getting Bea up the ladder would have been just as difficult with two people as with one.”

“Well, maybe he rigged up some kind of system to haul her up once he was up here. The coroner’s report says that he drugged her before he brought her up here, right?”

“That’s it,” Paige agreed. “The killer must have used a rope to haul Bea Milling up here. He would have had to tie it off on the water tower somewhere.”

That thought had her looking around the edges of the tower trying to find anything that might corroborate that theory. She lay down, leaning over the edge of the water tower, trying to get a better view. She assumed that the killer would have taken the rope with him, but maybe there would be marks where it had rubbed against the metal of the tower to show how the killer had done it.

What Paige saw was even better. There were fibers there, snagged against one of the water tower’s struts. Paige reached for them ...

... and felt her balance starting to give way as she did so.

“Careful, Paige!” Christopher said. Paige felt him grabbing her legs to brace her, holding her in place so that she wouldn’t fall. Her heart hammered in her chest, but she could feel Christopher holding her, the strength in his arms more than enough to keep her in place while she reached for the fibers.

Her fingers snagged them, right on the edge of her reach. She pulled them back in even as Christopher lifted her back onto the safety of the water tower. Paige lay on her back for several seconds, breathing hard. Even as she did so, she held up the fibers to examine them. They were yellow and synthetic, strangely smooth to the touch.

“Rope fibers,” she said, holding them up for Christopher to see.

He took them from her, looking at them intently, as if he might be able to divine the identity of the killer if he just looked hard enough.

“Not just any rope fibers. This is synthetic climbing rope.”

Paige’s eyes widened slightly as she realized what that meant. “There’s a chance that the killer is an experienced climber.”

Especially with the fact that he'd been able to rig up a system to lift Bea Milling up here, it was the explanation that made the most sense.

Christopher nodded. "Yes, and he had to have planned this out well in advance. He knew the victim, he knew the location, and he had the equipment to pull this off."

Paige felt a sense of unease settle in her stomach. The killer was smart, resourceful, and skilled. That made him even more dangerous. They would have to be careful if they wanted to catch him.

"So, we're looking for someone with climbing experience. One who went to the trouble of rigging up a system to get Bea Milling up here."

Christopher nodded. "It narrows down the pool of suspects, but it's still a pretty broad category. There must be a lot of climbers out there."

Paige sighed. "Yeah, I know. But it's something. We need to keep digging."

She kept looking around the tower and started to wonder what kind of person would pick out this place. Who would think of this water tower to bring a victim?

Who would have access to it?

"Somewhere this old and rickety would require maintenance, wouldn't it?" Paige said.

"You're thinking it might be someone in one of the maintenance crews?" Christopher asked.

Paige nodded. "It's possible. They would have access to the tower and know the area well. It's worth checking out. Maybe someone on a council maintenance crew would also have access to the administration building with the clock tower."

Christopher looked thoughtful. "That's a good point. We should check out the maintenance crews in the area, see if anyone matches the profile we're looking for."

Paige nodded, feeling a sense of hope. Maybe they were getting somewhere with this case after all. She stood up, dusting off her pants.

“We should get back to the local precinct and start looking into this. If we get in contact with the city authorities, we might even be able to get a list of everyone who’s worked on this tower over the years.”

“After that, we’ll need to find a way to cross reference anyone we find with climbers,” Christopher pointed out. “It’s not as if there’s exactly a register of people who climb.”

Paige nodded. She knew that, but it was the best shot they had. They would find a way.

As they made their way down the ladder at the side of the water tower, Paige couldn’t shake the feeling of unease that had settled in her stomach. The killer was still out there, and they had only just begun to scratch the surface of his identity.

They just had to hope that what they’d found at the water tower would help them to find him. If they didn’t find him soon, then Paige had a feeling that more people were going to die before this was over.

## CHAPTER FIVE

It wasn't easy, selecting the perfect victim, one who embodied everything he was looking for, but he thought that he had found her. Her name was Sarah, and she was a young college student who loved to hike and climb.

He had been watching her for days now—even while he was planning his previous work—studying her patterns and routines. He knew where she would be and when at almost every minute of the day. People were a lot more predictable in their habits than they liked to believe. It made them vulnerable.

He had already prepared everything he needed for the abduction. The rope, the drugs, the gloves, and the mask. He had even scouted out the perfect location for it: a spot near her walk home from the college she went to where she usually left the company of her friends. There would be a window of opportunity then, one that he wouldn't miss.

He followed behind her now in his car, waiting for his moment. It was harder than it looked, following someone on foot using a car. It meant that he had to stop and start, finding excuses to pull over, waiting and watching as Sarah went about her day.

Sarah was still with her friends, but he knew that, soon enough, she would separate from them and take the path that he had been watching. He waited patiently, feeling the thrill of anticipation building inside of him.

Sarah seemed to be taking forever to split from her friends to go her own way. What if she didn't do it today? What if they all suddenly decided to go back to her place together, or she wandered off with one of them to go to one of the stores that lined the street? In that moment, his plan felt so fragile, a thing that might blow away with the lightest breeze.

He had to tell himself to be patient. The plan would work, just as his plans had worked with the others. Even so, he found

his fingers drumming a repetitive pattern on the steering wheel as he willed Sarah to do what she always did.

Finally, the moment came. Sarah's friends had said goodbye, and she continued down the street alone. He followed her, keeping a safe distance behind her. She had no idea he was there, even as he pulled up next to her, in exactly the spot he'd planned.

He exited the car, the syringe ready in his hand. There was no time to waste now, and no room for error. As he walked towards her, he could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He had done this before, but it seemed that it never got any easier. He had to focus, to stay calm and collected.

He approached her from behind, slipping the mask over his face to make sure that even if she saw him, even if she somehow got away, she wouldn't be able to identify him. This was a blind spot for cameras, but he wasn't prepared to take any risks. Everything depended on him not being identified before he could finish his work. In an ideal world, he would complete it and slip away, a ghost in the wind.

He was getting closer to Sarah now, his anticipation building. He must have made some small sound, though, must have scuffed the sidewalk with his shoe or something because Sarah started to look around towards him.

He had a moment to curse himself for clumsiness, then he closed the distance between them in an instant, knowing that there was no more time for quiet stalking. This was the moment to act.

He clamped a hand over her mouth, stifling her attempt to scream. He pulled her off balance so that she wouldn't be able to fight back. He plunged the syringe into her neck in the same movement. Sarah struggled for a moment, but he simply held onto her as she did so, knowing that it was only a matter of time now.

Soon enough, the drugs took effect, and she went limp in his arms, the way the others had. The sudden limp weight of her was almost enough to make him drop her, but he didn't. He was stronger than that. It felt like he was stronger every time.



He picked her up, carrying her back to his car and sliding her into the trunk.

This was the most dangerous moment because if anyone saw him now, he was lost. There would be no way to talk his way out of it. He would have to fight, or run, abandoning Sarah. It would have been easier just to kill her in the spot where he'd abducted her, but he couldn't—that wasn't how this worked.

He had to do this right. The right way, in the right place. He couldn't kill her yet, but soon, it would be time for Sarah to meet her fate.

## CHAPTER SIX

“I think I’ve found something interesting,” Paige said as she sat at a desk in the Winterly PD, staring at a computer screen.

Detective Johnson had put her and Christopher in an office in one corner, away from the main bullpen of the place. Paige didn’t know if that was so that they wouldn’t be disturbed, or so that they couldn’t interfere with the other business of the department.

“What have you found?” Christopher asked as he waited, holding a phone, trying to get through to someone who would know who had done maintenance on the water tower.

“I’ve been looking through the social media of Bea Milling and Ellie Kane,” Paige said. “It looks like Ellie was a member of a climbing club. Detective Johnson didn’t flag it because he had no way of knowing that it was relevant.”

Christopher put the phone on speaker as the line rang on the other end. “That’s interesting,” he said to Paige. “One thought, did she post anything about either of the locations where the murders took place, the clock tower or the water tower?”

“You think they might be spots for climbers?”

“There are urban climbers, right?” Christopher said. “People who like to scale buildings rather than rock faces?”

Paige had heard of that. It was generally illegal, so that climbers had to do it in secret, but if Ellie was involved in it, then it might provide a connection between her and the locations where she and Bea Milling had been murdered.

Paige scrolled through Ellie’s social media feeds, looking out for anything that featured either the water tower or the clock tower. “I don’t see anything specific about the water tower or the clock tower, but she did post pictures of her climbing gear and talking about climbing locations around Winterly. So, maybe it’s possible?”

“Is there anyone specific she seems to have spent a lot of time climbing with?” Christopher asked.

Paige shook her head. “Not that I can see. There are a bunch of different people in her photos. But it’s a lead. Maybe we could interview some of her climbing partners, see if anyone had problems with her.”

“Do you have any information on the club?”

Paige nodded. She’d looked that part up the moment she’d seen the fact that Ellie Kane was a member. “It’s called Winterly Climbing Club. They have a social media page, and it looks like they have a pretty active community. Ellie posted photos of her climbing with them, and there are a few comments from other members.”

Christopher nodded, looking pleased that they had that much, at least. “That’s great. We can start by getting a list of members and cross-referencing them with anyone who has worked on the water tower or the clock tower to see if anyone was at both locations the victims were taken to.”

Paige nodded. “Exactly. I’ll keep digging through social media and try to find any connections between the victims or the killer.”

Paige searched the page, trying to find contact details for anyone connected with Winterly Climbing Club. She found a phone number tucked away at the bottom and called it.

“Hello, Winterly Climbing Club, this is Kate,” a woman answered.

“Hi, my name is Paige King, and I’m with the FBI. I was wondering if I could speak to someone about the club?”

There was a moment of hesitation before the woman responded, obviously taken aback. “The FBI? Why would the FBI call here?”

“I’m investigating a case, and your club has come up in connection with it. I was wondering if you could give me a list of members or put me in touch with someone who could help me with that.”

“I’m not sure if I’m authorized to give out that information, but I can check with the president of the club and get back to you.”

Obviously, she wouldn’t just give out details of the club’s members to a stranger.

“Kate, did you know Ellie Kane?” Paige asked. Her only hope was to appeal on a personal level, and to hope that Kate understood the importance of this.

“Yes, I knew Ellie,” the woman said. “She was a great climber, always pushing herself to new heights.”

“It sounds like the two of you were friends,” Paige said.

“We were. We climbed together a few times. Why are you asking? Wait ... this is about what happened to her, isn’t it? The FBI are investigating?”

“I’m investigating her murder, along with another in the area,” Paige said. “We found climbing rope at one of the scenes, and now that we’ve found out that Ellie was a climber, we think that there might be a link. That’s what I need the list of members for.”

There was a long pause before the woman spoke again. “I can’t imagine anyone wanting to harm Ellie. She was such a kind person. But I’ll see if I can help you out with that list of members.”

“Thank you, Kate. I appreciate it. Were there any specific problems or conflicts between Ellie and anyone in the club?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Kate said. “Ellie got along with everyone. She was a bit of a loner, but she was always friendly and helpful.”

“Okay, thank you, Kate,” Paige said. “If you could send me the list of members at this number, that would be great.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Kate said and then hung up.

Paige hoped that she’d done enough to get the list she needed, and that it would be able to help them in the case. Now that they were off the call, there was a chance that Kate would think again about whether she should pass on the

information. In that case, Paige would need to go get a warrant.

As it was, though, it was only a couple of minutes before a list of members from the climbing club came through to Paige's phone. Paige felt a note of hope that she might now have what she needed to make progress on the case.

Paige looked over at Christopher. "I spoke to someone from the club. She's sent us a list of the members there. Any luck with the local authorities?"

"I'm still on hold," Christopher said. "No, wait a minute."

A voice came through on the other end of the line. "Hello?"

"Hello," Christopher said. "I'm Agent Christopher Marriott with the FBI. Who am I speaking with, please?"

"This is Hubert Jenkins with the Winterly Department of Public Works. How can I assist you, Agent Marriott?"

"I'm investigating a case, and I was hoping you could tell me who did maintenance on one of your water towers."

Hubert paused for a moment before answering. "I'd have to check the records, but I can't just give out that information. You need to file a request with the department and wait for approval."

It seemed that he was being more careful with information than the climbing club.

"The water tower is the one where a woman named Bea Milling was found murdered," Christopher said. "We don't have time for that. Lives are at stake here, Hubert. This man has already killed two people and could already be searching for another victim."

"You think one of our maintenance people was involved?" Hubert asked.

"We don't know, yet," Paige said. "That's why we need the list."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Agent King." Paige did her best to empathize with this man who was currently obstructing them. After all, she'd been

a psychologist before she was an agent. What did a man like Hubert want? The answer to that was obvious: he wanted to know that everything was being done properly, and that he wasn't going to get into trouble for helping them.

“Mr. Jenkins, we understand that you have protocols to follow, but time is of the essence here,” Paige continued. “We’re not asking you to break any laws, but we need your cooperation to solve this case and prevent any more deaths. The alternative is that we have to get a warrant and come down there for the information.”

Which would cause exactly the kind of fuss a man like Hubert would want to avoid.

Hubert seemed to consider that, making a thoughtful sound before he spoke again. He sighed. “All right. I’ll get you the information you need. Just give me a few minutes to pull the records.”

“Thank you, Hubert,” Christopher said. “We’ll be waiting.”

Paige and Christopher waited patiently as they both went back to looking through the list of climbing club members. Paige began to cross-reference the list with social media profiles and search for any connections to the two victims. Which members did Ellie Kane know? Did any of them know Bea Milling as well?

Christopher’s phone rang, and he picked it up immediately. “Marriott here.”

“Agent Marriott, this is Hubert Jenkins. I have the information you requested.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. Can you please tell me who has done maintenance on the water tower recently?”

“The most recent maintenance was done six months ago by a man named Jack Reynolds. But I can’t imagine that he could have been involved in anything like this. He’s been with the department for over two years now and has a spotless record.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. That’s very helpful,” Christopher said. “We may need to speak with Mr. Reynolds. Can you give me his contact details?”

“Sure, let me get that for you,” Jenkins said, and there was a rustling sound before he read out a phone number and an address.

“Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. We’ll be in touch,” Christopher said and then hung up.

“We have a name,” Christopher said, turning to Paige. “Jack Reynolds. Can you cross reference it against the list you have from the climbing club.”

“Already on it,” Paige assured him, looking down the list. It didn’t take her long to find what she was looking for. She felt a wave of excitement building inside her. “He’s here. He’s on the list.”

“I’ll look him up on the FBI system,” Christopher said. “You try checking the victims’ social media to see if he had any direct connection to Ellie Kane or Bea Milling beyond just the climbing club.”

Paige nodded and started to look through Ellie Kane’s social media. She wasn’t surprised to find that Ellie and Jack were friends, at least online. There was even a picture of the two of them at the foot of a climbing wall together.

It meant that Paige got her first look at Jack Reynolds. He was a good-looking man, tall and lean, with spiky, blond hair and a strong jawline. In the photo, he was smiling, and Ellie had her arm around his shoulder. Paige felt a pang of sadness for Ellie. Was it possible that she’d been that close to someone who might have killed her? Maybe the reason that he’d killed her was somewhere in the relationship between the two of them.

Paige continued to scroll through Ellie’s social media, then Bea’s, looking for any other connections between Jack and the victims. She didn’t find anything else, but the picture was enough to make her suspicious. She turned to Christopher, who was still typing away on his computer.

“Christopher, I’ve found something,” Paige said, interrupting his search. “Ellie and Jack were friends. There’s even a picture of them together at the climbing gym.”

“That’s a good find, Paige,” Christopher said, looking up from his laptop. “Did you find anything about Bea Milling?”

Paige shook her head. “Not yet, but I’m still looking. Have you found anything on Jack Reynolds on the FBI systems?”

Christopher nodded. “He might have a spotless record with the Department of Public Works, but he definitely doesn’t with the police. He’s been arrested a couple of times. Once for a fight in a bar, and once for an alleged assault on a girlfriend where the charges were dropped.”

“So, a violent man?” Paige said. That hint of violence made her wonder. Was it enough to suggest that he might be their guy? Taken with the fact that he’d done work on the water tower, that he was a member of a climbing club, and that he knew Ellie Kane from that climbing club, it might be.

Christopher seemed to agree. “I think it’s time we went to talk to Jack Reynolds.”

Paige nodded. This could be the killer they were looking for. If so, they needed to get to him now, before he had a chance to hurt anyone else.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Paige could feel her heart beating faster as she and Christopher drove over to Jack Reynolds's house. The two of them might be about to confront a killer in his home. One who had already murdered two women.

That wasn't the only reason for her nervousness, though. The fact that Christopher was almost silent during the drive over was concerning. He wasn't talking. Specifically, he wasn't talking about the death of his wife.

With it being so fresh, Paige might have expected him to want to talk, either about Jennifer or about the killer who had murdered her. The Exsanguination Killer was still out there somewhere, but the two of them were stuck investigating these murders instead. That had to be having some kind of effect on Christopher, didn't it? Even as an FBI agent, his urge must be to try to catch her. Now, though, it must have been almost impossible to hold back from it.

Paige found herself thinking about her father's murder again. It had been years, but the pain was still there, just beneath the surface. She knew that Christopher was feeling the same thing, and she wished she could offer him some kind of comfort. However, they were both professionals, and this was their job. They had to stay focused and do what needed to be done.

Christopher pulled up outside a small, two-story house on the outskirts of town. Paige looked it over quickly. It was a modest home with a small garden out front. Paige could see a car parked in the driveway, and she wondered if it belonged to Jack Reynolds.

Paige tried to steady her breathing, but she couldn't help feeling nervous. The moments when they were about to confront a suspect were always risky. In this case, they had no concrete evidence against Jack Reynolds, but they had enough to warrant a closer look.

“Ready?” Christopher asked, turning off the engine.

Paige nodded, taking a deep breath as she stepped out of the car. She followed Christopher up the path to the front door, her heart beating faster with each step. She resisted the urge to reach for her gun. There wasn't any threat yet. Christopher rang the doorbell, and they waited for a few seconds.

After a while, the door opened, and a woman appeared. She was in her mid-thirties, with long, blonde hair and a friendly smile. She was wearing a light blue dress and a cream cardigan.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Hi, we're looking for Jack Reynolds,” Christopher said, flashing his FBI badge, his tone friendly but professional. “Is he home?”

The woman's smile faltered, slightly. “I'm sorry. Jack's not here right now. Can I ask why you're calling by here?”

Paige noticed the woman's nervousness and wondered what that note of discomfort was about. Was it just because the FBI were at the door, or was there something more?

“Who are you?” Christopher asked.

“Sophia. His girlfriend.”

“Is everything all right?” Paige asked her. Even as she asked it, her eyes searched the woman for anything that might help her to understand what was going on. She caught sight of some bruises on her forearms, swiftly covered up by the woman as she saw Paige looking at them. Paige thought that she had her answer then.

“Everything's fine. What do you want Jack for?” She said that just a little too quickly to be believable.

“We need to talk to him in connection with a case,” Paige said. She didn't want to give away more details than that. “Can you tell us where he is, please?”

“Where he always is,” the woman said, with a note of bitterness. “He's gone climbing.”

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Paige wondered more about Jack Reynolds as she and Christopher drove towards the climbing gym, trying to fit a new piece of information into the mental picture she had of him.

“You saw the bruises on Sophia’s arms back there?” Paige asked Christopher.

“Yeah, I did,” Christopher replied, his eyes still focused on the road. “You’re thinking they might be Reynolds’s work? He was already arrested once for violence towards one of his girlfriends.”

“Suggesting a man with no problem being violent towards women.” The more Paige thought about Reynolds, the more she believed that he might be the killer.

“But we can’t jump to conclusions,” Christopher said. “We need more evidence.”

Paige nodded, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. They were getting closer to Jack Reynolds, and she was starting to feel a sense of foreboding about what might happen when they caught up to him.

Maybe a part of the sense of something being wrong had something to do with the sense of awkwardness in the car, though. Christopher was still barely talking to her. Paige knew he’d told her that he needed to focus on the case to be able to handle things, but could he? Was this silence really a good thing when it came to the case. Normally, they spent their time talking about cases, about just about anything, but now ... it was almost like Paige was working the case alone, with Christopher there but not fully there.

Paige couldn’t help feeling a note of guilt for her part in all of this. If she hadn’t gone to see Adam Riker, looking for answers, then Christopher’s wife might still be alive. But then again, if she hadn’t, they might never have gotten the information that was allowing Sauer to pursue the case while Paige and Christopher were here. It was a double-edged sword, and Paige was still trying to come to terms with it. She

knew that dwelling on what ifs wouldn't get them anywhere. They had a job to do, and they needed to do it well.

"Do you think that Adam Riker really knows who the Exsanguination Killer is?" Christopher asked as they drove. Paige realized that his thoughts must have been going to a lot of the same places as hers.

"I ... think so," Paige said. She knew that she had to be careful what she said right then. Christopher's emotions on this would still be raw. "He let slip what he knew accidentally. And the fact that the Exsanguination Killer targeted Jennifer so soon after my visit suggests that Adam pointed her out as a target. Yes, I think he knows exactly who she is. I think he enjoys knowing that I want to know, and that I can't pay his price."

Paige couldn't kill someone, not even to find out who had killed her father. She wouldn't prove Adam right about who she was. She wouldn't be the murderer that he'd wanted her to be from the start of all of this.

"A part of me can't stand that," Christopher said, the anger in his voice obvious. "A part of me wants to go back to DC even now and just beat the answers out of him. I don't care that I'm an FBI agent. I don't care that it's wrong."

Paige put a restraining hand on his arm. "You know you can't. And you know that it wouldn't work. Adam would only give us information that he wanted us to have. He'd weave it all into one grand trap, making us run around where he wanted us to run, laughing while we did it."

Paige could feel the connection of her hand against Christopher's arm, and she hoped that it was somehow comforting. They were both struggling with their own demons, and they needed to hold onto something to keep them grounded.

Yet it was more than that. There was instant attraction the moment her skin brushed his. The same attraction that Paige had confessed to Christopher before. The same attraction that had made it increasingly difficult to work together, to the point where Paige had requested a transfer before this case. If it hadn't been for the death of Christopher's wife, Paige might

have been working in another department by now, a long way away from him. The touch was a reminder of just how close they were instead.

“We’re here, not in DC,” Paige said. “There’s a killer here we need to catch. Ellie Kane and Bea Milling deserve justice, and that means us giving *this* our attention, not Adam Riker.”

“You’re right,” he said, taking a deep breath. “We need to keep our heads clear and focused. We’re getting close to something here; I can feel it. There has to be something in the climbing connection.”

Paige nodded in agreement, trying to bring her focus back to the murders they’d been sent to investigate. “Do you think it’s possible that Jack Reynolds is the killer in this case?”

“It’s too early to say for sure,” Christopher said. “But there’s enough to make him a good suspect. He definitely has a history of violence, he knows the water tower, and he knows Ellie Kane from the climbing club. We need to talk to him and see what he has to say.”

The climbing gym came into view, and Paige could see a group of people clustered around the entrance. Most of them were dressed in brightly colored climbing gear, and she could see the ropes and harnesses that they were wearing. Paige wondered if any of the rope there would be a match for the fibers that she’d found at the water tower? Probably too much of it for it to tell them who the killer was, but at least it gave her the sense that they were in the right place.

The climbing gym was a large, industrial building among a cluster of other, similar buildings, with a bright sign out front advertising its name. Paige could hear the sound of music and people laughing as they got closer. She wondered how many of them were aware of the brutal murders that had happened in their town. Some of them had to be, surely, when one of the climbing club’s members was one of the victims. Yet that didn’t seem to do anything to stop them from enjoying themselves.

It was so strange sometimes that normal life could simply keep going in spite of the horrors that occurred near people. Or maybe that was just the way people worked, trying to keep

things as normal as possible as a way of coping with everything that was happening.

They pulled up in front of the gym and headed inside. As they entered the gym, Paige saw a series of large climbing walls with people clustered around them. There were mats on the floor and ropes hanging down from the ceiling. It looked like the people there were having a lot of fun, but Paige was more serious. They were there on business. They were there to find a suspect and question him.

There was a reception desk at the front of the gym, made from what had been constructed to look like one huge, shaped slab of rock. Paige approached it while Christopher hung back, surveying the area, obviously keeping a lookout for Jack Reynolds.

Paige could see a young woman, probably in her early twenties, sitting behind the desk. She had short, dark, curly hair, and she was typing something into a computer. The woman behind the desk looked up as Paige approached.

“Hi, can I help you?” the woman asked, smiling.

“We’re looking for Jack Reynolds,” Paige said, showing her FBI badge.

The woman thought for a moment or two before nodding. “Yeah, he’s here. He’s on the wall over there right now. Do you want me to call him down for you?”

“No, we’ll go to him and wait until he’s done,” Paige said. If they called for him, that gave him too much time to get down off the wall and get away if he was the killer. It was better to wait at the bottom of the wall he was using, where he wouldn’t be able to get away. She turned to Christopher. “Let’s go.”

They made their way over to the climbing wall the receptionist had indicated, where a group of people were watching as a man made his way up to the top of what looked like a particularly difficult wall to climb. Paige spotted Jack Reynolds immediately, currently making his way around an overhang as easily as if he were out for a stroll. He was tall

and lean, with a shock of blond hair held in place by a sweatband and a focused expression on his face as he climbed.

“Now, do we call him, or do we wait for him to finish?” Paige asked.

Since she and Christopher were at the base of the wall, covering his escape routes, she couldn't see how Reynolds could get away. It might be easiest just to wait and would make the questions they had to ask him seem a little less hostile. On the other hand, they had to push forward with this case. If Reynolds didn't turn out to be the killer, could they really waste time here waiting?

“I don't want to wait,” Christopher said. “Jack Reynolds! This is the FBI! Come down! We need to speak with you!”

It should have been enough to get Reynolds to climb back to them, or at least stop and talk. Instead, Paige saw the panicked expression on his face, followed by a flash of determination.

Paige saw Jack Reynolds start to climb faster. He swung up along the climbing wall with the speed and ease of a monkey, heading for the rafters ... and a window that would let him out into the outside world.

Paige's heart raced as she watched Jack Reynolds climb with a newfound sense of urgency. She knew that they had to act fast if they were going to catch him. If they hesitated any longer, they were going to lose him.

Paige and Christopher exchanged glances, both realizing what was happening. Reynolds was making a run for it.

Without hesitation, Paige took off after him. There was no other choice. She could hear Christopher below, but she didn't dare look back. Her heart was racing as she chased Reynolds up the wall, climbing as quickly as she could, her fingers reaching out to grab at his ankles.

Reynolds was quick, but Paige was determined. She pulled herself up the wall, her muscles straining with the effort. It helped that she didn't have to stick to particular hand and footholds, the way the climbers did when making their way along a route, but even so, it was hard work. She was almost

there, her fingers brushing against Reynolds's leg, when he made a sudden move, kicking her hand away.

Paige lost her grip and fell, her body slamming into the mats below. She felt a sharp pain in her chest, and for a moment, she couldn't breathe. She gasped for air, clutching at her ribs as she tried to stand up.

Christopher was already at her side, helping her to her feet. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice tight with emotion.

Paige was on her feet again then. She could see Reynolds clambering out of the window he'd been trying to get to, and she ran over to the receptionist.

"I need another way onto that roof, right now."



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Paige ran up the stairs leading to the roof, taking them two at a time. She knew that there was no time to lose if she was going to catch up to Jack Reynolds. Not when he already had a head start. Christopher was a little behind her, also moving quickly.

There was a door at the top of the stairs, leading out onto the roof. Paige approached it without slowing down.

Paige pushed the door open and stepped out into the bright sunlight, reflecting from the glass of multiple windows to allow light through into the climbing gym. She could see Jack Reynolds up ahead, running along the rooftop towards the far edge, still with plenty of ground to cover over ducts and old chimneys. She sprinted after him, her heart hammering in her chest.

Reynolds vaulted over a duct smoothly, with all the grace of a parkour expert, barely breaking his stride to do it. Paige watched him in awe for a brief moment, admiring the way he moved. But then she remembered why he might be fleeing, and her sense of purpose returned. Why would he run if he wasn't the murderer?

She pushed herself harder and followed suit, leaping over the duct as she continued after him. Her movement wasn't as smooth as his, but it didn't slow her down. Behind her, she heard the sound of Christopher clearing the same duct with a clatter, his heavier frame making it impossible to do it quietly.

Ahead of her, Reynolds was moving faster than ever, desperation seeming to lend him speed. He was almost at the edge of the roof now, and Paige could see him looking down at what lay beyond.

"Stop, Jack!" she called out, hoping to make him pause if only for a moment or two.

But he didn't slow down. Instead, he turned around and looked at her with a wild expression on his face. "You'll never

catch me!” he shouted before leaping off the roof and disappearing from sight.

Paige gasped in sudden horror, unable to believe what had just happened as she ran to the edge of the roof. Had Reynolds really just thrown himself off the roof rather than be caught? She looked over the edge, fully expecting to see Reynolds lying on the ground, dead. Instead, she saw him already running across an adjacent, lower, roof.

Paige knew what she had to do if she wanted to catch him, but the thought of it was still enough to make her hesitate. It was a long way down, and if she got this wrong, there was no way that Paige was going to survive. Paige took a couple of steps back from the edge, preparing to make the same leap that Reynolds had.

“Paige, wait!” Christopher called out.

Paige took a couple of steps and then threw herself forward, out into space. For a moment, Paige felt as though she was flying through the air. The wind rushed past her, whipping her hair across her face. She worried in that moment that she might have misjudged it, that she might plummet to the ground below.

Then she hit the roof of the building on the far side, her legs buckling beneath her. Paige rolled to take some of the impact, coming up onto her feet again. She briefly glanced back and saw Christopher approach the edge of the roof as she had, then fling himself across the way Paige had.

He was stronger than Paige was, but also more heavily built, so he didn't leap across the space between the buildings as gracefully as Paige had. He fell short, hands grabbing for the edge of the building, and Paige's heart was in her mouth as she grabbed his wrist, hauling with all her strength to try to make sure that he didn't fall.

Christopher's weight was too much for Paige to bear, and she almost lost her grip, but adrenaline gave her strength. She held on, determined not to let him fall. Christopher's fingers scrabbled wildly at the rough surface of the roof, finding no purchase at first.

Then she saw him get a firmer grip, one foot hooking up onto the lip of the roof, ready to haul himself over. Paige dug her feet into the surface of the roof and yanked with all her strength, hauling Christopher up and over the edge of the building. He landed on the roof with a grunt, rolling over onto his back.

“Are you ok?” Paige asked. He could have been hurt or killed, trying to follow her like that.

“I’m fine, thanks, Paige,” he gasped, his chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath. “Now go! Don’t lose him!”

Paige hated the thought of leaving before she knew for sure that Christopher hadn’t been hurt, but she was an FBI agent, and her suspect was getting away. Already, Paige could see Reynolds running along the slope of a brick-built outbuilding, doing a front flip off the end as if this were all some kind of performance rather than a desperate attempt to flee.

Paige set off, renewing her pursuit. She was quickly gaining on Reynolds, her anger fueling her determination. How dare he put her and Christopher’s lives in danger like this? She was going to catch him and make sure he paid for what he had done.

Reynolds reached the edge of this roof, and there were a couple of metal bars bolted into place between it and the next rooftop. Reynolds crossed them quickly and with agility, feet splayed out to the side like he was walking a tightrope. He’d clearly done it many times before.

Paige realized as he did so that someone had put all of this in place to allow access between the various rooftops. Had it been Reynolds, looking for a quick escape? No, Paige didn’t believe that, but she *did* believe that if there were a group of parkour practitioners from the climbing club, they might have crafted a course that let them travel from roof to roof around the industrial district of the town. Maybe the businesses below let them do it, or maybe they simply didn’t know.

It meant that Reynolds would know his way over the rooftops well. Paige followed, trying not to look down as she made her way over the pipe. She could feel it wobbling

beneath her in spite of being fixed in place. It felt like an eternity before her feet found solid ground again.

She followed after Reynolds, and now, she could see that the climbers had fixed a kind of metal framework atop this next roof. Reynolds was already clambering through it with rapid agility, taking twists and turns so that Paige was forced to follow through the structure in a crouched position.

Paige was quickly realizing that Reynolds was not just a simple suspect but a skilled athlete, with a talent for moving quickly and gracefully through any terrain. She was impressed but also angry that he had put them in danger like this. She wasn't going to give up. She would follow him wherever he went now. Just the fact that he had run made her almost certain that he was the killer, and Paige was determined to bring him down.

Finally, they both reached the end of the metal framework, and Reynolds leaped down onto another roof, landing in a crouch. Paige followed suit, feeling the impact in her knees as she landed.

But Reynolds was already on the move again, darting between air conditioning units and solar panels to avoid being caught. Paige ran after him, only catching glimpses of him as he moved ahead now. He was clearly trying to break line of sight so that he could take off at a new angle, confusing her.

Paige could feel her arms straining as her heart pounded in her chest with the effort of the chase. She was determined to catch him, but she knew she was getting exhausted. Reynolds seemed to have endless stamina, moving through the structure with ease as if he had done this a million times before. Paige, on the other hand, was struggling to keep up.

The only good news for her was that Reynolds was running out of places to go. The course the climbers had set up between the buildings was starting to curve back around towards the climbing gym, and if they went back there, Paige was confident that she would be able to catch up to Reynolds before he got out through the building. There were too many people there for him to move this quickly.

He seemed to have realized the same thing, though. She could hear Reynolds's footsteps pounding on the roof, his breathing coming a little harder now from the exertion. Maybe Paige had overestimated him before when she'd thought he had endless stamina, but it would be hard to take advantage of that. She was still a long way behind him.

Paige took a deep breath and pushed herself harder, her muscles screaming with the effort. She could see Reynolds ahead of her, his form growing smaller as he ran towards a spot on the side of the building where fire escapes zig-zagged down its side.

Paige realized that Reynolds was trying to escape down the fire escape, so she had to get there before him. She gritted her teeth and pushed herself to the limit, her legs pumping furiously as she closed the distance between them.

Reynolds was there, though, running down the fire escape. Paige had to follow in his wake, her feet barely touching the stairs as she hurried after him. Surely, she would be able to catch up to him.

But as she descended the fire escape, Reynolds seemed to gain even more speed. He was moving so quickly that it was as if he was flying down the metal stairs.

Paige's breath was coming in quick gasps as she tried to keep up with him. She could see the ground coming closer and closer, and she knew that she had to catch him before they reached it.

But Reynolds was still one step ahead of her. As she reached the bottom of the fire escape, she saw him darting across the street, narrowly avoiding a car that was speeding towards him. Paige could hear the car screech to a halt, and she quickly ran across the street herself, trying to catch up to Reynolds.

He had already disappeared into a nearby alleyway, and Paige had to follow, slowing now, her hand on her gun as she prepared for anything. The alleyway was dark, and Paige could see that it was littered with trash and debris. She moved forward slowly, her eyes darting around, looking for any sign of Reynolds.

That was when he leapt out at her from behind a dumpster, a fist swinging for her skull with his full weight behind the attack. Paige barely dodged the blow, but he still crashed into her, and Paige knew that if she gave him a chance, he would start running again.

Paige grabbed for him then, clinging onto him for dear life, bearing him to the ground. Reynolds was strong, with all the power and athleticism that it took to clamber up rock faces. He was on top then, holding Paige down as a fist came back to punch her.

Then Christopher was there. Had he followed them through the rooftop course, or had he descended to ground level and kept pace with them there? It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he slammed into Reynolds, knocking him off Paige, taking away the threat in a tackle that took both him and Reynolds to the ground.

For a moment, they just lay there, Reynolds obviously stunned, Christopher clearly recovering from the effort it had taken to get there in time. Then Paige rolled over and handcuffed Reynolds, locking his wrists together behind his back.

"You're under arrest," she said, her voice shaking with exhaustion and adrenaline.

They dragged him back to his feet. The sooner they got him back to the police department to question him, the better.

## CHAPTER NINE

They took Jack Reynolds back to the Winterly PD to question him, shutting him in an interrogation room while Paige and Christopher tried to work out how they were going to approach their run at him.

“He hasn’t asked for a lawyer yet,” Christopher said. He sounded a little surprised.

Paige was too. She expected a man like Jack Reynolds to clam up and say nothing, letting his lawyer do the talking for him. Maybe he was still working up to that part.

“Maybe he figures that he’ll look more innocent if he doesn’t immediately lawyer up?” Paige guessed, although she couldn’t imagine why someone would think that when they’d already run from the FBI. Reynolds’s previous run-ins with the law must have taught him better than that.

She watched Jack Reynolds through the one-way mirror of the interrogation room. He sat at one side of a metal table, hands cuffed, waiting for them. He looked nervous, but were those the nerves of someone who knew that he was guilty and was about to be found out, or just the nerves that anyone might feel when they’d been brought in by the FBI to be interrogated?

In an attempt to work that out, Paige tried to read his body language as he sat there.

She could tell that he was tense, his muscles coiled like a spring. His eyes darted around the room, never settling on anything for too long. It was as if he was trying to take everything in at once, trying to anticipate their next move. Maybe he was looking for a way out of there.

Paige glanced over at Christopher, who was frowning in concentration. “We need to approach this carefully,” he said. “We don’t want to spook him.”

Paige nodded. She knew that they had to tread carefully, at least initially. If they mishandled this interrogation, he wouldn't say anything. He'd lawyer up and, without direct physical evidence to tie him to the scene, they might not get another chance to question Reynolds.

It worried her as she looked at him that she couldn't quite put her finger on what he was thinking. There was something about him that made Paige suspicious, but she couldn't say what.

"I'll go in alone," Paige said.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Christopher replied. "If he attacks you ..."

"He's cuffed; he's no danger," Paige said. But there *was* a danger that Christopher might go in too hard with this, too quickly. So soon after the death of his wife, Paige wasn't sure that she trusted what his reactions would be. "Besides, there's a chance that he'll underestimate me alone."

"So, I'm meant to just wait out here?" Christopher said, obviously not liking the idea.

"I thought maybe you could chase up the one piece of physical evidence we do have," Paige suggested. "Push the lab. See if any of the ropes Reynolds was using are a match for the fibers that we found at the water tower."

She saw Christopher frown, obviously getting what she was doing. "Paige, you don't need to protect me."

"I'm not trying to protect you. I'm trying to make sure we approach this in the right way," Paige said firmly. "I'll handle the interrogation. You handle the evidence."

Christopher nodded slowly, still looking like he wasn't entirely convinced. But Paige knew that she was right. They needed to be careful with this, and if that meant him staying out of the interrogation room, then so be it.

If they were lucky, Reynolds would open up to Paige in a way that he wouldn't with Christopher around. If he really hated women enough to kill them, maybe she could make him show that side of himself.



Paige watched Christopher leave the room, then took a deep breath and stepped into the interrogation room. Reynolds looked up as she entered, his eyes darting to her as she sat down opposite him.

“Hi, Jack,” she said calmly. “My name is Agent Paige King. I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to you,” Reynolds said, his expression hard to read.

“Clearly. You ran over several rooftops just to avoid talking to me.” Paige tried to keep her tone light. “Why is that?”

Reynolds shifted in his seat, his eyes flicking towards the door as if he were considering making a run for it again. But then he seemed to change his mind, and he slumped back in his chair.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, his voice low and tight.

“People who don’t have anything to hide don’t run from the FBI, Jack,” Paige said. “You know that you’re in a lot of trouble already? Assaulting a federal agent? With the way you tried to jump me in the alleyway, that’s jail time straight away. But you know that, don’t you?”

Paige tried to keep her tone even, rather than threatening. She needed Reynolds to see her as the way out of his problem, rather than the source of it.

Reynolds didn’t answer, instead staring at Paige with a cold expression. Paige leaned forward slightly, her eyes locked on his.

“But I want to help you, Jack,” she said softly. “I want to understand why you did what you did. Why did you attack me? Why did you run? If you can give me a good explanation, maybe we can resolve this, and you can go.”

Reynolds looked away, his jaw clenched tight. Paige could see the muscles in his neck bulging. “I don’t have to answer any of your questions,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Paige leaned back in her chair, her eyes never leaving Reynolds's face. She could see the fear in his eyes, the panic just below the surface.

"What are you afraid of, Jack?" she asked quietly.

Reynolds looked back at her, his eyes narrowed. "I'm not afraid of anything," he said, but Paige could hear the tremble in his voice. "Especially not you."

"Then why did you run?" she asked.

Reynolds looked away again, his jaw working. Paige waited patiently, knowing that sometimes all it took was a little silence to get a suspect to crack.

"You know why. If you found me there, that means you went to my house. That bitch Sophia told you all about it, didn't she?"

Paige thought back to what she'd seen at Reynolds's house. "You mean the bruises on her arms? You thought we were there to arrest you for assaulting her?"

He looked at Paige with surprise then. "You mean that's not what this is about?"

Paige could barely keep herself from laughing.

"We're the FBI, Jack," Paige said. "Domestic assault is a matter for the local PD. We deal with some of the most serious crimes out there."

She didn't say what, not then. She let it sink in for a moment or two before she kept talking. "You did some work on a water tower outside town recently."

She saw him shrug. "It's my job," he said.

"A water tower where a woman was found killed," Paige said then. It was time to let him see how serious this was, just so that she could watch how he reacted. Was that a flicker of fear in his eyes at the accusation?

"I didn't kill anyone!" Reynolds shouted, his voice rising in anger. "I don't know anything about any murder."

Paige leaned back in her chair, letting the silence hang for a moment. "Okay, let's assume for a moment that you're telling

the truth. Tell me about Ellie Kane. You knew her?”

The change in direction seemed to catch Reynolds off guard.

“Yes, I knew her,” Reynolds admitted.

“How well did you know her?” Paige asked, playing a hunch.

“I might have asked her out for coffee a couple of times,” Reynolds admitted.

“So, there was some trouble between you? An unwanted advance?”

“That’s all it was,” Reynolds said. “Is a guy not even allowed to hit on a good-looking woman anymore?”

“It depends on what he does when he’s rejected,” Paige replied. “You see, Jack, the murder at the water tower is linked to Ellie Kane’s death. So, we know you were previously at one murder scene, a scene at which we found strands of climbing rope. We know you knew the other victim and had a potential motive to kill her. And you’ve already shown me that you’re happy using violence towards women you get involved with. If you don’t want me to think that you’re the killer, then you’re going to have to give me something. An alibi, a reason it couldn’t be you. Something.”

Something that they could check. Something that, if they caught him lying about it, would help them to be certain that he was the man they were looking for.

“Look, Ellie died last night, right? Well, I wasn’t even in Winterly. I was up the coast, doing some work a couple of towns over. And ... well ... and seeing someone. That’s what Sophia and I fought over. She found the pictures on my phone.”

Paige’s heart sank because that sounded like an alibi that would be easy to check. One that Reynolds had plenty of proof for. She got up, leaving the interrogation room. Christopher was there waiting for her.

“Did you hear that?” she asked.

He nodded. “And I’ve been checking his phone as well as chasing up the forensics. Yes ... here are the photographs. He wasn’t in Winterly when Ellie Kane was killed. Then there’s the rope. It’s climbing rope, but he uses a different brand. The fibers are a different chemical makeup.”

Either one of those pieces of information might have been enough to clear Reynolds of suspicion, but both together made it almost a certainty. Paige felt a pang of disappointment. She’d been hoping for a breakthrough, but instead, they were back to square one.

“Damn it,” she muttered, running a hand through her hair. She’d wanted it to be him. She’d wanted this to be simple.

“We can let the local PD hold him for attacking us, and maybe see if his girlfriend wants to press charges,” she said, turning to Christopher. “We’re done with him.”

As they walked away from the interrogation room, Paige couldn’t help but wonder who had killed Ellie Kane and Bea Milling. The rope fibers were an important lead, but they still had a long way to go before they caught the killer. She just hoped they could do it before they struck again.

## CHAPTER TEN

He drove, ignoring the repetitive thudding sound coming from the trunk of his car as Sarah woke up. It didn't matter now that they were on the move. She was tied and gagged, so there was no chance of her getting out or attracting enough attention to cause a problem.

Even so, he found himself watching every car and pedestrian they drove past, watching out for any sign of trouble, any sign that they had recognized that there was a woman being held captive in his trunk. He was ready to hit the gas at the first hint of a problem.

Of course, there were no such signs. He even drove past a cop car without a problem, although he still tensed as he did so, waiting for the sound of their siren, the flicker of their lights. Only once they disappeared in his rear-view mirror did he dare to breathe a sigh of relief.

Nothing could be allowed to interrupt what he was doing. It was too important for that.

He was driving through a quiet part of town now on his way out to the limits of the city, to the spot he had picked out. The streets were empty, and the only sounds were the tires against the pavement and Sarah's occasional muffled cries. He had planned this meticulously, and he knew that he wouldn't be caught. Not after all the work he had put into this. After all, he hadn't been caught with Bea Milling or Ellie Kane, had he?

As they drove farther and farther, moving away from the city, he felt a sense of relief wash over him. They were safe now, and he could finally relax a little. He loosened his grip on the steering wheel and took a deep breath, enjoying the feeling of freedom that came from knowing that he could do whatever he wanted with no one to stop him.

He let out a sigh of relief as he drove out of the city, away from the prying eyes of the people. He knew that he had covered all his tracks. The only thing that mattered now was to

get Sarah to the spot he had picked out. The place where she would die.

That place was only a little way ahead: a large field with an oversized weather balloon waiting, tethered in place. It was more than enough for the payload he intended for it.

He drove up to the edge of the field, getting as close as he could before he stopped the car in a secluded spot where it wouldn't be seen. He went around to the trunk and opened it, pulling Sarah out roughly. She stumbled as she was pulled out, and he grabbed her arm with bruising force to steady her. He wanted to make it clear that she had no chance to fight back or get away.

He pushed her towards the balloon, ignoring her attempts to break free, all but carrying her as they got closer. He could feel his own anticipation in this moment, the knife already waiting ready at his belt. Would this be as good as the others had been? He hoped so.

Slowly, he started to tie her in place, lashing her to the weather balloon. Maybe *this* time, they would see what he was doing and understand.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

They bought takeout and found a motel to stay the night at. A part of Paige didn't want to stop, but she was too tired by then to do anything else other than sleep. She and Christopher booked rooms next to one another, and Paige paused at the door to hers, while Christopher stood at his.

"Christopher, are we all right?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You've been very quiet around me, and ... I don't know, different. If that's grief, I want to be there for you, but is it something else? Are you ... angry with me?"

That had been Paige's fear almost since the start of this: that Christopher would be angry about her going to see Adam Riker, that he would blame her for Jennifer's death.

She saw Christopher wince slightly.

"No, it's not that. It's not that at all. You couldn't know how Riker would react. That ... that's not why I couldn't call."

"Then why?" Paige asked.

Christopher shook his head. "It's complicated, and I don't want to get into it now, like this. We need to get some sleep. We have a case to solve."

He went into his motel room then and, although a part of Paige wanted to follow him, she knew that she couldn't, not now. They both had to focus on the case.

It was a struggle to get to sleep. They were back to square one on this case, and she couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something crucial. They and the local PD had looked into every obvious lead and interviewed everyone they could think of, but nothing was adding up.

Jack Reynolds had been the obvious suspect, but his alibi checked out. If he wasn't the killer, then who did that leave? More to the point, where were Paige and Christopher meant to find new information?

Paige slept badly that night, still trying to think of an answer. By the time Christopher came knocking on her door the next morning, Paige thought that she had one.

“I want to go to the clock tower,” Paige said to Christopher, as he held out coffee for her. “We checked out the water tower, but when we hit on a lead there, it meant that we never took the time to look over the spot where Ellie Kane was killed.”

She saw Christopher nod his agreement. “Maybe we’ll find something there that will point us in a new direction. At the very least, it will give us a better sense of what’s going on.”

They headed out. Paige had the files from the case available on her phone and started to read through them again while Christopher drove, just in case she’d missed something the first time around.

“What are you looking for?” Christopher asked, without taking his eyes from the road.

“I don’t know. *Something*. Anything that stands out. Anything that might point us in the right direction.” The hard part was that Paige didn’t know what that would look like, so she had to pore over every detail, reading through the crime scene reports, staring at the pictures there, hoping that something would jump out at her and spark a new train of thought.

“I still don’t know what to make of the letters the killer drew on the victims with their blood,” Paige said. That was probably the strangest component of all of this, even stranger than the way the killer had displayed his victims so high up after he’d killed them. “The Greek letters *alpha* and *beta*. What does he mean by doing that?”

Christopher pulled the car to a halt in front of the administrative building that held the clock tower. “It’s obviously meant to be some kind of clue or message, presumably aimed at us. Maybe it’s just a sick game to the killer. Or maybe it’s like you said before. Maybe he’s just working his way through the alphabet.”

Could it be as simple as that? Would there be women marked with the letters *gamma* and *delta*, all the way up to



*omega*? Was the killer planning that many murders if they didn't find a way to stop him? The thought of that only added to the pressure Paige felt to solve this case.

Something about the letters continued to tug at the edges of Paige's mind, though, something that wouldn't let her let go of the thought of them. She realized with a start that this couldn't just be alphabetical, for one simple reason.

"They're in the wrong order," Paige said.

She saw Christopher frown at that. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Bea Milling was the first victim, but she was labeled with the letter *beta*," Paige explained. "Ellie Kane was second, but she was labeled with *alpha*. They're out of order if he's working his way through the alphabet. It must be something else."

"But we have no way of knowing *what* else right now," Christopher pointed out. He looked over at the clock tower. "We need to focus on what's in front of us. Maybe that will help us."

They were parked in front of the town's administration building, with its grand clock tower that stretched up in almost gothic splendor, with spikes and jutting gargoyles that seemed out of place against the backdrop of the coastal town.

They got out of the car, looking up at the towering structure above them. Paige took a deep breath, feeling a sense of unease wash over her. The Greek letters still wouldn't leave the back of her mind. She had a feeling that they were getting closer to the truth, but she didn't know if she was ready for what they might find.

They headed into the clock tower through a door marked off with police tape. Ellie Kane had been killed at the top, and that meant a long climb.

They made their way up the winding staircase, the sound of their footsteps echoing off the walls. When they reached the top, Christopher went to the edge of the platform, scanning the area while Paige went to look at the spot where Ellie Kane had been killed.

From there, she looked out over the city. As with the water tower, the view was stunning, but all Paige could focus on was the empty spot where Ellie Kane had once been. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something crucial here. Why put the victims so high up? Why do *any* of this in this specific way when it must have taken the killer so much time and effort to do it all?

Paige tried to focus on the physical scene around her. It didn't take long for her to spot something that made her heart race. There was a small piece of rope on the edge of one of the stones caught on a rusted nail.

"Christopher, come over here," she called out.

He made his way over, taking in the sight. "That's interesting. It looks like the same kind of rope we found at the other murder scene,"

He pulled out an evidence bag to collect it.

"It looks like it's been cut, rather than untied. Let's get this to forensics and see what they can find out. Maybe this will lead us to the killer."

"If it's the same type as the previous rope, I'm not sure if it gives us much more," Paige said.

"It's something, though," Christopher insisted.

It was, but was it enough? It didn't lead them anywhere new. They continued to search the area but found nothing else that stood out. The clock tower was empty.

Paige was starting to feel as though merely following the physical evidence wouldn't be enough to get them to the killer in this case. After all, in their previous cases, it had always been when she'd started to work out the intentions of the killer and their pattern that they'd managed to get ahead of the killers and stop them. That was what she'd trained for. That was what she was good at.

"I want to try to get inside the mind of the killer a little," Paige said.

"Up here?" Christopher said, gesturing around them.

Paige nodded. “We have to start somewhere, and this is the place where he chose to kill. It has to mean something to him.”

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, and tried to imagine what the killer might be thinking. What was their motive? What did they want to achieve?

She saw flashes of images, the pictures of the victims, the Greek letters drawn on their bodies, the way they were displayed. It was like the killer was trying to create something, to tell a story through the murders he was committing. Or ... trying to complete a deliberate sequence.

“I think the killer wants to create something,” Paige said out loud. “Something that they can’t create on their own. They’re using their victims as a canvas, trying to tell a story. But what’s the story they’re trying to tell?”

Christopher frowned. “That’s a bit abstract, isn’t it?”

“I know, but it’s something. We have to keep an open mind about this. We need to start thinking like the killer if we’re going to catch him. We need to find the right questions to ask.”

“Such as?” Christopher sounded a little doubtful.

“Such as why does he kill his victims in these places?” Paige asked. “Why is it special to him to kill them so high up?”

Christopher rubbed his chin. “Maybe there’s a personal connection to these locations.”

“Maybe,” Paige said. It was her turn to sound doubtful. “But if there were someone with such a strong connection to the water tower and this clock tower, I feel as though we would have heard about them by now. It seems more like the height is the point of all of this.”

“Why?” Christopher asked.

“I’m not sure,” Paige admitted. “But the more I think about it, the more I’m certain that the height is important to the killer. Maybe it’s a power thing. Maybe it’s about feeling like they’re above everyone else. Or maybe it’s something else entirely.”

Christopher nodded thoughtfully. “It’s a possibility. Maybe there’s something about the height that’ll give us a clue.”

Paige looked back out at the view from the clock tower. She didn’t see anything that would give them that clue, but she knew they had to keep searching. They couldn’t let this killer get away with any more murders.

“Maybe this is just about being able to display his victims to the largest number of people,” Christopher suggested.

That didn’t quite work. “If he wanted to display Bea Milling to the maximum number of people, he would have picked somewhere other than an out of the way water tower.”

“So, maybe it’s not that,” Christopher said. “Maybe it’s a place where they can be in control. They can see everything, and no one can see them.”

That made a little more sense, but Paige got the feeling that it didn’t explain everything the killer was doing, either. If he just wanted to feel safe, then he could have killed his victims anywhere out of the way. Why on top of high places, and why leave the Greek letters? It was the combination of the two that made all of this so strange, but Paige didn’t know yet what that combination meant to the killer. There was only so far into his mindset that she could think herself without more evidence.

“We should head back down and see what else we can find,” Paige said.

Paige was starting to get the feeling that they’d gotten everything they could up here. As they made their way back down the stairs, Paige’s mind was racing. She couldn’t shake the feeling that they were missing a crucial piece of the puzzle. But what was it?

They went back to the car, where Paige started to go through the files once more, trying to look at them in the light of the additional context of having been up the clock tower. The local police department had been thorough, interviewing everyone connected with the case, from the people who had found Ellie Kane’s body to her and Bea Milling’s family. They’d even talked to one of Bea’s old boyfriends, who seemed to have stayed in touch with her. They’d quickly

discounted him as a suspect, not least because he had an alibi, but Paige found herself going through his statement in detail anyway, hoping that she could find something that would let her pick that alibi apart.

What she found instead was a single, casual comment, but one that was enough to make her gasp as she saw it.

“What is it?” Christopher asked as he drove.

“Bea Milling’s ex-boyfriend says that she was afraid of heights.”

“How afraid?” Christopher asked. “And would the killer have known that?”

Paige could only shrug her shoulders at that. The answers simply weren’t there in the file, but maybe there was a way to find out more.

“I think we need to go talk to Bea Milling’s boyfriend,” Paige said.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Paige found herself hoping that this would be the break they needed. They were so close to finding the killer, she had to believe that.

As they drove to the ex-boyfriend's house, Paige felt a sense of unease. She didn't know what to expect. Would he be defensive? Would he be angry? Would he be a suspect?

"Tell me about the ex-boyfriend," Christopher said to her as they drove over to the address that was on the police files for him.

"His name is Mark Stoltz," Paige said. "He's a local guy, grew up in Winterly. He and Bea dated for a few months before she broke up with him about a year ago," Paige said, going over the details she had read in the file. "He works in construction, has no criminal record. From what I can tell, he's not a suspect."

"And we're going to see him *just* because he mentioned that Bea Milling was afraid of heights."

Paige nodded. At this stage, she would follow up on any lead they could get, no matter how small.

"That's significant because both of the victims were killed at a high altitude. It could be a coincidence, but I'm not sure that I believe it in this case."

Christopher nodded in agreement, and it was only a minute or two more before they arrived at the ex-boyfriend's house. The house was an old, brownstone structure near the middle of town—quite an imposing structure.

When they knocked on the door, a tall, muscular man answered. He was in his mid-twenties, with light blond hair and blue eyes. He was good looking in a boy-next-door kind of way, with broad shoulders that obviously came from his construction work.

"Mr. Stoltz?" Paige asked.

“Yeah, that’s me,” he replied, eyeing them both suspiciously. “Are you with the cops?”

“We’re with the FBI,” Christopher said, flashing his badge.

“The FBI?” Mark said. He looked suddenly worried. “The cops already cleared me.”

He sounded as if he were afraid that they might think he was a suspect. That made Paige wonder why, but she suspected that it was just the usual kind of worry that came from having the FBI show up out of nowhere.

“We’re not here to accuse you of anything, Mr. Stoltz,” Paige said, trying to reassure him. “We just have a few more questions about Bea Milling.”

Mark hesitated but eventually stepped aside and let them in. The inside of his house was relatively clean but sparsely furnished. It seemed to be undergoing renovations, with plastic sheeting down in the hall and one wall half-painted.

“Ignore the mess,” he said. “I got this place cheap because it needed a lot of work.”

He led them to the living room, where they all took a seat.

“What do you want to know?” Mark asked, sitting down across from them.

“We’re just trying to understand what happened to Bea Milling,” Paige said.

“I don’t know anything,” Mark said. “Do you think if I knew who had done that to Bea, I would be sitting here? I’d find him, and I’d make him pay for what he’s done.”

There was a greater depth of feeling there than Paige had expected.

“Mark, tell me about your feelings for Bea.”

Mark looked surprised at the question, as if he hadn’t expected it. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, she broke up with you a year ago, but you’re still reacting like you’re in love with her,” Paige clarified.

Mark hesitated before answering. “Yeah, I loved her. I thought she was the one. But she broke up with me, and I

guess that's just the way it goes sometimes.”

Paige nodded, but she didn't believe him. She sensed that there was more to his story than simply that they broke up. She decided to press him further.

“But you stayed friends afterwards?”

“Yeah, it was just ... it was the best I was going to get, you know? I kept hoping that eventually ...”

Paige nodded, understanding. Mark had clearly still been in love with her. He'd definitely been close to her. If the local cops hadn't already cleared him, that might have made him a suspect because she might have wondered if he'd tried to reignite things and been shot down. As it was, though, it meant that he was in a good position to answer questions about Bea beyond simply the one that they'd come here to ask.

“Can you tell me a little bit about her? What was she like?”

Mark hesitated for a moment before answering. “She was amazing. Beautiful, smart, funny.”

“And can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt her?” Christopher asked. It was a standard question, but Paige doubted that it would get them much.

“No, of course not. Like I said, if I knew who had done this ...”

Then he would have reacted with violence. Maybe it was just as well that he didn't have any sense of who might have killed his ex-girlfriend.

“Do you know if she's had any more recent boyfriends?” Paige asked.

Mark shook his head. “I don't really keep tabs on her personal life anymore. We were just friends.”

Paige nodded, but she didn't believe him. It seemed unlikely that he wouldn't know if she had started dating someone else, especially if he still had feelings for her. But she didn't press him on it. She wanted to focus on the thing she'd come there to ask.

“You mentioned in your statement that she was afraid of heights.”



“That? You want to know about that?”

“It might be important,” Paige said.

Mark nodded. “Yeah, she was. She hated going up tall buildings or even just being on a ladder.”

“Do you know if there was any specific reason why?” Christopher asked.

Mark shook his head. “No. She just said it made her feel dizzy and sick. Just the thought of it would be enough to stress her out.”

It sounded like quite a powerful phobia to Paige. One that seemed significant, given the location of her death.

One question seemed crucial, given the depth of that fear.

“Did people know about her fear?” Paige asked. “Was it something that just anyone could have found out about?”

Mark shook his head. “No, not really. She didn’t like to talk about it much. Only a few people knew.”

“Who knew about it?” Paige pressed.

Mark thought for a moment. “Well, I knew, obviously. A few close friends. Her parents too. I mean, we talked about it a few times, but it wasn’t like she went around telling everyone. She was embarrassed about it, I think.”

Paige nodded, trying to think. It seemed like too much of a coincidence that both victims had been killed at a high altitude, and now they knew that Bea had a severe fear of heights. She had a hunch that this was significant.

“Okay, thank you for your time, Mr. Stoltz,” Christopher said, standing up. “We might have a few more questions for you in the future, but for now, we’ll let you get back to your evening.”

“Sure, no problem,” Mark said, standing up as well. “I hope you find whoever did this.”

Paige got up to leave. She was halfway to the door when Mark spoke again.

“Wait a minute. There’s one other group of people who might have known. Bea said something about getting some

kind of group therapy for her fear. She wanted to find a way to overcome it.”

Paige turned back to face Mark, her interest piqued. “Do you know what kind of group it was?”

Mark shook his head. “No, sorry. I don’t remember. I think the name was something like honeysuckle, honeymead, something along those lines. But I do remember her mentioning it a couple of times.”

Paige’s interest was piqued. “Do you know the name of anyone in the therapy group or where they meet?”

Mark shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. I don’t know anything else about it.”

“Thank you,” Paige said, feeling a sudden note of hope. They’d been hitting dead ends before, but maybe they had a way into this case. She and Christopher left the house, heading back towards the car.

“That fear of heights could definitely be significant,” Christopher said, unlocking the car doors. He sounded as though he thought they might have worked out what this was about, at last.

Paige nodded. “And the fact that only a few people knew about it could mean that the killer knew Bea personally.”

“Agreed,” Christopher said as they got into the car. “And this group therapy she mentioned could be a lead.”

“I think it’s potentially a better lead than any of her friends,” Paige said. “If one of those had a motive to kill Bea, then it would have come up in the initial police investigation. With a therapy group, we potentially have a whole pool of people connected to Bea explicitly through her fear of heights.”

As Christopher started to drive back in the direction of the Winterly PD, Paige started to look into any possible therapy groups that Bea Milling might have been a part of.

She started with a simple online search, but “honeysuckle therapy group” didn’t yield any results. She tried a few variations of the name, but nothing came up.

Paige was about to give up when she came across a result for the Honeydew Therapy Group. Paige started to look into it further and found that it was a support group that offered group therapy for various mental health issues, including phobias. She quickly jotted down the address and phone number, feeling a sense of excitement building within her.

Paige looked for details of the person who ran the group. After a few more minutes of scrolling through their website, she found the name of the group leader, Lauren Michaels. There was even a picture of her on the website, a middle-aged woman with kind eyes and a warm smile.

Paige wrote down her name and phone number, feeling like they were finally making some progress in the case. The Honeydew Therapy Group could be the key to unlocking what had happened to Bea Milling.

“I think we need to talk to Lauren Michaels. Maybe she’ll be able to shed some light on anyone in the group who might have wanted to hurt Bea.”

Christopher nodded, a determined look on his face. “Let’s do it. We need to find out who did this before anyone else gets hurt.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Paige tried to look into the group a little more. It was getting close to lunchtime now, but Paige didn't want to break off from this when it seemed like they had finally found a lead that might get them somewhere.

She found a social media page for the group, and on it, she found a couple of pictures with Bea Milling in them. There were also a couple of references there to someone called "El." That name caught Paige's attention instantly, making her hope. Was it possible that it was a nickname for Ellie Kane? It was a stretch, when Ellie was a member of a climbing group, but if it *was* her, then they would have found a link between the victims, one that might explain the killer's whole motivation and possibly lead them to him.

As they drove, Paige called the number listed for the Honeydew Therapy Group. A woman answered.

"Hello, Honeydew Therapy Group, can I help you?"

"My name is Agent Paige King. I'm with the FBI. I'd like to speak to Lauren Michaels, please."

It seemed better to call ahead to let Lauren know that she and Christopher were coming.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the woman said, sounding hesitant. "Lauren's not available right now."

Paige frowned. "Is she out of town or something?"

"No, but she went home. She isn't feeling very well. Perhaps you could try another time?"

Paige wished that it were that simple.

"We're looking for someone who might be able to talk to us about a therapy group that included Bea Milling," Paige said.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "That would have been Lauren's group."

"And no one else was involved in running it?"

“She was the facilitator for it.”

Then they didn't have any other options. She couldn't just leave this before she had some kind of answer, not when the killer could already be out there somewhere, selecting another victim.

“Would it be possible for us to get a home address for her?” Paige asked. “This is urgent.”

“I ... suppose so.” It was obvious that the woman on the other end of the line wasn't comfortable. She read out an address, and Paige quickly wrote it down, showing it to Christopher.

He nodded, turning the car onto a new street, heading for the address that they'd been given.

“We're going over to see her now,” Paige told the woman on the other end of the line.

“I'll give her a call to let her know that you're coming and to see if she's willing to speak with you. But no promises.”

It was the best Paige was going to get, and right then, it was enough. She and Christopher drove through the town, and Paige could see the intensity on Christopher's face as he took the twists and turns of the city.

“What is it?” she asked him.

He started slightly, as if only just realizing that Paige was looking his way.

“I was just thinking about how close we might be to finding the killer,” Christopher said. “And how dangerous it could be.”

Paige nodded. “I know. We have to keep pushing forward.”

“I just want to make sure that we get this guy before he kills someone else. Before someone's family has to learn that a loved one is dead. Can you imagine how hard this is hitting all of them?”

Paige didn't have to imagine, since she'd been the one to find her father dead all those years ago at the Exsanguination Killer's hands. She guessed that Christopher was thinking about his own pain in that moment too. It was the closest he'd come to really talking about it since they'd arrived in Winterly.

The part of Paige that had been a psychologist before she became an FBI agent wanted Christopher to speak about it, to talk it through, to avoid keeping everything locked away inside. Other parts of her overruled that. As an agent, she needed Christopher to be able to keep everything together so that they could hunt this killer. As someone who cared about him, who had feelings for him, she didn't want to hurt him like that.

The combination meant that they drove in silence for a few more minutes until they reached the address that the woman on the phone had given them. It was a modest house in a quiet neighborhood. The lights were on inside, and as they got out of the car, they could see someone moving around in there.

As they pulled up outside Lauren Michaels's address, Paige hoped that she might be able to give them answers that they wouldn't be able to get elsewhere. Maybe this would be the moment when the two of them finally got something that would lead them to the killer that they were looking for here in Winterly. How many people really knew about Bea's fear outside of this group?

Christopher got out of the car, and Paige followed suit. They walked up to the door and knocked, waiting for a response. After a few moments, the door swung open, and a woman appeared on the other side. A kind looking woman in her forties stared back at them. Because Paige had seen her picture on the website for the group therapy, she knew that this had to be Lauren Michaels.

"Can I help you?" Lauren asked, not looking surprised to see the two of them. Paige guessed that she'd gotten the promised call from the woman at the Honeydew Therapy Group as soon as Paige got off the phone with her.

"My name is Agent Paige King, and this is my partner, Agent Christopher Marriott," Paige said, pulling out her FBI badge. "We're here to ask you a few questions about the Honeydew Therapy Group. May we come in?"

Lauren hesitated for a moment, and for a second, Paige thought that she might say no, tell them to come back some other time, when she was feeling better. If she did, then it

would be an agonizing wait. Finally, she stepped aside to let them in. “Of course. Please, come in.”

Paige and Christopher followed her into a cozy living room, filled with comfortable-looking furniture and warm lighting. It was quiet except for the soft hum of a diffuser.

“Please, have a seat,” Lauren said, gesturing to a pair of armchairs across from the sofa. “What can I help you with?”

Paige took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the case on her shoulders. She knew that they didn’t have time to waste on anything other than the question they’d come to ask.

“We’re investigating the murder of Bea Milling. We believe that she may have been a member of your therapy group, and we were hoping that you could tell us more about it, and possibly any other information that you have that could help us solve this case.”

Lauren’s expression turned serious, and she leaned forward in her own armchair. “I’m terribly sorry to hear about Bea’s death. She was a wonderful woman.”

Paige nodded, encouraging her to continue in silence.

“Well, Bea had been attending our group for a few months. She was a kind and compassionate person, always willing to listen and offer support to the other members. She seemed to be making progress with her personal struggles with her phobia.”

“What about the other members?” Christopher asked. “Did they get along with Bea?”

Lauren’s face betrayed no emotion, but Paige could sense that she was hesitant to share any information. “You must understand that I can’t share any personal information about our members. They expect privacy in the sessions we conduct.”

Paige knew that Lauren was right, but she couldn’t help feeling frustrated. “We understand that, but we’re not asking for anything too personal. We just want to know if there was anyone in the group who may have had a motive to hurt Bea.”

Lauren sighed, looking down at her hands. “I don’t know of anyone in our group who would want to harm Bea. Our sessions were always focused on self-improvement and building a supportive community. The idea that anyone there could have done anything to harm her is ... well, ludicrous.”

Paige wasn’t convinced. “What exactly did you do in the sessions?”

“We focused on exposure therapy. Do you know what that is?”

Of course, Paige did. She had a doctorate in psychology, but the part of her that was a trained FBI agent knew that Lauren wanted the excuse to talk. Paige stayed silent, letting the other woman explain it.

“We help people to confront their fears, little by little,” Lauren said. “The group I lead ... I’m not a medical professional, just a group leader, they all have very similar fears regarding heights.”

“So, that’s a common enough phobia for a whole group to tackle it together?” Christopher asked.

Lauren nodded. “Yes, exactly. We found that it can be helpful to have a support system when it comes to facing our fears. And for some, it can be easier to do it in a group setting.”

“And when you say that they confront their fears ...” Paige prompted.

“We go to high places together. With the right encouragement, our group members can grow accustomed to something they would otherwise find terrifying. A couple of them have even taken up climbing, would you believe?”

Like Ellie Kane, possibly. Or like the killer.

Paige leaned forward. “Did anyone in the group ever express anger or frustration towards Bea? Or perhaps jealousy of her progress in therapy?”

Lauren shook her head. “No, not that I’m aware of. Everyone was very supportive of each other.”



There was a slight hesitation in her voice, though. That was enough to make Paige follow up. If there was information that she and Christopher needed to have, Paige was going to get it.

“What is it you’re not saying, Ms. Michaels?”

That got another moment of hesitation. “Well ... there was one member, now a former member. We had to ask him to leave the group. He was ... we found out that he was secretly recording the conversations people had as we went up into higher places. It was like he got off on hearing how frightened they were.”

That caught Paige’s attention instantly.

“Did this person have any issues with Bea specifically?” she asked.

Lauren hesitated again, but this time, there was a clear look of concern on her face. “I can’t say for sure, but he did seem to have a particular interest in her progress. He would ask her a lot of questions, and it made her uncomfortable. When we found out about the recordings, we had to ask him to leave the group immediately.”

“What was his name?” Christopher asked.

“I’m really not sure if I—”

Paige cut her off before she could finish her objection. “As you say, you’re not a medical professional. This is a support group, not a psychiatry session. You’re not bound by patient confidentiality. We’re asking for the name of one person who has left the group, who is no longer a part of it, and who already broke its rules. Someone who might be a killer. Someone who might have killed one of the people you worked with.”

That was enough to stop Lauren Michaels short. “A killer? You really think that?”

“I think it’s more than possible,” Paige said.

That seemed to be enough to get through to Lauren. She blinked a couple of times, then said, “Linus Brink. His name is Linus Brink.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Paige looked up Linus Brink in the car, trying to get a sense of who this man was who had been thrown out of the group therapy sessions for secretly recording the others. This man who seemed to enjoy their fear.

“You want to go see Brink now?” Christopher asked.

Paige nodded. She wanted to make as much progress on this as possible today. She wanted to find answers before there was a chance for the killer to strike again.

“Unless you think we should head back to Winterly PD first?”

Christopher shook his head, looking just as determined as Paige felt.

“No, let’s go straight away. The faster we can get this done, the better. And ... it’s better to keep busy.”

Paige could understand that need to keep busy. That need to think about anything other than the pain that threatened to rise up inside. Paige had the same need a lot of the time. She forced herself to focus on the case and their attempts to make progress on it, turning her attention back to Linus Brink.

“There’s a Linus Brink who lives near here,” she said, reading from the screen as she looked into him. “It looks like he’s a ranger who works in the forests near here. The address I can find for him is for a ranger’s station about ten miles outside of the town.”

“Give me the address, and I’ll get us there,” Christopher said. He sounded even more eager than Paige was to keep going, in spite of how hard they’d already been pushing today. He was obviously determined to finish this case and get back to DC.

Paige handed over the address and continued to look into Linus Brink while Christopher drove, the streets of the town flashing by around them. Above, dark clouds were starting to

gather; it seemed as though Winterly was in for a storm at some point today. A big one.

There wasn't much about Linus Brink online, but she managed to find a few different social media accounts under his name. They were all private, but she could see a few pictures that he had posted. He was a tall man with dark hair and piercing blue eyes. Something about him seemed off, unsettling even.

As she dug deeper into Linus Brink's background, Paige found herself growing more and more concerned. He had a criminal record, including several charges for stalking and a restraining order filed against him by an ex-girlfriend. It seemed that he had a pattern of becoming fixated on women, following them, and frightening them. Paige found the file on the restraining order, reading through it.

"Brink's ex-girlfriend took out a restraining order against him," Paige said to Christopher. "It says here that he was controlling, that he seemed to like making her afraid, that he was violent."

Christopher's jaw tightened. "That's not good. But it might be consistent with the kind of guy we're looking for."

Paige nodded, scrolling through more of the file. "And it looks like it wasn't just his ex-girlfriend. There are reports from a few different women who say that he followed them, harassed them. None of the cases were strong enough to press charges, but it's clear that he has a history of being a danger to women."

*"Definitely not good."*

"No, it's not. If we add in the fact that he was thrown out of the therapy group for secretly recording their conversations while they were doing exposure therapy, he's starting to look like a good suspect."

Christopher's grip on the steering wheel tightened, his expression tight. "It sounds like he could be our guy."

Paige nodded. "I think so, too, but we can't jump to conclusions. We need to talk to him first. We need evidence. We need to see if we can get him to slip up."

They fell into a tense silence as they drove to the ranger's station. The storm clouds above covered the sky completely now, rendering the world around them grey. Paige tried to push aside the unease that was starting to creep over her. They were trained FBI agents; they could handle themselves. But something about Linus Brink, the way he had been thrown out of the group therapy sessions, the way he had fixated on Bea ... it all added up to a dangerous and concerning combination.

They were approaching the forest now, trees close on either side of the road so that they almost seemed to shut out the world beyond. It was like they were driving into somewhere that had nothing to do with Winterly, or with civilization.

The ranger's station was a small building on the edge of the forest, surrounded by trees on all sides so that it was practically invisible until they were almost on top of it. Christopher pulled up in front of it, and they both got out, approaching the building cautiously. Paige could feel her heart pounding in her chest as they knocked on the door.

They waited for a few moments, but there was no answer. Christopher knocked again, louder this time and more determined.

"Linus Brink! This is the FBI!"

Still, there was no response from inside.

Paige checked the address again. This was definitely where Linus Brink was supposed to be living.

"Maybe he's out on patrol?" she suggested. After all, he was the ranger here. It was his job to make sure that nothing went wrong in the forest.

Christopher frowned. "It's possible. But I don't like leaving this open-ended. We should take a look around, see if we can find him."

They started to walk around the station, looking for any signs of Linus Brink. It was quiet, and the sounds of the forest around them only made it eerier.

"There's no sign of him," Christopher said.

Paige could only agree with that. Had they come all that way for nothing? No, Paige wasn't prepared to leave without finding the man who seemed like their best suspect so far.

She started to look around for any sign of where he might have gone. She happened to glance out of one of the windows of the ranger's station, and in the forest, she saw a flicker of something moving, something orange.

"There's someone out there," Paige said.

Christopher looked across, following the line of her gaze. "Maybe it's him."

There were other possible explanations, of course, but few that made sense.

"It could be someone else," Paige said, but she didn't believe it. "Let's go check it out."

They moved carefully, not wanting to give away their position, they had to move quickly, and that presumably meant that whoever was out there would see them coming. The flash of orange was moving steadily deeper into the forest, and they followed it, moving along one of the trails as quickly as they dared in the gloom caused by the storm clouds.

The flicker of movement came and went, sometimes bright, sometimes not there at all, flickering and almost ghostly. Paige tried to fix its location in her mind each time she saw it, but it seemed to be in a slightly different spot every time.

There was a fork in the path ahead, and the movement ahead disappeared once more, giving no clue as to Linus Brink's location. Paige and Christopher exchanged a look, silently agreeing to split up and take each trail. Paige jogged down the left fork, her hand on her gun just in case.

The path was made dark by the trees pressing in on both sides, the thick trees blocking out most of the moonlight from above. Paige could feel thin beads of sweat running down her skin as she walked, her senses on high alert. She wasn't sure what she was expecting to find, but she knew that it wouldn't be good.

The flicker of movement appeared again ahead of her, and Paige quickened her pace. She was getting closer to whoever

was there, and she could hear the sound of footsteps now, a breaking twig alerting her to someone's presence in the woods ahead.

"Linus Brink?" Christopher called out, somewhere to Paige's right. "This is the FBI. We just want to talk to you. Come out where we can see you."

There was no response, but the flash of orange ahead of Paige flickered and moved again. Paige could feel worry starting to rise inside her. Worry that she was out there alone, split away from her partner, with a potentially dangerous man somewhere in the dense, half-dark forest, obviously avoiding her and Christopher.

Suddenly, Paige heard a rustling sound coming from behind her. She spun around, her hand on her gun, but she couldn't see anything. Her heart was pounding in her chest as she stood there in the trees, listening intently for any sound that might indicate where the person was.

"Christopher?" she called out, hoping that he was still nearby. But there was no answer.

Paige took a deep breath and started to walk slowly forward, carefully scanning the area around her. She was almost at the spot where she had seen the movement before, and she could feel her nerves starting to fray.

Then she heard it again, the sound of someone moving through the forest behind her. Paige spun around, her gun drawn now, and aimed it at the spot she thought the sound had come from, ready for any threat that presented itself.

A flicker of movement came away to her left, there and gone again in a second. Paige approached the source of the movement, trying to make out any shapes in the darkness. Her instincts told her to be careful, to proceed with caution, but she couldn't ignore the need for urgency, the need to find the source of the movement before it was gone again.

More sounds came from her right, and Paige realized what was happening: Linus Brink, who seemed to enjoy the fear of others so much, was trying to make her afraid. He was playing a game of cat and mouse with her in the forest, using her own

blundering movements to keep track of which way Paige was looking and staying out of sight.

There was only one thing for it: Paige stood very still, allowing the gloom of the forest to surround her. It was disorienting to be surrounded by the trees, not knowing where Brink was, but Paige knew it was the best way to throw off Brink's game. She moved quietly, her senses heightened, trying to listen for any sounds that would give him away.

She heard it then, a sound that was too close for comfort: the sound of someone breathing. Paige spun around, gun raised, and aimed at the sound. But she couldn't see anything, and the breathing had stopped.

Paige took a step forward, her gun still aimed out in front of her. "Linus Brink," she called out, her voice firm. "We just want to talk to you."

There was no response, and for a moment, Paige thought that maybe he had disappeared into the forest once more. But then she heard it again, the sound of someone breathing. This time, it was coming from her left.

She turned, gun raised, and stepped forward again. The breathing was getting louder now, and Paige could feel her pulse pounding in her ears. She was getting closer, she knew it.

And then, out of nowhere, a figure moved out of the trees ahead, moving across Paige's field of vision. Paige didn't hesitate as she saw him. She grabbed for him, tripping him, and the two of them tumbled in the dirt of the forest.

"Hey! Get off me!" he yelled, starting to struggle.

Paige didn't let him go, though. She had the advantage now, and she wasn't about to give it up. She wrestled with the figure beneath her, snapping handcuffs on his wrists to restrain him. She stood up and turned her flashlight on him, keeping her gun leveled in case he tried anything.

Paige recognized the figure there in the now dirty ranger's uniform from the pictures that had accompanied his file. He was thin faced and had a short, straggly beard, his dark hair falling around his face in a tangle.

“Linus, we just wanted to talk,” Paige said. “Are you going to talk to us, or do we need to arrest you and drag you back to Winterly?”

“What?” he said, as if he’d done nothing wrong, “I was just having some fun with you.”

She pulled Brink to his feet, keeping a tight grip on his arm. Christopher had appeared out of the trees now, his own gun drawn, ready for trouble.

“We need to get him back to the ranger’s station,” Paige said, “I want to find out what he knows as soon as possible.”



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They took Linus Brink back to the ranger's station to question him. If they didn't get good answers, Paige had no problem with arresting him and continuing the conversation at the Winterly PD, but for now, it was quicker and easier not to go so far.

They moved Linus over and sat him in a chair in the station. Paige took a seat opposite him, while Christopher stayed standing, keeping between Linus and the door so that he didn't get any ideas about running. If he did, and he made it out into the forest, they might never find him again.

"Alright, Linus," Paige began, "why don't you tell us what you were doing out in the forest with your little scrap of orange cloth?"

Brink shrugged. "Just taking a walk. Enjoying the peace and quiet, you know? It's my *job* to be out there. I am the ranger here."

Paige didn't buy it for a second. "We both know that's not true. You were playing games with us, trying to make us scared."

Brink's eyes flickered with something that Paige recognized as annoyance. He obviously didn't like being challenged. "I was just ... having some fun."

"The same way you were having fun when you stalked your ex-girlfriend?" Christopher asked in a tone that had no give in it.

Brink's eyes widened, and he glanced between Paige and Christopher nervously. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"That won't work, Linus," Paige said. "We looked at your file before we came here. We know about the restraining order your ex-girlfriend got against you and about the complaints from other women."

“I wasn’t doing anything wrong!” Brink insisted. “Christine messed with my head, so I decided to mess with hers a little, that’s all.”

“To scare her?” Paige asked, watching Brink closely to gauge his reaction. There wasn’t any hint of remorse there.

“There wasn’t any harm in it,” Brink insisted.

Paige exchanged a look with Christopher; they both knew that Brink was lying about that part.

“The judge didn’t agree,” Christopher said, “and you’re not doing a very good job of convincing us, Linus. Why don’t you just tell us the truth?”

“What truth?” Brink asked.

“That you like it when women are scared,” Paige said. “That’s why you did your best to frighten me out there, isn’t it? Because you like getting that reaction.”

Brink’s eyes darted back and forth between Paige and Christopher, and for a moment, he didn’t say anything. Then he let out a sigh and leaned back in the chair.

“Fine,” he said. “Maybe I get a little thrill out of scaring people. But it’s not like I hurt anyone. It’s not my fault if they’re all so sensitive.”

“Except for your ex-girlfriend,” Paige pointed out. “And who knows how many other women you’ve scared or harassed.”

Brink didn’t respond, but the guilty look on his face said enough.

Now that they’d gotten him to admit to that part, it was time to talk to him about the main reason they’d come here: the group therapy sessions.

“Was it thrilling for you when you went to the exposure therapy sessions? Was it thrilling for you to watch as people afraid of heights went up into high places?” Paige asked. “As you filmed them?”

Brink’s eyes widened in surprise. “What? How did you know about that?”

“We did our homework, Linus,” Christopher said. “We know about your involvement in those therapy sessions. And we know that you stopped attending them because you were told to leave.”

“We know that you recorded the people who went to the sessions,” Paige added.

“What’s it to you?” Brink asked, defensive. “Doesn’t the FBI have anything better to do than ask me about all this?”

“Bea Milling was a member of that group,” Paige said.

She saw Brink pale at the mention of her name, obviously realizing what this was about, and why the FBI had come to speak with him.

“What about her?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“She was murdered,” Paige said. “Found in exactly the kind of high place that would have terrified her. My current theory is that someone set out to frighten her as she died. Someone who would have enjoyed that fear.”

Brink’s eyes widened in shock as he realized the accusation implicit in that, then quickly narrowed in anger. “I don’t know anything about that! I haven’t seen Bea since the last session!”

“We know you had a motive,” Paige said, leaning forward. “Bea was afraid of heights. You liked scaring people. It’s not that big of a leap to think that you wanted to take things to the next level. A fatal level.”

“I’m telling you that I didn’t do anything to Bea.”

“What about Ellie Kane?” Paige asked.

Brink frowned then. “I don’t even know who that is. What’s that name meant to mean to me?”

“El? From the group?” Paige said.

Brink shook his head, suddenly looking more confident. “El’s real name was Louise. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

That caught Paige by surprise. When she’d seen the nickname on the group page, she’d assumed that it was short

for Ellie. But now, she realized that she had been wrong.

“What do you mean, Louise?” she asked.

Brink hesitated for a moment, then sighed. “El was a nickname for Louise. Louise Grant. If you don’t even know that, then my guess is that you have nothing here. You’re just fishing.”

“We still have a connection between you and Bea Milling,” Christopher said, taking a step forward, his body language threatening. “We still have a motive for you to have killed her.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Brink said, obviously enjoying himself again.

He had a point, and Paige couldn’t help but feel frustrated. They had a suspect, but they still didn’t have any solid evidence to tie him to the murders.

“Do you do any climbing, Linus?” Christopher asked.

It was a question Paige hadn’t thought to consider. After all, he’d been a member of an exposure therapy group focused on a fear of heights. Yet, if he’d only been there to record the others, or if the therapy had worked, there was no reason that he couldn’t be a climber.

Brink shrugged. “I’ve been a few times. I have to climb trees sometimes in my job, but it’s not really my thing.”

Paige leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. “But *you* like heights, don’t you? The thrill of it? Everyone else in your group was scared, but you like it, right?”

Brink shifted in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with where this was going. “I guess so.”

“And you’ll have climbing gear around here somewhere?” Paige asked.

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” Brink said, but his voice was unsteady.

“Do you, or don’t you?”

“I have some gear in my truck,” Brink said reluctantly.

“Then let’s take a look,” Christopher said, already starting to stand up.

They went out to the truck together, with Brink unlocking it and pulling out a harness and several lengths of rope. Paige took the rope in her hands. It was impossible to be certain without forensics taking a look, but it looked pretty close to the fibers that she and Christopher had found at the murder sites.

“At this point, Linus, you need to give us a very good reason why we shouldn’t arrest you. Where were you five days ago, at around 8 p.m.? And yesterday, in the early hours of the night?”

Brink swallowed hard, his eyes darting nervously between Paige and Christopher. “I was here last night,” he said. “But five days ago ...”

He smiled then and Paige knew that he had an alibi. “Five days ago, I was at my sister’s house for her daughter’s birthday party. There were a lot of people there, so if you need me to, I can give you their names and contact information.”

Paige and Christopher exchanged a look. It was frustrating to have a suspect that seemed to have an alibi for the murders, but they knew that they would need to verify his story.

“Alright, give us their information,” Christopher said, taking out his notebook. “And we’ll need to take these ropes and harness in for analysis.”

Brink nodded, looking relieved that he wasn’t being arrested on the spot.

Paige found herself feeling frustrated once again. They’d had a suspect, but it seemed like they still didn’t have enough to tie him to the murders. If the alibi checked out, then they didn’t even have that much.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll need to verify your alibi, but for now, you’re free to go. But don’t think that this is over. And don’t go anywhere. We’ll be keeping a close eye on you, Linus.”

Brink nodded, looking relieved as the two of them stepped away from him.

Paige went back to the car with Christopher. She managed to contain her frustration until she was safely inside it and the two of them were starting to drive away.

“Dammit,” she muttered, slamming her fist against the dashboard. “We’re back to square one. Again.”

“We still have his climbing gear,” Christopher pointed out. “If the forensics come back with a match to the fibers at the murder sites, that could be enough to get a warrant for his arrest.”

“Assuming we find a match,” Paige said, feeling defeated. “I just don’t know where to go from here. We’ve hit a dead end.”

“We keep investigating,” Christopher said firmly. “We look for other suspects, other leads. We can’t let this go. We just keep working the case.”

Paige nodded, feeling some of her determination returning. “You’re right. We can’t give up now. We’ll keep digging, and we’ll find something.”

They drove in silence for a few moments, both lost in thought. That was when Paige’s phone started to ring. She answered and heard Detective Johnson’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Agent King, where are you?”

“We’re on our way back to the station. Why? What’s happened?”

“We’ve got another one,” Johnson said, his voice grim. “There’s been another murder.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He sat in his car, watching the field from a distance in the dark, watching the police vehicles starting to arrive in a swarm of flashing lights, like distant fireflies. He watched the weather balloon still high above it, slowly being winched in so that they could get to Sarah's body.

It had taken them a long time to find this. He'd expected them to find her last night, but he'd overestimated how many people would come past. Now, it was a new day, and he found that he still wanted to watch the moment when they realized what was happening.

Did they still think that she might still be alive? He hoped so, if only so that they would have that additional moment of feeling helpless as they discovered that he'd cut her throat, the same as he had with the others. He'd taken her blood and used it to write the letter *nu* on her.

He smiled to himself, feeling a sense of satisfaction. He had left his mark once again, done what was required by the sequence. The police would be scrambling to find any leads, any evidence that could help them catch him. But he knew that they wouldn't find anything. He was too careful, too deliberate.

He knew that they were searching for him, but he had no intention of letting them catch him. He had carefully planned each move, covered his tracks, and left no evidence behind. He felt invincible, like a puppet master controlling the entire situation. He was getting stronger with each kill.

He knew that the police would be looking for someone with a motive, someone who had a grudge against the victims. They hadn't worked out the true pattern behind all of this yet, in spite of the ways he'd shown it to them. In its way, that was almost disappointing. He wanted them to understand, to see this great work for what it was. To acknowledge the

importance of what he was doing even as they tried to stop him.

He had to be careful not to give them too much, though. If the police understood too much, then there was a chance that they might try to prevent his next move, and he couldn't allow that. He had to finish this, had to complete the pattern. That was the part that truly mattered. He couldn't let his guard down. He had to be mindful of every move he made, every word he spoke, and every interaction he had with others. He couldn't afford to slip up.

He was in control, of himself, of them. He had the power. He had *gained* the power that came from the kills. And he loved it.

As he watched the chaos unfolding in the field, with sirens blaring and lights flashing, only drawing more attention to what he had done, he couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. He had successfully eluded the authorities, and he knew that it wouldn't be long before he struck again. The pattern had to be perfect.

Would he stop at four, or would he keep going and take eight? Perhaps he could go elsewhere and begin again? He chuckled to himself as he started his car, ready to disappear back into the night. He had all the time in the world to decide. He was a master of his craft, and the world was his canvas. He would create again and again, leaving behind only his signature for the authorities to find.

He knew that they would never catch him, never truly understand the depth of his art. He would continue until he was satisfied, until he had created his masterpiece. And then, and only then, he would disappear into the shadows, leaving behind only perfection in his wake.

Yes, he thought to himself, smiling as he drove away from the scene. He was a true artist, a master of his craft. He would complete the pattern perfectly. No one would be able to stop him.

But for now, he would lay low. He would let them search for him, and he would enjoy their fear before he continued.



He knew that the police would be swarming the area, looking for any clues that might lead them to him. But he also knew that he was careful, that he left no evidence behind. He wasn't worried about getting caught.

His only worry was about completing the work that he had begun. The pattern was in place. Now, he just needed to follow through on it.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

To Paige, it looked like chaos as she and Christopher drove up to the field Detective Johnson had told them to meet him at. There were police vehicles everywhere, a van full of forensic techs trying to set up spotlights so that they could search the area more precisely in the growing gloom of the storm, even a huddle of reporters at one end of the field, snapping photographs as a group of police officers struggled to haul on a long wire tether.

A huge weather balloon bobbed on the other end of it, lit from beneath, and on that balloon, just visible from below, was a body.

Paige's stomach twisted uncomfortably as she realized that this was yet another victim. She couldn't believe that this was happening again. She and Christopher quickly made their way over to where Detective Johnson was waiting for them, still while everyone ran around him.

"Agent King, Agent Marriott," he greeted them, his expression grim. "We've got another one. The same as the others."

"We can see that," Christopher said. "Shouldn't the balloon be on the ground by now? Shouldn't the coroner's people have the body?"

"There's been a problem with the winch system used to pull the balloon in," Johnson said. "Someone, probably the killer, broke it once he got the balloon up there."

"He wanted her to stay up there," Paige said, staring up at the victim. "He wanted people to see his work."

"That's what it looks like," Johnson agreed. "We think she might have been up there since some time last night. We've got a team working on getting her down as quickly and carefully as possible."

Paige felt a wave of anger and frustration wash over her. This killer was taunting them, playing games with them, frustrating even their efforts to do the simplest things. She couldn't stand it.

The police officers hauling on the line continued to pull the balloon closer and closer to the ground. Paige watched it approach, knowing that she would have to look over the body as it reached the ground, trying to find any clue the killer had left behind. She saw the flash of cameras in the background, the press obviously taking the opportunity to get as many pictures as they could.

As the balloon reached the ground, Paige couldn't help but feel a sense of dread. She knew what she was about to see would be gruesome, but she had to be strong for the victim, for justice. She had to remember that she was there to do a job. Sympathy for the victim was important, but Paige couldn't be so overwhelmed by it that it stopped her from doing her job.

The body was carefully lowered to the ground, and Paige and Christopher quickly made their way over to it, pushing their way past the forensic teams and the police.

Paige's breath caught as she looked at the victim. It was clear that this victim had suffered the same fate as the others. Her throat had been cut, and another Greek letter was written on her body in blood. Paige recognized it as the letter *nu*.

"Do we have any idea who the victim might be?" Paige asked Detective Johnson.

"A woman named Sarah Creasling was reported missing yesterday," the detective said. "And this victim seems to match her picture. We'll need to wait for a formal ID though before we can be certain."

"What do we know about Sarah Creasling?" Paige asked.

"Early twenties, a student at the local college," Johnson said. "No known enemies or conflicts reported when she went missing, no criminal record, nothing out of the ordinary. We'll start looking into her social media accounts and any recent relationships she may have had. We'll also look into her

background, trying to find any connections to the other victims.”

Paige nodded, her mind already racing with questions and theories. She knew that they had to find a way to catch this killer, to stop him before he could harm anyone else. But how? They had no leads. They’d come here after yet another suspect had come to nothing. They needed to find somewhere to start.

“Are your men searching the area?” Christopher asked the detective.

“Yes, we have a team combing the field for any evidence or clues that might lead us to the killer,” Johnson replied. “But as you know, it’s difficult with the terrain and the darkness.”

Paige and Christopher exchanged a look, both knowing that they had to take matters into their own hands. They weren’t going to be able to do more here. It seemed obvious that they weren’t going to find anything in the dark, so it was better to leave it all to the local PD.

As they walked back to their car, Paige tried to work out where this new murder fit into the broader pattern of the other deaths.

“We need to go back to the station and go over everything again,” she said to Christopher. “There has to be something we’re missing, some connection we’re not seeing.”

Christopher nodded in agreement. “I’ll drive,” he said, pulling out his keys. “You see if you can find a connection here to the other cases.”

Paige nodded, feeling a sense of determination wash over her. They had to catch this killer, and they had to do it soon. That meant coming up with something new.

As they drove towards the station, Paige went over the case files again, looking for any connections between the victims. She started to look for any information she could find on Sarah Creasling, trying to find anything that might connect her to the therapy group, the climbing gym, anything that might push her and Christopher back in the direction of one of the leads they’d already pursued.

“I don’t know what to do with all this,” Paige said as they pulled up at the Winterly PD.

“It isn’t working?” Christopher asked.

“There are no obvious connections.”

“We have to find a way to catch this guy,” Christopher said, determination in his voice. “We can’t keep letting him get away with this.”

“I know,” Paige agreed. “But how do we do that? We don’t have any leads, any evidence. He’s too careful.”

“Paige, you need to focus on what you’re good at,” Christopher said. “You’re a psychologist first and foremost. Stop looking just at clues and start trying to figure out what he’s thinking, what he wants.”

That was the part Paige didn’t have an answer for, not yet. Paige braced herself to get out of the car; there were reporters waiting in front of the Winterly PD, and she knew that she would have to run the gauntlet of them asking questions as soon as she left the safety of the vehicle.

As soon as they got out of the car, Paige’s fears were realized. The reporters surged forward, their microphones and cameras thrusting into her face. She could hear their rapid-fire questions as they jostled for position, trying to get the best angle for their shots.

“Agent King, how many victims does that make now? Are they all connected? Do you have any leads?”

Paige ignored them as best as she could, focusing on getting into the station as quickly as possible. Christopher used his greater size to push them aside, creating a clear path for Paige to step through.

“Agent Marriott, how does it feel to be stuck here in Winterly when you could be out there hunting the man who killed your wife?”

Paige saw the anger that crossed Christopher’s face, and she knew in that moment that he would round on the reporter, shout at him, maybe even lash out physically. There was a level of pain in Christopher’s expression that Paige knew had

been the whole point of the question, just trying to get him to react.

Paige pushed Christopher back towards the police department before any of that could happen. She wasn't going to let him end his career because some reporter was trying to get a rise out of him.

"Don't react," Paige whispered to him. "However hard it is, don't react."

It was only once they were safely inside the police station that Paige dared to breathe easy again.

"They shouldn't have done that," Paige said, still seeing the anger on Christopher's face. "Are you going to be ok?"

"It's fine," Christopher said gruffly. "I'm used to asshole reporters."

Paige knew that wasn't true. No one ever got used to the constant barrage of cameras and microphones, the constant scrutiny and judgement from the press.

And this wasn't a normal situation. This wasn't just a reporter piling on pressure, asking questions about when they would solve the case or why the FBI had been called in at all. The reporter out there had tried to use the fact of Jennifer's murder at the hands of the Exsanguination Killer against Christopher.

"We need to focus," Paige said, trying to steer the conversation back to the case. "We can't let them distract us from finding this killer."

"I know that, Paige," Christopher said. He sighed. "I can handle this. You don't need to worry about me."

Paige couldn't help worrying about him though. Couldn't help thinking about him at almost every step of this.

"What do you need me to do?" Christopher asked.

"You try to focus on the victims. Try to find a reason the killer would have targeted these three, rather than someone else."

"And what will you be doing?" Christopher asked.

Paige considered her options. “I need to make a phone call.”

Paige needed some good advice on this case, and she’d always gotten her best advice from her friend and mentor, Professor Thornton. He’d been her supervisor when she’d been doing her doctorate, and he was a brilliant academic, specializing in understanding the criminal mind. If anyone could help Paige to understand this killer, it was him.

Paige went off to a desk in a quiet corner of the department to make the call.

Paige dialed Professor Thornton’s number and waited for him to answer. She fidgeted with her pen, tapping it against the desk, waiting for him to pick up.

“Paige?” Thornton’s voice came through the phone. “Is everything okay?”

“Actually, no,” Paige said, feeling a tightness in her chest. “I’m working a case, and I’m stuck. I was hoping you could help me.”

“Of course,” Thornton said. There was no hesitation, no sense that Paige was intruding. “What do you need?”

Paige began to lay out the details of the case for Thornton, telling him about the three victims, the lack of evidence. The presence of the Greek letters.

“I see,” Thornton said thoughtfully. “That’s a difficult one. I think the question you need to ask yourself is what are the most distinctive features of the case?”

“The fact that he leaves bodies in high places and the use of the Greek letters,” Paige said instantly. She already knew that, though.

“You have to think like him,” the professor replied. “You have to imagine yourself in his place, seeing the world through his eyes. What motivates him to set up the murders in this particular way? It’s an approach you already know, Paige. You’ve been looking into the why of murders long before you were an FBI agent.”

That was true. She'd spent most of her doctorate interviewing the notorious serial killer Adam Riker, trying to understand what made him who he was. Paige thought about those interviews then. Adam had been very particular about his methods. They'd been almost a part of his personality.

"Tell me more about the Greek letters," Professor Thornton said.

"*Beta, alpha, and nu*—in that order," Paige said. "I briefly thought this might be about working his way through the alphabet, but *nu* doesn't fit with that, and the first two are in the wrong order."

"Have you thought of asking yourself the question 'why Greek?'" Professor Thornton asked. It was a little like being back in one of his tutorials, with him asking questions to prompt Paige to think in new directions.

Paige paused, considering his words. "No, I hadn't thought of that. Why Greek?"

She turned the question back on the professor, hoping that he would have an answer.

"Perhaps it's a clue to the killer's identity," Professor Thornton said. "Is there anyone in your investigation with an interest or background in Greek culture or language?"

Paige's mind raced through the potential suspects they had already considered. None of them fit that profile. But then, maybe they had missed something. Maybe there was someone else entirely to find.

Or maybe there was another possibility. Paige had a distant memory of something she'd read once, something that might be relevant.

"Thanks, Professor. I need to go now. I have an idea."

She hoped that it would be one that blew all of this wide open.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Paige hurried back through to the office Detective Johnson had provided, determined to tell Christopher what she had come up with. She had the details on her phone, ready to show him, because she knew that with something this strange, he would need to see the confirmation to be able to believe it.

“Christopher, I think I might have a lead,” Paige said, holding up her phone. “It’s something to do with the Greek letters.”

Christopher raised an eyebrow in question, but he also shook his head, gesturing towards his phone.

“Paige, I’m on a call with Agent Sauer. Hold on, I’ll put him on speaker. You’re going to want to hear this.”

Sauer’s voice came through loud and clear then. Paige was a little frustrated to have to hold back from telling Christopher her theory, but she knew that this must be important if Sauer was calling. She listened intently as Sauer started to talk.

“I know it’s late,” Sauer said. “I know you must both be winding down your investigation for the day.”

“Not yet, sir,” Christopher said. “We’re still trying to make progress here.”

“Well, then, I guess you could use at least one piece of good news: we just arrested Anne Dawson for the Exsanguination Killer murders.”

Paige felt her heart stop for a second before starting to race again in her chest, too fast now. They had her. The woman who had killed her father and Christopher’s wife. The thought that she was in custody after Paige had spent so many years searching for her was . . . almost too much for her.

“We’re sure it’s her?” Paige asked. She needed to be certain. She needed there to be no doubt.

“She attacked our agents with a knife as soon as they went to question her. There’s also a lot of writing in her apartment

that clearly states how much she wants to kill again. We'll need to question her and try to find more to tie her to the scenes for a conviction, but I'm confident we have the right person."

"That's great news, sir," Christopher said, his voice calm and professional. Under it, though, Paige could hear the welling of emotion that Christopher was trying to contain.

Paige felt almost as much. They had finally caught the Exsanguination Killer. The one who had taken away everything from Christopher and Paige. The one who had caused them so much pain and grief.

Paige's mind was racing with thoughts and emotions. Relief, anger, sadness; it was all there, mixed together in a jumble of feelings that she couldn't quite sort out.

"Yes, it is," Sauer said. "I'll send over the details later, and I'll let you know once we get more, but I wanted to let you both know as soon as possible. We can close this case now."

Christopher and Paige exchanged a look. It was more than a relief to know that the Exsanguination Killer was no longer a threat, that she was under arrest. It was the closing of a chapter in Paige's life that had gone on since she was fourteen, that had fundamentally changed who she was.

A part of Paige wanted to be there when they questioned her, to look her in the eye and ask her why she'd done all of this.

Another part of her knew that she didn't have that option. She and Christopher were FBI agents. They had a job to do here, and a killer to catch. She felt relief that Dawson was back behind bars but, even as she felt that relief, her mind couldn't help but turn back to the present case. There was still a killer out there, still someone who needed to be caught.

"How are you feeling about all this?" Paige asked Christopher as he hung up the phone.

"I'm ... not sure," Christopher said, his voice strained. "It's just a lot to process."

Paige could understand that. She'd been obsessed with the idea of finding whoever had killed her father ever since she

was fourteen. Her whole doctorate had focused on trying to understand serial killers. She'd put herself in danger specifically to try to catch the Exsanguination Killer. She'd joined the FBI to have a better chance of doing it.

And now, the Exsanguination Killer seemed to be in custody, just like that. It was almost anticlimactic. Paige had expected this moment to feel like so much more.

Paige wished that she could take the time to get it all straight in her head, but she couldn't; she and Christopher still had a job to do.

"I found something," she said, remembering what she'd come in here to say. "In our case here, I found something."

Christopher looked up at her, his eyes focusing on her intently. "What did you find?"

"It's about the Greek letters," Paige said. "I remember reading a book once about the Tower of the Winds in Athens, Greece. It's an ancient tower constructed with effigies of the different winds at each of its corners."

"What does that have to do with our case?" Christopher asked, his brow furrowing as he tried to make sense of it.

"Because of the names of the Ancient Greek gods of the winds. Boreas was the north wind, Apeliotes was the east wind, Notus was the south."

"*Beta, alpha, and nu,*" Christopher said, clearly understanding now. Paige could hear the hint of excitement in his voice now.

"Exactly. The full list is Boreas, Kaikias, Apeliotes, Eurus, Notus, Lips, Zephyrus, and Skiron," Paige said, "but my guess is that the killer is starting with the cardinal points."

Christopher's eyes widened as he realized the significance. "So, he's been treating the victims as the effigies, trying to recreate some version of the tower?"

Paige nodded, feeling a sense of satisfaction at finally having found a way into the case. More than that, she'd found a way into the head of the killer.

“That’s an interesting theory,” Christopher said, nodding thoughtfully. “But how does it help us catch the killer?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Paige said. “But it means that we need to change our approach.”

Christopher leaned forward in his chair, his attention fully focused on Paige. “What do you mean by changing our approach?”

“We need to stop focusing on the possible connections between the victims,” Paige said. “We’ve already established that there isn’t anything there that’s going to lead us back to the killer. This isn’t about Ellie Kane’s climbing friends or Bea Milling’s fear.”

“And what do we do instead?” Christopher asked.

Paige had been thinking about the answer to that almost since she worked out what was going on here.

“We need to start looking for connections to the Tower of the Winds, the Ancient Greek gods of the winds, and how it might relate to the killer’s motive,” Paige explained. “We need to dig deeper into the history and mythology of Ancient Greece to understand the symbolism and meanings behind the different winds and how they might be related to the killer’s psychology.”

Christopher nodded. “That’s a good idea. We could consult with a historian or a mythologist to help us understand the significance of these symbols and how they might be related to the killer’s behavior.”

Paige smiled at that idea. She wondered if Christopher would have done that before the two of them met, or if he would have focused on the more straightforward, procedural aspects of the case. “We can also start looking at the locations of the murders. The killer has been using the victims as a way to recreate the Tower of the Winds, so we need to start looking at the geography of the city, see if there are any patterns that match up with the cardinal points.”

Paige felt a sense of satisfaction as they started to make a plan. They might not have caught the killer yet, but they were getting closer. They had a sense of purpose now, an

understanding of what they needed to do. She knew that there was still a lot of work to be done, but for the first time in a while, she felt like they were making real progress.

“There’s one more thing,” Paige said. “If we accept that this is about the Tower of the Winds, then it starts to tell us a few things about the killer, so we can start to profile him.”

“What does it say about them?” Christopher asked.

“It tells us that they have an interest in Ancient Greek mythology,” Paige said. “No, not an interest, an obsession. This is someone who is prepared to kill to recreate an aspect of Ancient Greece. Someone like that will have shown their interest in Greek myth and culture in other ways.”

“That’s a start. What else?” Christopher asked.

“It also shows that they’re methodical and detail oriented. They’re not just killing at random, they’re following a plan, a pattern. And they’re probably very intelligent to have come up with this plan in the first place.”

“So, we’re looking for someone who’s highly intelligent, methodical, and has an interest in Ancient Greek mythology.”

Paige nodded. “And someone who’s probably deeply damaged psychologically. Someone who’s seeking power and control because they feel powerless in their own life.”

“Those last points are kind of general,” Christopher pointed out.

“I know,” Paige said. “Profiling isn’t an exact science. It’s not much to go on, but it’s a start. And the Greek angle should get us somewhere.”

Paige just had to hope that it would be enough to catch the killer before he struck again. Because there was one thing that was certain now: he would strike again.

“The Tower of the Winds connection means that the killer will try to kill at least one more victim,” Paige said. “Maybe another four after that if he wants to hit all eight compass points.”

“But we can’t say that for sure,” Christopher replied.

Paige shook her head. There was a chance that the killer would murder one last victim and then disappear, leaving no trace of himself to follow. They might never catch him once he did that.

Would he strike quickly? Or would he wait, biding his time, knowing that the FBI was on his tail?

Paige knew that they didn't have the luxury of waiting for the killer to strike again. They needed to act fast if they were going to catch him.

"I think we should start by talking to experts on Ancient Greek mythology and the history of the Tower of the Winds," Paige said. "Maybe they can help us get a better understanding of the killer's motives and behavior."

Christopher nodded in agreement. "I'll start researching and see if I can find anyone who might be able to help us."

Paige was grateful for that. Every moment that they wasted was another moment that the killer had to slip away from them. The latest victim had been killed last night, but that didn't mean that the killer wasn't already out there, looking for another victim.

Paige leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. For a moment, she let herself feel the weight of everything that they were up against. The killer was intelligent and careful, and he seemed to be always one step ahead of them. But then she opened her eyes and looked at Christopher, and she knew that they could do this. They were a good team, and they had a plan.

"Let's get to work," she said.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was getting later, and the storm had begun, rain starting to lash the outside of the Winterly PD's windows. Paige had been looking for answers for what felt like forever now. It was one thing to say that they should look into the Tower of the Winds, but quite another to find a way to turn that into a real suspect. As if sensing her thoughts, Christopher leaned back in his chair with a sigh. He was obviously at least as tired as Paige was right then.

"We've been pushing hard," Paige said. "Maybe we should take a break for food."

Christopher shook his head, though. "I feel like we're almost there with this. We need to keep going."

Paige rubbed her eyes and stood up, stretching her arms and legs. "I need to take a break even if you don't," she said, looking over at Christopher. "Do you want me to grab you a coffee?"

"That would be good," Christopher said. Christopher was back typing away on his computer, his brow furrowed in concentration as he tried to find answers.

Paige was impressed by that determination but also a little worried by it. Was Christopher trying to lose himself in his work as a way of avoiding feeling anything? The news that the Exsanguination Killer had been caught had to have some kind of effect on him, didn't it? It certainly had on Paige, leaving her feeling both exhilarated and empty, all at once.

She grabbed her coat and headed out into the chilly rain. As Paige walked, she thought about Christopher and the way he had been working lately. She knew that he was dealing with a lot, not just with the case, but with his personal life as well. Would finding answers here do anything to help him?

The streets were empty in the storm, and she shivered as the wind whipped through her hair. She made her way to a coffee

shop on the corner and ordered two steaming cups of coffee to go.

As she waited, she found herself looking around at the rain lashed buildings and the empty streets. She couldn't help but feel a twinge of fear. It wasn't just the killer she was worried about; it was the storm itself. The way it seemed to be closing in around her.

She shook her head, trying to shake off the feeling. It wasn't like her to be afraid of the dark. She was a trained FBI agent, after all. She shouldn't be afraid of anything.

But in the silence of the night, with the wind howling through the empty streets, she couldn't help but feel like there was something out there. Something waiting for her.

She took a deep breath and gathered her courage. She had to get back to Christopher. They had work to do.

Paige got back to the office and saw that Christopher was no longer typing. Instead, he had fallen asleep at the desk, head in his arms. The office was empty enough by now that no one was going to disturb him.

Paige went over to him, putting a gentle hand on Christopher's arm to wake him up. He started awake with a sudden sound, eyes glancing around as if looking for threats.

"Here's your coffee," Paige said, handing him the cup. "And I think we should take a break. Even if it's only for a few minutes."

Christopher shook his head. "Not yet, we're close to getting answers, and I—"

"What, Christopher?"

"If I stop, then I have to think about everything that's happened. I have to think about Jennifer leaving me, then her dying. I have to think about how just catching Anne Dawson isn't enough. It doesn't make any of the pain go away."

Paige took a deep breath and sat down next to him. "I know it's hard, Christopher. But running yourself into the ground isn't going to help anything. We need to take care of ourselves too."



“I know,” Christopher said, his voice thick with exhaustion. “I just feel like if I stop, then everything is going to come crashing down on me.”

Paige put a hand on his shoulder. “We’re in this together, Christopher. You’re not alone.”

Christopher looked at her, and for a moment, Paige thought she saw tears in his eyes. But then he blinked them away as he looked at her. He’d always been so tough, so strong. It was the first time Paige had seen him this vulnerable.

Paige felt a lot of the same things that he did. She felt the same strange emptiness at the news that the woman they thought was the Exsanguination Killer had been arrested. It felt as though a whole section of her life had been ripped away, and merely arresting Anne Dawson didn’t replace that.

Paige took a deep breath. “It’s okay to feel that way. It’s normal to feel overwhelmed, especially with everything that’s happened. But you don’t have to do it alone. I’m here for you.”

They sat in silence for a moment, sipping their coffee. Paige couldn’t help but feel a sense of closeness with Christopher, a sense of understanding. They were both going through a tough time, and they were both doing their best to cope.

She wasn’t sure when the moment shifted to more than that, but it did. Somewhere in those moments of looking at one another, the attraction that Paige had felt towards Christopher since the start of all this flared up again, becoming something more urgent, more intense.

Christopher seemed to feel it, too, because he leaned in closer to her, his hand moving up to cup her cheek. “Paige,” he said softly, “I don’t know what it is about you, but I can’t get you out of my head. I shouldn’t. Not now. I know I shouldn’t, but I still feel it every time I look at you. It’s why I couldn’t call. It’s why I couldn’t see you all last week.”

Paige felt a rush of heat in her cheeks, and she found herself leaning into his touch. “I feel the same way,” she whispered.

Christopher leaned in closer, his breath hot on her skin. Paige melted into him, taking him into her arms, feeling the warmth of his body against hers. It was like the world outside had ceased to exist, and they were the only two people left in it.

Somewhere in that moment, their lips inched towards one another's.

The kiss was soft at first, then became more passionate. Christopher's hands slid down Paige's back, pulling her closer to him. Paige's fingers tangled in his hair as they kissed.

They pulled back, both out of breath, and looked at each other. There was a moment of hesitation as they both tried to process what had just happened.

"I'm sorry, Paige," Christopher said, his voice low. "I shouldn't have done that."

Paige shook her head. "No, it's okay. I wanted it too."

"That doesn't make it right," Christopher said. "We're partners. Jennifer ..."

Paige could hear the pain there. She knew that things were too complicated. They'd been too complicated since she first became Christopher's partner. It was the main reason Paige had wanted to transfer. She hadn't been able to deal with this pull towards Christopher even as she knew that nothing could happen.

"Put it down to working too hard," Paige said, not wanting to deal with the situation. "Or to both of us feeling too much now that the Exsanguination Killer has been caught."

That wasn't it, and Paige knew it. She'd kissed Christopher because she'd wanted to, because she'd been so attracted to him in that moment that she couldn't do anything else. Putting it down to other things meant that they could both take a step back from one another safely.

Christopher nodded, looking relieved. "Yeah, you're right. We're both just ... emotional right now, and we need to focus on the case."

Paige nodded, feeling a pang of disappointment at how easily they both seemed to be able to put what they felt aside, but she knew that Christopher was right. They couldn't let their personal lives interfere with their work.

But as they went back to their work, Paige couldn't help but steal glances at Christopher. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was something between them, something that couldn't be ignored forever.

Christopher was typing, his eyes fixed on the computer screen. Quite *pointedly* fixed there, as if he didn't dare look anywhere else. Certainly not at Paige.

"I found something," he said. "Or rather, someone."

Paige straightened up, feeling a spark of hope. "What did you find?"

"A professor at a local university who specializes in Ancient Greek mythology," Christopher said. "His name is Dr. Alexander Kostopoulos."

Paige's interest was piqued. "What's his focus within the field?"

As someone who had briefly been planning to go into a life of academia, Paige knew as well as anyone that each field could have a hundred small specializations, some relevant, some not.

"He's written extensively on the symbolism of the winds in Ancient Greek mythology," Christopher said. "And he's done research on the Tower of the Winds specifically."

That was too much of a coincidence not to be connected to this case somehow. Especially when the academic was local. Paige went online, looking for more about Dr. Kostopoulos.

She found an old academic profile, with a list of his publications and a picture. Paige couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. There was something eerie about the way that Dr. Kostopoulos looked in his photos, as though he knew something that other people didn't. According to the page, Dr. Kostopoulos had published several articles on the subject of the Tower of the Winds.

Paige was more interested in the web articles she found about him.

*Local Lecturer Fired After Harassing Students*

It seemed that Dr. Kostopoulos had been let go by the university he taught at after a series of students complained about him. He'd been outspoken, even erratic, according to the report.

Paige went looking for the academic's social media pages next. They were just as concerning. She found a series of bizarre posts that had been made by Dr. Kostopoulos on his account. They were all about the Tower of the Winds, and they ranged from the cryptic to the downright disturbing.

He seemed to post about it as if it were some mystical thing, the heart of his personal spiritual being, rather than an ancient archaeological site. There were pictures of Dr. Kostopoulos at ancient ruins around the world, with captions that hinted at obsession.

"We need to talk to this guy," Paige said, turning to Christopher. "Can you find an address for him?"

"I'll get one from the DMV, but it's pretty rough weather outside. Will we be able to speak with him?"

"We have to try," Paige said. With a man this obsessed with the Tower of the Winds, there was a chance that he was their guy. If this was the killer, then for all they knew, he could already be planning the next murder he needed to complete his Tower of the Winds. They couldn't risk leaving things until the rain abated.

They had to go speak with Dr. Kostopoulos right away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Paige kept looking into Dr. Kostopoulos as Christopher drove the two of them over to the academic's house. She quickly read through his works on the Tower of the Winds, skimming them the way she might have done back when she was a grad student to work out what was important and what wasn't the day before a tutorial.

But this time, it wasn't just academic. This time, they were looking for something that could help them catch a killer. The more she read, the more it seemed that Dr. Kostopoulos had an unhealthy obsession with the Tower of the Winds, one that went well beyond the interests of an academic.

His early works seemed straightforward enough: articles on the symbolism of the tower in Greek society, a work on the rediscovery and uncovering of the ruin as an archaeological site.

His more recent works, however, seemed to have wandered off into pseudo-science, linking the Tower of the Winds to everything from mystical systems to the possibility of aliens. Then there was the last book, the novel.

From the moment Paige started reading it, she saw the violence in it. The whole thing was set in the Tower of the Winds, and it seemed that the point of it was a death at every station of the tower, appeasing the Ancient Greek deities of the wind one at a time.

The more Paige read, the more she became convinced that Dr. Kostopoulos was their man. He fit the profile of a serial killer to a T: obsessed with his chosen subject matter, highly intelligent, and with a history of erratic behavior.

When they arrived at Dr. Kostopoulos's house, Paige's mouth was dry. Was it possible that they were really about to confront the killer? She couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen.

The house was huge, practically a mansion. Paige guessed that Dr. Kostopoulos's more recent works must have done well for him, because it wasn't the kind of place that could be bought with a professor's salary. The place was large and creepy, with vines crawling up the sides and a wrought-iron gate that creaked as she and Christopher opened it. The dark windows of the house seemed to be staring back at them.

Christopher parked the car, and they got out, walking up the long driveway while keeping a careful watch for trouble. Paige couldn't help but feel uneasy as they approached. Something felt wrong here.

One thing was *definitely* wrong: the front door to the mansion was open, light spilling out from the hallway. Paige found herself reaching for her gun automatically, while she saw Christopher doing the same. An open door? Even if Winterly was a lot smaller and safer than a major city, Paige doubted that was normal.

They stepped into the mansion, their guns drawn and ready. Paige could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she and Christopher slowly made their way through the hallway, searching for any sign of Dr. Kostopoulos.

"Dr. Kostopoulos?" Christopher called out. "It's the FBI. Are you there? We need to ask you a few questions."

There was no answer. That was concerning. Was Dr. Kostopoulos here?

The hallway was filled with objects that Paige guessed were connected with Ancient Greece. There were display cabinets off to one side holding fragments of pottery and bronze swords. There were several shields set above the staircase, bearing insignia that Paige recognized as those of the various Ancient Greek city states: the club of Thebes, the axe of Crete, the owl of Athens.

Everywhere Paige looked, there were statues in the Ancient Greek style, while books stood on stands. Several seemed to be about the Tower of the Winds, carefully positioned to catch the eye.

“Dr. Kostopoulos? Are you here?” Christopher called out again. “This is the FBI. If you’re there, answer me.”

There was no reply, which only raised Paige’s concerns. Why would the door be open if there was no one here? It didn’t make sense.

“We need to search the house,” Christopher said. “Dr. Kostopoulos could still be in here. Either he’s the killer, hiding from us, or he’s in some kind of danger.”

Paige nodded, and together, they started to make their way through the building, looking for any sign of the academic.

They moved quickly, clearing each room as they went, checking the corners, keeping their guns at the ready. Paige’s eyes darted across every surface, looking for any clues that could lead them to their suspect.

It wasn’t long before they found something. In a room at the end of the hallway, they found a small office. It was cluttered with papers and books, but Paige’s eyes were drawn to a large model that sat on the desk there.

It was an octagonal tower, constructed in white marble. Paige could see the intricate details etched into the marble, the carvings of figures that she recognized as the wind gods of Ancient Greece. There were eight levels to the tower, each one depicting a different wind deity. And at the top, there was an opening, which would have been just big enough for a person to crawl through in the actual tower.

Paige felt a shiver run down her spine as she realized what she was looking at. This was a model of the Tower of the Winds. If anything showed the depths of Dr. Kostopoulos’s obsession, this was it.

It showed more than that, though. As Paige leaned closer, she saw tiny red marks on some of the deities around the top of the tower: Boreas, Apeliotes, Notus.

“Christopher,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She barely dared to speak at all. “Look at this.”

Christopher leaned over her shoulder and looked at the marks. “What do you think they are?”

“I think they’re blood,” Paige said. “And I think these marks have been made recently.”

Paige’s brain struggled to take in what they’d just found. This was it. They had found evidence that connected Dr. Kostopoulos to the murders.

But where was he now? That was the point of them being there, after all.

Even as Paige thought it, she heard a sound from somewhere above, the sound of a man keening as if in immense physical or emotional pain.

“Upstairs,” Christopher said. “Quickly.”

The two of them raced up the stairs, their guns drawn and ready. The noise had stopped now, making it impossible to know where it had come from, but at least they knew now that they weren’t alone in the house.

They started to check the second floor. There were bedrooms, but they were all empty, at least of people. Each seemed to have been filled almost at random with more of the detritus of Ancient Greece, so that Paige had to pick her way through it with care, not wanting to crush anything valuable beneath her feet.

There was still no sign of Dr. Kostopoulos.

“This floor is clear,” Christopher said. He sounded professional now, ready for trouble. “Let’s check the third floor.”

Paige nodded, her heart racing with anticipation. They climbed the narrow staircase that led up to the third floor, their guns still drawn. As they reached the top, they paused, listening for any sound.

There was a faint rustling coming from behind one of the closed doors. Christopher nodded to Paige, indicating that they should approach it. She nodded back, steeling herself for whatever lay beyond.

Even as they did so, the same anguished cry as before came, this time from somewhere beyond the door. There was



no time to hold back or be subtle now. Paige saw Christopher take a step back, then he kicked the door.

The door burst open, revealing a room that was completely empty except for one thing: a spiral staircase leading up to a small trapdoor in the ceiling. The screaming was coming from above.

Paige and Christopher exchanged a look, then started up the stairs. The screaming grew louder with each step, filling the air with a sound that was almost unbearable.

The trapdoor led out onto the roof, and there, on the edge, stood Dr. Kostopoulos. Paige recognized him from the pictures on his social media: he was in his fifties, solidly built, with greying hair and a slightly wild looking beard. He was standing there, looking out over the city while storm clouds burst overhead and cold, hard rain began to fall. He screamed out at it in a mixture of pain and rage, as if everything he saw made him angry.

“Dr. Kostopoulos?” Paige said, her voice shaking slightly as she tried to think of a way to calm him down. “We need you to come with us. Please.”

He looked around as Paige spoke, then took a step back, right to the edge of the roof.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What are you doing up here? This is my home. You have no right to be here.”

“We’re with the FBI, Dr. Kostopoulos,” Paige said. “We need to talk to you. Why don’t you step away from the edge for a moment so we can talk?”

“Step away? No, no! Today is the day the wind claims me! Today is the day when I pay for my mistakes!”

Paige realized to her horror that the academic was planning on throwing himself off the roof. Which meant that she and Christopher had walked into the middle of a life and death situation, one where their guns and their training wouldn’t even begin to help.

Paige had to find a way to talk Dr. Kostopoulos down, or he was going to jump.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

“Dr. Kostopoulos, please, why don’t you step away from the edge so that we can talk?” Paige said.

Dr. Kostopoulos shook his head, his eyes wild and unbalanced. “You don’t understand,” he said. “I’ve done something terrible. Something unforgivable.”

Paige took a careful step forward. “We can talk about it,” she said, her voice low and soothing. “Whatever it is, we’ll help you through it. But you have to come away from the edge first.”

Dr. Kostopoulos hesitated, his eyes flickering back and forth between Paige and the drop below. Paige could feel her heart racing as she watched him, willing him to make the right choice.

“Dr. Kostopoulos, why don’t you tell us about what you did?” Christopher said.

But the academic didn’t even seem to hear. He was too consumed by his own thoughts and pain.

“You don’t understand,” he said, his voice filled with anguish. “I have brought such destruction upon myself and others. I have desecrated the Tower of the Winds, and now the gods seek revenge. The storm. Look at the storm. The winds are angry! I tried to appease them, tried to write the perfect things for them, do everything they would want, but they are wroth with me!”

Wroth with him? Paige knew then that Dr. Kostopoulos was mentally unstable. In her view, it was clear that he had become obsessed with the Tower of the Winds and was now suffering some kind of psychotic break. She had to tread carefully, or he would jump.

Briefly, she found herself wondering if that would be a bad thing. If he had killed three people, why not let him? Why not make the world a better place?

No, that wasn't the way Paige did things. She was an FBI agent. She was going to talk this man down and then bring him in, whatever it took.

"Can you feel the winds?" Dr. Kostopoulos said. He spread his arms wide to the side. "Can you feel their power?"

The storm was building behind him, the wind whipping across the roof as rain continued to lash down.

Paige knew she needed to act. She slowly took a step closer to Dr. Kostopoulos, edging forward, trying to get as close as she could.

"Dr. Kostopoulos, we understand that you're in pain," she said, her voice calm and steady. "But you don't have to face it alone. We're here to help you."

Dr. Kostopoulos looked at her, his eyes flickering with emotion. For a moment, Paige thought he was going to step back from the edge. But then he shook his head.

"No one can help me," he said. "Not anymore. I have to pay for what I've done."

"Dr. Kostopoulos, what have you done?" Christopher asked. Paige realized that he was seeking confirmation that the academic was the killer. He wanted that confession here and now just in case this situation didn't turn out the way they were hoping.

Paige wanted to bring the academic in, wanted to be able to arrest him so that they could see him face justice. Doing that, though, meant being able to talk him down off the edge.

"I didn't understand the Tower of the Winds when I started working on it," Dr. Kostopoulos said. "I looked at studying it as a purely academic exercise, something to discuss with colleagues and get a couple of papers out of before I moved on to more important things."

"But you didn't move on?" Paige guessed.

Dr. Kostopoulos shook his head. "As I delved deeper, I began to realize the true power that it held. The wind, the air, the natural elements that make up our world. The Greeks

spoke of each wind deity as having a different character, as needing to be appeased.”

Paige could see the desperation in Dr. Kostopoulos’s eyes, as if he were grasping for something that was just beyond his reach. She knew then that he was a man who had lost his way, who had become too lost in his own work and his own head.

“I wrote this, you know,” Dr. Kostopoulos said, as the rain continued to batter the roof of his mansion. “The tower, the sacrifices at each station, I wrote all of it!”

Paige felt a chill run down her spine. She’d seen his books. Dr. Kostopoulos had indeed written about people being killed at each of the stations of the Tower of the Winds. It was a kind of ritual that they had been chasing all along. Her mind raced as she tried to figure out how to bring him in without pushing him too hard. Even if she lunged for him, there was a chance that she might simply send him tumbling back.

“Dr. Kostopoulos, we need you to come with us,” she said, taking another step closer. “We need to understand what’s going on and how we can help you. Please come away from the edge.”

Dr. Kostopoulos shook his head. “No, no, you don’t understand,” he said. “The sacrifice must be made. The tower demands it. The winds demand it. I know you don’t understand, you can’t. So few people do. When I started to write about all of this, my colleagues didn’t understand. They said that I was deranged, that I’d given up on real research. They didn’t see that I was doing true research for the first time in my life!”

His expression was frantic now, as if searching for the right words.

“I tried to teach people, tried to show them that the different directions of the wind blow through each of our lives, that we must understand the character of each if we are to become our authentic selves. But I got followers who didn’t understand what I was saying, who tried to tack on their own stupid misunderstandings to my work! I could never show them clearly enough!”

“Is that what you’ve been doing in Winterly?” Christopher asked. “Have you been killing people to show everyone the truth?”

“Now, *you* don’t understand!” Dr. Kostopoulos shouted, his eyes blazing. “It’s about the power of the wind, the power of the elements! That was what I wrote, what I intended. Now, three deaths. There must be a fourth, and it must be me!”

Paige took another step forward, hoping to get close enough to grab him if necessary. “Dr. Kostopoulos, we need to take you into custody. We can help you, but you need to come away from the edge.”

Dr. Kostopoulos looked at her, his eyes flickering with emotion. Paige could see the fear and desperation in them, as if he were battling with himself over what to do.

She decided to try a different approach. “Listen to me, Dr. Kostopoulos,” she said. “We understand that you’re in a very dark place right now, but you don’t have to go through this alone. There are people who can help you.”

Dr. Kostopoulos looked at her, his eyes flickering with emotion.

“No one can help me,” he said. “I have to face the consequences of my actions. I have to make the final sacrifice. It’s the only way. The only way to stop this.”

Paige knew that she was running out of time. She had to do something, or he was going to jump.

“Dr. Kostopoulos, please,” Paige said, taking a step closer. “You don’t have to do this. We can help you. We can get you the help you need to understand what’s been happening to you.”

But it was too late. Dr. Kostopoulos took one more step back, off the edge of the roof, teetering for a second and then disappearing into the stormy night.

Paige lunged forward, her hand clamping onto Dr. Kostopoulos’s wrist as she threw herself flat, her arm almost wrenched from its socket by the sudden weight of the falling man. She heard Christopher’s surprised exclamation behind her, but she didn’t have time to pay it any attention.

For a moment, the world was a blur of rain and wind as Paige struggled to hold on to Dr. Kostopoulos's flailing body. She could feel his weight dragging her towards the edge, the wind howling in her ears.

"Paige!" Christopher cried out, his strong arms wrapping around her, holding her in place as Paige struggled to hold Dr. Kostopoulos's weight.

"Grab onto something!" Paige called out to him. "Dr. Kostopoulos, you have to help me pull you back up!"

He didn't, though. Instead, he flailed, fighting against Paige's grip. Paige could feel that grip starting to fail, the rain making Kostopoulos slippery, so that he started to slide through her fingers a little at a time.

In a moment of panic, Paige started to slide towards the edge of the roof with Dr. Kostopoulos. She could feel the wind whipping at her hair and the rain pelting her skin. The sound of the storm was deafening, and she could barely hear Christopher screaming for her to hold on.

Paige was hanging onto Dr. Kostopoulos with all the strength she had. She could feel the weight of his body dragging her down, and she was struggling to hold on.

Then Dr. Kostopoulos slipped from Paige's grasp, tumbling down towards the ground with his arms and legs pinwheeling wildly. Paige couldn't look away, didn't have any time to do so, which meant that she had to watch the moment when Dr. Kostopoulos hit the ground, his body breaking and twisting with the impact that killed him.

Paige gasped even as Christopher pulled her back from the edge, arms wrapping around her, holding her close, forcing her to look away from the shattered body below.

"It's over, Paige," he said. "It's done."

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Paige felt ... lost. She and Christopher waited in the house for the coroner's people to arrive along with the local PD and forensics teams. Paige sat in Dr. Kostopoulos's study, shivering as she stared at his model of the Tower of the Winds with its intricate figures and its bloodstains.

"I could have saved him," she said. "I *should* have saved him."

Christopher reached out to touch her shoulder. He was sitting on the couch beside her, his arm around her shoulders. "It's not your fault," he said. "You did the best that you could."

"He died," Paige said, taking a deep shuddering breath. "He jumped off the roof, and he died."

"It's not your fault," Christopher repeated. "This is a man who killed three people, and he chose to kill himself rather than face justice for it. You heard him up there; he couldn't live with himself after everything he'd done."

Paige glanced up at him. "What if he was innocent?"

Christopher shook his head. "I don't think that he was innocent," he said. "I think that he was delusional. I think that he killed those people because of something he imagined in his book and then he felt like he had to keep killing until he got it right. But he wasn't right. His book wasn't right. And he died because he was so far into his delusion that he didn't know how to get out of it."

Christopher made it sound so easy, so simple, when for Paige, none of this was simple.

Christopher looked at his phone. "Detective Johnson and the others are downstairs. The coroner's people are taking the body. I'll go down to talk to them all. I'll get forensics to come up here to test the bloodstains on the tower model. Once we get confirmation that the stains belong to the victims, we'll

have enough to call this case closed. But Sauer will want a report on what happened up on the roof.”

“I’ll start writing it,” Paige told him. She knew that it was better to get it down now, while it was fresh, and maybe, just maybe, doing that could distract her from the image of Dr. Kostopoulos falling.

Christopher left the room, leaving Paige alone with her thoughts. She looked back at the model of the Tower of the Winds, feeling a chill run down her spine. There was something about the intricate figures and the bloodstains that made her uneasy, as if the model was a symbol for everything that had gone wrong in Dr. Kostopoulos’s life.

She still couldn’t shake off the feeling that there was more to this case than they had uncovered. Christopher thought that the case was closed, but something still didn’t feel finished about all of it to Paige.

Paige tried to focus. She knew that she had to produce a report on how Dr. Kostopoulos had fallen, so she took out her phone to try to write the basics of it down. Even doing that, she couldn’t shake the image of Dr. Kostopoulos falling from the roof, his body twisted and broken on the ground below.

Paige couldn’t settle. She got up and walked over to the tower model. It was a beautiful piece of work, intricate and detailed, with every figure and symbol carefully crafted. But now, it was stained with blood, a reminder of the horror that had unfolded.

She tried to get the events that had unfolded on the roof into some kind of order in her head. She wondered what kind of person could become so delusional that they would kill multiple people and then ultimately take their own life. She couldn’t imagine being in that kind of mental state, even having worked as a psychologist with people who had suffered terrible mental conditions, some of which had pushed them to do awful things.

Paige sighed, feeling exhausted and drained. She rubbed her eyes and tried to focus on the report again, but her mind was too scattered.



She needed to focus. They'd approached the house and found the door open. They'd called out for Dr. Kostopoulos. They'd searched the house for him when he hadn't responded. They'd found him on the roof, where he'd ranted about the Tower of the Winds and confessed to his part in the murders ...

Except that wasn't what had happened, was it? Dr. Kostopoulos hadn't confessed, not exactly. He'd said that he couldn't live with himself for what he'd done, but he'd never come out and said outright that he'd killed the three women who had died. He'd never confessed to killing them, only to writing their deaths.

Paige sat there, thinking about that fact. She sat there while a couple of forensic techs came and bagged the model tower as evidence, while they started to go through the rest of Dr. Kostopoulos's possessions.

Paige went looking for a copy of his last book, trying to reassure herself that this was the work of a man who was so obsessed, so dangerous, that he had undoubtedly done this.

She found a copy and started to read. As she did so, she remembered just how much violence there had been in this last work by the academic. But he'd been tormented by the model of the Tower of the Winds. He'd been obsessed with its figures and symbols.

She started to read through the book again, looking for the passages that had sent shivers down her spine before and made her so uncomfortable she had barely been able to keep reading. The same passages had her sitting there with her blood running cold this time.

There was a big difference between this version and the version that Paige had skimmed through online before coming here: this version had notes scribbled in the margins in a couple of different colors of ink, almost as if Dr. Kostopoulos was having a conversation with himself about it all. Arguing with himself.

"What are you doing?" Christopher asked as he came back into the room.

“I’m reading through Dr. Kostopoulos’s work, trying to convince myself that he’s the killer,” Paige said.

“You really don’t think that he is?” Christopher replied with a frown. “After everything that happened?”

Paige considered that. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “It’s just that ... his confession on the roof wasn’t exactly a confession. He never outright said that he killed those women. And then there are these notes in the margins of his book, like he was talking to himself, trying to justify something. I don’t know ... it just doesn’t add up.”

Christopher crossed his arms. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that there might be more to this than just a crazy academic who turned into a killer,” Paige said. “Think about it, Christopher. Assume that he’s the killer.”

“As far as I can see, he *is* the killer,” Christopher pointed out.

“Then why did we find him up here tonight, ready to kill himself?” That part didn’t make any sense to Paige.

“Maybe he had a sudden attack of conscience?” Christopher suggested. “You heard him up there. He was sorry for what he’d done.”

“Then why didn’t he do that after one murder or hand himself in?” Paige asked. “I know killers’ minds, and Dr. Kostopoulos was obsessed, completely obsessed. If he was the killer, trying to recreate the Tower of the Winds the way he wrote it in his book, then why didn’t he finish what he started?”

“So, your reasoning for him not being the killer is that he didn’t kill enough people?” Christopher said.

Paige shrugged. “Four winds, maybe eight if he’s counting all of them rather than just the cardinal points. Only three murders. An obsessed killer would do anything, *anything* to complete the pattern. He wouldn’t stop early.”

“Is it possible that he considered himself to be the last part of that pattern?” Christopher asked.

Paige shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe. But it still doesn’t add up. And then there are those notes in the margins of his book. It’s like he was talking to someone, trying to convince them or himself of something.”

“There’s the blood on the model to consider,” Christopher said.

“We don’t know yet that it’s from the victims,” Paige said. “Another thing: have the search teams found any sign of climbing rope here? Did *we* see any when we looked?”

“Not yet,” Christopher admitted. Paige could hear the reluctance in his voice, and she thought that she could understand why.

“Christopher, I know you want to get back to DC. I know you want to get into a room with Anne Dawson and get answers out of her. Believe me, I want the same thing, but I really don’t think that we’re done here.”

Paige caught the flicker of pain that crossed Christopher’s face with those words.

“Paige, I know you’re trying to be thorough, but we have to follow the evidence,” Christopher said, his voice firm. “We have a confession from Dr. Kostopoulos, and we have physical evidence in the blood on the model. We can’t ignore that.”

“Kostopoulos only said that he’d done something wrong, and that he’d written the murders,” Paige insisted. “He’s obviously linked to all of this in some way, but that doesn’t necessarily make him the murderer. What if ... what if someone read his book and decided to recreate it? What if *that’s* why he felt so guilty tonight? What if he threw himself off the building because he thought it would complete the pattern and stop this?”

“That’s a lot of what ifs,” Christopher pointed out. “We can’t just ignore what happened here tonight.”

“I’m not saying we should ignore it,” Paige countered. “I’m just saying that there might be more to this than we think. We need to keep digging.”

“And what if we don’t find anything?” Christopher asked. “What if this leads nowhere? We can’t keep chasing shadows.”

Paige sighed. She knew that Christopher was right. They couldn't keep going in circles, trying to find something that might not be there. But she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this case than they had uncovered.

“Please, Christopher, I'm asking you to trust me. If there's one thing I know, it's the mindset of killers, and I truly don't believe that Dr. Kostopoulos was the killer.”

Christopher hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Alright, Paige. I trust your instincts. For now. But let's not ignore the evidence we have either. We need to keep investigating and find out exactly what happened here.”

Paige nodded, feeling relieved that Christopher was willing to keep looking for answers. “Agreed. Let's keep going.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

It was important to pick out the right victim, the right sacrifice to the winds. She had to embody some of the qualities of the deity she was meant to represent, or this wouldn't work properly.

He'd been fascinated with Dr. Kostopoulos's work for as long as he could remember now. The obsession started as an innocent interest in Ancient Greek mythology, something anyone might stumble into, but it soon turned into something much darker. He had found himself drawn to the Tower of the Winds, the intricate details of the figures and symbols, and the idea of the winds being controlled by a deity.

He had read Dr. Kostopoulos's books multiple times, trying to understand the man's mind and his obsession. It had quickly become clear to him that he could go further than the message of unlocking some metaphorical tower within himself. By making the right sacrifices in the right places, he could draw something of the power of the winds to himself. He would become more; he would become powerful in a way that he had never felt in his life prior to this.

He would become free.

The life he'd had before he learned about the Tower of the Winds had been a pitiful thing. He'd been weak, easily cowed, eager to please others. Now, he was strong. Now, he was someone to be afraid of.

He sat in his car outside Zelda Mackie's apartment, waiting for her to come down. He knew that she would do it, despite the storm. She would be his Zephyrus, gentle and favorable, easy to appease. She was a kindergarten teacher, young and pretty, blonde-haired and blue eyed, with a smile that lit up her entire face. He had seen her walking to work multiple times, and she had caught his eye immediately. He'd seen the potential in her, known the role that she would ultimately play.

As he watched her step out of the building, he felt his heart rate increase with excitement. This would be his fourth sacrifice, the completion of the four winds, the most important step towards his ascension. He might fulfil the full eight in time, but the cardinal points ... they were what mattered. He quickly got out of the car and started to follow her, staying far enough behind so as not to raise suspicion until he was ready to act.

He had the syringe in his pocket, ready to use. The ropes were waiting in the trunk of his car, both to bind her and to hoist her into position to make the sacrifice. He'd already picked out the perfect spot in the west of Winterly, one that would display her to the world, to the gods, to everyone.

Would he get to see the police running around again, dragged in by his efforts? It was exhilarating to watch them try to connect the dots, to see them struggle and fail to understand the true purpose behind his actions. He was careful, meticulous, leaving behind no traces of evidence that would lead back to him. There was a certain satisfaction in knowing that.

As he followed Zelda down the street, he felt a sense of serenity wash over him. He was doing the work of the gods, fulfilling a destiny that had been written for him long before he was born. He was their chosen one, their messenger, their disciple.

He watched as she turned down a quiet alleyway, and he quickened his pace. This was the spot. She always took this route, and he was ready to seize his moment. It was time.

He took out the syringe and approached her from behind, his footsteps quickening. Even as he did it, though, he saw her turning, and now, her expression looked neither mild nor favorable.

“What do you want, you creep? You think I haven't seen you looking at me before?”

She should have run; she should have turned and sprinted as fast as the wind that she was to be a sacrifice to, rather than trying to confront him.

He lunged forward. She struck out at him, but he moved inside the blow. He had already started to become stronger. He was more than strong enough to do this. He grabbed Zelda, clamping a hand over her mouth so that she couldn't scream for help as he injected her neck with the sedative.

She continued to fight for several moments, swinging punches at him that he didn't feel. Those punches quickly lost their power though, and soon her body went limp in his arms.

He hoisted her over his shoulder and made his way back to his car, feeling the weight of her body against him. She was lighter than he expected. He stuffed her into the trunk then, tying her tightly so that there would be no chance of her getting away. He didn't waste any time, quickly binding her hands and feet together with the ropes he had prepared. He closed the trunk of his car and got in the driver's seat, starting the engine with a sense of purpose.

Above him, the storm continued to rage. It was the perfect weather for what he had in mind; the perfect demonstration of the power of the winds even as he got ready to make his sacrifice to them.

As he drove towards the west of Winterly, he couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation. The fourth sacrifice was the most important one, and he could feel the power growing within him with each passing moment. Soon, he would be able to complete the pattern, just as Dr. Kostopoulos had laid out. Soon, the Tower of the Winds would be complete.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Paige knew that she couldn't stop. She'd pushed hard throughout today, and now she'd seen a suspect fall to his death right in front of her. Any other time, that would have been a signal to stop, to rest, to take stock of what was going on.

Paige couldn't rest now, though. There was too much at stake, too many lives that hung in the balance. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this case than they had uncovered.

She was going through Dr. Kostopoulos's study, trying to find anything that might help. Christopher was assisting her with it, working his way through letters and books, reading each one and then setting it aside.

"What exactly are we looking for with all of this?" he asked as he worked.

Paige sighed, rubbing her temples. "Honestly, I don't know. Anything that might give us a clue, I suppose. Something that connects all of this together."

"And what will that look like?"

Paige paused, considering her response. "Anything that might suggest what the killer is planning next if it isn't Kostopoulos. Or something to prove that it was him. We know that this is about the Tower of the Winds. The patterns, the symbols, the sacrifices ... there has to be some sort of method to their madness, and we need to find it before they strike again."

Christopher nodded, his expression serious as he continued to sift through the documents. "So, assuming that it isn't Dr. Kostopoulos, you think the killer is going to strike again soon?"

"I think either today or in the next couple of days," Paige said. "Once he hears about the death of Dr. Kostopoulos, that



could be a trigger for it, or he could already be planning it. And with the way Kostopoulos was talking up on the roof, I don't like this storm."

"You think that it could prompt the killer to finish his sequence?" Christopher said.

"Exactly." Paige liked that Christopher was willing to go along with her on this, even though she knew that he probably wasn't entirely convinced that Dr. Kostopoulos wasn't the killer. It was good to know that he trusted her like that.

Now, Paige had to live up to that trust.

On impulse, she called up a map of Winterly on her phone, plotting out the locations of the three murders to date. They were spread out around the city, to the north, east, and south.

"The fourth sacrifice is yet to come, and the killer will need to choose the perfect spot for it," Paige said, studying the map. "Somewhere to the west, perhaps? That seems to be the only area left untouched by their twisted pattern, and it fits with the wind that would be next on his list."

Christopher leaned over her shoulder, examining the map as well. "If that's the case, then we need to be ready to intercept them. We'll need to coordinate with the local officers and set up a perimeter to catch them in the act."

"Yes, but *where*?" Paige asked. They couldn't cover the whole of the western part of Winterly in the hope that they would be able to catch the killer. They needed to find a suitably high place that the killer might use for the culmination of his scheme. Even then, they had no way of knowing for sure that the killer was going to strike again tonight.

As the storm howled outside, Paige felt a sense of foreboding settle over her. She couldn't shake the feeling that they were running out of time, that they might be too late to stop the killer from completing their pattern.

"There are a lot of high buildings out that way," Christopher said.

"And the killer has shown that he's prepared to use more than just buildings," Paige pointed out. "There was the balloon, and the water tower."

“What if the killer chooses to use a natural landmark?” Christopher suggested. “Something like a cliff or a hill that’s high enough to satisfy their need for a sacrifice but also secluded enough to avoid detection.”

Paige nodded, but the thought didn’t help. “That only expands the range of possibilities. Unless we can find an exact spot, we’d be wandering around blindly.”

Paige went back to Dr. Kostopoulos’s work, hoping that it might provide further clues to the location, but as far as she could see, he mostly wrote about symbols and their meanings, not about the necessity of geographical precision. That meant that the killer could potentially pick any high place for his last kill.

No, trying to work out the location wasn’t the way that they were going to solve this. They had to think of something else. They had to try to find a way to work out the identity of the killer.

What had their visit to Dr. Kostopoulos’s house given them? They’d found a few of his works, heard him talk about how guilty he felt. They’d found the model of the Tower of the Winds with blood on it. At first glance, all of that pointed back at him as the killer.

Paige went through his last book, though, the one with all the notations. Something struck her as she did it. Something she hadn’t noticed before.

“This isn’t just in two different colors of ink,” she said. “There are two different sets of handwriting here. They’re similar, which is why I didn’t spot it, but there are differences too.”

Christopher looked up, intrigued. “What do you mean?”

Paige flipped through the pages, pointing out the differences in the handwriting. “Look at this section. The notes in blue are much more technical, while the ones in black are more personal. It’s like someone else was writing in the margins, responding to Dr. Kostopoulos’s work.”

Christopher leaned in, studying the pages. “You’re right,” he said finally. “That means ... what? That Dr. Kostopoulos

shared his copy of the book with someone?”

Paige felt a sense of excitement building within her. This was something new, some new clue that could break the case wide open.

“Think about it. These notes, the way they argue with one another. It’s like he had an assistant, someone who was working on this with him, editing him as he went, challenging him.”

“An assistant who might be just as obsessed as he was,” Christopher said.

Paige nodded. “An assistant with access to the model of the tower, one who could have applied the blood to it. What if ... what if the reason Dr. Kostopoulos felt so guilty was that he worked out what his assistant was doing? What if he felt as though he was the one who had sent him down that path?”

“Why not just call the cops then and tell them?” Christopher asked. “Why wouldn’t he just report his assistant to them?”

Paige shrugged. “I don’t know. Not for sure. Maybe he felt responsible for his assistant’s obsession with the Tower of the Winds. Maybe he felt like it was his duty to try and help him.”

Whatever the reason, Dr. Kostopoulos had died without telling them about this other person. That meant that their identity was a secret, one that Paige and Christopher would have to figure out.

“Go through everything here again,” Paige said. “See if you can find anything that might point to who this person is. I’m going to look through Kostopoulos’s social media again. If he has an assistant, maybe there’s a picture of them somewhere.”

Christopher nodded, already back to rifling through the documents. Paige took out her phone, scrolling through Dr. Kostopoulos’s social media accounts. She knew that it was a long shot, but it was worth trying.

As she scrolled, Paige’s mind kept returning to the idea of an assistant. If Dr. Kostopoulos had been working with someone on this, then there was a good chance that they had

access to all of his notes, all of his research. They would have known more than enough to do all of this.

Paige paused on a photo of Dr. Kostopoulos at a conference, his arm around the shoulder of a younger man. The man was smiling into the camera, looking happy and carefree.

*Me and Alvin at a conference of people actually willing to listen for once*, the caption read.

Paige went back through Dr. Kostopoulos's other photos, trying to find more pictures of the young man. She found a few, including one of him and Dr. Kostopoulos standing in front of the Tower of the Winds in Greece.

"Look for any reference to an Alvin anywhere," Paige said.

"There's an Alvin Richards who's thanked in the dedications to a couple of the more recent books," Christopher said. "And the name Alvin comes up in a couple of the notes."

Alvin Richards? Was that the name of the assistant? More importantly, was that the name of the killer? Was that the man who had murdered three women and left them in high places as offerings to the wind?

Also, where had Paige heard that name before? She felt certain that she had, but for a second or two she couldn't place it.

Then she did.

She started as she remembered, pulling up the police files from Ellie Kane's murder. The police had interviewed several passersby who had seen the body, asking them if they had spotted anything suspicious.

Alvin Richards had been one of them. He'd been there. Had he been watching it all, watching the local cops, laughing at them while they tried to deal with such a horrific murder?

Paige looked for Alvin Richards online, quickly finding his social media. In it, she saw something else that made her stop short: a picture of him in climbing gear, halfway up a rock wall.

"It's him," Paige said. "It has to be him."

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

They found an address for Alvin Richards through the DMV and started driving over there as quickly as they could in the storm. Paige clung to her seat as Christopher sped through the streets of the city, weaving in and out of the little traffic on the road, ignoring the way the water made the streets slippery as they cornered. Paige's heart pounded with anticipation. She didn't know what they would find when they got there, but she knew that it wouldn't be good.

Would Alvin fight when they got there? Would he try to run? Paige knew that they had to be ready for anything that he tried.

The house was a small, rundown place on the outskirts of town, with peeling paint and an overgrown yard, obviously not cared for compared to the houses around it. It was a far cry from the mansion where Dr. Kostopoulos lived. Paige and Christopher parked the car and got out, approaching the door cautiously.

Paige hesitated, her hand hovering over the doorbell. "What if he's not here?" she whispered.

There was no sign of a car in the driveway, while the house was quiet, with no sign of life inside. But that didn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe he was just hunkering down out of the storm.

Christopher shook his head. "We'll deal with that when we get to it. For now, we have to assume he's inside."

Paige nodded, steeling herself. She pressed the doorbell, waiting nervously for a response.

Christopher was less patient. He stepped forward, hammering on the door with his fist. "Alvin Richards, this is the FBI! Open up!"

There was still no answer from inside. Paige could feel the tension building up inside her as they waited for a response.

“Check the back of the house,” Christopher said. “I’ll cover here.”

Paige nodded. She knew that there was a chance that a killer like Alvin would try to run when he heard the FBI coming. She headed around the side of the house, her gun drawn in case of trouble.

The back of the house was just as run-down as the front, with a rickety, wooden fence separating the yard from the neighbors. Paige scanned the area, searching for any sign of movement. She made her way carefully towards the back door, her gun held out in front of her.

She could hear Christopher still knocking on the door at the front, his voice ringing out clearly.

“Alvin Richards! Open up! This is your last chance!”

Paige kept covering the rear of the house, making sure that Alvin wasn’t about to come charging out at her. She heard a noise and span towards it, but she saw that it was only Christopher approaching.

“There’s no answer,” he said.

“What do we do now?” Paige asked.

In response to Paige’s question, Christopher took a step towards the rear door of the house and kicked it, splintering the wood around the lock as it broke open. The two of them moved into the house, turning on lights as they went to counter the greyness of the weather.

Inside, the air was musty and still. There was no sign that anyone was there. The only sound was the soft pattering of their shoes on the old linoleum floors.

“Clear,” Christopher said from the kitchen, his voice echoing through the empty house. “Paige, check the bedrooms.”

Paige nodded, making her way up the narrow staircase. The first bedroom was empty, the bed stripped of its sheets. The second was the same, with nothing but a few old clothes and some empty bottles scattered around the room. It was only in the third bedroom that she found something interesting.

This bedroom was obviously lived in, with clothes scattered on the bed and clutter all around the room. It was the nature of that clutter that made Paige's breath catch in her throat.

"Up here!" she called out to Christopher, hearing him come running.

The room was full of materials relating to the Tower of the Winds. There were books, notes, and sketches, all carefully laid out on the bed and surrounding surfaces. Alvin had been studying the tower, just like Dr. Kostopoulos. Alongside Kostopoulos, sharing in his obsession and then going further, into violence.

There were maps, diagrams, and notes spread out on the bed and the floor. Paige scanned the notes, her eyes widening as she realized that they contained detailed information on the tower's history and construction.

"Look at this," she said, holding up a piece of paper. "It's a list of potential sacrifices, with dates and locations to grab them."

Christopher peered over her shoulder, his eyes flicking over the list. "There's three names on here from the times of the murders," he said. "This has to be it. This has to be where he planned everything."

Paige nodded, her mind racing. "But where is he now?"

"Maybe he's already gone to make the next sacrifice," Christopher said, his voice grim. "There's another name on this list. Zelda Mackie."

Paige shuddered at the thought. They had to move fast if they wanted to catch him. If they wanted to save a young woman's life.

"We need to get to him before he can finish this."

Christopher nodded, his face grim. "We need to find him first."

"There's no car in the driveway," Paige said. "That suggests that he took it with him to go wherever he's going. If we can trace the car, then we can trace him."

“I’ll go get Detective Johnson and his people to check the traffic camera footage for Winterly,” Christopher said. “With so few cars on the road, there shouldn’t be much to look through. You stay here and see if you can find anything else.”

He left the room to make the call. Paige started to go through Alvin’s notes, trying to use her psychological skills to get a sense of the person they were dealing with.

As she scanned through the notes, she began to see patterns in the way Alvin thought and the way he approached his obsession. He was meticulous and detail-oriented, with a deep fascination for the Tower of the Winds and its history. But there was something darker beneath the surface, a sense of madness that lurked behind his careful planning.

Paige shuddered as she read through a list of potential victims, each with their own detailed descriptions and notes on their personalities. It was clear that Alvin was not just a researcher or a scholar, but a true believer in the power of sacrifice and the ancient gods.

Christopher came back into the room as Paige finished looking through the papers. “I have a location,” he said. “Alvin Richards’s car was spotted at an old shopping mall in the west of the city. Local PD are going to send people over, but I want to get there first. We have the best chance of ending this, not them.”

Paige nodded, quickly packing up the notes and following Christopher out of the house. They climbed into their car and sped away towards the shopping mall, their lights flashing as they cut through the rain.

If the local police got there before them, there was a chance that the killer would spot them and kill his victim early. With Paige and Christopher there, there was at least a chance to try and save her.

Paige could see the old shopping mall ahead now. It stood as a main block with two towers jutting up from it, an old sign hanging between them from a series of wires.

It was long abandoned, its formerly bright sheen dull, some of its windows broken and boarded up. The old sign that hung



between the towers was missing a letter, and the whole thing was unlit, only occasional flashes of lightning illuminating it.

There was scaffolding around it, as if someone had been working on it recently. Paige's mind raced as they pulled up to the deserted parking lot, trying to work out where Alvin would be with his latest victim.

The parking lot was empty, except for one car parked in the far corner. Christopher pulled up next to it, and the two of them got out of the car, their guns drawn. The only sounds were the rustling of the wind through the empty parking lot and the steady drumming of the falling rain.

Paige was grateful that she and Christopher had gotten there before the Winterly PD. It meant that there was no chance that Alvin had already been scared off from the location. Not that he *got* scared by the presence of the police. They'd already established that he liked to watch them as they arrived, liked to watch the chaos that he caused.

She approached the car, checking for any sign of movement. The car was old and rusty, with a dent on the driver's side door. Paige saw that the passenger window was slightly open, while the trunk was open and empty. Had Alvin kept his victim in it before moving her into the mall somewhere?

She saw that the car was empty, but something inside of her told her that Alvin was close. She found herself looking up at the roof of the mall. She couldn't see Alvin, but she had no doubt that that would be where he was heading.

"There's no time to wait for backup," Paige said, but she suspected that Christopher wasn't going to suggest it.

"With just the two of us, there are going to be more places that he can hide and run," Christopher pointed out.

"But if we wait, then there's a chance that he kills his victim before we can get to them."

Christopher followed her gaze and nodded in agreement. "Let's go," he said, leading the way towards the mall entrance.

The entrance was locked. The door was cool to the touch, but Paige could feel the coldness under the layer of dust that

caked the door. Paige watched Christopher try to open it, but it obviously wasn't the way that Alvin had gotten in, dragging his victim with him.

Paige looked around for another way in. She moved around the side of the building, checking each of the doors, trying to find one that would let her and Christopher inside.

Finally, she spotted a broken window at ground level, formerly boarded up, but now, those boards had been ripped away. They hung open, the broken window gaping like an open mouth.

"It looks like he went in this way," Paige said, gesturing to the broken window. Shattered glass covered the ground below the window and the boards that had been used to cover the window were broken and ripped away.

Christopher looked up towards the roof. "And we know where he'll be going."

Paige motioned for Christopher to follow her. They made their way carefully through the broken glass, being careful not to cut themselves, and stepped into the mall.

There was little light coming in through the windows, so that the darkness was palpable, pressing in on them from all sides. Paige could hear Christopher's breathing, the sound of his footsteps as he moved closer. Her own heart was pounding in her chest, the adrenaline pumping through her veins.

Paige felt a shiver across her skin, making the hairs there stand on end. The air was colder inside, but that wasn't the only reason for it. She could feel the worry building in her that they might be too late. Even if they weren't, they were approaching a murderer who had already killed three people. If they blundered in blindly and he saw them coming, they might find themselves walking into a trap.

They didn't have a choice, though. Alvin was here with his victim. There was no time to waste. They had to get up there before Alvin was able to complete his grim ritual, sacrificing the last of his four victims in his version of the Tower of the Winds.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

They moved quickly through the mall, searching for any sign of Alvin or Zelda. Paige could hear a faint sound in the distance, something like a soft whimpering. Her heart sank as she realized that it was probably the woman he'd taken, still alive but afraid.

The only bright point in that was that it suggested that the woman Alvin had kidnapped was still alive. There might still be a chance to save her life. They followed the sound, their guns still drawn.

They couldn't just rush to the roof. There were plenty of high spots on the upper floors of the mall, and any one of them might serve as a place for Alvin to kill Zelda Mackie. Paige knew that they would have to clear the mall space by space, and the time it took to do that might give the killer they were hunting enough time to finish what he had started.

Paige couldn't allow that. She was determined to get there in time.

The mall was remarkably clean. There was the scent of cleaning chemicals floating in the air, and Paige could also smell paint and new carpets, a fresh smell that signaled that the mall was being worked on, ready to be reopened. Paige briefly wondered what the news that a killer had chosen this as the site of a murder would do to the place, but she pushed that thought away. She wasn't going to let Alvin succeed in his grim task.

Paige realized that she couldn't hear the whimpering in the distance anymore. She motioned to Christopher, signaling him to stop. They both stood still, listening intently for any sound. The silence was absolute now.

Paige's heart raced as she imagined the worst-case scenario. Had Alvin already killed Zelda Mackie? Had they arrived too late? She shook her head, trying to dispel the thought.

“We have to keep moving,” Paige said, trying to keep her voice steady. “We can’t give him enough time to do what he’s planning to do.”

Christopher nodded, and the two of them continued down the halls of the mall. They kept their guns at the ready, scanning the surrounding area for any sign of movement.

They headed upwards. Paige moved towards the escalator, her gun pointed forward. The sound of her footsteps echoed in the silence, and the only other sound she could hear was her own breathing.

Finally, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She spun around, her gun raised, ready to fire. But it was only a rat, scurrying away from her. She let out a breath that she didn’t realize she had been holding.

Christopher obviously noticed the tension in her because his hand closed around her wrist, squeezing it gently. Paige looked over at him, his eyes meeting hers in the dark.

“We’ll get her out of here,” he said, his voice steady. “We’ll stop him.”

Paige nodded, feeling a sense of relief that she had someone like Christopher by her side. Together, they made their way through the corridors of the abandoned mall, their guns at the ready.

“We can’t cover all of this in time if we stay together,” Christopher said as they continued to make their way through the mall. “We’re going to need to split up.”

Paige hesitated at the suggestion. Splitting up would make them more vulnerable, but she knew Christopher was right. They needed to cover more ground if they were going to find Alvin and his victim.

“Okay,” Paige said, nodding. “You take the third floor, and I’ll take the fourth. We’ll meet at the roof.”

Christopher nodded in agreement, and they went their separate ways. Paige made her way up the stairs to the fourth floor, her gun at the ready. The dim light of the mall meant that Paige had to use her flashlight to pick her way through the

empty spaces, looking into each of the mall's abandoned units to make sure that Alvin wasn't there with his victim.

She moved quickly, checking each room as she passed, but there was no sign of Alvin. Procedure said that she had to check them all, to be thorough, but it was still hard not to run straight for the roof. She felt a sense of urgency knowing that time was running out. If she didn't find them soon, it might be too late.

Paige found a door leading upwards through one of the mall's towers and went through it, making her way up and up, keeping her gun trained on every dark corner in case it held some threat. Paige kept climbing the stairs inside the tower, determined to catch up to Alvin as he prepared for his last sacrifice.

Finally, she reached the roof. The wind was howling, and Paige could feel the cold air on her skin. The storm was showing no sign of relenting as rain battered her, forcing Paige to wipe it out of her eyes, trying to focus as she looked for any sign of Alvin or even Christopher. He was meant to meet her up there, after all.

The rooftop around her was exposed to the elements, the rain pelting her skin like icicles, the cold wind chilling her bones. The rain was a cloying, cold slap in the face, the wind a maniacal howl.

Through the rain, Paige stared out, trying to see anything. Her flashlight's beam reflected from the wires of the sign that hung between the buildings, several of those wires broken and hanging down.

Paige looked past them, and she saw three figures. One was bound, stumbling. That had to be Zelda. Another was Alvin. Paige recognized him from the photographs that she'd seen of him with Dr. Kostopoulos.

Then there was Christopher, approaching over the rooftop, clearly planning to make the arrest. Paige felt a surge of hope that this would soon be over, that her partner would be able to take down the bad guy, and the woman he'd taken captive would be safe.

Even as Paige thought it, Alvin turned around, his eyes falling on Christopher. Paige couldn't hear the words that passed between them, but she knew that Christopher would be demanding that Alvin give himself up.

Alvin raised his hands, and Paige saw Christopher move in to cuff him. That was the moment when Alvin lunged, knocking the gun Christopher held aside, slamming into him, and striking with all the fury and strength that came from his madness.

Paige wanted to help then, but she couldn't. She was stuck on a separate rooftop, connected only by the sign and its trailing wires. She could only stand and watch as the two of them fought.

It was a brutal fight, both men were evenly matched, and Paige could see the determination in Christopher's eyes as he tried to take down Alvin. He struck with fists and elbows, his training making the difference, letting him land blows through the gaps in Alvin's defenses. He closed in, reaching for Alvin, obviously trying to overpower him and handcuff him.

That was when Paige saw Alvin strike back with a vicious headbutt that caught Christopher square in the face. Paige saw Christopher stagger, obviously stunned by the blow.

That was all Alvin needed to follow up with a barrage of punches. The sound of the rain and the wind was drowned out by the sound of fists hitting flesh. Paige could see Christopher struggling to defend himself against Alvin's frenzied attack. Blood was streaming down his face, and his movements were becoming slower and weaker.

Paige saw the moment when Alvin knocked Christopher down. Then, worse, he stood over him and lifted him back to his feet, moving him towards the edge of the roof. Paige realized to her horror that he planned to throw Christopher over the edge.

Paige's heart felt as though a hand was closing around it, her terror for Christopher was that great. She knew that she had to do something, or Christopher would be killed. Paige lifted her gun, aiming carefully. She fired, the sound of the shot loud even against the storm.

The wind was too strong and the haze of the rain too great. Paige's shot went wide. Worse, Christopher was between her and Alvin now, so that she couldn't risk a second shot that might hit him.

Paige's heart pounded in her chest as she tried to think of a way to help. She could see the wire on the sign between the rooftops, and an idea struck her.

She ran towards the edge of the rooftop, her eyes locked on the wire. She took a deep breath and then she jumped.

Paige landed on the sign, her feet slipping on the wet metal. She fought to keep her balance, her arms flailing out to grasp the wires.

For a moment, she hung there, swaying, then she started to make her way along the sign towards the far rooftop.

Paige edged along the sign. The wind was so fierce that it threatened to rip her away, and she struggled to keep her balance. Time seemed to pass in slow motion as she inched closer to the far roof. Spots danced in front of her eyes, but she kept going, knowing that she was the best thing that she could do to save her partner's life.

No, not just her partner. Christopher was so much more than that.

Paige tried to tell herself that it was just like being back on an obstacle course in training, but those hadn't come with the risk of a deadly fall to the ground below. Paige forced herself not to look down and made herself focus on the spot where Alvin was still struggling with Christopher. Christopher was fighting not to be thrown over the edge, but Paige could see that it was a fight that he was losing.

Paige had to get to him, but now there was a problem beyond the sheer difficulty of trying to hold onto the sign. Paige was almost at the far roof, but she had reached the point where there was a missing letter. There was no structure for her to climb over, only a couple of dangling wires hanging down.

On an obstacle course, that might have been enough to make Paige turn back. She couldn't make that jump, not in this

weather. Yet Christopher was dead if she didn't.

Taking a deep breath, Paige jumped out into the open air, hands reaching for the wires that hung there.



## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

For a moment or two, Paige seemed to hang in midair, the time seeming to stretch until that second or two became an eternity. Paige found herself thinking of Christopher, of her future, of her life, of everything that might not happen if she didn't make this jump.

Paige would plummet to the ground and then Christopher would follow her. Zelda Mackie would be murdered, a sacrifice to the winds. Alvin might escape justice. Paige would never get to look the Exsanguination Killer in the eye either, would never get to finally finish what she had made her life's work after her father died.

She found herself wondering if this was the moment when she was going to save Christopher, or if they were both going to be killed.

Paige felt a jolt of pain as her hands closed around the wires, the metal biting into her skin. She gritted her teeth and held on, the wind whipping her hair into her face.

She leaned forward as she swung her feet back and forth, trying to build up momentum for the next swing.

Paige closed her eyes for a moment, then she swung back. The wires swayed and creaked, moving in the wind, and the rain lashed her face, blinding her.

Paige's plan had to work. There was no alternative. If she didn't reach Christopher in time, he was going to be killed. Even if she did make it back, there was still no guarantee that they would be able to escape together. She knew that if she wanted any chance at all of saving Christopher, she had to reach him now.

Paige's heart was pumping as she swung back and forth, her fingers locked tight around the wires that stretched out above the gap between the rooftops. She could feel the strain in her muscles as she swung, but she had to ignore that. She focused on reaching the rooftop that was just in front of her.

Paige tried to judge the perfect moment for her leap. Christopher was still struggling with Alvin, desperately trying to keep from being thrown off the roof. Paige realized that if she didn't act now, then Christopher would be thrown down to the ground below, and she wouldn't be able to help him. Paige swung towards the roof, took a deep breath, and then she let go.

Paige sailed through the air and smashed into the struggling forms of Christopher and Alvin, knocking them both from their feet. Paige hit the ground hard and rolled, ignoring the pain in her hands as she came up. She pulled her gun, but Alvin was already ducking back out of sight behind a large ventilation duct.

"Give it up, Alvin," Paige said. "It's over. There's nowhere for you to run!"

"I'm not here to run!" Alvin said. "I'm here to finish this. It *must* be finished. Once a ritual like this has been started, it can't be simply abandoned. I won't let anything stand in my way. Not you, not him, not *anything*."

Paige looked over to Christopher. He was lying there, conscious but obviously not able to help at the moment.

"Are you all right?" Paige asked Christopher, keeping her gun trained on the ventilation duct in case Alvin tried anything.

"I'll be fine," Christopher assured her. He started to get up, then slumped back down.

"That doesn't look like fine to me," Paige said. She looked over to the young woman Alvin had taken to be his victim. She was standing there, still bound.

"Don't worry, Zelda," Paige said. "We're with the FBI. We'll get you out of here. Stay with my partner."

There was no time to stop and untie her, not with a killer lurking just yards away. That had been a clear part of Paige's training: take down an active threat first, then deal with everything else.

Paige advanced on the ventilation duct. "Alvin, come out with your hands up. I know you're armed. I won't hesitate to

shoot.”

“You can’t kill me,” he said. “The wind gods have already given me too much power. I paid their price, in blood, and I am stronger than you will ever be.”

Did he really believe that? Did he truly think that he was being granted ... what? Some kind of divine boon that would make him superior, invincible?

“Alvin, this has to stop. We’ve already halted your ritual. You need to give yourself up.”

There was no reply. Alvin didn’t come out from behind the ventilation duct. Paige couldn’t hear anything, either, which wasn’t a good sign. She edged closer, her gun raised.

Paige moved around it, her whole body tense. As she did so, Alvin met her, coming the other way, his knife slashing at her arm. The sudden, sharp pain of it was enough to make Paige drop her gun, the weapon going off in an almost deafening shot as it clattered down on the rooftop.

Alvin attacked her then, his knife slashing for her throat. Paige blocked his blow with her arm, wincing at the pain, trying to dodge out of the way. She blocked a second blow, then a third, kicking at Alvin’s knee. It buckled for a moment and that gave Paige a chance to get both of her hands on his knife arm.

She held on for dear life. At such a close range, it was all Paige could do to keep Alvin from stabbing her. Alvin’s breath was warm on her face, his body pressing her back, his strength almost more than Paige could handle. She knew that if she gave up her grip, she was going to die. She couldn’t let that happen. She had to hold on. She had to win.

Paige struck at Alvin then with everything she had. She hit him with knees and headbutts, trying to get him to loosen his grip on the knife. She wrenched at his arm and tripped him, bearing him to the ground, hoping that she would be able to twist the knife from his grip, or at least control him long enough that Christopher could recover and help.

Alvin looked up at her, his eyes blazing with hatred. “You’ll never win,” he said through gritted teeth. “The wind

gods will never allow it.”

“It’s done, Alvin. It’s over.”

“It’s not over until the Tower of the Winds is complete!”  
Alvin snarled.

He kicked out at Paige then, hard enough that she was sent stumbling back. Alvin wrenched clear of Paige’s grip in the same moment, so that for a second or two, he was standing over her with the knife in his hand.

Paige saw her gun away to her right. She made a quick decision and dove for it, desperately seeking something that would equalize the situation. Paige felt her fingers close around the grip, and she brought it up, aiming back at where she expected Alvin to be.

He wasn’t there. Instead, he was running back towards the bound form of Zelda Mackie. Paige snapped off a shot at him, but again, the storm made it impossible to aim properly, and she missed.

Alvin was behind his captive holding a knife to her throat while she tried to struggle.

“Now,” he said. “Now, this ends the way it always had to end. With the Tower of the Winds getting its last sacrifice.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Paige stood across from Alvin and Zelda, tension running through her as she tried to work out what she was going to do next.

She knew that it was up to her. Christopher was down, too hurt to help. The young woman Alvin was holding at knifepoint was still bound, so there was no chance that she was going to suddenly break free.

Paige considered her options. She could try to take a shot at Alvin, but with the storm raging around them, it was more likely that she would hit Zelda instead. Her earlier shots had already gone wide because of the weather, and she couldn't risk the young woman's life.

Time was running out, and she needed to act fast before Alvin carried out his twisted plan. She couldn't let him claim another victim.

Paige took a step forward, her gun still aimed at Alvin. "Let her go, Alvin. You don't have to do this. We can work this out."

Alvin laughed. "You really think I'm going to fall for that? You're just trying to buy time. But time is the one thing we don't have. The winds require a sacrifice."

Paige knew that talking was her only option right then. Trying to grab for the knife arm would only get his hostage hurt or killed. Doing nothing would give him the time to complete his sick ritual. She had to talk, to stall, to try to find a way to either talk him down or distract him long enough to act.

Paige suspected that it wasn't going to be the former. She could try to talk him down, but she knew that he was too far gone, too convinced that what he was doing was right.

"Why don't you tell me about the woman you're planning to kill?" Paige asked. "Her name is Zelda Mackie. Is that right?"

“Why?” Alvin countered. “What does it matter?”

“I want to know if this is random, or if you picked out your victims carefully. I want to understand you, Alvin.”

Actually, Paige already knew that this wasn't random. She'd seen some of the pages where Alvin had planned this. Paige's point was to try to humanize the young woman in Alvin's eyes, to remind him that he was planning to take the life of someone with her own thoughts and dreams.

“Yes, this is Zelda Mackie,” Alvin said. “She's a kindergarten teacher. She's perfect for this.”

“Hang in there, Zelda,” Paige said. She could see how frightened the young woman was, and she had to keep her calm as well. “Alvin, you don't have to do this. There's always a way out. Let's talk about it. We can find a solution that works for all of us.”

Alvin shook his head. “No, there's no other way. The winds demand a sacrifice, and I am their chosen one. I must complete the Tower of the Winds, or everything will be lost.”

“If you kill her, I will shoot,” Paige warned him. If she couldn't appeal to any humanity left in him, she could at least use the threat of lethal force to delay him.

“That will do nothing. I am chosen by the winds,” Alvin said.

Paige knew that she needed to keep Alvin talking. “And why did you choose Zelda, rather than someone else?”

“She's the perfect sacrifice,” Alvin said. “She's young; she's full of life. She embodies calmness and good favor, the attributes of Zephyrus. The winds will be pleased with her blood.”

“Alvin, that's not true. The winds don't need sacrifices. Your beliefs are twisted.”

“You don't understand,” Alvin said. “The winds have spoken to me. They've shown me the way. I am their chosen one.”

Paige wasn't getting through to him. Worse, she still couldn't think of anything that would distract him enough to

let her try to act more directly. The only thing was to try to keep him talking, draw the situation out, try to create a kind of inertia where he didn't ever quite bring himself to finish this.

"Tell me about it," Paige said. "Tell me about the Tower of the Winds. My colleague and I learned a little about it, but I want to hear what it means to you."

Alvin's eyes lit up as he began to talk about the Tower of the Winds, his voice rising in excitement.

"The Tower of the Winds is everything. From the moment I first learned about it, the moment I first read one of Dr. Kostopoulos's works, I knew that it would be at the heart of my life's work. The winds cover the world and embody all the different aspects of it. Eight winds, eight facets of what it means to be human, to be whole."

"And you aren't whole, Alvin?" Paige asked. It was the kind of question she might have asked back at the St. Just Institute when she'd been working as a psychologist, but now, her reasons were very different. She wasn't trying to assess and treat those deemed criminally insane, but instead, she was trying to find a way to save a life.

"No, I'm not," Alvin replied, his voice bitter. "I've spent my entire life searching for something to fill the emptiness inside of me. And then I found the Tower of the Winds. It's the key to everything. I was a weak, broken, young man. My life had no meaning until I found Dr. Kostopoulos and his work. I became his personal assistant just so that I would have a chance to gain a greater understanding of the Tower of the Winds."

"And did you?" Paige asked. She circled Alvin as she talked, trying to find an angle from which it might be possible to take a shot without harming Zelda.

Alvin backed away, right to the edge of the roof, where there was no chance that Paige could get behind him.

"I know what you're doing," he said. "Trying to keep me talking. Trying to find a spot where you can shoot me. Put your gun away. Do it now, or I'll kill her!"

Paige considered her options. There was no way to get a clear shot at Alvin without risking Zelda's life. Having the gun out achieved nothing. She couldn't let him hurt her.

"Okay, okay," Paige said, holding her hands up. "I'll put the gun away. Maybe you could lower the knife so we can keep talking."

She slowly lowered her weapon and holstered it, half-hoping that Alvin would lower his knife in response. But he didn't.

"Now come closer," Alvin said. "I want you here when I complete the sacrifice. I want you to be a part of it."

Paige took a step forward, knowing that she had to keep him talking. "Alvin, what do you think will happen after you complete the Tower of the Winds? Do you really think that the winds will be pleased with human sacrifice?"

Alvin laughed. "You don't understand. The winds are beyond human comprehension. They don't care about us. They only care about their own power. And once the Tower of the Winds is complete, that power will be mine."

"Is that what Dr. Kostopoulos told you?" Paige asked him.

"He wrote about it. His last book. It was more brilliant even than the rest. We debated it, wrote in it, worked on the theories. It showed me the way."

"That was a work of fiction, Alvin," Paige pointed out. "Dr. Kostopoulos never intended for anyone to copy it. He never planned for you to do this."

Alvin's grip on Zelda tightened, and he pressed the knife against her neck. "Liar! You're lying. You just want to stop me from completing the Tower of the Winds. You don't understand the power that it holds."

"I understand that you're about to kill an innocent young woman," Paige said, closing the distance between them.

Alvin's eyes darted between Paige and Zelda, and for a moment, Paige saw the cracks in his resolve. She also knew that they weren't enough.



“Alvin, look at me,” she said. “Look at me and listen. You don’t have to go through with this. You’re not alone. We can help you. We can get you the help you need.”

“Help? I don’t need help! I just need to complete this. There have to be four winds. The cardinal points. Four winds, four deaths!”

Paige knew then that if she didn’t think of something quickly, Alvin was going to kill Zelda, and there would be nothing she could do to stop it. She had to think of something that would distract him, something that would stop him, right away.

An idea came to her; a desperate, dangerous idea. Paige had heard the admiration in Alvin’s voice when he spoke about Dr. Kostopoulos. That gave her a chance.

“There have already been four deaths, Alvin!” Paige called out to him.

“Three, there have only been three. I killed them myself.”

“Four!” Paige insisted. “Dr. Kostopoulos died earlier today.”

“You’re lying!” Alvin snarled, pointing the knife at Paige.

“I’m not. He knew what you were planning, and he blamed himself,” Paige said. “He threw himself from the roof of his mansion. He said that he was making himself into the fourth sacrifice, that it was the only way to end this.”

“No, no, he can’t have,” Alvin said. “He can’t have. It’s all wrong!”

Paige saw him let go of his grip on Zelda, stepping away from her as he tried to make sense of it all. Paige knew that she would only have one chance to act.

She rushed forward, pushing Zelda out of the way, determined to get her to safety. She shoved Zelda clear, but then Alvin was turning towards Paige, slashing with the knife.

Paige managed to block that blow, but then they were in close and grappling, struggling for the weapon. Paige felt the edge of the roof under her feet ...

And then the two of them started to topple over the edge,  
together.

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Paige felt herself starting to fall, and in that moment, she was certain that she would tumble from the top of the mall like a plummeting stone to crash to the ground below. She thought of Christopher and found herself wishing that she'd had the time to say all the things to him that she felt.

Then Paige's foot found the edge of the roof one last time, pushing against it, not in an attempt to recover her balance, but to fling herself further out into the empty air.

Paige's arms stretched out, grabbing for the dangling wires that had once held the mall sign's missing letter. She reached for them, extending her arms to their limit as she tried to keep herself from falling to her death.

Paige felt her hands close around the wires, the metal cutting into her hands as her weight hit them, leaving Paige dangling from them, desperately trying to hold on.

Alvin Richards wasn't so lucky. Paige watched him fall, watched his body tumble from the top of the mall all the way down to the ground below. For the second time that night, she could only stare as a life was lost, a life that could have been saved if things had gone differently.

Paige winced at the impact of Alvin's body with the ground. From such a height, there was no hope for survival. His obsession with the Tower of the Winds had cost him his life. It had also cost the life of his mentor, along with those of three innocent women.

Paige just hoped that it wasn't about to cost *her* life too. Her arms were in agony trying to hold her weight as she dangled so far above the ground, while her hands felt as if the wires were cutting into her skin, dripping blood making it even harder to grip them.

Paige clung on anyway because the only alternative was to fall and die.

Paige tried to climb a little higher on the wires, tried to get a more secure grip, but she simply couldn't do it. After everything she'd been through tonight, she didn't have the strength.

"Paige!" Christopher was there then, on the edge of the roof, looking over at her. There was a strange mixture of terror and relief on his face as Paige hung there. "I thought you'd fallen. I thought you were dead."

"I still might be," Paige replied. "I don't think I have the strength to hold on here."

"Can you swing back across, the way you did before?" Christopher asked.

Paige tried, but even as she swung her legs to generate momentum, she knew it wouldn't work. She could feel her grip slipping with the movement, and she had to stop.

"I'll fall if I try," she said. "I ... I think I'm stuck."

Paige realized then that she was going to die. She was going to hang here in the air for a little while longer and then she was going to fall.

Paige felt tears welling up in her eyes. She had survived so much, so many things. This was the end of the line, wasn't it? All the ghosts in her past were finally going to claim her.

"I'm sorry," she said, to Christopher, to everyone else. "I really am. You didn't deserve to have me here. You deserved better."

"Paige, don't say that," Christopher begged. "Please don't say that."

"When this is over, I just want you to know that I think I'm in love with you," Paige told him. "I'm so sorry. I should have told you sooner."

"Paige!"

"I love you," Paige repeated. "I know I shouldn't say it. I know you're grieving. I know how complicated it makes things between us, that's the reason I was going to put in for a transfer. But I want you to hear it, before ..."

"You are *not* going to fall," Christopher insisted.

Paige wished that she could believe him, but she simply wasn't sure how much longer she could keep holding on.

"Wait," Christopher said, "I have an idea."

Paige saw him go over to Zelda, starting to untie her. Paige saw Christopher taking the rope in his hands as he did it, testing it, obviously trying to work out how strong it was, and how much of it there was.

Climbing rope, Paige remembered with a start. Alvin always tied his victims up using climbing rope. Christopher was there at the edge of the building again, lying down, bracing himself.

"Paige, I'm going to throw you one end of the rope. I need you to catch it."

"I'll try," Paige said, even though it was probably easier said than done. It was taking all her strength just to hold onto the wire. If she took a hand off to catch the rope, wouldn't she simply fall? Yet if she didn't try this, she had no hope of survival.

"Now!" Christopher called to her. Christopher tossed the rope, and Paige reached out, fingers stretching to try to catch it. She felt her grip on the wire loosening as she did so, and for a moment, Paige felt herself falling. Then she caught the end of the rope, grabbing it with all her strength.

For another second or so, she was still falling, this time in an arc as the rope swung Paige into the side of the building. Paige hit it hard, knocking the breath out of her, but she refused to let go.

Paige braced herself against the side of the building and tried to pull herself up, but her arms were still too weak.

"Christopher, I can't do it," Paige said, feeling tears streaming down her face. "I don't have the strength."

"Yes, you do," Christopher said, his voice firm and determined. "Climb!"

Paige took a deep breath and tried again, this time with more determination. With each pull, she felt herself getting

closer to the edge of the roof. Christopher was there to help her, pulling the rope from the other side.

Finally, Paige reached the edge of the roof, and Christopher was there to help her over. She collapsed onto the ground, gasping for air, her heart racing.

“Thank you,” Paige said, tears still streaming down her face. “Thank you, Christopher. You saved my life.”

“I had to,” Christopher said, looking at Paige with intense eyes. “I couldn’t let you die.”

He helped her up.

“All those things you said. I ... I feel the same way.”

That was lot, hearing him confess his feelings like that. It was enough that Paige wanted to fall into his arms, wanted to kiss him, wanted to just stand there with him in the middle of the storm on top of the mall’s roof.

Yet they couldn’t. They had to get back down from here. They had to get Zelda Mackie to safety. They had to tell the Winterly PD that the serial killer who had been haunting their town had been found, and that he was now lying dead far below the spot where Paige currently stood.

After that ... well, after that, there would be time for the two of them.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Paige woke in the middle of the Winterly PD's offices. It took her a moment to remember exactly where she was and why.

They'd had to come back here after everything that had happened on the rooftop. She and Christopher had to come and make sure that Zelda was safe, then write up their reports about everything that had happened. Even with the murder solved, there had been so much to do that Paige and Christopher couldn't even think about simply stopping.

Somewhere in the middle of all of it, Paige must have fallen asleep. Now, she found herself blinking awake. Christopher was there standing by the desk, holding two cups of coffee. He passed one to Paige.

"You're finally awake," he said with a smile. "I thought you might sleep forever."

After everything that had happened last night, that didn't sound like such a bad idea. Paige reached out for the coffee cup, realized that it was with her injured hand, and took it with the other. Her right hand was bandaged now, but she would need to get further medical attention once she got back to DC.

Paige found herself wondering what else would happen when she and Christopher got back.

"Paige, I wanted to say, when we return to DC ..."

"Yes?" Paige said. Hope and worry vied in her for supremacy then. What if Christopher said that things couldn't go any further between them? What if he'd only said what he'd said in the heat of the moment?

"Well, I just wanted to say that I thought maybe we could go somewhere to talk? Maybe a restaurant or something?"

"A date?" Paige asked, not wanting to presume it even then.

Christopher nodded. "If you'd like that."

He sounded almost as worried that Paige might not say yes as Paige felt right then. Paige nodded quickly.

“Yes, yes, I’d like that.”

She knew that things would be tricky. Christopher was still grieving for his wife. They were partners in the FBI. But they had to try to find a way to make this work. Paige *wanted* this to work, almost more than anything else.

Paige wasn’t sure what she might have said next if her phone hadn’t started to ring. She saw Agent Sauer’s name on the display and knew that she had to answer. Presumably, he wanted a report on the case.

“Sir?” she said.

“Agent King. Is Agent Marriott there with you?”

“Yes, sir,” Paige said. “I’ll put the call on speaker.”

She did so and tried to think about how she was going to phrase her report. Her and Christopher’s suspect was dead. Him and Dr. Kostopoulos. That was an outcome that still brought a twinge of guilt from Paige. She hadn’t meant to bring about Alvin Richards’s death, but he had died as a result of their fight on the edge of the mall’s roof.

Christopher was obviously thinking the same thing.

“Sir, are you looking for a report on the case?”

“No, Marriott, this is something more serious, something I felt I had to tell you myself.” There was a brief pause on the other end of the line. Did Sauer sound nervous?

“What is it, sir?” Paige asked.

“I’m not sure how best to put this. We have evidence that Anne Dawson cannot be the Exsanguination Killer.”

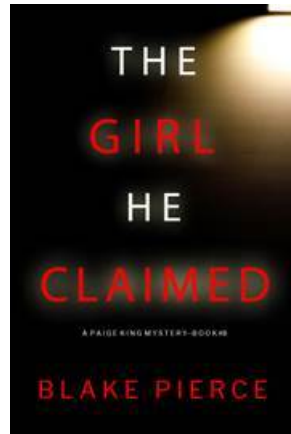
Paige could still hear the worry in Agent Sauer’s voice. She wasn’t used to hearing her boss sound like that. He was normally utterly confident and in control.

“What kind of evidence, sir?” she asked.

“The Exsanguination Killer has just committed another murder.”



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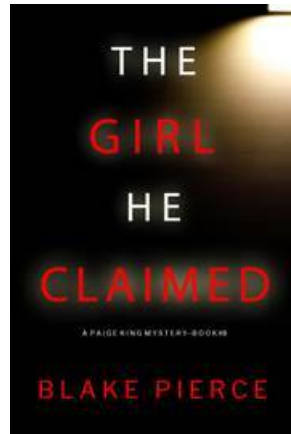
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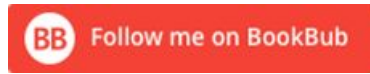
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