

AN AMBER YOUNG MYSTERY—BOOK #5

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BLAKE PIERCE



# ABSENT REASON

(An Amber Young Mystery —Book Five)

BLAKE PIERCE

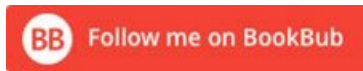
## Blake Pierce

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

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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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# CHAPTER ONE

Kelly shivered, and not just because of the cold night air. She made her way over the north bridge, her feet echoing in the silence of the dark. It was getting close to midnight, and she was running out of time.

A car drove past, full of frat boys. A couple of them called out to her while music blasted from it. Kelly almost flagged it down, almost called out for help, but she didn't dare. That would have been against the rules.

Instead, Kelly kept walking, slowly closing in on the far side. The moon was up high above her while the lights of the city of Verdice shone all around her. Those lights pointed to the possibility of life and joy, to happiness and other people.

Right then, though, Kelly felt utterly alone. There was no one out there with her. There was no one who could help her, not tonight. Even if she succeeded in this, there was something about this experience that would change her forever. If she didn't...

A small sound of fear escaped Kelly, but she continued to make her way across the bridge, step by stuttering step. She had to do this. She had to finish this.

As she reached the center of the bridge, a sudden gust of wind whipped through her long, blonde hair and sent a chill down her spine. She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to stave off the cold. But it wasn't just the wind that made her shiver.

She didn't want to do this. She hadn't wanted to do this from the start, but she didn't have a choice. She had to keep going.

As Kelly neared the end of the bridge, she dared to feel a hint of hope. This was the fifth bridge. Five of seven. Two more and all of this would be over. Two more, and she would be safe and free.

Kelly walked forward a little more confidently now, her dark coat whipping open in the wind to reveal the jeans and sweatshirt beneath. She reached for her phone and stopped herself.

No police, he'd said. He'd told her that he would be watching. No police, no help. Just her. If he'd left her phone alone, not told her to leave it behind or throw it off the first bridge, then it was as a trap, not as an aid. It was a way of tempting Kelly away from the rules of the game.



She took out the paper map instead as she approached the end of the bridge, trying to shield it with her body from the slight drizzle that was falling, lending a misty, unfocused sheen to the lights on the bridge.

Kelly kept down her terror as she did it, telling herself over and over that she was closer to the end of this than the beginning, that she would be done soon. It wouldn't take much longer.

*Then* she could go to the police, although she wasn't sure what she could tell them, when she'd never seen his face, when she had nothing beyond the message that he'd left with her, safely locked away back in her dorm.

In a way, that was comforting. It meant that once she found a way through all this, he might leave her alone. *And she would* find a way through all this. Kelly told herself that over and over again. Maybe if she said it enough times, it would even prove to be true.

Kelly reached the end of the bridge. She'd been traveling over to one of Verdice's central islands, which put her in the middle of an entertainment area there now, the sounds of nightclubs and bars there in the background. In spite of the reminder that there were other people out there, Kelly still felt utterly alone.

The university was just visible in the distance. A part of her thought about running right back to her dorm room, but she knew that she couldn't. If she did, it would be an admission of defeat. He would kill her. She checked the time. She still had another hour to go. She could do this. She just had to plot out the last part of her route, and this would be done.

Kelly spread out the map on a nearby bench, her fingers trembling as she traced the route with her eyes. The next two bridges were a little way apart, only a few blocks away from one another. One led to the eastern island of the city, another to the south bank. If she could just cross them, then she would be done.

There was only one problem with that thought. As soon as she saw it, Kelly's breath came shorter, her heart thundering in her chest as she realized the mistake that she'd made, how badly things had gone wrong.

She couldn't cross the last two bridges without going back over one of the others. She couldn't do it. She'd gone wrong somewhere, taken a wrong turn, done this in the wrong order, and that meant...

"No!" Kelly said to herself, to the world. "No."

She turned, starting to run back over the bridge, hoping that she could. As Kelly ran, her heart beating like a drum in her chest, she knew that she had to

figure out a way to get help. She took out her phone, calling the police, hoping that they would be able to come to her aid in time.

"How can I help you?" an operator's voice asked on the other end of the line.

"Help me," Kelly said. "Please... someone's trying to kill me!"

"Can you tell me where you are?"

"I'm on the north bridge, heading for 14th Street," Kelly said. She didn't slow down now. Her only hope was to keep moving. The wind whipped past her, tugging at her long hair and her coat, but she barely felt it. Every part of her was focused on figuring out a way to get out of there, to get to safety.

There was a faint sound of footsteps somewhere behind her, and Kelly's heart leaped into her throat. She didn't know who it could be, but she didn't want to stand there and find out. Kelly kept hurrying along the bridge, determined to get away from there, determined to get back...

Where? She was going the wrong way for her dorm room, so where was she running to? Kelly didn't know, but right then, it wasn't as important as simply getting away. She ran across the bridge, her feet pounding the walkway there as she tried to reach the other side. Some instinct told her that if she could only reach the other side, she would be safe.

As she ran, Kelly felt something slip around her throat. She realized with a start that it was hemp rope, but by then, it was already drawing tight. Kelly tried to turn, to fight, her hands going up to try to tear the noose from around her neck.

It just continued to tighten, lifting Kelly from her feet while her legs kicked in the air. The last thing she thought before the darkness claimed her was that none of this had been fair. None of it had been...

## CHAPTER TWO

Amber Young ran along the corridors of the hospital, terror for Joseph lending speed to her legs. She dodged past the staff there, looking around frantically as she tried to get to the room she was looking for.

Her blonde braid whipped behind her as she ran, her diminutive frame darting through gaps between visitors to the hospital and doctors. She barged into a nurse accidentally, bounced off, and kept running.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" the nurse called out. "I should call security!"

"FBI!" Amber called back, hoping that it would stop any trouble. "Sorry!"

It was still strange saying that, even though she'd worked several cases as an FBI agent now. In her heart, a part of Amber still assumed that she was just a puzzle editor and was almost surprised each time she said it.

Amber looked back and saw that the nurse had stumbled, but she had no time to stop and check if everyone back there was okay. Amber had to keep going. There were people waiting in front of the elevators with a look that said that they'd been waiting for a while, so she plunged into one of the stairwells instead, taking the stairs two at a time as she headed up towards the fourth floor. As she ran, Amber was grateful for all the times she'd run obstacle courses and sprints in her FBI training.

Somewhere in the breakneck run up the concrete staircase, Amber's glasses slipped from her girlish, slightly rounded features. She caught them barely in her left hand, not bothering to set them back in place as she ran on. Her shoes set echoes rattling through the stairwell as she hopped from step to step, determined not to waste even a second.

In spite of her training, Amber was out of breath by the time she reached the fourth floor, but she still didn't slow down. She burst in there, running over to the receptionist's desk. The middle-aged woman there looked up at her with a mix of annoyance and concern. She was plump and dark-haired, wearing a grey cardigan over a severe dark dress.

"I'm sorry, miss, but you can't just barge in here like that," the receptionist said. "What's the emergency?"

"I'm here to see Joseph Connolly," Amber said, trying to get her breath back.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but it isn't visiting hours right now, and in any case he-" Amber took out her ID, setting it down on the reception desk, where the receptionist could see it.

"I need to see him," she said. This wasn't an FBI case, but right then, she would do whatever it took to make sure that Joseph was okay. "Which room is he in?"

The receptionist blinked, obviously trying to work out what she should do, then looked at her computer screen. "Room 423," she said, pointing down the hall. "But I'm not sure if you're allowed to go in there."

Amber didn't bother to wait for permission. She took off down the hallway, her shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor. She spotted the right room instantly because there were a couple of uniformed police officers standing outside. Amber felt a sudden sense of horror at the sight of them, but she forced herself to keep moving forward.

One of the police officers was middle-aged, with a greying mustache, while the other was younger, taller, and dark-haired. He looked like he was barely out of the academy.

"Ma'am..." the younger police officer began, obviously about to tell her to turn back.

Amber held up her ID, forestalling any attempt to do that after she'd come so far.

"Agent Amber Young, FBI," she said. That wasn't the capacity in which she was here, though. She wasn't rushing to Joseph's bedside because it was her job. She was rushing there because he was her boyfriend, and her heart had felt as though it might break the moment she heard the news.

While the police officers were still trying to work out if they should stop Amber or not, she hurried into the room. Right then, the only thing that mattered was getting to Joseph. Making sure that he was all right.

He wasn't all right, not even close to it. Joseph was lying there on a hospital bed, currently unconscious. Normally, he was tall, dark-haired, athletic and impeccably dressed. Now, he lay flat with tubes coming out of his body and running to a collection of nearby machines. His features were twisted with bruises, while a blood-stained bandage showed on one side of his head.

Amber felt tears sting the corners of her eyes, her legs feeling unsteady for a moment or two so that she barely took in the doctor's approach. The doctor was a tall, thin man with wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. His lab

coat was neatly pressed, and he carried himself with a kind of detached efficiency that suggested he was used to dealing with critical situations. Amber hoped so. She wanted the best people possible to look after Joseph.

"Are you a family member?" the doctor asked in a clipped tone.

"I'm Joseph's girlfriend," Amber said. This was a moment when it didn't matter that she was an FBI agent. That didn't do anything to take away the hurt she felt. "What happened to him?"

"We're still not sure," the doctor said. "He was brought in a few hours ago with severe head trauma. We've done a CT scan, and there's evidence of a concussion and a skull fracture, but we won't know more until he wakes up."

"Can I sit with him?" Amber asked, tears beginning to roll down her cheeks at the thought of what was happening.

The doctor hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, of course. Just don't disturb him too much."

Amber nodded, taking a seat beside the bed and taking Joseph's hand in hers. She squeezed it gently, hoping that somehow he could feel her presence. She leaned over him, brushing her lips against his forehead.

"Please wake up, Joseph," she whispered. "Please come back to me."

There was no sign of response from Joseph, but Amber knew that she couldn't expect one, not when he was like this.

"We're keeping him sedated for now," the doctor said. "It's safer if he has time to heal like this."

The doctor left, and Amber sat there, staring at Joseph, barely able to believe what had happened to him. How could someone have done this to him? *Why* would someone have done this to him?

Amber tried to distract herself from those thoughts, trying to just be there with Joseph as his girlfriend. She pulled up puzzles on her phone, solving them one after another. She started with crosswords, moved on to some chess problems, and kept going. Anything to distract herself from what had happened.

Yet it wasn't what she really needed. Amber needed answers, and getting those answers meant going back outside to talk to the cops, however much she thought that she ought to be in here, hoping that Joseph would wake. Amber struggled to compose herself. She knew that the cops wouldn't give answers to Joseph's girlfriend, but they *might* share information with an FBI agent with an interest in the case, just as a professional courtesy. Amber tried to look as professional as she could as she left the room to approach them.

"Hi, guys," Amber said. "Have you been here long?"

"We're the ones who attended the scene," the older cop said. "I'm Park, this is Granby."

"Do we know who did this yet?" Amber asked.

"We received a call from someone who found him out on the street at the mouth of a blind alley not far from his apartment," one of the cops said. "He was unconscious when the paramedics got there, and none of the witnesses report him saying anything while he *was* awake."

Amber's heart sank at those words, trying to picture what must have happened. It sounded like Joseph had been jumped by someone, but why? Joseph had never mentioned any enemies, and he certainly didn't seem like the kind of person who would get into a fight.

"Did any of those witnesses see anything that might help catch this guy?" Amber asked. She wanted to believe that there might be a quick answer to this, that whoever had done this might be caught quickly.

Amber's hopes of a quick arrest started to fade as Park shook his head. Amber frowned, trying to make sense of the situation. Why would anyone want to attack Joseph?

"Do you have *any* leads on who might have done this or why?" she asked.

It was Granby's turn to shake his head. "Not yet, but we're working on it. We've got some nearby security cameras we're reviewing, and we've been canvassing the area for more witnesses. Maybe someone saw something but didn't stick around."

Amber nodded, feeling a sense of frustration. She knew how unlikely that was to give them much. She wanted to do something to help, but right now, there was nothing she could do but wait and hope.

Amber hated that. For as long as she could talk about the case as an agent, it felt as though she could push back the pain that was waiting deep inside her at the thought of what had happened to Joseph. They had no leads, and Joseph had been left for dead in an alley. She needed to do something, anything, to help find out who did this to him.

What was the alternative? Sitting there by his bedside, doing more puzzles while she waited for him to wake up?

"What's your current theory? Was this a mugging?" Amber asked. "Is there a chance that we'll be able to find who did this by tracing something like his phone?"

Amber had access to the resources to do that. If someone had hurt Joseph

this badly just to steal from him, she would do everything it took to find them. She would use every resource she had access to, even if it hurt her professionally to do it. The pain that she felt right then was so great that she simply didn't care what happened to her as long as it helped to find the person who had done this.

"They didn't take anything," Park said. "So we're not convinced that this is a mugging gone wrong. That's part of why we're here. If someone targeted him, then we want to know why."

"Not a mugging?" Amber said. She had a hard time believing that someone would do this to Joseph for some other reason. Everybody liked him. He was a journalist, though. One who often reported on political events and on criminals. Was it possible that he'd stepped on the wrong toes with one of his stories? Had he upset someone with everything he'd been working on?

"They didn't take anything, but they *did* leave something behind," Granby said. He took something out of an evidence bag, something that made Amber's heart almost stop in her chest, feeling as if a hand was clamping down on it.

It was her diary. Her workbook, the one in which she'd sketched out ideas for puzzles alongside her personal thoughts. It had been essential in her former role as a puzzle editor for the Washington News but had also contained references to everything she'd thought and felt.

Amber stared at it in shock. She had known that it was missing, but she'd assumed that she'd simply lost it somewhere in her apartment, under the chaos of half-finished puzzle projects.

Instead, it seemed that someone else had taken it. Someone who had then gone out and attacked Joseph. Someone who had left the diary next to him as... what? Some kind of message?

That prompted another horrifying thought. This attack didn't have anything to do with Joseph. The fact that someone had left the diary behind meant that they'd wanted to send a message to Amber. The whole *attack* was a message.

Joseph was lying there hurt, maybe dying, because of her, and Amber didn't know what to do next. All she could do was sit with him and hope that Joseph woke up.

## CHAPTER THREE

"Doctor!" one of the nurses called out, sounding suddenly worried as she rushed over to Joseph's hospital bed.

A doctor ran in, not the same one Amber had seen before. This one was younger, slightly built. He hurried to the bedside, joining the nurse, looking just as worried.

"What's happening?" Amber asked, feeling a sudden wave of near panic at the thought that something worse might be happening to Joseph. Something she couldn't control or help with.

"You need to wait outside and let us work ma'am," the nurse said in a tone that didn't allow for any argument.

Amber had to go out into the hall, waiting out there, looking through the glass panel of the door and hoping that Joseph was going to be all right. The hardest part was that there was nothing Amber could do here to make things better. Joseph lay in a hospital bed while other people worked on him, and she couldn't do anything other than stand there, holding the diary that had been left near him.

The police had let her look it over for now, but she would have to give it back as soon as she left the hospital. It was evidence in the ongoing assault case, after all. Park was standing at the far end of the hallway, looking slightly bored. He looked up as Amber came hurrying out but didn't come over to the room. He obviously knew that there was nothing he could do, either.

It occurred to her that he probably wasn't there just in case Joseph's attacker came to finish him off or even just to get a statement from him when he woke up. The cop was there in case Joseph died, and this suddenly turned into a murder investigation. Amber hoped with all her heart that wouldn't be the case.

Amber started to go through the diary, trying to understand what it was doing at the scene. She checked on the familiar puzzle designs, the sections that she'd written there that were more personal. Someone had obviously taken this from her apartment, someone who knew enough about her work and personal life to do it when Amber wasn't home. But who could it be?

She stopped as she saw the first of the notes in the margins, frowning.



Someone had solved one of the puzzles there. No, they hadn't just solved it; they'd sketched out a better version of it. There were more notes on other pages, comments on Amber's work in a neat hand, and casual solutions to what she had assumed were some of her more fiendish puzzle ideas. Amber was starting to ponder the implications of that when a voice cut through the silence.

"Amber, I came as soon as I heard!"

Amber turned to see Agent Simon Phelps, her partner in the FBI, hurrying down the corridor towards Joseph's room. Simon was broad-shouldered with an athletic build, with blond hair and blue eyes. He was immaculately dressed in a dark suit, while his square-jawed, good-looking features were currently tight with worry. He obviously knew how much it would mean to Amber that Joseph had been attacked.

"What happened?" Simon asked. "Was it a mugging? Or maybe something to do with his job?"

Those were the same assumptions that Amber had made because those were the assumptions that any normal person *would* make with something like this. Even working in law enforcement, no one would assume that this was about anything else.

Amber held up the diary. "It's to do with me, Simon. This is because of me. They left my diary behind at the scene. My workbook. They must have taken it from my apartment."

"Someone broke into your apartment?" Simon's worry only appeared to be compounded by that. "When?"

"I don't know," Amber admitted. That was another part of all of this that terrified her. Someone had broken into her apartment and taken her diary without her noticing. "It must have been while we were away on a case. This, all of this, it was aimed at me."

The more Amber thought about it, the more she realized the importance of that. This meant that she had enemies, people who would want to hurt her. Who could those enemies be, though? As an FBI agent, she had put away many dangerous criminals, and some of them might be seeking revenge, but realistically, the people she'd put away didn't have the means to break into her apartment or hurt Joseph. They were all still behind bars.

Could it be someone else? Had she managed to upset someone else while working on a case to the point where they might do something like this? Amber couldn't think of anyone. Before she'd been an FBI agent, she'd just

been a puzzles editor. Was this some kind of rival puzzle expert? Someone she'd upset by beating them in a competition?

The doctor came out of the room. "He's fine for now. We've managed to stabilize him, and we think he'll make a full recovery, given time. For now, though, Mr. Connolly needs rest."

"Can I stay with him?" Amber asked.

"For now," the doctor said. "But it may be some time before he wakes up. If you leave us your number, we'll call you as soon as there's any change."

Amber didn't want to go, not yet. She went into the room, sitting beside Joseph's bed. She couldn't help looking at the diary, flicking through it and taking in the annotations, trying to understand the mind of the person who could so neatly solve and improve on her puzzles. She barely heard Simon come in behind her, obviously there for her as much as for Joseph.

As she pored over the diary, Amber felt a deep sense of unease. She had an enemy out there somewhere that much was clear, but who could it be? She couldn't think of any particular rival puzzle experts or anyone she had upset in a competition. The criminals she'd put away weren't in a position to do this. So who had the motive to hurt her, and why now?

As she turned the pages of her diary, she saw a note in the margins that caught her attention. It was a message written in the same neat handwriting as the earlier annotations. It read: "Almost good enough".

Almost. That one word was both an insult and a challenge. It seemed that whoever had stolen the diary didn't think that she was a good enough puzzler. Was this all just their way of getting Amber's attention?

Amber sat there pondering it. Even as she did, she heard Simon's phone going off. He grabbed for it, checked the name on the screen, and hurried to answer, looking even more serious than he had been when he walked in there.

"Agent Palliser?" he said. Amber winced slightly at the name. Agent Palliser was their boss, and she could only imagine one reason why she would call out of the blue. A reason that Amber wasn't sure she was in a position to deal with right then.

"I understand, ma'am. What's the case?" Simon asked, confirming Amber's suspicions. He paused for several seconds before he spoke again.

"Understood. Agent Young is here with me. I'll tell her what's happening. But, ma'am, I'm not sure if she'll be able to do this right now. There's a... personal emergency for her. I understand, ma'am, I'll ask."

He hung up, leaving Amber staring at him, knowing what was going to

come next.

"What's going on?" she asked. "I guess Palliser wasn't calling about Joseph."

Simon shook his head with an apologetic look. "She has a case for us. A town called Verdice, maybe an hour away? They've had two women killed in a week, both found hanging from bridges there. They think it's a serial killer, and Palliser wants us there to look into it."

He made it into a question, silently asking Amber if she wanted to do this. Their boss might have assigned them a case, but Simon clearly understood how difficult this situation was for her.

Amber looked at him, then looked over to Joseph. "I can't help with this one, Simon. I have to be here. I have to stay and make sure that he's okay. Joseph is hurt because of me."

"*Not* because of you; because of some scumbag who we *will* find," Simon promised her, his tone determined. "But right now, I don't think there's anything we can do here."

Nothing except be there for her boyfriend and wait for him to wake up. Joseph had always told Amber that her job was too dangerous. That she should stick to solving puzzles. Now it seemed that he was the one paying the price for it.

"I have to be here," Amber said. "I can't just leave."

"I understand," Simon said. "I told Palliser that you might not be able to come on this one, and I know she'll get it once she hears what happened. I'll handle this. I'll go to Verdice and look into the murders. You deal with things here."

Amber should have felt relief at those words, but instead, she felt torn. It felt to her as if she were letting her partner down by staying and maybe even putting Joseph in more danger. She felt as if she didn't know where she ought to be right then or even what was going on. All of this felt like a puzzle she couldn't solve, and *that* was a feeling Amber wasn't used to at all.

Amber was still trying to work out what to say next when a woman walked into Joseph's hospital room, moving quickly. She was tall and dark-haired, with high cheekbones and dark eyes that marked her as probably some kind of relative to Joseph. Amber knew that he had a sister, although she'd never met her. Could this be her?

"Denise?" Amber asked, standing, taking a guess.

"Yes, that's right, and you are?"

"I'm Amber." Amber had a second in which to decide how to introduce herself to Joseph's sister. She almost, *almost* just said that she was an FBI agent because that might make things simpler. "Joseph's girlfriend."

Denise smiled. "The one who used to work with him on the News?"

Amber nodded.

"Do you know what happened here?" Denise asked. "No one will tell me anything. Joseph said you were with the FBI, right? Can you get the cops to tell you what happened?"

"We don't really know yet," Amber said. "We won't know much until Joseph wakes up."

She didn't mention the diary, didn't mention that this was all her fault. At that moment, Amber knew that she couldn't be there when Joseph regained consciousness. She couldn't sit in that room, knowing that all of it was because of her not being able to tell Joseph's sister what was really happening. She couldn't be here, which meant that there was one other place that she should be instead.

"Denise, are you going to be able to stay with Joseph?" Amber asked. She still wanted to make sure that someone would be there. It just couldn't be her. Not when this was all her fault.

"You're leaving?" Denise said with a frown.

"I have to," Amber said. "I have a case. The call just came through a little while ago. People have been murdered. But I need to know that Joseph is safe. Can you call me or get the hospital to call as soon as he's awake?"

"I... guess so," Denise said. "You really have to go?"

"Lives might be at stake," Amber said, feeling nothing but guilt as she said it. She knew that the right thing to do was to stay, but the truth was simply that she couldn't stand being there, couldn't stand staring at Joseph and knowing that it wouldn't have happened to him without her in his life.

She needed to get out of there, and Verdice was as good a place to go as any. She would return the diary to the cops, catch up to Simon, and get over to Verdice as quickly as she could. The further away from Joseph Amber was, the safer he would be.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Amber was surprised to find that she was the one driving them over to Verdice rather than Simon. Usually, when they drove, he was the one to take the wheel, but not today. It meant that he was the one reading through the case files, talking her through the details as he went.

"So we have two victims, Kelly Wasner and Mia Wilson," Simon said, flipping through the pages. Amber wondered if he looked for the same things in a report that she did, if he was picking out all those small details that didn't quite fit like it was a puzzle. "Both students at the local university, both found hanging from bridges in town. No signs of struggle and no witnesses so far."

"Any possible suspects so far?" Amber asked her eyes on the road ahead. Traffic was light, and they were making good time.

"The local PD have nothing concrete yet, but there have been reported sightings of a man in a dark hoodie hanging around near the bridges," Simon said. "Could be our guy, but there's no way to ID him. The hoodie means that there haven't been any security shots of his face, and there are no witnesses who can describe him."

That was frustrating. Amber would have liked more to go on, but she guessed that if there were more, the local PD would already have suspects and wouldn't need the FBI's help for this. Maybe they would have already closed the case. Amber didn't know whether to be flattered or not that she and Simon only got called in at a point when the local cops had already run out of options. Did that mean that she and Simon were the best at what they did, or did it mean that they were only a last resort? Either way, it meant that they got cases where there weren't the kind of clear leads that were going to provide an easy arrest. They would have to find something here that the police hadn't already found.

Simon continued to read through the reports. "The bridges the women were found hanging from are in different parts of town. There doesn't seem to be any connection between them, except for the fact that they were both young female students at the university."

Amber nodded, her mind still reeling from the events of the past few hours. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was somehow responsible for Joseph's condition, and that made it hard for her to focus on anything else.

Still, she tried. Two women who were both students already seemed like the beginnings of a connection.

"It seems like a classic serial killer," Simon said, "one who's choosing young women as his targets. But with the first death, the police initially thought that it might be a suicide. It was only when the coroner found bruises on Mia's body consistent with a struggle that they realized it was murder."

"So they were trying to make it look like a suicide so that they could avoid suspicion?" Amber shook her head even as she said it, knowing that couldn't be the answer. "No, that doesn't work. If so, the second murder makes it too obvious that this is a series of murders. The killer has to know that the police would make the connection between the two."

"Maybe he was hoping they'd think it was a series of linked suicides?" Simon suggested, but he didn't sound as though he thought it was likely.

Linked suicides, or even suicides inspired by one another, did happen, but by picking such a strange method, the killer seemed to be deliberately drawing attention to his work. Maybe the whole *point* was to grab attention.

"Anything from the victims' cell phones?" Amber asked. She guessed that the Verdice PD would have been through them almost immediately.

"Nothing. There aren't any messages to suggest that they were lured to their deaths, and there's nothing in there to suggest anyone threatening them."

Amber glanced over at Simon, looking away from the road for a moment. "Do you think this is the first time the killer has been killed?"

Simon raised an eyebrow as he looked up from the file at her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it seems like he knows what he's doing," Amber said. "You haven't mentioned any DNA evidence, and the victims didn't have a chance to get away. Is there a chance that he's done this before, or worked up to it, somehow?"

"It's possible," Simon said. "But we don't know for sure. We can't assume anything until we have more information."

Amber nodded, but she still found herself wondering about it as she drove. Amber shook her head. "It doesn't make sense if he's trying to make this look like suicide. The killer is taking a huge risk by continuing to commit murders. He has to know that there will be an investigation and that it will lead to people assuming it's murder. Each one increases the chances that he'll be caught."

"Unless he's confident that he *won't* get caught," Simon said. "Maybe he just thinks he's too clever for the police to catch up to. Or maybe he just wants the attention so much that he's prepared to take the risk."

That seemed much more likely as an explanation for the MO of the crimes. In that sense, were the bridges just a convenient place to display the victims, or was there something more to it than that? Was there a significance to the choice of the bridges as display sites that they weren't seeing yet?

"How hard would the killer have to work to find different bridges to display his victims?" Amber asked. They were getting closer to Verdice now. It wouldn't be long before they got there, and Amber wanted to have some idea of how they were going to find a way into this case by the time they got there.

"In Verdice?" Simon said. "From what I've read, not that hard. The town is built on either side of a river, with a couple of islands in between and plenty of bridges to choose from."

Maybe they *were* just convenient sites then, or maybe the killer had an obsession of some kind with them in a city with so many bridges to choose from. Without seeing the situation on the ground, though, Amber suspected that they weren't going to make inroads into the case.

She was about to ask Simon more about the contents of the case files when his phone went off. He answered quickly, speaking in soft tones as if he didn't want Amber to hear too much of the conversation. In the confines of the car, though, it was impossible to avoid overhearing fragments of it.

"Hey, Francesca. How are you? Sorry, I can't talk much right now. I'm in the car with Amber on the way to a case."

Francesca? That had to be Detective Angelique, with whom the two of them had worked on their last case, chasing a serial killer obsessed with the Greek Tower of the Winds. Was she calling to follow up on something to do with the case?

There was a brief pause. Amber saw Simon smile at something Detective Angelique said, and it occurred to Amber that this call might not be entirely work-related. After all, she'd seen the two having a personal moment together at the end of that last case, and they'd spent most of the case with half their attention on one another. It was clear that the two of them were attracted to one another, even if they were on opposite sides of the country. Was there a chance that the two of them were trying to make a relationship work in spite of that distance?

"I know," Simon said. "I'm looking forward to you coming over to DC too. I'll call you as soon as I get a moment alone, okay, and we can talk properly? Good, I'm looking forward to it."

He hung up, leaving Amber wondering if she should say something. Maybe she should just stay quiet and focus on the case. Simon was her partner, but that didn't mean that Amber got to be involved in his personal life. Amber had her own life, her own boyfriend.

Ultimately, though, she couldn't help herself.

"So, you and Detective Angelique..."

Simon looked momentarily embarrassed, but he recovered quickly. "Well, you know that we hit it off when we were working on the last case."

That was one way of putting it. The way Amber remembered it, the two of them had barely been able to take their eyes off one another.

"So we decided, maybe we should give things a try. Francesca is going to come visit DC, and we've been talking pretty regularly. I guess we both just want to find out if there's something there."

Amber suspected that there was *definitely* something there between her partner and the detective. She'd been able to see the spark there from the moment the two met. It brought up the strangest of emotions in Amber: jealousy. She felt jealous right then of Francesca and how close she was to Simon. She felt jealous of their whole relationship.

That feeling was quickly followed by a sudden surge of guilt. Amber had no right to feel jealous when it came to Simon and Francesca or Simon and anyone. She and Simon weren't a couple; they weren't anything but partners. She was seeing Joseph. Joseph, who had been hurt because of her. Who had been attacked because of her? Who deserved so much better?

"Well, so long as it doesn't distract you from the case," Amber settled for saying, half joking.

"You know it won't," Simon replied.

Amber hoped not because there was a serial killer still out there, and Amber suspected that this would need both of them at their sharpest if they were going to catch him. They needed to work out why someone was killing these women on the town's bridges, and they needed to stop him.

She continued to push the pace down the highway, hoping that soon, they would get their first glimpse of Verdice. They needed to get there quickly and hope that they could stop any more women from being killed.



## CHAPTER FIVE

As Verdice lay ahead of them, Amber thought that she understood now why it had so many bridges.

The town wasn't just spread out across both sides of a wide river, which meandered its way down across the landscape; it also sprawled over two islands in the middle of that river, the whole connected together by a web of bridges carrying road and foot traffic. Amber counted seven large bridges, each of slightly different construction, ranging from ancient-looking stone to modern steel and cables.

The sight of it spread out there below Amber reminded her of something, but she couldn't remember exactly what it was right then or whether it would be relevant to what she and Simon were doing in the town. One thing about spending so much of her life cramming her head full of facts for puzzle competitions and quizzes was that any situation threatened to throw up a dozen connected snippets of information, most of which would only be relevant to a fellow quizzer. Amber wondered if she'd memorized something about the town's population statistics or some weird product that had been invented there. Both were common things that she'd spent a lot of time memorizing lists of. Maybe there was someone famous who came from the town, or maybe it had been used as a location in a movie. Amber had memorized lists of that, too.

Amber didn't do so much of that kind of memorization these days, though, because she had more important things to work on. There were killers out there in the world, waiting for Amber and Simon to catch them. Maybe that was the reason that she couldn't remember; information tended to slip over time, even for her.

They drove down into the city, and as they got closer, Amber could see that it was a green, leafy place with trees on every street and public parks spread out through it. The architecture seemed almost deliberately old-fashioned as if harking back to some previous moment of greatness for the town. The river was clearly visible down the town's main street, with the islands on it standing a little apart from one another, one larger, one smaller. Amber could see a massive campus of buildings that had to be the city's university, set on one of the islands in the middle of the river.

Since both Kelly and Mia had been students there, Amber suspected that they would need to visit it as a part of their investigation, if only to question the people who had known them. If the killer was targeting students, then it was possible that he knew them or that he was at least hanging out around the university, trying to identify possible victims.

For now, though, they should check in with the local PD, both to let them know that they'd arrived in town and to see if they'd made any progress on the case in the time it had taken Amber and Simon to get there. Maybe they would have some lead that Amber and Simon would be able to work to get closer to the killer.

Amber pulled the car up outside the local police station, a long, brick-built building that looked as if it had been grafted onto the much older buildings around it without much thought for how it looked. Police cars sat outside in neat ranks, but they still gave the impression of not really belonging in the leafy neighborhood that held the station. The whole place looked functional and utilitarian in a way that the rest of the area didn't.

Amber took a deep breath before getting out of the car. This was it. She had to focus now. They were here to work the case and find the killer. Whatever she felt about Joseph, or Simon, or the person who had broken in to steal her diary, she had to put any personal distractions aside and concentrate completely on the task at hand. Too many lives potentially depended on what they did here to risk being distracted. Amber suspected that would be easier said than done.

Amber and Simon headed inside. The walls of the police station were thick enough that the muffled sound of the outside barely reached beyond them. Instead, it was filled with the sounds of the police working hard on their cases. The conversation of the cops as they went about their day was a chaotic mix of voices, none of them loud enough to be clearly understood. The building was warm inside, and Amber could feel the vibrations of activity all around her. She had the impression of local cops rushing to try to keep up with everything that was going on in the case.

Almost the moment that Amber walked into the reception area of the police department, a man approached her and Simon. He was in his thirties, tall and tanned, with dark hair and an eager expression. He was wearing dark slacks, a white shirt, and a grey woolen jacket. Amber briefly thought that he might be a detective there, but she couldn't see a badge, and in any case, he didn't have the slightly hard edge that law enforcement seemed to give

people. It was only as he held out a microphone to the two of them that Amber realized that he had to be a reporter.

"Gregor Mathews, Verdice Gazette. Are you with the FBI?" he asked without hesitation.

Amber nodded, trying to keep her expression neutral. Even as someone who had worked on a newspaper, she knew that the last thing they needed was a reporter getting in the way of their investigation.

"Yes, that's right," she said.

"You're here to hunt for the serial killer who is stalking our town?" the reporter asked, obviously trying to get any kind of juicy quote he could from Amber. She kept her response deliberately bland.

"We're here to assist the Verdice PD, at their request, with an investigation into two homicides," Amber said.

"Can you tell me anything about the progress of the case?" Gregor asked, pressing the microphone closer to Amber's face.

"We can't comment on an ongoing investigation," Simon cut in smoothly, placing a hand on Amber's shoulder and leading her away from the reporter. "Sorry, we have to get to work."

They both headed away, but Gregor followed them, looking as though he was going to continue peppering them with questions, at least until a middle-aged man in a police uniform stepped into his path. The newcomer was short and stocky, with a dark beard and imposingly broad shoulders; he held up a hand to stop the reporter, a stern look on his face as he did it.

"What did I tell you, Gregor? I said that if you stayed here, I'd tell you when we found something, as long as you didn't cause trouble or harass anyone. Now you get to wait out on the streets and pick up your story where you can."

"But Chief Williams-" the reporter started to protest, obviously realizing that he'd overstepped the mark.

"Out!" the police officer said, pointing to the door. The reporter took the hint, slinking off with bad grace. Amber wondered what kind of story he would write about them because of that snub. Once the reporter was gone, the police officer turned to Amber and Simon. "So, you're the feds."

He sounded not exactly happy about it, but not hostile either. Maybe he felt that having the FBI there was an admission of defeat.

Amber took out her ID. "I'm Agent Young, this is Agent Phelps."

"Chief Williams. My detectives are all working on interviewing as many

people who knew the two victims as possible, but I thought I should come greet you when you got here. We're happy to help in any way we can."

That was good to hear, although Amber doubted that the local police chief would want to get as involved as Detective Angelique had been in their last case. He would have to run things back here, dealing with whatever other crime there was in the town as well as with the murders.

"I guess you'll want to see the crime scenes?" Chief Williams said.

Amber saw Simon nod. "The files gave us a lot, but going there will help us get a sense of what happened and how the killer could have made his approach."

"All right. I'll take a car out to it. Follow me, and I'll show you the scene and talk you through what happened when we get there, but I'll need to get back here to coordinate things afterward."

Amber looked over to Simon, who nodded, obviously liking the fact that the police chief was prepared to help them like that. The two of them headed back out to their car, following behind Chief Williams as he led the way through the city's streets.

Again, Amber had the sense of a peaceful, leafy town, presumably the kind of place where nothing like the murders normally happened. It was large enough that it would have some crime, but a serial killer was something else entirely. She saw coffee shops and bars, pedestrians out on the street wrapped up against the cool air. It might have been a pleasant scene except for what had happened in the town.

Amber could see the river ahead, glinting in the sun while the water rolled on peacefully, oblivious to the violence that had taken place so recently and to the fact that there was a killer out there somewhere, maybe already plotting his next murder.

Amber could see the bridge now. It was a concrete and steel suspension bridge, its posts reaching up into the sky like fingers, while its length stretched out over the water, its metal painted a deep green, police tape marking a small stretch of it as the crime scene. Amber, Simon, and the police chief had to park at one end of the bridge before walking out along the pedestrian walkway to the spot where Mia Wilson had died.

Amber could hear the cars around her; it was busy in the day. Amber guessed that it wouldn't have been this busy at night when the murder had taken place.

"We couldn't keep the bridge closed for long," Chief Williams said as the

traffic buzzed by. "Just long enough for the coroner's people to collect the body. Thankfully, it was late at night, so there wasn't as much traffic to divert."

Amber tried to imagine what the bridge would have been like at the time of the murder. She looked out along its length, trying to imagine Mia making her way along it in the dark with no one else around. It would have been lonely and terrifying. Had she been running from someone? Had she already known by that point that someone was stalking after her, ready to kill her?

"When your people got here, was there anything that seemed odd or out of place?" Amber asked Chief Williams. "Anything that didn't seem to fit?"

"They didn't report anything. We didn't get much of a forensic sweep here at this first scene, either."

"Your people thought it was suicide?" Simon said. He kept his tone neutral, but it was obvious that the police chief heard an accusation there in the words.

"It seemed like the most logical explanation," he said. "And it's not like our teams found anything at the second scene either to point towards a killer. Look, I have to get back to the department. Take a look here as long as you need to. There's a location for the second murder in the case files."

He left, hurrying back to his car and heading off. Amber looked over to Simon.

"Looks as though we're on our own with this one," she said.

Simon nodded. "He probably has a lot to coordinate back at the department. Besides, not every local police department is going to want to ride along on the case for the whole thing."

Amber knew that he was thinking of Detective Angelique again. Even Amber found herself wondering what the detective would make of all of this.

Together, they approached the taped-off area, careful not to disturb anything that might be evidence, although given the heavy traffic over the bridge, she suspected that any evidence that had been there would be gone by now. Even so, Amber leaned over the railings there, looking for anything that the killer might have left behind, any fibers that the cops might have missed, or any marks to show signs of where a struggle might have taken place. Amber could see the approach in either direction, and that caught her attention a little.

"How did the killer manage to sneak up on her?" Amber asked.

"Maybe he hid behind the girders," Simon suggested. "In the dark, it

would be hard to see.”

“Maybe,” Amber said, but she wasn’t entirely convinced.

“There's nothing here,” Simon said. He was looking up rather than down. “There are cameras near the end of the bridge, which is presumably why we have the footage of a figure in a hoodie, but I doubt they'll give us our killer. If they were going to, the police would already have a picture of his face up for everyone to see.”

“We should still check,” Amber said. It was important that they didn’t cut any corners, not when any small clue might be the one that gave them the killer’s identity.

Simon nodded. “We should also check in with the coroner to see if there's anything their people noticed that can add to the information in the files.”

That made sense. First, though, Amber wanted to check out the site of the second murder. Maybe there, they would find the evidence they needed to finally start making some headway in this case.

## CHAPTER SIX

"This bridge isn't the same as the other," Amber said, looking around at the bridge on which the second murder had taken place.

Instead of a long suspension bridge, this was a stone-built span with multiple arches, each one carved with small decorative figurines.

The traffic wasn't as busy here, either, with just a few cars rolling across. Amber guessed that in the dead of night, it would have been absolutely quiet. It could have been terrifying for Kelly Wasner, making the journey across it if she had any idea that someone was following her.

Did she, though? Did she know that someone was stalking her, ready to kill her, or had the first she'd known about it being when a noose had gone around her neck, pulling tight?

"Do you think the victims knew that the killer was after them?" Amber asked Simon. "Would they have had any reason to suspect what was happening?"

It might make a difference. A victim who knew that she was a killer's target might have left some kind of clue.

"It's hard to say at this point," Simon replied, his eyes scanning the area. "Given the way they were killed, it's possible that they didn't even see it coming. A noose around the neck? To me, that says that the killer attacked them from behind."

Amber nodded, taking in the scene. They were standing at the edge of the bridge where Kelly Wasner's body had been found. The area was cordoned off with police tape, and there were still signs of the forensic sweep that had taken place after the body was discovered.

As with the first crime scene, the potential solitude of the location at night struck Amber while she looked out over the river.

"It wouldn't be easy sneaking up on someone on a bridge if it was quiet," Amber said.

Simon looked around for a moment or two and then nodded. "It would be easier towards the end of the bridge. There are more spots to hide there. There isn't the same camera coverage that there was at the first murder site, though, so it's hard to say for sure."

It was speculation, but Amber was willing to bet that it was how this had

happened. The killer had ambushed his victim, dragged her to this spot, and hanged her over the edge of the bridge.

"This is someone who isn't looking for head-on conflict with his victims," Amber said, trying to guess at the mindset of the individual who had done this. "He wants to sneak up, kill them, display them and get away before anyone notices."

Did that point to someone who felt that they couldn't fight victims face to face or to someone who felt that was simply the best way to avoid leaving evidence? Was this a predator trying to be careful, or one who had been forced to be because they couldn't simply attack head-on?

One other thing was bothering her. One way that this case didn't fit in with the ones that they'd worked on before.

"Why did Palliser send us on this one?" Amber asked. "There's no obvious puzzle here. We've become experts at dealing with killers who like puzzles and who play games with people. There's nothing like that here."

Amber certainly had. Thanks to her previous work as a puzzle editor, she'd become an expert at dealing with cases that had puzzles at their heart.

"We don't get to pick and choose the killers we hunt," Simon said.

Amber frowned. "I don't mean it like that."

Maybe a part of Amber did, though. She felt more comfortable when there was a clear puzzle to solve. It was the thing she was the best at, the thing she could do better than almost anyone else.

*Almost good enough.*

The memory of those words written in her diary made Amber shudder. That was a mystery where the perpetrator clearly had an interest in puzzles. Maybe she should have stayed in DC to solve it. Except that it hadn't been an FBI case. An assault like that would be handled by the Washington PD. It wasn't something Amber could help with.

"It's just... I'd feel a lot more comfortable if the killer had left us a code or a puzzle to solve, something that would let us get ahead of him."

Amber saw Simon shrug. He obviously understood how this would feel to her, but Amber suspected that there wasn't anything he could do to make this easier for her.

"I get what you're saying, but we have to work with what we have. Maybe there's something we missed, some clue or detail that will lead us to the killer," he said. "We just have to keep looking."

Amber nodded, knowing Simon was right. They couldn't force this case



into a neat little box, no matter how much they wanted to. They had to be patient, thorough, and let the evidence guide them.

She looked back out over the river, the sound of the rushing water filling her ears. It was peaceful here, in a way, despite the violence that had taken place. Maybe that was a part of what the killer was after, Amber thought. The quiet, the emptiness, the stillness. Maybe he wanted a spot where he could be alone with his victims.

For now, though, they needed to look for other sources of evidence.

"We should head back and see what the coroner has to say," Amber said, turning to Simon. "Maybe they found something that can help us."

Simon nodded, and they made their way back to the car, ready to continue the hunt for the killer.

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The coroner's office was located in a building that looked from the street like it had seen better days. Amber couldn't quite shake the feeling that they were walking into a place that was more abandoned than operational. The paint on the outside of the building was peeling, the windows at the side were cracked, and the sign over the door was so faded that it was barely visible, as if it had been there for years and had never been touched. As they walked in, Amber couldn't help wondering if they would be able to trust anything that came from inside a place this badly maintained. If they were that sloppy about looking after the building, how detailed would they be in their work?

The interior of the morgue was a stark contrast to the outside of the building. Everything was clean and sterile, the walls gleaming white under the fluorescent lights above. The air was cold, and the smell of disinfectant was almost overpowering. Amber tried not to let it get to her as she headed deeper into the building to one of the examination rooms. With everything so pristine, Amber started to hope that maybe they might get more answers than she'd thought there.

The coroner met them in the examination room. She was short and stout, with gray hair pulled back into a tight bun. Her face was lined with wrinkles, but her eyes were sharp and intelligent, looking over Amber and Simon as if assessing them carefully before she spoke. Amber had the uncomfortable feeling that she knew what it was like to be one of the bodies on the coroner's slab in that moment.

"Agents," she greeted them, her voice crisp and professional. "Chief Williams called. I've been expecting you. I'm Dr. Hardcastle."

"This place looks very different on the inside," Amber said, looking around at the walls.

Dr. Hardcastle shrugged. "We try to keep up to date in here, but the outer façade doesn't matter as much when it comes to the dead. Now, should we begin?"

"What did you find in your examinations of Mia Wilson and Kelly Wasner?" Simon asked, obviously eager to get whatever information he could.

Before answering, the coroner turned and pulled out two mortuary drawers, pulling out two trolleys, where a pair of young women lay covered by sheets. One, Mia was taller, dark-haired, and athletic looking. The bruises around her throat were clear to see. The other, Kelly, was a shorter woman with pale skin, blonde hair and rounded features. Again, Amber could see the marks of the noose that had killed her around her throat.

Amber had to bite back a wash of horror at the sight of the two dead young women lying there like that, so coldly and clinically. It didn't matter that she'd been at crime scenes before that were much less professional and controlled than this; it was still unsettling, looking at the dead. Amber was grateful, in some ways, that she did feel that. She didn't ever want to reach the point where she looked at the dead and felt nothing.

Even so, she had to push aside the revulsion she felt at what had been done to these young women. For their sake, she had to be professional and give herself the best possible chance of catching the person who had done this to them.

"The cause of death in both cases was asphyxiation due to hanging," the coroner said. "I found defensive bruising on Mia Wilson's body, suggesting that she fought back against her killer, but the only bruises on Kelly Wasner were to the throat and the back of the legs."

Amber frowned, not quite understanding. "What does that suggest?"

"The most likely explanation is that the killer struck from behind, dragging Kelly Wasner off balance and kicking the back of her knees to ensure that she couldn't stay standing," Dr Hardcastle explained.

"But the injuries were more extensive on Mia Wilson?" Simon asked.

The coroner nodded. "It seems likely that she saw her killer and tried to fight back against him. There are some marks of manual strangulation before

the noose went around her neck, suggesting that he subdued her that way before hanging her.”

"Which suggests that he's learning as he goes along," Amber said. "He didn't want his next victim to be able to fight back the way Mia did. Or he improved the way he was able to sneak up on her."

"That seems to be consistent with the evidence, yes," the coroner said.

The idea that the killer was improving with each kill was a little worrying. It meant that he was likely to make fewer mistakes each time he killed, leaving less and less for Amber and Simon to go on.

"Can you tell us anything about the killer based on the evidence?" Amber asked. That was what they needed. Some way to get from the evidence to who could have done this. Some way in that they might be able to use.

"A couple of things," the coroner said. "Based on the bruising and which way he centered the knots for the noose, we can suggest a left-handed killer. He also wouldn't have been shorter than his victims. The angles of the bruising on their throats suggest an initial pull that was level or slightly upward, and thus a taller assailant."

Amber filed that information away in case it became useful later. It might help to narrow down any suspects they found. For now, though, it didn't seem like much. There were plenty of left-handed men out there in the world taller than the two dead women. By itself, that information wouldn't help to identify the person who had done this.

"Is there any sign that anything was taken from the victims?" Simon asked. Presumably, with such an unusual method of murder, he wasn't thinking about the possibility of it being about robbery.

The coroner shook her head. "Their personal effects included all the things I would usually expect, phone, keys, money."

"Are there any items of jewelry that we know the victims wore that aren't there?" Amber asked. "Any signs that some had been removed? Or any items of clothing missing?"

"There's no sign that the killer took anything as a trophy if that's what you're asking." Dr. Hardcastle shook her head. "I'm sorry, the killer simply didn't leave much evidence behind to examine. He was careful, and he seems not to have been interested in anything other than finishing the kill, then escaping."

Meaning that they were dealing with someone determined, someone who had his own purpose that they didn't yet understand. Someone who could,

even now, be out there picking a new victim.  
They had to find him before that happened.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"We've put you in here," Chief Wilson said, gesturing to a small side office in the station.

Amber was used to being tucked out of the way like that. Most of the time, local police departments seemed to want to keep the FBI separate, in spaces where they wouldn't interfere with the efficient running of the department. Or maybe where they couldn't see anything they weren't meant to.

Except for Francesca Angelique, the detective who was now in a relationship with Simon. She'd wanted to be involved all the way through their last case. Amber frowned at that thought. Why was she thinking about a detective from a previous case now? The answer to that was obvious: because Francesca and Simon seemed to be seeing one another now, and Amber couldn't help reacting to that.

Amber wasn't sure what that would mean long term or if it would have any effect on her partnership with Simon or not. Amber tried to tell herself that it was fine, that nothing would get in the way, that she had better things to think about right then than who her partner was seeing. All of those things were true, but it was still hard not to think about what the detective would do if she were here. Probably, she would already be off, talking to potential suspects.

"This is fine, thank you," Simon said, which brought Amber's attention back to the small office. The police chief left them in the office. It had a couple of desks, an evidence board at one side, and a couple of aging file cabinets that presumably didn't have anything relevant to the case in them. That was fine, though. They had a space to work in, and Amber didn't plan on spending a lot of time in there anyway.

Amber chose one of the desks, setting her laptop down on it. At least they had somewhere to work through the evidence now when they weren't actively out chasing down suspects.

"I'll see if I can get the camera footage from near the bridges," Simon said. "Maybe there will be something on them that the local cops haven't already found. Something we can use."

Amber nodded. "I'll start to look into the two victims. Maybe there's a connection between the two of them that the local police weren't able to find."

Any connection would help them narrow down their search and give them a clearer picture of why this was happening. It would suggest a killer who wasn't working randomly but who had a purpose and a clear list of targets. If Amber could establish that, then she might be able to find a link back to the killer or at least work out who he was going to try to kill next.

There had to be some kind of reason for this, some kind of explanation, even if it was only one that made sense just in the mind of the killer. Finding a connection between the victims might be the first step to understanding that.

Amber began pulling up files on both Mia Wilson and Kelly Wasner, trying to find any commonalities between them. She started to look through their social media profiles and read through the interviews the local PD had done with their family and friends, looking out for anything that might be relevant.

They weren't friends on social media, and there was nothing up there to suggest that they might have moved in the same circles because they didn't have the same interests or friendship groups. Mia liked hiking, sports and seemed to party a lot, while Kelly seemed quieter and more into art. Although they were both young, there were still a few years between them. Even though they were both at the university, there was no reason to suspect that they might have run into one another. Just to be sure, Amber looked through as many photographs of the two women as she could, searching for any sign of the two of them together, but nothing leaped out at her.

Meanwhile, Simon was working on the camera footage. He didn't look as though he was making any more progress than Amber was. He glanced over her way.

"Anything interesting?" he asked.

"Nothing yet," she said. "I've been through all their social media, the interviews with their friends, everything. There's just no immediate connection between them that I can see. What about you?"

Simon spread his hands. "I have what the police have, but that isn't particularly helpful when it comes to giving us a suspect. There's a vague image of someone on the bridge, but they're wearing a hoodie, and there's no clear shot of their face. Between the angles and the darkness, it's hard to tell much about them at all. We could be looking for anyone."

That was, in some ways, more frustrating than not having an image at all to work with. Having footage of the killer seemed to hold out the promise of

more, seemed to draw Amber's attention, while at the same time offering her and Simon nothing that they could use. There was a risk that they could both be caught up trying to get more out of it when they should be trying to make progress in other ways.

"Is there any chance that image enhancement might give us enough for facial recognition?" Amber asked, unwilling to give up on the possibility that easily.

"There's nothing there," Simon said, with a firm shake of his head. "I've tried looking for alternative angles, reflections, anything that the techs back at Quantico might be able to enhance, but there's nothing."

Amber could hear the frustration there in his voice. She could understand that. She felt a lot of the same frustration in that moment. She wanted something that she could work on, something that she could start to reason through in order to get to an answer. Again, she found herself wishing that there was a more obvious puzzle at the heart of all of this because that would at least give her a clear path to get to the killer. A puzzle could be solved. A puzzle gave them a clear direction. This, trying to find answers when there was no obvious piece of evidence to follow, was much harder.

She was stuck trying to find connections where there weren't any to find. Mia and Kelly were similar ages but not close enough that they probably hung out. They were both college age, and both attended the local university, but Mia was just starting out majoring in physics while Kelly had been studying for a master's degree in statistics. There was no obvious link between the two there.

"They don't even look alike," Amber said, which cut out another potential link between the two. "With a serial killer, one who's picking victims without a clear connection to them or reason for it, I thought they typically had some factor that they latched onto with their victims, something that makes them choose one victim profile over another?"

"That's usually the case," Simon agreed. "But maybe this killer is different. Or maybe we just haven't found the common factor yet. Sometimes the killer's motivations aren't immediately apparent. Maybe there's something about their personalities or past experiences that drew the killer to them. Keep digging, Amber. There has to be something for us to find."

Amber nodded, feeling a sense of determination settle over her. If there was a link to find between Mia and Kelly, she intended to find it, no matter how small or obscure. It was the only way forward, the only way to catch this

elusive killer before he struck again.

She started to look through the victims' phones, pulling them out of evidence to make sure that the local police hadn't missed anything. There was nothing that seemed out of the ordinary, no messages that suggested that someone hated them or mentioned the bridges. There was, crucially, no sign of either woman in the other's contacts.

Amber did notice one thing on Mia Wilson's phone: she had several puzzle apps there. Amber opened them almost automatically, seeing the puzzles that those apps recommended based on Mia's interests and skill level. It felt as though she knew the victim better in that moment than she had before. The puzzles a person liked said something about them, whether they were more logical or lateral, whether they liked word puzzles or more abstract, shape-based problems.

As she continued to search, she couldn't help but wonder what kind of person could do this. What kind of person could take the lives of two young women in such a brutal way? Amber had seen killers before on her other cases, but she still couldn't understand what it was in someone that pushed them over the line into killing other people.

She shook her head, trying to push those thoughts aside. She couldn't afford to get caught up in trying to guess at the killer's motives without evidence. She needed to find something to go on first.

"I don't think we're going to find any more connections between them," Amber said as she continued to look. The small ones they had were the best that they were going to get. "But we already have three connections, in this case, I guess. They were both young women; they were both killed on bridges, and they both went to the university. The question is whether that's going to be enough to let us find whoever did this."

Simon nodded thoughtfully, looking a little doubtful about how far those three connections would get them, "It's not a lot to go on, but it's a start. Maybe it's enough for the killer that they're women. Maybe that's his whole victim profile."

"If so, then every woman in Verdice is potentially in danger," Amber said. She didn't want to think about the potential consequences. "Or at least, every woman connected with the university."

"Or every woman who crosses one of the local bridges," Simon said.

Amber felt a sense of relief that Simon was on the same page as she was, tempered by the possibility that so many women in the city might be in



danger.

"Do you think we're missing something?" she asked. She wanted there to be more than such general connections between the victims.

Simon shrugged, "It's always a possibility. But we're looking at this from every angle we can think of. Sometimes the answers just don't come easily. For now, at least we have some potential connections to explore."

"So we're saying... what? That either this killer is targeting women he spots at the university, or he's hanging out around the local bridges at night, waiting to ambush women at random?" Amber asked. Both possibilities seemed very general but also plausible. A killer who merely wanted to target young women might lurk in a particular location, looking for suitable victims and then following them to kill them.

Simon nodded. "I'm not sure which of those possibilities worries me more."

Amber could only agree. Neither one promised anything good. They both meant that a lot of women could be in danger.

"A killer at the university might have some connection to the victims even if they don't appear to have one to one another," Amber said. "This could still all be about some grudge or a personal conflict that's gotten out of hand."

"That might be the spark for it," Simon said, "but it feels like it's escalating into something more than something limited to a personal grudge."

Amber couldn't argue with that. The killer had obviously learned between his first and second kills. Even if this had started out as something personal, there was a chance that it could spiral into a killing spree that wouldn't stop until they caught whoever was behind this.

They had two potential leads on the case, two potential directions in which to look. They could go to the university and ask the young women's friends if there was anyone they both knew, or they could look into the bridges on the assumption that these were random attacks linked to the locations, that this was a killer who would have killed any woman who walked across the wrong bridge alone at the wrong time.

Either option might help to get them closer to the killer, but they couldn't investigate both at once. They needed to choose.

"Let's look into the bridges first," Amber said. "If this were just about the university, why is he killing women there? The bridges are obviously important to the killer, and it might be easier to find someone obsessed with the local bridges than it is to hunt through an entire college campus for a

killer."

Simon nodded his agreement to that. "You start looking into them to see if there's anything about the bridges that someone might latch onto and obsess about. I'll ask the local PD if there's anyone they know of with an unhealthy obsession with the bridges. Maybe someone has come to their attention in the past, but they haven't thought about them because they've been looking for people with connections to the victims."

Finally, it felt as though they had something to go on. Amber just hoped that it would be enough. If it wasn't, then there was a good chance that someone else would pay with her life.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Victoria sighed with relief as she got home from work, tossing her bag down near the door to her apartment and settling down on the couch while she read through her mail. It was the usual collection of junk mail and bills, with nothing important there. She closed her eyes, feeling almost exhausted after a long day. She had to remind herself that, soon enough, the work was going to be worth it. She was starting to make a name for herself.

She had preparation for tomorrow in her bag, but right then, Victoria wanted to ignore it for an hour. She got out her phone, wondering if any of her friends would want to go out for an hour or two in town, but then thought better of it. Now that they were all in their thirties, they had jobs and families, reasons to not go out drinking in the middle of the week.

Besides, there was all of that business with the killer, who was supposedly out there in town somewhere, targeting women. It was all over the local news and Victoria's social media groups. The whole town seemed abuzz with it. She'd spent at least ten minutes earlier trying to find a way to explain to her friend Zoe that the first two women had been more than a decade younger than either of them, so they probably didn't fit the killer's preferred victim type, all without making it sound like she was calling Zoe old. Being too old for a serial killer seemed like a strange thing to be offended by, but Zoe could be touchy about that kind of thing.

Victoria ran a hand through her short, dark hair, contemplating everything that was happening in the town. In spite of her assurances to Zoe earlier, Victoria really didn't feel like going out into town when there was a killer out there somewhere. It felt too much like tempting fate. It was better to stay here, inside, where it was safe.

Victoria tried to push the thought away, but it was hard to ignore, given everything that was going on in the town and in Victoria's life. She lived alone, and while she was confident in her self-defense skills, she couldn't help but feel vulnerable. After all, the killer had already struck twice. What was to stop him from striking again and again until someone stopped him? It seemed better to stay inside and definitely to stay as far away from the town's bridges as possible for the moment.

She shook her head, trying to clear her mind. She needed to focus on

something else, something less unsettling than thoughts of a killer. Maybe she could watch a movie or read a book. But even as she considered her options, the thoughts intruded again. Victoria couldn't shake the feeling that Verdice wasn't a safe place to be right then. A part of her wondered if she should leave town for a few days, but no, that would be overreacting. This didn't have anything to do with her.

Her phone beeped, and Victoria nearly jumped out of her skin as the sound came. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down before she checked the notification. She hadn't realized that she was so jumpy. It was just a text from her friend Emily asking if she wanted to come over for dinner tomorrow night.

Victoria smiled at that, finally relaxing a little. Emily was one of the few friends she had who wasn't married or in a serious relationship, and they often commiserated over the difficulties of being single in their thirties. It would be nice to spend some time with her, and so long as the two of them were together, it should be safe enough.

Victoria was still thinking about that when she heard a knock on her door.

"Who is it?" she called out, not wanting to get up if she didn't have to.

There was no answer, so it seemed that she was going to have to go and check. Victoria went over to the door, using the peephole to check the hallway beyond. She half-expected to find some delivery guy, or maybe one of her neighbors, out there. Had she been too loud sometime in the last couple of days, and one of them was coming over to complain?

Instead, there was no sign of anyone out there in the hallway. Was that down to some kid running through the building, knocking on doors as they went? The Levins, up on three, had a young son who might do that kind of thing, didn't they?

Victoria opened the door to check, but whoever it was had already gone. Victoria thought that she could hear the sound of footsteps retreating down the stairs, but she didn't want to start following after them. If it was anything that mattered, the person would have stayed. She would rather get back to picking out a book to read.

That was when Victoria saw the envelope lying there on the ground, right in front of her door, sitting there almost like a toad squatting on a rock. She picked it up. Had whoever it was who had knocked left this for her? If so, why not wait and put it in her hand? Or better yet, talk to her?

Victoria took the envelope, heading inside with it and wondering what it

might be. Was this someone's messed up way of serving her with legal papers, or was it just going to be a note from one of her neighbors? Victoria tore open the envelope and read through the sheet of paper that was inside. The contents made her pause, staring at them in a mixture of surprise and worry.

There was a crudely drawn map of the town in there. Well, not even the town, really. Just the river, the islands, and the connecting bridges. It had been simplified to the point where it was little more than a mathematical diagram, setting out the essential elements of a problem. Handwritten instructions lay beneath.

*Walk across all seven bridges by midnight. Walk each one only once. Do it by midnight. Fail, or tell anyone, and meet your punishment.*

Victoria stared at the note for several seconds longer, taking in the words there and their potential implications. She tried to work out what she should do about it. Should she call someone? Maybe the cops or something? She could feel fear welling up in her.

Then Victoria pushed that fear aside with a laugh.

"Nice try," she said aloud, just in case whichever of her friends was trying to prank her was listening in, waiting for a reaction. "But I know an impossible math problem when I see one."

This was clearly someone's idea of a sick joke. In the middle of a situation like this, take a very old, very well-known problem, then see if they could trick Victoria into walking out onto all the town's bridges while she was scared for her life that there was a killer out there. Probably, they would video the whole thing and put it up online just to enjoy Victoria's discomfort. Probably, they were laughing at her right now.

A part of her wondered who among the people she knew would do something like this. Under the circumstances, it wasn't funny trying to dare her to go walking the bridges at night. It wasn't the kind of thing Victoria thought that most of her friends would ever do. Only the part where they'd picked such an obviously wrong problem made it slightly funnier. That, and the fact that Victoria so obviously didn't match up with the two young women who'd died, made it clear that whoever was trying to prank her with this hadn't done a very good job.

Victoria stuffed the envelope into a drawer. Maybe she'd hang onto it until she found out exactly who had sent the thing, then decide what she wanted to do about it. Maybe she'd pin it up where people could see it in a couple of

days or make a post of her own pointing out just how stupid the attempt had been.

For now, though, she wasn't going anywhere. Victoria picked out a book from her ever-expanding to-be-read pile and settled in, determined to ignore her so-called friends' idea of a practical joke.

## CHAPTER NINE

Amber was cramming. She tried to learn as much as she could about Verdice's bridges as quickly as she could, getting all the information she could find, treating it the way she would have if she were planning to put together quiz questions about them or if she thought that the subject might come up in some kind of puzzle competition.

It was nice to be able to use her research skills to do something on this case, at last. To have the feeling that the skills she'd built up might make a difference. The more Amber could learn, the more she hoped that it might help her to find a way to understand what the killer was focused on here.

So she learned. She learned that the earliest had been built a couple of hundred years ago, before even the rest of the town, while the most recent had been completed just a decade back to try to ease traffic through the heart of the town. She learned about the large local manufacturing plant that had funded one of the bridges in the early twentieth century before going bust and about the time an eighth bridge had collapsed, sometime in the sixties.

She looked at the bridges on a map, trying to see if there was any obvious reason why the killer might have murdered Mia on one bridge and Kelly on another. It suggested that this wasn't about an obsession with a single bridge. She briefly entertained the idea that maybe the killer might be working his way around the bridges of the town in some kind of sequence, but it clearly wasn't geographical since the two bridges were nowhere near one another. Amber didn't think that it was chronological either, based on her research, since the first bridge had been the newest one and the second was among the older ones.

Amber kept checking for possible patterns, for any information when it came to the bridges that might help her make sense of these crimes. If she could find a pattern, then she might be able to work out where the killer was going to strike next.

But no matter how hard she looked, she couldn't find any connections between the bridges or any reason why the killer might have chosen those two specific locations. So far, nothing seemed to be adding up. She knew that the killer had to have some kind of connection to the bridges; otherwise, why choose them as the locations for the murders? But what that connection was,

she couldn't say.

As she scrolled through her research notes, only one thing stood out to Amber. Both bridges had been relatively isolated at the time of the murders. Mia's murder had taken place early in the morning when few people would have been around. Kelly's murder had also taken place at a time when the bridge was deserted. That didn't help to establish a pattern, though. It only pointed to a careful killer who didn't want to be disturbed while he went about his work. One who was careful.

Did that mean that they could stop the murders just by having police officers guard all of the town's bridges until they were able to locate the killer? Amber wasn't convinced that was anything more than a temporary solution. There was too much of a risk that the killer would simply wait them out if he saw the police in place. The police couldn't guard the bridges forever, so if the killer simply waited until they went back to their normal duties, he would be free to kill again. It might stop the killings for a while, but it didn't help them to catch whoever was doing this.

There was also a risk that stopping him from using the bridges would simply drive him to kill elsewhere. Serial killers like to stick to their patterns, but shutting down the preferred pattern wouldn't necessarily stop the killing. Forcing one to break his might produce an even worse killing spree, one that might cost more lives.

Amber leaned back, trying to think of the best way to proceed with all of this. As she thought, it occurred to her that she hadn't heard anything about Joseph since she'd arrived. Was he okay? His sister had said that she would call if there was any news, but maybe Amber should check-in.

Did she want to check in? What if it was bad news? What if he'd been hurt worse than they all thought because of her?

Amber knew that she couldn't think like that. She put in a call to Joseph's phone. She wasn't entirely surprised when she heard Denise's voice on the other end of the line rather than Joseph's.

"Hello? Amber?"

"That's right," Amber said. She braced herself for what she might hear next. "Are you still there with Joseph?"

She had to be if she was answering his phone, but that meant that she'd been there with her brother for hours, sitting by his bedside, waiting for him to wake up. It meant that Joseph was still hurt enough that he couldn't answer the phone.



It was where Amber suspected that she should have been, but she couldn't, not when there was a murderer there.

"I've been here off and on since I saw you earlier," Denise said. There was no note of accusation in her voice, but Amber suspected that there should have been.

"How is he?" Amber asked, afraid as she asked it of what the answer might be.

"No change. The doctors say that they've reduced the sedation and that he should wake up naturally at some point, but he hasn't shown any sign of doing it yet."

Amber's worry only grew. Joseph hadn't woken up yet? The doctors had said that he would, but what if he didn't? What if Amber was over here in Verdice, chasing a killer, and Joseph died while she was gone? Would Amber be able to live with herself if that happened?

"I... I should get back there," Amber said. It was an offer rather than a declaration of what she was going to do. She needed to know if she was wanted there.

"Aren't you in the middle of a case?" Denise asked a worried note in her voice.

"Yes. There's a serial killer, and-"

"Then you need to stay there." Amber got the feeling that the other woman was trying to make this as easy for her as possible when she didn't have to. "The doctors say that there's nothing anyone can do here anyway except wait."

A part of Amber wanted to go there anyway, wanted to make up for running away earlier by being there now. Especially when she and Joseph had argued so soon before he'd been attacked. Joseph hadn't been able to understand why Amber had run off everywhere, putting herself in danger to chase bad guys. Now, she was chasing another bad guy, and it was Joseph who was in danger.

Yet if she did go back, she would be running out on a case she'd already taken, one that Palliser and Simon both expected her to keep going with. If the killer wasn't caught, if he killed anyone else, Amber would see the faces of his victims every time she closed her eyes. She would feel the guilt of it as her responsibility. She would never know for sure if she could have helped to save their lives. She *had* to stay here.

"All right," Amber said, knowing that it was the only thing that she *could*

say. "But I still want to know if there's any change. Especially if Joseph wakes up."

"I'll call you *when* he wakes up," Denise said. "Or better yet, I'll get him to call you. It will be okay, Amber."

Denise sounded as if she were saying that mostly to reassure herself. She definitely didn't seem certain about it. Amber had to hang up and had to force herself to focus on the case. She was meant to be looking into the town's bridges, although there hadn't been anything concrete there that she and Simon could use.

Amber decided to go and see how Simon was getting on with his part of the investigation. She left the office and could see him across the Verdice PD's bullpen, talking to Chief Williams and a couple of detectives. As she walked over, she could see that Simon was animatedly gesticulating, his eyes shining with excitement at what the detectives were saying. Amber had to admit, there was something about him when he got so caught up in a case that made him almost magnetic, impossible to take her eyes off.

"What's going on?" Amber asked, coming to a stop beside them.

Chief Williams turned to her. "Agent Phelps has been asking us to go through our files to see if there's anyone who spends time around the bridges who might be a potential suspect."

Amber knew that part. She wanted to know if they'd found any answers.

"And?" Amber said.

Chief Williams gestured to a computer screen. There was a police file there on the screen for a man named Marcus Johnson. He was a skinny, bearded, white male in his late thirties, although years of living rough had left him looking older.

"One of my guys remembered Marcus when Agent Phelps asked about people who spend a lot of time around the bridges. He's been homeless here for years now. He never quite managed to get back on his feet. Some pretty serious mental health issues. He and some of the other homeless guys use the spaces under the bridges for shelter at night."

"So why him?" Amber asked, wanting to know what had made the police chief pick this one man out from the crowd. "Rather than one of the others?"

"Look at his record."

Amber looked closer at it. The record was a litany of petty theft and assault charges, including multiple complaints of harassment from local women. There were notes on his file about him spending time in a local

psychiatric institution following an assault on a kindergarten teacher a few years ago. That note of violence caught Amber's attention.

"Marcus is paranoid and a little disconnected from reality," Chief Williams said. "Mostly, he's okay if you keep your distance, but he doesn't stay on his meds, and he has a history of violence."

Amber considered that part. Could this be the killer they were looking for? Everything about him seemed to fit with the kind of profile they were looking for, but they would need a lot more than that to tie him conclusively to the crimes. A strange man who hung out near the bridges wasn't enough.

Right now, though, Marcus Johnson was the best potential suspect they had in this case. At the very least, Amber and Simon needed to talk to him to find out about his movements over the last few nights. If he couldn't give them good answers, then he would start to look more and more like the killer they were looking for.

Of course, before they could question him, they still had to find him, and when he didn't have a fixed address, that wouldn't be easy.

"You said the local homeless guys hang out around the bridges?" Amber said, wanting to be certain.

Chief Williams shrugged. "Sure."

Amber looked over to Simon, who nodded his agreement.

"Then that's where we're going next."

## CHAPTER TEN

"The spot where the homeless guys shelter out of the weather should be just ahead," Simon said, gesturing to the road ahead.

Simon watched the sky darkening as they drove up to one of the bridges between the two islands that occupied the middle of the river, one larger, one smaller. Amber was driving again, which for Simon felt like it fit with the way she'd been growing as an agent, taking more charge of the investigations they worked on, starting to come into her own as more than just someone there to solve puzzles. He was impressed by how good an agent she'd become. He was impressed by *her*.

Now, they had a good potential suspect in this case. Someone with clear mental health issues and a history of harassing, even attacking, women. Someone who had an obvious link to the local bridges. They didn't have any direct proof linking him to the crimes, but they had to look into him.

"Do we go in and arrest him straight away?" Amber asked. "Then bring him in for questioning? With a guy like this, he isn't likely to want to talk to us."

Simon shook his head. "All we have so far is conjecture. He's a plausible suspect, but there's nothing to tie him directly to the crimes."

"There's nothing to tie *anyone* to the crimes so far," Amber pointed out. That was legitimate, but they needed to go somewhere in this case.

"Which is why we talk to him, and we hope that he slips up."

Simon briefly wondered why the local PD hadn't come up with Marcus Johnson as a possible suspect before this. Why they hadn't come to speak to him the moment the first woman died. Maybe it was just the recency of the second murder so that they were still coming to terms with this being a serial killer, maybe they hadn't seen the connection to the bridges, or maybe they'd just dropped the ball. He wanted to believe that Francesca would have found this angle if these killings had taken place in Westford.

The thought of Francesca made Simon smile briefly, even though he knew that he ought to focus on the case. He hadn't expected to find that kind of connection with someone in the middle of a murder investigation, and he was glad that she was arranging to come over to DC to visit. When this was done, he hoped that he would get to spend plenty of time with her.

Right now, though, as pleasant as the thoughts of Francesca were, Simon needed to keep focused. He and Amber needed to find Marcus Johnson among the homeless people living under the bridge. They needed to find a man who might be a serial killer.

The two of them left the car, approaching on foot so that they would have a better chance of getting close to the area under the bridge without scaring off the people there. Above, darkness was closing in rapidly, the water of the river a dark rush off to one side, the sound of it reminding Simon of just how close they were to the water.

The area beneath the bridge was dark and damp, with the only light coming from a small fire burning in a metal drum, creating an orange glow. There were several makeshift tents and shelters under there constructed from scrap metal and tarpaulin, creating a rough camp there beneath the bridge, and maybe a dozen or more people were sleeping or huddled together against the chill of the evening. It was clear that this was a community of sorts, even if it was a desperate one, one that might fall apart at any moment.

Amber and Simon approached carefully, picking their way between the tents. There was graffiti here under the bridge, but Simon couldn't make out any gang signs he knew. He suspected that this was just a place for the city's down and outs rather than its criminal element.

Already, Simon could see eyes on them as they moved forward, a few of the people there backing away, obviously already realizing that they were law enforcement. The two of them walked towards a group of men who were sitting around the fire, huddled together for warmth. They were all wearing dirty and ragged clothes, with unkempt hair and beards. Most of them were gathered around the burning oil drum. A couple of them were off to one side, rather incongruously playing chess on an aging board with cheap plastic pieces. They looked up as Amber and Simon approached, their eyes wary and hostile. It was obvious that they knew from the first look that Simon and Amber were there on official business. Simon could sense the tension there, but he didn't feel as though it was about to turn into a violent situation. The people there mostly seemed sullen and silent, as if hoping that Simon and Amber would go away as quickly as possible.

Amber spoke up before Simon could, calling out so the people there could hear.

"We're looking for Marcus Johnson," Amber said. "Do any of you know where he is?"

Simon knew at once that it was too direct. Amber had probably been trying to save them time or maybe even trying to get them out of there as quickly as possible so that they could stop bothering these people, but the question instantly put the people there on edge.

The men exchanged glances, but no one spoke. Simon could see the fear in their eyes, the desperation to avoid any more trouble from the police. Had they worked out that Simon and Amber were FBI, or did they just think that they were detectives? Would it make any difference to them? Simon doubted it.

"Look, we're not here to cause any trouble," Simon said. "The sooner someone talks to us, the sooner we can go and get out of your way. We just need to talk to him. It helps him if we can find him."

There was still no answer from any of the people under the bridge. They'd probably all heard that kind of thing before. It was clear that they'd learned better than to talk to law enforcement. A few of them even started to drift away from the small encampment under the bridge, heading off as if they would rather give up their sleeping spot than risk having to talk to the FBI.

Simon and Amber exchanged a look. They couldn't risk losing their only lead. Amber seemed to have an idea, though. She headed over to the men playing chess.

"Do you mind if I play?" she asked.

The men looked uncomfortable, but they weren't about to say no. Amber sat down opposite one of them, resetting the pieces. She started to play, not saying anything, not asking about Marcus Johnson, not yet. Simon stood off to one side, trying not to look too threatening and hoping that Amber knew what she was doing.

She won the first game easily, then spun the board around to play black. She won that game too, and by now, a couple of the others were watching her. A big man pushed forward.

"Play me next, miss FBI," he said, with a slight Eastern European accent. "Let's see how good you are."

He said it with the confidence of someone who clearly thought he was good at the game. Even so, Amber beat him. Simon didn't understand enough about the game to know *how* she beat him; he just spotted the moment when the big man frowned. He played on a few more moves, then stuck out a hand.

"You play well."

Amber took it. "I'm better with puzzles."

“But now, I must have a rematch, yes?”

Simon wondered if they really had time for Amber to play everyone there in the camp, but he was willing to go along with it. It was obvious that she was trying to build some kind of rapport with these men.

“Marcus Johnson,” she said, her tone soft. “We're not here to hurt anyone or cause any trouble. We just need some information. The sooner we find out where he is, the sooner we can leave you all alone.”

One of the men, an older man with a wild beard and missing teeth, spoke up. “Marcus ain't here. He's probably down near the university. Reckons he can get money off those college types.”

The man laughed and spat as if to emphasize how little he thought about the other man's chances. Simon wasn't interested in that, just in the implications of what the man had said for the investigation.

Simon looked over to Amber. The university? If Marcus Johnson was hanging out there as well as near the bridges, then he suddenly had a link to both places that seemed to be connected to the murders. Now, they really had to find him, *especially* if he wasn't here where they'd expected him to be. If he was off at the university, that might mean that he was already out there, stalking another victim.

There was definitely no time to let Amber finish her game of chess.

“Come on,” Simon said to Amber, unable to keep the sense of urgency out of his voice. “We need to get to the university.”

Amber and Simon hurried back to their car, and Simon could feel his heart pounding with the urgency of the situation. If he was the killer they were looking for, then they had to hurry. They had to find Marcus Johnson before he could hurt anyone else.

Thankfully, it was only a short drive to the university, over the bridge and onto one of the islands. There, large buildings in a Gothic style loomed ahead of them in a series of spires and ivy-covered walls. A central campus seemed to focus around a large quad, while the sprawl of it was contained by the limits of the island that the university sat upon. They pulled up in front of the campus, and the two of them leaped out, heading into it and looking around for any sign of their suspect.

They found a member of campus security instead, a large man who looked over at the two of them suspiciously as if wondering what they were doing there on the campus at night. Simon flashed his ID and watched the security guard's expression turn to something more helpful almost instantly.

"We're looking for a homeless guy who might be hanging around campus," he said.

Amber held out her phone. She'd pulled up a picture of Marcus Johnson. That was good thinking. It was a lot easier than trying to describe him.

"Him?" the security guard said, sounding surprised that the two of them were looking for him. He gestured in the direction of one of the campus administration buildings. "I think I saw him over that way somewhere. Why? What has he done?"

"We just need to talk to him in connection with a case," Amber said.

It was the right thing to say. Simon didn't want to raise a panic about Marcus potentially being a serial killer when they didn't have enough evidence to connect him to the crimes yet. He also didn't want campus security to overreact if they saw him. Not until they knew more.

Instead, he and Amber started to make their way over towards the administration building, hoping that Marcus would still be there when they got there.

As they walked, Simon couldn't help but feel a sense of unease settling into him with every step he took. The darkness had fully descended by now so that the only light came from the lamps that dotted the campus pathways. It meant that there were plenty of shadows beyond their glow. He glanced around, wondering how many potential hiding spots there were for someone who didn't want to be found. They passed by several students, and each time, Simon had to check to make sure that they weren't the man the two of them were looking for.

They rounded a corner and saw a figure huddled up against the wall, wrapped in a ragged coat. Simon's heart leaped into his throat as he recognized the figure from his photographs. It was Marcus Johnson.

Amber started forward, but Simon held out a hand to stop her. They needed to be careful about how they did this. They couldn't just rush in blindly. They didn't know if Marcus was armed or if he had any friends nearby who might try to intervene.

They approached more slowly, their hands on their weapons, ready to draw them at the first hint of trouble from the homeless man.

Marcus Johnson?" Simon said, keeping his voice low and non-threatening. "I'm Agent Simon Phelps, and this is Agent Amber Young. We need to ask you some questions."

Marcus looked up at them, his eyes wide and unfocused. It was clear that



he was drunk or high, or both. Simon could see the glimmer of a bottle in his hand.

"Don't care about your questions," Marcus said. "Keep away from me!"

"Where were you last night, Marcus?" Amber asked, taking another step forward.

"I don't talk to cops. I know you're out to get me."

"We're FBI, not cops," Simon said. He hoped that the difference would help Marcus to understand the seriousness of the situation. "Were you anywhere near the north bridge?"

"I don't talk to cops!" Marcus snarled and took a clumsy swing at Amber with the bottle.

Simon stepped into the path of the attack, blocking the swing. They'd let themselves get too close, and now there was no time to draw a gun, even if it might have been useful. Against a drunk with a bottle, it seemed better to do this without resorting to lethal force.

"Get off me!" Marcus snarled, throwing punches at Simon, trying to break away.

Simon covered up, stopping the punches from getting through while making sure that he didn't lose his grip on the arm holding the bottle. That could hurt him much more than any of the punches the homeless man could throw at him.

Simon wrenched at that arm, and the bottle clattered from Marcus' grasp, falling to the ground and shattering, with shards of glass scattering across the paving underfoot. Simon knew that he needed to be careful now. He couldn't take Marcus to the ground now to control him, not with so much broken glass there.

That moment of hesitation gave the homeless guy the opportunity that he needed. Marcus managed to land a punch to Simon's jaw then, hard enough that he was able to break away. Before Simon could recover and grab him again, he turned and started to run.

Simon and Amber followed after him, their feet pounding against the paving. They had to catch him before he got away. Marcus weaved through the buildings, his ragged coat flapping behind him as if he knew his way around the university perfectly. He was surprisingly fast, considering his inebriated state.

Simon and Amber gave chase, their adrenaline surging as they ran through the campus. They couldn't let Marcus get away, not when he was their only

lead in the case. They kept pace, and then they started to catch up.

Marcus was fast, but Simon was faster. He'd always been in good shape, and now his FBI training allowed him to close the gap between him and Marcus quickly. Now that they were well clear of the broken bottle, Simon had no qualms about taking this suspect down. He tackled him from behind, taking him to the ground. Marcus struggled and kicked, but Simon managed to keep him pinned down until Amber arrived to help cuff him.

Panting, they both stood up, their eyes fixed on Marcus. It was clear that he was still under the influence, and it was unlikely that they would get any useful information from him at this point. But they had him, and that was a start.

Simon took out his phone, calling for backup to come and take Marcus into custody. They would have to wait until he was sober to question him, but at least now they had him.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Is there any sign of a lawyer for him?" Amber asked as she watched Marcus through the one-way glass that looked through into the interrogation room, watching him with an increasing sense of worry.

"He says he doesn't want one," Simon said. "He doesn't trust them any more than he trusts us."

That didn't make Amber any less concerned.

"Do you think we can head in there?" Amber said. Marcus was currently pacing the interrogation room, occasionally gesticulating to something only he could see in a way that implied disagreement, even violence.

"I'm not sure if this is the drink or just his normal mental state," Simon said, taking a second or two to consider Marcus' behavior. "I think this is the best we're going to get."

That still worried Amber a little, but she and Simon needed to question Marcus at some point, and it was already getting late. They needed to end this. They needed to either try to establish that Marcus was the killer or find somewhere else to look. If they waited too long and they were wrong about him being the killer, then they gave whoever was still out there all the time in the world to strike again.

"Let's go in," she said.

Simon nodded and signaled to the guard to open the door. They stepped inside the room, closing the door behind them. Marcus stopped pacing and turned to glare at them, his eyes bloodshot and wild. He obviously didn't like them being in there.

"What do you want?" he snapped. "Want to jump on me again? Beat me up?"

"We want to ask you a few questions," Simon said calmly, taking a seat across from Marcus.

"I told you already; I don't talk to cops."

"We're not cops," Amber said. "We're FBI."

Marcus snorted. "Same difference."

"The difference is how serious this could get for you if you don't cooperate. Sit down, please, Marcus," Simon said in a firm tone. Marcus looked as if he might argue or even fight, but after a few seconds, he took a

seat, glaring at the two of them from one side of a table there. Amber and Simon went to sit down opposite him.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Do the names Mia Wilson or Kelly Wasner mean anything to you?" Amber asked.

"Never heard of them." That had the feeling of an automatic reaction rather than a real answer. It was obvious that Marcus wasn't in a mood to cooperate.

"Are you sure?" Amber asked. She pulled up pictures of the two victims on her phone, showing the photographs to Marcus one after the other.

Marcus didn't even look at them before he answered. "Never seen them."

It was obvious that Simon was as frustrated by that as Amber was.

"Marcus, we have you for trying to assault a federal agent," he snapped. "You swung a beer bottle at my partner, and you hit me several times. If you don't start cooperating, we'll hold you for that, even if we can't hold you for the murders."

Amber saw Marcus' eyes widen at the last word.

"Murders? I don't know anything about that," Marcus said, crossing his arms over his chest. "You're not pinning something like that on me. I didn't do that!"

"Mia Wilson and Kelly Wasner were both killed on bridges in the town," Amber said, determined to take advantage of him finally reacting to her and Simon. "You like to hang out around bridges, don't you, Marcus?"

"Lots of people do," Marcus insisted.

"And at the university?" Simon asked. "Did you know that both of the victims were students there?"

"I don't know anything about them! I didn't do this!" Marcus said, raising his voice. "I told you, I never even saw those people."

"But you didn't even look at the pictures, so how would you know?" Simon demanded.

"Where were you last night, Marcus?" Amber asked. It was time to try to pin him down to something that they could check. If he didn't have an alibi, then they could start to look more closely at him, trying to find anything that would connect him definitively to the crimes.

"I..." He shrugged.

"We need an answer, Marcus," Amber said. "A woman was killed last night. If you can tell us where you were, if you can give us an alibi, then

you're off the hook for the murders."

Marcus sat there for several seconds longer. Amber couldn't tell if he was considering whether to start talking or just trying to remember where he'd been. She suspected that doing so wouldn't be entirely simple for him a lot of the time.

"I made it into a local shelter for the night," Marcus said. "I got in there a little after six. I was there all night."

"Which shelter?" Simon asked, obviously determined to pin down the details.

"On Barnabus Street."

Simon looked over to Amber, then nodded to the door. Amber went along with him. She was already looking up the number for the homeless shelter. She called it as soon as she and Simon were out of the interrogation room and into the hallway beyond.

"Barnabus Shelter. How can I help you?"

"Hi, this is Agent Amber Young with the FBI. I'm calling to ask if you had a guest by the name of Marcus Johnson last night," she said, hoping that they would be able to either verify or break his alibi. Either way, she and Simon needed to know for sure whether Marcus was telling them the truth.

There was a pause on the other end of the phone, and then a woman's voice replied. "What's this about?"

"Mr. Johnson has given your shelter as an alibi in an ongoing investigation," Amber said. "Was he there?"

"Mr. Johnson?" the woman said. She laughed. "I doubt Marcus has been called that much in his life. But yes, he was here. Cantankerous, crazy guy that he is."

"Do you remember what time he was there?" Amber asked.

"He came in around 6:30 pm and stayed until we closed this morning. That would be around 8 am."

"Did he leave at any point during the night?" Simon asked, taking the phone from Amber.

"No, as far as I know, he stayed here the whole time. He would have been here all night."

"Thank you," Simon said before hanging up with a wince.

"Damn it," Amber said, feeling a wave of frustration rising in her at the realization that Marcus Johnson's alibi checked out. She'd thought that Marcus was a strong suspect, but he couldn't have committed the murder of

Kelly Wasner. Since both victims had undoubtedly been murdered by the same person, he wasn't the killer they were looking for.

They would have to let him go, but what then? What were they going to do next? Instantly, Amber wanted to find another angle to pursue, another way to find a suspect. There was still a killer out there, somewhere in the dark.

"We should go to the university," she said. "We should-"

"We should call it a night," Simon said. "It's getting late, Amber. This lead didn't pan out, and it's too late to go looking for another. Let's start again tomorrow."

"But the killer is still out there," Amber argued. She didn't want to leave things like this.

"We'll have the police guard the bridges tonight," Simon said. "But we need to get some rest and start fresh in the morning."

As much as Amber wanted to keep working on the case, she knew that Simon had a point. She had to go along with it.

"All right, but we start first thing tomorrow."

The two of them left the police department, leaving word to release Marcus in the morning before heading for a motel. They got two rooms there. It was cheap and simple, but it was more than enough when they wouldn't be spending much time there.

Amber and Simon hesitated outside of their respective rooms. Amber couldn't help looking over at Simon, taking a moment or two to look at him simply standing in the doorway.

"I'll see you in the morning," Simon said. Was there the smallest of hesitations there, as if he wanted to invite her to come in? Or was that Amber's imagination? Was it something Amber was hoping, and if so, *why* was she hoping it?

"Yes, see you then," Amber replied. It was still too easy to imagine going over to him there, even though she knew that he was with Detective Angelique, even though *she* was with Joseph.

The sheer intensity of those feelings had faded a little, given what had happened to Joseph. It had been a reminder that what Amber did affected him and potentially put him in danger. Even so, the feelings were still there, at least a little.

Part of the reason that Amber had left to go on this case was because of the feeling that Joseph was safer without her there, but a part of that... Amber

wanted to be here with Simon. Was that because of the need to solve the problem of a case like this, or was it because of Simon?

She pushed that thought out of her mind. This wasn't the time or place for those kinds of thoughts or feelings. She and Simon were both professionals working on a case that had to be solved. Nothing else mattered, and there certainly wasn't going to be anything between them here and now.

Amber went into her room, locking the door behind her. She turned on the lights, taking a deep breath. She needed to clear her mind and get some rest. This case was starting to get to her, and she couldn't let that happen.

But as she lay down on the bed, she couldn't help but think about Simon. He was handsome, smart, and had a commanding presence that she found attractive. She shook her head, trying to think of something else, but his face kept popping up in her mind.

Amber had to force herself to focus on Joseph instead and on what had happened to him. She thought about calling the hospital to see how he was, but it was late, and Denise had already promised to call if anything changed. Calling now wouldn't be a good idea.

Amber focused on the question of who might have attacked him instead. She didn't have the diary with her because it was in evidence with the Washington PD. She couldn't simply take it out to look through it, but she could remember some of the notes that someone had written there. She could remember the puzzles that this person had corrected. And that one note beneath one of them:

*Almost good enough.*

There was no doubt that he was intelligent. Certainly clever enough to solve the puzzles Amber had worked on there. Clever enough to improve on some of them. Was there a point in doing that? Was it intended as some kind of challenge to Amber?

*Could* this be someone from the puzzle world? Someone she knew? In her first case, she'd upset Raymond Johns, the puzzle editor for the Gazette under the name Idea, by accusing him of being a killer. Might he have done something like this to retaliate?

No, Amber didn't believe that. Even so, when she got back, she was going to try to get the Washington PD to compare the handwriting in the notes to some of Raymond's, just to make sure.

That was a matter for when she and Simon were back in DC, though. For now, they had a killer to catch here in Verdice, and that meant that Amber

had to try to find a new lead that might get them somewhere now that the most likely suspect from near the bridges hadn't worked out.

That was a matter for the morning, though. There was nothing Amber could do tonight. She just had to hope that the police watching the town's bridges would be enough to keep the women of Verdice safe while she and Simon slept.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Victoria wasn't sure what it was that woke her up, sending her blinking her way back into consciousness. Some sound from her apartment in the night, perhaps? Some hint of something in the dark that didn't quite fit?

For a moment, Victoria wanted to believe that it was just a bad dream, but she still sat up in bed, her heart racing as she tried to listen for anything out of the ordinary. But all she heard was the sound of the wind outside, the normal sounds of her apartment building at night. Nothing that would have woken her up.

Victoria took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down and not really succeeding. She didn't know why she was so jumpy tonight. It had been a long day, but that was no excuse for her to be this on edge.

Maybe it had something to do with the weird note that she'd been sent earlier, the one demanding that she walk over all the bridges in town. It had been a strange joke, the kind of thing that she should have been able to dismiss out of hand and never think about again, but something about it had unsettled Victoria. Apparently, to the point where she lost sleep over it.

Briefly, she looked over at the clock on the bedside table. The display told her that it was twenty minutes past midnight. Victoria's mind automatically jumped to the fact that it was twenty minutes after the deadline from the note.

Victoria knew that, with her thoughts racing like this, she wouldn't get back to sleep quickly. She got out of bed, walking over to the window to look out at the moonlit street below. There was no one there, no sign of anything suspicious. Maybe she'd heard an animal outside or a branch snapping in the wind. She couldn't shake the feeling of unease, though, the feeling that something wasn't right.

Victoria was still looking out of the window when she heard a sound somewhere in her apartment. Something definite this time, something that couldn't be put down to just a bad dream or an unexpected sound outside. It was a faint creak, nothing much, but it was a sound that shouldn't have been there. Not in her apartment.

Victoria wondered if she should call the cops, but a part of her was still half-convinced that this was all a joke by one of her friends. Victoria grabbed her phone in case she needed it, but she also picked up the baseball bat that

she kept near the bed in case she needed *that*, too. If someone wanted to scare her, she was more than capable of scaring them right back.

Victoria set off through her apartment, turning on lights as she went. She held the baseball bat ready, as much to scare whoever was doing this as because she thought that she would actually need to use it. If she did... well, she wouldn't hesitate to swing it right at anyone she found.

"You got something wrong," she called out, trying to keep her voice level. "The puzzle you set doesn't work. If you want to scare me with some fake threat, you need to do better than that."

There was no answer, and Victoria kept moving through her apartment. Maybe there was nothing there. In which case, she needed to check, needed to be sure. It wasn't a huge space, so Victoria could quickly establish that there was no one in the main room. She headed for the bathroom, wanting to make sure that she was alone. She reached the door to it, her heart beating fast in spite of herself.

Victoria threw the door open, baseball bat at the ready. There was nobody there. Victoria let out a sigh of relief. She'd obviously imagined this whole thing.

That was when she heard a sound behind her. She tried to turn, but she was too slow.

Something dropped around her neck. It started to tighten rapidly, cutting into her neck, cutting off her ability to breathe. Victoria wanted to say that this wasn't fair, wasn't right that the problem was impossible, but she didn't have the breath to do it then.

She was pulled backward, and the noose only continued to tighten.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Amber was standing in the middle of a bridge, looking out over the water, seeing the moonlight shimmer from its surface as it rippled and shifted far beneath her. She wasn't sure how she'd gotten there, only that there had been reports of a man lurking there and that she had to investigate.

Simon was with her, his gun out, ready for any danger. He was moving ahead of Amber, checking every shadow and corner for any sign of trouble. Amber was grateful for his presence there, knowing that there was no one she would rather have backing her up. Even so, Amber could feel her nerves building as the two of them started to make their way over the bridge.

They searched the struts of the bridge one at a time, wanting to make sure that there was no one hiding behind their steel girders, checking each riveted hiding spot for any sign of the man who had been seen there. Amber couldn't remember the call that had brought the two of them there, but there must have been one, or why were they there?

Amber felt a slowly growing sense of worry, a small certainty that something terrible was going to happen here that lodged in her chest and refused to leave. There was a killer there somewhere, but Amber no longer felt certain that she and Simon would be able to take him down.

"We should go," Amber said to Simon, but the problem was that they couldn't go. It was their job to be there. They had to keep searching, even though every instinct Amber had screamed at her to leave, now, before anything happened.

"It will be fine, Amber," Simon said, turning to look at her.

That moment, when he was distracted because of Amber, was when a figure leaped from behind one of the girders, almost appearing out of nowhere, dressed in dark clothes, almost wrapped in shadow. Amber couldn't see his face beneath a hood that obscured his whole head. She only knew that he was larger than either of them, strongly built, and clearly dangerous.

Amber went to shout a warning, but she couldn't move then, couldn't speak. It felt as though she was paralyzed with fear, unable to do anything as the figure leaped at Simon, slamming into him and sending his gun spinning from his hand. The two of them went down, struggling with one another.

Still, Amber couldn't move. It was as if she were stuck in molasses, rooted

to the spot. She should have been going for her weapon, but her limbs didn't seem to want to move. She couldn't even shout out to try to distract the killer. All she could do was stand there and hope that Simon would come out on top in this fight.

For a moment, it looked like he would, then Amber saw the man he was fighting pull back one booted foot and kick Simon hard in the side of the head, the sound of it awful against the night.

Simon tumbled off his opponent, obviously stunned. The man in the hooded top jumped atop him, throwing punches. Amber heard the impact of them, one after another, raining down on Simon while he was helpless to resist.

Amber could only stand there and watch, struggling to move, struggling to help. But nothing happened. She could only watch in helpless terror as the figure lashed out at Simon again and again and...

Amber woke with a gasp that seemed to fill the motel room, cold sweat covering her skin. Light was pouring in through the window to her room.

Amber checked her phone for the time. It was early, but Amber didn't care. She was awake now; there was no way that she was going to be able to get back to sleep now, not with that dream waiting for her the moment that she closed her eyes.

Since she had her phone in her hand, Amber checked to make sure that there weren't any messages or missed calls waiting for her that might mean there had been another murder overnight.

There was nothing, and that eased Amber's worries a little, taking away some of the tension that had lingered from the dream. She guessed that the presence of the guarding police officers had deterred the killer from striking on the bridges for now. Or maybe he hadn't been planning to kill anyone last night, and the efforts of the Verdice PD had been wasted. Maybe he would be out there tonight, targeting another woman.

At least for now, it meant that Amber and Simon had time in which to continue their hunt for the killer.

First, though, Amber called the hospital. "Hello, I'm calling to check on one of your patients. Joseph Connolly? I was there yesterday. I'm his girlfriend, Amber Young."

"I'll put you through to his doctor," the receptionist said. Amber had to hold, but it wasn't long before a man's voice came onto the line.

"Hello, this is Dr. Schmid. You're the woman who was here yesterday,

yes?"

"That's right. Amber. I'm Joseph's girlfriend. Is there any news?"

"Not so far. He hasn't woken up yet, but that's normal with this kind of injury. We've been keeping him sedated to allow any brain swelling to reduce, and anticipate that he'll be ready to wake up later today."

It was difficult to hear that Joseph was still unconscious. Amber wanted to be sure that he was all right. She wanted to hear his voice.

"Ok," Amber said because it was all that she could do. "I'll check again later."

She hung up. Amber wanted to get back to DC, back to Joseph, which meant that she needed to get started again on the case as soon as possible. Amber showered and dressed, hurrying over to Simon's room and knocking on the door.

"I'm coming!" Simon called out from the other side of the door.

He answered after a few seconds, still buttoning his shirt. Amber resisted the urge to stare, but only barely.

"Amber, is everything all right?"

"Yes, yes, everything's fine," Amber said, surprised by the sudden relief flooding through her. It seemed that a part of her had needed to see that Simon was okay. "I just thought we should grab breakfast and then get an early start."

"Sounds like a good idea. Hopefully, we'll make some progress today. Where do you want to start?"

Amber had been thinking about that. They'd had two potential leads, and they'd already looked at one of them. Maybe it was time to look into the other one.

"We didn't get anything from looking at the bridges," Amber said. "So I think it's time we took a look at the university. There *has* to be a connection between the two victims somewhere there."

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They grabbed breakfast at a small diner, then headed over to the university, looking for the building given over to physics. It proved to be a little more modern looking than the rest of the campus, with sleekly angled sides and large banks of solar panels covering the roof.

Amber and Simon went inside, walking up to a reception desk staffed by a

young woman with glasses and a friendly smile.

"Hi, can I help you?" the woman asked, peering over her glasses at them. There was a textbook on one side of the reception desk, suggesting that she was only working there while she was studying.

Amber showed her ID to the young woman. "I'm Agent Young, this is Agent Phelps. We're looking for anyone who might have known one of the students in your department: Mia Wilson."

Amber saw the receptionist's eyes widen slightly at that. They hadn't mentioned the murders explicitly, but she clearly knew what this was all about.

"We don't keep track of who the students' friends are," the receptionist pointed out, "but I guess I can pull up a list of the classes she was in, if that helps."

Amber suspected that would help their investigation a lot. If they could find a class that Mia was in, they would be able to find the people who knew her and who might be in a position to tell them about what had been going on in her life. Hopefully, that would give them something to go on, a direction to look in that might allow them to find the killer.

The receptionist tapped away at a computer for a few moments before bringing up a list of Mia's classes. One of them, a general introductory class in physics, was running right then. It seemed like a good place to start Amber.

Amber and Simon made their way over to the lecture theater, waiting for the class to finish. They wanted to catch people when they were more relaxed and willing to talk rather than interrupting.

Eventually, students started to pour out of the lecture theater, some of them hanging out in the hallways after the class finished. Amber went over to one group of them while Simon headed to another. They needed to split up here to talk to as many people as possible and give themselves the best chance of finding people who might give them the information they needed. They had no way of knowing which, if any, of the students might be able to tell them something that they could use.

"Hey," Amber said, flashing her badge briefly but not trying to make too much of it. She didn't want to risk intimidating any of the students there. "Did anyone here know Mia Wilson?"

She tried to sound casual in spite of the seriousness of the case. A few of the students looked at each other, but one girl stepped forward. She had

spiked blue and green dyed hair while she was wearing a t-shirt for a band Amber hadn't heard of.

"I knew her. Most of us here did. We had a few classes together. She was a really sweet girl." There was a note of pain there in the young woman's voice as she talked about Mia. Amber guessed that was simply because it was hard for anyone there to believe that one of their number had been murdered the way Mia had.

"Did you ever hear her mention a woman named Kelly Wasner?" Amber asked. That potential connection was important to explore, even if it hadn't appeared from the files as if the two of them knew one another. If she could find a link, it might be enough to tell her what all of this was about.

Around Amber, the students shook their heads.

Amber tried something else. If she couldn't find a link to Kelly, then it was better to focus on finding any reason why Mia might have been killed. "Do you know if she was having any problems? Did anything seem off about her lately?"

Again, no one seemed to know anything. Maybe it had been too much to hope that going to speak to the people who knew Mia would give them answers. Still, Amber kept going, wanting to make sure.

"And no one saw anything strange going on around her in the last few days?"

Still nothing. Amber left that group, going over to another to ask the same questions. The key was to ask as many of the students as possible. They only needed one to remember something, and they would be able to start making headway in this case. She could see Simon working his way around the hallway, too, asking about Mia. From the frustration on his face, she suspected that he wasn't getting any more from them than Amber was.

The problem was that the students were starting to drift away now, heading off to their next classes, and it didn't look as though Simon had gotten anywhere. Amber went over to check in with him.

"Anything?" she asked, hoping for a moment that she'd misread his frustration.

Simon shook his head. "There's no sign that she knew Kelly Wasner, and there's no hint that there was anything else going on in her life that might have gotten her killed."

They'd struck out here, then. Amber could feel her frustration building. She'd hoped that if they couldn't get anything around the bridges, then the

university would be able to provide them with answers.

Even as Amber thought, though, the girl from the first group of students Amber had spoken to came over.

"Look, I didn't want to say this in front of everyone," she said, sounding hesitant. Even now, she looked as though she might hurry away without saying anything. Probably only the seriousness of what happened to Mia was keeping her there.

That caught Amber's attention. "What is it? Some problem Mia had?"

The girl hesitated before answering. "I don't know about any problems, but I did hear some rumors that Mia was seeing someone. Someone she shouldn't have been."

Amber felt a flicker of interest at that. A relationship they didn't know about, particularly one that Mia's friends thought shouldn't have been going on, could point to a potential motive for someone to murder her. "Do you know who this person might be?"

The girl nodded after a few seconds. "The rumor is that it was Professor Samuels," she said. "He teaches some of our math classes. It's just a rumor, though."

Even the rumor of it was enough to keep Amber's attention. A math professor might reasonably also have met someone who was doing a master's degree in statistics. It might potentially give him a connection to both victims. That meant that they would need to speak to this professor, but first, they needed to find out if there was any sign of him having a connection to Kelly Wasner.

"Come on," Amber said to Simon. "We need to check this."

Amber headed out of the physics building with Simon alongside her, already pulling up files on her phone, searching for any hint of someone who knew Kelly well enough to tell them if she'd known the professor.

A name leaped out: Justine Burton, Kelly's best friend.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They got a dorm room number for Justine Burton from the receptionist who had helped them before, then headed over there as quickly as they could. A hint of a rumor wasn't much to go on, but right then, Amber would take anything that she could get.

If the rumor proved to be true, the relationship Mia had been in might point to a reason for her murder. For now, though, they needed to see if there was any connection to Kelly. They needed a motive that worked for both murders, not just one.

They reached Justine's dorm, a smaller building tucked around the back of a couple of the bigger academic buildings. They headed inside and tried to find their way through the halls until they came to the correct room. Amber knocked on the door. After a few moments, a young woman answered. She had long brown hair and freckles, while she was wearing a floral pattern dress. Her eyes looked slightly red as if she'd been crying recently.

"Can I help you?" she asked, looking at them with curiosity tinged with worry.

"Justine Burton?" Amber asked. She showed her badge. "I'm Agent Young with the FBI. This is Agent Phelps. We understand that you were Kelly Wasner's best friend?"

Justine's eyes widened as Amber said that. "Yes... I guess that's right. Sorry, this is just... is there something I can help you with?"

It was obvious that their presence had flustered her a little.

"We know this must be hard for you, Justine," Amber said. "But can we come in and ask you a few questions?"

Justine nodded, then stepped back, letting them into a dorm room decorated with posters from old movies.

"I talked to the police about Kelly already," Justine said. "I'm not sure what I can tell you that they haven't already heard. She was... she was a great roommate, but I don't really know much."

"But I'd guess that, as her roommate, you would know her pretty well?" Amber said.

Justine nodded. Amber could see the grief etched there on her features. Amber reached out to put a hand on her arm.

“We know it’s hard, Justine,” Amber said. “When someone you know well, someone you’re close to, is hurt, there’s no worse feeling.”

She was thinking about Joseph as she said that, and some of what she felt must have come through in the words because Justine looked at her as if recognizing that Amber was talking from personal experience.

Amber knew that she should try asking the questions they were there for. She and Simon needed to get answers. To one pressing question in particular.

"Did she know Professor Samuels?" Amber asked. "He's a math professor here, and-"

"I know who he is," Justine said, with a note of distaste that Amber caught. It intrigued her. "Kelly was doing statistics, after all."

"So she knew him from her classes?" Simon asked. "Just from her classes?"

He'd obviously caught the note of distaste too. Justine hesitated. That hesitation caught Amber's attention in the same way that the hint of distaste had before.

"What is it, Justine? What aren't you telling us?"

"Well... there was something else," Justine said. "It's just..."

Amber tilted her head to the side. "What else?"

"Professor Samuels... made a pass at her once. Hit on her, whatever you want to call it. Obviously, she turned him down. He's a professor and much older than her. She just wasn't interested. He wasn't very happy about it, but I didn't think it meant anything."

Now, though, it might mean everything. Amber's mind raced, thinking of the potential implications of this revelation, what it meant for their case. If Professor Samuels had made a pass at Kelly and she had turned him down, it was possible that he could have held a grudge against her. Maybe even one that might have given him a motive for murder.

And if he'd been having a relationship with Mia, that meant that suddenly he was the only connection between them. It was easy to imagine how things might have gone. Maybe Mia told him that she wasn't prepared to see him anymore, or maybe Kelly had found out about Mia and threatened to tell the university authorities.

There hadn't been any evidence of the relationship with Mia on her phone or any connection with Professor Samuels on Kelly's, but maybe that just meant that the messages had been deleted. Maybe a tech team could still recover something?

Amber wasn't sure about the significance of the bridges. Maybe they'd just been a convenient place to meet the young women? Maybe he'd asked to meet them there, and that was why they'd been killed in spots where they wouldn't usually have been. Maybe the bridges had been a way to display them, to tell the world that no one got away with turning him down?

Amber didn't have any answers, but she did know where to get them. She and Simon needed to find Professor Samuels. The sooner they did that, the sooner they had a chance to find out what his involvement in all of this was.

Amber and Simon exchanged looks. They had a potential suspect and a lead to follow up on. It was time to move quickly.

"Thank you, Justine," Amber said, standing up. "You've been a big help." Justine nodded, looking a little overwhelmed by the whole thing.

"Are you going to be okay?" Simon asked her.

She nodded. "I... yes. It hurts losing a friend like this, but if you can catch whoever did this to her... that will be something, at least."

Amber nodded. "We're going to do everything we can. I promise you that."

Amber and Simon made their way out of the dorm, hurrying back through the university.

They went to the math department, which proved to be a confusing maze of nearly identical-looking hallways lined with notice boards and occasional problems set up as if on the off chance that some passerby would solve them. Amber stopped a passing student, a young man who looked as though he was barely awake. Maybe he'd pulled an all-night study session.

"We're looking for Professor Samuels' office," Amber said. In a place like this, it seemed like the quickest way to find who they were looking for.

"Just over that way. Room five."

"Thanks."

After a minute or so of searching, they found Professor Samuels' office. They knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Amber tried the handle, but it was locked.

"Are you looking for Dirk?" a voice asked. Amber turned to see an older, white-haired professor standing there watching her and Simon.

"We need to talk to Professor Samuels," Simon said, showing his badge. The professor peered in to look at it as if checking that it was real.

"The FBI, oh my. Well, this time of the day, you'll find him teaching classes. Lecture room four, I think."

Amber and Simon set off, looking for the lecture hall. To Amber, it felt as though they were following a trail of breadcrumbs, going from one person to the next in search of Professor Samuels.

When they reached lecture room four, they slipped inside and peered down at the front of the room from the rear. It was a large lecture theatre with sloped banks of seats so that the two of them were high above the lecturer who stood at the front, pointing to equations that were being projected up onto a screen, trying to explain the concepts behind them to the class.

"So, as you see, there's a fundamental flaw in the proof that was provided in the late 19th Century. A more modern approach is..."

The lecturer kept talking. He was a man in his forties, with thickly curling dark hair and small, wire-framed glasses. He was athletically built and dressed in dark slacks with a deep blue shirt. Amber tried to imagine him in place of the figure from the security footage. This had to be Professor Samuels.

"Do we wait for the end of the class?" Amber asked Simon. They could stand there, making sure that the professor didn't get away, until the end of the lesson, the way they had when waiting for the students.

Simon nodded. "He isn't going anywhere. We'll-"

"Who's talking there?" the professor demanded.

Amber looked over at Simon, wondering if she should say something.

"You there! Who are you, and why are you talking at the back of my class?" The words came out sharp and hostile. Professor Samuels was looking their way. "You don't look like my students, and I don't know about anyone due to audit my session. So who are you?"

Amber winced at being singled out like that. So much for any plans they had of doing this discretely. It was time to do things more directly. Amber pulled out her ID, walked down the steps that led to the front of the lecture theater, and approached Professor Samuels.

"I'm Agent Young with the FBI; this is Agent Phelps. We need to talk to you, Professor. Would you come with us, please?"

Amber gestured to the door, hoping that the professor would comply with the request without any difficulties. She and Simon started to make their way down the stairs towards the front through the thronging students.

"What is this about?" Professor Samuels asked suspicion in his voice. No, not just suspicion, outright hostility. "I have a class to teach."

Amber would much rather have left him to finish teaching the class before

she approached him. Around her, Amber saw what must have been fifty phones pointing at her and the professor, every student in the place trying to get a picture or a video. This was the last thing that she wanted to happen.

"Perhaps you could come with us," Simon suggested as phone flashes continued to go off.

Even as Amber looked around at the watching raft of phones, the professor turned to run, heading for a side door to the lecture theater. Amber cursed as she realized that the professor was trying to get away. She set off after him, hurrying down the steps that led to the front of the lecture theater. The packed theater made it slow going as Amber and Simon ran after him.

It meant that they were too late as they reached the side door. The door had already slammed shut. They tried the handle, but it had been bolted from the other side.

"Damn it," Amber muttered. "It's locked. We have to find another way around."

"Back that way," Simon said, pointing back up the stairs leading from the lecture theater. The students kept out of their way, but they continued to film the two of them as they tried to pursue the professor.

They quickly hurried out of the lecture hall, heading out of the building and then running around it, trying to catch sight of the professor. If he'd gone out of a side exit, he had to be out here somewhere. It was just a question of finding him in time.

The fact that he was running made Amber even more suspicious than she had been when she'd found out that he had a link to both of the women who had died so far. Why run if he had nothing to hide? Had he realized that he was about to be found out and decided to flee before they could bring him in? Was this to buy him time to escape the city, or was he planning to keep killing? Amber couldn't allow that. She and Simon had to bring him down.

There was a grassy central quad ahead. Amber spotted the professor in the distance, making a beeline across the quad. His head start with the door had let him put a lot of distance between himself and Amber. She and Simon increased their pace, trying to catch up to him.

He was moving quickly, too, though, keeping ahead of the two of them, and Amber started to worry that she and Simon might not be able to catch up to him before he made it out of sight or got to a vehicle that he could use to escape.

There were several groups of students out on the quad, most of them

staring at the sight of one of their professors running away from Amber and Simon. Simon seemed to get an idea from that because he called ahead.

"FBI! Stop that man!"

Amber wasn't sure if it would do anything, but she guessed that it was worth a try. A little to her surprise, one of the students in the group, Professor Samuels, was passing stuck out a foot, catching the professor just above the ankle as he ran. He went tumbling on the grass, rolling and trying to get up again.

It only bought Amber and Simon a second or two, but Amber was determined to make the most of that opportunity. She increased her speed again in a last burst of effort. She hurried forward, grabbing for Professor Samuels before he could get back to his feet. He struggled, but she and Simon pinned him to the ground, their combined weight holding him in place.

Professor Samuels tried to lash out, but it was clear that he was no match for the two of them working together. Simon dragged his hands behind his back.

Amber handcuffed him. "Professor Samuels, we could have just talked this through in your office, but now, you're under arrest for the murders of Mia Wilson and Kelly Wasner."

Now that he'd run, Amber wasn't going to take any chances. They had plenty to link him to the two victims; now, they just needed to get some answers out of him.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“They’re deliberately making us wait.”

Amber paced outside the interrogation room. She watched in frustration while Professor Samuels sat in the interrogation room with his lawyer, both of them talking together. Amber wanted nothing more than to get in there. She wanted to know why the professor had done this. She wanted a confession.

“We have to be patient,” Simon said. “He isn’t going anywhere.”

The lawyer’s suit was dark blue with pinstripes, and he wore a matching blue tie. His skin was dark, and his hair was black and neatly combed. He looked much calmer than the professor did as if he were completely in control of the situation. Professor Samuels looked as if he would have done anything to get out of the interrogation room.

It was time for Amber and Simon to head in. They stepped inside together, taking up position on one side of a central metal table while Professor Samuels and his lawyer sat on the other.

The lawyer's voice was low and smooth, the kind of voice that a car salesman might use to calm a nervous buyer.

"My client tells me that you interrupted his lecture, chased him across the university, and instructed students to assault him. He will be making a complaint to the FBI about all of this unless he is released immediately."

He was obviously trying to put Amber and Simon on the back foot, trying to get them caught up in dealing with threats of complaints and legal issues rather than conducting the interrogation. At the very least, it was an attempt to take the initiative away from them and distract them. Amber knew that she and Simon couldn't allow that.

"Professor Samuels," she said, focusing on the professor rather than the lawyer. "Is it true that you were having a relationship with Mia Wilson?"

The professor's facade cracked, and for a moment, Amber saw fear in his eyes at the question. But then he composed himself. Amber saw him pulling a mask of control back into place.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said coolly. His lawyer nodded in agreement, or perhaps in approval that his client wasn't going to give up too much.

"Really?" Simon spoke up now. "So when an FBI tech team starts to go through every one of your devices, they won't find any evidence of contact between you and her?"

The lawyer cut in then, obviously knowing that it was a dangerous line of questioning. "Evidence of a professor contacting his students proves nothing other than that he was doing his job."

"We have at least one other student who is prepared to say that you were in a relationship with Mia," Amber said. "I imagine that number will go up when we start looking for more."

The professor and his lawyer exchanged a glance, and the lawyer leaned in closer to whisper something to his client. Professor Samuels shook his head, his eyes darting between Amber and Simon.

The professor's lawyer raised an eyebrow. "And who is this student? Do you have any evidence to back up their claim?"

Amber ignored that point for now, not least because they *didn't* have any hard evidence, just a rumor. It was time for her to keep *them* off balance. "We also know that you tried to ask out Kelly Wasner. She turned you down, didn't she?"

"Asking someone on a date isn't illegal," the lawyer said, in the same neutral tone he'd been employing.

Amber leaned back in her chair. "We're more interested in the connections Professor Samuels has to two recent murder victims. One with whom he seems to have been in a relationship at some point, the other who seems to have turned him down for a similar relationship. Did Mia end your relationship, Professor, or did you?"

He didn't answer, but Simon added his voice to Ambers, obviously deciding to keep pushing.

"Our current theory is that you don't like it when women turn you down, Professor. I think that you became angry when Mia broke up with you and that you were angry with Kelly because she wouldn't go out with you at all. I think that you lured them to two bridges here in Verdice, and you hanged them in some kind of sick punishment for rejecting you."

The professor looked aghast at the thought of it. Or maybe at the thought of being caught out. Amber wanted to know which it was.

"No, I would never do something like that!"

Simon looked at the professor levelly, with no give in his expression.

"Professor, it would be wiser for you to tell us the truth about this. If there



is anything that you're hiding, now is the time to come clean because we *will* find out the truth."

There was a long pause before Professor Samuels spoke. "Fine," he said finally. "Yes, I had a relationship with Mia. It was consensual, and I cared for her deeply. But I had nothing to do with her death."

"Then why did you run from us when we came to ask you about it?" Simon asked.

That was the key question. Why had he run away the moment the FBI had arrived? This wasn't some habitual criminal who would always run the moment that he saw law enforcement. This wasn't someone with outstanding warrants who'd known that he could afford to let them catch up to him. No, this was a supposedly respectable professor. There had to be a reason why he'd fled.

"I thought... I thought you were there to arrest me."

"For murder?" It seemed to Amber as though they were edging closer to an admission from the professor. Even his lawyer looked a little worried.

Professor Samuels fell silent for several seconds, then started to have a whispered conversation with his lawyer. Amber could make out the urgency there, but not any of the words.

Amber and Simon exchanged glances, knowing that they were getting closer to the truth. Finally, the lawyer leaned back and cleared his throat. "My client is willing to cooperate with your investigation on one condition."

Amber raised an eyebrow, wondering why Professor Samuels suddenly thought that he was in a position to set conditions. Wondering why he needed to. "And what's that?"

The lawyer put the next part carefully. "That we agree that his other... transgressions have nothing to do with your case."

"*What* 'transgressions'?" Simon demanded. There wasn't any give in his voice. It was obvious that he didn't want to cut any deals without knowing all the details.

"As I understand it, there have been several affairs with students over the years," the lawyer said. "But that is hardly a matter for the FBI."

"These murders are, though," Amber said. "And I'm sure you can see how such illicit relationships might provide the motive for a killer. Do you have an alibi for two nights ago, Professor Samuels?"

The professor was silent for a moment or two. He looked embarrassed. "I was... with another of my students."

"It doesn't bother you that you're their professor? That you hold all the power in that relationship?" Amber snapped at him.

"The ethics of my client's relationships are not relevant here," the lawyer said.

"Her name is," Simon shot back. He didn't sound any happier about this than Amber was.

"Elise Fitzroy," Professor Samuels said. "You can check with her."

"Oh, we will," Amber assured him. "And in the meantime, you can wait here."

It took a lot for Amber to contain the anger and disappointment she felt in that moment. A part of her *wanted* Professor Samuels to be the killer when he was so obviously sleazy, hitting on so many of his students, using the authority of his position to get them into bed. But the lawyer was right; that wasn't the FBI's business.

Simon gestured to Amber for them to leave the interrogation room.

As they walked out, Amber couldn't help but feel a sense of defeat. They had no concrete evidence to prove that Professor Samuels was the killer. All they had were rumors, suspicions, and a possible motive. None of which counted for anything against his alibi.

"I can't believe he's getting away with all of this," Amber muttered under her breath.

"He isn't," Simon said. "First, we'll check the alibi carefully because there's always a chance that a student who thinks she's in love with him might lie to us to protect him. Then, we'll let the university know what he's doing with his students. *They'll* deal with him."

"And we just have to hope that he gets fired?" Amber said.

Simon shrugged. "It's the best we have. For now, though, we need to start thinking of another way to go in this case. Samuels wouldn't have given us the name of a student as an alibi if he didn't think it would check out, so we're back to square one."

Amber nodded, but she couldn't shake off the feeling of defeat that came in the wake of the interrogation. After another wrong turn, she started to wonder if they would ever catch the killer. They'd checked out the bridges and found one potential suspect, then looked at the university and found another. Neither one had panned out for them.

What did that leave for them now when those options hadn't given them anything? What new approach could they take to find the killer that might

prove more successful than their previous tries?

"There has to be another way to approach this case," Amber said. "Do you have any ideas?"

Simon thought for a moment or two. "We could try looking into the victims' backgrounds again, see if there's anything we missed that connects them. I'm willing to bet that if there's one connection at the university, there will be more. Or maybe we could try to find people around the bridges on the nights they were killed, someone who saw them around the time of their deaths, someone who might have seen something suspicious."

Again, it felt as though they were being drawn back to the bridges and the university, those two sites fundamentally at the heart of this case.

Amber nodded, considering his suggestions. They were good ideas as far as they went, but she still felt like they were missing something. There was still something nagging at the back of her mind about Verdice, something she couldn't quite remember.

"Amber, what is it?"

Amber frowned. She hadn't realized that Simon was watching her closely enough to notice how worried she was.

"There's just something about this. It all feels very familiar. All this business with the bridges... it's like I've seen it before somewhere like there's a puzzle somewhere or a fact that's similar to this."

"If it's relevant, then it could help us find a way into all of this," Simon said with a sudden hint of hope. "Take your time, Amber. Try to remember."

Amber stood there, trying to do exactly that. She tried to think where she'd seen or heard something that was connected to this whole situation. The worst part was that she even didn't know if it was going to prove relevant or if it was just going to be some random piece of trivia about the town, something she'd learned for a quiz sometime.

Amber was interrupted by Chief Williams hurrying up to the interrogation room. He looked concerned. So concerned that Amber felt a sinking sense of dread even as he approached. As he came forward, Amber felt as though she knew what he was going to say next. Simon looked just as worried as she was.

"What is it?" Amber asked him.

The police chief took a breath. "There's been another murder."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“This has to be the place,” Amber said.

She and Simon pulled to a halt outside the apartment building, stopping short of the police barrier that sought to keep back a growing crowd of reporters. Even so soon after hearing about the murder, the space around the apartment building was busy.

Amber could see the coroner's van there, along with a couple of police cars. Chief Wilson pulled up next to Amber and Simon, jumping out of the car. Almost instantly, the reporters started to shout questions his way.

“Chief Williams! What are you doing to catch the killer terrorizing our city?”

Amber looked across at Simon, silently asking if they should join the police chief or let him distract the reporters long enough for the two of them to slip into the apartment building unnoticed. The latter might allow them to get on with their jobs more efficiently, but it would also leave the police chief to deal with the media fallout alone.

Simon answered by getting out of the car and wading into it all. Amber moved to join him, determined to back up her partner, even in a situation where the only danger was from reporters.

Instantly, questions from the surrounding mass of reporters washed over her.

"Is it true that there's been another murder?" one reporter shouted.

"What can you tell us about the victim?" another chimed in.

The key was not to say anything. They needed to keep moving, and if that took some of the pressure off the police chief, even better. Amber and Simon stayed silent, making their way through the throng of reporters and towards the apartment building. The reporters followed them, the questions getting louder and more insistent with every step they took.

Finally, they made it to the police barrier, where a uniformed officer stepped back to let Amber, Simon, and the police chief through.

"What's the situation?" Amber asked once they were all safely past the barrier. “What have your people been able to tell you so far?”

"Female victim, thirties. Her name is Victoria Crossing. Same MO as the others," Chief Williams said grimly. "We got the call half an hour ago from a

roommate who came home from a night shift to find her hanging in her apartment. Given everything that's going on, we're treating it as linked until proven otherwise. We've already started canvassing the area for witnesses, but so far, no one saw anything."

"Not the same MO," Simon pointed out. "The first two murders took place on bridges; this was in an apartment building. That's a pretty significant difference. Are we sure that this isn't a suicide?"

It was an important question to ask. A death that wasn't linked to the others might muddy the waters, making it harder to find the truth.

"From what I got on the radio in the car, the coroner's initial impression is that it isn't," Chief Williams said.

Even as he said it, several of the coroner's people came down, carrying a body bag and hurrying towards the van there. Amber was grateful for the speed with which they'd moved. It was horrific enough knowing that someone had been murdered there; it would have been far worse to have to watch Victoria Crossing hanging there in her apartment. Amber had seen the dead before, but that didn't mean that it got any easier.

Amber and Simon headed inside, walking up to an apartment cordoned off with police tape. There were forensic staff working around the door, obviously looking for any trace of the killer.

The interior of the apartment was also busy, with more forensic investigators going through every inch of the place. Amber and Simon navigated around them, trying not to disturb the scene too much.

The apartment was simple, with a living room and a small kitchen leading off from it. There were only three doors visible from the spot where Amber was standing, presumably leading to a bathroom and a couple of bedrooms.

There was a noose there on the floor, left where it had presumably been cut down to retrieve the body. A forensic investigator was working on it, and somehow, the sight of it there was almost as horrifying as a body hanging above might have been.

The sight of the noose there on the floor was enough to make Amber's stomach churn. She couldn't help but think that this was all her fault. If she and Simon had been quicker to solve the case, if they hadn't gone off after so many false leads yesterday, they might have found the killer, and Victoria Crossing might still be alive.

"Any leads?" Amber asked one of the forensic investigators, a man in his twenties whose face was mostly hidden behind a face mask so that he

wouldn't disturb any evidence with his breath.

"Not yet," the investigator replied. "But we're still processing the scene. We'll let you know."

"Thank you," Amber said. "Chief Williams said that the victim had a roommate?"

"They've put her over in the next apartment if you want to talk to her."

The investigator pointed towards the door.

"We'll talk to her," Simon said. He led the way through the apartment and then over to the neighbor's place. Amber took a breath to steady herself and then followed him.

Simon knocked on the door, and a short Asian American woman answered. Simon showed his badge.

"You're here to speak to Maggie?" the woman said.

Simon nodded.

"All of this is terrible. Truly awful." She stepped back out of the way, letting them inside, into a neatly kept apartment with a retro feel to it, with ornaments everywhere. The roommate was a petite woman with curly brown hair and puffy eyes. She had clearly been crying, and it was evident that she was in shock at what had just happened. She perched on the edge of the apartment's couch, knees drawn up to her chest, arms hugging around them defensively.

Amber knew that they had to approach this cautiously, or they risked merely traumatizing this woman rather than being able to get any information from her.

"Hi," she said, taking a seat next to her. "I'm Amber. I'm with the FBI. This is Simon. What's your name?"

"Maggie," the woman said. "Maggie Cruz."

"I know it's hard, Maggie," Simon said. "But do you think you would be able to talk to us? To tell us what happened?"

Maggie nodded, her eyes still filled with tears. Amber could see the tracks of them on her cheeks. "There isn't much to tell. I... I work as a nurse over in the local hospital. I came back from my night shift, and usually, she's gone by the time I get back when I'm working nights. This morning, I found her there... like that. She was hanging there in the living room. I cut her down and got the noose from around her neck."

"You did that, rather than the police?" Simon said.

"I thought there was a chance that I could still save her, but she was..."

gone."

"That's when you called the police?" Amber asked.

Maggie nodded.

"Can you tell us about Victoria?" Simon asked in a careful tone. "What was she like?"

"She wouldn't do something like this to herself," Maggie snapped, anticipating the possible line of questioning. "She wasn't depressed; she wasn't worried about anything. I would have known if she were."

"No one's suggesting that she killed herself," Amber said quickly, wanting to make it clear that they believed Victoria. "We just want to understand more about her."

"Victoria was... she was always so kind."

"What did she do for a living?" The question was just to get Maggie to talk more about her friend.

"Victoria is... was a teaching assistant down at the university."

That was enough to make Amber stop short. The university again. Everywhere they looked, in this case, it seemed to be there. Amber looked over to Simon, and he nodded. He'd obviously come to the same conclusion.

"What department did she work in?" Simon asked.

"The Math department," Maggie said. "Why?"

Because that gave them another potential connection between the victims. They'd had one studying physics, one statistics, and now one who taught math. They might be three different subjects, but mathematics represented a clear link between them, one that seemed impossible to ignore. Everything pointed back towards the university.

"Did you notice anything unusual in the area when you came home?" Amber asked, hoping to jog Maggie's memory for any clues that might help.

Maggie shook her head. "No, nothing. It was quiet when I got back. I didn't hear or see anything out of the ordinary. I was late getting in from work this morning. Maybe if I'd gotten here earlier..."

Amber reached out to put a hand on her shoulder. "You can't think like that, Maggie. This didn't happen because of anything you did or didn't do."

And if she'd shown up at the wrong moment, then maybe she would be dead as well right now. The killer had already broken his pattern by killing someone at home; maybe he wouldn't have waited for his victim to be alone, either.

"Do you know who did this?" Maggie asked.

"Not yet," Amber admitted. "We're working to catch him."

There wasn't anything else she could say when they had so little to go on. There was only a connection to the math department at the university.

"Is there anyone you can go stay with for today while the forensic teams continue their work?" Simon asked.

Maggie nodded. "I have some friends across town."

"Good," Amber said, "and if you think of anything else, get in contact with us through the Verdice PD."

Amber and Simon made their way back out of the bedroom to the crime scene. One look told Amber that the police were stumped. They had been through the murder scene carefully and found nothing that would connect to the killer.

"Anything?" Amber asked the nearest forensic investigator.

He shook his head. "There's no DNA left behind; there isn't even a single fingerprint that we can't explain. It looks like the killer was careful or wiped it all away."

Which meant that the killer was thorough. Meticulous. They weren't going to catch him through some stray piece of evidence pointing back towards him.

"Is the rope the same as the one used in the other two scenes?" Simon asked. He was clearly making sure that this killing was connected to the others.

The forensic investigator nodded. "It looks the same, although we'll need a more detailed analysis to be sure."

Which meant that this was probably the same killer, even though he'd apparently changed his MO. He'd killed an older victim, and done it in her apartment, rather than murdering a young student out on one of the city's bridges the way he had the first two times.

"Did he kill her here because we had the bridges watched?" Amber asked Simon. Was this because of them? Had the killer murdered Victoria Cressing because he couldn't stick to his normal pattern?

Simon shook his head. "You can't think like that. We don't know for sure that the bridges were ever essential to whatever he's doing. This is about the university."

Amber found herself agreeing with that assessment, at least up to a point, given the way this murder changed things. They had two students at the university, plus a TA in the math department. There was no way that was a



coincidence, but Amber still wasn't completely ready to give up on the possibility that the bridges were important to all of this too. The first two murders had been so specific in their method, so precisely carried out, that it seemed improbable that the location wasn't significant somehow.

As for this murder, maybe Amber had been right. Maybe it only took place here because the killer didn't feel as though he could use the bridges for the murder. Maybe he couldn't find a way to lure Victoria Cressing to one of the bridges, or maybe he really had been deterred by the presence of the local cops.

Whatever the reason, Amber still wanted to find a pattern to all of this. She was convinced that once she and Simon managed to find that pattern, it would lead them all the way back to whoever was killing women in Verdice.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"There must be something," Amber said as she paced the office she and Simon were borrowing, trying to think.

They'd come back here because it hadn't seemed as though there was going to be much else to find at the crime scene, and if there was, then the forensic team would be the ones to find it. They knew about the possible link to the math department. Now, they were trying to find any additional connections between the victims that might explain why the killer had picked them out there rather than someone else.

"I'm not sure that there is anything," Simon said. "We already checked for Kelly Wasner and Mia Wilson. If there's some overarching connection between the three women, then we would have found it between those two already."

Amber looked at a board that Simon had started to put together, with photos and information on their three victims. Everything they knew so far was up there. Amber knew though, that it was information that they'd already gone over several times, and it was information that was unlikely to give them any new clues.

Amber shook her head. "We already know about one link. They're all in the same place, doing subjects with a link to the Math department. They *are* linked. It's just a question of why someone picked them out of all the women who work or study at the university. There must be a lot of women who pass through there."

"Which is why we need to look into the math department," Simon said. "That's clearly the connection here. I want to know what's so important to the killer about it. Is this something about the relationships the killer built up there, or is it something about math itself?"

"If you ask a mathematician, it's the language of the universe," Amber said. "Everything from quantum physics to rocket science, everything that makes up our world, boils down to numbers and statistics."

That thought didn't help, though. If anything, it broadened the potential pool of suspects rather than narrowing it. It didn't do a lot to explain the killer's motivations, either.

"If he didn't already have an alibi, I'd say that this new murder gives us an

even stronger link to Professor Samuels," Simon said, sounding thoughtful. "I want to check it. I'm going to give the woman he says he was with a call and see if she has anything that can corroborate that he was with her."

"You're thinking that she might be lying for him?" Amber said.

"It wouldn't be the first time someone in a relationship has lied about an alibi."

Amber knew that if anyone could crack that alibi, then it would be Simon. He had the determination to look into the details, the drive to find out the truth. A part of Amber hoped that he would be able to. If they could show that Professor Samuels was lying, then they would be back to him being the best suspect they could find. But it was also a long shot. They needed more evidence before they could do anything concrete.

"I want to go talk to some of the other professors in the math department," Amber said. "I'll see if any of them have noticed anything unusual about Professor Samuels or any of their other colleagues. Maybe someone there will be able to point us in the right direction."

Simon nodded, picking up the phone to make the call. Amber left the office, heading for the university and its math department. As she walked out of the car, she couldn't help but think about the victims. She still wondered what, if anything, they had in common beyond their studies. Why them and not someone else within the math department? Did they all have a certain look or demeanor that the killer was drawn to? Or was it simply a matter of convenience that they were the ones who happened to cross his path?

Amber drove over to the university. Now, the place had a tense edge to it. Maybe that was because the people there were wary after three of their number had already been killed, or maybe it was just Amber. Maybe it was because she *knew* now that a killer had to be lurking here somewhere.

When Amber arrived at the math department, she found it bustling with activity in a way that it hadn't been yesterday. Professors and students alike were hurrying to and fro, clearly engrossed in their work. A few of them looked around at Amber as she entered the department, giving her curious glances. It was possible that they were just reacting to a new face there, but Amber suspected that they knew exactly who she was after everything that had happened with Professor Samuels. Most of them had probably seen the footage of the chase that had led to his arrest.

"Excuse me," Amber said, approaching a group of professors who were discussing a problem on a whiteboard. They seemed to be sketching out

patterns there, arguing over rows of equations at the side of them.

"Is there something we can help you with?" one of them asked? He was a younger professor, but he dressed as if he were expecting to turn into one of his older colleagues at any moment, in a tweed suit with elbow patches and wire-rimmed glasses.

"My name is Amber Young," Amber said. "I'm with the FBI. What's that you're working on?"

"We're discussing ways to predict migration patterns in bird species based on existing nesting data," the professor said, with a smile that said he knew exactly how uninteresting that would be to the FBI and exactly how little chance someone like Amber would have of understanding it.

"I was hoping to talk to anyone who might have known Victoria Crossing."

The professors exchanged glances, looking at each other before the younger one nodded. "I knew Victoria," he said. "We weren't particularly close, but we taught in the same field. What can I help you with?"

"I'm trying to find out if there was anything unusual about her behavior over the last few days or if she mentioned anything to you that could help us understand why someone would want to harm her," Amber said.

The professor frowned, shaking his head after a few seconds. "No, I can't say that I noticed anything out of the ordinary."

"Has she had any conflicts with any of her colleagues, or problems with her students, in the last few weeks?" It seemed like another important avenue to check up on.

The young professor shook his head. "That's not something I would really know about, but certainly I haven't heard of anything like that."

Amber had been hoping for more, for something that would point her at more potential suspects. She continued to make her way through the department, heading for an administration office, hoping that she would be able to get a full list of staff and students there. If necessary, she would go through each name in turn using the FBI's systems, checking for any prior convictions or red flags that might point to someone capable of this kind of violence.

Even as she walked, though, Amber found herself thinking about what the small group of professors had been doing. Mathematical modeling of patterns was common enough, seeking to understand behavior in the real world with often simple mathematical rules.

Amber wondered if this killer was doing the reverse. Was there a chance that he'd set himself the challenge of killing according to some specific pattern that was more complex than the ones she'd been looking at before?

Amber started to pull up a map of the city on her phone but then spotted a much larger, poster-sized map of it displayed on one of the walls of the math department. It clearly showed the city clinging to both sides of the river, the two islands in the middle, and the seven bridges connecting its various sections.

As she looked at it, Amber started to plot out where the murders had taken place, looking for some kind of pattern. Of course, with only three data points, it wasn't possible to get much of a sense of what was going on. They formed a rough triangle, but so would any three murders spread out across a town like this. There didn't seem to be anything to let Amber know where the killer was based or where he planned to strike next.

There was still that lingering feeling that some fact about the city wanted to spring into Amber's mind. It was like an itch somewhere deep in her brain. It was something about the layout of it, something familiar. Something that *wasn't* about Verdice but was about another city with almost the same layout.

Amber got out her phone, checking her guess. As soon as she found what she was looking for, she knew that she was right. She felt her heart beating faster as she realized that she might be onto something. She called Simon, wanting to tell him what she'd found, wanting to make this real rather than just a theory.

He picked it up after only a couple of rings.

"Bad news, Amber," he said as he answered, his tone conveying his disappointment. "I'm pretty sure Professor Samuels' alibi is solid. His student's roommate remembers seeing him arrive."

"The Konigsberg Bridge Problem!" Amber said, unable to contain her excitement at what she'd found even long enough to lead into it properly.

"What?" Simon said, now sounding puzzled.

"It's a mathematical puzzle about the bridges of the old city of Konigsberg, what's now Kaliningrad. The city had seven bridges, and the challenge was to walk over them all without retracing your steps. It was impossible to do, but it got me thinking about our case. Verdice has a very similar layout to Konigsberg, with two central islands and seven bridges. If we want to know what links together a math department and the bridges in this city, it's that."

"That's a stretch," Simon said skeptically. "Especially when Victoria

Crossing wasn't killed on a bridge."

"Maybe that's because we guarded the bridges, or maybe there's something else," Amber said. "I want to go back to her apartment."

"What for?" Simon asked. "The forensic team already said that they didn't find anything there."

"I'm not looking for forensic evidence," Amber said. "I'm looking for anything connected to the bridge problem. If there's anything there, anything at all, it will prove that I'm right, and it will give us the link that we're looking for in this case."

If Amber was right, it would mean that there was a killer out there obsessed with an impossible mathematical problem, one who was prepared to murder people over it. That knowledge might finally help them to understand what was happening here, and it might let them know what the killer was planning to do next.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Amber didn't wait for Simon when she reached the apartment building but headed straight for the entrance, determined to find anything that connected Victoria Crossing to the bridge problem.

There weren't as many reporters outside the apartment building now; they clearly thought that they'd gotten as much of the story there as they were going to get, so most of them had drifted away. So had the forensic teams and the coroner's people. There was just a single police car out front, presumably to keep away anyone who wanted to look around.

"Agent Young, are you making any progress on the case?" one of the few remaining reporters there called out as Amber approached.

"No comment," Amber called back. She didn't want to give away anything to the press in case it got back to the killer. She didn't want to turn this into some kind of contest between him and the FBI. That risked escalating the situation dangerously.

Besides, she didn't want to admit how little progress she and Simon had made so far. It felt too much like an admission of defeat.

Amber flashed her badge to the officer outside, who stepped aside to let her in. She took the stairs up to Victoria's apartment and let herself in past the police tape, taking a deep breath as she looked around the room.

It was easy to see the signs that the police and the forensic units had been there. The main room had clearly been searched thoroughly, but that had been for anything the killer might have left behind. If there had been forensic traces, they would have found them, but Amber was looking for something... else. She just wasn't sure what yet.

She had to force herself not to think about the fact that a woman had died in this room, that a sadistic killer had hanged Victoria Crossing here.

Amber had to push those thoughts away. It was important to have sympathy for the victim, but the *best* thing that Amber could do for her was to stay objective and find the person who had done this. That meant not giving in to the horror she felt about the death here. It meant searching carefully, without emotion.

She tried to see everything with fresh eyes, looking for any signs of anything related to the Konigsberg bridge problem. Her eyes fell on a

bookshelf in the corner of the room, and she walked over to take a closer look. There were a few books on mathematics, but nothing that stood out to her. When Amber checked the indexes, she couldn't find any mention of it in there.

But then, why would there be? This was just a hunch based on the combination of the bridges, the shape of the town, and the link to the mathematics department. And if it had anything to do with this case, it would be the killer with an obsession, not the victims. She needed far more than that to go on, though.

Amber continued to make her way through the apartment, trying to think. If there were anything related to the bridge problem, it would be from the killer, and the only circumstance in which he might send his victims something like that was if he were making a threat or... maybe setting a problem?

If that were the case, though, why hadn't anything related to the bridge problem been found on the other victims?

Maybe Amber was reaching too much here with this conjecture. She had no reason to suspect that the killer had sent his victims anything, let alone something about the bridge problem.

But what if he had? What would it look like if the killer had sent the victims something?

If so, then the fact that there was nothing found on the other victims meant that the killer had to have removed anything he'd sent.

So now, Amber was using the absence of evidence as evidence?

She knew how far down the rabbit hole she was going with this chain of reasoning, but she still found herself following the train of thought all the way to the end. Her only chance of finding anything was if all of this was true and if the killer somehow hadn't been able to remove what he'd sent this time.

What would Amber do if she'd been sent something odd? What would she do if a killer sent her a threat or a warning, something like that? She would either throw it away because she didn't think it was real, call the cops or put it somewhere safe for later.

Amber knew that there hadn't been a call to the cops, or the Verdice PD would already have flagged it. Amber checked the trash, but it was completely empty. Obviously, forensics had already been through it just to make sure that there was nothing there to find.

Where did that leave?



Amber started to look around the apartment, this time looking for anything hidden, anything the killer wouldn't have been able to find in a hurry.

At the same time, she knew that she was grasping at straws with this. There was no reason to think that the killer had left anything or that he wouldn't have taken it with him if he had.

Even so, Amber made her way through to what must have been Victoria's bedroom. The room was tidy, with a neatly made bed and a small bedside table. Amber walked over to it and tried the drawer, but it was locked.

Amber focused on it automatically. A locked drawer was interesting. Amber had to find a way to get it open.

She scanned the room for something she could use to pick the lock but came up empty. Then her eyes landed on a nearby lamp. With a quick glance around the room, Amber grabbed the lamp and started to strike the locked drawer with the base.

"Amber?"

"In here," Amber said, continuing to attack the drawer with the lamp.

Simon came in and looked at her with horror.

"Amber, what are you doing?"

"I... it would take too long to explain."

Plus, she wasn't convinced that she *could* explain it in a way that made any sense. She'd stacked conjecture atop conjecture, and now it led here to a point where she was breaking a murder victim's bedside table with a lamp. She could say that she was searching every corner of the apartment in general, but this was several steps beyond that.

"Amber-"

The lock gave way, even as Simon said it, and Amber opened the drawer, finding nothing but some old receipts and a couple of hair ties. For a moment, Amber froze, realizing everything that she'd just done. She'd made assumptions, leaped to conclusions, and now there was nothing here.

"Amber, what are you doing?" Simon asked.

Amber still wasn't sure that she could explain. She was about to close the drawer again when something caught her eye - a corner of a piece of paper sticking out from beneath the hair ties.

Amber pulled the paper out, feeling a thrill of excitement as she saw what it was.

"Here!" she said, holding it up for Simon to see. There was a hand-drawn version of the Konigsberg bridge problem on it, along with a message in

small, neat handwriting.

"This is a demand that Victoria walk over all the bridges of Verdice by midnight or face a punishment for failing it," Amber said. Excitement flooded her as she realized what this meant. "Does the coroner have a time of death for Victoria Crossing yet?"

She saw Simon check something on his phone.

"A little after midnight."

"Because she didn't do what he wanted." Amber could see it all now, could finally see how these murders worked. "He's using the Konigsberg bridge problem as some kind of twisted test. He's forcing his victims to solve it or die."

Simon looked at her, his expression grim. "That's insane."

"I know," Amber said, her mind racing. "But it's the only thing that makes sense." And there was one part that made it even more awful. "But Simon, this is worse than you think."

Simon didn't look happy about that. "Worse than a killer who murders people because they can't solve a puzzle he sets? That sounds pretty bad anyway, Amber."

Amber nodded. "This is definitely worse than that. This is all based on a famous mathematical problem: the Konigsberg bridge problem. It's very old. The mathematician Euler solved it in the 18th century."

Simon frowned at that, clearly not understanding yet. "That doesn't sound so bad, Amber. A math problem that has been solved... shouldn't the victims *know* the answer? Victoria Crossing, in particular, if she taught math?"

"I think she did," Amber said. "I think that's why we found her here rather than out on one of the city's bridges. Euler proved that the Konigsberg bridge problem is only possible to complete with an even number of bridges, so either adding one or taking one away from Konigsberg's original seven."

"The same as Verdice," Simon said. Amber could see from the gravity of his expression that he understood. "He sets them an impossible problem, forces them to play his game, and then kills them when they realize that they can't solve the puzzle he's forced them to try to complete."

"Exactly," Amber said. "This isn't someone playing a sick game with his victims. That would be bad enough but this... it's just a way of tormenting them. And if they refuse to play..." she gestured back towards the main room of the apartment. "Victoria was a math TA; she would have known about the problem. She would have known that the problem was impossible to solve."

Maybe she thought it was a joke, or maybe she was planning to take it to the cops in the morning, but either way, she didn't want to play the killer's game. She probably thought that she was safe enough in here, well away from the bridges."

"So he broke in here and killed her for it," Simon said. Now, as he started to understand the full cruelty of what had happened, Amber could hear an echo of the horror that she felt in his voice.

Amber choked back a sudden burst of anger that threatened to rise up through her at the thought of what the killer had done. She was a puzzler at heart. She loved solving tough problems and setting them. Occasionally, in her former job as a puzzle editor, she'd really let herself go, let herself make problems that would have challenged someone on her level of puzzling skill, rather than trying to judge what the readers could and couldn't handle.

Those problems had verged on the impossible, but they hadn't *been* impossible. That wouldn't have been fair; that wouldn't have been right. A puzzle that didn't have a real solution wasn't truly a puzzle; it was just a way to inflict suffering on people. To Amber, a puzzle without a solution felt simply... wrong.

Amber thought about Mia and Kelly. They'd both been on bridges, which meant that they'd both tried to solve the problem. They'd both set out, trying to finish it. Maybe they hadn't known that it was impossible, maybe they'd hoped that there was a difference in the layout of the city that would allow it to work here, or maybe they'd been so scared that they'd tried it anyway. They'd gone out with the hope that they might survive, and the killer had followed, knowing that they were dead from the start.

What kind of mind could do that to someone?

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

He moved with the utmost caution as he approached the house, but then, he was always careful. He never took risks that he didn't need to when it came to this. He watched, and he waited; he calculated every move that he was going to make, and he acted only when he knew that the probability of success was approaching one hundred percent.

Mathematics was fundamental to the ordering of the universe, governing it and setting out the limits within which anything was possible. He knew this better than anyone, and he reveled in it. There was something magical about the way that numbers could be used to shape the world, predict outcomes, and control variables. It was a power that he wielded with great skill and precision. No, not magical, because magic was irrational. It broke the rules. This was pure rationality, real understanding. It *was* the rules of everything.

As he approached the house, he felt a thrill of excitement. This was his game, and he was winning it from the start.

Not that the game worked the way the women he killed thought that it did. They were stupid. They didn't understand. Well, of course, they were. The first two had been so foolish that they actually tried to solve an impossible puzzle. Victoria thought that she was clever by refusing to take part, but that was just a different kind of move in a greater game. Another wrong choice, another proof that she was lesser, as clean as any mathematical proof could be.

He'd learned a lot about games and problems over the years. Math loved to examine that kind of thing, loved to look at every facet of human behavior and ask what the optimal approach was.

Not that it had helped with his first interactions with these women. He'd calculated exactly what he needed to do and say, worked out the probabilities precisely, but it still hadn't helped. Mia had shot down his invitation to dinner with a laugh, as if it were a stupid idea as if he weren't brilliant, exceptional. Kelly had whispered about him behind his back, saying that he was losing it. Victoria... well, she'd done something far, far worse. She'd dared to correct some of his work. As if *he'd* been the one to do something wrong.

He couldn't have been. He didn't do things wrong. Not when it came to math. He didn't make those kinds of mistakes. It had been *her* fault, not his.

Like most women, they all thought that they were so perfect, so clever. They didn't see that they were just... less than him. They didn't understand that he was smarter than they could ever be, that he understood the world on a level that they could never dream of touching.

They should have been grateful for his attention. Instead, they'd treated him like he wasn't brilliant.

They had to be shown that they weren't as smart as they thought, that they were stupid, weak, and worse. It wasn't enough for them to die; they had to die knowing that they'd lost and that they'd been helpless from the moment he'd decided that they should die. They had to die, knowing that there had never been a chance for them to survive.

He crept up to the house, leaving his envelope in the mail, addressed to Nicole. Nicole was another one who deserved everything she got, who had ignored him and not taken him seriously. Who hadn't seen his genius, who hadn't given him the respect he deserved?

She would see his brilliance soon enough, though, when she found herself forced to play his impossible game. When she realized that she had lost before the game even began. She would walk the bridges and die knowing that she'd failed, or she would refuse and know that she'd chosen her own death.

Either way, soon enough, he would leave her hanging the way he had with all the others.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

"The Konigsberg what?"

Amber sighed as she tried to explain the whole thing again to Chief Williams back in the Verdice PD. This was not proving as simple as it had with Simon, but then, he hadn't spent case after case working with her, learning to trust her.

"The Konigsberg bridge problem. The city of Konigsberg, which is now Kaliningrad, used to be a part of the old Prussian empire. It had seven bridges spread across two islands and the banks of a river. Does that sound familiar?"

"Sure," Chief Williams said. "I get that's similar to the layout of Verdice."

"Not similar, almost identical. The puzzle was whether it was possible to find a route that would let you cross all seven bridges only once each."

"And that note you found shows that someone is making women do a version of it here, in real life?" Chief Williams said. He looked over to Simon as if seeking confirmation that all of this was real and not some flight of fancy on Amber's part.

"Listen to my partner, Chief Williams," Simon said. "She knows about this kind of thing. There's probably no one out there who knows more about puzzles."

Amber wasn't so sure about that. She could still remember the corrections to her designs that someone had drawn in her diary.

"All right," the police chief said. "What do you recommend, Agent Young? Should we warn women about this puzzle? Hell, we could even put out the solution over the media and really spoil this killer's day."

Amber shook her head. It seemed that the police chief hadn't been listening closely enough the first time she explained this.

"It wouldn't work for two reasons. First, even in the hypothetical situation where we could do that, the killer could easily just change the puzzle so it's not the Konigsberg bridge problem anymore. He could set something else, change his MO, and then we're no better off. Second, it's an impossible puzzle. There *is* no solution. That was the whole point of it. A problem that could be proved to be impossible."

"Then what use is it knowing that he uses this puzzle?" Chief Williams asked.

Amber sighed. "As I said before, the puzzle itself isn't the point. It's just a way for the killer to torment and control his victims. It tells us something about the kind of man he is."

"And what kind of man is that?"

Amber hesitated before answering. She knew that her answer would be unsettling, but it was the truth. She felt as though she knew exactly what kind of person would set an impossible puzzle. She knew puzzlers and the kind of cruel people who wouldn't play fair with a puzzle.

"He's a man who believes that he's smarter than everyone else and that anyone who disagrees with him or challenges his intellect deserves to die. He's arrogant, narcissistic, and sadistic. And he's not going to stop until he's either caught or dead. He enjoys the power he has over others, and the puzzle is just a way for him to exert that power. He's probably meticulously planning everything, calculating every move and every possible outcome."

"Then we'll just have to find a way to make sure that the only outcome is with him in jail," Chief Williams insisted.

He made it sound so simple. Amber wished that it were that easy. The killer hadn't left any forensic evidence behind at the scenes. They'd only found out about the game he was playing with his victims because he hadn't been able to retrieve the challenge he'd sent and because Amber had followed a chain of guesses back to it.

Amber was about to ask Simon what he wanted to look into next when her phone went off. The moment Dianne's name came up on the screen, Amber hurried off to take the call, not caring that she was in the middle of talking about a case with the others.

"Amber?" Joseph's sister said as Amber picked up.

"Yes, Dianne, I'm here. Did something happen with Joseph?" Amber's heart felt tight in her chest as she asked that. If Dianne was calling rather than Joseph, did that mean that things had taken a turn for the worse? If she was calling so suddenly, did that mean that something had happened?

"Joseph woke up briefly this morning," Dianne said. "I thought you would want to know."

Amber breathed a sigh of relief. That relief flooded through her at the thought that nothing worse had happened to Joseph. At the thought that he might be turning the corner. "Thank you for letting me know, Dianne. How is he doing?"

"He's stable for now, but it's still touch and go. The doctors are doing

everything they can, but they need more time to see how he responds to the treatment."

"I understand. I'll come visit him as soon as I can," Amber promised. She didn't know how soon that would be, though, not when she was in the middle of a case.

"He asked after you, you know," Dianne said. "The first thing he did when he woke up was to ask where you were."

Amber winced at those words, at the thought of Joseph asking after her straight away as if she were the most important thing in the world. Any other time, it would have been a touching moment, a reminder that Joseph was thinking about her. Now, it was just a reminder that she couldn't be there with him. That she was an FBI agent, not just a doting girlfriend who could run to his bedside to check on him. She had to be here, in Verdice, chasing a killer.

That reality brought a wave of guilt to Amber. Not only was Joseph in hospital because of her, but she couldn't even be there with him. She couldn't tell him how sorry she was that he'd been hurt. She had to be in an entirely different city, hunting a murderer. Before, Joseph had complained that Amber spent too much time away and put herself in too much danger. Doing that while he lay in the hospital only made it feel worse.

"Thank you for letting me know, Dianne." Amber struggled to keep her voice level, to not let any of the pain she felt come through. "I'll get back to DC as soon as I can."

Amber hung up and just stood there for a few moments, trying to push back the emotions she felt. It wasn't just the guilt; it was the mixture of it with the relief that she felt that Joseph had woken up, everything she felt for him, and her worries about what still might happen to him before she got back.

Simon was there then. Amber hadn't heard him approaching her. Of course, he would follow when Amber ran off in the middle of talking about the investigation. He put a hand on her shoulder, looking at her with concern. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's just Joseph. He woke up for a bit this morning, and Dianne, his sister, called to let me know. When Joseph woke up, he... he wanted to know where I was."

Simon's expression softened, obviously understanding exactly what Amber was going through in that moment. "I'm sorry, Amber. That must be hard for you."

Amber nodded, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. "It's just..."



everything. I'm worried about what might happen to him before I can get back to DC."

"I understand," Simon said, his voice gentle. "But right now, as hard as it is, your focus needs to be on this case. You're not there with him because you're trying to save lives. We need to catch this killer before he hurts anyone else. And when we do, then you can go back to DC and be with Joseph."

Amber nodded again, taking a deep breath to steady herself. Simon was right. There was too much at stake to take her focus off this case now. They still had to find a way to locate the man who was doing this.

"All right," she said. "What do we actually know about this killer?"

"We know he's fascinated by the bridge problem," Simon said. "We know he has some kind of link to Mia Wilson, Kelly Wasner, and Victoria Crossing. Since they're all from the university, that suggests that he's somewhere there."

"Specifically within the math department," Amber said. That part mattered. It cut down the space where they would have to search. "Especially since it's a mathematical problem."

"And my guess is that he has a fascination with puzzles more generally," Simon said. "Otherwise, why do it all like this?"

Amber wasn't entirely convinced by that since what puzzler would set something like this? But for now, it seemed like the best path to follow.

"All right," she said. "How do we find puzzlers within the university?"

"We start by checking out the math department," Simon said. "We'll look for any professors or students who have a particular interest in puzzles. We can also look for any puzzle clubs or groups on campus. Maybe they'll be able to point us towards any of their members who are behaving oddly or who might be able to do this."

"Good idea," Amber said. "But we also need to keep in mind that he might not be affiliated with the university at all. He might just hang around there *because* he's so interested in this math problem."

"That's true," Simon agreed. "But I still think that it's a good place to start."

They started to look for answers, Simon looking at the math department, Amber trying to look for puzzlers within the university. She found a few different societies there. There was a chess club, a board game club, a quiz society. Amber started to look for any commonalities between them, but also for any contact details.

She found a number for the secretary of the university's puzzle society and called it.

"Hello?"

"I'm looking for someone from the university puzzle society," Amber said.

"You called the right number. I'm Kevin, the head of the society."

"My name is Amber. I'm with the FBI. I was hoping to ask you a few questions about your society," Amber said, trying to keep her tone professional.

"Of course, I'd be happy to help in any way I can," Kevin replied. "What would you like to know?"

"I was wondering if you've had anyone new join the society recently, probably someone from the math department, probably someone in particular who stands out as a particularly skilled puzzler," Amber asked. "But also someone who doesn't quite fit in. Maybe someone who makes any female members of the group feel uncomfortable? Is this description reminding you of anyone?"

She knew it wasn't as simple as that and that killers could hide pretty well, but she suspected that if this killer was lashing out at so many women, there was a chance that he would make them uncomfortable in other areas of his life. They reacted to him, and then he took that as a sign that he should hurt them.

"I'm not sure..." Kevin began.

"Kevin, just think. Does my description remind you of anyone?"

"Well... we *did* have a new member join a few weeks ago. He's been quite active, and he's definitely one of our strongest puzzlers," Kevin said. "I... I'm not sure about the other part, but he's definitely pretty awkward. Prickly, you know. He hates the idea that anyone could be cleverer than him. One of our members, Mia, solved a puzzle faster than him, and I thought he would explode."

"Mia Wilson?" Amber said, her interest suddenly caught.

"Yes, that's right." There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I'm not saying... I mean, I don't think that he would..."

He'd obviously heard what had happened to Mia.

"I need a name for this new member," Amber said.

"Mark Jensen."

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

"I don't know if it's enough that this is a creepy guy who likes puzzles."

Amber could understand that. It was why she was looking deeper into him while Simon drove the two of them over to the address she'd found for Mark. She wanted to find out more about him, wanted to find anything that might tell them if this was their guy.

"A creepy guy who likes puzzles and who apparently had some kind of problem with Mia Wilson," Amber said as she continued to look.

Simon still frowned. "That's just one of the three victims."

"But the *first* one," Amber insisted. "And the first one is often significant for a killer, right?" Amber was no expert on criminal psychology, but she knew the basics when it came to serial killers. She'd learned them back at Quantico. "Maybe, once he had a taste for killing, he didn't have to know the others so well. They just had to be there in order to be viable targets for him."

"It's possible," Simon admitted, although he didn't sound entirely convinced by it.

Amber started to read out some of the stuff she was managing to pull up on their newest suspect, collating the information the way she might if there were going to be a quiz later about Mark Jensen.

"He's involved in most of the puzzle-related societies at the university. He's also a math major, so there's a good chance he could have come into contact with all three of the victims. We already know he knows Mia."

"Anything else?" Simon asked.

"He has a record. He got arrested for stalking a girl a couple of years back."

The more Amber saw when it came to Mark Jensen, the better suspect he looked.

"It seems that she turned him down as a potential boyfriend, but he refused to take no for an answer. She had to get a restraining order against him."

He seemed like exactly the kind of man who might target women, who might want to humiliate them.

They drove over to the address they had for him, a house he was sharing just off campus with a few other students. The house was small and run-down, with a yard overgrown with weeds. Clearly, none of the students there

bothered to maintain it. They parked in front of the house and got out of the car. Amber took a deep breath to steady her nerves before approaching the front door. Simon followed a few steps behind her, looking around as if expecting trouble.

She rang the doorbell, and they could hear footsteps coming closer from inside. The door creaked open, and a tall, thin man in his early twenties stood in front of them. He had messy brown hair and a nervous look in his eyes. He looked at them as if trying to work out who they were and what they were doing there.

"Mark Jenson?" Amber asked.

He nodded uncomfortably.

"Hello, Mr. Jenson," Amber said, showing him her badge. "I'm Agent Amber Young with the FBI, and this is Agent Simon Phelps. We'd like to ask you a few questions if that's all right."

Mark's eyes widened with surprise, and for a moment, Amber wondered if he would run. Instead, he nodded and stepped aside to let them in. The living room was small, with a ratty couch and a coffee table littered with puzzle pieces. The air was thick with the smell of stale pizza and dirty laundry.

They all sat down, with Amber picking a spot on the couch that was free from pizza boxes.

"You're a member of a few of the puzzle societies around the university, aren't you, Mark?"

He snorted. "If you can call them that. It's like... they all like their own little corner of things, but they don't want to do everything. They don't see how it all connects."

He sat there for several seconds, staring at her, almost unblinking. Amber could see how easily he might make other people uncomfortable.

"Amber Young," he said. "You're famous. I didn't get it before when you said you were an FBI agent, but you're *famous*."

"I'm not sure I am," Amber replied.

"No, no, you are. You were the puzzle editor for the Washington News, right? You set questions for the five states quiz off?"

"Well... yes," Amber admitted. It occurred to her that, for a very specific kind of person, that probably did count as famous. And Mark clearly was that kind of person.

"That's amazing!" Mark said. "But what are *you* doing *here*?"

Amber looked over to Simon, wondering how she should handle this. He

shrugged. He obviously didn't know any better than her what to do about an obsessive quiz fan. If anything, Amber probably had more experience than he did with that.

"We're here looking into three murders, Mark," Amber said. "Those of Mia Wilson, Kelly Wasner, and Victoria Crossing."

"I... I knew Mia from the puzzle society," Mark said.

Simon cut in. "We know you did. We also know that you argued with her."

"That was... I just couldn't believe that she beat me!" Mark said. He sounded as if he still couldn't quite believe it.

"Because she's a woman?" Amber guessed.

"Because she was never any good at puzzles before. She got lucky. A puzzle shouldn't be about luck. It should be about skill and knowledge. It shouldn't be random. Not like that."

"What about the Konigsberg bridge problem?" Amber asked. "What do you think about that?"

"That's not even a real puzzle," Mark said with a contemptuous sound as if the whole thing were beneath him. "It's impossible to solve correctly, so there's no *point* to it."

"You don't like impossible problems?" Amber asked.

Mark shook his head. "They aren't fair."

That was a sentiment Amber could agree with. One that she could understand. Simon still had questions, though.

"Where were you the last couple of nights?"

Mark thought for a moment or two. "Last night, I pulled an all-nighter in the library. I had a math paper to finish, but I kept getting distracted playing online chess. One of the librarians told me off for doing that. He said I was disturbing people, but there wasn't anyone around. And I was *winning*. The night before that, there was a frat party. The guys all insisted that I go, even though I hate that kind of thing. I think they just like laughing at the thought of me being there."

Both would be fairly easy to check. With the library, in particular, it would be easy to use cameras and key card data to establish whether he was there around midnight. They would check, but the very fact he'd given them something so easy to verify suggested to Amber that it wasn't likely to be him.

Amber stood up. "Thank you, Mark, you've been very helpful. Tell me,

can you think of anyone who *would* be interested in the Konigsberg bridge problem?"

"Just some of the math people," Mark said. "They treat that kind of thing like it matters, like impossible problems are something special."

Amber headed for the door with Simon behind her.

"We're leaving already?" he asked. "We're not going to ask him more questions?"

"You heard his alibi. It's easy to check. Too easy for someone with something to hide. Either he's telling us the truth, or he's lying, and we'll find out quickly. Then we come back for him, but honestly? I don't think he's the killer."

Simon raised a slight smile. "Because he's a fan?"

Amber got the feeling that she hadn't heard the last of that. That she wouldn't for a while. "Because he hates puzzles that aren't real. I have a bit of the same feeling, Simon. When I realized what the killer was doing, do you know what my first reaction was?"

She saw Simon frown. "No. What?"

"That it wasn't fair. A part of me felt as though the biggest thing this killer, this *murderer*, had done wrong was to set a problem with no solution. Now imagine how much worse it is for Mark. You've seen him and heard about him. He's clearly obsessed with puzzles, but real ones. If this were some nearly impossible problem that the victims had to solve, then maybe, but a genuinely impossible problem... no."

"So we're looking for people with an interest in that kind of impossible problem?" Simon said as they left the house. He looked back towards the university campus. "And I guess he already told us where we need to look for that."

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They seemed to keep returning to the math department of the university. The answer had to be here somewhere. It was still bustling when Amber and Simon got there. Students were moving between classes, and staff members were talking in the corridors, but there was a nervous edge to it now as if the most recent murder had brought it home that their department was at the heart of everything that was going on.

Amber looked around for anyone who might be able to help them. She

spotted the younger professor they'd spoken to before and headed over, hoping that he would prove as helpful as he had last time.

"Excuse me," she said. "Do you have a moment?"

The professor smiled as she and Simon approached.

"Of course. It's Agent Young, isn't it?"

Amber nodded. "Yes, and I don't think I caught your name last time around. Professor..."

"Just Doctor, I'm afraid," he said. "Dr. Iain McCloud. I'm on the regular teaching rotation, but I'm a long way from tenure yet."

The slight note of bitterness in the words hinted at a whole world of departmental politics that Amber didn't have enough time to get into unless it started to prove relevant to the case.

"We're looking for someone with a particular interest in impossible puzzles," Amber said.

The professor frowned in thought. "Well, there are a few people who come to mind. They're helpful in understanding mathematical limits and paradoxes. There's Professor Henderson in number theory. He's always talking about the Riemann hypothesis. Then there's Dr. Lee in combinatorics. She's been working on the P vs. NP problem for years. And there's a student, Alex Kim, who's been making waves with his work on the complexity of the game Go."

The latter didn't sound like the kind of thing they were looking for. Go wasn't impossible, merely complex. Amber was about to ask about the other two when Dr. McCloud kept going.

"Of course, when it came to collecting *impossible* problems, there was no one here quite like Professor Arran. He used to devise them; he said that showing that something was definitively impossible showed us as much about math as all the positive proofs in the world."

That sounded like exactly the person they needed to see.

"Where is he?" Simon asked, looking around at the offices.

"Oh, he's not here anymore. Officially an extended sabbatical."

"And unofficially?" Amber asked, her interest caught.

Dr. McCloud sighed, looking a little embarrassed as if he didn't want to bring any of this up. "I don't want to be one to gossip, but... he had a breakdown. He thought he'd come up with an impossible problem. He thought he'd come up with a proof that it was impossible, but then one of our TAs went and found a solution."

"One of the TAs?" Amber asked, her attention caught even more firmly.

"It wasn't Victoria Crossing, was it?"

"I..." Dr. McCloud hesitated for a moment or two. "Actually, I think it might have been."

Amber looked over to Simon. If that was true, then they had a new lead suspect. They needed to find Professor Arran before he had a chance to kill again.



## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Nicole had just finished a major study session when she went down to get the mail. Her head hurt from trying to cram in so many details of her Math 101 class, and it still felt as though none of them had stuck. She'd only taken it because somehow it was a required course. It didn't seem to matter that she planned to major in drama and couldn't see what math had to do with any of that. Nicole imagined that somewhere, a college administrator was laughing at that.

Even before going down to get the mail, Nicole checked her appearance. She wasn't going to go outside looking less than perfect. Not today, not ever. You never knew when a casting director might be walking past. Okay, so it probably wouldn't be outside a shared house just off campus in Verdice, but it wasn't *impossible*. People had been discovered in stranger places. Besides, there might be a cute guy or something.

So Nicole fixed her dark hair, tying it back, put on what she considered to be the bare minimum of makeup, and checked that her sweater and jeans combination actually worked for her. It did, of course, it did.

*Then* she went down for the mail, taking the stairs two at a time.

There was the usual collection of fliers from fast food places, a letter from the administration of the university about her course choices for next year, and a handwritten note that stood out from the others mostly just by not having an address on it, simply her name. Someone must have slipped it into the mail with the rest.

The fliers went into the trash, but Nicole took the note with her back up to her room. The room was small, with a twin-sized bed and a desk in the corner. She flopped down on the bed and opened the note, her curiosity piqued. Maybe someone had seen her and was trying to be romantic.

As soon as she opened the letter, Nicole stared in horror at the contents. There was a crudely drawn map of the city, little more than outlines of the islands and the bridges.

*You must walk all of the bridges, each no more than once. Do it by midnight. Fail, or try to tell anyone, and you will die.*

Nicole knew what this was. She'd heard the rumors by now and seen the news about the murders in the city. The rumors said that there was no way to

get away from the person who sent the letters once they arrived. There was no way to avoid it, no way out of this.

Nicole's first instinct was to call the cops and hope that they could protect her. But what if whoever had sent this was watching her? What if he heard her calling the cops and killed her before they could arrive? What if he waited until they were gone and came for her then?

There wasn't anywhere that Nicole could run or hide from this.

Her only hope was to do this, to walk the bridges the way this psycho wanted. To solve this stupid puzzle. There had to be a solution. Nicole would just have to find it.

Right then, she wished that she were a lot better at math.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Amber had to admit that Professor Arran's house was kind of impressive. It was a large, old place not far from the university, which looked as though it had been well cared for over the years. There was a car on the driveway, an aging but probably still quite expensive European import. At least they knew that the professor was likely to be home.

"How do you want to play this?" Amber asked Simon as they approached.

Simon considered for a moment before responding. "Let's be straightforward," he said. "There's no reason to burst in or arrest him straight away. We're FBI agents, we have reason to believe that Professor Arran may be a suspect, and we'd like to talk to him about it. If he's not willing to talk, then we'll have to consider other options."

"Sounds good to me," Amber replied. She took a deep breath and stepped up to the door, rapping on it with her knuckles loud enough that anyone inside should have been able to hear.

There was no answer from inside. Amber listened closely for any sign of movement. Was the professor trying to make an escape, or maybe hoping that they would go away if he ignored them?

"Check around back," Simon said. "I'll watch for any movement here."

Amber nodded and made her way around the side of the house, checking the windows as she went for signs of life. They were all closed and dark, but Amber found one towards the back that she could peer through into the house's kitchen.

There, on the floor, she saw a still form: an older man lying there, the mane of his white hair pooled around him on the floor.

"Simon, we've got something here!" Amber called out.

Simon rushed around the house and joined Amber at the window. Together, they peered into the kitchen and saw the body of someone who had to be Professor Arran lying on the floor.

"We need to get inside," Simon said, with a note of urgency in his voice that made it clear just how worried he was.

Amber nodded and started to look around for a way inside. They quickly found a spare key hidden under a nearby rock. They unlocked the door and cautiously made their way inside, drawing their weapons just in case.

The house was quiet, the only sound being the creaking of the old floorboards beneath their feet. Amber made her way over to the professor.

The first thing she noticed was the rise and fall of his chest.

"He isn't dead," Amber called out to Simon, feeling relief flood through her that they weren't dealing with another death.

The second thing she noticed was the heavy smell of alcohol in the air, so thick that Amber found it hard to believe that anyone could have drunk that much.

Simon rushed over to them, peering down at the professor. "Get him up," he instructed Amber. "I'll check the rest of the house."

Amber nodded and carefully lifted the professor, grunting with the effort of moving him. She helped him to sit up against the nearest counter, and the professor groaned, his eyes flickering open.

"What... what happened?" he asked groggily. "Who... who you?"

He was obviously still incredibly drunk. Drunk enough that he could barely manage the words. He was drunk enough that he definitely wasn't about to manage coherent sentences.

"There's no one else here," Simon said as he returned. "But there are half a dozen chalkboards in the other room filled with what look like impossible math problems."

"Not... 'moss," Professor Arran slurred. "Not 'moss enough!"

With that, his eyes fluttered closed again, and he almost fell over again. Amber had to catch him, propping him up once more.

"Professor, can you hear me?" she said. "We're with the FBI. We need to ask you where you were last night."

The professor didn't answer but instead started to snore gently. It seemed obvious that they weren't going to get any answers out of him right then.

"He's too drunk to question," Simon said.

Amber nodded. Even if they got something from him like that, it wouldn't be admissible. "I want to look around for a minute. Watch him."

She went through to the living room. As Simon had said, there were multiple chalkboards set up there, each with a difficult-looking problem on it. She could see what the professor had meant when he'd drunkenly talked about them not being impossible, though. One of them, a kind of maze problem, Amber could see a route through in seconds. The others... she imagined that it would take time, but she would be able to crack all of them with enough effort. They were interesting puzzles, but they didn't look

impossible.

There was one thing that caught her eye, though. There was a drawing there that was unmistakably a version of the Konigsberg bridge problem. It was *possible* that the professor had only put it up there to try to adapt it or as a form of inspiration, but here and now, with everything that was going on, it was deeply suspicious. Amber used her phone to grab a photograph of the board, then went back through to Simon and the professor.

"What do you want to do with him?" Amber asked, with a nod towards the professor.

"We should bring him back to the Verdice PD and wait until he sobers up a little. Maybe *then* we'll be able to find out the truth of all this."

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Amber waited outside the Verdice PD drunk tank, watching the professor as he lay in there, looking awful as he edged towards sobering up at a snail's pace. He seemed to be trying to draw problems in thin air with the fingers of one hand.

It was taking a painfully long time. It was already starting to get into the evening, but the truth was that she and Simon had nowhere left to go with this case before they managed to talk to the professor.

Even now, they probably couldn't do it. Maybe they could get a couple of semi-coherent answers out of him, but certainly, nothing that he said would be admissible in court. Like this, he could confess to everything, and any competent lawyer would get the case thrown out. It was frustrating, having to wait when their best suspect so far was too drunk to interrogate.

Amber headed through to the office that she was sharing with Simon. He looked up as she entered.

"Anything?"

Amber shook her head. "We still won't be able to get a coherent answer out of him. Which worries me a little."

"What do you mean?"

"Everything we've seen of him suggests that he's been drinking steadily at least since last night, possibly for days. Maybe ever since Victoria Crossing solved his puzzle. If so, would he have been in a fit state to murder anyone? Let alone plan and execute something so meticulous?"

"Or maybe he just got drunk after killing Victoria as a celebration of what

he intended to be his last kill?" Simon suggested.

It was plausible, but Amber wasn't entirely convinced.

"Maybe you're right, but if you aren't, that means that the killer is still out there, maybe getting ready to kill again while we wait for the professor to sober up enough for us to talk to."

That was a terrifying thought, one that made Amber want to rush out there, looking for any other evidence that she could find.

"The local PD are still watching the bridges just in case," Simon said.

That was good. Amber hoped it would be enough to prevent anyone else from being killed.

"And there's one other thing. He's drawing in the air with his *right* hand," Amber said. "Didn't the coroner say that the killer was probably left-handed?"

"Maybe, but I'd guess that it's hard to be precise about that kind of thing," Simon said.

Amber still wasn't convinced. For now, she found herself naturally drawn to the series of puzzles the professor had drawn on his chalkboard. For her, a puzzle was a way to understand someone. She felt as though she could tell a lot about them by whether their puzzles were hard or easy, geared towards pure logic or general knowledge, required leaps of lateral thinking or a grinding kind of reasoning.

Amber started to solve the puzzles that had been put up on the chalkboard. She was no mathematical genius, but she knew enough to understand what was going on in each case, and each was really a logic problem anyway. This wasn't P vs. NP but rather a series of real-world scenarios that *looked* impossible until Amber started to dig deeper.

Rather like this case.

On impulse, Amber looked for the original problem that Professor Arran had come up with, the one that was supposed to be unsolvable but to which Victoria Crossing had come up with a solution.

It took a while, but Amber eventually found the original problem on a mathematics forum. She studied it carefully, trying to get into the mind of the professor and understand why he thought it was unsolvable. After a while, something clicked in her mind, and she saw the solution. It wasn't easy, but it was there, and it made sense.

Amber couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction as she wrote out the solution, but also a strange sense of dislocation. This... didn't feel right.

Amber had seen the professor's work sketched out on the chalkboards. She'd worked through those problems, and they had one feel to them.

This puzzle had quite another. There was something sharp-edged about it, wanting the person trying to solve it to walk one path and one only. There was a trap in it, leading the solver down a blind alley from which there was no way out. Yet the parameters were quite loosely defined, which meant that it was possible to take an alternate route through the problem, one that hadn't been envisioned by whoever crafted it.

Amber was almost certain now that it wasn't the professor. He was more honest in his problems and much fairer about them, even when they were impossible. He signposted their impossibility, didn't rely on traps to make people merely think that they were.

"I think there's someone else involved in this," Amber said.

Simon looked over at her. "What makes you say that?"

"This puzzle, the one Victoria Crossing solved, it doesn't *feel* like the professor's work."

"You're sure?"

"This is *me*, Simon. I know one puzzler from another. There's something different about this one. It's almost as if it was designed to lure someone, to trap them in a way that the professor's problems never were."

Simon leaned against the desk. "Okay, let's say you're right. What does that mean?"

Amber's mind was already racing with possibilities. "It means that we need to figure out who this other person is. Maybe they're the one who killed Victoria; maybe they're the mastermind behind all of this. Either way, we need to find them."

"How do we do that?" Simon asked.

That was the problem. Amber didn't know.

"The professor might know," she said. "But by the time he sobers up, another woman might already be dead."

"The local PD are still keeping an eye on the bridges," Simon said. "If they spot anyone trying to attack a woman there, they'll intervene."

Which would be fine if the killer couldn't also get to women in their homes. Besides, there was too great a chance that the killer might be able to get away. The moment he saw the cops, there was a chance that he might run, disappear from Verdice, and start again somewhere else. No, they needed something that would let them get close to the killer and identify him before

he could get away."

Amber could think of a way of doing that, but she suspected that Simon wasn't going to like it.

"I have an idea," she said.

"Tell me," Simon replied.

Amber explained her plan. She could see Simon's expression getting more worried at the moment.

"No, absolutely not. It's too dangerous, Amber."

Amber was determined, though. "It's our only chance. We have to do this."



## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

"You want me to do *what*?"

It seemed that Chief Williams didn't like Amber's plan any more than Simon had. Less, if that were possible. His voice echoed out over the bullpen of the Verdice PD. Still, she held fast to her position. It was the only way that they were going to be able to catch this guy.

"I want your men to pull back from the bridges," Amber said.

"No way." The police chief sounded adamant. "They're the only thing keeping that psycho from killing more women."

"I don't want you to pull them back fully," Amber said, trying to explain, trying to make Chief Williams see the importance of her plan if they were going to catch the killer. "They can still watch the bridges, but I want them to stay out of sight, and I only want one officer per bridge. Out of uniform, undercover."

"That won't do anything to deter the killer," Chief Williams pointed out.

Amber sighed. "That's the *point*. We don't want to deter him; we want to lure him in and make it seem like it's safe to strike. We want to be there when he does."

The police chief still didn't seem convinced or happy.

"That's a risky move. One wrong move, and we could be putting a police officer's life in danger. One officer might not be enough to take this guy down."

"I know the risks, Chief, but this is the best way to catch the killer. We need to take a risk if we're going to solve this case."

"You're asking me to put my officers in harm's way," he said, his tone firm. "I can't do that."

Amber felt a pang of frustration. She understood Chief Williams' concerns about the dangers of this plan, but they were running out of time. They needed to catch the killer before he struck again.

"I understand your concern, Chief," Amber said, trying to stay calm. "But this is our best chance of catching this guy. If we don't act soon, another woman might die."

"And what about any woman the killer might target while you have us playing wait and see with the bridges?" the police chief asked.

Simon answered then. "Your men will still be there to spot any women approaching the bridges, but our best chance to save more lives is to catch this guy."

"So, what do you want us to do?" Chief Williams demanded. "Sit there until some woman walks out onto the bridges? Wait for the killer to attack, then hope that we're fast enough to save her and that a single officer can take down this psycho?"

Amber could understand his concerns. None of them knew who this killer was or how dangerous he might be. So far, he'd killed the women via strangulation, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be carrying another weapon as a backup in case anyone found him.

But that wasn't the plan, either.

"The idea isn't for your men to engage unless they absolutely have to," Amber explained. "They're there as spotters for the killer if they can see him, but more likely, they'll spot a woman trying to cross the bridges one by one first. When they spot that, they need to call me or Agent Phelps so that we can provide backup. Then they need to pull back."

"So you're using our citizens as bait?" Chief Williams said.

Simon shook his head. "Not as bait. They're going to be out there anyway. We're trying to save them. If the killer truly doesn't believe that the bridges are an option for him, he won't stop. He's already shown that he's prepared to kill women in their own homes. This is our best chance."

Given that Simon had already raised his own reservations regarding this plan, Amber felt grateful that he was prepared to back her up in front of the police chief. It was good to know that her partner had her back. Amber just hoped that she would be able to justify his faith in her.

Chief Williams let out a deep sigh, his expression showing a mix of frustration and concern. "I don't like it, but I can see the logic behind it. If we can catch this guy before he strikes again, it's worth the risk. I'll have my men set up undercover on the bridges, but I want to make it clear that if anything goes wrong if another woman dies, I'm holding you responsible, Agent Young."

"I understand," Amber said, relieved that they had gotten the go-ahead.

"Good. I'll have my officers positioned within a half-hour. But you and Agent Phelps better have a solid backup plan in place in case something goes south."

"We will," Simon promised.

With that, Chief Williams walked off, leaving Amber and Simon to finalize their plan. They knew it was risky, but it was their best chance of catching the killer before he could claim another victim. They just had to hope that their plan would work and that they would be able to take the killer down without anyone getting hurt.

"Do you think that this will work, Amber?" Simon asked, not sounding as certain as he had when the police chief was there in front of them.

Amber could see the tension in Simon's face, and she felt it too. It was a huge risk, and she couldn't guarantee that it would work, but it was their best chance.

Amber knew that Simon was questioning the plan's effectiveness. But she also knew that it might be their only chance at catching the killer. "I don't know," she admitted. "But I think we have a better chance of catching him this way than just trying to track him down after he kills."

"I hope you're right."

So did Amber. The hardest part was that there was nothing to do now except wait. They had to trust that Chief Williams' officers would do their jobs and that, sooner or later, the killer would show his hand in this.

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"Why hasn't one of them called?" Amber wondered aloud, pacing the office that she was sharing with Simon. "How long has it been now?"

She saw Simon check his watch. "A couple of hours. We still have time for this to work."

Amber hoped so. "What if he was never planning to kill tonight? What if I'm wrong, and it *is* Professor Arran, after all?"

"Then we still have him in the cells, where he can't hurt anyone, and we can question him in the morning," Simon said.

Amber nodded, knowing that Simon was right. They had to be patient and let their plan play out. But the longer they waited, the more her anxiety grew.

She paced the office, trying to burn off some of the anxiety she felt. Trying to give herself to keep her mind occupied, she even sat down with the image of the professor's not-quite-impossible puzzles, working through them again in her head. The problem was that she could work out the answers to them relatively simply now, she had already worked out the answers to most of them.

That left only the bridge problem, and what was Amber meant to do with that? It wasn't even a real puzzle when there were seven bridges. There was no way to walk across all of the bridges in turn without crossing back over one of them. Logically, it simply didn't work.

But another part of Amber *could* see a way through it. What had she thought about the problem that Victoria Crossing had solved? That the parameters for it hadn't been well designed?

Amber went back to the note that she'd found in Victoria's apartment, reading the words there carefully. She'd had to walk over all seven bridges by midnight, not crossing any of them more than once. It seemed like it was impossible, but when worded like that... Amber could see a way to do it.

"I think I just solved the Konigsberg bridge problem," Amber said.

"I thought that was meant to be impossible?" Simon replied with a frown.

"It is, if it's worded carefully or if you stick to the spirit of it, but the killer *hasn't* been careful about the way he's worded his version. I think-

Amber was interrupted by her phone ringing. She answered at once and found Chief Williams on the other end of the line.

"All right, Agent Young, one of my guys just radioed in that they've seen a woman approaching New Bridge, looking scared. She's standing there, staring at a piece of paper. My guess is that she's the next woman this bastard has singled out to be his victim. What do you want to do now? I can get units there in five minutes."

"Tell your men to keep their distance," Amber said almost automatically. "Let me and Agent Phelps handle this. We don't want to risk scaring him away."

Amber hung up and turned to Simon. "There's a probable next victim on New Bridge."

"So we need to get over there."

Amber hesitated for a moment before she said the next part. "I think I need to do this alone."

"What? No way!" Simon said. It was obvious that he had no intention of going along with that.

"Think about it, Simon," Amber said. "If you show up with me, what does he see? The FBI arrives to save a woman. He'll run, and we might never see him again. Plus, she'll never be safe. If he sees me, he just sees a woman. With a man like this, it doesn't matter to him that I'm an FBI agent. I'm just another potential victim."

"And when he attacks you?" Simon demanded.

"Then I take him down. Or I hold him off long enough for you to get there. I'm not saying that you need to stay away. I'm saying that you need to hang back."

Simon looked at Amber, his eyes full of concern. "I don't like this, Amber. It's too risky."

"I know, and I don't like it either. But it's the best chance we have to catch him," Amber said, her voice firm. "I can handle myself, Simon. You've seen me take down killers before."

Simon's lips pressed into a thin line as he considered her words. Finally, he nodded. "Okay. But I'll be nearby, just in case."

"Thank you," Amber said, grateful for his compromise. "There's just one more thing."

"What do you need?"

Amber pointed to a spot near one of the bridges. "I need you to arrange with Chief Williams to leave a small boat tethered exactly *here*."

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Amber drove at speed through Verdice, determined to get to the New Bridge before it was too late. How long did it take to cross a bridge? Not long. How long might it take a scared young woman who knew that she would die if she did this in the wrong order?

Amber hoped that would buy her time to get there, but even so, she drove as quickly as she dared, doing it without lights or a siren, not wanting to alert the killer to the fact that law enforcement was coming.

The bridge came into view, lit from below in a way that turned the carvings on its sides into something grotesque. Amber pulled up short of the bridge and walked the rest of the way. She could see the woman on the bridge, clutching a piece of paper in her hand, looking lost and terrified. She was dark-haired, with a coat wrapped around herself, huddling against the rain that was starting to fall. It was a night when no one would have been out if they didn't have to be. Amber felt a pang of sympathy for her. No one should have to go through what this killer was putting these women through.

Amber approached the woman carefully, not wanting to startle her. "Excuse me," she said softly. "Are you okay?"

The woman looked up at Amber, her eyes wide with fear. "No," she said, her voice shaking. "I don't know what to do. I'm supposed to cross the bridges in a certain order, but I don't know which one to start with."

"It's okay," Amber said, moving closer to the woman. "Let me see that paper."

She took it gently. The diagram on it was the same as it had been for Victoria Crossing. The Konigsberg bridge problem. The same impossible problem that the killer had used before. Amber read the instructions carefully, wanting to make sure that the killer had

"What's your name?" she asked the young woman.

"Nicole," she replied. Amber could hear the fear there in her voice.

"Everything's going to be all right, Nicole," Amber said. "I'm with the FBI. We know about the puzzle. About what he's making you do."

Nicole looked both scared and relieved at that news.

"He said no cops. But I keep looking at the puzzle, and I can't see a way to solve it."

"It will be okay," Amber repeated. She didn't explain to the young woman the full horror of her situation: that there wasn't a solution to the Konigsberg bridge problem with seven bridges. Instead, Amber kept her tone soothing.

"You're going to wait here. There will be police officers along in a minute to take you to safety."

Amber looked around, trying to spot any sign of the killer lurking in the shadows. She knew that he had to be somewhere near the bridge so that he could attack his victims if they took a wrong step. He had to be able to see them. Did that mean that he could hear them as well?

Could he hear Amber now? Amber hoped so. She needed to persuade the killer not to run. She needed to persuade him to focus on her rather than Nicole. Amber raised her voice.

"My name is Amber Young. I'm an agent with the FBI, but more importantly, I'm a puzzler. I used to be the puzzles editor for the Washington News."

Amber hoped that would be enough to catch the killer's attention, but she kept going, just in case.

"I solved your problem, the one you helped Professor Arran to make. I solved all the other ones, the ones that he was trying to come up with to replace that problem. Impossibility is harder to come up with than you think."

Amber took a breath. "And I can solve *this* problem, too. You think you've come up with a trap, a mathematically impossible problem. Well, you're wrong. I have a solution."

She paused for a moment or two, still looking around into the night. She thought that she saw a flicker of movement there, somewhere in the dark, but it was impossible to pinpoint for sure. Maybe it was one of Chief Williams' officers waiting for the moment to come forward and collect Nicole.

Amber knew that she couldn't charge off after that shadow. That wasn't the way this was going to work. This wasn't about her hunting a killer in the dark. This was about her bringing him to her.

"So this is what's going to happen," Amber said. She held up the note the killer had sent. "In a minute, cops from the local PD are going to come to collect Nicole here. She's gone. You'll never get to her. Instead, *I'm* going to take on your puzzle. I'm going to walk the bridges. If I succeed, you hand yourself in. If I fail... well, we both know what happens if I fail."

Amber could feel the tightness of nerves running through her.

This was risky, even for someone as experienced as her. But she had to

keep going. If there was any chance to catch this killer, she had to take it. She handed the note back to Nicole.

"Wait here with the officers, Nicole. They'll take you to safety."

Nicole nodded, her face still full of fear, but at least now she had a glimmer of hope. Amber took a step back and looked up at the bridge. It was a daunting sight. Seven bridges spanning the two shores of the river and the twin islands in between.

It was a classic mathematical problem and one that had been studied for centuries. But the problem was that there was no solution for seven bridges. It was impossible.

But Amber had a plan.

She took a deep breath, calmed her nerves, and began to walk towards the first bridge. She could feel the killer's eyes on her, watching her every move. She had to be careful not to make a mistake. One wrong move, and she would be his next victim.

As she walked across the first bridge, she felt the weight of the puzzle pressing down on her. But she kept going, trusting that she'd worked this out, that her plan would work.

The first bridge was the easy part. Now, Amber just had to remember everything she'd calculated. She'd worked out the path that she would take before she got here. She'd worked out every step of this.

Amber checked her watch. She only had around an hour before midnight. The terms of the puzzle said that she had to walk all seven bridges by then. Amber quickened her step.

The killer would be behind her somewhere, following, sticking to the shadows. Amber suspected that Simon would be somewhere further back still, following in Amber's wake, trying to spot any sign of the killer following her.

The quicker pace would make it harder for that killer to be careful. If he followed too close, Amber might spot him, and then... well, she had her gun by her side and all the training of the FBI academy ready to help her.

For now, though, there was no sign of him. Amber had to keep going, had to keep heading for the next bridge. She had to trust that the killer would be watching, waiting to see what she did, waiting for the moment when he would get to kill the FBI agent who had dared to take on his deadly test.



## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

His first instinct when the FBI agent walked away from the bridge was to go after Nicole, to try to get to her before anyone could arrive to help her.

Swiftly, though, flashing lights appeared near the bridge, and two cop cars pulled up next to it. Cops got out, beckoning Nicole over to them. There was no chance of getting to her now, not without being caught. It wasn't as if he'd brought a weapon other than the rope he used. He'd never needed one, and he'd always calculated that if the cops ever got too close to him, he could abandon the rope and just walk away. They would never be able to link anything to him.

His next instinct was to do exactly that, to just walk away into the night and disappear. It was obvious that the cops didn't know who he was, not yet, or they would already have come to his home and arrested him.

The FBI agent's words stopped him from doing that. She claimed that she was some great puzzler, that she'd already solved the problem that he'd set and that Professor Arran had taken the credit for.

That was what came of being stuck as a TA. He had a doctorate, he was as intelligent as anyone at the university, but there was no tenure, no respect. He was there to teach classes and mark work, little more than a functionary.

He'd definitely not gotten respect from the women he'd killed. They'd ignored him or laughed at him. They hadn't taken his work seriously. The problem he'd created had been meant to be his ticket to more. The moment when Victoria Crossing solved it tore his world apart.

So he'd decided that she would pay. She, and the others who had denied him, belittled him, and pretended that they were so clever. As if any woman could ever be his intellectual equal.

He tore his thoughts away from the others. He had to focus on Amber Young. He would get the chance to kill her before the night was done.

She thought that she was superior to him. She thought that she could solve any problem that he could set, but she was so stupid that she was trying to solve an impossible problem. He would follow her; he would wait for the moment when she realized that she'd overestimated her own capabilities when she realized that she couldn't solve this puzzle.

That was when he would hang her from the edge of a bridge, the way he

had with the others.

He watched as she walked across the first bridge, her movements deliberate and calculated. The game had begun.

He followed her, staying hidden in the shadows. He had to be careful not to give himself away. He guessed that was at least part of her intent: to try to get him to show himself so that the police could take him down.

Yet he couldn't see any police nearby. She'd miscalculated. They weren't coming to save her.

As Amber Young quickened her pace, he did the same. Yet he didn't follow directly behind her now. He didn't need to. One of the beauties of the bridge problem was that he always knew where the women he stalked would be heading next. He hurried on down a side street, determined to get ahead of Amber Young.

She was arrogant enough to think that she could solve an impossible problem. Well, she would pay for her arrogance soon enough.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Amber held her breath as she started to cross the sixth bridge. With every bridge she crossed, the odds of the killer trying to attack her went up. With everyone, there was a chance that he would decide that she had taken a route that made it impossible for her to finish the puzzle.

Now, on the sixth bridge, the odds of that were at their greatest. This was the point where Amber had no options left, where she couldn't choose between different bridges to cross anymore. She was committed now. There was this bridge and then the seventh.

The problem, of course, was that it was impossible to walk to the seventh without crossing back over the bridge.

"I know that this is the Konigsberg bridge problem," Amber said as she walked. She had to assume that the killer was close by now. "I know that Euler proved it to be mathematically impossible."

She said it to buy herself time. She wanted the killer to wonder why Amber had done this at all if she knew that it was an impossible problem. Amber had to fight to keep her hand from her gun tucked away beneath her suit jacket. She didn't want to scare the killer off; she wanted to draw him in.

Amber kept walking over the bridge, looking around with every step, unable to keep herself from looking for any sign of him. This bridge was large and steel-built, with girders rising high over Amber's head. Briefly, Amber shuddered, imagining a rope dropping down on her from the darkness above, wrapping around her throat before she had a chance to stop it.

She had to force herself to keep walking, to keep focused on the task at hand. She knew that she had to get to the end of the last bridge before the clock struck midnight, or she would fail the puzzle. She couldn't let that happen.

As she reached the other end of the bridge, she let out a sigh of relief. She had made it. There was only one bridge left to cross, and then she would have completed the challenge. She looked around, trying to spot any sign of the killer, but there was nothing.

"Where are you?" she muttered under her breath. "Come out and face me."

She knew that it was a foolish thing to do, but she couldn't help herself. She was tired of being hunted, tired of being afraid. She wanted this to be

over, one way or another.

Amber looked down towards the water. It was time to hope that Chief Williams had done what Amber had asked of him.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw a small rowboat tied up there on the bank near the bridge, exactly where Amber had asked for it to be left.

In the original problem, it wouldn't have counted. The Konigsberg bridge problem was a logic puzzle, and it relied on those trying to solve it doing so according to the implicit rules of the scenario. The goal was to walk over all seven bridges, and it was implied that one should travel between them only by walking. In the original problem, swimming or taking a boat would represent a failure.

"You know that you don't set the parameters for your problems tightly enough, right?" Amber called out to the night. "That was what went wrong with the one Victoria Crossing solved. You assumed that people had to solve it the way that you wanted."

There was no answer from the darkness.

"You made a Gordian knot of a problem so tangled that no one would ever unpick it."

Amber let that sink in for a moment or two before she delivered the second part of it.

"Of course, the *point* of the legend of the Gordian knot was that Alexander the Great cut through it rather than trying to unpick it," Amber said.

There was still no answer from the darkness, but Amber could guess at what the killer was feeling. He would be apprehensive now, uncertain of what she was planning next. Perhaps he even had some inkling that his own arrogance had been his downfall, that he had underestimated her just as he had underestimated the other women he had killed.

It was time to make her move. Amber walked over to the boat, untying it from the bank. She had no experience rowing, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that Amber could make it back across the river without ever setting foot on the sixth bridge again. She could get herself into a position where she could simply walk over to the seventh bridge and cross it, solving the puzzle as the killer had set it.

Amber paused before she entered the boat. She could do that. She could solve the puzzle easily.

"You didn't set your parameters clearly enough," she said. "This is the real world, not a logic problem. If you don't exclude it, then there's nothing to

stop me taking a boat back across the river, or swimming, or having someone set up an extra rope bridge to cross back and get back to the seventh bridge."

Amber could have done any of those things. She could get in the boat, even now, and start to row. She felt a surge of almost savage triumph at that thought. At the idea that she could solve a seemingly impossible problem.

But she hesitated. Amber wasn't just a puzzler anymore. She was an FBI agent. The puzzle she had to solve here *wasn't* the Konigsberg bridge problem. It was the question of who had killed three women and had tried to kill a fourth.

Amber's original intention had been to make the killer angry by using the boat to solve the problem, breaking his problem the way Victoria Crossing had, turning herself into a target he couldn't ignore.

Now, though, Amber found herself wondering if the killer would do that or if he would decide to run when it was clear that he wasn't going to win. He certainly wouldn't quietly give himself up, not when he would feel that Amber had cheated against the intent of the problem, if not against the letter of it as the killer had set it. He hadn't said that Amber could only walk between bridges. He hadn't said that she couldn't take a boat or that she had to avoid getting wet. The letter of his version of the puzzle allowed this, and there was no doubt that rowing across would do that.

But Amber had already made him angry the moment that she told him what she'd been planning. Rowing across wasn't the way to do this, now.

Amber tied up the boat again instead.

"You aren't very good at setting problems," Amber said. "A *good* puzzle should have a solution. It should be a conversation between the person setting it and the person solving it. When you try to set an impossible problem and pretend it's real, it's just you shouting over them because you know you don't have what it takes to talk properly."

Amber made her way back up the bank to the edge of the bridge. She knew that there wouldn't be any backup coming for her, not now. She'd left Simon behind, and the undercover cops near the bridges would have cleared out once they spotted Nicole.

It was just her up there. Her and the killer.

"An impossible math problem might be beautiful if you're honest about it," Amber said. "It might tell you something about the world, about what is possible. But you didn't do that, did you? You passed one off as a real puzzle because you're so insecure that you couldn't back yourself to come up with a

genuine puzzle that your victims couldn't solve. Deep down, you knew that you weren't good enough. That they were all better than you. That I'm better than you."

Amber was trying to keep the killer's attention now, trying to make sure that he wouldn't run, that he would do anything to make sure that Amber died at the end of this.

"I could have solved your puzzle," Amber said. "You were sloppy, but I'll play this fair, even if you aren't. I'll stick to the rules of the *original* problem. So now, I've crossed six bridges, and there's only one way for me to get back to the seventh."

One way, one that broke the rules. One that meant that the killer would try to claim Amber's life. But Amber was an FBI agent, and the goal here was to catch a killer. This was the best way to do it.

She stepped back out onto the sixth bridge in the sequence and started to walk.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Amber had to force herself not to draw her gun as she walked. She couldn't afford to spook him, couldn't afford to send him running away into the dark. She needed him to come to her, needed him to strike.

Amber continued to pad forward, resisting the urge to look around at every shadow. She knew that the killer was out there somewhere, watching her every move. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but she kept her cool. She had to stay calm and focused if she was going to catch him.

The hardest part was forcing herself not to look around. This was a killer who liked to strike by surprise, getting a noose around the necks of his victims and strangling them. If Amber was too wary, he wouldn't see his chance; he wouldn't attack her.

She needed him to attack her.

"Why do all of this?" Amber called out into the darkness. "Just because Victoria Crossing solved your puzzle?"

There was still no response from the killer, but Amber could feel his presence looming closer. She kept walking, every step bringing her closer to the seventh bridge and the end of this deadly game.

"You're a sadistic coward," Amber said, her voice ringing out in the quiet night. "You hide in the shadows, preying on women who are smarter than you. And you can't even face me like a man."

She guessed that would make the killer angry. That was good. Amber wanted him angry. She wanted him to react on instinct rather than thinking.

"You know that this is over for you, don't you?" Amber said. "Sooner or later, Professor Arran is going to sober up enough to talk, and then, all we have to ask him is who helped him with the puzzle. Then we'll have a name. After that, there won't be anywhere for you to hide."

Amber kept walking over the bridge, kept her eyes facing forward, even though it was almost impossible not to look around for the killer, for any sign that he was coming.

Amber kept walking, knowing that the killer could be hiding behind any of the girders that held the structure up.

She was almost back across the bridge now, almost to the far side. A few more steps and she would reach the far shore. She would finish walking the

bridge, finish going wrong in the problem the killer had set.

Amber heard a sound somewhere behind her. She looked around, hand going for her gun, but it was too late. A figure was there in front of her. He looped a rope around her neck, which seemed to be dangling over one of the girders. He hauled on that rope, pulling Amber from her feet.

Even as Amber gasped and scrabbled at the rope around her neck, struggling to breathe, she realized that she knew him.

Dr. Iain McCloud stood there, staring at Amber with utter hatred as he tied off the rope, leaving no give in it.

"I shouldn't have pointed you at Professor Arran," he said. "I thought that he would take the fall nicely for this. As it is, though, I guess it's enough that you'll die."

Amber continued to fight against the strangling power of the rope.

"Another bitch who thinks she's so clever. Another woman who wants to think she's better than me, who wants to laugh at me, who wants to try to control what I do. I wonder, did you tell anyone else about your theory that someone else wrote Professor Arran's problem? I'm guessing not. Which means that when he has an accident, when he kills himself and leaves a confession... I'll be free to do what I want."

Amber wanted to tell him that he wouldn't succeed, that he would be stopped regardless of what happened to her, but she didn't have the air to do it right then. There was nothing but the awful pressure of the rope around her neck, the darkness drawing in around her.

Amber reached down for her gun. Her fingers felt for it, fumbling as they sought it. She could feel her body twitching in midair as the rope held her, but Amber managed to draw the gun.

She raised it and fired, not at Dr. McCloud, but at the rope above her. The sound of the gun was deafening in the night, echoing through the hollow space of the bridge.

The rope snapped, and Amber fell to the ground, gasping for air as she tore the noose from around her neck.

Amber struggled to her feet, gun still in hand, trying to bring it to bear. Dr. McCloud was already moving, slamming into Amber, sending the gun spinning from her hand out over the edge of the bridge to plummet into the water below.

Amber and the academic struggled there, each hitting out at the other. Dr. McCloud slammed a fist into Amber's ribs, then struck out at her jaw. Amber



covered up, then slammed the heel of her hand into McCloud's chin, making him stumble for a moment or two. She managed to hook a foot behind his leg, and the two of them went tumbling to the surface of the bridge together.

They both scrambled, trying to avoid getting caught there. Amber was on top for a moment or two, hitting out with one fist, trying to get Dr. McCloud to turn away from her so that she could pin him down and cuff him.

He kicked out at her instead, lashing out, his foot catching the side of Amber's head. She saw stars for a moment, falling back, struggling to rise. Maybe if she hadn't almost been strangled to death by the noose Dr. McCloud had dropped on her, Amber might have been fast enough to get clear of him.

Instead, McCloud got on top of her, his hands reaching out for Amber's throat. They fastened around her neck, starting to squeeze, cutting off the air as tightly as the noose ever had.

"I might not be able to hang you, but I can still strangle you," McCloud snarled, his weight bearing down on Amber, the pressure on Amber's neck immense.

Amber tried to buck him clear, trying to create enough space for herself to breathe, if only for a moment. Yet she couldn't do it, couldn't move Dr. McCloud's weight from atop her. She was too hurt, too exhausted, to be able to be able to move him as his weight bore down on her, his hands squeezing tight around her throat.

Amber found herself thinking about Joseph, lying in his hospital bed, wondering where she was. She thought about Simon too. Would he blame himself if she died here? Would he feel the agony of losing a partner, or would it be more than that for him? Amber could feel herself starting to fade from consciousness but still fought back, managing to shake Dr. McCloud off her for just a second.

In that second, Amber thought that she could see a shadow up above, in the girders of the bridge. A figure dropped down from them, slamming into Dr. McCloud, dragging him off of Amber. Even as Amber gulped in life-giving air, she recognized Simon.

He and McCloud fought, the two of them throwing punches at one another. Simon was obviously stronger, but the academic attacked with a degree of ferocity that almost made up for it. He seemed to ignore the punches Simon threw, striking back with ones of his own that made Simon wince.

Amber struggled to sit up, then to stand, ignoring the pain in her throat and

the way her body complained at having to act again so soon after almost being strangled to death.

Still, as Simon and the killer academic closed in to grapple with one another, Amber forced herself to stand and stagger over to the two of them. Dr. McCloud got in a couple of good punches then, one of them staggering Simon. He pulled his arm back for a third.

Amber caught hold of his arm, gripping it as tightly as she could. It was all she could do to hang on, as weak as she felt right then, but at least she could buy Simon a second or two in which to act.

He took advantage of the opportunity that Amber gave him, tackling McCloud from his feet and taking him to the ground again. Simon and Amber both jumped on the academic, trying to pin him down as he thrashed to get free. Amber wrenched on McCloud's arm, forcing him to turn over with a sound of pain and anger. She and Simon managed to pull his arms behind his back, and Simon held him there while Amber fumbled for her handcuffs. After everything she'd just been through, it was hard to perform even the simple action of clamping them down his wrists. Finally, Amber managed it, kneeling down next to him so that she could look him in the eye.

"You're under arrest, Dr. McCloud."

Away in the distance, Amber could see the blue lights of the approaching cops. For now, none of that mattered. All that counted was that they had the killer. He wasn't going to hurt anyone else.

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

"I'm fine," Amber insisted as the doctor checked her out.

The woman made an irritated sound. "You are anything but fine, Agent Young. You've suffered significant bruising to your throat and muscular damage around your neck. You'll probably need some degree of physical therapy if you want to avoid an injury that will linger for months or years."

"But I *will* heal up?" Amber asked. She was eager to get out of the hospital. She seemed to spend far too much time in them these days.

"If you take things easy and you follow medical advice, then everything should be fine," the doctor said.

Amber hoped that she would get a chance. The way her job had been going recently, it had seemed sometimes like there was barely a chance for Amber to catch her breath.

"All right," the doctor said. "Your partner is waiting outside. I'll go and get the papers to release you."

"Thank you," Amber said. She was eager to leave, to get home.

For now, though, Simon was there, walking into the hospital room, looking disheveled after the fight with Dr. McCloud but still as good as ever. What was it about him that drew Amber's eye whenever he walked into a room? It wasn't just that he was handsome because Amber wasn't so shallow as to be drawn to simply a pretty face.

Some of it was that Amber knew how brave he could be, how strong, and how willing to risk himself to protect her. Some of it was that he was smart and tough and that he'd helped her to take down some of the worst killers out there. Some of it was what he'd done on the bridge, throwing himself into harm's way, literally leaping down from the bridge to pull away a man who would have killed her otherwise.

"Thank you," Amber said. "For the bridge."

"You don't need to thank me, Amber," Simon said. "I'm your partner. I'm meant to look out for you. I know you'd do the same for me."

Amber would, but so often, it seemed to be Simon saving her rather than the other way around. She didn't want to think about what would have happened if Simon hadn't been there. Dr. McCloud had her, could have strangled her easily if Simon hadn't intervened.

“You scared me, going off alone like that,” Simon said. “Putting yourself in danger like that.”

“It's a part of the job,” Amber said. She didn't want to have the same argument with Simon that she seemed to have so often with Joseph about how much danger she was putting herself in for the sake of her work when she could be at home working on puzzles instead.

“I know that, Amber,” Simon said. He reached out, his hand touching Amber's arm. “I'm not saying that you shouldn't take risks. Just let me be there to back you up when you do, okay?”

That was very different to the kind of thing that Joseph would have said. For a moment or two, Amber was all too aware of the pressure of Simon's hand on her arm. There was something almost electric about that touch, something that drew her to him and made her want to move closer.

For a second, Amber actually did start to lean closer to him, drawn in almost magnetically, unable to stop herself. She thought she *thought* that she saw Simon inch towards her too, and Amber anticipated the moment when the two of them would close that gap between them and...

...and what? Kiss? Amber jerked back at the thought, and it seemed as if Simon did, almost in the same instant. Simon was seeing Detective Angelique, while Amber had a boyfriend. She was with Joseph, and he... he was in the hospital because of Amber. He'd been hurt because of her, yet here she was, so far from DC, very nearly kissing someone else.

Amber cast around for anything that would let her change the mood. There was one thing that she realized she wanted to know. One thing that didn't quite make sense.

“How did you know that I would be on the sixth bridge when McCloud struck?” Amber asked. “You must have been up there on the bridge waiting because there's no way you could have gotten into that spot without him seeing you coming.”

“I climbed up after I left the boat,” Simon said. “I just wish I'd spotted *him* climbing into place. I could have stopped all of this before he had a chance to strangle you.”

“You were in plenty of time,” Amber said. “What I don't get is why you chose there. The plan was that I'd take the boat and cross the last bridge, try to lure him in by solving his puzzle.”

Simon shrugged then. “I know you, Amber. As I was moving the boat into position, I realized that there was a chance he'd run if you cheated your way

to a solution like that. I knew that *you* would realize the same thing.”

"Not cheating," Amber said. "He just didn't define his terms well enough. Didn't you think that I'd want to complete the problem? I'm a puzzler, after all."

"You're an FBI agent first," Simon said. "I guessed that you'd realize the priority was to draw in the suspect, and that meant going back over the bridge."

Had he backed her to be an agent rather than a puzzler? Amber didn't know whether to be surprised or grateful for that. She was just glad that she had a partner who was prepared to back her up in something like that and who knew her well enough to guess exactly what she would do in a life-or-death situation.

The doctor came back, looking relieved that she would be able to get Amber out of her hair.

"All right, the paperwork is complete. I'll need a couple of signatures, and then you can go."

Amber would be only too grateful to get out of there. It wasn't just that she wanted to leave this hospital. No, it was more than that. There was another hospital that she needed to get back to. One where she hoped there would be good news waiting for her.

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"You're here. Good. It means that I can take a break."

Amber wasn't sure whether Joseph's sister was truly glad to see her as she arrived in the hospital room. Dianne looked exhausted like she'd been there pretty much continuously since Joseph was brought in. She got up from her chair, brushing past Amber as she left.

"You take over here for a while. I need to go get coffee."

Judging from her tone, she wasn't exactly happy that Amber hadn't been there the past couple of days. It didn't matter. All that really mattered then was being there with him. Amber could do that.

She sat down beside Joseph, taking his hand in hers, looking him over, and trying not to wince at the way the bruises had blossomed over his face and torso.

Amber sat there with him, thinking about the person who had done this to him, thinking about everything she would do to make sure that they were

caught and punished.

Thinking about her diary and what that meant.

The diary was back with the local police now, but Amber had had a chance to read through it, however briefly. She'd seen the notes in the margins. She had to hope that those could be used to trace the person who did this.

That would be down to the Washington PD, though, because they were the ones handling the case. They were the ones who had the diary in evidence. Amber could offer to assist them, but she wasn't even sure if Palliser would let her do that. Maybe she would see it as Amber trying to use the FBI's resources for a personal case.

For now, all Amber could do was sit there, holding Joseph's hand, hoping that at some point he would wake up.

Somewhere in the waiting, his eyes fluttered open.

"Amber." His voice sounded weak and hoarse. Amber gave him a sip of water from a bottle beside the bed. Joseph attempted a smile, then winced, presumably as even that hurt. "You're back."

"I'm sorry I had to go. I had a case. There was a killer."

Somehow, even that didn't sound like a good enough excuse for not being there with him while he'd been like this.

"Amber... what happened to your neck?"

Amber put a hand to the bruises that covered her neck self-consciously. Maybe she should have covered up the bruises with concealer before she came here, but the sight of her in that much makeup would probably have made Joseph just as worried.

"You're asking me about *my* bruises?" Amber joked, trying to deflect Joseph.

It didn't work.

"Amber, what happened?"

Amber shook her head. "It's nothing. The suspect got violent when we went to take him down. But Agent Phelps was there. I was never in any real danger."

That was a half-truth at best, considering how close she'd come to dying out there on the bridge, but Amber knew that Joseph would only be scared for her if he heard what had really happened.

"Amber, if this is happening to you—"

"I'm more worried about what happened to you, Joseph," Amber said.

“Have the doctors talked to you since you woke up the other day?”

“A little,” he said. “They’re saying I have cracked ribs, a concussion. They think I’ll be fine.”

“Do you... do you remember who did this to you?” Amber said. “Did you see their face? Did they say or do anything distinctive?”

Joseph shook his head, though, wincing again with the movement. “I don’t remember anything about it, Amber. It’s all a blur. One moment I was walking, and the next... the next I was waking up here.”

A part of Amber was grateful that Joseph couldn't remember because that would save him from a lot of the trauma of what had happened to him. Another part of her, the part that was an agent, the part that had gone back over the bridge, wished that he had been able to remember because that would let her bring in whoever had done this before he hurt anyone else.

Because one thing was certain when the attacker had deliberately left Amber's diary behind at the scene:

This attack was only the beginning.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Colm O'Rafferty watched the woman with dispassionate eyes from the other side of the street. She was in her twenties, short, with long blonde hair and glasses. She was wearing a cream dress with a green cardigan thrown over it and was carrying a cream handbag.

Colm approached her carefully, not wanting to startle her. He made sure that he had his most pleasant, open expression on as he did it, knowing that his usual predatory look would send her running before he got anywhere near her.

Of course, it helped that Colm was blond-haired and good-looking, in a boyish kind of way, with an athletic body currently well-dressed in a sharp suit and expensive shoes. To Colm, laying his hands on money was just another kind of puzzle, and Colm was very good at puzzles.

Far better than even Amber Young.

“Casey? It’s Casey, right? Amber’s friend?”

Casey Doyle looked around at the sound of her name or perhaps at the sound of Amber's. That was the part that made it clear that Colm wasn't there to serve her with legal documents or try to sell her anything.

“Amber? Amber Young?” Casey was quite pretty in her way, but that was beside the point. The connection to Amber was what mattered. “I haven’t spoken to her in...”

“In a couple of years,” Colm said. “She told me.”

Actually, it had been in her diary. Part diary, part workbook, containing all the details that Colm needed for this.

“Sorry, you are...”

“Oh, I forgot. I’m Colm. I’m in town for a couple of days, and Amber said that I should look you up if I got a chance.”

He saw Casey frown, not quite understanding. The key with something like this was to keep moving, not give her too much time to think.

Colm fumbled almost theatrically at his clothes. He found that it was easier to control the ways people acted if they thought that he wasn't anything special if he hid how much better he was than all of them.

“She wanted me to give you something. I looked you up. I hope you don’t mind.”



Colm flashed his best smile. It was a smile that could disarm even the most pointed suspicions. Looks could be a weapon as easily as a blade, as easily as his mind.

“No, no, I don’t mind,” Casey said. “It’s just surprising.”

Colm took out a puzzle, a series of pieces to shift around to make the pattern of a globe, which would unlock the box it sat on when completed. It was one of Amber's designs, but he'd improved on it, of course.

“Amber told me that you liked this design,” he said. “She also says that you need to be careful about making mistakes with this one. Go on, try it.”

Casey stared at it, turning the small box over in her hands. Obviously, it would be a shock for her, something like this coming out of nowhere. Colm had bet that her curiosity would overcome her reluctance.

It did. She started to move the puzzle pieces around. Colm took a quiet step back.

It meant that when the click came when the poison flowed out from the container within the box, it didn't touch him. Only her. Colm stood there as she gasped, then clutched at her throat, then collapsed.

Colm took a quick step forward, making it look like he was trying to help but actually just setting an envelope down on the dying woman.

“I told you that you needed to be careful about the moves you made, Casey.”

Colm was much more precise about the moves *he* made. He’d made one when he’d attacked the man Amber was seeing. This was the next move in the game.

He hoped that Amber would play a more interesting game than Casey had.

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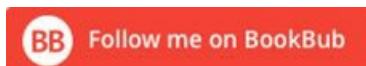
## Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising thirty-one books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising twenty-one books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA

GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting), of the FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the JULIETTE HART mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the MORGAN CROSS mystery series, comprising seven books (and counting), and of the new FINN WRIGHT mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

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

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



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WHEN YOU'RE SAFE (Book #2)  
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WHEN YOU'RE SANE (Book #5)

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FOR RAGE (Book #2)  
FOR LUST (Book #3)  
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FOREVER (Book #5)  
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