

BLAKE PIERCE

HIER

LAST

LIE

A RACHEL GIFT MYSTERY--BOOK #13

HER LAST

LIE

(A Rachel Gift Mystery—Book Thirteen)

BLAKE PIERCE

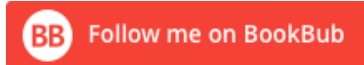
Blake Pierce

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-five books (and counting); 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 fifteen books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books; of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books; of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books; of the NICKY LYONS mystery

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

As the rain pelted against her apartment window, Dr. Emma Willis was in a lively discussion about her life's work. At the age of forty-four, her entire career as a biochemist had led up to this moment. She'd had visions of this discussion—of this potential breakthrough—taking place in a lab setting or a massive boardroom of some kind with dozens of her peers in attendance. Instead, it was taking place with two of her colleagues on a video call at ten o'clock at night.

It seemed almost unofficial; the entire meeting had a casual feel despite the groundbreaking implications. She wasn't certain, but she thought Dr. Hastings, currently situated in the bottom window on Emma's screen, was drinking a glass of wine.

“Okay...” Hastings said. He was about Emma's age, another biochemist with greying hair and sharp blue eyes. He had a slight Dutch accent, which seemed thicker when he was excited. “So this all looks good. And *good*, of course, doesn't even touch it. I'll send it all over to the team in Tokyo and get their final confirmation.”

“This is...what...the third confirmation?” the third member of the call asked. This was Estelle Regent, an absolute rock star in the field. She was pushing seventy but often seemed to have more energy than anyone else in her close proximity.

“Yes, it’s the third,” Emma said. “But with what we’ve got here...I think it requires a second and third look. Maybe even a fourth tomorrow by the guys in Houston?”

“Good idea,” Hastings said.

Emma realized that at this point, they were just hesitating to end the call. They had something monumental in their hands, and ending the call seemed almost rude. The most promising lab-tested and beta-approved approach to age reversal hovered between the three of them. It had been just tests and speculation for so long, but now they had the data, the experts, and the results to make it a reality. And it could begin its developmental rollout by the end of next week if all went well with this final confirmation out of the world’s most renowned biogenetics lab in Tokyo.

“One last question,” Emma said. It was one she nearly just pushed to the side, afraid it might make her seem a bit dramatic. But with what they were dealing with, she figured there should be no stone unturned, no potential pushback ignored. “Whenever this goes public, the science behind it is bound to anger some people—particularly certain politically-driven groups. Who is going to be in charge of coming up with a response for something like that?”

“Oh, I’m several steps ahead of you on that,” Regent said. “I’ve got a PR team in New York working on it. I’ve worked with them in the past when there was public outcry over stem cell research. Trust me on this, Dr. Willis...you have nothing to fear. You need to just accept the win on this. This is huge

for us all, but *you're* the hero here. Let someone else worry about the not-so-pretty parts.”

“Okay, thanks. I had to ask.”

“And I appreciate it,” Regent said. “For now, though, I think we call it a night. I’ll reach out to each of you tomorrow as soon as we get a ping back from Tokyo.”

“Sounds good,” Hastings said. “Good night ladies.”

Emma and Estelle Regent murmured their goodbyes as well, and then the call was over. Emma sat behind her desk for a moment longer, her study illuminated by just the glow of the laptop and a small desk lamp. The rain continued to patter against the window as she finally got up from her desk and did her best to let the moment soak into her. She’d worked hard for this. And soon she’d be called on to speak at lectures, to serve as an adjunct professor at prestigious universities...and she wasn’t ready for any of it. But if everything came back positively from Tokyo (and she knew it would, it was really just a precaution), that’s what her life would look like.

“One thing at a time,” she told herself as she closed the lid of her laptop and left her office. She went directly to the bathroom, knowing that tomorrow was going to be packed and exhausting. Though it was a bit earlier than she usually went to sleep, she knew she needed to head to bed rather than reading or unwinding with a podcast. So, in the bathroom, she popped two melatonin and brushed her teeth.

She was unable to push the weight of the big career moment off as she tried to force an end to her day. In an odd way, it was making her feel uneasy and she wasn’t sure why.

She did her best to figure it out as she left the bathroom and went through her nightly routine. She checked to make sure the door was locked, she set up her coffee to auto-brew at six in the morning, cut off the lamp in the living room and then walked through her large, expensive, eleventh-floor Seattle apartment to her bedroom. She turned the lights on to dim as she made her way over to her bureau.

As she neared it and reached for the top drawer, a flicker of movement to her right caused a little gasp to rise up in her throat. It happened more than she cared to admit; there was a full-body mirror on the opposite end of the bureau, directly beside her walk-in closet. It often spooked her because her reflection was the first thing she saw most mornings as she stepped into the closet and, not yet fully awake, it was startling. She kept meaning to move the stupid thing but had never gotten around to it.

She opened up the top drawer to grab something to sleep in, and her eyes trailed to the mirror again. Her own movements caught her attention again and—

No, what wasn't *her* movement. That was something else...something else moving behind her. Her heart raced madly as she wheeled around to face the moving shape she'd seen in the reflection.

There was a man standing in her bedroom. She'd been so preoccupied with thoughts of work and the information exchanged in the call that she'd somehow missed him. For a second, her brain seemed to freeze. She wanted to scream for help, she wanted to ask who he was, why he was there, how

he'd gotten into the apartment...but all of those things collided and she did none of them. She simply froze, staring at him from across the ten feet or so that separated them. He was blocking her path to the door that led to the hallway, so there was no escape. She *could* run into the closet, but then what? Her phone was on the nightstand table so she couldn't call for help if she was trapped in there. She was—

Suddenly, none of that mattered. He came rushing at her, lunging at her. Somehow, it was only in that moment that her frazzled mind noticed several things about him. First of all, he was wearing a generic ski mask, with only his eyes showing. Second, he was wearing a black, long-sleeved tee shirt and dark jeans. The hands that were grasping out to her were covered in black leather gloves.

Emma shouted out and pivoted to the left, heading for the nightstand and her phone. Maybe, she thought, she could grab it and leap over her bed. She could close him in the bedroom and call for help.

Only, as she moved to do exactly that, her left foot struck the edge of the bureau and she went sprawling to backward and to the left. In doing so, her hand flailed out to support herself against the wall and, instead, found one of the room's two windows. She pushed herself for it, her eyes on the cellphone now just a few feet away.

But the man was there first. And instead of grabbing her as she'd feared, he did the exact opposite. He shoved her...and she shoved her *hard*. The back of Emma's head struck the window. She could barely hear the glass shattering due to the

thud of her head connecting. And it wasn't just a crack, but a shattering sound. He'd shoved her hard. Right away, she could feel the patters of rain touching the back of her head, where she was also quite sure she'd been cut.

She attempted to raise her right arm to swing out at the man, but he was already coming at her again. This time, he shoved her even harder, nearly punching her with both fists. They landed along her shoulders, and she felt the shove. She then felt her body pressed back against the large picture window. And as she suddenly felt cool night air pressing against her back, Emma became aware of two terrifying things at the same time.

First, the fragments of broken glass that remained in the frame were digging into her back, having pierced her shirt and now slicing into her skin. Second, there was eleven stories of open air waiting for her.

And her attacker continued to push. He grunted with the force of it, and with one last shove of force, all Emma felt was the air. It went rushing past her so fast that she didn't even realize she'd fallen from her window until her body was wrapped in a chill and the rain was falling on her.

She opened her mouth to scream, her arms flailing. And as she looked up into the night sky, rain coming down like little stars to guide her to the street below, she saw the perfect outline of the masked man in her broken bedroom window.

It was the last thing Dr. Emma Willis ever saw.

CHAPTER ONE

Rachel had never enjoyed flying, but this particular flight had been quite different. First of all, someone from the previous flight had left a newspaper in the little netting on the seatback in front of her. She'd gladly turned to the puzzles page and went to work. All through her treatments and doctor's appointments for her brain tumor, it had been suggested that she work on all sorts of puzzles to keep her mind sharp. She'd spent several weeks tearing through Sudoku books and had downloaded three different crossword apps to her phone. From time to time, she'd find herself getting stuck, as if her brain felt like it was stripped of a few gears. She felt it now, in the place as she struggled with 32 Down in the morning crossword puzzle; it took her far too long to come up with the rather obvious answer of *Male Lead in Hit Film*, *Dirty Dancing*. Of course, it could just be her brain decided that Patrick Swayze wasn't important enough to remember, but still...it made her worry.

When she'd gone back to work, she'd stopped doing such exercises within any regularity. It had been lessened to a morning crossword over coffee or maybe, if she was having trouble sleeping, a puzzle app on her phone. But when she saw the newspaper right in front of her, the itch had come back. Also, there was just something quaint and oddly comforting about doing a crossword puzzle on newsprint.

So she did the crossword puzzle, and then she knocked out the word jumbles. And when she was done, she took the time to peruse the paper. It was a paper out of Seattle—her destination—so she figured she'd get an idea of what was going on in the area. She'd be there for a total of four days, after all. She'd never visited Seattle before, so she thought it might be helpful to get an idea of things she could do during her downtime.

That was, of course, if she *had* downtime. The specialists she'd spoken to about this groundbreaking and highly experimental treatment claimed the side effects were minimal. But they'd also stressed that people responded differently. While there was a high probability that she'd be perfectly fine following each of the four treatments she'd be getting, they'd made sure to point out that there was a very small chance that she may feel sick to the stomach and experience headaches.

She breezed through the papers, getting a sense of the weather forecast while she'd be there (drizzling rain and overcast the entire time) and found a few restaurants she thought she might try out. In the midst of all of this, though, something in the local news caught her eye. Overshadowing the news of a new bakery opening up and a local teen who'd saved an elderly woman from an apartment fire, there was news of a murder that had the Seattle PD baffled.

So, as the flight drew closer to its end, Rachel read about the strange murder of Dr. Emma Willis. A brilliant biochemist, she'd been murdered in her apartment two nights ago and so far, the police and even agents from the bureau field office out of Seattle had no clues as to who did it. The *why* seemed to be

a bit clearer, as Willis had been working on experimental methods to reverse aging. There were quotes from Dr. Willis's colleagues in the article, grieving her loss not only as a friend but as one of the most pioneering minds in the field of reverse aging.

The article explained very little of the crime scene or the body—just that she'd apparently been pushed out of her eleventh-story window. Rachel understood that this lack of detail was probably out of respect for Dr. Willis and her family, but it already had Rachel's mind working. Who would have killed such a doctor? Had the original intent been to push her from a window, or had there been something else planned? Has she been the center of controversy at some point because of her research and work?

When the pilot announced that they were beginning their descent into Seattle, Rachel folded the paper up and placed it back into the netting in front of her. As she looked out to the gray sky, she thought about the sort of work and potential scorn some doctors surely took because of their research. Over the course of the past fourteen months or so, she'd become very much aware of how competitive and cutting-edge experimental treatments could be. Only her own view had been confined to cancer and tumor research. And if there were *that* many advancements in that field, there was no telling what sort of approaches were being studied and researched. Stem cell, sure...she'd heard all about the protests and angry groups who had railed against that sort of research when it came to anti-aging practices. But beyond that, Rachel was mostly uneducated on the field.

She thought back over all she'd read in the article just as another way to keep her mind sharp and focused. But by the time the landing gear touched down on the runway, she had somehow slipped into work mode and found herself trying to view the case from every possible angle.

This came to a stop as she grabbed her luggage from the overhead compartment and filed off of the plane. She then made her way into the airport and made a direct line for check-in for her rental car. She had her first appointment with the team of neuropathologists in exactly an hour and a half and, not knowing the city, was already fearing she was going to be racing the clock.

But in the back of her mind, she held on to the hope that this appointment could be the first of a handful that end up bringing an end to this chapter of her life. She'd tried so many different approaches, and with each one, Rachel had become more and more hopeful. She'd nearly stayed with the treatments in Sweden but had ultimately decided to try these specialists not only based on the word of mouth from doctors back in Richmond, but because the team in Switzerland had never quite gotten behind the idea that their approach would actually *cure* her. And maybe it was just the competitive streak in her, but she wanted to *beat* this damned thing, not just learn how to live with it.

And that was the attitude that carried her out of airport, across the rental parking lot under a drizzle of chilly rain. She punched the address of the clinic into her phone and headed into the city, chasing answers to her cancer and, perhaps more importantly, *hope*.

“We’re excited to get started,” Angler said as they all took seats at the table. He then reached out to a very large stack of file folders and stroked them as if they were cat. “Of course, as you can imagine with a treatment like this, there are lots of waivers and signatures required.”

“I trust you’ve read over everything we sent you?” Dr. Pace asked.

“I did,” Rachel said. “Several times, in fact.”

“Do you have any questions before we get started? Anything at all. I know there are a lot of peculiar things to wrap your head around.”

That was an understatement. She felt like she’d been trying to desperately make sense of things ever since she arrived. The clinic didn’t feel like any sort of medical clinic or research center she’d seen before. Instead, it was decorated almost like a resort. When she’d presented herself at the front desk and signed in, the receptionist had offered her a coffee—four different kinds, at that. Rachel declined, as she was already a little jittery about the meeting.

A second receptionist had escorted her down a wide, brightly-lit hallway. There were only a few doors on each side, but from one of the doors being open, Rachel could clearly see that the rooms were enormous. The receptionist led her to the last door on the right and opened it for her. When Rachel

stepped inside, there were already three people sitting around an elegant conference table—the place she currently sat.

And that was what brought her snapping into the moment again. For a second, she'd allowed her FBI agent tactics to take over, retracing her steps to see if she did indeed have any questions.

There were two men and a woman, all of whom looked to be middle-aged, sitting at the table with her. There were no doctor smocks or coats. They were all dressed casually; in fact, one of the of the men was wearing a rather bright polo with a subtle tropical design.

The woman was a thin, blonde woman with a bright smile and blue, sparkling eyes behind a pair of glasses. “She'd introduced herself as Dr. Laura Pace. It was her job to keep track of Rachel's progress after each of the injections.”

To her immediate left sat a man in a tropical polo shirt. His black hair had started going grey at the temples, but he possessed a boyish sort of charm and gait. He'd introduced himself as Dr. Warren Angler. The other man was of Asian descent and was the only familiar face in the room. Rachel had spoken with him once before via video call. Dressed in a simple blue button-down and a pair of slacks, he introduced himself as Dr. Ken Seang.

Rachel eyed them all, wondering if they *expected* her to have questions. She was quite sure she understood it all but feared that she might have questions that she'd buried down under all of the details. She'd read the PDF documents that had been sent over and could even recall the conversation

she'd had with Dr. Seang on a video call eight days ago. She knew the basics of the treatment and why it was seen as so strange and controversial. Essentially, over the course of the next four days, this small team would inject her with an extremely experimental nanobot. She would be only the eleventh person to receive these particular nanobot, and would become one of less than three thousand in the world to receive a nanobot injection. Hence the experimental nature. The nanobot would deliver medicines that were almost identical to what she'd been receiving in Sweden directly to the tumor. It would be aided by ultrasound techniques that she honestly didn't understand.

If the nanobots failed, there was no harm, no foul. She'd simply have a little nanoparticle trapped in her bloodstream—too small to cause any damage. But if it worked, as it had in ten out of eleven recipients so far, she could be cancer-free within two months. And the best part (as far as she was concerned) was that the treatments were minimally invasive and wouldn't cause her to be laid up at home.

“No, I think I understand everything,” she finally said. “I just wonder...how long will each treatment take?”

Angler chuckled and this and said, “Well, the injection should take about three seconds. The walk down to the ultrasound machine will take roughly thirty seconds, and then the ultrasound itself will take about five minutes.”

“And that's it?” She could hardly believe it. Seang had told her it was a quick procedure, but this was crazy. She'd expected *at least* an hour or so.

“And when I leave here today, from what I understand, I can just go about my day?”

“Absolutely,” Dr. Pace said. “Go grab a bite to eat, maybe a drink somewhere. Did anyone come with you?”

“No, it’s just me.”

“Ever been to Seattle before?” Angler asked.

“No, this is my first time.”

“Well then,” he said, pushing the stack of paperwork and waivers in her direction. “Let’s get all of *this* started so we can get to the important stuff. And then let’s push you out of here to go explore the city.”

She reached for the files and papers. The stack was nearly a foot tall and was pretty intimidating. But if this was the most time-consuming part of what was about to happen, she was more than happy to accept it. With the three doctors all smiling warmly at her, she opened the first folder, grabbed the pen that was waiting inside on top of a series of forms, and began the process.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Rachel checked into her hotel, she felt like she was on a small vacation. She was in and out of the clinic in an hour and a half—and would have been out even sooner if he'd not had a few questions about the paperwork. The paperwork had taken nearly an entire hour and had indeed turned out to be the worst thing about the entire experience.

Now, looking out the window of her hotel room down onto the Belltown area of the city. It was still raining, which seemed to fit just about every stereotype she'd heard about Seattle. She could see a few different restaurants, a few bars, some scattered shops here and there. It was currently 3:30 Seattle time, which meant it would be another three hours before Paige would be arriving home...and another six or so before Jack would be off the clock at work.

She was feeling positive about the treatment. And though she loved Paige, Grandma Tate, and Jack, it *was* nice to be away from home for a while. Aside from chasing down leads on her own here and there, she couldn't remember the last time she'd ever just spent some time alone. Dr. Angler had jokingly made the recommendation to head out into the city for a meal and a drink and as she looked out onto the city with a bright new hope for the future, that seemed like an incredibly good idea.

She cut the television on simply for some background noise and decided to take a shower before heading out. One of

the reasons she didn't like to fly was because she always felt slightly stuffy—almost *dingy*—whenever the flight was over. She figured a nice refreshing shower would be a great way to set off on a small adventure into the city.

Still, as she showered, she found herself wondering what Jack was up to. Neither of them had been assigned to any notable cases in the past two weeks. Between cases, Jack usually helped run clean-up on smaller cases as a relief to other agents—usually those with less experience. She found herself eager to talk to him...not just about his day at work, but with details about how her time at the clinic had gone.

When she stepped out of the shower, she realized that she was maybe in the best mood she'd been in for a very long time. She wasn't sure what that said about her—to be so overjoyed and free while away from home—but there was an undeniable bounce in her step. As she made her way out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her, she was even humming a song she'd caught on the radio during the drive between the clinic and the hotel.

She started getting changes, figuring she'd dress cute and simply treat herself. A drink or two, maybe a trip to a local bookstore for a book to read over the next few days while she was in the city. As she quickly studied herself in the mirror, a gameshow on the TV went to commercial break as the camera swept over an applauding audience. She barely paid it any attention until the commercial break kicked off with a quick promo for the evening news.

A young female news anchor started stiffly into the camera and said, “No new movement in the murder of local doctor Emma Willis doesn’t necessarily mean a cold case. We’ll have the latest updates and speak to local authorities as to why Willis’s killer has remained so elusive. All of this and more on your local news at six.”

She stood in front of the mirror for a second, the announcement having frozen her in place for a moment. She supposed it was a workplace hazard to always notice the headlines of unsolved murders in a new place. The news items some would only frown out before changing channels usually stuck in her like a thorn. She wondered if it was the same for most other agents as well. She recalled the article she’d read on the plane, bringing back the few details she’d gathered.

A renowned biochemist, pushed from her eleventh story window. No clues or trace evidence left behind. No signs of forced entry. No leads on the case.

Don’t do it...

She heard the comment in her head, coming through in Jack’s voice. And really, it was good advice. She was in town to focus on her health, to try to finally beat this tumor. The last thing she should be doing was growing obsessed with a case that was *very* far away from home.

Then again, she’d been keeping her mind sharp with puzzles...and what better puzzle than a murder case that had yet to be cracked?

The idea of going out for a drink dissolved slowly away as she went to her suitcase. She opened it up, pulled out her

laptop, and powered it up while sitting in the center of the bed. She then searched the local news for *Dr. Emma Willis's murder*. There were countless articles from local news organizations and even a few on the national level as well. She spent some time reading over the articles as the gameshow came back on TV. Almost absently, she switched it off and focused all of her attention on her lazy research.

The vast majority of the articles focused on the same details she'd already learned. But there were a few, including the handful she'd found that had gone national, that revealed a bit more. And as she continued to read about the murder and Dr. Emma Willis herself, Rachel started to find more pieces to the puzzle.

Dr. Emma Willis was forty-four when she died. The work she'd done in regards to the reversal of aging was heralded by many to be the most important in the field. And while the details were slim, it was suggested that she and a team scattered around the globe were on the verge of a breakthrough that would revolutionize the field. Out of more than twenty articles, only two mentioned a small blip on the radar from three years ago when a paper she'd written on the use of stem cells had caused a stir in certain political circles. It had been Dr. Willis's first step onto the national media stage, and she'd handled it with grace.

As for the murder itself, it had occurred in Dr. Willis's apartment sometime between 10:20 and 10:40. The last people to have seen her were two doctors who had been on a video call with her. Neither of them indicated that anything had been amiss; if anything, Dr. Willis had seemed excited about the

meeting and what was on the horizon. The scene had showed a fairly simple story: a shattered window beside the doctor's bureau and the doctor herself, dead on the pavement eleven floors below. Security cameras from the lobby of the apartment complex had given the police upwards of thirty potential suspects, nine of which were impossible to identify due to the angles at which they'd passed by the camera.

A list of thirty potential suspects...a doctor shoved from a window...a twenty-minute period in which it could have happened...security cameras in the lobby...

There were other factors she thought of that weren't included in any of the articles. For instance, were the elevators of the newer variety, with the electronic touchpads? If so, what information could be gleaned from their routes during that twenty-minute window? What had Dr. Willis been wearing when she was pushed? Had any neighbors on the eleventh floor heard or seen anything odd over the last few days?

Rachel glanced at the clock in the corner of her laptop screen and saw that she'd been looking over the articles for forty-five minutes. She closed the cover slowly and sat in the center of the bed, in a position Paige referred to as crisscross applesauce, thinking. If the next three days at the clinic were as speedy as it had been today (and without all of the paperwork, thanks God) she'd have a lot of time on her hands. What would be the harm in checking in with local PD to see if she could lend a hand?

Even before the thought had time to root itself in her thoughts, she'd pretty much decided. Any illusions she'd had

of taking the afternoon to enjoy herself with food, drink, and relaxation was gone. But what she had in mind was even more tempting, something she knew she'd not be able to ignore for the duration of her stay.

She grabbed her phone and, after some strategic planning, found the number for the FBI's Seattle field office online. As she was digitally ushered to the switchboard, she wondered if she should have perhaps called Director Anderson first. She honestly didn't think he'd mind—that he'd actually be thrilled to have one of his agents assisting in another city on a case no one had yet been able to move forward. She figured she'd call him next just to make sure all of the boxes were checked.

After pressing a series of numbers and finally being transferred to a human, a woman's dry, monotone voice spoke up in her ear. "Federal Bureau of Investigation, Seattle office. What extension do you need?"

Without much thought behind it, Rachel gave her name and badge number. And in doing so, her trip to Seattle suddenly had two very important purposes.

CHAPTER THREE

Rachel stepped out of the taxi and looked up, craning her neck to take in the full height of the high-rise known as Benson Tower. It was fifteen stories tall and, though clearly not the tallest building in the city—or even just on this particular block, even—it did hold a certain elegance that all of the surrounding buildings lacked. The glass along the sides looked futuristic, like something out of a cyberpunk movie. The top came to a slanted point as if to proclaim its exciting nature to the city.

She entered through the front doors and entered a large, minimally decorated lobby. Everything was clean and polished, sleek and white. The lobby led to a lounge area on the right, what appeared to be a small meeting place to the left, and the elevators all the way to the back. She made her way to the elevators, already taking note of a man standing by the doors. He was an older African American gentleman, but he had the build of a much younger man. His shoulders were massive, and his neck looked like the trunk of a tree.

She approached him, taking her badge and ID out of the front pocket of her jeans. Even for an out-of-town trip where there was supposed to be no work involved, the badge and ID always came with her. It was something she's learned to do earlier in her career, as agents could never be sure when their services may be needed. She had, on the other hand, not packed any of her bureau outfits, the usual jacket, button-

down, and slacks she typically wore. So she approached the guard, showing her badge while dressed casually in a thin cotton sweater and a pair of dark jeans.

“Special Agent Rachel Gift,” she said. “I think you should have gotten a call that I was coming?” She hoped so, anyway. She’d spoken with the Seattle field office and had even gotten the okay from Anderson in Richmond. He’d not been a fan of the idea at first, but she knew he’d not be able to pass up the opportunity to have one of his agents potentially close a case elsewhere in the country that had so far remained a mystery.

“Sure did,” the man d said. He reached into the pocket of his jacket, and she already knew what she’d see. She smiled softly as he showed her his credentials. He was a local detective.

“Detective Paul Sullivan. Good to meet you.”

Rachel shook Sullivan’s hand, and they stepped onto the elevator together. Even the interior of the elevator had a futuristic and minimal feel to it. There were no buttons, but a touch-pad on the panel and even that was minimal in nature—no larger than a paperback book. Sullivan punched in the information, lighting the panel up with a single touch and then selecting the eleventh floor.

“Has anyone else been up there today?” Rachel asked as they were rocketed up. The elevator glided in such a way that she couldn’t even feel the progress.

“Two detectives came this morning,” Sullivan answered. “Had a few folks from the press come by too, but security sent them packing.” He paused a beat and then asked: “So, from

what I understand, you aren't even in town for the case. You just wanted to lend a hand. Is that right?"

"I suppose you could say that. I'm in Seattle on personal business, and there's going to be a lot of free time. I read about the murder, then saw it all over the news and ended up doing a bit of basic research."

"Well, I won't lie," Sullivan said. "I may have done a bit of research myself when I heard you were on the way. Granted, it wasn't much...but enough for me to find out that you're the agent that arrested Alex Lynch *and then* killed him after he managed to escape prison."

"Yeah, that's me."

"I also know you've been battling a brain tumor. Are you okay now?"

It stung to hear it mentioned so bluntly, but she swallowed down her primary reaction of growing defensive. "I am, yes. Better than I was even *before* I was diagnosed."

"That's amazing. Glad to hear it."

The elevator dinged a faint, musical note, and the doors opened up onto the eleventh floor. Rachel stepped off, and Sullivan followed.

"I assume you've already been on the scene?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah, twice. A lot of good it did. I'm really only here this time because my director asked me to come assist you if you needed it. Maybe catch you up."

Sullivan led her to the right, and when Rachel looked ahead, she was instantly able to locate Emma Willis's apartment. The next-to-last door on the left side of the hallway was blocked off at the top of the frame by bright yellow crime scene tape. As she approached the door, Rachel also saw that a laminated sign had been attached to the door. It read: *Active Crime Scene. No Trespassing Under Any Circumstances. Violators Will Be Arrested.*

The door had two locks—a traditional key slot, but also a thin, square device just above the key slot. Sullivan pulled a keycard out of his pocket and inserted it into the device; he was rewarded with a soft chiming noise. The square device glowed blue for a moment, and then the lock disengaged. He opened the door, allowing Rachel to enter first. She had to duck slightly to avoid the crime scene tape at the top of the doorframe.

The front door entered into a small foyer of sorts, a perfect square that offered three different paths into the apartment. Straight ahead was a short hallway that ended at the bedroom. To the left, there was a living area, with a plush couch, expensive rug, and a TV mounted to the wall. On the backside of this area, there was another sitting area—an area that looked as if Dr. Willis had used it as both a dining room and makeshift office. To the right, there was the kitchen. Each and every room was tidy and well-maintained. The only clutter in sight were a few dishes in the sink, and a laptop and a few files and papers on the large table in the dining area.

As Rachel walked toward the bedroom, Sullivan followed behind her, making sure to keep a respectable distance. Rachel

appreciated it, as he was showing that he wanted her to feel like she had her own space and wasn't being crowded over by a local.

“Were you one of the first on the scene?” Rachel asked as she came to the bedroom.

“No,” Sullivan answered. “I didn't show up until the following morning—yesterday morning, in fact. That was after the initial police investigation couldn't turn up anything.”

Rachel stepped into the bedroom. It was chilly, as the shattered window on the right side of the room had not been replaced or boarded up yet. The window appeared to be the only thing in the room that had been disturbed. The bed was still perfectly made, and there were no clear or obvious signs of a struggle.

“All we know about what happened here,” Sullivan said, “other than the fact that she fell out of that window, is that the light was on in the walk-in closet. Forensics is also quite certain she was shoved through the window rather than her just sort of stumbling in an attempt to escape.”

Rachel looked at the glass and agreed right away. The way much of the glass had shattered rather than simply broken was an indicator that a great amount of force had struck it. Even in the glass that remained, there were spiderweb-like cracks running all the way to the frame. She also noted that a few of the more jagged shards along the bottom of the frame were tinged with blood. With a queasy feeling in her stomach, Rachel looked out of the broken window and to the ground below.

“She landed on her back,” Sullivan said from the other side of the room. “The lacerations from the window were also on her back and shoulders. It’s widely believed that cuts on her back indicate she went out back-first.”

“Which would give even more credence to the idea that she was pushed,” Rachel added.

“Exactly.”

“But no prints, fibers, nothing like that? Nothing left behind?”

“Not a damn thing.”

Rachel walked to the closet door, which was standing open. The interior showed no signs of a fight; clothes hung perfectly and the bins and boxes along the top shelves were perfectly aligned and straight. However, she did figure that the perfect opportunity for an attacker to sneak into the bedroom and take Dr. Willis unaware would be when she was in this closet. Rachel stepped back out and turned casually, as Dr. Willis might have on the night she died. The window was about five feet to the right, beside a tall bureau. The bed was even further away, which meant it would not have gotten in the attacker’s way. The only question that remained was if the killer had *intended* to shove Willis out of the window or if it had just happened in the heat of the moment. With no indications of a struggle within the room, it was going to be pretty much impossible to ever know for sure.

“Everything I read indicated that she had been on a video call with some colleagues,” Rachel said. “Is that correct?”

“It is. We’ve had other agents reach out to the people she spoke with. None of that mentioned anything about Dr. Willis, mentioning she might be in danger. In fact, they said spirits were high.”

Rachel exited the bedroom and made her way into the large area that Dr. Willis had apparently been using as an office. She stood behind the chair she assumed Willis had been using for the video call, getting a good look at the work area. The laptop was still open. There was a stack of four different folders to the right of the laptop. To the left, there was a small notepad with just a few things written down on it. Rachel read them to herself, unable to make sense of it.

Dean would know? / PR out of NY...maybe need S. Catron. / TOKYO. One more time.

“Any idea what any of this means?” she asked Sullivan.

“The S. Catron is Sean Catron. He works with medical teams and insurance companies on rolling out effective public relations campaigns. A lot of people accuse him of being a Big Pharma shill. The reference to Tokyo is all about a team Dr. Willis and her crew were working with to do a triple-check on an anti-aging development they’d been working on. And I see your look...you’re impressed that I know all of this. But I only know it because I *literally* just read the file half an hour ago when I knew you were coming. I can email it to you if you want.”

“That would be great.” She recited her email address to him as she studied the work setup. When she was done, she

said, “would you happen to have a pair of evidence gloves on you?”

“I do, actually.” He fished around in his other inner jacket pocket and pulled out two sets. He handed one over to her and then began slipping on a pair for himself. “Again,” he added as Rachel took her set, “don’t be too impressed. I just wasn’t sure how deep into this you wanted to go. So I thought I’d be as prepared as possible.”

“I appreciate it,” she said. “Gloves aren’t typically something I have on me even when I *am* on the clock.”

Rachel began to thumb through the folders stacked by the laptop. The first one was filled with data print-outs. She had absolutely no idea what she was looking at. She did know that some of them were medical records of some kind because Lord only knew how many of *those* she’s subjected herself to over the past year or so. The first folder contained roughly fifty pages and they all looked the same. A few of them had been marked with small post-it markers and tabs.

“According to the team working with Willis,” Sullivan said, “everything here is data and reports on the experiments and lab results they’ve been conducting over the past six months. All of it is about anti-aging, but beyond that, I’m clueless.”

“Yeah, same here,” Rachel said as she started looking through the second folder. At first, this folder contained more of the same. Just print outs and graphs, reams of technical data and jargon from reports and lab results.

“Did you hear about another murder in the area, a woman named Jane Adler?” Sullivan asked.

“No. Who is that?”

“She was killed five days ago. She was a doctor, but the sort that spends most of her time in labs rather than hospitals and operating rooms from what I understand. Most recently, she’d been working in a local lab. Something to do with stem cell research.”

“And the media didn’t latch on to that?”

“For about a day. It surprised me because the use of stem cells...that usually stirs up controversy. Good for clicks and views, you know?”

She did find this interesting and was all but certain the two would be connected. Stems cells, after all, were often mentioned in the same conversations and anti-aging drugs and medical breakthroughs in terms of making people appear younger. But she had to focus on one thing at a time, so she continued studying the material in the folders.

As she neared the back of the second folder, her eye saw something that was a bit outside of what she’d been seeing in these papers. She went past it at first but stopped her thumbing and went back to it. The page in question showed three different charts, and each chart showed what she assumed was levels of some kind. They rose and fell and were explained with a series of numbers, percentages and long, complicated medical terminology. She’d seen at least fifty of these same pages so far, but these were *just barely* different.

At the bottom of the second read-out, the terminology and series of numbers was different. To make sure she was right, she randomly looked at three she'd already viewed. Each one was adorned with an eighteen-digit number, followed by what resembled a small barcode, and then two more series of numbers—one seven digits long, and the other four digits long.

But on the one that stood out, those numbers and barcode-like object were gone. In their place was three rows of characters that looked like absolute nonsense at first. But as she actually took the time to study them, she thought it resembled code—the sort used to build software. But, no... that wasn't quite right. She wasn't one hundred percent certain, but she thought it might be some sort of encrypted code or message.

She opened her mouth to call over Sullivan, wanting to get his opinion. But before she could, she saw something else at the bottom of the page.

“Sullivan...the pictures I've seen of Dr. Willis show her as having brown hair. Would you agree with that?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Why?”

Using her glove pinky, Rachel lifted the loose hair she'd seen along the bottom of the page—the one page that had seemed to stand out from all of the rest.

“Because it seems someone with short, grey hair had been looking through all of this recently.”

“Could it be an officer or agent that was looking through the scene?”

“Possibly. Do you think we could get our hands on a list of people who have looked through these folders following Dr. Willis’s death?”

With a growing look of excitement on his face, Agent Sullivan pulled his cellphone from his pocket and said, “There’s only one way to find out.”

CHAPTER FOUR

With the loose hair bagged up as evidence, Rachel and Sullivan left the apartment building. Because Rachel had taken a cab to the building, she rode along with Sullivan as they sped to the police department. She noted that Sullivan looked very excited, probably because he was about to walk into the office with the first solid bit of evidence that had been collected in regard to the Willis murder.

When they arrived, the place was already bustling. It was a decent sized police station—just one of six within the city—and Easton’s call to have the lab at the ready when he arrived at ignited a spark within the place. When they walked in, Rachel noticed the lingering stares right away. She didn’t think she’d ever get used to the level of fame and notoriety that came with her name. Whether it was because of her history with Alex Lynch or the fact that the news had leaked that she’d taken him down while suffering from a brain tumor, she didn’t think she’d ever be able to accept that some members of law enforcement agencies saw her as something of a legend.

She kept her eyes on the case, though, following Sullivan to the back of the building where a network of halls contained several rooms: interrogation rooms, offices, and conference rooms alike. He led her to an office near the back of the building. The break room must have been nearby because she could smell coffee and microwaved food.

Sullivan opened the door for her and gestured inside. “Make yourself at home. I’ll run this hair over to the lab. it’s right next door, so it’ll only be five minutes or so. If you...hey, I’ll be damned.”

“What?” she asked as she walked into the cramped but tidy office.

Sullivan hurried to his desk and glared at a stack of folders that had been bound together with a rubber band. “I put a request in for Jane Adler’s police file *and* whatever she’d been working on in the days before her murder.” He tapped the top of the stack of folders and said, “Looks like someone came through. And I suspect it’s because word got out that Agent Rachel Gift was coming by.”

“I don’t think my name has as much power as you think it does.”

He grinned at her and said, “Maybe you’re the one who’s wrong about that. Anyway...I’ll be back. Feel free to have a look at Adler’s files.”

She waited for Sullivan to leave before sitting down in a chair positioned in the car corner. She started looking through Jane Adler’s file, which was surprisingly thick. In addition to the police report concerning her murder, there were reams of other information as well: her work history, a list of people who she’d been working with over the past year or so, as well as the initial reports related to conversations the police had with them.

The paperwork had been handled well, and Rachel was able to determine quite a bit about Dr. Adler’s case. For

starters, she lived just outside the city, in a well-to-do neighborhood. From what she could tell, her main focus in terms of her career was with Fulton Research Partners, but she was also involved in a few medical practices and local hospitals. Much like Dr. Emma Willis, Dr. Jane Adler seemed to have had a very busy schedule and was highly sought after.

Dr. Adler had been killed in her lab outside of St. John Memorial Hospital. She'd been stabbed four times and had her head slammed into the edge of a lab table. There had been a single witness to the murderer leaving the building late at night, and it had been caught on a security camera. But the killer had been dressed quite plainly and, during the act, had worn a ski mask over his face. So far, two people had been brought in for questioning as potential suspects but had been released once their alibis checked out.

Rachel then turned to the folders containing summaries and reports on Dr. Adler's most recent work. Like what Rachel had seen with Dr. Willis, there were graphs and medical results that looked vaguely familiar but were also like trying to read Greek. The only section of the work Rachel could easily follow were several pages that dealt with timelines concerning medical outcomes following an injection of stem cells.

As she pored over all of this, Sullivan came back in. "The hair has been handed over to the lab. I assume you know the drill. For a hair sample, even on a rush, we're looking at about two days."

She did know this and instantly thought: *I'll still be in town when that comes in.* However, on the heels of that, there

was another thought. *Should I be getting so involved in a case that may not be closed before I have to head back home? Would Anderson give me the okay to stay in Seattle until the case is wrapped?*

“So, what’s the rundown?” Sullivan asked, nodding to the stack of folders as he took his seat behind the desk.

“I assume you know the basics?”

“Stabbed several times, knocked out on the side of a table. There was a witness and security camera footage, but the guy got away.”

“Yeah, that’s the gist. And the work she was doing seems similar to Dr. Willis, though not exact.”

“How so?”

Rachel walked him through what she’d read. It didn’t take long because she understood so little of it.

“But stem cells, as I understand it,” Sullivan said, “are used in anti-aging research, right?”

“In some areas, yes. Sometimes, it’s literally just to make older people look and feel younger. But they’re also used in more pressing matters, such as replacing cells that have been damaged by certain cancers or blood-related diseases. Either way, I think it’s safe to assume that our killer is probably focusing on that...the use of stem cells.”

“I figured. That’s been a pretty hot-button topic over the past decade or so.”

“What I find troubling, though,” Rachel said, “is how he knew where these doctors would be at the time of their death. He knew Dr. Adler would be in the lab at such a late hour, and according to the stories I’ve read, the apartment where Dr. Willis was killed was only one of her two residences. She and her husband apparently had another house in a rural area outside of the city. So the killer *knew* she’d be there.”

“So maybe someone who knows the docs,” Sullivan said. “Or even someone who has seen both of them for medical issues.”

“Maybe. And I know I’m just the guest here, but I think getting a list of clients from both doctors is going to be a good place to start. It shouldn’t be long at all. If their area of interest was primarily research, I don’t even know if they would have seen *any* patients at all.”

“I got that ball rolling this morning,” he said. “I’ve got two cops drawing all of that information together. I should have it all by tomorrow.”

She was impressed by how casually he filled her in on things. She’d worked closely with detectives in the past, but Sullivan seemed to be on his A-game. She wondered if he was always so efficient or if it was because he knew he’d be working closely with not only an FBI agent, but one who’d been in the news and apparently had a bit of a legendary reputation—even if she *did* resent it.

“Would you happen to have the coroner’s report on Adler?” she asked.

“Yeah. Somewhere....” He moved around a few files on his desk and eventually handed her a thin folder. “I got it late yesterday evening. There are a few crime scene photos in there, too.”

She read through the file as Sullivan collected the stack on Adler’s work. The coroner’s report was much smaller and more precise. The cause of death was listed as blood loss and a punctured lung. Two of the stab wounds had torn through her lung, a third dented but did not break through her breastbone, and the fourth one tore open her stomach. As for the blow to the head, she’d suffered a skull fracture just above her left eye. Dr. Adler had still been alive when the ambulance arrived but died on the way to the hospital.

Seems like pushing Dr. Willis from a window may have been a bit more efficient, Rachel thought. Though, she still wasn’t convinced it had been intentional.

The crime scene photos showed Dr. Adler’s lab with three separate pools of blood on the floor. There was also a bit of blood on the side of one of the tables—presumably the one she’ had her head smashed

“Do you happen to know how many other people were in the building at the time?” she asked.

“Yes. Four in total...and all in different parts of the building. One was the janitor. All four of them were questioned, and everything checked out. I can get you those reports as well, if you’d like.”

Rachel checked her watch and was shocked to see that it had somehow come to be 2:45 in the afternoon...which meant

it was 5:45 back home. She'd promised she'd call Paige after her first day of treatments, and she intended to keep that promise.

“Actually, that would be great,” she said. “Who do I need to speak with about getting copies of everything you've got?”

“I'll make a call and you'll have it within half an hour,” Sullivan said. “I take it you're calling it a day?”

“Yeah. Well, for now. I just want to get back to my room and take it easy for now.” She stopped herself, realizing that she'd nearly ventured into the details of her doctor's visit and why she was in town in the first place. Sure, Sullivan knew the very basic bits, but she didn't want to get too deep into it.

He seemed to understand where she was headed, though. He gave her a smile as he picked up the receiver of his desk phone. “I read you loud and clear. Let me see how quickly I can get you those copies. And you know...if you do find anything or want to chase after something, I'd appreciate a call.”

“Of course,” she said.

It was strange to be working in such a random and thrown-together partnership with someone she didn't know. She'd grown so comfortable with Jack that she'd forgotten what it was like to work a case with a stranger. She was surprised to find that it was exciting and that she rather enjoyed it so far. And hopefully, all of that would come together in a neatly closed case before she had to head back home. More than just a closed case, though...but bringing a killer to justice.

Someone was out there, killing doctors and researchers who were at the cutting edge of trying to save lives in brilliant and innovative ways. And as a woman who was currently in the midst of fighting her own health-related battle, she couldn't help but take it very seriously. So if she had her way, she would absolutely nail this bastard before she left the city.

A daunting thought indeed, seeing as how she was literally running out of time before she had to be on a plane back home.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Roger says Seattle has a bunch of cool bands,” Paige said, staring into the screen. “Is that true?”

“Who’s Roger?” Rachel asked. She was sitting on the edge of her bed with several stacks of files and papers scattered out on the small table in the corner of the room. There was also a bag of Thai takeout waiting for her on the same table.

“He’s the boy who won the science fair last year. The one I told you sometimes comes to school smelling like garlic.”

“Oh, that Roger. And...as far as the bands, I know there *used* to be a lot of good music coming out of Seattle. Remember your dad’s favorite band? Pearl Jam?”

Paige’s eyes went wide for a moment and then almost thoughtful. Rachel cringed a bit, not aware she’d mentioned Paige’s father until it was out of her mouth. It wasn’t that they avoided talking about Peter, but it still felt strange to mention him in a random and passing sort of way.

“Yeah, I remember,” Paige said, recovering without much trouble. “They’re from Seattle?”

“Yeah, but that was a while again. Besides, even if there was still good music coming out of Seattle, I don’t think I’d be up for any concerts.”

“So what will you be doing?”

“I’m not sure yet. I may lend a hand with a case the cops have on their hands up here.”

“Is that safe?” Her tone was accusing, reminding Rachel that her daughter was growing older, more mature.

“Yes, it’s nothing intense. And besides, these treatments I’m doing are *very* chill and relaxed. Would you mind getting Grandma Tate on the call, too? I’d like for you all to hear about it rather than having to repeat it twice.”

“Yeah!”

For the next fifteen minutes, Rachel explained the process of the treatments. She also spent some of that time insisting that she really felt fine and that she was taking care of herself. She did glance to the stack of files pertaining to the deaths of Dr. Willis and Dr. Adler with a bit of guilt as she did so.

“Now,” she said, when she was done, “what about Jack? Has he been around today?”

“He dropped by this morning,” Grandma Tate said. “Just to check in. I invited him over for dinner, but I think he still feels weird about coming over when you aren’t here.”

“That’s silly. I’ll talk to him.”

They exchanged small talk for another five minutes, before Grandma Tate insisted that it was time to make dinner, and that Paige was going to help since they were having her favorite: baked ziti and garlic bread. Rachel ended the call and walked over to her Thai dinner and the large stack of files on the two deaths. She wondered what it said about her

personality that she was absolutely *stoked* to dive into both with equal measure.

She started by separating the police reports and the information about the doctors' work. She placed the stack of police reports on one side of the bed and the work-related material on the other. As she sorted out Dr. Willis's work, she pulled out the sheet that had the strange-looking coding and set it to the side. Then she began to go over everything. She studied the pages meticulously, looking for similarities and patterns. She also kept an eye out for any reference to the other doctor within the files—any instances where Dr. Willis had referred to Dr. Adler, or vice versa. But bit by bit, she found nothing of the sort. What she did start to notice, though, was that she would find the occasional report or bit of data that did look similar to something from the other doctor's pile. In this way, she was able to confirm that there were indeed certain parts of their work that were similar—particularly when it came to the use and study of stem cells.

Rachel scrutinized these areas but could find nothing that would link the two. However, in a footnote to one of the pages with graphs, readings, and so on, she saw a simple yet almost foreboding note. One of the graphs contained an asterisk and in the footnotes, the asterisk said: *Refer to Williams, Paul* for confirmation.

So she went through the files page by page until she came to a sheet with the name *William, Paul* specifically listed. Right away, Rachel knew she'd found something of note. Because on the same page with Paul Williams' name, she also saw that same strange stream of code she'd found in Dr.

Willis' research. She took it out at once and set it beside the page from Dr. Willis' files. The coding and numbers weren't exactly the same, but the format and the seemingly random placement of it in the midst of so many files certainly made it stand out.

She then continued searching Dr. Adler's notes for any further mentions of Paul Williams. It took another ten minutes of digging, but she found two other mentions. One came with another name, and as she read it and an identifying term to go along with it, her alarms started to go off.

Just as she made the connection, though, her phone rang. The name in the display read: JACK. She answered it at once, finding that she was thrilled to talk to him. "Hey there," she said. "Are you off for the day?"

"Eh, for a bit. Anderson has me helping and an interrogation later tonight. But for now, yeah...it's off for some fast food for dinner. But enough about me...how are you feeling? The text you sent me earlier wasn't much on details."

"I'm feeling great, actually. The treatments are so minimal that I feel almost guilty for being here all by myself. It's sort of like a vacation, honestly."

"Really?" he asked, and she could hear the suspicion in his voice.

"Well, I may have poked my nose into an ongoing police investigation."

Jack chuckled—a sound that never failed to bring a smile to Rachel's face. "Whew...I'm glad you came out and told me

right away. I was afraid you were going to try to keep it a secret.”

“Wait...you know?”

“I do. You can blame Anderson. When you put in the request to join the Willis case, he called to ask if I had any objections. As your partner, not as your fiancé. He made that *quite* clear.”

“Well, that’s...I don’t know what that is, but it feels sexist.”

“No, not Anderson. I think he just wants to make sure he’s not giving you too much of a leash. I think if you weren’t there *for treatments*, he may have been more confident about it. And no offense, but he does have reason to suspect such a thing. You know...with the treatments and all.”

“And *are* you okay with it?”

“Yeah...but only after I asked about the details. I mean, you’re feeling much better, and I couldn’t imagine you in a strange city just twiddling your thumbs between treatments. I get it. I know you all too well.”

“Thanks, Jack. That means more than you know.”

“Oh, I know. You owe me big when you get back home.”

“Noted.”

“So, how *is* the case going? Have you been able to help yet?”

“Not just yet, no...but I think I might be on to something,” she said as she looked back over to the sheet she’d just come

across.

“Well, I just wanted to check in. I’ll let you get back to your work-vacation.”

“Thanks. Oh, and hey...you know, you can hang out with Grandma Tate and Paige even when I’m not there.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just weird. But I’ll accept the next invitation. I promise.”

The exchanged *I love yous* and ended the call. Rachel instantly went back to the last page she’d found with Gary Williams listed on it. Only, on this page, there was another name listed with it. She studied the section for a moment, certain it had to mean something>

Williams, Gary (father)

Williams, Blake (son, deceased)

Under any other circumstances, it may not have seemed like a very big deal. But the fact that Gary’s name was linked to that strange coding sequence was too strange to ignore. With a stirring of excitement, she went back to Dr. Willis’ notes. She flipped through them until she came to the reams of test results and readings that resembled the ones where she’d found Gary Williams in Dr. Adler’s notes. She then scanned for names, and she found several. Most were the names of doctors and other researchers who had contributed to the work but near the end of the papers, there was the name again: Gary Williams.

As far as she was concerned, it was more than enough reason to look into Williams. His name was listed in both doctors' work over the past year or so *and* the inclusion of a deceased husband gave him one more solid tie—one more reason he might have a grievance against Willis and Adler.

She grabbed her cellphone and called up Detective Sullivan, pulling his number from the Post-It note he'd adhered to the inner cover of one of the folders. Sullivan answered on the third ring with a slightly jovial tone to his voice.

"Is this Agent Gift?" he asked.

"It is. How'd you know?"

"The area code in your number. Plus, it's been about three hours since you left. I figured that was enough time for you to dredge something up from those files."

"Well, I think I might have. I know it's a bit after five, but are you still good to head out to follow a lead?"

"Absolutely. Give me your address, and I'll come pick you up right away."

CHAPTER SIX

The rain had let up a bit, but it had left a murky and foggy atmosphere in the city. Sullivan had been able to pull up the address of Gary Williams and found that he lived close to the Wedgewood area of town. The fog only thickened as they entered into the sparsely wooded portion of the city. It was actually quite beautiful, an almost perfect match to some of the pictures Rachel had always seen of Seattle on television.

“This should be interesting, I think,” Sullivan said. “The guy doesn’t have a record to speak of—nothing I saw from the quick check I did before leaving the station. But for his name to be in that research, along with the name of a dead son...” He stopped there, as if the description spoke for itself.

“It *is* peculiar,” Rachel said as Sullivan pulled his car onto a secondary road off of the main highway. They drove deeper into the trees, the idea of a large city looming behind them becoming less and less prominent. And the deeper they drew into the forest, the more fitting she thought it seemed...a man who’d lost his son, somehow connected to two recently murdered doctors. Gary Williams sure did check a lot of boxes, but she tried her best not to let the gloomy environment play too much into her mindset.

Three minutes later, Detective Sullivan turned into a thin, gravel driveway. A modern-styled cabin sat on a plot of land that looked perfectly chiseled out of the forest; it was hugged

by trees—mostly pines and spruces—to all sides. An SUV was parked at the end of the driveway, old and dusty.

Dusk was falling, but in the cover of the trees and with the overcast sky still spitting the smallest bit of rain, it looked much closer to night. Sullivan parked the car, and there was an awkward moment where they both hesitated while stepping out into the driveway. Neither of them was sure who would take the lead: she knew Sullivan was hesitating because, more often than not, a federal presence overruled cops and detectives. However, as far as Rachel was concerned, his was Sullivan's case. And it was also his territory.

She smiled at him and gestured him forward toward the cabin. "You go ahead. This is your show."

He nodded politely and led the way to Gary Williams' porch. It was a partial wrap-around and, like the cabin itself, looked neat and well-maintained. A single rocking chair sat to the left of the front door. A decorative barrel had been turned upside down to hold an ashtray, the bottom of which was littered with the remnants of a cigar butt and old ash.

Sullivan knocked on the door, and they waited together in an awkward silence. Within a few seconds, they heard shuffling footsteps approaching the door. The sound of a disengaging lock broke the quiet, and then the door was opened. A man of about fifty started out at them, giving them a scrutinizing gaze.

"Yeah, can I help you?"

Sullivan continued to take the lead. Rachel admired the way he remained casual and almost conversational. "Hey

there, sir. Are you Mr. Gary Williams?”

“I am. And who are you, exactly?”

“I’m Detective Paul Sullivan with the Seattle PD. This lady beside me is Special Agent Rachel Gift, with the FBI. I was hoping we could have a word with you.”

Williams looked legitimately confused, his eyes narrowing and blinking wildly as he looked back and forth between Sullivan and Rachel. “Why? Is there something wrong? What’s happened? And...and can I see some ID, please?”

“Of course,” Sullivan said. He not only took out his ID, but handed it over for Williams to have a closer look. Rachel kept hers in her hand as he surveyed it.

“And for right now,” Rachel said. “There’s nothing wrong. We just need to speak with you.”

“That’s right,” Sullivan added. “We’re working a case that led us to some medical records where your name showed up specifically.”

Rachel saw the quick shift in Williams’ face at the mention of *medical records*. He took a single step back, and Rachel wondered if he was about to close the door in their faces. “These records...was my son’s name also included in them?”

“Yes, it was.”

“So you’ve been speaking with Dr. Adler?”

“Well, that’s just the thing,” Rachel said. “We haven’t exactly been speaking with her because she’s been killed. Her

and another doctor we think you may be linked to...a Dr. Emma Willis.”

“Adler has been killed?” he asked. His delivery was monotone, almost as if he honestly didn’t care. It felt like he was going through the motion, simple showing them what he thought they expected.

“She has,” Rachel said. “And if you’d let us come inside, we’d like to just ask you some basic questions about why your name was listed in her records...in a section of records there weren’t any other names listed. And also why she would refer to you and your son in th—”

“My son is dead,” Williams said.

“We know,” Rachel said.

“Well, there you go. That’s all you need to know.”

“May I be blunt?” Sullivan said.

Williams said nothing. He just stood in the doorway, still looking back and forth between them as if he expected one of them to blindside him with a punch.

“We are fully aware of the specialties Willis and Adler were involved in,” Sullivan said. “We have reams of papers on file that give a glimpse into their research. And right now, we have *your* name—as well as your son’s—in their reports and research. We even have a note referring to your case. Now... given that your son has indeed regrettably passed away and that your name is in the—”

Rachels saw what was going to happen a split second before it actually did. She saw something give way in Gary

Williams' eyes; his face went blank and rigid at the same time. He let out an odd, muted growl and delivered a right-handed punch. He was slow, which not only meant Sullivan was able to sidestep it without much trouble, but that Rachel was able to catch his right arm, pull him out of the doorway, and deftly press him against the side of the house.

Sullivan was there right away to lend an assist. And as Sullivan cuffed him, William began to bellow: "How dare you mention my son! You don't know what we went through...the time spent...those endless, sleepless nights! *How dare you!*"

"You mentioned your son, Mr. Williams," Rachel said. "And now that you've attempted to attack Detective Sullivan, you've made it much easier for us to legally search your house."

"For what?"

Sullivan gave Williams a gentle push through the still-opened door. "Two doctors are dead, and we have no suspects. At least one of them mentioned you in their reports. We came to only ask you questions about your involvement with them, but you got violent, which makes things look a little strange."

"So, you...you think *I* killed them?"

"I said no such thing."

As Sullivan interacted with Williams, Rachel took a look around the cabin. It was set up in an open floor plan, the only exception being the small office area to the right, which was blocked off by a half-wall. It was incredibly spacious, with a wide staircase leading to the second floor.

“Are you ready to answer our questions now?” Sullivan asked.

“There are no questions to ask,” Williams spat. “Those doctors were so sure they could fix Blake...could help him get his life back. And their damnable science *killed him*. That’s the only answer worth having as far as I’m concerned.”

Rachel listened in to the conversation as Sullivan allowed Williams to sit down, still handcuffed, in a plush recliner against the far wall. It faced a small fireplace and a mounted TV. Her attention was on the small office space in the back corner. It was quite tidy, with very little clutter in the wide, oak desk.

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Williams?” she asked as she stepped into the space.

“Really? That’s what you want to know. *That’s* one of your questions?”

Rachel wasn’t taking the bait, avoiding a much larger argument. She exchanged a quick look with Sullivan, and he nodded at her to go ahead and have a look around while he stayed by Williams’s side. As she began to search through the office area, she continued to listen into the conversation; only, it wasn’t much of a conversation. Sullivan would ask questions while Williams remained focused on the topic of how those doctors had killed his son.

She found that Williams had apparently been working or, at the very least, checking his email when they’d come to visit. She looked at his laptop screen and put together that he was a freelance editor of some kind—from foreign websites being

translated into English. However, there was also an email buried in his inbox from a sender labeled *HHS Rep*. Knowing that HHS referred to as the Health and Human Services, she clicked on the email. She knew that it was technically now allowed, seeing as how they didn't have a warrant, but she also knew that the fact he'd taken a swing at Sullivan would allow them to get away with a few infringements.

The email was a reply to something Williams had already sent. It was a brief and to the point, stating simply: *Your concern has been noted and passed along to the proper channels*. She scrolled down to read the original message sent by Williams. It had been sent three weeks ago and was a very long complaint about how the use of stem cells in experimental medicine was more dangerous than the public knew and that there should be more available information about the practice made easily accessible. He'd also attached several documents, which all appeared to be receipts and records from multiple hospital stays.

As she closed out of it, she continued to listen to Sullivan try to get answers out of Williams, but he was being stubborn. There wasn't much else around the office that would give any insight into what else Williams might be into. She did, however, see a small pad of paper placed behind the laptop. She looked it over and, at first, saw nothing more than a few work-related notes. Apparently, he'd been working on a Taiwanese site recently. However, a few pages closer to the back of the pad, she saw a list...a list of names.

Jane Adler was written at the top. There were four other names, the last of which was *Emma Willis*. She had never seen

or heard of the other two and, in that moment, wasn't too concerned about it—though she knew they'd have to circle back around to it soon enough.

“Mr. Williams, do you want to tell me about this list?” Rachel asked, bringing the notepad with her to the armchair. She handed it to Sullivan to let him have a look while she leveled her gaze at Williams.

“The doctors?” he asked. “Those are doctors that are supposed to be so-called pioneers in the field of anti-aging and other uses for stem cells.”

“You understand how this looks, given why we're here, right?” she said.

But he said nothing. Williams shook his head and looked down to his handcuffs.

“Mr. Williams,” Sullivan said. “You took a swing at a detective and we spent a grand total of five minutes in your house and already found other things that, quite frankly, don't look good for you. I suggest you start talking *now*, or we can do it in an interrogation room down at the station.”

He looked to them with an expression Rachel was pretty sure was supposed to look defiant, but there was too much sadness in his eyes to pull it off.

“Well, what are we waiting for then?” he said, still trying to look stubborn and determined. “Let's get to the station.”

“Still don’t want to talk to us, Mr. Williams?” Sullivan asked as he drove them back to the station.

“No.”

“Would you like to tell us about the email you sent to the Department of Health and Human Services? It was quite professional, but very angry.”

His face tightened, and she was certain she would get some sort of comment out of him, but he bit his tongue. He remained quiet as they finished the ride to the station. Night had fallen over the city, the streets glistening in the day’s rainfall. Sullivan parked behind the station and led Rachel through a back door while escorting the still-cuffed Gary Williams along.

The back door opened up onto a hallway that ran along the back of the building. Sullivan took an immediate tight upon coming through the door. He walked about halfway down the hall and came to a stop at the first of three doors. It opened up onto a generic-looking interrogation room: basic white, tiled floors, a two-way mirror on the left, and a glaring white light overhead. The table sitting against the back wall with just enough room between it and the wall for a single chair looked very old, showing the wear and tear of countless conversations that had come before.

“Okay, we’re here,” Sullivan said. “And now things get a bit more complicated for you...depending on whether or not you cooperate.”

“I’ve already told you! All you need to know is—”

“Is that your son is dead,” Rachel interrupted. “Yes, we know. We know because we saw it in the reports we were looking through. And if that’s the only reasoning you have for having sent that barbed email to the Department of Health and Human Services *and* a list of doctors that includes two who have been recently murdered, things are going to get very bad for you. So I suggest you talk. Our questions are very simple if you’d take the time to listen.”

“She’s right,” Sullivan said. “I don’t know if you understand just how much potential trouble you could be in if you continue to be difficult. Two doctors are dead. One of them had you and your son’s name in their records. And now we have a list taken from your home with the names of two dead women...women who worked in a field you’re blaming for your son’s death.”

Both Rachel and Sullivan fell quiet, letting the weight of the situation sink in. Williams looked slightly rocked, his eyes and mouth unable to decide on a singular emotion.

“I didn’t kill those women,” he said.

“In the email I read in your house,” Rachel said, “you referred to any research having to do with stem cells as, and I quote, ‘a deplorable affront to God where doctors and scientists are more concerned with breaking new ground and raising donations and finds rather than saving actual human lives.’ Do you still believe that?”

“Yes,” he said in a near whisper. Tears had started to form and pool up on his eyes.

Rachel stepped closer to the table and made sure to lower her voice in a respectful tone. “What happened with your son?”

Williams blinked the tears loose and wiped them away. “He had...he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma at the age of seven. It’s a rare condition where cancer pops up in plasma cells and multiplies. By the time we had any real answers, his kidneys were almost entirely shot. We were referred to two specialists, one of whom was right here in town...Dr. Adler. She didn’t waste any time...”

He stopped for a moment, sneering at the memory as he wiped more tears away. “She didn’t waste any time pushing us toward stem-cell treatments. To her credit, I do believe that she firmly believed it would work, and all of the research and studies she presented were almost too good to be true. So that’s what we did. Blake underwent stem-cell treatment. About a month later, all of his tests came back looking very promising. He was more active and happier than I’d seen him in months. Two more weeks, the news was even better. And then there was a night...about nine weeks after the treatments, when he woke up screaming. He said he was in tremendous pain, horrible pain. So I called for an ambulance, and we went to the hospital. Three days later, his kidneys were shot. Dr. Adler and some of her assistants came in and out of the room as his immune system also started to fail.

“He was dead four days later after arriving at the hospital. I never got straight answers from Adler about why it happened. All I got was a lot of *I don’t know*, and *this just doesn’t make sense*. But she sure as hell asked if she could take

blood samples to try to figure it out. She claimed it could help them make improvements...could prevent this from happening to anyone else.”

“And did you allow it?” Rachel asked.

“Hell no. That was thirteen months ago, and I’ve been fighting against the use of stem-cells ever since. Petitions, writing letters to the government like the one you found. That list was the names of doctors I’d found online...doctors in the state of Washington who specialize in stem-cells and stem-cell research.”

“Have you had any contact with Dr. Adler since your son’s passing?” Sullivan asked.

With an almost embarrassed look on his face, Williams said, “I called her offices several times at the start...when things were bad. My wife...she...she OD’ed after Blake died. I refuse to think she killed herself, but...but that’s how it seems. And when I lost her, I...I snapped. Yeah, I made some calls I shouldn’t have. I rode by the offices and on one occasion had an altercation with security guards. But, no...I never actually saw or spoke to Dr. Adler.”

The flow and emotion of the entire story had Rachel thinking there was no way this man was capable of murder. He was simply hurting and emotionally drained. He’d been living alone in that cabin for a year, nursing the loss of a son and wife. And she was starting to think that maybe he’d *wanted* them to arrest him and bring him in. She’d seen it before; sometimes suspects wanted that attention in the hopes that their beliefs or cause would get the same level of spotlight.

So no...she didn't think Gary Williams killed Emma Willis and Jane Adler. And she also knew there was a very easy way to find out.

“Mr. Williams, can you tell us where you were and what you were doing two nights ago—preferably between ten and eleven-thirty?”

He looked a bit puzzled by the sudden change in direction the conversation had taken. He took a moment to think, letting out a deep sigh as he did so. “I was wrapping up an edit for an e-commerce website out of Taipei.”

“Do you have proof of this?”

“Yeah, actually.” Rachel could hear the relief in his voice, betraying the unbothered exterior he'd tried to show them earlier. “I was texting and making Zoom calls up until about midnight...the time difference and all. And I have to keep logs of all of that to turn in to my clients. So...yes, I can prove where I was two nights ago.”

Rachel saw the little sting of disappointment in Sullivan's face at this bit of information. But she thought he'd likely been expecting this sort of news, too. Still, Sullivan wasn't ready to let up on it just yet.

“We'll need to see those logs,” he said. “Until then, you'll have to stay here.”

“That's fine. Just...tell me what I need to do.”

And with the interrogation having started and ended much faster than anyone had expected, Rachel already found herself looking ahead to the next step, to the next potential lead. She

knew where she wanted to go from here but had to remind herself that she wasn't specifically the one in charge—even though Sullivan seemed perfectly fine to follow her lead.

She was also aware that this case was not her sole reason for being in Seattle; she had to focus on her treatments and her health. But as it was only 7:10 in the evening on the West Coast, she figured she may as well get another few hours in before calling it a night. Because while it may not technically be her case, there were still two dead women without their killer having been brought to justice.

And as long as she was in town, she refused to let that slide. The way this case was beginning to look, practically anyone involved in this particular field could be in danger. And while that did help to narrow the killer's pool significantly, it also made him a bit more dangerous.

CHAPTER SEVEN

With a secondary team searching through Gary Williams' home and securing the logs for his Zoom calls and texts, Rachel and Sullivan were freed up to pursue other avenues. It just so happened that Sullivan was in agreement with Rachel's plans for their next course of action: visiting the family of Dr. Emma Willis.

Rachel was at first confused when Sullivan began to drive them away from the heart of the city. Dr. Willis had, after all, been killed in her apartment, which was right in the center of the most active parts of the city.

"Yeah, but the Dr. Willis and her husband had a second home out in the forests," Sullivan told her as he once again pointed the car toward the outer rural section of the city. "From what I gather, the apartment was the secondary residence; they'd stay there on weekends sometimes, and every now and then they rented it out. But it was primarily somewhere for Dr. Ellis to stay when she needed time alone, closet to her main office, to work."

"So you've already spoken to her family?"

"I have. She has no brothers or sisters, and her father died a few years ago. So it's just her husband, her daughter, and her mother. There were some friends of the family dropping in when I spoke to him. But he was adamant that I reach out to him whenever I had questions."

Rachel watched the towering trees roll by, made eerie and ominous by the night. However, when Sullivan turned off of the primary road and onto a thinner, winding road, streetlights were placed roughly every fifty yards or so, illuminating the road and the driveways to what looked to be a very well-to-do community. Sullivan slowed, checking each of the numbered addresses on the brick pillars that bordered each driveway. He finally came to the one he was looking for and turned in. A beautiful two-story home in the center of an equally gorgeous yard, the house bordered with wide flowerbeds. The right side of the house was partially illuminated by a small spotlight installed in the yard, used to shine on a small garden that poured out of the flowerbed.

“Do you know what Mr. Willis does?” Rachel asked.

“He’s a professor at the University of Washington. English Lit, I think. He’s also on one of their boards. So between that and the money Dr. Willis was bringing in, they’re quite well off. It only shows in the house and apartment, though. From what I can tell, they were both really down-to-earth people.”

Sullivan parked his car behind a Tesla at the top of the driveway. There was another car parked beside it, but that was all. Apparently, Mr. Willis had decided the time for visitors and fellow mourners was over. They got out of the car and walked up the concrete sidewalk, which was bordered by the soft, small illumination of a few solar lights positioned at the sides.

“You’ve already spoken to him and made that connection,” Rachel said. “I think you should take the lead here.”

“Sure thing. But don’t hesitate to speak up. I get the sense that even I he has to start from the beginning and recite everything he’s already told me, Mr. Willis will be happy to do so.”

They came up to the front door, and Sullivan knocked. Rachel took the moment to look around the elegant porch. There was a porch swing that looked more like an Adirondack chair than a swing, and ferns ganging from the porch’s support beams. The door was answered almost right away, and they were greeted by a tall man that looked to be fifty or so—maybe younger, though; Rachel had no doubt that some of the sorrow in his eyes (as well as the dark bags beneath them) was contributing to his overall look. He was very handsome, even in his weary and worn-down state. Even the shaggy five o’clock shadow, which couldn’t decide if it wanted to be grey or brown, looked good on him.

“Hey again. Mr. Willis,” Sullivan said. “So sorry o to bother you again. But I was hoping you’d have some time to talk.”

“Good to see you again, Dr. Sullivan,” Willis said, offering his hand. “And drop the ‘mister’ crap, please.”

“Sorry. Declan, I’ve bought a visitor with me this time. Let me introduce you to Special Agent Rachel Gift. She’s in town on personal business but has offered to lend her experienced hand in trying to help us find our killer.”

“The FBI?” Declan asked, surprised.

“Yeah. I’ll explain it a bit more in a second. Can we come in?”

“Yeah, sure, come on in. It’s just me and Emma’s mom right now. Well, and Belle, too.”

“Belle?” Rachel asked.

“My daughter. But we sent her upstairs because we, uh... we just wrapped things up with the funeral director and it’s...” He shook his head to indicate that he wasn’t up to talking about it.

“I know how hard this has to be on you, so we’ll make it as quick as we can,” Rachel said. She could tell that he’d be fine to talk to; already, she could tell that he was the sort that was going to hold it all in as long as he could. And she also knew that meant he’d be as stoic and solid as possible until the moment the funeral was over. When he came back home and realized she was truly gone for good, he’d break. And he’d spent about a week trying to pull himself out of despair. She’d seen it far too many times to count throughout her career.

“You’re fine,” he said as he led them into his den. “You can take as much time as you need. I don’t expect to get much sleep tonight, anyway.”

“Well, for starters,” Rachel said, “I’d like to hear, in your words, what your wife was like...here at home, at work, and maybe even her demeanor over the past few weeks.”

Declan smiled while he plopped himself down into an elegant-looking armchair. The den almost looked like a library, with bookshelves covering the entire back wall, and a cozy reading corner by a small fireplace on the opposite side of the room. There was also a couch in the room, placed on an ornamental rug in the center. Rachel and Sullivan sat on it as

Declan Willis began to tell them about his recently deceased wife.

“Emma was obsessed with the idea of working in the anti-aging field ever since I first met her as a freshman in college. And by the time we were both in our senior year, she had hospitals openly competing to have her work with them. Ultimately, she chose the Cleveland Clinic but then pretty quickly moved to Seattle when she found out there were labs actively working on anti-aging techniques. When she called to inquire, they pretty much offered her a job over the phone. And that’s how we ended up in Seattle.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Coming up on about fifteen years.”

“And Emma had been working in that same field ever since then?”

“Yes. Well, at the start, it was sort of part-time. She would do routine hospital work but then also contribute to the work being done in the labs for anti-aging. It wasn’t until the last seven or eight years that the advancements in the field really allowed her to focus on it full-time.”

“I assume she collaborated with lots of different doctors and scientists, right?”

“Oh, for sure. We had Christmas parties right here in this house for two years straight, comprised of only people she had worked with in that year. And this place was packed out.”

“Did she ever have a falling out with anyone she worked with?”

“No. Nothing bad. I mean, she’d tell me about disagreements she had with others, but it was always very professional...heated debates about things, you know?”

“And I wonder...can you recall her ever being the target of any protests? Even if it was just her office and not her directly.”

“There was one moment several years ago when there were protestors outside of the hospital. They were throwing trash at the cars of some of the doctors, not even knowing which doctors they were supposed to be angry at. They were pissed about the stem-cell stuff, of course. But everyone at Emma’s work always did a good job of sort of keeping the inner workings of their office discreet. I don’t think that building itself ever actually saw any protests.”

Out of nowhere, a small sob escaped his mouth and he looked away, as if embarrassed. Rachel waited for him to collect himself before pressing on, though as it turned out, she didn’t need to. As soon as he took a single breath following the sob, he started again.

“And I know where you’re headed with this,” he said. “The cops asked during the initial visit, and Detective Sullivan asked, too: did she have any enemies, anyone who might want her dead. And I’ve thought *so much* about that, but I just can’t come up with anything.”

“Was it uncommon for her to be in that apartment, working at such late hours?” Rachel asked.

“God, no. In fact, over the past year or so, it’s been a pretty regular thing. There are some weeks where Belle actually

stays there, too. And I just thank God this wasn't one of those nights."

Rachel thought back to one of the most basic ideas she'd formed on the case. The killer had known Dr. Willis was going to be in the apartment rather than at home. That, or they'd taken her out, following her and studying her schedule. These details alone led her to believe that the killer was likely not going to be someone who knew the victims intimately. The need to follow and study indicated a lack of basic knowledge concerning the lives of the victims.

"You said you sent your daughter upstairs to finish up discussions on the funeral, correct?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, that's right."

"How is she doing?"

"Quiet. Se's trying to eb strong...even making the same lame jokes she sometimes makes. But I know what she's doing...she's going to do the same thing I'm going to do. She's going to keep her shit together until the funeral, and then she's going to b...br..."

Declan uttered a curse and turned away, wiping at freshly fallen tears.

"Would you allow me to speak with her?" Rachel asked.

Declan's tear-streaked eyes shows surprise at the question, but he nodded. "That's fine...but why?"

"Well, you said yourself that she sometimes stayed with her mother when she was at the apartment. It's also just always

wise to get as many perspectives as possible. How old is Belle?”

“Thirteen.” He got up from the chair as if glad to have an excuse to be moving again. “I’m sure you’ll understand,” he said, “that I’d really rather you not speak with her in private. I just don’t know how she’d react.”

“That’s perfectly fine.”

“Hold on a second.” He walked out of the den and into the hall, where he stopped at the foot of a set of finely polished wooden stairs. He called up, and his voice boomed in a bit of an echo that thundered through the house.

“Belle! Sweetie, I need you to come down here for a second, please.”

There was a faint and muffle reply of “One second!” There was no annoyance or irritation to it. If anything, both father and daughter just sounded exhausted.

Declan gestures for Rachel and Sullivan to follow him, so they did. He led them into a large, slightly cluttered kitchen. There were casserole dishes empty, soda cans, and wine glasses all over the counter.

“Delores—that’s Emma’s mom—has been helping quite a bit but we’ve also just has so many people coming to help and give their condolences. When she heard me say I thought it was the detective at the door again, she escaped back to the sunroom. She hates to hear any active discussions about the case. It makes her very anxious and uneasy.”

As Rachel took a seat in a stool at the bar, she felt a sudden wave of exhaustion. This didn't alarm her because it had, after all, been a very long day. She'd woke up at 4:35 in the morning in order to catch her flight to Seattle. Then, after the flight and her appointment with the specialists, she'd only given herself a few hours of reprieve before jumping into this case. This is what she told herself, anyway; she was trying very hard not to wonder if it might have something to do with the treatments.

While Declan poured himself a cup of coffee, Rachel heard the sound of soft footsteps coming down the stairs. Seconds later, a teenage girl appeared in the entryway to the kitchen. She was the spitting image of her father, right down to the redness of the eyes from recent bouts of weeping. And if she was indeed like her father, Rachel assumed she'd done it in secret. Her brown hair was pulled up in a tight ponytail and her posture was rather slumped, her hands stuffed into the pouch pocket of the Seahawks pullover she was wearing.

"Belle," Declan said, "do you remember Detective Sullivan?"

"Yeah." And then, with a tired look of acknowledgement, she provided a small: "Hey again."

"Well, this time," Declan said, "he's brought along Agent Gift. She's an FBI agent, and she wanted to ask you some questions about your mom."

"Me?"

Declan looked to Rachel, giving her a nod to take the floor. "Would that be okay?" Rachel asked.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Well, first of all, your dad says that you’d sometimes hang out with your mom when she stayed in her apartment near the center of town. I’d just like to know if you ever saw or heard anything out of the ordinary while you were there?”

Belle thought about for a moment. She took the time to go to the fridge and take out a can of ginger ale. As she popped the top, she said, “Not really. The only thing weird I ever heard was some of that really deep, really nerdy talk she had with other doctors over her Zoom calls. But there was never anything bad. No arguments or anything like that. She always seemed really happy to be on those calls.”

“How about when it was just the two of you? Did she ever mention how something was stressing her out, or that she had to work hard to make sure she pleased certain people?” Rachel quickly looked to Declan as she asked this question, letting him know she’d like him to consider the question as well.

“I really don’t remember anything like that. As far as I know, everyone that worked with mom liked her. If you’re trying to find who killed her, I don’t think it was anyone she worked with.”

Rachel saw a quick look of shock cross Declan’s face at the bluntness of her comment. *If you’re trying to find who killed her...*

“So you never saw her stressed out over work at all?”

“Oh...well, sometimes. I mean, she was always worried about getting reports and papers to people all over the world,

and she always wanted to make sure it was on time.”

“If I can interject,” Declan said, “Emma was notorious for setting unrealistic deadlines for herself. But she did always hit them. And it did sometimes wear her down.”

“Yeah,” Belle agreed. “She would look tired and sort of...I don’t know, sort of just *yuck* every now and then. But even if she was stressed out, I never heard her complain about her work.”

“Same here,” Declan said.

It was all enough for Rachel to feel like Declan and Belle Willis wouldn’t be able to offer anything of use. Still, there was one thing that nagged at Rachel, a detail that she wasn’t sure would result in any answers, but one that made her feel uneasy: with another residence that was usually *only* occupied by Dr. Willis. It simply left too many unmarked moments they’d never have access to, and no answers available.

“Detective Sullivan, is there anything you’d like to add?” Rachel asked.

He shook his head, offering Belle a sad little smile. “No, I think we’re good here. Declan...Belle...thanks again for taking the time to speak with us.”

Declan hugged Belle to him and kissed her on top of her head. “Of course. Anything we can do to help...you call any time of the day or night.”

“Thanks,” Sullivan said. “We can see ourselves out. You two take care.”

Rachel followed Sullivan out of the kitchen and down the hallway to the front door. As Sullivan opened the door for her and she stepped out into the damp, chilly night, she felt that exhaustion clinging to her. She also thought of Paige, Jack, and Grandma Tate...of the promises she'd made to them. Whether she liked it or not, she was going to have to call it a night. She'd go to her appointment tomorrow morning and pick up where she'd left off.

She knew this was what needed to be done, but it was easier to plan in her head than to actually follow through with it. She'd just seen a father and daughter trying to remain as strong as possible after losing a wife and mother. While Belle Willis was four years older than Paige, it was still far too easy to imagine Paige living her life without a mother.

So, for now, her health would come first. She nailed it down in her mind as she and Sullivan pulled away from the Willis residence and back out into the thick, towering trees. She peered out into the dark shapes with skeptical eyes, as if the killer was out there, lurking in the shadows and mocking her.

Yes, her health had to come first. But in that moment, she also decided that as long as Anderson would approve it, she was going to stay in Seattle until this killer was found.

CHAPTER EIGHT

He wasn't an idiot. He knew that the police presence would be ramped up now that he'd killed two of them. More than that, he figured it would only be a matter of time before all of the doctors and scientists in the state who were prominent in the field of stem cells and anti-aging would be given some sort of security detail. So he knew he needed to act fast if he wanted to take out the rest of them.

Ah, but...he wasn't an idiot. He had no delusions that he would be able to take out every single one of them. He'd done his research. There were seven remaining in Seattle. Actually, as of next Wednesday, there would be eight; a Japanese researcher was coming over from Tokyo. He'd read about it in a news article.

The way he'd changed up the algorithms on the news app on his phone was just one of the ways he'd gone deep in trying to learn more about these demonic people—these people who thought they were geniuses and pioneers. He now got countless scientific articles about progress made in the field of anti-aging. He figured if he was going to lead the fight against such a travesty, he should at least be well informed.

He'd spent nearly two years getting ready for the work he was currently carrying out. He'd done more reading than he could keep up with and had undergone meticulous research to learn about the thought-leaders in the field. Now that there was more money, funding, and interest in the area, it seemed that

there were new so-called experts popping up every single day. But that was fine with him. He would start in Seattle. And when all of those monsters were gone, he'd venture elsewhere. There was apparently a doctor somewhere near Olympia who had been starting collaborations with the labs in Seattle. He'd be the next victim.

He stared through his windshield, looking out across the thin strip of lawn that separated the delivery route to the LaRange Labs building and a small employee lot. He knew that most employees parked in the back because the labs were closer to the back of the building. It was also a better way to avoid the occasional small group of protestors or journalist. As far as he knew, LaRange Labs didn't get that problem very often, but they put the safety of their employees and scientists above all else.

It was almost ironic, then, that he could now see the back door opening up. About eight yards separated his car and the back door, but he could see the shape of the overweight security guard as a woman passed by him. They exchanged some pleasant chatter, and then the woman stepped out into the night.

The woman was Molly Stevens. She was thirty-seven years old, recently divorced, and had worked as a neuroscientist for the past five years after getting her second doctorate at the age of thirty. LaRange Labs wasn't her home base, though; she was staying in Seattle for six months to assist with experiments being handled at LaRange Labs and in cooperation with a few other scientists throughout the city. She

was also an adjunct professor for two different colleges in California.

He knew all of this because he had done his research. He had read up on Molly Stewart and had done a deep dive into her all of her social media accounts. He also knew where she was staying in the city and, for the most part, what time she got into work and when she left. She typically worked fourteen hours most weekdays, sometimes only clocking in for half a day on Fridays. He knew she drove a black Honda Accord, which she was currently getting into. He waited patiently as she started the engine, letting her go a good distance ahead of him. It wasn't like he was going to lose her. He'd followed her at least a dozen times and knew the route from the labs to the little townhouse she was staying in while she was in Seattle. He watched the bright red glow of her taillights trail around the building. He then took two deep, calming breaths and, smiling thinly, pulled away from his space beside a stack of old crates and metal bins. He followed the secondary road around the back of the building, skirted along the primary parking lot, and came to the highway two minutes later. As expected—and as had been the case the numerous other times he'd attempted this little dance—he came to the intersection two blocks over from the labs just as Molly passed through a green light to the right.

He turned right and followed her toward the highway that would lead into the heart of the city. But, as he expected, she turned off two miles later, taking a left into a little network of townhomes and apartment complexes. It was a cute

neighborhood, the streets strategically illuminated by streetlights at certain intervals.

It excited him to know what he had in mind but to also know that Molly Stevens had no idea he was following her... or that he'd already done it at least twelve times. But even more importantly, she had no idea that she only had a day or two left to live...and that *he* was the one who held that power over her.

And she'd never even met him.

There was just a single car between when Molly turned left into the parking lot of her townhouse. Her townhouse was in a small cluster with four others; the lot had a streetlight on both sides, and that was it. He coasted a bit as he watched her park and get out. And with that same thin smile on his face, he even waved to her. Molly didn't see him, of course, but he didn't care.

He chuckled to himself as he drove further into the night. He'd already taken two, and Molly would be the third. And even if the police did get in his way at any point, he would not stop until he'd done as much damage as he could.

CHAPTER NINE

Rachel's alarm went off at 6:30, and she instantly began to think of home. She wanted to get back to her family, hopefully with amazing news about her treatments. But she was heavily invested in this case now, and thoughts of home were quickly obliterated. She began to wonder as she rolled out of bed and cut the alarm off, is Anderson would allow her a few more days if it came down to that.

But what sort of message did that send to Paige? She'd sworn to her daughter that she'd be back as soon as her treatments were over. She couldn't allow work to come first even when she wasn't at home, all the way on the other side of the country.

In other words, she only had two days left to solve this case. *Less* than two full days, actually. And this was a thought that haunted her as she got her day started. She'd taken a shower before going to bed last night, but she took another quick one just to help herself wake up a bit faster. She then grabbed a blueberry bagel and fresh fruit from the hotel's complimentary breakfast and headed back to the room. Today's appointment at the clinic was scheduled for 9:00, which meant she still had nearly two hours at her disposal.

Using her laptop, she instantly started looking online for more information of Dr. Jane Adler. Like Dr. She knew that basics of Adler's murder in the same way she'd known the

basics of Dr. Emma Willis's murder. And the few articles she read over didn't supply her with anything new.

Adler had been killed in her lab by an unseen assailant. There had been a brief chase, and so on. But even when she tried to do a deep dive into Dr. Adler's history, there was nothing hugely controversial. In fact, there was very little to find at all.

She was reading through another article—the sixth she'd tried—when her cellphone rang. She half expected it to be Jack, even though they'd agreed to not be the syrupy-sweet, engaged couple who called each other every chance they got. She'd phoned him the night before and they'd spoken for about fifteen minutes before both agreeing it should be enough before she called to say goodnight to Paige the following day.

It wasn't Jack, though. The number that appeared on her call display was a local number. She answered it, fairly certain Sullivan would be on the other end...only she didn't recall ever giving him her number.

"This is Agent Gift," she answered.

"Good morning, Agent Gift. It's Detective Sullivan. I didn't call too early, did I?"

"Not at all. I'm glad to hear from you, actually."

"Good. I know you said you had another appointment today...this morning, right?"

"That's right. I should be free sometime around ten or so."

"Perfect. How do you feel about meeting me over at Dr. Alder's labs? They're located near St. John Memorial."

“That sounds perfect. I think that’s the next logical step. I wonder, though...could you send me digital copies of the files on her murder?”

“Have you not checked your email this morning?”

“Can’t say that I have,” she replied as she instantly pulled up her email account. There were two emails waiting for her; one was regarding paperwork on a case from a year ago back home and the other, more recent email, was from Sullivan, Paul. The subject line was Adler/Willis files. He’d apparently send PDF copies of everything around midnight.

As she saw all of this, Sullivan said, “I sent them to you last night. I figured you were the sort that needed to have them in your possession.”

“Tell me, Detective Sullivan...do I also seem like the sort to step on toes when I’m in someone else’s territory?”

He chuckled a bit, a deep and joyous sound. “Honestly, yeah, you do. But you’re not doing it to me. I’m glad to have you.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’ll see you at the labs around ten.”

They ended the call, and Rachel instantly opened up the files Sullivan had sent her. Freshly showered and sitting near a window with a rather pleasant view of a slightly overcast Seattle morning, she stretched out on the bed and started reading the case files. It was, in an odd and very specific way, incredibly relaxing to her. And as she waited for the appointment at the clinic to roll around, she went digging

through the files, looking for even the most remote of breadcrumbs that might lead her and Sullivan to solid lead.

The morning's visit to the clinic was even more relaxed than the first one, but the relentless unanswered questions of the case kept her thrumming with tension. The only difference in this particular meeting was a very brief meeting with Dr. Pace following the injection. They met in a small office near the front of the building where she was offered coffee, which she took, and a donut, which she did not take.

“Okay, so it's all spelled out in the paperwork we went over yesterday,” Pace said with a bright and pretty smile. “Day two of the injections...it's not at all uncommon to get a headache or two. But unless you're running a marathon or doing some sort of strenuous labor, they shouldn't be too bad. Feel free to treat it with Ibuprofen, and make sure to drink plenty of water. But other than that, you're free to go. And we'll see you here tomorrow at the same time.”

Rachel left the clinic in something of a hurry, anxious to get to Dr. Adler's labs. She did stop by the first convenience store she saw to grab a few bottles of water, wanting to make sure she followed doctor's orders. She started working on one during her drive toward St. John Memorial Hospital. The drive itself took just fifteen minutes, thanks to the perfect time of morning—between morning rush hour and the brief buzz most cities got during the rush of lunch breaks.

The labs Dr. Adler had worked in were located just one block over from the primary entrance to the hospital. The block was populated with several identical-looking buildings, all brick and glass, one-story structures. The building containing the laboratories Adler had been working with was identified by a simple pillared sign by the driveway that read St. John Labs and Research.

She parked and got out, taking one last swig of water from the first bottle. She walked in through the front door and was greeted by a bored-looking receptionist—a grey-haired man of about sixty or so.

“I’m looking for a detective who should be on the premises,” she said. “Do you know where he might be?”

“That would be Labs B and C,” the older gentleman said. “Or what we’ve always just called the Adler Labs. Head down the hall, take your first right and then a left at the double doors. You can’t miss them.”

She followed the instructions, making her way through the primary hallway that honestly looked like a basic hospital hallway. But when they pushed through the double doors, all of that changed. She found herself in a small alcove that fed into a much wider hallway. There were windows on both sides, looking into a variety of rooms, all of which were equipped with a variety of laboratory equipment. The first room she passed by, Lab A, resembled what she assumed just about anyone who imaged “hospital lab” would bring to mind. There were microscopes set up along a single counter and a centrifuge near the back. Two people were stationed inside,

one looking through the microscope while the other typed into a desktop monitor.

Labs B and C were next in line. They rooms were apparently joined, separated by a large counterpace in the middle. And when she looked in through the window, she saw Sullivan standing inside. He was near the back wall, his head tilted slightly as he looked at something on the floor. Rachel came to the end of the window and opened the door into the lab. She noted that it was the sort that typically required a badge or ID to be scanned at the doorframe, but it had apparently been opened for their visit.

“Good morning,” she said as she stepped into the room. “How long have you been here?”

“Maybe five minutes.”

She walked over to where he stood so she could get a good view of whatever he was looking at. The joined labs had apparently been left in the same condition as when Adler had been murdered. A glass container had been knocked from one of the center counters and shattered on the very-light-blue, tiled floor. A few scattered papers rested on a desk to the back, the desk looking like some sort of weird surface out of a spaceship, as it merged directly into the wall.

Sullivan, on the other hand, was looking at the edge of the long workspace. This desk didn't merge into the wall but looked more like a very large kitchen island. He was looking at the stain on the back edge of the surface—the blood stain from where Adler had hit her head. A few drops of it were on

the floor, then a smear of it; Rachel assumed this had occurred when the body was finally removed.

“Did you read the files I sent over?” Sullivan asked.

“I did.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think this killer scoped the place out for a while... probably Adler, too. If you need a car or badge to open that digital lock on the outside, the killer had to have had it.”

“That’s right. And for a few hours right after the case came to me, I chased down the idea that maybe the killer stole someone else’s. But the logs from that night indicate that Adler’s ID was the only one used to open his door after hours.”

“And what are *after-hours* considered in this place?”

“She was the only one in or out of these labs between eight and just after eleven.”

“Any idea how the building security works?” Rachel asked. “How easy would it have been for the killer to get in through the front doors during that time?”

“No one will give me a straight answer on that. I spoke to a daytime security guard who claims when anyone is here after hours, those front doors are locked electronically. Just like the doors to the labs, they have to be opened by keycard or ID. But some of the other scientists I spoke to—people who are sometimes here late into the night—said that the electronic locks are sometimes disengaged by those staying in the building because the security system is so sensitive and it goes

off whenever someone takes too long to enter or exit a room. All that said, the logs indicate that the front door's locks were in fact disengaged by Adler herself just after nine."

"I recall in the files that there were two security breaches before nine. Maybe they were just enough to annoy her and cause her to shut them off?"

"Likely. One of her coworkers that I spoke to said they've done it every now and then."

Rachel considered all of this as she looked around the labs. The evidence that there was a struggle was clear. But she knew that didn't mean the killer took her by surprise. She wondered if the killer had come into the building through the unlocked front doors and then got the jump on Adler at some point, forcing her to open the door to the labs and then a fight broke out in the lab."

"Is there any point in looking at the security footage?" she asked.

"Not in my opinion. There's just two shots of the killer racing through the hallway you come in through. Well, racing to leave. He came in pretty slowly...almost confidently."

"I think I *would* like to check out the footage, if possible."

"Sure thing. I'll get you in front of it as soon as possible. I can probably get it sent to your phone if you want."

"That would be great," she said, though her attention was divided between the blood on the edge of the table and the door. She couldn't help but wonder if the killer had *known* about the tendency of some of the scientists to disable the

locks on the front doors. Because if *that* were the case, it opened up some very alarming possibilities...that the killer may know the building well because they'd spent a lot of time in it.

“A shattered window in Dr. Willis’s apartment,” she said. “And then signs of a struggle here...”

“Yeah?”

She thought for a moment and, with her focus now on the fragments of the broken glass container, finally said: “It looks like the killer is either very careless about what they’re doing or they’re simply enjoying the fight.”

“And would you prefer one over the other?”

“As bad as it sounds, I’d always rather be up against a killer that enjoys the fight. They’re more likely to slip up... maybe get a bit too confident. On the other hand, killers who take more than one life tend to learn from their mistakes; they get more careful, more cunning.”

Sullivan allowed the comment a moment to breath before moving away from his place by the wall. He pulled out his phone and typed something into it. “Okay...,” he said, pocketing his phone when he was done. “Someone from the PD is going to email you the security footage. I expect you’ll have it within ten or fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks. Hey, tell me...do you know when Dr. Adler’s funeral is?”

“I don’t. I think it’s already been held, though. She was killed five days ago. Why?”

“Did you talk to the family?” Rachel asked.

“No, that was Seattle PD. I just read up on the police reports. Why? You want to go pay them a visit?”

“May as well,” she said. “Because nothing else seems to be panning out.”

“Well, let’s get to it, then,” Sullivan said. “With any luck, you can watch that security footage on the drive over there.”

Rachel nodded, but her eyes kept going from the blood, to the glass, and then to the door. Something wasn’t adding up here. There were too many X-factors—from after-hours electronic locks being willingly disabled, to a killer who seemed to know far too much about the victims. He’d known how to get into the labs and when to strike. And with Dr. Willis, he’d known when she was going to be in her apartment in the city.

Maybe she’d been wrong a few minutes before when she suggested their killer was careless. If anything, he may be smarter and more determined than she’d originally thought. And if that was the case, she wondered how many steps ahead of them he already was.

CHAPTER TEN

They arrived at the home of Lawrence and Mary Adler much faster than Rachel expected and by the time Sullivan pulled his car to the curb in front of their suburban home, local PD had not yet sent over the security footage from the labs. Jane's parents lived in a beautiful and rustic neighborhood. The houses were very much alike, with spacious backyards—some large enough to boast a pool. The Alders, though, had opted for a flower garden that just barely peeked around the side of the house. Rachel spotted a few errant wildflowers that had grown out of the flowerbeds as they made their way up the sidewalk.

Rachel knocked on the door, and as they waited, she thought she could hear the light tinkling of a piano coming from inside. As her ears tried to make sure she was actually hearing this, the door was answered. Mr. and Mrs. Adler had come to the door together; Lawrence answered it, and Mary stood closely behind him. They both looked extremely tired, but Mary Adler managed a thin smile for them as a form of greeting.

“Can we help you?” Lawrence asked. He was a short and rather stout man who was quickly on the way to losing all of his hair. Rachel guessed him to be near seventy, though his current fatigue made it hard to tell for certain.

“I'm Special Agent Rachel Gift,” she said, showing her badge. As the Adler's studied it, she added: “I'm in town to

assist with your daughter's case—a case that we now believe might be linked to another one. I was hoping we could ask you some questions.”

Lawrence seemed to perk up a bit as a steely look of determination came across his face. “Have there been new leads?”

“Nothing substantial, I'm afraid. But some of what you may be able to tell us could help make links between the two a bit clearer.”

“Well, by all means,” Mary Adler said, “please come in.”

The Adlers led them through a small foyer that emptied out into a large den. A sofa and recliner were turned to face a wall-mounted TV that was installed over the fireplace. Rachel looked around for picture son the walls or the furniture but saw very few—just a couple on the mantle over the fireplace. She and Sullivan sat down on the couch while Mary settled down in the recliner. Lawrence opted to stand.

“So, what sort of information are you looking for?” Lawrence asked.

“First and foremost, the basics...we're trying to find out if Jane had any competitors or maybe even enemies within her field.”

“None that we are aware of,” Mary said, shaking her head. “The cops already asked the same sort of thing.”

Sullivan nodded, as if he understood perfectly. “I wasn't originally on the case, but I *have* seen all of the reports and notes from the original conversations. We just like to ask again

a few days later because you never know what sort of things might pop up.”

“Yes...I get that, but I can't think of anyone fitting that description.”

“Then again,” Lawrence said, “she never really spoke to us about her work. She did when she was younger because she was so excited about it and just went on and on *and on* about it.”

“Did something change that caused that excitement to dwindle?” Rachel asked.

“No, not at all. Not that I'm aware of. She just...you know, after you spend several years in a job, it all becomes commonplace. Also, I think she just got a little tired of our confused expressions whenever she tried talking about work with us.”

“I always felt bad about it,” Mary said. “Almost stupid, really. She worked so hard to get to where she is. As early as the ninth grade, she was fascinated with the science behind anti-aging. That's been nearly twenty-five years, so there wasn't much to go on back then, but...she pushed and remained determined the entire time. And when she started getting those college acceptance letters as a Senior, there was just no looking back.”

As Rachel listened, her gaze coasted across the mantle above the fireplace. It was in a basic golden frame, situated beside another photo that showed Jane sitting on the beach with a dog in her lap. A few flowers had been placed in front of the beach picture as a small memorial. But Rachel was

more interested in the smaller picture beside it. Without making a comment, she got to her feet and walked over to the pictures. She looked to the smaller one in the golden frame. Jane was also in this picture. She was standing with a group of four others—two men and two women, Jane breaking the tie of the sexes.

Jane was a bit older in this picture than the one of her on the beach; in fact, she looked remarkably similar to the same age she'd appeared in the photos from the crime scene. The group was standing in front of a building. To the left, a sign barely peeked into the picture, low and squatted, no more than four feet tall. All Rachel could see from the sign because of the cut-off was YSON LABS.

But in that same moment, the portion of the sign seemed unimportant when she took notice of one of the other women in the photo. She was standing all the way at the edge of the group of five, the furthest away from the sign.

It was Emma Willis.

“Excuse me,” Rachel said, “but when was this picture taken?”

Lawrence walked over to her and smiled at the sight of the photo. “That was about four years ago.” He then looked over to Mary for confirmation. “Right? This photo from Grayson labs?”

“Yeah, that would have been a little more than four years ago. That was taken at Grayson Labs, out in Nevada.”

“Did Jane ever live out there?”

“She may as well for about half a year or so,” Mary said. “She was hired by some big pharma company to work with the team you see right there. They spent about six or seven months setting up a lab, running experiments, and speaking to potential donors. We barely saw her while she was on that job but my God, was she on Cloud Nine.”

“Did you know anyone else in the picture?”

“No. Not personally. But I think one of those women ended up moving here, to Seattle. And then then Asian gentleman and that short redhead you see there ended up getting engaged and then married. Last I heard from Jane, they were living in Germany.”

Rachel went through each face as Mary Adler spoke. The Asian man and the redhead were standing right beside one another, smiling bright. If they were indeed in Germany, Rachel felt momentarily confident in placing an invisible X on their faces. And then, of course, both Jane and Emma were dead, so she placed two imaginary Xs over their faces as well. She had just started to truly study the remaining face in the picture—a man of about fifty or so, his hair salt-and-pepper grey and his eyes bright blue—when Mary spoke up with a question.

“Is that...is that why you’re here?” she asked. “Did something else happen to someone on that team?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Sullivan said from his place on the couch. “Emma Willis was also murdered.”

“Oh my...oh my God,” Mary said, her hand clasping over her mouth in shock.

“Mrs. Willis, you said you didn’t know these people personally, but what about the team itself? Did they get along? Did they keep in touch after the project was over?”

“I couldn’t tell you. All I *can* tell you, though, is that Carl Webber put a massive smear on them. Jane never came out and said as much, but I think it’s one of the reasons that cute married couple ended up moving to Germany...to get away from it.”

“What sort of smear?” Sullivan asked.

Mary looked at them, as if shocked they hadn’t already heard. “Well, on the one hand, he was sleeping with one of the interns on the job; she was nineteen when he was fifty. And secondly, though it was never proven that I know if, he was allegedly caught selling stem cells to third-rate buyers overseas. Again, let me stress that I don’t think it was ever proven. But it caused enough of a fuss to send Jane into a depressive episode when it all came out.”

“Was this immediately after the project was over?” Rachel asked.

“No...this was probably about two years ago. And guilty or not, the drama of it all ruined Webber.”

“Yeah,” Lawrence said rather grimly. “He was fired, and there were a few blips on the news about him.”

“On the *local* news?” Sullivan asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Lawrence said. “Webber was a Seattle native, too. He was quite helpful in making connections for

Jane at the start of her career. I think it might have even been him that squared her away a spot on that team.”

“Any idea if he still lives in town?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Mary said. Lawrence shrugged in agreement. “I think even if Jane *did* talk to us about her work more often, she wouldn’t have mentioned him.”

Rachel took out her phone and snapped a picture of the photo. It felt silly to take a picture of a picture, but she wasn’t about to ask a grieving mother if she should take a picture of her recently killed daughter if she had it out in such a place of prominence.

“Mr. and Mrs. Adler, thank you for your time,” she said as she pocketed the phone. “And please accept my condolences.”

As Rachel started back for the front door, Sullivan followed closely behind. She was vaguely aware of Mary Adler trailing hesitantly after them. And just as Rachel reached the door, Mary spoke up. Her voice was thin and breaking.

“You don’t think Carl Webber did these atrocious things so you? Did he...do you think he killed our Jane?”

“We have no reason to believe that right now,” Sullivan said, giving the same answer Rachel was a second away from giving. However, on the trail of her unspoken comment was a follow-up thought.

But we’re sure as hell going to find out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

All it took to get Carl Webber's address was a single call from Sullivan to a local station. He was on hold for about thirty seconds before he was given the address. He recited it out to Rachel from behind the wheel and she started typing it into the GPS app on her phone.

"No need," Sullivan said. "I know the place. And it seems Dr. Webber had had a pretty terrible fall from grace."

"How's that?"

"That address is for Sunquest Apartments. It's run-down and infested with just about every sort of criminal you can think of. If I had a quarter for every visit I made over there, I'd be a rich man."

As he drove as the afternoon unwound ahead of them, Rachel typed *Grayson Labs* into a Google search. She got a few hits, most from four years ago. It spoke about the facility in Nevada that was being created to study the science and ethics in stem cell research and anti-aging practices. She skimmed over a few articles and only found two that mentioned any of the doctors by name.

By the time she'd opened up the sixth article, the car came to a crawl and she heard the click-click of the car's turn signal. "We're here," Sullivan said.

As he pulled the car into the parking lot of the Sunquest apartment complex, Rachel saw that Sullivan had not been

exaggerating. She counted three floors and seventeen windows along each floor on the front. Assuming the odd seventeenth window was the stairwell, she figured the complex held forty-eight apartments. And according to the address Sullivan had been given, Webber lived in Apartment 22.

Sullivan parked beside a car that looked far too nice and expensive in front of a building like this, and they headed inside. The front doors led to a small alcove area, which was blocked off by more doors. There was a security lock along the frame—the sort with codes tenants could punch in to unlock it—but it was clearly busted; the back had been cracked open and a few wires dangled out.

“That thing has been replaced at least twice in the past six weeks,” Sullivan said as he opened the next set of doors up for her.

They stepped into a small lobby that smelled of body odor and marijuana. Underneath it all was a cleaning agent that probably smelled like bleach when it wasn't overwhelmed by the other smells. A small office was located to the right, but the door was closed and a sign hanging on it, written on notebook paper in back marker, read: NOT IN. CALL 206-555-0168.

The thrum of bass from loud music came from somewhere overhead. A low hum issued from somewhere else, a sound Rachel thought might be a vacuum cleaner being used. They made their way past the closed office and to the stairway on the other side of the lobby. It was brightly lit, which helped the dirt and litter along the stairs to stand out even more: empty

beer cans, little bits of paper and food wrappers. And as they climbed the stairs, the reek of pot grew even stronger.

“There’s nothing subtle about this place, is there?” Rachel asked as they stepped up into the second floor.

“Not at all.”

They made their way down the hall toward Apartment 22—just the second door on the hallway. The doors were all painted brown. The paint had started peeling and flaking on some of them. The number 22 sat in the upper center of the door, the one on the right slightly out of place. When Sullivan knocked on the door, the loose number trembled a bit.

Rachel knew that just after two in the afternoon, there was a very good chance Webber would not be home. Her heart sank a bit at this thought, as she didn’t think it would be very easy locating him, given that he’d essentially devolved into a lifestyle the exact opposite of the one he’d been living just as recently as two years ago.

But to her surprise, shuffling feet approach the door on the other side. This was followed by a man’s gruff, irritated voice. “Who is it?”

Sullivan looked to Rachel, raising an eyebrow. he gestured for the door with an inquisitive look, essentially asking: *You want to take it?* She politely shook her head, and Sullivan did the honors.

“This is Detective Paul Sullivan with the Seattle PD. I’ve got a federal agent with me as well, Special Agent Rachel Gift. I was hoping to have a word, sir.”

Rachel was rather surprised when there were no further questions or hesitations. She heard the door unlocking right away, then opening just seconds later. The door was opened all the way, revealing Carl Webber on the other side. Rachel could just barely make out the man she'd seen in the photo back at the Adler house. His salt-and-pepper hair had gone almost completely gray, and the clean-shaven look from the picture had been replaced by a thick and unkempt beard. Deep crow's feet extended out from the corner of his eyes.

"FBI?" Webber said, eyeballing Rachel. "Really? Seems a bit much."

"For what, exactly?" Rachel asked.

Webber scrutinized them a bit more and, leaning against the doorframe, said: "Aren't you here about the noise complaint I called in last night?"

"No, sir," Sullivan said. "I'm afraid not. I don't know anything about that."

"So then what use are the police? The idiots who live below me got into some sort of a fight last night. Screaming and yelling and things breaking for the better part of an hour."

Rachel wasn't about to let him sidetrack them, so she went ahead and dove right into the heart of the matter. "We're here to ask about how you've been spending your time over the course of the past week."

"I don't...what? What for?"

"You *are* Carl Webber, correct?" Sullivan asked.

"I am."

“Mr. Webber, you once worked with two doctors named Jane Adler and Emma Willis, right?”

“Yes, I did. But wh—”

Webber cut himself off and stood straight again. His eyes went wide, and his mouth drew back in an astonished expression. “You’re here to ask me about their deaths?”

“So you’ve heard about them, I take it?” Rachel said.

“Of course I have. Emma’s has been all over the news. I actually heard about her murder before I heard about Jane, though. And I...” he chuckled in a dry, nervous fashion before finishing. “And I guess you’re here to ask the screw-up of their team if he killed them?”

“We’re just here to ask some questions for right now,” Sullivan said. “Can we come in?”

He said nothing, but when he turned his back to them, he waved them inside. Rachel caught a quick look of his face as he turned away and it was hard to read his expression. At first, she thought it was one of sorrow, but it could have also been one of fear. One thing she *did* know was that based on his demeanor and the way he’d answered his door promptly and was not inviting them in without question, she thought she’d be able to get a good read on him. She’d always been a good judge of whether or not people were lying, and there were occasions where it was almost eerily easy for her. It came down to how the suspect carried themselves and how they processed emotion while in the middle of an interrogation.

The door led them directly into the living room, with the kitchen adjoined off to the side. With the exception of a small hallway that led to a bathroom, the apartment was essentially just the one single room with nothing more than a small bedroom; Rachel could see the bedroom through the opened door on the far side of the living room.

“So, tell me,” Webber said as he fell into an old, well-worn couch. “What do you need from me to prove I didn’t kill them?”

“Well, for starters,” Sullivan said, “you might try not speaking so flippantly about their murders.”

“I think that’s a fairly appropriate response when a detective and FBI agent come asking if you killed two women you once worked with...that you respected a great deal.”

“Well, take a second and view things the way we see them right now,” Rachel said. “Two women you worked with on what seems to be a very important and exclusive project are dead. The two others who were on the team are married and in another country. That leaves just you...the member of the team who just happened to make some very bad decisions and fell from grace while these two recently deceased women went on to continue making strides and breakthroughs in their field.”

She caught some bitterness in his eyes for a moment, but it instantly turned to sadness. “Seems like a dull and rather straight-to-the-point way to put it.”

“We have two dead women,” Sullivan said. “Straight-to-the-point is the best approach. So forgive me...but unless you

can give us alibies for your last few nights, this conversation is going to get a lot more stressful for you.”

“Well, that’s easy enough. I don’t go anywhere. I’m here all the time.”

“You’re not working?” Rachel asked.

“All freelance. I edit technical manuals for medical equipment. It’s niche stuff, but I’m booked for the next six months and the money is remarkable.”

“If you’ve been here every night for the past week, can anyone back that up?”

It was the first time since they’d come into his apartment that Webber actually looked scared. He cast his eye to the floor, thinking. He then looked toward his bedroom and shrugged. “I think the only proof would be on my laptop, but I don’t even know how you’d go about finding the proof.”

“Do you work late?”

“Not all of the time. I’ll go a week or two without working at all, but I’ll work crazy hours other weeks to make up for it. This week and last week have been crazy ones. Some nights I’m up until almost one in the morning or so, working.”

“Any Zoom calls or anything like that?”

“No.”

“Any software with autosave?”

“I honestly couldn’t tell you. Maybe. It’s a combination of Google Docs and a file management system.”

“Google Docs uses autosave,” Rachel said. “And if the file management system requires a log-in, we could use it to back up your story. Would you allow us to check your computer?”

“I...I think I’m uncomfortable with that.”

“So you’re saying *no*?” Jack asked.

“I just—”

“Listen,” Rachel said. “I’m not concerned about your extracurriculars right now...anything you might be doing on the side. Right now, I’m only concerned about making sure no one else dies. And quite frankly, if I have to get a warrant to have a look at your computer, that’s going to delay us by hours. And that’s going to piss me off. Just make it easier on us here...*and* maybe help us save a few lives.”

Webber looked positively sick with worry, but he nodded and waved his hand almost dismissively at his laptop.

“Fine,” he said. “Whatever you need,. But I’m telling you right now, I had nothing to do with either of those murders. Both of those women were remarkable, and whoever killed them robbed the world of two bright and brilliant minds.”

He led them into his surprisingly tidy bedroom. His twin bed was pushed into a corner, and his workspace took up roughly half of the remaining room. The desk was actually quite nice, as was the laptop and accessories. Everything was nice, neat and in its proper place. Webber walked over to the laptop and signed into his Google account.

“Okay, so...*this* is the project I’ve been working on for the past three days,” Webber said.

He stepped aside, allowing Rachel to take control of the laptop's touchpad. It took her a moment to remember what needed to be done because she hadn't used the program in quite some time. But in under a minute, she found the version control feature. And in just a few clicks, she was able to pull up the document history. She found that he'd worked until 11:47 last night, and 1:32 the night before that. Most importantly, though, she saw a series of autosaves and corrections on the night Emma Willis was murdered that did indeed pin him to this very bedroom between the hours of 7:30 and 12:26. And because they knew Dr. Willis had been attacked before midnight, it did rule him out.

“What about six nights ago?” Sullivan asked. “What were you working on then?”

“That's when Jane was killed, eh?” Webber asked with an edge of irritated sarcasm. Without waiting for an answer, he opened up two different documents. “Both of these. This last one was wrapped that night. I delivered it through the management system, which I'm actually currently logged into.”

Even without looking behind her, Rachel could feel a sort of deflation to Sullivan. She then checked the same details as before. The first document confirmed that he'd been working on it up until eight at night. The second one showed edits and revisions all the way up until 9:35. She then checked the management system and saw that two notes and a single file had been uploaded at 1:14.

She pulled up the information on Dr. Adler in her head. The reports had indicated that the figure passing through the halls shortly after midnight. She figured, based on the drive to Sunquest Apartments, that the drive over to Adler's labs would take twenty minutes or so. In other words, he wasn't completely cleared from either murder, but he would have had to plan things masterfully to pull it off.

She glanced back and saw that Sullivan had taken a few steps in her direction to look over her shoulder. He *did* look deflated, apparently coming to the same conclusions she had. They locked eyes for a moment, and he simply nodded.

"Mr. Webber," he said, "most of this does check out. But we're going to have to ask you not to leave the city until we have some answers in this case."

"Okay..."

"And beyond that," Rachel said, "we need to ask if you had any initial thoughts when you heard about the murders. Did anyone come to mind...anyone you thought might want either of them dead?"

"No, not really. My first thought was that it was just some overzealous protestor. I'm sure you know that people tend to get very up in arms over stem cells. It's becoming *a little* more accepted, but not nearly as much as we'd like to see."

"Were there any organizations or individual protestors you can think of that ever specifically targeted Dr. Willis or Dr. Adler?"

They were still standing in his bedroom, between his desk and bed. Something about it all made him seem so much more vulnerable to Rachel.

“No. Of course, they more or less erased me from their lives after all of my mistakes. So if they’d had issues with anyone in the past year and a half to two years or so, I’d not know about it anyway.” He grimaced a bit and when he looked to both of them—back and forth as if to truly drive home his sincerity—he looked to be on the verge of tears. “I wish...I wish I could be of more help. I was especially taken with Dr. Adler. I was *sure* she was going to revolutionize the field... that within a decade, her stem cells approaches would help hundreds of thousands of people in terms of regenerative medicines. Both women...such terrible losses.”

The comment seemed to bring the conversation to a close. And though Carl Webber wasn’t quite off the hook, Rachel knew a dead end when she saw one. He was innocent—it was just a matter of proving it by finding the true killer.

And now, with yet another lead having fallen apart, finding that killer seemed to be more difficult than ever. Especially as the day wound closer to its end, and she had to face the fact that she was starting to get very tired. She didn’t think her immediate future would have a police station and high-stakes interrogations, but rather her hotel room and a nice, comfy bed. It made her feel weak and even guilty, but she knew she had to put her health first. It was something she’d never been particularly good at doing, but she knew it was the responsible thing to do.

Not only for her own safety and promises made to her family, but maybe even to any further potential victims of this killer. because if she wasn't fully rested and thinking clearly, the killer would have an even larger advantage.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rachel once again found herself impressed with Detective Sullivan. To his credit, he was more than understanding when she suggested she should go back to her hotel. He didn't quite handle her with kids' gloves, and he also didn't freak out when she told him just how tired she was. He simply asked if she was okay and then delivered her to her car.

"I've got all of the files back at my hotel room," she said as she stepped out of his car back at the parking lot in front of Jane Adler's labs. "I'll dig through everything I have and see if I can find anything else."

"I appreciate it," Sullivan said, "but you really don't have to."

Was that a sort of strangled resentment in his voice? Rachel thought she heard *something* like that in his tone but couldn't be sure. Maybe he was relieved that she was calling it a day a bit early. Maybe he was starting to realize that this hotshot agent with a bit of celebrity behind her was on the verge of swiping up what had been his case from the start.

"Well, it's that or watch sitcoms and HGTV back at the room."

"Yeah, that does sound sort of awful." He seemed to think about something for a moment and then added: "When I get back to the station, I'll send you over the information you need to get onto the local database remotely."

“Thanks,” she said. Maybe she’d misread his earlier tone after all.

She got into her car and pulled up the address of the hotel; she hadn’t been in the city nearly enough to know her way around. It was just shy of four as she started back to the hotel and the sky had grown overcast, threatening to spit more rain down. But she didn’t see a single drop during the brief drive back to the hotel. As she parked and made her way into the building and then up to her room, her thoughts kept drifting back to the tone she thought she’d heard in Sullivan’s voice. If there *was* a bit of him that was starting to resent her, she could certainly understand. It did seem that her request to help with the case had gone a bit smoothly, with no pushback from Anderson or the Seattle heads at all. Surely a local detective had to take that as a bit of an insult, even if the case did seem to be targeting medical professionals of high esteem.

She considered this as she entered her room and approached the small stacks of files and printouts that were waiting for her. Maybe it *was* a little presumptuous of her to think she could just come in on someone else’s case and lend a hand. She also knew that she had never been a very good follower. She wondered if she’d taken too much control of the case. She’d only taken the lead whenever Sullivan had offered it, but still...sometimes she was unaware when she was taking control.

She sighed deeply as she looked at her little workspace, the window in front of it looking out into the cloudy afternoon streets. She forced herself to step away from it all—even if for only a moment—and called for takeout dinner. As she waited,

she took a shower and did her best to wash away the doubts and lingering suspicions that she was becoming a hindrance. It didn't necessarily work, but she was able to clear her mind a bit. All she had to do was come out and ask Sullivan if she was cramping his style. And if she was, then she'd step back. Of course, that was easier said than done now that she was so mired in the case and she'd seen the dead women. Would she *really* be able to step away from such a mystery if asked to do so?

Yes, she thought. Out of respect for Detective Sullivan and the case itself, yes, I can step away if he wants me to. It hurt to admit it to herself, but there it was.

She timed the shower perfectly, as the room phone was ringing to notify her that her dinner order had arrived: pizza this time. She went down to the lobby to pick it up and then headed back up to her room. She again found herself sitting in the center of her bed with the case file scattered out around her.

As she dove back into the information, there was a nostalgic part of her that was reminded of late-night study session back in college and even at the academy in Quantico. She supposed it was why she felt at ease and even almost juvenile by sifting through it all on the bed while eating pizza. Remarkably, it seemed to help her process the information in a different way; seeing it as nothing more than a study session seemed to bring the facts and descriptions in the files create new paths and puzzles.

Of course, as she looked at the crime scene photos and saw the dead eyes of Jane Adler and Emma Willis staring back at her, it took some of the ease out of it. She had no doubt that Sullivan would eventually find his way to the killer, but now that she was involved, she felt close to those brilliant women—that she owed it to them to see it through.

So she pored over the files and case reports as all of this hovered over her mind. She even looked back through the initial interviews conducted with family members—people she and Sullivan had spoken to, but from different points-of-view and further removed from the tragedies. She looked back at the crime scene photos and the coroner’s reports, looking for any missed leads or patterns.

But there was nothing. After several hours of digging, all she had to show for her efforts was half a missing pizza. And she didn’t even realize this until she was broken from her session by the ringing of her cellphone. Even before looking at the caller display, she felt guilty. She looked to the clock on the laptop and saw that it had somehow already come to be nine o’ clock...and she hadn’t bothered calling back home. She’d been *that* enamored with her work. It was nearly 7:30 back in Virginia, meaning Paige and Grandma Tate had likely just finished up dinner.

However, when she grabbed her phone on the second ring, she saw that it was Jack. She felt just as guilty when she realized she’d had no instinct to call him, either. But she pushed that guilt to the side as she answered the call. Just like yesterday, she was simply thrilled to be able to hear his voice.

“Hey,” she said, forcing herself to look away from her work.

“Hey yourself.” There was no accusation in his tone, but he did sound a bit off. “How’s it going?”

“Good. Same as yesterday.”

“So the treatments aren’t knocking you out?”

“No, not at all. I haven’t had anything bother me at all today.”

“Are you still trying to help out on that case?”

She hesitated for a moment because she *could* sense some irritation in his tone. Someone who didn’t know him well would probably have missed it, but she knew him well enough. She decided to let it go, though, and answered honestly. “I am. But honestly, it’s just been a lot of file-reading and speaking to dead leads. I promise you, Jack, there’s nothing dangerous or overwhelming about this case.”

“I suppose I’ll have to take your word for it, huh?”

“I would hope so. Anyway, how are *you*?”

Jack chuckled, a sound Rachel never grew tired of. “Well, I have to be honest with you. I just had dinner with two beautiful ladies.”

“Oh, you did?” She was amazed at just how filled her heart was in that moment—assuming, of course, he meant Grandma Tate and Paige.

“I am. Now, I love you and all but one of these women in particular has a feisty side that I’m really starting to

appreciate.”

“That could be either of them.”

They both had a laugh at this, again making Rachel feel about two inches tall for forgetting to call. “Hold on a second,” Jack said. “We’re in the middle of cleaning up dinner, but let me put you on speaker so you can talk to everyone.”

She spent the next twenty minutes speaking with her family—hearing all about Paige’s day at school, about Grandma Tate’s blood pressure check-up at the doctor, and how Jack had been in charge of making tonight’s avocado salsa chicken. When they were all done, Jack moved quickly into another room and they said their goodbyes. And Rachel hung up the phone, her heart still felt full. She supposed there was some truth to the phrase *absence makes the heart grow fonder*. She couldn’t remember ever wanting to see him so badly. It had her feeling slightly giddy as she ended the call—like a high school girl who had just managed to bag her crush.

Smiling, she went back to the case files even though she was pretty sure she’d already exhausted every possible thought and avenue to be had. She felt a very small, ghostlike urge to just call it quits. If she threw the towel in and focused solely on her treatments, there would be no harm, no foul. It wasn’t like it was her case, now was it?

But she knew she wouldn’t be able to do that. What she *did* know was that the day had taken its toll on her. And even though, after another two hours of pouring over things it still wasn’t yet even 9:00, she found herself struggling to keep her eyes open after just five minutes of returning to the files. She

knew better than to fight it; it could be a very minor drawback to the treatments. Also, she'd been constantly on the move for a period of about six hours or so. Rather than forcing herself to soldier on, she tidied up the piles of files and folders and placed them on the small table in the corner, along with her laptop.

As she brushed her teeth and readied herself for bed, she felt momentarily stuck between two worlds: one world was here, in the midst of this terrible case, and the other was on the other side of the country where a fiancé, daughter, and living grandmother waited for her. It made her feel both fully alive and split right down the middle.

She feared that this strange feeling would keep her from falling asleep. But as she lay down in bed, she quickly found this would not be the case. She knew most people often felt uncomfortable sleeping in hotels, but she'd always found it easy. Her head was on the pillow for no more than thirty seconds before she felt herself slowly succumbing to sleep.

She naturally had no idea how long she'd been asleep before the nightmare started, but it began with a dissolving sort of fluidity that seemed to understand her feeling of dislocation.

In the nightmare, she found herself standing in Jane Adler's lab. Sullivan was standing by the door, speaking to Jack. As they spoke, both of them kept suspiciously glancing over at her. She opened her mouth to ask them why, but when she opened her mouth, several teeth fell out, carried on a gush of blood.

She could just barely hear Jack's voice, whispering to Sullivan. *"If she can't slow down and learn to put her health first, she'd not going to make it to the wedding."*

Another voice spoke up from behind her. "He's right, you know."

She turned and saw Alex Lynch. He was standing just three feet away from her. By the time she realized who she was looking at, she also understood that he held a knife in his hand. Upon seeing it, Lynch thrust it in her chest. Somewhere, in some unseen place within the nightmare, she heard Paige begin to cry. She stared into Lynch's eyes and found them full of glee.

The wind went racing out of her. The stab burned. Rachel opened her mouth to call out for Paige and—

She jerked awake with a scream, nearly having crawled out of her throat. For a sickening moment, she still felt the burn of Lynch's knife piercing her gut.

Gasping, she looked around the room and suddenly understood that it was more than fright that had pulled her out of the nightmare. Her cell phone was ringing on the bedside table. She reached out to it with a trembling arm; the terror of the dream was doing its best to creep into the waking world and she was sure this call would have something to do with Paige back home on the complete opposite side of the country.

Instead, she saw two other bits of information at once. First, it was 4:57 in the morning. Second, the call wasn't coming from home; it was Detective Sullivan. The option to ignore the call didn't even occur to her. Her brain associated

Sullivan with the Adler/Willis case, and she instinctually answered despite the time.

She answered the call, doing her best not to sound too rattled and out of sorts. “This is Agent Gift.”

“It’s Sullivan. Hey, sorry to call so late...or early, however you see it. But I thought you’d want to know that it looks like we’ve got a third victim.”

The last vestiges of sleep that had remained after the nightmare fell away, and Rachel found herself suddenly very much awake. “You’re certain?”

“Yeah, it’s sort of undeniable. Now, I know you’ve got your treatments, but I thought you’d want to know. If you want to come out and have a look at a pretty fresh crime scene, you can be—”

“Can you shoot me the address?”

“Sure thing. But...you’re sure you’re up for it?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” She felt this was true but also knew that the smart move—the *healthy* move—was to try to go back to sleep and not leave the room until it was time for her appointment, which was scheduled for 9:30.

“Okay, then,” Sullivan said. “I guess I’ll see you in a bit.”

Rachel ended the call and instantly slid out of bed. She was not only awake, but felt a bit jittery. A fresh crime scene, a third murder. A new sense of urgency filled her, lighting a new fire.

Maybe she'd be able to see this case wrapped before she left Seattle after all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The address took Rachel into a well-to-do subdivision. Dawn had not yet quite cracked the sky, but the street was aglow all the same with a series of headlights as patrol cars came and went. Rachel parked behind one of four patrol cars and shows her badge to the large officer who had been assigned security duty by the house's mailbox.

She looked ahead to the house, the sort of build that made it hard to tell if it was a one-story or two-story home. As she made her way to the short porch, Rachel also noticed another police officer on the left side of the yard. He was speaking to a pair of noy neighbors who were practically breaking their necks to get a better look at what was going on.

Rachel climbed the two stairs onto the porch and then opened the door. Two cops stood in front of it as she opened it, and she again flashed her badge. "Have either of you seen Detective Sullivan?" she asked.

"Back bedroom," one of the cops said. He looked tired and cranky, or maybe slight demeaned for having been stationed as a guard.

She nodded her thanks and passed them by, stepping into the house. It turned out to be a two-story, only the main floor appeared as a one-story home. She passed a slight of stairs as she made her way down the hallway, which she supposed led

up to a half-floor—maybe an over-the-garage apartment or something.

The back bedroom was all the way down the hall, past an office and a restroom. The door was opened, and as she stepped through it, she saw Sullivan standing with two police officers. For a moment, it was far too similar to the part he'd played in her nightmare as he'd spoken to Jack. It caused a chill to race through her. Sullivan saw her right away, excusing himself from the officers and making his way over to her. As he neared her, she took a quick look around the room.

A dead woman was sprawled out on the bed. There were small flecks of blood on her face, and her nose appeared to be broken. Other than the sheets being kicked into a messy pile at the end of the bed, there appeared to be no real signs of a struggle.

“Who is she?” Rachel asked as she approached the bed

“Dr. Molly Stevens,” Sullivan asked. “Aged fifty-three. She lives alone, as she and her husband divorced three years ago. Not sure where he lives, but we're looking into that right now.”

“Who found the body?”

“She actually called 9-1-1. According to the operator, she was never able to say anything—there was just the sound of a struggle and a woman, presumably Dr. Stevens, struggling to breathe.”

Rachel stepped closer to the bed, looking to the dead doctor's eyes. They stared up at the same ceiling she likely

took in as her last sight before death. Her neck was slightly swollen and showed bruising—*fresh* bruising.”

“Are there units out looking for the killer? If she called 9-1-1 while it was happening and—”

“Yes, there’s a thorough search. But this neighborhood is so damned congested, I don’t know that it’ll do any good. We’ve got it pegged that eight minutes passed between the 9-1-1 call and the arrival of the first police unit.”

“That’s a decent head start,” Rachel said. “Especially if the killer knows the area well.”

“Agreed. That’s why I think we’re best off to stay here and check the place over.”

“I take it you haven’t found much yet?”

“Just that she was obviously strangled,” he said, nodding toward Dr. Steven’s bruised neck.

“Any signs of a break-in?”

“None. As I’m sure you saw, there’s a video doorbell at the front door. But there’s not one on the back. You’re welcome to go look for yourself, but there’s no sign of a break-in back there at all. Two officers had a look at the back door before I did.”

“And no footage on the doorbell camera?”

“We’ve got a cop out in his car right now working with someone in tech to unlock her phone...hoping she has an app for the doorbell. But again, just like the back door, there are no

signs of a break-in up front, either. Right now, whether or not he came in invited or by force is all speculation.”

“And do we—”

She was interrupted as another cop came into the room. He looked slightly flustered, as if he’d been moving in a rush. “Detective Sullivan?” he said.

“Yeah?”

“We just got confirmation that Dr. Stevens worked for a company called VexoCorp —some sort of applied medicines research center.”

“Is that here in the city?” Rachel asked.

“It is. Not too far away from LaRange Labs, in fact.”

“Applied medicine,” Sullivan said thoughtfully. “That could be somewhat related to anti-aging and stem cells, right?”

“I don’t know,” Rachel said. She stowed all of the information in her head, filing it away into its proper place. She began to examine it bit by bit as she turned away from Dr. Stevens’ body and looked toward the door. “I’m going to have a look around.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” Sullivan said.

Rachel exited the room and started investigating the house. She started at the back door, which was actually located to the right side of the house, between the dining area off the kitchen and the mudroom. She looked the door over and, just like Sullivan had said, there were no signs of a break-in. She opened the door and looked outside; she saw no doorbell of

any kind but also no signs of forced entry. She walked through the mudroom to where another door gave way to the garage. She stepped inside and found the space occupied by a single car and racks along the left wall holding black plastic bins.

She walked over to the garage door and looked it over for any sort of faults or recent damage but found nothing. She used the control panel along the wall to get the door to rise up and then performed a similar check outside. Again, she found nothing to indicate someone had broken in. And from what she could tell, the only way in was by punching in a code on a small, covered keypad installed into the right frame of the garage door. She assumed there would also be a control somewhere in the car parked in the garage.

She walked back into the garage, and as she lowered the door back down, she thought about the other murders. For Emma Willis, the killer had come right into her apartment. For Jane Adler, he'd come through the front doors of the building and there was supposedly security footage of it (that she'd not yet seen, so she made a mental note of this). And now there was Molly Stevens...and the bastard seemed to have somehow magically morphed through a door and into her house.

She turned to head back into the house, and as she stepped into the kitchen, Sullivan was already marching over to join her. He held a phone in his hand and wore a slight frown on his face.

“What is it?” Rachel asked.

“We got her phone unlocked. And she does have an app for the doorbell camera, but it shows absolutely nothing. No one

came to that front door all night.”

“Which means they came in through that side door over there,” she said, nodding toward the door that led out to the small patio. “I don’t know how they would have come in through the garage unless they knew the code for the door. And if that was the case, that opens up a whole new level of craziness.”

“You want to have a look at this,” Sullivan asked, handing over Stevens’ phone with the app still pulled up.

She nodded and took it, though trusted Sullivan’s initial take. If he said there was nothing there, he meant it. Still, as a matter of due diligence, she had a look herself. The camera had only been triggered a single time since sundown and that was when a jogger had rushed by, a bit too close to the yard.

She handed the phone back, doing her best not to feel too defeated. She felt like she was in the middle of a locked room mystery...and slowly, she began to wonder if that might be the key to the entire thing. The killer had to easily be getting in *somehow*. Her first suspicion was that the killer knew the victims personally—that he’d simply been invited in. But if that was the case, he would have come right to the front door. What sort of bullshit excuse would he have given Molly Stevens about needing to come in through the side door or the garage?

“Hold on a second,” she said, a thought suddenly occurring to her. She walked back through the kitchen and to the side door. She switched on the light to the small patio and stepped outside. The patio was ground level, consisting of a stone floor

with a curved stone wall ten feet away. Some patio furniture and a grill occupied the space. There were also three plants of differing sizes. She started by looking at each plant...only, not specifically the plants, but the placement of their pots. She studied each one for a moment and then turned back to the door. A small mat sat in front of the door, just big enough to kick dirt off of one's shoes.

The mat was slightly crooked. There was the slightest bit of discoloration along the edges, revealing the area where the mat usually sat...until very recently. On two of the plant pots, she saw similar discoloration on the stone floor.

Sullivan stepped out with her, tilting his head as she remained in her knees, looking at the mat. "Did you find something?"

"Maybe. Two of these planters and the mat have been moved recently...like someone was looking under them."

"Looking for a key?"

"That's what I'm thinking," Rachel said. "And if that's the case, I think we can eliminate the idea that the killer knew these victims well enough to just be invited in."

"But he'd know their homes well enough to know that Dr. Steven has a video doorbell. And he was either *very* lucky in Adler's case, or he *knew* when she would kill those alarms."

Rachel got back to her feet, looking around the patio. "I never saw the security footage from Adler's lab come through. Did you?"

“Shit. Yes, I did. And I’d meant to forward it to you and never did.”

“Anything on there?” She found herself irritated but quickly placed herself in check. After all, she wasn’t Sullivan’s boss. Hell, she wasn’t even his partner.

“Nothing that would help us...not at first glance anyway.” He was taking out his phone as she spoke, and as he navigated around the screen, she could tell that he was clearly very upset with himself. “I’m sending it now so you can see for yourself. I’m really sorry, Agent Gift.” With a nervous smirk, he added: “I guess I’m just not used to working with a partner.”

“It’s quite alright. Honestly, right now, I think I’m more interested in what else we might be able to get from that phone.”

Sullivan looked down to Dr. Stevens’ phone with a quick look of surprise, as if he’d forgotten he was even holding it. “Yeah, I figured next steps were taking a look at her calendar and the last few numbers she called.”

Huddled together on the patio, with the sun rising and shedding some light on the neighborhood, Sullivan went to Dr. Stevens’ recent calls. Right away, Rachel saw that there was a voicemail that had not yet been checked. And based on her call history, it seemed to have come in within half an hour or so of Dr. Stevens’ death.

“Bingo...” Sullivan said.

Without any discussion on the matter, he played the message and turned the volume up.

“Molly, it’s me. Listen...I know you didn’t want to hear this earlier, but you really do need to keep an eye out. I keep getting those messages, and now that there are *two* doctors who have been killed, it seems so much worse. Just...please be careful. And call me if you need to talk or suddenly decide to take this seriously. I’m only trying to look out for you.”

The message ended without the caller giving her name. Rachel also thought it was worth noting that Dr. Steven apparently didn’t know this person well enough to assign her a name-listing within her phone.

“I think we call the number back,” she suggested.

“Yeah, same here,” Sullivan said.

He wasted no time in doing it, calling the number at 6:08 in the morning. It rang a single time before it was answered. The same voice that had left the message responded right away. “Molly. Thanks God. But...it’s early. Are you okay?”

“Who’s speaking, please?” Sullivan asked.

Rachel cringed. That was not at all how she would have started the conversation. She had a pretty good idea of what was coming next and was proven right immediately. Rather than responding, the woman ended the call. She’d been spooked.

“Let me try on my phone,” Rachel said. “Maybe something about getting the call from Molly’s phone made them uneasy for some reason.”

Rachel called the number from her phone, but there was only a single ring before it went to voicemail. She shook her

head and shoved her phone back into her pocket, frustrated.

“We can trace it, then,” Sullivan said, clearly embarrassed at the result. “It shouldn’t take too long, right?”

They headed back inside and as Sullivan made a few calls to the precinct and spoke with officers on the scene to get a trace put in place for Molly Stevens’ phone, Rachel made her way back into the bedroom. She looked to the victim’s neck, the bruises having grown a bit darker. Right down to the finger-like shapes along some of the contours of the bruise, it was perfectly clear this had been a strangulation case. But he also knew that this killer was crafty. No prints had been left behind so far, and no clues other than the single hair that she’d seen on the files in Dr. Willis’s apartment. She would be willing to bet any amount of money that there would be no prints on Dr. Stevens’ neck...or elsewhere within the house for that matter.

No, the only real answers were going to come from more research. And that research needed to start at a very specific place.

Who was Molly Stevens, and what had she been working on?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“So, what time is your appointment today?”

Sullivan asked this question as they pulled through a drive-thru a mile and a half away from Molly Stevens’ house. Neither had had breakfast or coffee yet, and it seemed like a perfect moment to do so as they waited for the trace results of the number they’d called back from Dr. Stevens’ phone.

“Nine thirty. So I need to make sure I’m readily available to leave whatever location we’re at around nine.”

“That’s simple enough.”

Rachel felt like it was the perfect opportunity to express some of what had been on her mind last night—to make sure she wasn’t forcibly inserting herself into the case. “That’s not to say that the case needs to come to a standstill without me. I’m very much aware that I’m the tag-along here, and I can’t help but feel that I sort of butted in.”

“I suppose you did, in a way,” Sullivan said as he pulled the car up through the drive-thru window. “But it was more than welcome. Trust me...my higher-ups are thrilled. You notice no one has called to tell you the rules, right? Whether you want to admit it or not, your name carries some weight even here, all the way on the other side of the country.”

Rachel frowned, not sure how she felt about this. She believed that Sullivan wasn’t feeling put out by her presence, but she hated the idea that there were still some fumes behind

her little brush with fame from nearly seven months ago. Then again, she knew just how long and lingering news items like her ordeal tended to service in the annals of law enforcement.

“Do you mind if I ask a question about your treatments?” Sullivan asked.

“No, that’s fine.” Oddly, she found that she appreciated the interest.

“After the ones you’re undergoing this week... is that it? or will there be more in the future?”

The employee at the window handed them their orders. Sullivan paid, and as they pulled away, with Rachel sorting out the orders and handing Sullivan his coffee and food, she answered as best as she could.

“The hope is that there would be no more treatments at all. And if there *are*, they’d be so far in the future that they’re not even worth worrying about. There will be check-ups and things like that—probably for the rest of my life—but that’s *far* preferable to chemo and constantly worrying.”

“Well, I suppose it does sort of seem like a weird type of fate that this case is going on during the same few days you find yourself in Seattle for your treatments.”

“Yeah, that did sort of work itself out just right, didn’t it?”

Sullivan chuckled, but before he could respond, his phone started ringing. He checked the caller display and said, “This is Officer Stapleton, from the Stevens’ house.”

He took the call, placing it on speaker mode so Rachel could be part of the conversation. “Hey, Stapleton. Be

forewarned...Agent Gift is also on the call, so watch that potty-mouth of yours.”

“Thanks for the heads up. Anyway, look, we traced that phone number. It belongs to a woman named Sherry Calloway. I’ve got an address for her home and her work...and I’ll give you one guess what she does for a living.”

“She’s into anti-aging field as well?”

“She is. In fact, her work history has her working with Adler.”

“And we know for a fact she also knew Molly,” Rachel pointed out. “What’d the work address for her?”

“Looks like she worked at VexoCorp, too. Looks like they deal in some sort of applied medicine and manufacturing stuff.” He recited the address, and Rachel instantly tapped it into her phone.

“Anything else you need from me?” Stapleton asked.

Sullivan looked to Rachel, and she shook her head.

“Nope,” Sullivan said. “That’s perfect. Thanks.”

As soon as he ended the call, Rachel started dissecting things. She felt a brief sense of urgency because she knew she’d have to step away in a few hours to make it to her appointment. “I know it’s early, but by the time we get to this place, it’ll be nearly seven-thirty. And if I’ve learned anything about the doctors in this field, it’s that they’re workaholics. I think heading straight to VexoCorp will save us a trip.”

“Yeah, that could be true. And even if Sherry Calloway isn’t there yet, we can ask anyone else who *is* there about her.

So...lead the way.”

She used the map to guide him, getting a feel for the early morning Seattle traffic as they made their way across town. The drive between Dr. Stevens’ house and VexoCorp was only sixteen minutes but it felt slower to Rachel, knowing there was a killer out there—a killer who’d only had a twenty-minute headstart on them when the first officer had arrived at the Stevens residence.

The VexoCorp building was a nondescript little place that ended up being less than two miles from LaRange Labs. It was in a small business park with several other small buildings tucked away from the highways and streets as if they were all trying their best to remain unseen. All of the buildings had a faded white exterior, a shade Rachel thought might be referred to as eggshell or white smoke. When Sullivan parked at 7:10, there were already nine cars in the parking lot.

“You mind taking the lead on this?” Sullivan asked. “I mean, since you’ve already butted me and all.”

Rachel smiled, as she’d always been a firm believer in using sarcasm as a way to subtly convey comfort between two people. And he’d put the sarcasm on very thick, making sure she knew it wasn’t an actual dig against her.

“Not a problem,” she said. “Based on her message and her reaction to hearing your voice on the phone, I think she’s going to be spooked pretty easily.”

They entered through the front doors and came to a small lobby. There was a desk at the front, but no one was sitting at

it—likely due to the early hour. A small sign stood front and center on the desk. It read: *Please buzz for help.*

Rachel approached the desk and saw a small device that resembled a credit-card reader. There was a large button along the right side and a number-pad on the left. She pressed the button and heard a very faint, electrical buzzing. She and Sullivan stood by for about ten seconds before there was a response of any kind. After that time, there was a soft *beep* and a man's voice came through a hidden speaker on the device.

“Hello?”

“Hi,” Rachel said. “I’m Special Agent Rachel Gift, here with a local detective by the name of Paul Sullivan. We were hoping to speak with Sherry Calloway.”

“Oh...um...okay. A Special Agent? Like with the FBI?”

“That’s right.”

“Would you mind walking over to the camera mounted by the door to your left and showing your badge?”

She did as instructed, eyeing the camera as she made her way over. She supposed the metal door it was installed over led into the labs. She held her badge and ID up to the camera. Sullivan filed in behind her and did the same. A handful of seconds later, there was a dry-sounding click, and the door in front of them opened.

Sullivan pulled it open and allowed Rachel to pass through first. The hallway they stepped into was the same color as the building’s exterior...not quite white, but almost. Unlike the

labs where Dr. Adler had been murdered, there were no large windows allowing passersby to look inside. Instead, there were sleek doors that almost looked like they belonged on a spaceship. As they started down this hallway, one of those doors—two doors down from them—opened up and a man stepped out. He was on the young side, surely no older than thirty, and he looked as if he was trying to hide the fact that he was excited to be receiving a visit from the FBI.

“Sorry about that,” he said as he made his way toward them with a bit of a shuffle to his step. “Security and all, you know.”

“No problem at all,” Rachel said. “Can you please show us where we would find Sherry Calloway?”

“Take a right at the end of this hall. She’s got an office and lab combo sort of thing. The first three doors you’ll come to are hers.”

“She’s in?”

“Yeah. I think she’s been here since six. A lot of folks here either work late or come in early...depends a lot on who they’re collaborating with and where they are in the world.”

Rachel quickly nodded her thanks as she and Sullivan continued down the hall. When they came close to the end, Rachel heard what she thought was murmuring...like two people talking in something almost lighter than a whisper. There was an urgent edge to it, something that caused her to start moving a bit faster.

As she came to the intersection at the end of the hall, she caught the tail end of a comment, and *that* caused her to move even faster.

“..to just tell them I had to leave for a personal reason or some—”

The voice stopped as Rachel came to the intersection. She looked to the left and saw two women speaking in a close huddle, but that last comment came to an end when both women spotted Rachel, and then Sullivan coming in on her heels. Rachel knew one of them was Sherry Calloway at once; her look of guilt and fear was hard to miss. She was quite gorgeous, her blonde hair spilling slightly over her shoulders and her bright blue eyes made somehow more alluring by the fear filling them.

Calloway’s mouth opened and then tried to turn into a smile. Instead, it froze somewhere in between and became a look of shock.

And then she pushed slightly away from the woman she’d been speaking to and ran.

Rachel gave chase without even thinking. And when she heard Sullivan’s footfalls chasing behind her own, she turned her head slightly and said: “I’ve got her. You double back to the parking lot and make sure she doesn’t somehow make it to her car.”

The woman Calloway had been speaking with looked furious for a moment. As Rachel dashed by her, the woman said, “Hey, just what in the hell is this ab—”

But Rachel didn't hear the rest. Her eyes were on Calloway just up ahead, taking a right at the end of the hall and venturing deeper into the building. "Dr. Calloway, we just need to speak with you!" Rachel called out as she ran. "We need you to explain the message you left on Molly Stevens' phone!" She nearly added in the fact that Stevens was now dead, but it didn't seem the sort of thing to reveal to someone in a high-stakes chase.

Besides...why *was* Calloway running? Out of fear, sure. But fear of what? Did she believe herself to be guilty of something? If she wasn't the killer (which Rachel doubted based on the timing of the voice message), perhaps she knew something about a link between the victims. Maybe, she even had a good idea of who the killer was.

All Rachel knew was that innocent people didn't tend to run when the police showed up.

Rachel came to the end of the hall and followed in Calloway's footsteps. Just as she came around the corner, she saw a door to her right slowly closing and heard footsteps fading further away. She dashed to the door and opened it up, revealing a dimly lit stairwell. The footsteps continued to recede further below. Rachel could also hear thin, whisper-like whines coming from the woman—an indication that she was not accustomed to making a run for it

Rachel took the stairs with hurried ease, taking two or three at a time. She was rushing, yes, but there was a practiced restraint to it. And by the time she reached the final flight of concrete stairs that led to a door at the bottom of the stairwell,

she knew she'd catch Calloway before she even made it out of the door.

This turned out to be exactly the case. Rachel came to the bottom of the last stairwell at the same moment Calloway was throwing herself into the door. It pushed open, revealing morning light, but she wasn't able to make it through before Rachel was able to reach out and grab her by the shoulder.

Rachel did her best to stay as gentle as possible as she pulled Sherry Calloway backward and spun her. It was almost like performing a dance move as she spun Calloway around while also making their way through the door. She pinned Calloway against the side of the wall, taking a quick moment to take in their surroundings. They'd come out on the backside of the building, off of a sublevel that looked as if it was used for loading and unloading shipments and equipment.

"Please, no, I'm sorry," Calloway said. "I just...I saw you and freaked out."

"And why is that?" Rachel asked, her hand still pinning Calloway's right shoulder to the side of the building. The woman wasn't fighting to get away, but Rachel still didn't trust her.

"Because they said the FBI was here and...and I feared the worst. The worst about Molly...and not even sure you were really the FBI and—"

"Slow down," Rachel said. "Try to calm down, okay? You're Sherry Calloway, yes?"

"Yes."

“Mrs. Calloway, I’m going to take my hand off of your shoulder, but if you run again, I’m going to lose my patience. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Rachel slowly took her hand away, and Sherry remained still. “This morning, my partner returned a call you’d placed to Molly Stevens and—”

“Oh, thank God.” Calloway seemed to understand that he’d actually said this out loud rather than simply thought it to herself. Her eyes went wide for a moment, but then the same look of frozen terror Rachel had seen on her face inside came back.

“Did you think it was someone else?” Rachel asked.

“I did.”

“From whoever you were referencing in that voice message?”

“Yes. I thought it was the person who was...wait. Hold on. Your partner called on Molly’s phone. Does that mean...my God, is Molly...is she okay?”

“I’m afraid she’s not. She was—”

“He got to her, too?”

“Yes. But Dr. Calloway...we need you to tell us *who*.”

Calloway blinked her eyes rapidly, as if she’d just awoken from a terrible dream. Tears filled the bottoms, and a few spilled out as she did her best to keep control.

“I can, of course, give you time to process this,” Rachel said. “But so far, you seem to be the only real source of information we’ve come across. So as soon as you can tell us anything you know, we can—”

“No,” Calloway said defiantly, angrily wiping away her tears. “No, if I can do anything to help stop this bastard, I want to do it.”

“So then, why did you not come to the cops with information sooner?”

“Because I wasn’t sure. I thought I was losing my mind, maybe just jumping to assumptions.”

“Is there somewhere we go inside to talk?”

Calloway nodded and started for the door again. Frowning and close to crying, she again said: “I’m really very sorry. After Molly didn’t call and I heard that man’s voice on her phone this morning—your partner, apparently—I just freaked out when I heard the FBI was here.”

“I think we can let that slide for now, as long as you’re cooperative from here on out.”

Calloway led Rachel back into the building, but they only went up two flights of stairs as opposed to the three they’d come rushing down. As she followed, Rachel texted Sullivan to let him know she’d stopped Calloway and they were heading somewhere on the first sublevel to talk. His response was immediate and brief: *be there in a second*.

“We can go in here,” Calloway said, heading for the first door she came to along the hallway. Her face was tight, her

eyes still gleamed with tears, and her bottom lip was trembling, but she also seemed determined to make it through the next few minutes before allowing herself to break down.

Calloway opened the door and let Rachel in first. It was a small conference room of sorts, maybe a bit too casual for business. There was an elegant yet small table in the center, a couch along the back wall, and a few chairs around the table. When Calloway flipped the light switch, the room was bathed in a soft, ambient light from overhead.

“I’ll make this as quick as I can,” Rachel said. “In your message, you told Molly to keep an eye out...to be careful. It seemed like you knew something was going to happen.”

“Yeah...the day after Jane Adler died, someone had left a note on my car. It literally just said, ‘*Do you want to join Dr. Adler?*’ And then that night, I would get calls from a blocked number. No one ever said anything on the other end and I tried to call back but it was always a dead line.”

“Were you and Molly close to Jane Adler?”

“Not close, no, but...”

She stopped as the door opened, and Sullivan stepped in. He gave them both a tentative smile, not quite sure what was going on. “We good?” he asked Rachel.

“Yes. She’s telling me why she left such an ominous message on Dr. Stevens’ phone.” She then turned her attention fully back to Calloway and asked: “Did you have any reason to believe that the killer who went after Adler would be coming for you and Dr. Stevens?”

“Not at first. I thought the threats against me were just some sort of sick prank...maybe by one of the interns here at VexoCorp. But when Emma Willis was killed, too...”

“Did all of you ever work together?” Sullivan asked.

“Not closely, no. In fact, I think Dr. Adler ever visited us here a single time. And I only ever had email communications with Dr. Willis.”

“Were you ever working on the same projects?”

“No. Whatever working relationship we all had among one another was research-based. I think we would have eventually needed to get together to sort of join forces, as some of the medicines we’re developing here share a lot of similarities with a few of the stem-cell therapies Willis and Adler were involved with.”

“Dr. Calloway,” Rachel said, “can you think of anyone at all who might have wanted these four women dead?”

“No...no, not at all.”

“Do you still have the note you found on your car?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know if Dr. Stevens ever received those same sort of threats?” Sullivan asked.

“I don’t think so. If she did, she never told me. She *had* seemed pretty nervous ever since Dr. Willis died, though.”

“And what about those calls to your phone?” Rachel asked. “Would you mind if we had a local officer try to track them?”

“Not at all. That’s fine.”

On the word *fine*, Calloway’s voice broke. It was followed by a gasping sob that she’d apparently been holding in ever since Rachel had told her about Dr. Stevens’ death. Quietly and with as much care as she could muster, Rachel said, “We’ll give you some time...”

Slowly, she and Sullivan left the room. With the door closed between them and Sherry Calloway, they could still hear her crying.

“Well, the timing of her call and this genuine show of sadness seems to suggest she’s not the killer at all,” Sullivan said.

Rachel hated dealing in absolutes, but she agreed. And though it felt like just another dead end, Rachel realized they now had a few important details. First of all, of the deceased women had at least communicated with one another in some capacity—all of it having to do with anti-aging or, at the very least, medicines that might assist. And maybe, if they were lucky, they’d catch a break with these blocked calls that had come in to Calloway’s phone.

“You know,” Rachel said, “I think it might be a good idea to have some sort of security detail set up for Dr. Calloway. And I also think it’s time we compile a list of doctors in the area that are working in the field of anti-aging research of any kind.”

“I can make a call for security detail for Calloway,” Sullivan said.

“And I’ll head back upstairs to have a talk with anyone who can get me a list of names we can start trying to keep an eye on.”

It seemed like a simple enough plan, and a good one. But Rachel hated to waste time speaking and doing research when there was very clearly a killer still out there. Throw a looming treatment appointment into the mix and the case truly did start to feel as if it was getting away from them bit by bit.

In fact, looking at her watch, she saw that she stood a good chance of missing her appointment...for a case that wasn’t even hers.

Priorities... she reminded herself. Health. Family. Future...

Still, she found herself irritated by the appointment and couldn’t help but wonder if making sure she had her priorities in order might result in the loss of another life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By the time Rachel had to leave for her appointment, she had a list of four other names from within the Seattle area—the names of doctors who worked in the anti-aging field. Of the four, three were male and only one was female. It made Rachel wonder if the killer was going after the females first because of societal expectations that females were weaker and would, therefore, not put up much of a fight.

She handed the list off to Sullivan before heading to her appointment. He took it along with Calloway's phone to the precinct after making plans to meet at the home of Dr. Calloway's parents as soon as the appointment was over.

At the appointment, Rachel felt almost irresponsible for having her mind so fixated on the case rather than the treatment. It was, though, a testament to just how lackadaisical the treatments were. A single injection, a wait of about twenty minutes, and then five minutes in the MRI machine. After a quick round of questions with her doctors, Rachel was out of the office exactly thirty-six minutes after she'd passed through the doors.

Before heading to the address Sullivan had sent her, she took the time to text both Jack and Grandma Tate back home. She had to keep reminding herself that her responsibilities to her health and to matters back home really should come before a case that had never truly been hers in the first place. The text was brief, but that was exactly what they'd expect from her.

*Third treatment down. Docs say all looks perfectly well.
See you guys in TWO DAYS!*

Sending it, she found that she was homesick. She knew that if this case had been officially assigned to her and Jack, sending them across the country, the feeling wouldn't be quite as bad. But as she typed in the *two days* part, it seemed like an impossibly long amount of time.

Then it's a good thing I've got this case to occupy my time, she thought as she started back out into the city.

She was filled with a strange sort of excitement, a thrill that almost made her feel bad. She knew it was silly, but she almost felt as if she was cheating on Jack. Even if he could not be here with her, maybe she should at least be sharing more details about the case or being more forthright about how much time and mental focus it was taking. She was sure Jack would understand, even though he'd much prefer that she rest up in the hotel room.

She forced herself to shut such thoughts down when she reached the address Sullivan had sent her. She pulled in behind his car, parked in front of a two-story house in a neighborhood that looked remarkably similar to the one where Dr. Molly Stevens had lived. There was also a lone police car there as well, parked just at the lip of their paved driveway. As she made her way up toward the front porch, she felt guilty again—this time for having missed the brutal gut punch of informing these parents that their daughter had been murdered.

At the front door, she knocked softly. She could hear muffled voices and treading footsteps on the other side. Just a

handful of seconds later, the door was opened. A middle-aged policeman greeted her, his face solemn and his lips pulled into a tight, expressionless shape.

Rachel showed her badge and ID, and the cop stepped to the side to allow her in. Without a single word exchanged between them, the cop led her into the house. The front door entered into a wide hallway of sorts. An archway to the right revealed a sitting room that looked to also double as a home office. Further ahead, at the end of the hallway, was a large living room. The sounds of soft speech and the sniffles of a woman crying poured out of the space.

Before they came to the living room, Rachel stepped closer to the cop and whispered: “How long has Detective Sullivan been here?”

“About fifteen minutes,” the cop said.

“Was he the one who broke the news?”

“No, that was me. Easily the worst part of this job, though.”

When they came to the living room, Sullivan waved her in. “Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, this is the agent helping me on the case, Special Agent Rachel Gift. Would you mind if she joined us?”

Rachel observed the parents, both looking to be in their early seventies. The mother looked to be absolutely wrecked, and the father stared blankly at Rachel. It was the father who answered, his voice dry and monotone.

“Of course, that’s fine,” he said.

“Agent Gift,” Sullivan said, “Mr. and Mrs. Stevens have just informed me that Molly had just come out of a serious relationship. Four years, and an engagement. It was quite a dramatic breakup, but she and her former fiancé had mended their bridges and were trying to work on things.”

“I see,” Rachel said. “Had she been married before?”

“No,” the father said. He was a tall, skinny man, and with the shocked expression that seemed to be glued to his face, he looked almost phantom-like. “She had a serious boyfriend through most of college, but they broke things off. I think she dated here and there along the way, but nothing serious.”

“She never had time for a romantic life,” the mother finally said. Her voice was a wave of emotion, and Rachel wasn’t sure if the woman was on the verge of screaming or crying. From the looks of her eyes and her tear-streaked face, she’d already done a bit of the latter. “She was always so fixated on that damned job of hers. Is that why she was killed? Because of her work? Did one of those damned fool protestors take things too far?”

“Sadly, we just don’t know,” Rachel said. “That’s why we’d like to speak with you. We’re trying to learn anything we can about your daughter and any enemies she might have had...or any sort of controversies she might have—”

She was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. The officer who’d met Rachel at the front door went rushing to the front of the house, but before he could make it halfway down the hall, a high-pitched, shrill voice filled the house.

“Mom? Dad?” a woman’s wavering voice said. “Is it...is it true? Molly...is she gone?”

Rachel turned to the sound of pounding feet as a woman of about thirty or so came hurrying down the hall. The policeman stood frozen for a moment, not sure how to respond. But when he saw the broken look on the woman’s face the moment her eyes fell on Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, he stepped aside and let them pass.

Mrs. Stevens let out a wail of despair as she got up and embraced the new arrival. The way they hugged, and the way the father nearly tripped over himself to join into the sorrowful embrace, made it clear that this was another child—Molly Stevens’ sister. Through it all, the cop who was pretty much serving as greeter waved Rachel and Sullivan over into the hallway.

“Look,” he said. “We all know how this goes. I’ll stay here until backup arrives; someone is supposed to be on the way with a grief counselor. You guys go do whatever else you need to do, and when they’re able to talk, I’ll let you know.”

“I appreciate that,” Sullivan said. He pulled his wallet from his pants pocket and fished a business card out. he handed it to the cop and said, “Thanks for your help.”

Rachel followed him out of the Stevens’ house just six minutes after she’d arrived. She didn’t necessarily feel as if it was a waste of time. They’d learned Molly had a former fiancé that, if things continued to stall, could be questioned if it came down to it. And she’d also learned that, just like the other

victims, Dr. Molly Stevens had pretty much been consumed with her work.

“Maybe we can stick around to find out the name of the fiancé,” Sullivan suggested. “That’s certainly a path worth exploring, right?”

“Could be. But we could also get that information from people at VexoCorp. I think we need to go back there, anyway. See if Dr. Stevens had an office there and have a look around.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Maybe we can knock both out, though. How do you feel about heading back over to VexoCorp while I do a deep dive on the fiancé. Maybe I can even get him on the phone or pay him a visit and get some information.”

“That’s fine with me, if that’s what you want. Again...I’m not looking to step on any toes.”

“Hey, if we can wrap this case and catch this killer before another person dies, you can cut off my toes and throw them at me.”

“That’s morbid, Detective,” she said with a chuckle. “But yes, let’s go with that plan.”

When she arrived at the VexoCorp building this time, there was a young redhead stationed at the front desk. Two people were sitting in the small waiting area to the left, both engaged

in reading something on their phones. Rachel approached the desk and showed her ID.

“I was here earlier this morning to speak with Dr. Calloway,” she said, thinking: *that’s putting it mildly*. “Do you know if she’s still here?”

“I don’t believe she is. From what I understand, she was quite upset about the news concerning Dr. Stevens’ death. I assume you’re the agent she referred to?”

“Yes, that would be me. At the risk of sounding uncaring, I wonder if there is any way I might be able to get into Dr. Molly Steven’s office?”

“Yes, I can make that happen. Hold one second, please.”

The redhead picked up the desk phone and punched in an extension. Just a few seconds passed before someone on the other end picked up. The redhead said: “Agent Gift is here and would like to look inside Dr. Stevens’ office.” A pause, and then, “Okay.” She ended the call and pressed a button behind the desk. The same soft buzzing noise Rachel had heard during her first visit sounded out to her left by the metal door that led into the rest of the building.

“You’re good to go,” the redhead said. “Dr. Stevens’ office is down the second hallway on your right. Office 2C.”

“Thanks.”

Rachel made her way to the door and once again found herself in the hallways of VexoCorp. The place was quiet, the only sounds coming from the hum of the HVAC overhead and the soft sound of someone clearing their throat from behind

one of the doors along the hall. Rachel made her way down the hallway, passing by the intersection where she'd given chase to Sherry Calloway earlier in the day.

She found 2C, the door unlocked. She stood in the doorway for a moment, looking in. It was a daunting feeling to look into someone's workspace, knowing that they'd never return to it. While the laptop on the desk may be repurposed and given to someone else, what about the books on the small bookshelf, or the files that were stacked nearly on the edge of the desk? What about the framed pictures and the little unicorn plush that was sitting on top of an unopened package of Post-It notes?

The office itself wasn't very big; there was just enough room to comfortably walk around between the desk, the two chairs on the other side of the desk, and the walls. Everything was neat and clean, the books on the shelves pulled neatly out so that they were perfectly aligned. She eyed the laptop, wondering what sort of answers might be on the hard drive, what her email exchanges between Adler, Willis, and Stevens might have looked like.

She looked through the file folders on the desk, wondering if she might come across the marking that resembled a barcode—the oddity that had, for a while, seemed to link Willis and Adler. But she saw nothing of the sort. In fact, most of the folders were filled with what looked like drafts of product description and how certain medicines interacted with *other* certain medicines.

She then looked at the three different framed photographs that stood at different angles on Dr. Stevens' desk. In one of them, she saw the sister who had come into the parents' house, wrecked by the news of her sister's death. Rachel had hoped to find Willis or Adler in one of the pictures, but they were absent. Apparently, Calloway had been right—that the only communications between the doctors had been in the form of emails.

So then how does the killer know they're linked? she wondered as she continued to look around the office. Or is he literally just picking off everyone associated with anti-aging and stem cell research?

It made her think about the security detail hopefully being in place for Sherry Calloway, and the list that the police were supposed to be putting together of anyone else in the field that could be a potential target for the killer. Maybe that was how they'd end this case—by quietly keeping an eye on those would-be victims and hoping the killer would come without knowing a trap had been set in place.

Because one thing became more and more certain as Rachel slowly backed toward the office door, feeling like this had been a wasted errand. This killer was working fast and seemed to somehow be one step ahead of them. It was clear that he'd planned this out in advance, that he was—

Her phone rang, startling her. She answered it as she remained in the doorway, looking into an office that would never again be used by Molly Stevens. She saw Sullivan's number on her display screen and answered.

“This is Gift.”

“Agent Gift, it’s Sullivan. You, uh...you may want to come down to the station. We got some mail.”

“Mail?”

“Yeah. The killer...he sent some messages, straight to the police department. Nothing of use, really...just taunting us. Still, I figured you might want to take a look.”

A killer that sent messages was both dangerous and foolish. Rachel felt her anxiety swell a bit, sensing that this case was about to hit another level. Because if this maniac was taunting the police force in the midst of his killing spree, it meant he had no fear—that this had become nothing more than a game to him.

True, this boastful action could backfire on him and provide them with more clues and insight into his character.

But it could also mean that he was about to ramp things up...and that this entire sick game could only just be beginning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rachel found the precinct alive with chatter, the pace sounding like a buzzing beehive as she stepped through the front doors. Apparently, the killer's little delivery had gotten everyone on edge. She could feel it in the air as she passed through the station toward Sullivan's office—a tension and borderline anger that was going to make it quite an interesting day for most of these officers.

She found Sullivan in his office, speaking with another man. The badge on this man's chest identified him as Captain Moreno. he stopped mid-sentence when Rachel stepped into the office.

"You're Agent Gift, I take it?" he asked.

"I am."

"Rachel Gift," Sullivan said from behind his desk, "this is Captain Moreno."

"Did you find anything at Stevens' office?" Moreno asked, not interested in formalities.

"No, sir. Nothing."

Moreno slapped his hand down on Sullivan's desk, where a bagged piece of paper sat in the center. "Well, I know I have no rule or reign over you, Agent Gift, but I'd greatly appreciate it if the two of you can wrap this shit up as quickly as possible."

“Yes, I—”

But Moreno was apparently not interested in what she had to say. He gave her a look that wasn't quite angry (it *very* close) and then stormed out, slamming the door closed behind him.

“And *that's* my Captain,” Sullivan said. “I've just been told that I am not to so much as *think* about another case until this one is closed. As if I needed to be told that. Anyway... yes,” he said, nodding toward the plastic bag on his desk. “That's the mail we got from the killer.”

Rachel picked up the evidence bag. The letter consisted of a single sheet of notebook paper. The left side was ridged with tattered spiral tears, indicating it had come out of a spiral notebook. As for the text, it was written in all caps, in exaggerated squared-off shapes. any hope of running any sort of handwriting analysis would be useless. The letter read: *By the time you receive this, I will have killed three. And if you pursue me, I will only work faster. I will not be stopped. These people have no right to play God, to push their deplorable practices on the world. I will stop them here in Seattle, and then I will move elsewhere. If you attempt to stop me, I will kill others as well—innocents who may happen to get in my way. I do not want to do this, but someone has to do it. It must be done.*

“And this came in the standard mail?” Rachel asked.

“Yes. The envelope was placed into another bag and it's currently with forensics.”

“So he had to have mailed this yesterday at some point.”

“Yeah, before three in the afternoon for it to get here this morning.”

“Which means he’s planned this very rigidly. He sent it yesterday, having already claimed he’s taken three lives, even before killing Molly Stevens.”

“I know. Sort of creepy, right?”

She nodded her agreement. “Where are we on that list of other doctors and experts in the field?”

“Already compiled. We’ve got units heading out to speak to all of them. Oh, and better than all of that, one of the people on the list actually offered to assist in any way she could. She said she knew Emma Willis especially well and wants to see this come to an end.”

“You spoke with her?”

“No, the call came in while you and I were out this morning. But Captain Moreno set up a meeting at noon. We’re due to meet with her at her office at the University of Washington School of Medicine. An older lady by the name of Kathy Upton. She’s supposedly an industry expert.”

“And have the others on the list been contacted?”

“All but one: Sophia Ross. She hasn’t answered calls, and when a unit went by her house, no one was home. Last I heard, they’re going by LaRange Labs. We don’t know for sure she works there, but it’s the last place listed on her records as a place of employment.”

“So it seems like she’s the one we really need to focus on.”

“For sure. We already have a few units out looking for her—hunting down friends, family, and co-workers. But for now, you and I need to get ready to head over to the University of Washington. If you want, of course. I’m not keen on bossing around a fed.”

“No, I think that’s the best bet for now. No sense in us just adding to the pool of officers already out on task.”

“Let me grab a coffee and I’ll meet you out back at my car.”

Rachel took her leave, stepping back out into the bustling station. They had one remaining name to check into in the form of Sophia Ross, and an expert who seemed anxious to speak with them. It was a lot to juggle in a short period of time, but Rachel would always be juggling than sitting and twiddling her thumbs.

Phones were ringing, officers were coming and going, and the tension of the moment felt as if it were only growing thicker. She still felt it as she made her way back through the doors and outside, as if the urgency of the case was actually pushing her along, urging her to do whatever she could to bring it to a close.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He picked up the key card badge with Molly Stevens' face on it. She was smiling in the picture, a depiction of a woman who cared for her job and was maybe even happy on every single morning she used this badge to get into work. Holding it and studying it filled him with a sense of pride and accomplishment. It wasn't something he'd felt often in his life, but on the occasions he did experience it, he held on to it desperately.

When he'd started on his mission, he'd been under the impression that the act of murder would torment him—that he may not have the stomach for it. But when he'd managed to not only kill Jane Adler, but also get away with it—all of that had changed. He'd *enjoyed* it. And by the time he'd gone after Emma Willis, he'd been relishing the moment he could take her life as well.

And then there had been Molly Stevens. He'd nearly messed up when he'd gone into her house, almost getting *too* anxious and stepping right up to her front doorstep where he *knew* there was one of those electronic camera-equipped doorbells. He'd opted to strangle her just because, at that point, he'd become familiar enough with the act of taking a life that he wanted to *see* it fade from her eyes.

And after he'd killed her, he'd taken the ID card he'd seen sitting on her kitchen counter.

He'd also taken little souvenirs from Adler and Willis as well. He'd taken an empty vial from Adler's lab, which currently sat in front of him, on his cluttered desk. From Emma Willis's apartment, he'd taken her datebook, which had been sitting among her piles and piles of paper and files.

He observed all of these little trophies as he sat in the murky light of his study. And as he looked them over, he wondered if sending the letter to the police yesterday may have been a mistake. He'd essentially tipped them off, showing his hand—admitting that yes, he was going after any and everyone who had anything to do with stem cell research.

He'd done it because he felt his mission deserved more attention. Yes, there had been news items, both on television and in print (and of course, some of social media as well) but he felt more people needed to know. And not because he cared anything about people knowing about *him*. No...he felt he needed to open more people's eyes to the travesty of the practices taking place in so many of these anti-aging studies and their wretched labs. Not too long ago, the topic of stem-cell research and practices had been a hot-button topic. But somehow it had become commonplace; more than that, it had become widely accepted and even applauded.

Maybe if he could get the topic back into the public mainstream and remind people of its horrors, things could be corrected. And maybe, just maybe, his taunting letter to the police might help to stoke that fire.

He knew who he was going after next. Like all of the others, he'd studied this woman. She wasn't a doctor, but a

researcher and soon to be a co-head of an organization that went to hospitals all around the nation to make sure they were all well-educated on the many different ways stem cells could be used in multiple arenas of medicine. He knew where to strike and had a pretty good idea of how much time he'd have to get away before anyone showed up on the scene. This one would be a bit riskier than the others, mainly because he was going to have to strike in broad daylight. It was just going to be the easiest way to do it...especially if he was trying to wrap up his work here in Seattle in the next few days before moving on.

Could he pull it off in broad daylight, though? Was he really up for such a challenge? What if he messed up and, in his over-confidence, all of his work went to waste?

“What to do...?” he asked the empty room.

But he already knew the answer. There was no way he could turn back now.

Boston was next. There were two hospitals who worked in the same capacity, both pushing hard to really get stem cell therapies and techniques to become much more common. He figured he'd have to spend at least three months on researching those doctors as well, but it would be worth it.

But he couldn't let his prospects of the future derail him. Right now, he had to focus on Seattle. He was nearly done... just three more remaining. He wasn't stupid; he knew it would be harder with each murder because the police presence would just continue to grow by leaps and bounds.

He sat forward at his desk, moving like spilled ink in the shadows of his small office space. The rest of his apartment was quiet and still all around him. He grabbed the binder he'd been putting together—filled with articles he'd found and notes he'd taken. There were timelines and codes, all helping him to get into Adler's lab and Willis's apartment. Milly Steven's had been a bit harder, but one day a few weeks ago, he'd gone to her house and hunted for the spare key. He'd found it beneath a flower pot on the patio...and now it here, in his office, as part of his little collection.

He opened the binder, flipping past the pages concerning the three women he'd already killed. There were two more women and a single man he needed to take care of. Actually, there were more than that in the city, people who had dabbled in stem cell research but had eventually stopped. He supposed they'd seen the error of their ways, so he therefore saw no point in taking their lives.

He turned to his next victim, starting at the picture of her he'd found online. He looked to her daily schedule, though he already knew it by heart. he knew she was next, and the idea that it could happen before nightfall filled him with a pleasure and longing that was almost sexual in nature. Smiling, he then looked back to Molly Stevens' ID and spare key, Jane Adler's stolen vial, and Emma Willis's planner.

He wondered what new souvenir he'd add to his collection next.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rachel felt the slight push of urgency follow her as she and Sullivan left the precinct and drive down the streets leading to the University of Washington School of Medicine. And it was still with her as they walked into the large, modern-looking building where Professor Kathy Upton kept her office.

Upton's office was on the third floor, on one of two hallways that were dedicated to professors and academic counselors. Knowing that they were coming, Upton's door was open when they came to her office. All the same, Sullivan knocked softly in the frame.

"Come in, come in," Upton said.

Kathy Upton looked to be in her late fifties. Though she looked slightly stressed as they greeted her, she offered a bright smile that seemed to shed roughly ten years away from her appearance. She was dressed in a blue button-down and slacks, her black hair straight and ravenlike.

"Thanks for taking the time to speak with us," Sullivan said. They ran through a quick round of introductions as Rachel and Sullivan sat down in the chairs on the opposite side of the desk.

"I'm happy to do it," Upton said. "Though honestly, aside from knowing Dr. Willis and Adler on a passing sort of basis, I don't know how I can help."

“Well, for now,” Rachel said, “it seems like this killer is striking because of the link between the victims—the link of stem cells and anti-aging studies. I know that protests over this sort of thing is pretty common, but we’re trying to determine what sort of person we might be dealing with: some angry zealot who is just taking his beliefs a little too far, or someone who might feel they’ve been somehow wronged because of these studies. Given your expertise in the field, specifically within this area, would you have any opinion on that?”

“Sadly, no,” Upton answered. “I’ve certainly seen my share of those protestors, though. I’ve even had students walk out of my classes whenever I suggest that stem cell research could both revolutionize medicine and save countless lives. We’re already seeing that all around the world. As to what sort of individual would be driven to kill over this sort of thing... all I can come up with is *ignorant* or *misguided*.”

“We now have three victims,” Sullivan said. “Molly Stevens, Jane Adler, and Emma Willis. Were you particularly close to any of them?”

“I knew Emma quite well for a time. When she was working on that project out in Nevada, we would email one another back and forth, just exchanging information and theories. She had me on a few calls while she was over there, just sort of as another brain to pick. But I wouldn’t go so far as to say we were close friends.

“And then, I know I had Jane Adler in one of my classes. I went back and pulled the information up...it was a basic Applied Medicines course from twelve years ago. I don’t

recall much about her other than the fact that she was an amazing student.”

“What’s the community of anti-aging personnel like in the city?” Rachel asked. “It seems like it’s small enough where pretty much everyone is sort of in the same circles, but not *quite* small enough so that everyone knows everyone else.”

“That pretty much nails it. If you were to ask me for someone who knew the most about the use of stem cells in cancer research, I could point you immediately to someone. Well...maybe not now, as Jane Adler was the go-to on that. And I think the same would be the case in any lab or research center in the city. Someone would *at least* always know where to point you.”

“In *your* experience, have you ever come across someone in any of these circles that maybe had a falling out with someone else? Maybe someone who felt the research was going too far or started to have moral struggles with it all?”

“Honestly...I’ve tried and tried to come up with a name, hoping I’d be able to help find this monster. But really, no one comes to mind.” She stopped, hesitated for a moment, and then sighed. She was clearly troubled about something.

“What is it?” Rachel asked.

“Well, there *is* one name...a man who once worked here, actually, at the university. His name is Stanley Cooper. He was essentially the same as me...a professor with a medical license who just preferred the classroom to labs and research centers. But about four years ago—give or take a few months—he had a breakdown of some kind. He didn’t show up to work for

about two weeks, and when he *did*, it was only to go to the board and complain about what we were doing...how we were teaching our students that it was perfectly okay to destroy human embryos. Which, of course, we don't actually state. Naturally, he was terminated right away."

"And was he violent or in any way hostile about it?"

"No, not at all. He expressed his concerns to the board, requested a few meetings with some of the other professors, and that was all. Now, he's sent some articles and emails to several of us ever since that happened. Nothing to tear us down or insulting us, just things like how stem cells are harvested and how there's a conspiracy that pregnant women in third world countries are being kidnapped so their embryos can be harvested for stem cells. It's all nonsense, of course. I blocked him a while back...almost a year and a half ago."

"Has anyone else here at the university had contact with him since he was let go?" Sullivan asked.

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Tell us about him *before* the breakdown. Did you know him well?"

"Fairly well, actually. And he was a stand-up professor. He was married with three kids, but as I understand it, he left his family following the breakdown. Last I heard, his ex-wife had relocated to California and two of his kids went with her."

"And the other one?"

"College. I'm not sure where, though I do know Stanley used to talk about his oldest being obsessed with Harvard. And

look...I know where you're going with this. But I can tell you right now that Stanley Cooper did not do this. To think of him *murdering* women...it's just inconceivable."

"Was it inconceivable that he'd have a breakdown and change his stance on something he'd work for over the course of his career?" Rachel asked, point blank.

Upton tilted her head and sighed again. "No. No, I can't say that I would have ever imagined that."

"Do you know if he still lives around here?" Sullivan asked.

"I'm pretty sure. An old adjunct professor I once worked with claimed they saw him just a few weeks ago. A random pass-by in the street."

"Could you please contact HR and have them pull his last known address/" Rachel asked.

Upton still seemed shaken by the mere idea of Cooper having anything to do with the murders. In fact, a look of guilt had stuck to her face ever since she'd mentioned the man's name. Rachel wondered if she regretted even bringing it up.

"Yes, one second, please."

With that, she picked up the receiver from the phone on her desk and punched in an extension. She looked almost sick to her stomach as she did it, and Rachel momentarily felt bad for her. But in the end, of course, Upton went through with it. Because even she seemed to understand that sometimes the people we *thought* we knew well might very well be capable of the unthinkable. And in the case of Stanley Cooper, the

request she was making to HR might very well help bring a killer to justice.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Stanley Cooper's home was a two-story lake house, a dwelling that would surely look regal and inviting if it had seen a caring hand in the last few years. As it stood, though, most of the lawn was overgrown and the wooden siding looked filthy, coated in grime and dust. The windows were in the same shape; they were clearly filthy, even from a distance of about fifty yards or so. If not for the pickup truck sitting at the end of the driveway, Rachel might have assumed the place had been abandoned.

They'd come to it by a roundabout series of roads that took them alongside Washington Lake, with the huge, towering firs and cedars looming along the sides of the secondary roads.

After taking several turns onto other secondary roads—each getting thinner and thinner, Sullivan finally needed Rachel to start reading out directions. Five minutes later, they were turning into a finely landscaped gravel driveway. It had led down a slight hill and curved around to the left, bringing them to Cooper's residence.

“Man, when smart people have breakdowns, they sure do go very far in the opposite direction, eh?” Sullivan said.

Rachel felt that this was a line of very dangerous thinking and said nothing as Sullivan parked. They got out and walked across a sidewalk that had tall grass and weeds growing up through errant cracks in the surface. They climbed the porch

stairs, and they creaked beneath their weight. Now that they were closer to those grimy window, Rachel found it akin to looking into murky water and not knowing what sort of creatures were swimming just by your ankles.

Rachel had ventured into some creepy houses during her time as an agent, but this one was right at the top of the list. She knocked on the front door and took note of the cobwebs in the corner of the door frame. One of them had trapped a particularly large fly. When several seconds passed without an answer, Sullivan stepped forward as knocked as well.

Rachel waited another twenty seconds and was about to suggest they leave and come back later when she heard shuffling, almost sliding footsteps approaching the door. When it was opened, it was practically flung inward. A man was holding onto it, leaning on the side, as he peered out to his visitors.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Are you Stanley Cooper?”

The man smiled and brushed some long, thinning hair out of his face. “The one and only.”

It took only those few words for Rachel to figure out that he was drunk—at 1:05 in the afternoon. He was somewhat good-looking, maybe pushing fifty. His hair was long and a bit tangly, some of it hanging down into his face. His eyes were dark with a rugged look to them, a fitting match for his thin face and chiseled chin. Several days’ worth of stubble on his cheeks and chin had not yet made a complete beard.

“Mr. Cooper,” Sullivan said, stepping forward and nearly into the doorframe. “I’m Detective Paul Sullivan, and this is Special Agent Rachel Gift. We’d like to have a word with you.”

“Damn! A detective *and* a federal agent! Must be my lucky day.”

“I take it you’ve had a few drinks today, Mr. Cooper?” Sullivan said.

“A few for sure, yeah. Not a crime, is it? I haven’t even left the house!”

“Not a crime at all, sir,” Rachel said, putting on her best cheerful tone. “Now, would you mind inviting us inside?”

Cooper smiled a bit but then seemed to think better of it. “You got a warrant?”

“We don’t need a warrant if we just want to talk.”

“Ah, good point!” He swayed a bit against the door and then sighed. “What are you here to talk about?”

“Well, we were speaking to someone you used to work with about half an hour ago,” Sullivan said. “She gave us your name...thought you could maybe help us out.”

Rachel admired this tactic. The man was clearly drunk, so making him think they were there for some sort of assistance rather than to accuse him or ask pointed questions was absolutely the best way to go.

“And who might that be?”

Rachel spoke up, already sensing that their window of opportunity might be closing. He was interested now and maybe even felt that he was needed. Might as well spring while the iron was hot. Besides...they had no idea how he might respond to a name from his past—especially the name of someone who he believed strongly disagreed with his beliefs and morals.

“Can’t we come in, Mr. Cooper?” she asked. “Just for a second?”

He sighed again and opened the door up wider. “May as well, I suppose. But don’t judge the place too harshly. I haven’t had guests in ages. Haven’t really kept the place in the best shape.”

As he ushered them in, Rachel saw that he wasn’t kidding. The downstairs was mostly one large area; the only part that was excluded from this was the kitchen, which was divided off from the rest of the floor by an L-shaped counter and bar.

“So who mentioned me?” Cooper asked.

He’d not invited them to sit down, but Rachel did so anyway. She sat down on the edge of a large sofa that was cluttered with books and blankets as she answered his question. “Professor Kathy Upton over at the University of Washington.”

The response was immediate. The drunken cheer that had kept him somewhat civil slid right off Cooper’s face like water. “Oh? And what did she have to say about me?”

“Not much, honestly. We were just looking for a name.”

“A name for what?” Cooper had made his way to the kitchen counter, glaring at them from about twelve feet away as he leaned against it. Not only was the cheer gone, but so was the cloud of drunkenness. She could see in his eyes that he was clearly inebriated, but emotion had come to the surface and had, at least for the moment, sobered him up.

“Mr. Cooper,” Sullivan said, “do you know any of the following three women? Emma Willis, Jane Adler, or Molly Stevens?”

Cooper narrowed his eyes. As he absorbed the question, Rachel took a quick glance around the room. She paid the most attention to a stack of books sitting on a long table pressed against the living room wall. There were two large books with several bits of paper sticking out of each one, serving as makeshift bookmarks. A few scattered newspapers and what looked like pamphlets were scattered in a sloppy pile beside it.

“I knew Willis and Adler, yes,” he said. His voice had taken on a low, gravelly sort of tone. “And I also know that they’ve been murdered recently. Is that why you’re here? Did you come to ask how I knew them?”

“Among other things,” Rachel said. “And you don’t know Molly Stevens?”

“The name doesn’t ring a bell.”

“She worked for VexoCorp. She was found strangled in her bedroom this morning.”

She noticed Cooper flinch at the news. With something of a sneer, he said, “Anti-aging?”

“Yes, she was involved in the field. Applied Medicines, to be more specific.”

“Well, I didn’t know her. And I hadn’t’ spoken with Willis or Adler since I was terminated form the university.”

“Professor Upton said you’d emailed her several times after you lost your position,” Sullivan said. “Did you also email Dr. Willis and Dr. Adler?”

Cooper thought about it for a moment and then looked longingly at the bottle of bourbon sitting on the other end of the bar. He walked over to it and poured a large helping into a tumbler beside the bottle. “I believe I may have emailed Willis once or twice. But that’s been years ago.”

Rachel got to her feet and made a point to move toward the books and the stack of papers she’d seen. She saw that one of the pamphlets was from a stem cell center out of Portland, Oregon. She saw that Cooper had placed a Post-It on the bottom, with a name and a phone number written on it.

“What are you doing with your time these days?” Rachel asked.

“Not much, honestly. I’ve worked as an administrator for a few online colleges, basic nursing and medical stuff.”

“And keeping tabs on the spread stem cell clinics and research?” Rachel asked, picking up the pamphlet out of Portland.

“And so what? No one else in this country is keeping those bastards in check.” His tone took an aggressive turn, and as he practically growled the final few words, Sullivan stepped a bit closer to him.

“Mr. Cooper, can you please tell us where you’ve been these last few days? Particularly at night.”

The question baffled Cooper for a moment. He took a long sip from the tumbler of bourbon and set it down with a loud *clink*. “Why? So you can pin the deaths of those women on me?”

“I didn’t say that. We just need to confirm your whereabouts so we can—”

“How dare you?” Cooper roared.

Without any sort of warning at all, he lunged forward. He didn’t quite punch Sullivan, but delivered more of an open-handed strike to the detective’s shoulder. It honestly wasn’t that hard of a strike, but it did send Sullivan back just enough for the back of his knee to strike the edge of the cluttered coffee table. He tottered and started to fall backward.

Rachel didn’t see how his stumble ended, though. She was already halfway across the room, acting instinctively. Cooper was so focused on Sullivan (and it also didn’t help that he was drunk), so he didn’t even notice that Rachel was coming from him until it was too late. She grabbed his still-outstretched right arm and swiveled hard to the right, pulling the arm with her.

Cooper spun in a half-circle and went to the floor with an almost comical yelp that came squeaking out of his mouth. When he hit the floor and Rachel instinctively planted a knee into the small of his back, it occurred to her that she had no handcuffs. Somehow, in the thrill of it all, she'd forgotten that she'd come to Seattle without her sidearm, handcuffs, or any other work accessories.

But Sullivan was there only a moment later, expertly helping Rachel pull Cooper's arms behind his back and cuffing him.

"That was foolish, Mr. Cooper," Sullivan said. "I'd like to think you wouldn't have made the mistake if you weren't drunk but...you just attacked a detective. So you're under arrest."

Sullivan shared a brief glance with Rachel and mouthed *thank you*. She saw embarrassment on his face but ignored it. She was already walking back to the two large books and the stack of papers. The books were recent college textbooks, both geared toward cutting edge medicines. She flipped to the first three bookmarks of paper and saw that each one was holding a place that discussed stem cells.

She saw another little pamphlet underneath them and pulled it out. She held her breath for a moment when she saw that it was a pamphlet for VexoCorp. She moved both books and saw several other pamphlets and brochures. There was another for LaRange Labs. She opened it up, and when she saw the small segment labeled Our Team, everything fell into place.

She dared to believe that, despite Cooper's objections, they'd found their killer.

"Hey, Sullivan?" she said, taking the LaRange brochure over to him, still standing by Cooper, cuffed on the floor.

"What have you got?"

She showed him the brochure, leaving it opened so that he could see what had so distinctly grabbed her attention. He looked at it, did a double-take, and said: "I'll be damned."

In the Our Team section, there were pictures of five employees. One of them was Jane Adler. Her picture had been circled, and a large slash mark had been drawn over it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Somewhere between his lake house and the precinct, Stanley Cooper had apparently sobered up quite a bit. Rachel could still smell the bourbon on him as they escorted him into the back of the station where the interrogation rooms were located, but he was walking perfectly fine. He'd only made a few pleas of his innocence during the drive but had apparently decided shutting up would be his best course of action.

He'd been quiet for over ten minutes when he sat down to the table in the interrogation room and broke his silent streak. "Please," he said. "Is there any way I can get some water and a cup of coffee?"

One of the officers who'd assisted in getting Cooper into the building gave an obedient nod and went off in search of these two items. He closed the door behind him, leaving just Rachel, Sullivan, and Stanley Cooper in the room.

"You know why we came to see you," Rachel said. "And I assume by now you realize what a mistake it was to lash out the way you did. So I want you to start talking first. Maybe start with the collection of brochures and pamphlets...with why Dr. Jane Adler's face had a slash through it."

Cooper sighed and did his best to hold steady eye contact with her. "I'm not an idiot...I know what that looks like. There's a slash through her face because I was eliminating her from a list of doctors and researchers I've been compiling."

“Why was she eliminated?” Rachel asked.

“Because after I read up on her newest developments, I found out that she’s been leaning more toward the medicine side of things...how to help patients better respond to stem cell treatments rather than actually handling and administering the stem cells herself.”

“And you were looking for people that were directly administering them?”

“Administering, harvesting, actively seeking them out.”

“And what did you plan to do once you had this list compiled?” Sullivan asked.

“I’ve been working on a research paper these past few months. I was originally going to write a book on the topic, but it quickly became apparent that there was no market for it. Whenever I had the paper finalized, I was going to send copies of it to everyone on that list.”

“How many names are currently on it?”

“About twenty. Maybe a few more.”

Before the questioning could continue, the cop came into the room with a plastic bottle of water and a Styrofoam cup of coffee. He set them down in front of Cooper and left right away. Cooper lifted his hands, the cuffs rattling, and said: “Any chance these can come off?”

“No,” Sullivan said.

Frowning and still clearly rattled, Cooper reached for the water first and worked carefully to bring it to his mouth. As he

drank some of it down, Rachel went on with the questioning.

“Right now, you’re cuffed and in an interrogation room because you shoved an officer when we approached you to ask questions about a series of murders. One of the women who has been murdered was in a brochure you had, and you had *crossed out her face*. You understand how this looks, right?”

“Yes.” He was no longer holding eye contact, and the response once again came out as a growl.

“So, are you ready to tell us where you’ve been the last few nights?”

“Nowhere. Just at home. I went into town on Wednesday night to buy a bottle of bourbon and grab some groceries, but that’s it.”

“So you’ve just been at home?” Sullivan asked.

“Yes.”

“Any way you can prove that?”

Cooper thought rather hard about it, going quiet for roughly fifteen seconds. When he finally managed to meet their eyes again, he shook his head. “No.”

“Well, if you don’t have an alibi,” Sullivan said, “your stay here is going to be a bit longer than you’d hoped.”

“I’m not exactly a very social person,” Cooper spat. “I can show you my credit card transaction for the booze and groceries, but that’s about it. But you know...I’ll stay here for as long as you need me to because all you’re going to find out is that I did *not* kill those women.” Sneering, he added: “I’m

no murderer. I changed my tune on stem cell research because I wanted to *spare* life, not *take* it.”

Rachel knew this was a polarizing argument, and though she had thoughts of her own on the matter, now was not the time to share them. Although, as his final comment rattled around in her brain, she approached the table and looked down at him, trying to pull some care and sincerity into her eyes.

“Will you try to be cooperative with us if we can work towards proving you *aren't* the killer?”

“Of course,” he said, though there was still some venom in his voice.

“Well then let me share this with you. If you stay here and the theory is pushed that you're the killer and are just lying to us about why you'd have Adler's face crossed out, we'd end up searching your home. That's going to happen one way or the other. But this research paper of yours...did you send emails to other experts in the field?”

“Yes.”

“And were there arguments?”

“Some. Most just ignored me, it seems. Why?”

“Let me get a head start. Let me have a look at your laptop—at your inbox, at your research, and the paper itself. Would there be things there that might help clear you?”

He seemed almost excited for a moment, but it was quickly replaced by disappointment. “I honestly don't know. But if you think it might help, you're free to it all.”

Rachel took out her phone and said, “What passwords will I need to get to everything? And where can I find the paper?”

“Are you for real?”

“Yes. If you aren’t who we’re looking for, I don’t see the point in wasting this much time. So if you want to show you’re ready to cooperate, you can give me these things, right?”

She eyed Sullivan for just a moment, and he looked completely confused by this sudden approach—maybe even a little irritated.

“Fine, then,” Cooper said. He then gave Rachel two passwords, which she typed into her phone. One to log into his computer and another to sign into his email account.

When she had the information typed in, she nodded her quick thanks and then looked to the door. “Detective Sullivan, can I see you in the hallway for a moment?”

Sullivan shrugged, and they both left the room. Rachel closed the door behind them and took a few steps away. “Sorry to pull that without talking it over first, but I think it does tell us some very important things.”

“Like what?”

“Like he’s fine with knowing that I’m about to snoop around his house. Also, let’s be honest...he was drunk at 1:30 in the afternoon. That’s not exactly the sort of determination and focus a man who had killed three people in a week is going to have.”

“So you don’t think it’s him? not even after he attacked me and after we found the brochure with Adler in it?”

“I won’t rule him out, but I think it’s ridiculous to stop looking because he *sort of* fits what we’re looking for.”

“Fine, okay...I’ll give you that. So, you’re really going to go looking through all of that stuff?”

“Might as well. How long would we be looking at if we waited for official channels?”

He sighed and said, “Good point. So...do you want me to come along?”

“Actually, if you don’t mind me making a request...”

“Go ahead, Gift,” he said with a smile. “It’s my field, sure, but you’re still just a tier or two higher than me up the ladder.”

“Why don’t you make a call to the coroner? Get an estimate on the size of the hands that choked Molly Stevens. Then get a measurement on Cooper...see if they’re similar.”

Sullivan smiled at the idea and then shook his head, as if disappointed in himself that he hadn’t thought of it first. “I can get that done, yeah. You want to call me if you find anything over at Cooper’s place?”

“Yeah...same for you if you get a yay or nay on the hand measurements.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Sullivan said.

With the ghost of that smile still on his face, he walked back into the interrogation room. Rachel, feeling a familiar stirring of urgency, hurried back to the front of the building. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she felt that she was rushing against the clock. Because one way or another,

tomorrow was her final treatment and her flight for home left tomorrow at one in the afternoon.

Sure, she wanted this killer caught as soon as possible—assuming that it wasn't truly Stanley Cooper—but she also wanted to close it before she left. It wasn't anything about making sure her name was tagged to a closed case on the other side of the country, but simply needing to know all loose ends were closed before she got on that plane tomorrow.

So, with that imagined clock ticking away in her head, Rachel hurried out to her car and once again found herself heading back to the lake.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Sophia Ross was beginning to really hate this new schedule she'd committed herself to. For the past three months, she'd woken up at 3:30 so that she could be at work by five, one of the first in the labs. Usually, she was out by 1:00, and she'd then go home and join two Zoom meetings to go over new research and developments. She hadn't been getting much sleep as of late, but work so going very well so she supposed it was worth it. Also knowing that she and her boyfriend would be taking an Alaskan cruise in two months was a huge bonus as well.

Currently, it was 2:12, and she was running rather late. She'd already let her collaborators know that she wasn't going to make the 2:30 meeting. She hated to miss it; there was such a feeling of progress in regards to an approach she'd been assisting with for about four months now—an approach they hoped to be able to test in lab environments within just another few months.

Her thoughts shifted from the Zoom meeting to Derik, her boyfriend. They were supposed to do dinner and a movie tonight, but she was tired and wasn't sure she had it in her. Even if this new schedule *did* make her more productive, it was leaving her absolutely exhausted by four in the afternoon. She was going to have to see what she could do to switch things up when she and her boyfriend got back from the cruise.

Currently, she was walking through the breezeway between the back of a little research center situated at the back of the learning labs at a cancer research clinic a mile and a half away from Seattle General. She worked three days a week, spending the other two analyzing research from home for several different North American research centers. She and Derik lived together and he, too, worked from home as a software engineer. It was a cozy little life they'd garnered for themselves, and she was starting to wonder if Derik might propose on their cruise. While they were living rather blissfully as it was (aside from being tired all the damned time), having that commitment from him would seal the deal.

As she came out of the breezeway, she reached for her cellphone but then rolled her eyes at herself. Somehow, she never got used to not having her phone on her. On the days she worked at the learning labs, she always left her personal phone in her car. If she expected recently graduated college students to give her their undivided attention and keep their phones stowed away, she knew she needed to do the same. So to make it easier, her personal phone stayed in her car—though she did have a secondary one the school paid for tucked away in a drawer in her desk in the event of emergencies.

The breezeway emptied out into a set of stairs that led down to the parking garage. It was still rather crowded, and she thought she might just manage to miss the traffic after all. She knew she was running late, but she figured she still had an hour or so before—

She caught the movement from her right at the last possible moment. Someone lunging at her, a man with a dark

face...no, not a dark face, a dark *mask*. A cliched ski mask, of all things. She paused for a single moment, her heart starting to slam in her chest, but then his hand was on her shoulder. She opened her mouth to scream, but a fist came sailing at her face. It struck her right in the nose and mouth, cutting off her scream for help.

Sparks of darkness erupted in her vision, and she then felt the man's other hand close around the back of her neck. She understood what he was doing at once, but the realization didn't properly have time to sink in. He shoved her head hard into the roof of the nearest car, and the world went hazy with pain and a sickening *thud*.

She wobbled backward, the sark sparks evolving into a curtain. And the last thing Sophia Ross saw before he blacked out completely was a smile among the scant opening in the mask. It was perhaps the worst thing she could see before the darkness claimed her.

She'd been late. She'd been almost an hour late coming out of the building and into the breezeway, and it had pissed him off. It had made him nervous. And in that hour, as he stewed and waited in his own car, his need to kill her grew. It grew into some poisonous, rotten thing, and he'd ended up changing his plan.

He'd brought a knife—the same knife he'd intended to use on Emma Willis before she fell out of the window. He'd planned to just jab it into Sophia's heart a few times and leave her bleeding in the parking garage. But that was when he'd thought things would be the same as every other day he'd followed her to this building, to the learning center. With so much uncertainty mingled with the still-growing desire to kill her, he'd shifted. He wanted to watch her suffer...to watch her squirm the way she was making him squirm.

He wanted to hear her beg. He wanted to hear her explain to him why she found it perfectly acceptable to take stem cells from human embryos. He wanted to watch her suddenly change her opinion when her life hung in the balance.

So he'd knocked her out, and now, with her body limp in the back seat of his car, he could only hope he'd not be pulled over. So he kept to the speed limit and avoided all busy intersections. And as he closed in on his home, the smile he'd felt on his face while he'd slammed her head against the car started to come back.

He was already coming up with ways to make her hurt...to make her scream.

Just a week ago, this had all been simply about proving a point and getting an important topic in the headlines again. But now something had changed inside of him and he was going to see just how far he was willing to go as he took Sophia Ross home and further prove his point.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

With no one home, Staley Cooper's residence was eerily quiet. It had the feel of a house that had been abandoned for years despite all the evidence to the contrary. It simply felt *stale*. Rachel felt like a true intruder as she made her way across the house and sat down at Cooper's workspace.

She wasted no time and instantly used the first password Cooper had given her to unlock the laptop. She found the home screen practically empty, with just a few random icons littering it. She opened up the browser and logged into his personal email account. It almost felt too easy, and it was yet again a further inclination that it wasn't likely Cooper was the man they were looking for.

When she opened up his inbox, she saw just how organized Cooper was. It took some searching, but she soon found that he had folders for each of the people he'd interviewed for his paper. There were twenty-three in all. With just some random clicking and searching, she ascertained that some of the messages went as far back as two years, while others had come in as recently as three weeks ago. The folders appeared to be in alphabetical order.

She started looking at the dialogues from the very top of his saved folders. The first folder consisted of three emails from a specialist in stem cell research out of London. The conversation consisted of Cooper asking the specialist for numbers pertaining to research conducted three years prior. He

got a response two days later with a few attachments. The next folder was a bit more interesting. It took her a few mails into an exchange that consisted of a dozen to understand that this person was a former recipient of stem cells. She had only glowing things to say and seemed to get defensive when Cooper suggested there could be downsides. The patient did admit that she'd suffered from serious hemorrhages and her doctors had issues trying to raise her blood platelet count afterwards. The exchange ended in a few short exchanges, and even in reading them, Rachel could sense the tension.

As she made her way through the third folder—a lengthy exchange from a doctor out of Chicago—she understood that this process could go on for quite a while. Instead of scanning each folder, she read the name of each folder to see if she recognized any names. After all, she *had* heard a collection of names over the past few days; if she could link them to Cooper's research and paper, that might go a long way to finding some answers.

She read through all of them, beginning to wonder if she'd made a mistake. Maybe Cooper *was* their guy. Maybe she was trying too hard, looking for shadows that weren't there while the killer was already in an interrogation room.

But then she saw one name out of the group that she recognized. It was second to last on the alphabetized list.

Carl Webber.

She clicked on it instantly as her mind drew up the scene at Carl Webber's run-down apartment. She also recalled how looking at the save dates on his freelance work had made her

doubt he could be the killer...but how it had not ruled him out completely.

There were nine emails in the folder, and two of them consisted of rather lengthy exchanges. In Webber, Stanley Cooper had found someone who felt just as strongly as he did about his objections to stem cell research. More than that, both men had actually once been a part of the field, which made them even more sympathetic.

Within the first few mails, she found out that though the men had been aware of one another, they'd only met a single time. The exchanges began with Cooper reaching out to Webber and presenting the gist of his research paper with him. He addressed his passionate concerns about the use of stem cells, mainly how dangerous and immoral it seemed to be growing now that it wasn't considered nearly as controversial a topic as it had once been. Rachel read back and forth between the men as they shared these same views and concerns.

But it was near the end of the list of mails that things seemed to take a turn. It was Cooper who first suggested that they meet up, maybe over dinner or a few beers. And based on how the follow-up mails went, she assumed they had indeed met up...maybe even several times. While this seemed promising enough, there was one particular email that sent a chill through her—a sort of instinctual red lag rising up and flapping in a breeze of suspicion.

You know, Webber had written eight months ago, I can take you to the old research center and show you around. I sneak

down there sometimes just to remember it all, as sick as that may sound. It started by hoping there might be some paperwork or data left over, something left behind from the move to the bigger facility over at VexoCorp. There's nothing, but it does help clear my head in a way that I never expected. I do my best thinking there.

Cooper's response had come a day later, and they'd agreed to meet at the old research center (wherever that was) and have a few drinks.

It was just as the reality of what this might mean began to sink in that Rachel's phone rang. It startled her badly, and she had to clamp her lips together to keep from screaming out. She pulled it out of her pocket and saw that it was Sullivan calling. She answered it right away, her eyes trailing back to the emails.

"This is Gift."

"Hey, Gift. Look...it seems like Cooper may not be our guys after all. Based on what the coroner said—and then even with a call to forensics to get their opinion, too—the hand shape on Molly Steven's neck is too large to be Stanley Cooper's. Even an untrained set of eyes like mine could see it. The fingers are too thick...too long, too. Not by much, but I think it might be enough to prove his innocence."

Though she hadn't been quite sold on Stanley Cooper being their killer, Rachel still felt a sting of disappointment. "Thanks for looking into that. And you know, I think I may have found something, too."

"Yeah, what's that?"

“I’m looking through these emails and there’s a pretty long string of communication with Carl Webber. And it’s getting juicy. I assume you aren’t in the interrogation room with him right now, are you?”

“No. But I can be.”

“Yeah, I’d like to speak with him.”

“One second...”

She could hear Sullivan moving and then the sound of a door opening and closing. This was followed by Sullivan’s muffled voice and something being slid around—maybe a chair. She then heard Sullivan’s voice again, much clearer this time, as he said: “Okay, Gift. I’m sitting here with Cooper, and you’re on speaker mode.”

“Good. Mr. Cooper, I’m looking at a thread of emails between you and Carl Webber. Webber is someone we spoke with earlier in the case. He had alibis that were good, but not quite airtight. I need you to tell me about anything that was discussed when you met in person that you would consider strange, or a red flag.”

“Webber? Yeah, he’s an interesting one. He did provide me with a lot of information for the paper, though. He’s passionate to the point of being nearly obsessed.”

“About what, exactly?” Rachel asked.

“Making sure the public sees the immoral side to stem cells and how they’re procured. He’s brilliant but...I don’t know. Sort of creepy if you get right down to it.”

“Did the two of you have some sort of falling out?”

“No, not at all. But I did want to sort of stay away from him after a while. He was getting too chummy. I made the mistake of venturing out to this old research center he used to work at, and after that...I don't know. It's like he thought that made us best friends or something. So in the end, just to distance myself from him, I lied to him and told him I was all set. He reached out a few more times, but I sort of pushed him off...said I was too busy or made promises to get back in touch with him. But I have to actually had an exchange with him in about—”

“About eight months, from the looks of your emails,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, that's right.”

“So tell me about this place...this research center. The emails say it was somewhere he went to think clearly.”

Cooper chuckled in a nervous manner and sighed. “That place was creepy as hell. It's this small building in one of those old business parks that sort of fell apart a few years ago. I don't know the full story, but I think a lot of the folks that are now doing research for VexoCorp came out of that center. And there were people like Webber and Dr. Willis, too.”

“And do you happen to know anything about the project Webber, Ellis, and Adler were working on out in Nevada, at Grayson Labs?”

“No. I mean, I know *about* it, and I know that they were all on some sort of superstar team, but I don't know any of the specifics. I have the bare bones of it all in my paper, though.”

Rachel took a moment to think it all through, and found her thoughts coming back to the research center Webber apparently went to from time to time. She wasn't so bold as to think it might be the key to everything, but something about it did seem slightly off.

“Tell me about this research center.”

“It's a bit outside of the University District. Like I said, it's inside of those business parks that never quite caught on. A few abandoned buildings, but a few factories. I think there's some sort of bottle manufacturer back in there somewhere. But this was a smaller building, just a front area and several offices with a single, big conference room. But everything was moved out years ago, and I guess the developer and landlord just let it go to pot. But yeah, Webber told me he goes there sometimes to just get out of his shithole apartment. He uses it as a sort of clubhouse, I think. A really sad mancave that—”

“Do you know the address?”

“I don't but—”

Sullivan interrupted, and she could hear a slow, building excitement in his voice. “I know where it is...or, rather, I know where that bottle manufacturing plant is. You want to meet me over there?”

“Yes.”

“Hold on, and I'll get the address and send it to you.”

“Sounds good,” Rachel said, already standing up from Stanley Cooper's laptop and heading for the front door.

She didn't know the city well, and she wasn't sure where she was headed, but she suddenly started to feel that things were rolling in the right direction. She hated to retread her steps by looking into a suspect they'd already dismissed, but the case seemed to be pointing them that way. It would be a waste of time to beat herself up about letting Webber go so easily; she knew there had been enough evidence not to make an arrest when they'd first spoken to him. To sit on mistakes and dissect them now would waste time and effort. She had to focus on moving forward...and right now, forward seemed to be in the direction of an abandoned research office.

When she reached her car, her phone dinged at her as Sullivan sent her the address. She punched it into her maps app, and when she pulled out of Webber's driveway, she did so with such speed that she kicked up gravel and dust behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The thrill of the new lead she'd stumbled across had her breaking the speed limit in a city she wasn't familiar with—which added its own extra spark of energy. According to her map, Webber's old research center was twenty-three minutes away from Cooper's house. She figured Sullivan would likely get there before she did, and she was okay with that. She had no idea if this would pan out to anything, but she *was* very interested in this huge new piece to a former suspect—something Webber had not even alluded to when they'd first spoken to him. She couldn't help but wonder if Jack might have picked up on something if he'd been on the case. Not to discredit Sullivan in any way, but Jack had always had a knack for finding trails others might overlook. She sometimes thought of him as a sort of bloodhound for that sort of thing.

But Jack wasn't with her. And as she came to the business center, she truly started to feel his absence. Knowing that she'd been reunited with him and her family tomorrow night brought her an incredible little tingle of joy, but it also reminded her that she was running out of time to help with this case.

She passed by the bottling factory, still speeding. It was the first of several buildings inside the Gafferty-King Business Park. But after this large warehouse-style building, she saw several other buildings that fit the description Cooper had given them for the research center. There appeared to be

nothing wrong with the buildings from the outside, but the parking lots and grimy windows made it clear that most of them had not been used in quite some time.

The research center sat on the left side of a large cul-de-sac. Cooper had described the size well; it wasn't large at all. The parking lot wrapped around the front and right side of the building, allowing room for about a dozen cars or so. The neighboring building sat about fifty feet away, separated by a strip of overgrown grass and dead shrubs.

There was no sign of Sullivan's car, but there was an old Toyota Corolla parked near the back of the right side of the parking lot. It was an old car and not in the best shape, so it was impossible to tell if it had been parked recently or had been here for a while, abandoned just as long as the building.

She parked her car beside the Corolla and took note of the inspection sticker in the window. According to the year on the sticker, the car was apparently a new addition to the lot—at least by a few months. She stepped out of the car and looked to the back of the building. Abandoned or not, she figured the easiest entry would be at the back. She assumed the front would be locked; the back should be, too, but years of experience in searching buildings like this told her that at some point, loiterers or the homeless were far more likely to break into a place like this through the back, leaving the door and lock useless afterwards.

She spotted the back door, a sturdy metal number that did indeed show signs of someone having pried it open in the past. *Maybe Webber*, she thought. As she made her way to the door,

she received a text. Her phone buzzed in her pocket but this time it wasn't quite as startling. It was a text from Sullivan that read: *I'm about five minutes away.*

She quickly responded with: *Already here.* She then pocketed her phone and grabbed the knob of the back door. As she'd suspected, the lock was busted. She did have to give it a tug to free it from the frame, but it came open right away with a slight squeal. She pulled it fully open and stepped inside.

She heard the sounds of whimpering right away.

Rachel reached for her Glock but went still when she realized she didn't have it. And why would she? She'd only brought her badge and ID for flight and rental car purposes; this wasn't designed to be a work trip. She knew the smart move would be to back out and wait for Sullivan to arrive. But even as she understood this, she heard the whimpering sound again, this time punctuated with a stifled female voice.

"Please...no..."

If Rachel retreated, she'd have no idea what was wrong with the woman. And she knew she couldn't call out to her because there might be someone else. Maybe the killer... maybe Webber.

With her nerves pinched tight and every sense on high alert, Rachel made her way further into the building. The back door had entered onto a hallway that led to the front of the building. She could just barely make out the dusty sunlight coming through one of the windows up front. Along the hallway, there were four rooms—two on each side and a secondary hallway just ahead to her right.

But the whimpering and the woman's voice had come from the first room up ahead on her left. And as she took another step toward it, she heard just how loud every single footstep with this empty, silent building seemed. If the killer was indeed here, they probably already knew they had company.

Rachel glanced around madly, looking for something—*anything* to use for a weapon but there was nothing. The place had been cleaned thoroughly when the center was its employees were relocated. So as she approached the doorway, she could do nothing more than ball her hands into fists and push her weight down into her claws just in case she needed to deliver a punch the moment she turned into the room.

She steeled herself and did just that. Her forearms drew tight, ready to fight. But there was only one person in the room, and they clearly weren't prepared for a fight. There was a woman sitting in the corner. Her face was bloodied and her hands were tied behind her back. Some of the blood from her face had matted in her dark hair at her brow. Fresh blood had trickled onto the old carpet, and there were streams of it running down the woman's arm. The woman looked up to Rachel with wide eyes—eyes that were blackened and bruised. There was a cloth gag around her mouth, which explained why she whimpers and her voice had been so muffled. She—

A prickle ran up Rachel's spine, the hairs at the back of her neck standing on end. She turned around just in time to see a man lunging at her. She sidestepped the lunge and as she did, in a blur of motion she just barely had time to register that the man had a knife. As she regained her feet and planted them

firmly along the floor, she also saw that the man was indeed Carl Webber.

Furious and loaded with adrenaline, Rachel was finally able to deliver the right-handed jab she'd had coiled up for the past ten seconds or so. But at the same time, Webber lashed out blindly with his knife. The blade caught Rachel across the top of her wrist, taking away a good amount of the force behind the punch. Still, it landed, and when it did, blood from her wrist speckled Rachel's hand.

She drew her hand away, terrified that he'd cut deep right across an artery. Her blood was thrumming, positively spilling out of the wound. Webber took advantage of the situation and lashed out again, this time aiming for her stomach. He was wiry and quick, but he was also essentially telegraphing each attack. Rachel was not only able to dodge it, but she grabbed his right arm and twisted it hard and she fell to her knees and slammed Webber down to the floor. He reached out and grabbed her, carrying him with her, the blade of the knife nearly lashing into her face. She immediately lifted her left arm up to drive the elbow into his back but when she did, she realized she'd perhaps hit the floor too hard. Something flared up in pain in her side—a rib, she thought.

Still, she couldn't waste any time. Screaming through the pain, she nailed him right between the shoulder blades with her elbow. When he yelled out in pain, Rachel reached out for the knife. Her left side once again roared in pain, and she was now fairly certain she'd cracked a rib when he'd pulled her down to the floor. She managed to grab his wrist with both hands and twisted hard, twisting his wrist back. He cried out,

his hand instantly dropping the knife. But at the same time, with both of Rachel's hands centered on his wrists, he attacked in a desperate sort of frenzy, trying to get out from under her. His head rocked back, the back of his skull slamming into her chin.

She heard her teeth clink together, and little flares of light went spiraling across her vision. Stunned for a moment, she rolled away as Webber clamored for the knife. He grabbed it and tried staggering to his feet while Rachel did her best to clear the fuzz out of her head from Webber's haphazard headbutt. She knew she was in danger—that if she couldn't clear the cobwebs, he was going to plant that knife right into her. When he came at her, he looked like a ghost, wavering in and out, blurry one moment and then startlingly clear the next. She had to time her attack right, had to look past the pain in her ribs and—

A third figure came sailing through the door. It slammed hard into Webber, and both figures went to the ground in a hard heap. Blinking back the last of the shock, Rachel saw that it was Sullivan; he'd tackled Webber in a brutal fashion, currently pinning him to the floor with a forearm across Webber's neck and a knee in his gut. Webber screamed defiantly, but there wasn't much fight left in him. The knife he'd brandished was on the floor several feet away from him, dropped in the scuffle.

Sullivan looked back to Rachel with alarm and worry in his eyes. "You're bleeding like crazy."

"I know," Rachel said.

But she was already walking over to the woman on legs that she didn't quite trust yet. And with every step, her left side flared up. She removed the gag from the woman's mouth and noticed that this poor woman had taken quite a beating. Her nose was broken, her upper lip was busted open, and there were cut marks all along her arms. It appeared as if Webber had been torturing her.

"What's your name?" Rachel asked.

"S...Sophia Ross..." she said in deep, hitching breaths.

She's the one they had trouble getting in touch with, Rachel thought. "I can see some of the things he's done to you, but is there anything else? Anything internal?"

"No...no, he..."

"It's okay, Ms. Ross," Rachel said, digging her phone out of her pocket. "I'm going to get you some help." As she dialed 9-1-1, she said: "Do you know who this man is?"

"He said he used to work with stem cells. Webber... something Webber. No...I didn't know him before today, and I...I..."

She was going to hyperventilate if she didn't calm down, so Rachel simply shook her head and rested her right arm on the woman's knee. "It's okay. You just focus on your breathing for right now, okay?"

As the 9-1-1 operator picked up, Rachel used the gag that had been around Sophia's mouth to stem the flow of blood from her own arm. And as she gave the operator her badge

number and location, she looked over to see Sullivan slapping a set of handcuffs on Webber.

“We got the bastard,” Sullivan said with a timid smile on his face.

Rachel nodded, and couldn't help but think of poor Molly Stevens...a woman who might still be alive if they'd not dismissed Carl Webber earlier.

The four of them remained in the room until help arrived. Rachel unbound Sophia's arms from behind her back and, with a first aid kit in the back of Sullivan's car, tended to Sophia's wounds before then focusing on her own. By the time she'd managed to wipe the blood off of her arm and get the cut to stop bleeding, the sound of ambulance sirens filled the business park. Looking around the room, Rachel found herself nearly on the brink of tears, not quite sure how she was going to explain her wounds to Jack. Because even with a captured killer on the floor in front of her, she couldn't help but feel that she'd been very irresponsible.

Oh yeah, she thought. Even after all of this, I have another appointment tomorrow. It was almost funny enough to draw a laugh out of her, but she swallowed it down and sat there, grimacing at the pain in her side, as paramedics began to come in through the back of the building.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

She waited until after she'd received her stitches before calling Jack. The cut to her right arm had not nicked at the artery as she'd feared, but it had still been quite deep. Thirteen stitches and a wrap had taken care of it. As for her ribs, X-rays revealed that she had in fact cracked one. The doctor had warned her to expect a very uncomfortable flight back home the following day, but she was fine with that. As selfish as it made her feel, with the case now closed and Carl Webber in custody, she couldn't wait to get back home.

She was in the hospital for a grand total of four hours, receiving updates through several texts and calls from Sullivan. He'd also informed her that Sophia Ross was going to come out of it all with just a broken nose, a fractured wrist, and a few bandages. None of the cuts to her arms had been major. According to what she'd told police, he'd simply cut enough to make her bleed, yelling another about her work with stem cells with each slice into her flesh.

It was 8:02 when she got the all-clear to leave the hospital. She booked an Uber to take her back to the hotel, as Sullivan had already had someone on the force retrieve her car from the old research center; it was currently waiting at the precinct. When she stepped out of the Uber and walked toward the hotel, Rachel found herself in a strange little whirlwind of emotion. She dreaded letting Jack know what she'd done today—how dangerous the situation had become. But on the

other hand, she badly wanted to speak to him. And she wants to speak with Paige even more. If she could keep it together and Paige would allow it, she even thought she'd volunteer to read something over the phone in a way they'd done in the past—where she would find a poem or funny story online and read it to Paige as she settled in for bed.

First, though, a shower and some dinner. It was taking some time to get accustomed to the three-hour difference for the phone call schedule, so she didn't realize she still had about two hours before Paige's bedtime. She was so wrapped up in all of this while also still processing the events of the day that she didn't see the familiar face waiting for her in the hotel lobby until they called after her.

“Agent Gift!”

She stopped on her way to the elevators and saw Detective Sullivan walking over to her from a chair near the lounge. Despite the smile on his face, he looked tired and just about as ready for a shower and bed as she was.

“Hello, detective. Shouldn't you be interrogating a certain someone right about now?”

“Already done. He confessed to everything. That's why I thought I'd come down. I thought you'd want to know. And I figured it was the sort of thing you should hear in person. But when I called to ask the hospital about visiting hours, they said you'd already left anyway. So...here I am.”

“So he confessed?”

“Yeah. Because he’s proud of what he’d done. He’s hoping the headlines will open people’s eyes to what he stands for. Of course, after half an hour or so, he wants to go back on it. But he’s given us enough evidence and information to nail it down. He’s guilty as hell and is going to go to jail for a very long time.”

“That’s good to know.”

“So...a cracked rib and a couple of stitches. I really wish Seattle had treated you better.”

Rachel shrugged. “Eh, I invited myself into a murder case that wasn’t mine. I guess it sort of comes with the territory.”

“All the same,” he said, extending his hand. “It was a pleasure to work with you. And I hope you have safe travels back home.”

“Thank you,” she said, shaking the offered hand. “Thanks for tolerating me.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure.”

She drew him in and hugged him, which seemed to shock him. But he returned it with a little chuckle.

“Take care, Detective Sullivan.”

“You do the same.”

She watched him walk back across the lobby out into the night. She took the elevators upstairs, and in the silence and isolation of the space on her way up, she allowed herself to get slightly emotional. Maybe she’d been foolish today. Maybe she’d unnecessarily risked her life. The idea of Paige losing

her mother when she wasn't even near home was heartbreaking, and she wondered if she would have gone into that building so determined if that thought had crossed her mind just before entering through that back door.

She didn't know...and she didn't want to spend the time and energy dwelling on it.

When she got to her room, she realized that she hadn't even bothered trying to fill the prescription for pain meds the doctor had given her for her rib. She had the spare packs of bandages they'd given her stuffed into her pocket, and she figured she'd need to change into the new bandages following her shower.

She was about to slide out of her shirt and do exactly that when there was a knock on the door. Rachel paused, wondering why anyone would be knocking on her door *in Seattle*. Maybe it was Sullivan, she thought. Maybe there was something he'd forgotten to tell her. Maybe there was some paperwork she needed to take care of as part of Carl Weber's arrest. With a sigh, she walked to the door and looked through the peephole.

Sullivan wasn't on the other side. Instead, it was a woman with an ice bucket. Another hotel guest. Curious, she opened the door and smiled at the woman in a way that was mostly polite, but also showed a bit of inconvenience.

"Hello?" Rachel said.

"Hi," the woman said. She looked to be in her forties—a mousy little woman with blonde hair, a cute face and a slightly

pointed chin. “I’m so sorry to bother you. But I was wondering if you know where the ice machine is.”

“Oh, um...I’m not sure. I think if you go down the hall and —”

In a move that seemed almost surreal, the woman suddenly threw the ice bucket at Rachel. Rachel was so unprepared for this odd attack that she couldn’t even bring herself to swat the bucket away. It hit her right in the face, bouncing off of her chin.

“What the h—”

The woman came rushing into the room, and just as Rachel’s brain understood what was happening, she saw the knife. For a strange and terrifying moment, she thought she was back in that old research center and Carl Webber was coming at her with the knife. But no...she was in her hotel room, and this strange woman was attacking her. Why? Who was she? What the hell was going on?

It all ran through her head as she acted instinctively. She took a lunging step back to avoid to full extent of the woman’s stabbing motion. She then reached out and grabbed the woman’s arm. She intended to use one hand to grab the wrist and one to grab the forearm; with a single twist, the woman would drop the knife.

But as she attempted to get a good grip on the woman’s arm, the pain in her ribs roared, reminding her that she was hurt. She cried out, and the woman yanked her hand away. The attacker then drew back to follow through with another stabbing motion. But before she could even get the movement

going, Rachel delivered a vicious right-handed blow. Even though her aching rib wouldn't let her get her full power behind it, the punch nearly knocked the woman right off her feet. She stumbled backward, colliding with the doorframe. Her nose had been busted open; she seemed to feel the blood coursing down her face as her eyes went wide.

“Who are you?” Rachel demanded, drawing back for another punch.

But the woman, suddenly not so brave now, turned on her heel and ran back through the door. Rachel gave chase, but right away, her entire left side seemed to seize up in pain. She gasped at it, taking a few staggering steps toward the door. She tried once more to chase after the woman but knew it would be useless.

Confused, startled, and amazed at just how badly her side was hurting, Rachel hurried over to the landline phone on the bedside table. She picked the receiver up, pressed 0 for the front desk, and sat down on the bed. She was furious, she was confused out of her mind, and she was in pain. Her anger only increased as the line rang and rang downstairs. Finally, on the fifth ring, someone answered. Before they could even say “*front desk,*” Rachel cut them off.

“This is Rachel Gift in Room 406. Someone just attacked me...tried coming at me with a knife. They ran away, down the hall. Send security to the doors, to every exit and—”

“Ma'am, are you sure you—”

“Please just *do it!*” she yelled.

She had no idea if he did or not because she was already reaching for her cell phone, wondering who else to call. Anderson? Sullivan? Jack?

In a rare moment of weakness not brought on by chemo or experimental treatments, Rachel felt tears welling up in her eyes. She knew if hotel security couldn't stop the woman, she'd likely go free. Rachel could give a description to the cops, and that *might* help in unison with hotel security footage. But for now, as the absurdity of the moment truly settled upon her and she realized that she'd nearly been killed *twice* today, there was only one person she wanted to speak to.

She called Jack, and when he answered, Rachel told him everything.

She did it through tears that she was ashamed of, tears that told her that even if the tumor in her head wasn't an issue, she had a decision to make: family or career. Yes, she could have both, but if she didn't figure out which one needed to take priority sooner rather than later, she was afraid she could maybe lose both. Having nearly been killed in a random hotel room without any warning at all was just another sign that even aside from the tumor, there was no guarantee of just how much time she had left.

Jack did not interrupt her a single time as she made her way through the details of the case, and then of the encounter she'd just had with the strange, random woman. She told him everything and was still talking through her tears when the hotel manager came knocking on her door to make sure everything was okay.

EPILOGUE

Alice didn't know how it had happened the way it did.

Rachel had gone to the hospital for something...and she'd come out with a bandage on her right arm and favoring her right side. Whatever she'd gone through today had put her through the ringer.

So she'd been hurt. More than that, the bitch was in a strange city, with no allies. Jack Rivers hadn't been around to help. Injured and alone...and Rachel Gift had still managed to best her.

Of course, Alice figured maybe she'd just gotten too full of herself. What the hell had she been thinking she could just stroll up to an FBI agent and overtake them. But she'd been *hurt!* She'd been unsuspecting! God, when she answered the door with no clue at all, it had been so sweet. And seeing that ice bucket clang off her head had been beyond satisfying.

But ultimately, she'd failed.

She'd spent the money and the time to chase after Rachel Gift. She'd come all the way across the country, and for what? A busted nose and an overwhelming sense of defeat. She should have just stayed behind. She should have just stayed in Richmond and waited. Was she really *that* obsessed with killing this woman?

Now Rachel knew someone out there wanted her dead. The element of surprise was now gone. She'd ruined it. She'd

screwed it all up.

Alice thought through all of this in her shitty Olympia, Washington hotel room. She'd finally gotten her nose to stop bleeding and wondered if it was broken. She also wondered how close she'd come to getting caught. After she realized Rachel could not chase after her, Alice had escaped down the stairwell and then through the exit door between the lobby and lounge. Out on the street, she'd slowed down and tried to blend in—which had worked.

That was thirteen hours ago and now Alice was forced with some very hard decisions.

Was it *really* worth killing Rachel Gift, just to honor Alex Lynch?

The answer was easy. *Yes*. That bitch had taken Alex from her...had taken any possibility of true happiness from her.

And she had to pay.

But now, after her failed attempt on Rachel's life, things would have to be different. She'd have to strike in a more unconventional way.

She had, after all, been studying and following Rachel, Paige, and the grandmother for months now. She'd even been following Jack Rivers, though not as often as the other three. She knew their every move. She knew their schedule just as well as *they* did.

Laying in that run-down motel and listening to the hum of the heating unit as well as the muffled sounds of lovemaking

from the room next door, Alice boiled down the approaches she had remaining.

Jack Rivers wasn't an option. If she couldn't take out Rachel, how could she expect to kill Jack? And then there was Grandma Tate. That would be easy enough, but would it really cause as much pain and suffering as Alice was going for? For a while, maybe.

That left only one option: Paige.

The idea unsettled Alice. Because while she had managed to get over her aversion to murder, she wasn't sure she could bring herself to kill a child. That, she thought, took a special sort of evil. It was something that even Alex had looked down upon.

No, she couldn't kill a child.

But she thought she could steal one. In fact, the more she thought about the idea of kidnapping Paige Gift, the more alluring it became. She wondered why she'd not seriously considered the idea before.

A small, slight smile crept across her face as she lay in the hotel room. She focused on what was ahead and how she would accomplish it rather than her monumental failure last night in Rachel's hotel room.

Slowly, Alice sat up and slid out of bed. She readied herself for the day and, after a while, began to hum. She'd book a slight back home later. Maybe she'd fly out of Spokane; going back to Seattle seemed like too big of a risk. She'd grab a nice lunch somewhere and then start arranging

her trip back home. That was a tentative plan, anyway, because even as she got dressed and brushed her teeth, she was already thinking of how she'd carry out the kidnapping of Paige Gift.

And the excitement it stirred up within her was almost too much to stand. She wasn't sure how much longer she'd be able to wait.

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