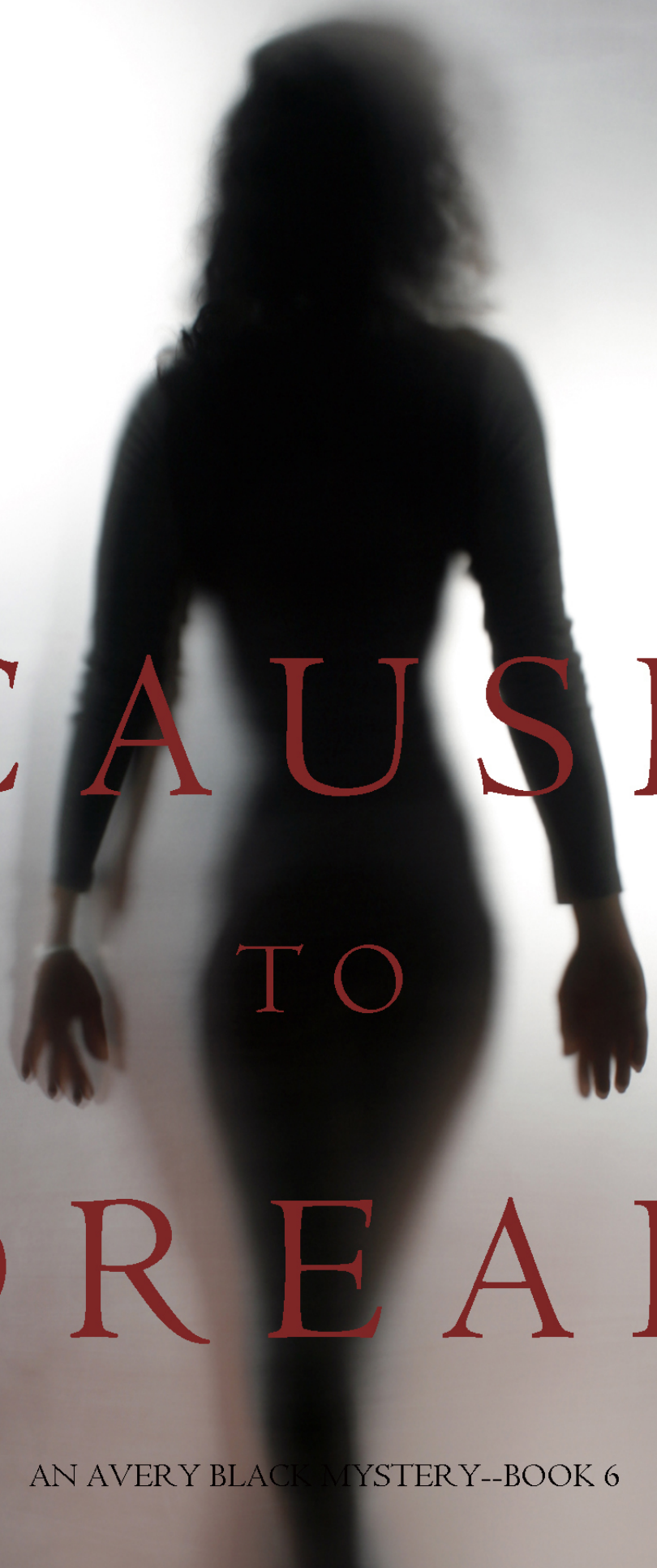


BLAKE PIERCE



CAUSE
TO
DREAD

AN AVERY BLACK MYSTERY--BOOK 6

An Avery Black Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Cause to Dread

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Пирс Б.

Cause to Dread / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (An Avery Black Mystery)

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“A dynamic story line that grips from the first chapter and doesn't let go.”
--Midwest Book Review, Diane Donovan (regarding Once Gone) From #1 bestselling author Blake Pierce comes a new masterpiece of psychological suspense—the AVERY BLACK SERIES—which continues here with CAUSE TO DREAD (Book #6), also a standalone novel. The series begins with CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)—a free download with over 200 five star reviews! A woman turns up dead in her own apartment, locked in her closet, her body crawling with poisonous spiders, and the Boston police are stumped. As all of their leads collapse, they are dreading the killer will strike again. Desperate, the police have no choice but to turn to Boston’s most brilliant and controversial homicide detective—Avery Black. Now retired, Avery, in a low point in her own life, reluctantly agrees to help with the case. But when other bodies start turning up, murdered in grotesque and unusual ways, Avery can’t help but wonder: is there a serial killer on the loose? With the intense media pressure and the stress of having a new, inexperienced partner, Avery is pushed to her limit as she struggles to crack the bizarre cases—and to keep herself from falling into the abyss. Avery finds herself falling deeper and deeper into the twisted mind of the killer, who holds more secrets than Avery could imagine. The most riveting and shocking book of the series, a psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, CAUSE TO DREAD will leave you turning pages late into the night. “A masterpiece of thriller and mystery. Pierce did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side, so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. The plot is very intelligent and will keep you entertained throughout the book. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone)

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Blake Pierce

CAUSE TO DREAD

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

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MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)

PROLOGUE

For a man named Rosie, there was nothing delicate or pretty about him. Roosevelt “Rosie” Dobbs marched up to the front porch of Apartment 2B with his usual awkward gait – and had anyone been nearby, they might have heard him cursing under his breath, a string of obscenities that followed him like a shadow.

With a ham-sized fist, Rosie hammered on the door. With each strike, he saw the face of the man who lived in 2B. A pretentious prick named Alfred Lawnbrook – the type who always thought he was better than anyone even though he lived in a second-rate apartment in one of the worst parts of the city. He’d never paid his rent on time, always at least a week late for the two years he’d been living in the apartment. This time, three weeks had gone by. And Rosie was tired of it. If Lawnbrook didn’t have his rent by the end of the day, Rosie was going to kick him out.

It was Saturday, just after nine in the morning. Lawnbrook’s car was parked in its usual spot, so Rosie knew he was home. Still, despite the hammering, Al Lawnbrook did not answer the door.

Rosie gave one last violent slam against the door with his fist and then used his voice as well. “Lawnbrook, get your ass out here! And you best have your rent in your hand when you open the door.”

Rosie tried to be patient. He waited a full ten seconds before he called out again. “Lawnbrook!”

When there was still no answer, Rosie unhooked the huge ring of keys he carried on a carabiner on his hip. He thumbed expertly through them to the one labeled 2B. Without another warning, Rosie drove the key into the lock, turned the knob, and entered the apartment.

“Alfred Lawnbrook! It’s Rosie Dobbs, your landlord. You’re three weeks late and – ”

But Rosie knew right away that he was not going to get an answer. There was a stillness and quiet about the place that let him know that Lawnbrook wasn’t home.

No, that’s not quite it, Rosie thought. It’s something else...something feels off. Sort of stale and... well, wrong.

Rosie took a few steps further into the apartment, stopping when he came to the center of the living room.

That’s when he noticed the smell.

At first, it reminded him of potatoes that had gone bad. But there was something different about it, something more subtle.

“Lawnbrook?” he called out again, but this time there was a wave of fear in his voice.

Again, there was no answer...not that Rosie had been expecting one. He walked through the living room and peered into the kitchen, thinking maybe some food had been left out and started to spoil. But the kitchen was fairly clean and, because of its small size, it was evident that there was nothing amiss.

Call the cops, some wiser part of Rosie said. You know something is wrong here so call the cops and wash your hands of it.

But curiosity is a hell of a drug and Rosie was not able to turn away. He started down the hallway and some sick intuition cast his eyes directly toward the bedroom door. Several steps down the hallway, the smell evolved into something nastier and he knew right away what he was walking toward. But still, he could not stop now. He had to know...had to see.

Al Lawnbrook’s bedroom was in a mild state of disarray. A few items had been knocked from his nightstand: wallet, book, framed picture. The plastic blinds in the window sat slightly askew, the bottom folds bent.

And here, the smell was worse. It wasn’t overpowering, but it was certainly not something Rosie wanted to breathe in much longer.

The bed was empty and there was nothing to be seen in the space between the dresser and the wall. With a lump in his throat, Rosie turned to the closet. The door was closed and that was somehow worse than the smell. Still, his morbid curiosity pushed him and Rosie found himself heading to the closet. He reached out and touched the knob and for a moment he thought he could actually *feel* the terrible smell, sticky and warm.

Before he turned the knob, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. He looked down to his feet, thinking his nerves were just wrecked and playing tricks on him. But no...he *had* seen something.

Two spiders came rushing out from under the door. They were both rather large, one the size of a quarter and the other so large it barely fit through the crack. Rosie jumped back in surprise with a little scream escaping his throat. The spiders scurried under the bed and when he turned to look at them, he saw a few spiders clinging to the bed as well. Most of them were small, but there was one the size of a postage stamp scurrying along the pillow.

Adrenaline pushed him on. Rosie grabbed the knob, turned it, and pulled it open.

He tried to scream but his lungs seemed paralyzed. Nothing more than a dry noise came from his throat as he slowly backed away from what he saw in the closet.

Alfred Lawnbrook was splayed out in the back corner of the closet. His body was pale and motionless.

It was also almost entirely covered in spiders.

There were several thick strands of web on him. One along his right arm was so thick that Rosie could not see his skin. Most of the spiders were small and seemed almost harmless, but, like the ones he'd seen so far, there were large ones mixed in as well. As Rosie stared in horror, a spider the size of a golf ball went parading across Lawnbrook's forehead. Another smaller one scrambled up over his bottom lip.

That's what broke Rosie out of his frozen state. He nearly tripped over his own feet as he went blazing out of the room, shrieking, swatting at the back of his neck, feeling as if there were millions of spiders crawling all over him.

CHAPTER ONE

Two months earlier...

As Avery Black opened one of the many boxes still scattered around her new home, she wondered why she had waited so long to move away from the city. She did not miss it at all and was actually starting to resent the fact that she had wasted so much time there.

She peeked inside the box, hoping to find her iPod. She had not labeled anything when she had left her Boston apartment. She'd hastily thrown everything into a series of boxes and moved out in the course of a day. That was three weeks ago and she still had yet to finish unpacking. In fact, her sheets were jumbled up somewhere in these boxes but she had elected to sleep on the couch for the last three weeks.

The current box did not contain her iPod, but it did hold the few bottles of liquor she had nearly forgotten about. She pulled a tumbler out of the box, filled it with a healthy dose of bourbon, and walked out onto the front porch. She squinted at the bright morning light and took a pull from her bourbon. After enjoying the burn of it, she took another. She then checked her watch and saw that it was barely after ten in the morning.

She shrugged and plopped down in the old rocking chair that had been on the porch when she'd brought the place. She looked out at her new surroundings and was warmly reassured that she could live out the rest of her life here quite comfortably.

The house wasn't quite a cabin but had that sort of rustic feel to it. It was a simple one-story place with a modern interior. In terms of a mailing address, she was close to Walden Pond but just far enough off the beaten track to also be considered "in the middle of nowhere." Her nearest neighbor was half a mile away and all she could see beyond her front porch and the rear kitchen window were trees.

No horns blaring. No busy pedestrians in a hurry while glaring at their phones. No traffic. No constant smell of gasoline and exhaust or the droning of engines.

She downed another gulp of her morning bourbon and listened to her surroundings. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Well, that wasn't necessarily true. She could hear two birds calling back and forth and the slight creaking of the trees as a chilly late-fall breeze passed through.

She'd tried her best to get Rose to come out here with her. Her daughter had been through a lot and God only knew that staying in the city was not going to help her heal. But Rose had refused. Rose had actually *vehemently* refused. After the smoke of the last case had cleared, Rose had needed somewhere to place the blame for the death of her father. And, as usual, that blame had fallen at Avery's feet.

As much as it hurt, Avery understood it; she would have behaved the same way if the roles had been reversed. During the move out into the woods, Rose had accused her of running away from her problems. And Avery had no qualms about admitting that. She'd come here to escape the memories of the last case – of the last several months of her life, if she was being totally honest.

They had come so close to recovering the relationship they'd once had. But when Rose's father had died – as well as Ramirez, a man she had started to tolerate as her mother's love interest – that had all come to a screeching halt. Rose fully blamed Avery for her father's death, and Avery was slowly starting to blame herself, too.

Avery closed her eyes and finished off the tumbler of bourbon. She listened to the quiet sounds of the forest and let the warmth of the bourbon comfort her. She'd let similar warmth comfort her over the course of the last three weeks, getting drunk a handful of times, so much so one time that she blacked out for several hours. She'd spent that night hunched over a toilet and moaning over Ramirez and the future they had come so close to having.

Looking back on that, Avery was embarrassed. It made her want to swear off drinking for good. She'd never been a huge drinker but the last three weeks, liquor and wine had helped float her through.

Through to what, though? she wondered as she got up out of the rocking chair and headed back inside.

She eyed the bourbon, tempted to go ahead and obliterate herself by noon just to get through another day. But she knew that was cowardice. She had to get through this on her own, with a clear head. So she put the bourbon and the other liquor bottles up in a cabinet in the kitchen. She then went to the next box in her piles, still looking for the iPod.

A stack of photo albums sat at the top of the box. Because her mind had been on Rose while on the porch, Avery fished them out quickly. There were three in all, one of which was filled with pictures from her college days. She ignored this one completely and flipped open the second one.

Rose stared up at her right away. She was twelve, on a sled with her hat covered in snow. Underneath this picture, Rose was still twelve. In this one, she was painting what looked like a field of sunflowers on an easel in her old bedroom. Avery flipped through them all until about halfway through the book, she came to a picture that had been taken only three Christmases ago. Rose and Jack, Rose's father, were dancing comically in front of a Christmas tree. They were both smiling to the point of giddiness. Jack's Santa hat was crooked on his head and the ornaments gleamed in the background.

It was like a knife to the heart, piercing and twisting and turning. The need to cry came on like a bomb. She'd not felt the urge a single time since moving here, as she had gotten quite good at stifling such things over the course of her career. But it hit her then, out of nowhere, and before she could fight it off, her mouth opened and an agonized moan came out. She grabbed at her heart as if that imagined knife really was there, and sank to the floor.

She tried to get up, but her body seemed to revolt. *No*, it seemed to say. *You're going to allow yourself this moment and you're going to cry. You're going to weep. You're going to grieve. And who knows? You might actually be better for it.*

She clung to the photo album, pressing it against her chest. She cried hard, letting herself be vulnerable for just a moment. She hated that it felt so good to get it out, to let herself break down. She moaned and cried, saying nothing – not calling out to anyone, not questioning God or offering prayer. She simply *grieved*.

And it felt good. It damn near felt like an exorcism of sorts.

She didn't know how long she sat there on the floor among the boxes. All she knew was that when she got to her feet, she no longer wanted to numb herself with something from a bottle. She needed to get her head clear, needed to get her thoughts in order.

She felt a familiar ache in her hands, something even stronger than the need to drink away her emotions. She clenched her fingers into loose fists and thought of paper targets and the long expanses of indoor firing ranges.

Her heart then started to lift a bit as she thought about the few items she had in the bedroom that she would eventually arrange and decorate one of these days. There wasn't much in there, but there *was* one certain thing that she had nearly forgotten about in the haze of the last few days. Slowly, trying to encourage herself as she walked through the living room full of boxes, Avery entered the bedroom.

She stood in the doorway for a moment and studied the gun that was propped up in the corner.

The rifle was a Remington 700 that she'd had ever since she'd graduated college. During her senior year, she'd had big plans of moving somewhere remote in order to hunt deer in the winters. It was something her father had always done and, while she had not been particularly good at it, she had enjoyed it. She'd often been ribbed about it by her girlfriends and she had probably scared a boyfriend or two away in high school because of her affection for the sport. When her father passed away, her mother had begged her to take the gun, thinking her father would have wanted her to have it.

It had been passed around, from move to move, usually stowed away in a closet or under a bed. Two days after moving into this house, she'd taken it to a local gun dealership and had them clean it. When she picked it up, she also purchased three boxes of cartridges for it.

Figuring she might as well strike while the mood had hit her, she stripped down to her underwear and slid into a pair of thermals. It wasn't *too* cold out this morning – a bit above freezing – but she wasn't used to being out in the woods. She owned nothing in camo, so she settled for a pair of dark green pants and a black sweater. She was well aware that it wasn't the safest get-up to go deer hunting in, but it would have to do for now.

She slid on a pair of thin gloves (having to dig through yet another box to find them), laced up her most rugged pair of shoes, and headed out. She got into her car and drove two miles away to a stretch of back road that led to an expanse of forest that was owned by the man she had purchased the house from. He had given her permission to hunt on his land, almost as some random footnote or bonus to having purchased the house for ten thousand over the asking price.

She found a spot on the side of the road where it was quite obvious that hunters had been turning around or pulling over for years. She parked her car there, the driver's side just barely off of the road. She then took up the rifle and walked off into the forest.

She actually felt silly, parading through the woods. She had not hunted for five years or so – the very weekend she had received the gun from her mother. She did not have the gear – the proper boots, the deer scent to spray on trees, the blaze orange hats or vests. But she also knew that it was a Wednesday morning and that the woods would be virtually empty of other hunters. She felt a bit like the shy kid who only played basketball by herself and then skipped away when the more talented kids came into the gym.

She walked for twenty minutes and came to a rise in the land. She walked quietly, with the same practiced caution she had used as a homicide detective. The gun in her hands felt good, although a bit foreign. She was used to much smaller weapons, her Glock in particular, so the rifle felt quite powerful. As she came to the top of the slight rise in the land, she spied a fallen oak several yards away. She used it as a meager means of hiding herself, sitting on the ground and then scooting down a bit with her back against the fallen tree. In a reclining position, she rested the rifle next to her and looked up into the tree tops.

She lay there peacefully, feeling even more enclosed by the world than she had while on the porch an hour or so ago. She grinned when she imagined Rose out here with her. Rose hated just about anything to do with being outdoors and would probably flip her lid if she knew her mother was currently sitting in the forest with a rifle, looking to potentially kill a deer. Thinking of Rose, Avery was able to clear her mind a bit, to focus on everything around her. And when she was able to do that, her career instincts kicked in.

She heard the rustling of leaves on the ground as well as in the trees as the last few stubborn leaves clung on against the coming winter. She heard a skittering somewhere to her right and above her, likely a squirrel coming out to check the wind. Once she was acclimated to her surroundings, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to really let go.

She heard all of those things but she also saw her own thoughts start to slide into place. Jack and his girlfriend, both dead. Ramirez, dead and gone. She thought of Howard Randall, falling into the bay and probably also dead. And at the end of it all, she saw Rose...how she had been constantly ensnared in danger because of her mother's line of work. Rose had never deserved it, had never asked for it. She had done her best to be a supportive daughter through it all and she had finally reached her breaking point.

Honestly, Avery was impressed that she had lasted as long as she had. Especially after the last case, where her life had literally been in danger. And it hadn't been the first time.

The snap of a twig from behind her broke Avery from her thoughts. Her eyes snapped open and she was once again staring up into the mostly stripped branches overhead. She slowly reached for the Remington as yet another soft shuffling noise sounded out somewhere behind her.

She brought the rifle to her and slowly readied it. She moved with expert stealth as she raised herself to her elbows. She breathed in and out slowly, making sure not to so much as blow a nearby leaf askew. Her eyes scanned the area below the little rise she was hiding on. She spotted the deer to the west, about seventy yards away. It was a buck, an eight-pointer from what she could tell. It was nothing sizeable, but it was something, at least. She spotted another one further ahead of it but it was partially covered by two trees.

She brought herself up a bit more, steadying the rifle on the side of the fallen oak. She flexed her finger as it found the trigger and firmed up her grip on the stock. She took aim and found it a bit more difficult than she had anticipated. When she lined the crosshairs up and had a shot, she took it.

The rifle's crack as the shot was fired filled the forest. The recoil was noticeable but very slight. The moment she fired, she knew she'd be off to the right; her elbow had slipped in its positioning on the tree as she had pulled the trigger.

But she did not get to see the buck make its escape.

When the sound of the gunshot filled her ears and the woods, something in her mind seemed to tremble and then freeze. For a paralyzing moment, she could not move. And in that moment, she was not in the forest, having failed to take down a deer. Instead, she was standing in Jack's living room. There was blood everywhere. Both he and his girlfriend had been killed. She had not been able to stop it and, as such, she felt like *she* had killed them. Rose was right. It *was* her fault. She could have stopped it if she'd been faster – if she'd been better.

The blood glistened red and Jack's eyes looked at her, dead and seeming to plead. *Please*, they said. *Please, take it back. Make it right.*

Avery dropped the rifle. The clatter of it on the ground broke her out of her fugue and once again, she found herself openly weeping. The tears came, hot and flowing. They felt like little trails of fire down her otherwise chilled face.

"It's my fault," she said to the forest. "It was my fault. All of it."

Not just Jack and his girlfriend...no. Ramirez, too. And everyone else she had been unable to save. She should have been better, always better.

She saw the picture of Jack and Rose in front of the Christmas tree in her mind's eye. She curled up into a ball by the fallen oak and started to shake.

No, she thought. *Not now, not here. Get your shit together, Avery.*

She fought the surge of emotions off and swallowed it down. It wasn't too hard. She had, after all, gotten quite good at it over the last decade or so. She slowly got to her feet, picking the rifle up from the ground. She cast only the slightest of glances back toward where the two deer had been. There was no regret in missing the shot at all. She simply didn't care.

She turned back the way she had come, carrying the rifle over her shoulder and a decade's worth of guilt and failure in her heart.

*

On her way back to the house, Avery supposed it was a good thing she hadn't killed the deer. She had no idea how she would have gotten it out of the forest. Drag it back to her car? Bungee cord it to the top of her car and slowly drive back home? She knew enough about hunting to know that it was illegal to leave a kill just sitting to rot in the woods.

Any other time, she might have found the image of a deer affixed to the top of her car hilarious. But she currently found it nothing more than another oversight. Just something else she had not properly thought through.

Just as she was about turn onto her road, the chirping of her cell phone broke her out of her funk. She grabbed it from the console and saw a number she did not recognize, but an area code that she had seen for most of her life. The call was coming from Boston.

She answered it skeptically, her career teaching her that calls from unknown numbers could often lead to trouble. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Ms. Black? Ms. Avery Black?” a male voice asked.

“This is she. Who is this?”

“My name is Gary King. I’m the landlord for the place your daughter is staying. She has you listed as a next of kin on her paperwork and – ”

“Is Rose okay?” Avery asked.

“As far as I know, yes. But I’m calling because of a few different things. First of all, she’s behind on her rent. It’s two weeks late and it’s the second time in three months. I try to go by there and talk to her about it but she never answers the door. And she won’t return my calls.”

“Certainly you don’t need me to work on that,” Avery said. “Rose is a grown woman and she can handle getting scolded by a landlord.”

“Well, it’s not just that. I’ve gotten calls from her neighbor complaining about the sounds of loud crying at night. This same neighbor claims to be fairly good friends with Rose. She says Rose has not seemed herself lately. Says she keeps talking about how everything sucks and how meaningless life is. She said she’s worried about Rose.”

“And who is this friend?” Avery asked. It was hard to fight off, but she could feel herself quickly slipping into detective mode.

“Sorry, but I can’t say. Legalities and all.”

Avery was pretty sure Mr. King was right, so she didn’t press the matter. “I understand. Thank you for you call, Mr. King. I’ll check up on her right away. And I’ll see to it that you get your rent.”

“That’s fine and I thank you...but I’m honestly more worried about what might be going on with Rose. She’s a good girl.”

“Yeah, she is,” Avery said and ended the call.

By that point, she was less than half a mile away from her new home. She pulled up Rose’s number and placed the call as she pushed her foot down harder on the gas. She was pretty sure how the next couple of minutes would play out, but still felt a stinging hope each time the phone rang in her ear.

As she expected, it went straight to voicemail. Rose had only answered one of her calls since her father had been murdered and that had been when she had been especially drunk. Avery opted not to leave a message, knowing that Rose would not check it, much less return the call.

She parked in her driveway, leaving the engine running, and ran inside long enough to dress in something a little more presentable. She was back in the car three minutes later, pointing it back toward Boston. She was sure Rose would be pissed that her mom was coming into town to check up on her, but Avery didn’t see where she had any choice, given the call from Gary King.

When the road smoothed out and became less curvy, Avery increased her speed. She wasn’t sure where her future rested in terms of her old job but she did know one thing she’d miss about working in law enforcement: the ability to break the speed limit any time she damn well pleased.

Rose was in trouble.

She felt it.

CHAPTER TWO

It was shortly after one o'clock when Avery showed up on Rose's doorstep. She lived on a ground floor apartment in a decent part of town. She was able to afford it because of the tips she got as a bartender at an upper-class bar – a job she nailed down shortly before Avery had moved out to her cabin. Her job before that had been a little less glamorous, waitressing at a chain restaurant while doing some cheap editing work for ad firms out of her apartment on the side. Avery wished Rose would just buckle down and finish college, but she also knew that the harder she pushed, the less inclined Rose would be to choose that path.

Rose knocked on the door, knowing Rose was home because her car was parked a block down on the side of the street. Even if that clue hadn't tipped Avery off, ever since she'd moved out on her own, Rose had opted for jobs with later hours so she could sleep late and lounge around the house all day. She knocked louder when Rose didn't answer and nearly called out her name. She decided not to, figuring her voice would be even less welcome than that of the landlord she was trying to dodge.

She probably figures it's me because I tried to call beforehand, she thought.

Given that, she figured she'd go with what she did best: negotiating.

"Rose," she said, knocking again. "Open up. It's your mom. And it's cold out here."

She waited a moment and there was still no answer. Instead of knocking again, she calmly approached the door, standing as closely as she could to it. When she spoke again, she raised her voice just enough to firmly be heard inside but not nearly enough to cause a scene out on the street.

"You can keep ignoring me if you want but I'll keep calling, Rose. And if I want to get really obsessive about it, remember what I used to do for a living. If I want to know where you are at any given time, I can make it happen. Or you can make life easier for both of us and just open the damned door."

With that said, she gave another knock. This time, it was answered within a handful of seconds. Rose opened it slowly from the other side. She peered out like a woman who didn't trust the person standing on the other side of the door.

"What do you want, Mom?"

"To come in for a minute or two."

Rose considered it for a moment and then opened the door all the way. Avery did her best not to pay too much attention to the fact that Rose had lost some weight. Quite a bit, actually. She had also dyed her hair raven black and straightened it.

Avery walked inside and found the apartment meticulously cleaned. There was a ukulele on the couch, something that looked sorely out of place. Avery pointed to it and gave a questioning look.

"I wanted to learn to play something," Rose said. "Guitar is too time consuming and pianos are too expensive."

"You any good?" Avery asked.

"I can play five chords. I can almost get through one song."

Avery nodded, impressed. She almost asked to hear the song but figured that might be pushing it. She then thought about sitting down on the couch but didn't want to seem as if she were making herself welcome. She was pretty sure Rose wouldn't extend that invitation anyway.

"I'm okay, Mom," Rose said. "If that's why you're here..."

"It is," Avery said. "And I've wanted to speak with you for a while. I know you hate me and blame me for everything that happened. And that sucks, but I can deal with it. But then today I got a call from your landlord."

"Oh God," Rose said. "That greedy jerk won't leave me alone and –"

"He just wants his rent, Rose. Do you have it? Do you need some money?"

Rose scoffed at the question. “I made three hundred dollars in tips last night,” she said. “And I make almost double that in tips on a Saturday night. So no... I don’t need any money.”

“Good. But... well, he also says that he’s worried about you. That he’s been hearing about some things you’ve said. Now don’t bullshit me, Rose. How are you, really?”

“Really?” Rose asked. “How am I *really*? Well, I miss my dad. And I was nearly killed by the same asshole that killed him. And while I miss you too, I can’t even think of you without remembering how he died. I know it’s messed up, but every time I think of Dad and how he died, it makes me hate you. And it makes me realize that ever since you got really deep into working as a detective, my life has suffered for some reason or another.”

It was hard for Rose to hear, but she also knew it could have been much worse. “How are you sleeping?” she asked. “And eating? Rose... how much weight have you lost?”

Rose shook her head and started walking back toward the door. “You asked how I was doing and I answered you. Am I happy? Hell no. But I’m not the type that’s going to do something stupid, Mom. When this passes, I’ll be fine. And it will pass. I know it will. But if it *is* going to pass, I can’t have you around.”

“Rose, it’s – ”

“No. Mom... you’re toxic to me. I know you’ve tried very hard to make things right between us – you’ve tried for several years now. But it’s not working and I don’t think it ever will considering recent events. So... please leave. Leave and stop calling.”

“But Rose, this is – ”

Rose broke into tears then, opening the door and screaming. “Mom, would you please *just fucking leave*?”

Rose then looked at the floor, stifling her sobs. Avery fought back her own as she obeyed her daughter’s wishes. She passed by her, painfully restraining herself from hugging her or giving some last argument. In the end, she simply walked through the door and out into the cold.

But the door slamming violently closed behind her was perhaps the coldest thing of all.

Avery was crying before she was able to start her car. By the time she was back on the road and headed for her new home, she was doing everything she could to hold in a series of chest-tightening sobs. As the tears ran down her face, she realized that she had cried more in the past four months or so than she had for the entire span of years beforehand. First there was Jack dying, then Ramirez. And now this.

Maybe Rose was right. Maybe she was toxic. Because when it came right down to it, the deaths of Jack and Ramirez were her fault. Her ambitious career had led the killer to those she loved the most and, as such, they had been targeted.

And that same career had pushed Rose away. Never mind the fact that the career in question was over. She’d retired soon after Ramirez’s funeral and although she knew that Connelly and O’Malley were leaving a back door open for her, it was an invitation she knew she’d never accept.

She pulled into her driveway, parked the car, and walked inside with tears still running down her face. The sad fact was that if she abandoned her career completely, her life would be empty. Her future husband had been killed, an ex-husband she had been on good terms with was gone, and now, the only survivor from her past, her daughter, wanted nothing to do with her.

And rather than fix it, what did you do? some smaller part of her asked. It almost sounded like Ramirez’s voice, pointing out how she was making matters worse. *You left the city and retreated into the woods. Rather than face the pain and a life that had been upended, you ran away and spent a few days drinking yourself into oblivion. So what will you do now? Run away again? Or should you maybe fix it?*

Back inside the cabin, though, she felt safer than she had while standing on Rose's doorstep. It seemed to lessen the sting of having her daughter slam a door on her. Yes, it made her feel like a coward but she simply didn't know how else to deal with it.

She's right, Avery thought. I am toxic to her. Over the last few years, I've done nothing but make her life so much more difficult. It started when I put my career over her father and then just got worse when, no matter how hard I tried, the career won out over her, too. And here we are again, at odds even when the career is gone.

And it's because she blames me for her father's murder.

And she's not exactly wrong about that.

She walked slowly over to the bed that she had yet to fully put together. Her personal safe was there, sitting among the headboard and the box springs. As she opened it, she thought of entering Jack's living room and finding his body. She thought of Ramirez in the hospital, already seriously injured before he had been killed.

Her hands were dirty in all of that. And she'd never be able to clean them.

She reached into the safe and pulled out her Glock. It felt familiar in her hands, like an old friend.

The tears still came as she rested her back against the headboard. She looked to the gun, studying it. It or one just like it had been on her hip or at her back for nearly two decades, closer to her than any human had ever been. So it felt all too natural when she placed it to the soft flesh beneath her chin. Its touch was cold but assertive.

She let out a sob as she positioned it back at an angle, making sure the bullet would pass through at the best angle. Her finger found the trigger and trembled against it.

She wondered if she'd even hear the blast before she was gone and, if she did, if it would sound as loud as Rose slamming the door behind her.

Her finger curled around the trigger and she closed her eyes.

The doorbell rang, making her jump.

Her finger loosened and her entire body went limp. The Glock clattered to the floor.

Almost, she thought as her heart slammed mounds of adrenaline into her bloodstream. Another quarter of a second and my brains would be all over the wall.

She looked down at the Glock and swatted it away as if it were a poisonous snake. She buried her head in her hands and wiped the tears away.

You almost killed yourself, the voice that may or may not have been Ramirez said. Doesn't that make you feel like a coward?

She pushed the thought away as she got to her feet and made her way to the front door. She had no idea who it could be. She dared to hope that it was Rose but she knew that would not be the case. Rose was very much like her mother in that regard – stubborn to a fault.

She opened the door and found no one. She did, however, see the rear of a UPS truck leaving her driveway. She looked down to the porch and saw a small box. She picked it up and read her own name and new address in very neat handwriting. The sender's address showed no name, just a New York address.

She took it inside and opened it slowly. There was no weight to the box and when she opened it, she found balled up newspaper. She removed it all and found just one single thing waiting for her at the bottom.

It was a single sheet of paper, folded in half. She unfolded it, and when she read the message inside, her heart stopped for a moment.

And just like that, Avery no longer felt the need to kill herself.

She read the message over and over, trying to make sense of it. Her mind worked it over, seeking an answer. And with something like this to figure out, the mere thought of dying before it was solved was out of the question.

She sat on the couch and stared at it, reading it again and again.

who are you, avery?

Yours,

Howard

CHAPTER THREE

In the coming days, Avery kept touching the area beneath her chin where she had placed the barrel of the gun. It felt irritated, like a bug bite. Whenever she lay down for sleep and her neck extended when her head hit the pillow, that area felt exposed and vulnerable.

She was going to have to face the fact that she had gone to a very dark place. Even though she had ultimately been pulled away from it, she had gone there. It would forever be a smear on her memories and it seemed that even the very nerves within her flesh wanted to make sure she did not forget it.

For the three days following her near-suicide, she was more depressed than she had ever been in her life. She spent those days curled on her couch. She tried to read but couldn't focus. She tried motivating herself to go for a run but felt too tired. She kept looking to Howard's letter, handling it so much that the paper was starting to wrinkle.

She stopped her heavy drinking after receiving the letter from Howard. Slowly, like a caterpillar, she started to break out of her cocoon of self-pity. She slowly started to exercise. She also did crossword puzzles and Sudoku just to keep her mind sharp. Without work, and knowing she had enough money to last her a year without having to worry about anything, it was very easy to fall into a mindset of laziness.

But Howard's package had erased that lethargy from her. She now had a mystery to solve which set her to a task. And when Avery Black was set to a task, there was no end until it was resolved.

Within a week after receiving the letter, her days slipped into something of a routine. It was still the routine of a hermit, but the routine of it alone made her feel normal. It made her feel like there might be something worth living for. Structure. Mental challenges. Those were the things that had always inspired her and they did that in those coming weeks.

Her mornings started at seven. She'd go out running right away, etching out a brisk two-mile run through the back roads around the cabin for that first week. She'd return home, eat breakfast, and go over old case files. She had more than one hundred in her own personal records, all of which had been solved. But she went over them just to keep herself busy and to remind herself that among the failures that had occurred there near the end, she'd also enjoyed more than a few successes.

She'd then spend an hour unpacking and organizing. She followed this with lunch and either a crossword or a puzzle of some kind. She then did a simple exercise circuit in the bedroom – just a quick session of crunches, sit-ups, planks, and other core exercises. She would then spend a bit of time looking at the files from her last case – the case that had ended up taking the lives of Jack and Ramirez. Some days she'd look at them for ten minutes, other days she'd stare at them for two hours.

What went wrong? What had she missed earlier on? Would she have survived the case had it not been for Howard Randall's behind-the-scenes interference?

Then came dinner, a bit of reading, some more cleaning, and then bed. It was an eventless routine, but it was a routine all the same.

It took two months to get the cabin clean and in order. By that time, her two-mile run had evolved into a five-mile run. She no longer looked over the old files or the contents from the last one. Instead, she had taken to reading books she bought on Amazon featuring real-life crime dramas and nonfiction police procedurals. She'd also mixed in some books pertaining to the psychological evaluations of some of history's most noted serial killers.

She was only partly aware that this was her way of filling the void her work had once filled. As this dawned on her more and more, she couldn't help but wonder about what her future looked like.

One morning, while she made her run around Walden Pond, the cold burning her lungs in a way that was more pleasant than unbearable, this hit her a little harder than it had before. Her mind was running a loop around the questions about getting the package from Howard Randall.

First, how did he know where she was living? And how long *had* he known? She'd lived under the assumption that he'd died when he had fallen into the bay on the night that final, terrible case came to a close. While his body had never been found, it had been wildly speculated that he had indeed been shot by an officer on the scene before splashing into the water. While she ran her lap, she tried to put together a trail of next steps to figure out where he was and why he'd reached out to her with a strange message: *Who are you?*

The package came from New York but it's obvious he's been around Boston. How else would he know I moved? How else would he know where I live?

This, of course, brought images to her mind of Randall hiding out in those trees with eyes on her cabin.

Just my luck, she thought. Everyone else in my life has died or shut me out. It makes sense that a convicted killer would be the only one that seemed to give a damn about me.

She knew that the package itself would offer no answers. She already knew when it was sent and where it was sent from. It was really just Randall teasing her, letting her know that he was still alive, on the loose, and interested in her in some form or another.

The package was on her mind when she returned from her run. As she stripped off her gloves and stocking cap, her cheeks pink and blustery from the cold, she walked to where she had kept the box. She had looked it all over for clues or little hidden meanings from Randall but had found none. She'd also come up empty when she had looked over the balled up newspaper. She'd read every article on the crumpled paper and nothing had seemed worthwhile. It had just been filler. Of course, that had not stopped her from relentlessly rereading each and every word on those pages several times.

She was tapping anxiously on the box when her cell phone rang. She grabbed it from the kitchen table and stared at the number on the display for a moment. She smiled hesitantly and tried to ignore the happiness that tried to peek into her heart.

It was Connelly.

Her fingers froze for a moment because she honestly didn't know what to do. Had he called two or three weeks ago, she would have simply ignored the call. But now...well, something was different now, wasn't it? And as much as she hated to admit it, she supposed she had Howard Randall and his letter to thank for that.

At the last moment before her phone would go to voicemail, she answered the call.

"Hey, Connelly," she said.

There was a heavy pause on the other end before Connelly responded. "Hey, Black. I...well, I'll be honest. I was expecting to just have to speak to your voicemail."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh, no way. I'm glad to hear your voice. It's been too long."

"Yeah, it's starting to feel that way."

"Am I to take that to mean you're regretting your far-too-early retirement?"

"No, I wouldn't go that far. How are things?"

"Things are...good. I mean, there's a void in the precinct that used to be filled by you and Ramirez but we're plugging along. Finley is really stepping up his game. He's been working very closely with O'Malley. I think Finley, between me and you, he took it personally when you quit. And he decided that if someone is going to have to take your place, then dammit, it better be him."

"Good to hear. Let him know I miss him."

"Well, I was sort of hoping you'd come and tell him yourself," Connelly said.

"I don't think I'm ready to visit just yet," she said.

"Okay, so I was never good at the small talk bullshit," Connelly said. "I'll cut to the chase."

"That's when you're at your best," she said.

"Look...we've got a case –"

“Stop right there,” she said. “I’m not coming back. Not now. Probably not ever, though I wouldn’t rule it out completely.”

“Hear me out on this one, Black,” he said. “Wait until you hear the details. Actually, you’ve probably already heard them. This one has been all over the news.”

“I don’t watch the news,” she said. “Hell, I only use the computer for Amazon. I can’t remember the last time I read a headline.”

“Well, it’s strange as hell and we can’t seem to get to the bottom of it. O’Malley and I had a late-night drinking session last night and decided we needed to call you. This isn’t just me kissing your ass and trying to convince you...but you’re the only person we came up with that could maybe crack this one. If you haven’t seen the news, I can tell you it’s – ”

“The answer is no, Connelly,” she said, interrupting. “I appreciate the thought and the gesture, but no. If I’m ever ready to discuss a return, I’ll call *you*.”

“A man is dead, Avery, and the killer might not be finished,” he said.

For some reason, hearing him use her first name stung a bit. “I’m sorry, Connelly. Be sure to tell Finley I said hello.”

And with that, she hung up. She looked at the call idly, wondering if she had just made a huge mistake. She’d be lying if she told herself the idea of returning to work hadn’t elicited a bit of a thrill. Even hearing Connelly’s voice had made her yearn for that part of her old life.

You can’t, she told herself. *If you go back to work now, you’re basically telling Rose that you don’t give a damn about her. And you’d be running directly back into the arms of the creature that put you where you are right now.*

She got to her feet and looked out the window. She looked out to the trees, into the thickness and shrouded daytime shadows between them, and thought about Howard Randall’s letter.

About Howard Randall’s question.

Who are you?

She was beginning to think she wasn’t exactly sure of the answer. And maybe being without her work in her life was the reason.

She broke out of her routine that afternoon for the first time since establishing it. She drove out to South Boston, to St. Augustine Cemetery. It was a place she had been avoiding since the move, not just because of guilt but because it seemed that whatever cruel force manipulated fate had delivered a vicious jab to her. Both Ramirez and Jack were buried in St. Augustine Cemetery and though they were many rows apart, that did not matter to Avery. As far as she was concerned, the nexus of her failures and grief was located in that one green strip of land and she wanted nothing to do with it.

That’s why this was her first visit since the funerals. She sat in the car for a moment, looking out toward Ramirez’s grave. She slowly got out of the car and walked over to where the man she had been ready to marry had been laid to rest. The grave marker was modest. Someone had recently placed a bouquet of white flowers on it – probably his mother – that would wither and die in this cold within the next day or so.

She didn’t know what to say and she supposed that was fine. If Ramirez was aware that she was there and if he could hear what she could say (and a large part of Avery thought that was the case), he would know that she had never been one for sentiment. He was probably shocked, even in whatever ethereal place he was occupying, that she was here at all.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the ring that Ramirez had intended to one day place on her finger.

“I miss you,” she said. “I miss you and I’m just so...so *lost*. And there’s no need to lie to you...it’s not just because you’re gone. I don’t know what to do with myself. My life is falling apart and

the one thing I know will make it somewhat stable again – work – is probably the worst thing I could turn to.”

She tried to imagine him there with her. What would he say to her if he could? She smiled when she imagined him giving her one of his sarcastic frowns. *Suck it up and do it.* That’s what he’d say. *Get your ass back to work and pick up what’s left of your life.*

“You’re no help,” she said with her own little sarcastic expression. It scared her a bit that speaking to him through his grave felt almost natural. “You’d tell me to go back to work and figure it out from there, wouldn’t you?”

She stared at the gravestone, as if willing it to answer her. A single tear came out of the corner of her right eye. She wiped it away as she turned away and headed in the direction of Jack’s grave. He’d been buried on the other side of the cemetery, which she could just barely see from where she stood. She walked to the little path that ran through the grounds, enjoying the silence. She paid no attention to the few others who were there to pay their respects and grieve, leaving them with their privacy.

Yet as she neared Jack’s grave, she saw someone already standing by it. It was a woman, short and with her head bowed down. With another few steps, Avery saw that it was Rose. Her hands were stuffed into her pockets and she was wearing a coat with a hood, which was up and covering her head.

Avery didn’t want to call out, hoping she’d manage to get close enough where they could actually have a conversation. But within several more steps, Rose apparently sensed someone approaching. She turned, saw Avery, and instantly started walking away.

“Rose, don’t be like that,” Avery said. “Can’t we just talk for a minute?”

“No, Mom. Jesus, how can you ruin this for me, too?”

“Rose!”

But Rose had nothing more to say. She quickened her pace and Avery did everything she could not to give chase. More tears came spilling down Avery’s face as she turned her attention to Jack’s grave.

“Whose side did she get that streak from?” Avery asked the gravestone.

Like Ramirez, Jack’s stone was of course also silent. She turned back to her right and watched as Rose grew smaller in the distance. Walking away from her until she was gone completely.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Avery walked into Dr. Higdon's office, she felt like a cliché. Dr. Higdon herself was very poised and polite. She seemed to always have her head pointed slightly upward, showing off the perfect point of her nose and the angle of her chin. She was a good-looking woman, if not a bit overdone.

Avery had fought the urge to go to a therapist but knew enough about how the traumatized mind worked to know that she needed it. And that was excruciating to admit to herself. She hated the idea of visiting a shrink and also did not want to resort to calling upon the services of the Boston PD—assigned shrink she'd seen a few times over the years following particular tough cases.

So she'd reached out to Dr. Higdon, a therapist she had heard about last year during a case involving a suspect who had used her to get over a series of irrational fears.

"I appreciate you meeting with me so quickly," Avery said. "I was honestly expecting to have to wait a few weeks."

Higdon shrugged as she sat down in her chair. When Avery took a seat on the adjacent couch, the feeling of becoming a living cliché only intensified.

"Well, I've heard of you a few times just through news stories," Higdon said. "And your name has come up when new patients have come in, people you've apparently crossed paths with in your line of work. So I had an open hour today and figured it would be nice to meet you."

Realizing that it was unprecedented to get an appointment with a respected therapist just two days after making a call, Avery knew not to take the appointment for granted. And, never having been one to beat around the bush, she had no problem getting to the point.

"I wanted to meet with a therapist because, quite honestly, my head is just a mess right now. One part is telling me that healing is going to come from time off. Another part is telling me that healing is going to come from productivity and familiarity – which leads me back to work."

"I know just the briefest of details about the healing you're looking for," Higdon said. "Could you elaborate?"

Avery spent ten minutes doing just that. She started with how the last case had unfolded and then ended in the death of her ex-husband and her would-be fiancé. She breezed over the part about moving away from the city and the recent fallout with Rose, both at her apartment and their run-in at Jack's grave.

Dr. Higdon started asking questions right away, having taken down handwritten notes the entire time Avery had been talking. "The move to the cabin by Walden Pond...what made you want to do that?"

"I didn't want to be around people. It's more isolated. Very quiet."

"Do you feel that you heal better both emotionally and physically when you're on your own?" Higdon asked.

"I don't know. I just...I didn't want to be in a place where people had the ability to come by and check on me a hundred times a day."

"Have you always had problems with people concerned for your well-being?"

Avery shrugged. "Not really. It's a vulnerability thing, I suppose. In my line of work, vulnerability leads to weakness."

"I doubt that's true. In terms of perception, probably – but not in the actual state of things." She paused for a moment here and then sat forward. "I won't try to dance around topics and subtly lead you to the key points," she said. "I'm sure you'd see it for what it was. Besides, the fact that you can admit to a fear of vulnerability tells me a great deal. So I think we can get directly to the point here."

"I'd prefer it that way," Avery said.

"The time you spent alone in the cabin...do you believe it's helped or hindered your healing?"

“I think it’s a stretch to say it helped, but it made it easier. I knew I wasn’t going to have to deal with the onslaught of well-wishers to constantly check in on me.”

“Did you try reaching out to anyone during that time?”

“Just my daughter,” Avery said.

“But she rejected all of your attempts to reconnect?”

“That’s right. I’m pretty sure she blames me for her father dying.”

“If we’re being honest, that’s probably true,” Higdon said. “And she’ll come around to the truth on her own time. People grieve differently. Rather than escaping it all in a cabin in the woods, your daughter has chosen to assign blame to an easy source. Now let me ask you this...why did you resign from your job at all?”

“Because I felt like I’d lost everything,” Avery said. She didn’t even have to think about it. “I felt like I’d lost everything and failed at my job. I couldn’t stay because it was a reminder of how I wasn’t good enough.”

“Do you still feel that you aren’t good enough?”

“Well...no. At the risk of sounding conceited, I’m very good at my job.”

“And you’ve missed it over the course of these last three months or so, right?”

“I have,” Avery admitted.

“Do you feel that your desire to return there is just to fall back into what your life was once like or do you think there might be some actual progress to be found there?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know. But I’m getting to the point where I think I have to find out. I think I have to go back.”

Dr. Higdon nodded and scribbled something down. “Do you think your daughter will react negatively if you went back?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Okay, so let’s say she wasn’t in the equation; let’s say Rose couldn’t care less if you went back or not. Would you have any hesitation?”

The realization hit her like a brick to the head. “Probably not.”

“I think you have your answer right there,” Higdon said. “I think at this point in the grieving process, you and your daughter can’t let one another dictate the way the other grieves. Rose *needs* to blame someone right now. That’s how she’s dealing...and your strained relationship makes it easy. As for you...I want to say returning to work might just be the thing to help push you along.”

“You *want* to?” Avery asked, confused.

“Yes, I think it makes the most sense, given your history and track record. However, during all of this time alone, isolated away from everyone, have you ever had suicidal thoughts?”

“No,” Avery lied. It came easily and without much regret. “I’ve been low, sure. But never quite that low.”

Yes, she had omitted her near-suicide. She had also not mentioned her package from Howard Randal as she had recounted the last several months. She didn’t know why. For now, it simply felt too private.

“That being the case,” Higdon said, “I don’t see the harm in returning to work. I do think you should be partnered with someone, though. And I know that could be touchy given who your last partner was. Still...you can’t be released into high-stress situations on your own so soon. I’d even recommend you do some light work first. Maybe even desk work.”

“I’ll just be honest...that’s not going to happen.”

Higdon smiled thinly. “So do you think that’s what you’ll do? Will you see if returning to work helps to get you over this self-doubt and blame?”

“Soon,” Avery said, thinking of the call from Connelly two days ago. “Yeah, I think I just might.”

“Well, I wish you the best of luck,” Higdon said, reaching over to shake her hand. “In the meantime, feel free to call me if you need to hash anything out.”

Avery shook Higdon’s hand and left the office. She hated to admit it, but she felt better than she had in weeks – ever since she had finally found a routine for exercise and sharpening her mind. She thought she might be able to think a little more clearly and not because Higdon had uncovered some profound hidden truth. She had simply needed someone to point out to her that although Rose might be the only person left in her life outside of work, that did not mean that her fear of how Rose viewed her should dictate what she did with the rest of her life.

She drove toward the nearest exit to head back to the cabin. She saw the high-rise buildings of Boston off to her left. The precinct was about a twenty-minute drive away. She could head that way, pay everyone a visit, and be given a warm welcome. She could just pull the Band-Aid off and do it.

But a warm welcome was not what she deserved. In fact, she wasn’t sure *what* she deserved.

And maybe that was where the last remaining bit of hesitation came from.

The nightmare she had that night was not a new one but it *did* present a twist.

In it, she was sitting in a visitation room in a correctional facility. It was not the one she had sometimes visited Howard Randall in, but something much larger and almost Greek-looking. Rose and Jack sat across the table, a chessboard between them. All of the pieces remained on the board, but the kings had fallen over.

“He’s not here,” Rose said, her voice echoing in the cavernous room. “Your little secret weapon is not here.”

“Just as well,” Jack said. “It’s about time to learn to solve some of the bigger cases on your own.”

Jack then passed a hand over his face and in the blink of an eye, he looked the way he did on the night she had discovered his body. The right side of his face was awash in blood and his face had a sort of sag to it on the right side. When he opened his mouth to speak to her there was no tongue in his mouth. There was just darkness beyond the teeth, a chasm where his words came from and, she suspected, where he wished her to be.

“You couldn’t save me,” he said. “You couldn’t save me and now I have to trust you with my daughter.”

Rose stood up at that moment and started walking away from the table. Avery stood with her, certain that something very bad would happen if Rose got out of her sight. She started to follow her but could not move. She looked down and saw that both of her feet had been nailed to the floor with enormous railroad ties. Her feet were shattered, nothing but blood, bone, and chunks of flesh.

“Rose!”

But her daughter only looked back at her, smiled, and waved. And the farther away she got, the bigger the room seemed. Shadows came spilling from every direction, descending on her daughter.

“Rose!”

“It’s okay,” said a voice from behind her. “I’ll watch over her.”

She turned and saw Ramirez, holding his sidearm and looking into the shadows. And as he so gallantly chased after Rose, the shadows started coming after him.

“No! Stay!”

She pulled against the spikes in her feet but to no avail. She could only watch as the two people she had loved the most in the world were swallowed by the darkness.

And that’s when the screams began, pouring out of the shadows, Rose and Ramirez filling the room with cries of agony.

Still at the table, Jack pleaded with her: “For fuck’s sake, *do something!*”

And that's when Avery jolted upright in bed, a scream building in her throat. She turned her bedside lamp on with a trembling hand. For a moment, she saw that enormous room spread out ahead of her but it slowly dissipated with the light and wakefulness. She looked to the still-new cabin bedroom and, for the first time, wondered if it was ever going to feel like home.

She found herself thinking of Connelly's call. And then of Howard Randall's package.

Her old life was haunting her dreams, sure, but it was also invading this new isolated life she had tried building for herself as well.

There seemed to be no escape.

So maybe – just maybe – it was time to stop trying to escape it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Once she'd stopped the heavy drinking during the more desolate stretches of the grieving process, she had slowly replaced her alcohol intake with caffeine intake. Her reading sessions would often consist of two cups of coffee with a Diet Coke in between. Because of this, she'd started to develop minor headaches after several weeks if she went without coffee for more than a day or so. It wasn't the healthiest of ways to live but certainly better than drinking herself into despair.

That's why she found herself in a coffee shop after lunch the following day. She'd gone out for groceries primarily because she'd run out of coffee at the cabin and, having only had a single cup that morning, needed a quick fix before getting back to the cabin and finishing out the day. She had a book to finish reading but also thought she might head out into the woods for another try at deer hunting.

The coffee shop was a trendy local place, with four people huddled down behind their MacBooks throughout the shop. The line at the counter was long, even for such an early afternoon hour. The place was abuzz with conversation, the whirring of machinery behind the counter, and the soft volume of the TV at the waiting end of the bar.

Avery got to the cashier, ordered her dirty chai with two espresso shots, and took up her own place at the waiting area. She passed her time by looking at the small corkboard filled with fliers for upcoming local events: concerts, plays, fundraisers...

And then she noticed the conversation beside her. She did her best not to seem obvious that she was eavesdropping, keeping her eyes turned to the events board.

There were two women behind her. One was in her mid-twenties, wearing one of those Baby Bjorn baby slings that wrapped over around her chest. Her baby napped restfully against her chest. The other woman was a bit older, drink in hand but not quite ready to leave the shop.

Their attention was turned to the TV behind the counter. Their conversation was hushed but easily overheard.

"My God...have you heard about this story?" the mother was saying.

"Yeah," the second woman said. "It's like people are finding new ways to hurt one another. What kind of sick mind do you have to have to even think about something like that?"

"Looks like they still haven't found the creep," the mother said.

"They probably won't," the other woman said. "If they were going to catch this guy, they would have *something* by now. Jeez...can you imagine the poor guy's family, having to see this on the news?"

Avery's attention was snapped when the barista called her name and handed her drink over the counter. Avery took it and, now facing the television, allowed herself to watch the news for the first time in almost three months.

There had been a death on the outskirts of town one week ago, in a rundown apartment complex. Not just a death, but a pretty blatant murder. The victim had been found in his closet, covered in spiders of varying varieties. Police were working on the assumption that the act had been intentional, as half of the spiders there had been kinds that were not native to the region. Despite the abundance of spiders at the scene, only two bites were found on the body and neither had been venomous. According to the news, so far, the police were working on the assumption that the man had been killed by either strangulation or heart attack.

Those are two pretty different causes of death, Avery thought to herself as she slowly started to turn away.

She couldn't help but wonder if this was the case Connelly had called her about three days ago. A case with a very unique twist and, so far, without any real answers. *Yeah...this is probably the one,* she thought.

With her drink in hand, Avery headed out the door. She had the rest of the afternoon ahead of her but she was pretty sure she knew how it would go. Whether she liked it or not, she'd probably be looking quite a bit at spiders.

Avery spent the rest of the afternoon getting familiar with the case. The story itself was so morbid that she didn't have a problem finding a variety of sources. When all was said and done, she found eleven different reputable sources that told the story of what had happened to a man named Alfred Lawnbrook.

Lawnbrook's landlord had entered his apartment after rent had been two weeks late for the umpteenth time and had known something was off right away. Reading it, Avery couldn't help but parallel her recent experience with Rose and her landlord and, quite frankly, it creeped her right the hell out. Alfred Lawnbrook was found stuffed in his bedroom closet. He had been partially draped in at least three different spider webs, with two different bites – bites that, as the news report in the coffee shop had said, were not overly harmful.

While an actual count was not possible, an educated guess as to how many spiders had been found at the scene was somewhere between five and six hundred. A few of them were exotic and had no business being in an apartment in Boston. An arachnologist had been called in to assist and pointed out that she had seen at least three species that were not native to America, much less Massachusetts.

So there's intention, Avery thought. And a lot of it. That much intention points to the likelihood that this guy will strike again. And if he's going to strike again in the same way, it should be possible to trace him and take him down.

The coroner's report stated that Lawnbrook had died of a heart attack, likely from the fear of the situation. Of course, with no one having been at the scene during the murder, there were numerous other scenarios that could have played out. No one could know for sure.

It was an interesting case...if not a little morbid. Avery did not fear much, but large spiders was certainly on the top of her list of Things She Could Do Without. And while there had been no images of the scene revealed to the public (thank God), Avery could only imagine what it had looked like.

When she was filled in, Avery stared out of the back window for quite a while. She then went into the kitchen and moved quietly, as if she was afraid she might get caught. She pulled out the bottle of bourbon for the first time in months and poured herself a shot. She took it quickly and then grabbed her phone. She pulled up Connelly's number and pressed CALL.

He answered on the second ring – pretty quick for Connelly. Avery supposed that said a lot, all things considered.

"Black," he said. "I honestly didn't expect to hear from you."

She ignored this formality and said, "So, this case you were calling me about. Was it the one involving Alfred Lawnbrook and the spiders?"

"It is," he said. "The scene has been combed over repeatedly, the body has been scrutinized, and we just have *nothing*."

"I'll come in for it," she said. "But just this one case. And I want to be able to do it on my terms. No over the shoulder hand-holding just because I've been through a rough time. Can you see to that?"

"I can do my best."

Avery sighed, resigned to how good it felt to be needed and to know that her life would soon feel like her own again.

"Okay then," she said. "I'll see you at the A1 tomorrow morning."

CHAPTER SIX

Avery wasn't sure what she'd been expecting when she walked back into the precinct for the first time in over three months. Maybe some butterflies in her stomach or a wave of nostalgia. Maybe even a secure feeling that would make her wonder why she ever thought it had been a smart idea to quit in the first place.

What she wasn't expecting was to feel nothing. Yet, that's what she felt. When she walked back into the A1 the following morning, she felt nothing special. It felt almost like she hadn't missed a day and was just churning out another day – any other old day, just like before.

Apparently, though, she was the only one in the building who felt that way. As she made her way through the building and back toward her old office, she noticed that the busy rush of the morning seemed to quiet as she passed by. It was almost like a wave of silence followed her. The receptionists on the phone went quiet, the murmur of conversation by the coffee pots fell silent. They all looked at her as if some huge celebrity had entered the building; their eyes were wide with wonder and their faces were slack. Avery wondered for a moment if Connelly had even bothered telling anyone that she was coming back.

After weaving her way through the central part of the building and to the back where the offices and conference rooms were, it felt a little more natural. Miller, a records and research guy, gave her a little wave. Denson, an older officer who had maybe two years left before retirement, gave her a smile, a wave, and a genuine: “Nice to have you back!”

Avery returned the woman's smile, thinking: *I'm not back.*

But on the heels of that there was another thought. *Whatever. Tell yourself that lie all you want. But this feels natural to you. It feels right.*

She saw Connelly coming out of his office at the end of the hallway. The man had caused her some pain and headaches over the years but damn if she wasn't glad to see him. The grin on his face let her know the feeling was mutual. He met her in the hallway and she could tell that the A1 captain – usually a staunch hard ass – was holding himself back from giving her a hug.

“How was it coming in?” he asked.

“Weird,” she said. “They looked at me like I was a celebrity or something. I couldn't tell if they wanted to avert their eyes or bust out into spontaneous applause.”

“Truth be told, I was worried you'd get a standing ovation for coming in. You've been missed around here, Black. You...well, you and Ramirez both.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

“Good. Because I'm about to show you something that might piss you off. You see...deep down, I had this hope that you'd come back some day. But we couldn't just make the entire A1 stay on pause until that day came. So you don't exactly have an office anymore.”

He explained this to her as he led her down the hallway, in the direction of her old office.

“That's not a big deal at all,” Avery said. “Who got that dump anyway?”

Connelly didn't answer. Instead, he took the last final steps toward her office and nodded toward it. Avery approached the door and poked her head in. Her heart warmed a bit at what she saw.

Finley was sitting at her desk, sipping from a mug of coffee and reading something on a laptop. When he saw Avery, his face went through a variety of emotions: shock, happiness, and then settling on embarrassment.

He did not show the same restraint as Connelly had. He instantly got up from the desk and met her at the door with a hug. She had underestimated how much she had missed him. While they had never truly worked together, she had enjoyed watching Finley slowly make his way up the ladder. He was funny, loyal, and genuinely kindhearted. She'd always felt as if he were a distant brother in the workplace.

“It’s good to have you back,” Finley said. “We’ve missed you around here.”

“I already went through all of that with her,” Connelly said. “Let’s not give her a big head her first day back.”

Dammit, I’m not back, she thought. But it felt even flimsier than it had five minutes ago.

“You want me to take her out to the site?” Finley asked.

“Yes, and soon. O’Malley is going to want to touch base with her later and I’d like her all nice and caught up when he lands here. Ride her out there and catch her up on everything we know. Try to get out of here in the next ten minutes or so if you can.”

Finley nodded, visibly happy to have been given the task. As he hurried back to the computer, Connelly motioned Avery back out into the hallway. “Come with me,” he said.

She followed him farther down the hall, to the big office at the end. Connelly’s office hadn’t changed a bit since she left. Still cluttered but in a neat sort of way. There were three coffee mugs on his desk and she guessed at least two of them were from this morning alone.

“One more thing,” Connelly said, walking behind his desk. He opened his top desk drawer and pulled out two things that Avery had missed probably more than any of the people in this building.

Her gun and her badge. She smiled as she reached out to them.

“I already filed the paperwork for you,” Connelly said. “They’re yours. In terms of pay and the duration of your stay, I’m handling that paperwork, too.”

Avery honestly didn’t care about the pay or how long she was expected to stay onboard for the case. When her fingers fell on the badge and then picked up the Glock, she felt something slide into place inside her heart.

As sad as it seemed, the badge and the gun felt familiar.

They felt like home.

The crime scene was six days old and, therefore, was vacant when she and Finley got there. They ducked under the yellow tape and she watched as Finley unlocked Alfred Lawnbrook’s apartment door with a key he took from a small envelope that he’d kept in the breast pocket of his shirt.

“You got a fear of spiders?” Finley asked as they stepped inside.

“A bit,” she said. “But that goes no farther than right here, deal?”

Finley nodded with a grim smile. “I only ask because while there were arachnologists and exterminators that came in and took care of them, there were a few stragglers. Just common ones, though. Nothing fancy.”

He led her through the apartment. It was very basic; the layout and appliances told her that Lawnbrook had either been a divorcé or a bachelor. “But there *were* ones that had no business here, right?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Finley said. “At least three species. One was local to India, I think. I’ve got the detailed notes saved on my phone if you want them. The spider expert that came out and looked the place over said that there were at least two species at the crime scene when the body was found that would have had to have been ordered from a dealer. And that it would likely have been hard to get.”

“Any huge ones that you know of?” Avery asked.

“I think they said the biggest one was about the size of a golf ball. And if you ask me, that’s big enough.”

They entered the bedroom and Avery did her best not to start scanning the walls and floor for rogue spiders. She did a quick sweep of the room and found it expertly cleaned out. The closet door was standing open, allowing Finley to reach inside and flick the light on. He did so very quickly and then stepped back just as fast.

“Lawnbrook was slumped over in the back left corner,” Finley said. “We’ve got the pictures back at A1 and I’m sure O’Malley would love to go over them with you. That asshole is fascinated with this case.”

Avery stepped into the closet doorway. Other than a few stray threads of cobweb in the corner, there was nothing to be seen.

She then left the bedroom and started looking the place over for any signs of a break-in. Finley followed behind her, keeping his distance and letting her work. She looked for anything knocked out of place, even something as small as a picture in the living room, but found nothing. She scanned the books sitting on the small bookshelf beside the entertainment center for anything linking Lawnbrook to spiders but found nothing.

“Do we have any kind of link at all between Lawnbrook and an interest in spiders?” Avery asked.

“No. Nothing.”

“Has anyone spoken with the family?”

“Yes. And I think O’Malley ran backup on that. From what I understand, they painted Lawnbrook as something of a scaredy-cat. Hated roller coasters, scary movies, things like that. So the chance that he had a thing for spiders seemed to be thrown out the window.”

So if the spiders weren’t here because of Lawnbrook, why were they here? Avery wondered. And what sort of a person would bring them here? And why?

The days upon days of keeping her mind sharp with Sudoku and crosswords had paid off. Once the questions started rolling through her head, she couldn’t get them to stop. And it felt *good*.

“Do you know if Lawnbrook is still with the coroner?” she asked.

“Yeah, he’s still there. The spider experts have been studying him. There were eggs found in his nose and lower intestine during the autopsy.”

Avery couldn’t suppress the shudder she felt at this revelation. “Feel like taking a ride over there?”

“I’ll take you anywhere you’d like to go, so long as it gets me away from this place. I know they’re all gone, but – ”

“But it feels like they’re crawling on you,” Avery said with a shaky grin. “I know. Let’s get going.”

Even the hectic pace of traveling from one stop to the next to find answers felt amazing to her. It wasn’t just *her* moving, but her life. She could feel the sensation of things in motion, of people and places buzzing by her as Finley drove her to the coroner’s office.

She had hoped there might be an arachnologist there when they arrived, but was disappointed. She *did* find that the woman who performed the autopsy was there. And that was the next best thing. After being ushered through to the back and to the examination rooms, Avery and Finley met with Cho Yin. Yin was a petite, beautiful Asian woman who seemed more than pleased to discuss the case. Like O’Malley, she also seemed to find the case morbidly fascinating.

They met in Yin’s office, a very tidy room with an ancient-looking filing cabinet in the back corner. Avery introduced herself and wasted no time getting right to the point. She already felt like she was behind because of coming on so late and didn’t have the convenience of niceties.

“I suppose my first question is about the bites,” Avery said. “From what I understand, there were only two.”

Yin shook her head and looked surprised. “That’s not correct at all. Some bad reporting on the part of the media, I think. There were three bites from spiders that could have been lethal. But there were other bites as well, mostly from non-venomous spiders. There were twenty-two in all.”

“Oh my god,” Avery said. “And would that be enough to kill someone?”

“Yes, especially one of the bites from the venomous spiders. There were two bites from a brown recluse, as backed up by the entomologist that was on hand during the exam. The third venomous bite came from a funnel web spider. And from what I understand, that’s the rare one. The family from which that spider came isn’t native to the States.”

“Where does it come from, then?” Avery asked.

“I don’t know. You’d have to speak with the arachnologist. And you know, I must say that I can’t be absolutely certain the venom from the bites killed the victim. It was something that the spider expert and I disagreed on, actually.”

“Why is that? What do you think killed him?”

“Well, Mr. Lawnbrook’s cortisol levels were much higher than they should have been. Essentially, he was basically terrified at the moment of his death – but the levels I saw were off of the charts. The heart showed massive signs of stress and trauma. I am quite certain Mr. Lawnbrook suffered a heart attack during his time in the closet. He was *that* frightened.”

“Is the body still here?” Avery asked.

“It is. I have to warn you, though...it’s a pretty grisly sight.”

“I’ll be okay,” Avery said.

She had nearly said *I’m sure I’ve seen worse* but then she tried to imagine what someone with twenty-two spider bites – three of which were deadly – might look like. The imagery from what Finley had told her about eggs being found in the nostrils and intestine did not sit well with her either. Still, she felt she needed to see the body for any other signs or clues.

Yin led them to the rear exam room and methodically walked over to the rows of sliding cabinets. With a hefty pull, she drew out the slab that Alfred Lawnbrook was occupying. She stepped back, allowing Avery and Finley room to step forward. Avery approached the body while Finley remained close to the door, making it clear that he had no intention of getting any closer to the body.

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