



next door

a chloe fine psychological suspense--book I

BLAKE PIERCE

Блейк Пирс Next Door

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Аннотация

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery. Blake 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. 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*)

NEXT DOOR (A Chloe Fine Mystery) is book #1 in a new psychological suspense series by bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller *Once Gone* (Book #1) (a free download) has received over 1,000 five star reviews.

FBI Evidence Response Team intern Chloe Fine, 27, finds herself forced to confront her own dark past when her troubled twin sister needs her help—and when a body turns up dead in her small, suburban town.

Chloe feels life is finally perfect as she moves back into her home town, and into a new house with her fiancé. Her career with the FBI looks promising, and her wedding is on the horizon.

But, she learns, all is not as it seems in suburbia. Chloe begins to see the underside—the gossip, the secrets, the lies—and she finds herself haunted by her own demons: her mother’s mysterious death when she was 10, and her father’s imprisonment.

And when a fresh body is found, Chloe soon realizes that her past, and this small town, might hold the key to solving both.

An emotionally wrought psychological suspense with layered characters, small-town ambiance and heart-pounding suspense, **NEXT DOOR** is book #1 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #2 in the **CHLOE FINE** series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

Next Door

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes thirteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); 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 two books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising two books (and counting).

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

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Prologue

Chloe sat on the front steps of her apartment building beside her twin sister, Danielle, watching as the police led their father down the front stoop, in handcuffs.

A large cop with a round belly stood in front of Chloe and Danielle. His black skin glistened with sweat as the summer night beamed down on them.

“You girls don’t need to see this,” he said.

Chloe thought it was a silly thing to say. Even at ten years old, she knew he was simply trying to block out the sight of their father being led into the back of a cop car.

That sight was the least of her problems. She’d already seen the blood at the bottom of the stairs. She’d seen how it was splattered on the bottom step and then soaked into the carpet that led into the living room. She’d seen the body, too. It had been facedown. Her father had tried very hard not to let her see it. But no matter what he did, the sight of all that blood had stuck itself to the walls of her head.

It was what she saw as the fat cop stood in front of her. It was all that she saw.

Chloe heard the door to the police car slam closed. She knew it was the sound of her father leaving them—she sensed, forever.

“You girls okay?” the cop asked.

Neither of them answered. Chloe was still seeing all of that

blood at the bottom of the stairs, soaking into the blue carpet. She looked quickly over at Danielle and saw that her sister was staring at her feet. She wasn't blinking. Chloe was pretty sure something was wrong with her. Chloe thought Danielle had seen more of the body, maybe even the really dark spot where all of the blood seemed to have come from.

The fat cop looked up the front stoop stairs all of a sudden. Under his breath, he said in a hissing voice: "Christ, can't you wait? The girls are right here..."

Behind the cop, they brought a body bag out of the building and down the steps. It was the body. The one that had leaked all of that dark red blood on the carpet.

Their mother.

"Girls?" the cop asked. "One of you want to talk to me?"

But Chloe did not want to talk.

Sometime later, a familiar car pulled up behind one of the remaining cop cars. The fat cop had stopped trying to get them to talk and Chloe sensed that he was just there with them so they would not feel alone.

Beside Chloe, Danielle said her first word since they had been brought out to the front stoop.

"Grandma," Danielle said.

The familiar car that had showed up belonged to their grandmother. She got out of the car as quickly as her legs would allow. Chloe saw that she was crying.

She felt a tear sliding down her face but it was not like crying.

It felt like something breaking.

“Your grandmother is here,” the cop said. He sounded relieved, happy to be rid of them.

“Girls,” was the only word her grandmother got out as she came up the stairs. After that, she started to sob and took both of her granddaughters in an awkward embrace.

Oddly enough, it was that embrace that Chloe would remember.

The sight of the blood would become faint. The fat cop faded after just a few weeks, as did the surreal sight of the cuffs.

But for her entire life, Chloe would remember that awkward hug.

And the feeling of something deep inside cracking, and then breaking.

Had her father truly killed her mother?

Chapter One

17 Years Later

Chloe Fine climbed up the stairs of her new home—the home that she and her fiancé had hunted for, for months—and she could hardly contain her excitement.

“That box too heavy?”

Steven dashed up the steps beside her, carrying a box labeled PILLOWS.

“Not at all,” she said, hefting her own box, which read DISHES on the side.

Steven set his box down and took hers.

“Let’s trade,” he said with a smile.

He had been smiling a lot recently. Actually, there seemed to have been a permanent smile on his face ever since she had allowed him to slip an engagement ring on her finger eight months ago.

They marched together up the sidewalk. As they went, Chloe took in the sight of the yard. It wasn’t the big sprawling yard she’d always envisioned. In her mind, her house had a big open yard with trees scattered along the back. Instead, she and Steven had settled on one in a quiet neighborhood. But she was only twenty-seven; she had time. Both she and Steven knew that this was not the house they’d grow old in. And something about that made it

even more special. This was to be their starter home, the place they would learn the ins and outs of marriage—and maybe where they'd work at having a kid or two.

She could see their neighbor's house quite clearly. The lawns were separated only by a series of tall bushes. The picturesque white porch was almost identical to their own.

"I know I grew up here for the most part," Chloe said. "But it just doesn't feel the same. It feels like a different town."

"I assure you, it's exactly the same," Steven said. "Well, give or take a few new housing developments like the one we are currently homeowners in. Good old Pinecrest, Maryland. Small enough so you'll always run into people you don't want to but just large enough to not have to drive an hour to a grocery store."

"I miss Philly already."

"Not me," Steven said. "No more Eagles fans, no more Rocky jokes, no more traffic."

"All good points," Chloe agreed. "Still..."

"Give it some time," Steven said. "This will feel like home soon enough."

Chloe wished her grandmother was there in that moment to see this house. Chloe was pretty sure she'd be proud. She'd probably also waste no time in firing up the brand new oven in the kitchen in order to bake a celebratory dessert.

But she'd died two years ago, just ten months after Chloe's grandfather died in a car accident. It would have been poetic to think she'd died of a broken heart but that hadn't been the case;

in the end, it was a heart attack that claimed her grandmother.

Chloe also thought of Danielle. Right after high school, Danielle had moved away to Boston for a few years. There had been a pregnancy scare, an arrest or two, and several failed jobs. All of that had eventually led her sister back here, to Pinecrest, a few years ago.

As for Chloe, she had gone to college in Philadelphia, met Steven, and started working toward her career of becoming an FBI agent. She had a few classes remaining, but the transition had been smooth. Baltimore was just a half hour drive to the west and all of her credits had transferred without a hitch.

The stars had seemed to align in some majestic way when Steven had managed to land a job in Pinecrest. As much as Chloe joked about not wanting to return to Pinecrest, something inside of her knew she'd always end up back there if even for just a few years. It was a dumb sentiment but she felt she owed it to her grandparents. Growing up, she couldn't get out of this place fast enough and she felt that her grandparents had always taken that a little personally.

And then the perfect house had come along and Chloe had started to love the idea of being back in a smaller town. Pinecrest wasn't tiny at all—a population of about thirty-five thousand made it a comfortable size as far as Chloe was concerned.

Also, she was excited to meet up with Danielle at some point. But first, they had to finish moving in. The meager belongings she and Steven owned were packed into the back of the U-Haul

that was currently parked askew in their small concrete driveway. They were now two hours into unloading the truck, in and out, back and forth, until they could finally see the back of the trailer through the last row of boxes and bins.

As Steven brought in the last of the boxes, Chloe began to unpack. It was surreal to realize that these were items from their separate apartments now being unboxed to share the same space they'd share as a couple. It was a warm feeling, one that made her glance at the ring on her finger with a confident smile.

As she was unpacking, she heard a knock on the front door—the first actual knock at their new home. This was followed by a woman's high-pitched voice saying: *"Hello?"*

Confused, Chloe stopped unpacking and walked to the front door. She wasn't sure what she was expecting to see but it certainly wasn't a face from her past. Strangely enough, that's exactly what she found waiting at the door.

"Chloe Fine?" the woman asked.

It had been eight years, but Chloe recognized the face of Kathleen Saunders easily enough. They'd gone to high school together. It was very dreamlike to see her here, standing at her front door. While not the best of friends in high school, they had been a bit more than casual acquaintances. Still, seeing a face from her past standing in the threshold of her future was so unexpected that it made Chloe feel dizzy for a moment.

"Kathleen?" she asked. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Living here," Kathleen said with a smile. She had put on quite

a bit of weight since high school but her smile was exactly the same.

“Here?” Chloe asked. “In this neighborhood?”

“Yes. Two houses over, to your right. I was coming in from walking my dog and I *thought* it was you. Well, you or your sister. So I came over and asked the man in the back of the U-Haul and he said to come on up and say hello. Is that your husband?”

“Fiancé,” Chloe said.

“Well, how small of a world is this?” she asked. “Or...rather, how small of a *town*.”

“Yes, I suppose it really is,” Chloe said.

“I’d love to stay and chat, but I actually have to go meet with a client in about an hour,” Kathleen said. “And besides, I don’t want to keep you from unpacking. But listen...there’s a block party this Saturday. I wanted to be the first to personally invite you.”

“Well, thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Hey, really quickly...how’s Danielle? I know when she finished up high school she was going through some stuff. Rumor has it that she’s living in Boston.”

“She *was* in Boston,” Chloe said. “But she’s actually been back here in Pinecrest for a few years.”

“That’s so cool,” Kathleen said. “Maybe invite her to the block party, too? I’d love to get to catch up with both of you!”

“Likewise,” Chloe said.

She briefly looked over Kathleen’s shoulder and saw Steven

in the back of the U-Haul. He was shrugging his shoulders and giving a squinted up face that seemed to say: *I'm sorry!*

“Well, it was so good to see you,” Kathleen said. “I hope to see you at the block party. And if not, you know where I live!”

“Yup! Two houses over, to the right.”

Kathleen nodded and then surprised Chloe with a hug. Chloe returned it, pretty sure Kathleen had not been the hugging type back in high school. She watched her old (and new, she supposed) friend wave to Steven as she walked back down to the sidewalk along the street.

Steven came back up the porch steps, carrying the final two boxes. Chloe took the top one off for him and they carried them into the living room. The place was a maze of boxes, bins, and luggage.

“Sorry about that,” Steven said. “I didn’t know if that would be a welcome guest or not.”

“No, it’s fine. It was *weird*, but fine.”

“She said she was a friend from high school?”

“Yeah. And here we are, living two houses apart. She seemed really sweet, though. She invited us to a block party this weekend.”

“That’s nice.”

“She knew Danielle back in high school, too. I think I’m going to invite her to the party, too.”

Steven started opening up one of the boxes, letting out a sigh. “Chloe, we haven’t even been here an entire day. Can’t we wait

before inviting your sister into our lives?”

“We are,” she said. “The party is three days away. So we’re waiting three days.”

“You know what I mean. Danielle has a tendency to make things difficult when they don’t have to be.”

Chloe *did* know what he meant. Steven had met Danielle four times and each of those occasions had been awkward—and neither of them had a problem saying as much. Danielle came with a particular set of issues, none of which were well suited for being around people she was unfamiliar with. So she supposed Steven was right. Why invite her to a block party where she wouldn’t know anyone?

But the answer was easy: *Because she’s my sister. She’s been alone and hurting these last few years and as lame as it sounds, she needs me.*

A quick flash of the two of them sitting on those apartment stairs tore through her head like a desert wind.

“You knew I’d reach out to her eventually,” Chloe said. “I can’t very well be living in the same city and continue to shut her out of my life.”

Steven nodded and came to her. “I know, I know,” he said. “But a man can dream.”

She knew there was a bit of barbed truth to the comment but she also recognized the joking tone. He was giving in, not wanting to let a discussion about her sister ruin moving day for them.

“It could be good for her,” Chloe said. “Getting out and socializing...I think I can bring it out of her if I can become something of a regular fixture in her life.”

Steven knew the complex history between the two of them. And although he made no secrets about not being particularly fond of Danielle, he had always lovingly supported Chloe and understood her concern for her sister.

“Do what you think is best for her, then,” he said. “And after you call her, come help me put the bed together in the master bedroom. I’ve got plans for it later.”

“Oh, you do?”

“Yeah. All this moving has wiped me out. I’m exhausted, I’m going to sleep so hard...and it’s going to be so hot.”

They both cracked up and found their way into each other’s arms. They shared a lingering kiss that suggested maybe their first night in their new home *would* put the bed to good use. But for now, there were the mounds and mounds of boxes to unpack.

Plus, a potentially uncomfortable phone call to make to her sister.

It was a thought that filled her with equal amounts of joy and anxiousness.

Even as her twin sister, Chloe was never sure what to expect from Danielle. And something about being back in Pinecrest made her sadly certain that things with Danielle had likely only gotten worse.

Chapter Two

Danielle Fine popped a No-Doz, swallowed it down with a warm, flat Coke, then opened up her underwear drawer and dug down on the right side for the sluttiest thing she could find.

Danielle thought about Martin. They had been dating for about six weeks now. And while they had both decided that they were going to take it slow, Danielle had lost her patience. She had decided she was going to throw herself at him tonight; stopping at second base every time they saw one another was making her feel like a stupid teenager who didn't know what she was doing.

She knew what she was doing. And she was pretty sure Martin did, too. By the end of the night, she'd know for sure.

She ended up selecting a lacy black pair that barely covered the front and was practically nonexistent in the back. She thought about which bra to wear but decided on not wearing one at all. She and Martin weren't exactly dress-up types and besides, she knew she was very much lacking in the chest; there was no expensive bra in the world that was going to be of much help. Besides...Martin had told her he liked how her boobs looked when their shapes were visible through a T-shirt.

They were meeting early, catching an early dinner so they could make the 6:30 movie in time. The mere fact that they were doing dinner and a movie rather than cheap drinks and a trip back to his house for a painful make-out session was a point in

her favor. She wondered if Martin was the kind who liked to feel that he was being a gentleman.

Six weeks with the guy...you should already know that kind of shit, she thought as she slid on the panties.

She got dressed in front of the full-length mirror on her bedroom wall. She tried on a few shirts before deciding to play it chill. She settled for a black, slightly tight T-shirt and a very basic pair of jeans. She was not the sort of girl who owned a bunch of dresses or skirts. She normally put on the first thing she grabbed in the morning. She knew she'd been blessed with her mother's good looks and, because she also managed to have immaculate skin, she usually went without much makeup, too. Her dyed black hair and intense brown eyes pulled the entire package together; in the blink of an eye she could make the transformation from innocent and sweet to aggressively sexy. It was one of the reasons she had never really cared about her small boobs.

With a quick look into the mirror, seeing the same figure, face, and T-shirt band logo that had all been there as a teen, Danielle was ready to head out to meet Martin. He was a greaseball of sorts, only not the kind that hung out in motor garages or racetracks. He'd toyed with amateur boxing at one point, or so he said. He had the body to make her believe it (another reason she was losing her patience) and currently worked as a freelance IT specialist. But, like her, he didn't take life too seriously and enjoyed drinking a lot. So far, they seemed like a perfect match.

But still. Six weeks without sex. She felt a lot of pressure.

What if he refused? What if he really wanted to keep taking it slow and she just couldn't wait?

Sighing, she went to the fridge. To calm her nerves, she grabbed a Guinness from the fridge, popped the top, and took a swig. She realized she was putting alcohol on top of her No-Doz but shrugged it off. She'd certainly put her body through much worse.

Her phone rang. *If he's calling to cancel on me, I'll kill him*, she thought.

When she saw that it wasn't his name on the display, she relaxed. Yet when she saw it was her sister, she slumped her shoulders. She knew she might as well answer it. If she didn't Chloe would call her back fifteen minutes from now. Persistence was one of the few traits they had in common.

She answered the call, skipping hellos as she usually did. "Welcome back to Pinecrest," she said, as monotone as possible. "You officially a resident again?"

"Depends on if you're asking me or all of these unpacked boxes," Chloe replied.

"When did you get in?" Danielle asked.

"This morning. We finally got everything out of the U-Haul and are trying to get through the boxes and figure out where everything needs to go."

"Do you need some help?" Danielle asked.

The brief silence on the other end of the line suggested that Chloe had not been expecting this sort of generosity. Truth be

told, Danielle had only asked because she knew Chloe would not take her up on it. Or, rather, Steven would not *want* Chloe to take her up on it.

“You know, I think we’re good right now. I wish I would have thought to call you when we were unpacking all of the damned boxes.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have offered then,” Danielle said with dry sarcasm.

“Anyway, listen. Do you remember Kathleen Saunders from high school?”

“Vaguely,” Danielle said, the name bringing to mind a bright and smiling teenaged face—the kind of face that always got a little too close when speaking.

“Turns out she lives in my neighborhood. Just two houses down. She came by a while ago and said hello. She also invited Steven and I to a block party this weekend.”

“Wow, one day in and you already sound domesticated as hell. You buy a minivan yet?”

There was another brief silence; Danielle figured Chloe was trying to decide if the comment was a venomous barb or just a joke. “Not yet,” she finally answered. “Need the babies first. But about that block party...I think you should come. Kathleen was asking about you.”

“I’m flattered,” Danielle said, not flattered at all.

“Look, we’re going to end up hanging out anyway,” Chloe said. “We may as well do it sooner rather than later to avoid all

the phone tag. And I'd really like for you to see the house."

"I might have a date that day," Danielle said.

"Like a real date or just one of your poor one-night guys?"

"A real date. You'd like him, I think." That was bullshit. She was pretty sure Chloe wouldn't approve of Martin at all.

"You know how we can find out? Bring him, too."

"Ah Jesus, you're insufferable."

"Is that a yes?" Chloe asked.

"That's a *we'll see*."

"I'll take it. How are you, Danielle? Everything going good?"

"Yeah, I suppose. Work is going well, and I'm about to go out on a date with the same guy for the twentieth time."

"Ooh, he *does* sound special," Chloe joked.

"Speaking of which, I need to get going," Danielle said.

"Sure. I'm going to text you our address. I hope you come to the block party. Three o'clock, this Saturday."

"No promises," Danielle said and then took a very long gulp from her Guinness. "Bye, Chloe."

She hung up without waiting for Chloe's goodbye. She had no idea why, but the conversation had been draining.

A block party, she thought with bitter sarcasm. *I know we don't talk all that often, but you'd think she'd know me better than that...*

As this thought crept through her mind, she started to think about her mother. That's where her mind usually went whenever she was irritated with Chloe. As she thought of her mom, her hand went to her neck. Finding the area there bare, she hurried

back through her small apartment and into the bedroom. She went to the jewelry box on her dresser and pulled out her mother's silver necklace—just about the only tangible thing she owned that had once belonged to Gale Fine. She placed it around her neck and tucked the simple little pendant beneath her shirt.

Feeling it against her skin, she wondered how often Chloe thought of their mother. She also tried to remember the last time they had both talked about what had happened that morning seventeen years ago. She knew they were both haunted by it, but really, did anyone ever enjoy talking about ghosts?

Now with only ten minutes left before she needed to leave to meet with Martin, she chugged down the rest of her beer. She figured she could just go and be a little early. She headed for the front door to do just that but then stopped in her tracks.

Directly beneath the front door, there was an envelope. It had not been there when she was speaking on the phone with Chloe.

She walked to it and carefully picked it up. It felt like watching herself in a movie because she had done this before. This was not the first note that had come.

The envelope was unmarked. No name, no address, no markings of any kind. She opened the flap, which had not been adhered to the rest of the envelope. She reached inside and found a simple square of cardstock paper, a little larger than a playing card.

She took the note out and read it. And then read it again.

She tucked it back into the envelope and carried the envelope

to the desk along the far wall of the living room. She placed it there with the other four notes, all with similar messages.

She stared at them for a moment, fearful and confused.

Her palms grew sweaty and her heart started to beat harder.

Who's watching me? she wondered. *And why?*

She then did what she usually chose to do when something bothered her. She ignored it. She pushed this most recent note out of her mind, along with the simple message it carried, and headed out the door to meet Martin.

As she walked out of the building, the note's message flashed in her mind in little shocks, almost like a neon sign.

I KNOW WHAT REALLY HAPPENED.

It made no sense, but then again, it seemed to make all the sense in the world.

She looked down at her own shadow on the city sidewalk and couldn't help but walk a little faster. She knew she could not escape a problem by putting it in her personal rearview mirror, but it at least made her feel better.

I KNOW WHAT REALLY HAPPENED.

Her feet seemed to agree, wanting to stop walking, to run back and try to make sense of the letters—to call someone. Maybe the cops. Maybe even Chloe.

But Danielle only walked faster.

She'd managed to put her past behind her, for the most part.

Why would these letters be any different?

Chapter Three

“So you’re still sticking with the chicken, huh?”

It was such an innocent question at its core, but it sent a flare of anger through Chloe. She lightly bit at the inside of her lip to keep any stray remarks from slipping out.

Sally Brennan, Steven’s mother, was sitting across from her with an aged Stepford Wives sort of smile on her face.

“Yeah, Mom,” Steven said. “It’s food...food I probably won’t even eat because of all the nerves. If someone wants to complain about the food at my wedding reception, then they can go home. Maybe grab some Taco Bell on the way.”

Chloe squeezed Steven’s hand under the table. He’d apparently picked up on her irritation. It was rare that Steven ever stood up to his mother, but when he did he came out looking like a hero.

“Well, that’s not a very nice attitude to have,” Sally said.

“He’s right,” Wayne Brennan, Steven’s father, said from the other end of the table. The wine glass beside him was empty for the third time of tonight’s dinner and he was reaching for the bottle of red sitting near the center of the table. “Honestly, no one gives a damn about the food at the reception. It’s the booze they’re looking forward to. And we’ll have an open bar, so...”

They left the conversation hanging, the sour look on Sally’s face making it clear that she still thought chicken was a bad

choice.

But that was nothing new. She'd bitched and complained about nearly every decision Chloe and Steven had made. And she never failed to offhandedly remind them who was paying for the wedding.

As it turned out, Pinecrest was not only once again home to Chloe, but it was home to Steven's parents as well. They had moved there five years ago, technically just outside of Pinecrest in a smaller town called Elon. In addition to Steven's job, it had been one of the reasons Chloe and Steven had decided to move to Pinecrest. He worked as a software developer for a government contractor and had been offered a position that had been too good to turn down. As for Chloe, she was currently interning with the FBI while working on her master's in Criminal Justice. Because of the close proximity to FBI headquarters in Baltimore, it had all just made perfect sense.

Chloe was already regretting living so close to Steven's parents, though. Wayne was all right most of the time. But Sally Brennan was, to put it mildly, an uppity bitch who loved to stick her nose in places it had no business being.

The Brennans as a couple were nice enough people, both retired, well-to-do and mostly happy. But they also coddled Steven. As an only child, Steven had admitted to Chloe numerous times that his parents had spoiled the hell out of him. Even now, when he was twenty-eight, they treated him far too much like a child. And part of that came across in an attitude of

overprotectiveness. It was the main reason Chloe internally cringed whenever they wanted to go over the wedding plans.

Which, unfortunately, they apparently wanted to do over dinner. Sally had wasted no time in getting to the dinner choice for the reception.

“So how’s the house?” Wayne asked, just as eager as Chloe to move away from the topic of the wedding.

“It’s great,” Chloe said. “We’ll make it through the maze of boxes in a few days.”

“Oh, and get this,” Steven said. “A woman that Chloe went to high school with lives right down the street—like two houses down. Isn’t that crazy?”

“Maybe not as crazy as it seems,” Wayne said. “This city is just too damned small. You’re bound to stumble over *someone* you know at some point.”

“Especially in those neighborhoods where the houses are all on top of each other,” Sally said with a smirk, making a not-so-subtle jab about their choice of location.

“Our houses aren’t right on top of each other,” Steven said.

“Yeah, we have a decent-sized yard,” Chloe added.

Sally shrugged her shoulders and took another mouthful of wine. She then seemed to think about her next comment, maybe even almost deciding to keep it in, but letting it out anyway.

“Your high school friend isn’t the only one in Pinecrest, right?” she asked. “Your sister lives around here too, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, she does.”

She spoke the answer firmly but without being rude. Sally Brennan had never made any secrets about her distaste for Danielle—even though they had only ever crossed paths twice. Sally had the misfortune of being one of those clichéd bored housewives who lived for scandal and gossip. So when she found that Chloe had a sister with a rocky and dark past, she’d been both appalled and intrigued.

“Let’s not dwell there, Mom,” Steven said.

Chloe wished this made her feel defended but if anything, it made her feel slighted. Usually when the topic of Danielle came up, Steven ended up siding with his mother. He did have the good sense to know when to shut up but his mother usually did not.

“Will she be the maid of honor?” Sally asked.

“Yes.”

Sally didn’t roll her eyes at the comment, but her facial expression showed her feelings about it.

“She *is* my sister,” Chloe said. “So yes, I have asked her to be my maid of honor.”

“Yes, it makes sense,” Sally said, “but I always thought the maid of honor should be chosen carefully. It’s a big honor and responsibility.”

Chloe had to grip the edge of the table to keep from coming back with a hard-edged reply. Noticing her tension, Steven did his best to salvage the situation. “Mom, give it a rest,” he said. “Danielle will do fine. And even if something should go wrong,

"I'll make sure everything is covered. This is my wedding, Mom. I'm not going to let anything bad happen."

This time it was Chloe who nearly rolled her eyes. It was once again his way of standing up for her but of also not irritating his parents. Just once, Chloe would like for him to *truly* defend Danielle. She knew that Steven had no real problems with her but that he was doing his best to pacify his mother's uneasiness of her. It was a little disgusting.

"Enough of this nonsense," Wayne said, reaching out for a second helping of the roasted potatoes. "Let's talk football. Now, Chloe...you're a Redskins fan, right?"

"God, no. Giants."

"Just as bad," Wayne said with a laugh.

And just like that, the uneasiness of the night was swept under the rug. Chloe had always valued Wayne's boldness in being able to ignore his wife's bitchiness, pushing along to some another benign topic whether she was done or not. It was a trait Chloe wished Steven had picked up from his father.

Still, as the night went on, Chloe couldn't help but wonder if Sally's worries were legitimate. Danielle was not the sort to dress up, stay quiet, and get in front of people. Danielle would be stepping out of her comfort zone at the wedding and Chloe herself had wondered how it might go over.

As those worries floated through her head, she thought of the little girls from so many years ago, sitting on the front stoop as the body bag was carried out of their apartment. She could easily

recall the blank look in Danielle's face. She knew something had snapped in her at that moment. That, overnight, she had lost her sister.

And she suspected that, from that moment on, Danielle would never be the same again.

Chapter Four

It was raining when Chloe and her field work instructor arrived on the scene. She felt very minor league as she stepped out of the car into the drizzling rain. Because she was an intern having to go alongside her instructor in shifts with other interns, they were not given high-profile cases. This one, for instance, sounded as if it were a typical domestic abuse case. And while the details of the case did not sound very graphic or brutal, the very words *domestic abuse* made her cringe.

She had, after all, heard those words a lot after her mother had died. Her instructor must have been aware of her past—of what had happened with her parents—but had mentioned nothing of it this morning as they had headed out.

They were in the town of Willow Creek on that first day, a small town about fifteen miles outside of Baltimore. Chloe was interning with the FBI to eventually become part of the FBI's Evidence Response Team, and as they walked toward the simple two-story house, the instructor even let her take the lead. Her instructor was Kyle Greene, a forty-five-year-old agent who had been taken out of basic field work when he had torn his ACL while chasing down a suspect. He'd never healed properly from the injury and had been given the option to serve as an instructor and mentor of sorts for interns. He and Chloe had only spoken twice before this morning, having met via FaceTime a week ago

to get to know one another and then two days ago, during her ride from Philly to Pinecrest.

“One thing before we go inside,” Greene said. “I held this from you until now because I didn’t want you dwelling on it all morning.”

“Okay...”

“While this *is* a domestic abuse case, it is also a homicide case. When we get inside, there’s going to be a body. A relatively fresh one.”

“Oh...” she said, unable to contain her shock.

“I know it’s more than you were expecting. But there was some discussion when you came in. Discussions to maybe let you peek behind the curtain right from the start. We’ve been toying with the idea of letting the interns have more responsibilities, letting them stretch out a bit more. And based on your dossier, we thought you’d be a prime candidate to test that out. I hope that’s okay with you.”

She was still taken aback, unable to form any real response. Yes, it was more responsibility. Yes, it meant more eyes would be on her. But she had never backed down from a challenge and she didn’t intend to start now.

“I appreciate the opportunity.”

“Good,” Greene said, his tone indicating that he never had a doubt.

He waved her on to follow him as they walked to the porch and up the stairs. Inside, were two agents conversing with the

coroner. Chloe did her best to ready herself for the scene and while she thought she'd done a pretty good job, she was still shaken when she saw a woman's legs sticking out from behind the kitchen island.

"So I need you to take a walk around the body," Greene said. "Tell me what you see—both in terms of the body and the surroundings. Walk me through your processing."

Chloe had seen a few dead bodies in the course of her interning; When she lived in Philadelphia, they had not been all that hard to come by. But this was different. This one felt a little too close to home—a little too familiar. She stepped behind the kitchen counter and looked down at the scene.

The victim was a woman who looked to be in her thirties. She had been hit in the head with a very solid object—most likely the toaster that lay shattered in pieces several feet from her. The brunt of the impact had been along the left side of her brow, hard enough to shatter the ocular cavity, making her eye look like it could very well slide out onto the floor at any moment. A pool of blood surrounded her head like a halo.

Perhaps the oddest thing about her was that her sweatpants were pulled down to her ankles and her underwear pulled down to her knees. Chloe hunkered down closer to the body and looked for any other details. She saw what looked like two small scratch marks on the side of her neck. They looked to be fresh and in the shape of fingernails.

"Where's the husband?" she asked.

“In custody,” Greene said. “He’s admitted to it and already told the police what happened.”

“But if it’s a domestic dispute, why call the FBI in?” she asked.

“Because this guy was arrested three years ago for beating up his first wife so bad that she went to the ER. But she didn’t press charges. And his home computer was flagged two weeks ago for potential snuff videos.”

Chloe took all of that information and applied it to what she was seeing. She interlocked it all like a puzzle and spoke her theories out loud as they came to her.

“Given this man’s history, he was prone to violence. Extreme violence, if the crushed toaster is any indication. The sweatpants pushed down and underwear not quite all the way down indicates that he was trying to have sex with her here in the kitchen. Maybe they *were* having sex and she wanted it to stop. Scratch marks on her neck indicate that the sex was rough and either consensual at first or entirely unwanted.”

She paused here and studied the blood. “The blood looks to be relatively fresh. I’d estimate the murder to have occurred within the last six hours.”

“And what would your next steps be?” Greene asked. “If we *didn’t* have this guy in custody right now and there was an active search for him, how would you follow up?”

“I’d check for evidence of intercourse. We could get his DNA and get a match. While waiting for those results, though, I’d look for things like wallets upstairs in the bedroom, hoping for

a driver's license. Of course, that's if it wasn't already suspected that it was the husband. If that were the case, we could get the name from the address."

Greene smiled at her, nodding. "That's right. You'd be surprised how many rookies miss the fact that it's sort of a trick question. You're in the guy's house, so you'd already know his name. But if it *wasn't* suspected that it was the husband, you're exactly right. Also...Fine, are you okay?"

The question took her by surprise—mainly because she *wasn't* okay. She had zoned out, staring at the blood on the kitchen tile. It pulled her all the way back into her past, staring at a pool of blood drying into the carpet at the bottom of the stairs.

Without warning, she started to grow faint. She braced herself against the kitchen island, afraid she was going to puke. It was alarming and embarrassing.

Is this what I can look forward to at any remotely gruesome crime scene? At any scenes that remotely resemble what happened to Mom?

She could hear Sally in the back of her head, one of the first things she'd ever said to Chloe: *I don't know how a woman would make an exceptional agent. Especially one with your traumatic background. I wonder if that sort of stress comes home with you...*

"Sorry, excuse me," she mumbled. She pushed herself off the island and ran back to the front door. She nearly fell down the porch stairs on her way to the lawn, sure she was going to throw up.

Thankfully, the fates spared her that particular embarrassment. She took a series of deep breaths, concentrating so intently on them that she almost didn't notice when Greene came quietly down the porch steps.

"There are certain cases that get to me, too," he told her. He kept a respectable distance, letting her have her space. "There are going to be scenes that are much worse. Sadly, after a while, you sort of become desensitized to it."

She nodded, as she had heard all of that before. "I know. It's just...this scene brought up something. A memory I don't like dealing with."

"The bureau has exceptional therapists to help agents process through things like this. So never think you're alone or that something like this makes you less of an agent."

"Thanks," Chloe said, finally managing to stand upright again.

She realized that she suddenly missed her sister very badly. As morbid as it seemed, fond thoughts of Danielle would flood through her whenever memories of the day their mother died surfaced in her head. It was no different now; Chloe could not help but think of her sister. Danielle had been through a lot over the years—a victim of circumstance as well as her own poor decisions. And now that Chloe lived so close, it seemed unthinkable that they should remain so distant.

Sure, she'd invited Danielle to the block part this weekend, but Chloe found herself unable to wait that long. And Chloe suspected that she wouldn't even come.

Suddenly, she knew: she had to see her now.

Chloe didn't know why she was so nervous when she knocked on Danielle's door. She knew Danielle was in; the same car she'd had as a teenager was parked in the apartment complex parking lot, still boasting the band stickers. Nine Inch Nails. KMFDM. Ministry. Seeing the car and those stickers brought a pang of nostalgia that was more sadness than anything else.

Has she really not grown up at all? Chloe wondered.

When Danielle answered the door, Chloe saw that she had not. Or, rather, it did not look like it in terms of appearance.

The sisters looked at one another for a period of two seconds before they finally moved in for a brief hug. Chloe saw that Danielle still dyed her hair black. She was also still sporting the lip ring, protruding from the left corner of her mouth. She was wearing a slight bit of black eyeliner and was decked out in a Bauhaus T-shirt and ripped jeans.

"Chloe," Danielle said, breaking into the faintest of smiles. "How have you been?"

It was as if they had seen one another just the day before. That was fine, though. Chloe had not exactly been expecting any sentiment from her sister.

Chloe stepped into the apartment and, not caring much how Danielle would receive it, gave her sister another hug. It had

been a little over a year since they had seen one another—and about three since they had actually embraced one another like this. Something about the fact that they now lived in the same city seemed to have bonded something between them—it was something Chloe could feel, something she knew would not need to be vocalized.

Danielle returned the hug, albeit lazily. “So...you’re...what?” Danielle teased.

“I’m good,” Chloe said. “I know I should have called but...I don’t know. I was afraid you’d find some excuse for me not to come by.”

“I might have,” Danielle admitted. “But now that you’re here, come on in. Excuse the mess. Well, actually don’t excuse it. You know I’ve always been messy.”

Chloe laughed and when she entered the apartment she was surprised to find the place relatively tidy. The living area was sparsely furnished, just a couch, a TV and TV stand, a coffee table, and a lamp. Chloe knew the rest of the place would be the same. Danielle was the sort of person who lived on only the minimal amount of belongings. The exception, if she hadn’t changed since her teen years (and it seemed she hadn’t) was music and books. It made Chloe nearly feel guilty for the spacious and elaborate home she had recently purchased with Steven.

“Want me to put on some coffee?” Danielle asked.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

They walked into the kitchen, again only boasting the necessities. The table was clearly something that had been scoured from a yard sale, given at least a bit of dignity with a ruffled tablecloth. Two lonely chairs sat at it, one on either side.

“Are you here to bully me about your block party?” Danielle asked.

“Not at all,” Chloe said. “I was interning today and came to this crime scene that...well, it brought everything racing back.”

“Ouch.”

Silence hung between them as Danielle set the coffeemaker up. Chloe watched as her sister moved about the kitchen, a bit creeped out at how much it seemed she had not changed. She could very well be looking at the seventeen-year-old girl who had left home with the hopes of starting a band, despite their grandparents’ wishes. Everything looked the same, right down to the sleepy expression.

“Have you heard anything about Dad lately?” Chloe asked.

Danielle only shook her head. “With your job, I thought you’d be the one to hear anything. If there was anything to hear.”

“I stopped checking a while ago.”

“Cheers to that,” Danielle said, covering a small yawn with the back of her hand.

“You look tired,” Chloe said.

“I am. Only, not like *sleepy* tired. The doctor had me on these mood stabilizers. It screwed with my sleep. And when you’re a bartender who usually doesn’t get home until after three in the

morning, the last thing you need is a medicine that fucks with your sleep.”

“You said the doc *had* you on them. Are you not taking them anymore?”

“No. They were fucking with my sleep, my appetite, and my libido. Ever since I stopped, I feel much better...just tired all the time.”

“Why were they prescribed in the first place?” Chloe asked.

“To deal with my nosy sister,” Danielle said, only half-joking. She waited a beat before giving an honest answer. “I was starting to get easily depressed. And it would come out of nowhere. I dealt with it in some...pretty dumb ways. Drinking. Sex. *Fixer Upper*.”

“If it was for depression, you should probably get back on them,” Chloe said, realizing as she said it just how intrusive she was being. “What do you need a libido for anyway?” she asked with a snicker.

“For those of us that *aren't* about to get married, they're pretty important. We can't just roll over in bed and get laid whenever we want.”

“You never had problems getting guys before,” Chloe pointed out.

“And I still don't,” she said, bringing mugs of coffee to the table. “It's just too much work. Especially lately. This new one. A serious guy. We decided to take it slow...whatever.”

“That's the only reason I'm marrying Steven, you know,”

Chloe said, trying to get into the joking mood right along with her. “I got tired of having to go out and work for sex.”

They both had a laugh at this. It should have felt natural to laugh and smile together again but something about it felt forced.

“So what’s up, sis?” Danielle asked. “It’s not like you to drop by. Not that I’d know, as we haven’t had that opportunity in almost two years.”

Chloe nodded, remembering the one time they had actually spent together in the last handful of years. Danielle had been in Philly for some concert and had crashed at her apartment. They’d talked a bit, but not much. Danielle had been hammered and passed out on her couch. Their mom had come up in the conversation, as had their dad. It was the only time Chloe had ever heard Danielle openly speak about wanting to go visit him.

“That scene this morning,” Chloe said. “It made me think of that morning outside of the apartment. I kept thinking about the blood at the bottom of the stairs and it got to me. I thought I was going to puke. And I’m *not* that kind of person, you know? The scene itself was pretty vanilla compared to some of the stuff I’ve seen. It just hit me hard. It made me think of you and I had to see you. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. The mood stabilizers...I’m pretty sure all of the depression was coming from nightmares I was having about Mom and Dad. I’d have them and then be in a funk for days. Like, not wanting to get out of bed because I trusted no one else out in the world.”

“Well, I was going to ask how you cope with it when you think of what happened, but I guess I know the answer, huh?”

Danielle nodded and looked away. “Meds.”

“You okay?”

Danielle shrugged but she may as well have flipped Chloe her middle finger. “We’re together for about ten minutes and you already go there. God, Chloe...haven’t you learned to live your life without dragging that shit up? If you recall, when you called to tell me that you were moving to Pinecrest, we decided to not talk about it. Water under the bridge, remember?”

Chloe was taken aback. She’d just watched Danielle go from dry and sarcastic to absolute furious in the blink of an eye. Sure, the topic of their parents was a sore subject, but Danielle’s reaction was bipolar in nature.

“How long have you been off the meds?” Chloe asked.

“Fuck you.”

“How long?”

“Three weeks, give or take a few days. Why?”

“Because I’ve only been here for about fifteen minutes and I can already tell that you need them.”

“Thanks, doc.”

“Will you start taking them, please? I want you at my wedding. Maid of honor, remember? As selfish as it might seem, I’d like for you to actually enjoy it. So would you please just start taking them again?”

The mention of maid of honor did something to Danielle.

She sighed and then relaxed her posture. She was able to look at Chloe again and while she was still angry, there was something warm there as well.

“Fine,” she said.

She got up from the table and went to a little decorative wicker basket on the kitchen counter. She pulled out a prescription bottle, shook out a pill, and swallowed it down with her coffee.

“Thank you,” Chloe said. She then pressed a bit more, sensing something else amiss. “Is everything else okay?”

Danielle thought about it for a moment and Chloe caught her casting a quick glance toward her apartment door. It was very brief but there was fear there—Chloe was sure of it.

“No, I’m good.”

Chloe knew her sister well enough to know not to press it.

“So, what the hell is a block party, anyway?” Danielle asked.

Chloe laughed; she had nearly forgotten Danielle’s ability to drop a subject and start another one with all the grace of an elephant in a china shop. And just like that, the subject was changed. Chloe watched her sister to see if she ever looked back to the door with that bit of fear in her eyes, but it never happened again.

Still, Chloe felt that there was something there. Maybe after some time together, Danielle would fess up.

But to what? Chloe wondered, casting a glance at the front door herself.

And it was then that she realized that she really didn’t know her

sister at all. There were parts of her that seemed very much like the gothed-out seventeen-year-old she'd last known so well. But there was something new to Danielle now...something darker. Something that needed meds to control her moods, to help her sleep and function.

It occurred to Chloe in that moment that she was scared for her sister and she wanted to help in any way she could.

Even if it meant digging into the past.

But not now. Maybe after the wedding. God only knew what sort of arguments and mood swings talking about the death of their mother and incarceration of their father would bring up. Still, Chloe felt the ghosts of her past stronger than ever while sitting there with Danielle and it made her wonder just how haunted Danielle had been by it all.

What kind of ghosts lurked around in Danielle's head? And what, exactly, were they telling her?

She sensed, the way she did a coming storm, that whatever Danielle was suppressing, it would all eventually involve her. Her new life. Her new fiancé, her new house. Her new life.

And it would all lead to nothing good.

Chapter Five

Danielle sat on her couch, reclining back against Martin, her leg draped over his, and she was very aware that she was not wearing underwear beneath her pajama shorts. Not that it would matter; somehow, he had refused her last night, despite no bra and the skimpy little panties. It seemed Martin was taking this whole taking-things-slow thing seriously.

She was also beginning to think that he was either just being a gentleman or was not sexually attracted to her. The latter was hard to believe, though, because she'd literally felt the proof of his attraction grinding against her legs and hips on the multiple occasions they'd made out.

She tried not to let it bother her. While she was indeed sexually frustrated, there was something to be said about finally finding a man who wanted more than just sex.

Tonight was a great example. They'd chosen to remain low-key, just sitting around her apartment and watching a movie. Beforehand, they had discussed Martin's day. Yet as an assistant manager at a print shop, there were only so many details to discuss. It was like listening to someone explain how paint dried. As for Danielle, she hated talking about her day. As a bartender at a local restaurant, her days were boring. She sat around and read most of the time. The nights were filled with stories to share but by the time she managed to get some sleep and woke up

around one in the afternoon, she never wanted to go over them.

Once the niceties were over, they *had* kissed a bit, but it was all very PG. Again, Danielle found that she had no problem with that. Besides, ever since Chloe's visit, she had been bummed out. The mood stabilizers likely wouldn't even kick in until she took her second pill right before bedtime.

Thanks to Chloe's visit, Danielle had been thinking about her mother, her father, and the childhood that had passed her by like a warped flicker of film. Really, all she wanted was to be held by Martin—something it pained her to admit to herself.

They'd settled on one of her DVDs, popping in *The Shawshank Redemption* and curling up together on the couch like a couple of nervous and inexperienced middle school kids. On a few occasions, his hand would slip a little lower than her shoulder and she wondered if he was trying to make a move. But he remained respectable, which was both refreshing and infuriating all at once.

She also noticed that on a few occasions, his phone would ding. It was sitting on her coffee table right in front of them but he elected not to check it. At first, she assumed he was just being polite and not infringing on their date time. But after a while—what Danielle assumed had been at least seven or eight little dings—it started to get obnoxious.

Just as Tim Robbins locked himself in the warden's office and played some opera music over the PA for the prisoners of Shawshank Prison, it dinged one more time. Danielle looked to

the phone and then to Martin.

“Are you going to check on that?” she asked. “Someone must really need you for something.”

“Nah, it’ll be okay,” he said. He pulled her closer and stretched out. They were lying side by side. If she wanted, she could easily kiss his neck. She looked at the exposed space there and thought about it. She wondered how he might react if she kissed him there, maybe softly ran her tongue along the side of his neck.

The phone dinged again. Danielle let out a little chuckle and, without any kind of warning, sprang across Martin’s chest. She grabbed the phone and pulled it to her chest. Stalled at his lock screen, she said, “What’s your pass—”

Martin violently yanked the phone away from her. He looked more surprised than furious. “What was that about?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “Just playing around. You can check your phone while you’re with me. I don’t mind. If it’s another girlfriend or something, though, I might have to go bitch-mode on her.”

“I don’t need you to oversee my phone usage,” he snapped.

“Um, hold on. There’s no need to get crazy about it. I was just playing around.”

He sneered at her and shoved the phone in his pocket. He sighed and sat up, apparently no longer interested in cuddling with her.

“Ah, you’re one of those guys, then,” she said, still trying to find the line between joking around and being a little persistent. “Guard your phone like it was your dick or something.”

“Leave it alone,” he said. “Don’t be weird about it.”

“Me? Martin, I thought you were going to break my wrists getting it out of my hands.”

“Well, it’s not your phone now, is it? Don’t you trust me?”

“I don’t know,” she said, raising her voice. “We haven’t been going out all that long. God, there’s no need to get so fucking defensive.”

He rolled his eyes at her and looked at the TV. It was a dismissive gesture, one that pissed her off. She shook her head and, doing her best to keep her playful façade front and center, she quickly straddled him. She reached down as if going for his zipper but then angled for the pocket he had put the phone in. With her other hand, she started to tickle his right side.

He was taken aback, clearly unsure how to respond. Yet the moment her fingers found the edge of his phone, he seemed to flip a switch somewhere. He grabbed her arm and pulled it up in a vise-like grip. He then shoved her down on the couch, not yet letting go of her arm. It hurt like hell but she was not about to let him hear her scream out in pain. The speed and strength he showed reminded her that he had once trained to be an amateur boxer.

“Whoa, let go of my fucking arm!”

He did, looking down at her in surprise. The look on his face made her think he had not intended to get that rough with her. He had surprised even himself. But he was also angry; the furrowed brow and trembling shoulders were evidence of that.

“I’m going to go,” he said.

“Yeah, good idea,” Danielle said. “And don’t even bother calling again unless it’s going to start with an apology.”

He shook his head—whether at himself and his actions or at her, Danielle wasn’t sure. She watched him quickly walk for the door, closing it firmly behind him. Danielle sat on the couch, looking toward the door for several moments as she tried to figure out what exactly had happened.

No interest in screwing me and a surprise temper on him, she thought. That dude might be more trouble than he’s worth.

Of course, she’d always been drawn to that kind of man.

She looked at her arm and saw red splotches where he had grabbed her and shoved her down. She was pretty sure they’d bruise. It wouldn’t be the first time a guy had put bruises on her but she had really not seen it coming from Martin.

She toyed with the idea of chasing after him to see what had gotten into him. But instead, she stayed on the couch and watched the movie. If her past had taught her anything, it was that men simply weren’t worth chasing after. Not even the ones who seemed too good to be true.

She finished the movie by herself and called it a night. As she shut off all the light, she felt like she was being watched—like she was not alone. She knew this was ridiculous, of course, but still could not help but look back to her front door, where the letter had appeared yesterday—and several times before—as if out of nowhere.

She remained on the couch and watched the door, almost expecting another letter to slide through the bottom. And twenty minutes later, when she got up and started getting ready for work, she did so with every light in the apartment on.

Slowly, a creeping paranoia churned within her. It was a familiar one, a feeling that had become something like a close friend over the years—a very close friend ever since those letters started arriving.

She thought of the pills and wondered for a moment if this were all in her head. Everything. Including the letters.

Was any of this real?

She couldn't help reaching back into her past, reminding herself of the darkness she thought she had escaped.

Was she losing her mind again?

Chapter Six

Chloe sat in the waiting room, looking at the sparse reading selection on the coffee table. She had visited two different therapists following her mother's death but had not really understood the purpose of those visits. Now, though, at the age of twenty-seven, she knew why she was here. She had taken Greene's advice and called the on-hand bureau therapist to talk out her reaction to yesterday's crime scene. Now she found herself trying to recall the offices she had visited as child.

"Ms. Fine?" a woman called from the other side of the room.

Chloe had been so deep in her own thoughts that she hadn't heard the door to the waiting room open. A pleasant-looking woman waved her back. Chloe got to her feet and tried her best not to feel like a failure as she followed the woman down a hallway and toward a large office space.

She thought back to what Greene had told her yesterday as they had shared coffee. It was still bright and shining in her mind because it had been the first bit of real advice a seasoned agent had ever given her during her very young career.

"I saw this therapist several times my first year. My fourth crime scene was a murder-suicide. Four bodies in all. One was a three-year-old kid. Rattled the hell out of me. So I can tell you without hesitation...therapy works. Especially if you start it at this stage of your career. I've seen agents think they're hot shit and don't need

the help. Don't be one of those, Fine."

So no...needing a therapist did not make her a failure. If anything, she hoped it might make her stronger.

She entered the office and saw an older gentleman of about sixty or so sitting behind a large desk. A window behind the desk revealed a small topiary outside, butterflies darting to and fro. His name was Donald Skinner, and he had been doing this for more than thirty years. She knew this because she had Googled him before deciding to make the appointment. Skinner was very prim and proper; he seemed to expand slightly, filling the room a bit more as he walked over to greet her.

He gestured toward a comfortable-looking armchair in the center of the room. "Please," he said. "Make yourself comfortable."

She sat down, clearly nervous. She knew she was probably trying a bit too hard to try to hide it.

"Ever done this before?" Skinner asked.

"When I was much younger," she said.

He nodded as he took a seat in an identical chair positioned in front of hers. When he sat, he hefted his right knee up on his right leg and folded his hands atop them.

"Ms. Fine, why don't you tell me about yourself...ending with why you are here today."

"How far back?" she asked, meaning it as a joke.

"For now, let's just focus on the crime scene yesterday," Skinner answered.

Chloe took a moment to think and then started. She held nothing back, even delving back into her past a bit to paint that picture for him as well. Skinner listened intently and now mulled over everything he had just been told.

“Tell me,” Skinner said. “So far, out of the crime scenes you’ve visited, was this the grisliest?”

“No. But it was the grisliest thing I’d been allowed to actually *see*.”

“So you are willing to fully admit that it was this event from your past that caused you to react the way you did?”

“I suppose. I mean, it’s never happened before. And even when it sort of *tries* to bother me, I can stomp it out pretty easily.”

“I see. Now, are there any other factors that might have come into play? It’s a new city. A new instructor, a new house. There’s a lot of change.”

“My twin sister,” Chloe said. “She lives here in Pinecrest. I figured maybe the idea of seeing her again after a year or so... maybe that did it in addition to the scene being so similar.”

“That could very well be the case,” Skinner asked. “Please forgive me asking such a simple question, but did the murder of your mother lead you to a career with the FBI?”

“Yes. I knew by the time I was twelve, this is what I wanted to do.”

“And what about your sister? What does she do?”

“She’s a bartender. I think she enjoys it because she only has to be social for a few hours of the day and then she can go home

and sleep until noon.”

“And does she remember that day the same way you do? Have you spoken about it?”

“We have, but she won’t go into great detail. When I try, she shuts me down pretty much right away.”

“So go into those details with me right now,” Skinner said. “It’s clear you need to discuss it somehow. So why not with me... an impartial party?”

“Well, like I said earlier, it seemed like a pretty basic yet unfortunate accident.”

“Yet your father was arrested for it,” Skinner pointed out. “So to me, as someone not familiar with the case, I don’t lean towards accident. It makes me curious how you can see it so clearly as such. So let’s go over it. What happened that day? What do you remember?”

“Well, it was an accident *caused* by my father. That’s why he was arrested. He didn’t even lie about it. He was drunk, Mom made him mad, and he pushed her.”

“I’ve given you the chance to go into greater detail and that’s all I’m getting?” Skinner asked in a friendly tone.

“Well, some of it is blurry,” Chloe admitted. “You know how past memories are sort of fogged over with rose-colored glasses?”

“Indeed. So...I want to try something with you. Because this is the first time we’ve met, I’m not going to try hypnosis. I *am* going to try a proven form of therapy, though. It’s what some

refer to as timeline therapy. For today, I hope it might help to dig further details from that day—details that are right there in your mind but have sort of been tucked away because you're afraid to see them. If you continue to see me, this sort of therapy will eventually help us to pluck the fear and anxiety that arise in you whenever you're faced with that day. Does that sound like something you'd be willing to undergo today?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation.

"Okay. Good. So...let's begin with where you were sitting. I want you to close your eyes and relax. Take a moment or two to clear your head and get comfortable. Give me a tiny nod when you are ready."

Chloe did as she was asked. She allowed herself to sink back into the chair. It was a very comfortable faux leather armchair. She felt that she was still tensing her shoulders, uncomfortable with being so vulnerable in front of someone she had never met. She sighed deeply and felt her shoulders go limp. She nestled into the chair and listened for the hum of the air conditioner. She found it, listened to its droning, and then gave a nod. She was ready.

"Okay," Skinner said. "Out on that stoop with your sister. Now, even if you can't remember the sort of shoes you were wearing that day, I want you to imagine that you are looking at your feet. Look down at your shoes. I want you to focus on them and nothing else—just the shoes you were wearing that day when you were ten years old. You and your sister out on the stoop. But

keep your eyes only on those shoes. Describe them to me.”

“Chuck Taylors,” Chloe said. “Red. Scuffed up. Big floppy laces.”

“Perfect. Now study the laces. Really zone in on them. Then I want your ten-year-old self to stand up without looking away from those laces. I want you to stand up and walk back to where you were before discovering the blood on the carpet at the bottom of the stairs. I need you to go back a few hours. But don’t look away from those laces. Can you do that?”

Chloe knew she was not hypnotized but the instructions seemed so simple. So basic and easy. She stood up inside her mind and walked back into the apartment. When she did, she saw the blood, saw her mother.

“Mom is right there at the bottom of the stairs,” she said. “Lots of blood. Danielle is somewhere, crying. Dad is pacing.”

“Okay. But just look at your shoelaces,” Skinner instructed. “And then see if you can go back farther. Can you do that?”

“Yeah. Easy. I’m with Beth...a friend of mine. We just got back from a movie. Her mom took us. She dropped me off and stayed there on the curb until I got inside. She always did that, not pulling away until she saw me go inside.”

“Okay. So watch those shoelaces as you get out of the car and walk up the stairs. Then take me through the rest of the afternoon.”

“I went inside the building and then up to the second floor, where our apartment was. When I walked to the door and pulled

out the keys to unlock it, I hear Dad inside. So I just walked in. I closed the door and headed for the living room but saw Mom's body. It was at the bottom of the stairs. Her right arm was pinned beneath her. Her nose looked all smashed up and there was blood everywhere. Most of her face was covered with it. It was all over the carpet, right there at the bottom of the stairs. I think Dad might have tried to move the body..."

Chloe trailed off here. She was finding it hard to focus on those ratty old shoelaces. She knew the scene she was relaying far too well to ignore it.

"Danielle is standing right there, right over her. She has some blood on her hands and her clothes. Dad is talking really loudly into the phone, telling someone to come quickly, there's been an accident. When he gets off, he looks at me and starts crying. He threw the phone across the room and it shattered against the wall. He came over to us and hunkered down. He said he was sorry... he said there was an ambulance on the way. He then looked at Danielle and we could barely understand him through the tears. He said Danielle needed to go upstairs. She needed to change her clothes.

"She did, and I followed her. I asked her what had happened but she wouldn't talk to me. She wouldn't even cry. Eventually, we started to hear sirens. We sat there with Dad, waiting for him to tell us what would happen next. But he never did. The ambulance arrived, then the police. A friendly policeman took us outside on the stoop and stayed there with us until Dad was

brought out in handcuffs. Until they brought Mom's body out..."

Suddenly, the vision of the busted up shoelaces was gone. She was back on the stoop, waiting for her grandmother to pick them up. The overweight cop was with her and although she didn't know him, he made her feel safe.

"You okay?" Skinner asked.

"Yeah," she said with a nervous smile. "The part about Dad throwing the phone...I had totally forgotten about that."

"How's the remembered sight of it make you feel?"

It was a hard question to answer. Her father had always been quick to temper but seeing him do it in the wake of what had happened to her mother almost made him seem weak and vulnerable.

"It makes me feel sad for him."

"Have you blamed him for your mother's death ever since it happened?" Skinner asked.

"It honestly just depends on the day. Depends on my mood."

Skinner nodded and broke his statue-like posture. He got to his feet and looked down at her with a reassuring smile.

"I think we're good for today. Please call me if you experience this sort of reaction to a crime scene again. And I would like to see you again soon. Can we set up an appointment?"

Chloe thought about it and nodded. "We can, but I have a wedding coming up soon and we have all these meetings with florists and bakers...it's a nightmare. Can I call you with a date?"

"Of course. And until then...stick closely to Agent Greene.

He's a good man. And he was right to direct you to me. Please know that this early in your career, having to come to someone like me to deal with your issues means nothing. It is not a reflection of your talents."

Chloe nodded. She knew this but it was still nice to hear Skinner say it. She got up and thanked him for his time. As she walked out the door and into the waiting room, she saw her father throwing the phone. But then there was a comment he'd made—one she had not forgotten but had become muddied until today.

He had looked at Danielle and, with something far too close to urgency in his voice, had said: "Danielle, honey...go change your clothes. There's not much time before they get here."

That comment rolled through Chloe's head for most of the remainder of the afternoon, chilling her while also poking at a locked door she had managed to ignore for the last seventeen years.

Chapter Seven

Danielle woke up at eight o'clock, feeling as if she had not slept well at all. She'd gotten in from work at 2:45 and collapsed into bed at 3:10. She usually had no problem sleeping until well after eleven—sometimes even later—but when her eyes opened at 8:01 that morning, she could not go back to sleep. Truth be told, she really hadn't slept very well ever since she'd known that Chloe was coming back into town. It had felt like her past was slowly following her and it would not stop until it swallowed her whole.

Cranky and tired, Danielle showered and then ate breakfast. She did it all with Skinny Puppy's *Too Dark Park* album playing in the background. As she placed her breakfast dishes in the sink, she realized she'd have to go grocery shopping today. Most days, this did not bother her. But there was the occasional day where she felt like going out into public was a mistake...that people were watching her, waiting for her to fuck something up and point fingers.

She also feared that any time she went out allowed the letter writer a chance to follow her. One of these days, she figured the writer would stop playing around with her and just kill her.

Maybe today would be that day.

She drove to the grocery store, already knowing full well that this was going to be one of those days...one of those days where

she was going to be afraid of everything. One of those days where she would constantly be looking over her shoulder. She drove quickly, even running a red light along the way, wanting to get the trip over.

Ever since Danielle started receiving the disturbing notes under her door, she found it anxiety-inducing to be in a public place for very long. It was far too easy to imagine the person who had been writing those letters to be following her. Even at work, she wondered if the writer was sitting at the bar, having just received a drink from her. When she picked up her Chinese food, was he following her, waiting to finally jump her as she walked back to her car?

Even after she had arrived safely at her destination, hurrying into the grocery store and practically racing a cart with a squeaky wheel down the aisle, the worry was there. The letter writer could be there with her, mirroring her steps on the next aisle over, maybe getting a good look at her across the produce section or across the cereal aisle.

It was a very real fear that flashed through her head the day following the surprising turn of events with Martin. The paranoia sank into her, causing her to lower her head and push up her shoulders. If someone wanted to see her face, they'd need to be very purposeful about it, to the point of stopping her and hunching down.

She hated that she was like this. She'd always faced these kinds of issues, which was why most of her dating relationships rarely

lasted more than a month. She knew she'd developed a reputation for being a bit of a slut during her first tenure here in Pinecrest, but it hadn't been because she enjoyed sleeping around. It was just that by the time she was comfortable enough with a guy to sleep with him, she'd start to assume the worst about him. She'd end the relationship, take some time to recover, and then start again.

She'd gotten a bit better when she'd moved back to Pinecrest a few years ago. She'd left Boston and felt like she was retreating... but that was okay. She was at least retreating to somewhere familiar. The hardest thing to get used to was the stagnant dating scene. It had been okay at first, although she'd managed to ruin every single relationship she'd started. That's why the fight with Martin had struck her so hard.

Of course, there was the downside to Pinecrest. Far too many people remembered her and Chloe. They remembered how the poor little Fine girls had ended up living with their grandparents after their mother had died and their father had been taken to prison.

"Danielle, is that you?"

She turned toward the voice, startled. She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she'd managed to fully expose her face while reaching up for a box of Froot Loops. She found herself looking at a face from her past—a woman who looked terribly familiar but whom she couldn't quite place.

"Do you not remember me?" the woman asked, on the verge

of entertained and offended. She was probably forty-five, maybe fifty. And no, Danielle did not remember this woman.

“I guess you *don't* remember me,” the woman said. “I guess you were only thirteen or fourteen the last time I saw you. I’m Tammy Wyler. I was a friend of your mom’s.”

“Oh yeah, sure,” Danielle said. She did not remember the woman at all but the name did sound familiar. Danielle assumed she was one of the family friends who had visited her grandparents in the year or two following the death of her mother.

“I almost didn’t recognize you,” Tammy said. “Your hair is... darker.”

“Yeah,” Danielle said unenthusiastically. She supposed the last time Tammy Wyler had seen her, she’d only just started her full rebellion mode. Back then, at thirteen or fourteen years of age, she’d usually opted for neon pink hair with black stripes. Now it was raven black, a style she realized was old and used up but seemed to still fit her perfectly.

“I always knew you came back around here but well...I don’t know. I just never really got around to looking you up after you moved. You went to Boston or something for a while, right?”

“Right.”

“Oh, so I hear Chloe is back in town, too. Bought a new house out near Lavender Hills, right?”

“Yeah, she’s back,” Danielle said, quickly approaching her tolerance limit for small talk and bullshit.

“I heard through the grapevine that she lives just a few houses away from a girl you guys went to high school with. I actually live about two streets over from her.”

Poor Chloe, Danielle thought.

“Oh, and did she tell you about the block party?” Tammy asked, apparently unable to keep her mouth shut for any more than three seconds at a time.

“She did,” Danielle said. She was hoping Tammy would take her short responses as a cue that she really wasn’t the sort to just chat it up in the aisle of the grocery store.

There was a brief silence between the two of them where Tammy *did* seem to piece this together. She looked around awkwardly and bowed out with as much grace as she could. “Well, I hope you can make it. It was good running into you, Danielle.”

“Yeah, you too,” Danielle said.

She wasted no time in hunching her shoulders and casting her head down as she pushed her cart farther down the cereal aisle. Her need to get out of the store and back to her apartment was stronger than ever—now not just because of her usual paranoid feelings, but because of the awkward encounter with Tammy Wyler.

She rushed through the rest of her shopping, nearly colliding with an elderly lady in the dairy section. She went through the self-checkout (because why deal with chatty cashiers if you didn’t have to) and hurried out to her car. When she was back out in

the fresh air, she felt a little better. Of course, maybe the man sending the letters was sitting in one of the cars in the parking lot. Maybe he had been following her in the grocery store, listening to her speak awkwardly to Tammy.

She put her bags in the back seat and started the car. Before she had a chance to back out of her parking spot, her phone rang. She saw Martin's name on the display and didn't hesitate to answer. If he was calling to argue, she was game. If he was calling to apologize, she'd be open to that, too. Truth be told, she just liked the idea of being on the phone with someone she knew in that moment.

She answered with a simple, "Hey."

"Hey, Danielle," Martin said. "Look, I owe you one hell of an apology for last night. And not for just for getting rough. I shouldn't have been so weird about my phone. It's just that things are sort of going to hell at work. That's what the texts were. I knew it the moment they started coming in. I didn't want to face it last night. Does that make sense?"

"It does. But what doesn't make sense is why you didn't just tell me that last night."

"Because I'm stupid," he said. "I didn't want you to know that my job might very well be on the chopping block. And then when you got really playful about it, I just took it the wrong way. Danielle...I have never hurt a woman. Please believe me on that. And putting my hands on you like that last night...God, I'm so sorry."

She said nothing. Her arms had bruised up a bit and she *had* felt a bit in danger. Still, she could hear what she thought was genuine sadness in his voice.

“Danielle?”

“I’m here,” she said. “Just...I wish you would have told me all of this before it got to the point it did.”

“I know. Please...can you forgive me?”

She knew she would. She was simply trying to think of what she could do to turn things in her favor. She smiled at the idea that came to her and couldn’t help herself.

“Well, this PG relationship is coming to a stop. You’re going to meet me at my apartment tonight and we’re going to make out. I’m not going to sleep with you yet but...well, there’s going to be touching.”

“Um...okay. I can do that,” he said, clearly confused yet appreciative.

“That’s not it. My sister just moved into town. I told you that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s some swanky uptight neighborhood. The kind that has block parties. She’s invited me to a block party this weekend. I want you to come with me.”

“Oh. Okay. I can do that.”

“Good,” she said. “I’ll see you tonight, then.”

She ended the call just like that. She liked the idea that he had no idea how to respond to her. She also liked that she basically

had control of him now—not in any sort of devious way, but just so that she could feel a little more comfortable around him.

Feeling a bit better, the paranoia now just a little seed of worry in the back of her head, she headed home. And she was delighted to find that she was excited for tonight. It had been a very long time since she'd actually *wanted* a man's hands on her.

That, plus the quickly fading paranoia, made her wonder if maybe Martin might be the right man for her after all. He seemed to be changing all sorts of things about her. Of course, he knew very little about those things and she'd keep it that way for as long as she could.

She continued home, starting to wonder just what in the hell you were supposed to wear to a block party.

It was almost enough to drive away the spike of paranoia that had firmly latched itself into her earlier that morning and had remained on her in the grocery store.

Almost.

She grabbed her phone and dialed up Chloe. She didn't even allow her sister time to say *Hello* before she started speaking.

"This block party....can I bring a date?"

"...Yes, of course," Chloe said, clearly stunned.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then."

And with that, she hung up the phone, wondering what the hell she had just gotten herself into.

Chapter Eight

Chloe was pruning a head of broccoli when the doorbell rang. She knew right away that it was Danielle. She was quite nervous about this but, at the same time, happy to see something as stable as an actual boyfriend in her sister's life. Steven, meanwhile, was skeptical. He figured the boyfriend would be someone just like Danielle, creating an even tenser environment with two people to worry about.

Chloe had managed to shrug off Steven's attitude toward Danielle for most of their four years together but now that the wedding was getting closer, it was really starting to annoy her. But that was an argument for another day.

Chloe wiped her hands off on a dish towel and walked to the door. She took a steadying breath before she answered it. She hated to sway toward Steven's line of thinking but she was slightly worried about what Danielle would look like.

When she answered the door and found her sister somewhat made up and striking, she nearly did a double take. The black hair was put up into a cute little bun in the back. She was wearing a slight bit of makeup—just enough to help her cheeks glow—and had thankfully decided against band T-shirts or her standard pseudo-goth look. She *was* wearing black, but it was a semi-dressy tank top with delicate straps. Her tattoo showed along her upper back but that wasn't too distracting. The jeans she wore

surprised Chloe the most; they were basic dark denim and quite tight, showing off her curves in a way Chloe had never seen before.

“Danielle, you look amazing,” Chloe said.

“Yeah, don’t get used to it.” She stepped aside and nodded to the man who had come with her. “This is Martin.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Martin said, extending his hand.

Chloe shook it and noticed for the first time that he was dressed basically how she’d expected Danielle to show up. His T-shirt was wrinkled and his cargo shorts had a noticeable tear underneath one of the pockets. He wore a tattered pair of flip-flops with well-worn bands. His hair looked like it hadn’t been washed in a few days. He looked tired and out of sorts. Chloe couldn’t help but wonder if he was high. And if not high, almost certainly a user. She dreaded the moment when Steven met him.

“This house is enormous,” Danielle said as she stepped through the foyer and into the living room.

“Yeah, it does feel big,” Chloe said. “We’re nearly unpacked. I think once all the crap is out of the boxes, it might not feel so big.”

The sunlight was reflecting off of the polished hardwood floors as she led Danielle and Martin into the kitchen. Chloe bit back a tiny smile, enjoying the feeling of sort of showing off in front of Danielle. There was no malice in the feeling, but more of a basic sense of pride.

“Got kids?” Martin asked.

Wow, *Danielle really doesn't talk about me*, Chloe thought. "No," she answered. "Not yet and no time soon."

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