

A person with their back to the camera, wearing a white, short-sleeved, floor-length dress with a black belt, is pulling back heavy, light-colored curtains. The person's arms are raised, and they are holding the edges of the curtains. The light from the window behind them is very bright, creating a strong silhouette effect. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

BLAKE PIERCE

a
neighbor's
lie

a chloe fine psychological suspense--book 2

Блейк Пирс
A Neighbor's Lie
Серия «A Chloe Fine Psychological
Suspense Mystery», книга 2

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Аннотация

"NEXT DOOR is full of completely unexpected twists—you will read it on the edge of your chair. It is Blake Pierce at his best! Another masterpiece of suspense and mystery. I highly recommend it to the permanent library of all readers that appreciate an excellent thriller, full of psychological suspense and with a completely unexpected ending. This is the first in what promises to be another excellent series. I can hardly wait to read the sequel."

—Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos

A NEIGHBOR'S LIE (A Chloe Fine Mystery) is book #2 in a new psychological suspense series by bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) (a free download) has over 1,000 five-star reviews.

FBI Violent Crimes Division Special Agent Chloe Fine, 27, still reeling from the secrets of her past, finds herself thrown into her first case: the murder of a nanny in a seemingly perfect suburban town.

Immersed in a world of secrets, of unfaithful couples, of pretense and artifice, Chloe soon realizes that anyone—and everyone—may be guilty. Yet at the same time, with her own father still in jail, she must battle her own demons and unravel her own secrets, which threaten to bring her down before her own career even begins.

An emotionally wrought psychological suspense with layered characters, small-town ambiance and heart-pounding suspense, *A NEIGHBOR'S LIE* is book #2 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #3 in the *CHLOE FINE* series will be available soon.

Содержание

PROLOGUE	10
CHAPTER ONE	14
CHAPTER TWO	22
CHAPTER THREE	32
CHAPTER FOUR	47
CHAPTER FIVE	54
CHAPTER SIX	61
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	69

Blake Pierce

A Neighbor's Lie. A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 2

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 three books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising three books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three 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

Working as a nanny was not the life that Kim Wielding had envisioned for herself, but it was actually quite enjoyable. Which was a little surprising, considering in her early twenties she'd had a career she wanted to pursue in Washington, DC, firing along the campaign trails and writing speeches for underdog candidates. And she'd almost landed it.

Almost.

Life just worked out in funny ways sometimes.

Now, at the age of thirty-six, those dreams of working in DC were long gone. She'd replaced them with another dream: of writing the great American novel in her downtime as a nanny. She'd sort of fallen into the job after a promising candidate she had worked for had been miserably defeated. That was all it had taken for her to sit on the sidelines for a while. And while on those sidelines, a very easy means of employment had landed in her lap. She hadn't even considered watching kids in any capacity, but it had fit.

Kim reflected back on her first job as a nanny as she sat at the kitchen island inside the home of Bill and Sandra Carver. It was hard to believe it had been a little over ten years ago. It was a stretch of time that had somehow blurred those memories of working in DC, of writing speeches with hope and just a smidge on untruth.

Her laptop sat in front of her. She had hit the forty-thousand-word mark on her book. She figured she was about halfway through it. Maybe she'd finish it up in another six months or so. It all depended on the direction the lives of the three Carver children took. The oldest child, Zack, was in ninth grade this year and seriously eyeing football as a pastime. The middle child, Declan, played soccer. And if the youngest, Madeline, stuck with gymnastics, Kim was going to be running around in a frenzy for the next few months.

She closed the lid of her laptop and looked around the kitchen. She was thawing chicken for dinner. The counters had already been wiped down, the dishes were done, and the fourth load of laundry was currently churning away in the washing machine. Until the kids got home, her day was done. It was how she'd been able to work on her book for the last forty-five minutes.

She glanced at the clock and saw that the day had managed to sneak away from her—something that she was starting to understand happened to nannies quite a bit. She'd need to leave to pick the kids up from school in fifteen minutes...and that was no small feat, seeing as how the Carver kids were aged in crude stairstep fashion, the youngest in elementary school, the middle child in middle school, and the oldest in high school. All told, it was just over an hour's worth of travel and traffic time to pick them all up from school and return home with them. It sounded worse than it was, though, as Kim had recently discovered how wonderful audiobooks could be to kill time in the car.

She got up and checked the chicken, nearly defrosted in the sink. She then swapped the laundry into the dryer and got all of the spices out that she would need to complete dinner. As she was setting the paprika down on the counter, someone knocked on the front door.

It was a fairly common occurrence in the Carver household. Sandra Carver was an Amazon junkie and Bill Carver always had schematics and blueprints being FedEx'd to their home. Kim grabbed her purse, figuring she'd go ahead and leave for school pick-ups after bringing the packages inside.

She opened the door, her eyes instantly going to the floor of the porch in search of an Amazon box. That's why it took her brain a full second to understand that there was the shape of a person standing in front of her. When she looked up to see their face, her line of sight was blocked by—something.

Whatever it was, it smashed into her head. It connected right between her eyes, along the top of the bridge of her nose. The cracking noise inside of her head was deafening but she barely had time to register it before the sensation of falling overruled everything.

When she hit the Carvers' hardwood floors, the back of her head struck hard. She felt blood rushing out of her nose as she tried scrambling backward.

The person from the porch came inside. They shut the door causally behind them. Kim tried to scream but there was too much blood in her nose, cascading down into her throat and

mouth. She coughed, almost gagging, as the person took one large step forward.

They lifted that blunt object again—a pipe, Kim thought vaguely as pain swept through her mind like a hurricane—and that was the last thing she saw.

Before that final blow, her mind went to a strange place indeed. Kim Wielding died wondering what would happen to that chicken, still defrosting in the Carvers' sink.

CHAPTER ONE

Because of the way her life had started—a dead mother, an incarcerated father, and grandparents who were always hovering over her—Chloe Fine often preferred to do things on her own. People sometimes referred to her as a severe introvert and as far as she was concerned, that was fine with her. It was this personality that had driven her toward getting exceptional grades in school and had helped her to blast through her studies and training at the FBI academy.

But it was also that personality that had caused her to end up moving into her new apartment without a single person to help her. Sure, she could have hired a moving company, but her grandparents had taught her the value of a dollar. And since she had strong arms, a strong back, and a stubborn mindset, she'd elected to move in by herself. After all, she only had two heavy pieces of furniture. Everything else should be a cakewalk.

This was proven to not be the case when she finally managed to lug her dresser up the stairs—with the assistance of a dolly, several ratchet straps, and a thankfully wide stairwell leading to her second-floor apartment. Yes, she'd managed to do it but she was pretty sure she had pulled a thing or two in her back along the way.

She'd saved the dresser for last, knowing it would be the hardest part of the move. She'd intentionally packed the boxes

light, knowing it would be a one-woman job. She supposed she could have called Danielle and she would have helped but Chloe had never been the type to ask family for favors.

Chloe sidestepped a few boxes of her books and notebooks and collapsed in the recliner she'd had since her sophomore year of college. The thought of Danielle being here with her to sort through all of her stuff and start to set the place up was appealing. Things had been not quite as strained between the two of them since Chloe had uncovered the truth about what had occurred between their parents when they'd been young girls, but there was definitely something different. They were both very aware of the weight of their father hanging over their heads—the truth of what he had done and the secrets he had been keeping. Chloe felt that they were both dealing with those secrets in their own ways and they knew their opinions differed in some nearly psychic way that only close sibling are capable of.

What she had never dared express to Danielle was just how much she missed their father. Danielle had pretty much always resented him after he had been taken to jail. But Chloe had been the one who had missed that father figure in her life. She had been the one who had always dared to hope that maybe the cops had gotten it wrong—that there was no way her father had killed their mother.

And it had been that hope and belief that had resulted in the little adventure they'd taken together that had culminated in the arrest of Ruthanne Carwile and an entirely new viewpoint on

the case of Aiden Fine. The thing that had sort of backfired on Chloe, though, was that in uncovering those little secrets, she had started to miss him even more. And she knew that Danielle would find this horrifying and maybe even masochistic in a way.

Still, despite all that, she wanted to call Danielle over to celebrate the small albeit hard-earned victory of moving into her new place. It was just a small two-bedroom apartment in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, DC—small, barely affordable, but exactly what she had been looking for. It had been about two months since they'd hung out—which seemed odd, given everything they had gone through the last time they'd been together. They'd spoken on the phone a few times and while it had been pleasant enough, it had also been very surface level. And Chloe wasn't good at doing surface level.

Screw it, she thought, reaching for her phone. *What could it hurt?*

As she pulled up Danielle's number, the reality of the situation sank in. Sure, it had only been two months since everything had happened, but they were different people now. Danielle had started to pick up the pieces of her life. She had a job that could potentially start paying quite well—a bartender and assistant manager at an upscale bar in Reston, Virginia. As for Chloe, she was still figuring out how to go from having been recently engaged to now being single and apparently not able to remember how to go about finding a date.

You can't force something like this, she thought. *Especially not*

with Danielle.

With her heart churning over it, Chloe sent the call. She fully expected it to go to voicemail. So when it was answered on the second ring by a chipper-sounding Danielle, it took Chloe a moment to respond.

“Hey, Danielle.”

“Chloe, how are you?” she asked. It was so odd to hear Danielle’s voice with an edge of cheer to it.

“Pretty good. I moved into the apartment today. I thought about how nice it would be to celebrate it by having you come visit and have a bottle of wine and some really unhealthy food. But then I remembered your new job.”

“Yeah, grinding away,” Danielle said with a laugh.

“Are you liking it?”

“Chloe, I’m *loving* it. I mean, sure, it’s only been three weeks but it’s like I was born for this job. I know it’s only bartending but...”

“Well, you’re assistant manager, too, right?”

“Yeah. A title that still scares me.”

“I’m glad you’re liking it.”

“Well, how about you? How’s the apartment? How was the move?”

She didn’t want Danielle knowing she had moved it all in by herself, so she kept the answer generic—which she hated to do. “Not too bad. I still have to unpack, but I’m just glad to be in, you know?”

“I’ll absolutely come have that wine and greasy food with you soon, though. How is everything else?”

“Honestly?”

Danielle was quiet for a moment before she responded with: “Uh-oh.”

“I’ve been thinking about Dad. I’ve been thinking about going to see him.”

“And why in God’s name would you do that?”

“I wish I had a good answer for you,” Chloe said. “After everything that happened, I just feel like I need to. I have to make sense of it all.”

“My God, Chloe. Leave it alone. Isn’t this new job of yours supposed to keep you busy solving *other* crimes? Man... I thought I was the one who spent all of her time living in the past.”

“Why does it upset you so much?” Chloe asked. “Me going to see him...”

“Because I feel like we’ve both given him enough of our lives. And I know if you see him, my name is going to come out of one of your mouths and I’d rather not have that happen. I’m done with him, Chloe. I wish you could be, too.”

Yeah, I wish the same thing, Chloe said but kept the comment to herself.

“Chloe, I love you, but if you plan on the rest of this conversation being about him I’m going to say goodbye now.”

“When are you working again?” Chloe asked.

“Every night this week, except Saturday.”

“Maybe I’ll come by and see you Friday afternoon. I expect you to serve me whatever drink you consider your specialty.”

“Better not plan on driving home, then,” Danielle said.

“Noted.”

“How about you? When does your new job start?”

“Tomorrow morning, actually.”

“In the middle of the week?” Danielle asked.

“It’s sort of an orientation thing. Mostly meetings and all of that for the first day or so.”

“I’m excited for you,” Danielle said. “I know how much you’ve wanted this.”

It was nice to hear Danielle speaking highly of her work. Not only that, but even pretending to take an interest in it.

There was a heavy silence between them, one that mercifully ended with Danielle saying something that was rather out of character for her. “Be safe, Chloe. With the job...with Dad...with all of it.”

“I will,” Chloe said, the comment taking her off guard.

Danielle ended the call, leaving Chloe to look around the central area of her apartment. It was hard to see the totality of the place because of all of her clutter but she already felt that the place was home.

Nothing like an awkward conversation with Danielle to make a place feel like home, she thought idly.

Slowly, stretching her back, Chloe got out of the recliner and went to the box closest to her. She started to unpack it, getting a

sense of what her life would be like if she didn't figure out how to reconcile relationships. Whether it was with her sister, her father, or her ex-fiancé, she didn't have the best track record of keeping people close.

At the thought of her ex-fiancé, she came across several framed pictures sitting at the bottom of the first box. There were three pictures in all, photos of her and Steven; two were from their earlier days, when dating had been the only thing on their radar. But the third was a picture of them after he had proposed...after she had said yes and nearly started crying.

She gathered the pictures up out of the box and placed them on the kitchen counter. She rummaged around and found her trashcan sitting on the other side of the room, next to her mattress. She took the pictures to it and dropped them into the trashcan. The sound of the glass breaking in the frames was a little too delightful.

Easy enough, she thought. Can't wait to move on from that debacle. Now, why can't you move on from this nonsense with your father just as easily?

She had no answer for that. And the thing that scared her was that she felt the answer might be hiding in a conversation with him.

With that thought, the apartment seemed emptier than before and Chloe felt very much alone. The mere thought of it made her go to the refrigerator and start on the six-pack she'd purchased earlier in the day. She opened the bottle, a little alarmed at just

how good that first swallow was.

She did her best to occupy herself that afternoon and well into the night, not by unpacking but by slowly going through the boxes one by one and trying to decide if she needed each and every item. The trophy she'd won for the debate team in high school went the way of the trashcan. The Fiona Apple CD she had been listening to when she lost her virginity as a sophomore in high school, she kept.

Any pictures of her father went into the trash. It hurt to do it at first but by the time she was on the fourth bottle of beer, it was easier.

She made it through two boxes...and would have probably gone through at least one more if she had not gone to the fridge only to find that she had somehow gone through the entire six-pack. She looked at the clock on the stove and let out a little gasp at what she saw.

It was 12:45 at night. *So much for getting a good night's sleep before my first day*, she thought.

But what was even more alarming was the fact that she was more upset about the empty six-pack than having a potentially groggy morning on her first day with the bureau. She fell into bed after brushing her teeth, the room spinning a bit, as she realized that what she had really been trying to do that night was make herself not give a care about trying to erase memories of her father.

CHAPTER TWO

Chloe hadn't been sure what to expect when she stepped into the FBI headquarters the next morning. But what she absolutely had not been expecting was to be met by an older agent in the lobby. She saw him as he spotted her and wasn't quite sure what to do when she noticed that he was walking directly toward her. For a moment, she thought it was Agent Greene, the man who had served as her instructor and partner on her sort-of case that had led to uncovering the truth about her father.

But when she got a better look at his face, she saw that this agent was another man entirely. He looked hardened and made of stone, his mouth drawn in a tight line across his jaw.

"Chloe Fine?" the agent asked.

"Yes?"

"Director Johnson would like to speak with you before orientation."

This both excited her and scared her. Director Johnson had made exceptions for her when she had been partnered with Greene. Was he perhaps having second thoughts? Had her actions in that last case perhaps gotten him into some hot water? Had she come this far only to have her dreams crushed on the first day?

"What for?" Chloe asked.

The agent shrugged, as if he really didn't care. "This way,

please,” he said.

He led her to the elevators and for a moment, Chloe felt as if she had stepped back in time. She could see herself stepping into these same elevators a little over two months ago with this exact same knot of worry in her stomach, knowing that she was going to meet with Director Johnson. And just like last time, that knot of worry began to grow tendrils into the rest of her body as the elevator started sliding upward.

The stone-faced agent led her off of the elevator when it came to a stop on the second floor. They passed several offices and rooms before the agent came to a stop outside of Johnson’s wing. The secretary at her desk gave her a polite little nod and said, “You can go on in. He’s waiting for you.”

The stone-faced agent gave her a similar nod—only not nearly as polite—and gestured toward the office door. It was clear that he was not going in.

Doing her best to stay calm and reserved, Chloe walked to Director Johnson’s door. *What am I so afraid of?* she wondered. *The last time I was called to his office, I was granted responsibilities and duties most new agents in my shoes don’t get.* This was true, but it did nothing to settle her nerves.

Director Johnson was sitting at his desk, intently reading something on his laptop when she entered. When he looked up, all of his attention was on her; he even closed the lid on the laptop.

“Agent Fine,” he said. “Thanks for coming. This will only take

a second. I don't want you to miss any of the orientation—which, I'll go ahead and let you know—is fairly quick and painless.”

Hearing *Agent Fine* was still something of a head trip for her, but she tried not to let it show. She sat down in the chair in front of his desk and smiled as evenly as she could. “No problem,” she said. “Am I...well, is something wrong?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” he said. “I wanted to present you with an option concerning your duties. I understand that you're heading into a career with the Evidence Response Team. Is that something you've always had your eye on?”

“Yes sir. I have a pretty strong eye for detail.”

“Yes, that's what I hear. Agent Greene spoke very highly of you. And despite a few hiccups in the events from two months ago, I have to admit—I was very impressed as well. You carry yourself with a confidence and unwavering certainty that is rare in newer agents. And it's because of that and the feedback I got from Agent Greene and a few of your instructors from the academy that I want to ask you to reconsider your department of interest.”

“Is there a particular department you had in mind?” Chloe asked.

“Are you familiar with the ViCAP program?”

“The Violent Criminal Apprehension Program? Yes, I know a bit about it.”

“The title is fairly self-explanatory, but I think it also lends itself to your knack for evidence. Plus, if I'm being quite frank,

the Evidence Response Team has a quite large group of first-year agents this time around. Rather than you getting lost in the crowd there, I think you might fit well within ViCAP. Is that something that might interest you?"

"If I'm being honest, I don't know. I'd never really thought about it."

Johnson nodded but Chloe was pretty sure his mind had already been made up. "If you're up for it, I'd like for you to just give it a try. If you find after a few days that it's not a good fit, I will personally see to it that you are seamlessly placed back into your current slot with Evidence Response."

She honestly wasn't sure what to say or what to do. What she *did* know, though, was that it made her feel rather accomplished and proud to feel that her director felt so strongly about placing her in a department solely based on her skills and positive feedback from her peers.

"Yes, I can work with that," she finally answered.

"Fantastic. There's already a case I want to place you on. You'd start on it tomorrow morning. Maryland State PD has been running it, but as of this morning, placed a call for assistance. I'll be placing you alongside another agent that finds herself without a partner. The one she had been assigned folded under the pressure and called to resign yesterday."

"Can I ask why?"

"With the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, some of the crimes tend to be a little gruesome. It happens to some new

recruits...they make it through training, seeing the sample cases and even the real-life scenarios. But in the end, realizing they'll be *living* in it...it's too much for some."

Chloe said nothing. She tried to fathom having to make such a decision and it was beyond her. She'd been wanting a job like this for as long as she could remember—for as long as she knew the difference between right and wrong.

"Will I need any additional training?"

"I'd recommend more firearms training," Johnson said. "I'll make sure that's all set up for you. Your previous scores from Evidence Response enrollment in terms of firearms look quite good, but you may want a few extra skills in that area once you really get into the thick of ViCAP—should you decide to stay on."

"I understand."

"Well, unless you have any questions, I guess you can go ahead and get started with orientation downstairs. You've still got three minutes before it starts."

"No more questions at the moment. And thanks for the opportunity. And the trust."

"Of course. I'll handle all of the paperwork and someone will call you about your assignment by the end of the day. And Agent Fine... I have a good feeling about this. I think you'll be a remarkable asset to ViCAP."

It was then, as she stood up to leave his office, that she realized that she had never been very good at accepting compliments.

Perhaps it was because she had never received very many of them throughout her younger years. Now she simply smiled awkwardly and made her exit. The knot of nervousness that had been in the pit of her stomach was gone now, replaced by a flying sensation that made it feel as if her feet weren't even touching the ground as she made her way to the elevators.

Orientation was about what she had expected. It consisted of a list of dos and don'ts that came from a collection of seasoned agents. There were examples of cases gone wrong, of cases so bad that past agents had quit over them or even committed suicide. The instructors told miserable tales of murdered children and serial rapists who had not, to this very day, been apprehended.

As these stories were passed along, Chloe could hear little murmurs of uneasy conversation in the crowd. Two seats to her left, she heard a woman whispering to the man beside her.

“Apparently, my partner heard these stories before us. Maybe that's why he bailed.” She said it in a bitchy way, a mean-girl sort of way that instantly annoyed Chloe.

With my luck, that's the partner-without-a-partner Johnson wants me paired up with, Chloe thought.

The session eventually ended for lunch. When it did, the instructors on stage broke the crowd up into the specific

departments. When Chloe heard *Evidence Response Team* called, she felt a small pang of sorrow. She watched as about twenty recruits walked down to the stage and collected on the right side. Knowing that she was supposed to be among their numbers less than three hours ago made her feel a little isolated, especially when she saw that some of the agents seemed to have already formed friendships.

When the agents in the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program were called, she got up and headed for the floor. The crowd she walked with was smaller than the Evidence Response Team. Including herself, she counted only nine. And one of them was indeed the woman who had made the comment about her partner quitting.

She was so focused on this woman that she didn't notice the man stepping up beside her as they made their way to the floor.

"I don't know about you," he said, "but I feel like I need to be hiding my face. Being part of a program with the word *violent* in it...makes me think people are judging me."

"I don't think I've ever thought of it that way," Chloe said.

"Well, do you have a tendency towards violence?"

He asked it with a smirk and it was that smirk that somehow helped her to realize that the man was extremely good-looking. Of course, the comment about a tendency toward violence skewed it a bit.

"Not that I know of," she answered awkwardly as they reached the floor where their group was gathered.

“Okay,” the instructor, an older gentleman dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, said. “Lunch first, then we’ll meet up in Conference Room Three to go over some details and run through a Q and A. Before all of that, though...” He paused here and looked at a sheet of paper, scrolling through it using his finger. “Is there a Chloe Fine here?”

“That’s me,” Chloe said, nearly breaking into a sweat from having been singled out in this group of people she did not know.

“I need to speak with you for a moment, please.”

Chloe walked toward the instructor and saw that the gentleman was also beckoning another agent forward.

“Agent Fine, I see here that you are a new addition to ViCAP, directly from the recommendation of Director Johnson.”

“That’s correct.”

“Good to have you. Now, I’d like to you meet your partner, Agent Nikki Rhodes.”

He motioned to the other agent that he had beckoned toward him. Sure enough, it was the bitchy woman from earlier. Nikki Rhodes smiled at Chloe in a way that made it clear that she knew she was beautiful. And even Chloe had to admit it. Tall, perfectly tanned skin, sparkling blue eyes, sickeningly straight blonde hair.

“Nice to meet you,” Rhodes said.

“Likewise,” Chloe said.

“Now, you two go enjoy lunch,” the instructor said. “From what I understand, you’ll be working a case early tomorrow. You were both at the top of your class, so I expect to hear some very

big things about the two of you.”

Rhodes gave her a smile and Chloe could feel the fakeness of it. She hated to automatically assume someone was not a genuine or authentic person, but her gut had always been spot on with things like this. The instructor had turned to join the rest of the group, leaving the two women alone. Noticing that the eyes of a superior were no longer on them, Rhodes turned and walked away without saying anything at all.

Chloe kept back from the rest of the group for a moment, trying to get her head straight. She'd woken up this morning excited to start her career as a member of the Evidence Response Team. Everything for the foreseeable future had essentially been planned out. And now here she was, placed into a department she was not very familiar with, assigned to a partner with a stick up her ass.

“She doesn't exactly seem like a people person, does she?” someone said from behind her.

She turned and saw the man who had walked with her down to the floor—the handsome one who had asked if she had any violent tendencies.

“No, she doesn't.”

“Imagine having most of your courses with her at the academy,” he said. “It was miserable. Speaking of which...I don't remember you being in any of my courses or modules.”

“Yeah...I'm sort of new. I was placed in this department this morning.”

A look of mild shock came over his face. “Oh, okay. Well, welcome to ViCAP. I’m Kyle Moulton and if your new partner doesn’t want to have lunch with you, I’d like to take her place.”

“Help yourself,” Chloe said, finally falling in behind with the rest of the group. “It’s fitting of my day to say the least.”

“How so?”

“Because nothing else has really gone as planned, either.”

Moulton only nodded as they left the auditorium. Even though Moulton was a stranger (albeit a handsome one), it was nice to have him by her side as they walked to the catered lunch waiting for them elsewhere in the building. She was afraid that if she had to step into this uncertain future completely alone, it might make her rethink everything.

“Plans are overrated anyway,” Moulton said.

“Not to me. Plans mean structure. Plans mean predictability.”

“I don’t think *predictability* was in the job description for our positions,” Moulton joked.

Chloe smiled and nodded but had never quite looked at it that way. Quite frankly, it frightened her a bit. Which made no sense, really. Her life had never been anything more than an unpredictable pile of utter crap, so why would her career be any different?

Luckily, she had learned to roll with the punches. And if snotty bitches like Nikki Rhodes happened to obscure her path along the way, then Rhodes could either adapt or get the hell out of her way.

CHAPTER THREE

The following morning, Chloe got a rude awakening to how the remainder of her career would be structured. Her phone rang at 5:45, the call coming from one of the assistant directors who worked under Director Johnson. She had barely managed to croak out a raspy “Hello?” before the man on the other end started to speak.

“This is Assistant Director Garcia. Is this Agent Chloe Fine?”

“It is.” She sat up in bed, her heart hammering as a surge of adrenaline flooded through her, kicking out the remnants of sleep.

“You’re to meet Agent Rhodes in Bethesda at seven a.m. You’ll be working together on what we believe is a pretty open and closed case of gang violence, likely from MS-13. Any questions should come directly to me, at this number. Agent Rhodes will be given the exact same information. Following this call, the address will be texted to your phone. Do you have any questions, Agent Fine?”

Chloe was sure she had some questions, but they were hiding in the wake of her first actual assignment.

“No, sir.”

“Good. Be safe and smart out there, Agent Fine.”

And that was it. That was how she got her first assignment. She knew that they would not come like this in the future; they’d

been told this much at orientation yesterday. Still, it was quite an effective way to kick off her first day on the job.

She'd already laid her clothes out and showered the night before, doing everything she could to make sure she would not be late for whatever awaited her on the first day. She dressed, grabbed a bagel with some cream cheese, and poured a thermos of coffee that she had set to brew at 5 a.m. last night. During all of this, the text from Director Garcia came through, giving her the address in Bethesda. When Chloe got to her car, only fifteen minutes had passed since the call had come in.

She'd been to Bethesda, Maryland, several times so she knew it was a quick drive—a little less than half an hour, especially leaving this early and getting in front of the miserable morning commuter traffic. Once she was out of the grind of DC's streets and onto more open lanes, she plugged the address into her GPS and saw that she was only twenty-two minutes away.

She found herself wanting to call Danielle. She felt herself driving toward one of the more memorable and meaningful moments in her life and felt the need to share it with someone. But she knew Danielle would still be sleeping and that she would also probably not understand the excitement of it. And that was fine with Chloe. They had different interests and passions, and neither one had ever been particularly great at faking their enthusiasm.

She arrived at the address two minutes ahead of the time her GPS had given her. It was a rundown one-story apartment

building, the kind that was usually visited by the police at least a dozen times over the weekend for violence, drugs, sexual assault, and just about anything else imaginable.

She'd fully expected to be there ahead of Rhodes but was a bit dejected to see the other agent not only already there, but walking up the porch steps toward the crime scene.

Annoyed, she parked along the side of the street and hurried up the sidewalk. She made it up to the porch just as Rhodes opened the door to head inside.

"Good morning," Rhodes said, clearly not meaning it.

"Good morning. What did you do...fly here?"

Rhodes only shrugged. "It doesn't take me very long to get ready in the mornings. It's okay, Agent Fine. This isn't a race."

As they stepped inside, they saw a man standing in the center of a small cluttered living room. He turned toward them and his eyes seemed to hang on Agent Rhodes for a moment. She was wearing very modest black slacks and a conservative white top. Her hair had been straightened and although she'd claimed she took very little time to get ready, it was obvious that there had been some makeup work done that morning.

"You with the bureau?" the man asked.

"Yes," Chloe said quickly, as if making sure the man knew there were two agents present, not just the tall pretty blonde one.

"Agents Rhodes and Fine," Rhodes said. "And you are?"

"Detective Ralph Palace, Maryland Homicide. I'm just taking a few final notes, as I understand this is your case now."

“What can you tell us to get us started?” Chloe asked.

“It’s pretty basic. Gang-related murder. MS-13 is a big one in this area, so that’s what we’re going with. The bodies of a husband, wife, and thirteen-year-old son were removed yesterday afternoon, about seven hours after the call was placed. Reports of shots fired, and this place ended up looking like *this*.” He waved his arms all around, indicating the mess of the apartment. “Some pretty simple police work revealed that the father once had ties with a rival gang, the Binzos.”

“If MS-13 is involved how is ICE not on this?” Chloe asked.

“Because it hasn’t been proven yet,” Palace said. “With immigrant-related gang crimes, we have to be pretty certain. Otherwise, we can expect lawsuits and grievances about the unfair treatment of ethnic groups.” He gave a shake of his head and sighed. “So if you guys could prove this one way or the other, that would be great.”

He made his way to the front door, taking a business card from his wallet as he did. It was no surprise at all when he handed it directly to Rhodes. “Call me if you need anything else.”

Rhodes didn’t bother with a response as she pocketed the card. Chloe assumed she had been the kind of girl in high school and college who had gotten acclimated to having guys ogle her all the time. This encounter with Detective Palace had no doubt been just another one of those tiresome moments.

Chloe took a moment to look around the place. The coffee table in front of the couch had been overturned. Something—

a dark soda from the looks of it—had been spilled from the table during the melee. The dark fluid had mixed with what was clearly drying blood on the pale shag carpet that covered the entire living room up until the adjoining kitchen. There was more blood splattered on the walls. There was also some smeared on the linoleum floor in the kitchen.

“How do you want to split this up?” Rhodes asked.

“I don’t know. If shots were fired, there’s a good chance one went into a wall or the floor. And from the messy look of the place, it wasn’t a simple shootout. There was a struggle. And that tells me there’s probably fingerprints somewhere as well.”

Rhodes nodded. “We also need to figure out how the killer got in. Did you get a look at the front door? No signs of forced entry. So that means one of the family members let the guy in—maybe someone they knew well and trusted.”

Chloe agreed with all of this and found herself impressed with Rhodes and the way she had already checked the door before even stepping inside.

“Why don’t you look around outside for signs of forced entry?” Rhodes suggested. “I’ll see if there are any signs of what type of weapons were used in here...see if there are any bullet fragments or anything like that.”

Chloe nodded in agreement but was already sensing that Rhodes was doing her best to angle herself as the lead in the investigation. Chloe took it in stride, though. Based on what Palace had told them—and the fact that this had been assigned to

two brand new agents with the oversight of an assistant director—she knew it was considered a small-time task in the grand scheme of things. So if Rhodes was going for some sort of power play already, it wasn't anything to get bent out of shape over. Not yet, anyway.

Chloe headed back outside, running the scenario through her head. If the killer was someone the family knew, why the struggle? If the killer had used a gun, three shots one right behind the other would not have allowed much time for any sort of struggle at all. But the door had indeed showed no signs of being forced open. So really, some sort of forced entry was more likely than the killer simply being allowed inside. But if not at the front door, then where?

She walked slowly around the building, realizing that calling it an apartment building was a bit of a stretch. She became more and more certain that it was some sort of urban housing, perhaps offered as some form of government aid. It was at the very edge of a collection of four identical buildings, separated by a strip of mostly dead grass between each one.

The left side offered nothing. It was mostly featureless with the exception of a small gas tank and a busted spigot where a water hose was coiled uselessly on the ground. But when she got around back, she saw several opportunities. First, there were three windows. One looked into the kitchen and the other two looked into bedrooms. There was also a set of concrete stairs that led up to a back door. She checked this door and found it

unlocked. It opened up into a very small area that looked to have served as a mudroom. A few pair of dirty shoes were on the floor and a tattered dirty coat hung from a hook on the wall. She checked the door and the frame and found that it was all sound. From her point of view, she could not see where it had been forced open at any time in the recent past.

She went back to each window, looking for anything suspicious, and was not disappointed. On the third window, looking into what she assumed was the master bedroom, there were two small chunks of wood removed from the frame. They had been crudely removed, as if chipped away. One was along the bottom edge, where the frame sat against the edge of the pane. The other was along the top of the bottom portion of the frame. Whatever had happened to chip the wood had also caused a crack to form in the glass, though nothing hard enough to break it.

She did not want to touch anything out of fear of damaging any prints that had been left behind. But by standing on her tiptoes, she could see that this particular chip in the wood would have allowed someone from the outside to push down to disengage the window lock.

She went back inside through the back door and made her way into the master bedroom. There was no clear indication that anyone had entered through the window. But she also knew that a thorough dusting might tell a different story.

“What are you doing?”

She turned and saw Rhodes standing in the doorway to the

bedroom. She had a skeptical look on her face as she studied Chloe.

“This window has been tampered with from the outside,” Chloe said. “We need to collect prints.”

“You got evidence gloves?” Rhodes asked.

“No,” Chloe said. She found this ironic; had she started her day as a member of the Evidence Response Team as she had originally planned, she’d have them on her. But after Johnson had switched her department yesterday, she hadn’t thought to bring any evidence-based equipment along.

“I’ve got some in my car,” she said. She then tossed Chloe a set of keys with a look of annoyance. “In the glove box. And please lock it when you’re done.”

Chloe muttered a subdued “Thanks” as she passed by Rhodes while leaving the room. She wondered why Rhodes would keep evidence gloves in her car. As she, Chloe, understood it, each agent would be supplied with the appropriate equipment and materials for any given case from the bureau. Had Rhodes been given the correct supplies? Had her late addition to the ViCAP program already come back to bite her in the ass?

She went outside and found a box of latex gloves in Rhodes’s glove compartment. There was also an evidence kit, which she took out as well. It was a small emergency kit but better than nothing. And while it showed that Rhodes was prepared, it also indicated that she wasn’t going to go out of her way to help Chloe. Why keep it a secret that she had gloves and an emergency

evidence kit in the glove box unless she had planned on keeping them for herself?

Determined not to get too bogged down by such details, Chloe slapped the gloves on as she walked back into the house. As she passed by Rhodes again, Chloe handed her the evidence kit. “Thought we might need this, too.”

Rhodes gave her a biting look as Chloe headed back for the window. She checked the area that has been chipped and found that her hunch was correct. It would allow someone from the outside to apply just enough force to the lock to get it to pop open.

“Agent Fine?” Rhodes said.

“Yeah?”

“I know we don’t know one another, so I’m going to say this as polite as I can: Can you please watch what the hell you’re doing?”

Chloe turned back toward Rhodes and gave her a defiant look. “Excuse me?”

“Look at the carpet under your feet for God’s sake!”

Chloe looked down and her heart sank. There was a footprint there, just a partial one but clearly the top half of a footprint. It was made of what looked like dust and mud.

And she had stepped on it.

Shit...

She stepped back quickly. Rhodes took her place by the window, kneeling down to look at the print. “Hopefully you didn’t ruin it enough to make it unusable,” Rhodes spat.

Chloe bit back the retort that jumped up on her tongue. After

all, Rhodes was right. She'd somehow overlooked something as glaringly obvious as a footprint. *It's because I'm just in my head too much*, she thought. *Maybe Johnson switching departments on me is affecting me more than I thought.*

But she knew that was a lame excuse. After all, so far this crime scene had essentially been nothing more than evidence collecting—which was what she had been wanting to do all along in the first place.

Feeling embarrassed and enraged, Chloe walked out of the room to collect her breath and her thoughts.

“Jesus,” Rhodes said as she observed the print. “Fine...why don't you see what you can find out there that might of some use? There are bullet holes in the kitchen wall I didn't get a chance to look at while you were outside. I'll wrap this up...if it's even possible.”

Again, Chloe had to bite back quite a few vile comments. She was in the wrong here and that meant she had to overlook Rhodes being a bitch. So she kept quiet and headed back out into the central area of the apartment, hoping to find some way to redeem herself.

She went into the kitchen and saw the bullet holes Rhodes had mentioned. She saw the casings in each hole, several inches deep into the plaster. She was sure they'd be able to find out what kind of gun had been used based solely on that. So as far as Chloe was concerned, the bullet holes were a gimme—an easy clue that would give them just enough information to keep the

case chugging along.

Maybe there's something else, though, she thought.

She walked back toward the hallway and stopped where it connected with the living area. If the killer had indeed come in through the window in the master bedroom, this would likely be where the shooting had started. The lack of blood or chaos in the bedroom indicated that nothing violent had happened back there.

She looked to the couch and saw the spray of blood on the floor in front of it. *Probably the first shot,* she thought. She observed the layout of the place and could see it all in her head. The first shot had killed someone on the couch. That would have caused anyone else on the couch to jump up quickly, perhaps knocking over the coffee table. Maybe they tripped over it or tried jumping over it. Regardless, the blood and spilled soda on the other side of the overturned coffee table indicated that this person did not make it out.

Still, it made her wonder. She slowly walked into the living room, following the path she assumed the bullets had gone. The amount of dried gore on the back of the couch gave her enough evidence that the person sitting there had died right away. She could see no entry on the couch where the bullet had torn into it, meaning it had lodged somewhere in the victim's head.

She could easily see two bullet holes in the kitchen wall, about three inches apart. She could see them from the couch. But if there were two stray shots there, maybe there were more elsewhere. If there were, it might give them a more precise chain

of events throughout the scene.

She went to the coffee table and hunkered down. If someone had stumbled here before being shot, the killer would have aimed low. She looked around for any other stray shots and saw none. The killer had apparently hit his target.

However, she did see something else that she had not even been looking for. There was a small desk pushed against the wall to her right. It held a decorative bowl and a framed picture. Stuffed between the legs of the table was a tattered wicker basket with old mail and books. Between that basket and the back legs of the table was a cell phone.

She picked it up and saw that it was an iPhone. She pressed the power-up button and the screen lit up. The lock screen was a picture of Black Panther. She pressed the home button, expecting the passcode screen to pop up. When it didn't, she was surprised. Instead, it opened without an issue.

Must have been the son's phone, she thought. And maybe the parents rigged it so there was no passcode so they'd have access at all times.

It took her a moment to understand what she was looking at. She saw a young boy's face with some weird zombie-like features cartooned over it. She checked the edges of the screen and then saw the telltale signs of Snapchat. She was looking at a video (or a "snap") that had not yet been sent.

"Holy shit," she whispered.

She then realized how warm the phone felt. She looked to the

battery indicator in the upper right corner and saw that it was in the red.

She ran toward the hallway, gripping the phone. “Rhodes, do you see a phone charger in there?” she yelled.

There was a pause before Rhodes answered. “Yeah. On the bedside table.”

By the time the full answer was out of her mouth, Chloe was already entering the room again. She saw the charger Rhodes had mentioned and instantly ran to it.

“What is it?” Rhodes asked.

Chloe couldn’t help thinking: *Wouldn’t you like to know, you bitch?* But she kept it quiet as she plugged the charger into the phone.

“I think the son was on Snapchat when the killer came in. And I think he was sending a snap to a friend. Only he never got a chance to send it.”

She played the video that had been on the screen when she found the phone. It was of a young boy, maybe twelve or thirteen. He was sticking his tongue out, his face highlighted with the zombie-like animation. Within two seconds, the first gunshot sounded out. The phone was jostled and then a second gunshot sounded out. The boy appeared to fall to the floor, the phone was jostled again, and then the screen went black—apparently coming to a stop in its resting place beneath the little desk.

That’s where the snap ended. The entire thing lasted about five seconds.

“Play it again,” Rhodes said.

Chloe replayed the video, this time paying attention to the jostled moments. For about a quarter of a second, there was the shape of a figure standing in the hallway, coming into the living room. It was brief, but it was there. And because the phone was a newer one, even in its hectic movements, the image was fairly clear. Chloe couldn’t make out a face with her untrained eye, but she knew the bureau would have no problem running a frame-by-frame analysis and enhancing the footage.

“This is literally the smoking gun,” Rhodes said. “Where did you find the phone?”

“Under the desk pushed against the wall in the living room.”

Chloe could tell that Rhodes was excited by the find but did not want to give her too much credit. Instead, she nodded her approval and went back to her work, dusting for prints underneath the window.

They both sensed that, thanks to the Snapchat video, their work here was just about done. They had the perfect piece of evidence and anything they did afterward was just going to be out of methodology and routine.

Chloe figured she might as well play along and not cause any further tension between them. She took the phone with her back into the living room. She walked across the kitchen and set about digging the bullets out of the wall. But she knew the key to the case was in the phone she carried, waiting to bring the killer of this family to justice. And in the back of her mind, she

couldn't help but feel that this was too easy. She was sure that Rhodes might also be thinking the same thing—as well as a way to somehow make it backfire in Chloe's face.

CHAPTER FOUR

They returned to FBI headquarters two hours later with what Chloe felt was more than enough evidence to have a suspect in custody by the end of the day. The Snapchat video was the most powerful thing they had found, but they had also managed to come across two solid fingerprints, the footprint on the bedroom carpet, and two hairs clinging to the bottom of the bedroom window.

They presented their findings to Assistant Director Garcia, huddled around a tiny conference room table in the back of his office. When Chloe showed him what she had found on the phone, she saw him trying to bite back a smile of satisfaction. He also seemed pleased with how professionally and by-the-book Rhodes had bagged and catalogued all of the evidence they had found.

Maybe she should switch departments, too, Chloe thought with a bit of venom.

“This is some incredible work,” Garcia said, standing up from the table and regarding them as if they were prized students. “You worked quickly, thoroughly, and I don’t see why we won’t be able to get a solid arrest off of this.”

Both agents gave their thanks. It made Chloe feel a little bit better to see that Rhodes was just as uneasy with accepting compliments as she was.

“Now, Agent Fine, I got a call from Director Johnson just before you came in here. He wants to meet with you in about fifteen minutes. Agent Rhodes, why don’t you head down to the lab to see what happens to all of the evidence when it’s brought in?”

Rhodes nodded, still playing the part of the good student. As for Chloe, she felt herself panicking again. When she’d visited Johnson yesterday, he’d thrown her one hell of a curveball. What did he have planned now?

Keeping her questions to herself, she walked down the hall toward his office. When she entered the small reception area, she saw that his door was closed. His secretary gestured to one of the chairs along the wall while she spoke to someone on the phone. Chloe took the chair and finally took a moment to reflect back on what today had meant to her and for her career.

On the one hand, she had discovered a significant piece of evidence that would likely lead to the arrest of a gang member who had killed an entire family. But at the same time, she’d made a very rookie mistake by potentially damaging what had been a fairly decent print. She figured in the long run, the print would not matter thanks to the Snapchat evidence. Still, she was embarrassed as hell by being called out by Rhodes in such a way. She figured the best she could hope for was to come out even—her amazing find balancing out her bone-headed mistake.

When the door to Johnson’s office opened, her thoughts broke apart. She looked to the door and saw Johnson poke his head out.

He saw her and didn't even say anything. He just beckoned her toward him, into his office. It was impossible to tell if this was a show of simple hurriedness or anger.

She entered his office and when he closed the door behind her, he gestured to the chair on the other side of his desk—a spot that was becoming more and more familiar to Chloe. When he sat down behind his desk, Chloe thought she could finally read his expression. She was pretty sure he was irritated about something.

“You should know,” he said, “that I just got off the phone with Agent Rhodes. She told me about how you basically trampled a footprint at the crime scene.”

“That's accurate.”

He nodded, disappointed. “I'm torn, because on the one hand, she's just as new as you are. And by her calling to essentially tattle on you pisses me off. But at the same time, I'm glad she told me. Because even though this *is* your first day, it's important to keep tabs on this sort of thing. You understand, of course, that I don't call every agent that makes a mistake into my office to ask them about it. But for you, I thought I should check in with you since I did sort of throw you a curve ball at the last minute. Do you feel it threw you off your game?”

“No. I simply overlooked it. I was hyper-focused on looking at the window and didn't even see the print.”

“That's understandable, if not a little clumsy. But Assistant Director Garcia tells me you found evidence that should lead directly to an arrest—a cellphone with a Snapchat window open.

Correct?”

“Yes sir.” And for reasons she did not understand, she felt herself wanting to add: *But anyone could have found it, really. It was sort of just dumb luck.*

“I consider myself to be a fairly forgiving man,” he said. “But do know that many more mistakes like the one with the footprint might result in some fairly serious consequences. For now, though, I want you and Rhodes on another case. Do you see a problem working with her?”

The word *yes* was on her lips but she did not want to seem petty. “No, I think I can manage it.”

“I had a look at her files. Her instructors say she’s incredibly sharp but has a tendency to try doing things on her own. So my advice to you would be not to let her take full control over a case.”

Yeah, I’ve already seen some of that, Chloe thought.

“And to be fair, I have warned her against this,” he went on. “I also told her I didn’t appreciate it when brand new agents tried to throw others under the bus. So I expect her to shape up on the next case. Director Johnson and I will be overseeing it from here on out, just to make sure everything is done by the book.”

“Okay. I appreciate that.”

“Other than potentially ruining a print, I think you did a great job today. I’d like for you to spend the rest of the day writing up a report on the scene and your interactions with Agent Rhodes.”

“Yes sir. Anything else?”

“That’s all for now. Just...as I said...if you start to feel that

my last-minute change to your plans is affecting your work, let me know.”

She nodded as she got up. As she exited the office, she felt like she had just dodged a bullet—like a kid who had been called to the principal’s office but had been let off with only a small slap on the wrist. Still, having Johnson commend most of the work she’d done earlier in the day set her mind at ease.

She headed back down to her little workspace—a glorified cubicle was really all it was—with her mind reeling. She wondered if there had ever been a new agent who had been called into the Director’s office twice in less than forty-eight hours. It made her feel both elated and somehow closely scrutinized all at the same time.

As she waited for the elevator, she saw another agent coming around the corner. Chloe vaguely recognized his face from the small group of agents who had been included in the ViCAP group the day before.

“You’re Agent Fine, right?” he said with a smile.

“I am,” she answered, unclear of where the conversation was headed.

“I’m Michael Riggins. I just heard about the case you and Rhodes were assigned to. Gang-related family murder. Word has it that there’s an arrest in progress already. That’s got to be some kind of record, right?”

“I have no idea,” she said, though she did feel that it had all happened very fast.

“Hey, you know, not all first-day agents got to go out into the field today,” Riggins said. “Some were mired in research or paperwork. There’s already murmurs of a few of us heading out to grab a drink after work today. You should come by. It’s the place two blocks over, Reed’s Bar. We could use a legit success story to lift our spirits. But maybe don’t invite Rhodes. Everyone...well, no one seems to really care for her.”

Chloe knew it was mean-spirited but she couldn’t help but smile at the comment. “I might show up,” she said. It was the best answer she could give...much better than explaining that she was very much an introvert and wasn’t the type to just hang out at a bar with people she didn’t know.

The elevator arrived, its doors sliding open. Chloe stepped on and Riggins waved goodbye to her. It was bizarre to have someone envious of her situation, especially after the conversation she’d just had with Johnson. It was a feeling that sort of *made* her want to go out to the bar, even if it was only for a single drink and a half an hour of her time. The alternative was heading back to her apartment and continuing to unpack. And that was not something that particularly lifted her spirits.

The elevator took her up to the third floor, where her workspace sat alongside similar spaces shared by other agents. As she made her way down the hall, she passed Rhodes in the hallway. She thought about saying *hello* or to sarcastically thank her for the out-of-nowhere meeting with Johnson. But in the end, she decided to take the high road. She wasn’t going to fall for

Rhodes's little games.

Still, even passing the woman in the hall and exchanging nasty stares was enough to make the decision for Chloe: yes, she would go to the bar tonight. And unless her day drastically changed, she'd likely have much more than just one drink.

That seems to be happening a lot lately, she told herself.

It was a thought that haunted her throughout the rest of the day, but, much like recurring thoughts of her father, she managed to push it back into the darker corners of her mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

When she arrived at the bar at 6:45, it was about what she had expected. She saw several faces that were familiar, but none that she knew well. And that was because she did not know any of them well at all. Another downside of having her department switched by Johnson at the last minute was that there were very few people in the ViCAP group who had taken the same courses or training modules as she did.

The two faces she recognized the most were both male. First, there was Riggins. He was sitting with another male agent, talking animatedly about something. And then there was Kyle Moulton, the good-looking agent who had offered to take her to lunch after the first stage of orientation—the man who had somehow stuck out to her because he had asked her if she'd ever had any violent tendencies. She was a bit discouraged to see that he was speaking with two other women. No surprise there, though. Moulton was drop-dead gorgeous. He looked a bit like Brad Pitt from his earlier years.

She elected not to interrupt him and instead to go sit with Riggins. As conceited as it might seem, she liked the idea of hanging out with someone who had seen her accomplishment from the morning as something to marvel at.

“This stool taken?” she asked as she plopped down on the seat beside him.

“Not at all,” Riggins said. He seemed genuinely happy to see her, his slightly chubby cheeks widening with his smile. “I’m glad you decided to come. Can I buy you a drink?”

“Sure. Just a beer. For now.”

Riggins waved the bartender over and had him add Chloe’s first drink to his tab. Riggins himself was drinking rum and Coke, of which he ordered a second when he ordered Chloe’s drink.

“How was your first day?” Chloe asked.

“It was okay. Most of my day was research for a case involving an interstate drug runner. It sounds boring but I actually enjoyed it a lot. So how was a full day with Rhodes by your side?” Riggins asked. “Sure, wrapping that case must have been great but she already has a reputation for being hard to handle.”

“It was pretty tense. She’s a great agent but...”

“Say it,” Riggins said. “I can’t call her a bitch because I don’t like calling a woman a bitch in front of another woman.”

“She’s not a bitch,” Chloe said. “She’s just very direct and thorough.”

Their conversation went on for a bit longer and it was all very casual. Chloe snuck a few peeks over in the direction of Agent Moulton. One of the women had left, leaving him to speak with only one. He was leaning in close and smiling. Chloe tended to be a little naive when it came to relationships, but she was pretty sure Moulton was enamored with the woman.

This disappointed her in a way she had not been expecting. It

had only been two months since she and Steven had called things off. She assumed she was only interested in Moulton because he'd been the first friendly face that had bothered speaking to her after Johnson had pulled the rug out from under her feet. That, plus the idea of heading back to her new apartment all alone was not appealing. The fact that he was incredibly good-looking also played a part as well.

Yeah, it was a mistake to come out. I can drink for much cheaper at home.

"You okay?" Riggins asked.

"Yeah, I think so. It's just been a long day. And tomorrow is shaping up to be just as long."

"You driving or walking home?"

"Driving."

"Eh... I better not offer to buy you another drink, huh?"

Chloe smiled in spite of herself. "That's very responsible of you."

She stole a glance back over toward Moulton and the woman he had been speaking to. They were currently both getting to their feet. As they made their way toward the door, Moulton gently placed his hand along the woman's lower back.

"Can I ask what got you started down a road that led to a career like this?" Riggins asked.

She smiled nervously and finished off her beer. "Family issues," she answered. "Thanks for inviting me out, Riggins. But I need to get back home."

He nodded as if he understood. She also noted that he slowly looked around the bar and saw that he was the only one that would be remaining. It made her think that maybe Riggins had some ghosts of his own that he was wrestling with.

“Take care, Agent Fine. May tomorrow be as successful as today.”

She made her exit, already making plans for how to finish out her night. She still had boxes to unpack, a bedframe to put together, and an assortment of laundry and kitchen odds and ends to put away.

Not quite the exciting life I was expecting, she thought with a bit of sarcasm.

As she made her way to her car, still parked in the parking garage beneath FBI headquarters, her phone rang. When she saw the name on the display, rage flushed through her and she almost ignored it completely.

Steven. She had no idea why he would even be calling. And that’s why she decided to answer. She knew that if she didn’t, the mystery of it all would drive her crazy.

She answered the call, not liking how nervous she instantly felt. “Hello, Steven.”

“Chloe. Hey.”

She waited, hoping he’d just dive into whatever he had called for. But it had never been like Steven to get right to the point.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, everything is fine. Sorry...I didn’t even think about

how me calling you might make you think...”

He trailed off here, reminding Chloe of one of the many little annoying traits he had never realized about himself.

“What do you need, Steven?”

“I want to get together to talk,” he said. “Just to sort of reconnect and check in on each other, you know?”

“I don’t think so. That wouldn’t be the best idea.”

“There’s no ulterior motives here,” he said. “I promise. I just...I feel like there are things I need to apologize for. And I need...well, I think *we* need closure, you know?”

“Speak for yourself. Things are pretty much closed for me. No closure needed.”

“Fine. Then consider it a favor. I just want like half an hour. There are some things I’d like to get off my chest. And if I’m being honest...I’d just like to see you one more time.”

“Steven...I’m busy. My life is crazy right now, and...”

She stopped, not even sure where to go from there. And really, it wasn’t like she had this massive social calendar that would prevent her from seeing him. She knew that for Steven to make such a call was huge. He was having to humble himself, which was not something he had ever done well.

“Chloe...”

“Fine. Half an hour. But I’m not coming to you. If you want to see me, you’ll have to come to DC. Things are crazy here right now and I can’t—”

“I can do that. When’s a good time for you?”

“Saturday. Lunchtime. I’ll text you a place for lunch.”

“Sounds good. Thanks so much, Chloe.”

“You’re welcome.” She felt that there was more she should say, anything to ease the tension. But in the end, all she said was “Bye, Steven.”

She ended the call and pocketed her phone. She couldn’t help but wonder if she’d only caved because she was in a rather lonely position. She thought of Agent Moulton and wondered where he and his lady friend had gone off to. More than that, she wondered why she was so hung up on it.

She reached her car and drove home as the streets of DC began to darken toward night. It was a remarkable city; despite the congestion and weird blend of history and commerce, it was somehow beautiful all the same. It set her into a melancholy state as she headed to her apartment—an empty new apartment in a location she had felt fortunate to find but that now felt like some isolated island calling her home.

When her phone stirred her awake the following morning, it pulled her out of the haze of a dream. She tried snatching at the tendrils of it as it escaped but then stopped, wondering if it was even worth it. The only dreams she’d had as of late involved her father, stranded and alone in prison.

She thought she could even hear his voice humming some old

Johnny Cash tune he'd often sung around their apartment when she'd been a little girl. "A Boy Named Sue," she thought. Or maybe not. All of those songs started to sound the same.

Still, "A Boy Named Sue" was in her head when she slapped at her nightstand for her phone. As she yanked her phone from its charger, she saw that her clock read 6:05—just twenty-five minutes before she had set her alarm to go off.

"This is Agent Fine," she answered.

"Agent Fine, it's Assistant Director Garcia. I need you in my office right away. Shoot for within the hour. I've got a case I need you and Agent Rhodes on as soon as possible this morning."

"Yes, sir," she said, sitting up. "I'll be there right away."

In the moment, she didn't care that it was another day with Rhodes. All she cared about was that so far, she was 1-0 as far as cases went and she was eager to improve upon that record.

CHAPTER SIX

Chloe arrived in Assistant Director Garcia's office three minutes later. He was sitting at the small conference table in the back, looking through a few papers. She saw that he had already set out two cups of coffee for them, steaming and black, on either side of the table.

"Good morning, Agent Fine," he said as she entered. "Have you seen or spoken with Agent Rhodes?"

"She was pulling in just as I got on the elevator."

Garcia seemed to think about this for a moment, maybe confused as to why she had not simply waited at the elevator if she'd seen Rhodes. She then wondered just how much Johnson had told him about the little power struggle that was at play in their partnership.

Having finished her own coffee in her car on the way, Chloe sat down in front of one of the cups and sipped from it. She preferred a splash of cream and some sugar but didn't want to appear high maintenance. Just as she started sipping, Rhodes entered the room. The first thing she did was shoot Chloe a look of annoyance. She then took the seat in front of the other cup of coffee.

Garcia eyed them both, apparently sensing the tension, but then shrugged. "We've got a murder in Landover, Maryland. It's a case that appeared pretty normal at first. Maryland PD is

running it right now but they've asked for our help. It's also worth mentioning that Jacob Ketterman of White House Public Affairs knows the victim. He used to work with her back in the day. He has requested we look into it as well, as a favor. And when it comes from the White House, we try to keep it quiet. That should be simple with this case. It's a pretty simple homicide from the looks of it. It's one of the reasons we're putting new agents on it. It'll be a good test and there seems to be so pressing time table, although of course we'd like it solved as soon as possible."

He then slid two copies of his report over to them. The details were brief and to the point. As Chloe read over them, Garcia recited what he had learned.

"The victim is thirty-six-year-old Kim Wielding. She was working as a nanny for the Carver family when she was killed. From the best we can tell, someone entered the home and killed her. She was hit in the head twice with something very hard and then strangled. There were two rather nasty blows to the head. It has yet to be determined which of those things killed her. We need the two of you to find out who did it."

"Was the murder the sole reason for the killer to visit the home?" Chloe asked.

"Seems that way. Nothing was reported stolen. The house seemed exactly the way the Carvers last saw it...with the exception of their dead nanny. The address is right there in the files," Garcia continued. "I just got off the phone with the sheriff in Landover. Both of the Carvers and their three children have

been staying at a motel since the murder occurred two days ago. But they'll be meeting with you at the house this morning to answer any questions. And that's it, Agents. Get out there and get another win for us. Head down to HR and check out a car between the two of you. You familiar with the process?"

Chloe was not, but nodded anyway. She assumed Rhodes already knew the ins and outs. Given the way yesterday had gone, Chloe assumed Rhodes knew just about every single piece of information on how the bureau was run.

Both Chloe and Rhodes got up from the table. Chloe took one last gulp of her coffee before heading out of Garcia's office. They walked down the hallway toward the elevator without a word shared between them.

This is going to be a long day if she and I don't get past this stupid rivalry nonsense, Chloe thought.

As Chloe pushed the Down arrow, she turned to Rhodes and did her best to not just break the ice—but to obliterate it.

"Agent Rhodes, let's just get it out in the open. Do you have a problem with me?"

Rhodes smirked and took a moment to think about her answer. "No," she said finally. "I don't have a problem with you, Agent Fine. But I am a bit hesitant to work with someone that was placed into ViCAP at the very last minute. It makes me wonder if someone is doing you favors—favors that are unfair to other agents that busted their asses to be part of this program."

"Not that it's any of your business, but I was *asked* to join

this program. I was perfectly content to stay my course with the Evidence Response Team.”

Rhodes shrugged as the elevator doors opened up. “I’m not so sure the ERT would have been so thrilled with how you muddled that footprint yesterday.”

To that, Chloe remained silent. She could keep having this little war of words with Rhodes, but it would do nothing but make the working relationship even worse than it already was. If she was going to bring it to a stop, she was simply going to have to prove herself to Rhodes.

Besides, she *had* screwed up yesterday. And the only way to fix that was to prove herself with this new case.

When Rhodes elected to drive without any sort of conversation about it, Chloe let it ride. It wasn’t worth getting upset about. On the way to Landover, Chloe started to wonder if something had happened at some point during Rhodes’s path to get to where she was—something that caused her to be bossy and to overcompensate. She had plenty of time to ponder this during the half-hour drive to Landover because Rhodes was still not making any real effort to talk.

They arrived at the Carver residence at 8:05. It was a gorgeous house in a well-to-do neighborhood, the type where all of the lawns were perfectly edged to show the perfect lines of the

sidewalks. There was a newer minivan in the driveway, parked in front of the garage. Rhodes pulled in behind it and killed the engine. She then looked over to Chloe and asked: “We good?”

“I don’t think so, but that doesn’t matter. Let’s just focus on the case.”

“That’s what I meant,” Rhodes spat as she opened the door and got out.

Chloe joined her and as they did, a man and a woman got out of the minivan—the Carvers, Chloe presumed. A quick round of introduction revealed that these were indeed the Carvers, Bill and Sandra. Bill looked like the type who never really got much sleep but thrived off of it. Sandra was rather pretty, the type of woman who probably didn’t have to put much effort into it. But she also looked tired, especially as she looked toward the house.

“I understand you’ve been staying in a motel?” Chloe asked.

“Yes,” Sandra said. “When it happened, Bill was away on business. The cops were coming in and out of the house and there was...well, there was just so much blood. So I picked the kids up from school, took them to dinner, and then took them to a motel. I told them what had happened and it just seemed morbid to come back right away.”

“I got back home yesterday morning,” Bill said. “Around noon or so yesterday, the police gave us the okay to get back into the house. But the kids and Sandra were just too creeped out by it.”

“That might be for the best,” Rhodes said. “We’d like to get a look at the scene, if that’s okay.”

“Yes, the sheriff told us you were coming,” Sandra said. “He instructed us to tell you that there’s a file with all of their information on the kitchen counter.”

“Before we head inside,” Chloe said, “I was wondering if you’d like to tell us a bit about Kim?”

“She was so kind-hearted,” Sandra said.

“And great with the kids,” Bill said. As he said it, there was a waver in his voice. It was as if the full weight of what had happened was only now starting to catch up with him.

“Do you know if she had any bad blood with anyone?” Chloe asked

“Not that we know of,” Sandra said. “We’ve been asking ourselves that for the past two days. It just...it makes absolutely no sense.”

“Any failed relationships?” Rhodes asked. “Maybe an estranged ex-boyfriend or something?”

“She has an ex, sure,” Bill said. “But she rarely mentioned him.”

“But she *did* mention him?” Chloe asked.

Something akin to understanding flashed in Sandra’s eyes. “You know, she did say how it was something she had to *escape*. And I don’t think it was a joke. I mean...she never really talked about him.”

“Do you have a name?” Rhodes asked.

“No,” Sandra said. She then looked to Bill for the answer but he only shook his head.

“Did Kim ever stay here?” Rhodes asked.

“Yes. If Bill and I ever went on little mini-vacations, she’d stay. We have a guest bedroom that we always joked was Kim’s. She’d also sometimes just stay overnight on days where the kids had really been struggling with homework or school stuff.”

“Which bedroom is that?” Rhodes asked.

“Upstairs, first one on the left,” Bill said.

“Would you mind just hanging out for a while in case we need to speak with you after we have a look around inside?” Chloe asked.

“We don’t have to come in, do we?” Sandra asked.

“No,” Rhodes said. “You’re welcome to just stay out here.”

Sandra seemed relieved at this. But she still looked at the house as if she were expecting an axe murderer to come barreling out of the front door at any moment.

Both of the Carvers remained in the driveway while Chloe and Rhodes headed for the porch. It was a wraparound porch, complete with a porch swing and two rockers. Chloe opened the front door and they stepped inside.

The local and State PD had done the cleanup, according to Garcia’s reports. And from what Chloe could tell, they’d done a great job of it. Of course, it would have been much easier to get a read on the scene if the evidence was still there—including any blood that had been spilled. Whoever had tasked the bureau with taking on this case apparently had no clue as to how forensics or evidence collection was carried out.

Chloe saw a folder sitting on the kitchen counter—the report and files from the sheriff, she supposed. She walked across the foyer and through the living room to retrieve it. She opened it up, flipping through the basic report and skipping to the crime scene photos. She walked back to the front door to show Rhodes and they both studied the five pictures, comparing it to the now immaculately cleaned scene.

In the pictures, there was blood on the foyer floor, right up to the doorframe. The body of Kim Wielding lay sprawled on the floor, her left foot no more than six inches from the front door. In the second picture, it was very evident that she had been struck in the face with a blunt instrument. Her nose had been partially caved in and the lower half of her face was nothing more than a sheet of blood.

“Safe bet she was answering the door,” Rhodes said.

“Which means she knew the person,” Chloe added. “Or that she had been expecting someone.”

Rhodes took the pictures from the folder, not necessarily snatching them away, but not being polite about it either. “This pisses me off.”

“What does?” Chloe asked.

“This case. A single murder in an upscale neighborhood. With a cleaned murder scene and no direct help from local PD, what the hell can we do?”

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