

a chloe fine psychological suspense--book 3

cul
de
sac



blake pierce

Блейк Пирс Cul de Sac

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Cul de Sac. (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 3):

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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*)

CUL DE SAC (A Chloe Fine Mystery) is book #3 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 VICAP Special Agent Chloe Fine, 27, must immerse herself in a suburban world of cliques, gossip and lies, as she races to solve the murder of a seemingly picture-perfect wife and mother on the night of her 20th high school reunion.

Old high school friends, now in their late 30s, have returned back to the same suburban town to raise their kids, and have resurrected the same cliques that sustained and divided them 20 years ago. As their 20th high school reunion brings back old memories, resentment, betrayals and secrets, it causes fresh pain a generation later. On the same night, their former queen bee is found murdered in her home.

In this seemingly perfect, manicured town, the past haunts the present—and anyone and everyone is a suspect.

Can Chloe Fine solve the murder—while wrestling with the demons of her own past, and the potential release from jail of her own father?

An emotionally wrought psychological suspense with layered characters, small-town ambiance and heart-pounding suspense, CUL DE SAC is book #3 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #4 in the CHLOE FINE series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

Cul de Sac. (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 3)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fourteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising eleven 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 four books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising four books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising four 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

Jerry Hilyard pulled his Mercedes Benz into his driveway just after one o'clock on a Monday afternoon and smiled wide. There was nothing better than owning your own business and being rich enough to call it a day whenever you wanted.

Jerry looked forward to the look of surprise on his wife's face when he told her he was taking her out for a surprise lunch. He wanted to make it a brunch, but he knew Lauren would still be nursing a hangover from the night before. She had stayed out way too late, going, for reasons he still did not understand, to her twenty-year high school reunion. By lunchtime, she should be less cranky—and maybe even up for joining him for a Bloody Mary or two.

He smiled when he thought of the good news that he would be sharing with her: he was planning a two-week getaway to Greece. Just him and her, without the kids. They'd be leaving next month.

Jerry walked to the door, briefcase in hand, excited about how the afternoon might turn out. He found the door locked, which wasn't unusual. She had never been a trusting sort of woman, even in a neighborhood as well-to-do as theirs.

As he unlocked the door and made his way into the kitchen to pour himself a glass of wine, he realized that he could not hear the bedroom television. The house was just as quiet as when he had left. Maybe the hangover had not yet run its course.

He wondered how the reunion had gone last night. She hadn't really spoken about it that morning. He had been in her same graduating class but he *loathed* sentimental nonsense like high school reunions. All it was at its core was an excuse for classmates to get together ten or twenty years later to see who was doing better than everyone else. But once Lauren's friends had convinced her to go, she'd gotten almost excited about seeing some of her old classmates. Or so it had seemed. The intake of alcohol last night indicated that it might have been a rough night all around.

These thoughts were parading through Jerry's head as he made his way through the upstairs hallway toward their bedroom. But as he neared the doorway, he stopped.

It was very quiet.

Sure, this was to be expected if Lauren was indeed taking a nap and had not put on Netflix to finish binging whichever show had been her fancy for the week. But this was a different kind of quiet...a total lack of movement or motion that seemed out of place. It was like a silence he could hear—a silence he could literally *feel*.

Something's wrong, he thought.

It was a frightening thought but still, he moved toward the door quickly. He had to know, had to make sure...

Make sure what?

All he saw at first was red. On the bedsheets, on the walls, a dark red so thick and dark that it was almost black in places.

A scream pushed itself up through his lungs and out of his mouth. He didn't know if he should go running to her or downstairs to the phone.

In the end, he did neither. His legs gave out and the weight of his gut-wrenching screams took him to the floor, where he pounded his fists, where he tried to make sense of the horrific sight in front of him.

CHAPTER ONE

Chloe focused, narrowed her vision down the sight of the gun, and fired.

The recoil was gentle, the blast light and almost peaceful to her. She breathed deeply and fired again. It was easy; it came naturally to her now.

She could not see the target at the other end of the indoor range, but she knew she'd made two good shots. She was able to get a sense about these things lately. It was one of the ways she knew she was growing into the position as an agent. She was more comfortable with the sidearm, the stock and the trigger as familiar as her own hands when she could really get into the zone. In the past, she'd gone to the range only as a study of sorts, a way to improve and get better. But now, she enjoyed it. There was freedom to it, a weird release from firing at even just a paper target.

God knew she needed to feel that way as of late.

It had been a lackluster two weeks at work, leaving Chloe with nothing much to do but assisting others with data and research work. She'd nearly been pulled in to help a team with a small-time hacking sting and she'd been far too excited about it. It made her realize just how slow things had been for her as of late.

That's how she ended up at the range. It wasn't necessarily her ideal way to pass the time, but she knew she needed some

practice. While she had been among the best in her class on her way through the academy, being transitioned from the Evidence Response Team to the Violent Crimes Program had made her realize that she could never be too sharp, too on top of her game.

As she fired off several more rounds into a target fifty yards away, she understood how people were drawn to it. You were absolutely alone, just you and your firearm and a target in the sights. There was something very Zen about it, the focus and the intent behind it. And then there was the *pop* of the gunshot in the open space. The one thing Chloe had always taken away from her time at the range was just how fluid the relationship between the human body and a sidearm could be. When focused, her Glock felt like a simple extension of her arm, something else she could control with her mind in the same way she controlled the movements of her fingers or arms. It was a cautionary example of how her gun should only be used when absolutely necessary because when you are trained to use it, it can start to feel almost *too* natural to squeeze the trigger.

When her session was over, she collected her targets and took stock. She had a surprising number of direct hits to the center of the target but a few stragglers to the outside, right along the edges of the paper.

She took a few pictures of the targets with her phone and made a few notes, ensuring that she would improve next time. She then tossed the paper targets and made her way out of the facility. As she did, she felt yet another thing that she assumed was so

appealing to those who spent a great deal of time at the range. The feeling of numerous recoils thrumming through her hands and wrists felt peculiar, yet at the same time, pleasant in a way she could not quite describe.

As she made her way out through the lobby, she saw a familiar face coming through the door. It was Kyle Moulton, the man who had been assigned as her partner but also a man she had not seen much of over the last few weeks due to the slow caseload. She had a moment of school-girl panic when Moulton flashed a smile at her as the doors closed behind her.

“Agent Fine,” he said, with an almost sarcastic tone. They knew each other well enough to drop the *Agent* and just use first names. In fact, Chloe was certain there was some romantic tension brewing between them. She’d felt it on her end almost right away, from the moment she had seen him to the moment they had wrapped their first case three months ago.

“Agent Moulton,” she responded in kind.

“Blowing off steam or just passing the time?” he asked.

“A bit of both,” she said. “I’m just feeling restless lately, you know?”

“I do. Riding a desk doesn’t seem to do it for me, either. But... well, I didn’t know you frequented the gun range.”

“Just trying to stay sharp.”

“I see,” he said, smiling.

The silence that fell on them was the typical one that Chloe was getting used to. She hated to feel so conceited, but she was

fairly certain he was feeling the same thing she was feeling. It was evident in every little glance they gave one another and the way Moulton could not look at her in the eyes for more than three seconds—like right now, in that moment, as they stood at the doorway of the shooting range.

“So look,” Moulton said. “This may sound stupid and it might even be a little reckless, but I was wondering if you’d like to have dinner with me tonight. Like, not as partners.”

Chloe was unable to keep the smile from jumping up on her face. She wanted to say something a little biting and sarcastic in response. Maybe a cliché “*Well, it’s about time,*” or something like that.

Instead, she settled for a much safer and genuine: “Yeah, I think I’d really like that.”

“If I’m being honest, I’ve wanted to ask you for a while now but...well, it was always so busy. And these last few weeks have been pretty much the opposite.”

“I’m glad you finally decided to ask me.”

That silence wrapped around them again and this time, he was able to meet her gaze without looking away. For a moment, she was pretty sure he was going to kiss her. But the moment passed and he nodded toward the doors.

“I’d better get to it,” he said. “Call me later to let me know where you’d like to eat.”

“I will.”

She stood there for a moment, watching him enter the range.

As far as the start of some sort of relationship, it had been awkward. It was the equivalent of a nervous pre-teen standing around at a dance when she'd heard that some cute boy had his eye on her. It made her feel incredibly naïve and juvenile, so she walked away as quickly as possible.

It was nearing five o'clock and since she had nothing on her schedule, she simply decided to head home. There was no use in going back to her little cubicle only to watch the last fifteen minutes or so tick away. Thinking of the time, she then realized that she didn't have much time to prepare for dinner with Moulton. She had no idea what time he preferred to have dinner but she assumed it would be sometime around seven—which gave her just a little more than two hours to figure out where to eat and what she was going to wear.

She hurried to the parking garage and got into her car. Here, she again fell into high-school-girl mode. What if they ended up in her car for some reason? It was pretty gross, considering she hadn't bothered cleaning it since she and Steven had split up. And as she thought of Steven, she realized *that* was why she felt so awkward easing her feet back into the dating pool. She had only had one serious relationship before Steven, and then she and Steven had dated for four years before getting engaged. She wasn't at all used to the dating scene and the idea of it seemed antiquated and, if she was being honest, a little scary.

She did her best to calm herself on her fifteen-minute commute to her apartment. She had no idea what Kyle Moulton's

dating history was like. He could be just as out of the loop and rusty as she was. Of course, judging from his looks, she doubted this was the case. Honestly, if she was basing it all on just his looks, she had no idea why he was interested in her.

Maybe he's into girls with broken pasts and a tendency to throw themselves far too hard into their work, she thought. Guys find that sexy these days, right?

By the time she reached her street, her nerves had calmed quite a bit. The anxiety was slowly turning into excitement. It had been seven months since she had called it off with Steven. That was seven months without kissing a man, without having sex, without...

Let's not jump the gun, she told herself as she fit her car into a parking spot at the end of her block.

She got out of the car, mentally running through what she had in her closet that would look nice but not *too* nice. She had a few ideas of what to wear, as well as a few ideas of where they could go for dinner, as she had been craving Japanese as of late. Some sushi would really hit the spot, actually, and—

As she walked to her front stoop, she saw a man sitting on the top step. He looked rather bored, his head propped up in one hand while he scrolled through his phone with the other.

Chloe slowed a bit and then came a complete stop. She knew this man. But there was no way he could be here, sitting on the steps to her apartment building.

There's no way...

She took another slow step forward. The man finally noticed her and looked up. Their eyes met and when they did, Chloe felt her heart shudder.

The man on the steps was Aiden Fine—her father.

CHAPTER TWO

“Hey, Chloe.”

He was trying to sound normal. He was trying to make it sound as if it were a perfectly normal thing to have him show up on her step. Never mind the fact that he had been in prison for nearly twenty-three years, serving time for playing a hand in the murder of her mother. Sure, recent events that she herself had uncovered showed that he was likely innocent of those charges, but to Chloe the man would always be guilty.

But at the same time, she had a small yearning to go to him. Maybe to even hug him. There was no denying that seeing him here, out in the open and free, stirred up a huge range of emotions within her.

She didn't dare move a step closer, though. She didn't trust him and, worse than that, she did not fully trust herself.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Just wanted to come by and visit,” he said, getting to his feet.

A million questions swirled through her head. Chief among them was how he had found out where she lived. But she knew that anyone with an internet connection and stubborn determination could figure that out. Instead, she tried to be civil without being warm and inviting.

“How long have you been out?” she asked.

“A week and a half. I had to work up the nerve to come see

you.”

She recalled the phone call she had made to Director Johnson when she had found that last piece of evidence two months ago—evidence that had apparently been more than enough to free her father. And now here he was. Because of her efforts. She wondered if he even knew what she had done for him.

“And this is exactly why I waited,” he said. “This...this silence between us. It’s awkward and unfair and...”

“Unfair? Dad, you’ve been in prison for most of my life... for a crime I now know you weren’t guilty of but didn’t seem to mind taking the fall for. Yes, it’s going to be awkward. And given the reason for your incarceration and the last few conversations we’ve had, I hope you understand if I don’t come to you, dancing and tossing flowers your way.”

“I absolutely get that. But...there’s so much time we’ve missed. You might be unable to feel that yet, being so young. But those years I wasted in prison, knowing what I sacrificed...time with you and Danielle...my own life...”

“You sacrificed those things for Ruthanne Carwile,” Chloe spat. “That was your choice.”

“It was. And it’s a regret I’ve had to live with for nearly twenty-five years.”

“So what do you want?” she asked.

She moved toward him and then past him, toward her door. It took more willpower than she thought to pass by him, to be that close to him.

“I was hoping we could grab dinner.”

“Just like that?”

“We have to start somewhere, Chloe.”

“No, actually we don’t.” She opened her door and turned back to him, looking him in the eyes for the first time. Her stomach was in knots and she was doing everything she could not to get emotional in front of him. “I need you to leave. And please don’t ever come back.”

He looked genuinely hurt but his eyes never left hers. “Do you really mean that?”

She wanted to say yes, but what came out of her mouth was “I don’t know.”

“Let me know if you change your mind. I have a place in—”

“I don’t want to know,” she interrupted. “If I want to get in touch, I’ll find you.”

He gave her a thin smile, but there was still some pain there. “Ah, that’s right. Working with the FBI now.”

And what happened with you and Mom is what led me down that path, she thought.

“Bye, Dad,” she said, and stepped through the door.

When it closed behind her, she did not bother looking back. Instead, she made it to the elevator as quickly as she could without appearing as if she were in a hurry. When the doors slid closed behind her and the elevator started going up, Chloe pressed her hands to her face and started to cry.

She stared into her closet, thinking very hard about calling Moulton and letting him know that she couldn't make it tonight after all. She wouldn't tell him the real reason why—that her father had gotten out of prison after spending twenty-three years there and had suddenly showed up on her doorstep. Certainly he'd understand the trauma of that, right?

But she decided that she was not going to let her father ruin her life. His shadow had hovered over far too much of her life already. And even something as small as canceling a date because of his presence was giving him too much power over her.

She called Moulton's number and when it went to voicemail, she left her suggestion for a dinner spot. With that done, she took a quick shower and got dressed. As she was slipping into a pair of pants, her cell phone rang. She saw Moulton's name on the display and her mind went to the worst scenarios first.

He's changed his mind. He's calling to cancel.

She actually believed this until the moment she answered the phone. "Hello?"

"So yeah, Japanese sounds good," Moulton said. "Now, maybe you can tell because of the extreme lack of detail and follow-through, but I don't do this much. So I don't know if I come pick you up or if we just meet there...?"

"Pick me up, if you don't mind," she said, again thinking of

the ragged state of her car. “There’s a pretty good place not too far from here.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “See you then.”

...I don't do this much. Even though he'd admitted such a thing, Chloe still found it hard to believe.

She finished getting dressed, fussed with her hair a bit, and waited for a knock on the door.

Maybe it'll be your father again, she told herself. Although really, if she was being honest, it wasn't her own voice that was speaking to her. It was Danielle's voice, condescending and confident.

I wonder if she knows he's out yet, Chloe thought. *My God, she'll be absolutely furious.*

She didn't have time to dwell on this, though. Before she could, there was a knock at the door. For one paralyzing moment, she was sure it was her father. It made her freeze for a second, unwilling to answer it. But then she recalled how Moulton had been just as uncomfortable as she had been outside of the shooting range and she realized just how badly she wanted to see him—especially after the way the last few hours of her life had gone.

She answered the door, putting on her best smile. Moulton had one of his own. Maybe it was because they rarely saw one another outside of work, but Chloe found his smile sexy as hell. It also helped that while he had dressed rather plain—a button-down shirt and a pair of nice jeans—he looked incredibly handsome.

“Ready?” he said.

“Absolutely,” she said.

She closed the door behind her and they headed out into the hallway. Once again, there was that perfectly still silence between them, one that made her wish they were a bit further along. Even something as simple and innocent as him reaching out to hold her hand...she needed something.

And it was that simple need for human contact that showed her just how much she had been rocked by her father showing up.

It's only going to get worse now that he's out of prison, she thought as she and Moulton took the elevator down to the lobby.

But she was not going to let him ruin this date.

She pushed all thoughts of her father out of her mind as she and Moulton stepped out into a warm evening. And to her surprise, it actually worked.

For a while.

CHAPTER THREE

The Japanese restaurant she had selected was a hibachi grill-type place, with the big open stovetops to allow large groups to sit around and watch the cooks perform their artistry. Chloe and Moulton opted for a table in the quiet, more private area of the restaurant. When they were both seated, she was pleased to find that it felt natural to be in a setting like this with him. Physical attraction aside, she had liked Moulton from the first moment she had met him. He had been the one shining light in a day where she had been switched from the Evidence Response Team to the Violent Crimes Program. And here he was, still making awkward moments in her life more bearable.

She didn't want to ruin the night with such conversation, but she also knew that if she didn't get it off her chest, it would be a needless distraction.

"So," Moulton said, picking at the corners of his menu as he opened it. "It wasn't odd that I asked you out?"

"I'm sure it depends on who you ask," she answered. "Director Johnson might not think it's the best idea. However, in keeping with honesty," she said, "I've kind of been hoping you'd ask."

"Ah, so you're a traditionalist? You wouldn't have asked me out? You would have waited for me to ask?"

"It's not so much being a traditionalist as it is being scarred from a past relationship. Which I supposed I may as well let you

in on. Up until about seven months ago, I was engaged.”

The shock on his face was only momentary. Fortunately, she saw no fear or awkwardness there. Before he could comment on this, the waitress came by to take their drink orders. They both ordered a Sapporo, placing the orders quickly, as not to let the momentum of their conversation stall out.

“Can I ask why it fell apart?” Moulton asked.

“It’s a long story. The condensed version of it is that the guy was overbearing and couldn’t separate himself from the shadow of his family—his mother in particular. And when I suddenly had a career with the FBI sitting right there in front of me, he wasn’t very supportive. He also wasn’t at all supportive of my own family issues...”

It then occurred to her that he probably knew about some of her family history. When she had gone digging it up near the end of her training, she was well aware that it had made the rounds of the academy grapevine.

“Yeah, I heard bits and pieces about that...”

He let the comment hang. Chloe took that to mean that if she wanted to tell him about it, he would listen. But if she’d rather not go there, he was fine with that, too. And at the moment, with everything that was on her mind, she figured it was now or never. *No sense in waiting*, she thought.

“While I’ll spare you the details for some later day, I guess I should let you know that I saw my father today.”

“So he’s out now?”

“Yes. And I think it’s mostly because of discoveries I made about my mother’s death over the last several months.”

It took Moulton a while to figure out where to go from there. He, too, used sipping from his beer as a method of taking his time. When he had a large gulp of it down, he replied with the best answer he could have.

“Are you okay?”

“I think so. It was just very unexpected.”

“Chloe, we didn’t have to go out tonight. I would have understood if you called it off.”

“I almost did. But I didn’t see the point in giving him control over yet another part of my life.”

He nodded and they both took the silence that followed as a time to look over their menus. The silence remained between them until the same waitress came back to take their orders. When she was gone, Moulton leaned across the table a bit and asked: “Do you want to talk about it, or are we ignoring it?”

“You know, I think I’d rather just ignore it for now. Just be aware that there might be times tonight where I might be distracted.”

He smiled and slowly got up from his chair. “That’s fair. But let me try something, if that’s okay.”

“What?...”

He took a large step toward her, bent down a bit, and kissed her. She jerked back at first, unsure of what he was doing. But when she realized his intent, she let it happen. Not only that, but

she kissed him back. It was soft but with just enough urgency to give her the idea that he had been thinking about this probably as long as she had.

He broke the kiss before it started to get uncomfortable; they were, after all, sitting in a restaurant surrounded by other people. And Chloe had never been one for public displays of affection.

“Not that I’m complaining,” she said, “but what was that for?”

“Two things. It was me being brave...something I am rarely able to do with a woman. And it was also me giving you another distraction...hopefully one that can outweigh the distraction of your father.”

With her head swimming a bit and warmth radiating through her entire body, she sighed. “Yeah, I think that might just have done it.”

“Good,” he said. “Also, I suppose it negates the whole *are we supposed to kiss at the end of this date* nonsense that I always screw up.”

“Oh, after that one, we better,” she said.

And, as Moulton had hoped, thoughts of her father’s sudden appearance seemed very distant.

Dinner went much better than she could have hoped. Once they wrestled around the topic of her father showing up and then continued onward after Moulton’s unexpected kiss, it went very

smoothly. They talked about learning the ins and outs of the bureau, music, movies, acquaintances and stories from their time at the academy, their interests and hobbies. It felt natural in a way she had not been expecting.

Sadly, it made her wish she'd gotten rid of Steven sooner. If this was what she had missed out on by taking herself off of the dating scene for him, she had missed out on a lot.

They'd finished eating but stuck around for a few more drinks. It was another opportunity for Moulton to display his care and affection as he stopped at two drinks while Chloe had a third. He even asked if she'd feel more comfortable taking a cab if she was uncomfortable with him getting behind the wheel.

He took her back to her apartment, pulling up to the curb a little after ten o'clock. She was far from drunk but had a nice enough buzz going to wonder about things she might not otherwise entertain.

"I had a great time," Moulton said. "I'd like to do it again very soon if you don't think it will get in the way of work."

"Me, too. Thanks for finally asking me."

"Thanks for saying yes."

Never one to claim she was a master at the art of seduction, she responded to that comment by leaning in and kissing him. Like the kiss in the restaurant, it started slow but then started to build. His hand was suddenly on the side of her face, slipping down to the back of her neck to pull her closer. The armrest was between them and she found herself tilting her body to allow her

hand to find his chest.

She wasn't sure how long the kiss went on. It was slow and wildly romantic. When they parted, Chloe found herself slightly out of breath.

"So, we've already covered the fact that I never really got to date," she said. "So if I do this next part wrong, you'll have to forgive me."

"What part?"

She hesitated a moment but the three drinks urged her on. "I want to invite you in. I'd make the claim that it's for coffee or another drink, but that would be a lie."

Moulton looked genuinely surprised. It was a look that made her wonder if he had misread her. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"That sounded bad," she said, embarrassed. "What I meant was...I'd like to do this without an armrest between us. But I'm not...I'm not going to sleep with you."

Even in the dim light, she could see his face redden at this comment. "I never would have expected you to."

She nodded, a little embarrassed herself. "So...do you want to come in?"

"I *really, really* do."

With that, he kissed her. This time, it was a bit more playful. In the midst of it, he elbowed the armrest in jest.

She broke away from him and opened her door. As they walked to the stoop of her building, she could not remember the last time she'd felt herself so...so *floaty*.

Floaty, she thought with a smile. It was a word Danielle had once used in explaining what it felt like to come down off of the physical high of an orgasm. The memory suddenly had Chloe feeling warm all over, reaching out and taking Moulton's hand as they entered the building.

They took the elevator and when the doors closed, Chloe surprised herself by pressing him against the elevator wall and kissing him. Now able to properly place her hands on him, she grabbed him by his waist and pulled him to her. This kiss was a bit more passionate, hinting at so much more she wanted to do to him in that moment.

He was just as eager, his hands finding the small of her back. When he pressed her closer to him and their bodies met, she let out the tiniest of gasps. It was a little embarrassing.

The elevator came to a stop and she pulled away. She could only imagine the looks on the faces of the people she shared the building with if they caught her making out in an elevator. She was relieved to find that Moulton looked a little out of sorts and was breathing a little heavily.

She led him down the hallway, four doors down to her apartment. It then occurred to her that other than Danielle, Moulton would be the only person to have visited her apartment.

It's a shame I don't plan on wasting time with a tour, she thought.

It was yet another thought that made her feel a little embarrassed. She had never felt quite this physically needy when

it came to a man. After a while, sex had become this formulaic, expected thing with Steven. And if she was being honest with herself, the times she had been left satisfied had been few and far between. And because of that, she hadn't really had much of a desire for any sort of intimacy with him.

Chloe unlocked the door and they stepped inside. She flipped on the kitchen light and hung her purse on one of the barstools.

"How long have you been here?" Moulton asked.

"Six months or so, I guess. I don't really have much company."

Moulton stepped to her and placed a hand at her waist. When they leaned in and kissed, it was slow and purposeful. It only took a few moments before he gently pressed her against the bar and their kiss deepened. Chloe felt herself growing breathless again, feeling a level of desire she had not felt since becoming intimate with a boy for the first time in high school.

She broke the kiss long enough to lead him to the couch, where they sat next to one another and immediately continued. It felt good to simply be with a man in such a way, especially one who made her feel like this. If she included the portion of her relationship with Steven where physical intimacy had practically gone cold, she had not been kissed and touched by a man like this in about a year and a half.

Eventually, after what felt like mere seconds but was in reality more like five minutes, she was leaning into him and he had no choice but to lie down. Chloe lay on top of him and when she did, one of his hands found its way up the back of her shirt. That

small skin-on-skin touch pushed Chloe to an edge she did not see coming. She sighed against him and he responded by slipping his hand further up her back and running it along the side of her bra.

She sat up, straddling him, and smiled down at him. Her head felt like it was swimming and every muscle in her body was begging for more.

“I meant what I said,” she said almost apologetically. “I can’t sleep with you. Not so soon. I know it might seem old-fashioned...”

“Chloe, it’s fine. You tell me when it’s enough and we’re good. Tell me when I’ve worn out my welcome.”

She smiled down at him. The response was almost enough to make her change her mind. But she felt strongly that they should not be rushing this. Sitting on top of him on her couch was already pushing her limits.

“The welcome won’t be worn out,” she said. “Would I sound like too much of a headcase if I asked you to stay? No sex, but like...actually *sleeping* together?”

The offer seemed to surprise him. She supposed it *was* rather strange.

And do you know why you’re asking such a thing? It was Danielle’s voice in her head, always mocking but also helpful at the same time. *It’s because Dad showed up today and screwed your world up. You want Moulton here so you won’t be alone tonight.*

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That seems conflicting and dumb and

—”

“No, it’s okay,” Moulton said. “That sounds nice. I do have one thing to ask, though.”

“What’s that?”

“More kissing, please,” he said with a smile.

She returned the smile and happily obliged.

She stirred awake some time later to Moulton getting off of the couch. She lifted herself up on one elbow. Her shirt had come off during their make-out session but that had been it. It had been weird to fall asleep on her couch with her pants on but she was oddly proud of their restraint. She glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was 5:10 in the morning.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I just...I felt weird sleeping over. I didn’t want it to be weird in the morning. I thought it might be best if I left. But at least there’s not the added awkwardness of sex.”

“Maybe that was my plan all along,” she joked.

“Should I rush out and we pretend this didn’t happen?” Moulton asked.

“I think I’d like you to stay. I’ll put some coffee on.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think I’d really like that, actually.”

She slipped her shirt back on and made her way into the

kitchen. She went about setting the coffee up while Moulton slid his own shirt back on.

“So it’s Thursday,” he said. “I don’t know why, but it feels like Saturday.”

“Is it because what we did last night is usually reserved for Friday nights? A way to kick off the weekend?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t done something like that for a while.”

“Get out of here,” she said as she set the coffee maker to brew.

“Seriously. Junior year of high school, I think. That was good year for me in terms of make-out sessions without the sex.”

“Well, you apparently didn’t miss a beat. Last night was... well, it was much more than I was expecting when you picked me up.”

“Same here.”

“But I’m glad it happened,” she added quickly. “All of it.”

“Good. Maybe we can do it again. This weekend, maybe?”

“Maybe,” she said. “But my restraint is already feeling weakened.”

“Maybe that was *my* plan after all,” he said with a sultry smile.

She blushed and looked away quickly. She was a little taken aback by how much she enjoyed seeing him in such a flirty state.

“Look,” she said. “I need to grab a shower. You’re welcome to anything in the fridge if you want breakfast. There’s not much there, though.”

“Thanks,” he said, seemingly unable to take his eyes away from her.

She left him in the kitchen and went into the bedroom, which the larger bathroom was connected to. She stripped down, turned on the water, and stepped into the shower. She almost felt like giggling over how the night had gone. It had made her feel like a teenager, enjoying the feeling of him there with her and feeling comfortable enough with him to know that he wasn't going to pester her for sex. It had been romantic in an odd way and there had been two moments where she had nearly gone back on her claim of not sleeping with him. With a glee she was not used to, she secretly hoped he might decide to summon up the nerve to come join her under the water.

If he does, all restraint is going out the window, she thought.

She was just about done with her shower when she did indeed hear him enter the bathroom.

Better late than never, she thought. Her entire body tensed up with excitement and she found herself instantly eager for him to join her.

“Hey, Chloe?”

“Yes?” she asked, a bit provocatively.

“Your phone just rang. Maybe I was being nosy... but I looked. It was from the bureau line.”

“Really? I wonder if something has come up...”

She then heard the ringing of another cell phone. This one was closer, presumably in Moulton's hand. Chloe peeked out of the shower, pulling the curtain slightly to the side. They exchanged a look before Moulton answered his phone.

“This is Moulton,” he answered. He stepped back out of the bathroom and into her bedroom. Realizing why, Chloe turned off the water. She grabbed a towel from the rack and stepped out, grinning at him when he stared while she quickly wrapped the towel around her. Just because they had made out for about an hour and a half last night did not instantly mean she was okay with him seeing her completely naked.

There wasn’t much of a conversation to eavesdrop on. It was mainly just Moulton listening and saying, “Okay...yes, sir...” a few times.

The call lasted about a minute and when he was done, he comically poked his head into the bathroom.

“Is it okay for me to come in?”

Wrapped in a towel that covered all of her private spots, she nodded. “Yes. Who was that?”

“That was Assistant Director Garcia. He said he tried to call you but you must have slept through it.” He smiled at her and then went on. “He said I should call you or come by and wake you up. There’s a case they want us on.”

She chuckled as she stepped out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. “You think last night will affect the way we work together?”

“It might cause me to sneak into your motel room after hours. Other than that...I don’t know. We’ll see.”

“Would you pour me a cup of coffee? I need to get dressed.”

“I was sort of hoping I could use your shower.”

“Of course. Though it would have been nicer if you’d asked ten minutes ago when I was still in there.”

“I’ll know better next time,” he said.

As he went to the shower and Chloe started to get dressed, she realized that she was happy. *Quite* happy, in fact. Throwing a new case on top of all that had happened last night...it seemed as if her day had not been devastated by the sudden appearance of her father at all.

But if living with such an estranged family history had taught her anything, it was that you never truly escaped it. One way or the other, it always seemed to catch up with you.

CHAPTER FOUR

At roughly the same moment Chloe was being reminded what it felt like to lose herself in a man, her sister was in the middle of a nightmare.

Danielle Fine was dreaming about her mother again. It was a recurring dream she'd been having since the age of twelve or so—one that seemed to take on a different meaning with each stage of life Danielle entered into. The dream was always the same, never changing in detail or plot.

In the dream, her mother was chasing her down a long hallway. Only, it was the version of her mother that she and Chloe had discovered that day as young girls. Bleeding, wide-eyed, and lifeless. For some reason, the dream had always assumed she'd broken a leg in the fall (even though there were no official reports of any kind that had ever suggested such a thing) so the dream version of her mother dragged herself across the floor in pursuit of her daughter.

Despite the injury, her dead mother was always right on her heels, just a few fingertips away from grabbing her little ankle and pulling her down to the floor. Danielle ran away from the grisly vision in terror, her eyes cast to the end of the hallway. And there, standing in a doorway that seemed a universe away, was her father.

He would always be kneeling, opening his arms to her with

a huge smile on his face. But there was blood dripping from his hands and in a moment of dream-panic that always woke her up, Danielle would stop running, stuck between her dead mother and her maniacal father, unsure of which direction was the safest.

It was no different now. The dream came to a crashing conclusion, jarring Danielle awake. She sat up in bed slowly, so accustomed to the dream now that she knew what it was even before she was fully awake. Groggily, she looked over to the clock and saw that it was only 11:30. She'd only been asleep for about an hour this time before the dream had come sneaking in.

She lay back down, knowing that it would take a while before she'd be able to go back to sleep. She shook the dream away, having learned many years ago how to shut it out by reminding herself that there was nothing she could have done to keep her mother from dying. Even if she had come clean with all of her little secrets about things she had seen and heard and experienced in regards to her father's toxic personality, there was nothing she could have said or done that would have kept her mother alive.

She turned over and looked toward the bedside table. She almost reached for the phone to call Chloe. It had been three weeks since they'd last spoken. It had been tense and awkward and it had been her fault. She knew she had been projecting a lot of negativity toward Chloe, primarily because Chloe didn't hate their father with the venom and angst that she did. It had been Danielle who had made the call three weeks ago, realizing that Chloe was waiting for her to make the next move since the last

conversation they'd had before that had not gone so well—with Danielle practically telling her sister not to reach out.

But she didn't know Chloe's schedule. She had no idea if 11:30 was too late. Truth be told, Danielle had been having trouble falling asleep before two in the morning as of late. Tonight was one of her rare nights off from the lounge and also a night where she was not needed for any sort of sign-offs or approvals for the renovation of the bar her boyfriend bought for her.

She quickly pushed all thoughts of work out of her head as she searched for sleep. If she started thinking about work and everything on her plate, she would never get back to sleep.

Once again, she thought of Chloe. She wondered what sorts of dreams and nightmares her sister had about their parents. She wondered if she was still hung up on the idea of freeing their father and, if so, whether she had decided to keep it to herself.

Eventually, sleep caught back up to her. When it did, Danielle's last thought was of her sister. She thought of Chloe and wondered if it was finally time to forgive and forget—to let the memories of their father stop roadblocking her from a meaningful relationship with Chloe.

She was surprised at how happy the thought made her...so happy that when she did fall asleep again, there were the thinnest little traces of a smile on her face.

The young bartender who had been hired as her replacement had caught on quickly. She was twenty years old, drop-dead gorgeous, and was like some sort of savant at reading drunk men. Because she was doing so well, Danielle was able to meet with her boyfriend and the contractors at the building that would be her own pub and restaurant in about a month and a half.

Today, there was HVAC work being done, as well as some last-minute paneling in a back room that would serve as a reserved room for larger parties. When she arrived at the scene, her boyfriend was looking over a contract with an electrician. They were sitting at one of the tables that had recently been unpacked—one of three set-ups Danielle was supposed to choose from in terms of the types of tables she'd have in the restaurant.

Her boyfriend saw her as she entered. He quickly said something to the electrician and then came over to meet her. His name was Sam Dekker and while he wasn't necessarily the most honest or intelligent man, he made up for it in rugged good looks and a shrewd yet refined business acumen. He was about eight inches taller than she was so when he gave her a quick kiss, he had to lean down to do so.

“Reporting for duty,” she said. “What can I do today?”

Sam shrugged, looking around the place in an almost

theatrical fashion. “Honestly, I don’t think there’s too much you can do. It’s all starting to fall into place. I know it might seem silly, but you might want to start looking through the ABC catalogue and figure out which brands of liquor you prefer to serve. Go ahead and figure out where you want the little overhead speakers for music and things like that. Those are the sorts of things that get lost in the shuffle and suddenly pop up as last-minute nuisances near the end of the project.”

“I guess I can do that,” she said, a little disappointed.

There were days when she stepped onto the renovation site and felt as if Sam was really just entertaining her—giving her menial tasks to do so he could handle the important things. It felt degrading in a sense but she also had to remind herself that Sam knew what he was doing. He had opened three bars that were doing incredibly well, one of which he sold to some big national company last year for more than ten million dollars.

And now he was choosing to back her in her own little endeavor. It was an endeavor that he’d had to talk her into. He insisted that she had the smarts to run a place like this, but only after all of the moving parts had been set into place.

Most girls that date semi-wealthy guys get jewelry and cars, she thought as she walked to the soon-to-be lounge area. Me...I got a bar. Not a bad deal, I guess.

She did feel a little out of her depth most of the time when she thought about the road ahead. She’d actually be in charge of a place. She’d be running things and making decisions. There

was also a degree of guilt to it as well. She felt the opportunity had been handed to her for no real reason other than she had happened to end up in a relationship with a guy that knew how to get businesses started. As a result, she was aware that there were many things she had to sacrifice and things she simply allowed Sam to get away with. She never questioned his late nights out, always buying the stories that he was in meetings or with contractors, wining and dining them. She'd been a part of some of those meetings, so she knew it was true—most of the time.

She also felt that she had to show her appreciation as often as she could. That meant not nagging when she didn't see him for several days. It meant not getting too up in arms when he expected certain things in the bedroom. It meant not getting pissy because despite buying her a bar and trusting her to run it, the whole idea of marriage had not been mentioned a single time. Danielle was pretty sure Sam had no intentions of getting married. And for now, she was fine with that, so she saw no reason to argue about it.

Besides...what did she have to complain about? She'd finally met a guy who treated her like royalty—when he was around—and she seemed to be on a path to easily earned success.

It's because most things that seem too good to be true usually are, she thought.

When she reached the room that was going to be the lounge area, she pulled the digital blueprints up on her phone. She made

indications where the speakers could go and also made a note about potentially adding some sort of tinted window along the back wall. It was in doing things like this that she felt the dream of it all becoming a reality. Somehow, this was all really happening to her.

“Hey...”

She turned and saw Sam standing in the framed doorway. He was smiling at her and looking at her with the hungry expression he often shot her way when he was feeling frisky.

“Hey yourself,” she said.

“I know it seems like I just brushed you off,” he said. “But really...these next few weeks, all I’m really going to need from you are a few signatures.”

“You’re working me too hard,” she joked.

“I fully intended for your training with the newbie at the bar to take longer. It’s not my fault we ended up hiring a bartending genius.” He approached her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She had to look up into his eyes but it always made her feel safe for some odd reason; it made her feel like this man would always *literally* watch over her.

“Let’s grab lunch later today,” Sam said. “Something simple. Pizza and beer.”

“Sounds good.”

“And tomorrow...what do you say we go somewhere. A beach...South Carolina or somewhere like that.”

“Really? That seems spontaneous and very much like a burden

to all of this work around us. In other words...it sounds nothing like you.”

“I know. But I’ve been getting so wrapped up in this project and...I realize I’ve been neglecting you. So I want to make it up to you.”

“Sam, you’re giving me my own business. That’s more than enough.”

“Fine. I’ll be selfish about it then. I want to get away from all of this and be naked and alone with you near the ocean. That sound better?”

“It does, actually.”

“Good. So go to the bar, check in on the newbie. I’ll pick you up for lunch around noon.”

She kissed him and although he was clearly rushing it, the sentiment of everything he had just said did not escape her. She knew it was hard for him to be emotional and sincere. She rarely saw that side of him so when she did, she dared not question it.

Danielle walked back through the mostly open spaces of the old brick building that would soon be her bar-slash-lounge. It was hard to think of it as hers, but that was very much the case.

When she stepped outside, the sun seemed brighter than it had when she had gone in. She smiled, still trying to make sense of everything her life had become. She thought of Chloe again and made the decision to call her in the next few days. Everything else in her life was going so well, she may as well try repairing the tense relationship between her and Chloe, too.

She got into her car and headed back to Sam's other bar—the bar he had hired her to work in six months ago. She was so distracted by the thought of going away with him for the weekend that she didn't notice the car parked on the side of the street as it inched out into traffic behind her.

If she *had* noticed it, she might have recognized the driver, though she hadn't seen him in a very long time.

Still, did a daughter ever truly forget what the face of her father looked like?

CHAPTER FIVE

When Chloe and Moulton arrived at Garcia's office, Director Johnson was already there, waiting for them. It appeared that he and Garcia had been looking through case files; Garcia had a few pulled up on his desktop screen while Johnson had a small pile of printouts in front of him.

"Thanks for coming so quickly," Johnson said. "We've got a case out in Virginia—a small town on the other side of Fredericksburg, in an upscale neighborhood. And I should probably start with saying that the victim's family has some very powerful political friends. That's why we've been called in. Well, that and the gruesome nature of the death."

As Chloe took a seat at the small table in the back of Garcia's office, she did her best not to seem too obvious that she was trying to create some distance between herself and Moulton. She knew that she was probably glowing, beaming from the way the night and the morning had gone. She wasn't sure how Johnson might react to any kind of relationship between them and she honestly didn't want to test it.

"What are we looking at?" Chloe asked.

"Four days ago, a husband came home from work to find his wife dead," Garcia said. "But it was more than that. She had not only been murdered, but brutally so. There were multiple stab wounds—sixteen by the coroner's count. The crime scene was a

mess...blood everywhere. It's unlike anything the local PD has ever seen.”

He slid a folder over to Chloe with a look of warning on his face. Chloe took it and opened it slowly. She peered inside, saw just a flash of the crime scene photo, and then closed it just as quickly. Based on her one glimpse alone, it looked more like a slaughterhouse than a murder scene.

“Who is the victim’s family friends with?” Moulton asked. “You said someone in politics, right?”

“I’d really rather not give out that information,” Johnson said. “We don’t want it to seem as if the bureau plays favorites when it comes to bipartisan matters.”

“What’s the level of local police involvement?” Chloe asked.

“They’ve kicked off a county-wide manhunt and have the State PD involved,” Garcia said. “But they’re being asked to keep it quiet. The local PD is understandably upset because they feel like we’re hindering a case that is already a bit outside of their comfort zone. So I need you to get down there as soon as you possibly can. Also...and please listen closely: I thought of you two for this case because of how well you’ve worked together in the past. And Agent Fine, you seem to have a knack for this small-town, isolated community sort of crime. However, if the case itself and those crime scene photos make you feel uneasy—like it might be a little too much for you to handle at this stage of your career—let me know now. I won’t judge and it won’t count as any sort of mark against you.”

Chloe and Moulton exchanged a look and she could see that he was just as eager as she was to take the case. Still, unable to help himself, Moulton took a look at what was inside the folder. He grimaced a bit as he flipped past the few crime scene photos and scanned the very brief report in the back. He then looked back over to Chloe and gave a nod.

“We’re good as far as I’m concerned,” Chloe said.

“Same here,” Moulton said. “And I appreciate the opportunity.”

“Glad to hear it,” Johnson said, getting to his feet. “I’m excited to see what you two can do. Now...get moving. You’ve got some driving to do.”

Moulton was behind the wheel of the bureau car, heading off of the beltway and heading toward Virginia. Barnes Point was only an hour and twenty minutes away, but the Beltway made just about *anywhere* feel like it was on the other side of the planet.

“You sure about this?” he asked.

“About which part?”

“Working together on a case like this. I mean...we were making out like two horny teenagers about ten hours ago. Will you be able to keep your hands off of me while we’re working?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Chloe said, “but after what I saw in that folder, doing that with you again is the farthest thing

from my mind.”

Moulton nodded his understanding. He veered off onto the next ramp, hit a straight stretch, and stepped on the gas. “All jokes aside, though...I enjoyed last night. Even before the part back at your place. And I’d like to do it again. But with work...”

“We should remain strictly professional,” she finished for him.

“Exactly. And, to that end,” he said, sliding his iPad out of the hollowed center of the console, “I downloaded the case files while you were packing.”

“Did you *not* pack?”

“You saw my bag. Yes, I packed. But I’m quick about it.” He shot her a cute little sly grin as he said this, indicating that she had perhaps taken a bit longer than he had expected. “I didn’t get a chance to look it over, though.”

“Ah, some light reading material,” Chloe said.

They both chuckled and when Moulton rested his hand on her knee while she started to read the file, Chloe wasn’t sure they *would* be able to keep it professional.

She perused the case files, reading the important parts out loud for Moulton. They found that Garcia and Johnson had done a fine job of summing it up. The police report was quite detailed, as well as the pictures. They were still no easier to look at and Chloe didn’t blame the local PD. She figured *any* small-town police force might be out of their element on something this violent and bloody.

They shared thoughts and theories and by the time they passed

a sign telling them that Barnes Point was fifteen miles away, Chloe had changed her mind. She thought they *would* be capable of working professionally together. She had spent the last few weeks so wrapped up in her physical attraction to him that she had nearly forgotten how sharp and intuitive he could be when it came to casework.

The idea then occurred to her that if they could truly make this work, she might have what just about every woman on the planet desired: a man who respected her as an equal in career and intellect but also in the bedroom.

You're not even a day into this, a voice said in her head. Danielle's voice again. *Are you really getting all dreamy and gaga about it already? Jesus, you made out with him for a few hours and didn't even sleep together. You barely know him and—*

But Chloe chose to shut those thoughts away.

She then turned her attention to the coroner's report. It told the same story Johnson had told them, but in more detail. And it was these details that she focused on. The blood, the violence, the potential political motive. She read them over, studying with intense focus.

"I'm thinking this isn't politically motivated," she said. "I don't think the killer was too concerned with the powerful political friends that the Hilyards might have had."

"I heard confidence in that statement," Moulton said. "Please explain."

"Lauren Hilyard was stabbed sixteen times. And every single

wound was centered in the abdomen area, with only a single stray one slicing into her left breast. The coroner reports that the wounds were ragged and almost on top of one another, indicating someone made stabbing motions one right behind the other. The note here in the reports says: *as if in a blind rage or frenzy*. If this was the act of someone with political motivation, there would likely be some sort of message or other indicator.”

“Okay, then,” Moulton said. “I’m on board. It’s not politically motivated.”

“That was easy.”

He shrugged and said, “I’m coming to understand that people in DC think *everything* has political motivations. So what if the Hilyards maybe sort of kind of know someone higher up in a political office. Not everyone is going to care.”

“I like the way you think,” she said. “But I don’t know that we rule it out one hundred percent just yet.”

They were closing in on Barnes Point, and the fact that they had been entrusted to round up a case with potential political ties was not lost on her. It was an amazing opportunity for both of them and she had to make sure that was where her focus was for the time being. For now, nothing was more important than that—not suddenly reappearing estranged fathers, not the voice of her stubborn and joy-dead sister...not even a potentially perfect romance with the man sitting next to her.

For now, there was the case and only the case. And that was more than enough for her.

CHAPTER SIX

Barnes Point was a quiet yet cute city, with a population right at nine thousand. The Hilyard residence sat just outside the city limits, in a little subdivision called Farmington Acres. The victim's husband, Jerry Hilyard, had not yet been able to bring himself to return to his home since discovering his wife's body; with no immediate family living nearby, he had been invited to stay elsewhere in the neighborhood, with close friends.

"I think I might have needed to get farther away than just a few houses down," Moulton said. "I mean, can you imagine what this poor guy is going through?"

"But he might also need to be close to his home," Chloe suggested. "To the place where he and his wife had shared a life together."

Moulton seemed to consider this as he drove their rental car further into the subdivision, toward the address the State Police had forwarded them while they'd been en route. It was yet another example of how Chloe was beginning to both understand and respect the fluidity of the way the bureau worked. It was hard to imagine that just about any information she needed—addresses, phone numbers, work histories, criminal records—was readily available, just a call or email away. She assumed agents eventually got used to this, but for now, she still felt quite privileged to be part of such a system.

They arrived at the address and walked to the door. The mailbox read *Lovingston* and the house itself was a carbon copy of just about all of the other homes in the neighborhood. It was the sort of neighborhood where the houses were right on top of one another but the environment was quiet—a good place for kids to learn to ride their bikes and probably a lot of fun during Halloween and Christmas.

Chloe knocked on the door and it was answered right away by a woman with a baby in her arms.

“Are you Mrs. Lovingston?” Chloe asked.

“I am. And you must be the FBI agents. We got a call from the police a while ago saying you’d be on your way.”

“Is Jerry Hilyard still staying here?” Moulton asked.

A man appeared behind the woman, coming from the open room to the left. “Yeah, I’m still here,” he said. He joined Mrs. Lovingston at the door and leaned against the door frame. He looked absolutely exhausted, apparently not having slept well ever since he had lost his wife in such a brutal fashion.

Mrs. Lovingston turned to him and gave him a glare that made Chloe think the baby in her arms might be in for some nasty looks in the future. “You sure you’re up to this?” the woman asked him.

“I’m fine, Claire,” he said. “Thanks.”

She nodded, held her baby tighter to her chest, and headed back elsewhere in the house.

“Come on in, I guess,” Jerry said.

He led them into the same room he had come in from. It

looked to be a small den of sorts, mostly decorated with books and two elegant-looking chairs. Jerry fell into one of the chairs as if his bones were starting to give out on him.

“I know Claire might seem a little hesitant about you being here,” Jerry said. “But...she and Lauren were good friends. She thinks I need to be grieving...which I am. It’s just...”

He stopped here and Chloe could see him wrestling with a flood of emotion, trying to make it through this conversation without crumbling in front of them.

“Mr. Hilyard, I’m Agent Fine and this is my partner, Agent Moulton. I was wondering if you might be able to tell us about any political ties your family might have.”

“Jesus,” he breathed. “It’s overblown. The local PD made a huge fuss about it and got all freaked out. I’m pretty sure that’s why you were called in, right?”

“*Are* there political ties?” Moulton asked, sidestepping the question.

“Lauren’s father used to be really good golf buddies with the Secretary of Defense. They grew up together, played football together, all that. They still hang out on occasion—duck hunting, fishing, things like that.”

“Did Lauren ever speak with the Secretary?” Chloe asked.

“Not since we’ve been married. He came to our wedding. We get a Christmas card from his family. But that’s about it.”

“So do you think what happened might be due to that relationship?” Moulton asked.

“If it is, I have no idea why. Lauren was not into politics at all. I think it’s just her father’s way of making himself seem important. Someone killed his little girl so it *must* be because he knows important people. He’s kind of an ass like that.”

“So what can you tell us about the last few days of Lauren’s life?” Chloe asked.

“I’ve already told the police everything I could.”

“We understand that,” Moulton said. “And we have copies of all of their reports. But for us to properly get a foothold here, we may be asking you some questions that have you repeating a few things.”

“Fine, that’s good,” Jerry said.

Chloe thought the man might not quite be aware of what was happening, exactly. He looked incredibly detached. If she didn’t already know the traumatic situation he was going through, she might have assumed he was on drugs.

“The first question may seem silly in light of what has happened,” Chloe said, “but can you think of anyone who might have had a reason to be upset with your wife?”

He sneered and shook his head. When he spoke, his voice trembled in a sort of eternal yawn. “No. Lauren stayed to herself these days. An introvert. It had gotten even worse as of late... drawing into herself, you know?”

“Any idea why?”

“She had a rough past. Messed up parents and all that. She was sort of a bully in high school. I guess that’s what she’d

be classified as these days. Or maybe a mean girl. She'd been coming to terms with those mistakes as of late. I think it got worse when she got that damned high school reunion invitation in the mail."

"She was anxious about going?" Chloe asked.

"I'm not sure. It made her sad, I think...to think about the people she had maybe been mean to."

"Did the two of you graduate together?" Moulton asked.

"We did."

"And did you go with her to the reunion?"

"God no. I hate that sort of stuff. Posturing and pretending to like people you mostly hated in high school. No. I sat it out."

"You say she was an introvert," Chloe said. "Did she not have many friends?"

"Oh, she had a few. Claire was one of them. And the friends she did have were like family to her. They were extremely close."

"Have you spoken with them since this happened?" Moulton asked.

"Just one. She called shortly after she found out to see if I needed anything."

"Are these friends that perhaps went to the reunion with her?"

"Yeah. Claire went, too. But she's also sort of an introvert. I think she went just out of curiosity."

"Do you and Lauren have any children?" Chloe asked. "A neighborhood like this, I figured there would be at least one kid in every house."

“We have two. Our oldest, Victoria, is eighteen; she just started college this year. She...well, she chose to spend this very difficult time with her grandparents. And because she went with them, our youngest—Carter—wanted to go, too. I’ve never had the best relationship with my in-laws but my kids being with them right now is a godsend. I feel like a terrible father, but if my kids were here, I’d crumple up and just break, I think.”

“Is there any animosity about your children being with their grandparents right now?” Moulton asked.

“I want them here with me...just to see them. But I’m a mess. And until the house is in better shape...that’s where they need to be.”

“You said your oldest *chose* to be with them during this time,” Moulton said. “Why is that?”

“She couldn’t wait to get out of our house. She had a strained relationship with Lauren for the last few years. Some toxic mother-daughter stuff. Our daughter...she was having boys over, sneaking in the house at night. She was doing this as young as thirteen. Had her first pregnancy scare at fifteen. And if you do the math in your head...Lauren was thirty-seven. We had our daughter when Lauren and I were both nineteen.”

Chloe thought the tumultuous family situation could not be making this any easier on Jerry Hilyard. She didn’t think there was anything there worth digging into, though it might do some good to eventually speak with the daughter.

“Mr. Hilyard, would you have any objection to us taking a look

around your house?” she asked.

“That’s fine. The sheriff and a few of his men have been in and out a few times. The code to get in is two-two-two-eight.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hilyard,” Moulton said. “Please contact us if you think of anything else. For now, I think we’ll speak with Mrs. Lovington to see if she has any details to share.”

“She’s told the police everything she knows. She’s starting to get irritated, I think.”

“What about her husband? Did he know your wife well? Did the four of you frequently hang out together?”

“No. Claire’s husband works out of town quite a bit. I did FaceTime him to make sure he was okay with me staying here. And anyway, it was mainly just Claire and Lauren. They had a weekly thing where they’d drink wine on the front porch, switching houses every week.”

Claire stepped into the room slowly, apparently having put the baby she had been carrying down for a nap.

“And we’d do the predictable things that women do. Talk about our husbands, reminisce about the past. I’d tell her about the highs and lows of having a baby. And, more recently, we’d talk about what she was going through with her daughter.”

“What can you tell us about Lauren and what might have led someone to do such a thing to her?” Chloe asked.

“Lauren made some decisions during high school that her parents did not particularly agree about,” Claire replied. “Once Lauren graduated high school and had her daughter...well,

college was out of the picture.”

“They were embarrassed,” Jerry added. “They got pissed and moved to New Hampshire. They feed our daughter these brutal lies about Lauren whenever they can.”

“Trying to make up for the mistakes and neglect from raising Lauren,” Claire said. “A couple of real assholes.”

Sensing the conversation headed to a bashing session, Chloe spoke up. “Mrs. Lovington, would *you* happen to be able to think of any enemies or even strained relationships Lauren might have had?” Chloe asked.

“Not outside of her family. And while they are a couple of jerks, they certainly wouldn’t do this. This is...this is deplorable.”

Moulton reached into his inner pocket and pulled out a business card. He placed it on the coffee table and stepped back. “Please...if either of you think of anything else, please don’t hesitate to contact us.”

Both Claire and Jerry gave only curt nods. The conversation had been brief but it had taken its toll on them. Chloe and Moulton made their exit in an awkward silence.

When they were outside, heading for the car, Chloe paused for a moment on the sidewalk. She looked down the street, in the direction of the Hilyard house, and saw that it was just out of sight. Still, she was starting to agree with Moulton. Maybe it was a little too close. And if the bedroom still looked anything like what she had seen in the photographs Johnson had showed them,

it seemed almost morbid that Jerry was staying so close.

“Ready to go check out the house?” Chloe asked.

“Not really,” Moulton said, the images he’d seen from that case file still clearly in his mind. “But I guess we’ve got to start somewhere.”

They got back into the car and headed back the way they had come. Right away, Chloe kept telling herself that it couldn’t be as bad as it had appeared in the pictures—all of that crimson red among the crisp white sheets.

It took all of twenty seconds to get to the Hilyard house. The fact that it closely resembled the Lovington house—and most every other house on the block—was creepy as hell as far as Chloe was concerned. They entered through the front door with the code Jerry Hilyard had given them and stepped into an absolutely still and silent house.

Knowing exactly why they were there, they wasted no time and went directly upstairs. The master bedroom was easy to find, the room all the way at the end of the hallway. Through the opened door, Chloe could already see streaks of red on the carpet and the sheets.

She was relieved, however, to find that the scene truly didn’t look as bad as it had appeared in the pictures Director Johnson had showed them. First and foremost, the body had

been removed. Secondly, the bloodstains had been sitting longer, making them paler in color.

They walked to the bed, careful to step over any blood splashes left on the carpet. She could see areas in the blood splatter where the coroner and initial investigators had accidentally stepped in it. Chloe looked to the other side of the room, toward a dresser and where a small flat-screen TV was mounted to the wall. *She was probably watching TV when it happened, maybe purging her head of high school reunion memories...*

Chloe then went downstairs and had a look around. She could see no signs of forced entry and no clear indications that anything had been stolen. She looked around the living room, the kitchen, and the guest bedroom. She even stepped out on the back deck and had a look around. There was a small patio table in the corner. An ashtray sat in the center of it, under the shade umbrella.

Chloe made a *hmm* sound as she saw the ashtray's contents. There were no cigarette butts in the tray, but some other kind of ash and paper. She leaned down to it and took a light whiff. The scent of marijuana was unmistakable. She sorted through some things in her head, trying to figure out if this could be relevant in any way.

Chloe jumped a bit when her phone rang. Moulton, stepping out onto the back porch to join her, caught her look of momentary shock and smiled. She rolled her eyes and answered the call, not recognizing the number.

“This is Agent Fine,” she answered.

“This is Claire Lovington. I thought you might want to know that I just got a call from one of my friends, Tabby North. She was one of the close friends that Jerry was telling you about. She asked if anyone else from the police had come to speak with me. I told them the FBI had just visited and she’d like to speak with you.”

“Does she have information for us?”

“Honestly...I don’t know. Probably not. But this is a rather small community. I think they just want to get to the bottom of it. I’m sure you’ll find them incredibly helpful.”

“Great. Text me her number after this call.”

Chloe killed the call and filled Moulton in. “That was Claire. She said one of Lauren’s other friends called her to see if anything new had developed. She’d like to speak with us.”

“Good. I won’t lie...I’m pretty much done here. That bedroom is giving me the creeps.”

It was a good way to explain it. Chloe could still see the pictures in her head, so seeing the scene without the body was like looking into some old abandoned place she was not meant to see.

Still, they went back to the bedroom and took some time to check the place over, looking in the bathroom, the walk-in closet, even under the bed. After finding nothing of interest, they left the house and, moments later, the Farmington Acres neighborhood. Chloe again thought that it was incredibly quaint

—a perfect neighborhood to grow a family and shape a future.

So long as you were okay knowing that, from time to time, there might be a murder to contend with.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tabby North was a redhead who had the kind of body that Chloe assumed saw the gym at least four days a week; it was also a body that, in Chloe's humble opinion, could use a few more meals. She was gorgeous in a very obvious way, but she looked as if a strong wind might blow her away.

Chloe and Moulton met Tabby at her house and found that she had invited another close friend, a woman who apparently went to that very same gym with Tabby. This woman was Kaitlin St. John, who was crying when Chloe and Moulton showed up. They gathered together on Tabby's screened-in back porch, where Tabby treated them to a pitcher of lavender lemonade. Chloe could not help the thoughts that blew through her head—of how pretentious it all seemed, these women quickly approaching forty, with their tiny waists and trendy health-nut drinks.

These thoughts are certainly not why Johnson stated he thought you had a knack for these small neighborhood-based cases, she thought to herself.

To be polite, she sipped from the lemonade. Despite her negative thoughts, it was actually delicious.

“I assume you ladies have already spoken to the police?” Chloe asked.

“Yes,” Tabby said. “And while I fully understand that they are doing their best, it was quite clear that they had no idea what they

were doing.”

“They’re spooked, too,” Kaitlin said.

“Spooked by what?” Moulton asked.

“By the idea that it might have some sort of political reasoning. I guess you know about Lauren’s dad being all buddy-buddy with the Secretary of Defense. I’m sure the local police would rather avoid a media circus if they can help it.”

“So, *is it* politically connected?” Tabby asked.

“It’s far too early to know for sure,” Chloe said. Already, she was getting an uncomfortable vibe from these two. She did not doubt their grief; it was apparent in their expressions and the fact that Kaitlin had been openly crying since they’d showed up. But she also had no real problem picturing these two sitting around—perhaps with Lauren Hilyard and Claire Lovington—gossiping about everyone in town. She wondered how much of what they might discuss right here and now would end up hitting the Barnes Point grapevine.

“Can you tell us when you last saw Lauren?” Moulton asked.

“It was the night before she died,” Tabby said. “We all met up at our high school reunion.”

“We practically had to drag Lauren to it,” Kaitlin said. “She always hated that kind of thing.”

“Well, she hated that sort of thing *after* school was over,” Tabby corrected. “She always wanted to try to leave the high school years in the past.”

“Did she seem any different that night?” Chloe asked.

“Nothing that I noticed,” Tabby said.

“Same here,” Kaitlin said. “I daresay she ended up having some fun later on in the night. Lauren...well, she was the heartthrob of our high school. All the guys wanted her and when Jerry Hilyard just happened to knock her up during senior year... man, it was like the place had exploded. She lost some of that allure, you know. But the way everyone treated her that night at the reunion...I think everyone forgot about that. And it was like she was the queen bee all over again. I think she needed that.”

“Was there a big crowd?” Moulton asked.

“Pretty big,” Tabby said. “This is sort of a strange part of town. Lots of people that went to our high school either graduated or ended up coming back this way after college. It’s not exactly a wealthy city, but this side of town is known for being the wealthy side, you know? Anyway, for a few moments, Lauren actually looked happy.”

“We understand that Lauren was among those that graduated and stayed around,” Chloe said. “Were you all friends in high school?”

“Yes. Hell...Lauren and Claire were friends from kindergarten.”

“So would you say they were the closest out of the four of you?”

“Probably,” Kaitlin said. “They’ve always been besties. We know they had their little private porch sessions. It’s sweet...but yeah, from time to time, I felt a little left out. How about you,

Tab?"

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