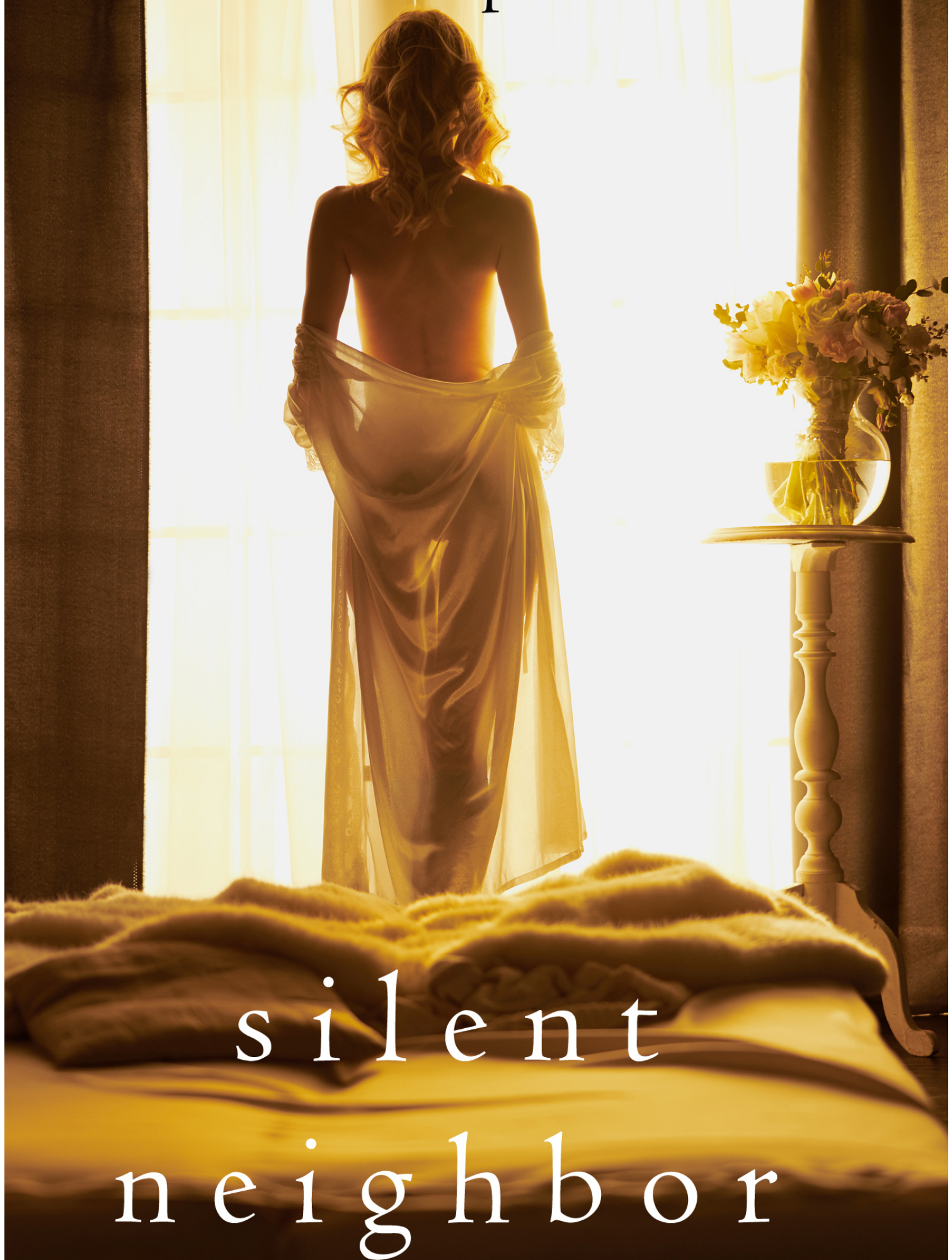


blake pierce



silent
neighbor

a chloe fine psychological suspense--book 4

A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery

Blake Pierce

Silent Neighbor

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

Silent Neighbor / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery)

ISBN 978-1-64-029745-6

“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) SILENT NEIGHBOR (A Chloe Fine Mystery) is book #4 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. When a flashy, new neighbor flaunts her wealth in a suburban town, it isn't long before she's found murdered. Did her flaunting ways upset her envious neighbors? Or was there a deeper secret to her husband's fortune? FBI VICAP Special Agent Chloe Fine, 27, finds herself immersed in a small-town world of lies, cliques, gossip and betrayal as she tries to separate truth from lies. But what is the real truth? And can she solve it while also dealing with the release of her troubled father from jail, and the spiraling down of her troubled sister? An emotionally wrought psychological suspense with layered characters, small-town ambiance and heart-pounding suspense, THE SILENT NEIGHBOR is book #4 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #5 in the CHLOE FINE series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

SILENT NEIGHBOR

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fifteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising thirteen 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 five books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five 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

Rosa unlocked the door to the two-story home, thinking how strange it was that people hired other people to clean their homes, giving them full access to every room and potential secret to their lives. Rosa had been cleaning homes in the Falls Church, Virginia area for six years now and she had stumbled upon quite a few unexpected things. It alarmed her just how little people did to cover up their indiscretions and secrets.

She didn't think she was going to accidentally find scandalous items or dark secrets with this couple, though. This was her newest client—the seventh on her list, helping her to hit her goal of making four grand a month by just cleaning houses. Not too bad for a woman who had once barely paid her three-hundred-fifty-dollar rent by bussing tables.

No, this couple, the Fairchilds, seemed clean-cut and free of drama. A nice married couple, though possibly a bit too involved in their work. The husband was some sort of finance broker who traveled at least once a month to attend meetings in New York and Boston. The wife, a mousy-looking woman of fifty or so, didn't seem to actually do much of anything. She was some sort of social media influencer—whatever that meant. But they were nice enough, they were wealthy, and they were incredibly kind and friendly to Rosa...something that a lot of her other clients were not.

She stepped inside the large foyer and glanced around at the spacious living room, the open floor plan and the attached kitchen, separated only by a floating bar. The house was, in her opinion, far too big for a couple with no kids—a couple where the husband was gone about a week or so out of every month.

Taking a look around, Rosa figured this would be one of those weeks where she was going to feel as if she wasn't truly earning her money. The Fairchilds were quite neat, leaving the house mostly clean. Rosa would go through the motions, scrubbing and vacuuming and cleaning windows, but it really wasn't much of a chore in the Fairchild house.

She went to the laundry room and the adjoining mudroom, where she filled the utility sink with water, dumping a bit of lavender-scented Pine Sol into it. She figured she'd get the kitchen floors, as it seemed to be the most-used room in the house. While she was waiting for the floors to dry, she'd vacuum the upstairs rooms, all of which were carpeted. She hated to feel as if she was getting one over on such a nice couple, but she figured if she could make it appear that she had truly gotten all of the most important areas, the Fairchilds would consider it a job well done. Besides, it wasn't her fault that they were leaving practically nothing to clean up.

As she waited for the sink to fill halfway, Rosa walked through the kitchen and to the stairway. The vacuum was in the upstairs linen closet because it was the only area in the house with carpet. She figured it might need a new filter and wanted to check now before she started mopping and forgot.

She found the vacuum in its usual place and checked the filter, finding that she had another few uses before it needed to be changed. While she had the vacuum out, she decided to roll it into the master bedroom. It was a huge room, complete with a fireplace, built-in bookshelves, and an adjoining bathroom that was larger than the living room in Rosa's apartment.

The bedroom door was open, so she stepped in without knocking. She often didn't know whether Mrs. Fairchild was home or not but had learned to knock whenever there was a closed door in the Fairchild home. She rolled the vacuum in but stopped after she took three steps into the room.

Mrs. Fairchild was on the bed, sleeping. This felt odd, as she was pretty sure Mrs. Fairchild woke up early and went for a run on most days. She nearly left the room, not wanting to wake her. But then she noticed two peculiar things at once.

First, Mrs. Fairchild was dressed in her running attire. Second, she was lying on top of the sheets, the bed freshly made.

Alarm bells started sounding in Rosa's head and instead of backing out of the room as she had originally intended, she felt herself stepping forward as if pushed by an invisible hand.

"Mrs. Fairchild?" she asked.

There was no answer. Mrs. Fairchild didn't even move in response.

Call the police, Rosa thought. Call nine-one-one. This is not good...she's not just sleeping, and you know it.

But she had to know. She took two more steps forward until Mrs. Fairchild's face came into view.

Her eyes were staring open, looking toward the window—unblinking. Her mouth was partially open. A pool of blood, still relatively fresh, stained the sheet just above her head. A grotesque slash mark was plainly visible along her neck.

Rose felt a little moan rise up in her throat. Her knees buckled a bit, but she managed to take a few steps backward. When she collided with the vacuum, she let out a shriek.

It took a considerable amount of effort to tear her eyes away from Mrs. Fairchild, but when she did, she quickly ran out of the room. She went to the kitchen bar where she had set down her phone, and called 911. As the dispatcher answered, Rosa was so horrified by what she had seen that she didn't stop to think about the utility sink in the mudroom, filling and filling by the second, close to overflowing.

CHAPTER ONE

Chloe had heard many cautionary tales about trying to keep a very broad fence between her personal life and her career. As a federal agent, things tended to get very sticky when the two worlds collided. But honestly, she had been living with the constant collision of those two worlds ever since she had graduated from the academy—thanks to her father’s mental cat-and-mouse games.

She knew she spent far too much time speculating on her father and what he may or may not have done to her mother nearly eighteen years ago. Thanks to Danielle’s discovery of her mother’s journal, Chloe had been living the past few weeks in a haze of confusion. She now felt fairly confident that their father had killed their mother all those years ago. She had given him every benefit of the doubt up to this point—going so far as to try pinning her mother’s murder on a scapegoat, Ruthanne Carwile.

But now she had it written in her mother’s handwriting. Now she had more than enough evidence to truly feel her father was not only a killer—but that he had killed her mother.

It had hit her quite hard. While Chloe had done her best not to let it affect her work, it had consumed almost every free moment she had. She’d spent the first two weekends after the discovery dodging calls from everyone—from Danielle, from her partner, Agent Rhodes, and from her father.

All I have to do is make it public, she thought to herself time and time again. Just go public, take it to the bureau, and take him down. Wrap up this sordid chapter of my life and put the bastard back behind bars.

But that was risky. It could affect her own career. And, more than that, there was the little girl still defiant inside of her, a younger version of herself who insisted maybe there was something she was missing...that there was no way her father was really a murderer.

It was an internal fight that had her going into work with a hangover a few times. It had been just twenty days since she’d made the discovery in the journal. And even at work, though she remained professional and did not let her own personal demons interfere with her job, entries from the journal would pop up in her head.

He strangled me tonight... and he slapped me in the face. Before I knew what had happened, he pushed me against the wall and strangled me. He said if I ever disrespected him again, he’d kill me. He said he had something better lined up, some better woman and some better life...

The journal was on her coffee table. She left it there so she would always be reminded...and so she could not give herself the convenience of having it out of her sight. She kept it there as a reminder that she had been a fool—and that her father had been pulling the wool over her eyes for a very long time.

It was twenty days in, almost three whole weeks since she and Danielle had finally come together to the conclusion that their father had killed their mother, when Chloe considered just going to his apartment and killing him. It was a Saturday. She’d started drinking at eleven that morning, staring out of her apartment window as DC traffic trickled by beneath her.

She knew enough about how the system worked to make it look like a suicide. Or, if nothing else, she knew how to hide her tracks well. She could make sure he died without having anything traced back to her.

She had thought it out quite carefully. She had the stirring of a plan in her head, most of which was solid.

But that’s lunacy, isn’t it? she asked herself.

But then she thought of how thoroughly he’d had her fooled. She remembered how loyal she had been to him even when Danielle had tried warning her that their father was not the man she thought. And when all of that weighed on her brain, no...the idea of killing him did not seem so drastic after all.

She was daydreaming of pulling the trigger on her father and starting on her third beer of the day when a gentle knock sounded on her door. She cringed; her father had come by four times in the past twenty days but she had always stayed quiet on the other side. This knock was different, though—the heartbeat-like drumming pattern from the intro to “Closer” by Nine Inch Nails, one of Danielle’s favorite songs. It was the telltale knock they had agreed upon so that Chloe would know it was her sister on the other side of the door.

With a weary smile, Chloe answered the door. Danielle was waiting on the other side, in mid-beat. She lowered her hands and offered her sister a smile. It felt weird; Danielle was usually the gloomy one that Chloe tried to cheer up. It had been that way for most of their lives, especially ever since Danielle had discovered what absolute jerks boys can be.

“Not sleeping well?” Danielle asked as she stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

“Not particularly,” Chloe said. “Want a beer?”

“What time is it?”

“Noon? Or close to it...”

“Just one,” Danielle said, eyeing her sister suspiciously.

Chloe was very much aware of how the roles had basically turned completely around for them. As she popped the top on a bottle and handed it to Danielle, she saw the concern in her sister’s face. Which was fine...it showed that Danielle had grown. It showed that in the face of what they had discovered together, she could stand on her own two feet without her sister there to support her like she’d usually done.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Chloe said.

“No, you don’t. I hate to say that I sort of like the Chloe that drinks before noon. I like this moody fuck-the-world Chloe. But I’d be a bad sister if I didn’t tell you that I’m worried about you. You don’t exactly have the personality to pull off the dark and brooding goth thing.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Chloe asked. “To tell me you’re worried about me?”

“Partly. But there’s something else. And I need you to bear with me for a second, okay?”

“Sure,” Chloe said as they settled down on the couch with their beers. She spotted her mother’s journal on the coffee table and her thoughts briefly went back to the sordid idea of killing her father. And it was then, with Danielle sitting across from her, that she knew she could never do it. She could fantasize and plan all she wanted, but she would never do it. She simply wasn’t that sort of person.

“So, a while back, I remember watching this show...sort of like one of those *Unsolved Mysteries* deals,” Danielle said.

“I hope this is going somewhere,” Chloe interrupted.

“It is. Anyway...it was about this woman who saved her brother’s life. See...they were identical twins. Born like five minutes apart or something like that. She’s cooking dinner for her family one night and gets this sharp twinge in her mind...sort of like someone speaking to her. She had the overwhelming idea that her brother was in trouble. It was so strong that she stopped what she was doing and called him. When he didn’t answer the phone, she called her brother’s girlfriend. The girlfriend went over to the brother’s house and found that someone had broken into his home and shot him. He was bleeding out when the girlfriend found him but she called nine-one-one and ended up saving his life. All based on this weird feeling his twin sister got.”

“Okay...”

Danielle rolled her eyes. Chloe could tell that she was thinking very hard about the next words to come out of her mouth. “I got something like that about forty minutes ago,” she said. “Not nearly as strong as that TV show made it sound, but it was there. It was strong enough. And it was...well, it was weird.”

“No one broke in,” Chloe said. “I haven’t been shot.”

“I can see that. But...I don’t know. I had the weird twin-feeling. I felt like I had to be over here. Sorry if it sounds dumb. But...well, is there anything I might have prevented by showing up?”

Chloe shook her head no. But she thought: *Just stopping me from plotting out the murder of our father.* She gave a soft little laugh and sipped from her beer.

“You’re not well,” Danielle said. She nodded to the beer bottle. “How many of those will I find in the trash, empty?”

“Two. And I’m sorry...but who are you to be concerned about someone’s drinking habits? I have a kettle to go with that pot.”

“Oh, I don’t care about the drinking. You self-medicate however you see fit. But I do know that self-medicating isn’t you. It never has been. You’re the logical one...the smart one. It’s because you’ve delved into my old strategies for coping that I’m here. *That’s* what has me worried.”

“I’m fine, Danielle.”

Danielle folded her arms and reclined back on the couch. If there had been any good-natured ribbing to the conversation, Chloe sensed it disappear in that simple gesture. Danielle’s gaze had an icy feel to it.

“So you mean to tell me that the last year or so, with you proclaiming Dad’s greatness to me... I just let that ride? You and I coming to a head several times for him, and you always going to bat for him. The way I see it, I deserve some honesty, Chloe. I’m not stupid. This bombshell with Dad has messed you up.”

“Of course it has.”

“So tell me what you’re thinking. Tell me what we do now. If I’m being totally honest, I don’t see why you haven’t turned him in yet. Isn’t the journal enough to convict him?”

“You don’t think I’ve thought of that?” Chloe asked, starting to get slightly angry. “And no... the journal isn’t enough. It could be enough to maybe reopen the case, but that’s about it. There’s no hard evidence...and the fact that there was already a trial and our father was put in prison and then let go makes it even harder. Throw Ruthanne Carwile’s recent conviction in there, and it becomes one huge mess.”

“So you’re saying he’s likely going to end up getting away with it?”

Chloe didn’t give an answer. She downed the rest of her beer and walked into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator door to retrieve another but then stopped. Slowly, she closed it again and leaned against the small kitchen counter.

“I’m aware that this is mostly my fault,” Chloe said. It was hard to admit. The words tasted like acid in her mouth as they came out.

“I’m not here to blame you, Chloe.”

“I know. But it’s what you’re thinking. And I don’t blame you. Now that I’ve seen what’s in that journal and sort of...I don’t know...sort of *have a feel for him*...I’m thinking it, too. If I had listened to you before all of this started it would be different. Before Ruthanne, before landing my job at the bureau...”

“Don’t do that. Just...let’s look forward. Let’s figure out what we can do.”

“There’s nothing!”

Chloe surprised herself when she screamed the two words at her sister. But once they were out, she found it hard to reel them back in.

“Chloe, I—”

“I messed up. I failed you and Mom and myself. This is me now. I have to live with this and just...”

“But we can figure it out together, right? Look...I dig this role reversal and all, but I can’t stand to see you beating yourself up like this.”

“Not now. I can’t deal with it right now. I have to figure some things out.”

“Let me help, then.”

Chloe felt suffocated. She also felt another outburst coming on, but she clenched her fists and was able to stamp it down. “Danielle,” she said as slowly and as patiently as she could, “I appreciate

the sentiment and I love you for being so concerned. But I need to handle this on my own for right now. The longer you pester and press in, the harder it's going to be. So please...for right now...can you just leave?"

Chloe watched as something in Danielle's expression shifted. It looked like disappointment. Or maybe it was something closer to sadness. Chloe couldn't tell and, quite frankly, she didn't care in that moment.

Danielle set her beer down on the coffee table—not yet even a quarter of the way empty—and got to her feet. "I want you to call me when you're done being distant."

"I'm not being distant."

"I don't know *what* you're being," Danielle said as she opened the door to leave. "But *distant* sounded better than *a bitch*."

Before Chloe could say anything in response, Danielle made her exit, closing the door behind her.

Chloe wished Danielle would have slammed the door. At least then there would have been some sort of feeling left, some sign that Danielle was just as mad as Chloe was. But there was only the soft click of the door closing and nothing more.

Chloe sat in the silence that followed for the rest of the afternoon and all she had to show for it the next day were more empty beer bottles in the trash can.

CHAPTER TWO

On Sunday, Chloe found herself sitting in a visitor parking space outside of the DC Central Detention Facility. She looked at the building for a moment before getting out of the car, trying to figure out exactly why she was there.

She knew the answer, but it was a hard one to swallow. She was there because she missed Moulton. It was a truth she would never speak out loud, a sore spot that she was having trouble processing. But the plain and simple truth was that she needed someone to comfort her and ever since she'd moved to DC, she'd seen Moulton as that figure. Oddly enough, it was something she had not come to realize until after he had been sent to prison for his role in a financial fraud scheme.

At first, she'd thought she only missed him because of the physical intimacy—the need to be held by a man when she was feeling discouraged and lost. But when Danielle had left yesterday and Chloe had found herself desperate to talk to someone about what she was dealing with, she thought only of Moulton.

With one final push of motivation, Chloe got out of her car and walked through the front doors. She used her federal ID to get inside, signed in, and then sat in a small holding area as a guard was sent back to get Agent Moulton. The holding area was basically empty; apparently Sunday was not the most popular day to visit troubled loved ones in prison.

Less than five minutes later, Moulton appeared through the door in the back of the room. The room itself was set up like a small lounge of sorts. Chloe was sitting on a couch, which Moulton slowly approached. He looked at her with a skeptical smile, as if trying to size her up.

“You okay if I sit here?” he asked, uncertain.

“Yeah,” she said, scooting over to allow him room on the couch.

“It’s nice to see you,” he said right away. “But I have to admit that it’s also very unexpected.”

“How are you being treated here?”

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “It’s mostly guys like me. White collar crime stuff. I’m not ever really worried about getting jumped in the showers or beaten up in the exercise yard, if that’s what you mean. But I don’t even want to talk about that. How’s work? Working on anything of interest?”

“No. They partnered me back up with Rhodes. She and I have been working this profiling project. A little boring at times, but it keeps us busy.”

“You two getting along?”

“Better than the first time around, that’s for sure.”

He leaned in closer and once again gave her a skeptical look. “What brings you to these parts, Fine?”

“I wanted to see you.”

He smiled. “That makes me feel much better than it should. But I don’t buy it. Not completely anyway. What’s up?”

She looked away from him, starting to feel embarrassed. Before turning back to him, she was finally able to squeak out something of an answer: “My father.”

“Your father? The one who just popped back up in your life a few months ago? The one that spent most of the last twenty years or so in prison?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“I thought you were happy about that, for the most part.”

“I was. But then something else popped up. And then something else. There’s just been this huge pile of crap that keeps getting added onto. And this last thing I discovered...I don’t know. I think I just need someone not attached to him to give me an opinion.”

“Maybe someone who worked closely with you before getting thrown in prison?”

“Maybe,” she said, giving him a smile that felt a bit too flirty.

“Well, hearing the story would be the most interesting thing I’ve taken part in over the past two weeks or so. So let me hear it.”

It took a few seconds for Chloe to find the courage to talk about such a personal issue but she knew it needed to be done. And as she started telling Moulton about Danielle’s constant warnings about their father as well as the revelations discovered in the journal, she understood why she had refused to discuss it with Danielle; it was opening her up to vulnerability. And that was not a state that Danielle had ever seen her in.

Even as she told Moulton everything, she kept some of the more private details to herself—particularly when it came to memories pertaining to her mother’s death. But getting out the bits she did was extremely helpful. She knew that at the core of it all, this was nothing more than a venting session. Be that as it may, it still felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

It helped that Moulton never questioned her or even made faces to indicate his true feelings on the matter. He knew what she needed; she just needed someone to listen—someone to maybe even offer some advice.

“I assume you’ve considered taking this to Johnson?” he asked when she was done.

“I have. I’ve thought about it a lot. But you know as well as I do that nothing would be done just because of a few journal entries written two decades ago. If anything, it would probably just clue him in. The moment police or FBI start questioning him, he’d know something was up.”

“You think he’d run?” Moulton asked.

“I don’t know. You have to remember...I don’t know him all that well. He spent most of my life in prison.”

“And what about you and your sister? Do you feel safe? You think he’d come after you?”

“Doubtful. He still sees me as his confidant. Although I’m sure he might figure something is up since I haven’t returned his calls or texts. And I’m not answering the door when he comes by.”

Moulton nodded, understanding. He was looking at her in a way that was slightly uncomfortable. It was the same thing she had seen in his eyes a month or so ago when they had nearly slept together. And God help her, she wanted to kiss him quite badly in that moment.

“You know what you have to do,” he said. “I don’t know if you came here hoping I’d back you up on it or what.”

“I know.”

“Then say it. Speak it out loud and make it real.”

“I need to find out for myself. Not an official investigation, but just... keep tabs on him, I guess.”

“You think that involves reaching back out to him?” Moulton asked. “Maybe just carrying on like normal, as if everything is the same as it was before you read those journal entries?”

“I just don’t know.”

A brief silence fell between them, which Moulton eventually ended with a sigh. “There are a lot of things I’m going to miss out on because of what I did,” he said. “Too much stuff to really even think about, honestly. But one of the things I’m starting to truly regret is that I think you and I could have been pretty great.”

“I’m trying *not* to think about that.”

He nodded, looked into her eyes, and slowly leaned in. She felt herself being drawn toward him like a magnet, could even feel her lips starting to part to accept his kiss. But she turned her head at the last minute.

“Sorry. I can’t. All this nonsense with my dad...the last thing I need is some weird strained relationship with a criminal.”

He chuckled at this and rested his head playfully on her shoulder. “You’re right,” he said, pulling his head up and looking at her. “But hey...I call rights on being able to hit you up when I get out of here.”

“And how long will that be?” Chloe asked.

“Officially a few years. But good behavior and some bureau loopholes...no one is sure just yet. Could be as little as eight months.”

“Yeah...I’ll give you first rights,” she said.

“Something to look forward to...that’s good. Because this place sucks. The food, though... better than I expected.”

She was reminded of why she enjoyed his company. He had seamlessly transitioned the awkward talk of her father into something else. And he had done it without making her feel like a burden.

They sat on the couch for another fifteen minutes as Moulton described what life had been like for him over the past few weeks. He was taking it all with a grain of salt and had no qualms about fully admitting his guilt and remorse. It was good for Chloe to hear it—not just because she believed he truly was a good man deep down, but because it showed that people *were* capable of being honest.

And given the nightmare she could feel brewing between her, Danielle, and her father, being in the presence of any kind of honesty was hugely refreshing.

She took her leave forty minutes after she had gotten out of her car in the parking lot. Moulton had not tried to kiss her again, though she secretly wished he would. She left feeling oddly satisfied, feeling that she was finally moving forward after three weeks of feeling stagnant and stymied.

As she made the walk back across the parking lot, her phone rang. She grabbed it right away. It was probably Danielle or her father. If it was her father, she thought she might actually answer it this time and make up some excuse as to why she had been dodging his calls. She figured he’d accept just about any reason, given the fact that he had just suddenly reappeared in her life after almost twenty years.

But the number she saw on the display was neither her father’s nor Danielle’s. It was a line from the bureau. She cringed a bit as she answered it. A call on a Sunday was sure to set up a stressful Monday.

“This is Agent Fine,” she answered.

“Fine, it’s Johnson. Where are you right now?”

She actually had to bite back a small laugh before answering. “In town,” she answered as vaguely as possible.

“I need you to visit a crime scene in Falls Church. Seems to be right in the area of your expertise. Wealthy neighborhood, murdered socialite-type.”

“Today?”

“Yes, today. The body was discovered Friday morning. The police have done their part and are coming up blank.”

“Just one body?”

“Yes. But we need an agent on it to ensure that it isn’t linked to a similar case in that area last year.”

“Sir...do you think Rhodes can handle it alone? I’m sort of dealing with some personal things.”

There was a brief moment of silence on the other end. “Is someone dead? A loved one pass away?”

“No sir.”

She knew that Johnson knew the scantest details about her father’s history. She wondered if he was silently considering all of that on the other end.

“Sorry, Fine. You’ve spent three weeks in an office, putting a profile together. I want you out in the field. I want you and Rhodes both down in Falls Church within three hours. Two if you can manage it.”

She opened her mouth to protest but stopped herself. She had no desire to be knee-deep in a murder investigation given everything she was dealing with. But at the same time, she knew that

getting involved in a case might be exactly what she needed. It would not only distract her from the drama with her dad, but it might put her in the right frame of mind to figure out a way to bring down her father.

“Yes sir,” she said. “I’ll call Rhodes right away.”

And just like that, she had her first active case in three weeks. The timing wasn’t the best but who was she to argue? At the end of the day, she’d joined the bureau to help people in need—to help bring a sense of justice to a criminal system she had never fully trusted.

In light of all that had happened concerning her father in recent weeks—including her own misconceptions about him—it seemed almost fitting that it was this mindset that followed her as she got into her car and called up Agent Rhodes.

CHAPTER THREE

If Rhodes suspected that Chloe was dealing with personal issues, she made no mention of it as they rode out into Falls Church. In fact, she had not said anything about a change in Chloe's personality for the three weeks they had been working together on the profile project—trying to come up with a profile on a man believed to be leading the charge on a series of armed bank robberies in New York. Then again, Rhodes was something of a hard ass and kept to herself. Even when their partnership had hit a new level after Chloe had saved her life following a near-fatal gunshot wound, Rhodes showed no signs of wanting to know Chloe on a deeply personal level.

And that was perfectly fine with Chloe.

In fact, most of the drive from DC to Falls Church, Virginia, was covered in silence. Johnson had not given them much to go on; the details on the murder were practically nothing. All he'd told them was that the local deputy would be on the scene to debrief them when they arrived.

The closest they came to a meaningful conversation occurred just as they got off on the exit ramp to enter Falls Church. "You know much about this city?" Rhodes asked.

"A bit. Mostly upper class, I think. But this neighborhood we're headed to, if I remember correctly from a case study back in the academy, it's one of those areas that's rich mainly because of what they call *old money*."

"Ah, you mean rich people that are rich because mommy and daddy were rich and didn't have anything to do with the money after they died."

"Basically, yes."

Rhodes chuckled and looked out the window. "It seems to me that you and I have become the go-to agents on things like this. Well...you, anyway. How do you feel about that?"

It wasn't anything Chloe had really considered before. She simply shrugged and answered honestly: "I guess everyone needs a niche to specialize in."

Rhodes let it go after that. Chloe was doing her best to convey that she had no interest in small talk right now—trying to get the point across without being too rude. Apparently, it worked. They made it to the crime scene—a beautiful two-story home in an affluent neighborhood—without another word spoken between them. Most of the lots were either wooded or boasted huge backyards. The neighborhood itself was a bit removed from the more densely packed neighborhoods, giving each home a bit of space to breathe.

The presence of a single police car in the driveway seemed terribly out of place. It gave the residence an almost haunted feel after having seen so many of the other homes. It was like a blemish on the neighborhood.

They parked the car and walked up to the porch. The door was closed, so Chloe knocked, not wanting to be presumptuous by just walking in when there was an officer there waiting for them. Her knock was answered right away. The officer who opened the door looked to be in his early thirties. He was clean-shaven, quite plain looking, and appeared surprised to find two women on the other side of the door.

"We're Agents Fine and Rhodes," Chloe said. "We were sent to look into the murder of Jessie Fairchild."

The officer extended his hand and introduced himself. "Deputy Ed Nolan. I'm running the wrap-up on this. Come on in."

He ushered them inside, where Chloe discovered the house was larger inside than it had appeared outside. The foyer was nearly the size of the living room in Chloe's apartment and the ceilings were at least twelve feet over her head. The place felt as if it hadn't been lived in for quite some time, giving Chloe a creepy vibe.

“So what’s the story here?” Chloe asked. “All we’ve been told is that we need to rule it out as connecting to a case from last year.”

“What case is that?” Nolan asked.

“Three strangulation deaths about five miles away from here,” Rhodes said. “All women, all between the ages of forty and sixty.”

“Yeah, I think we’ll be able to rule that out pretty quickly.”

“Why is that?” Chloe asked.

“Well, the body has obviously been moved by now, but I can show you the pictures. Mrs. Fairchild wasn’t killed by strangulation, although she had been strangled too. It was more like a slice to the throat...but in a weird way that I’ve never seen before.”

He led them into the kitchen and grabbed a file folder from the bar. He used it to point up the stairs as he said, “The house cleaner discovered the body in the master bedroom upstairs. She went up while leaving the utility sink in the mudroom going. She obviously got a little sidetracked by finding the body, so much so that the utility sink overflowed.”

“Let’s go take a look at the bedroom, then,” Chloe said.

Nolan nodded and took the lead. As they passed through, Chloe noticed that either the cleaning lady was exceptionally good at her job or the Fairchilds just naturally kept a clean house.

The upstairs hallway was just as impressive as the downstairs. A bookshelf stood at the end of the hall, built into the walls. There were four rooms along the hall, two of which were bedrooms, the third a secondary bathroom, and the fourth an office.

Nolan led them to the master bedroom. While the body had of course been moved, Chloe saw that the sheets had not been removed since the murder.

“The room is exactly as it was when the body was discovered?” Chloe asked.

“All we moved was the body,” Nolan confirmed.

“Can you walk us through the details?”

He did just that as Chloe looked around the room with Rhodes. She listened to each detail, trying to play it all out in her head, imagining the scenes taking place in the room in which she currently stood.

“Rosa Ramirez, the house cleaner, discovered the body around eleven thirty in the morning. Police were on the scene just before noon. I was part of the initial party to respond to the call, so I was able to see everything in this folder firsthand. Jessie Fairchild’s throat had been cut, but in a very strange and grisly fashion. While we *do* believe there was strangulation involved, the cutting was done with a very large diamond ring.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Positive. Forensics confirmed it late yesterday. It was coated in blood and the jagged lines of the cut match the cut of the diamond. For what it’s worth, her husband isn’t sure if the ring belonged to his wife.”

“Hold on,” Rhodes said. “There’s no way a diamond ring is big enough to cut that deep.”

“We thought the same thing,” Nolan said. “But the angle of the cut hit a vital artery and it also punctured the windpipe.”

“Any motive?” Chloe asked.

“We originally assumed it was a home invasion or robbery. I’m sure you’ve noticed that this place is loaded with valuables.” He pointed to the walk-in closet on the left side of the room and added: “There’s a disgusting amount of jewelry in there. When we talked to the husband, he pointed out a necklace that’s worth about thirty grand. And it wasn’t in a safe, either. Just hanging there, on a plain old jewelry rack. There’s also two cars in the garage, one of which costs about three years of my salary. A huge pool in the back, a spa-level hot tub. It’s being humble to say the Fairchilds were loaded. And with them being new to the neighborhood, we assumed it was a robbery. But we can’t find any evidence of that.”

“Was *anything* taken?” Chloe asked.

“We had the husband do a run-through to look around, but he came up with nothing. He said he could not see where anything had been taken. Of course, he was distraught from having had his wife recently murdered so who knows how accurate of a search he did...”

“You said you thought there was some sort of strangulation involved,” Rhodes said. “Do you know what she was strangled with?”

“We don’t know for sure, but we think it was a fox stole—this fur wrap sort of thing. We found it tucked under the bed. Forensics says they’re pretty sure both ends of it had recently been tightly gripped and pulled. The husband also said he couldn’t remember the last time he’d ever seen her wearing it.”

“What can you tell us about the Fairchilds?” Chloe asked. She was stepping toward the bed, looking at the dried bloodstains on the top sheet.

“They were new in town. Moved in about five weeks ago. There are still some boxes out in the garage that they hadn’t even unpacked yet. The husband, Mark, is some kind of big-shot banker... something with finances and stocks. Jessie Fairchild dealt with social media...some kind of influencer for C-list celebrities. Instagram, Facebook, stuff like that. Moved here from Boston...the husband said it was because they were just getting tired of the big-city congestion.”

“Where is the husband now?” Chloe asked.

“He went to some cabin out in the mountains with his brother. Left this morning, actually. He’s um...well, he’s a wreck. I mean, people take death different ways, I know. But this man...I watched him just sort of crumple and wither up, you know? It was the worst I’d ever seen.”

“No fingerprints anywhere on the scene, I take it?” Chloe asked.

“None. We did find a single loose hair on that fox stole, though. It was blond, and Jessie Fairchild was a brunette. It’s being tested as we speak...should know something pretty soon.”

Chloe took a moment to take it all in. Because there was a strong indication of at least *some* sort of strangulation, she could not rule out a connection to the murders from a year ago. But the cut with the diamond ring told her this was something new...something different. She picked up the folder and nearly opened it up to start digging into it right then and there.

“You said you’re in charge of wrapping the loose ends?”

“Yeah.”

“Can we follow you to your precinct? I’d like to get a workstation set up.”

“So you *do* think it’s related to the strangulation murders from last year?” Nolan asked. It was clear that he had not been expecting this.

“I don’t know for sure,” Chloe said. “But what I do know is that a woman is dead—that she was killed in her own home—and we currently have no one in custody. So...let’s get to work.”

Nolan smiled at her go-get-’em attitude. He nodded and started back for the bedroom door, headed to the hall. “Let’s get started then.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Chloe opened up the folder on the Jessie Fairchild murder as soon as she was settled down at the precinct. Nolan had given them an office that had once belonged to an assistant deputy who had been let go as a result of cutbacks. Some of the former assistant deputy's belongings had been left behind, making Chloe feel out of place.

Still, she buckled down and pored over the information in the file. She was impressed with how well put together it all was. Apparently, Deputy Nolan had a knack for organization and details.

Beyond the basic police report, which included everything Nolan had already told them at the Fairchild residence, there were several pictures of Jessie Fairchild's body. She was fully dressed, on the bed. Her head was cocked to the left, her opened eyes staring in the direction of the pool of blood that had collected around her head. The most noticeable feature of her body, though, was the ragged laceration along the center of her neck.

The pictures must have been taken within several hours of the murder because most of the blood was still wet. She could see where it was starting to congeal, but it was still mostly fresh. The cut itself was quite brutal. It was jagged and gruesome, a straight line that looked almost as if it had been sawed into the flesh. Chloe could also see very slight indications that something had been wrapped around her neck, though it was hard to tell for certain from the photos. Without seeing the body, she'd have to take the word of the forensics team. But if what she *did* see was indeed where something had been wrapped around her neck, it would line up perfectly with the fox stole that she saw in one of the other pictures.

She also saw a picture of the diamond ring that had been used to make the cut. It was sitting on the bedside table; the killer had not made any attempts to clean it or hide it. As far as Chloe was concerned, this was the killer trying to send a message.

But what message?

"The ring is throwing me off," Rhodes said. "Why put it right there on the bedside table? Is he bragging? Maybe trying to tell us something?"

"I was just wondering the same thing. I wonder if the ring has any special meaning. Why *that* ring. It looks like one of those engagement/wedding ring combo deals."

"It also looks expensive as hell," Rhodes added.

"It's got to be symbolic in some way. You don't just accidentally place a blood-soaked diamond ring on a nightstand after using it to kill someone."

"So you think it's the killer trying to tell us something?"

"It might be. It could also—"

She was interrupted by the ringing of her phone. She pulled it out, assuming it would be Johnson to make sure they had arrived. But when she saw **DAD** on the display, she cringed a bit. A flare of anger went spiraling through her, leaving bits of fear in its wake.

She ignored the call and placed her phone face down on the desk. When she returned her attention to the folder in front of her, it was hard to get back on track.

"You okay?" Rhodes asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, you just looked at your phone like it called you a slut or something."

Chloe shrugged, hating the passive feel of it. "Just personal stuff."

Rhodes nodded, clearly not wanting to engage in anything deep. "Yeah, personal stuff can certainly suck."

As Chloe continued to try getting refocused on the folder, there was a knock at the door. When it opened, she saw Deputy Nolan's face peeking in. When he opened it wider, she saw another man

behind him. He looked much older and wore one of those thick gray moustaches that always reminded Chloe of a walrus.

“Agents,” Nolan said, “this is Chief Clifton.”

Clifton came into the office and looked at both of them, giving nods of appreciation. He looked at the folder, currently opened on the desk and revealing one of the photos of the gory cut along Jessie Fairchild’s neck, and quickly looked away.

Chloe and Rhodes ran through a quick series of introductions as Nolan entered behind Chief Clifton, closing the door behind him.

“Was Deputy Nolan able to get you everything you needed?” Clifton asked.

“Absolutely,” Chloe answered. “He was very accommodating.”

“Is there anything else we can get for you?”

“Well, being that it was such a large house, I’m assuming there was a security system. Any evidence of that?”

“Yes, actually,” Nolan said. “The husband gave us the code so we could reset it after leaving the house.”

“And he never got any sort of alerts that the alarms had been tripped?”

“None.”

“Can we get some sort of report on that?” Rhodes asked.

Nolan and Clifton nodded in unison. “I’ll get in touch with the security company,” Nolan said.

“Also, we’d obviously want to speak with the husband,” Chloe said. “Deputy, you said he was in the mountains somewhere with his brother, right? Any idea when he’s coming back?”

“No idea. He didn’t say.”

“I’d really like him to be here, in town,” Chloe said.

“You suspect him?”

“Not necessarily. But he is the man closest to the victim.” She did not put an accusatory tone into her voice, though she did find it irresponsible that the police had simply allowed the husband to leave.

“I’ll get him on the phone, too. He might actually be very accommodating. If he knows the FBI is on this and it will help catch the killer, I think he might get down here pretty quickly, actually.”

“One last thing,” Chloe said. “I know you said the Fairchilds are new to the area. But do either of you happen to know if Jessie Fairchild had any enemies? Any calls or complaints about her and her husband, or maybe from them about someone else?”

“No, nothing like that,” Clifton said. “But that neighborhood...hell, that whole area...it’s sort of a mess. We do get calls from time to time. Jealous wives trying to catch their husbands in affairs that don’t exist, snooty homeowners trying to get their neighbors in trouble because their dog shit in their yard. People in that neighborhood think far too highly of themselves.”

“Forgive me for asking, but why are you telling us this?” Rhodes asked.

“Because while I would not go so far as to say that Jessie Fairchild had enemies, I can almost guarantee you that she had women in the neighborhood that were at least *envious*. It’s a very snotty neighborhood. I know that’s not the best thing for a police chief to say, but it’s the sad truth of the matter.”

“Well, that could potentially mean there’s a deep pool of potential leads,” Chloe said. “If these are the types of women you’re insinuating, there might be quite a bit of gossip. Maybe they already know some things and can lead us in the right direction.”

Clifton chuckled under his breath and shrugged. “I wish you the best of luck with that.”

Chloe knew where he was coming from but was irritated by the unhelpful nature of the comment. “For now, I’d like the contact information of the cleaning lady who discovered the body.”

“We’ve already spoken to her at length,” Clifton said. “You’re welcome to just look over our notes.” He was not necessarily being defensive, but wanted to make sure she knew that they weren’t

totally inept. She wondered if that had anything to do with him realizing that they probably should not have let the husband leave town so soon after the murder.

“All the same, I think I’d like to speak with her personally.”

Clifton folded his arms but nodded. “I’ll see that you get that information promptly,” he said. He gave a quick smile before saying: “It was nice meeting you, Agents.” With that, he opened the door and headed out.

Nolan cringed and said, “He gets like that. Especially the few times we’ve worked with the bureau or other outside agencies. Control issues...just between the three of us.”

Chloe made a zipping gesture across her mouth. “I get it. Now...if we can get the cleaning lady’s information, I’d like to meet with her before it gets too late.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Rosa Ramirez lived in an apartment just on the cusp of the nicer edge of the downtown district. When she took the call from Nolan, she seemed quite eager to help Chloe and Rhodes. When they arrived at her apartment at 4:30, it was clear that she had straightened up her place just for them. She even had coffee and graham crackers set out on her coffee table as snacks.

“Ms. Ramirez,” Chloe said, “how long had you been working for the Fairchilds? As I understand it, they had only been in town for about five weeks.”

“That’s right. I responded to a help wanted ad I saw online. This was about a week before they even moved out here. They wanted everything set up and ready to go when they moved in. That included a house cleaner. I even stepped in to help them unpack some of their things.”

“Did they seem grateful for the help?”

“Yes. It was clear that they weren’t exactly used to people so willing to help out.”

Chloe helped herself to the coffee even though she usually tried to limit her caffeine intake. She wanted Rosa to feel at ease; a comfortable witness or lead was often more prone to stumble across truths they may not even realize they had.

“Were there ever any cross words between you and the Fairchilds?” Rhodes asked.

“No, not a single one. Honestly, I even went in asking for a rate a little over what I typically ask for and there weren’t even any negotiations. Neither of them ever spoke a negative or cross word to me.”

“What about the two of them?” Chloe asked. “Did you ever see them arguing?”

“No. I’ve been trying to think about that myself but I can’t think of a single time. Now, keep in mind that for the five weeks I worked for them, I only saw them together two different times. Mark was usually off on business.”

“Any idea where he would go on these business trips?”

“All over. But I think it was primarily on the east coast. Boston, DC, New York.”

“Do you know if Jessie resented him for it?”

“If she did, she hid it well. She kept herself busy. Like *really* busy. I don’t know that she gave herself time to even really notice that her husband was gone.”

“Busy how?” Rhodes asked.

“Well, the neighborhood they live in is filled with prominent people. Or, if I’m being honest, people who *think* they’re prominent. Jessie was already trying to find her place in that scene. She was sort of dipping her toes in all of the social circles...garden clubs, fundraisers, looking into helping organize local gala events, that sort of thing.”

“Did she officially join one of those things?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Ms. Ramirez, I’m sure you understand that I need to ask you where you were for the earlier part of the day that you discovered Jessie Fairchild’s body.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, letting out a little sigh. “It was Friday. And on Fridays, I take the morning to myself. Sometimes I just sleep in and catch up on a few TV shows I watch. Other times, I get errands done. But this past Friday, I was actually at the library for part of the morning.”

“Did anyone see you? Would there be anyone that can confirm that?”

“Yes. I was emptying out some of my old boxes in storage. I donated a ton of old paperback books to the Friends of the Library. I wheeled them in on one of the library’s little dollies and even helped the assistant librarian shelve them.”

“So you remember what time this might have been?”

“Sure. I got there just after ten thirty, I think. I was out of there around eleven or a little after. Then I drove out to the Fairchilds’ house.”

“Did you stop anywhere along the way.”

“I did. I stopped at Wendy’s to grab lunch.”

“And when you arrived at the house...you saw nothing strange or out of the ordinary?”

“Nothing at all. The first strange thing I saw was Jessie, on the bed in her running clothes.”

“We were told by the police that her husband was here in town...not on business. Do you know if there is any truth to that?”

“I think so. Usually they let me know when Mark is going to be away. But as far as I know, he was at the local office on Friday. I got there right around eleven thirty...which means he had probably been gone about three or four hours by the time I got there.”

“Ms. Ramirez,” Rhodes said, “do you feel there’s any chance at all that Mark might have killed her?”

Rosa shook her head confidently. “No. I mean, I know nothing is impossible, but I really doubt it. He’s a nice guy. And very playful and kind with her. They’re both in their early fifties...the kind of couple that still holds hands. I even saw him playfully smack her on the butt one time, like two young newlyweds. They seemed very happy.”

Chloe let this all sink in. She was confident that Rosa had nothing to do with Jessie Fairchild’s murder. She’d have the local PD follow up on the alibis she’d just given, but she felt it would be wasted effort.

“Thank you for your time,” Chloe said, finishing up her coffee with a long gulp. She handed Rosa one of her business cards as she headed for the door. “Please contact me if you think of anything else.”

Rosa nodded as she walked them to the door. “There *is* one thing that comes to mind,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“The ring on the nightstand...the one used to cut into her neck. It had no business being there. Jessie was sort of a neat freak—it’s why she had a housekeeper even though she kept a mostly clean house. I had never seen jewelry just sitting out.”

Chloe nodded, as she had been hung up on that, too. The ring being there not only served as some sort of message from the killer, but it also proved that the murder was likely not related to wealth or a botched burglary. The ring was an expensive one and had been used as nothing more than a crude weapon. Even though the killer had it in their hands at one point, they’d had no interest in ever stealing it.

And that alone spoke volumes about the killer.

Now, Chloe thought, *all I have to do is translate the killer’s message.*

CHAPTER SIX

It was just after five when Chloe and Rhodes left Rosa's apartment. It was only about a forty-minute drive from where they had parked back to DC. Chloe considered this a big plus, as it eliminated the need for checking into a motel. The can of worms it opened up, though, was that it was hard to tell when to call it a day.

"Should we head to the library to check out Rosa's alibi?" Rhodes asked as Chloe pulled out of the apartment complex parking lot.

"I thought about that, but it's Sunday afternoon. It's doubtful the library would even be open. I was thinking I'd like to find out where that ring came from. See if we can maybe figure out who last wore it. If the husband doesn't recall it even belonging to his wife..."

Rhodes opened her mouth to respond but the chirping of Chloe's cell phone stopped her. Chloe answered right away, hoping for a lead on what was looking to be a slow and grinding Sunday afternoon.

"This is Agent Fine," she answered.

"Agent Fine, this is Deputy Nolan. I thought you'd want to know that I was able to get in touch with Mark Fairchild, the husband. He's due to come by the station around eight tonight. He and his brother are headed back home to take care of funeral arrangements, insurance paperwork, and things of that nature."

"And he knows the FBI is looking into things now?"

"He does. He seemed pleased, and eager to speak with you."

"I'll see you at nine, then," Chloe said, ending the call exactly as she had hoped: with another source of information lined up. When the information came to you rather than having to hunt it all down, it tended to make for a quick and easy case.

Chloe just hoped things continued at this pace.

It was clear from first glance that Mark Fairchild had not been sleeping well. From his appearance alone, Chloe was willing to bet he had not slept a wink since being told his wife had been killed. There were dark circles around his eyes—eyes that seemed to be staring at nothing at all while managing to look rapidly around the small conference room, as if trying to take everything in. His hair was disheveled and a growth of thin stubble covered the lower half of his face.

Still, he looked somewhat centered and determined. He sat partially slouched in a chair, holding a cup of coffee that Nolan had given him, but not sipping from it. His brother was standing in the corner, looking just as tired but carefully watching over his grief-stricken sibling.

Chloe knew that the coming conversation could be difficult. Grieving people who were clearly tired, still dealing with the idea of their recent loss, could be precarious. They could either talk endlessly, often in circles, or lose control of their emotion within just a handful of seconds. So she knew she'd have to choose the leading questions carefully, giving him the feeling that he was in control.

"Mr. Fairchild, I'd like you to walk me through Friday morning. Include every detail you can, no matter how small or trivial you feel it might be."

He nodded, but looked clearly uncomfortable. "Everything," he said with a sleepy grin that looked rather forced. "Well...my alarm went off for work. I hit snooze and when I did, Jessie came to me and snuggled up...sort of a tradition we've had since we were dating. It was Friday and had been a good week for both of us so snuggling led to sex. She enjoyed it in the morning; it was really nothing out of the ordinary."

Chloe felt awkward as she watched his face go through several emotions as he recalled the start to the morning. She gave him a moment as he paused, clearly making sure that he was going to be able to get through it.

“So I hopped in the shower while she answered some work e-mails. I got out of the shower and she was brushing her teeth. There was some small talk. As I got dressed for work, Jessie put on her running clothes—the same ones she was wearing when...”

He trailed off here, taking in a deep breath. He looked to his brother, who gave Mark an encouraging nod. Mark returned the nod and then started again, his voice a bit shaky.

“We went downstairs. She had a smoothie and I had a cup of coffee. She never drank coffee before her run. She said it played hell on her stomach. She walked me to the door, I remember that. She usually does that, just to kiss me goodbye. She was fiddling with her airpods, cueing up whatever podcast she’d been listening to so she could listen to it on her run. We kissed, I got in the car, and that was it. That was the last time I saw her alive.”

“What time do you believe it was when you left the house?” Chloe asked.

“I don’t know an exact time, but it was somewhere between seven fifty-five and eight-oh-five, I’d guess. Certainly no later than that.”

“So we’re looking at a three-, three-and-a-half-hour window,” Rhodes said.

“Mr. Fairchild, had you and your wife made friends yet? Anyone who had come over a few times since you’d moved in?”

“No. Just acquaintances. There had been people in the house, sure. When a new family moves into the neighborhood, people come over with pies and cookies and things like that, you know? But I think the only person who had ever stepped foot in the house that was more than just a welcome-to-the-neighborhood kind of thing was the housekeeper. Oh, and the plumber. We had an issue with the garbage disposal on the first week.”

“I want to also talk about the ring found on the bedside table,” Chloe said. “I understand that you can’t confirm whether or not it belonged to your wife?”

“That’s right. It didn’t look familiar, but that’s not unusual. Jessie never really wore jewelry... just her wedding ring. That may seem silly because the closet is full of jewelry. But Jessie sort of collected jewelry the way some women go crazy with shoes or purses. When her mother passed away six or seven years ago, Jessie got all of her mom’s jewelry. Necklaces, rings, these awful-looking earrings. But it put a fire under Jessie. She started to collect that sort of stuff.”

“Do you recall how many rings came to Jessie through her mother?”

“No. I remember it was mostly in a safety deposit box. Some of it was, anyway. I do know that she received a small box with some necklaces and rings. There had to be at least ten rings in that box.”

“So you’d say there’s a decent chance the ring found at the scene was one of the ones that came from her mother.”

“Probably. But that’s the thing...she kept them in the closet. Whoever did that...”

He stopped here, as if the mere mention of what had been done with the ring had frozen him. He sucked in a breath and shook his head, determined to go on.

“Whoever did it,” he continued, “must have known where to look for it.”

“That or they simply got lucky and figured out where expensive jewelry might be kept.”

“True,” Mark said.

“And the week leading up to Friday...was there anything particularly off about your wife?”

“No. I’ve been wondering that myself...wondering if I missed anything. But I swear...she seemed perfectly fine.”

“We understand that Jessie had started to try to get involved in local groups and organizations,” Rhodes said. “Do you happen to know which ones?”

“She talked a lot about Kid’s Cove, this non-profit that raises money for kids that have trouble paying for school lunches and things like that. There was another one...some garden club or

something like that. I'm pretty sure I know where she kept names and numbers of all of those people, if you'd like to see it."

"We have a copy of that already," Nolan said.

Mark nodded, rolling his eyes. "That's right. I swear...these last three days just sort of all blur together."

"I'm sure," Chloe said. "Mr. Fairchild, thank you for your time. Please...go home and get some sleep. And I ask that you stay in town for the foreseeable future just in case we have more questions."

"Certainly."

He got up and gave a halfhearted wave as he and his brother exited the room. Nolan followed them out, closing the door behind him.

"What do you think?" Rhodes asked Chloe when they were alone again.

"I think even if Mark Fairchild *did* have something worth telling us, he probably wouldn't remember. I think he's telling the truth about that morning, though. His cheeks flushed when he mentioned the sex. And those pauses he took...he was legitimately fighting back tears and a potential sobbing fit."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too."

"Still, it paints an interesting picture, doesn't it? A new wealthy couple comes to town. The husband has a job that keeps them solidly in the upper class. And they seem to get targeted right away...less than five full weeks after they've moved in."

"You think they were running from something?" Rhodes asked. "You think they maybe moved to Falls Church to get away from something in Boston?"

"Could be. I'd like to know as much as I can about his job. Maybe get a peek at the Fairchilds' financial information and criminal records. Maybe even talk to Mark's employer if I have to."

"And I think we need to also check the security company," Rhodes said. "I find it odd that no alarm was tripped. It makes me think Jessie Fairchild willingly let in the person that killed her."

As they mulled all of this over, the conference room door opened and Nolan came back in. He looked drained from having been in the presence of a man who had been so heartbroken and distressed.

"Nolan, what do we know about Mr. Fairchild's job?" Chloe asked.

"He's a standard broker. From what he tells me, he just got lucky with a few deals early in his career. It led him to some high-profile clients becoming very happy with him. He was quite humble about it, but he told us that he brought in a little over six million last year."

"And it's all on the up and up?"

"As far as we can tell. We haven't done a deep, through check into their finances yet, or into his tax returns from last year. We told him it might come down to that before it was all said and done. He seemed a little offended, but gave us his blessing. Even gave us a few numbers to call where he works if we need help."

"So in other words, he's not hiding anything when it comes to money."

"That's right. Clean as a whistle from what we can tell. But I'll probably still call some of the numbers he gave, just to say it's been done."

"I didn't see any note of a criminal record in your files, either," Rhodes added.

"Yeah. Both of the Fairchilds have clean records. Nothing. Not even a speeding ticket."

Chloe looked to the file folder on the table in front of her, suppressing a frown. True, the case seemed to already be veering far away from the strangulation deaths the year before. But there was still a death that had gone unsolved.

She stared at the folder, as if willing it to give her the answers. She had basically memorized what was inside; it told the story of Jessie Fairchild's murder in forms, reports, notes, and crime scene photos.

And for right now, the story seemed to be very open-ended.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chloe had forgotten how useful car rides with a partner could be. They left Falls Church at 8:42 that night and headed back to DC but they made use of those forty minutes. Before they were even out of Falls Church, Rhodes had managed to get a manager from Intel Security on the phone. Intel was the brand of security system the Fairchilds had set up on their property. Chloe listened to the conversation as she headed through the night back home.

She smiled here and there, realizing just how good Rhodes was when it came to dealing with people. Chloe had noticed how Rhodes only asked questions during investigations when she had a good one to ask. She wasn't much for asking one hundred questions and hoping one might stick. She was the same way on the phone when speaking with Intel Security. She polite and cordial, but there was no pussyfooting around what she needed. As such, though, it was hard for Chloe to keep up with the information she was getting, as she was only hearing Rhodes's short-and-to-the-point side of the conversation.

Several minutes later, when the call was over, Rhodes filled her in. Here, Chloe realized another of Rhodes's strengths. She was a copious note-taker and often didn't even need to take the notes at all. The woman's mind was like a lockbox when it came to details.

"Okay, so the gentleman I spoke with said there is no sign that the alarm was sounded last Friday morning," Rhodes said. "He also pulled up their data timeline and said he didn't see where the alarm had been disengaged at all. It wasn't cut off by one of the Fairchilds at any point."

"Did he give you details on how it works?"

"Yeah. The alarm kicks on when the door is opened with force. Opening with a key automatically disengages the alarm. When the door is opened from the inside, it is also disengaged. The only time the alarm would kick on other than someone essentially picking the lock or kicking the door open is if the door is left standing open for more than twenty seconds."

"In the few weeks they've been there, were there any instances of the alarm going off?"

"He said there were two notes on their account. Both came from the first week they were living there. Intel gives courtesy calls when the alarms are triggered. On both of the calls, Mark Fairchild said they'd neglected to fully close the door while bringing in boxes and furniture as they were moving in."

"What about windows? Does the alarm work for windows as well?"

"According to what I was just told, any time a window is opened from the outside, the system has to be deactivated. They gave an example of spring cleaning—making sure the windows and frames are all cleaned. If someone planned to do that sort of cleaning, they should kill the alarm first."

"But you're saying there were no suspicious alarm triggers over the last week or so, right?"

"Not a single one."

"So in other words," Chloe said, "whoever killed Jessie Fairchild did not break in. They were allowed to come inside."

"Seems that way."

The car went quiet as they both pondered this. Chloe knew where they needed to start looking next. So far, all they truly knew about Jessie Fairchild was that ever since she and Mark had moved to Falls Church, she had been looking into how to get involved in local groups and organizations. New to town, neither she nor Mark had any real friends—and that meant most of the people they spoke to would be unreliable.

But she also thought about a question that had come up earlier. Had the Fairchilds perhaps left their home in Boston because they had been running from something? If the investigation ended up taking them into the lives of the Fairchilds all the way back in Boston, this seemingly simple murder case could become a lot more convoluted.

“No friends, no local family,” Rhodes said out loud as they neared DC. “A sister in Boston, both parents deceased. If this thing takes us into Boston...”

Chloe grinned, pleased with how the two of them were starting to think along the same lines, at the same speed. “Well, wasn’t there a note somewhere in the file about a relative of Mark’s? Someone who lives right outside of Falls Church?”

“Yeah, his uncle. But from what I gather, he’s on some kind of trip. A vacation, I think.”

She answered it with the sort of nonchalance that made Chloe think Rhodes felt the same way about that potential lead as she did—that it wouldn’t come to much anyway.

Closing in on home, Chloe slowly allowed herself to slip into more personal thoughts. She strongly considered calling Danielle to apologize for her behavior yesterday. But those kinds of conversations with Danielle typically turned into a rather long discussion, and she did not have the stamina for that.

They returned to bureau headquarters, swapped out the bureau car with their own, and parted ways. Chloe once more thought about Danielle before she left; she even considered driving out to Danielle’s new place—an apartment she had rented just twenty minutes away after moving so her ex-boyfriend had no idea where she was living.

In the end, she decided against it. She knew she and Danielle would be okay—that sometimes, it just took some extra time for both of them to cool down. Still...she had an hour before she needed to ramp down for the night. And with things at a standstill on the Fairchild case until morning, there was one other thing she could do that came to mind. The thought seemed to flip her insides, making her feel slightly sick, but the impulse was there and she acted on it almost immediately.

She pulled out into the street and pointed her car toward her father’s apartment.

She had no intention of actually seeing him, let alone speaking to him. But she needed to prove to herself that she was capable of even driving past his place. It would have to happen at some point if she wanted to check up on him so she may as well get over her nerves as soon as possible.

His apartment was less than half an hour from bureau headquarters, and less than twenty minutes away from her apartment coming in from another direction. It was 10:08 when she cruised into the parking lot. His place wasn’t so much an apartment as a townhouse...the kind of home that was directly attached to another, and then another, in an apartment complex style. She knew the car he drove—a used Ford Focus—and it was parked directly in front of his place. A light was on, visible through the main window.

She paused without parking, peering at that light and wondering what he was doing. Was he just watching TV? Reading, perhaps? She wondered if, when he cut that light out and got ready for bed, visions from his past flooded his mind...his daughters, his dead wife. She wondered if the torture and torment he had put them all through kept him awake some nights.

She certainly hoped so.

Anger started to rise up in her. It rushed through her, hot like injected venom, until she realized that her hands were gripping the steering wheel tight enough to show the whites of her knuckles.

Maybe I should just go in right now, she thought. Knock on his door and lay it all out. Let him know I know what he did...that I read Mom’s diary...

It was compelling enough to make her heart feel like it might burst out of her chest. A pleasant little rush of adrenaline plowed through her bloodstream as she considered it.

But of course, she could not go there. Not yet...

Chloe found the closest empty parking spot and used it to turn around. She headed for home, not realizing until she came to the first stoplight that she still had the steering wheel in a death grip.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It had been quite eye-opening for Danielle to realize that once her last relationship had ended, she found herself unemployed again. The bartending gig and the too-good-to-be-true dreams of running her own bar had been enough to float her through life for a few months but here she was again, without a man and without any sort of meaningful job.

She'd always done a good job of masking her contempt for shit jobs, but this one was particularly difficult. She was bartending at a strip club—only the management was adamant about not calling it a “strip club.” They preferred either just “club” or “gentlemen’s lounge.” As far as Danielle was concerned, it didn’t matter what you called it. The fact of the matter was, there was currently a woman on stage, rhythmically shaking her ass in a man’s face to the beat of some shitty Bruno Mars song.

She finished making the mojito a customer had just ordered (*seriously, who orders a mojito at a strip club?*) and handed it to him. He was about fifty and when he took the drink, he made no effort to hide the fact that he was checking out her boobs. He smiled at her and sipped from his drink, his eyes never leaving her chest.

“You should be up on the stage, you know?” he said. Finally, he looked to her eyes, maybe so she could see the seriousness in his drunken gaze.

“Wow. I haven’t heard that one before. What a unique pick-up line.”

Confused, the guy eventually sneered at her and then moved away from the bar and took a seat closer to the stage.

Yes, she’d had more than a dozen guys clearly baffled that she was behind the bar and not on the stage. Her manager was one of them. And while Danielle had endured enough demeaning jobs in the past, she drew the line at taking her clothes off for drunk men so they could slip fives and tens down her thong.

She knew this was just a temporary job. It *had* to be. She wasn’t sure what she would do to get out of this, though. Maybe she’d finally finish college. She had another year and a half left...and even though she’d be almost thirty by the time she graduated, it would at least be *something*.

Not that the perks of this job were anything to sneeze at. She’d had the job for a month, working four nights out of the week. On her second week, she’d garnered more than seven hundred dollars in tips alone. But it was the atmosphere and the feel of the place. Even when the goth girls came out and danced to music Danielle actually enjoyed, she felt the need to get out as quickly as she could.

Besides...sometimes when the dancers came to the bar or when she happened to run into them backstage, Danielle was always surprised to see that they didn’t look miserable. And when she saw them folding those fifties and hundreds up as if they were just handling napkins, the thought of getting up on stage wasn’t *all that* terrible.

That, more than anything, was why she wanted out of this place as quickly as possible.

She looked up and down the bar and noticed the crowd was thinning out. There were five people at the bar, three of whom—a male and two females—looked to be huddled very tightly, perhaps making plans to close out their Sunday night. Danielle checked her watch and was surprised to see that it was 11:50. Another hour and she could go home...she could go home and sleep until noon—something she had missed over the course of the last year or so as she had tried to become a more responsible adult. A responsible adult who had been far too dependent on a man, but a responsible adult nonetheless.

She started wiping down the drip trays under the taps and checking the liquor bottles to get an updated inventory sheet for her manager. She was in the middle of the tequila row when she heard her name called out from behind her.

“Hey, Danielle.”

It was a male voice. She tried to place it. Only a few guys that frequented this place had bothered to remember her name. She frowned, not in the mood for lighthearted flirting, even if it *did* mean a pretty nice tip.

She turned around, putting on her best agreeable face. But her expression froze when she saw the man sitting at the bar.

It was her father. He not only looked out of place sitting right there in front of her—but the sight of him in a strip club was surreal. To his credit, though, he *did* look incredibly uncomfortable.

The word *dad* formed on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it down. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of calling him that to his face. Instead, the most obvious question came out of her mouth first.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I came by to see you,” he said. He leaned forward, as if trying to distance himself as far as possible from the two topless women on the stage twenty-five feet behind him.

“Let me try another question,” Danielle said. “How did you know I worked here?”

He frowned and nodded to the liquor bottles behind her. “Can I get a whiskey first?”

Acting as quickly as she could, Danielle grabbed a glass and filled it halfway with the cheapest whiskey the place had. She all but slammed it down in front of him. The entire process took less than ten seconds.

“There. Whiskey. Now...speak.”

“I'm not proud of it,” he said, “but I followed you.”

“From where? How do you even know where I live?”

He drained the whiskey in one full chug, grimacing as it went down. He slid the glass to her and gave her a nod to fill it up. Danielle took the glass and slid it to the side.

“Answer the question,” she snapped.

“I don't know where you live. I was driving by Chloe's place last week. Went up and knocked on her door because she won't answer my calls or texts. As I came out of the building and got in my car, I saw you. You were heading into the building and I—”

He stopped here, glancing over his shoulder as a new song came on. Behind him, the same two girls started dancing and gyrating against one another to a newer deplorable excuse for a rock song.

“Can we talk somewhere else?” he asked.

“No. I'm working.”

“Five minutes, Danielle. That's all I want.”

She nearly refused him, but then realized that he had answers she wanted. How did he know she worked here? What else did he know about her? And why the hell was he here in the first place?”

“Hold on,” she said.

She went to the door at the left edge of the bar and opened it. To the right, the dancer who had just come off of the stage was walking up a flight of stairs to the changing room. To the left, a small hallway led to three other rooms—an employee bathroom, an office, and a small break room for the girls.

Her manager was standing in the doorway to his office, speaking with another dancer and the backup DJ. He saw Danielle poking her head out the door, dropped what he was discussing, and came walking to her. It wasn't that she was all that important—she was simply the only bartender on duty; she had been since nine o'clock that night, as Sundays tended to be relatively slow.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“No. Look...can you man the bar for like ten minutes? My fucking father decided to show up. And we don't have a great—”

“Say no more,” he said with a smile. “I understand parent issues more than I care to admit.”

“Thanks,” she said. She doubted the bit about parents was true. He was always nice to her, probably because he was always trying to recruit her as a dancer.

He came out and stood behind the bar, allowing Danielle to lift the little employee door on the side. She didn't even look at her father as she passed by him. She simply said, "Come on already," and headed for the exit. She nodded to the security guard at the back entrance and he stepped aside to let them pass through.

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