

a chloe fine psychological suspense--book 6

tinted  
windows

blake pierce

A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery

Blake Pierce

**Tinted Windows**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Pierce B.**

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

ISBN 978-1-09-431072-5

“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) TINTED WINDOWS (A Chloe Fine Mystery) is book #6 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 popular personal trainer is murdered in a high-end suburb, FBI VICAP Special Agent Chloe Fine, 27, is summoned to sift through a small town filled with cheating spouses and figure out who may have wanted him dead—and why. Behind the manicured lawns, Chloe learns, lie broken marriages, lonely spouses, secrets, and endless lies—all hiding behind the veil of perfection. Beneath the carefully built façade of a polished, upstanding community lies a populace dishonest to its core. What secrets led to this man’s being murdered? And who will be next to die? An emotionally wrought psychological suspense with layered characters, small-town ambiance and heart-pounding suspense, TINTED WINDOWS is book #6 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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# **Blake Pierce**

## **Tinted Windows (A Chloe Fine Psychological Suspense Mystery—Book 6)**

**Blake Pierce**

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes sixteen 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 five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the new ADELE SHARP mystery series.

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](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.

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## PROLOGUE

Viktor Bjurman had heard the myths and stories about runner's high. He had never experienced it himself—at least not by running. Though Viktor worked out more than the average man, running had not been something he'd ever really bought into. He did jog from time to time, but the full-out runs just weren't his thing. He did not envy those who had experienced runner's high, though. No, he had felt it himself many times without running. He knew, as a personal trainer, that the so-called runner's high was an experience available to anyone who worked out in any capacity and did not mind stretching themselves to the limit.

He'd experienced it a few times with a kettlebell circuit he religiously adhered to, as well as during an intense weightlifting session a few months ago where he had pushed his arms to failure. That so-called high was nothing more than his body finding another gear that most people kept hidden—a gear that could only be accessed by breaking through the physical barriers and limitations most people built up for themselves.

As he stepped out of the house on Primrose Street, Viktor was on a totally different kind of high. He felt adventurous and at least twenty years younger than his actual age of thirty-eight. He'd just wrapped his last session of the day—a very busy day that had seen him visit five different homes for personal training sessions, and two in a local gym. He was worn out and exhausted...but was also experiencing something very akin to runner's high.

He'd saved the best client for last. Theresa Diaz was a forty-seven-year-old woman whom he'd been working with for over a year. His workouts had caused her to lose more than thirty pounds within that year, getting her closer to the body she had been wanting. The significant weight loss had also increased her confidence.

Viktor assumed that was why she had been so aggressive in starting the affair. She was married, and had been for twenty-three years. She'd openly confessed that her husband cared nothing for her, only paying attention to her when he wanted her for his own physical needs. That very conversation had opened the door for Viktor. And although he, too, was married, he had taken the opportunity.

It had not been the first client he had slept with, so he had learned to push away any thoughts of guilt. He and Theresa had been having sex for the better part of three months now, after living through the tension of working out together for nearly fifteen months. Viktor had known she'd be good. A similar experience from a year or so ago had made him think as much; apparently, women who had been overlooked by their husbands and then rediscovered their confidence were typically eager, willing, and aggressive in bed.

Or, as it had been just five minutes ago with him and Theresa, on the living room floor.

He knew didn't need to hurry; Theresa's husband was out of town. He'd mentioned as much when he had FaceTimed her when they had *actually* been working out. Still, he jogged a little faster than usual when he left her house. His own home wasn't too far away, just six blocks to the east. It would be a nice, brisk jog. Night had just fallen and the temperature was a chilly sixty degrees.

He was replaying the workout session (the later extracurricular part, not the actual workout that he was paid for) in his mind. It had been the stuff of fantasies, like something right out of a porn script. He'd had several conquests during his career as a personal trainer, but he thought Theresa Diaz was going to prove to be the best. When they were together physically, it was almost like she was taking out her aggressions of a loveless marriage and wasted twenty-three years on him. And he was more than happy to let her do so. He supposed, in an odd way, he should be thanking her sorry excuse for a husband—

The thought was brought to a screeching halt as he saw something come flying toward him.

He had no idea what it was. A car? Something someone had thrown at him? He did not know. All he knew was that it slammed into his stomach with tremendous force.

Viktor doubled over, dropping to a knee. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of the object that had struck him. It was an aluminum baseball bat. And as he spied it, it was rising into the air. Viktor tried sucking air into his lungs, but he could not breathe. The blow had taken all of the wind out of him and caused a terrible pain along his right side. All of this came together in a sickening conclusion as he watched the bat fall again.

It struck his chest this time. The noise was strange—as if the person behind the bat had struck an empty cardboard box rather than his chest. There was an explosion of pain in his chest as something shattered inside of him. He tried to scream but could still not draw in a breath. He did, however, raise his arms up as he saw the bat already coming down for another blow.

He did stop the bat from striking his chest again, but his right wrist was shattered. A mewling sort of moan escaped his lips as he could finally draw in air.

He saw the shape behind the bat. It was masculine, but he could not see a face. Through the pain, he wondered if it was Theresa's husband. It made sense, but—

Logic and reason went fleeing from him as the bat came down again. This time it struck his left side, breaking his ribs. He tried to scream again but it was too much—no wind, too much pain. He opened his mouth, hoping *something* would come out.

But there was nothing. Just the rise and fall of the bat. He was struck in the stomach again, then the chest, then another cataclysm of pain as he was caught in the right shoulder, pulverizing the bone.

Viktor lost count of how many times the bat rose and fell.

Somewhere around the ninth or tenth attack, something inside of him seemed to give way, snapping like an invisible thread. He watched the bat descend again but, mercifully, did not feel the pain of it as a sudden darkness came swooping in to steal him away.

## CHAPTER ONE

Chloe Fine was listening to her deceased father's voice as a late-summer thunderstorm rumbled outside. She sat on her couch in her quiet apartment, holding her sister's voice recorder in her hand. She'd press play, listen for a bit, and then rewind it to hear it back again. She was dressed in an old T-shirt and a pair of comfortable pajama pants, her knees curled to her chest as if she were a little girl listening to some sort of morbid bedtime story.

She had listened to the single line where he admitted to the planned murder of her mother over and over again. It had become almost like a mantra, like the chorus to a song that got stuck in her head.

With the thunder softly booming outside, Chloe listened to it one last time. She held the recorder with both hands, almost as if she were expecting it to come to life and she'd be ready to strangle it when it did. She played the same sixteen seconds over again, trying to imagine what Danielle had been going through in that old abandoned warehouse.

She was oddly proud of her sister, but also a little frightened by the lengths she had gone to get this confession.

Chloe stopped the recorder and set it down on her coffee table. She sat in the silence for a moment, trying to grow acclimated to the current state of her life. It was not the first time she'd done this. It was a lot to take in, a lot to digest.

It had been five days since she and Danielle had buried their father in that unremarkable little stretch of forest in Texas. They'd buried him deep enough, and though she was sure his body might eventually be discovered by some form of wildlife, that would be many years down the road. She supposed if someone wanted to really go looking for the recently missing Aiden Fine, they could potentially find his body out there. But it would take a lot of looking.

That was the beauty of it, though. No one was going to look for him. He had no one to give a damn that he was gone. No one.

Besides, as far as any form of law enforcement knew, Aiden Fine was on the run, probably somewhere in Mexico by now.

The lie had been simple yet complex. And because the sisters had the same tale—not to mention the fact that one of the sisters was an FBI agent who had, on at least one occasion, been vocal about her estranged father—no one had really questioned it. Instead, there was currently a statewide manhunt for Aiden Fine.

That was the only part Chloe felt truly guilty about. She knew the bureau was using resources to find him. But she also knew that when the trail proved to be cold in about two weeks, the case would lose steam until it eventually became nothing more than a distant and hopeless case pushed back into reams and gigabytes of files.

Aiden Fine had kidnapped his daughter. It had started when he invited her over to his place for dinner. Things had gotten heated, a brief fight had ensued, and then Aiden used Danielle's car to cart her off to some shithole town in Texas. He had taken her there because he knew it was a place she had once tried to escape from. According to Danielle, he'd claimed it had been a way to break her spirit, to let her know that even when she had been running from her demons, he had known where she was.

Even though the bureau had eaten the story up, Chloe had still been reprimanded. She had, after all, gone to save her sister and knowingly stepped into a dangerous situation. As far as they knew, though, Aiden had managed to escape her and Danielle, making a run for it.

Looking at the tape recorder, Chloe couldn't help but wonder if they had gone about it wrong. The cops and the bureau had not seen the recorder, of course. No, Chloe had taken that, as there had been a few little remarks made here and there from Danielle that told the real story—that it had been *she* who had kidnapped *him*.

Still, they had a confession. It would have been enough to put him away. And then they could have skewed the story about how he had then attempted to kill Danielle, so she had been forced to kill him in self-defense. Sure, there may have been a few more loose ends that way, but it would have meant far less lying to the very same bureau she was working for.

In the end, she supposed it didn't matter. Regardless of what story they had gone with, the most important question of all would not have been answered.

Her sister had killed their father. And if it had come down to it, Chloe would have killed him as well, if it meant saving Danielle. So that raised the question: did they both possess that same darkness their father had?

And now that they had worked together to hide such a sin, would that darkness have more of a hold on them?

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Chloe fell asleep to the thunderstorm, sprawled on her couch. When her alarm clock shrieked from the bedroom the following morning, she sat up with a pain in her back, the result of so awkwardly sleeping on the couch. She walked to the bedroom, stretching her back out, and slapped the alarm button to shut it up.

She looked around her bedroom and realized that she had spent the last five days in something of a stupor. She needed to clean up. She needed to do laundry. She needed to eat a decent meal rather than something straight out of the microwave.

She wondered if she could call in and take a sick day. She was sure Director Johnson would see through it, but given what she and her sister had just endured, she thought he might be okay with it. She took a quick hot shower to loosen her back, hoping it might help her to come around and get out of the funk she'd been in. It helped a bit, though when she dried off and got dressed, she still liked the idea of taking a day or two off.

She was about to grab her phone to place the call, but it rang before she could pick it up. When she saw that it was coming from FBI headquarters, she cringed. *So much for a day off, I guess...*

She answered the call and listened to Johnson's secretary give a quick *Good morning*, before transferring her through to Johnson's office line.

"Agent Fine, did I catch you before you left for work?" Johnson asked.

"Yes sir."

"Good. I need you in my office as soon as possible. There's a briefing we need to go over if you're up to it."

Honestly, she wasn't sure if she was up to it or not. What she did know was that if she did nothing but sit around her apartment for another few days second-guessing everything she and Danielle had done and fabricated, she might just start to go a little crazy. She toyed with the idea of passing on the debrief and feigning sick again but only for a moment. There was a potential new case out there. Of course she was going to take it.

"Sounds good," she said, still not having decided if this was true or not. "See you in half an hour."

She rushed through getting dressed and then wolfed down a quick breakfast of cereal and toast before leaving. Even doing that was a welcome change. Routine was a great way to get back into the swing of things. Even though she had only been feeling dreary for the last five days, it was five days that had set her back mentally and emotionally. Yes, she had reported in to work but once she got there, she'd felt like nothing more than a mindless drone, her mind on about a million other things.

But now that she was reporting in to work to get the details on a potential case, it felt different. For the first time since leaving Texas, she felt like she might be able to start moving toward putting it all behind her.

When she arrived at work, she wasted no time. She headed straight for Johnson's office, wondering what sort of case he'd have her on. For some reason, she had somehow gotten something of a reputation as the agent who cracked the seedy cases in suburbia, the ones involving rich and spoiled adults who spent far too much of their lives hiding secrets.

*Seems like I'd fit right in some of those neighborhoods, she thought. Because as much as I want to deny it, I now have secrets that I'm never going to outrun.*

When she got to Johnson's office, she started for the seat she usually occupied on the front end of his desk. But then she saw that he wasn't at his desk. Instead, he was sitting at the small conference room table at the back of his office. And he wasn't alone. There was one other man and a woman sitting with him. She had seen the man before; his name was Beau Craddock and he was somewhere quite high up on the bureau's ladder—above Director Johnson for sure. She had never seen the woman before, but if she was in the company of Craddock, Chloe assumed she was also from further up the food chain.

"Agent Fine," Johnson said. "Please have a seat."

"Okay..."

There was only one other seat at the table, right at the very end. She took it, giving polite little nods to those in attendance.

"Agent Fine, let me introduce you to Deputy Director Craddock and Special Council to the Director, Sarah Kirsch."

Craddock and Kirsch said nothing. Kirsch did manage a rather fake-looking smile, though.

"We'd like to hear the timeline of events as they occurred when you were out in Texas to find your sister," Craddock said.

A cold knot of dread wound its way through Chloe's guts. She looked directly at Johnson, confused. "Sir, I've gone through this two different times—once with you and once with the police. Is this really necessary?"

"Honestly, probably not," Kirsch said before Johnson could answer. "But as it stands, you showed up on the scene where a man who is currently wanted for kidnapping and abuse had his victim. So yes, your testimony is worth hearing."

Johnson gave her a shrug and a little *what-are-you-gonna-do* look. "Sorry, Fine, but the fact that you happen to be closely related to the abductee and the abductor doesn't let you slide. It has obviously attracted the attention of higher offices. But, as I told them, everything checks out. There's nothing shady going on here. They'd just like to hear it themselves."

*Nothing shady, my ass, Chloe thought. If there was nothing shady, you would have told me this was happening when you called this morning. Instead, you blindsided me with it. You're trying to trip me up, you bastard.*

But what could she do?

She sat back in the chair, feeling like she had just willingly placed her foot into a bear trap.

## CHAPTER TWO

Craddock started the questioning. When he did, he wore a very small smile. She was sure it was there to try to make her feel more at ease, but it made it look like he was enjoying the moment of putting her through this torture.

“Agent Fine, how did you happen to know where your sister was?”

The truth, of course, was that Danielle had called her from a pay phone. But the truth would damn them both. She pulled up the story they had come up with as they had buried their father and recited from it.

“Honestly, it was almost a lucky guess. When I knew something was going on, I started trying to think of places my father might take her. Danielle once lived in Millseed—during a time in her life when she was verbally confrontational with our father. She used to tell me that the one time she spoke with him—during a visit to see him in prison—he told her she belonged in a place like Millseed. A sorry excuse for a town, drying up and dying. He said it would be a terrible place to die but maybe that’s what she deserved.”

“Was your father always so dramatic and good with foreshadowing?” Kirsch asked.

“Forgive me if I don’t want to discuss my father’s personality with you,” Chloe said. “Is this about a profile on my father or questioning me once again about all that happened?”

Craddock and Kirsch exchanged a perturbed glance before carrying on. Johnson stared her down, his expression conveying a simple message: *Watch your tone.*

“Can you tell us exactly what happened when you arrived?” Kirsch asked.

“The place was easy to find,” Chloe said. “Danielle had told me stories about some of the not-so-lawful things she and some friends used to do out at that old warehouse. I had to stop at a store and ask how to get there. When I did get there, he had her tied to a chair and was slapping her. I confronted him, we fought a bit, and he managed to get away.”

“Define *fight*,” Craddock said.

“The use of fists to punch one another. Sometimes kicking. The attempt to better your opponent with physical force.”

“Agent Fine,” Kirsch said, “I suggest you take this inquiry seriously.”

“Oh, I am. And I took it seriously the other two times I was deeply questioned about it.” She took a moment here, taking a series of breaths to try to keep herself in control. “Look. I understand the need to understand it all and I fully accept my faults in trying to take matters into my own hands. But you have to understand...this is not just a case. This is my sister and my father and the whole deplorable history between us. I don’t particularly enjoy being put through this wringer again and again.”

Her little plea must have worked—somewhat, at least. Craddock and Kirsch exchanged a sorrowful look between them. They then looked to Johnson, who gave a small shrug.

“Of course we are trying to keep that in consideration,” Craddock said. Then, as if choosing each word carefully, he asked: “Do you think you injured him during the fight?”

So maybe her plea wasn’t as effective as she had thought. Angry, she went ahead and answered the question. She lied, saying she thought she may have landed a blow that could have resulted in a cracked or broken rib. It was an extra and useless detail, but in these sorts of interrogations, she knew that they would be looking for such details.

As they continued to question her, she became very aware of what, exactly, they were doing. They were having her go back over her story, making her retrace it from a different standpoint, seeing if she would change anything. They were trying to trip her up...she just wasn’t exactly sure why.

*Maybe they found something that breaks the story apart*, she thought. But this was doubtful. If that were the case, the questions would have been more direct and they may even make an accusation.

But no...instead, they were looking for cracks in her story. And Chloe did not intend to give them any.

But she wondered what this scenario might be like if Danielle was sitting in her seat. If they brought Danielle in and had her run through the story for a third time—in a more official setting with these stuffed suits surrounding her—would she crack?

It scared Chloe to think about it. So she did her best not to as she swallowed down her anger and continued to answer their questions like a good little girl.

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It was quicker than she had been expecting when she sat down. Craddock and Kirsch took their leave fifteen minutes later. When they were gone, Johnson looked at her from across the table. Chloe was interested to see if he was going to try to play the sympathetic good guy or if he was going to side with the power duo that had just left his office.

“Sorry to make you go through that again,” he said.

“Are you? You seemed to do a good job of blending in with them.”

“Fine...I understand you’re under an immense amount of emotional pressure, but I still need you to mind your tone and your attitude. I’m trying to be as reasonable as I can, but I will certainly file a report for insubordination if you continue to address me and your other superiors in this smart-ass way.”

Still swallowing her anger and her pride down like some bitter pill, she nodded. “I understand. Now, can I go?”

“Yes. I believe you’ll find assignments on your desk. Wiretap detail and a research request from a field agent in Philadelphia, I believe.”

“Are you kidding me?”

She exited his office before he had time to offer an answer or an explanation. While she certainly did not think she was above the more trivial desk-oriented work that many agents endured on a weekly basis, it still seemed like a step back. She couldn’t help but wonder if it was a punishment of sorts—and if it was, she wondered how long she’d be mired in it.

Usually one to keep her emotions contained, Chloe found herself struggling to keep her anger in check. She took her time as she walked to her cubicle, knowing she was only going to grow angrier when she saw the bullshit work that Johnson had lined up for her.

She was so caught up in her own emotional chaos that she almost didn’t notice the familiar face coming out of an office at the end of the hallway. It was Rhodes, her face pointed down as she scrolled through something on her phone. When she looked up and saw Chloe standing there, she looked at first alarmed and then relieved.

“You good?” Rhodes asked.

“Yeah. But you saw me yesterday. Why do you ask now?”

“Word gets around,” Rhodes said. “I heard you had been called into a meeting with Johnson today. I also heard that Director Craddock was there. I figure you were getting reamed for something.”

“No, not really. Just...they keep wanting to plow up this story about my sister and my father, and I’m just done with it.”

Rhodes looked up and down the hall, as if wanting to make sure no one was within hearing distance. “I wonder if they’re looking to see if it emotionally affected you...maybe seeing if you’re capable of working after such a personal and traumatic event.”

“Doubtful.”

“I don’t know. It would make sense as to why I was just given an assignment without you as a partner. I know we haven’t been made official partners yet, but the case looks like it would be right up your alley.”

“What? When did you get the assignment?”

“Half hour ago. I’m about to set up travel arrangements right now. The reason I was given was that Johnson wasn’t sure you were up for the task. He thought you might need some time to recuperate.”

Chloe grinned, but only because it was easier to do that than to bite back her scream of anger. “I’m perfectly fine. Apparently, his idea if recuperating is listening in on wiretaps and helping out the research department.”

“You poor thing,” Rhodes said. “If you want, I could push to get you added.”

“I appreciate it,” she said, “but I think I’ll make the request.”

Rhodes nodded, but it was clear that she was uncomfortable with the way it was all going down. “Don’t push, though. I wouldn’t want you getting into trouble or anything.”

“I won’t.”

She was about to turn around and head right back to Johnson’s office, but then a thought occurred to her. It wasn’t like Rhodes to show this type of concern. The phrase *I wouldn’t want you getting into trouble or anything* was not like her at all.

“Rhodes...have you heard anything? About me or my sister?”

“Nothing anyone else hasn’t already heard. It sort of got around that you went down to Texas and had some sort of confrontation with your father. Most people around here think it was heroic of you. I think Johnson probably does, too...he just has his superiors breathing down his neck.”

Chloe wasn’t quite sure why, but she didn’t believe her. She felt that she was getting to know Rhodes pretty well, and there was something about the way she had answered the question that did not sit right with Chloe. Still, if she wanted to get on this case and try to carry on with her life as usual, she was going to have to let it sit for now.

She walked back down the hallway to Johnson’s office and happened to run into him in the hallway while he was on his way to somewhere else.

“So, I spoke with Rhodes,” she said. “Why was I not given the chance to work this new case with her?”

“Not that I have to answer to you, but I didn’t know that you would be ready to head back out, given everything you had been through.”

“I appreciate that, sir. But if nothing else, I think it might actually help me.”

He smirked at her and she could not tell if it was one of disgust or good nature. “Would it help to get you over this subordinate attitude you’ve got going on?”

“I can’t promise it,” she said. She meant it as a joke, hoping it might sway him.

“She’s due to leave within a few hours. Can you just drop things that quickly and go?”

“Yes, sir.”

Johnson considered this for a moment and then sighed. “The case *does* seem to fall right into your wheelhouse.” He then gave a defeated little shrug and said, “Okay. Speak with Rhodes and have her forward you all of the case details. You’re officially on the case, but I need you to be responsible. If you get out there and find that you *aren’t* ready for it just yet, I need you to be honest about it.”

“Of course. And thank you, sir.”

She wheeled back around, heading for Rhodes’s office before he could change his mind.

## CHAPTER THREE

Danielle had been handling the aftermath of Millseed, Texas, about as well as she might have expected. Because Danielle had always preferred solitude and stewing in it to actually trying to be proactive, she had spent the five days since coming back home sitting in her apartment. The only thing she had done in terms of going out and trying to better herself was seeing the doctor in regards to her injuries. She had suffered a mild concussion and a slightly sprained ankle from the confrontation with her father and nothing more.

Still, she felt sore all over. She had read something somewhere about how the body keeps score—how even when there is no psychical trauma, your muscles and nerve endings recall the tension of a given time or place and can cause it to resurface.

Apparently, her body was doing exactly that.

She was also having to deal with the fact that she held no regrets. She was glad the bastard was dead—glad even that she had helped get him to such a state. When she looked back to the backbreaking work of digging the grave and then shoving him in, she was filled with relief and pride rather than any sort of sadness.

These were all things she would never tell Chloe. She was well aware that Chloe had always thought she was a little deranged. It was hard to read Chloe on the matter, though. Sometimes it was broached as an almost passive sort of comic relief, while other times she felt that Chloe almost looked down on her because of it.

Honestly, Danielle just wanted to get back to her life—back to work, back to pretending like her father didn't exist. She still felt that it had been unfair of him to resurface after she had spent so much of her life pretending he didn't exist in the first place.

Now, on day five after everything had taken place in Millseed, Danielle was sitting on her couch, trying to decide what to watch on Netflix. She knew she needed a shower, knew she needed to call into work to see when they would let her start picking up shifts again. But she knew once she did that, her life *would* begin again. And as cliché as it seemed, she knew that now that her father was dead, there would be a new chapter to her life beginning when she did decide to get her ass off the couch.

As if reading her thoughts about needing to get into action, her cell phone rang on her coffee table. She reached out for it and was surprised to see it was Chloe. They'd only spoken once since returning from Texas. It was unlike Chloe to distance herself after something so monumental, but Danielle assumed she had her reasons. The lies they had constructed were so intricate and numerous that she likely figured it was best not to talk very much for a while.

*So then why is she calling now?*

Curious, she answered the call. "Hey, sis."

"Hey, Danielle. How are you feeling?"

"Rested up and mostly fine, I think. You?"

"Same. I haven't been sleeping particularly well, though. I feel the need to just start life back up again, you know?"

"I do, actually," Danielle said. "The sleep thing...you having nightmares?"

"No. It's just anxiety, I think. Look, D...there's something a little strange going on at work and I wanted to give you a heads-up. I was questioned again this morning about what happened. It wasn't just my director this time, though. He brought in some other people from higher up—the sort of people that only get involved when there could be potential trouble brewing."

"How'd you do?" Danielle asked. She knew just how careful her sister could be. She didn't think Chloe would have cracked under the pressure, but she wasn't absolutely positive. If either one of them cracked or slipped up and their stories all of a sudden didn't line up, they were both going to be in some pretty deep shit.

“I did fine, but I’m worried they might call you in, too.”

“Don’t I need to be arrested for them to question me like that?”

“No. It’s almost considered a courtesy at this point. They’ve already questioned you, so they’d expect you to accommodate them again.”

“To hell with that. Why would I want to go through it again?”

“If they do contact you, you can’t have that sort of attitude.”

Danielle rolled her eyes. “So I just bend over and keep taking it as long as they want to give it to me?”

“For a while, yes. Just please...Danielle, please stick to the story. Don’t let your emotions or annoyance take over.”

“Is that really why you called?” Danielle asked.

“It is. Well, that and because I know how you tend to stew in your emotions when things get bad. How are you holding up?”

“I stink. And I’m out of things to binge on Netflix. Thinking of heading back in to work tomorrow.”

“That sounds good,” Chloe said. “Please don’t talk about what we did to the people you work with, okay?”

“My God, Chloe. I’m not an idiot.”

“I know, I just—”

“Chloe, let’s not do this. How about you go ahead and resume your life and I’ll do the same. Let’s give it a few weeks and see where we are. I know how this works. We’ve been through something pretty fucked up. And no matter how you like to paint it in *your* head, you and I have never been especially close. We don’t have that tight sisterhood bond, you know? So maybe we don’t need each other to get through this.”

She sensed she had said too much about halfway through, but it had been too late to stop by that point.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right,” Chloe said. Her voice was deflated and thin. Danielle had clearly hurt her feelings—something she had never been fully aware of either as a child or as a grown woman.

“Chloe...”

“I think you should get back to work,” Chloe interrupted. “Pick up your life like it was before all of this. And if the bureau or the cops come calling, all I ask is that you play it cool. Don’t take it personally. They are, after all, only doing their jobs.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Love you, sis. Bye for now.”

Before Danielle could respond, Chloe ended the call. Danielle set her phone down slowly, not quite sure why she was so bothered by the nature of the conversation. She had always been the sister who had not been bothered by hostile discussions. But now, to feel that Chloe was so annoyed with her, she felt like she was letting her sister down.

*It’s because she saved your ass from a stupid mistake,* she thought.

Yes, it had occurred to her several times in the last few days that Chloe had likely saved her life. And that would change the direction of their relationship from here on out. Never having been comfortable with feeling as if she owed people anything, Danielle was simply not sure how to handle it.

She absently started scrolling through the Netflix home screen again. She looked back to her phone and considered calling work. Maybe she could even get on the schedule for tonight.

Chloe was right, after all; she had to pick things up at some point. She no longer had the shadow of her father looking over her to blame everything on. No, now the bigger mistake was one that she had to own—the knowledge of knowing she had played a very large hand in her father’s death.

Yes, it would alter her entire life from here on out, but it was no reason to throw in the towel and give up on everything. But what scared her the most was the notion of discovering—even after her father was no longer around—that he may not have been the only problem after all.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Chloe had pored over the information in the case files the moment she received them. She did not realize it then, but she was diving into the case in the same way an alcoholic turned to the bottle. She was trying to drown out the reality of what she and Danielle had done. She felt that if she could bury it all beneath enough passion for her work, she might just be able to obliterate it completely after a while.

They were headed to the rather small town of Pine Point, Virginia. About ten miles outside of Winchester, it boasted a population of just under ten thousand and was made up of predominately wealthy families, making it a case that seemed to line up with just about every case Chloe and Rhodes had been assigned to. The difference here, though, was that the victims were both male. From what Chloe could tell from the reports, there was nothing special or unique about the killings. It appeared that in both cases, the men had been beaten to death rather brutally, with no apparent links between the two.

“Getting tired of these high-end neighborhoods yet?” Rhodes asked from behind the wheel. Chloe, looking over the case files on her tablet, looked away from the content and out the window. Somehow, they had already arrived. The distance between DC and Pine Point was only about an hour and a half, and it had gone by quickly.

“I’m getting there,” Chloe admitted. “You have to admit, though...the familiarity of it is pretty nice, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose. The files for this one, though...makes me think this one is going to turn into nothing more than some whacked out muscle-bound dick taking his aggressions out on those he feels are either beneath him, or a threat to him.”

This had also crossed Chloe’s mind, but she wasn’t too sure. Someone killing for those reasons would likely be perfectly fine with placing a bullet between someone’s eyes or slicing through a throat. A brutal beating on two separate occasions seemed to speak to something a little darker.

There was more to dissect, but her brain was in a fog of sorts. There were a few questions she wanted to ask Rhodes—questions to help her probe into what Johnson and others in the bureau were truly thinking about what she had helped her sister do. She couldn’t help but wonder if they knew more than they were telling but didn’t have enough evidence to actually confront her. After all, it was the fact that Johnson had been fully prepared to send Rhodes out on this case alone that had Chloe more paranoid than anything else.

“Can I ask you something, Rhodes?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Have you heard anything about an internal investigation into my actions regarding my sister?”

She tried to read Rhodes’s reaction but her partner had a poker face. After a few moments, she shook her head. “I don’t think so. I know there were questions about your father and his abduction of your sister, but I haven’t heard anything about an internal investigation into your actions.” She hesitated for a moment and then shrugged. “If you’re worried about Johnson not immediately pairing you with me for this case, I wouldn’t read too much into it. I’d imagine he was just taking your mental well-being into consideration.”

“Maybe.”

“Now...let me ask *you* something,” Rhodes said. “And please don’t take this the wrong way. This is just between the two of us, but I need to know. Is there anything I need to know about? Is there anything you’re afraid they might be looking into?”

“No,” Chloe said. She feared she’d answered too quickly, with a bit too much bite to her tone.

“I had to ask,” Rhodes said. “Working together in this capacity and all. I can’t claim to understand what you’re going through, so I won’t patronize you. But I just need to know you’re good

to go. In hindsight, I should have maybe asked before you signed on to help with this case, but you know how it goes.”

“I’m good.”

This was mostly true, but now Chloe could not help but wonder if Rhodes’s prying had ulterior motives. Had Johnson spoken with Rhodes before they left DC, asking her to try to pry information out of her? It wasn’t like Rhodes to ask deep, personal questions. She typically remained above the surface, not going too deep. For her to pry so blatantly seemed a little out of character for her.

“Good,” Rhodes said. “And I hope you know that if you *do* ever need to talk it out or process through it or whatever, I’m a decent listener.”

“Thanks,” Chloe said, though the comment made her even more suspicious.

The two women fell silent as the GPS on Rhodes’s phone told them to turn in half a mile. And beyond that turn was their destination, the crime scene of the second victim.

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There were two local cops waiting for them, as had been arranged with a phone call before leaving bureau headquarters. Their car was parked on the side of the road, a few feet away from a curb where two streets intersected. One of the cops, a very tall red-headed woman, smiled and pointed to the space directly behind their car. Rhodes pulled into the designated place and said: “This one already seems bossy.”

Chloe and Rhodes stepped out of the car and joined the two cops on the sidewalk. The tall woman greeted them first, her smile wide and strikingly beautiful. The second cop was an African American man who looked to be forty or so. He had the look of someone who knew full well he worked in the shadow of his partner. When he shook Chloe’s and Rhodes’s hands, introducing himself as Officer Benson, he did so with a lackluster smile.

The tall redhead was named Anderson, and she spoke with a slight southern drawl. “Good to meet you,” she said, the *you* coming out with a dragged out *a* on the end, the typical southern *ya*. It made Chloe wonder if she was the type who used the word *y’all*.

“So,” Anderson said, “it’s a pretty simple story. A guy named Viktor Bjurman was found on this curb last night. Two teenagers on bikes discovered him. The blood was still pouring out of him. He was pronounced dead right away when the ambulance got here. The latest report from this morning tells us that there are multiple causes: blunt force trauma to the head, a broken rib, which was shoved upwards and pierced his heart, nearly completely crushed chest and breastbone, or a collapsed lung. Take your pick.”

“Any clear idea on the weapon of choice?” Chloe asked.

“Everyone is assuming it was a bat,” Anderson said. “The coroner has all but agreed with this, but says if it *was* a bat, it was an aluminum one. Bjurman was struck with such force that a wooden bat would have left splinters.”

“Is there any connection to Bjurman and the first victim?” Rhodes asked.

“None that we can find,” Benson said. “Victim one—a guy by the name of Steven Fielding—was found in his home. His wife discovered him sprawled out on the living room floor.”

“At first, it looked like a botched burglary,” Anderson said. “Someone broke in, beat the hell out of the guy who just happened to be home, and took some stuff. But as of right now, the wife can’t come up with a single thing that appears to be missing. So it looks like if it *was* a break-in, it was only to kill Fielding.”

“The files indicate that the first murder wasn’t as brutal as this second one, right?” Chloe asked.

“Depends on your definition of brutal,” Anderson said. “He was struck in the head and face with something hard—something that may or may not have also been an aluminum bat. Fielding’s nose was crushed to oblivion. Grossest damned thing I’ve ever seen.”

“But on the other hand,” Benson said, “Bjurman’s face appeared to have never been struck, though there was a single blow to the top of the head that left a slight indentation.”

Chloe walked a few steps forward, looking to the area on the sidewalk that had clearly been Viktor Bjurman’s final resting place. The dried blood was still visible, though it was clear that the city maintenance crew had done its best to clean it up.

“Is there anything at all remarkable about this intersection?” she asked.

“Nothing at all,” Benson said. “It’s just like any other corner in this town.”

Chloe walked to the end of the corner and looked to the right. If Bjurman was indeed attacked here on the street, this would be where the attacker had been hiding. It would have been easy enough, she supposed. There was no stoplight, just a stop sign. Before the sign, though, there was a monstrous oak tree that had deposited acorns all over the ground. The oak was bordered by withering shrubs. Still, even without their foliage, they would provide more than enough room for someone to remain hidden, so long as they were crouching down.

“The files state that Bjurman was some sort of athletic trainer,” Chloe said. “Any idea what kind?”

“Yeah, he was more of a fitness guy, not a trainer per se,” Anderson said. “Worked down at a private gym, but he did house calls, too.”

“What gym might that be?”

“Fulbright Fitness. This super pricey place that pushes yoga, sweat rooms, things like that.”

“And what about Fielding?” Rhodes asked. “What did he do?”

“Car detailer by day, bartender by night,” Anderson said.

Chloe did her best to not let her own personal issues cloud her mind, but so far she was having trouble finding a link between the two men and the way they were killed. She was quickly coming to the conclusion that this was not a serial case at all. But even if that was the case, the fact remained that two men had been brutally killed.

“Victim one didn’t live here in Pine Point, right?” Chloe asked.

“May as well,” Benson said. “He lived just a few miles outside of town, closer to Winchester. Little town called Colin.”

*Another mark against it being an obvious serial,* Chloe thought.

“Has anyone spoken to Bjurman’s wife yet?” Rhodes asked.

“Yeah, that would be me,” Anderson said. “Weird situation there. She was very sad, of course, but not as upset as you’d expect.”

“Any idea why?” Chloe asked.

“None that she shared. You’re welcome to speak to her yourself. Maybe you can get more out of her than I did.”

There was no scorn or judgment in the statement. It seemed Anderson and Benson might be glad the bureau had arrived to take this mess off of their hands. They both stood idly by as Chloe and Rhodes snapped a few quick pictures of the scene, as if waiting impatiently for them to make the case magically disappear.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Jenny Bjurman had clearly been crying, but it did very little to ding the woman's obvious beauty. She was short-statured and had the sort of body Chloe figured most women would kill for. That body was evident in the T-shirt and yoga pants she was wearing when she invited them into her home. It seemed like an off choice of attire given the circumstances, but she also figured this might be the sort of clothes Jenny Bjurman wore around the house when she had nothing to do. Given the woman's appearance, it made Chloe wonder how attractive her husband had been.

"We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us," Chloe said. "We understand the police gave already talked to you."

"It's quite all right," Jenny said, sitting down at her kitchen table and sipping on a cup of tea. "I'll talk to anyone that can help. I'm at a loss for words...for thoughts, for...anything, really."

"Forgive us if we repeat questions the cops already asked," Rhodes said. "But can you think of anyone at all that might have wanted to see your husband dead?"

"That's just the thing," Jenny said. "Everyone loved him. I know how trite that sounds, but so far as I know, it's true. I can't think of a single enemy he might have had."

"Anyone from work?" Chloe asked. "From Fulbright Fitness, maybe?"

"It's doubtful," she said. "He usually told me about most of what went on at work. Besides, all of his classes at Fulbright are contracted through the owners, not Viktor. Any grievances would go to Fulbright Fitness management."

"You say everyone loved him. Can I assume he was a social sort of man?"

"Yes, very much so. Any new business that opened, or any sort of gala or formal event, he was there. He was also always willing to help anyone. He was the kind of person who would give the shirt off his back if it was necessary."

"What about the in-home clients he saw?" Rhodes asked. "Did you know any of them?"

"I know most of them, yes. Viktor was always sure to let me know when he took on a new client because they were almost always female. He was very open and up front about that. He wanted to make sure I knew when he was going to be in a woman's home. Their husbands were there most of the time, so it was no big deal."

"Do you have a list of his clients?"

"I don't, but we have a shared contacts list on our phones. But I think the cops had already worked with the people over at Fulbright Fitness to get a list of his in-home clients."

"All the same, if you could provide the names and numbers for us, that would be helpful," Chloe said.

"Of course," Jenny said. As she grabbed her phone from beside her cup of tea, she started to weep softly. She stared at her home screen image, one of her and a man Chloe assumed was her husband. She punched in her code and started sifting through her contacts.

She gave them the names and numbers of Viktor's clients one by one. Her voice cracked a bit more each time as she read through the remains of her husband's life. Chloe, meanwhile, started to connect a few dots in her head as she and Rhodes copied down the list. Nearly every in-home client Viktor Bjurman had was female. And if he looked anything like his wife, she was pretty sure he was having to work extra hard to remain faithful.

She kept that tucked away in the back of her head as Jenny Bjurman continued to list out the clients. After seven of them, Jenny had to stop. She shoved the phone away with a violent motion and then crumpled onto the kitchen table, where she let out a wail of grief.

Chloe slowly picked the phone up from the floor and placed it back on the table. When she did, she got a good look at the picture on the home screen and found that Viktor Bjurman was indeed a good-looking man. He and Jenny made a breathtaking couple. And though she hated to go there

so quickly, Chloe wondered how a man that handsome was able to go in and out of women's homes without pissing off at least a few husbands.

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Once Jenny had been able to talk coherently again, she looked at Viktor's schedule and figured out that the last client he had seen before he died was a woman named Theresa Diaz. She lived on Primrose Street, a little less than half a mile away from the Bjurman residence.

It was just after noon when Rhodes pulled the car in front of the Diaz residence. It was a pretty little home with flowerbeds all along the edges of the house. The two-car garage was open, revealing a single SUV parked inside. The agents stepped out and Rhodes rang the front doorbell. It took a few moments, but it was finally answered by a pretty blonde woman. In a way, it was almost like *déjà vu*. While she bore at least *some* resemblance to Jenny Bjurman, there were noticeable differences. One thing the two women did have in common was that they had both been crying—only Theresa Diaz had done her best to make it appear as if she hadn't.

"Hello?" she asked in a quizzical voice.

"Mrs. Diaz, we're Agents Fine and Rhodes with the FBI," Chloe said. "We were hoping to ask you some questions about Viktor Bjurman. I assume you've heard the news?"

"I have. And yes, come on in."

Theresa led them into her home, a small yet beautifully decorated house. Soft music was coming from somewhere within the house—a soft ballad-like song that Chloe remembered from several years ago. Theresa led them into what served as the living room. Chloe appreciated that there was no television and all the chairs were pointed at one another, indicating the Diaz family was more focused on conversation than bingeing whatever new show everyone was talking about.

"When did you last see Mr. Bjurman?" Rhodes asked.

"Yesterday evening. He came over for a Pilates and core training session."

"When did he leave?" Chloe asked.

"I don't remember the exact time, but the session ended at seven. He's usually out the door promptly after the session. So I'd say no later than seven-oh-five or so."

"Please forgive me asking this," Chloe said, "but was your husband present during the session?"

"No." She paused for a moment, as if trying to decide if she should be insulted by what Chloe might be suggesting. In the end, she shrugged it off and went on as well as she could. "He's on business right now. He's not due back for another three days. But my husband has met Viktor and there is nothing to even think about there."

She was not being defiant or mean-spirited. Her tone was quite polite, in fact. Still, Chloe noted that the woman had definitely been crying recently.

"Did you know Mr. Bjurman outside of your professional relationship?" Rhodes asked. "That is, would you consider the two of you friends?"

"Sure. We laughed together and joked around. He would even stay over for a glass of wine every now and then after the sessions, but only when Mike—my husband—was home."

Chloe considered her next question carefully. Theresa Diaz had made a point to mention her husband several times in the last twenty seconds or so. She had also done her polite best to shut down any implication that there may have been an affair. So Chloe knew it was a touchy subject for some reason or another. This also made her know that if she pressed on toward that subject, Theresa was going to send them packing.

"How long had you been a client of Mr. Bjurman's?" Chloe asked.

"About a year or so. He was very good..."

She stopped here, composed herself a bit, and shook her head. "Sorry. It's all very sudden. I mean...I just saw him last night."

“That’s okay,” Rhodes said. “Given your working relationship with him, can you think of anyone who might have had something against him?”

“That’s just the thing,” Theresa said. “I never saw him have a cross word with anyone. For that matter, I never heard anyone say anything bad about him.”

“What was your husband’s opinion of him?” Rhodes asked. Chloe cringed a bit, wondering if this would be the question that got them kicked out. But no, Theresa took it in stride or simply didn’t see the subtlety of Rhodes’s question.

“Mike got along fine with him. Now, full disclosure here, he did not like the idea of a male trainer coming into the house while he’s not here. But once Mike got to meet Viktor, all of that changed. I can’t stress enough how charming of a man he was. Everyone loved him. It makes absolutely no sense why anyone would kill him.”

“Would you happen to know if he had any clients in the town of Colin?” Chloe asked.

“I’m not sure. His wife might be able to get that information.”

*Brave for her to mention Bjurman’s wife, Chloe thought. There’s almost certainly some degree of an affair or, at the very least, attraction here.*

“Did Mr. Bjurman seem at all distressed or uncomfortable during last night’s session?” Chloe asked.

“No. Or, if he was, he hid it very well. I just...I don’t understand...”

So far, this seemed to be the running theme. And it was further proof that they weren’t going to get anything worthwhile out of Theresa Diaz. She knew the next logical step was to visit the town of Colin to see what they could find out about the murder of Steven Fielding. But by doing that, Chloe felt that they’d be leaving a cold trail to the murder of Bjurman because with every moment that passed, she was becoming more and more certain the murders were not connected.

“I just don’t understand,” Theresa said again, her voice wavering and close to tears.

*That makes two of us, Chloe thought.*

## CHAPTER SIX

“So they were definitely screwing, right?”

The question was a blunt one, yet the sort of thing Chloe had fully expected Rhodes to ask once they got back into the car.

“That’s the feeling I got,” Chloe said. “You noticed she had been crying, right?”

“Yeah, the redness and slight puffiness around her eyes. The little tremor and creak in her voice.”

“So it’s clear why she’d not want to confess to the affair,” Chloe said. “Especially if what she said about her husband meeting Bjurman is true. Makes sense she’d want to cover her ass. If the man she was sleeping with on the side is all of a sudden dead, it makes the task of hiding the affair that much easier.”

“Still, I think we should check out the story about her husband being away on business,” Rhodes said. “We could probably get our new friends Anderson and Benson to hunt that information down.”

“You think the killer could have been the husband?” Chloe asked.

“Probably not. But seeing as how the murders so far seem to be unconnected, we need to check every box, I suppose.”

Chloe nodded. She liked it when she and Rhodes were so perfectly in sync. Their partnership had certainly started off rocky, so it was good to be reminded of just how far they had come every now and then.

“Hey, Fine?”

“Yeah?”

“What really happened out there in Texas?”

Chloe felt those thoughts of their in-sync partnership come to a screeching halt. She resented that Rhodes was going there—with or without Johnson’s guidance—but did not want to show that it angered her. She knew that would make it appear she had something to hide.

“Do you want the story with or without all of the family drama that comes attached with it?”

Rhodes grinned. “Without. I know how you hate dredging that shit up.”

Chloe hesitated for a moment, unsure of how to proceed. If Rhodes was playing a part, she was playing it well.

“Dad and Danielle got into some sort of skirmish at his apartment. I don’t even know what it was fully about because Danielle won’t give me all the details. But in the end, I just think Dad snapped and...”

“Yeah?”

“Rhodes, I hope you don’t take this personally, but I don’t really feel like talking about it. Not right now. It’s going to mess with my head and keep me from focusing on the case. You can understand that, right?”

“Of course.”

Chloe couldn’t tell if there was disappointment in her face and voice or not. She hated to think that Rhodes might actually be spying on her, tasked to report anything she learned to Johnson and those above him. But for right now, she had to be incredibly careful of every word that came out of her mouth.

Yet the silence that then fell between them indicated that Rhodes had not been expecting to be shut down in such a way. The moment sat thick between them as Rhodes guided the car into Colin.

It was so thick that when Chloe’s cell phone rang, she jumped a bit. Hoping Rhodes hadn’t seen her reaction, she answered the call quickly.

“This is Agent Fine.”

“Agent Fine, it’s Deputy Anderson,” came Anderson’s singsong voice. “Thought you should know that we just got notified that an officer in Colin just arrested a man. They’re pretty sure it’s Steven Fielding’s killer.”

“Any possible connection to Bjurman?” Chloe asked.

“We don’t know yet. But I told them I’d let you know. They’re literally just now processing him. He should be ready for questioning as soon as you get to the department.”

Chloe gave her thanks and ended the call. “That was Anderson. Looks like the Colin PD got the killer.”

“Both victims?”

“No one knows yet.”

“Well then, let’s find out,” Rhodes said, sinking her foot down harder on the gas.

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The Colin Police Department was easily the smallest Chloe had ever stepped foot into. The front lobby was perfectly square, containing a small waiting area, the minuscule bullpen, and a small snack area. The place smelled of aerosol spray and strong coffee. It did seem to be in good shape, though, everything in its right place, and a sense of order to it all. Several seconds after Chloe and Rhodes made their entrance, they were met by a small but muscular man who looked to be in a very big hurry. He was dressed in his uniform blues, the shirt of which was partially sticking to him due to the sweat that was clearly visible along the chest. The tag above his left breast read Cooper.

“You the agents?” he asked.

“That’s us,” Rhodes said. “Agents Rhodes and Fine.”

“Fantastic,” Cooper said. “Come on back.”

He led them through the small bullpen and to a hallway that extended into the rather cramped back half of the building. He didn’t bother taking them into an office, but to the far back of the building where there was an honest-to-God holding cell situated by a single room—which Chloe assumed was where they had stored the suspect.

“Here’s what we’ve got,” Cooper said. “We got a call about an hour ago from Rock and Sam’s, a local bar just up the road. The bartender, Sam, is a good friend of mine, so I can vouch for his story. He said this guy came in, a guy he’s seen before named Carol Hughes. He comes in for lunch all the time. Hughes ordered his usual and when he reached out to grab his beer, Sam said he noticed the watch on the guy’s wrist. It was a fancy one, one that sort of didn’t really seem like it would be seen on this guy. Not only that, but Sam had seen the exact same watch a few times in the past—on the wrist of Steven Fielding.”

“Really?” Rhodes asked. “He *thinks* he saw the same watch on some other guy’s wrist?”

“Well, it’s a pretty unique watch. It’s gold—not sure if it’s real gold or not—and it has the Tennessee Volunteers logo on the face. Sam said he distinctly remembers seeing that logo on the watch when Steven wore it several weeks back, talking shit about college football. So when he saw it on Hughes’s wrist, he then remembered how he’d heard Steven had been murdered in some sort of messed up burglary just a few days ago. He discreetly called us. I answered the call myself and went down to the bar to pick the guy up. He just about pissed his pants when he saw the law in the bar. Put up a fight, but never admitted anything.”

“That does seem pretty cut and dry,” Chloe said.

“If you need to see the watch, it’s just now been bagged up and is in evidence. Dusted it for prints and it looks like there are two sets on it. I’d bet my house on them belonging to Fielding and our suspect.”

“That’s not necessary,” Chloe said. “I think speaking to the suspect will be enough.”

“Help yourself. And let me know if you need anything.”

With that, Cooper unlocked the door to the single room by the holding cell. As Chloe had suspected, it was what served as an interrogation room. There was the cliché table near the center of the room, to which Carol Hughes's right wrist had been handcuffed. When Chloe and Rhodes entered the room, he looked like he might jump straight out of the chair.

He was a very plain-looking man. He was in need of a haircut, as his sideburns were bushy and his brow was covered by a mess of sweaty hair. He looked up at them with wide eyes and then a confused look dawned on his face. Chloe was beginning to wonder if she and Rhodes had been paired up to experiment with a line of thought that suspects would often find themselves baffled that two petite women had been sent in. She wondered if such befuddlement might be disarming to criminals. If the bureau was looking for evidence that this was the case, Hughes would have been a great study.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

Chloe showed her badge and ID as she approached the table. There was no chair on her side, so she and Rhodes simply stood. They stood by the table, making sure Hughes felt closed in and trapped.

"What was your relationship with Steven Fielding?" Chloe asked.

"None. I'd seen him at the bar. Seemed like he might have some money."

"Seems pretty stupid to wear a watch you stole from his home. Especially after you killed him. Wouldn't you agree?"

A flash of anger crossed Hughes's face, but it was temporary. Apparently, the anger had been quickly drowned out by the realization of just how much trouble he was in.

"I didn't meant to do it," he said.

"To do what?" Rhodes asked.

Hughes struggled with something for a moment. Chloe had seen it before; even when presented with their guilt and knowing full well that they had been caught, it was often very hard for humans to admit that they had crossed that mortal line.

"Look, I know it was wrong, but I just needed some extra cash, you know? I lost my job three months ago and bills...man, they just keep adding up. And my woman, she won't...she won't even think about marrying me until I'm stable..."

"So burglary seemed like the appropriate answer?" Rhodes asked.

Chloe had been thinking the same thing, but she had never seen the point in antagonizing a suspect. It usually just caused the suspect to delay things a bit more. Honestly, in the case of Hughes, she had also been biting back a comment about how if he had been out of work for the past three months, it probably wasn't the best idea to keep frequenting bars.

"Walk us through what happened," Chloe said.

"I'd been following him for a few days, getting to know his schedule. I didn't think he'd be home. I was going to get in, get out, and that would be that." He paused here for a moment and at first, Chloe thought he might start crying. But what she had seen as fear slowly dissolved into terror. Hughes was realizing the gravity of what he had done and it was finally starting to sink in, to drag him down.

"But when I came in through the front door, he was right there, on the couch. I had a crowbar in my hand because I was expecting to have to break into the house. When he came at me and we started fighting, I just...I lost it. I was surprised and scared and I just...I started hitting him with the crowbar. And I couldn't stop...I couldn't..."

"What *did* cause you to stop?" Rhodes asked.

"I heard the garage door opening. I guess it was his wife coming home. I had that part down, too. I wanted to be in and out before she got there, you know? I never wanted to hurt or kill anyone... but I heard that garage door and I stopped. I saw what I had done and..."

He stopped here, still unable to bring himself to say it.

"Go on," Chloe prodded.

"I knew he was dead and I felt like I had to take *something*. I saw the watch, though it was gold. Grabbed his wallet out of his pocket and took the cash inside. Eighty-two bucks."

“And you left?” Chloe asked. “Right out the door?”

Hughes nodded. “I could even hear the garage door coming back down. I must have missed his wife by no more than thirty seconds.”

“You knew he was dead when he left?” Rhodes asked.

“Not for sure.” He was trembling now, the links on the cuffs rattling against the bar he was handcuffed to. “But the way his head looked...and all the blood, I figured there was no way he was still alive. Or if he wasn’t dead then...he would be soon...”

“Mr. Hughes, do you know a man named Viktor Bjurman?”

The question seemed to jar him, perhaps because it was seemingly unrelated to his own actions. After thinking about it for a moment, he shook his head. “No. No, I can’t say that I do.”

“Have you been to Pine Point anytime in the past week or so?” Chloe asked.

“Yes. There’s a little health food store there. I get my vitamins from them. That was...last Friday, I think.”

Chloe stepped away from the table. She eyed Hughes, considering the story and his answers. Even a poor liar could concoct a story like that. But it took a true sociopath to be able to get down the little details like trembling and having their expression soaked in genuine fear. Based on her experience and her gut instincts, she knew he was telling the truth—and he was terrified of what the consequences might be. The fact that he had even offered up a small personal detail like the vitamins sealed the deal for her.

And given that, she was quite confident that this was not the man who killed Viktor Bjurman. Which meant the deaths were not linked at all. Sure, it felt rather good to be right, but it was equally frustrating as they were now back to square one on Bjurman’s murder.

“Mr. Hughes, we’re going to have the local PD work with you to draw up a timeline of where you’ve been and the things you’ve done over the course of the moment you inadvertently killed Mr. Fielding and the moment you were arrested. If you do it well enough, the bureau won’t have to get involved. Do you understand?”

He nodded, still looking like a confused kid in math class. “I just don’t understand how all of this happened. I don’t...”

“Anything else, Agent Rhodes?” Chloe asked.

“Nothing.”

The agents left Hughes where he sat, with a scared and now quite confused look on his face. As soon as they were back out in the hallway, Cooper came rushing back down the hall toward them. There was another officer with him now and they both looked just as confused as Hughes had when they’d walked out.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No,” Chloe said. “You and your men have done some great work. He’s your guy for sure, just not the one *we* were looking for. If you could find out where he’s been the last few days so we can rule him out as Viktor Bjurman’s murderer, that would be great.”

“Yeah...I didn’t think he did that one, too,” Cooper said. “As shaky and terrified as he is, I don’t even see him being capable of doing what he did to Fielding. I mean, Christ...did you see the pictures?”

Not wanting to sway the officers one way or the other, Chloe only nodded. She handed Cooper her business card and said, “Please, once you get some sort of timeline down, would you mind giving us a call?”

“Of course,” Cooper said, though it was clear he had not yet wrapped his head around why they were already leaving.

“Thank you for your time,” Rhodes said as they passed by him and back toward the front of the building.

Chloe hated that they left in a borderline rude fashion, but there had truly been no point in them sticking around. Chloe racked her brain as they headed back for their car, trying to think of even the smallest thing they could do to one hundred percent verify that Carol Hughes had not killed Bjurman—even though any law enforcement agent worth his salt would be able to tell by just spending two minutes alone with the guy.

“Good for the Colin PD,” Rhodes said as she got behind the wheel. “I doubt these guys ever really get that kind of action.”

“Yeah, good for them,” Chloe said. Then she added: “You saw it, too, right? He was terrified of what he had done...almost like he still didn’t even believe it.”

“Yeah, I saw it. Not exactly the way you’d expect a man that has brutally killed two men to react to being questioned by federal agents.”

“Still, we should try to find an alibi. See what Cooper and his men come up with.”

“Agreed,” Rhodes said. “But what do we do until then?”

Chloe thought about it for a moment and finally gave a shrug. “Lunch?”

It was admitting defeat without actually admitting defeat. Chloe hated to think of a killer being brought to justice as a *defeat* but the seemingly cut-and-dry case of Carol Hughes did put something of a damper on the Bjurman case. Chloe knew that without any link between Bjurman and Fielding, she and Rhodes would be called off the case, leaving Bjurman’s death as an unsolved murder to be handled by local law enforcement.

And it was that fear that revealed something else to her: the fact that she was so hard pressed to keep this case because she was not ready to return to the drama waiting for her with Danielle back home.

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Lunch consisted of a greasy yet delicious pizza at a local pizza joint, and side salads. They ate in relative silence, certain that Johnson or one of his underlings would be calling any minute now to tell them to come on in. Rhodes had called bureau headquarters after leaving the Colin PD to update the case and even in that, things had felt rather final. Chloe had no doubt that their visit to Pine Point was already coming to an end.

“Anything still pricking you the wrong way?” Rhodes asked.

“Why do you ask?”

Rhodes shrugged and wiped her hands on a napkin that had already accumulated a lot of the grease from their margherita pizza. “You look bothered...like you’ve lost something.”

“Maybe a little,” Chloe admitted. “I have no doubt that Hughes did not kill Bjurman. But the whole Bjurman thing...something about Theresa Diaz seems off to me. Even if she had come out and admitted to sleeping with Bjurman—which I’m pretty certain of, by the way—I think there might still be something to her...something she might be hiding.”

“If they were sleeping together, maybe it was more than an affair,” Rhodes suggested. “Maybe they were in love?”

“Possibly.”

They fell into silence again, mulling it over. About a quarter of the pizza remained, though both agents had had their fill.

Chloe felt a slight shift inside of her as returning home became more and more of a possibility. While she was indeed happy to be away from all of the Danielle drama—even if only an hour and a half removed—she was still very much worried about how her sister was going to react when (more than likely *if*, Chloe figured) the FBI contacted her. The entire ordeal created a boiling knot of worry within her, so she did her best to push it to the side.

When Rhodes's phone rang while they were waiting for the check, they both jumped a bit. They both figured it would be Johnson, and Chloe did her best not to feel slighted that he had opted to contact Rhodes over her.

Chloe listened closely, trying to act as if she really wasn't all that interested in what was being said. But in listening to Rhodes's side of the very brief call, Chloe heard all she needed to. When Rhodes ended the call, the expression on her face confirmed it. It was an expression of mild irritation and a faded sort of relief.

"He wants us to check in with the Colin PD before we leave, and then come on home," Rhodes said. "And if you ask me, that should put us back in DC at the perfect time to go grab a few drinks before calling it a day."

They settled up the bill and headed back to the Colin Police Department. On their way back into Colin, they drove directly past the curb where Viktor Bjurman had been murdered. With no patrol cars or crime scene tape to section the area off, it looked like any normal corner on any city in America. Something about that unnerved Chloe, knowing there were answers on that corner that may never be found—answers that, as of now, would forever remain out of Chloe's reach.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Danielle was balancing on the very thin line between buzzed and totally drunk when someone knocked on her door. She had been drinking to put a nail in this chapter of her life, to keep it closed like a treasure chest buried at the bottom of the ocean. Her work had not allowed her to come in last night, or tonight for that matter. But she started back tomorrow, pulling both the afternoon and night shifts. She never thought she'd be happy to see the strip club again, or to smell the scents of spilled liquor and cheap cologne of the men around the bars.

But she could not wait to get back. First, though, a small bender of sorts. It had been a while since she had gotten drunk by herself. She was sure some people saw it as sad and pathetic, but she had always found it liberating in a way she could not quite grasp.

When the knock came to her door, she had already knocked back three margaritas she had made in her blender—a perfect concoction she had learned at work. Walking to the door, she wondered if it might be Chloe, come to rehash everything face-to-face. Danielle almost hoped this was the case. With enough tequila in her, she'd freely say things that a sober-minded Danielle would think better of.

When she answered the door, though, she did not find Chloe on the other side. A man stood there, dressed in what Danielle had always thought of as a “goon suit.” Because her sister was in the FBI, she recognized the get-up and the man's too-serious expression at once. He was a federal agent. He looked to be of Asian descent and when he smiled at her, it seemed far too fake for her.

“Danielle Fine, correct?” the man said.

“That's me. And you are...?”

“Agent Shin, FBI.” He flashed his badge, allowing her to study it for a moment before folding it back up and slipping it back into his inner jacket pocket. “Would you mind if I came in for a moment?”

“With all due respect, what for?” Danielle asked.

“Well, while I don't know your sister personally, I did hear about the ordeal you went through down in Texas. It's a story that is sort of making the rounds at the bureau. I've been asked to come out to check in on you.”

“By whom?”

“By my supervisor. There are some loose ends regarding what happened down there and we're just trying to tie them up. Of course, with your sister, those ends can be tied up internally. But we need to get just a few assurances and answers from you as well.”

She looked oddly at him but opened the door to let him in. She recalled Chloe telling her on the phone that there was an internal investigation and if anyone came asking her questions, she needed to play it cool. Refusing to allow a federal agent into her apartment would likely be considered the opposite of playing it cool.

She stepped aside and opened the door wider, allowing Agent Shin inside. Danielle sat down at the kitchen table, making it clear in a polite way that she did not intend to let him walk any deeper into the apartment. Shin relented and propped himself up against her kitchen counter.

“First and foremost,” he said, “how are you doing? I know you suffered a few injuries during everything that happened.”

“Thanks for asking,” she said, doing her best to pour on the charm. “But it seems that I'm good. I head back to work tomorrow and—might as well go ahead and admit it—I've sort of been celebrating today.” She nodded toward the blender and the pale green drink inside.

Shin smiled and said, “Glad to hear it. Now, I sort of have to ask this, and I'm sorry if it's too personal, but do you plan on pushing hard for a case to find your father?”

“No,” she said right away. “Fuck him. The only time I'm going to give a damn about him is if he shows up in DC, coming after me and Chloe again.”

“Well, as you know, his description has been handed out to several field offices. But we can’t make it a priority unless you want.”

Danielle shrugged and sipped from her latest margarita. “Chloe and I can talk it over a bit more, but I think we’re done with him.”

Shin nodded, as if he understood perfectly. As he nodded, a little spike of fear made its way through Danielle. She recalled digging the hole in a mad dash, shoving their father’s body into it, and then covering it back up. Had they dug deep enough? Had some scavenging little fox already come along and found their father as a morsel?

“Fair enough,” Shin said. “I do have a few more questions about what happened, if you don’t mind.”

“Again? Really?”

“I know. But with your sister being a federal agent, we really need to make sure we fully understand everything.”

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