

BLAKE PIERCE

A woman in a black dress stands in a doorway, looking out at a large, bare tree in a wooded area. The scene is dimly lit, with the woman's silhouette and the doorway's frame visible against the brighter outdoor light.

CAUSE  
TO  
RUN

AN AVERY BLACK MYSTERY--BOOK #2

An Avery Black Mystery

Блейк Пирс  
**Cause to Run**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Пирс Б.**

Cause to Run / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,  
— (An Avery Black Mystery)

ISBN 978-1-63-291839-0

In CAUSE TO RUN (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 2), a new serial killer is stalking Boston, killing his victims in bizarre ways, taunting the police with mysterious puzzles that reference the stars. As the stakes are upped and the pressure is on, the Boston Police Department is forced to call in its most brilliant—and most controversial—homicide detective: Avery Black. Avery, still reeling from her last case, finds herself up against a rival precinct and a brilliant, cunning killer who is always one step ahead of her. She is forced to enter his dark, twisted mind as he lays clues for his next killing, and forced to look into places in her own mind she would rather not go. She finds herself compelled to seek the counsel of Howard Randall, the twisted serial killer she'd put behind bars years ago, all while her new burgeoning life with Rose and Ramirez is falling apart. And just as things cannot get any worse, she finds out something else: she herself may be the target. In a game of psychological cat and mouse, a frantic race against time leads Avery through a series of shocking and unexpected twists—culminating in climax that even Avery could not imagine. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, CAUSE TO RUN is book #2 of a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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# Содержание

PROLOGUE	7
CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	13
CHAPTER THREE	16
CHAPTER FOUR	17
CHAPTER FIVE	21
CHAPTER SIX	25
CHAPTER SEVEN	29
CHAPTER EIGHT	31
CHAPTER NINE	33
CHAPTER TEN	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

# **Pierce Blake**

## **CAUSE TO RUN (An Avery Black Mystery – Book 2) by Blake Pierce**

**Blake Pierce**

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which include the mystery suspense thrillers ONCE GONE (book #1), ONCE TAKEN (book #2), ONCE CRAVED (#3), and ONCE LURED (#4). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series and the AVERY BLACK mystery series.

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**AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES**

**CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)**

**CAUSE TO RUN (Book #2)**

## PROLOGUE

He lay hidden in the shadows of a parking lot fence and stared up at the three-story brick apartment building across the street. He imagined it was dinnertime for some, an hour where families would gather and laugh and share stories of the day.

*Stories.* He scoffed. Stories were for the weak.

The whistling shattered his silence. *Her* whistling. Henrietta Venemeer whistled as she walked. *So happy*, he thought. *So oblivious.*

His anger increased at the sight of her, a red, burning rage that bloomed in his entire visual landscape. He closed his eyes and took in a few deep breaths to make it stop. Drugs used to help with his anger. They had calmed him down and kept his mind light and carefree, but lately, even his prescriptions had failed. He needed something bigger to help balance in life.

Something cosmic.

*You know what you have to do*, he reminded himself.

She was a slight, older woman with a shock of red hair and a can-do attitude that permeated her every movement: hips swayed like she was dancing to an inner song and there was a noticeable hop in her step. She carried a bag of groceries and headed directly toward the brick building in a forgotten part of East Boston.

*Go now*, he commanded.

As she reached her building door and was fumbling for her keys, he left his spot and ambled across the street.

She opened her building door and entered.

Before the door shut, he placed his foot inside the opening. The camera that watched the foyer had been disabled earlier; he'd applied a film of clear spray-gel over the lens to obscure any images and yet give the illusion that the camera appeared in working order. The second foyer door had been disabled, too, its lock easy enough to break.

A whistle was still on her lips as she disappeared up a flight of stairs. He walked into the building to follow, giving no thought to the people on the street or other cameras that might have been watching from other buildings. Everything had been investigated earlier, and the timing of his attack had been aligned with the universe.

By the time she reached the third floor to unlock her front door, he was behind her. The door opened and as she walked into her apartment he grabbed her by the chin and clamped her mouth shut with his palm, stifling her screams.

Then he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

## CHAPTER ONE

Avery Black drove her flashy new ride, a black four-door Ford undercover cop car she'd bought, off the lot, and she smiled to herself. The smell of the new car and the feel of the wheel beneath her hands gave her a sense of joy, of starting anew. The old, white BMW that she'd bought as a lawyer, which had constantly reminded her of her previous life, was finally gone.

*Yay*, she inwardly cheered, as she did almost every time she sat behind the wheel. Not only did her new ride have tinted windows, black rims, and leather seats, but it came fully equipped with shotgun holster, computer frame on the dash, and police lights in the grilles, windows, and rearview mirrors. Better yet, when the blue-and-reds were turned off, it looked like any other vehicle on the road.

*The envy of cops everywhere*, she thought.

She'd picked up her partner, Dan Ramirez, at eight o'clock sharp. As always, he looked the model of perfect: slicked-back black hair, tan skin, dark eyes, decked out in the finest clothes. A canary yellow shirt was under a crimson jacket. He wore crimson slacks, a light-brown belt, and light-brown shoes.

"We should really do something tonight," he said. "Last night of our shift. Might be a Wednesday but it feels like a Friday."

He offered a warm smile.

In return, Avery batted her ice-blue eyes and flashed him a quick and loving grin, but then her features turned unreadable. She focused on the road and inwardly wondered what she was going to do about her relationship with Dan Ramirez.

The term "relationship" wasn't even accurate.

Ever since she'd taken down Edwin Peet, one of the strangest serial killers in recent Boston history, her partner had made his feelings known, and Avery had, in turn, let him know that she might be interested as well. The situation hadn't escalated much further. They'd had dinner, shared loving looks, held hands.

But Avery was worried about Ramirez. Yes, he was handsome and respectful. He'd saved her life after the Edwin Peet debacle and practically remained by her side the entire time during her recovery. Still, he was her partner. They were around each other five days a week or more, from eight AM to six or seven or later depending on a case. And Avery hadn't been in a relationship in years. The one time they kissed, it had felt like she was kissing her ex-husband, Jack, and she'd immediately pulled away.

She checked the dashboard clock.

They hadn't been in the car for five minutes and Ramirez was already talking about dinner. *You have to talk to him about this*, she realized. *Ugh*.

As they headed toward the office, Avery listened to the police band radio, as she did every morning. Ramirez suddenly turned on a jazz station, and they drove a few blocks listening to light jazz mixed with a police operator detailing various activities around Boston.

"Seriously?" Avery asked.

"What?"

"How am I supposed to enjoy the music *and* listen to the calls? It's confusing. Why do we have to listen to both at the same time?"

"All right, fine," he said in mock disappointment, "but I'd better get to listen to my music at some point today. It makes me feel calm and smooth, you know?"

*No*, Avery thought, *I don't know*.

She hated jazz.

Thankfully, a call came on the radio and saved her.

“We have a ten-sixteen, ten-thirty-two in progress on East Fourth Street off Broadway,” said a scratchy female voice. “No shots have been fired. Any cars in the vicinity?”

“Domestic abuse,” Ramirez said, “guy’s got a gun.”

“We’re close,” Avery replied.

“Let’s take it.”

She turned the car around, hit the lights, and picked up her transreceiver.

“This is Detective Black,” she said and offered her badge number. “We’re approximately three minutes away. We’ll take the call.”

“Thank you, Detective Black,” the woman replied before she gave out the address, apartment number, and background information.

One of the many aspects Avery loved about Boston were the houses, small homes, most of them two to three stories high with a uniform structure that gave much of the city its communal feel. She hung a left onto Fourth Street and cruised to their destination.

“This doesn’t mean we’re off the hook on paperwork,” she insisted.

“Nah, of course not.” Ramirez shrugged.

The tone of his voice, however, coupled with his attitude and the unruly piles on his own desk, made Avery wonder if an early-morning drive had been the best decision.

Not much detective work was needed to discover the house in question. One police cruiser, along with a small crowd of people that were all hidden behind something, surrounded a blue stucco house with blue shutters and a black roof.

A Latino man stood on the front lawn in his boxers and a tank top. In one hand, he held the hair of a woman who was on her knees and crying. In his other hand, he simultaneously waved a gun at the crowd, the police, and the woman.

“*Get the fuck back!*” he yelled. “Every one of you. I see you there.” He pointed his pistol toward a parked car. “Get the fuck away from that car! Stop crying!” he screamed at the woman. “You keep crying, I’m going to blow your head off just for pissing me off.”

Two officers were on either side of the lawn. One had his gun drawn. The other had a hand on his belt and a palm up.

“Sir, please drop your weapon.”

The man aimed at the cop with the pointed pistol.

“What? You wanna go?” he said. “Then shoot me! Shoot me, motherfucker, and see what happens. Shit, I don’t care. We’ll *both* die.”

“*Don’t fire your weapon, Stan!*” the other officer shouted. “Everybody just stay calm. Nobody is going to get killed today. Please, sir, just – ”

“Stop fucking talking to me!” the man howled. “Just leave me alone. This is *my* house. This is *my* wife. You cheating motherfucker,” he simmered and shoved the muzzle of his gun into her cheek. “I should clean out that dirty fuckin’ mouth of yours.”

Avery turned off her sirens and sidled up to the curb.

“Another fucking cop!?” the man seethed. “You guys are like cockroaches. All right,” he said in a calm, determined way. “Someone is going to die today. You’re not taking me back to prison. So you can all either go home, or someone is going to die.”

“Nobody is going to die,” said the first cop, “please. *Stan! Put your gun down!*”

“No way,” his partner called out.

“*God damn it, Stan!*”

“Stay here,” Avery said to Ramirez.

“Fuck that!” he stated. “I’m your partner, Avery.”

“All right then, but listen up,” she said. “All we need now is two more cops turning this into a bloodbath. Stay calm and follow my lead.”

“What lead?”

“Just follow me.”

Avery hopped out of the car.

“Sir,” she commanded to the drawn officer, “put your gun *down*.”

“Who the fuck are you?” he said.

“Yeah, who the fuck are you?” the Latino aggressor demanded.

“Both of you step away from the area,” Avery said to the two officers. “I’m Detective Avery Black from the A1. I’ll handle this. You too,” she called to Ramirez.

“You told me to follow your lead!” he yelled.

“This *is* my lead. Get back in the car. Everyone step away from this scene.”

The drawn officer spit and shook his head.

“Fuckin’ bureaucracy,” he said. “What? Just because you’re in a few papers you think you’re super cop now or something? Well, you know what? I’d love to see how you handle this, super cop.” With his eyes on the perpetrator, he raised his gun and walked backward until he was hidden behind a tree. “Take it away.” His partner followed suit.

Once Ramirez was back in the car and the other officers were safely out of firing distance, Avery stepped forward.

The Latino man smiled.

“Look at that,” he said and pointed his gun. “You’re the serial killer cop, right? Way to go, Black. That guy was fucking crazy. You got him good. *Hey!*” he yelled at the woman on her knees. “Stop fuckin’ squirming around. Can’t you see I’m trying to have a conversation?”

“What did she do?” Avery asked.

“Fuckin’ bitch fucked my best friend. That’s what she did. Didn’t you, bitch?”

“Damn,” Avery said. “That’s cold. She ever do anything like that before?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “I guess she cheated on her last man with *me*, but shit, I married the bitch! That’s got to count for something, right?”

“Definitely,” Avery agreed.

He was slight of frame, with a narrow face and missing teeth. He glanced at the growing audience, then looked up at Avery like a guilty child and whispered:

“This don’t look good, right?”

“No,” Avery answered. “It’s not good. Next time, you might want to handle this in the privacy of your own home. And quietly,” she said softly and stepped closer.

“Why you getting so close?” he wondered with a cocked brow.

Avery shrugged.

“It’s my job,” she said as if it were a distasteful chore. “The way I see it? You have two choices. One: You come in quietly. You already screwed up. Too loud, too public, too many witnesses. Worst-case scenario? She presses charges and you have to get a lawyer.”

“She’s not pressing no fucking charges,” he said.

“*I won’t, baby. I won’t!*” she swore.

“If she *doesn’t* press charges, then you’re looking at aggravated assault, resisting arrest, and a few other minor infractions.”

“Will I have to serve some time?”

“Have you been arrested before?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Five-year stint for attempted manslaughter.”

“What’s your name?”

“Fernando Rodriguez.”

“You still on parole, Fernando?”

“Nah, parole was up two weeks ago.”

“OK.” She thought for a moment. “Then you’ll probably have to be behind bars until this gets worked out. Maybe a month or two?”

“A month?!”

“Or two,” she reiterated. “Come on. Let’s be honest. After five years? That’s nothing. Next time? Keep it private.”

She was right in front of him, close enough to disarm him and free the victim, but he was already calming down. Avery had seen people like him before when dealing with some of the Boston gangs, men who’d been beaten down for so long that the slightest infraction could make them snap. But ultimately, when given a chance to relax and take stock of their situation, their story was always the same: they just wanted to be comforted, helped, and made to feel like they weren’t alone in the world.

“You used to be a lawyer, right?” the man said.

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “But then I made a stupid mistake and my life turned to shit. Don’t be like me,” she warned. “Let’s end this now.”

“What about her?” He pointed at his wife.

“Why would you want to be with someone like her?” Avery asked.

“I love her.”

Avery sucked in her lips and challenged him with a stare.

“Does this *look* like love?”

The question seemed to genuinely bother him. With a furrowed brow, he glanced from Avery to his wife and back to Avery again.

“No,” he said and lowered his gun. “This ain’t no way to love.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Avery said. “Give me that gun and let these guys take you in quietly and I’ll promise you something.”

“What promise?”

“I promise I’ll check in on you and ensure you get treated right. You don’t look like a bad guy to me, Fernando Rodriguez. You just look like you’ve had a rough life.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” he said.

“No,” she agreed. “I don’t.”

She held out a hand.

He let go of his hostage and handed over the gun. Instantly, his wife scrambled across the lawn and ran to safety. The aggressive cop that had been prepared to open fire came forward with a snarling look of thinly veiled jealousy.

“I’ll take it from here,” he sneered.

Avery got in his face.

“Do me a favor,” she whispered. “Stop acting like you’re better than the people you arrest and treat him like a human being. It might help.”

The cop blushed in anger and seemed ready to push past and destroy the tranquil vibe that Avery had created. Thankfully, the second officer reached the Latino man first and handled him with care. “I’m going to cuff you now,” he said softly. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you get treated right. I have to read you your rights. Is that OK? You have the right to remain silent...”

Avery backed away.

The Latino aggressor glanced up. The two held each other’s gaze for a moment. He offered a nod of thanks, and Avery responded with a nod of her own. “I meant what I said,” she reiterated before she turned to leave.

Ramirez had a big smile on his face.

“Shit, Avery. That was hot.”

The flirtation bothered Avery.

“Makes me sick when cops treat suspects like animals,” she said and turned back to watch the arrest. “I bet half the shootings in Boston could be avoided with a little respect.”

“Maybe if there was a female commissioner like you in charge,” he joked.

“Maybe,” she replied and seriously thought about the implications.

Her walkie-talkie went off.

Captain O'Malley's voice came over the static.

"Black," he said. "Black, where are you?"

She picked up.

"I'm here, Cap."

"Keep your phone turned on from now on," he said. "How many times do I have to tell you that? And get over to the Boston Harbor Marina off Marginal Street in East Boston. We have a situation here."

Avery frowned.

"Isn't East Boston A7 territory?" she asked.

"Forget about that," he said. "Drop whatever you're doing and get over here as fast as you can. We've got a murder."

## CHAPTER TWO

Avery reached the Boston Harbor & Shipyard by the Callahan Tunnel, which connected the North End to East Boston. The marina was off Marginal Street, right along the water.

The place was crawling with police.

“Holy shit,” Ramirez said. “What the hell happened here?”

Avery took it slow into the marina. Police cars were parked in a haphazard pattern, along with an ambulance. Crowds of people that wanted to use their boats on this bright morning ambled about, wondering what they were supposed to do.

She parked and they both got out and flashed their badges.

Beyond the main gate and building was an expansive dock. Two piers jugged out from the dock in a V shape. Most of the police had clustered around the close end of one dock.

In the distance stood Captain O’Malley, dressed in a dark suit and tie. He was in deep discussion with another man in full police uniform. By the double stripes on his chest, Avery guessed the other guy was captain of the A7, which handled all of East Boston.

“Look at this character.” Ramirez pointed at the man in uniform. “Did he just come from a ceremony or something?”

Officers from the A7 gave them hard stares.

“What’s the A1 doing here?”

“Go back to the North End,” another shouted.

Wind whipped across Avery’s face as she walked down the pier. The air was salty and balmy. She tightened her jacket around her waist so it wouldn’t fly open. Ramirez was having a difficult time with the intense gusts, which kept messing up his perfectly combed hair.

Docks jugged out at perpendicular angles on one side of the pier, and each dock was filled with boats. Boats were also lined on the other side of the pier: motorboats, expensive sailing vessels, and tremendous yachts.

A separate dock formed a T shape with the end of the pier. A single mid-sized white yacht was anchored in the middle of it. O’Malley, the other captain, and two officers talked while a forensics team scoured the boat and took pictures.

O’Malley sported the same gruff look as always: dyed black hair cut short, and a face that looked like he might have been a boxer in a former life, scrunched and wrinkled. Eyes were squinted from the wind and he seemed upset.

“She’s here now,” he said. “Give her a shot.”

The other captain had a regal, stately quality about him: graying hair, lean face, and an imperious glance below a furrowed brow. He stood much taller than O’Malley and appeared slightly befuddled that O’Malley, or anyone outside of his team, would encroach on his territory.

Avery nodded to everyone.

“What’s up, Captain?”

“Is this a party or what?” Ramirez smiled.

“Wipe that smile off your face,” the stately captain spit. “This is a crime scene, young man, and I expect you to treat it as such.”

“Avery, Ramirez, this is Captain Holt of the A7. He was gracious enough to – ”

“Gracious my ass!” he snapped. “I don’t know what kind of show the mayor is running, but if he thinks he can just walk all over my division, he has another think coming. I respect you, O’Malley. We’ve known each other a long time, but this is unprecedented and you know it. How would you feel if I walked over to the A1 and started to bark orders?”

“No one is taking over anything,” O’Malley said. “You think I like this? We have enough work on our own side. The mayor called both of us, didn’t he? I had a whole different day planned, Will, so don’t act like this is me trying to make a power play.”

Avery and Ramirez shared a look.

“What’s the situation?” Avery asked.

“Call came in this morning,” Holt said and motioned to the yacht. “Woman found dead on that boat. She’s been identified as a local bookseller. Owns a spiritual bookshop over on Sumner Street and has for the last fifteen years. No record on her. Nothing outwardly suspicious about her.”

“Except for the way she was murdered.” O’Malley took over. “Captain Holt here was having breakfast with the mayor when the call came in. The mayor decided he wanted to come down and see it for himself.”

“The first thing he says is ‘Why don’t we get Avery Black on this case,’” Holt concluded with dagger-eyes at Avery.

O’Malley tried to ease the situation.

“That’s not what you told me, Will. You said your guys came in, they didn’t understand what they were looking at, and so the mayor *suggested* you ask someone who’s had some experience in this kind of thing.”

“Either way,” Holt snarled and pompously lifted his chin.

“Go take a look,” O’Malley said and pointed to the yacht. “See what you can find. If she comes up empty,” he added to Holt, “we’ll be on our way. Does that seem fair?”

Holt stomped off toward his two other detectives.

“Those two are from his homicide squad,” O’Malley indicated. “Don’t look at them. Don’t talk to them. Don’t ruffle any feathers. This is a very delicate political situation. Just keep your mouth shut and tell me what you see.”

Ramirez practically gushed as they walked up to the large yacht.

“This is one sweet ride,” he said. “Looks like a Sea Ray 58 Sedan Bridge. Double decker. Gives you shade up top, AC inside.”

Avery was impressed.

“How do you know all that?” she asked.

“I like to fish.” He shrugged. “Never fished on anything like this before, but a man can dream, right? I should take you out on my boat sometime.”

Avery had never truly enjoyed the sea. Beaches, sometimes; lakes, absolutely; but sailboats and motor vessels far out on the ocean? Panic attacks. She’d been born and raised on flat land, and the thought of being out on the bobbing, crashing tides, with no idea what might be lurking just beneath the waves, made her mind go to dark places.

As Avery and Ramirez passed by and prepared to board the boat, Holt and his two detectives ignored them. A photographer at the bow snapped one last picture and signaled to Holt. He made his way along the gunwale on the starboard side and wiggled his eyebrows at Avery. “You’ll never look at a yacht the same way again,” he joked.

A silver stepladder led to the ship’s side. Avery climbed up, placed her palms on the black windows, and shimmied toward the front.

A middle-aged, saintly looking woman with wild red hair had been positioned on the front of the ship, just before the bow sidelights. She lay scrunched up on her side, facing east, with her hands gripped to her knees and her head down. If she’d been sitting upright she might have appeared asleep. She was completely naked, and the only visible wound was the dark line around her neck. *He snapped it*, Avery thought.

What made the victim stand out, beyond the nudity and the public display of her death, was the shadow she cast. The sun was up in the east. Her body was slightly angled upward, and it produced a mirror image of her scrunched form in a long, warped shadow.

“Fuck *me*,” Ramirez whispered.

As Avery did when she was cleaning surfaces in her home, she got down low and glanced at the ship’s bow. The shadow was either a coincidence or a meaningful sign by the killer, and if he’d left one sign, he might have left another. She moved from one side of the ship to the other.

In the glare of the sun, on the white surface of the ship’s bow, right above the woman’s head, between her body and her shadow, Avery spotted a star. Someone had used their finger to draw a star, either in spit or saltwater.

Ramirez called down to O’Malley.

“What did forensics say?”

“Found some hairs on the body. Could be from a carpet. The other team is still over at the apartment.”

“What apartment?”

“The woman’s apartment,” O’Malley called up. “We believe she was abducted from there. No prints anywhere. Guy might have been wearing gloves. How he transferred her here, to a very visible dock, without anyone seeing, we don’t know. He blacked out some of the marina cameras here. Must have been done right before the murder. She was possibly killed last night. Body seems unmolested, but the coroner has to give the final say.”

Holt scoffed at nothing.

“This is a waste of our time,” he snapped at O’Malley. “What can that woman possibly offer that my men haven’t already discovered? I don’t care about her last case *or* her public persona. As far as I’m concerned she’s just a washed-up attorney who got lucky on her first major case because a serial killer, *that she defended in court, helped her!*”

Avery stood up, leaned on the railing, and observed Holt, O’Malley, and the two other detectives on the dock. Wind ruffled her jacket and pants.

“Did you see the star?” she asked.

“What star?” Holt called up.

“Her body is angled to the side and up. In the sunlight, it creates a shadow image of her form. Very distinct. Almost looks like two people, back-to-back. Between her body and that shadow, someone drew a star. Could be a coincidence, but the placement is perfect. Maybe we can get lucky if the killer drew it in spit.”

Holt consulted with one of his men.

“Did you see a star?”

“No sir,” replied a lean, blond detective with brown eyes.

“Forensics?”

The detective shook his head.

“Ridiculous,” Holt mumbled. “A drawn star? A child could have done that. A shadow? Shadows are created by light. There’s nothing special about that, Detective Black.”

“Who owns the yacht?” Avery asked.

“A dead end.” O’Malley shrugged. “Bigshot real estate developer. He’s away in Brazil on business. Been gone for the last month.”

“If the boat’s been cleaned in the last month,” Avery said, “then that star was put there by the killer, and since it’s in perfect placement between the body and the shadow, it has to mean something. I’m not sure what, but something.”

O’Malley glanced at Holt.

Holt sighed.

“Simms,” he noted to the blond officer, “get forensics back here. See about that star, *and* the shadow. I’ll call you when we’re finished.”

Miserably, Holt glanced at Avery, then finally, he shook his head.

“Let her see the apartment.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Avery walked slowly down the hall of the dim apartment building, flanked by Ramirez, her heart pounding with anticipation as it always did when entering a crime scene. At this moment, she wished she was anywhere but here.

She snapped out of it. She put her game face on and forced herself to observe every detail, however minute.

The victim's apartment door was open. An officer stationed outside moved away and allowed Avery and the others to duck under the crime scene tape and enter.

A narrow hallway led to a living room. A kitchen branched off from the hall. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary anywhere; just someone's very nice apartment. Walls were painted a light gray. There were bookshelves everywhere. Piles of books were stacked on the ground. Plants hung from the windows. A green couch faced a television set. In the only bedroom, the bed was made and topped with a lacy white blanket.

The only obvious disturbance to the apartment was in the living room, where a central rug was clearly missing. A dusty outline, along with a darker space, had been marked with numerous yellow police tags.

"What did forensics find here?" Avery asked.

"Nothing," O'Malley said. "No prints. No camera shots. We're in the dark right now."

"Anything taken from the apartment?"

"Not that we know. Change jar is full. Her clothes were neatly placed in her hamper. Money and ID were still in the pockets."

Avery took her time in the apartment.

As was her habit, she moved in small sections and observed every section thoroughly – the walls, the floors and wooden floorboards, any trinkets on shelves. A picture of the victim with two female friends stood out. She made a mental note to learn their names and contact each one. The bookshelves and piles were analyzed. There were stacks of female romance novels. The rest were mostly on spiritual subjects: self-help, religion.

*Religion, Avery thought.*

*The victim had a star above her head.*

*Star of David?*

Having observed the dead body on the boat and the apartment, Avery began to form a picture of the killer in her mind. He would have attacked from the hall. The kill was quick and he left no marks, made no mistakes. The victim's clothing and effects had been left behind in a neat spot, so as not to disturb the apartment. Only the rug was moved, and it was dusty in that area and around the edges. Something about that harked to anger in the killer. *If he was so meticulous in every other way, Avery wondered, why not clean the dust from the rug sides? Why take the rug at all? Why not leave everything in perfect condition?* She worked it through: He snapped her neck, undressed her, put the clothing away and left everything in order, but then he rolled her in a rug and carried her out like a savage.

She headed over to the window and stared down at the street. There were a few places where someone could hide and observe the apartment without being noticed. One spot in particular called to her: a dark, narrow alleyway behind a fence. *Were you there?* she asked herself. *Watching? Waiting for the right moment?*

"Well?" O'Malley said. "What do you think?"

"We have a serial killer on our hands."

## CHAPTER FOUR

“The killer is male, and strong,” Avery went on. “He obviously overwhelmed the victim and had to carry her to the dock. Seems like a personal vendetta.”

“How do you know that?” Holt asked.

“Why go through so much trouble with a random victim? Nothing appears to be stolen so it’s not a robbery. He was precise about everything except that rug. If you spend so much time planning a murder, undressing the victim and putting her clothes in a hamper, why take *any* of her items? Seems like a planned gesture. He wanted to take *something*. Maybe to show he was powerful? That he could? I don’t know. And leaving her on a boat? Naked and in full view of the harbor? This guy wants to be seen. He wants everyone to know he made this kill. You might have another serial killer on your hands. Whatever decision you’re going to make about who handles this case,” and she glanced at O’Malley, “you might want to make it quick.”

O’Malley turned to Holt.

“Will?”

“You know how I feel about this,” Holt sneered.

“But you’ll go with the call?”

“It’s a mistake.”

“*But?*”

“Whatever the mayor wants.”

O’Malley turned to Avery.

“Are you up for this?” he asked. “Be honest with me. You just came off a very high-profile serial murder. The press crucified you every step of the way. Once again, all eyes will be on you, but this time, the mayor is paying special attention. He asked for you specifically.”

Avery’s heart beat faster. Making a difference as a police officer was what she truly loved about her job, but catching serial killers and avenging the dead was what she craved.

“We have a lot of other open cases,” she said. “And a trial.”

“I can give everything to Thompson and Jones. You can oversee their work. If you take this on, this is priority number one.”

Avery turned to Ramirez.

“You in?”

“I’m in.” He nodded in earnest.

“We’ll do it,” she said.

“Good.” O’Malley sighed. “You’re on the case. Captain Holt and his men will deal with the body and the apartment. You’ll have full access to the files and their full cooperation throughout this investigation. Will, who should they go to if they need information?”

“Detective Simms,” he said.

“Simms is the lead detective you saw this morning,” O’Malley relayed, “blond hair, dark eyes, tough all over. The boat and apartment are all being handled by the A7. Simms will contact you directly with any leads on this end. Maybe you should talk with the family for now. See what you can uncover. If you’re right, and this is personal, they may be involved or have some information that can help.”

“We’re on it,” Avery said.

\*

A quick call to Detective Simms and Avery learned that the victim's parents lived just a bit further north, outside of Boston in the town of Chelsea.

Breaking the news to families was Avery's second-most loathed part of the job. Although she had a way with people, there was a moment, right after they learned about a death of a loved one, that complex emotions took hold. Psychiatrists called it the five stages of grieving, but Avery thought of it as slow torture. First, there was denial. Friends and relatives wanted to know everything about the body – information that would only make them grieve more, and no matter how much Avery offered, it was always impossible for the loved ones to imagine. Second came anger: at the police, at the world, at everyone. Bargaining came next. "Are you sure they're dead? Maybe they're still alive." These stages could happen all at once, or they could take years, or both. The last two stages usually happened when Avery was somewhere else: depression and acceptance.

"I have to say," Ramirez mused, "I don't like finding dead bodies, but this does free us up to work on this case. No more trial and no more paperwork. Feels good, right? We get to do what we want to do and not have to be bogged down in red tape."

He leaned over to kiss her cheek.

Avery pulled away.

"Not now," she said.

"No problem," he replied with his hands up. "I just thought, you know...that we were a thing now."

"Look," she said and had to really think about her next words. "I like you. I really do, but this is all happening too fast."

"Too fast?" he complained. "We've only kissed once in two months!"

"That's not what I mean," she said. "Sorry. What I'm trying to say is, I don't know if I'm ready for a full-blown relationship. We're partners. We see each other every week. I love all the flirtation and seeing you in the morning. I just don't know if I'm ready to move further."

"Whoa," he said.

"Dan –"

"No, no." He raised a hand. "It's OK. Really. I think I expected that."

"I'm not saying I want this to end," Avery reassured him.

"What *is* this?" he asked. "I mean, I don't even know! When we're working, you're all business, and when I try to see you after work, it's almost impossible. You were more loving towards me when you were in the hospital than in real life."

"That's not true," she said, but a part of her realized he was right.

"I like you, Avery," he said. "I like you a lot. If you need time, I'm OK with that. I just want to make sure you actually have some feelings for me. Because if you don't, I don't want to waste your time, or mine."

"I do," she said and glanced at him for a quick second. "Really."

"OK," he said. "Cool."

Avery kept driving, focusing on the road and on the changing neighborhood, forcing herself to snap back into work mode.

Henrietta Venemeer's parents lived in an apartment complex just past the cemetery on Central Avenue. From Detective Simms, Avery had learned they were both retired and would most likely be found at home. She hadn't called in advance. A hard lesson she'd learned early on was that a warning call could alert a possible killer.

At the building, Avery parked and they both walked up to the front door.

Ramirez rang the buzzer.

A long pause ensued before an elderly female answered.

“Yes? Who is it?”

“Mrs. Venemeer, this is Detective Ramirez with the A1 police division. I’m here with my partner, Detective Black. Can we please come up and speak with you?”

“Who?”

Avery leaned forward.

“Police,” she snapped. “Please unlock the front door.”

The door buzzed open.

Avery smiled at Ramirez.

“That’s how you do it,” she said.

“You never cease to amaze me, Detective Black.”

The Venemeers lived on the fifth floor. By the time Avery and Ramirez exited the elevator, they could see an elderly woman peeking out from behind a locked door.

Avery took lead.

“Hi, Mrs. Venemeer,” she said in her softest and clearest voice. “I’m Detective Black and this is my partner, Detective Ramirez.” They both flashed their badges. “Can we come in?”

Mrs. Venemeer had a tangle of wiry hair just like her daughter, only hers was white. She wore thick black glasses and had on a white nightgown.

“What’s this all about?” she worried.

“I think this would be easier if we could talk inside,” Avery said.

“All right,” she mumbled and let them in.

The entire apartment smelled like mothballs and old age. Ramirez made a face and jokingly waved at his nose the moment they entered. Avery hit him in the arm.

A television blared from the living room. On the couch was a large man that Avery assumed was Mr. Venemeer. He was dressed only in red boxers and a T-shirt that he probably wore to bed, and he seemed to have no awareness of them at all.

Oddly, Mrs. Venemeer sat down on the couch beside her husband, without any indication of where Avery or Ramirez might sit.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

A game show played on the TV. The sound was loud. Every so often, the husband cheered from his seat, settled down, and mumbled to himself.

“Can you turn down the TV?” Ramirez asked.

“Oh no,” she said. “John *has* to watch his *Wheel of Fortune*.”

“This is about your daughter,” Avery added. “We really need to talk to you, and we’d like your full attention.”

“Honey,” she said and touched her husband’s arm. “These two officers want to talk about Henrietta.”

He shrugged and growled.

Ramirez turned the television off.

“Hey!” John yelled. “What are you doing!? Turn that back on!”

He sounded drunk.

A bottle of half-filled bourbon was beside him.

Avery stood next to Ramirez and introduced them again.

“Hi,” she said, “my name is Detective Black and this is my partner, Detective Ramirez. We have some very difficult news to share.”

“I’ll tell you what’s difficult!” John snapped. “It’s difficult dealing with a bunch of cops when I’m in the middle of my television program. Turn on that goddamn TV!” he snapped and tried to get out of his seat, but he couldn’t seem to stand.

“Your daughter is dead,” Ramirez said, and he squatted down to look him right in the eyes. “Do you understand? Your daughter is dead.”

“What?” Mrs. Venemeer whispered.

“Henrietta?” John mumbled and sat back.

“I’m so sorry about this,” Avery said.

“How?” the old woman mumbled. “I don’t...*no*. Not Henrietta.”

“Tell us what you’re talking about!” John scoffed. “You can’t come in here and say our daughter is dead. What the hell do you mean?!”

Ramirez took a seat.

*Denial*, Avery thought. *And anger*.

“She was found dead this morning,” Ramirez said, “and identified because of her position within the community. We’re not sure why it happened. Right now, we have a lot of questions. If you can, please just bear with us during this time and help answer some of them.”

“*How?*” the mother cried. “How did it happen?”

Avery pulled a seat beside Ramirez.

“I’m afraid this is an ongoing investigation. We can’t talk about any specifics at this time. Right now, we just need to know anything that *you* might know to help us identify her killer. Did Henrietta have a boyfriend? A close friend you might know about? Someone that might have had a grudge against her?”

“Are you sure it was *Henrietta?*” the mother wondered.

“Henrietta had no enemies!” John shouted. “Everybody loved her. A goddamn saint she was. Came over once a week with groceries. Helped out homeless people. This can’t be right. This has got to be some kind of mistake.”

*Bargaining*, Avery thought.

“I assure you,” she said, “you’ll both be called later this week to make a positive identification of the body. I know this is a lot to absorb. You’ve just received some terrible news, but please, let’s stay focused on finding out who might have done this.”

“No one!” John blared. “This is obviously a mistake. You have the wrong child. Henrietta had no enemies,” he declared. “Was she hit by a bus? Did she fall off a bridge? At least give us *some* idea what we’re dealing with here.”

“She was killed,” Avery offered. “That’s all I can say.”

“Killed,” the mother whispered.

“Please,” Ramirez said. “Anything you can think of? Anything at all. Even if it seems insignificant to you, it might be a big help to us.”

“No,” the mother replied. “She had no boyfriend. There’s a circle of girlfriends she keeps. They were over last year for Thanksgiving. None of them could have done something like this. You must be wrong.”

She looked up with pleading eyes.

“You must!”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Avery parked at an empty spot on the street between police cruisers and braced herself as she looked over at the A7 police department headquarters on Paris Street in East Boston. Outside the station was a media circus. A news conference had been called to discuss the case and a number of television vans and cameras and reporters barred the way, despite numerous officers trying to get them to move.

“Your public awaits,” Ramirez noted.

Ramirez seemed to want to be interviewed. His head was lifted high and he smiled at every reporter that turned his way. To his disappointment, none of them approached. Avery had her head down and walked as fast as possible to push her way into the station. She hated crowds. At one time in her life, when she was a lawyer, she’d loved when people knew her by name and flocked to her trials, but ever since she herself had been figuratively put on trial by the press, she’d learned to despise their attention.

Instantly, the reporters converged.

“Avery Black,” one of them said with a mic in her face. “Can you please tell us anything about the woman murdered at the marina today?”

“Why are you on the case, Detective Black?” yelled another. “This is the A7. Were you transferred to this department?”

“How do you feel about the mayor’s new Stop Crime campaign?”

“Are you and Howard Randall still an item?”

*Howard Randall*, she thought. Despite an overwhelming desire to cut all ties with Randall, Avery hadn’t been able to get him out of her mind Every day since her last meeting with Randall, he’d found some way to creep into her thoughts. Sometimes, a simple smell or an image was all she needed to hear his words: “Does it bring back something from your childhood, Avery? What? Tell me...” Other times, while working on different cases, she tried to think like Randall would think to uncover the solution.

“Out of the way!” Ramirez yelled. “Come on! Make room. Let’s go.”

He put a hand on her back and led her into the station.

The A7 headquarters, a large brick and stone building, had recently received a major interior overhaul. Gone were the metal desks and typically sullen feel of a state-operated organization. In its place were sleek silver tables, colored chairs, and an open area for booking that looked more like the entrance to a playland.

Like the A1 – only more modern – the conference room was encased in glass so that people could look out on the floor. A large, oval mahogany table was complete with microphones for each seat and a huge flat-screen TV for conferencing.

O’Malley was already seated at the table beside Holt. On either side of them were Detective Simms and his partner, and two people Avery guessed were the forensics specialist and the coroner. Two seats remained open at the bottom of the table near the entrance.

“Sit down,” O’Malley waved. “Thanks for coming. Don’t worry. I’m not going to be on your backs the entire time,” he said to everyone, with special emphasis to Avery and Ramirez. “I just want to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

“You’re always welcome here,” Holt said with genuine affection toward O’Malley.

“Thanks, Will. Take it away.”

Holt indicated his officer.

“Simms?” he said.

“All right,” Simms said, “I guess I’m on. Why don’t we start with forensics, then get the coroner’s report, and then I’ll tell you about the rest of our day,” he said with emphasis to Captain Holt before he turned to the forensics specialist. “Sound good, Sammy?”

A lean Indian man was the head of their forensics team. He wore a suit and tie and gave a big thumbs-up when his name was mentioned.

“Yes sir, Mark,” he practically gushed. “As we discussed, we have very little to go on. The apartment was clean. No blood, no sign of a struggle. The cameras were all disabled with a clear epoxy that you can buy at any hardware store. We found remnants of black glove fibers, but again, they offered no solid leads.”

Detective Simms kept jerking his chin toward Avery. Sammy had trouble understanding who was in authority. He kept looking at Simms and Holt and everyone else. Eventually, he caught on and began to address Avery and Ramirez.

“We do, however, have something from the shipyard,” Sammy said. “Obviously, the killer disabled the cameras there, in much the same way as the apartment. To get to the shipyard unnoticed would mean he had to work between eleven p.m., which is when the last worker left the marina, and six in the morning, when the first shifts came on. We found matching shoe prints in the shipyard and on the boat before the other police officers were on the scene. The foot is a ten and a half boot, of the Redwing variety. He seems to walk with a limp from a possible injury to his right leg, as the left shoe created a deeper indent than the right.”

“Excellent,” Simms said proudly.

“We checked into that drawn star on the bow as well,” Sammy continued. “No genetic material could be found. However, we did find a black fiber within the star similar to the glove fibers in the apartment, so that was a very interesting connection, thank you for that, Detective Black.” He nodded.

Avery nodded back.

Holt sniffed.

“Lastly,” Sammy concluded, “we believe the body was carried to the shipyard in a rolled rug, as there were many rug fibers on the body and a missing rug from the house.”

He nodded to indicate he was finished.

“Thanks, Sammy,” Simms said. “Dana?”

A woman in a white lab coat, who looked like she would rather have been anywhere else but in that room, spoke next. She was middle-aged, with straight brown hair that came down to her shoulders, and a constant frown on her face.

“The victim died from a broken neck,” she said. “There were bruises on her arms and legs that indicated she was hurled to the floor or against the wall. Body has probably been dead about twelve hours. There was no sign of forced entry.”

She sat back with her arms folded.

Simms raised his brows and turned to Avery.

“Detective Black? Anything on the family?”

“That was a dead end,” Avery said. “The victim saw her parents once a week to bring groceries and cook dinner. No boyfriend. No other close relatives in Boston. She does, however, have a close circle of friends that we’ll have to speak with. The parents themselves aren’t suspect. They could barely get off the couch. We would have begun researching the friends, but I wasn’t sure about protocol,” she said with a look to O’Malley.

“Thanks for that,” Simms said. “Understood. I think after this meeting, you’ll be in charge, Detective Black, but that’s not my call. Let me tell you what *my* team discovered so far. We checked her phone records and email addresses. Nothing unusual there. Cameras in the building were disabled and no other lenses had sight on the building itself. However, we did find something at Venemeer’s bookstore. It was open today. She has two full-time workers. They were unaware of the victim’s death and genuinely shocked. Neither of them seemed like viable suspects, but both of them mentioned

that the store has recently come under fire from a local gang known as the Chelsea Death Squad. The name comes from their main hangout on Chelsea Street. I spoke with our gang unit and learned they're a relatively new Latino gang loosely affiliated with a bunch of other cartels. Their leader is Juan Desoto."

Avery had heard of Desoto from her gang days during her rookie years. He might be a small player in a new squad, but he'd been a big-time enforcer for a number of established gangs throughout Boston for years.

Why would a mob hitman with his own squad want to kill a local bookstore owner and then deposit the body in high-profile fashion on a yacht? she wondered.

"Sounds like you've got a *great* lead," Holt gushed. "It's distressing that we have to hand the reins over to a department on the other side of the channel. Sadly, however, that's part of life. Isn't it, Captain O'Malley? Compromise, yes?" He smiled.

"That's right," O'Malley reluctantly answered.

Simms sat taller.

"Juan Desoto would definitely be my number one suspect. If this was *my* case," he stressed, "I'd try and visit with him first."

The slight jab bothered Avery.

*Do I really need this?* she thought. Although she was utterly intrigued by the case, the blurry boundary lines between who handled what bothered her. *Do I have to follow his lead? Is he my supervisor now? Or can I do what I want?*

O'Malley seemed to read her mind.

"I think we're finished here. Right, Will?" he said before speaking exclusively to Avery and Ramirez. "After this, you two are in charge unless you need to refer back to Detective Simms over information we've just covered. Copies of the files are being made for you right now. They'll be sent over to the A1. So," he sighed and stood up, "unless there are any other questions, get started. I have a department to run."

\*

The tension at the A7 kept Avery on edge until they were out of the building, past the news reporters, and back in her car.

"That went well," Ramirez cheered. "You do realize what just happened in there?" he asked. "You were just handed the biggest case A7 has probably had in years, and all because you're *Avery Black*."

Avery wordlessly nodded.

Being in charge came with a high price tag. She was able to do things her own way, but if problems arose they were on her head alone. Besides, she had a feeling that it wasn't going to be the last time she heard from the A7. *Feels like I have two bosses now*, she inwardly groaned.

"What's our next move?" Ramirez asked.

"Let's clean the slate with A7 and visit Desoto. Not sure what we'll find, but if his gang was harassing a bookstore owner, I'd like to know why."

Ramirez whistled.

"How do you know where to find him?"

"Everyone knows where to find him. He owns a small coffee shop on Chelsea Street, right by the expressway and the park."

"You think he's our guy?"

"Killing is nothing new to Desoto." Avery shrugged. "Not sure if this crime scene fits his MO, but he might know something. He's a legend throughout Boston. From what I understand, he's done jobs for the blacks, Irish, Italians, Hispanics, you name it. When I was a rookie they called him the

Ghost Killer. For years, no one even believed he existed. Gang Unit had him pegged for jobs as far as New York City. No one could prove a thing. He's owned that coffee shop for as long as I've heard his name."

"You ever meet him?"

"No."

"Know what he looks like?"

"Yeah," she said. "I saw a photo of him once. Light-skinned and really, really big. I think his teeth were sharpened too."

He turned to her and smiled, but beneath that smile she could sense the same panic and rush of adrenaline she was starting to feel herself. They were heading into the lion's den.

"This should be interesting," he said.

## CHAPTER SIX

The corner coffee shop was on the northern side of the underpass to the East Boston Expressway. A one-story brick building with large windows and a simple sign, *Coffee Shop*, served as the location. The windows were blacked out.

Avery parked right near the door entrance and got out.

A darkening had come to the sky. Toward the southwest, she could see the sunset horizon of orange, red, and yellow. A grocery store was on the opposite corner. Residential homes filled the rest of the street. The area was quiet and unassuming.

“Let’s do this,” Ramirez said.

After a long day just following along and sitting in a meeting, Ramirez seemed pumped and ready for action. His eagerness worried Avery. *Gangs don’t like jumpy cops invading their hood*, she thought. *Especially ones with no warrant who are only there on hearsay.*

“Easy,” she said. “I’ll ask the questions. No sudden moves. No attitude of any kind, OK? We’re just here to ask questions and see if they can help.”

“Sure.” Ramirez frowned, and his body language said otherwise.

A jingle of a bell came as they entered the shop.

The tiny space held four cushioned red booths and a single counter where people could order coffee and other breakfast items throughout the day. There were barely fifteen items listed on the menu and few customers.

Two old, thin Latino men that might have been homeless drank coffee at one of the booths on the left. A younger gentleman wearing sunglasses and a black fedora was slouched in one of the booths and turned toward the door. He wore a black tank top. A gun was clearly holstered in a shoulder strap. Avery glanced at his shoes. *Eight and a half*, she thought. *Nine, tops.*

“*Put a*,” he whispered at the sight of Avery.

The older men seemed oblivious.

No chef or takeout employee was visible behind the counter.

“Hi there.” Avery waved. “We’d like to speak to Juan Desoto if he’s around.”

The young man laughed.

Quick words were spoken in Spanish.

“He says, ‘fuck you, cop whore and your bitch boy,’” Ramirez translated.

“Lovely,” Avery said. “Listen, we don’t want any trouble,” she added and held up both palms in submission. “We just want to ask Desoto a few questions about a bookstore on Sumner Street that he doesn’t seem to like.”

The man sat up and pointed at the door.

“Get the fuck out, *cop!*”

There were a lot of ways Avery could have handled the situation. The man was carrying a gun and she guessed it was loaded and had no license. He also seemed ready to engage despite the fact that nothing had actually occurred. That, combined with the empty counter, led her to believe that something might be going on in a back room. *Drugs*, she guessed, *or they have some hapless store owner back there and are beating him to a pulp.*

“All we want is a few minutes with Desoto,” she said.

“*Bitch!*” the man snapped and stood and pulled his gun.

Ramirez instantly drew.

The two older men continued to drink their coffee and sit in silence.

Ramirez called out over the barrel of his gun.

“Avery?”

“Everybody calm down,” Avery said.

A man appeared in a cooking window behind the main counter, a big man by the look of his neck and round cheeks. He seemed to be leaning into the window, which gave him a foreshortened height. His face was partially hidden in dim shadow; a bald, light-skinned Latino with a humorous glint in his eyes. A smile was on his lips. In his mouth was a grill that made all of his teeth look like sharp diamonds. No outward display of malice could be observed, but he was so cool and calm given the tense situation that it made Avery wonder why.

“Desoto,” she said.

“No weapons, no weapons,” Desoto mentioned from the square window. “Tito,” he called, “put your gun on the table. Cops. Put your guns on the table. No weapons here.”

“No way,” Ramirez said and kept his gun pointed at the other man.

Avery could feel the short blade she kept attached to her ankle, just in case she ran into trouble. Also, everyone knew they were headed to Desoto’s place. *We’ll be all right*, she thought. *I hope*.

“Put it down,” she said.

As a show of good faith, Avery gently pulled her Glock out with her fingertips and put it on the table between the two older men.

“Do it,” she said to Ramirez. “Put it on the table.”

“Shit,” Ramirez whispered. “This is no good. No good.” Still, he complied; placed his gun on a table. The other man, Tito, then put his own gun down and smiled.

“Thank you,” Desoto said. “Don’t worry. No one wants your cop guns. They’ll be safe right there. Come. Talk.”

He disappeared from view.

Tito indicated a small red door, practically impossible to notice given its location behind one of the booths.

“You first,” Ramirez said.

Tito bowed and entered.

Ramirez stepped through next and Avery followed.

The red door opened into the kitchen. A hallway moved further back. Directly in front of them were basement stairs, steep and dark. At the bottom was another door.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Ramirez whispered.

“*Quiet*,” Avery whispered.

A poker game was being played in the room beyond. Five men, all Latino, well-dressed and strapped with guns, went silent on their approach. The table was packed with money and jewelry. Couches lined the walls of the large space. On numerous shelves, Avery noticed machine guns and machetes. One other door was visible. A quick glance at their feet revealed that none of them had shoes large enough to match the killer.

On the couch, arms splayed wide, and with a huge smile on his face that exposed the grill of razor teeth, sat Juan Desoto. His body was more bull than man, pumped up and chiseled from daily workouts and, Avery guessed, steroids. A giant even though seated, he might have stood to nearly seven feet tall. His feet, similarly, were huge. *At least a twelve*, Avery thought.

“Relax, everyone, relax,” Desoto commanded. “Play, play,” he urged his men. “Tito, get them something to drink. What would you like, Officer *Black*,” he said with emphasis.

“You know me?” Avery asked.

“I don’t know you,” he replied. “I know *of* you. You arrested my little cousin Valdez two years ago, and some of my good friends in the West Side Killers. Yes, I have many friends in other gangs,” he said at Avery’s surprised look. “Not all gangs fight each other like animals. I like to think *bigger* than that. Please. What can I get for you?”

“Nothing for me,” Ramirez said.

“I’m fine,” she added.

Desoto nodded to Tito, who left the way he'd come. All men at the table continued to play cards except one. The odd man out was a spitting image of Desoto, only much smaller and younger. He muttered something to Desoto and the two of them had a fiery conversation.

"That's Desoto's little brother," Ramirez translated. "He thinks they should just kill both of us and dump us in the river. Desoto is trying to tell him that that's why he's always in prison, because he thinks too much when he should just keep his mouth shut and listen."

"*Sientate!*" Desoto finally shouted.

Reluctantly, his little brother sat down but he glared hard at Avery.

Desoto took in a breath.

"You like being a big celebrity cop?" he asked.

"Not really," Avery said. "Gives guys like you a target in the police department. I don't like to be a target."

"True, true," he said.

"We're looking for information," Avery added. "A middle-aged woman named Henrietta Venemeer owns a bookstore on Sumner. Spiritual books, new age, psychology, things like that. Rumor has it you don't like the shop. She was being harassed."

"By *me*?" he noted in surprise and pointed to himself.

"By you or your men. We're not sure. That's why we're here."

"Why would you come all the way into the devil's den to ask about some woman at a bookshop? Please, explain this to me."

No recognition of Henrietta or the bookstore appeared on his face. In fact, Avery thought he was insulted by the accusation.

"She was murdered last night," Avery said and paid careful attention to the men in the room and how they reacted. "Her neck was broken and she was tied to a yacht at the marina on Marginal Street."

"Why would I do this?" he asked.

"That's what we want to find out."

Desoto began to speak to his men in very quick and agitated Spanish. His little brother and another man seemed genuinely annoyed that they would be accused of something so clearly beneath them. The other three, however, turned sheepish under the interrogation. An argument ensued. At one point, Desoto stood up in anger and displayed his full height and size.

"These three have been to the shop," Ramirez whispered. "They robbed it twice. Desoto is pissed because this is the first time he's hearing about it, and he never got his cut."

With a loud roar, Desoto hammered his fist onto the table and cracked it in half. Bills and change and jewelry went flying. A necklace nearly whipped into Avery's face and she was forced to stand back against the door. All five men pushed away in their chairs. Desoto's little brother yelled out in frustration and raised his arms. Desoto kept his fury squarely placed on one man in particular. A finger was pointed in the man's face, and a threat was given and received.

"That guy took the others to the shop," Ramirez whispered. "He's in trouble."

Desoto turned with his arms wide.

"I apologize," he said. "My men did indeed accost this woman in her shop. Twice. This is the first I've ever heard of it."

Avery's heart was beating fast. They were in an isolated room full of angry criminals with weapons, and regardless of Desoto's words and gestures, he was an intimidating presence, and, if the rumors were true, a mass murderer. Suddenly, the feel of her small blade so far out of reach wasn't as comforting as she'd thought.

"Thanks for that," Avery said. "Just to be sure we're on the same page, would any of your men have any reason to *kill* Henrietta Venemeer?"

"No one kills without my approval," he flatly stated.

“Venemeer was strangely placed on the ship,” Avery pushed. “In full view of the harbor. A star was drawn above her head. Would that mean anything to you?”

“Do you remember my cousin?” Desoto asked. “Michael Cruz? Little guy? Skinny?”

“I don’t.”

“You broke his arm. I asked him how a little girl could have bested him, and he said that you were very fast, and very strong. Do you think you could take *me*, Officer Black?”

The downward spiral began.

Avery could feel it. Desoto was bored. He’d answered their questions and he was bored and angry and he had two unarmed cops in his private room beneath a shop. Even the men who’d been playing poker were fully locked onto both of them.

“No,” she said. “I think you could murder me in hand-to-hand combat.”

“I believe in an eye for an eye,” Desoto said. “I believe when information is given, information should be received. *Balance*,” he stressed, “is very important in life. I have given you information. You arrested my cousin. You have now taken from me twice. You see this, yes?” he asked. “You *owe* me something.”

Avery backed up and assumed her traditional jujitsu stance, legs bent and slightly parted, arms up and hands open under her chin.

“What do I owe you?” she asked.

With only a grunt, Desoto jumped forward, cocked his right arm, and punched.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The room emptied in Avery's mind; it turned black, and all she could see were the five men, and feel Ramirez next to her, and see Desoto's fist moving closer to her face. She called it *the fog*, a place where she'd often been during her running days – another world, separate from her physical existence. Her jujitsu instructor had called it “the ultimate awareness,” a place where focus became selective, so the senses were more heightened around specific targets.

She spun into Desoto's arm and gripped his wrist. At the same time, her hip popped back into his body for leverage, and she used his own momentum to throw him into the basement door. Wood cracked and the giant man crashed hard.

Without breaking her stride, Avery spun and kicked an attacker in the stomach. After that, everything moved in slow motion. Each of the five men was targeted for maximum damage with minimal aggression. A jab to the throat made one fall to the ground. A kick to the groin followed by a hard back-spin and another man crashed on the broken table. She lost Desoto's little brother for a second. She turned to see him about to punch her with a pair of brass knuckles; Ramirez jumped in and tackled him to the ground.

Desoto roared and grabbed Avery in a bear hug from behind.

The massive weight of his body was like a cement block. Avery couldn't break his hold. She kicked at the air. He lifted her up and threw her into a wall.

Avery slammed into a shelving system and the entire unit fell on her head when she dropped to the ground. Desoto kicked her in the stomach; the blow was so powerful it lifted her up. Another kick and her neck snapped back. Desoto lowered down. Thick arms clutched her neck in a dangerous choke. A quick lift and she was up – feet dangling.

“I could snap your neck,” he whispered, “like a twig.”

*Groggy.*

Her mind was groggy from the blows. Air was hard to take in.

*Focus, she commanded. Or you're dead.*

She tried to flip over his body, or break the hold with his arms. An iron grip held her fast. Something slammed into Desoto's back. He lowered Avery's feet to the ground and looked behind him to see Ramirez with a chair.

“That didn't hurt you?” Ramirez asked.

Desoto growled.

Avery collected herself, lifted her foot, and stomped her heel into his toes.

“Ah!” Desoto howled.

He wore a white button-down T-shirt, tan shorts, and flip-flops; Avery's heel had cracked two bones. Instinctively, he let go, and by the time he was ready to grip her again, Avery was in stance. One quick punch to his throat was followed by a jab to his solar plexus.

An iron bat was on the ground.

She picked it up and swatted him in the head.

Desoto instantly went limp.

Two of his men were already down, including the little brother. A third – who'd been watching her battle with Desoto – widened his eyes in surprise. He drew his gun. Avery swatted his hand with the bat, spun with the momentum, and clobbered him in the face. He crashed into a wall unit.

The last two men had overtaken Ramirez.

Avery swung the bat into the back of one man's knees. He flipped up. She brought the steel down on his chest and kicked him hard in the face. The other man punched her in the jaw and followed with a screaming tackle onto the poker table.

They crashed down together.

The man was on top and rained down blows. Avery finally caught a wrist and rolled. He fell off and she was able to spin and trap his arm in a submission hold. Avery lay perpendicular to his body. Her legs were over his belly and his arm was straight and hyper-extended.

“Let go! Let go!” he cried out.

She lifted a leg and kicked him in the face until he passed out.

“*Fuck you!*” she yelled.

The room was silent. All five men, including Desoto, were out cold.

Ramirez groaned and got to his hands and knees.

“Jesus...” he whispered.

Avery spotted a gun on the floor. She grabbed it and pointed it at the basement door. No sooner had she aimed than Tito appeared.

“Don’t you lift that gun!” Avery howled. “You hear me!? Don’t you do it.”

Tito glanced at the gun in his hand.

“You lift that gun and I shoot.”

The scene in the room was impossible for Tito to believe; his mouth practically fell open when he saw Desoto.

“You do all this?” he asked seriously.

“Drop the gun!”

Tito aimed at her.

Avery fired two shots into his chest and sent him flying back into the staircase.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Outside the coffee shop, Avery held a bag of ice over her eye. Two nasty bruises were throbbing beneath it, and her cheek was swollen. It was also hard to breathe, which made her think she'd fractured a rib, and her neck was still sore and red from the tight squeeze of Desoto.

Despite the abuse, Avery felt good. *Better* than good. She'd successfully defended herself against a giant killer and five other men.

*You did it*, she thought.

She'd spent years learning to fight, countless years and hours when she was the only one in the dojo, just sparring with herself. She'd been in other fights before, but none against five men, and certainly none against someone as powerful as Desoto.

Ramirez sat on the curb. He'd been on the verge of collapse ever since the basement. Compared to Avery, he was in bad shape: face riddled with cuts and swollen spots and constant dizzy spells.

"You were an animal down there," he muttered. "An animal..."

"Thanks?" she said.

Desoto's diner was in the heart of A7, so Avery had felt obligated to call in Simms for backup. An ambulance was on the scene, along with numerous A7 cops to take Desoto and his men in for assault, weapons possession, and other small infractions. Tito's body – wrapped in a black bag – was brought up first and loaded into the back of the emergency vehicle.

Simms appeared and shook his head.

"It's a mess down there," he said. "Thanks for the extra paperwork."

"Would you have rather I called my own people?"

"No," he admitted, "I guess not. We've got three different departments all trying to pin something on Desoto, so at the very least this can help shake the tree. I don't know what you were thinking going into that place without backup, but nice work. How did you take all six of them on your own?"

"I had help," Avery said with a nod to Ramirez.

Ramirez raised a hand in acknowledgment.

"What about the yacht murder?" Simms asked. "Any connection?"

"I don't think so," she said. "Two of his men robbed the store twice. Desoto was surprised about it, and pissed. If the two other clerks corroborate the story, I think they're in the clear. They wanted money, not a dead store owner."

Another cop appeared and waved at Simms.

Simms gave a light tap on Avery's shoulder.

"You might want to get out of here," he said. "They're bringing them up now."

"No," Avery said. "I'd like to see him."

Desoto was so large he had to dip out of the front door. Two cops were on either side of him, and one was at his back. Compared to everyone else, he looked like a giant. His men were brought up behind him. All of them were led toward a police van. As he drew close to Avery, Desoto paused and turned; none of the cops could make him move.

"Black," he called.

"Yeah?" she said.

"You know that target you were talking about?"

"Yeah?"

"Click, click, *boom*," he said with a wink.

He stared at her for another second before he allowed police to load him in the van.

Idle threats were part of the job. Avery had learned that a long time ago, but someone like Desoto was the real thing. Outwardly, she stood her ground and stared back at him until he was gone, but on the inside, she was barely keeping it together.

“I need a drink,” she said.

“No way,” Ramirez muttered. “I feel like shit.”

“I’ll tell you what,” she said. “Any bar you want. Your choice.”

He instantly perked up.

“Really?”

Avery had never offered to go out to a bar that Ramirez wanted. When he went out, he drank with the squad, while Avery chose quiet, low-key bars around her own neighborhood. Ever since they’d been a sort-of item, Avery had never once accompanied him out, or had a drink with anyone else in the department.

Ramirez stood up too fast, swooned, and caught himself.

“I got just the place,” he said.

## CHAPTER NINE

“*Fuckin’ A!*” Finley roared in a drunken stupor. “You just took out six members of the Chelsea Death Squad, including Juan Desoto? I don’t believe it. *I don’t fuckin’ believe it.* Desoto is supposed to be a monster. Some people don’t even believe he exists.”

“She did it,” Ramirez swore. “I was right there, man. I’m telling you, she did it. Girl is like a kung-fu master or something. You should have seen her. As fast as lightning. I’d never seen anything like it. How did you learn to fight like that?”

“A lot of hours in the gym,” Avery said. “No life. No friends. Just me, a bag, and a lot of sweat and tears.”

“You’ve got to teach me some of those moves,” he pleaded.

“You were doing pretty well there yourself,” Avery said. “You saved me twice, if I remember correctly.”

“That’s true. I did do that,” he agreed so that everyone could hear.

They were in Joe’s Pub on Canal Street, a cop bar only a few blocks away from the A1 police station. At the large wooden table was everyone who’d been on Avery’s previous Homicide Squad: Finley, Ramirez, Thompson, and Jones, along with two other beat cops that were friends with Finley. Homicide supervisor for the A1, Dylan Connelly, was at another table not far away, having a drink with some men that worked in his unit. Every so often, he glanced up seemingly to catch Avery’s eye; she never noticed.

Thompson was the largest person in the entire the bar. Practically albino, he had extremely light-colored skin, with fine blond hair, full lips, and light-colored eyes. A drunken gaze turned sour at Avery.

“*I could take you,*” he declared.

“*I could take her,*” Finley snapped. “She’s a *girl*. Girls can’t fight. Everyone knows that. This must have been a fluke. Desoto was sick and his men were all suddenly blinded by chick-beauty. No way she beats them cold. No way.”

Jones, a lean, older Jamaican, leaned forward with incredible interest.

“How you take Desoto?” he wondered. “Seriously. No gym shit. I be in the gym too and look at me. I barely gain a pound.”

“I got lucky,” Avery said.

“Yeah, but, *how?*” he truly wanted to know.

“Jujitsu,” she said. “I used to be a runner, back when I was in law, but after that whole scandal, jogging around the city wasn’t really my thing anymore. I enrolled in a jujitsu class and spent hours there every day. I think I was trying to purge my soul or something. I liked it. A lot. So much so that the instructor gave me keys to the gym and said I could go whenever I wanted.”

“*Fuckin’ jujitsu,*” Finley said like it was a bad word. “I don’t need no karate. I just call my crew and they go *pop-pop-pop!*” he cried and pretended to fire a machine gun. “They’ll blow everybody away!”

A round of shots were ordered to commemorate the event.

Avery played pool, threw darts, and by ten o’clock, she was hammered. This was the first time she’d ever actually hung out with her squad, and it gave her a true sense of community. In a rare, extremely vulnerable moment, she put her arm around the much shorter Finley at the pool table. “You’re all right by me,” she said.

Finley, seemingly bedazzled by her touch and the fact that a tall blond goddess stood next to him, was momentarily speechless.

Ramirez remained slumped over at the bar and sitting alone, where he'd been all night. A walk over nearly landed Avery face down on the floor. She put her arm around his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"Does that feel better?" she asked.

"That hurt."

"Aw," she cooed. "Let's get out of here. I'll make it better."

"Nah," he mumbled.

"What's wrong?"

Ramirez was distraught when he turned around.

"*You*," he said. "You're incredible at everything you do. What am I? I feel like I'm your sidekick sometimes. You know? Until you came along, I thought I was a great cop, but whenever we're together I just see my flaws. This morning – who else could have stopped that guy from shooting that cop? At the dock, who else could have seen what you saw? Who else could have gotten Desoto to let you into his crib and then *beaten* Desoto? You're just so good, Avery, it makes me question my own value."

"Come on," Avery said and pushed her forehead into his. "You're a great cop. You saved my life. *Again*. Desoto would have cracked my neck in two."

"Anyone could have done that," he said and wiggled away.

"You're the best-dressed cop I know," she offered, "*and* the most enthusiastic cop, and you always make me smile with your positive attitude."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she pushed. "I get into my head too much. I could stay there for weeks. You force me out of my shell and make me feel like a woman."

She kissed him on the lips.

Ramirez lowered his head.

"Thanks for that," he said. "Really. Thanks. That means a lot. I'm OK. Just give me a minute, OK? Let me finish my drink and think about some things."

"Sure," she said.

The bar was even more packed than when they'd first arrived. Avery scanned the crowd. Thompson and Jones had left. Finley was playing pool. There were a couple of other officers she recognized from their office, but no one she particularly wanted to meet. Two well-dressed men waved her down and pointed at drinks. She shook her head.

Images flashed through her mind: Desoto's hands around her neck, and the woman on the boat with her eerie shadow and star.

Avery ordered another drink and found a quiet table near a back corner. To anyone watching, she knew she must have looked crazy: a lone woman with a beaten-up face, hands on the table around a drink, and eyes focused squarely at nothing while she inwardly combed through the events of the day to find connections.

Desoto, dead end.

Parents, dead end.

Friends? Avery realized she needed to follow up with them at some point, probably sooner rather than later.

*Why did the killer draw a star?* she wondered.

She thought about the apartment where the murder had taken place, the books, the clothing in a hamper, and the missing rug. He's big, she thought, and strong, and he's definitely got a chip on his shoulder. Cameras were disabled, which means he's also stealthy. Military training? Maybe.

She checked off another box.

Definitely personal, she mulled. Go back in Venemeer's past. Find out who else worked at the shop, or dated her in school. Compile a list. After you have your list, maybe talk with the parents again so they can verify.

Pieces began to form, pieces to a puzzle she had yet to complete.

Ramirez stood right in front of her, watching.

“Hey,” Avery said and covered her face in embarrassment.

“Look at you.” He smiled back. “What are you doing?”

A blush painted her cheeks.

“This is how I work,” she said.

He sat down next to her.

“How?” he asked. “Tell me.”

“I just...go through it in my mind,” she said. “All the facts. All the pieces. Try to mentally look for connections. I create a checklist of leads to pursue so we don’t let anything fall through the cracks. I have to be thorough.”

“Why?” he asked. “Why are you so good at this?”

The image of her father came to her, shotgun in hand, the muzzle pointed at her face. “Stop crying or I’ll give you something to cry about!”

*Escape*, she thought.

That was all Avery had wanted for most of her life: to escape from her past. But escape meant she had to have a plan, and plans always had a way of going awry.

“It was the only way out,” she said.

“Out? Of what?”

Avery faced him, and shared a piece of information she hadn’t said aloud in years.

“I was an orphan. Did you know that?”

Ramirez sat back in awe.

“No!” he cried. “I would have never pegged you as an orphan. I’m a *really* bad cop.”

“Don’t think that.” She smiled and held his hand.

“Anyway,” she went on, “I was a foster kid for about six years. I went through a lot of homes, was picked up by a few families. House mothers. That’s what they’re called. They get paid to take in young children with nowhere else to go. Everybody’s happy. The state gets to wipe their hands clean of wayward children. Crappy people get to have slaves.”

“Avery. I am *so* sorry.”

“There was this one house mother – ”

A newspaper was slapped down on the table.

Dylan Connelly stood above them.

“You seen this?” he said. “It’s the late edition. All over the Internet. A copy of the letter was mailed to A7. O’Malley is waiting on us. Wants the entire team in to go over what you’ve discovered so far. It’s from your killer.”

The cover of the paper read: *Murder at Marina*, and showed a shot of the victim on the bow of a yacht docked to a pier. Lines from the article stood out: “Saliva swab on the letter matches that of the slain woman,” and “Possible bookstore connection.” Avery was mentioned twice by name: once as an investigator from the A1 brought in to help with the case, and once as a possible love interest of captured serial killer Howard Randall.

A smaller caption read: *Letter from the Murderer!* The picture displayed a zoom-in of words scrawled on paper.

Avery flipped to the page.

The letter was a full side. The killer’s note was written like a poem:

**How can you break the cycle?**

**How can you take advantage of each moment in life?**

**I have found the key**

**I can unlock the prize**

**Come all who dare**

**I defy you**

**The first body is set. More will come**

Avery set it down, her entire body trembling.

*More will come.*

She knew, with sudden certainty, that he was right.

## CHAPTER TEN

Before Avery and Ramirez even walked into the A1 conference room, they could hear O'Malley screaming into the speakerphone.

"Completely unacceptable, Will! You were supposed to share everything with us. We're handling this case now. But instead, you received a huge piece of evidence and decided to keep it for yourself. When were you going to call us?"

"We just received the letter this afternoon," Holt blared back from the speaker.

"How did the papers get it?"

"They got a copy. We have the original here, but the killer made copies. The way I understand it, he sent them to *every* newspaper."

"No way the papers would know that splotch on the bottom of the letter was a saliva swab. That had to come from your department. So you got the letter, you had forensics check it out, you matched the saliva to the victim, and then you told someone. That's the only way this could have happened, Will. The first call you should have made was to Detective Black. Do you know where I am right now? I'm in the office. You know where I *should* be? I *should* be in bed with my wife. But instead, I'm here. That's because you didn't do your job, and now we have a publicity nightmare on our hands and the mayor is pissed."

"Calm down, Mike, calm down."

"I won't calm down until you tell me the truth!"

"The truth is, we had no idea that letter was connected to the victim we found this morning. It came in the regular mail, it was opened by one of our staff, and someone had the foresight to send it to forensics. It just so happened that there was a match."

"Who called the papers?"

"They must have called us."

"The leak definitely came from your department."

"I'll handle it."

"You'd *better* handle it, and next time, we expect a call."

He hung up.

"*Shit!*" he cried.

Dylan Connelly sat down.

"Captain, why don't you go home?" he said. "I can handle this."

"I can't go anywhere just yet," O'Malley replied, "because the mayor pulled me into his Everybody-Holds-Hands crime campaign and now I'm screwed. Don't worry. I'm going home soon. You're here to learn everything you can from Black and Ramirez and act as a liaison with Simms over at the A7 so this doesn't happen again. You two are friends, right?"

"We were in the academy together."

"Good. Once we're through here, call him up. If he doesn't want to talk to myself or Black, he's at least got to talk to you."

"It might not be his fault," Avery said. "He was a little busy earlier."

"Oh yeah," O'Malley snapped. "That reminds me. Nice face," he noted to Avery. "What the hell were you doing in the gang den of Juan Desoto?"

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