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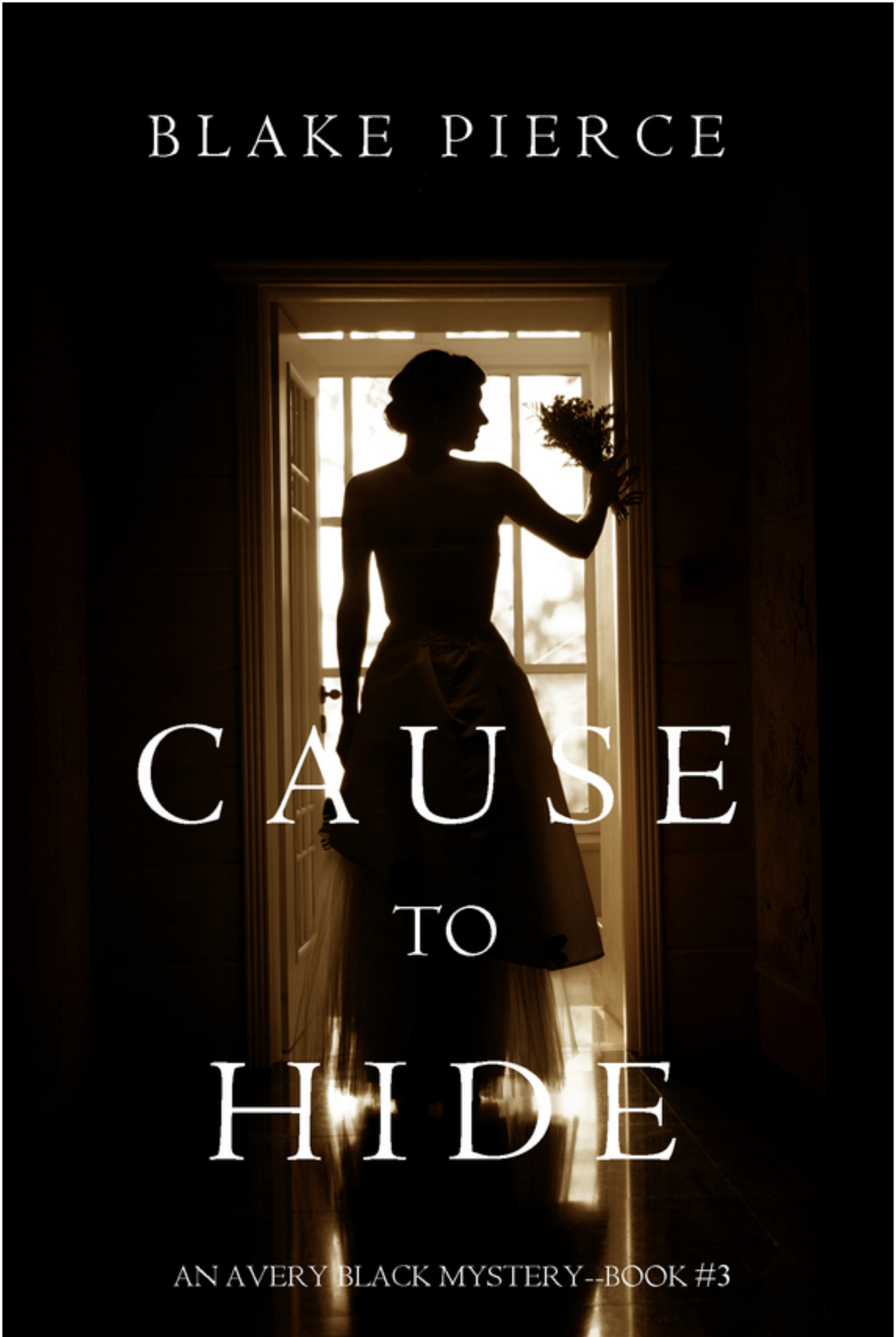

CAUSE TO HIDE

AN AVERY BLACK MYSTERY--BOOK #3

An Avery Black Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Cause to Hide

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Пирс Б.

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

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Bodies are being found in the outskirts of Boston, their corpses burned beyond recognition, as the police realize a new serial killer is roaming the streets. As the media converges and the pressure is upped, the Boston Police Department must turn to its most brilliant—and controversial—homicide detective: Avery Black. Avery, still trying to pick up the pieces of her own life—her budding relationship with Ramirez, her reconciliation with Rose—suddenly finds herself thrown into the most challenging case of her career. With scant evidence to follow, she must enter the mind of a psychotic killer, try to understand his obsession with fire, and what clues that offers into his personality. Her trail leads her deep into Boston's worst neighborhoods, to confrontations with its worst psychopaths—and finally, to a twist she could never possibly imagine. In a game of psychological cat and mouse, a frantic race against time, Avery is led too deep into the maze of a killer's mind, and to places darker than she'd ever wish to see. A psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, CAUSE TO HIDE is book #3 of a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Pierce Blake
Cause to Hide (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 3)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seven books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising four books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising four books (and counting); and of the new KERI LOCKE 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.comwww.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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PROLOGUE

When he made his way out across the vacant lot, dawn was burning off the last of the night. The slightest bit of rain had fallen the night before, creating a mist of fog that crept along the ground. He walked slowly, methodically, as if he did this every morning.

To all sides were the foundations of houses – houses that would never be finished. He supposed the frames had gone up five or six years ago, only to be left abandoned when the housing crisis hit. For some reason, it enraged him. So much promise for a family and a builder, only to end up failing miserably in the end.

Against the fog, he looked gaunt – tall and thin, like a living scarecrow. His black overcoat blended perfectly with the light gray wisps. It was an ethereal scene. It made him feel ghostlike. It made him feel legendary, nearly invincible. He felt as if he were a part of the world and it, a part of him.

But there was nothing natural about his presence there. In fact, he had been planning this for weeks. Months, really. The years that had come before had really just ushered him along, pushing him toward this moment.

He walked through the fog and listened to the city. The hustle and bustle lay perhaps a mile away. He was in a forgotten part of town, decrepit, a part of town that had suffered economic collapse. So many dead hopes and dreams littered the fog-strewn ground.

It all made him want to burn.

Patiently, he waited. He paced back and forth with no real purpose. He walked along the edge of the empty street and then into the construction area among the skeletons of houses that never were. He stalked about, waiting for another figure to show itself in the fog. Knowing that the universe would send it to him.

Finally, it appeared.

Even before the figure came fully into view, he could sense it through dawn's weak light and the slithering fog. The figure was feminine.

This was what he had waited for. Destiny was being knitted together right before him.

With his heart thundering in his chest, he stepped forward, doing his best to seem natural and calm. He opened his mouth and started to call for a dog that was not there. In the fog, his voice did not sound like his own; it was thin and wavering, like a phantom.

He reached into the pocket of his long coat and withdrew a retractable dog leash that he had purchased the day before.

"Sweet Pea!" he called out.

It was the sort of name that would confuse a passerby before they had time to really even give him a second glance.

"Sweet Pea!"

The figure of the woman came closer, stepping through the fog. He saw that she had her own dog, taking it for its morning walk. It was one of those small pretentious dogs, the sort that looked more like a rat. Of course, he knew this about her. He knew just about everything about her morning schedule.

"Everything okay?" the woman asked.

He could see her face now. She was much younger than he was. Twenty years, at least.

He held up the empty leash and gave the woman a sad sort of smile. "My dog got loose. I'm pretty sure she came this way, but I don't hear her."

"Oh no," the woman said.

"Sweet Pea!" he yelled again.

At the woman's feet, her little dog lifted its leg and peed. The woman barely seemed to notice. She was looking at him now. Something very close to recognition filled her eyes. She tilted her head. An uncertain smile touched the corners of her mouth. She took a tiny step backward.

He reached into his other coat pocket and wrapped his hand around the handle of the hammer he had hidden there. He brought it out with a speed that surprised even him.

He struck her hard on top of the head with it. The sound it made in the quiet lot, in the blanket of fog, was almost nothing. *Thunk.*

Her eyes went glassy. When she collapsed to the ground, the traces of that small smile were still at the corners of her mouth.

Her little dog sniffed at her and then looked up to him. It gave a pathetic little bark. He stepped toward it and growled lightly. The dog peed a little more, backed away, and then went running out of the lot, its leash dragging behind it.

He pocketed the hammer and the useless leash. He then looked down at her body for a moment and slowly reached for it, the only sound left that of the dog's barking, echoing endlessly in the rolling fog of morning.

CHAPTER ONE

Avery sat the last of the boxes down on the floor of her daughter's new apartment and felt like crying. The moving truck had pulled away from the curb downstairs five minutes ago and there was no going back now: Rose had an apartment of her own. Avery felt the pit growing in her stomach; this was completely different than her living in a college dorm, where there were friends at every corner and the security of the campus police.

Rose would be living alone now. And Avery still hadn't accepted it. A very short time ago, Rose had been endangered because of Avery's last case – and that was something that Avery still harbored massive guilt over. To have Rose now out on her own after such an ordeal felt irresponsible on Avery's part. It made her feel like a failure as a mother. It also made her very scared for her daughter. And that was saying something, coming from a decorated Homicide detective.

She's eighteen, Avery thought. *You can't hold onto her forever, especially when your grip on her was loose, if not non-existent, during her formative years.*

How had Rose grown up so fast? How had she become such a beautiful, independent, and driven woman? Avery certainly couldn't take credit for it, as she had been absent for most of Rose's life.

All that aside, it made her feel proud to watch her daughter as she unpacked her own dishes and placed them into her own cupboards. Despite the tumultuous childhood and teen years she had faced, Rose had made it. The future was hers for the taking, and it started with putting her Dollar Store dishes into the cupboards of her first apartment.

"I'm proud of you, kid," Avery said. She made her way through the maze of boxes that occupied the floor of Rose's living room.

"For what?" Rose said.

"Surviving," Avery said with a laugh. "I know I didn't necessarily make it easy on you."

"You didn't. But Dad did okay. And that's not a dig against you."

Avery felt a pang of sorrow.

"I know."

Avery knew that such an admission was hard for Rose. Avery knew that her daughter was still trying to figure out the footing of their relationship. For a typical estranged mother and daughter, reconciliation was hard enough. But they had both been through hell lately. From Rose being stalked by a serial killer and moved to a safe house, to the post-traumatic stress disorder Avery was wrestling with from running to Rose's rescue, there were mountain-sized obstacles to get over. And even something as simple as moving boxes into her daughter's new apartment was a huge step along the way of repairing the relationship Avery so badly wanted with her.

Taking that step required some sort of normalcy – a normalcy that wasn't always available in the world of a work-obsessed detective.

She joined Rose in the kitchen and helped her unpack the boxes labeled KITCHEN. As they worked together to unpack them, Avery felt herself close to tears again.

What the hell? When have I ever gotten this emotional?

"Do you think you'll be okay?" Avery asked, doing what she could to keep conversation going. "This isn't like a college dorm. You're legitimately on your own. Are you ready for that after…well, after everything you've been through?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm not a little girl anymore."

"Well, that's very clear."

"Besides," she said, putting the last dish away and setting the empty box aside. "I'm not exactly alone anymore."

And there it was. Rose had been a little distracted lately but also in a good mood, and a noticeable good mood was a rare occurrence for Rose Black. Avery had thought there might be a boy

involved and that opened up a whole different can of worms that Avery wasn't prepared to deal with. She'd missed the period talk with Rose, missed details of her first crush, first dance, and first kiss. Now that she was faced with the potential love life of her eighteen-year-old daughter, she understood just how much she had missed.

"What do you mean?" Avery asked.

Rose bit at her lip, as if she regretted having said anything.

"I…well, I might have met someone."

She said it casually and a bit dismissively, making it clear that she had no interest in talking about it.

"Oh yeah?" Avery asked. "When was this?"

"About a month ago," Rose said.

Exactly the amount of time I've been noticing her better moods, Avery thought. Sometimes it was eerie how her detective skills overlaid her personal life.

"But…he's not living here, is he?" Rose asked.

"No, Mom. But he might be here a lot."

"That's not the sort of thing the mother of an eighteen-year-old wants to hear," Avery said.

"God, Mom. It'll be okay."

Avery knew she should leave it alone. If Rose wanted to talk to her about this guy, she'd do it on her own time. Pressuring her would only make it worse.

But again, her work instinct took over and she couldn't help herself from asking more questions.

"Can I meet him?"

"Um, absolutely not. Not yet, anyway."

Avery sensed the opportunity to go deeper into the conversation – the awkward conversation about protected sex and the risk of diseases and teenage pregnancy. But she almost felt like she didn't have that right, given their strained relationship.

Being a Homicide detective, though, it was impossible *not* to worry. She knew the caliber of men out there. She had seen not just murders but severe domestic abuse cases. And while this guy in Rose's life might be a perfect gentleman, it was much easier for Rose to assume that he was a threat.

At some point, though, didn't she have to trust her daughter's instincts? Hadn't she just complimented Rose on how well she had turned out despite her upbringing?

"Just be careful," Avery said.

Rose was clearly embarrassed. She rolled her eyes and started unpacking DVDs in the small living room that joined the kitchen.

"What about you?" Rose asked. "Don't you ever get tired of being alone? You know…Dad's still alone, too."

"I'm aware of that," Avery said. "But that's none of my business."

"He's your ex-husband," Rose pointed out. "And he's my father. So yeah, he sort of *is* your business. It might do you some good to see him."

"That wouldn't be good for either of us," Avery replied. "If you'd ask him, I'm sure he'd tell you the same thing."

Avery knew this was true. While they had never talked about getting back together, there was an unspoken agreement between them – something they'd felt in the air ever since she'd lost her job as an attorney and had basically ruined her life in the weeks that followed. They would tolerate one another for Rose. Although there were mutual feelings of love and respect there, they both knew there would be no getting back together. Jack was only worried about the same thing she was worried about. He wanted Avery spending more time with Rose. And it was up to her to figure out how to do that. She'd spent time coming up with a plan over the last few weeks and although it would require sacrifice on her part, she was ready to try.

Sensing that the touchy topic of Jack was already passing over like a storm cloud, Avery tried broaching the topic of that sacrifice. There was no way to subtly get to it, so she just came out and said it.

"I was thinking about maybe asking for a lighter workload for the next few months. I figured you and I should really give things a real chance."

Rose paused for a minute. She looked taken aback, genuinely surprised. She gave a little nod of acknowledgment and went back to unpacking. She made a little *hmmph* sound.

"What?" Avery asked.

"But you love your work."

"I do," Avery agreed. "But I've been thinking of transferring out of Homicide. If I did that, my schedule would be freed up a bit."

Rose now stopped unpacking completely. A range of expressions crossed her face in the space of a second. Avery was pleased to see that one looked very much like hope.

"Mom, you don't have to do that." Her voice was soft and unguarded, almost like the little girl Avery could easily remember. "That's like uprooting your life."

"No it's not. I'm getting older and realizing that I missed out on a lot of family stuff. It's what I need to do to move on…to get better."

Rose sat down on the couch, littered with boxes and stray clothes. She looked up to Avery, that gleam of hope still on her face.

"Are you sure that's what you want?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Also," Rose said, "I see where I get my awesome ability to swerve subjects. You hopped off of being alone all the time pretty quickly."

"You noticed that, did you?"

"I did. And to be honest, I think Dad has, too."

"Rose – "

Rose turned to her.

"He misses you, Mom."

Avery slouched. She stood there, quiet for a moment, unable to respond.

"I miss him sometimes, too," Avery admitted. "Just not enough to call him up and dredge up the past."

He misses you, Mom.

Avery let that sink in. She rarely thought of Jack in any real sort of romantic sense. She had told the truth, though: She *did* miss him. She missed Jack's weird sense of humor, the way his body always seemed just a little too cold in the mornings, how his need for sex was almost comically predictable. More than anything, though, she missed watching him be an excellent father. But that was all gone now, part of a life that Avery was trying very hard to put behind her.

Still, she couldn't help but wonder what might have been, realizing that she'd had the chance for a great life. A life with picket fences, school fundraisers, lazy Sunday afternoons in the backyard.

But the chance for that was gone. Rose had missed out on that perfect picture and Avery still blamed herself.

"Mom?"

"Sorry, Rose. I just don't see your dad and I mending things, you know? Besides," she added, and took a deep breath, bracing herself for Rose's reaction, "maybe you aren't the only one that's met someone."

Rose turned to her, and Avery was relieved to see her smile. She looked to her mother with the sort of devilish grin girlfriends might share over cocktails while talking about men. It warmed Avery's heart in a way she was not prepared for, nor could she explain.

"What?" Rose asked, feigning shock. "You? Details, please."

"There are no details yet."

"Well, who is it?"

Avery chuckled, realizing how silly it would seem. She almost didn't say it. Hell, she had barely even told the guy how she felt. To voice it in front of her daughter would be a bit surreal.

Still, she and Rose were making progress. No sense in stifling it because of her own embarrassment of having feelings for a man that was not Rose's father.

"It's a man I work with. Ramirez."

"Have you guys hooked up?"

"Rose!"

Rose shrugged. "Hey…you wanted an open and honest relationship with your daughter, right?"

"Yes, I suppose I do," she said with a smile. "And no…we have not *hooked up.* But I'm sort of falling for him. He's nice. Funny, sexy, and has this sort of charm to him that used to annoy me but now…it's sort of appealing."

"Does he feel the same?" Rose asked.

"He does. Or…he did. I think I blew it. He's been patient but I think his patience ran out." What she kept to herself was that she had made the decision to tell Ramirez how she felt but had not yet summoned up the nerve to do so.

"Did you push him away?" Rose asked.

Avery smiled.

"Damn, you're observant."

"I'm telling you…it's genetics."

Rose grinned again, seeming to have forgotten about unpacking for the moment.

"Go for it, Mom!"

"Oh my God."

Rose laughed and Avery soon joined in. It was easily the most vulnerable they had been with one another since they had started working toward repairing their relationship. Suddenly, the idea of taking a step back from Homicide and taking some time off from work seemed like a necessity rather than just a hopeful idea.

"Are you doing anything this weekend?" Avery asked.

"Unpacking. Maybe a date with Ma – the guy who shall remain nameless for now."

"How about a girls' day with your mom tomorrow? Lunch, a movie, pedicures."

Rose wrinkled her nose at the idea but then seemed to seriously consider it. "Do I get to choose the movie?"

"If you must."

"Sounds like fun," Rose said with an edge of excitement. "Count me in."

"Great," Avery said. She then felt a prompting – a need to ask something that felt weird but something that would be pivotal to their relationship going forward. Knowing what she about to ask her daughter was humbling but also, in a very strange way, freeing.

"So you'd be okay with me moving on?" Avery asked.

"What do you mean?" Rose asked. "From Dad?"

"Yes. From your dad and that whole part of my life – the part of my life that made things rough for all of us. A big part of me moving on from that is not being chained by the guilt of what might have been. And I have to move away from your dad for that. I'll always love him and respect him for raising you while I wasn't there but he's a big part of the life that I need to get away from. Do you get that?"

"I do," Rose said. Her voice had gone soft and vulnerable again. Hearing it made Avery want to go over to the couch and hug her. "And you don't need my permission, Mom," Rose continued. "I know you're trying. I can see it. I really can."

For the third time in fifteen minutes, Avery felt herself inching toward tears. She sighed, and pushed the urge to cry away.

"How'd you turn out to be so good?" Avery asked.

"Genetics," Rose said. "You might have made some mistakes, Mom. But you've always been kind of a badass."

Before Avery had time to even form a response, Rose stepped forward and hugged her. It was a genuine embrace – something she had not felt from her daughter in quite a while.

This time, Avery let the tears come.

She could not remember the last time she had been quite this happy. For the first time in a very long time, she felt as if she were truly taking steps to escaping the mistakes of her past.

A big part of that would be talking to Ramirez and letting him know that she was done with hiding what had been growing between them. She wanted to be with him – whatever that looked like. Suddenly, with her daughter's arms around her, Avery could not wait to have that discussion with him.

In fact, she hoped it went far beyond a discussion. She hoped they'd end up doing much more than simply talking, finally letting the tension that had been building between them have its way.

CHAPTER TWO

She met with Ramirez three hours later, just after his shift had ended. He'd answered her call eagerly enough but had sounded tired. That's why they had elected to meet alongside the Charles River, on one of the many benches that overlooked it from the walking paths around the eastern lip of the river.

As she strolled up to the bench they had agreed upon, she saw that he had just gotten there. He was sitting down, looking out across the river. The tiredness in his voice showed on his face. He looked peaceful, though. She'd noticed this about him on numerous occasions, how he would get silent and introspective whenever presented with a scenic view of the city.

She approached him and he turned to her when he heard her footfalls. He flashed his winning smile and just like that, he no longer looked tired. One of the many things Avery liked about Ramirez was the way he made her feel whenever he looked at her. It was clear that there was more than simple attraction there; he looked at her with appreciation and respect. That, plus the fact that he told her that she was beautiful on a routine basis, made her feel safer and more desired than she could ever remember feeling.

"Long day?" Avery asked him as she joined him on the bench.

"Not really," Ramirez said. "It was filled with busy work. Noise complaints. A fight at a bar that got a little bloody. And I shit you not, I even got a call about a dog that had chased a kid up a tree."

"A kid?"

"A kid," Ramirez said. "The glamorous life of a detective when the city is quiet and boring."

They both looked out over the river in a silence that, over the last few weeks, had started to grow comfortable. While they were not technically an item, they had come to appreciate the time together that wasn't filled with talk just for the sake of talk. Slowly and deliberately, Avery reached over and took his hand.

"Walk with me, would you?"

"Sure," he said, giving her hand a squeeze.

Even hand holding was something monumental to Avery. She and Ramirez held hands frequently and had kissed briefly on a few occasions – but intentionally holding his hand was out of her comfort zone.

But it's getting comfortable, she thought as they started walking. *Hell, it's* been *comfortable for some time now.*

"Are you okay?" Ramirez asked.

"I am," she said. "I had a really good day with Rose."

"Things finally starting to feel normal there?" he asked.

"Far from normal," Avery said. "But it's getting there. And speaking of getting there…"

She paused, confused why it was so hard for her to say what she wanted to say. Due to her past, she knew she was emotionally strong…so why was it so hard to actually express herself when it was important?

"This is going to sound cheesy," Avery said. "So please bear with me and keep my extreme vulnerability in mind."

"Okay…" Ramirez said, clearly confused.

"I've known for quite some time that I need to make some changes. A big part of that came in trying to fix things with Rose. But there are other things, too. Things I've been almost frightened to admit to myself."

"Like what?" Ramirez said.

She could tell that he was getting a little uncomfortable. They'd been transparent with one another before, but never quite to this extent. This was much harder than she had expected.

"Look…I know I've basically ruined things between us," Avery said. "You showed extreme patience and understanding as I worked through my crap. And I know I kept luring you in a little at a time only to push you away."

"That would be accurate, yes," Ramirez said with a bit of humor.

"I can't apologize enough for that," Avery said. "And if you could find it in your heart to look past my hesitancy and my fears…I'd really like to have another chance."

"A chance for what?" Ramirez said.

He's going to make me come out and say it, she said. *And I kind of deserve this treatment.*

The evening was unraveling into dusk and there were only a scant few people out along the sidewalks and trails that wound around the river. It was a picturesque scene, like something out of one of those movies she usually hated to watch.

"A chance for *us,*" Avery said.

Ramirez stopped walking but kept her hand in his. He looked to her with his dark brown eyes and held her gaze. "It can't be a chance," he said. "It has to be a real thing. A surefire thing. I can't keep having you push and push, always keeping me guessing."

"I know."

"So if you can let me know what you mean by *us*, then I'll consider it."

She couldn't tell if he was being serious or just trying to give her a hard time. She broke their eye contact and gave his hands a squeeze.

"Damn," she said. "You're going to make this hard on me, aren't you?"

"Well, I think I – "

She interrupted him by pulling him to her and kissing him. In the past, their kisses had been brief, awkward, and filled with her usual hesitancy. But now she lost herself to it. She drew him as close as their bodies would allow and kissed him with the most passion she'd put into any sort of physical contact since the last happy year of marriage with Jack.

Ramirez didn't bother trying to fight it. She knew he had been wanting this for a while now and she could feel the eagerness running through him.

They kissed like love-struck teenagers by the side of the Charles River. It was a soft yet heated kiss that thrummed with the sexual frustration that had been blooming between them for several months.

When their tongues met, Avery felt a surge of energy pass through her – energy that she knew she wanted to use up in a very certain way.

She broke the kiss and leaned her forehead into his. They looked to one another for several seconds in that posture, enjoying the silence and the weight of what they had just done. A line had been crossed. And in the tense silence, they both sensed that there were still many more to cross.

"You're sure about this?" Ramirez asked.

"I am. And I'm sorry it took me so long to realize it."

He drew her close and hugged her. She felt something like relief in his body, like a huge weight had been lifted from him.

"I'd like to give it a try," Ramirez said.

He broke the hug and kissed her again, softly, on the side of the mouth.

"I think we need to celebrate the occasion. You want to get dinner?"

She sighed and gave a shaky smile. She had already broken through an emotional barrier by confessing her feelings to him. What harm could it do to continue being blatantly honest with him now?

"I do think we need to celebrate," she said. "But right now, at this very moment, I'm not too interested in dinner."

"So what do you want to do?" he asked.

His obliviousness was beyond charming. She leaned in and whispered into his ear, enjoying the feel of him against her and the smell of his skin.

"Let's go to your place."

He pulled away and looked at her with the same seriousness as before, but now there was something else there, too. It was something she had seen in his eyes from time to time – something that looked very much like excitement and was born out of a physical need.

"Yeah?" he said uncertainly.

"Yeah," she said.

As they hurried across the grass, toward the parking lot where they had both parked their cars, they were giggling like children. It was fitting, as Avery could not recall the last time she had felt so liberated, excited, and free.

***

The passion they had experienced while along the river was still there as Ramirez unlocked his apartment door. There was a part of Avery that wanted to jump him right there and then, before he even had time to shut the door behind him. They'd lightly pawed at one another the whole ride to his place and now that they were there, Avery felt like they were on the precipice of something monumental.

When Ramirez closed the door and locked it, Avery was surprised when he didn't come to her right away. Instead, he walked through the living room and into his modest kitchen, where he poured himself a glass of water.

"Water?" he asked.

"No thanks," she said.

He drank from his glass and looked out the kitchen window. Night had fallen and the city lights sparkled through the glass.

Avery joined him in the kitchen and playfully took the glass of water from him. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"I don't want to say," he said.

"Do you…well, have you changed your mind about me?" she asked. "Did all the waiting make you stop wanting me?"

"God no," he said. He put his arms around her waist and she could see him trying to form the right words.

"We can wait," she said, hoping he wouldn't take her up on it.

"No," he said, a little urgently. "It's just…shit, I don't know."

This was a surprise to Avery. With all of his masterful flirtation and seductive talk over the last few months, she was sure he would have been a little aggressive when and if the time ever came. But right now, he seemed unsure of himself – almost nervous.

She leaned in and kissed the corner of his jaw. He sighed and leaned in against her.

"What is it?" she asked, her lips brushing his skin as she spoke.

"It's just that this is real now, you know? This isn't just some one-night stand. This is for real. I care about you a lot, Avery. I really do. And I don't want to rush things."

"We've been dancing around this for the last four months," she said. "I don't think that's rushing."

"Good point," he said. He kissed her on the cheek, then on the little bit of shoulder her T-shirt was showing. His lips then found her neck and when he kissed her there, she thought she might collapse to the floor right on the spot, pulling him down with her.

"Ramirez?" she said, still playfully refusing to use his first name.

"Yeah?" he asked, his face still brushing against her neck and applying kisses.

"Take me to the bedroom."

He pulled her close, hoisted her up, and allowed her to wrap her legs around his waist. They started kissing then and he obeyed her. He slowly carried her to the bedroom and by the time he shut the bedroom door, Avery was so lost in the moment that she never even heard it close.

All she was aware of was his hands, his mouth, his well-toned body pressing against hers as he laid her down on the bed.

He broke their kiss long enough to ask: "Are you sure about this?"

And if she needed one more reason to want him, that was it. He genuinely cared about her and did not want to ruin what they had.

She nodded and pulled him down onto her.

And then for a while, she was not a frustrated Homicide detective or a struggling mother, or a daughter who had watched her mother die at her father's hands. She was just Avery Black then…a woman like any other woman, enjoying the pleasures life had to offer.

She'd almost forgotten what that was like.

And once she started to get acquainted with them, she vowed to herself that she would never allow herself to forget them again.

CHAPTER THREE

Avery opened her eyes and looked at the unfamiliar ceiling over her head. The muted light of dawn came in through the bedroom window, spilling across her mostly naked body. It also painted Ramirez's naked back beside her. She turned over slightly and smiled sleepily. He was still asleep, his face turned away from her.

They'd made love twice the night before, taking two hours between each session to make a quick dinner and discuss how sleeping together could complicate their working relationship if they weren't careful. It had been close to midnight when they had finally drifted off side by side. Avery had been drowsy and could not remember when she'd fallen asleep but she *did* remember his arm around her waist.

She wanted that again…that feeling of being wanted and being secure. She thought about running her fingertips along the base of his spine (as well as a few other places, perhaps) just to wake him up so he could hold her.

But she did not get the chance. The text alarm of her phone went off. So did Ramirez's. They pinged together, an occasion that could only mean one thing: it was work-related.

Ramirez sat up quickly. When he did, the sheet slid off of him and revealed everything. Avery snuck a peek, unable to resist herself. He grabbed his phone from the bedside table and looked at it with bleary eyes. While he did this, Avery retrieved her own phone from the pile of clothes on the floor.

The text was from Dylan Connelly, the A1 Homicide Supervisor. In Connelly's typical fashion, the message was direct and to the point:

Body discovered. Burned badly. Maybe trauma to head.

Get your ass to abandoned construction lot on Kirkley St NOW.

"Well, that's nice to wake up to first thing in the morning," she grumbled.

Ramirez climbed off the bed, still completely naked, and hunkered down on the floor with her. He pulled her close to him and said, "Yeah, *this* is nice to wake up to first thing in the morning."

She leaned into him, a little alarmed at how insanely content she was in that moment. She grumbled again and got to her feet.

"Shit," she said. "We're going to be late to the scene. I need to get my car *and* get back home for a change of clothes."

"We'll be okay," Ramirez said as he started getting dressed. "I'll text back in few minutes, while we're on the way to your car. You space yours out. Maybe the text sound didn't wake you. Maybe it took me calling you to wake you up."

"That sounds deceptive," she said, sliding her shirt on.

"That's *clever* is what it is," he said.

They smiled at each other as they finished getting dressed. They then went into the bathroom, where Avery did her best to make sense of her hair while Ramirez brushed his teeth. They hurried to the kitchen and Avery threw together two bowls of cereal.

"As you can see," she said, "I'm quite the cook."

He hugged her from behind and seemed to breathe her in. "Are we going to be okay?" he asked. "We can make this work, right?"

"I think so," she said. "Let's go out there and give it a try."

They wolfed down their cereal, spending most of the time looking at one another, trying to gauge the other's reaction to what had happened last night. From what Avery could tell, he was just as happy as she was.

They headed out the front door but before Ramirez closed it behind them, he stopped. "Wait, back inside for a minute."

Confused, she stepped back inside.

"Inside," he said, "we're off the clock. Not really officially partners, right?"

"Right," Avery said.

"So I can do this one more time," he said.

He leaned in and kissed her. It was a dizzying kiss, one with enough force to cause her knees to sag a bit. She playfully pushed him away. "Like I said before," she said, "don't start. Not unless you intend to finish."

"Rain check," he said. He then led her outside and closed the door behind them this time. "Okay, on the clock now. Lead the way, Detective Black."

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They went with Ramirez's plan. She did not return Connelly's text for another sixteen minutes. By that time, she was nearly back to her apartment and still quite giddy over the way last night had played out. She managed to get dressed, grab coffee, and hit the street again in less than ten minutes. The result, of course, was arriving at the scene on Kirkley Street roughly half an hour later than Connelly would have preferred.

There were several officers already milling around. They were all familiar faces, faces that she had come to know and respect since becoming a Homicide detective. The looks on their faces this morning clued her in to the fact that this was going to be a very long and bitter morning.

One of the people she saw in attendance was Mike O'Malley. She found it alarming that the captain would be out here so soon. As the head over most of Boston PD, he was rarely seen in the hustle and bustle of everyday crime scenes, no matter how vile they might be. O'Malley was currently speaking to two other officers, one of which was Finley. Avery had grown to respect Finley as an officer even though he tended to be a little too aloof for her liking.

She spotted Ramirez right away; he was chatting with Connelly on the far side of the abandoned lot.

As she made her way over to Ramirez and Connelly, she took in the scene as best she could. She'd been through this part of town several times but had never paid it any real attention. It was one of the many financial blights on this end of town, an area where enthusiastic developers had sunk tons of money into property only to see the property lose its value and potential buyers quickly run away. Once the housing efforts had shut down, the area had gone back to ruin. And it seemed to fit well with the surroundings.

Twin smokestacks could be seen in the distance, rising up like blemished giants. They both sent broken plumes of smoke into the air, giving the morning an overcast sort of feel – but only in this part of town. On the other side of the abandoned lot, Avery could see the edges of what could have been a promising little creek that would have run along behind the properties of upper-middle-class houses. Now, it was taken over by an overgrowth of weeds and brambles. Plastic bags, snack wrappers, and other litter were stuck in the dead weeds. The shallow banks were muddy and neglected, adding a whole new stagnant level to the sludge of it all.

Overall, this area had become a part of town that just about anyone would gladly skip over. Avery knew the feeling; taking it all in as she closed in on Ramirez and Connelly, the area instantly made her feel burdened.

An area like this can't be a coincidence, she thought. *If someone killed here or even just dumped a body here, it has to have some significance…either to the murder itself or to the killer.*

Immediately to the left of Finley and Ramirez, an officer had just finished putting up thin red stakes to border off a rectangular section of the lot. As Avery's eyes fell on what rested inside that rectangle, Connelly's voice boomed at her from just a few feet away.

"Damn, Black…what took you so long?"

"Sorry," she said. "I slept right through the text buzz. Ramirez called me and woke me up."

"Well, you aren't late because you were busy doing your hair or makeup, that's for damned sure," Connelly remarked.

"She doesn't need makeup," Ramirez said. "That shit's for girls."

"Thanks, guys," Avery said.

"Whatever," Connelly said. "So what do you think of *this*?" he asked, nodding down to the rectangle drawn out by the red stakes.

Inside of the marked-off area, she saw what she assumed were human remains. Most of what she saw was a skeletal structure but it seemed to gleam. There was no age to it. It was unmistakably a skeleton that had very recently been robbed of its flesh. All around it was what appeared to be ash or some sort of grime. Here and there, she saw what may have been muscle and tissue clinging to the skeleton, particularly around the legs and the ribs.

"What the hell happened?" she asked.

"Well, what a great question for our best detective to start with," Connelly said. "But here's what we know so far. About an hour and fifteen minutes ago, a woman out for her morning run put in a call about what she described as something that looked like a weird Satanic ritual. It led us to this."

Avery hunkered down by the red markers and peered into the area. An hour and ten minutes ago. That meant that if the black stuff around the skeleton *was* ash, this skeleton had been covered in skin at least an hour and a half ago. But that didn't seem likely. It would take some sick determination and planning to kill someone and then miraculously burn them down to nothing but bone in such a short amount of time. In fact, she thought it would be next to impossible.

"Anyone have evidence gloves?" she asked.

"One second," Ramirez said.

As he ran to Finley and the other officers who had stepped back to allow Avery some room, she also noticed a smell in the area. It was faint but noticeable – a chemical smell that was almost like bleach to her nose.

"Anyone else smell that?" she asked.

"Some sort of chemical, right?" Connelly asked. "We figure a chemical-induced burn is the only way you can fry a body like this one so quickly."

"I'm not thinking the burn was done here," she said.

"How can you be so sure?" Connelly asked.

I'm not, she thought. *But the only thing that makes sense to me at first guess seems pretty damned absurd.*

"Avery – " Connelly said.

"One second," she said. "I'm thinking."

"Jesus…"

She ignored him, looking at the ash and the skeleton with an investigative eye. *No…the body couldn't have been burned here. There are no scorch marks around the body. A burning person would flail and run about wildly. Nothing here is burned at all. The only sign of a fire of any kind are these ashes. So why would a killer burn the body and then bring it back here? Maybe this is where he took the victim…*

The possibilities were endless. One of the possibilities, Avery thought, was that perhaps the skeleton was the property of a medical lab somewhere and this was just some stupid sick prank. But given the location and the brazenness of the act, she doubted this was the case.

Ramirez returned with a pair of latex evidence gloves. Avery slipped them on and reached down to the ash. She gripped just a small bit of it between her pointer finger and thumb. She rubbed her fingers together and brought it to her face. She sniffed at it and looked at it closely. It looked like standard ash but possessed traces of the chemical smell.

"We need to have this ash analyzed," Avery said. "If there was a chemical involved, there's a good chance that there are still trace amounts in the ashes."

"There's a forensics team on the way as we speak," Connelly said.

Slowly, Avery got to her feet and removed the latex gloves. O'Malley and Finley came over and Avery wasn't surprised to see Finley keep his distance from the skeleton and ashes. He looked at them as if the skeleton might jump out at him at any moment.

"I'm working with the city to get footage from every security camera within a six-block radius," O'Malley said. "Because there aren't many of them in this part of town, it shouldn't take too long."

"It might not be a bad idea to also get the numbers of any companies that sell highly flammable chemicals," Avery pointed out.

"That could be millions of places," Connelly said.

"No, she's right," O'Malley said. "This burn wasn't done with just a household cleaner or spray. This was a concentrated chemical, I'd say. Finley, can you start working on that?"

"Yes, sir," Finley said, clearly glad to have a reason to leave the scene.

"Black and Ramirez…this is your case now," O'Malley said. "Work with Connelly to get a team on this ASAP."

"Got it," Ramirez said.

"And Black, let's make sure we're prompt for the rest of this thing. You showing up late this morning set us back fifteen minutes."

Avery nodded, not allowing herself to get baited into an argument. She knew that most of the men above her were still looking for any small thing to bust her on. And she was fine with that. Given her sordid history, she almost expected it.

As she started to step away from the red markers, she noticed something else several yards to the right. She'd seen it when she first approached the skeletal remains but had disregarded it as simple litter. But now as she walked closer to the detritus, she saw what looked to be the broken shards of something. It looked almost like glass, possibly something that had been fired in a kiln at some point. She walked over to it, getting a better view of the murky and stagnant creek along the back of the lot.

"Did anyone take note of this?" she asked.

Connelly looked over, barely interested.

"Just litter," he said.

Avery shook her head.

"I don't think so," she said.

She slipped the latex gloves back on and picked up a piece of it. Upon closer inspection, she saw that whatever the object had been, it had been made of glass, not a ceramic material. There didn't seem to be any dust or weathered wear and tear on the fragments. There were seven larger chunks, about the size of her palm, and then countless little slivers of it all over the ground. Aside from having been shattered, whatever had been broken looked to be fairly new.

"Whatever this is, it hasn't been here for very long," she said. "Make sure forensics checks this for prints."

"I'll sic forensics on it," Connelly said in a tone that indicated he did not appreciate taking orders. "Now, you two…make sure you get to the A1 within the next half an hour. I'll make some calls and have a team waiting for you in the conference room. This scene is less than two hours old; I'd like to nail this asshole before he gets too much of a head start."

Avery took one final look at the skeleton. Without the cover of flesh, it looked like it was smiling. To Avery, it was almost as if the killer were smiling at her, biting back a taunting laugh. And it wasn't just the sight of a newly stripped skeleton that made her feel a sense of foreboding and doom. It was the location, the almost perfectly sculpted mounds of ash around the bones, the purposefully unhidden remains, and the chemical smell.

It all seemed to point to something precise. It pointed to vast intention and planning. And as far as Avery was concerned, that could only mean one thing: whoever did this would certainly do it again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Forty minutes later, Avery stepped into the central conference room in the A1 headquarters. It was already filled with an assortment of officers and experts, totaling twelve in all, and she knew most of them, though not as well as Ramirez or Finley. She supposed that was her own fault. After Ramirez had been assigned to her as a partner, she had not gone out of her way to make friends. It seemed like a silly thing to do as a Homicide detective.

As they all took their seats around the table (except for Avery, who always preferred to stand), one of the officers she did not know started passing out printed copies of the scant information they had so far – pictures of the crime scene and a sheet of bullet points of what they knew about the scene. Avery scanned one and found it succinct.

She noted that as everyone started to take their seats, Ramirez sat in front of her. She looked down at him and realized that she had instinctively stepped closer to him. She also found that she wanted to rest her hand on his shoulder, just to touch him. She backed away, noticing that Finley was looking oddly at her.

Shit, she thought. *Is it that obvious?*

She went back to busying herself with rereading the notes. As she did so, O'Malley and Connelly entered the room. O'Malley closed the door and went to the front of the room. Before he started speaking, the murmurs and conversation within the room died down. Avery watched him with great appreciation and respect. He was the sort of man who could take charge of a room by simply clearing his throat or letting it be known that he was about to speak.

"Thanks for scrambling together so quickly," O'Malley said. "You have in your hands everything we know about this case so far with one exception. I had city workers pull everything they could from traffic light cameras in the area. Two of the four cameras show a woman walking her dog. And that's all we got."

"There's one other thing," one of the officers at the table said. Avery knew this man's name was Mosely, but that was about all she knew about him. "I got word two minutes before stepping into this meeting that dispatch fielded a call this morning from an elderly man claiming that he saw what he described as 'a creepy tall man' walking in that area. He said he was tucking some sort of a bag under a long coat. Dispatch took note of it but assumed it was just a nosy old man with nothing better to do. But then when this burn case kicked off this morning, they pinged me on it."

"Do we have this old man's contact information?" Avery asked.

Connelly shot her an annoyed look. She supposed he thought she was speaking out of turn – even though he had told her no more than forty-five minutes ago that this was her case.

"We do," Mosely answered.

"I want someone on the phone with him the moment this meeting is over," O'Malley said. "Finley…where are we on a list of places that sell chemicals that can burn this fiercely in such a short time?"

"I've got three places within twenty miles. Two of them are e-mailing me a list of chemicals that could do such a thing and whether or not they keep it in stock."

Avery listened to the back-and-forth, taking mental notes and trying to sort them into the appropriate slots. With each new bit of information, the more sense the odd crime scene from this morning started to make. Although, really, there wasn't too much sense to be made at this point.

"We still have no idea who the victim is," O'Malley said. "We're going to have to go on dental records alone on this one unless we can make some sort of connection with the footage from the traffic cameras." He then looked to Avery and gestured her to the front of the table. "Detective Black is the head on this one so everything you find from here on out will go directly to her."

Avery joined him up front and scanned the table. Her eyes landed on Jane Parks, one of the lead investigators on forensics. “Do we have any results from the broken glass shards?” she asked.

“Not yet,” Parks said. “We know for certain that there were no fingerprints, though. But we’re still working to find out what the object was. So far we can only imagine it might have been some sort of knickknack that is in no way related to the crime.”

“And what is the opinion of forensics in regards to the fire?” Avery asked. “Are you also in agreement that this was no casual burning?”

“Yes. The ash is still being studied, but it’s obvious that no standard fire could burn human flesh so thoroughly. There were barely even any charred remains on the bones and the bones themselves almost look pristine, showing no signs of scorching.”

“And can you describe to us what the usual process of a body burning might be?” Avery asked.

“Well, there’s nothing typical about burning a body unless you’re cremating it,” Parks said. “But let’s say a body is trapped in a burning house and is lit on fire that way. Body fat acts like a sort of fuel once the skin is burned away, which keeps the fire going. Almost like a candle, you know? But this burn was quick and very succinct…probably so intense that it vaporized the fat before it could even act as a fuel.”

“How long would it take a body to burn down to nothing more than bone?” Avery asked.

“Well, there are several determining factors,” Parks said. “But anywhere between five to seven hours is an accurate number. Slow and controlled burns, like the ones used at crematoriums, can take up to eight hours.”

“And this one burned in less than an hour and a half?” Connelly asked.

“Yes, that’s the assumption,” Parks said.

The conference room was awash in murmurs of disgust and awe. Avery understood it. It was hard to wrap her mind around it.

“Or,” Avery said, “the body was burned elsewhere and the remains were dumped in that lot this morning.”

“But that skeleton…that was a new skeleton,” Parks said. “It wasn’t without its skin, muscle, tissues, and so on for very long. Not long at all.”

“Can you make an educated guess as to how long ago the body was burned?” Avery asked.

“Surely no more than a day or so.”

“So this took planning and some head knowledge on the killer’s part,” Avery said. “He’d have to know a lot about burning bodies. And being that he made no attempt to hide the remains as well as killed the victim in such a startling way…that denotes a few things. And the thing that I fear the most is that this is likely the first of many.”

“What do you mean?” Connelly asked.

She felt all eyes in the room turn to her.

“I mean that this is probably the work of a serial killer.”

A heavy silence blanketed the room.

“What are you talking about?” Connelly asked. “There’s no evidence to support that.”

“Nothing obvious,” Avery admitted. “But he wanted the remains to be found. He made no attempt to hide them in that lot. There was a creek right along the back of the property. He could have dumped it all there. More than that, there was ash. Why dump ash at the scene when you could easily dispose of it at home? The planning and the method of the killing…he took great pride and pleasure in this. He wanted the remains found and speculated over. And that holds the marks of a serial killer.”

She felt the room stare back at her, felt a solemn air descend, and she knew they were thinking the same thing she was: this was evolving from an odd case involving an impromptu cremation to a time-sensitive hunt for a serial killer.

CHAPTER FIVE

After the tension of the meeting, Avery was glad to find herself back behind the wheel of her car with Ramirez in the passenger seat. There was an odd bit of silence between them that made her uneasy. Had she really been so naïve to think that sleeping together was not going to alter their working relationship?

Was it a mistake?

It was starting to feel like it. The fact that the sex had been pretty close to mind-blowing made it hard to accept, though.

"While we have a second," Ramirez said, "are we going to talk about last night?"

"We can," Avery said. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Well, at the risk of sounding like a stereotypical male, I was wondering if it was a one-time thing or if we were going to do it again."

"I don't know," Avery said.

"Regretting it already?" he asked.

"No," she said. "No regrets. It's just that in the moment, I wasn't thinking about how it would affect our working relationship."

"I figure it can't hurt it," Ramirez said. "All jokes aside, you and I have been dancing around this physical chemistry for months now. We finally did something about it, so the tension should be gone, right?"

"You'd think so," Avery said with a sly smile.

"It's not for you?"

She thought for a while and then shrugged. "I don't know. And quite frankly, I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about it yet."

"Fair enough. We *are* sort of in the middle of what looks to be a majorly fucked up case."

"Yes, we are," she said. "Did you get the e-mail from the precinct? What else do we know about our witness other than his address?"

Ramirez looked to his phone and pulled up his e-mail. "Got it," he said. "Our witness is Donald Greer, eighty-one years of age. Retired. He lives in an apartment roughly half a mile away from the crime scene. He's a widower who worked for fifty-five years as a shipyard supervisor after getting two toes blown off in Vietnam."

"And how did he happen to see the killer?" Avery asked.

"That we don't know yet. But I guess it's our job to find out, right?"

"Right," she said.

Silence fell on them again. She felt the instinct to reach out and take his hand but thought better of it. It was best to keep things strictly professional. Maybe they *would* end up in bed together again and maybe things would even progress to more than that – to something more emotional and concrete.

But none of that mattered now. Now, they had a job to do and anything evolving within their personal lives would just have to be put on hold.

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Donald Greer showed all eighty-one years of his age. His hair was a frazzled shock of white atop his head and his teeth were slightly discolored from age and improper care. Still, he was clearly glad to have company as he invited Avery and Ramirez into his home. When he smiled at them, it was so genuine and wide that the unsightly condition of his teeth seemed to disappear.

"Can I get you some coffee or tea?" he asked them as they came in.

"No, thank you," Avery said.

Somewhere else in the house, a dog barked. It was a smaller dog, and one with a bark that suggested it might be just about as old as Donald.

"So is this about that man I saw this morning?" Donald asked. He plopped himself down into an armchair in the living room.

"Yes, sir, it is," Avery said. "We were told that you saw a tall man that appeared to be hiding something under his – "

The dog that was located somewhere in the back of the apartment started to bark even more. Its yaps were loud and sort of grizzled.

"*Shut it, Daisy!*" Donald said. The dog went silent, giving a little whimper. Donald shook his head and gave a chuckle. "Daisy loves company," he said. "But she's getting old and tends to pee on people when she gets too excited, so I had to lock her up for your visit. I was out walking her this morning when I saw that man."

"How far do you walk her?" Avery asked.

"Oh, Daisy and I walk at least a mile and a half just about every morning. My ticker isn't as strong as it used to be. The doctor says I need to walk as much as possible. It's supposed to keep my joints in top order, too."

"I see," Avery said. "Do you take the same route every morning?"

"No. We switch it up from time to time. We have about five different routes we take."

"And where were you when you saw the man this morning?"

"Out on Kirkley. Me and Daisy had just come around the corner of Spring Street. That part of town is *always* empty in the mornings. A few work trucks here and there but that's about it. I think we've passed two or three people on Kirkley in the last month or so…and they were all walking their dogs. You don't even get any of those masochistic people that like to run out in this area."

It was obvious by the way he chatted that Donald Greer did not get many visitors. He was overly chatty and spoke very loudly. Avery wondered if it was because age had affected his hearing or if his ears were shot from listening to Daisy raise hell all day.

"And was this man coming or going?" Avery asked.

"Coming, I think. I'm not sure. He was a good ways ahead of me and he seemed to sort of stop for a second when I got on Kirkley. I think he knew I was there, behind him. He started walking again, sort of fast, and then just sort of disappeared into the fog. Maybe he took one of those side streets along Kirkley."

"Was he maybe walking a dog?" Ramirez asked.

"Nope. I would have known. Daisy goes ballistic when she sees another dog or even smells one in the area. But she stayed just as quiet as always."

"Do you have any idea what he might have been holding under that jacket you say he was wearing?"

"I couldn't see," Donald said. "I just saw him shifting something under it. But the fog this morning was just too thick."

"And what about the coat he was wearing?" Avery asked. "What kind was it?"

Before he could answer, they were interrupted by Ramirez's cell phone. He answered it and stepped away, speaking quietly into it.

"The coat," Donald said, "was like one of those long fancy sort of black coats that businessmen wear sometimes. The kinds that come down to their knees."

"Like an overcoat," Avery.

"Yeah," Donald said. "That's it."

Avery was running out of questions, feeling pretty certain that this interview with their only witness was a bust. She tried to find another relevant question as Ramirez stepped back into the room.

"I need to get going," Ramirez said. "Connelly wants me as an extra set of hands with some matter over near Boston College."

"That's fine," Avery said. "I think we're done here anyway." She turned to Donald and said, "Mr. Greer, thank you so much for your time."

Donald walked them out to the apartment building entrance and waved them off as they got into the car.

"You tagging along with me?" Ramirez asked when they were headed back down the street.

"No," she said. "I think I'm going to go back to the crime scene."

"Kirkley Street?" he said.

"Yeah. You can take the car to do whatever errand Connelly has you running. I'll catch a cab back to headquarters."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. It's not like I have anything else to – "

"To what?"

"Shit!"

"What is it?" Ramirez asked, concerned.

"Rose. I was supposed to hang out with Rose this afternoon. I made this huge deal about a girls' day out. And it looks like that's not going to happen. I'm going to have to let her down *again*."

"She'll understand," Ramirez said.

"No. No, she won't. I always do this to her."

Ramirez had no reply to that. The car remained in silence until they reached Kirkley Street. Ramirez pulled the car to the side of the street directly across from the morning's crime scene.

"Be careful," Ramirez said.

"I will," she said. She surprised herself when she leaned over and kissed him briefly on the mouth.

She then got out of the car and started studying the scene immediately. She was so focused and in the zone that she barely noticed when Ramirez pulled away behind her.

CHAPTER SIX

After staring at the scene for a moment, Avery turned and looked down the street. Her eyes followed the path that Donald Greer must have been taking, all the way down to her right, where Kirkley intersected with Spring Street. She walked down the street, came to the intersection, and then turned.

Several thoughts entered her mind as she started to walk forward. Had the killer been on foot the entire time? And if so, why had he come in from Spring Street – a street just as barren and washed up as Kirkley? Or perhaps he had come by car. If that was the case, where would he have parked? If the fog had been thick enough, he could have parked anywhere along Kirkley and his car could have gone unseen.

If the man in the long black coat was indeed their killer, he had walked along this same route less than eight hours ago. She tried to envision the scene shrouded in thick morning fog. Because it was such a desolate area of town, it was not hard to do. As she walked slowly forward to the lot where the bones and the shards hard been found, she kept her eyes open for potential places the man could have ducked out of sight.

There were plenty of them, to be sure. There were six empty lots and two side streets that the man could have hidden in. If the fog had been thick enough, any of those locations would have made for ample cover.

That raised an interesting thought. If the man had hidden in one of those areas, he had let Donald Greer go by without bothering him. That took out the possibility of the murder being an act of sheer violence. Most people capable of that sort of violence would not have let Donald pass by so easily. In fact, Donald would have become a victim in most cases.

If she needed any further proof that the body had been burned somewhere else, this thought gave it to her. Perhaps, then, the item the man had been shifting beneath his coat had been a container holding the remains that he had dumped in the lot.

It made sense and she slowly started to feel a ramped-up sense of accomplishment. Now she was getting somewhere.

She walked to the lot where the remains had been found. Ever efficient and prompt, O'Malley had already cleared police away from the scene. She assumed he had done this just as soon as forensics had come by and collected the remains.

She walked to where the bones and ash had been dumped and simply stood there, looking around. The marshy area behind the lot was more visible than ever now. It was so close and much less open than the lot. So why would someone dump the bones in the middle of the lot rather than a weeded-over creek? Why would they put the remains right out in the open rather than ditching them in mud and stagnant water?

It was a question they had already approached. And in her mind, the answer was proof that they were dealing with a serial killer.

Because he wants people to see his work. He's proud and maybe a little arrogant.

She thought he might be clever, too. The use of fog to hide himself indicated that he had planned things very well. He'd have to be persistent about checking the weather to make sure there would be ample fog. He also had to know the area relatively well. It would have to have taken some serious planning.

And fire…he'd have to know fire well. To burn a body so cleanly without charring or otherwise damaging the bones spoke of dedication and patience. The killer would really have to know a great deal about fire and the process of burning.

Burning, she thought. *Fire.*

As she studied the crime scene and envisioned the killer standing in this same place, she felt like she was missing something – that some crucial clue was staring her right in the face. But all there was to see was the marshy and muddy area at the back of the property as well as the small square of space where some poor victim had been dumped out as if they were nothing more than a standard pile of trash.

She looked around the empty lot again and wondered if perhaps the location of the remains was not as important as she thought. If the killer was using fire as a way to send a message to someone (either the victim or the police), maybe *that* was what she needed to focus on.

With an idea coming to her mind, she pulled out her phone and called up the closest cab company for a ride out of there. After the call was placed and the cab had been requested, she looked through her contacts and stared at her daughter's name for five seconds.

I'm so sorry, Rose, she thought.

She pressed CALL and brought the phone to her ear as her heart broke a little.

Rose answered on the third ring. She sounded happy right away. Avery could hear music playing softly in the background. She could imagine Rose getting ready for their afternoon out and hated herself a little.

"Hey, Mom," Avery said.

"Hey, Rose."

"What's up?"

"Rose…" she said. She felt tears coming on. She looked out at the empty lot behind her, trying to convince herself that she *had* to do this and that one day, Rose would understand.

Without Avery having to say another word, Rose apparently caught on to the emotion. She let out a little angry laugh. "Perfect," Rose said, the joy now gone from her voice. "Mom, are you fucking serious right now?"

Avery had heard Rose curse before but this time it was like a dagger to her heart because she deserved it.

"Rose, a case came up. A pretty bad one and I have to – "

"I know what you have to do," Rose said. She did not scream. She barely even raised her voice. And somehow, that made it that much worse.

"Rose, I can't help this. I certainly didn't expect this to pop up. When I made those plans with you, I had a wide open schedule for a few days. But this thing popped and…well, things change."

"I guess they do sometimes," Rose said. "But not with you. With you, things pretty much stay the same…when it comes to me, anyway."

"Rose, that's not fair."

"Don't you even *try* telling me what's not fair right now! And you know what, Mom? Just forget about it. This time and any other time you might want to pretend to play Good Mother in the future. It's not in the cards for us."

"Rose – "

"I get it, Mom. I do. But do you know how much it sucks to have this woman as your mother… a kick-ass woman with a demanding job? A woman I respect the hell out of…but a woman that time and time again disappoints me?"

Avery had no idea what to say. Which was just as well, since Rose was done.

"Bye, Mom. Thanks for letting me know in advance, though. Better than being stood up altogether, I guess."

"Rose, I – "

But the line went dead.

Avery shoved her phone back into her pocket and took a deep breath. A single tear rolled down her face from her right eye and she wiped it away as quickly as she could. She then walked

purposefully over to the area that had been cordoned off with crime scene tape earlier in the morning and stared at it for a very long time.

Fire, she thought. *Maybe it's more than something the killer is using for his acts. Maybe it's symbolic. Maybe fire offers more of a clue than anything else.*

So as she waited for the cab to arrive, she thought of fire and what sort of person might use it to deliver some sort of a message. It was hard to get a grasp on it, though, as she knew very little about arson.

I'll need a second mind at work on this, she thought.

And with that thought, she pulled out her phone and called up the A1 headquarters. She asked to be put through to Sloane Miller, the A1 psychologist and in-house shrink for the officers and detectives. If anyone could tap into the mind of a killer with fire on the brain, it would be Sloane.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Avery was back at A1 headquarters half an hour later. Upon entering, she did not take the elevator up to her office. Instead, she remained on the first floor and walked toward the back of the building. She'd been here before when she had been ordered to speak with Sloane Miller, the on-hand psychologist, during her last big and daunting case and it had affected her in a way she had still not quite come to terms with. But now she was visiting for another reason…for insight into a killer's mind. And, being in her element, the visit felt more natural.

She came to Sloane's office and was relieved to find the door cracked open. Sloane had no real set schedule and was more of a first-come-first-serve sort of resource for the police force. When Avery knocked on her door, she could hear Sloane typing something into her laptop.

"Come in," Sloane said.

Avery did, feeling much more at ease than the last time she'd met Sloane. Here in her office rather than her lobby-like setting for patients, things were a little more formal.

"Ah, Detective Black," Sloane said with genuine cheer as she looked up from her laptop. "It's so good to see you! I was very pleased to hear from you when you called. How have you been?"

"Things are good," Avery said. But in the back of her mind she knew that Sloane would jump at the opportunity to analyze her issues with Rose and her complicated relationship with Ramirez.

"What can I do for you today?" Sloane asked.

"Well, I was hoping to get your insights into a particular personality type. I'm leading up a case involving a man that we are fairly certain is burning his victims. He's left only bones and ash behind at the crime scene – cleaned bones, with no charring or damage. There's also a pile of ash and a slight chemical smell to the air…coming from the ash, I think. It's pretty clear he knows what he's doing. He knows how to burn a body, which seems like a very specific knowledge to have. But I don't think he's using the fire solely as a tool for his acts. I need to know what sort of person would not only use fire in such a way but also use it as some sort of symbolism."

"The idea that he's using the fire as a symbol of sorts is a great deduction," Sloane said. "In a case like this, I can almost guarantee you that's what's going on. At the heart of it, I think you might be dealing with someone that has an interest or maybe even a background in arson. Maybe he once had a job or hobby that included fire as a part of it. Studies have shown pretty resolutely that even children who are fascinated with campfires or matches show signs of an interest in arson-related acts."

"Can you tell me anything about that sort of personality that might help us get this guy sooner rather than later?"

"I can certainly try," Sloane said. "First of all, there's going be some sort of mental issues, but nothing too deep. It could just be something as simple as a tendency towards anger in even the most innocent of situations. He'll likely also be undereducated. Most repeat arsonists didn't graduate high school. Some see it as a way to rebel against a system they could never understand – the whole *some men just want to watch the world burn* nonsense. Some will claim they set fires as an act of revenge but can never define what it is they are seeking revenge against.

"They usually feel isolated or set apart from the world. So there's a good chance you're looking for either a single man or a man that is part of a loveless marriage. I'd expect he lives alone in a small house – probably spends a lot of time in a home office, basement, or garage of some kind."

"And what happens when you mix all of that with someone that clearly has no issue with killing people?"

"That does make it tricky," Sloane admitted. "But I think the same rules apply. Arsonists are usually very interested in people seeing what they've done. Setting fires is a way to attract attention. They're almost proud of it, like it's something they created. As for your suspect leaving the remains… that's a strange one. I suppose it could be linked to reports of arsonists visiting the scene of their fires

to watch firemen put them out. The arsonist sees the firefighters working hard and feels that he made that happen – that the arsonist is, in a sense, controlling the firefighters."

"So do you think our suspect might be hanging out nearby, watching?"

Sloane considered it for a moment and then shrugged. "It's certainly a possibility. But the precision which you said he's burning the bodies – right down to clean bone – makes me think that this guy is also patient and organized. I don't think he'd so something as foolish as revisiting the scene of a crime."

Patient and organized, Avery thought. *That goes right along with his exquisite planning, using fog as cover to get his victims and dump the remains.*

She thought of the way the bones had been put almost on display – almost as jarring and as obvious as a raging fire.

"Do you have any opinions on the case yet?" Sloane asked.

"I'm thinking it's a serial killer. As far as we know, this is his first victim but the blatant way he displayed the remains irks me. More than that, there's something very organized about collecting a victim, burning them just right, and then dumping the remains in a specific manner. It screams serial tendencies to me."

"I'd agree with that," Sloane said.

"I just wish some of the men I work with were that bright," Avery said with a smirk.

"So how are *you* doing these days, Avery? No bullshit, please."

"I really am okay, all things considered. For the first time in my life, my problems seem sort of normal compared to my past."

"What sort of normal problems?" Sloane asked.

"Problems with my daughter. Relationship confusion with a guy."

"Ah, the perils of a hard-working woman."

Avery smiled, although she sensed a deeper conversation coming on. This was why she sighed internally when her phone rang at that exact moment. She dug it out of her pocket and saw Connelly's number. "I have to take this."

She nodded.

Avery stepped out of the office and answered the call in the hallway.

"Black, don't let this go to your head, but you were right. Dental records came back from the remains. You nailed it. The victim is Keisha Lawrence. Thirty-nine years old and lived within a mile of the area."

"What else do we know?" Avery said, looking past the compliments.

"Enough to ramp this thing up a bit," he said. "I've got some guys digging on this but right now we know for sure that she had no immediate family in the area. The only person of interest we have is a boyfriend and a mother that died pretty recently."

"Has anyone spoken with the boyfriend yet?"

"I've got someone on it right now. Meanwhile, I ran his background. This jack-off has a rap sheet of domestic abuse and bar fights. A real champ, this one."

"Want me to get to him after your current guy?"

"Yes…go talk to this creep next. I'll call Ramirez and get him off of the Boston College detail. He's all yours for the rest of the day."

Did she pick up a hint of sarcasm in his voice? She was pretty sure she had. Either that or she was getting paranoid.

Your sex life is not that important, she thought. *Get over yourself.*

"Haul ass, Black," Connelly said. "Let's get this guy before another pile of bones turns up."

Avery ended the call and hurried down to the parking garage for a car. She thought of what Sloane had said about arsonists often watching firemen at work, feeling that they were controlling the firemen in a way.

Maybe we need to add potential voyeur to the list of potential suspect characteristics, she thought.

As for arsonists wanting to feel that they were controlling the people working to understand his crimes…Avery Black was no fireman and she sure as hell didn't like feeling like someone was controlling her.

She pulled out of the parking garage quickly, the tires making a quick and satisfying shriek of traction as she sped out. Keisha Lawrence's boyfriend was their first real lead on this case and Avery wanted to pay him a visit before anyone else.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Avery parked in front of the boyfriend's apartment just as Ramirez was getting out of his own car in front of her. He gave her a smile that felt different than usual. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, they were bonding in a way that went much deeper than a simple partnership at work.

"How were things at the college?" Avery asked as they met at the stairs to the house.

"Stuffy. Some stupid protest-related thing. So what's the deal here?"

"Boyfriend with an aggressive past. Pretty rough abuse-related rap sheet. I got a call on the way over that says he was almost confrontational with the police who broke the news."

"So fun times ahead, huh?" Ramirez asked.

Avery nodded as they started up the stairs. She buzzed the doorbell and listened to heavy footsteps approaching the door. Within seconds, a slightly heavyset man answered the door. He was thick in the gut, but shoulders and arms that had clearly seen some time in the gym stood out from the tank top he wore. Both arms were decorated with several tattoos, one of which was a naked woman straddling a skull.

"Yeah?" he said, sounding more irritated than sad.

"Are you Adam Wentz?" Avery asked.

"Who's asking?"

Avery flashed her badge and said, "I'm Detective Black and this is Detective Ramirez. We'd like to ask you some questions about Keisha."

"I've talked about her enough today," Adam Wentz said. "Having two policemen come to your house early in the morning to tell you that a woman you're seeing is dead is a hell of a way to start your day. So I'm done talking about it."

"Forgive me for saying so," Avery said, "but I'd expect a man who had just lost his girlfriend in such a tragic way would want to help in any way he could while the police try to get to the bottom of it all."

"No matter what you find, it won't bring her back now, will it?" Adam said.

"No, it won't," Avery said. "But any information you can give us might help find the man that did it."

Adam rolled his eyes. "So am I supposed to invite you in and weep on the couch about how much I miss her and how badly I want the killer brought to justice? Some shit like that?"

"Would that be so bad?" Ramirez asked.

With that, Adam stepped out of the doorway, closed the door behind him, and stood on the front stoop. It was clear that Avery and Ramirez were not going to be invited inside.

"I'm really not in the mood for this," Adam said. "So let's make it quick. What do you want?"

Avery took a moment to try to figure out his hostile attitude. Was it some sort of weird way to express his grief? Was he hiding something? It was too early to know for sure.

He either knows something or was more hurt by the news than he expected, she thought. *We have to be careful with our questions here.*

"For right now," Avery said, "we're just trying to narrow down our options and figure out a timeline."

Adam crossed his arms and gave a quick and gruff "All right."

"Can you provide a timeline of where you were over the course of the past two days?" Avery asked.

"I went to work yesterday and the day before. Clocked in at eight, clocked out at five thirty both times. I came home, had a sandwich and a few beers for dinner. A very exciting life, as you can see."

"Did you see Keisha during any of that time?" Avery asked.

"Yeah. She came over around seven the night before last. We watched some TV and then had sex on the couch."

Avery felt anger flaring up in her – that a man like Adam Wentz could speak about his recently deceased girlfriend in such an offhanded way placed a drop of acid in her stomach. Behind her, she sensed Ramirez taking a step closer. She knew from working with him that he wasn't taking well to Adam's mood, either.

"Did she sleep over?" Avery asked.

"No. She hasn't slept here in a while. She says it makes her late for work."

"It doesn't have anything to do with your history of abusing women?" Ramirez asked.

Avery cringed, not liking that Ramirez had taken the conversation in that direction. Adam looked directly at him, totally unthreatened, and scowled.

"No, actually," Adam said. "It's because her apartment is about twenty minutes closer to her work, you prick."

Ramirez stepped closer, now standing beside Avery and about three feet away from Adam.

"What did you do after she left two nights ago?" Avery asked.

"I went to bed, just like I did last night," Adam said. "Woke up this morning and started getting ready for work. That's when I got the call that Keisha had died. Your two cop friends were over about half an hour later."

"How did you feel when getting the news?" Avery asked.

"What kind of stupid question is that?"

Ramirez stepped up one more time, now on the stairs. He glared up at Adam with far too much contempt in his gaze for Avery's liking. "Can you just answer the question?" Ramirez asked.

"I was surprised," Adam said. "A little sad, I guess. Yeah, she was *sort of* my girlfriend but it wasn't too serious."

"How long had you dated?" Avery asked.

"About seven months. We weren't committed or anything."

"And is there any way you can prove you were at home last night? Maybe you went online at some point and we could check your internet history. Something like that?"

"No, and I don't…wait…are you actually thinking I did this? You think I killed her?"

"No, I didn't say that," Avery said. "I'm just trying to establish where you were when we believe she was killed. Trust me…I would love nothing more than for you to provide a reason to eliminate you from the equation."

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