



BLAKE PIERCE

CAUSE
TO
KILL

AN AVERY BLACK MYSTERY--BOOK #1

An Avery Black Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Cause to Kill

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Пирс Б.

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Homicide Detective Avery Black has been through hell. Once a top criminal defense attorney, she fell from grace when she managed to get a brilliant Harvard professor off—only to watch him kill again. She lost her husband and her daughter, and her life fell apart around her. Trying to redeem herself, Avery has turned to the other side of the law. Working her way up the ranks, she has reached Homicide Detective, to the scorn of her fellow officers, who still remember what she did, and who will always hate her. Yet even they cannot deny Avery’s brilliant mind, and when a disturbing serial killer strikes fear into the heart of Boston, killing girls from elite colleges, it is Avery that they turn to. It is Avery’s chance to prove herself, to finally find the redemption she craves. And yet, as she is soon to find out, Avery has come up against a killer as brilliant and daring as she. In this game of psychological cat and mouse, women are dying with mysterious clues, and the stakes could not be higher. 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 KILL marks the debut of a riveting new series—and a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Pierce Blake

Cause to Kill (An Avery Black Mystery – Book 1)

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) and ONCE CRAVED (#3). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series.

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)

PROLOGUE

It was nearly impossible for Cindy Jenkins to leave her sorority's spring party at the Atrium. The massive penthouse space had been fitted with strobe lights, two stocked bars, and a stellar crystal ball that sparkled down on a dance floor packed with partygoers. Throughout the night, she'd danced with no one and everyone. Partners came and went, and Cindy swung her auburn hair and flashed a perfect smile and sky blue stare at any dancer that happened to appear. This was *her* night, a celebration not just for Kappa Kappa Gamma pride, but for the many hard years she'd strived to be the best.

Her future, she knew, was assured.

For the last two years, she'd interned at a major accounting firm in town; they recently offered her a position as a junior accountant. The starting salary would be enough to buy a posh new wardrobe and afford an apartment only a few blocks away from work. Her grades? Top of the class. Sure, she could coast until graduation, but Cindy didn't understand the word "coast." She was all in, every day, no matter what she was doing. Work hard and play hard, that was her motto; and tonight, she wanted to play.

Another cup of the highly alcoholic "Dreamy Blue Slush," another Kappa Kappa Gamma cheer, and another dance, and Cindy couldn't keep the smile off her face. In the strobe lights, she moved in slow motion. Her hair whipped back and her perky nose crinkled at a boy she'd known for years that wanted a kiss. Why not? she thought. Just a peck; nothing serious; nothing to hurt her current relationship, just enough to let everyone at the party know that she wasn't *always* a Type-A goodie-goodie that followed the rules.

Friends spotted her and cheered in approval.

Cindy pulled away from the boy. The dancing and alcohol and heat had finally taken its toll. She swooned slightly, still smiling, and held onto the boy's neck so she wouldn't fall.

"Do you want to go to my house?" he whispered.

"I have a boyfriend."

"Where is he?"

That's right, Cindy thought. Where *is* Winston? He hated sorority parties. *It's just a bunch of stuck-up girls getting drunk and cheating on their boyfriends*, he always said. Well, she thought, I guess I can finally agree! Kissing a boy when she was already committed to another man was probably the raciest thing she'd ever done.

You're drunk, she reminded herself. *Get out of here.*

"Gotta go," she slurred.

"One more dance?"

"No," she replied, "really, I've got to go."

The boy begrudgingly accepted her terms. Staring lovingly at the popular Harvard senior, he backed away into the crowd and offered a wave goodbye.

Cindy slid a lock of sweaty hair behind her ear and made her way off the dance floor, eyes low, happiness beaming on her face. Her favorite song came on and she spun and swayed to the edge of the crowd.

"Noooo!" her friends moaned, as they saw her trying to leave.

"Where are you going?" one demanded.

"*Home*," she insisted.

Her best friend, Rachel, pushed through the group and grabbed Cindy's hands. A short, stocky brunette, she wasn't the prettiest or even the smartest of the pack, but her aggressive, sexual nature usually made her the center of attention. She wore a skimpy silver dress, and every time she moved, her body seemed ready to burst out of the garment.

"You *can-not-go!*" she commanded.

“I’m *really* drunk,” Cindy pleaded.

“We haven’t even played our April Fool’s prank! That’s the highlight of our party! Please? Just stay a little longer?”

Cindy thought of her boyfriend. They’d been together for two years. That night, they were supposed to have a late-night rendezvous at her apartment. She inwardly groaned at her uncharacteristic dance-floor kiss. How am I supposed to explain *that* one? she wondered.

“*Seriously,*” she said, “I *have* to go,” and, appealing to Rachel’s outrageously erotic nature, she glanced at the boy she’d kissed and humorously added, “If I stay? Who *knows* what could happen?”

“*Oh!*” her friends cheered.

“She is out of control!”

Cindy kissed Rachel on the cheek and whispered, “Have a great night. See you tomorrow,” and headed for the door.

Outside, the cool spring air made Cindy take in a deep breath. She wiped the sweat off her face and skipped up Church Street in her short yellow summer dress. The downtown city block was mostly composed of low brick buildings and a few stately houses nestled among trees. A left turn onto Brattle Street and she crossed over and walked southwest.

Streetlamps lit most corners, but a section of Brattle Street was blanketed in darkness. Rather than be worried, Cindy picked up her pace and spread her arms wide, as if the shadows could somehow cleanse her system of alcohol and exhaustion and energize her for the rendezvous with Winston.

A narrow alleyway came up on her left. Instinct told her to be careful; it was, after all, extremely late and she wasn’t oblivious to the seedier side of Boston, but she was also too high to believe anything could possibly stand in the way of her future.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught movement, and too late, she turned.

She felt a sudden sharp pain in her neck, one that made her catch her breath, and she glanced back to see something shimmering in the light.

A needle.

Her heart plummeted, and her buzz wore off in a single instant.

At the same moment, she felt someone pressing into her back, a single lean arm trapping hers. The body was smaller than her own, but strong. With a yank, she was pulled backwards into the alley. “Shhh.”

Any thought that it could be a prank vanished the moment she heard the evil, strong voice.

She tried to kick and scream. For some reason, her voice wouldn’t work, as if something had softened the muscles in her neck. Her legs, too, began to feel like Jell-O, and she could barely keep her feet on the ground.

Do something! she implored herself, knowing if she didn’t she would die.

The arm was around her right-hand side. Cindy turned out of the hold, and at the same time jerked her neck back to head-butt her attacker. The back of her skull smacked into his nose and she could almost hear a “crack.” The man swore under his breath and released her.

Run! Cindy pleaded.

But her body refused to comply. Her legs gave out from beneath her, and she fell hard on the cement.

Cindy lay on her back, legs splayed and arms out at opposite angles, unable to move.

The attacker knelt down beside her. His face was obscured by a sloppily placed wig, a fake moustache, and thick glasses. The eyes behind the glasses sent a chill through her body: cold and hard. Soulless.

“I love you,” he said.

Cindy tried to scream; a gurgle came out.

The man nearly touched her face; then, as if aware of their surroundings, he quickly stood.

Cindy felt herself gripped by the hands and pulled through the alley.

Her eyes filled with tears.

Someone, she mentally pleaded, *help me. Help!* She remembered her classmates, her friends, her laughter at the party. *Help!*

At the end of the path, the small man lifted her up and hugged her tight. Her head flopped on his shoulder. He lovingly stroked her hair.

He grabbed one of her hands and twirled her around like they were lovers.

“It’s all right,” he said loudly, as if it were meant for others, “I’ll get the door.”

Cindy spotted people farther off in the distance. Thinking was difficult. Nothing would move; an effort to speak failed.

The passenger side of a blue minivan was opened. He plopped her inside and carefully closed the door so that her head rested on the window.

On the driver’s side, he entered and placed a soft, pillow-like sack over her head.

“Sleep, my love,” she said, turning the ignition. “Sleep.”

The van pulled away, and as Cindy’s mind faded into darkness, her final thought was of her future, her bright, unbelievable future that had suddenly, horribly been snatched away.

CHAPTER ONE

Avery Black stood in the back of the packed conference room, leaning into a wall, deep in thought as she took in the proceedings around her. Over thirty officers packed the small conference room of the Boston Police Department on New Sudbury Street. Two walls were painted yellow; two were glass and looked out upon the department's second floor. Captain Mike O'Malley, early fifties, a small, powerfully built Boston native with dark eyes and hair, kept moving around behind the podium. He seemed to Avery to be perpetually restless, uncomfortable in his own skin.

"Last but not least," he said in his thick accent, "I'd like to welcome Avery Black to Homicide Squad."

A few perfunctory claps filled the room, which otherwise remained embarrassingly silent.

"*Now, now,*" the captain snapped, "that's no way to treat a new detective. Black had more arrests than any of you last year, and she nearly singlehandedly took down the West Side Killers. Give her some respect," he said and nodded toward the back with a noncommittal smile.

Head low, Avery knew her bleached-blond hair hid her features. Dressed more like an attorney than a cop, in her sharp black pantsuit and button-down shirt, her attire, a throwback from her days as a defense lawyer, was yet another reason that most within the police department chose to either shun her or to curse her name behind her back.

"Avery!" The captain raised his arms. "I'm trying to give you some props over here. Wake up!"

She looked around, flustered, at the sea of hostile faces staring back. She was starting to wonder whether coming to Homicide was a good idea after all.

"All right, let's start the day," the captain added to the rest of the room. "Avery, you, in my office. *Now.*" He turned to another cop. "And I want to see you too, and you, Hennessey, get over here. And Charlie, why you running out of here so fast?"

Avery waited for the throng of police officers to leave, then as she began to make her way toward his office, a cop stood in front of her, one she had seen around the department but had never formally greeted. Ramirez was slightly taller than her, lean and sophisticated in appearance, with tan Latin skin. He had short black hair, a shaved face, and although he wore a nice gray suit, there was an ease about his stance and appearance. A sip of coffee and he continued to stare without emotion.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"It's the other way around," he said. "I'm the one that's going to help you."

He offered a hand; she didn't take it.

"Just trying to get a bead on the infamous Avery Black. Lot of rumors. Wanted to figure out which ones were true. So far I've got: absentminded, acts like she's too good for the force. Check and check. Two for two. Not bad for a Monday."

Abuse within the police force was nothing new for Avery. It had started three years ago when she entered as a rookie cop, and it hadn't let up since. Few in the department were considered friends, and even fewer trusted colleagues.

Avery brushed past him.

"Good luck with the chief," Ramirez sarcastically called out, "I hear he can be a real asshole."

A limp, backhanded wave was offered in reply. Over the years, Avery had learned it was better to acknowledge her hostile partners than avoid them completely, just to let them know she was there and wasn't going away.

The second floor of the A1 police department in central Boston was an expansive, churning engine of activity. Cubicles filled the center of the expansive workspace, and smaller glass offices surrounded the side windows. Cops glared at Avery as she passed.

"Murderer," someone muttered under his breath.

"Homicide will be perfect for you," said another.

Avery passed a female Irish cop whom she had saved from the clutches of a gang den; she flashed Avery a quick glance and whispered, “Good luck, Avery. You deserve it.”

Avery smiled. “Thanks.”

Her first kind word of the day gave her a boost of confidence that she took with her into the captain’s office. To her surprise, Ramirez stood only a few feet outside the glass partition. He lifted his coffee and grinned.

“Come on in,” the captain said. “And close the door behind you.”

Avery sat down.

O’Malley was even more formidable close up. The dye job on his hair was noticeable, along with the many wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. He rubbed his temples and sat back.

“You like it here?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean this, the A1. Heart of Boston. You’re in the thick of it, here. Big City Dog. You’re a small-town girl, right? Oklahoma?”

“Ohio.”

“Right, right,” he muttered. “What is it about the A1 you like so much? There are a lot of other departments in Boston. You could have started at Southside, B2, maybe D14 and got a taste of the suburbs. Lots of gangs out there. You only applied here.”

“I like big cities.”

“We get some real sickos here. You sure you wanna go down that road again? This is homicide. A little different than beat.”

“I watched the leader of the West Side Killers flay someone alive while the rest of his gang sang songs and watched. What kind of ‘sickos’ are we talking about?”

O’Malley watched her every move.

“The way I hear it,” he said, “you got played – hard – by that Harvard psycho. He made you look like a fool. Destroyed your life. From star attorney to disgraced attorney, then nothing. And then the switch to rookie cop. That had to hurt.”

Avery squirmed in her chair. Why did he have to rehash all this? Why now? Today was a day to celebrate her promotion to Homicide, and she didn’t want to ruin it – and certainly didn’t want to dwell on the past. What was done was done. She could only look forward.

“You turned it around, though” – he nodded in respect – “made a new life for yourself down here. On the right side this time. Gotta respect that. But,” he said, looking her over, “I want to make sure you’re ready. Are you ready?”

She stared back, wondering where he was going with this.

“If I wasn’t ready,” she said, “I wouldn’t be here.”

He nodded, seemingly satisfied.

“We just got a call,” he said. “A dead girl. *Staged*. It doesn’t look good. Guys on the scene don’t know what to make of it.”

Avery’s heart beat faster.

“I’m ready,” she said.

“Are you?” he asked. “You’re good, but if this turns out to be something big, I want to make sure you won’t crack.”

“I don’t crack,” she said.

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” he said and pushed some papers on his desk. “Dylan Connelly supervises Homicide. He’s over there now working with forensics. You’ve got a new partner, too. Try not to get him killed.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” Avery complained, and she inwardly bristled at the recent Internal Affairs investigation, all because her former partner – a prejudiced hothead – had jumped the gun and tried to infiltrate a gang all by himself and take credit for her work.

The chief pointed outside.

“Your partner’s waiting. I’ve made you lead detective. Don’t let me down.”

She turned to see Ramirez waiting. She groaned.

“Ramirez? Why him?”

“Honestly?” The captain shrugged. “He’s the only one that wanted to work with you. Everyone else here seems to hate you.”

She felt that knot in her stomach tightening.

“Tread softly, young detective,” he added, as he stood, signaling their meeting was over. “You need all the friends you can get.”

CHAPTER TWO

“How did it go?” Ramirez asked, as Avery exited the office.

She lowered her head and kept on walking. Avery hated small talk, and she didn’t trust any of her fellow cops to talk to her without trading barbs.

“Where are we headed?” she replied.

“All business.” Ramirez smiled. “Good to know. All right, Black; we’ve got a dead girl placed on a bench in Lederman Park, by the river. It’s a high-traffic area. Not really a place you’d put a body.”

Officers slapped palms with Ramirez.

“Go get her, tiger!”

“Break her in right, Ramirez.”

Avery shook her head. “Nice,” she said.

Ramirez raised his hands.

“It’s not me.”

“It’s all of you,” she sneered. “I never thought a police station would be worse than a law firm. Secret boys’ club, right? No girls allowed?”

“Easy, Black.”

She headed toward the elevators. A few officers cheered at getting under her skin. Usually, Avery was able to ignore it, but something about her new case had already shaken her tough exterior. The words the captain had used weren’t typical of a simple homicide: *Don’t know what to make of it. Staged.*

And the cocky, aloof air of her new partner wasn’t exactly comforting: *Seems cut and dry.* Nothing was ever cut and dry.

The elevator door was about to close when Ramirez put his hand through.

“I’m sorry, all right?”

He seemed sincere. Palms up, an apologetic look in his dark eyes. A button was pressed and they moved down.

Avery glanced at him.

“The captain said you were the only one that wanted to work with me. Why?”

“You’re Avery Black,” he replied as if the answer were obvious. “How could I not be curious? Nobody really knows you, but everyone seems to have an opinion: idiot, genius, has-been, up-and-comer, murderer, savior. I wanted to sort out fact from fiction.”

“Why do *you* care?”

Ramirez flashed an enigmatic smile.

But he said nothing.

* * *

Avery followed Ramirez as he walked easily through the parking garage. He wore no tie and his top two buttons were open.

“I’m over there,” he pointed.

They passed a few uniformed officers that seemed to know him; one waved and flashed a strange look that seemed to ask: *What are you doing with her?*

He led her to a dusty, crimson Cadillac, old, with torn tan seats on the inside.

“Solid ride,” Avery joked.

“This baby has saved me many times,” he relayed with pride as he lovingly pat the hood. “All I have to do is dress like a pimp or a starving Spaniard and nobody pays me any mind.”

They headed out of the lot.

Lederman Park was only a few miles from the police station. They drove west on Cambridge Street and took a right on Blossom.

“So,” Ramirez said, “I heard you were a lawyer once.”

“Yeah?” Guarded blue eyes flashed him a sidelong glance. “What else did you hear?”

“Criminal defense attorney,” he added, “best of the best. You worked at Goldfinch & Seymour. Not a shabby operation. What made you quit?”

“You don’t know?”

“I know you defended a lot of scumbags. Perfect record, right? You even had a few dirty cops put behind bars. Must have been living the life. Huge salary, an endless stream of success. What kind of person leaves all that behind to join the force?”

Avery remembered the house she’d grown up in, a small farm surrounded by flat land for miles. The solitude had never suited her. Neither had the animals or the smell of the place: feces and fur and feathers. From the beginning she’d wanted to get out. She had: Boston. First the university and then the law school and career.

And now this.

A sigh escaped her lips.

“I guess, sometimes things don’t work out the way we plan.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

In her mind, she saw the smile again, that old, sinister smile from a wrinkled old man with thick glasses. He’d seemed so sincere at first, so humble and smart and honest. *All* of them had, she realized.

Until their trials were over and they went back to their everyday lives and she was forced to accept that she was no savior of the helpless, no defender of the people, but a pawn, a simple pawn in a game too complex and rooted to change.

“Life is hard,” she mused. “You think you know something one day and then the next day, the veil gets pulled down and everything changes.”

He nodded.

“Howard Randall,” he said, clearly realizing.

The name made her more aware of everything – the cool air in the car, her position on the seat, their location in the city. Nobody had said his name aloud in a long time, especially to her. She felt exposed and vulnerable, and in response she tightened her body and sat taller.

“Sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to – ”

“It’s fine,” she said.

Only it wasn’t fine. Everything had ended after him. Her life. Her job. Her sanity. Being a defense attorney had been challenging, to say the least, but *he* was the one that was supposed to make it right again. A genius Harvard professor, respected by all, simple and kind, he’d been charged with murder. Avery’s salvation was supposed to come through *his* defense. For once, she was supposed to do what she had dreamed about since childhood: defend the *innocent* and ensure justice prevailed.

But nothing like that happened.

CHAPTER THREE

The park had already been closed off to the public.

Two plainclothes officers flagged down Ramirez's car and quickly waved them away from the main parking lot and over to the left. Among the officers that were obviously from her department, Avery spotted a number of state police.

"Why are the troopers here?" she asked.

"Their home base is right up the street."

Ramirez pulled over and parked next to a line of police cruisers. Yellow tape had sectioned off a large area of the lot. News vans, reporters, cameras, and a bunch of other runners and park regulars stood by the tape to try to see what was happening.

"Nobody beyond this point," an officer said.

Avery flashed a badge.

"Homicide," she said. It was the first time she'd actually acknowledged her new position, and it filled her with pride.

"Where's Connelly?" Ramirez asked.

An officer pointed toward the trees.

They made their way across the grass, a baseball diamond on their left. More yellow tape met them before a line of trees. Under thick foliage was a walking path that wound its way along the Charles River. A single officer, along with a forensics specialist and a photographer, stood before a bench.

Avery avoided initial contact with those already on the scene. Over the years, she'd come to find that social interactions strained her focus, and too many questions and formalities with others sullied her point of view. Sadly, it was yet another characteristic of hers that had incurred the scorn of her entire department.

The victim was a young girl placed askew on the bench. She was obviously dead, but with the exception of her bluish skin tone, her position and facial expression might have made the average passerby think twice before they wondered if something was wrong.

Like a lover waiting for her paramour, the girl's hands were placed on the bench-back. Her chin rested on her hands. A mischievous smile curled on her lips. Her body was turned, as if she'd been in a sitting position and had moved to look for someone or breathe out a heavy sigh. She was clothed in a yellow summer dress and white flip-flops, lovely auburn hair flowing over her left shoulder. Her legs were crossed and her toes rested gently on the path.

Only the victim's eyes gave away her torment. They emanated the pain and disbelief.

Avery heard a voice in her mind, the voice of the old man that haunted her nights and daydreams. In regards to his own victims, he had once asked her: *What are they? Only vessels, nameless, faceless vessels – so few among billions – waiting to find their purpose.*

Anger rose up in her, anger born at being exposed and humiliated and most of all, from having her entire life shattered.

She moved closer to the body.

As an attorney, she'd been forced to examine endless forensics reports and coroner's photos and anything else related to her case. Her education had vastly improved as a cop, when she routinely analyzed murder victims in person, and could make more honest assessments.

The dress, she noticed, had been washed, and the victim's hair cleaned. The nails and toenails were freshly polished, and when she took a deep whiff of skin, she smelled coconut and honey and only the faint hint of formaldehyde.

"You gonna kiss it or what?" someone said.

Avery was bent over the victim's body, hands behind her back. On the bench was a yellow placard labeled "4." Beside it, on the girl's lower waist, was a stiff orange hair, barely perceptible among the yellow of her dress.

Homicide Supervisor Dylan Connelly stood akimbo and waited for an answer. He was tough and rugged, with wavy blond hair and penetrating blue eyes. His chest and arms nearly tore out of his blue shirt. His pants were brown linen, and thick black boots adorned his feet. Avery had noticed him often in the office; he wasn't exactly her type, but he had an animal ferocity about him that she admired.

"This is a crime scene, Black. Next time, watch where you're walking. You're lucky we already dusted for prints and shoes."

She looked down, baffled; she had been careful where she had walked. She looked up at Connelly's steely eyes and realized he was just looking for a reason to ride her.

"I didn't know it was a crime scene," she said. "Thanks for filling me in."

Ramirez snickered.

Connelly bit down and stepped forward.

"You know why people can't stand you, Black? It's not just that you're an outsider, it's that *when* you were on the outside, you had no real respect for cops, and now that you're on the inside, you have even less respect. Let me be perfectly clear: I don't like you, I don't trust you, and I sure as hell didn't want you on my team."

He turned to Ramirez.

"Fill her in on what we know. I'm going home to take a shower. I feel sick," he said. Gloves were removed and thrown to the ground. To Avery, he added: "I expect a full report by the end of the day. Five o'clock sharp. Conference room. You hear me? Don't be late. And make sure you clean this mess up, too, before you leave. State troopers were kind enough to step aside and let us work. *You* be kind enough and show them some courtesy."

Connelly walked away in a huff.

"You have a real way with people," Ramirez admired.

Avery shrugged.

The forensics specialist on the scene was a shapely young African American named Randy Johnson. She had large eyes and an easy way about herself. Short, dreadlocked hair was only partially hidden behind a white cap.

Avery had worked with her before. They'd formed a fast bond during a domestic violence case. The last time they'd seen each other was over drinks.

Excited to be on another case with Avery, Randy held out a hand, noticed her own glove, blushed, guffawed, and said, "Oops," followed by a wacky, *EEK!* expression and the proclamation: "I might be *contaminated*."

"Good to see you too, Randy."

"Congrats on Homicide." Randy bowed. "Moving up in the world."

"One wacko at a time. What have we got?"

"I'd say someone was in love," Randy replied. "Cleaned her up pretty good. Opened her up from the back. Drained her body, filled her up so she wouldn't rot, and stitched her up again. Fresh clothes. Manicure. Careful too. No prints yet. Not much to go on until I get to the lab. Only two wounds I can find. See the mouth? You can either pin this from the inside, or use gel to get a corpse to smile like that. From the puncture wound here," she pointed at the corner of a lip, "I'd guess injection. There's another one here," she noted on the neck. "By the coloring, this came earlier, maybe at the time of abduction. Body has been dead for about forty-eight hours. Found a couple of interesting hairs."

"How long has she been here?"

"Bikers found her at six," Ramirez said. "The park is patrolled every night around midnight and three a.m. They didn't see anything."

Avery couldn't stop staring at the dead girl's eyes. They seemed to be looking at something in the distance, yet close to the shoreline, on their side of the river. She carefully maneuvered to the back of the bench and tried to follow the line of sight. Downriver, there were a bunch of low brick buildings; one of them was short; a white dome rested on its on top.

"What building is that?" she asked. "The large one with the dome?"

Ramirez squinted.

"Maybe the Omni Theatre?"

"Can we find out what's playing?"

"Why?"

"I don't know, just a hunch."

Avery stood up.

"Do we know who she is?"

"Yeah," Ramirez replied and checked his notes. "We think her name is Cindy Jenkins. Harvard senior. Sorority sister. Kappa Kappa Gamma. Went missing two nights ago. Campus police and Cambridge cops put her picture up last night. Connelly had his people check through photos. Hers was a match. We still need confirmation. I'll call the family."

"How are we on surveillance?"

"Jones and Thompson are on that now. You know them, right? Great detectives. They're assigned to us for the day. After that, we're on our own unless we can prove we need the extra resources. No entrance cameras to the park, but there are some up the highway and across the street. We should know something this afternoon."

"Any witnesses?"

"None so far. The bikers are clean. I can troll around."

Avery surveyed the surrounding area. Yellow tape encompassed a large swath of the park. Nothing out of the ordinary could be found near the river or on the bike path or grass. She tried to form a mental picture of events. He would have driven in through the main road, parked his car close to the water for easy access to the bench. How did he get the body to the bench without causing suspicion?

She wondered. People might have been watching. He had to prepare for that. Maybe he made it look like she was alive? Avery turned back to the body. It was a definite possibility. The girl was beautiful, even in death, ethereal almost. He had obviously spent a lot of time and planning to ensure she looked perfect. Not a gang kill, she realized. Not a scorned lover. This was different. Avery had seen it before.

Suddenly, she wondered if O'Malley was right. Maybe she *wasn't* ready.

"Can I borrow your car?" she asked.

Ramirez cocked a brow.

"What about the crime scene?"

She offered a confident shrug.

"You're a big boy. Figure it out."

"Where are *you* going?"

"Harvard."

CHAPTER FOUR

He sat in an office cubicle – superior, victorious, more powerful than anyone on the planet. A computer screen was open before him. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes, and remembered.

He recalled the cavernous basement of his home, more like a garden nursery. Multiple varieties of poppy flowers lined the main room: red, yellow, and white. Many other psychedelic plants – each one accrued over countless years – had been placed in long troughs; some were alien-like weeds or intriguing flowers; many had a more common appearance that would have been overlooked in any wildlife setting, despite their potent abilities. A timed watering system, temperature gauge, and LED lights kept them thriving.

A long hallway made of wooden beams led to other rooms. On the walls were pictures. Most of the pictures were of animals in various stages of death, and then “rebirth” as they were stuffed and positioned: a tabby cat on its hind legs playing with yarn; a white and black spotted dog, rolled over and waiting for a tummy rub.

Doors came next. He imagined the door on the left opened. There, he saw her again, her naked body laid out on a silver table. Strong fluorescent lighting lit the space. In a glass case were many colorful liquids in clear jars.

He’d felt her skin when he’d rubbed his fingers along the outside of her thigh. Mentally, he reenacted each delicate procedure: her body drained, preserved, cleaned, and stuffed. Throughout the rebirth, he took photos that would later cover more walls saved for his human trophies. Some of the photos had already been placed.

Tremendous, surreal energy flowed through him.

For years, he had avoided humans. They were scary, more violent and uncontrollable than animals. He loved animals. Humans, however, he discovered to be more potent sacrifices for the All Spirit. After the girl’s death, he’d seen the sky open, and the shadowy image of the Great Creator had looked at him and said: *More*.

His reverie was broken by a snapping voice.

“You daydreaming again?”

A grumbling worker stood overhead with a scowl on his face. He had the face and body of a former football player. A sharp blue suit did little to diminish his ferocity.

Meekly, he lowered his head. His shoulders slightly hunched, and he transformed into a forgettable, diminutive worker.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Peet.”

“I’m tired of the apologies. Get me those figures.”

Inwardly, the killer smiled like a laughing giant. At work, the game was almost as exciting as his private life. No one knew how *special* he was, how dedicated and *essential* to the delicate balance of the universe. None of them would receive an honored place in the realm of the Overworld. Their everyday, mundane, earthly tasks: dressing up, having meetings, pushing money around from place to place – were meaningless; it was only meaningful to him because it connected him to the outside world and allowed him to do the Lord’s work.

His boss grumbled and walked away.

Eyes still closed, the killer imagined his Overlord: the shadowy, dark figure that whispered in his dreams and directed his thoughts.

A song of homage formed on his lips, and he sang in a whisper: “Oh Lord, oh Lord, our work is pure. Ask and I give you: More.”

More.

CHAPTER FIVE

Avery had a name: Cindy Jenkins. She knew the sorority: Kappa Kappa Gamma. And she was fully aware of Harvard University. The ivy league school had rejected her as an incoming freshman, but she'd still found a way to soak in Harvard life throughout her own college career, as she'd dated two boys from the school.

Unlike other colleges, the sororities and fraternities of Harvard weren't officially acknowledged. No Greek houses existed on or off campus. Partying, however, happened regularly at multiple off-campus houses or apartment complexes under the name of "organizations" or specialized "clubs." Avery had witnessed firsthand the paradox of college life during her own college tenure. Everyone pretended to be solely focused on grades until the sun went down and they transformed into a bunch of wild, partying animals.

At a red light, Avery performed a quick Internet search to discover that Kappa Kappa Gamma rented two areas on the same block in Cambridge: Church Street. One of the locations was for events, the other for meetings and socializing.

She drove over Longfellow Bridge, past MIT, and hung a right onto Massachusetts Avenue. Harvard Yard appeared on her right with its magnificent red brick buildings set among a forest of trees and paved pathways.

A parking spot opened on Church Street.

Avery parked, locked the car door, and lifted her face to the sun. It was a warm day, with temperatures in the high seventies. She checked the time: ten thirty.

The Kappa building was a long, two-story structure with a brick facade. The first floor housed a number of clothing shops. The second floor, Avery guessed, was reserved for office space and sorority operations. The only designation next to the second-floor buzzer was the blue fleur-de-lis symbol of Harvard; she pressed it.

A scratchy female voice came on the intercom system.

"Yeah?"

"Police," she growled, "open up."

Silence for a moment.

"Seriously," the voice replied, "who is this?"

"It's the police," she said in earnest. "Everything is fine. No one is in trouble. I just need to speak with someone in Kappa Kappa Gamma."

The door buzzed open.

At the top of the steps, Avery was greeted by a sleepy, haggard girl in an oversized gray sweatshirt and white sweatpants. Dark-haired, she appeared hard-partying. Wisps of hair hid most of her face. There were dark circles under her eyes, and the body that she normally took so much pride in accentuating appeared thick and formless.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Calm down," Avery offered. "This has nothing to do with sorority activities. I'm just here to ask a few questions."

"Can I see some identification?"

Avery flashed her badge.

She sized up Avery, inspected the badge, and stood back.

The space for Kappa Kappa Gamma was large and bright. The ceiling was high. A number of comfortable tan couches and blue bean bags littered the area. Walls had been painted dark blue. There was a bar, a sound system, and a huge, flat-screen TV. The windows were nearly floor to ceiling. Across the street, Avery could see the top of another short apartment complex, and then the sky. A few clouds rolled by.

She guessed her college experience was a lot different from that of most of the girls in Kappa Kappa Gamma. For one, she had paid for school herself. Every day after classes she went to a local law firm and worked her way up from a secretary to an honored paralegal. She also rarely drank in school. Her father had been a raging alcoholic. Most college nights, she was either the designated driver or in the dorm studying.

A burst of hope flashed on the girl's face.

"Is this about Cindy?" she asked.

"Is Cindy a friend of yours?"

"Yeah, my *best* friend," she said. "Please, tell me she's all right?"

"What's your name?"

"Rachel Strauss."

"Are you the one that called the police?"

"That's right. Cindy left our party pretty drunk on Saturday night. No one has seen her since. That's not like her." She rolled her eyes and offered a slight smile when she added, "She's usually very predictable. She's just like, Ms. Perfect, you know? Always to bed at the same time, same schedule that never changes – needs like, five years' notice for any changes. Saturday she was crazy. Drinking. Dancing. Threw the clock away for a while. It was nice to see."

A distant gaze took Rachel for a moment.

"She was just, really happy, you know?"

"Any particular reason?" Avery wondered.

"I don't know, top of her class. Has a job lined up for the fall."

"What job?"

"Devante? They're like, the *best* firm in Boston. She was an accounting major. So boring, I know, but she was a genius when it came to numbers."

"Can you tell me about Saturday night?"

Tears came to Rachel's eyes.

"This *is* about Cindy, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Avery said. "Maybe we can sit down?"

Rachel crashed on the couch and cried.

Through sobs, she tried to speak.

"Is she all right? Where is she?"

It was the part of the job Avery hated the most – talking to relatives and friends. There was only so much she was allowed to discuss. The more people learned about a case, the more they talked, and that talk had a way of getting back to the perpetrators of crimes. No one ever understood that or cared in the moment: they were too distressed. All they wanted were answers.

Avery sat beside her.

"We're really glad you called," she said. "You did the right thing. I'm afraid I can't talk about an ongoing investigation. What I *can* tell you is that I'm doing everything in my power to find out what happened to Cindy that night. I can't do it alone, I need your help."

Rachel nodded and wiped her eyes.

"I can help," she said, "I can help."

"I'd like to know everything you remember about that night, and Cindy. Who was she talking to? Was there anything that stood out in your mind? Comments she made? People that took an interest in her? Anything about when she left?"

Rachel broke down completely.

Eventually, she raised a hand and nodded and pulled herself together.

"Yeah," she said, "sure."

"Where is everyone else?" Avery asked as a distraction. "I thought sorority houses were supposed to be packed with hungover girls in Kappa gear."

“They’re at class,” Rachel said and wiped her eyes. “A couple of girls went out to get breakfast. By the way,” she added, “we’re not technically a sorority house. This is just a place we rent to crash when we don’t want to go back to our dorm. Cindy never stayed here. Too modern for her. She has more of a ‘homey’ air.”

“Where does she live?”

“Student housing not far from here,” Rachel said. “But she wasn’t headed home on Saturday night. She was supposed to meet up with her boyfriend.”

Avery’s senses heightened.

“Boyfriend?”

Rachel nodded.

“Winston Graves, big-time senior, rower, asshole. None of us ever understood why she dated him. Well, I guess I did. He’s handsome and comes from tons of money. Cindy never had any money. I think, when you don’t come from money, it’s really appealing.”

Yeah, Avery thought, I know. She remembered how the money and prestige and power of her previous law firm job had made her believe she was somehow different from that scared and determined young girl who had left Ohio.

“Where does Winston live?” she asked.

“In Winthrop Square. It’s really close to here. But Cindy never made it. Winston came over early on Sunday morning looking for her. He assumed she’d just forgotten about their plans and passed out. So we went to her house together. She wasn’t there, either. That’s when I called the police.”

“Would she have gone anywhere else?”

“No way,” Rachel said. “That’s not like Cindy at all.”

“So when she left here, you’re sure she was headed over to Winston’s house.”

“Absolutely.”

“Was there anything that might have changed those plans? Anything that happened to her early in the evening, or even at the end?”

Rachel shook her head.

“No, well,” she realized, “there was *something*. I’m sure it’s nothing, but there’s this boy that’s had a crush on Cindy for years. His name is George Fine. He’s handsome, tough-looking, a loner, but a little weird, if you know what I mean? Works out and jogs around campus a lot. I had a class with him once last year. One of our jokes was that he’s been in a class with Cindy nearly every semester since freshman year. He’s been obsessed with her. He was here Saturday, and the crazy thing is, Cindy was dancing with him, and they even kissed. Totally not like Cindy. I mean, she’s dating Winston – not that they have the perfect relationship – but she was really drunk, and raging. They kissed, danced, and then she left.”

“Did George follow her out?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Honestly. I don’t remember seeing him after Cindy left, but that might be because I was totally wasted.”

“Do you remember what time she left?”

“Yeah,” she said, “at exactly two forty-five. Saturday was our annual April Fool’s Night party, and we’re supposed to play this great joke, but everyone was having so much fun we forgot about it until Cindy left.”

Rachel lowered her head. Emptiness filled the air for a while.

“Well look,” Avery said, “this has been really helpful. Thank you. Here’s my card. If you can remember anything else, or if your sorority sisters have something to add, I’d love to hear about it. This is an open investigation, so even the smallest detail might give us a lead.”

Rachel faced her then with tears in her eyes. And as the tears began to roll down her cheeks, her voice remained calm and steady.

“She’s dead,” she said, “isn’t she?”

“Rachel, I can’t.”

Rachel nodded, and then she cupped her face in her hands and completely broke down. Avery leaned over and hugged her tight.

CHAPTER SIX

Outside, Avery turned her face to the sun and breathed out a heavy sigh.

Church Street was busy, and there were numerous storefront cameras. Even in the middle of the night, she couldn't believe it was where the abduction had taken place.

Where did you go? she wondered.

A quick check on her phone revealed the easiest route to Winthrop Square. She took a stroll up Church and turned left on Brattle. Brattle Street was wider than Church, with just as many shops. Across the street, she noticed the Brattle Theatre. A small alley was on one side of the building, buttressed by a coffee house. Trees hid the area in shadows. Curious, Avery crossed over and entered the narrow strip between buildings.

She moved out onto Brattle again and checked every storefront within a one-block radius on both sides of Church Street. There were at least two stores with cameras outside.

She headed into a small smoke shop.

The bell on the door clanged.

"Can I help you?" said an old, white hippie with dreadlocked hair.

"Yeah," Avery said, "I notice you have a camera out front. What kind of range do you get on that thing?"

"The whole block," he said, "both directions. Had to install it two years ago. Goddamn college students. Everyone thinks these Harvard kids are so special, but they're just a bunch of assholes like everyone else. For years they've been smashing my windows. Some kind of college prank, right? Not for me. You know how much those windows cost?"

"Sorry to hear that. Listen, I don't have a warrant," she said and flashed her badge, "but some of those idiot kids might have caused a disturbance right up your street. No cameras there. Any way I can take a look? I know the time. Shouldn't take too long."

He frowned and mumbled to himself.

"I don't know," he said, "I've got to watch the shop. I'm the only one here."

"I'll make it worth your while." She smiled. "How about fifty bucks."

Without a word, he lowered his head, walked around the counter, and turned the sign on the door from "open" to "closed."

"Fifty bucks?" he said. "Come on in!"

The back of the shop was cluttered and dark. Hidden among boxes and spare supplies, the man uncovered a small television set. Above the set – on a higher shelf – was a series of electronic equipment attached to the TV.

"Don't really use it that often," he said, "only when there's trouble. Tapes get erased every week on Monday night. When was your little incident?"

"Saturday night," she said.

"All right, then, you're in luck."

He turned on the set.

The black-and-white image was from right outside the shop. Avery could clearly see the entrance to the store, as well as the opposite side of the street and right up Brattle. The area she specifically wanted to investigate was about fifty yards away. The image was grainier, and it was nearly impossible to make out shapes in front of the alley.

A small mouse was used to scan backwards.

"What time did you say?" he asked.

"Two forty-five," she said, "but I'll need to check some other times as well. Do you mind if I just sit down and look for myself? You can get back to the shop."

A suspicious brow greeted her.

“Are you going to steal anything?”

“I’m a cop,” she said. “That goes against my motto.”

“Then you’re not like any cop *I* know,” he laughed.

Avery pulled out a small black chair. She wiped off the dust and took a seat. A quick review of the equipment and she was able to easily scan forward and back.

At two forty-five, a few people walked up and down Brattle Street.

At two fifty, the street appeared empty.

By two-fifty two, someone – a girl by the hair and dress – came into view from the direction of Church. She walked across Brattle and turned left. Once she passed the coffee shop, a dark image from under the trees merged with hers, and they both disappeared. For a moment, Avery could only see the indecipherable motion of various shades of black. As the scene continued, the tree shapes took on their original form. The girl never reappeared.

“Shit,” Avery whispered.

She unclipped a sleek, modern walkie-talkie from the back of her belt.

“Ramirez,” she said. “Where are you?”

“Who is this?” came a crackling voice.

“You know who this is. Your new partner.”

“I’m still at Lederman. Almost finished here. They just took away the body.”

“I need you down here, now,” she said and gave him the location. “I think I know where Cindy Jenkins was abducted.”

* * *

An hour later, Avery had the alleyway blocked off on both sides by yellow tape. On Brattle Street, a police car and the forensics van were pulled up onto the sidewalk. One officer had been stationed to discourage visitors.

The alley opened into a wide, darkened street about halfway into the block. One side of the street housed a glass real estate building and a loading dock. On the other side were housing complexes. There was a parking lot that could support four cars. Another police car, along with more yellow tape, was at the end of the alley.

Avery stood in front of the loading dock.

“There,” she said and pointed to a high camera. “We need that footage. It probably belongs to the real estate company. Let’s get in there and see what we can find.”

Ramirez shook his head.

“You’re crazy,” he said. “That tape didn’t show shit.”

“Cindy Jenkins had no reason to walk down this alley,” Avery said. “Her boyfriend lives in the opposite direction.”

“Maybe she wanted to go for a walk,” he argued. “All I’m saying is, this is a lot of manpower for a hunch.”

“It’s no hunch. You saw the tape.”

“I saw a bunch of black blurs I couldn’t understand!” He fought. “Why would the killer attack here? There are cameras everywhere. He’d have to be a complete idiot.”

“Let’s go find out,” she said.

Top Real Estate Company owned the glass building and the loading dock.

After a brief discussion with front desk security, Avery and Ramirez were told to wait on the plush leather couches for someone of higher authority to arrive. Ten minutes later, the head of security and the president of the company appeared.

Avery flashed her best smile and shook hands.

“Thanks for seeing us,” she said. “We’d like to access the camera right above your loading dock. We don’t have a warrant,” she frowned, “but what we do have is a dead girl that was abducted on Saturday night, most likely right outside your back door. Unless something comes up, we should be in and out in twenty minutes.”

“And if something comes up?” the president asked.

“Then you made the right choice to assist the police in an extremely timely and delicate matter. A warrant could take an entire day. The body of that girl has already been dead for two days. She can’t talk anymore. She can’t help us. But you can. Please help. Every second we waste, the trail gets cold.”

The president nodded to himself and turned to his guard.

“Davis,” he said, “show them up. Give them whatever they need. If there are any problems,” he said to Avery, “please come and find me.”

When they were on their way, Ramirez whistled to himself.

“What a charmer,” he said.

“Whatever it takes,” Avery whispered.

The security office at Top Real Estate was a buzzing room filled with over twenty television screens. The guard sat down at the black table and keyboard.

“OK,” he said. “Time and place?”

“Loading dock. About two fifty-two and then let’s move forward.”

Ramirez shook his head.

“We’re not going to find nothing.”

The real estate cameras were of a much higher quality than the smoke shop, and in color. Most of the viewing screens were of a similar size, but one in particular was large. The guard put the loading-dock camera on the larger screen and then spun the image backwards.

“There,” Avery called. “Stop.”

The image halted at two-fifty. The camera showed a panoramic view of the parking lot directly across from the loading dock, as well as left, toward the dead-end sign and the street beyond. There was only a partial view of the alley that led toward Brattle. A single car was parked in the lot: a minivan that appeared to be dark blue.

“That car’s not supposed to be there,” the guard pointed.

“Can you make out the license?” Avery wondered.

“Yeah, I got it,” Ramirez said.

All three of them waited. For a while, the only motion came from cars on the perpendicular street, and the motion from trees.

At two-fifty-three, two people came into view.

They might have been lovers.

One was a smaller man, wiry and short, with thick, bushy hair, a moustache, and glasses. The other was a girl, taller with long hair. She wore a light summer dress and sandals. They appeared to be dancing. He held one of her hands and spun her around from the waist.

“Holy shit,” Ramirez said, “that’s Jenkins.”

“Same dress,” Avery said, “shoes, hair.”

“She’s drugged,” he said. “Look at her. Feet are dragging.”

They watched the killer open the passenger door and place her inside. Then, as he turned and walked around to the driver’s side, he looked directly into the loading-dock camera, bowed in a theatrical way, and twirled to the driver’s side door.

“Holy *shit!*” Ramirez howled. “Motherfucker is playing with us.”

“I want everyone on this,” Avery said. “Thompson and Jones are full-time surveillance from now on. Thompson can stay at the park. Tell him about the minivan. That will narrow down his search. We need to know what direction that car was heading. Jones has a harder job. He needs to get

over here now and follow that van. I don't care how he does it. Tell him to track down any cameras that can help him along the way.”

She turned to Ramirez, who stared back, shocked and impressed.

“We've got our killer.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Exhaustion finally hit Avery at close to six forty-five in the evening, on the elevator ride up to the second floor of the police station. All the energy and impetus she'd received from the morning revelations had culminated in a day well spent, but a night with countless unanswered questions. Her light skin was partially burned from the sun, her hair a mess, the jacket she'd worn earlier strung over her arm. Her shirt: dirty and untucked. Ramirez, on the other hand, appeared even more refreshed than he had in the morning: hair slicked back, suit almost perfectly pressed, eyes sharp and only a dab of sweat on his forehead.

"How can you possibly look so good?" she asked.

"It's my Spanish-Mexican bloodline," he proudly explained. "I can go twenty-four, forty-eight hours and still keep this shine."

A quick, squeamish glance at Avery and he moaned: "Yeah. You look like shit."

Respect filled his eyes.

"But you did it."

The second floor was only half full at night, with most of the officers either at home or working the streets. The conference room lights were on. Dylan Connelly paced around inside, obviously upset. At the sight of them, he threw open the door.

"Where the hell have you been?!" he snapped. "I wanted a report on my desk at five o'clock. It's almost seven. You turned off your walkie-talkies. *Both* of you," he pointed out. "I might expect that from you, Black, but not you, Ramirez. No one called me. No one answered their phones. The captain is pissed too, so don't go crying to him. Do you have any idea what's been happening around here? What the hell were you thinking?"

Ramirez raised his palms.

"We called," he said, "I left you a message."

"You called twenty minutes ago," Dylan snapped. "I've been calling every half hour since *four thirty*. Did someone die? Were you chasing down the killer? Did God Almighty come down from Heaven to help you out on this case? Because those are the only acceptable answers for your blatant insubordination. I should take both of you off this case right now."

He pointed to the conference room.

"*Get in there.*"

Angry threats were lost on Avery. Dylan's fury was background noise that she could easily filter out. She'd learned the skill long ago, back in Ohio, when she had to listen to her father scream and yell at her mother almost nightly. Back then, she'd held her ears tight and sang songs and dreamed about the day she would finally be free. Now, there were more important matters to hold her attention.

The afternoon paper lay on the table.

A picture of Avery Black was on the cover, looking startled that someone had just shoved a camera in her face. The headline read "Murder in Lederman Park: Serial Killer's Defense Attorney on the Case!" Beside the full-page image was a smaller picture of Howard Randall, the old and withered serial killer from Avery's nightmares with Coke-bottle glasses and a smiling face. The heading over his photo said: "Trust No One: Attorney Or Police."

"Have you seen this?" Connelly growled.

He picked up the paper and slapped it back down.

"*You're on the front page!* First day on Homicide and you're front page news —*again*. Do you realize how unprofessional this is? No, no," he said at Ramirez's expression, "don't even try to speak right now. You both screwed up. I don't know who you talked to this morning, but you stirred up a shitstorm. How did Harvard get wind of Cindy Jenkins' death? There's a memorial for her on Kappa Kappa Gamma's website."

“Lucky guess?” Avery said.

“*Fuck you, Black! You’re off the case. You hear me!?*”

Captain O’Malley eased into the room.

“Wait,” Ramirez complained. “You can’t do that. You don’t know what we’ve got.”

“I don’t care what you’ve got,” Dylan roared. “I’m not finished yet. It just gets better and better. The Mayor called an hour ago. Apparently, he used to play golf with Jenkins’ father, and he wanted to know why a has-been defense attorney – who got a serial killer released from prison – is dealing with the murder of a close friend’s daughter.”

“Calm down,” O’Malley said.

Dylan spun around, red-faced and mouth open. At the sight of his captain – who was smaller and quiet but seemed coiled and ready to explode – he eased back.

“For whatever reason,” O’Malley said in an even voice, “this case just blew up. Therefore, I’d like to know what you’ve been doing all day, if that’s OK with you, Dylan?”

Connelly muttered something under his breath and turned away.

The captain nodded to Avery.

“Explain yourself.”

“I never told anyone the victim’s name,” Avery said, “but, I did interview a girl from Kappa Kappa, Cindy Jenkins’ best friend, Rachel Strauss. She must have put two and two together. I’m sorry about that,” she said with a genuinely apologetic look to Dylan. “Small talk isn’t my strong suit. I was looking for answers, and I got them.”

“Tell them,” Ramirez urged.

Avery moved around the conference table.

“We’ve got a serial killer on our hands.”

“*Oh come on!*” Dylan lamented. “How can she possibly know that? She’s been on the case for a day. We have *one* dead girl. There’s no way.”

“*Will you shut up?*” O’Malley yelled.

Dylan bit down on his lower lip.

“This is no ordinary murder,” Avery said. “You told me as much yourself, Captain, and you must have seen it too,” she said to Dylan. “The victim was made to look alive. Our killer worshipped her. No bruises on her body, no forced entry, so we can rule out gangs or domestic violence. Forensics confirmed that she was drugged with a powerful, probably a natural anesthetic the killer might have created himself, flower extracts that would have instantly paralyzed, and slowly killed. Assuming he keeps these plants underground, he’d need lights, a water system, and food. I made some calls to find out how these seeds are imported, where they’re sold, and how to get my hands on the equipment. He also wanted the victim alive, at least for a little while. I wasn’t sure why, until we caught him on surveillance.”

“What?” O’Malley whispered.

“We got him,” Ramirez said. “Don’t get too excited. The images are grainy and hard to see, but the entire abduction can be seen from two separate cameras. Jenkins left the party a little after two thirty on Sunday morning to go to her boyfriend’s house. He lives about five blocks from the Kappa Kappa Gamma suite. Avery took the same walk she assumed Jenkins took. She noticed an alley. Who knows what possessed her to do it, but on a hunch, she checked a surveillance camera at a nearby smoke shop.”

“You need a warrant for that,” Dylan cut in.

“Only if someone asks for it,” Avery replied. “And sometimes a friendly smile and engaging conversation go a long way. That shop has been vandalized about ten times in the last year,” she went on. “They recently had an outside camera installed. Now, the store is on the opposite side as the alley, and it’s about half a block down, but you can clearly see a girl – and I believed it was Cindy Jenkins – get accosted under some trees.”

“That’s when she called me,” Ramirez took over. “Now, I thought she was crazy. Seriously. I saw the video and I wouldn’t have blinked twice. Black, on the other hand, had me call forensics and bring in the whole team over this shit. As you can imagine, I was pissed. But,” he said with excited eyes, “she was right. There’s another camera at a loading dock in the back of the alley. We asked the company to let us see what was on it. They agreed and boom,” he said and opened his arms wide. “A man comes out of the alley holding our victim. Same dress. Same shoes. He’s slight of frame, shorter than Cindy, and dancing. He was actually holding her and dancing. She was clearly drugged. Feet dangling and everything. At one point, he even looks in the camera. That sick fuck was taunting us. He puts her in the front seat of a minivan and just drove away like it was nothing. The car is a Chrysler, dark blue.”

“License plate?” Dylan asked.

“It’s a fake. I already ran it. Must have had a dummy plate on. I’m compiling a list of all the Chrysler minivans in that color sold in the last five years within a five-county radius. It will take a while, but maybe we can narrow down the list with more information. Also, he had to be wearing a disguise. You could barely see his face. Wore a moustache, possible wig, glasses. All we can gauge is the height – around five-five or five-six – and maybe skin color: white.”

“Where are the tapes?” O’Malley asked.

“Downstairs with Sarah,” Avery responded. “She said it might take a while but she’ll try to get sketch of the killer based on what she sees by tomorrow. Once we have facial recognition, we can compare it to our suspects and put it through the database to see what comes up.”

“Where are Jones and Thompson?” Dylan asked.

“Hopefully, still working,” Avery said. “Thompson is in charge of surveillance at the park. Jones is trying to track that car from the alley.”

“By the time we left,” Ramirez added, “Jones had found at least six different cameras within a ten-block radius from the alley that might be able to help.”

“Even if lose the car,” Avery said, “we can at least narrow down the direction. We know he turned north out of the alley. That, matched with whatever Thompson finds at the park, and we can triangulate an area and go house by house if we have to.”

“What about forensics?” O’Malley asked.

“Nothing in the alley,” Avery said.

“Is that it?”

“We’ve got some suspects, too. Cindy was at a party on the night of her abduction. A guy named George Fine was there. He’s apparently been following Cindy around for years: takes classes she takes, seems to randomly bump into her at events. Kissed Cindy for the first time, danced with her all night.”

“Have you spoken to him?”

“Not yet,” she said and looked right at Dylan. “I wanted your approval before a potential shakedown at Harvard University.”

“It’s a good thing you have *some* sense of protocol,” Dylan grumbled.

“There’s also the boyfriend,” she added to O’Malley. “Winston Graves. Cindy was supposed to go to his house that night. Never showed up.”

“So we’ve got two potential suspects, footage of the event, and a car to track down. I’m impressed. What about motive? Have you given that any thought?”

Avery looked away.

The footage she’d seen, as well as the victim’s placement and handling, all pointed to a man that loved his work. He’d done it before, and he’d do it again. Some kind of power trip must have motivated him, because he had little care for the police. The alleyway bow to the camera told her as much. That took courage, or stupidity, and nothing about the body dump or the abduction pointed to a lack in judgment.

“He’s toying with us,” she said. “He likes what he does, and he wants to do it again. I’d say he’s got some kind of plan. This isn’t over yet.”

Dylan snorted and shook his head.

“Ridiculous,” he hissed.

“All right,” O’Malley said. “Avery, you’re clear to talk to your suspects tomorrow. Dylan, contact Harvard and give them the head’s-up. I’ll call the chief tonight and let him know what we’ve got. I can also see about getting you some blanket warrants for cameras. Let’s keep Thompson and Jones on their toes. Dan, I know you’ve been working all day. One more gig and you can call it a night. Get the addresses of those two Harvard boys if you don’t have them already. Roll by on your way home. Make sure they’re tucked in tight. I don’t want anyone bolting.”

“I can do that,” Ramirez said.

“OK.” O’Malley clapped. “Get going. Great job to both of you. You should be proud of yourselves. Avery and Dylan, hang out for a minute.”

Ramirez pointed at Avery.

“Want me to pick you up in the morning? Eight? We’ll head over together?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll keep on Sarah about that sketch. Maybe she’ll have something.”

The sudden eagerness of a partner to help – on his own and without prodding – was new for Avery. Everyone else she’d been paired up with since the moment she’d joined the force had wanted to leave her dead in a ditch somewhere.

“Sounds good,” she said.

Once Ramirez had gone, O’Malley made Dylan sit on one side of the conference table and he had Avery sit on the other.

“Listen up you two,” he said in a quiet yet firm voice. “The chief called me today and said he wanted to know what I was thinking, handing this case over to a well-known and disgraced former criminal defense attorney. Avery, I told him you were the right cop for the job and I stand by my decision. Your work today proves I was right. However, it’s almost seven thirty and I’m still here. I’ve got a wife and three kids waiting for me at home and I desperately want to go and see them and forget about this miserable place for a while. Obviously, neither one of you shares my concerns, so maybe you don’t understand what I’m saying.”

She stared back at him, wondering.

“*Get along and stop bothering me with your bullshit!*” he snapped.

A tense silence blanketed the room.

“Dylan, start acting like a supervisor! Don’t call me with every whiny detail. Learn how to handle your people on your own. And you,” he said to Avery, “you better cut out the wacky humor act and the I-don’t-give-a-shit attitude and start acting like you care for once, because I *know* you do.” He stared at her for a long time. “Dylan and I have been waiting on you for hours. You want to turn off your radio? Not answer phones? Maybe it helps you think? Good for you. You go right ahead. But when a superior calls, you call them back. The next time this happens, you’re off the case. Understood?”

Avery nodded, feeling humbled.

“Understood,” she said.

“Got it.” Dylan nodded.

“Good,” O’Malley said.

He stood taller and smiled.

“Now, I should have done this sooner but there’s no better time than the present. Avery Black, I’d like you to meet Dylan Connelly, divorced father of two. Wife left him two years ago because he never came home and he drank too much. Now they live in Maine and he never gets to see his kids, so he’s pissed off all the time.”

Dylan stiffened and was about to speak, but said nothing.

“And Dylan? Meet Avery Black, former criminal defense attorney that screwed up and released one of the world’s worst serial killer onto the streets of Boston, a man that killed again and destroyed her life. She leaves behind a multimillion-dollar gig, an ex-husband, and a kid that barely talks to her. And, like you, she’s usually drowning her sorrows in work and alcohol. You see? You two have more in common than you think.”

He turned deadly serious.

“Don’t embarrass me again, or you’re *both* off the case.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Left alone in the conference room together, Avery and Dylan sat across from each other for a few moments in absolute silence. Neither one of them moved. His head was low. A grimace lined his face and he seemed to be mulling something over. For the first time, Avery felt some sympathy for him.

“I know what it’s like – ” she began.

Dylan stood up so fast and stiffly that his chair slid back and hit the wall.

“Don’t think this changes *anything*,” he said. “You and I are nothing alike.”

Although his menacing body language emanated anger and distance, his eyes said something different. Avery was sure he was on the verge of a breakdown. Something the captain had said affected him, just like it had affected her. They were both damaged, lonely. Alone.

“Look,” she offered, “I just thought.”

Dylan turned away and opened the door. His profile on the way out confirmed her fears: there were tears in his bloodshot eyes.

“Dammit,” she whispered.

Nights were the worst for Avery. She had no steady group of friends anymore, no real hobbies other than the job, and she was so tired that she couldn’t imagine doing more legwork. By herself at the large, blond table, she hung her head low and dreaded what came next.

The way out of the office was like every other day, only there was a charged feeling in the air, and many on the force were even more emboldened by her front page story.

“Hey, Black,” someone called and pointed to her cover photo. “Nice face.”

Another officer tapped on the image of Howard Randall.

“This story says you two were very close, Black. You into gerontophilia? You know what that means? It means you like to fuck old people.”

“You guys are hilarious.” She smiled and shot her fingers out like guns.

“*Fuck you*, Black.”

* * *

A white BMW was parked in the garage; five years old, dirty and worn. Avery had bought it at the height of her success as a defense attorney.

What were you thinking? she mused. Why would anyone buy a *white* car?

Success, she remembered. The white BMW had been bright and flashy, and she wanted everyone to know she was a *boss*. Now, it was a reminder of her failed life.

Avery’s apartment was on Bolton Street in South Boston. She owned a small two-bedroom on the second floor of a two-story building. The place was a downgrade from her former penthouse high-rise, but it was spacious and neat, with a nice terrace where she could sit and relax after a hard day’s work.

The living room was an open space with shaggy brown carpeting. The kitchen was to the right of the front door, and separated from the rest of the room by two large islands. There were no plants or animals. A northern exposure ensured the apartment was usually dark. Avery threw her keys on the table and shed the rest of her belongings: gun, shoulder harness, walkie-talkie, badge, belt, phone, and wallet. She undressed on the way to the shower.

After a long soak to process the events of the day, she put on a robe, grabbed a beer from the fridge, then her phone, and headed out to the terrace.

Nearly twenty missed calls flashed on her cell, along with ten new messages. Most of them were from Connelly and O'Malley. There was a lot of screaming.

Sometimes Avery was so single-minded and driven she refused to pick up for anyone that wasn't essential to her task, especially when all of the pieces hadn't been put together; today was one of those days.

She scrolled down through last numbers dialed – and all the people that had called her in the past month. Not a single one was her daughter, or her ex-husband.

Suddenly, she missed them both.

Numbers were dialed.

The phone rang.

A message answered: “Hi, this is Rose. I'm not here right now to take your call, but if you leave a brief message, and your name and number, I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks so much.” *Beep.*

Avery hung up.

She toyed with the idea of calling Jack, her ex. He was a good man, her college sweetheart with a heart of gold: a truly decent person. They'd had a torrid affair when she was eighteen, and she, with a sickening ego after her dream job, had ruined everything.

For years, she blamed other people about the split, and for the rift with her daughter: Howard Randall for his lies, her old boss, the money, the power, and all those people she had to constantly entertain and beguile to stay one step ahead of the truth: Little by little, her clients had become less reliable, and still she wanted to keep going, to ignore the truth, to bend justice one way or the other – simply to win. Only one more case, she often told herself. Next time, I'll defend someone *truly* innocent and set the record straight.

Howard Randall had been that case.

I'm innocent, he'd cried at their first meeting. *These students are my life. Why would I hurt one of them?*

Avery had believed him, and for the first time in a long time, she had begun to believe in *herself*. Randall was a world-renowned psychology professor at Harvard, in his sixties, with no motive and no known history of his unhinged personal beliefs. More than that, he appeared weak and broken, and Avery had always wanted to defend the weak.

When she got him off, it was the highlight of her career, the highest of heights – that is, until he purposely killed again to expose her as a fraud.

All Avery had wanted to know was: why?

Why would you do it? she'd asked him once in his cell. Why would you lie and set me up, just to go to prison for the rest of your life?

Because I knew you could be saved, Howard had replied.

Saved, Avery thought.

Is this salvation? she wondered and viewed her surroundings. Here? Now? No friends? No family? A beer in hand and a new life hunting down killers to make amends for my past? She took a swig of her drink and shook her head. No, this isn't salvation. At least not yet.

Her thoughts turned to the killer.

A picture of him had begun to form in her mind: quiet, lonely, desperate for attention, a specialist with herbs and corpses. She ruled out an alcoholic or drug addict. He was too careful. The minivan harked to a family, but his actions seemed to indicate a family was what he *wanted*, not what he *had*.

Her mind swirling with thoughts and images, Avery downed two more beers before she suddenly fell asleep in her cozy outdoor chair.

CHAPTER NINE

In her dreams, Avery was with her family again.

Her ex was an athletic man with cropped brown hair and dazzling green eyes. Avid climbers, they were on a hike together with their daughter, Rose; she was only sixteen and had already received an early admission to Brandeis College, even though she was only a junior in high school, but in the dream she was six. They were all singing and walking along a path surrounded by dense trees. Dark birds fluttered and cried out before the trees morphed into a shadowy monster and a knife-like hand stabbed Rose in the chest.

“No!” Avery screamed.

Another hand stabbed Jack and both he and her daughter were hoisted away.

“No! No! No!” Avery cried.

The monster lowered.

Dark lips whispered in her ear.

There is no justice.

Avery jolted awake to the sound of incessant ringing. She was still on the terrace in her robe. The sun had already come up. Her phone continued to blare.

She picked up.

“Black.”

“Yo Black!” Ramirez answered. “Don’t you ever pick up? I’m downstairs. Get your shit together and get out here. I’ve got coffee and sketch samples.”

“What time is it?”

“Eight-thirty.”

“Give me five minutes,” she said and hung up.

The dream continued to permeate her thoughts. Sluggishly, Avery rose and headed into the apartment. Her head pounded. Faded blue jeans were tugged on. A white T-shirt was made respectable by a black blazer. Three chugs of orange juice and a downed granola bar was breakfast. On the way out, Avery glanced at herself in the mirror. Her attire, and her morning meal, were a far cry from thousand-dollar suits and daily breakfast at the finest restaurants. Get over it, she thought. You’re not here to look pretty. You’re here to bring in the bad guys.

Ramirez handed her a cup of coffee in the car.

“Looking good, Black,” he joked.

As always, he appeared to be the model of perfection: dark blue jeans, a light-blue button-down shirt, and a dark-blue jacket with light-brown belt and shoes.

“You should be a model,” Avery grumbled, “not a cop.”

A smile displayed his perfect teeth.

“Actually, I *did* do a little modeling once.”

He pulled out of the breezeway and headed north.

“You get any sleep last night?” he asked.

“Not much. How about you?”

“I slept like a baby,” he said proudly. “I *always* sleep well. None of this gets to me, you know? I like to let it *ride*,” he said and waved his hand through the air.

“Any updates?”

“Both boys were home last night. Connelly put a watch on them just to make sure they didn’t bolt. He also talked to the dean to get some information and make sure no one freaks out about a bunch of plainclothes cops hanging around campus. Neither kid has a file. Dean said they’re both good boys from good families. We’ll see today. Nothing yet from Sarah on the facial recognition. We

should hear something this afternoon. A few dealerships called me back with names and numbers. I'm just going to keep a list for a while and see what happens. You see the morning paper?"

"No."

He pulled it out and threw it on her lap. In big, bold letters, the headline read "Murder at Harvard." There was another picture from Lederman Park, along with a smaller photo of the Harvard campus. The article inside rehashed the editorial from the previous day and included a smaller picture of Avery and Howard Randall from their days in court together. Cindy Jenkins was mentioned by name but there was no photo given.

"Slow day in the news?" Avery said.

"She's a white girl from Harvard," Ramirez replied, "of course it's big news. We gotta keep those white kids safe."

Avery raised a brow.

"That sounds vaguely racist."

Ramirez vigorously nodded.

"Yeah," he agreed, "I'm probably a little racist."

They wove through the streets of South Boston and headed over the Longfellow Bridge and into Cambridge.

"Why'd you become a cop?" she asked.

"I *love* being a cop," he said. "Father was a cop, grandfather was a cop, and now I'm a cop. Went to college and got bumped up quick. What's not to love? I get to carry a gun and wear a badge. I just bought myself a boat. I go out on the bay, chill out, catch some fish, and then catch some killers. Doing God's work."

"Are you religious?"

"Nah," he said, "just superstitious. If there *is* a god, I want him to know I'm on his side, you know what I mean?"

No, Avery thought, I don't.

Her father had been an abusive man, and while her mother faithfully went to church and prayed to God, she was more of a fanatic than anything else.

The voice from her dream returned.

There is no justice.

You're wrong, Avery replied. And I'm going to prove it.

* * *

Most Harvard seniors lived off-campus in some of the residential housing units owned by the school. George Fine was no exception.

Peabody Terrace was a large high-rise set along the Charles River near Akron Street. The white, twenty-four-story building included an expansive outdoor patio, beautiful lawns, and a clear view across the river for those students lucky enough to be placed on the higher floors; George was one of them.

A number of buildings connected Peabody Terrace. George Fine lived in Building E on the tenth floor. Ramirez parked his car along Akron Street and they made their way inside.

"Here's his picture," Ramirez said. "He should be asleep right now. His first class isn't until ten thirty."

The image was a smaller crop of a larger picture pulled of the Internet. It showed a disgruntled, extremely cocky student with oily black hair and dark eyes. A slight grin was on his face; he seemed to be challenging the photographer to find a flaw with his perfection. A strong jaw and pleasant features made Avery wonder why he was called a weirdo. He looks confident, she thought. So why stalk a girl that obviously has no interest in him?

Ramirez flashed his badge at the doorman.

“You got problems?” the doorman asked.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Ramirez replied.

They were waved up.

On the tenth floor, they turned left and walked down a long hallway. Carpets were tan brown swirls. Doors were painted glossy white.

Ramirez knocked on Apartment 10E.

“George,” he said, “you around?”

After a brief silence, someone said: “Get lost.”

“*Police*,” Avery interrupted and banged on the door. “Open up.”

Silence again, then ruffling and then more silence.

“Come on,” Avery called. “We don’t have all day. We just want to ask you a few questions.”

“You got a warrant?”

Ramirez raised his brows.

“Kid knows his stuff. Must be *ivy* educated.”

“We can have a warrant in about an hour,” Avery called out, “but if you make me leave and jump through hoops, I’m going to be pissed. I already feel like shit, today. You *don’t* want to see me pissed off, too. We just want to talk about Cindy Jenkins. We heard you knew her. Open the door and I’ll be your best friend.”

The bolt unlocked.

“You really *do* have a way with people,” Ramirez realized.

George appeared in a tank top and sweatpants, extremely muscular and toned. He was about 5’6”, the same height Avery associated with the killer based on Cindy’s records. Despite the look of someone that was either on drugs or who hadn’t slept in days, a fearlessness burned in his stare. Avery wondered if he’d been bullied for years and had finally decided to strike back.

“What do you want?” he said.

“Can we come in?” she asked.

“No, we can do this right here.”

Ramirez put his foot inside the room.

“Actually,” he said, “we’d rather come in.”

George looked from Avery to Ramirez – to the foot holding the door open. Resolved, he shrugged and backed away.

“Come on in,” he said. “I have nothing to hide.”

The room was large for a double occupancy, with a living space, terrace, two beds on opposite sides of the room, and a kitchen area. One bed was neatly made and piled with clothing and electronic equipment; the other one was a mess.

George sat on the messy bed. Hands beside him, he gripped the mattress. He appeared ready to lurch forward at any moment.

Ramirez stood by the terrace window and admired the view.

“This is some place,” he said. “Only a studio, but grand. Look at this view. *Wow*. You must love looking out at the river.”

“Let’s get this over with,” George said.

Avery pulled a chair and sat down facing George.

“We’re looking into the murder of Cindy Jenkins,” she said. “We thought you might be able to help us, seeing as you were one of the last people to see her alive.”

“A lot of people saw her alive.”

The words were meant to sound tough, but there was pain in his eyes.

“We were under the impression you liked her.”

“I *loved* her,” he said. “What does that matter? She’s gone now. No one can help me.”

Ramirez and Avery shared a look.

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