

The background image is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a narrow, dilapidated hallway. The walls are heavily textured with peeling plaster and exposed brickwork. A person, seen from behind, is running away from the viewer towards a bright light source at the end of the hallway, creating a sense of urgency and mystery. The lighting is low, with the primary light source being the bright opening at the far end, which casts long shadows and highlights the textures of the walls and floor.

BLAKE PIERCE

CAUSE  
TO  
FEAR

AN AVERY BLACK MYSTERY--BOOK #4

**Blake Pierce**  
**Cause to Fear**  
Серия «An Avery Black  
Mystery», книга 4

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*CAUSE TO FEAR:  
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**Аннотация**

When a body turns up floating beneath the frozen Charles River, the Boston Police summons its most brilliant and controversial homicide detective—Avery Black—to close the case. It doesn't take Avery long, however, to realize that this is no isolated murder: it is the work of a serial killer.

Other bodies begin to turn up, all of them sharing one thing in common: all are trapped in ice. Is it all a coincidence—or the signature of a particularly deranged killer?

As the media converges and Avery suffers pressure from her bosses, she struggles to crack the inexplicable case, too bizarre even for her brilliant mind. At the same time she tries to keep her own depression at bay, as her personal life spirals to a new low. And she does it all while trying to enter the mind of a psychotic and elusive killer.

What she will find will shock even her, and make her realize that nothing is what it seems—and that the worst darkness may sometimes be closest to us.

A psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **CAUSE TO FEAR** is book #4 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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# **Blake Pierce**

# **CAUSE TO FEAR**

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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 five books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising four books; 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.com](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) [www.blakepierceauthor.com](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.

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## **RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES**

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**ONCE LURED (Book #4)**

**ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)**

**ONCE PINED (Book #6)**

# PROLOGUE

At thirty-nine years of age, Denice Napier could not remember a winter quite as cold as this one. While she had never really minded the cold, it was the bitter bite to the wind that unsettled her. She felt a gust sweep across the banks of the Charles River as she sat in a canvas chair, watching her kids skate, and she sucked in her breath. It was mid-January, and the temperature had barely broken double digits for the past week and a half.

Her kids, more clever than she cared to admit, had known that such drastic temperatures meant that most sections of the Charles River would be frozen over completely. That was why she had gone into the garage and dug out the ice skates for the first time this winter. She laced them up, sharpened the blades, and packed three thermoses of hot cocoa – one for her and one for each of her kids.

She watched them now, skating from bank to bank with the sort of reckless but beautiful speed only kids are capable of. The section they had come to, a straight but narrow section just through a strip of forest a mile and a half away from their home, was a complete sheet of ice. There was about twenty feet from bank to bank and then a wider expanse of about thirty feet or so that reached further out into the frigid river. Denice had clumsily gone onto the ice and set down little orange cones – the ones



her kids sometimes used for soccer drills – to show them their borders.

She watched them now – Sam, nine years old, and Stacy, twelve – laughing together and actually enjoying each other’s company. This was not something that happened very often so Denice was willing to put up with the bitter cold.

There were a few other kids out, too. Denice knew a few of them but not well enough to strike up a conversation with their parents, who were also sitting on the bank. Most of the other kids on the ice were older, probably in eighth or ninth grade from what Denice could tell. There were three boys playing a very disorganized game of hockey and another little girl practicing a spin move.

Denice checked her watch. She’d give her kids ten more minutes and then go home. Maybe they’d sit in front of the fireplace and watch something on Netflix. Maybe even one of those superhero movies that Sam was starting to like.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a piercing scream. She looked out onto the ice and saw that Stacy had fallen down. She was screaming, her face looking down toward the ice.

Every mother-based instinct raced through Denice in that moment. *Broken leg, twisted ankle, concussion...*

She’d gone through just about every possible scenario by the time she raced down to the ice. She skidded and slipped as she made her way to Stacy. Sam had also skated over to her and was looking down at the ice, too. Only, Sam wasn’t screaming. He

looked frozen, actually.

“Stacy?” Denice asked, barely able to hear herself over Stacy’s screams. “Stacy, honey, what is it?”

“Mom?” Sam said. “What...what is it?”

Confused, Denice finally reached Stacy and dropped to her knees beside her. She looked to be unharmed. She stopped screaming once her mother was there with her but she was trembling now. She was also pointing to the ice and trying to open her mouth to say something.

“Stacy, what’s the matter?”

Then Denice saw the shape under the ice.

It was a woman. Her face was a pale shade of blue and her eyes were opened wide. She stared up through the ice in a frozen state of terror. Blonde hair snaked this way and that from her skull, frozen in a position of disarray.

The face that stared back up at her, all wide eyes and pale skin, would revisit her in her nightmares for months to come.

But for now, all Denice could do was scream.

# CHAPTER ONE

Avery could not remember the last time she'd shopped so recklessly. She wasn't sure how much money she had spent because she'd stopped paying attention after the second stop. Actually, she'd barely even looked at the receipts. Rose was with her and that, in and of itself, was priceless. She may feel differently about it when the bill came, but for now it was worth it.

With the evidence of her extravagance in little trendy shopping bags by her feet, Avery looked across the table to Rose. They were sitting in some trendy place in the Leather District of Boston, a place Rose had picked out called Caffè Nero. The coffee was outrageously priced but was the best Avery had tasted in quite a while.

Rose was on her phone, texting someone. Usually, this would anger Avery, but she was learning to let things go. If she and Rose were ever going to get their relationship right, there had to be some give and take. She had to remind herself that there were twenty-two years between them and that Rose was becoming a woman in a very different world than the one she had grown up in.

When Rose was done with her text, she set the phone down on the table and gave Avery an apologetic look.

"Sorry," she said.

“No need to be,” Avery replied. “Can I ask who it is?”

Rose seemed to think about this for a moment. Avery was aware that Rose was also working on the give and take aspect of their relationship. She still had not decided how much of her personal life she wanted to let her mother into.

“Marcus,” Rose said softly.

“Oh. I wasn’t aware he was still a thing.”

“He’s not. Not really. Well...I don’t know. Maybe he is.”

Avery smiled at this, remembering what it was like when men were both confusing and intriguing all at once. “Well, are you dating?”

“I guess you could call it that,” Rose said. She wasn’t offering much in the way of words but Avery could see the red hues creeping into her daughter’s cheeks.

“Does he treat you well?” Avery asked.

“Most of the time. We just want different things. He’s not a very goal-oriented guy. Sort of directionless.”

“Well, you know I don’t mind hearing about things like this,” Avery said. “I’m always willing to listen. Or talk. Or help you trash guys that are hurting you. With my work...you’re just about the only friend I have.” She cringed internally at how cheesy it sounded but it was too late to take it back now.

“I know that, Mom,” Rose said. Then, with a smirk, she added: “And I can’t tell you how sad that sounds.”

They shared a laugh at this but secretly, Avery was awed by how much Rose was like her in that moment. The instant any

conversation became too emotional or personal, Rose tended to shut it down with either silence or humor. In other words, the apple hadn't fallen too far from the tree.

In the midst of their laughter, a dainty little waitress came over, the same one who had taken their orders and delivered their coffee. "Refills?" she asked.

"None for me," Avery said.

"Same here," Rose said. She then stood up as the waitress took her leave. "I actually need to get going," she said. "I've got that meeting with the academic advisor in an hour."

This was yet another thing Avery was afraid to make a big deal of. She was excited that Rose had finally decided to go to college. At nineteen, she'd made the moves and had set up appointments with advisors at a Boston-based community college. As far as Avery was concerned, that meant that she was ready to start making something of her life but was also not quite ready to leave familiar things – potentially including a strained yet fixable relationship with her mother.

"Call me later to know how it goes," Avery said.

"I will. Thanks again, Mom. This was surprisingly fun. We'll have to do it again sometime soon."

Avery gave a nod as she watched her daughter leave. She took the last gulp of her coffee and stood, gathering up the four shopping bags by her chair. After bundling them up around her shoulder, she left the coffee shop and headed for her car.

When her phone rang, it was quite an ordeal to answer it while

carrying the shopping bags. She felt silly with the bags, actually. She had never been one of those women who liked to shop. But it had been a great mending exercise with Rose, and that was what was important.

After shifting all the bags around on her shoulder, she was finally able to reach the cell phone in her inner coat pocket.

“Avery Black,” she said.

“Black,” said the always-gruff and rapid voice of A1 Homicide Supervisor Dylan Connelly. “Where are you right now?”

“The Leather District,” she said. “What’s up?”

“I need you over at the Charles River, just outside of town over near Watertown, as fast as you can.”

She heard the tone in his voice, the urgency, and her heart skipped a beat.

“What is it?” she said, almost afraid to ask.

There came a long pause, followed by a heavy sigh.

“We found a body under the ice,” he said. “And you’re going to have to see this one to believe it.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Avery arrived at the scene exactly twenty-seven minutes later. Watertown, Massachusetts, roughly twenty miles outside of Boston's city limits, was just one of the numerous towns that shared the Charles River with Boston. The Watertown Dam sat upstream of the Watertown Bridge. The area round the dam was mostly rural, as was the crime scene she was currently parking in front of. She estimated that the dam was still a good fifteen miles away, as the city of Watertown was another four miles up the road.

When she walked down to the river, Avery ducked under a long strip of crime scene tape. The crime scene was quite large, the yellow tape making a huge rectangle from two trees along the bank to two steel poles that the police had jammed into the solid ice on the river. Connelly was standing on the bank speaking with two other officers. Out on the ice, a team of three people were hunkered down on the ice, looking in.

She passed Connelly and gave him a wave. He glanced at his watch, gave an impressed look, and waved her on.

"Forensics can fill you in," he said.

That was fine with her. While she was growing to like Connelly more and more with each case, he was still best taken in small quantities. Avery made her way out onto the ice, wondering if those few times on a rink during her pre-teen years might serve

her well. Apparently, though, those skills were long gone. She walked slowly, careful not to slip. She hated to feel vulnerable and not fully in control but the damned ice was just so slippery.

“It’s okay,” one of the Forensics members said, noticing her coming toward them. “Hatch fell on his ass three times getting out here.”

“Shut up,” said another member of the team, presumably Hatch.

Avery finally made it across to where the Forensics guys were huddled. They were hunched down, looking into a cleanly broken portion of ice. Beneath it, she saw the body of a nude woman. She looked to be in her early twenties. Pale and partially frozen skin aside, she looked quite striking. Gorgeous, actually.

Forensics had managed to hook the body beneath the arms with plastic poles. The end of each pole had a simple U-shaped bend to it, coated with what looked like some sort of cotton. To the right of the broken ice, a simple insulated blanket waited for the body.

“And she was found like this?” Avery asked.

“Yeah,” said the man she assumed was named Hatch. “By kids, no less. The mom called the local PD and an hour and fifteen minutes later, here we are.”

“You’re Avery Black, right?” the third member asked.

“I am.”

“You need to check things over before we take her out?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind.”



The three of them stepped back a bit. Hatch and the member who had called him out for busting his ass held on to the plastic poles. Avery inched closer; the toes of her shoes were less than six inches from the broken ice and open water.

The broken ice allowed her to see the woman from her brow all the way down to her knees. She looked almost like a wax figure. Avery knew the extreme temperatures might have something to do with that, but there was something else to her flawlessness. She was incredibly thin – maybe just a scrap over one hundred pounds. Her flushed face was turning a shade of blue but other than that, there were no blemishes – no scrapes, no cuts, no bruises or even pimples.

Avery also noticed that other than her soaked and partially frozen blonde hair, there was not a single hair on her body. Her legs were perfectly shaved, as was her pubic region. She looked like a life-sized doll.

With a final glance at the body, Avery stepped back. “I’m good,” she told the Forensics team.

They came forward and with a count to three, pulled the body slowly from the water. When they pulled her out, they angled her so that she came out mostly on the insulated blanket. Avery noted that there was also a stretcher beneath the blanket.

With the body fully out of the water, she noticed two other things that struck her as odd. First, the woman was not wearing a single piece of jewelry. She knelt down and saw that her ears were pierced but there were no earrings. She then turned

her attention to the second oddity: the woman's fingernails and toenails were neatly clipped – to the point of looking recently manicured.

It was odd, but this was what raised the most alarm bells in her mind. With the frigid flesh turning blue beneath those nails, there was something eerie about it. *It's almost like she's been polished*, she thought.

“We good here?” Hatch asked her.

She nodded.

As the three of them covered the body and then carefully trudged back toward the bank with the stretcher board, Avery remained by the section of broken ice. She peered down into the water, thinking. She reached into her pocket, looking for a small piece of trash, but all she could find was a hair tie that had snapped on her earlier in the day.

“Black?” Connelly called from the bank. “What are you doing?”

She peered back and saw him standing close to the ice but being very purposeful to not step on it.

“Working,” she hollered back. “Why don’t you skate on out here and help?”

He rolled his eyes at her and she turned back to the ice. She dropped the snapped hair tie into the water and watched it bob up and down for a moment. Then it slowly caught the sluggish current of the water beneath the ice. It was pushed away and under the ice to her left, further out toward Watertown.

*So she was dropped in somewhere else,* Avery thought, looking down the river in the direction of Boston. On the bank, Connelly and the officer he had been speaking to were heading up behind the Forensics team.

Avery remained on the ice, standing straight up now. She was getting very cold as she watched her breath vaporize on the air. But something about the cold temperature seemed to center her. It allowed her to think, to use the light creaking noises of the ice as a metronome of sorts as she put her thoughts together.

*Nude and not a blemish or bruise on her. So assault is ruled out. No jewelry, so it could have been a robbery. But most cases of a body after being robbed would show some signs of struggle... and this woman was spotless. And what about those nails and the absolute lack of hair anywhere other than her head?*

She slowly walked to the bank, looking down the frozen river to where it rounded a bend and kept on in the direction of Boston. It was weird to think of how beautiful the frozen Charles River looked from Boston University while less than twenty minutes away a body had been pulled from it.

She pulled up her coat collar around her neck as she walked back to the bank. She was just in time to see the back doors of the Forensics van close. Connelly was approaching her but he was looking beyond her and out to the frozen water.

“You get a good look at her?” Avery asked.

“Yeah. She looked like a damn toy or something. All pale and cold and...”

“And perfect,” Avery said. “Did you notice there was no hair on her? No bruises or bumps, either.”

“Or jewelry,” Connelly added. With a heavy sigh, he asked: “Dare I ask for your initial thoughts?”

She was much more willing to be unfiltered with Connelly now. She had been ever since he and O’Malley had offered her a promotion to sergeant two months ago. In return, they seemed more willing to accept her theories from the get-go rather than questioning the hell out of everything that came out of her mouth.

“Her fingernails were perfectly trimmed,” she said. “It’s like she had just come out of a salon before she was dumped in the river. Then there’s the lack of hair anywhere. One of those things is odd enough but together, it screams intentionality to me.”

“You think someone cleaned her up before they killed her?”

“Seems like it. It’s almost like the funeral parlor making the dead look as presentable as possible for the open casket. Whoever did this cleaned her. Shaved her and did her nails.”

“Any idea why?”

Avery shrugged. “I can only speculate right now. But I can tell you one thing that you probably aren’t going to like very much.”

“Ah hell,” he said, knowing what was coming.

“This guy took his time...not even in the killing, but in how the body would look when it was found. He was intentional. Patient. Based on similar cases, I can almost guarantee you she won’t be the only one.”

With another of his patented sighs, Connelly dug his phone

out of his pocket. “I’ll call a meeting at the A1,” he said. “I’ll let them know we have a potential serial killer.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Avery supposed that if she was going to take the position of sergeant, she needed to get over her hatred of the A1 conference room. She had nothing against the room per se. But she knew that a meeting held within it so soon after the discovery of a body meant that there would be cross-talking and arguing, most of which would be used to shoot down her theories.

*Maybe as sergeant, that will come to an end,* she thought as she walked into the room.

Connelly was at the head of the table, shoving papers around. She figured O'Malley would be in soon. He'd seemed a lot more present at any meeting she was a part of ever since they had offered her the sergeant position.

Connelly looked up at her through the growing crowd of other officers. "Things are moving quickly on this one," he said. "The body pulled from the river was ID'ed exactly five minutes ago. Patty Dearborne, twenty-two years of age. A Boston University student and Boston native. Right now, that's all we know. The parents will need to be informed once this meeting is over."

He slid over a folder that contained only two sheets of paper. One showed a picture taken from Patty Dearborne's Facebook profile. The other sheet showed three photos, all taken from the Charles River earlier in the day. Patty Dearborne's face was present in all of them, her purple-tinted eyelids closed.

In a morbid train of thought, Avery tried to see the young woman's face in the same way a killer might see it. Patty was gorgeous, even in death. She had a body that Avery herself would have seen as far too skinny but bar-wandering men would salivate over. She used this mentality, trying to gauge why a killer would choose such a victim if there were no sexual implications.

*Maybe he's after beautiful things. The question, of course, is if he is seeking these beautiful things in order to fawn over them or to destroy them. Does he appreciate beauty or does he want to obliterate it?*

She wasn't sure how long she had been thinking about this. All she knew was that she jumped a bit when Connelly called the meeting to order. There were a total of nine people in the conference room. She saw that Ramirez had snuck in. He was in a seat near Connelly, looking through the same type of folder Connelly had given her moments ago. He apparently felt her looking at him; he glanced up and smiled at her.

She returned the smile as Connelly started. She dropped her gaze right away, not wanting to be too obvious. While just about everyone in the precinct knew that she and Ramirez were an item now, they still liked to try to keep it under wraps.

"Everyone should have been briefed by now," Connelly said. "For those of you that have not, the woman has been identified as Patty Dearborne, a BU senior. She was found in the Charles River just outside of Watertown but she is a Boston native. As Detective Black pointed out in the briefing you all received, the

current of the river suggests that the body was dumped elsewhere. Forensics is guessing that her body was in the water for as long as twenty-four hours. Those two things add up to a probable dumping spot somewhere within Boston.”

“Sir,” Officer Finley spoke up. “Forgive me for asking, but why are we not even thinking about suicide? The briefing states there were no bruises and no signs of a struggle.”

“I ruled that out almost right away when I saw that the victim was nude,” Avery said. “While suicide would usually be something to consider, it’s highly unlikely that Patty Dearborne stripped naked before jumping into the Charles River.”

She almost hated to shoot Finley’s ideas down. She was watching him become a damn good officer week by week. He’d matured over the last year or so, morphing out of the frat-boy persona most people knew him by and into a hard-working officer.

“But no bruises,” another officer said. “That seems to be a smoking gun.”

“Or evidence that it was *not* suicide,” Avery argued. “If she jumped from any sort of height more than eight to ten feet, there would have been visible bruising on her body from the sheer impact.”

“Forensics agrees with this,” Connelly said. “They’re going to be sending a more finalized report soon, but they feel pretty certain about this.” He then looked to Avery and gestured to the table with a sweeping of his hand. “What else do you have,



Detective Black?”

She took a moment to discuss the things she had pointed out to Connelly – details that were in the briefing. She mentioned the trimmed and polished nails, the lack of hair, and the absence of jewelry. “Another thing to point out,” she added, “is that a killer that would go to these lengths to make his victims presentable suggests either a skewed admiration for the victim or some sort of regret.”

“Regret?” Ramirez asked.

“Yes. He dolled her up and made her as beautiful as possible because maybe he didn’t *mean* to kill her.”

“Right down to shaving her...nether regions?” Finley asked.

“Yes.”

“And tell them why you think we’re dealing with a serial here, Black,” Connelly said.

“Because even if *was* a mistake, the fact that the killer did her nails and shaved her denotes patience. And when you add that to the fact that this woman was quite pretty and free of blemishes, it makes me think he’s drawn to beauty.”

“He has a funny way of showing it,” someone else spoke up.

“Which leads me back to the line of thought that maybe he didn’t mean to kill her.”

“So you think it was like a date gone bad?” Finley asked.

“We can’t be sure yet,” she said. “But my first reaction is no. If he was this deliberate and careful with the way she looked before dumping the body, I think he likely put that same kind of care

into selecting her.”

“Selecting her for what, Black?” Connelly asked.

“I think that’s what we need to find out. Hopefully Forensics will have some answers to lead us down the right path.”

“So what do we do until then?” Finley asked.

“We bust our asses,” Avery said. “We dig as deep into Patty Dearborne’s life as we can, hoping to find some clue that will help us find this guy before he does it again.”

When the meeting ended, Avery headed across the conference room to have a word with Ramirez. Someone needed to inform the parents of Patty Dearborne and she felt the need to do it. Speaking to grief-stricken parents, while incredibly difficult and emotionally draining, was usually one of the best places to find a lead right off the bat. She wanted Ramirez with her, wanting to keep working on the balance between their personal and professional lives. It was still tricky, but they were slowly getting the hang of it.

Before she made it to him, though, O’Malley came into the room. He was speaking on the phone, clearly in a hurry. Whatever he was dealing with, it must have been pressing for him to have missed the meeting about the Patty Dearborne case. He stood by the door, waited until everyone except Avery, Ramirez, and Connelly were gone, and then closed the door. He ended his call with a quick and almost rude “*Yeah, later,*” and then took a deep breath.

“Sorry I missed the meeting,” he said. “Anything big come

up?”

“No,” Connelly said. “We’ve got the woman ID’ed and now need to tell her family. We’re working on the assumption that whoever did this will do it again.”

“Black, can you send me a quick report explaining the details?” O’Malley asked.

“Yes sir,” she said. He never asked her for small things like that. She wondered if it was another of his not-so-subtle tests. She’d noticed him being more lenient with her over the last few weeks, more willing to give her more responsibility without interference. She was sure it all had to do with them asking her to take sergeant.

“While both of you are here,” O’Malley said, looking at Avery and Ramirez, “I’d like to have a word. A few words, actually... and I don’t have a lot of time, so I’ll make it quick. First...I’m totally fine with the two of you seeing one another outside of work. I thought long and hard about breaking you up here at the A1 but damn it...you work too well together. So as long as you two can tolerate the in-jokes and speculations, you’re going to remain partners. That good?”

“Yes sir,” Ramirez said. Avery nodded in agreement.

“The next thing...Black. The whole sergeant thing...I’m going to need a decision soon. As in, within forty-eight hours. I’ve tried to be patient, letting you work things out. But it’s been over two months now. I think that’s fair.”

“It *is* fair,” she said. “I’ll let you know something by

tomorrow.”

Ramirez gave her a look of surprise. Truth be told, her response had surprised *her*, too. Deep down, though, she thought she knew what she wanted.

“Now, on this lady-in-the-river case,” O’Malley said. “It’s officially yours, Black. Take Ramirez with you, but let’s keep it professional.”

Avery was a bit embarrassed that she found herself blushing. *Ah God*, she thought. *First a shopping spree and now blushing over a boy. What the hell has happened to me?*

To keep things rolling and not get thrown off of her game, Avery turned things directly back to the case. “I’d like to be the one to notify the family.”

“We can delegate that to someone else,” Connelly suggested.

“I know. But as terrible as it sounds, parents receiving such terrible news are usually the best resources for information. Everything is raw and open.”

“My God, that’s pretty heartless,” Connelly said.

“But effective,” O’Malley said. “Good deal, Black. It’s four fifty right now. With any luck, you’ll catch them getting off of work. I’ll make sure someone texts you the address within the next ten minutes. Now get to it. Dismissed.”

Avery and Ramirez took their leave. Out in the hall, the nine-to-fivers were starting wrap up their day. But for Avery, the day was far from over. In fact, with the task of breaking the news of a young woman’s death to her parents on the horizon, Avery

thought it was going to turn out to be one hell of a long night.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The Dearbornes lived in a quaint little house in Somerville. Avery read over the information that had been texted and emailed to her while Ramirez drove. Patty Dearborne had been a great student, in her senior year at BU with intentions of becoming a counselor for a behavioral health firm. Her mother, Wendy, was a trauma nurse who rotated through two different area hospitals. Patty's father, Richard, was a business development manager for a large telecommunications company. They were a well-to-do family with not a single speck of dirt on their record.

And Avery was about to tell them that their daughter was dead. Not only dead, but that she had been dumped into a frigid river completely nude.

"So," Ramirez said as he wound through the rustic little streets of the Somerville neighborhoods. "Are you going to take the sergeant gig?"

"I don't know yet," she said.

"Any inkling?"

She pondered this for a moment and then shook her head. "I don't want to talk about that right now. It seems small in comparison to what we're about to do."

"Hey, you volunteered for this," he pointed out.

"I know," she said, still not certain why. Yes, her thoughts about getting a good lead were true, but she felt like there was

something else. Patty Dearborne had only been three years older than Rose. It was far too easy to see Rose's face on that frozen body. For some bizarre reason, it made Avery feel that she needed to break the news to the family. Maybe it was a maternal-based urge, but she felt that she owed it to the parents in some strange way.

"So let me ask you this," he said. "What makes you so sure this isn't just a one-time thing? Maybe an ex-boyfriend just lost his shit. Maybe this is a one and done."

She grinned briefly because she knew he wasn't arguing with her. Not really. She had noticed that he liked to get glimpses into how her mind worked. His rebuttal of her theories was simply a way to get her primed up.

"Because based on what we know about the body, this guy was careful and meticulous. An enraged ex-boyfriend would not be so careful about not leaving bruises. The finger- and toenails are the clincher for me. Someone took their time with them. I'm hoping the parents will be able to provide more insight into the sort of woman Patty was. If we know more about her, we'll know exactly how much of the primping was done by whoever dumped the body."

"Speaking of which," Ramirez said, pointing ahead. "Here we are. You ready for this?"

She took a deep, shaky breath. She loved her job but this was the one part she absolutely dreaded. "Yeah, let's go," she said.

Before Ramirez had time to say another word, Avery opened

the door and stepped out.

She braced herself.

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Avery knew that no two people responded to grief in the exact same way. That's why she was not all that surprised when, fifteen minutes later, Wendy Dearborne was nearly in a state of shock while Richard Dearborne was a loud and frantic mess. At one point, she feared he would become violent when he slapped at a vase on the kitchen table and sent it crashing to the floor.

The weight of the news hung heavy in the room. Avery and Ramirez had remained quiet, speaking only when asked a question. In the silence, Avery saw two pictures of Patty in the living room; one was on the mantel above the fireplace and another was a canvas hanging on the far living room wall. Avery's suspicion had been right. The girl had been absolutely stunning.

Wendy and Richard were both sitting on the couch in the living room now. Wendy had gotten slight control of herself, letting out the occasional gut-wrenching sob as she lay against Richard's shoulder.

With tears streaming down his face, Richard looked at Avery. "Can we see her? When can we see her?"

"Right now, Forensics is still trying to determine what might have happened to her. As you might imagine, the cold water and frigid temperatures make it harder to find clues or evidence. In



the meantime, there are a few questions I'd like to ask you that may help us find answers."

Both of them wore looks of confusion and absolute horror on their faces but it was clear that Wendy would be no help. She was stunned into silence, taking the occasional look around the living room as if checking to make sure she knew where she was.

"Of course, whatever questions you have," Richard said. Avery thought the man was tough deep inside – perhaps trying to figure out some answers on his own.

"I know it's going to seem like a strange question," Avery said. "But was Patty the sort of girl to get really intricate with grooming and fingernails? Things like that?"

Richard let out a whimper and shook his head. He was still crying but was at least able to form words between his hitches for breath. "Not at all. She was actually sort of a tomboy. On any given day, I bet you'd find dirt under her nails before you found them with nail polish. She did get dolled up from time to time but only on special occasions. She sometimes paid a lot of attention to her hair, but she's not – she *wasn't*– a girl's girl, you know?"

Correcting himself on *wasn't* seemed to break something within Richard Dearborne. Avery hid her own little cringe as her heart broke for him. It was enough to make her decide not to ask the next question she had planned – a question about the frequency in which Patty shaved her legs. Avery thought it was a safe bet that if she was a tomboy who cared little for her nails, she probably wasn't obsessive about shaving her legs. There was no

need to ask the question to a man who had just lost his daughter.

“Do you know of any enemies Patty had? Anyone she had a history of problems with?”

The question took a moment to sink in. When it finally did, the flicker of anger she had seen earlier returned to Richard Dearborne’s eyes. He got up from the couch but was held in place by his wife’s groping hand on his wrist.

“That motherfucker,” Richard spat. “Yes. Oh yes, I can think of someone and I bet you *anything*...oh God...”

“Mr. Dearborne?” Ramirez asked. He had slowly gotten to his feet, perhaps anticipating some sort of rage-filled lashing out from Richard.

“Allen Haggerty. He was a high school boyfriend that just wouldn’t let go when things eventually ended two years into college.”

“Did he cause any problems?” Ramirez asked.

“Yeah. So much so that Patty had to get a restraining order placed against him. He was waiting outside of her classes for her. It got so bad that Patty lived here last year because she didn’t feel safe at the dorms.”

“Did he ever get violent?” Avery asked.

“If he did, Patty never said anything. I know he tried to touch her – hugs and kisses and things like that. But she never said anything about hitting her.”

“The note...”

Wendy Dearborne’s voice was so light that it was like wind.

She would still not look at Avery or Ramirez. Her eyes were downcast, her mouth partially open.

“What note?” Avery asked.

“A note that Patty never showed us but we found in her pockets while doing laundry while she was living here,” Richard said. “The creep left a note pinned to her dorm room door. She never said so, but we think it was the deciding factor in her moving back here. I don’t remember it word for word but it talked about how he thought about killing himself because he could not have her but how it sometimes made him angry. Some dark stuff about how if he couldn’t have her, no one could.”

“Do you still have the note?” Avery asked.

“No. When we confronted Patty about it, she threw it away.”

“How long did she stay here?” Avery asked.

“Until last summer,” Richard answered. “She said she was tired of living in fear. We made the decision that if anything happened with Allen again, we’d directly get the police involved. And now...now *this*...”

A heavy silence blanketed the room, until finally he looked up at them. Avery could feel the father’s grief and rage in that stare.

“I know it’s him,” he said.

## CHAPTER FIVE

As Avery and Ramirez staked out the block surrounding Allen Haggerty's address, she received Haggerty's file via email. She was surprised to find little on it. He had three speeding tickets since the age of seventeen and had been briefly arrested at a mostly non-violent protest in New York City four years ago, but nothing serious.

*Maybe he just went a little nuts when Patty tried leaving him,* she thought. She knew it happened from time to time. It was, in fact, one of the most prominent excuses given by violent husbands who beat their wives. It came down to jealousy, a lack of control, and feeling vulnerable.

No one was home, so within an hour and a half of informing the Dearbornes that their daughter was dead, there was an APB out for him. While canvassing the neighborhood, Ramirez once again showed Avery just how in tune he was with her. "This whole thing is making you think of Rose, isn't it?" he asked.

"It is," she admitted. "How did you figure that out?"

He smiled. "Because I know your face very well. I know when you're pissed, I know when you're embarrassed, uneasy, and happy. I also noticed how you quickly looked away from the pictures of Patty in the Dearborne house. Patty wasn't much older than Rose. I get it. Is that why you insisted on breaking the news to her parents?"

“Yes. Good catch.”

“It happens from time to time,” he said.

It wasn't until 10:08 that Avery's phone rang. Connelly was on the line, sounding both tired and excited. “We've located Allen Haggerty coming out of a bar in the Leather District,” he said. “We've got two of our guys holding him for you. How soon can you be there?”

*The Leather District, she thought. That's where Rose and I were earlier today, thinking how good our lives were and how timidly we were repairing our relationship. And now there's a potential killer in that same location. It feels...weird. Like coming full circle in some strange way.*

“Black?”

“Ten minutes,” she answered. “What's the bar?”

She took down the information and just like that, Ramirez drove them into the very same area of the city where she had, less than twelve hours ago, been enjoying time with her daughter.

Knowing that was something that Wendy Dearborne would never again get to do sat heavy on her heart. It also made her a little angry.

Quite frankly, she couldn't wait to grill this little sonofabitch.

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The two officers who had located Allen Haggerty seemed happy to hand him off. One of the officers was a guy Avery

had gotten to know fairly well – an older man who would likely be retiring within a few years. His name was Andy Liu and he always seemed to have a smile on his face. But not now. Now, he seemed irritated.

The four of them met outside of Andy Liu's patrol car. In the back seat, Allen Haggerty peered out at them, confused and clearly pissed off. A few people passing by to bar-hop on a Friday night tried to see what was going on without being too obvious.

"He give you any problems?" Ramirez asked.

"Not really," Andy's partner said. "He's just a little drunk. We were almost ready to take him to the precinct and give him a nice interrogation room, but O'Malley said he wanted you to talk to him before we made that sort of decision."

"Does he know why you want to speak with him?" Avery asked.

"We told him about Patty Dearborne's death," Andy said. "That's when he really lost his mind. I tried to keep it civil in the bar but in the end, I had to cuff him."

"That's fine," Avery said. She looked into the back of the patrol car and frowned. "Do you mind if we borrow your car for a second?"

"Help yourself," Andy said.

Avery took the driver's side while Ramirez slid into the passenger seat. They angled themselves to the side to peer easily into the back at Allen.

"So how did it happen?" Allen asked. "How did she die?"

“That’s still not clear,” Avery said, not seeing any reason to be vague with him. She’d learned a long time ago that honesty was always the best approach if you wanted to get a proper read on a potential suspect. “Her body was discovered in a frozen river, under the ice. We don’t have sufficient information to know if that was what killed her or if she was killed before being thrown into the river.”

*That might have been a little harsh,* Avery thought as she watched a soft shock fill Allen’s face. Still, seeing that genuine expression on his face was all she needed to have a good feeling that Allen Haggerty had nothing to do with Patty’s death.

“When was the last time you saw her?” Avery asked.

It was clear that he was having to struggle to think about it. Avery was pretty sure that by the time the night was over, Allen would shed more than a few years over his now-deceased lost love.

“A little over a year ago, I guess,” he finally answered. “And that was purely coincidental. I ran into her as she was coming out of a grocery store. We looked at each other for like two seconds and then she hurried off. And I don’t blame her. I was an asshole to her. I got pretty obsessed.”

“And there has been no contact since then?” Avery asked.

“None. I faced the facts. She was done with me. And being obsessed with someone really isn’t the way to win them over, you know?”

“Do you know of anyone in her life that might be capable of

doing something like this to her?” Ramirez asked.

Again, there was a struggle behind Allen’s eyes as he tried to piece it all together. As he thought about this, Avery’s phone rang. She glanced at the display and saw that it was O’Malley.

“Yeah?” she asked, answering quickly.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“Speaking with the ex-boyfriend.”

“Any chance he might be the one we’re looking for?”

“Highly doubtful,” she said, continuing to watch the sorrow overtake Allen’s face in the back seat.

“Good. I need you back at the station on the double.”

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“That depends on how you look at it,” O’Malley replied. “We just got a letter from the killer.”



## CHAPTER SIX

Even before Avery and Ramirez were able to get into the precinct, Avery could tell that this situation had gotten out of hand. She had to carefully maneuver the car through the A1 parking lot to not hit reporters or clip news vans. The place was an absolute circus and they had not even gotten inside yet.

“This looks bad,” Ramirez said.

“It does,” she said. “How in the hell did the press find out about this letter if it came directly to the precinct?”

Ramirez could only shrug as they got out of the car and hurried inside. A few reporters got in the way, one of whom practically stepped out in front of Avery. She nearly collided with him but sidestepped him just in time. She heard him call her a bitch under his breath but that was the least of her concerns.

They fought their way to the door, with reporters clamoring for comment and flashbulbs going off. Avery felt her blood boiling and would have given anything in that moment to punch one of those nosy ass reporters directly in the nose.

When they finally made it into the precinct with the doors closed and locked securely behind them, she saw that the inside wasn't much better. She'd seen the A1 in a state of urgency and disarray before, but this was something new. *Maybe there's a leak in the A1*, Avery thought as she walked quickly toward Connelly's office. Before she reached it, though, she saw him storming down

the hallway. O'Malley and Finley were marching behind him.

"Conference room," Connelly barked.

Avery nodded, taking a right a few feet further down the hall. She noticed that no one else was milling around the conference room door, meaning that this meeting was going to be small. And those types of meetings were typically not pleasant. She and Ramirez followed Connelly into the room. The moment O'Malley and Finley were also inside, Connelly shut the door and locked it.

He threw a sheet of paper down onto the conference room table. It was covered in a clear plastic sheet, causing it to slide almost perfectly in Avery's direction. She picked it up carefully and looked at it.

"Just read it," Connelly said. He was frustrated and looked a little pale. His hair was in disarray and there was a wild look in his eyes.

Avery did as instructed. Without removing the single sheet of paper, she read the letter. With each word she read, the room seemed to grow colder.

*Ice is beautiful, but it kills. Think of the gorgeous sparkle of a thin layer of frost on your windshield on a late fall morning. That same pretty ice is killing plant life.*

*It's efficient in its beauty. And the flower comes back...always comes back. Rebirth.*

*The cold is erotic, but it maims. Think of being extremely cold coming out of a winter storm and then curling up naked with a*

*lover under the sheets.*

*Are you chilled yet? Can you feel the iciness of being outsmarted?*

*There will be more. More cold bodies, floating into the afterlife. I dare you to try to stop me.*

*You'll succumb to the cold before you find me. And while you're freezing, wondering what happened just like the flowers burdened with frost, I'll be long gone.*

"When did this come in?" Avery asked, setting the letter back on the desk for Ramirez to read.

"Sometime today," Connelly said. "The envelope itself wasn't opened until about an hour ago."

"How in the hell did the press know already?" Ramirez asked.

"Because every local news network also received a copy of it."

"Holy shit," Ramirez said.

"Do we know when the media got their copies?" Avery asked.

"It was sent via email a little over an hour ago. We assume it's so it would get there in time to make the eleven o'clock news."

"Where was it emailed from?" Avery asked.

"Oh, this is the screwed up part...well, *one* screwed up part," O'Malley said. "The email address is registered to a woman named Mildred Spencer. She's a seventy-two-year-old widow that only has the email address to keep in touch with her grandkids. We've got someone talking to her right now, but all signs point to the account being hacked."

"Can we trace the hack?" Avery asked.

“No one at the A1 has the capabilities. We’ve called the State Police to try to crack it.”

Ramirez was done with the letter, sliding it back to the center of the table. Avery slid it back over to her and eyed it again. She did not read it again, but just studied it: the paper, the handwriting, the odd placement of sentences on the paper.

“Any initial thoughts, Black?” Connelly asked.

“A few. First, where’s the envelope it came in?”

“Back at my desk. Finley, run fetch it, would you?”

Finley did as he had been asked while Avery continued to pore over the letter. The handwriting was pristine but also sort of childlike. It looked like someone had gone to great lengths to perfect it. There were also a few key words that jumped out to her as being quite odd.

“What else?” Connelly asked.

“Well, a few things right off the bat. The fact that he sent us a letter makes it clear that he wants us to know it’s him – without knowing his identity. So while it might not be a game to him per se, it’s something he wants credit for. He also *enjoys* being hunted down. He *wants* us to go after him.”

“Are there any clues in there?” O’Malley asked. “I’ve looked it over at least a dozen times and I’m getting nothing.”

“Well, the wording is weird in some places. The mention of a windshield in a letter where the only other concrete thing he references are flowers and bed covers seems strange. I think it’s also worth noting that he used the words *erotic* and *lover*. Pair

that with the fact that the victim we found today was pretty much gorgeous and there's got to be something there. The mention of *afterlife* and *rebirth* is unsettling, too. But we could go a million different ways with that until we know more."

"Anything else?" Ramirez asked with his usual not-so-concealed smile. He loved to see her on a roll. She tried to push this to the back of her mind as she went on.

"The way he breaks his lines up...it's almost like fragmented stanzas of poetry. Most every other letter I've ever seen in old case studies where the killer contacted the police or media was usually in blocks of text."

"How's that a clue?" Connelly asked.

"It might not be," Avery said. "I'm just free-styling here."

A knock came at the door. Connelly opened it and Finley stepped back in. He closed the door behind him, setting the lock. He then carefully placed the envelope on the table. There was nothing remarkable about it. The address to the station had been written in the same carefully practiced script that was on the letter. There was no return address and a Forever stamp in the left corner. The postmark was high on the envelope and mostly to the left, its edges touching the stamp.

"It came from zip code 02199," O'Malley said. "But that means nothing. The killer could have gone miles outside of his area to mail it."

"That's true," Avery said. "And this guy seems too smart and determined to lead us right to him via a zip code. He'd have

thought about that. The zip code is a dead end, I can guarantee it.”

“So then what does that leave us to go on?” Finley asked.

“Well,” Avery said, “this guy seems to be preoccupied with the cold, with ice in particular. And not just because that’s where we found the body. It’s all over the letter. He seems to be fixated on it. So I wonder...can we run a search for anything dealing with ice or the cold? Ice skating rinks, meat lockers, labs, anything.”

“You’re certain the location isn’t purposeful?” Connelly asked. “If he wants to be known, maybe the zip code was like a calling card.”

“No, I’m not certain. Not at all. But if we can find a business or some other organization that deals in ice or just the cold inside of that zip code, I’d maybe start there.”

“Okay,” Finley said. “So do we need to check security tapes around the locations of post offices or drop boxes?”

“God no,” Connelly said. “It’ll take forever and there’s no way we’d know when this particular letter was sent.”

“We need a list of those businesses and organizations,” Avery said. “That’s going to be the best place to start. Can anyone think of any right off the top of their heads?”

After several moments of silence, Connelly let out a sigh. “I don’t know right off the top of my head,” he said. “But I can have you a list within half an hour. Finley, can you get that request rolling?”

“On it,” Finley said.

When he was out of the room again, Avery raised an eyebrow in Connelly's direction. "Is Finley an errand boy now?"

"Not at all. You're not the only one up for a promotion. I'm trying to get him more involved in every aspect of high-profile cases. And as you know, he thinks you walk on water so I'm giving him a chance on this one."

"And why are we locking ourselves in the conference room?" she asked.

"Because the press is on this. I don't want to take any chances with bugged rooms or tapped phone lines."

"Seems paranoid," Ramirez said.

"Seems *smart*," Connelly said with a bit of venom.

Wanting to prevent a pissing match between the two, Avery pulled the letter closer to her. "You mind if I eyeball this letter some more while we wait on results?"

"Please do. I'd much rather have someone on the A1 figure it out before the media blasts it all over TV and some nerdy kid in a basement figures it out."

"We need to get Forensics on this. A handwriting analysis should be done. The envelope needs to be looked over for any trace evidence: fingerprints, dust filaments, anything."

"They've been notified and the letter is going to them right away the moment you're done with it."

"It's got to be done quickly," she said. "I know you were just making a joke about some kid in his basement figuring it out, but it's a legitimate concern. And when this thing hits social media,

there's no telling what sorts of eyes and minds might be analyzing it."

As she started to take a closer look at the letter, Finley came back in the room. "That was fast," O'Malley said.

"Well, it just so happens that one of the women on dispatch has a father that works near the Prudential Center. And that's within the 02199 zip code, by the way. Maybe just a coincidence, but you never know. Anyway, her husband works at a tech lab over that way. She says they do these crazy experiments with quantum mechanics and things like that. Some sort of arm of the tech school at Boston University."

"Quantum mechanics?" O'Malley asked. "That's doesn't fit with our guy, does it?"

"It depends on the experiments," Avery said, instantly interested. "I don't know much about the field, but I do know that there are areas in quantum mechanics that deal with extreme temperatures. Something to do with finding the durability and central origin points of different kinds of matter."

"How the hell do you know all of this?" Connelly asked.

She shrugged. "I watched a lot of Discovery Channel in college. Some of it stuck, I guess."

"Well, it's worth a shot," Connelly said. "Let's get some information on the lab and get out there to speak to the brass."

"I can get that done," Avery said.

"In the meantime," Connelly said, looking at his watch, "the nightly news goes live in about three minutes. Let's tune in and



see how badly the media is going to fuck this case for us.”

He stormed out of the conference room with O'Malley on his heels. Finley gave Avery an apologetic look and then followed out after them. Ramirez looked at the letter over Avery's shoulder with a shake of the head.

“You think this guy is deranged or just wants us to *think* he's nuts?” he asked her.

“I'm not sure yet,” she said, rereading the cryptic letter. “But I do know that this lab is the perfect place to start.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

Esben Technologies was disguised among other normal-looking buildings about a mile and a half away from the Prudential Center, the block essentially a row of featureless gray buildings. Esben Technologies occupied the center building and looked exactly like the surrounding buildings – it hardly seemed like a lab.

As Avery stepped inside with Ramirez, she noticed the front lobby consisted of little more than a gorgeous wooden floor, highlighted by morning sun that poured in through a skylight overhead. A huge desk sat along the far wall. On one end, a woman was typing into a computer. On the other end, another woman was writing something down on a form of some kind. When Avery and Ramirez entered, this woman looked up and gave them a perfunctory smile.

“I’m Detective Avery Black and this is Detective Ramirez,” Avery said as she approached the woman. “We’d like to have a word with whoever is in charge here.”

“Well, the supervisor of the whole outfit lives in Colorado, but the man that sort of runs the ship here in the building should be in his office.”

“He’ll do just fine,” Avery said.

“One moment,” the receptionist said, getting to her feet and walking through a large oak door at the far side of the room.

When she was gone, Ramirez stepped close to Avery, keeping his voice low from the other woman who remained at the desk behind her laptop.

“Did you even know this place was out here before yesterday?” he asked.

“No clue. But I guess the low profile makes sense; technology centers that are tied to colleges but aren’t actually on campus generally try to keep a low profile.”

“More Discovery Channel?” he asked

“No. Good old research.”

A little less than a minute passed before the woman returned. When she did, there was a man with her. He was dressed in a button-down shirt and khakis. A long white coat that resembled the sort doctors often wore partially covered it all. He wore an expression of worry and concern that seemed to be magnified by the glasses he wore.

“Hi there,” he said, stepping toward Avery and Ramirez. He extended his hand for a shake and said, “I’m Hal Bryson. What can I do to help you?”

“You’re the supervisor here?” Avery asked.

“More or less. There are only four of us that work here. We sort of rotate in and out but yes, I oversee the experiments and data.”

“And what sort of work is done here?” Avery asked.

“Quite a lot,” Bryson said. “At the risk of seeming demanding, if you could perhaps let me know why you’ve come here, I can

probably be a bit more exact.”

Avery kept her voice low, not wanting the women at the desk to hear her. And since it was clear that Bryson had no intention of inviting them back beyond the door to the lobby, she figured they'd have to just have the conversation right then and there.

“We’re dealing with a case where a suspect seems to have an interest in ice and cold temperatures,” she said. “He sent a taunting letter to the precinct yesterday. We’re taking a chance to see if there might be some sort of research that goes on here that could be related. It’s a very strange case so we’re starting with the only clue we really have – the cold.”

“I see,” Bryson said. “Well, there are indeed a few experiments that take place here that involve extremely cold temperatures. I could take you back into the lab to show you but I’d have to insist that you are fully sanitized and put on the appropriate covering.”

“I appreciate that,” Avery said. “And maybe we will take you up on it later. Hopefully, we won’t have to. Could you just give us the abridged version of some of these tests?”

“Of course,” Bryson said. He seemed quite pleased to be able to help, taking on the manner of an expressive teacher as he started to explain things. “The bulk of tests and work we do here that involve frigid temperatures involves getting beyond what is known as the quantum back action limit. That limit is a temperature just barely above absolute zero – roughly ten thousand times colder than the temperatures you’d encounter in the vacuum of space.”

“And what’s the purpose of such work?” Avery asked.

“To aid in the research and development of hypersensitive sensors for more advanced work. It’s also a great avenue to understanding the structure of certain elements and how they respond to such extreme temperatures.”

“And you’re able to reach those temperatures here in this building?” Ramirez asked.

“No, not in our labs. We’re working as sort of an outreach for the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Boulder. We can get relatively close here, though.”

“And you say there are only four of you,” Avery said. “Has it always been that way?”

“Well, there were five of us until about a year ago. One of my colleagues had to step down. He was starting to have headaches and other health issues. He really just wasn’t well.”

“Did he step down of his own accord?” Avery asked.

“He did.”

“And could we have his name, please?”

A little concerned now, Bryson said: “His name was James Nguyen. But please forgive me for saying so...I very seriously doubt he’s the man you’re after. He was always very kind, polite...a quiet man. Sort of a genius, too.”

“I appreciate your candidness,” Avery said, “but we have to follow up with whatever avenues are presented to us. Would you happen to know how we can get in touch with him?”

“Yes, I can get that information for you.”

“When did you last speak with Mr. Nguyen?”

“It’s been at least...oh, I don’t know...eight months ago I’d say. Just a call to see how he was doing.”

“And how *was* he doing?”

“Fine, as far as I know. He’s working as an editor and researcher for a scientific journal.”

“Thanks for your time, Mr. Bryson. If you could get Mr. Nguyen’s contact information, that would be helpful.”

“Sure,” he said, looking rather sad. “One moment.”

Bryson walked over to the receptionist behind the laptop and spoke quietly to her. She nodded and started typing something new. While they waited, Ramirez once again stepped in close to Avery. It was an odd feeling; to remain professional when he was standing so close was difficult.

“Quantum mechanics?” he said. “Vacuums in space? I think this one might be out of my league.”

She smiled at him, finding it hard to not playfully kiss him. She did her best to stay focused as Bryson started back toward them with a printed slip of paper in his hand.

“It’s above my head, too,” she whispered to Ramirez, quickly flashing another smile at him. “But I sure don’t mind swimming for the surface.”

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Some days, Avery was rather amazed at just how fluid and

smooth things seemed to go. Bryson had given them the phone number, email address, and physical address for James Nguyen. Avery had placed a call to Nguyen and not only had he answered, but he had invited them to his home. He had seemed rather pleased to do so, in fact.

So when she and Ramirez walked to his front door forty minutes later, Avery couldn't help but get the feeling that they might be wasting their time. Nguyen lived in a gorgeous two-story house in Beacon Hill. Apparently, his career in science had paid dividends. Sometimes, Avery found herself in awe of people with mathematical and scientific minds. She loved to read texts by them or just listen to them speak (one of the reasons she had once been so drawn to things like the Discovery Channel and the *Scientific American* magazines she sometimes glanced through in the college library).

On the porch, Ramirez knocked on the door. It took no time for Nguyen to answer it. He appeared to be in his late fifties or so. He was dressed in a Celtics T-shirt and a pair of gym shorts. He looked casual, calm, and almost happy.

As they'd already introduced themselves on the phone, Nguyen invited them in. They entered an elaborate foyer that led into a large living area. It appeared that Nguyen had prepared for them; he had set out bagels and cups of coffee on what looked like a very expensive coffee table.

"Please, have a seat," Nguyen said.

Avery and Ramirez took a seat on the couch facing the coffee

table while Nguyen sat down opposite them in an armchair.

“Help yourself,” Nguyen said, gesturing to the coffee and bagels. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Well, as I said on the phone,” Avery said, “we spoke with Hal Bryson and he told us that you had to step down from your work with Esben Technologies. Could you tell us a bit about that?”

“Yes. Unfortunately, I was putting too much of my time and energy into my work. I started to get double vision and cluster headaches. I was working up to eighty-six hours a week for a stretch of about seven or eight months at one time. I just became obsessed with my work.”

“With what aspect of the work, exactly?” Avery asked.

“Looking back, I honestly couldn’t tell you,” he said. “It was just knowing that we were so close to creating temperatures in the lab that could mimic what someone might feel in space. To find ways to manipulate elements with temperatures...there’s something sort of godlike about it. It can get addicting. I simply didn’t realize this until it was too late.”

*His obsession with his work certainly fits the description of whoever we’re working for,* Avery thought. Still, from just having spoken to Nguyen for a grand total of two minutes, she was pretty sure Bryson had been right. There was no way Nguyen was behind it.

“What exactly were you working on when you stepped down?” Avery asked.

“It’s quite complicated,” he said. “And since then, I’ve moved



on from it. But essentially, I was working to get rid of the excess heat that is caused when atoms lose their momentum during the cooling process. I was tinkering with quantum units of vibration and photons. Now, as I understand it, it's been perfected by our folks in Boulder. But at the time, I was working myself *crazy!*"

"Outside of the work you're doing for the journal and things with the college, are you still doing any of the work?" she asked.

"I dabble here and there," he said. "But it's just things here at home. I have my own little private lab in a rental space a few blocks away. But it's nothing serious. Would you like to see it?"

Avery could tell that they weren't being baited or given false enthusiasm. Nguyen was clearly very passionate about the work he used to do. And the more he talked about what he had once done, the deeper they dug themselves into a world of quantum mechanics – something that was a world away from a crazed killer dumping a body in a freezing river.

Avery and Ramirez shared a look, which Avery ended with a nod. "Well, Mr. Nguyen," she said, "we truly appreciate your time. Let me leave you with one question, though: during the time you spent working in the lab, did you ever come cross anyone – coworkers, students, anyone – that struck you as eccentric or a little off?"

Nguyen took a few moments to think this over but then shook his head. "None that I can think of. Then again, us scientists are all a bit eccentric when you get right down to it. But if anyone pops into my head, I'll let you know."

“Thank you.”

“And if you change your mind and think you’d like to see my lab, just let me know.”

*Passionate about his work and lonely, Avery thought. Damn... that was me up until a few months ago.*

She could relate. And because of that, she gladly accepted Nguyen’s business card when he offered it to her at the door. He closed the door as Avery and Ramirez made their way down the porch stairs and back to their car.

“Did you understand a single word that guy said?” Ramirez asked.

“Very little,” she said.

But the truth was that he had said *one* thing that still clung to her mind. It did not make her think Nguyen was worth further investigation, but it did give her a new insight into how to think about their killer.

*To find ways to manipulate elements with temperatures,* Nguyen had said. *There’s something sort of godlike about it.*

*Maybe our killer is acting out some godlike fantasy,* she thought. *And if he thinks he’s godlike, he could be more dangerous than we think.*

# CHAPTER EIGHT

The hamster looked like a furry block of ice when he took it out of the freezer. It *felt* like a block of ice, too. He couldn't help but giggle at the clink sound it made when he placed it on the cookie sheet. Its legs were sticking up in the air – a stark contrast to the way they had been pedaling back and forth in panic when he had first placed it in the freezer.

That had been three days ago. Since then, the police had discovered the girl's body in the river. He had been surprised at how far the body had made it. All the way to Watertown. And the girl's name had been Patty Dearborne. Sounded pretentious. But damn, that girl had been beautiful.

He thought idly of Patty Dearborne, the girl he had taken from the outskirts of the BU campus as he ran his finger along the hamster's frigid belly. He'd been so nervous, but it had been quite easy. Of course, he hadn't meant to kill the girl. Things had just gotten out of hand. But then...then it had all sort of unlocked for him.

Beauty could be taken, but not in any mortal sort of way. Even when Patty Dearborne had been dead, she'd still been beautiful. Once he had gotten Patty naked, he'd found the girl to be damn near flawless. There had been one mole on her lower back and a small scar along the upper part of her ankle. But other than that, she had been spotless.

He had dumped Patty in the river and when she'd hit the frigid water, she had been dead. He'd watched the news with great anticipation, wondering if they would be able to bring her back... wondering if the ice that had held her for those two days would preserve her in some way.

Of course, it had not.

*I was sloppy*, he thought, looking to the hamster. *It'll take some time, but I'll get it figured out.*

He was hoping the hamster might be part of it. With his eyes still on its little frozen body, he retrieved the two heating pads from the kitchen counter. They were the sort of warming pads used in athletics to loosen muscles and promote relaxation for strained parts of the body. He placed one of the pads beneath the body and the other over its stiff little legs and frigid underside.

He was sure it would take some waiting. He had plenty of time...he was in no real hurry. He was trying to cheat death and he knew death was not going anywhere.

With this thought in his head, he filled his apartment with a witch-like cackle. Giving the hamster one final look, he walked into his bedroom. It was quite tidy, as was the adjoining bathroom. He went into the bathroom and washed his hands with the efficiency of a surgeon. He then looked into the mirror and stared at his face – a face he sometimes thought of as a monster.

There was irreparable damage on the left side of his face. It started just below his eye and reached down to his bottom lip. While most of the skin and tissue had been salvaged in his youth,

there was permanent scarring and discoloring on that side of his face. His mouth always seemed to be frozen in a permanent scowl as well.

At thirty-nine years of age, he had stopped caring about just how bad it looked. It was the hand he had been dealt. A shitty mother had resulted in a disfigured mess. But that was okay... he was working on fixing it. He looked to the mangled reflection in the mirror and smiled. It could take years to figure it out, but that was okay.

“Hamsters are only five bucks apiece,” he said to the empty bathroom. “And those pretty college coeds are a dime a dozen.”

He had done some reading, mainly in the forums of practicing nurses and med students. He figured if the experiment with the hamster was going to work, the heating pads needed to be on it for about forty minutes. It would be a slow thaw, one that would not too badly disrupt or shock the frozen heart.

He spent that forty minutes watching the news. He caught a few quick blips about Patty Dearborne. He learned that Patty was attending BU with aspirations of becoming a counselor. She'd had a boyfriend and currently had loving parents mourning her. He saw the parents on TV, hugging and crying together while speaking to the media.

He cut the TV off and walked into the kitchen. The smell of the thawing hamster was starting to fill the room...a smell he had not been expecting. He ran to the little body and threw the heating pads off of it.

The fur was singed and the previously frozen belly was slightly charred. He swiped the tiny furry body away. When it plopped onto the kitchen floor with little trails of smoke wafting from its hide, he screamed.

He stormed around the apartment for a while, furious. As was usually the case, his anger and absolute rage were driven by memories of an oven burner...blazing in his memories of childhood with the smell of burned flesh.

His screams downgraded to pouting and sobbing within five minutes. Then, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, he went into the kitchen and picked up the hamster. He tossed it into the garbage as if it were just a piece of trash and washed his hands at the kitchen sink.

He was humming by the time he was done. When he took his keys from the hook by the door, he habitually ran his free hand along the scarring along the left side of his face. He closed the door, locked up, and went down to the street. There, in the midst of an absolutely beautiful winter morning, he got into his red van and started down the road.

Almost casually, he glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. That permanent scowl was still there, but he did not let that deter him.

He had work to do.

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Sophie Lentz was done with this frat shit. For that matter, she was just about done with this college shit, too.

Vain or not, she knew how she looked. There were girls who were prettier than her, sure. But she had the Latin thing going for her, the dark eyes and raven black hair. She could also turn the accent on and off when she needed to. She'd been born in America, raised in Arizona, but according to her mother, the Latin had never left her. The Latin had never left her parents, either...not even when they had moved to New York the week after Sophie had been accepted into Emerson.

It was most apparent in her looks rather than her attitude and personality, though. And man, had that worked for her in Arizona. Honestly, it had worked for her in college, too. But only for her freshman year. She'd experimented then but not as badly as her mother was probably thinking. And apparently, word had gotten out: Sophie Lentz didn't take much prodding to get into bed and when she did land in your bed, buckle up because she was a firecracker.

She supposed there were worse reputations to have. But it had blown up in her face tonight. Some guy – she thought his name was Kevin – had started kissing her and she had let him. But when they were alone and he refused to take no for an answer...

Sophie's right hand still hurt. There was also still a bit of blood

on her knuckle. She wiped it away on her tight jeans, recalling the sound of the asshole's nose crunching against her fist. She was furious but, deep down, wondered if she sort of deserved it. She did not believe in karma but maybe the part of the vixen she had played last semester was catching up to her. Maybe she was reaping what she had sown.

She walked down the streets that cut through Emerson College, heading back to her apartment. Her goodie-goodie roommate would no doubt be studying for some test tomorrow, so at least she wouldn't be alone.

She was three blocks away from her apartment when she started to feel a strange sort of sensation. She looked behind her, sure that she was being followed, but there was no one. She could see the shapes of people in a little coffee bar a few feet behind her, but that was it. She had a fleeting irritated thought about what kind of morons drank coffee at 11:30 at night before she started on, still fuming over Kevin or whatever the guy's name had been.

Up ahead at a stoplight, someone was blaring some terrible hip-hop. The car's back bumper was rattling and the bass sounded wretched. *You're really being a bitch tonight, aren't you, slugger?* she said to herself.

She looked to her slightly swollen right hand and grinned. "Yes. Yes, I am."

By the time she reached the intersection where the booming car had been, the light had changed and the car raced off. She



turned right at the intersection and her apartment building came into view. Again, though, she felt that creeping sensation. She turned to look behind her and again, nothing was there. A bit further down the street a couple was walking hand in hand. There were several cars parked along the street and a single red van driving down toward the stoplight she had just passed.

Maybe she was just being paranoid because some loser had basically tried to rape her. That plus the adrenaline that was flowing through her was an unhealthy combination. She just needed to get home, wash up, and get to bed. This partying crap had to stop.

She neared her apartment, really hoping her roommate wasn't home. She'd be asking tons of questions about why she was home early. She did it because she was nosy and didn't have a life of her own...not because she actually cared.

She made her way up the steps to the building. When she opened the door and stepped inside, she looked back down the street, feeling that sensation of being watched once again. The streets were empty, though; the only thing she saw was a couple making out furiously against the side of an apartment building three doors down. She also saw that same red van. It was parked at the stoplight, just sort of idling there. Sophie wondered if there was some horny dude driving it, watching the make-out session against the apartment building.

With a case of the creeps, Sophie headed inside. The door closed, leaving the night behind her. But that unsettling feeling

remained.

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She woke up when her roommate left the next morning. The noisy bitch was probably on her way out to get more mangoes or papayas for her pretentious fruit smoothies. Sophie was pretty sure her roommate had no classes this early today. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was 10:30.

*Crap*, she thought. She had class in an hour and there was no way she'd make it on time. She had to shower, throw some breakfast together, and then get to campus. She groaned, wondering how she'd let herself become this sort of girl. Was she going to be the tease now? Was she going to let her personal drama get in the way of her education and bettering her life? Was she —

A knock at the front door broke her out of her internal reflection. She grumbled and slipped out of bed. She was only wearing a pair of panties and a thin cotton T-shirt, but that didn't matter. This would almost certainly be her roommate. The idiot had probably left her wallet. Or keys. Or something...

Another knock, soft yet insistent. Yes...it would be her roommate. Only she had that sort of annoying knock.

"Hold your horses already," Sophie yelled.

She reached the door and answered it, unsettling the lock. She found herself looking at a stranger. There was something wrong

with his face – that's the first thing she noticed.

And the last.

The stranger stormed into the apartment, closing the door quickly. Before Sophie could let out a scream, there was a hand at her throat and a cloth over her mouth. She breathed in a heavy dose of some sort of chemical – a scent that was so strong it made her eyes water as she fought against the stranger's grip.

Her fighting lessened quickly. By the time any real sort of fear had the chance to settle in, the world had gone a spinning shade of black that pulled Sophie down into something much darker and more final than sleep.

## CHAPTER NINE

Nights that weren't crammed with work or in a state of hectic hurry were not something Avery was used to. So when she found herself in the middle of one, she was never quite sure how to respond. Currently, she was sitting on her couch, holding her phone and texting Rose. She knew that if she was truly going to keep Rose in her life from now on, she was going to have to make a point to make her a priority.

Yes, she had the case notes for the Patty Dearborne case in front of her but they were not consuming her. She also had a photocopy of the letter the killer had sent and while that kept taunting her, she did her best to place Rose above it all in that moment. In her texts to Rose, she was discovering that her daughter had been waiting for this sort of attention even if she wasn't aware of it. She was chit-chatting like a pre-teen girl, talking about boys and movies. They were also making plans for their next outing. Avery was very careful to also let Rose know what was going on with her workload so if something came up that would interfere with those plans, it wouldn't be out of the blue.

As Avery got accustomed to these weird conversation schematics with her nineteen-year-old daughter, she was also enjoying another aspect of her life that she had not quite gotten used to yet: having Ramirez over most of the time.

He was sitting on the opposite end of the couch, his legs outstretched. Their feet were tangled in one another, toes grazing lazily.

*This is sort of sad, she thought. Cute...but sad. I thought this part of my life was over...playing footsie with a handsome man on my couch. Is this my life now?*

She chuckled to herself. She couldn't help it. Sometimes the surprises life doled out were beyond comprehension.

Ramirez was also texting. Only his texts were a little more heated than Avery's. He was having a dispute with his landlord. It was a dispute that had been going on for the better part of two weeks now, as Ramirez's lease was about to expire and the landlord was asking for nearly one hundred dollars more for rent.

"Any luck?" she asked.

He looked up from his phone and shook his head. "No. I've even texted some other people in the building. He's only upping the rent on the ones on the higher floors, but almost everyone that is affected is willing to pay. It's just me and two other people that are griping about it."

"And when is the lease up?" she asked.

"Two weeks. Which means I need to find somewhere to live, pack my stuff up, and be ready to move pretty quickly."

"Any area you have in mind?"

"Yeah. My existing apartment. I love that place. I've been there for five years and now the landlord wants to pull this shit."

"Maybe we can make a Saturday of it this weekend. You and

I will go apartment hunting and find you a nice place.”

“Find me a place like *yours*, and you’re on,” he said.

She smiled as her phone dinged. It was Rose again. She wanted to know if they could catch a movie Saturday. Something dramatic but not cheesy. And no explosions of any kind. Avery texted her back, letting her know that it sounded like a great plan.

Beside her, Ramirez had set his phone down and started to sift through the case file on Patty Dearborne. She could tell that he was frustrated and maybe even a little tired. She figured he would be staying here tonight – it had been a general rule of thumb that he stayed over any afternoon where he hadn’t left by seven or so. And that was fine with Avery. She liked having him around. And it was more than just the steady conversation, the easy access to sex, and the help in the kitchen. It had been far too long since she had consistently shared a space with someone. She was starting to get back into the habit and it felt good. The way things were going with Ramirez and Rose as of late was a stark reminder of what life *could* be like. It didn’t have to be work all of the time, nor a need to constantly beat herself up. She was only slightly beyond forty; she still had most of her figure, her looks, and an exciting career. There was no reason to assume the best parts of her life were over when there was so much still waiting ahead.

“Hey, so I have a thought,” Avery said, setting her phone down and looking at Ramirez.

“What’s that?” he said, still looking at the case files.

“Instead of apartment hunting this weekend, why don’t we just

go over to your place and pack everything up?”

“Because I’d like to know where I’m moving it to before I box it all up,” he said. He looked up from the case files, clearly confused.

“Well, I have an idea on that. Why not just move it in here?”

A smile slowly crept onto his face. He narrowed his eyes at her in a comical look and set the file back down on the coffee table. “What?”

“Move in with me,” she said.

“Um, well, I’d love to. But are you sure? We see each other almost all day at work. You wouldn’t get sick of me if you had to come home with me, too?”

She scooted over to him, closing the distance between them on the couch. She placed a soft kiss on his mouth and shook her head. “No, I would not. And yes, I’m sure.”

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