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Water Damage

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WATER DAMAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

In my thesis novel, *Water Damage*, I wanted to explore the nature of good, if flawed, people that are put under intense pressure. Using alternating point-of-view characters, I showed the good and bad parts of Washington, DC and the surrounding area through the eyes of someone that has benefited from privilege and someone that has not. These juxtaposing views change over the course of the novel until both point-of-view characters have become something different than they were at the start, learning humility and trust, respectively. Through the alternating chapters, I wanted to show two viewpoints of the same city and the same set of events, each contributing a unique perspective to the overall narrative. This technique let me touch on the beauty of large cities as well as the inadequacies therein.

Major thanks to everyone that helped me make it through writing this. Mostly my mom. I have so many of her emails saved.

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CHAPTER ONE

The morning after state representative Alice Kemper is found in the Potomac River, her body sitting limp in her husband's waterlogged, baby-blue hatchback, Tammy realizes that there is a before and after to everything in her life, and she has just stepped into the latter. As her early-2000s Panasonic feeds information and static electricity into her apartment, everything slows to a crawl, the moments shifting sap-thick. She wants to be dreaming. To have the possibility to wake up and forget. Nothing is as unforgiving as the passage of time.

The newscaster says that Kemper's missing husband will be the police's prime suspect if evidence of foul-play is discovered. If it's not just an unfortunate crash. Tammy rushes to the bathroom and heaves into the green porcelain toilet.

What was the last thing she'd said to him? The tile is cold on her knees. They'd just been together last Saturday, and he'd been distracted. A case he'd been working on for months was taking the bulk of his attention, and she missed the intensity she felt when he was truly focused on her. Like there was nothing else he cared about, or nothing that could convince him to care about anything else.

In the early hours of that morning, their goodbye had seemed so inconsequential. There was still the promise of him returning, a quick *see you later* to tide her over until he would text her again, or show up unannounced, which she couldn't bring herself to chide him for. Not when she wished she could do the same. She stands up and looks at herself in the mirror over the sink, cracked in several places, and breathes.

His toothbrush sits next to hers on the sink, two neat, perpendicular lines in their little ceramic cup.

It's not something she can handle right now. She heads into the kitchen and pours a cup of cold coffee brewed the previous morning. Canvases with prints and paintings from local artists clutter the floor and lean against the tiny kitchen's counters. Works she couldn't resist buying despite the fact that her apartment's walls are already ensconced by pop-art prints and baroque imitations and quiet portraits that are somehow both too intimate to enjoy and too enrapturing to ignore.

Tammy feels too big in the space that is left. Like she doesn't fit. A badly made puzzle piece. She's still nauseous and thinking too hard doesn't help. Her mouth tastes like bile.

The news has moved onto other things, but its noise pounds against her skull. It's chilling to think of his hatchback in the river with the wrong body in the front, and she's a terrible person for this, but part of her is relieved that it isn't Stuart. That he's still out there somewhere, maybe.

Relief feels too close to being pleased by Alice Kemper's death, and Tammy is disgusted by herself for the long seconds that the coffee mug spins in the microwave, its timer counting down to nothing much too slow.

Stuart could be gone. He could have left town after whatever happened with his wife. *If* anything happened—but she doesn't want to consider that. She wants to talk to him so badly, a sticky desperation that clings to the interior of her sternum, but she promised him she'd never call his cell phone or text if he didn't text her first, so she won't reach out because she's always been good like that.

At least, for him. Because he's shown her that she can be good in these ways.

But what does it matter now that the woman they were trying to keep in the dark has been pulled out of the Potomac? Tammy blinks back the image of the water-logged hatchback on the

news, a zoomed-in, five second clip filmed from across the river in Georgetown, probably right near the docks and their painted, stagnant sailboats.

How much of Alice was left when they found her? Full underwater submersion, the rapid decomp synonymous with that—it depends on how long her body was in the river. The possibilities range from light damage, torn skin nipped at by snakeheads and walleyes, to pearl-white bone and ruptured organs. She tightens her grip on the mug, wishing the coffee inside was fresh and hot, not just microwave-warm. Wishing she could hurt herself with its burn for thinking about something so dark.

The newscaster's accusation is far from the truth. Stuart wouldn't have been able to kill someone. Not his wife, no matter what kind of issues they had, often pushing Stuart to Tammy's apartment after three-in-the-morning fights and tense family dinners. Despite his frustrations, he's too kind to drive someone into a river and leave their body there. His hands—they're so careful. He would sit her between his legs on the couch sometimes, her back to his chest, and just hold her after a bad day. She would take one of his hands between hers and trace the fine lines, the impressions of vein and bone. They're the hands of an artist. Meant to create. To add to what's already here. Not to take away. Tammy is almost sure.

She still has to go to work today. The thought reveals the exhaustion hiding between her shoulder blades, a jack-in-the-box that pops out whenever it realizes she's at her worst. She has to keep moving like the rest of Washington, DC will whether Alice Kemper is dead or alive. Cities don't mourn like they used to.

Seven-thirty is bleak, especially on this side of town. Rain and its complementary wind-chill turn the winter morning even more frigid than usual. The air smells sharp and wet—salty in

the way fish are salty, rather than a summer's day spent at the beach, the taste of the sea on your lips.

She heads down 12th Street with the hood of her jacket pulled tight around her face and an apricot fruit leather hanging out the side of her mouth. There's no change in her pockets. She shakes her messenger bag, listening for the telling metal jingle of quarters pooling together amongst the crumbs and broken pens that collect in the bag's deep pockets. Nothing. The L'Enfant Plaza metro station is passed with only a vague longing for the cramped underground tunnels and echoes of humanity, and when Tammy turns onto Independence, she is abruptly reminded that her city is alive, even this early.

It's like everyone has converged on this one street, walking in staggered groups: tourists with chunky black cameras and frenetic morning commuters and high school kids wearing crisp uniforms bearing the insignia of the private school down the block. All the sounds of the city come together, the traffic and the police sirens and the swish of too-heavy doors opening and closing from the tall, concrete buildings that buttress the wide sidewalks, and layered on top, the smell of coffee and exhaust fumes and fresh bread from Tammy's favorite bakery.

Stuart could pass her on any street like this and she wouldn't even notice. Faces blend in city crowds. Identity is sapped from visitors and residents alike.

The crowds thin out as she gets close to the Memorial Bridge, teenagers following the GPS on their phones turning into single mom joggers, the occasional photographer trying to catch the sunrise on the river. Not that it makes the Potomac look any better—Tammy doesn't think anything could hide the deep brown color of the water besides good photo editing software.

From here, as she crosses into Virginia, she can see the bank where Stuart's car was dredged up, a patrol car's blue light flashing through the thin trees even though the car and the

body within have been long removed. Discouraging true-crime junkies and busy-bodies with nothing better to do from searching the area while the news story is still airing.

The news said it could be a crash. Maybe he's dead too, trapped beneath the film of scum and earth that colors the Potomac, his body swaying softly in the murky darkness.

She stops abruptly, the harsh wind from the river pulling at her coat, her skin, making everything sting and feel numb at once. It screams in her ears. Her brain has always been a traitor, pushing the worst thoughts possible into her mind and then assigning Tammy the blame, as if she thought them up herself. As if she would ever want to imagine Stuart's death. Imagine his body in the water. Imagine what he might look like after twelve or more hours of water damage. Imagine his handsome, perfect face torn and broken and hollow.

Hands balled into fists, she counts breaths slowly, thinks about the things that keep her grounded. The concrete beneath her feet. The weight of her bag on her back. The disruption of the air as cars pass by. Stuart is okay. Stuart is alive. He will come back and explain everything and they can go back to life as it was before.

Work starts at eight and Tammy's wristwatch indicates that she should have been at Happy Ends Funeral Home four minutes ago. She's usually on time and this is just another thing on the list of everything that has happened today that weighs her down. Makes her wonder why she's still awake and walking and breathing.

The line only rings once before the mortuary's phone is picked up. "What happened?"

"Missed the metro," Tammy lies, "so I thought I'd walk." A piece of gum affixes itself to the sole of her shoe and Tammy scrapes her black sneaker against the ground a few times to get it off. A man in a smart gray suit gives her an unimpressed look as he walks past, and Tammy

can tell exactly what tax bracket he's in just from the broguing on his shoes. She's surprised he even took the time out of his salaried day to look at her.

"I would've appreciated some earlier notice." Her boss, Morgan, is an understanding woman on the late side of forty that has a soft spot for those that don't really deserve it, but even her patience can be tested.

Tammy had gone to Happy Ends with a laughable resume, the last five years missing and the rest pretty bare before that. The product of an unfair sentencing and a felony charge that will color Tammy's life until she's finally at peace in the ground. Morgan had asked one question: Do you regret it?

She'd thought about her mother's delicate, translucent skin. The shuffle of nurses that refused to look either of them in the eye. The way her mother had smiled under the bright halogens of the National Gallery of Art's display room, black walls and white ceilings and paintings of soft tulle skirts and pale pink ballet shoes. Her answer had been short, clipped. I really wish I did.

Morgan had given her two rules: don't throw up in the morgue, and don't be late for work.

"You know what the construction is like on the Silver Line." Tammy sighs deep, tension holding her lungs too tight for the release to feel satisfying. "Trains are always running late, and then they don't come for another thirty. I thought this would be faster. And I like the fresh air." Even if it smells like sewage.

Silence on the line for just a moment. "Something's up, isn't it?"

Tammy schools her voice into something she hopes sounds steady, leaning against the slightly damp stone parapet and feeling the full brunt of dawn's stinging breeze. "No, I'm good.

Nothing's up." Above the river, there is the smell of fetid mud, burning into her senses and leaving an unfortunate imprint. It's nice to have an excuse for the red ringing her eyes. "It's just another morning."

"Well, we've got a bad one today." Morgan's turn to sigh. Papers shuffle through static. "Police asked me to look at her."

"Too many overnight guests?" Sometimes, not always, the two morgues that serve the entire DC police force will get full, and Morgan, ex-forensic pathologist and wife of a police sergeant, will examine a body in exchange for free lab equipment and referrals from cops delivering bad news to families. It's a morbid business, but they still need to advertise.

"All booked up for a few days. We might get more."

"Why is this one so bad?" The river churns below her, a taunting depth of cloudy water. Waves break, spray propelled upwards, calling to her, as if the river wants to swallow her up as well. It reminds her of the seascape she has at her apartment, in the kitchen, just perfectly wedged against the wall between the countertop and the overhead cabinet—Aivasovsky's work, two castaways on a raft soon to be overtaken by the perfect, oil-painted waves, their surf melding into the clouds that hide the dawn, turning sea into sky and back. Idyllic in its chaos.

"That representative they pulled out of the river ended up on our table. Can you pick up some lemons?"

CHAPTER TWO

As she has done every morning for the past week, Louise sits at her desk with a rapidly cooling cup of matcha tea and goes over her notes on the case.

It's how her father does it—bullet-pointing and collecting times and places and names and putting them all down in a Moleskine journal with butter-soft pages.

Her apartment, up high in one of Rosslyn's skyscrapers, is cold. Sixty-two degrees, her thermostat tells her. She hasn't turned the heat on since Alice's body was discovered in the river.

The cold keeps her awake. Alert. On her feet moving instead of sinking into the blue suede couch and sinking. The curtains are drawn across her floor-to-ceiling windows, and it makes the apartment feel dark. Cut off from the world. The view of the river waits behind, taunting her. Daring her to do her best.

And Louise plans on doing just that. Her dad did not kill Alice, and that's why she needs to read over her notes—why she needs to keep every available piece of information on the case at the forefront of her brain. So she can do what her dad does best and solve it.

Monday morning, her dad didn't show up for work. At 7:13, among the constant blaring of early morning DC traffic, his best friend and partner, Bill Jeong, called the Kemper house. No one picked up.

Louise learned this from Bill when they talked later at the station. She had called the house too, Alice asking her the night before if she'd be willing to work on another advertisement for her next campaign. In person, Louise said she would think about it. Over the phone, she could be much more brave.

At 9:30, not able to contact either of her parents, Louise walked through the doors of the Third District police department to report them missing. The woman behind the desk tried to tell her that she needed to wait twenty-four hours, but Louise knows why they do that. To keep clingy spouses and children from filing reports that'll be null when their partners or parents return a few hours later than expected. So instead of talking to the front-desk attendant, she walked into the station and found Bill. He put out an APB on Stuart's license plates—both his patrol car and the baby-blue hatchback that he loved so much.

A tropical storm was passed through on Sunday night, uncommon but not unheard of for the DC area in fall. Heavy rains.

She can't even remember what she'd been doing Sunday night. She'd looked at a few prospective clients, files of patients in psychiatric wards across the state of Virginia that had potential to improve under her one-on-one care. She's requested by prisons and psychiatric wards across the state, sometimes across the country, for the services she provides. The analysis of people that are nuanced in terrible ways. The plans she creates for how to get these people to become more like societally functional human beings.

It's all blurred in retrospect, like the memory has been obscured by the more important ones that follow. One of the files still sits on her desk, below her cup of tea, water-stained rings already marking the Manila from every morning she's sat in this chair before now. She could count the days in these rings. Trace each morning's stain with a careful finger.

Notes. Information. Focus, Louise.

At 11:40 that night, she was driving her parents' usual routes to work and their favorite trail off the George Washington Parkway. She feared the worst because she had been trained to,

because from a young age her dad had told her the truth about the world: anything can happen, and most of it isn't pleasant.

Alerts on her phone were set up to notify her about any car-crash John and Jane Does being taken into the local hospitals. She was adamant that Stuart's little hatchback, the tread on his tires worn nearly flat after years of not feeling the need to replace them—"I'm not much of a car guy, Louise, but if you want to take it in for me you can"—had taken both him and Alice on some tragic misadventure, not a sudden holiday to the Outer Banks that they hadn't told her about.

Her parents are boring, overbearing, predictable. Her dad wouldn't have driven a town away, let alone a state, without telling Louise at least a month in advance.

Louise takes a sip of her tea. Leans back in her uncomfortable, supposedly ergonomic office chair. They hadn't been on vacation for a long time. She's not sure they could have stood being alone together for more than a few days.

Still, she remembers a time when she was six or seven and they had driven out to Yosemite. Her dad carried her on his shoulders through all the trails, getting her so high up that she thought, like the child she was, that if she reached upwards, really put her whole body into it, she could touch the place where the towering sequoias scraped the clear sky.

She remembers tugging on her dad's hair, telling him to jump. His laughter as he asked her what she was trying to do. And he tried to help, even though what she wanted was a foolish, child's notion. He always helped.

She told Bill what she was doing the next day, 10:05 AM, a message left at his desk phone. It was another two days until they found the muddy tracks on the Virginia side of the river, a car that must have rolled gently into the Potomac right off the George Washington

Parkway, those tall, deciduous trees guarding the secret of how, exactly, it could have been an accident that the car careened off the road and ended up the water.

Louise stood by her belief that her dad would never have driven his car into the Potomac on purpose, but there was no way to traverse the trees there unless the car was steered, slow and careful, between them. Bill sent Louise home and told her that he hoped she was right.

The next morning, it took them an hour and a half to dredge the car from the river, sticking into mud remarkably close to the water's edge, the windshield shattered and the interior painted the brown-black of polluted dirt. Bill called Louise when he shouldn't have, and he told her that she shouldn't come even though he knew she would, and she hit eighty on the Parkway and prayed that all the cops in the area were already at the scene.

She parked illegally on the Parkway's shoulder and stood and watched with them all. More problems and questions dredged up with the baby-blue hatchback, the same color of the expansive sky the day before, when none of them knew what the next morning would hold.

She hadn't looked. She tried not to. But there was a glimpse she caught—her mother's hollow face, arms outstretched into the driver's seat, grasping at someone that wasn't there.

There is a moment where she could have stopped this. Of that she is sure. If she'd been there more. Maybe if she was a better daughter, if she actually believed in Alice's campaign slogan—A Vote for Kemper is a Vote for Family!—she would have called more, too. Surprised Alice with a visit to the house and a bottle of thirty-dollar Barbaresco. Maybe she could learn to reconcile her mother's anger and demands of perfection with love freely given.

But she couldn't. Can't. Alice asked for too much and gave too little in return.

That bottle of Barbaresco sits on Louise's work desk, half-empty and uncorked, memories of the night before the disappearance resurfacing a little when she picks it up. She

came home from Alice's Sunday dinner, where her dad had made the slightest comment on how the potatoes were seasoned and Alice decided that meant he thought the entire dinner was complete shit.

That's going to be the last memory of her mother. That and her face, blank, half-missing.

Louise finishes the rest of her tea and takes the Barbaresco to the sink. She watches the wine swirl around the drain as she pours it out and tries to come to the conclusion that she had been the best daughter she could be under the circumstances.

This is not in her notes, but she has no idea how she drove home that morning, mud still staining her fitted slacks and caking on the bare skin of her ankles. The drive was dream-like, foggy, but reality pressed down harder with every minute that took her back home, where she would have to sit in her silent apartment alone and remember her mother's cracked, water-damaged face.

The Potomac watched her as she turned down the same hooks and bends of the last road Alice saw. It pulsed at the peripheral of her vision, a wide, gaping wound bleeding into the earth, healing badly, its edges black with rot.

CHAPTER THREE

The basement of Happy Ends—lovingly called the mortuary by both Tammy and Morgan—is stuffy, but thankfully warmer than outside. Tammy sets down two lemons in a produce bag on the metal counter next to a litter of embalming tools and patient files, Morgan’s morning work, then shrugs off her coat and hangs it in the closet next to the staircase that leads into the house upstairs. This part of the mortuary looks like a lab, overcrowded with a stack of three microwave-reminiscent autoclaves for pre-procedure sterilization, a centrifuge, two clunky desktop computers still running Windows ‘95, and a wall of white, open-faced cabinets with rows and rows of tools for autopsies and embalment and dolling up corpses before their open-caskets. Through the thick plastic curtain opposite the staircase, the morgue waits with today’s work, the body no doubt already laid out on the metal table in the center of the room.

One room for the dead and one for the living, the surfaces in both all the kind of silver-and-white reminiscent of a hospital. Formaldehyde and cisplatin have entirely different chemical compounds, but there’s something about the phenolic taste they leave in the mouth, the bitter smell that’s common of both embalming fluids and chemo drugs, that takes Tammy back to before her incarceration, to long days in the hospital, to bringing Goodwill-scrounged Polly Pockets to her mom’s uncomfortable bedside because they were what Tammy played with as a child, and she loved them, no matter how badly their smiles had cracked with age.

This is not a regular funeral home. Henry S. Washington & Sons isn’t being asked to autopsy bodies by the Metropolitan Police Department. Tammy often wonders why Morgan puts up with the extra work if she quit being a criminal forensic scientist in the first place. Happy Ends has turned into Morgan’s last job, with less people and an overwhelming lack of

bureaucracy. Maybe that's the answer—perhaps the absence of overbearing structure somehow makes the work bearable.

Behind the translucent curtain, Tammy can see the blurred outline of Morgan running around, bright pink scrubs blurring into a blob of color that starkly contrasts her night-black hair. Dyed, like Tammy's, but Morgan pays a premium at an Arlington salon for her dark hair color while Tammy buys a seven-dollar box of Revlon and prays that her scalp won't get fried.

Tammy's natural color is streaked with gray now, even though she's just hit her mid-thirties. And besides, it's too much like her mother's hair, a rich, coffee brown that shone gold in the sun before she lost it all, replaced by solid-color silk scarves and paisley bandanas. The same Revlon box is sold in the prison commissary, and she has always been a creature of habit.

There's nothing to panic over if you already know the outcome.

The wooden cutting board that she finds in one of the overhead cupboards is only slightly stained, so she takes the lemons she bought out of their translucent, green bag and gets to cutting. Four slices, two for each of them: one to rub underneath the nose and around the mouth before suiting up and the other to lightly dab on the inside of the mask. An extra lemon in case that isn't enough.

Morgan pushes the curtain back, taking off her large headphones and blue surgical mask. "Thanks for grabbing those. I'll use the other one in my tea later if we don't need it, but who knows." The smell that emerges from the morgue through the parted curtain lets Tammy know exactly why Morgan wanted her to buy these. Decomposition, in its earlier stages, smells like a sweet sort of rot. Flowers wilting in a vase. Ripened fruit fallen from a tree, its flesh sinking into earth. The body that waits inside the morgue is nowhere close to those early stages.

"Advanced putrefaction," Morgan says.

“I got that from...” Tammy gestures towards the morgue, opening the equipment closet and pulling out a pair of scrubs. “How late did they find her?”

“I’m guessing she’s only been dead for two or three days, but it’s hard to tell. You already know she was in the river.”

Tammy hears the morgue curtain shift in the wind created by the overhead fan. The dull pound of the rain outside the overhead house’s thin glass windows. The natural groans of the earth that holds them in its belly, quietly leaking through the mortuary’s concrete walls. All are slowly drowned out by the tidal ringing in Tammy’s ears. “Yeah. It’s a real shame.”

“Can’t believe we lost a state icon. I can still hear ‘A vote for Kemper is a vote for family’ in her voice if I try hard enough.”

Before Tammy went to jail, Alice Kemper was running for her second term as Virginia state representative, and on every local station, the same campaign ad ran until the population of northern Virginia was sick of it. Kemper in front of her house in Arlington, showing the community that she was one of them. Her campaign slogan that became something of a local in-joke, the same slogan that decorated Kemper’s campaign banners and flags and billboards every single time she ran since—often unopposed. It’s hard to beat a local legend.

Now someone’ll have to take her place. Maybe someone already has, filling her desk with their own pens and leather-bound notebooks and family pictures curated to not quite show the whole truth.

“I remember it too.” I voted for her. Tammy doesn’t say that because it still feels strange—voting for a political candidate that’s married to the man she’s sleeping with, even though there’s no way Alice Kemper would have ever found out. Stuart was too good at keeping secrets.

Silent, they head into the morgue.

What lies on the autopsy table doesn't look much like Alice Kemper, and in a way, that's a relief. There is a natural disconnect that comes with this job, the point where Tammy turns off the part of her brain that recognizes the bodies on the table as human. A removal of certain elements of empathy. It steadies her breathing and calms her from the anxiety she's been feeling all morning since she watched the news, saw her toothbrush in its perfect place next to Stuart's.

The body is in the later stages of decomposition. External wounds are already turning black, the skin a clammy off-yellow that reminds Tammy of sandpaper. The chest is split open, ribs carefully clipped and put into a silver bowl at the head of the table. The face is a mess—*her* face. Tammy's brain makes the distinction without being asked. Nothing like the shiny images on the campaign billboards. She's missing both eyes, and there's a frown on what's left of her lips. Like she was disappointed in her final moments. Scared, maybe.

Tammy swallows and looks away, remembering how to separate herself into parts. Compartmentalize the thoughts in her brain that are screaming at the thought of having to touch Alice Kemper's dead body. The lemons aren't helping much with the smell.

"Sorry I started without you." Morgan walks around the body like it's nothing, arranging tools and swab tubes that she'll need to complete the autopsy. "We have some other clients that we'll need to prepare for their funerals later this week, so I thought it was best to get started early."

"Why are we examining her? Do the police think she was murdered?" Stuart's face, unbidden. A soft smile, crow's feet gentle around his eyes, a touch of his age. The way he laughs at staged jokes on day-time television, and the fine lines all come together and soften his face's hard edges. Not the laugh of a killer.

Morgan shrugs. “All Bill told me was that the daughter wanted her mother autopsied. We can't deny a family request. She might have been onto something, though. Here, come look at this.” She's standing behind the head of the table, looking down Alice's body.

Tammy joins her, and Morgan points to the skull, hair carefully parted and brushed to reveal hidden damage. A single fracture line on the exposed skull, surrounded by torn, discolored scalp.

“It could have been animals. Snakehead fish are pretty aggressive.” Tammy’s voice lacks the conviction she wishes it had.

“But the fracture? That's got to be blunt trauma, and I don't think a fish could do that.”

As Morgan has trained her to do, Tammy focuses on signs of violence or struggle: cracked fingernails, bruising, missing chunks of hair. It's hard to tell what was caused by the river and what was not. Slowly, Tammy circles Alice's body. There's the possibility that Stuart could have caused some of the dark, blood-clot coloring that rings her shoulders, her arms. Maybe handprints. She takes a wrist and turns it gently, the skin giving unnaturally in Tammy's grasp. Like cheesecloth pulled taut over putty. One of the bruises looks a little too much like a straight line, a ligature mark maybe, its aggravated red edges distinguishing it from the blooming purples around it.

“And there's this, too.” Morgan moves to the side of the table and pulls the edge of parted skin back, revealing organs that Tammy has only through practice been able to identify. “What do you see?”

Everything looks normal. When Morgan took Tammy in, offering her a job as an assistant, Tammy hadn't ever thought she'd be here, trying to identify the cause of death in a partially autopsied body. The first time, Morgan hadn't thought to tell her how grisly it would be,

instead giving her a hardly remorseful *you were going to see dead bodies either way* speech post-mortem.

No other job is going to give Tammy freedom like this. Not with a felony on her record, not with her tarnished history. “I don't see anything.”

“Exactly. If she'd drowned, the lungs would be bloated. We'd see signs that water had entered her esophagus. Right now, the lungs are decaying like they would if she'd died on dry land. There's no water inside them because there were no bodily functions at work to ingest any.”

“And if she hit her head when the car crashed?”

“Unless that blunt trauma broke her neck, which it didn't, she would have slowly bled out—and still been breathing. Drowned before the head wound could kill her. If she was any more decomposed, I don't think I'd be able to tell. I think whoever did this knew that, and they were counting on her staying in the river for as long as possible.” Very gently, Morgan pushes the skin at the edge of the chest cavity closed, pressing her parted halves together, as if Alice can retain a sense of modesty while dead and on full display in an unofficial police morgue. “Her husband was a cop. I know it's rich for me to say it with Bill on the force, but... there could be a history of violence.”

Tammy's teeth hurt. She's clenching her jaw and looking at this person on the table she can't seem to see as just an object even though she's done it dozens of times before. It must be that slight curve to Alice's mouth, the rise and fall of ruined bone across her face, the subtle expression that communicates too much at once. Like a Murillo painting, Tammy thinks, the subject's face drawn in baroque horror, hollow and haunting, the removal of the eyes somehow

mirroring the pain that can be perceived in each of Murillo's careful, loving brushstrokes. Alice's final expression asks a question Tammy doesn't quite know the answer to anymore.

Could he have killed me?

#

Once they've finished the autopsy, Morgan types up her report to send to the police while Tammy gets to work on a few of their less dilapidated clients, already embalmed. Their skin still feels unnatural beneath Tammy's fingers, but it doesn't have the same give of a non-embalmed body, something that, in an unsettling way, reminds her of memory-foam. The way it slowly reinflates after you've put pressure on it, holding that last imprint of touch in the way only something inanimate can.

Years ago, her mother took her to the National Gallery of Art on a sweltering, young summer day to see a limited viewing of baroque sculptures from Italian sister museums. Sweat stuck her purple butterfly tee-shirt to her back as she walked through the exhibit, rapidly cooling into an uncomfortable stickiness. Her mom had pointed to one sculpture, a large man holding onto a much smaller woman trying to escape his grasp—Bernini's *The Rape of Proserpina*, a god of the underworld grasping at youth and spring until her skin split under his fingers. "Look," her mom had said. "See the indents where his fingertips dig into her thigh? You'd never know marble could look so soft."

Tammy is good at burial preparation. The bodies are cold, too pale and perfect in death. Unlike earlier, she can easily see these bodies as objects. Large dolls that need her to add the finishing touches so that they can be put on display in their cases. Morgan usually does the heavy lifting for the closed-casket bodies, though Tammy minds those less and less the more she works at Happy Ends.

Throughout the day, Alice's unspoken question echoes in her head.

After closing up shop and saying goodbye to Morgan, Tammy walks out into the sun setting on the day, river-side trees painted a soft, forgiving red. Those faces, the feel of the skin through her gloves, the too-still way the bodies lay on their gurneys—it all fades from her mind.

Except Alice, a constant presence following her through the city's alleys and nooks and curves that lead to Southeast's residential district. A group of kids stand on the corner of her block, smoking and listening to music and laughing into the evening's quiet arrival. The same age as the girl who worked at 7/11, probably.

Tammy wishes she could be as carefree as them, but she has something she needs to do. When she reaches her building, she goes around the side into the alley that contains the trash for the five-story complex. The scent of rot creeps out onto the street—food decay that is distinct and separate from body decay. A different assortment of amino acids. There's a small iron gate that separates the street from the large dumpsters and recycling bins, the thick black bar on top covered in rust. Tammy reaches over the gate and digs her fingers into the hollow hidden there, a small opening formed by natural oxidation and time. Stuart hid notes for her there when it wasn't safe for them to talk over the phone.

Alice drags her teeth across the membrane of Tammy's mind. She closes her eyes and tries to breathe for a moment, even with the sharp scent of garbage sticky in the air.

At first, the hiding place just feels filmy, like there's nothing inside the bar but wet dirt, but her hand catches on something small and hard. From the hollowed-out bar, Tammy pulls two things: a small, silver key, and a wet lump of yellowish slime. Probably someone's trash that had caught on the iron gate's rusted maw. She lets the off-white slime fall to the ground with a wet smack, shaking off the residue and drying her hand on the hem of her shirt.

The key doesn't look familiar, and there's nothing to tell her what it's for. Stuart never gave Tammy the right answers. He was always one step ahead of her, even in their relationship. No matter how gently he held her. Everything was planned out. His wife was none the wiser. Only a cop would have the forethought and ability to predict movement that allowed Stuart to keep Alice in the dark for so long.

Did she find out? Would that be the thing that could have driven Stuart to kill her?

Her face goes hot, her pulse echoes in the capillaries in her eyelids. She's ashamed for thinking such a thing, but she also feels a bitter sense of dread.

She needs to know the truth. She should want to, as well—but she doesn't want to know what happened if it incriminates Stuart. She doesn't want to consider her feelings for a killer.

There is nothing else in the hiding spot. Tammy looks at the pile of sludge on the ground, remembers the way it felt on her hand. Despite her gut reaction to retch, she picks through the little blob of white.

Blue marks streak the inside of the detritus. Smudged, running. Ink. A note.

Frantic, Tammy unrolls the blob as best she can, plastering it across the leg of her jeans. It's paper, heavy with water and colored with rust. Stuart left this note more than a week ago. It hasn't rained since the tropical storm that came through town, the DC fall always achingly dry, and that means Stuart left this before his wife went in the river and before everything was dredged out of it. The sound of cars passing Tammy's apartment blur together, and suddenly she can only hear her own heavy, labored breathing. The sound of her heart beating in her ears.

He left her something—an explanation, maybe, or instructions, or the location where she should go to meet him so he could tell her everything good and bad, and she would be able to breathe again without the feeling that there was a weight holding the front and back of her lungs

pinned together. And it's ruined because she didn't check the spot earlier, because she was so stupid that when Stuart hadn't called for a few days, she assumed it was because he had to take care of things with his family. She could have *known*, and she doesn't because of her own inaction. The smell of trash makes her feel sick, her gut heavy with guilt and anger at her own failure and such a painful, sharp longing to know the truth that she can feel its blade at her throat.

The note is illegible apart from four letters in what looks to have been, at one point in time, two sentences stacked on top of each other: *Y D R A*. Next to that, a little drawing that barely resembles a garden spade surrounded by flowers. Stuart liked to sketch in his free time. He would tell Tammy that he knew he wasn't very good, and she would watch him improve with every sketch, wishing he would let her frame them and hang them on her apartment's walls between prints of Degas' ballerinas and Seurat's pastel, pointilliste landscapes.

She wants a memento. Something more than a key with no lock and a destroyed note and a toothbrush that might never get used again. More than that, she wants to hear Stuart's voice again, its rough edges that curled so carefully around the way he said her name.

In her apartment, the air feels stiff, starched like an inexpensive dress shirt. Without Stuart, the studio is a coffin that she is trapped in, tired to the bone. Tired of waiting, of worrying. Every time she thinks too much of him, her stomach twists with painful curiosity on the edge of desperation. Her fingers itch to call him just in case his phone is on.

She sits on her pinstripe couch, holding the key up to the dim afternoon light filtering in through her broken blinds. It can't be a house key. It's too small. Maybe a mail key? Or a PO box? Did Stuart leave things for her to find in another place, the note giving her a secondary location? Or was it a goodbye, a final doodle and a declaration of apology, a two-sentence admission of guilt or innocence?

She places the still-wet note on her desk in the patch of sunlight her single window allows. It isn't enough to sit here and wait. Stuart left something for her to find, and she owes him more than he would admit, humble as he is—more than enough to go looking.

CHAPTER FOUR

Louise approaches her parents' house after sunset, the once-beautiful streets of the Arlington suburbs twisting into a thing more sinister in darkness. She always loved it here when she was growing up. The gently rolling hills, the beautiful, post-colonial houses, the cherry blossoms that would bloom and litter the streets with pastel pink in April and go dormant again in May, empty boughs twisting into the clear baby-blue sky.

These are the things she keeps in her mind as she drives along the street on which she grew up, parking six houses down in the carport of a bungalow she knows is currently empty.

She planned this meticulously. She put thought into the time, the parking spot, the way she would leave no evidence of her presence at the house. Her hands are clammy on her key fob as she locks her BMW and she's doubting herself, which is not a thing that Louise is fond of doing. The silence that falls across the street is oppressive and too loud. One thing Louise has found in these past few days is that she hates being alone. She looked through her call logs yesterday and realized just how often she would call her dad when she needed someone to talk to. She wishes she had someone to call right now, just to fill her empty head.

Stuart Kemper is not a killer. Sure, he's a cop. Louise has worked in and around DC long enough to know the reputation that the police have here. She knows the statistics, the inaction, the omissions made by officers and commissioners in reports that could incur city-wide criticism if they were detailed in full. She also knows that her father tried his best to bring the right people to justice, to talk before resorting to violence, to end the cycles at work that have plagued the District for decades.

He's Louise's hero, but not because he tries to be. It's just who he is. Humble and self-sacrificing. The man that she models herself after each time she takes on a new patient, someone that the state has deemed broken, and puts every ounce of herself into making them whole again. Into helping them figure out and come to terms with their own fractured psyches.

Bill, her dad's partner, had been shaky on the phone when she'd called earlier, asking about any updates in her mother's case. "This is not public knowledge, kid. Not yet. You know how quiet we have to keep this. But Morgan found evidence that she'd been killed before she went in the river."

Louise didn't have time to ask Bill why he let his wife autopsy Alice instead of a licensed and trusted police coroner. She didn't have time to say a pleasant goodbye and thank him for his candidness.

In cases where a married woman is murdered, the husband is always the prime suspect until he is cleared. It's usually a valid assumption; fifty-five percent of female murder victims are killed by their spouses or romantic partners. Uxoricide. Louise has read this in nearly every crime statistic book, heard about it any time her father was investigating a murder. She has worked with men that killed their wives in violent, passionate fits and these are the clients she is less inclined to put back together. They're the ones she likes to pick apart.

Stuart isn't one of these men, and he isn't here to clear his own name. She'll do it for him, and no one will try to stop her because she won't let them.

The basement window is smaller than she remembers. Louise has put on a few pounds over the years since she was a teenager, sneaking out to see a girlfriend or two, but when the window slides open—always unlocked, because her mother couldn't reach the window and her dad never went in the basement—Louise is able to shimmy through with relative ease.

Legs first, she hangs from the window ledge and lands less than gracefully on her feet. She'll have to find something to climb on to get back out, Alice having gifted Louise her small stature.

She used to hate it when people said she looked like her mother. Maybe no one will ever say that again. This thought sits heavy with her.

It's dark. The silver washing machine and dryer glint softly in the moonlight let in by the now uncovered basement window, but the rest of the basement is hidden by a cloud of shadow. This is okay. She doesn't need the light to know where she's going.

The wooden stairs are quiet as she sneaks towards the ground floor, a childhood accomplice. Nothing in this house will give her away. Her DNA is already all over it, frequent coffee visits with her dad and extravagant dinners with her mother and other state representatives masking her presence from anyone that might be looking for an intruder.

Regardless, Louise is careful not to touch anything unless she has to. If the person that did this to her mother came into the house, abducted her, Louise can't risk their fingerprints being covered by her own.

The basement stairs lead up into the confined kitchen, with a "Home, Sweet Home" ceramic plate hanging above the sink next to a smaller, older plate, Louise's full name curving parallel to its pleated border. In the center, two tiny yellow handprints. The blinds on the kitchen window are open because no one has been here to close them. The adjoining dining room also looks unmarred, the polished oak dining room table only lightly scattered with scans of case files and paperwork her dad must have been working on before this situation occurred.

A matricide. Sixty-three-year-old victim, the son being convicted for hitting her across the head with an iron, and in the notes it's mentioned that he said he didn't mean to kill her. The

fact that someone could be so careless and violent that they would kill their own mother turns Louise's stomach. Her hands are balled into tight, uncomfortable fists. Such disregard for human life.

Alice wouldn't have liked to see Louise so angry. She used to say anger was for politicians and frustration was for everyone else. Still, a bitter hum fits itself under Louise's skin. Next to the case file, a picture of Stuart and Bill sits out of its frame. A picture from a fishing trip, one that Louise is fairly certain she took, a large snakehead held on its hook between the two. An invasive species. This was when you could get paid for catching them before the government realized that they didn't care about their city's ecosystems. She flips it over and reads the date the photo was taken, the note below in her dad's handwriting: The boys and their catch. What a great day for the sport and for the Potomac!

It doesn't look like he was planning on up and leaving, but that is circumstantial evidence more than anything. Anyone can scatter papers around a room to make it look like they're busy. There is a narrative built in every room, every facet of a person's life. If you know what people are like, fabricating those narratives can be easy. Just like sociopaths fabricate a personality to make others like them. A game.

She keeps to the shadows as she approaches the stairs to the second floor. The living room is untouched and picture-perfect, the corduroy IKEA couch that Louise is so familiar with from her youth sitting like a threat in the corner. Framed photos of her mother and father watch her from the brickwork fireplace's mantle, from the tastefully staggered hooks on the walls. In some of the photos, they're even smiling.

As her foot touches the first stair, Louise hears a slight thump from upstairs towards the right. The master bedroom. Her parents' room.

Quickening her pace and grabbing the pepper spray from her keychain, Louise takes stairs two at a time as quiet as possible.

Another small noise followed by a pregnant silence. The smell of pumpkin-spice Glade air freshener. A shuffling sound.

The door slams against the powder-blue wall of the Kemper's master bedroom and Louise points her pepper spray at the woman she finds on the ground. "Stay exactly where you are." She does not let her voice shake. This could be her mother's killer and she can't show fear in the face of someone so vile. Murderers like things like that, and Louise won't give her the satisfaction.

The woman turns, and she's shocked, but not enough to get up. Her hair is pixie-cut short, dyed dark with auburn roots showing, her delicate features drawn distraught. She's holding a small jewelry box—Alice's—and Louise can see that all of her black-painted nails are bitten down to the quick. "I'm just here for answers."

"What the hell does that mean?" Answers. Louise's suspicions are confirmed that this is about the events of the past few days, but the question remains of how much this woman knows. "You need to start talking before I get impatient."

She stands up, slow, placing the jewelry box on the ground and keeping her hands out to the side. Nonthreatening, or presenting as such. "My name is Tammy. I knew Stuart Kemper, and I want to find out the truth behind what happened to his wife. And to him."

"Nothing's happened to him."

"Then where is he?"

Louise feels her hands get clammy around the pepper spray. It has an effectiveness rating of eighty-five percent and she wishes she'd gotten a taser to go along with it. She should know better.

“I was on parole a couple of years ago. He was always the officer assigned to oversee my group do community service.” She keeps her hands to the side, but Louise can see that they’re shaking. A stress tremor. Different from the way hands shake when someone is nervous. “I don’t want to believe he’s guilty. But I know the cops have already decided who did this.”

He’d been on light duty two years ago after he broke his arm in the field, monitoring community service and speed traps on the DC beltway. He would sometimes call Louise from his patrol car and complain that holding the speed gun hurt his arm more than sitting behind a desk would, but more to hear her laugh than because he actually felt that way.

The details lining up doesn't mean she isn't lying—but there’s an earnestness in this woman’s voice, in her stress-shaking hands. Louise can’t be soft, though. Can’t show weakness. “We’re not talking about his guilt. We’re talking about yours. What were you going to find here that would prove his innocence?”

“You're Louise.”

Her name hangs in the silent bedroom like it does on the plate downstairs. “Yes.”

“Stuart talked about you a lot. He and I kind of became friends. I don't know how much you know about your mother's death, but I think they're going to pin it on your dad. And I don't want that to happen. I really, really want to believe he's innocent.”

“The police are doing their best. Better than we could do.” Her professors had often called her the devil's advocate while she'd been getting her master's in psychotherapy. She was always good at push-back, but that’s what makes her good at her job. It’s in the description.

“Why do you want to believe that?”

“Because he’s *such* a good man.” The woman is close to tears, but her face is grave, serious and imploring. “And if he’s innocent, he doesn’t deserve to be accused of something he didn’t do.”

Tammy’s tone tugs at Louise’s heart, something she has hardened over the years in order to be more rational in her work. Analyzing criminals, she has to keep a logical head. Dennis Rader, the killer known as BTK, had an absent mother. Bundy’s grandfather was a narcissist that beat his wife and the family dog. Just because a killer had a bad childhood, it doesn’t justify his actions later in life. Logically, she should call the cops right now and have them arrest this woman for breaking into her parents’ house.

Instead, she makes a decision that she might not have made if she hadn’t been broken down to separate, aching pieces over the past few days. She lowers her pepper spray and nods. “Good. Okay. If you’re so hellbent on proving my dad is innocent that you’ll break into his house, then I want you to help me. But I need to know how you knew he was the main suspect before the police made a statement to the media.” Uxoricide, statistics—the answer is obvious, but Louise doesn’t think that the woman in front of her would know much about either.

“I work for the forensic pathologist that did your mom’s autopsy.” Her face pales. She has a sickly pallor about her already, but Louise now worries the woman might actually throw up on her mother’s clean wood floors. “Morgan Jeong. She’s the reason we found out that Alice was, um, killed by a different means than we first thought.”

Morgan Jeong. Bill’s wife, someone that Louise has met a smattering of times but has never talked to in depth, Morgan’s job keeping her too busy for the dinners Alice would hold or the police events that families were also invited to. Still, this can work. The gears in Louise’s

brain stutter to life, suddenly working better than they have since the evening the car was pulled from the river. Having a forensic scientist on her side will help.

Louise tries not to think about it, but she is violently reminded of the way her mother's blank face stared out from the shattered windshield into the void beyond. She hopes Tammy and Morgan treated her well. Took care of her before doing the grisly work they had to do. Do what Louise hadn't been able to do. "My dad's best friend is your boss's husband. We're here for the same reason."

Just this morning, Louise was ready to yell at Bill for letting his wife autopsy Alice instead of a regular mortician. But it was good that he did. Any of the overworked and underpaid government workers in the city might have overlooked vital details.

Even if it casts her father in suspicion, Louise needs all of these knife-sharp and telling details. More than that, she needs to know who killed her mother so that she can put them in a cell. So she can dig into their psyche and try to understand what messed up part of their brain chemistry told them to tear apart a family for nothing more than sport. And then like she has done to others that have deserved it, she will pick them apart to nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tammy hadn't lied to Louise. She'd been at the house because she wanted to gauge Stuart's innocence, and the first step to that was to gather evidence. The key, the last thing that Stuart ever gave to her, will lead her to something. She knows it. She tried it on anything with a keyhole, doors and jewelry boxes and dresser drawers, but the key was either too small or wouldn't push all the way in.

Louise had looked at her so calmly when she said that Stuart had been the cop assigned to her parole unit. Tammy is used to looks of surprise, or even judgement. Maybe she's used to it, growing up so close to the force.

The metro screeches to a stop at an above-ground station that's only a three-minute walk from Happy Ends. Tammy got lucky and found a used metro card on the sidewalk leading up to the station nearest her apartment, and it had enough money to get her on the train.

Not enough to get her out of the station, though. She jumps the turnstile, easier at the outdoor stations than the indoor ones. No attendants, no one to really care on the Virginia side of the metro line. Her boots kick up puddles as she hurries down the muddy path to work.

“On time today? Nice.” Morgan is messing with slides in one of the morgue's display cabinets, a macabre collection of blood from bodies the police has given Happy Ends to work on. Not required by the police—and probably not legal in more than a few ways—but a sort of ritual. Tammy joked once that she could be a vampire, all pale skin and dark eyes on top of a collection of blood samples. Morgan didn't appreciate the comparison.

Tammy hangs up her bag in the coat closet, shrugs on her scrubs. “I try my best, Morgan. It's the city that doesn't always agree with me.” She slips the used metro card into the side pocket of her bag before turning back to her boss.

“That's fair,” Morgan says. “This city only agrees with corrupt politicians and Instagram famous yoga moms. So unless you're starting on a campaign that you haven't told me about, I think we're both going to have to get used to it.”

“I'm not running a campaign, but I *am* finding yoga more and more alluring as I get older. Y'know, for flexibility.”

“I'm this close to firing you.”

They're in for some embalming today, if Tammy remembers correctly, followed by a wake upstairs in the afternoon. Those are always her favorite. The basement can get so humid in the summer and so cold in the winter, but the old colonial upstairs is always the perfect temperature. It's also gorgeous—high, wooden ceilings and antique picture windows that let in just the right amount of buttery sunlight. Antique furniture that came with the house. Wood floors that look like every board was cut perfectly and precisely by hand. Even with a dead body in a coffin being the centerpiece of the drawing room most days, the house still retains its historic elegance.

There are parts of the job that Tammy loves and parts she could live without. Embalming can be a bit of both. With a good body, all its veins intact, Tammy can make a single incision in the inner thigh and run the embalming fluid through seamlessly. If the body has started to decompose, or if the person that the body formerly belonged to had a condition that caused their blood vessels to swell before expiration, multiple incisions have to be made to allow the embalming fluid to do its job.

Some days, Tammy wishes that the police would give Morgan a furnace for cremation rather than more centrifuges and DNA synthesizers, but there's also no room in the basement for any other large equipment, already packed to the gills with testing devices and bone saws and decades-old computers.

The body this morning is a woman. Probably not yet in her fifties. Her eyes are closed, but Tammy feels the weight of Alice's stare even as she turns the body's wrist in her hands to determine the status of her perforating veins. They run blue-green beneath her pale skin, slivers of choking algae slithering through a body of water.

What would Stuart's skin look like if he were laid out like this? If they find him in the river and deliver him to her? She thinks of the way his eyes crinkled when he laughed, always booming loud and contagious, because he's so beautiful when he laughs that Tammy can't stand not to join him, but the image is fuzzier than normal. Usually, she can picture him in stark clarity.

What if he never comes back, and she forgets?

"Tammy? You okay?"

She startles, pulling her hands away from the body. Her grip had tightened enough on the left wrist to leave deep red marks, clotted blood squeezing out of the veins into the pockets of skin left by decomp. Two incisions now, at least. One in the wrist, one in the thigh. Extra foundation on the bruising. "Sorry."

Morgan walks over, puts a careful hand on Tammy's arm. "It looked like the representative's body really shook you up the other day. Do you need some time off? I know how it can get to people. I was there, too, once." Her face, normally drawn tight, softens. Tammy still can't understand how this woman has given her the benefit of the doubt so many times.

“Hey, babe? I have some bad news.” A deep voice from behind the curtain.

Tammy startles as she sees the silhouette of a tall man, a blue uniform, a gun on his hip. The curtain parts and Morgan's husband walks in, a kind-faced man just a few years older than Tammy, probably early forties. He offers a smile to his wife, and then looks at Tammy.

Morgan does concise introductions and Tammy hears them and nods, but there's something about the look on Bill's face she finds ingenuine. He's smiling at her as if he's happy to meet her. He's heard so much about her, he says. He's starstruck meeting the legend in the flesh.

This is the smile that he must show to the families of victims, something bright but also pitying. Fake in a way that's practiced. He knows about Tammy's past, probably from Morgan. He'd want to know if his wife was working with a felon to gauge the danger. “Really, though—it's nice to finally meet you. Thanks for keeping my wife sane.” His voice rises and falls in all the right places.

“Thanks. And, um—nice to meet you too.” She likes Morgan, so she won't be rude.

Bill clears his throat and turns to his wife. “I wish I was here for a romantic lunch. Unfortunately, that's not the hand I was dealt today. I came with the coroner. Another body from the Potomac, DC side. Commissioner Chandran wants to know if you can look at it today.”

Morgan nods solemnly. “Yeah, no problem. We can push back some body prep, and I can stay late tomorrow if I need to. You'll have to cook dinner though.” Machines whirl behind the curtain, echoing in the enclosed basement.

Bill puts his hand on her arm and squeezes. There is a quiet intensity between them that Tammy doesn't quite understand, fueled by their deep understanding of one another. A

familiarity so strong it can be picked up on in the way they touch, the soft way they speak. “I’m sorry, babe. Thanks for always being open to help. I’ll make your favorite.”

“Tell the commissioner that he’s going to owe me lunch pretty soon if he keeps interrupting my flow of business like this.” She nods towards the curtain, letting Bill lead the way to the body bag presumably waiting upstairs.

The bodies from the police always take precedence at Happy Ends. Tammy pulls a white sheet of thick plastic over the now less important woman’s body, her embalming to be delayed until at least this afternoon. Something isn’t right about that thought. In the industrial freezer, she won’t decay more than Morgan can fix up with a little silicone and makeup. Regardless, Tammy finds herself wondering whether the dead are impatient to be buried, their souls inconsolable until they’re finally interred in earth, or their ashes released to nature. Becoming one with the buzzing aura that runs through the planet, the same undercurrent that cuts through DC’s streets each morning.

Tammy has never thought much about who will take care of her body when she dies. Or where she’ll end up. If her mother was still alive, she would’ve wanted Tammy placed in a coffin, beneath a tree or surrounded by flowers. She always loved the parks in DC, close to Arlington Cemetery. And now she’s buried in a single plot in the cheapest graveyard in northern Virginia.

“Is the table prepped?” Morgan’s head pops through the curtain.

“Just wiping it down now.”

The scent of chemical cleaner and bleach is sharp and head-clearing. The metal table shines in the single overhead light, its attached sink and worktop pre-sterilized and ready for what’s to come.

Bill, Morgan, and an older man in a blue jacket with the words 'Medical Examiner' printed across the back roll a stretcher forward and transfer a black body bag onto the autopsy table. The shape of a body inside is always unsettling. The subtle curves of a person beneath the tarp, no way to tell if they're alive or dead apart from the implications of the bag. Tammy watches, waiting to see the slight rise of the chest while a breath is taken, the twitch of a hand or foot. Something that will undo what appearances suggest—that would undo what happened to whoever is ensconced in the black tarp.

Morgan unzips the bag. The woman inside is dead. Tammy exhales.

"I'll see you later, Morgan." Bill stands in the doorway, holding the curtain to the side. The coroner walks up the stairs behind him. "And it was nice meeting you, Tammy."

She nods, trying to offer a smile back, but her eyes catch on the girl on the table and she thinks about all the bodies in the river just outside Happy Ends, the ones that haven't been found yet or never will be, and she turns away before Jeong can notice the sudden panic she feels within her chest, right between her ribs, imagining the possibility of Stuart down there with them, a phantom in the loam.

#

The woman laid on the table is young. Tammy might not even call her a woman. A girl, maybe seventeen. Her face is pale, lips blue. Her eyes are closed, but the lids aren't convex. Tammy can only guess that her eyes are half gone, eaten by the creatures that live in the Potomac and survive off soft tissue from whatever dead things they can find floating across the river bottom.

Something tugs at her. Persistent. There is something she needs to remember.

“This is... grim.” Morgan shakes her head. “Who does this to a girl this young? Or anyone?”

“You don't think she drowned herself?”

“No. I can already see bruising on the inner arms. There was a struggle before her body was dumped.”

Tammy and Morgan begin the meticulous process of collecting evidence. While Morgan examines the girl's torso and arms, Tammy does an inspection of her lower half. “A lot of bruising around her ankles, too.” The bruising is mottled, more red than purple, inconsistent with the way blood flows when a living person bursts a blood vessel. Might be post-mortem. “Did Lieutenant Jeong bring her belongings?”

“You can just call him Bill. I'm sure he wouldn't mind, even if he was here.” Morgan smiles at her across the body, a jarring scene but not the weirdest thing Tammy has seen at Happy Ends. “And yeah, they're out in the lab. Already processed, they just want me to test some fibers. You going to check her shoes?”

“You know it.” Tammy is already moving towards the lab, eager to get some distance between her and the body. Something still sticks in her mind, a detail waiting to be focused on.

“Change gloves before touching them, please!”

The first thing Morgan ever taught Tammy about bodies was their natural processes after death. Post-mortem swelling, decomposition, putrefaction—all words in a dictionary in Tammy's head dedicated to the worst part of her job. Swelling can cause post-mortem bruising, especially in corpses found in bodies of water. If the girl was wearing high-top shoes, tied too tight, her ankles would have swollen against the fabric, blood vessels rupturing under the pressure of her own natural processes.

Alternatively, her ankles had been bound after or right before death, causing the pressure that would form post-mortem bruising. Small details like this are Morgan's job, discerning between the mundane and the terrible, and slowly, Tammy has begun to pick up this skillset she never thought she'd need when her mom was talking to her about art school, about submitting pieces to galleries, about going to Europe to see her favorite paintings in person.

The contents of the plastic bag smell like mildew and trash. After putting on a new pair of gloves, Tammy grabs a pair of large forceps and pulls several items from within: the body's—the girl's—red-and-blue striped shirt, a dirty twenty-dollar bill, a left shoe, and a small, plastic-beaded charm bracelet.

Tammy's head pounds. She realizes what's been bothering her this entire time, since her eyes first landed on the pale face of the newest body to the morgue.

The bone saw starts to shriek in the morgue, a startling sound that puts Tammy even more on edge. Morgan is beginning to cut the ribs away, to process and check all the organs for abnormalities.

Tammy pushes aside the curtain, mask down and face guard up. Morgan stills the saw when she sees Tammy, probably about to give her hell for not being properly outfitted in the morgue.

“She's the girl that went missing near my apartment. I know her face—I used to see her working at the 7/11 on the corner. She was on the news a while ago.” The colorful bracelet hanging from Jennifer Sullivan's small wrist, a large smile on her face, Stuart still next to Tammy on her couch, Saturn watching them from behind the TV. A scrolling plea beneath the photo: *If you've seen this girl or know anyone who has, please call 911 immediately.*

Tammy goes back into the lab, finds her phone in the coat closet, and pulls up the first article she can. The same picture pops up, Jennifer smiling, looking out at Tammy and now Morgan, her face guard and mask slightly speckled with black blood.

“That looks a lot like her. I should probably call Bill.” She turns towards the morgue again, then hesitates, turns back towards Tammy.

“What are you thinking?”

“There’s something about her hands—I’m not sure if I’m reading into things too much.”

Morgan gestures for Tammy to follow her back into the morgue. “Look at the bruising along the arms and on the wrists. She’s been in the river for a while, I can definitely tell that, but—doesn’t it look like her wrists were bound to you?”

Tammy breathes in deep but can't seem to lessen the pressure on her chest. “Didn’t we see a similar thing recently?” It was Alice, and Tammy can still remember those red, too-straight marks around her wrists and ankles, much like the ones that would be left by a pair of high-tops tied too tight, and the shoes Tammy had seen in the bag before getting to the charm bracelet had been pink, low-top Reeboks.

“It’s just like Alice Kemper.” Morgan’s confirmation of Tammy’s thoughts doesn’t help the feeling of blood pooling in her fingertips, of static in her bones. “And knots like that—ones that won’t slip when the body starts its post-mortem processes—they’re purposeful.”

Please don't say it. Please don't.

“With just one body, I wouldn’t have made a connection. I don’t want to make assumptions, but this might have been Stuart Kemper. And it implies that he's killed before. These little tells aren't the mark of someone killing randomly. They're the pieces of evidence that are used to put away serial killers. These are consistent, matching ligature marks.”

Tammy shakes her head. Maybe his wife. An emotionally charged crime backed by years of resentment. Something unintended that couldn't be stopped. But not this—right? Stuart's just a tired man, weary from the world he sees every day at work. Suddenly, Tammy wished she'd watched more *Forensic Files* as a kid in her mother's kitchen, their small TV surrounded by buzzing static electricity on a stool in the corner. Was it common for police to go off the rails after a while, their minds and morals tarnished by the things they're forced to deal with?

If Stuart had the chance, would he have killed Tammy?

She shakes her head, vigorous, like she can loosen the thought from her mind, or stop it from ever having occurred to her. He used to buy her carnations from the same 7/11 that Jennifer Sullivan worked at, and she'd put them in a vase in the kitchen and admire the lines of each individual petal and consider drawing something for the first time in years. "The evidence just isn't there for him to have killed Alice—the representative. Or this girl. What would have even been the reason?"

"I think the real question lies in how easy it would be for him to pick her up. As a cop, you can tell just about anyone to get into your car. And just about anyone will do it."

Stuart driving up to her in the parking lot at Gravelly Point after her last court-appointed community service session, no longer a criminal under parole, the window rolling down to reveal a face that must have been gorgeous in youth and had mellowed out to a handsomeness that Tammy only saw in older men, a sort of matureness in the set of the jaw, the eyes. His invitation: coffee, no pressure, just two adults talking. They both read Charlaine Harris's mystery series and he'd love to continue their conversation from earlier. The sound of a plane overhead, drowning out Tammy's initial response. And then the bite of his car's air conditioning and the cool leather

seats sticking to the back of her bare thighs, her off-brand denim shorts scratching against the nice leather seats of his patrol car.

Much later, after Tammy has showered to wash the smell of death and formaldehyde from her skin, her phone chimes and she jumps, startled. No one texts her. All of her friends from before her sentence slowly found that they didn't have the free time to fit Tammy in anymore. There is a single notification from a number she doesn't have saved asking her to come to the Wharf.

Tammy pulls a ball cap over her still-wet hair—the Sox, Stuart's team—and leaves the apartment, unable to stop thinking about that cop car, the heat of the day, the overwhelming drone of summer cicadas and highway traffic. Stuart's handsome face, kind and weary. She hadn't thought twice about getting in.

CHAPTER SIX

Louise and Bill are sitting outside the Peet's Coffee in Georgetown at an iron table that has retained the day's cold, its frigid touch against the skin of Louise's forearms more of a wake-up call than the burnt coffee she has between her gloved hands. It's cramped, gaggles of tourists and commuters shuffling by almost too close for comfort, but the city itself is gorgeous. The short buildings that line the street are all pops of primary color against brown brickwork, stylish storefront displays, graffiti that could be displayed in the MoMA, layered posters for upcoming concerts at the 9:30 Club and the Black Cat. Louise comes here when she wants to feel like a DC local even though she isn't one, a tourist because she grew up just across the 14th Street Bridge.

The coffee shop is close enough to the Third District station that Bill didn't go out of his way to meet her, and it's far enough that no other cops are going to see them together. Talking to the daughter of a case's main suspect is taboo unless it's recorded and standardized in an interrogation room, but Louise and Bill know each other better than that. It's why she tells him about the previous night.

"You're admitting to breaking into Stuart's house and potentially contaminating evidence of what is technically a crime scene, and you still have the balls to ask for my help?" He doesn't seem angry—amused, maybe, in a terrible way that he shouldn't be, but Louise will take it.

"You're the only one who knows my dad like I do. And I'm hoping you'll see why it was necessary."

"The police already went over everything in the house. I'm not sure what you thought you were going to find that we couldn't." Bill sighs and takes a long sip of his coffee, three creams and five sugars, a combination that Louise has put together for him in her parents'

kitchen more times than she can count. “You’ve got me in a corner here, kid. Commissioner Chandran is telling me to call it and declare Stuart guilty so they can hold a trial in absentia. If he doesn’t show up, he can’t defend himself, and it’s in the black and off the commissioner’s hands. But you and I both know I don’t want that to happen. To him or to you.”

Trial in absentia. Louise’s body feels cold, useless. It’s not hard to get around the laws that require a defendant to be in court despite the astounding amount of legal red tape that smothers the judicial system. If he doesn’t show up, there’s no way a lawyer could prove his innocence. His absence is a guilty sentence to people that don’t know him well, and no judge in DC is going to be moved by a statement from her or Bill. Where the hell *is* he?

This morning on the local news, a picture of her father was put up next to helicopter footage of his hatchback being dredged from the river. The station has put out an APB. The line scrolling across the screen: *Husband of Virginia Representative Kemper Suspected of Homicide*. A vague statement from Commissioner Chandran saying that no, they haven’t ruled anyone out yet but yes, they think they’re close to solving the case.

It’s why Louise called Bill, shaking, and asked him to meet her face-to-face. Her apartment was too big, too empty, and its view of the Potomac from her high-up perch was just making things worse. She pays an extra hundred dollars a month to be riverside. The emptiness out there, the wide stain of the river, reminded Louise of her mother’s limp body in the passenger seat, the smell of the mud dredged up along with her dad’s car. She dried her eyes and made sure her face wasn’t puffy before heading out, applying concealer over red, blotchy skin.

“If he shows up, do you think he’ll have a chance?” Maybe her father is still in town. Something about the APB, the picture of Stuart on their last fishing trip smiling next to his hooked cod, had put something like hope in the space behind her ribs.

“I think the evidence of violence before her death will make it difficult. The track record for domestic violence in police—”

“I know. Forty percent of male police officers have been accused or convicted.” She gets this familiar coiling in her chest, small and hot, the same she felt when she first saw the news headline this morning, when she heard Commissioner Chandran speak at his sham of a press conference. The cup squeezes too easily between her hands, coffee bubbling out of the black plastic lid. “But Dad wasn’t like that.”

“Of course not. He wouldn’t have laid a hand on Alice. I don’t doubt that.”

“Did you have Morgan autopsy her to check?” She wants to lash out. Throw her coffee to the ground just to watch the pedestrians recoil from it. Make Bill react in a way that isn’t dead calm and caring. Her father is the definition of a good man, and that fact should never come into question. “Just in case?”

Bill looks at her like he’s disappointed, and Louise has to take a deep breath. He leans back, coffee in his hands, the steam curling up into the air and grazing his five-o’clock-shadowed face before disappearing into the harsh gray sky. His voice is soft when he speaks. “I’m not your enemy, kid.”

Louise’s cheeks burn red, hot and cold. She knows that. Still, she can’t meet Bill’s eyes, instead watching a few ants march across the table in harried formation.

“It’s just been a bad week for DC. The morgues get busy. And Morgan—there’s not one person I trust more than her to do her job right. If I’d heard they were going to have one of their amateur coroners autopsy Alice, I would have stepped in and had her sent to Morgan anyway.” He pauses, frowning, deep lines forming in his rough face, weather-beaten and tired in a way Louise understands too well. “God, I’m sorry. That sounded so business-like. It’s just the job,

sometimes. Your mother was an amazing woman, you know? It's strange to process that kind of grief when I'm used to things like this happening all the time." The ants have made it to his side of the table, to his coffee cup, and he swipes them from its surface with a casual movement of his hand. He seems uncomfortable, something in the line of his shoulders. Tension usually forms there when people are stressed or lying. Bill has signs of tension everywhere on him, in the shake of his hands, in the way he hasn't shaved, in the restless bounce of his leg. Her dad may be missing, but so is his best friend. A man he grew up with. "They've just never happened to me."

"I'm sorry, Bill."

Bill reaches out and takes Louise's hand when she offers it. Warm and cold. His hand and the iron table. So many things warring inside of her. She wants to be logical but there's an edge she keeps getting closer to, a breaking point that she's afraid of. The liminality she's forcing herself to exist in can only hold her for so long.

Eventually, she will have to come to terms with the fact that they might both be gone.

She bites her lip hard, tastes copper. Watches the reflection of the people passing by the Urban Outfitter's across the street in its floor-to-ceiling window. Bill sighs and she wants to as well but she has to hold her breath in right now. Because if she lets it out, she doesn't know what will happen.

"Nothing to be sorry for, kid. We'll find out what happened. I promise." He goes quiet. Considering something. A twist to his lips that is ruminative, hesitant. He wants to tell her something, she can tell, but he doesn't know if he should. "This didn't come from me. And—man, Louise, I shouldn't do this. I checked Stuart's phone records a couple days back and we found a few calls to an address in the District. Not related to his cases. Andrea Rodriguez. She lives near the Wharf. She wouldn't speak to the rookie that went by yesterday, and that means I

can't go there without a warrant, and we have one in the works, but—you know how Chandran's acting right now. Every request I put in is getting delayed or lost."

He can't be suggesting this. Bill, a police lieutenant after years of hard work, always a stickler for the rules. The same man that would chew her dad out when he didn't pull people over for going ten over the speed limit.

"I'm going to write down her address for you. Lose the paper as soon as possible." He raises his hand to his face, presses two careful fingers to the bridge of his nose like he's getting a headache, trying to stave it off. "I can't suggest that you do anything with it. But you're basically a cop yourself at this point, kid. Stuart trained you real well. You have all your degrees."

Cops have psychotherapists that work for them on retainer, but Louise has always been contract-based, independently employed. She's never solved a crime the way Bill has, or her father, despite the logic puzzles he'd give her when she was younger, despite the fact that he'd ask her for her opinion on some cases even when he wasn't supposed to tell her about them. "I'm still not qualified to do things like this. But I think knowing what I do makes me more positive that it couldn't have been Dad. I know Alice stressed him out a lot, but—he doesn't have the psychological profile of a killer. He sees himself as a martyr. Someone that's supposed to save the day, no matter the cost. He has an inferiority complex that can sometimes make him a people-pleaser. Those kinds of people are often the ones that get killed first in home invasions and shootouts because of their self-sacrificing natures."

Bill is silent for a second, considering her words. "Don't they say that if you're a therapist, you shouldn't treat family?"

Louise nods.

"Maybe it's not Stuart that saw himself as a martyr. Maybe it was you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Many of Stuart's thoughts leading up to his disappearance revolved around Tammy. There had been a point the month prior when he wanted to tell her that he loved her. That when he'd seen her at Gravelly Point, picking up litter for her community service hours, he had never seen a more beautiful woman. But he'd never been good at putting his thoughts into coherent words, and that was what Tammy deserved from him. That and more. She was too young to be seeing an old, burnt-out cop. She had so much ahead of her. Tying herself to him would not be good, especially not with the direction his life was heading.

Alice was the opposite of her. Where his wife was clean-cut, professional, and cold, Tammy was fluid with the way she dressed, expressing herself any way she could. And above all, she was so warm, like inside of her there was a flame. Stuart was afraid that if he touched her, he would put that flame out.

Instead, she passed on that passion and warmth to him. He started to love his job again. He wanted to talk to the people around him, to interact with his co-workers and the people he was doing his job for and the whole city, a living, breathing thing that asked him to put his finger on its pulse.

They could never go out, because the media knew Stuart's face well enough that if he was seen with a younger woman, his face would be across the tabloids the next day. Alice's reputation in the wind.

Lately, Stuart had been caring less about Alice's reputation and more about himself. It's something he hadn't let himself do in a long time. There were people that needed him to be something, and he was willing to give to any extent he could.

But there's an unexpected, quiet happiness in taking time to care for yourself.

He found himself doing a crossword on a dilapidated couch in a crappy studio apartment in south DC, and it was the best day of his whole damn life. The object of his affections—though she would have balked at that term, too old-fashioned, implying women are objects—stretched across the bed opposite him, playing sudoku. Her idea of a date, picking up some puzzle books from the food-slash-magazine truck where they'd bought *tacos de lengua* and two plastic cups of horchata, and Tammy had cinnamon on her lips when he'd kissed her on the short walk home.

"You're like a new person." Bill said one day, only a month before Stuart's disappearance, pouring them both a cup of coffee in the station's break room. "I just don't get it, man. It's like you got ten years back. What's the secret?"

Stuart considered the question for longer than he maybe should have. "There's no secret. I think it just took me a while to figure out that there's more to this city than I'd thought there was."

In her apartment, Stuart had forgotten about his crossword. Tammy smiled when she saw him watching the way her careful fingers held her pen—artist's hands, though she stopped painting a while ago. Still so elegant. "We can switch books if you're stuck. I'm running out of numbers to fit into this puzzle, anyway." Then, softer, "Unless you're enjoying your crossword. I can struggle on for a little more."

Stuart thinks of that exact moment right before he vanishes from Tammy's life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Wharf is unexpectedly quiet when Louise arrives, sitting on a wide, wooden post at the edge of the docks and watching the gentle sway of the moored sailboats and catamarans. Large, white swaths of canvas shoot up into the dark sky, the metal lines attached to the masts clinking delicately against each other, an impractical windchime. It's impossible to see the stars from here—even quiet, the lights from the apartment buildings and offices that have popped up around the Wharf drown out the night's beauty.

Louise remembers when this part of DC was just fish markets that smelled of overripe shrimp and cooked crab, lines of people clamoring for the lowest priced cod and mullet filets. It was like a carnival—vendors set up in white-and-yellow striped tents, the hastily set up floodlights that came before the ornate streetlamps painting the trash-littered ground a sickly shade of orange. Her dad brought her there some nights when he wasn't working late but Alice was. Cleaned the Old Bay from her sticky hands with a wad of napkins he brought from home.

Now there's a few nice restaurants on the water, upscale clubs with mandatory dress codes, a concert hall. Enough public trash cans for people to dispose of their ten-dollar craft IPAs instead of throwing them on the ground, though a few cans still linger down here on the docks, closer to the river. Louise had a meeting with one of her client's superintendents at the riverside bar a few years ago, the warden of a prison that wanted her to work with the more violent inmates. She had refused the job, even though he begged her to help—another PR nightmare would be the end of his career after it was implied that his prison guards weren't able to handle the inmates in supermax—but Louise saw no point. Her profession lets her read people enough that she can try to help them work through their traumas. She can figure out the motive of a

murderer, but there's no way to fix a felon that did something so terrible as the ones he was asking her to work with. No level of remorse can undo a purposeful crime.

Louise is hesitant to work with Tammy. She had been on community service. Something she did made this necessary. But her father had trusted this woman, and for now, that's enough.

It takes Tammy ten minutes to reach the docks where Louise is waiting, and her cheeks are mottled red, her hands buried deep into the pockets of her puffy jacket, zipped all the way up to the collar. She must have walked—or jogged, her breath coming heavy, each exhale turning to fog in the night's chill. “Did something happen?”

Louise hadn't given Tammy any details over text—Bill asked her to keep everything quiet. No paper trails that could lose him his job. But still, even with the inherent risk, he'd done this for her. Gave her something to work towards so she wouldn't go insane sitting at home and tracing those water rings on her now unimportant client folders.

The trial in absentia creeps closer. It's only a matter of time before Chandran is able to push the case to its close before the truth has been revealed. Before her dad's name is ruined forever. Before she has to answer for the crimes he didn't commit. Part of her wants to cease existing just to be able to let go of this responsibility. This burden. The other part is hellbent on using this lead to prove her father's innocence.

There's no way to know why her dad called this woman so many times. But maybe she can provide something. An alibi. A detail that means he couldn't have killed Alice. Maybe he's there, sitting in her living room with a cup of his favorite green tea in his hands, waiting for Louise to show up. Or maybe there's something worse.

She gives Tammy the gist of what Bill told her, and then adds, “I want you there to check the place for any kind of physical evidence. Blood spatter. Anything that points to violence

happening on the premises.” Her voice sounds weak and she clears her throat. Trains herself to sound confident. They’ll go in and charm this woman and get what they need. If that doesn’t work, Louise has enough cash in her wallet to buy some information. Tammy’s background in forensics is just a helpful extra, valuable in the case that Louise isn’t as perceptive as usual.

Tammy is silent for a moment, her face unreadable, half-obscured by the high collar of her jacket. “Louise, I’m not sure I’m gonna be good enough to help you there.”

“You work for Morgan.”

“Yeah,” she starts, flustered now, her hands curling nervous by her sides, “but I’ve never worked at a crime scene. It’s different from just working a body. I’m not trained. I mean, with my record, I’m not sure I could—”

“Felons can both get their mortuary licenses and work in forensics. You should do some research on that when you have free time.” Louise assumes that’s most of Tammy’s time outside of work, if she hasn’t applied herself in a job that requires a certain kind of drive to succeed. And her silence—it implies that Louise has been right. A felony, not a misdemeanor. Something bad enough to get her charged and put in jail.

This might be a waste of time, but Tammy’s already here, so she clenches her teeth and begins to walk along the dock, following the directions she’d memorized towards Bill’s lead. Tammy doesn’t follow her, deciding to watch, still, from the bottom of the concrete stairs that lead to the Wharf proper.

It’s already late. Louise doesn’t have time for Tammy to get cold feet. “Are you coming?”

“Do you still want me to?”

Louise considers telling Tammy to turn around, go home, but she thinks of showing up at a stranger's house with a half-baked plan and a sickening drive to find out anything about her father, and she is scared to do this alone. Bill couldn't come with her for obvious reasons—and who, apart from him, is left to argue her dad's case? “You can stand there in the cold, or you can follow me. Up to you.”

Tammy is by her side in an instant, just as Louise knew she would be. It's not like she's proud of it—nothing that Louise has done in the past week is anything she would have been proud of before all of this—but Tammy is clearly dealing with an inferiority complex, much worse than Stuart's, and pleasing those around her, no matter how tangential the connection, is something she will always try to do. It's the reason she was in the house when they first met. The reason she sounded so broken over a man she barely knows.

The wood is damp beneath Louise's feet, the water beside it shimmering in the unobstructed moonlight, painting white lines on an otherwise black canvas. The dock brings them to another set of stairs that curves a few flights up into one of Southwest's residential areas, the buildings much shorter and less shiny than the ones that flank the Wharf. Between breaths, Louise fills Tammy in on the finer details of where they're going and why, and every stair she takes is another step towards uncertainty, towards the possibility of a lead that, with a single misstep, they won't be able to use.

Where the docks had been eerily silent because of what had once been there, the street they begin to walk down feels like it's never known noise or life. There is the sound of sleeping gulls cawing lightly in unison. The smell of salt and soil. It's all cookie-cutter for-rent condos out here, multi-level, one unit upstairs and one downstairs. The doors to the downstairs units are slightly below sidewalk level, cast in shadow by the porches of the apartments above them.

Much farther in the distance, up in the sky behind the barren sycamores that line the streets at equidistant points, the spotlights of the Washington Nationals' Stadium shoot up into the light-polluted, blue-black skyline.

The condo that Bill told Louise about is one of the downstairs units, a sign on the door asking visitors to knock. The whole façade is cheery, a flowerbox in the single street-facing window full of winter jasmine, a faded welcome mat just before the door with its own white-and-yellow wildflowers staring up at them.

Tammy grabs Louise's arm, stopping her before she descends the few steps leading to the front door. Louise wants to shrug her off, but there is an immediacy to her grip, arresting in its strength. Her hands are so petite that Louise wouldn't have expected this kind of force from her slender fingers. "What if she doesn't want to help?"

"I'm not considering that as an option."

"Shouldn't you?" She's almost pleading. Frightened. Not sure what will be behind this door, just like Louise, but handling it worse. "Or what if what we find is bad?"

"The bad things we could find are evidence that she's a killer or my dad's body."

Louise's throat constricts. She clenches her teeth so hard together that it feels like she's forming cracks in the enamel. She shouldn't have said that. He's not dead. He's just missing. "If she had anything to do with my dad's disappearance, then we're calling the police. I'm not going to let her get away with anything if she's a criminal."

Tammy doesn't answer—just nods, shoulders curved inwards, feet shuffling forwards as they both approach the door. The look on her face is a heart-shattered, broken thing, and Louise doesn't think there will ever be a time where this woman hears someone else called a criminal and doesn't equate that with herself.

CHAPTER NINE

Tammy knocks hard with her knuckles, the sharp sound bouncing back and ringing in her ears. She knows she needs to be here, but there's so much uncertainty in this situation. The question of who is behind the door and how much she knows about Stuart. It makes Tammy feel sick, sweat beading on her forehead, cooling and quickly becoming uncomfortable.

The way Louise had said Andrea could be a criminal was so clear-cut. Like she has a definition for the word 'criminal' and it's not good.

Of course it's not. There's nothing good that comes out of that word. But there was a certain disgust there that she can't just ignore. Tammy is a criminal, technically, and her crime was so selfish. Maybe that makes it worse. The thought of telling Louise about it makes her feel like a teenager again, terrified to tell her stepfather that she'd put a dent in his decade-old Toyota Sera. She doesn't want to know what Louise thinks she deserves.

The door opens a few inches, a security chain glinting in front of a shadowed face. The woman who opens the door is older, crow's feet around her eyes, her skin starting to fold at the base of her jaw, giving her the look of a bulldog that hasn't quite grown into its features. "I don't know you."

"No, but you know my father," Louise says, blunt. "You must be Mrs. Rodriguez—I found your name and address in his contact book. I'm just making rounds to see if anyone has heard of him."

"You didn't think to call first?"

"There was no number. I would have."

Louise is either making all of this up on the spot, or she lied to Tammy, because this isn't what she said happened. Or she knows that mentioning she got this woman's address from a cop would be a red flag. An instant end to the conversation. Tammy thinks of how Louise alluded to Andrea potentially being a criminal.

"I just need a little help, Mrs. Rodriguez." Her voice is tactfully pleading. Like she's being genuine. Maybe she is. "My dad could be in trouble. You might have seen him on the news—Stuart Kemper?"

The door shuts. Night stretches out, and Tammy looks at Louise with a grimace. They should go—this is a bad idea, no matter what they might dig up. They obviously touched a nerve with Stuart's name. Louise looks determined, though, her pointed features severe in the overhead light of the streetlamp. Like she would break down the door herself to find out what's inside.

A gust of warm air evaporates the night's cold as the door swings open. "*Miss Rodriguez.* That is what you will call me."

"I can do that," Louise says. Hopeful.

"You said Kemper?" Her face has softened, and any scrutiny Louise had been under is gone. Andrea asks for proof that she's his daughter and Louise provides it, though uneasily, holding out her ID for inspection as if buying a bottle of wine at Trader Joe's. "Virginia license, huh? I could tell just from looking at you. Your friend, however, does not look as well off as you. Did you bring muscle?"

Muscle? Tammy considers her arms for a moment, but the sheer lack of any muscle definition is clear to her. This woman can't be serious.

“Not muscle.” Louise hides the expression from Andrea, but when she looks back at Tammy, it’s clear that she’s thinking the same thing. A ridiculous notion from an overly paranoid woman. “A friend of my dad’s. She wants to know, too.”

Andrea considers Tammy, squinting, scrutinizing. “Fine. Are you here for the papers? I don't know if they'll be of any use to you now.”

“Papers?” Louise shifts, her stance losing that easy confidence she carries in the set of her shoulders. “My father’s?”

Andrea nods. “The Kemper that's on the news. Stuart. I've had his documents ready for a month or so.” She lowers her voice. “If he murdered his wife, he's not going to escape with the package I have for him. He didn't even ask for a passport.”

Clarity dawns on Tammy slow, like cream spreading out through coffee. Swirling, roiling. Stuart was here for a new identity. Papers to get him out of the state.

“He didn't.” Louise looks dead calm—the kind of calm you get before the worst of the storm, Homer’s *The Gulf Stream* hung up on Tammy’s mom’s bedroom wall depicting a small ship adrift at sea, its single passenger looking out at the waves that will be his end. “He didn't murder his wife.”

Andrea shrugs. “You seem very passionate about this. I won't say more.”

She ushers Tammy and Louise inside, moving to the kitchen as soon as they're comfortable in the small living room. The apartment is cramped, but cozy, shelves filled with pictures of family and friends in silver-plated frames, sets of small porcelain animals, a china cabinet with glass doors that displays plates adorned with green-and-gold leaves. The house of a normal woman in her late fifties. If her address was given to Louise by Bill Jeong, a cop, then that means she’s on the police’s radar. They could be close to arresting her. Will anyone be there

to pack up Andrea's belongings when she's taken away in handcuffs? Wrap the china plates in brown paper and sort them carefully into labeled boxes?

She comes back out with a pitcher of iced tea, three glasses, and a manila folder. "I'm sure you know the risks of coming here. If you get me in trouble, I get you in trouble, and my associates won't take well to me being put away."

"Yes, ma'am," Louise says, like it's easy.

Tammy can't find her voice. Despite the people she has known, she forgets how career criminals can change on the spot. A life of risks does not create a weak-willed person.

"These are what I was asked to make."

The folder contains two items: a birth certificate and a Maryland state driver's license. Both have a fake name, but the driver's license has a recognizable photo. Stuart, unsmiling, staring into the ether.

"That's his passport photo," Louise says. She reaches towards it, fingers almost grazing the ID's glossy edge. "I remember driving him to CVS for this when his arm was broken. It's probably the only photo I've seen of him where he isn't smiling."

The photo reminds Tammy of Alice in the morgue: that long, unflinching stare that asks too much. The little silver key burns a hole in Tammy's pocket, a question and a reminder.

"I already received payment in full, so if you want them, they're yours. He's not a risk to me. Otherwise, I'll wait until Stuart comes around." Andrea pours herself a glass of iced tea. "Although, I don't think he'll come himself. Tea? No? Kemper didn't drop off the papers in person. He paid someone else to do it—that girl."

Louise is the one who speaks, though Tammy is sure they're thinking the same thing. A lead. "What girl?"

Andrea takes a long sip of her iced tea. “The girl on the local news. Not as interesting as a cop killing his wife, so CNN didn’t pick it up. She was only a couple of years younger than my son. It’s a shame what happens to young people these days on this side of town.”

“Jennifer Sullivan.” Tammy’s voice shakes a little. Stuart had known her, too. She wasn’t a random girl he’d seen on the street. She’d been a witness.

“Yes, that’s it—Jennifer. Such a pretty smile.”

Tammy wishes Stuart had told her what was going on instead of leaving a note. Maybe some of this would make sense. Once again, she hates that she couldn’t have stopped being lazy enough to check the hiding spot before the storm. Even though the two connected victims found their way back to Stuart, there’s still the possibility that he didn’t kill them. What did Morgan always say a killer needed? *Motive, means, modus operandi.*

Stuart had motive, Tammy thinks, judging by the way he would come to her apartment so keyed up from what his wife had said to him before he left home that he couldn’t sit still for an hour or two. Couldn’t stop tapping his fingers on her desk and chewing on his lower lip, anxious. He was a cop, so he had means. Tammy could never really wrap her head around the last part, but she’s sure the ligature marks are relevant. Stuart talked to her about it sometimes, between episodes of *Criminal Minds* or whatever other procedural was on that day. He pointed out the inconsistencies in the characters’ methods and the misinterpretation of proper police protocol, and Tammy just listened, enraptured, to the soft rumble of his voice as he outlined concepts and laws that she’d never heard of, even after working for Morgan for so long. “Do you know if she has any family—”

A police siren, screeching through the apartment much too loud. Ear-piercing. Blue lights flashing through the street-facing window, casting patterns on the opposite wall through the lace curtain.

The folder is snatched up from the table. Andrea looks around, calm, points to the door behind them further into the house. “In there, behind the clothes.”

She doesn't give them time to answer. She runs into the kitchen much faster than Tammy thought she could move, and this is going to be the end. Tammy's going to go to jail again. Repeated sentence means she'll be in for ten years minimum. She remembers cold food, hot summers with no AC, the slow decline in visits and phone calls. She'll never know what happened to Stuart and she'll never get to see him again and she'll have failed both him and Alice, two faces that will forever weigh on her conscience with their dead-eyed stares.

Louise's hand is a vice grip on her shoulder. There is a loud knock at the front door, followed by muffled yelling.

Tammy shadows Louise to the closet at the back of the dining room, full of tweed jackets and frilly, colorful church dresses, ironed pants and dress shirts that sag with the scent of mothballs. They're going to be found, no matter how well they hide.

She steps into the dark.

Dust hits her nose and she suppresses a sneeze. They hide behind the array of colorful, mismatching clothes, pulling the matching ironed shirt-and-skirt sets closed in front of them, creating a wall. A tweed jacket brushes uncomfortably against her arm. Louise pulls two of the dresses down and piles them in front of their feet, a mass of bright-colored satin and velvet. When Tammy was young, and she'd play hide and seek with her mom. She'd always forget to do the little stuff like that—hide her feet, make sure she was invisible from all angles.

Louise gives Tammy a long, meaningful look, then squeezes her hand.

Tammy squeezes back, trying to remember the last time she'd been shown any sort of kindness by anyone but Morgan. She wants to say thank you. Her throat is full of cotton.

The front door slams against the wall and the whine of the sirens screams through the house. Radios click. A man's raised voice splits the air in two, and someone is yelling—Andrea, asking for a warrant, a reason for the intrusion, and then nothing more than mercy until her voice fades and is drowned out by the siren.

There are cautious footsteps much too close to the closet.

She stops breathing. She wills herself to be smaller, pushing herself back against the wall as if she can sink into it and cease to exist. Her foot taps something solid—a pair of shiny, brown dress shoes with intricate broguing tucked into the closet's corner. Tammy grabs one and holds it like a weapon, testing the sharpness of the heel's corners with her thumb. Her hand is clammy in Louise's, and their mutual hold is so tight that Tammy's bones feel like they're about to snap.

The door opens. The curtain of clothes is moved aside, dissolving the childish hope that they might not, in fact, get caught. A flashlight shines in her eyes, then lowers. Time seems to move like it's fractured, each moment slowing and speeding up in time with Tammy's heartbeats.

Bill Jeong stands in front of them, holding the door partially closed, obscuring them from view. He takes a long moment to look between her and Louise. Tammy is outside of her body, looking at the scene as a bystander, even as the too-loud sounds of the house ring through her brain.

He is a cop, and he will do what cops do.

Tammy won't get to apologize to Morgan, or even explain what she's been trying to fix. She's going to disappoint one of the only people to ever take a chance on her. She shouldn't have trusted Louise—not with something like this. Something that requires the finesse of a person that's lived in Southwest, who understands how the city operates. How unforgiving it can be if you're caught out in the wrong place.

“Clear.” He shuts the door.

Tammy's veins are vibrating in her skin. She's back in her body again. Her knees go weak, and she starts to fall before Louise puts an arm around her, keeping her steady. She still regrets coming, following Louise blindly in hopes of helping Stuart, but she grips on to whatever support Louise is willing to provide regardless.

Footsteps recede from the apartment, radios once again clicking on and off. The sound of the police siren pierces the air when the front door is open, and then fades until it has stopped altogether.

They wait five minutes before opening the door, but for Tammy, it is her life played out in front of her, the mistakes that lead her to this point repeating over and over until her face is hot with shame. The air outside the closet feels cool against her skin when they step out into the living room.

“We need to go before we're seen,” Louise says. Her face is soft. She's worried. Maybe Louise thought that since Tammy had been to jail—since she's a criminal—she could handle anything that was thrown at her, just like her friends and her stepfather had when she'd been released. They acted like she could just be normal again.

There had been times, even up until Tammy's release, where she'd spend the whole night throwing up, so nervous and stressed that her body felt like it was trying to kill her. Get it over

with. Give up instead of finishing the most grueling five years of her life. She'd prefer anything but that again, when she'd lean against the cold metal of the bedframe and let it burn into her overheated skin. A pain she inflicted upon herself as punishment.

The folder is gone. The pitcher of iced tea has been knocked over, and liquid drips softly from the baby-blue tablecloth onto the floor, pooling into the worn carpet. It might be her imagination, but Tammy thinks she can hear it.

Outside, the night air is frigid. Her sweat feels cold on her forehead. Everything is too quiet after such loud, disastrous events, but Tammy understands—the world is always quiet and cold. People add that necessary warmth, like the kids that always hang out on the corner of her block, the Georgetown students smoking shitty weed outside the Chinatown metro station, the bustle of tourists careening through the Smithsonian mile, stopping to snap pictures of food trucks and red-breasted robins and particularly elegant brickwork.

Those kinds of people don't reach the developments on this side of DC, over-policed and standardized to a fault. Andrea might have been the last person on this block that could have told you what it looked like ten years ago. But she's gone, along with the damning evidence that Stuart was planning something, even if those plans didn't come to fruition. Something he never mentioned to Tammy.

CHAPTER TEN

The docks are more sinister with the moon hidden behind midnight clouds. Louise's legs shake a little as she walks, making her unsteady in her strappy Jimmy Choo heels, but she keeps everything inside, pushing it down until she can remember what it feels like to be stable. She lets Tammy lead when they diverge from their path to the Wharf, their hands tightly intertwined. Wherever Tammy's taking her is better than the open, the dark night that anyone could hide in.

They come to a tall, gray building on the south side of town. The paint on the outside is peeling, revealing damaged stucco underneath. Tammy puts a key into the lock of the front door and struggles with it for only a moment before it opens, warm air mixing into the cold.

Her apartment is on the third floor, and inside, Louise can see the kind of life Tammy lives. It's a cramped studio, dark in a way that doesn't have to do with sunlight, sparsely furnished. The thing that surprises Louise is the art—posters and canvases and framed prints hung up on every available surface, a mix of famous paintings that Louise can easily identify and different, weirder art that fits the darkness of Tammy's space. Above the television, a terrifying giant is printed, Andy-Warhol-Campbell-Soup-like, in four different colored blocks, shoving a small man into its mouth as its animal eyes survey the apartment.

Tammy drops onto the couch, its legs squeaking as she makes contact, and Louise follows suit, sitting as far away from her as possible. There was a moment of sympathy in the closet, when Tammy looked like she was about to pass out from an anxiety attack, but now the gap between them is palpable. Texting Tammy was a bad idea, even though Louise had thought she would be much more helpful at the time. A moment of weakness that led to someone else knowing something they shouldn't about her dad.

She did think that Tammy would be a good help if she needed forensic advice. But behind that, Louise lets herself realize, she had been scared. Terrified of being alone. Of what she would find.

Her father had a false ID made. A second identity. Not only is that illegal, but he was going to leave her at some point. Like he has now. His absence fits itself in Louise's ribs, a gaping wound that only his presence—his explanation—can heal.

And even then, it will heal badly. She can already tell. The wound feels like silence feels, heavy and raw. She hasn't slept well in such a long time.

And Alice. Louise and her mother hadn't been especially close, despite how Alice played their relationship for the cameras. *A Vote for Kemper is a Vote for Family*. Louise hated that slogan. Hates it still. The county of Arlington was more Alice's family than Louise had ever been.

But there are family dinners she'll never get to go to again. Phone calls late at night complaining about other representatives when Alice couldn't talk to her husband. The way she made roasted potatoes, crispy and gold. Louise misses her. So, so much. Everything feels inconsequential now. The search for evidence, for her father. None of it matters. It's not going to bring her mom back.

Pull yourself together. Grief is just a process—a puzzle, like the ones her dad would give her when she was younger, thousand-piece monstrosities stretched across the living room floor. Her dad laughed, kind, when she complained about how hard the piecing together of separate parts got. *You'll get it. You're good at these*. And because of him, she had been.

“Do you really think she deserved that?” Tammy is turned away from Louise, but her hands are balled at her sides. The words are almost too purposeful, carefully said. Rehearsed in her head before spoken out loud.

“Andrea?”

“She made fake IDs—so what? She deserves to be dragged out of her own apartment in the middle of the night, screaming? Scared? Fuck, Louise.” Leaning forwards, she runs a hand through her black hair, and Louise can see the tremor in her fingers. Her eyes narrow the way eyes do when they’re preparing for the burn of tears. “She offered us iced tea. A monster doesn’t do that.”

Again, she’s comparing herself to the people around her, getting defensive because people like her are being judged. This is stemming from something Tammy isn’t telling her. She’s keeping something secret, something about her past, and that guilt is eating at her.

Unraveling someone is all about asking the right questions. Making someone feel like they’re being heard while getting to the information you need. “Did you go an extreme? Is that what put you in prison?”

There is a moment when Louise thinks she won’t get an answer, and she understands—trusting someone you barely know with your traumas is not easy. But they had that shared experience at Andrea’s, a link between them, and Louise can see the moment when that clicks in Tammy’s head. She turns towards Louise, shoulders wide, chest open, head raised with determination even though her eyes are sad, the bags underneath them a deep purple, bruises smeared across cartilage and bone.

“My mom was an artist. Classically trained. Degas was always her favorite—the guy who did the ballerina paintings?”

Louise has never heard of him, but she nods regardless.

“She had ovarian cancer. The chemo made her really weak. There’s this thing with bone marrow, and what the radiation therapy does to it. She couldn’t paint anymore after a while. Her fingers couldn’t move right.

“And after that all she did was lie in her hospital bed. It was all she *could* do. And there was this exhibit that came into the Smithsonian, Degas’ most famous works and pieces from some other French painters, but they didn’t matter. *L’Etoile* was Mom’s absolute favorite. Just the color, and the shape. A dancer on stage, and the audience below her all red and orange like a fire. She told me it was a metaphor. The people watching her dance wanted to eat her up whole and spit out her ashes because they didn’t want to believe she could dance so well. She wanted—no. *I* wanted her to get to see it.”

Tammy stops speaking and recedes again, and she talks about her mother like she was a friend. Like they were confidantes in art and struggle. Alice had missed Louise’s first and only role in a school play, Gertrude in Hamlet, during ninth grade when she got it in her head to be an actor because she fell in love with Halle Berry. Though it was a short-lived obsession, her mother’s absence was noted. Filed away with the rest of the slights and disappointments. Packed into a box that lives in the back of Louise’s head, ever-growing. Alice was always at work, always doing the best for the county, for her *family*, while her actual family watched from home.

“My stepfather didn’t want her to go, but he’s an idiot. She was going to die anyway.” Tammy has to stop. She closes her eyes tight, painfully so, before she continues. “I took her. She wasn’t supposed to leave the hospital, but I got her out and took her to see the Degas exhibit and I got her back, too, but I had done my damage. She fractured a couple bones when we were out,

and then she died a few days later, and there was enough there to make it look like I was the reason. Familial abuse on top of a kidnapping charge.”

Like the paintings on the apartment walls, it’s not what Louise expected. Tammy wrings her hands, her fingers careful even in their disjointed movement. She must have been an artist too, at some point, though it doesn’t look like anything in the apartment is an original, and there are no cans of paint, no tarp covering the floor, no empty canvas eating up space. What did Tammy do that made her mom want to share that kind of passion with her? “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.” Tammy isn’t good at confidence, Louise knows, but she’s unexpectedly good at bluntness. “When she saw *L’Etoile*, she told me that she felt like she’d seen the last painting she needed to. It completed her collection. I know it was selfish of me to do, but I don’t think I could regret taking her if I tried.”

Louise doesn’t think that’s selfish at all.

“Your mom—”

“Let’s not go there.”

“Okay. We don’t have to.” She talks like she’s approaching an animal, careful, willing it to be calm. Louise hates that, the pity and the caution. “There was something I was meaning to speak to you about. Was it a habit for your dad to give women rides home? From work, or…”

She’s asking the wrong questions, and Louise hates that even more than the pity. “You said you thought he was innocent. You believed he is.”

“No, I—he still could be.” *Could* be.

The people she works on that lack conviction are always the worst. They lie like breathing. Louise bites the inside of her lip to calm herself, pain overtaking anger. A bad coping mechanism that she can’t seem to drop. “What are you getting at?”

“When your mother’s body came through our morgue, she had these marks on her wrists. They could have happened naturally, but they were just too prominent. The marks imply that something very tight was wrapped around them.”

“And?”

“The girl Andrea mentioned had those marks, too. On both her wrists and her ankles. Morgan and I had her in the morgue. Serial killers have tells like this, and ligature is one.”

Louise stands, unable to sit with the thought of another person dying like her mother did. Like they weren’t unique individuals—just women to be tied up and thrown out. You have to kill three people to be classified as a serial killer. The person that did this isn’t serial yet, Louise tells herself, as if that makes anything better at all. “Are you saying my dad killed her?”

“No, of course not,” said with that awful, sympathetic cadence like she’s talking to a child that doesn’t understand, “but it might be the same person that did it. We should just focus on the crime itself.”

Louise doesn’t want to let it go. Blood runs hot through her hands. Tammy obviously thinks she’s an idiot, fooled by her own father, unable to see through his veneer of charismatic goodness. She’s completely, laughably wrong in her assessment. “What do you even know about my dad? So you spent some time with him on parole. You talked to him about a couple books. Good for you. He’s my *father*.”

Silence. Breathing. Tammy's hands nervously grasp at nothing as Louise stares her down, taking advantage of her inability to handle confrontation.

“I’m not working with someone that’s actively working against me. I don’t care about what we saw at Andrea’s. All I care about is finding the proof the police aren’t willing to look

for and using it.” Tammy will see her side of the issue or she won’t be seeing anything more from Louise at all. “You got that?”

“Yeah. I got it. Stuart’s a good man.” She says it like she’s trying to convince herself of that fact. “But we can't ignore that this is a connection. We should look into it. If it wasn't Stuart, then whoever did this to your mom is doing this to others. There’s evidence in that, I think.”

It’s the first time Tammy’s been right all evening. Anyone can become a serial killer if they know how to not get caught, but her dad isn't that man. He hesitated to kill fish when he and Bill went on their fishing trips. They would swim around in the water-filled Home Depot bucket tucked under the seat in the back of the boat, and when the time came to get back to land, Bill would always say, *It's now or never*, and Stuart would either have to kill the fish quickly, let them drown in air in a bag in the back of the car, or release them.

Often, he did the latter, he and Louise getting take-out on the way home. The Thai place on 23rd Street that’s been closed for years now, or the Indian place on Eads that sits above a little home-owned grocery store. Stuart would pay, even when Louise had a steady job and offered.

She walks away, choking down her frustration. Right now, excess emotion will do her no good. She knows that this is emotional avoidance, and she knows it's unhealthy in the long run, but she never understood why so many people turned to it to cope until now. It feels good to shed her anger, if only for a moment. They’re going to find who did this.

The light coming through the crooked blinds falls on the Walmart desk tucked into the corner of the room. A piece of paper catches her eye, damaged and warped. A blue-ink drawing of a trowel surrounded by flowers. Maybe Tammy does still draw, even if she doesn’t display her own work. Something about it is almost calming. Almost familiar. “Nice hydrangeas. Detailed.”

“What?”

“Your drawing. My dad liked drawing, too.” Louise’s vision swims. Her cheeks are hot, the apartment now too warm. She thinks of packed lunches, post-it notes getting their adhesive on her white-bread peanut butter sandwiches, doodles of flowers and stars and spaceships. *An A in French? You’re almost fluent!* or *Remember to use the quadratic formula for those tough equations!* *Don’t panic, just think things through.* or *Love you, kiddo.* “He wasn’t very good. You are, though. The petals are really distinct.”

Tammy doesn’t respond—just watches as Louise’s fingers trail over the pulpy sheet of notebook paper, tracing the rough, blue lines. It really is a pretty drawing.

“There might be more victims, then,” Louise says. “If we’re dealing with a recurring killer. Would you be able to find out if there are other bodies that have been found in the Potomac with those same ligature marks?”

“I can look. Morgan has access to the Metro area coroner’s reports for the last five years or so, I think.” Tammy looks so small right now, even in the constricted apartment. The art makes it larger than life, grander than a studio in Southwest DC has any right to be. “I understand how you’re feeling to an extent. When things like this happen, you kind of hold onto that anger because it feels better than the alternative. It hurts, though. It’s tiring.”

“Don’t try to psychoanalyze me.” It’s insulting, even though Tammy has no idea what Louise does for a living. She’s left so many clients waiting, all those manila folders piled up on her desk—she doesn’t know if she’ll have any work to return to after this. Tammy is right about one thing in her assessment though, and it’s the tiredness. A bone-deep exhaustion that Louise feels most when she wakes up. It’s hard to get out of bed. “It’ll be worth it when we figure out the truth.”

“I hope so.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning, Tammy gets to Happy Ends earlier than Morgan. She can't get into the police databases by herself—Morgan is maybe the only civilian trusted with login credentials, and she'd worked for the DC police for years, so Tammy having access to it is out of the question. So she sits in the lab, listening to the centrifuge whir quietly, the hum of the morgue's refrigeration echoing off the eggshell walls and making the room feel too full, even in its emptiness.

There is the possibility that Stuart did this. She has allowed herself to consider it and has come to that conclusion. He shielded so much of himself away from her that, yes, maybe he could have killed these women and Tammy would have still been charmed by him and his ridiculous hatchback with its *Gone Fishin'!* bumper sticker and the cinnamon coffee he'd buy her every morning that he came by and the way he made her feel seen—like she *deserved* to be seen. Like she was more than her appearance and past would imply.

But, God, she hates thinking about it. The possibility doesn't sit easily with her, and if she, Louise, and Bill Jeong are the only three people in the entire Metro DC area trying to find innocence in Stuart's movements, Tammy isn't going to undermine that. Especially not after her conversation with Louise.

The thought of him drawing that hydrangea, the thought of his careful hands, makes her want to cry. So strong and delicate, both at once. She had looked at them so many times that she could have sworn she would be able to recall every detail, but things are fading and she can't remember if the beauty mark she liked to kiss when he held her was on his left wrist or his right.

Louise is stoic. Someone that isn't shaken by outside influence. Even the death of her mother didn't seem to break her like it should have. Tammy knows that pain. She wasn't allowed to come to the funeral. She thought about that every day for five years in jail, waiting to get out so she could visit her mother's grave for the first time.

She left a Polly Pocket sitting on the granite gravestone's flat top, one of the ones she'd found in the belongings her stepfather let her pick up from the house before telling her not to come back. The doll's eyes weren't painted on very well, one slightly crooked, but Tammy knew her mother would have loved it all the same. The weeds beginning to grow over the small plot told Tammy that no one else had visited her mom's grave since the headstone had been erected. Even now when she goes, it's her own dead flowers she cleans off the grave, her own melting collection of Polly Pockets sitting on top of the stone like rows of inanimate, blonde soldiers that no one has seen fit to remove.

This has to be brimming beneath the surface for Louise. Everything is still in motion. Tammy never had to see the aftershocks of her mother's death, though part of her wishes she could have, just to experience that grief around people she knew rather than around her first cellmate, a quiet woman from Queens that asked her kindly if she would stop crying so loud at night, and the unforgiving wardens. Maybe Louise won't let herself visit her mother's grave, leave her own trinkets, until everything is over.

Morgan's arrival is foreshadowed by a pop-piano beat, a woman's raspy vocals echoing down the stairs into the lab. She balks when she sees Tammy, turning off the music playing on her phone. "You know I can't give you a raise, right?"

"I need to talk to you about the bodies."

“That’s kinda vague. We do tend to go through a lot of those.” She pauses, maybe waiting for Tammy to say something—but she knows what this is about. She must. She understands Tammy’s moods better than a lot of people do. Maybe anyone. “This is about the representative.”

“Her and the girl we autopsied the other day. Jennifer.” Tammy can clearly imagine a car pulling up to Jennifer Sullivan, walking home from her shift at the 7/11, her lips pulling up into a smile and her braces catching the light as she accepts the ride home after a long, tiring day on her feet, in her pink, low-top Reeboks. “Does this feel like someone that’s doing this for the first time? Don’t killers like this usually have a first victim, or a string of less successful murders before they perfect their methods?”

Morgan sighs, but nods. “Typically. But this is the kind of investigation that the police do. I don’t know if we need to get caught up in it.”

“You really think that they’re looking into other bodies right now? It would be all too easy to pin these bodies on Stuart and forget about the case altogether. That’s what police do.”

“You knew him.”

That’s all it took—a slip of the tongue. Too familiar. What if it happens with Louise? “I’m trying to help his daughter get answers. Me and her dad are acquaintances, and he’s a good man. Really good. But now I’m starting to worry that he might have actually murdered these people, his *wife*, and if I don’t find out I think not knowing is gonna kill me. I think—I don’t know if I could just keep going.”

“I could call Bill about this. I could have him come here and tell you to stop before you get arrested again.” She obviously doesn’t know about Andrea’s, her husband’s flashlight

carving spots into Tammy's vision that echoed into the church dresses and tacky jackets long after the door was closed. "I feel like this is my fault, letting you work on these police cases."

"This is the only fulfilling thing I've done since getting out." Tammy thinks about Louise assuming that she has no passion for the job. It's nowhere near close to the truth—since she stopped painting, she's been looking for something to do with her nervous hands, and this job has filled part of the hole that the death of her mother left. She's just waiting for Morgan to give her the okay. To tell her that she's good enough to do this by herself. "Please don't blame yourself because I'm being self-destructive."

Morgan is almost never conflicted, always moving straight through problems to her chosen conclusion. Now more than ever, Tammy respects her decisiveness, her no-nonsense attitude coupled with her kindness. Silence stretches between them. Morgan hasn't even put her coat away yet. "I'll let you look through the database. That's it, though."

"Thank you, Morgan."

"Don't thank me." There is a tightness to her face, an elementary school teacher getting frustrated with her students but knowing she can't lash out—too gentle to consider it an option. "Promise me you'll be careful. You're a good person, Tammy, and I don't want to see you mess up." *Again*. The word hangs in the air unspoken. Morgan is aware of the lengths to which Tammy will go when she feels like her decisions are righteous. Even if the rest of the world doesn't agree.

Tammy's mother, only fifty-nine when she died, smiling in the National Museum of Art, a green-and-red bandanna tied carefully behind her ears to hide her bald head, staring at the flames of *L'Etoile*. No reprimands when Tammy made up her mind. Only words that made everything that followed worth it. "I promise."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Louise stalks the living room of her dark apartment. The curtains are drawn over the windows, blocking out the Potomac. She had thought getting an apartment in Rosslyn would be good—close to the city, close to her parents, close to a Panera. She ended up hating this little city and the space she inhabits within it, her desk covered in reminders of things she needs to do, the river outside her windows laughing at her, a curving, gaping mouth.

She can't do anything until Tammy gets back to her. She doesn't like to not have anything to do—the waiting kills her. She nearly asked Tammy if she could come to Happy Ends, too, at least to wait out the hours with someone that knows what her impatience feels like. Knows how deep it digs its teeth into bone.

Someone knocks at her door, the sound ringing through her apartment. So empty. Minimalist furniture. An IKEA couch she bought because it reminded her of her dad's, a coffee table she paid too much for at Pier 1 Imports, a couple of bookcases full of textbooks she hasn't touched in years. Her walnut-stained desk, another IKEA buy, shoved into the room's darkest corner. That's probably a bad thing. There's definitely a rule in feng shui that would tell her to put it somewhere with more natural light. She almost envies the cramped intimacy of Tammy's studio, the character of the many paintings, though she would never live anywhere near that part of DC.

Louise isn't expecting company, so she squints through the peephole, expecting a solicitor. A Jehovah's Witness. But certainly not Bill, in his civilian clothes, pinching the bridge of his nose and furrowing his brow in a way that looks painful. Like he's had a headache all day and it won't quit, no matter what he does.

She pulls the door open and Bill walks inside before she has a chance to invite him in. He's mad, more than she's ever seen. He walks towards her kitchen's island counter, the open plan of the apartment meaning that there is nowhere she can hide from him. He's wearing a leather jacket that her dad gave him when it got too tight around the shoulders. He puts his hands on the granite, spreads out his fingers. Watches them press against the stone. "I thought Stuart trained you better. Three cups, Louise."

"What?"

"There were three cups on the table in there," he says again, as if what he means is obvious. Something she should already know. Like he's disappointed in her. "Anyone with basic police training would have been able to tell the woman had guests. I thought you were going to be smart about things. I can't believe I gave you the address—I should have known not to. I could have lost my job and you could have gotten a whole sentence."

She shuts the door as if the neighbors are going to hear him chew her out, and that thought makes her embarrassed, shameful. She keeps one hand on its handle, like she's about to run. "Bill—"

"No, Louise. This is bad. That was *reckless*." He turns to her then, runs a hand down his face. He's running out of steam, Louise knows, but it doesn't help the way that she's feeling. "What were you thinking by bringing someone else with you?"

"We're working together. She has connections at the morgue. She's useful." Louise hates defending herself when she's already been driven into an inescapable corner. She hates being wrong. "You were the one that gave me the address, Bill. I couldn't not go, but—I couldn't go alone."

“I gave it to you to use for yourself. Not to share.” The pure command in his voice speaks to years of being a cop, of using his authoritative nature to tell others what to do. “I’ve met her before. Morgan has told me about her. Did you know she’s already been to jail?”

“Yes, but—”

“Louise, I can explain away my colleagues finding you there. I could have gotten you out of anything big. But not if you were found with someone else that already has a felony on their record.” He takes a deep breath, trying to tamp down his frustration. It takes a moment, the air still charged, Louise’s instincts on the knife-edge of telling her to leave. When he doesn’t carry the same kind of frenzied tension in his shoulders that he did when he arrived, he says, “I’m just worried about you. This kind of behavior... You should know better than anyone that this isn’t good. Reckless behavior after a loss is common. I pick up a lot of grieving partners and children that do drastic things when they lose the people they love.”

“I just want to understand what happened.”

The fight goes out of Bill—he’s the man she’s known since she was young again, awkward but kind, and he waves Louise over to the island and has her sit down at one of the uncomfortable, metal barstools.

Louise doesn’t protest, just follows the instructions, lets her body relax. God, she hasn’t sat down since she woke up this morning, earlier than the sun. Bill’s probably going to be late for work. She should open her curtains.

He opens the cabinet next to the sink and pulls out a small crystalline glass. Louise watches him get ice from her freezer and fill the glass with tap water. He’s been here so many times before that the motions are easy, familiar. He doesn’t sit down next to her until she has finished half the glass.

“You know I’ve always admired your determination. But some fights aren’t yours. You don’t have to take on every single thing in the whole damn world.” He hums, a nonverbal question, waiting for her to agree. He continues when she nods. “You’ll burn yourself out.”

“This one feels like it should be mine, though.”

“Of course it does, kid. But there’s a reason they don’t let therapists or doctors work on their own family.” His voice is beseeching—he wants so badly for Louise to understand his side of things even though she already does, she just wants to ignore them. He’s so open to her. His body language screams reassurance. She should accept it instead of wanting to push it away, and she feels almost guilty that he continues to try to give it to her. “You’re too close to the issue.”

“So are you, but you’re still working this case.”

“I’m bad at taking my own advice. But that doesn’t mean I don’t know when the advice I give is good.” He puts a hand on Louise’s and it’s dry, warm, calloused. His right hand, the one that holds the gun.

“You could have just called if you wanted to chew me out.”

“I’m not here to chew you out, kid. I’m here to make sure you understand the danger in what you’re doing. I wanted you to know that even if I’m frustrated by the things you do sometimes, I’m here for you.” He squeezes her hand. Her dad used to do this, too, uncomfortable with physical reassurance.

She remembers the scar that ran across his palm from a bad injury in training, decades-worn and lamb-white. She used to draw the same haphazard lines onto her own palm when she was really young, and then she would make him sit next to her at her little pastel Fisher-Price table so she could compare. See how well she recreated it from memory.

“Promise me you’ll be a little bit less reckless.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to be late if I don’t leave. Call me if you want to talk—or come to me and Morgan’s place for dinner. We’d love to have you.”

Louise thanks him and sees him out, and she feels warmer than she did before he got there. She doesn’t want to disappoint Bill.

Her phone chimes, and there is a text from Tammy about more bodies, more ligature marks, a lead to chase. She’ll keep her promise. She won’t be reckless. But she won’t do nothing, either.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the passenger seat of Louise's car, Tammy holds three folders of varying thicknesses. All coroner's reports. All from the same DC morgue, their similar injuries overlooked, their shared ligature marks shrugged off. Just another body in the river.

The youngest was fourteen.

All of them lived close to the Third District police department, but this is a fact that Tammy left out of her texts to Louise. Morgan had handed Tammy the files, still warm from the printer, and told her to come back to work when things were figured out. Of the three women that died, one had no family on record, another had a sister in Washington that Tammy couldn't get a hold of through the phone number registered with the DC police, given along with a witness statement—her sister had gone into the Bestway Liquors on 14th Street and hadn't returned to their car, parked at the karaoke/open-mic bar next door. They were going to a friend's twenty-first, the sister says in her statement. They picked "New York, New York" as their karaoke song because they all hated it so much that they thought it would be funny to sing it drunk.

The third was a student at Georgetown, her mother, Maria Oliver, still at the Richmond address that had been provided five years ago—the date of the coroner's report. For five years, this killer has been operating in secret. Maybe more. Tammy didn't even know Stuart five years ago.

Louise's BMW slides down the exit off the 95, bringing them to Bellevue, a neighborhood Tammy is only familiar with because of the tiny art gallery tucked behind a large park where her mom had once displayed some of her paintings.

Richmond has that colonial feel in some parts, old houses all lined up next to each other, their balconies with twisted iron railings and delicate white molding too close to one another. There's so much life, though, breathed into the streets by the art district and the museums and the tattoo shops with wild displays in the windows. Bakeries dot the streets, colorful signs outside displaying the day's prices, and vendor stalls line the wider sidewalks, farmers putting out baskets of multicolored peppers and dappled mangoes and lizard-green pears. The blends of color, the light blinking through the tall sugar maples, turn them into still-life paintings.

There are markets like this in DC, shoehorned between tall, glassy buildings, and Tammy never thought to visit them. Now she wishes she'd gone, hand in hand with Stuart, to buy produce she'd probably never use. Just to have that time. Just to see him smile as he cut up a mango in her kitchen and let her eat a piece off the knife. A memory to look back on instead of something to regret.

“Are you going to be okay when we get there?”

Tammy feels like she's been caught doing something bad. When she speaks, it's almost too fast, hurried in a guilty way. “Do I not look okay?”

Louise shrugs. “You look like you usually do. Tired. But this past week has been a lot for both of us.”

When she'd tried to tell Louise the same thing, she'd been reprimanded. It's hypocritical, and in any other situation, she would be annoyed. If Stuart had left Alice for her, Louise would have hated Tammy. “Do you think we would have been friends if we'd met in the real world? Or—acquaintances, I think, would make more sense.”

“This is the real world.”

“You know what I mean. None of this feels right. But I don’t think we would have ever been in a car together if this hadn’t happened. What do you think?”

“I think,” Louise considers her words, “I’ve come to appreciate you in some ways.”

That’s more than Tammy thought she was going to get. Louise probably doesn’t even interact with people like Tammy in her day-to-day—people who are poorer, people that have been wronged by the system, that have never sat in a BMW in their lives. This might be the first time Tammy has touched real leather outside of a department store.

Louise is from Arlington, the richest county in Virginia. She never needs to go to the bad parts of her state when she can stay in her county, and she never needs to come to the District and see its worst—only the coffee shops in Georgetown and the view from the Memorial Bridge and the pathways around the Washington Monument. Like a tourist. This is probably the longest she’s interacted with someone outside her tax bracket in her whole life.

Tammy decides to ask something she shouldn’t. “Even though I’m a criminal?”

“That’s not—” Louise puts a hand on her forehead, rubbing her temples. Her other hand is tight on the steering wheel. “It’s not about *you*, Tammy. It’s about criminals that really believe in what they did. That committed heinous crimes with the weakest motives and can’t even feel guilty about it.”

“I’m sorry.” She didn’t mean to make Louise angry—she’d only been curious. It’s something Stuart had liked about her. The questions she would ask that he told her no one else had ever thought to. Louise’s quick anger, her badly compartmentalized emotions—Tammy can tell just from these that if Stuart had solidified his and Tammy’s relationship, Louise would have hated her for as long as they were acquainted. It makes her sad, even though it didn’t happen.

She didn't want to do anything wrong. Stuart just makes her happy. He knows how to tell her the exact thing that makes her smile in the mornings. He remembered her birthday.

“We're here.” Louise has the car door open the second she parks, and though her anger isn't something she got from her dad, that drive is—the need for justice. To find the truth. And Tammy can admire that, if nothing else.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The townhouse sits in a row of brownstones built identically but differentiated by snippets of character. Balconies and colorful shutters. Front porches full of plants and delicate sculptures, hand-painted stone gnomes and glass animals that glitter and dispel prism-light across the pretty front doors behind them. Richmond itself is an art installation, a collection of people that want nothing more than to create, display, appreciate. Buttery afternoon light makes the brown bricks burn red.

A few seconds after Louise knocks on the door, four locks slot open, the sound of metal scraping against its sheath. A small woman smiles as the door opens, at least a foot shorter than Louise. Her hair is graying, cut into a shag, the ends curled, and she's beautiful—a seventies model hidden away in an unimportant townhouse. "You two don't look like you're here to tell me the Good News."

It's telling that she's holding her body between the door and its frame, as if she could block them from coming inside if they really tried. Tammy seems nervous, and when she gets nervous, her energy is contagious. They need to look like people that Maria can trust with information—people that are here for her best interests, not just theirs, no matter how true that actually is. She needs to keep Maria's attention on herself. "My name is Louise Kemper, and this is—"

"We don't have to have this kind of small talk for too long if you all have somewhere to be after this." Maria's words are accompanied by a smile so sweet that it takes Louise a second to feel the bite behind them.

“I’m sorry,” Louise says, doing her best to sound like she’s interacting with an adult instead of a child, “did we do something to offend you?”

“After what happened to Rhiannon, I had a lot of visitors. I still get some. Mostly people coming to give their condolences, or to offer financial help. More often than that, I get creeps that are interested by unsolved murders because no one close to them has ever been hurt. Some of them are hecklers. They’re the ones who leaked my address on the Internet in the first place, so I’ve dealt with them the most. They don’t bother me much anymore.” An obvious lie, though her body language makes a convincing case for it to be truth, confident and open. “Which of these are you?”

She addresses the question to Tammy. The obvious weaker link between the two guests. Maria is cunning—and Louise wonders if this is what the loss of a loved one does to you. Makes you sharper, cutting deeper with your words and actions than was possible before you’d experienced such emptiness. There was a point where Louise was not as cruel as she is now. She would have never talked back to someone her elder. She wouldn’t have used anyone’s insecurities against them. Loss doesn’t just take—it gives, too, the worst thing it possibly can. A look into what you’re really capable of if you peel back all the niceties and rules and manners you’ve been lectured on all your life.

“We’re here about Rhiannon. But not for those reasons.” Tammy stammers over her words, succumbing to Maria’s harsh attention. “Though I do want to say sorry.”

Obviously, getting information from Maria by ingratiating themselves to her is no longer an option. Louise puts on a voice she’s heard her father use hundreds of times before—the one he pulls out for suspects and witnesses. “We’re investigating her death and the deaths of other

women in the DC area. We think they all might have been killed by the same person. We just want to find the person that did it. Get them some justice.”

Maria laughs, a short and bitter sound—condescending. “Your police already tried to ‘get justice’ for Rhiannon and they failed. You don’t look like FBI, or anyone with better resources. What do you have that they don’t?”

“Emotional investment. A reason to keep going when things aren’t easy.” Tammy’s voice is watery, strung out and too loud. “When you lose someone you—someone close to you, there’s nothing you wouldn’t do to keep searching. You know this better than me, Maria. Right? I don’t think you’ve given up.”

Louise isn’t sure their potential informant likes Tammy’s tone, her careless words. She tries to cut in to save this interaction—this opportunity for information—before Tammy ruins it, but the words, however careless, ring true. Roughly forty percent of violent crimes each year go unsolved. There’s not always a clever perpetrator or criminal mastermind behind them. It’s usually people far less vicious. People just smart enough to evade any clumsy pursuer.

Tammy continues when no one else speaks. “I don’t trust the police to do what’s right, and I don’t think you do either. They haven’t given you a reason to. The cops are going to do what the cops are always going to do: put in minimal effort and call the case closed once things require more brainpower than they’ve ever used in their lives.” Tammy’s eyes are rimmed in red, bloodshot and tired. Bone-rooted exhaustion in the curve of her spine. How is she losing sleep over a man she had only briefly known? Maybe it’s her own personal trauma, seeing that poor girl’s body in the morgue—having to wash the very skin that the killer defiled—that’s driving her like this. “You can trust us because we *know*. We understand.”

Maria hums, considering Tammy’s words. “You both lost someone.”

It's not a question, but Louise nods.

“She'd just gotten her acceptance into Georgetown Law, and she was so happy. She called me the minute she opened the letter. What kind of monster destroys that happiness?” Maria puts a hand to her forehead, her breathing loud enough now that Louise can hear it. Losing composure. She looks her age at that moment, fine wrinkles showing themselves between her brows, around her slight frown. Louise hadn't noticed the gravel in her voice before now. The weight of holding back the truth. “There's one thing I didn't tell the police. I was afraid they would dismiss it, or worse. Punish me for it and stop looking. Rhiannon had mentioned a man a few weeks before she died. No one serious, but someone she met up with and had feelings for. She said he was only a little older, but I had a feeling she was lying.”

Maria stills. In her silence is a worry-worn grief that won't leave until the day she dies, clinging to her bones, feasting on the marrow. Louise worries that when she has nothing else to occupy her thoughts, she will come to know that same feeling too well. She worries that she'll never be able to set foot in her childhood house again. That she won't be able to forget Alice's broken body in the hatchback. That she'll think of the last call she got from her mom and wish she was able to use the word 'love' over the phone, or at all.

“He was a cop. Police don't turn on their own, so I didn't tell them.”

Tammy turns to Louise. There is an accusing, unflinching question in the clench of her jaw: *how much more proof do you need?*

Quickly, she thanks Maria and says goodbye, leaving Tammy behind her at the doorstep. She needs answers for the questions spiraling in her head. There are just over four thousand cops in DC and her father is only one of them. Rhiannon could have been seeing anyone. Louise's dad wouldn't have been meeting up with a random girl in DC about to go into law school—that puts

her at maybe twenty-five years his junior, and the thought sickens her. Someone younger than she is.

Her trachea stings like ice is forming in her lungs. Bitter cold. She steadies herself against her car. She feels nauseous in the worst way, the one where you can't stop yourself from crying while you heave up everything until there's nothing. Louise lures herself out of a panic attack, focusing on the physical, the rough tarmac beneath her feet, the soft fur on the inside of her boots, the smell of burning firewood. The last conversation Louise had with her father had been about work, of all things, and when he'd asked if she was happy doing what she did, she'd told him the truth.

She was miserable. Her dad told her to follow her passions. That they'd talk about it at Sunday dinner. To not leave him there alone, or her mother would take it out on him. An old married couple joke, even though there was validity in his words. Alice liked three things: her job, her home, and her sense of punctuality. Had he gotten tired of that over the years? The way she could go hot and cold, frustrated one moment and caring the next?

Louise had.

She has to stop thinking like this. Doubting everything she knows to be true isn't going to help find the truth. It feels unfair to both of her parents.

“Hey, Louise, you good?”

Tammy stands on the other side of the car, flushed in the cold, cheeks and nose a virulent red. She could be beautiful if she wasn't so thin, so worn and exhausted. If she took out the nose ring. She could be the kind of person Louise would see on the street and say hello to, who could live a normal life without a macabre job and terrible anxiety in everything she did.

The thought hadn't occurred to her before now. Perhaps in their interactions, Louise has become more like someone she would have previously considered alien, like she's soaking in Tammy's frayed but driven temperament by osmosis. Absorbing poison through her pores. "Did Maria say anything else?"

"No." Tammy lifts her hand to show Louise a transparent bookmark, a pressed flower in resin. "Just gave me a parting gift. For luck."

They get into the car in silence. On the ride back to DC, Louise notices Tammy staring at the bookmark in her hands, intently tracing the petals of a pressed hydrangea bloom.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tammy had never been into flowers. She would rather someone show her how they felt than give her something that would just die a week later. Until then, they just rot, wilting into nothing on the kitchen counter. Another thing to clean up.

Hydrangea bushes are common in Virginia. Tammy sees them all along the rows of manicured houses when she has to venture into Arlington, different shades of blue and pink and green dotted carefully across the petals. There had been an installation at a museum in Baltimore when Tammy was younger—George Seurat's works collected in one place. On a school trip, she learned about pointillism, large landscapes and tender moments between lovers created by tiny, purposeful dots of paint.

Stuart had laid it out for her, even though he's not here. This was the case he was really working on before he disappeared—not doing domestic abuse cases and petty robberies, the excuses he would give her when he got too wrapped up in his work. DC has bigger problems, and Stuart wanted to take them on. Tammy is sure of it.

She needed a guiding hand. Every time she reads a mystery novel, she tries to guess who the killer is before it's revealed, and every time she guesses wrong. She told Stuart this when they'd been at Gravelly Point, at the coffee shop after. Cinnamon in hers, white mocha syrup in his, whipped cream on top. I like it sweet, he said. As if it was a secret. Something he had to tuck away from other people until he finally met her. She kissed away the smudge of whipped cream just above his full lips before they parted ways, even though it was the first time they'd been together as people, just two human beings. She already knew, even then, that he was it.

Maria had placed the hydrangea bookmark in Tammy's hand, wished her good luck—told her it represented understanding, like the one they had between them.

Like the drawing on the note, Louise's fingers tracing hydrangea petals, more intricately drawn than any other piece of art Stuart had produced. Meticulous, almost.

In that campaign ad that everyone remembers because of its frequency, long before streaming services cut out the need for interrupted entertainment, Alice Kemper walked outside her house in the spring. Like a show of goodwill—this is where I live, in Arlington, just like you. *A Vote for Kemper is a Vote for Family*. Her slogan each time she ran, an inside joke with herself and the rest of the community.

In the background, at the front of her house, was a hydrangea bush, its heavy pink-and-white blossoms swaying gently, aired on TV over and over and over. That's where Stuart needs her to go.

Louise had dropped her at the apartment, telling Tammy that she would call Lieutenant Jeong in the morning to see what their new information can dredge up. If anything. The evidence keeps pointing to one man, with the key in Tammy's pocket perhaps the only way to figure out if it can point elsewhere. Even though Louise had looked a little broken, unsure of the future of both her life and the investigation, Tammy won't share this piece of evidence.

It's secret. Just for her. Stuart whispering into her ear, a shiver on her skin.

She'll have to tell the truth eventually. Louise has shown kindness. She has comforted Tammy. But no level of quiet solidarity in the face of danger will make Louise okay with her father having an affair. With Tammy being the one he chose over her mother.

She can't be that much older than Louise—five years, at most. Tammy had always been able to justify her and Stuart's gap in age. In the presence of Louise, that very gap is so much

more apparent. A physical thing, a manifestation of just how many more years Stuart had lived than her. How much more time he had to learn how to lie, to practice his sap-sweet words.

Despite this, Tammy thinks about the coffee. The whipped cream. The way he would hold her, like all he wanted to do was wrap her up and never let her go. Why did he have to leave with all the answers?

Tammy feels the key in her front pocket, a tiny metal reminder. Stuart left something for her to find, and she's almost entirely sure that it's related to the well-tended patch of hydrangeas in the front yard of his large Arlingtonian house.

She calls a Lyft and waits in front of her apartment complex, her breath spreading out in an icy cloud before her with every exhale. She can feel her ears turning red, numbness forming against the biting cold metal of her chunky earrings. Before heading downstairs, she grabbed two things: a pair of latex gloves and an angled, stainless-steel pie server. Tammy has never had a garden before in her entire life, so it's the closest thing she owns to a shovel. The pie server is snaked beneath her thick sweater and outdoor jacket, the metal tucked into her jeans and warming against her skin with each moment.

Anxiety builds in her throat as she slips into the Ford Focus that pulls up, offering a greeting she hardly remembers a few seconds later. The city slips by around her, buildings becoming blurs of stone and glass and steel. The sun has started to set, and the sky glows a malicious red high above. Every street, every microcosm of concrete and neon light, brims with life, people on the streets getting ready to head out for the night to wherever they might experience something new, the clubs on U Street already spilling their attendees out into the street, between cabs and horse-drawn buggies that tourists pay too much for and the beat-up cars of the people that, unfortunately, live in the buildings above.

It's Saturday, Tammy belatedly realizes, and marvels at how the days have all melded together since Stuart's disappearance, since her messy first meeting with Louise. The flow of time is delicate as cartilage and just as pliable.

Her ride gets to the bridge and the flow of heavy bass shakes the Ford on its wheels, its reverberations matching the nervous bouncing of her leg. She bites at her cuticles, ignoring sunset. Just like that day she walked to Happy Ends with a hole in her chest, she can feel the weight and pull of the water beneath her, an ebb and flow of gripping darkness.

Arlington approaches much too quickly, and a bead of cold sweat trickles down Tammy's temple. Night blankets the streets they pass, the lights above clicking on slowly and softly like clockwork—fifteen minutes after sunset. A dubious time in between where anything could happen in the dark.

Outside of the city, there is a deep quiet. Something Tammy doesn't experience in her normal day-to-day. It's all-encompassing. Her own heartbeat echoes in her ears, along with the gentle breath of the driver next to her, a man that seems to read her uneasiness and present her with the solitude she requires.

The only person who could calm her down right now would be Stuart. A squeeze on her shoulder. His deep voice reminding her to breathe, to remember that this world is not out to get her. The sound of the overworked AC as they sat at the bakery across the street from her apartment, sharing a morning bun and a bottle of San Pellegrino. Stolen mornings, guiltless and painted that early-gold of sunrise. Without his calm words, the darkness outside feels insidious. A predatorial thing that wants for blood.

The sedan stops in front of Stuart's house, and Tammy mumbles thanks and apologies in the same breath. She'll rate him five stars and tip well on the app once all is done to assuage her

own guilt. The Ford rolls down the street and out of sight. Tammy gets the same feeling that the painting *Nighthawks* gives her, Hooper's diner without a door, the night outside looking in at the people that will never step out into it, dread building in the still quiet. Both of the dark and the lack of an exit. Large bay windows covered by dark curtains stare out at her from each house like empty, accusing eyes.

The pie server is warm when she pulls it from beneath her jacket, and her fingers relish the feel of something solid to hold onto. Tammy skin buzzes hot and cold. Anticipation and fear, a ruthless back and forth. The need for the necessary information, the final puzzle piece, the clue that pins the murderer.

If Tammy hadn't seen that campaign ad run so many times that Alice Kemper's tagline was burned into her brain, she wouldn't know what to look for. It's too cold this time of year for much to bloom, though it won't snow again. Spring takes time to show its face after DC's long, brutal winters. When it snows, the District stops its march, as if the weather is a novelty. Kids play in deep drifts on shut-down sections of Pennsylvania Avenue that haven't yet turned into black, dirty sludge. Parents watch from the apartments above, from the sidewalks, from behind the picture windows of the warm coffee shops with alternating names on each street corner. Tourists dig trenches in the knee-high snow, driven by their determination to see as much of the city as possible. A feeling of muted joy and wonder buzzes back and forth, building to building, all the way down to the White House.

To be there with those people, to feel alive again, and whole, and part of a community that loves and accepts all—that's what Tammy wants. She misses that warmth, that comfort. The city a mother, her children safe within. The guy selling weed on the corner of Lafayette, the

businessman entering gilded doors to a vacuous lobby, the teen girls huddling together so close that their dyed hair blends into an amalgam of color, all friends and strangers at once.

She longs to be one of them. Someone else, outside of this skin.

The silver pie server meets hard dirt beneath an unassuming bush, the lack of blossoms making the hydrangea look like a shrub with long, pointed leaves. It's got to be underneath—Stuart's note, the drawing of the trowel next to the flower, a message communicated without words. Tammy shivers as she pries cold bits of earth from their slumber, cleaving apart roots and bugs and animal bones.

The sound of a car down the street makes Tammy jump. She drops the pie server and tries to look as inconspicuous as possible. The hydrangeas are planted at the very front of the house against the mossy brick and oak-wood siding, facing the street. There's nowhere to hide, so Tammy waits, still, hoping that the inky darkness will hide her itself.

Slowly, a silver car rolls up to the curb in front of Stuart's house, and the anxiety in Tammy feels turns sour, drops like a penny off the top of the Washington Memorial. The moments it hangs in open air, waiting, waiting, until it bounces on gray-washed pavement. The car is too familiar, and Tammy resists the urge to run as Louise gets out of the driver's seat. She has failed to hide, and even if she runs now, Tammy can't avoid confrontation forever.

Louise's car door slams shut, its echo reverberating across the tarmac. Her eyes are locked on Tammy, burning. She hadn't talked about coming back to the house. She hadn't let Tammy know what the next part of the plan was. *I need to talk to Bill*, which was code for *I don't trust you with what comes next*. Regardless, Tammy didn't plan for this, hadn't weighed the risks well enough. She feels foolish, a child playing at detective.

“This is twice, Tammy. Try to justify this to me.” She sounds so calm, but in that sharp-edged way. The killing calm. The moment of serenity before the knife meets the vein.

Tammy doesn't know what to say. She can't explain without telling the truth. And she can't tell Louise the truth. “I just want to help.”

“You're lying to me about something,” Louise says. Only a few feet from Tammy but her voice still sounds so close. “I'll give you a second chance to explain this to me.”

“I didn't lie to you—”

“You've been lying by omission. You're easy to read, Tammy. I do this kind of thing professionally and I've worked with people that have trained for *years* just so someone like me couldn't tell you what's going on in their head. I've talked to some of the most brutal killers in the country. I haven't hesitated to tear them apart. You're *nothing* compared to them.”

The words are stated so plainly, so unbiased—but they sting. You're nothing compared to them. You're nothing. Nothing at all.

“Tell me the truth, or we're done working together.”

If she tells Louise the truth, their partnership is over no matter what, tentative as it is. There's no way Louise will trust her after finding out the truth about Stuart. Even if he is innocent of murder, he's guilty of a different sin.

But he'd fallen out of love the way people do. Eternal love is too human a concept to really exist. And maybe she and Stuart wouldn't have even been together a year from now, or two, but they'd been happy. *She* had been happy. She hadn't been nothing to him. Stuart's real crime was prolonging the charade he was so desperate to hold onto, and Tammy's was playing along with no regard for his family.

Quietly, she tells Louise about the note.

“Why would he leave you a note instead of me?” Louise is on the edge of a realization, the conflict on her face evidence of her willful ignorance. She’s still trying to sound calm but Tammy can hear the beginnings of cracks in her veneer. “You barely knew him.”

Tammy looks down at the hydrangea bushes. Her heart beats in her throat and the feeling works its way into her brain, a pounding sensation pushing against her temples. Every nerve in her body is buzzing with warning signals that numb her skin, instincts telling her not to do what she must. Fight or flight begging her to run.

Louise is going to kill her. Maybe she’ll run over, take the pie server from Tammy, and bury it into her heart. Maybe Tammy would deserve that. She’s most definitely going to deserve the anger that Louise will show her and the hateful things she’ll say and Tammy will play them back in her head for months. Years.

But there’s no other option now. “I’m seeing Stuart. We’re—together, kind of.”

The answering silence speaks for itself, heavy enough that dread stabs into Tammy's lungs, restricting her breathing. She watches the bulbs of the hydrangeas sway softly.

“Excuse me?”

Tammy looks at Louise and the blank slate staring back at her is surprising in a horrible way. The lack of rage. “We weren’t just friends.”

“I understood that.” Louise covers her mouth with a hand. Not frustrated—unsure. Considering something. “Of course.”

“Of course what?”

“You don’t get to ask questions.” Her tone is flat, and this isn’t just a demand. It’s an order. Stop asking. Stop talking. Stop existing. She nods to herself, then asks, “How do you live with yourself?”

The question is paralyzing. Tammy doesn't know how to answer. She doesn't have one. She's barely been living with herself and she thinks Louise knows this.

“No, don't respond. I prefer you silent.” She laughs, then, almost unhinged. “When I said of course, I was talking about the situation. Of course you, as a person without a stable father figure, would gravitate to an older man. Of course your inferiority complex would want that man to be in a position of power because him even talking to you would validate your existence. Of course you wouldn't have any reservations tearing apart a family because the only person you had that you considered family died and left you with no one, and you needed something to fill that gap.”

Tammy is shaking. She doesn't understand why each of these statements hit her so hard but they do, because maybe Louise is right. Maybe she's fucked up and everything that's happened has been a product of her upbringing and not just because she loved the way Stuart would run his finger down her nose and always compliment her on how straight it was because his was hooked at the bridge. Her response is all too quiet. “He wasn't happy.”

“And *you* made him happy?” Louise asks, and she's smiling the same way that she laughed. Cruel and wide and ungrounded in a way that sends a shock of fear through Tammy's gut. “You're nothing. You're no one. Do you really think you could have made him happier than his family?”

Tammy shakes her head, compliant. She wants this to be over. She wants to be buried in the ground. She wants to rot in her apartment with her paintings and her toothbrushes and her memories.

“One day you'll be forced to learn that being selfish doesn't pay off.”

This, on top of everything else, makes Tammy falter. She is selfish. She always has been, and the record of her life just proves this. She thought this was a selfless act—helping Stuart. Helping his daughter. Really, it was the only thing holding her together in his absence. Because there was the possibility that they could find him and there was someone present to take her mind off the emptiness in her heart. “Louise. I’m so sorry, genuinely—”

“I will *never* accept an apology from you. What you’ve done is reprehensible. I hope you realize that.” It’s the first time that Louise has looked angry this entire conversation. Like she wants to spit at Tammy’s feet, but she won’t, because she’s too sheltered. It would’ve been the first thing Tammy did. She almost wants to tell Louise to do it, to bait the woman in front of her into giving Tammy some of the punishment she really deserves.

With the same kind of violence abruptness with which Louise’s anger had risen, the fight goes out of her, a deep sigh punctuating their silence. Her mask of calm doesn't return. She is not the type to openly cry, but Tammy thinks, in the dim light of the halogen streetlamps, she can see tears on Louise’s face. Maybe it’s the light. But it’s not. It’s not, and Tammy did this. Made a woman so assured in herself cry silently on her parents’ front lawn.

In the silence, Tammy is left to consider her what she’s done. The ruin she’s caused. She hadn’t been thinking about other people. About his family. She’d been thinking about Stuart’s scarred hands in hers. About long nights spent doing puzzle books while he read aloud articles about space or aqueducts or the reproduction cycle of turtles, anything he found particularly interesting or strange. She listened to his deep voice fold over and in on itself, like music, almost. Something she could listen to forever. She’d only been thinking of Stuart. She still is.

While thinking of Stuart's emotions, keeping his happiness in mind, she was also selfish. Tammy had never really thought about Alice as a real person, nor Louise. Not before this. And his happiness made her happy. She did it for herself as much as him.

“I wish I could change things. But I can’t,” she says, and her voice breaks, throat tight and face warm with shame. It's no wonder the truth disgusts Louise. Tammy feels vile inside and out. She wants to crawl out of her skin and become something else. “I just can’t.”

Louise nods as if confirming something to herself, schooling her body, her expression, back into its familiar neutral. It's an uncomfortable transformation to witness. Like she's not entirely human. “I don't think I have to tell you that this is over. I was going to go through some of my dad's stuff, but I think I'm too tired for that now. Do whatever it is you need to do. If there even is anything buried here, the ground would already be disturbed.” She gestures to the dirt Tammy has already dug through, the torn roots and the shining pie server. “I have no idea what you think you're going to find, but I thought even you would be smart enough to know something like that. I was wrong.”

“Louise, I'm so close to finding—”

“Please stop assuming that I care.” Louise puts her hand up, a quiet message. Stop while you're ahead. This road is closed forever. “I'm going to figure this out with Bill like I should've done in the first place. Try not to dig up the whole garden. And Tammy?”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck you.”

The tight-lipped smile she flashes before walking back over to her car hurts more than her final remarks—the same kind of smile she would flash at strangers, at Maria and Andrea, an expression with no warmth or care behind it. Tammy has become nothing to Louise. She has

become a stranger to placate with a smile, not someone to confide in. Someone not even worth the effort to really look at.

Tammy watches Louise drive away. They hadn't been friends. Where Louise and the investigation were once filling a vacuum, Tammy finds new parts of herself that have been ripped away. Raw edges. Tammy wants the solidarity of working with another person that knows Stuart like she does, but that's just another thing that proves her selfishness.

She walks over to the pie server and doesn't feel her feet touch the ground. Tammy can't tell if it's because they're numb from the cold or if her senses have just stopped working, leaving her to revel in the nothingness she's becoming quite acquainted with. Picking it up from the hole she dug before Louise's arrival, Tammy realizes that she had been digging through roots.

Networks of stark, tubular lines through the dirt, intertwined from years of growth.

If Stuart buried something here, the dirt would still be softer, less compact, than if it hadn't been disturbed at all.

Tammy puts all her emotion behind stabbing the pie server into the ground just half a foot from the initial hole she dug. She can feel the resistance, the roots that deny the metal from sinking fully into the ground, and it feels good to be angry. She repeats the motion again and again, making her way around the hydrangea bush, and with each stab into the earth, Tammy feels the tears fall, feels the need to get out of her own life boil over in her brain, and keeps going until her shoulders burn with effort. Her hands are numb and hot. She wants to scream and beg forgiveness all at once, but first she has to expel the manic energy inside herself, dig up the dirt until she physically can't anymore. Until something more dense, harder than the roots, stops her.

The tip of the server is speared barely two inches into the soft-packed dirt. Tammy strikes metal.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Louise gets back to her apartment close to midnight. She needs to wait to call Bill until tomorrow. To figure out everything that's going on in her head.

From a young age, Louise had determined that her dad could do no wrong. She hadn't realized how much she'd built him up, how the talks he gave her about justice had become her moral code, how his presence alone made her feel like she was always in the right. He's flawed, just like every other human on earth. Just like her.

Still, the feeling won't sink in. Like she's passively denying it to protect herself, even though she knows Tammy wasn't lying. Telling Louise the truth had taken a physical toll on her, and no one can fake something like that. Those secrets need time to simmer, to roil under the surface before they come up, each passing moment keeping them hidden just another to look back on and regret. It's cruel, but she hopes every moment that Tammy spent with Stuart turns to ash in her mouth—that she chokes on it.

Her apartment is cold. Something about the lack of furniture. She suddenly wishes she had enough items to clutter her bookcases, her desk, her kitchen counters. She wants trinkets, reminders, inconsequential things that only have a sliver of meaning tied to them. She wants to be like other people.

Louise has never wanted to display things like these before, showing who she is through physical items. Her knowing herself was enough. Despite that, she does have a framed photo of her and her dad hanging on the kitchen wall, next to the stainless-steel fridge. She puts her phone down on the granite countertop of the kitchen's small island and kicks off her shoes.

The photo seems to stare at her. Call to her. Her father has her in a bear hug, and Louise remembers the feeling of her ribs being squished, breath escaping her with the force of her dad's embrace. Jeong stands to the side, laughing. A rare occasion where Alice had come with them fishing to complain and take photos. She caught her first fish in years and her dad was proud of her in that earnest, genuine way of his. Louise feels like a terrible person for framing a family photo without her mother in it.

The only time her dad would ever take photos with Louise, or anyone else, was when he was fishing. He always wanted to be the photographer, more comfortable capturing the moment than being present in it. She has so few photographs like this.

Is that how she hadn't seen his loneliness? She knows he was having problems with Alice. She knows he was unhappy sometimes and that there was a disquiet in him that he didn't know how to silence. The fights got better as Louise grew up, but not because they grew closer. They were drifting apart.

It makes sense. But she never thought Stuart would stoop to something so low. Not her dad.

Her life feels like it's falling apart around her as much as she tries to keep it together, the ruin like an entity itself, actively working against her. She hates being lied to. Being kept in the dark. She wants to take the photo off the wall and throw it on the apartment floor just to watch the glass shatter. To see the cracks in her father's face.

Her phone buzzes on the counter—she wonders if Tammy is brave enough to text her after their exchange. Probably not. She's a coward, after all, not even brave enough to tell Louise the truth from the start.

It's Bill, calling even though it's past the time he usually goes to bed—nine-thirty on the dot, something her dad made fun of him for. Bill called it beauty sleep. Her dad called it getting old.

When she picks up, there's static on the line, bad enough that Louise can just hear Bill say, gentle and low, "Hey, kid. How're you holding up?"

Louise's words jumble in her throat. She wants to tell Bill everything, cry to him like she cried to her dad in high school after getting dumped for the first time. "I'm so tired, Bill."

"I know, kid. I can't tell you how sorry I am." He stays with her like that for a while, static on the line, and it's easier to collect herself in the presence of another person, even if it's over the phone. His silence is comforting, solid.

"We talked to the mother of another victim," she says, hating her own hoarse voice. "She said her daughter was seeing a police officer in town."

"And you think—no, never mind. It's okay, Louise." A deep sigh, and Louise can imagine the way Bill is pinching the bridge of his nose, dark brows drawn, thinking about what to say next. She wishes she was there with him. "We've been looking into past cases Morgan sent over. And I shouldn't tell you this, but we had an anonymous tip from a family member concerned about a sister going on dates with an older cop. Might be related."

This, in no way, makes her feel better. Bill has never been good like her dad was with emotions, with saying the right thing at the right time. It's why they worked so well together—Bill, direct, getting the information they needed, and Stuart there to smooth the rough edges he left behind.

"I'm on the night shift, about to do a stake-out outside the girl's house. I shouldn't really ask this, but do you want to come? I know you like to keep busy."

A moment passes and Louise takes in a deep breath, knowing what would be the right thing to do and knowing what would make her feel better. She knows what her dad would tell her to do, as well, but now she's worried that she's been blindly following his directions all her life with no regards for her own path. Maybe she was unhappy with her life because it was one that had been built for her instead of one she'd built herself, touching every brick, knowing their grain better than anyone else. "I'll come."

Bill pulls up fifteen minutes later in one of the most obvious unmarked cop cars Louise has ever seen: an aged Crown Vic the color of spiced oatmeal. He rolls down the passenger window and waves as he pulls up to the curb, and the slight smile on his face makes Louise's stomach stop churning. She should have been working with Bill this whole time—he has the resources, the information. Tammy just has a severed connection to Louise's dad, an underdeveloped career in forensics, and a penchant for lying.

"Hop in, kid."

"The department couldn't have put you in a nicer car? One with seat heaters?" She gets in the Vic and smells the Black Ice air freshener, patented leather, and Bill's cologne—the same one her dad wears. They got each other the same Macy's-Christmas-sale six-ounce Paco Rabanne For Men a couple years ago, something neither of them could stop laughing about, and they kept using it long after those bottles were empty.

"You know, I always ask for a nice car, but they keep telling me that they want me to drive something my age." He shrugs, putting the Vic in drive and turning onto the main road. "I'm too old to look cool in a sports car, apparently."

“Of course. I expect nothing more than superficiality from the police.” Louise realizes too late that her words have bite to them—she’s still on the offensive, Tammy’s confession fresh in her mind.

Jeong just laughs, and the tension building inside Louise instantly loses its traction. “The younger guys are all about looks, you’re right. Veterans like me focus on the important things, like who brings in the best coffee for the station pot. I always get the Tarrazu, so I’m the winner in that category.” The skin around his eyes crinkles when he smiles. He’d gotten older while Louise wasn’t paying attention. Spending more and more time at her job, at school. If she could see her dad right now, sit in a car with him, would she see those same details on his face? Marks of age that hadn’t been there when she was twelve, blowing out the candles on her birthday cake, Bill and her dad cheering because she got them all in one go? She’d wished for something back then, but she doesn’t remember what. She just remembers that it didn’t come true, even though she’d blown out all the candles. She’d been mad at her dad for a week after that because he promised if she could get them all, there was no way her wish wouldn’t be fulfilled. The first time he’d ever lied to her. Or the first time she remembers.

He just doesn’t have the right motive. If she looks at this logically, pries herself away from her feelings for a moment, she can see that it looks like he does. An unhappy marriage. Women in town that he might have seen around. If he’s been seeing Tammy—a lot of things are possible.

And there’s a connection she makes there. Between Tammy and everything. If her dad was a killer, why wouldn’t he have killed her too?

The lights of oncoming cars blur the night around them, the Vic moving faster than Louise had assumed it could, keeping up with traffic on the interstate. Arlington National

Cemetery looms in the distance. Moonlight glints off the marble gravestones visible from the road, sticking out of the ground like careful, even rows of teeth in a cavernous mouth, the well-kept grass blending into the dark of night. Bill takes a turn onto George Washington Parkway—the road off which they had discovered her mom. The hatchback. Louise's stomach flips, jaw suddenly tight. It occurs to her to ask where they're going.

“The girl lives out in Langley. We should get there pretty fast this time of night, though.” His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. He seems tired, too, like Louise has been, like everyone that has lost someone they cared about. It doesn't escape her that he calls this person a girl, the question of just how young she is hanging between them but left unanswered. “I'm surprised you didn't ask to bring your friend along.”

“I wouldn't call her a friend.” Louise's muttered response is automatic, and all at once she feels childish and stupid. “I just mean—we had a falling out. You never know with some people.”

Bill nods, a long sigh emphasizing the quietude of Virginia after midnight. Closer to the city, they'd seen late night traffic, but the farther they get down the Parkway, the fewer people they see, until they hit a long stretch of pitch black. Alone in the night.

What else had Tammy lied about? Louise had known she was keeping a secret, but—nothing like that. It's almost impressive that she could keep her truths hidden from someone trained to look for them. Maybe there's more to that. Maybe there's motive there.

An unhappy lover. A man unwilling to leave his wife. Alice's reputation would have been ruined if the public found out that her husband was cheating on her. He wouldn't have done that because he's too kind. Too self-sacrificing. The martyr complex again. Not something that lends itself to the motives of a murderer.

Inferiority complexes, however, are extremely common in serial killers.

It's possible, but unlikely. Only sixteen percent of serial killers are women. Still, the thought lingers. Biding its time.

"I'm sorry, kid. You've got other friends though, right? People you can turn to—and *not* do semi-illegal things with." He's teasing, but she doesn't smile.

Who else does she have in her life? She barely talked to her cohort in school, too focused on always studying, always being on top of things. A single-minded drive to get to the top. All to get a job she has all but dropped, and in retrospect, doesn't much like. She just liked the power that came with it—the feeling of being needed by people, the only one who could fill a specialized role.

How quickly had her clients replaced her when she stopped answering emails? Barren cherry blossom trees twist along the roadside, the Potomac a slinking beast behind them. It's interesting how anything can look sinister in the dark.

"You think we'll find someone there?" Louise pretends to be nonchalant when she asks, but they both hear her voice crack on the words.

He considers her schooled expression for long enough that Louise gets worried about him not looking at the road. "Maybe. Hopefully not. Or—you know." He turns back to the task at hand. The tightness in Louise's chest does not abate in the least.

Neither of them say his name, but Louise knows Bill is thinking about her father. The only person he thinks is left. If her dad had been seeing that girl—Rhiannon, Maria's daughter—could Tammy have gotten jealous enough to do something? To remove all other players in the game so she could force the victory she wanted?

No, it's still too unlikely. She would have needed help.

It could have been both of them. Together. Louise squeezes the car door's grab handle so hard that the plastic gives a little, cracking slightly. If Bill hears it, he doesn't comment.

Langley is a densely forested area that houses the CIA headquarters and a church for every single Christian denomination. Bill slows as they drive into the residential area by the local high school, rows of tall, fat houses in varying shades of beige and brown crowding the thin streets. Anyone that lives in this area has either had a house in the family for decades or works for the CIA—nothing stirs this late at night. It should be easy to see any kind of disturbance, if one should happen.

Though Louise wants to figure everything out, she hopes this will be uneventful. That the night will remain still. She wants to sit in the car with Bill until his shift is over and go home to stare out the window into the dense streets of Rosslyn.

“Here.” Bill's voice is soft, as if he doesn't want to disrupt the silence that settles across the street like a fog. He points to a house set further back from the road, a large willow tree in the front lawn drooping over the stone path leading to the front door. The walls are a mixture of tasteful cliffstone siding and wood panels, dating the house back to the 80s. The lawn is well-kept, the trash and recycling bins tucked neatly into an alcove at the side of the house. The entire picture, a little too perfect, shows its own hand and reveals the nosy-neighborhood-watch type of street this is. When Louise was younger, she'd wanted to work for the CIA. Become a secret agent. This entire neighborhood justified her decision to take a different career path. But it also begs the question—can anything bad really happen here?

They park across the street, Bill turning off the car and leaning back in his seat. “All right, time to strap in for a long night.”

The engine clicks and groans as it stops, and if Louise closes her eyes, she can practically feel its heat radiating through the Vic's dashboard. Like the sun on her face, on the river, fishing. Foam splashing up into the boat, wind cutting the water into harsh, choppy waves. The way her stomach felt like it was going to fall out of her body when the boat hit a wave and went up, its bow touching nothing, her and her dad flying through the air for only a moment before the unceremonious fall, impact making Louise shudder to her bones.

“Do you see that?”

Her attention snaps to the house, where she's expecting—something. A figure creeping underneath the willow. Her father standing on the sidewalk, beckoning her toward him. But there's nothing there. “See what?”

“The front door.” Bill sits up and suddenly his body is a live wire, tension in every muscle. He reaches across Louise and into the glove compartment, from which he pulls his gun and badge. “It's ajar. I should have noticed when we got here.”

The gun makes the situation feel extremely real, too much pressure on the length of a needle, a sudden piercing of skin. She can't take her eyes from it.

“Just a stun gun.” He pauses, waiting for her to acknowledge his words with a nod. “I don't get to take the real ones with me on stake-outs.”

She feels infinitesimally better—enough to ask, “What do we do?”

“*You* stay here.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, his fingers turning white at the tips. “I shouldn't have brought you with me. I don't know what I was thinking.”

Without warning, a fear so potent floods Louise's brain at the thought of what this could mean—what they could find. Her nails dig half-moon imprints into her soft palms, the pain both

grounding her and fueling a panic that makes her body shake. Quietly, she says, "Please don't leave me here." *I don't want to be alone.*

If anything happens to Bill, what will she have left?

Moonlight pools in the dips and eddies of the Vic's plastic dashboard, the peaks and hollows of Bill's angular face. Time crawls by unhindered.

"Okay." It's nothing more than a whisper, but Louise can hear how much effort it takes for him to agree. He reaches over and holds out his hand, pressing his keys into her palm when it is offered. "But stay close to me and try not to make a sound. And if anything happens to me, you have to get to the car, drive away, and call the police immediately."

She can do that, even though the thought of something happening to him makes the skin on the back of her neck tingle uncomfortably. Her hands stay balled into fists, and when she gets out of the car, her legs shake a little before she finds steady ground. Bill leads her across the grass to the side of the house, near the trash cans. The wooden panel she leans against for support is sleek beneath her hands, its polyurethane coating giving her nothing to hold onto. He motions for her to pause, and he ducks his head and dashes underneath the casement window between them and the front door. He nods at Louise and she returns the gesture, heart hammering in its home. The night doesn't even feel cold.

Slowly, he pushes the front door open little by little, stun gun held out towards the house's threatening emptiness. The door opens into an antiquated living room, couches with floral patterns flanking an ornate, wooden coffee table. Paintings adorn every wall, both abstract and modern, the art at odds with the traditional furniture. Everything is silent. Bill's footsteps on the shag carpet sound a thousand times louder than they should, broadcast by the room's

stillness. Louise feels like her breathing is too loud, bouncing off the walls, up the staircase she can see through the adjoining dining room, into the ears of whoever waits for them within.

She shouldn't have come. She should not be inside this house right now. A chill runs down her spine and leaves her trembling.

There's something on the coffee table that feels much too out of place. It's too dark for her to discern its true shape until they inch closer, heading towards the open archway into the dining room. Bill's eyes dart from corner to corner, stun gun steady in his hands. He's done this before, so many times. She shouldn't be as scared as she is. But when she gets close enough, she realizes that the thing on the coffee table is a length of black, nylon rope, and there could be many explanations for why it's there, but only one fits the circumstances. When she picks it up, it's cold. No trace of the warmth of another human's touch.

With the length of rope coiled around her hand as if she can use it as a weapon, she follows Bill deeper into the house. She has never been in a fight in her life.

Nothing seems amiss in the dining room. The stairway looms to their right, a dangerous and pointed question. Louise has watched too many episodes of *Law and Order*—she knows they'll clear the bottom floor before venturing upstairs. Again, that eerie quiet spreads itself through the room like warm honey, oozing into the floorboards that lightly echo Louise's steps. The house seems to be built around the staircase, each concurrent archway built into the plaster and painted a clean, eggshell white, leading them on a curved path towards the back of the house. There is a light on deeper inside, past the next archway—in the kitchen.

Louise gets as close to Bill as possible without getting in his way. The kitchen's floorplan is simple enough, no island in its middle, nothing to hide the entire span of the room from Bill's scrutiny. The oven light spreads a dim glow through the room, everything cast in shades of

yellow: the Formica countertops splitting at the edges, the old microwave with suspicious, circular knobs on its face, the tacky linoleum beneath her feet.

As Bill checks the two other doors in the room—a pantry and a linen closet—Louise backs herself against the tall, off-white fridge. She feels it whirl behind her, the fans working their hardest to keep its contents cool. They've probably been running for thirty odd years at this point, and they sound labored, an audible buzz behind Louise that sinks into her skin, matches the frequency of her own shaking. From here, she can see the whole room. No one can come up behind her, startle her, kill her before she even has a moment to remember why she was living in the first place.

“All clear.” Jeong's voice is a curt whisper, low and practiced. “Let's head upstairs.”

As they walk back the way they came, a photo on the wall next to the arch catches her eye, its frame ornate, silver, too lavish for this house. An important photo, then. And one that, when Louise gets a little closer, looks familiar.

Her father holding his biggest catch ever, and Jeong next to him, both caught by the camera in a triumphant moment, whooping and hollering and disturbing all other fish in the area—but what did it matter? They caught the king of all the fish in the river. It can't be here, on this wall, in this house a county over from its origin.

Louise remembers taking this photo.

Her muscles suddenly spasm and tighten, the rope gripped in her hand so tight that the nylon digs uncomfortably into flesh. Everything in her body cramps up, each muscle incongruously expanding and contracting and giving out at once, the sensation such a bizarre combination of numbness and pain that Louise almost doesn't realize when she hits the floor, her head knocking hard against sticky linoleum, and then there is nothing.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Before his disappearance, Tammy and Stuart always watched the news late at night, bundled together on her small, pinstripe couch. It was never good news, and maybe that kept her grounded. Knowing that she wasn't the only one having a hard time in the hollows of DC, in the forgotten parts that were only traversed by those making minimum wage or worse. Another girl missing, snatched up off the street on her way home.

Tammy knew she was a bad person for finding solace in that. Like she found solace this morning in Alice's death, that slight relief followed by self-hatred. So many women went missing on her side of town, sometimes near Tammy's apartment, or worse, on her block. As they watched the newscaster discuss not walking alone at night, the ever-growing list of missing persons in the DC area, reputable stores to buy mace and pocket-knives, Tammy examined the picture of the missing girl and realized that she worked at the 7/11 a block away from the apartment, where Tammy often found herself buying lukewarm corndogs and thin, milky coffee in the early hours of morning before work. In the picture, she was smiling, braces catching the light, a colorful, plastic-beaded bracelet on her wrist.

She looked like she would never have expected this to happen. Happy in only the way a child can be. Not a hint of anxiety in her smile. Jennifer Sullivan, seventeen. Just graduated from high school.

Tammy didn't understand why it was never her. She was waiting her turn, because surely this city was going to swallow her up like it did every other person that had no one to miss them. Even in its bright spots, in the art districts and beautifully graffitied overpasses and red-bricked one-way streets, there was dirt underneath. Even though Tammy had loved this city since she

was a child, she felt her own unease beneath that adoration, floating driftwood submerged in water, rising quickly to break the still surface of a river's edge.

The room was a gloomy swirl around them, the blue light of the television just managing to break up the shadow. Thrifted paintings on the walls morphed into abstract monsters. Tammy had always liked art that frightened her a little. Hanging behind the TV was a pop-art version of Goya's "Saturn Eating His Son," a large, twisted figure raising the limp body of a man to its mouth, the addition of color-blocking turning a once dark painting into an art-deco nightmare. But after seeing that girl's face, she couldn't seem to meet Saturn's wide, all-pupil eyes.

Stuart's arm was propped up on the back of the couch, and Tammy pressed herself fully against his side, her body accepting his warmth as its own. He was solid despite his age, and she found that reassuring. As if nothing could phase him or break him down where Tammy was so easily affected by everything. "How do you deal with it?" The question came as a surprise to both of them. "Seeing this kind of stuff all the time?"

He hummed, considering his answer. Tammy could feel the sound rumble beneath Stuart's skin. Comforting. She liked him close. He pressed a kiss to her hair before speaking. "I don't really deal with it. Not well, I think. No cop does enough, you know? I deal with it by going back in the morning, even though it's endless."

"That sounds more like something you'd say at a press conference. I'm asking for real."

"And I'm telling you for real." An airplane was flying overhead, slightly shaking the double-paned windows in their frames. "I have to deal with it by not thinking about the worst parts, which is awful. I know. Bad things happen every day. All I'm told to do is try my best to help—not even to stop things. Just to help where I can after everything's already gone to shit. Get the cases on our homicide board solved so our numbers look better than the other districts'."

This, she knew, was the truth. Just in the way he said it. The way his hand trailed carefully down her arm to hold her a little tighter to him. Stuart had a bad habit of joking about serious things. He didn't talk about the strikingly real parts of his life, his career, too often. Tammy wondered if he couldn't. If he didn't know how.

He leaned back, his head resting against the couch's edge so he could stare at the ceiling. The news faded out. Stuart's breathing felt louder than it was. Kids were playing on the street outside, their shouts echoing up into the apartment. "I don't know if I can do it much longer."

It was something she hadn't expected from him. A sense of vulnerability he hadn't allowed her before now. He loved his job—even in that moment, she knew he still loved it. But there's only so much one can take before breaking.

"Are you gonna leave?" The police. Arlington. DC. His wife. The question was open-ended because Tammy wasn't sure just how far he'd have to get away from the city to forget.

His arm tightened around her shoulders, and he sat upright again so he could rest his head on top of hers, his cheek warm against her hair. "Not you."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Louise's entire body aches. Her vision swims when she opens her eyes, tender as if she'd been crying. She doesn't remember crying. Things come into focus slowly. Her hands, in front of her. She's sitting. And dexterous fingers are tying something black and plasticky around her wrists, making them ache worse. The fingers' hands know what they're doing—when they pull away, Louise's wrists are tied so tight they don't budge when she tries to wriggle them out of their bonds.

The reality of her present situation hits her with sudden clarity, like cold water splashed against her face, like the descent after the rise, the feeling of flying already forgotten. She tries to move but her ankles are tied up as well, and her torso, the same strong, thin rope looped through the open back of the dining room chair she sits in. Her mouth isn't covered, but her tongue feels thick, words coming to her slowly.

Bill stands in the archway leading to the kitchen, leaning casually against the plaster. “Hey, kid. How are you feeling?”

“Fuck you.” The words are slurred and clumsy and stumble against her suddenly too-large teeth.

“I'm sorry I had to do that. There was no other way I could get you tied up without hurting you worse. It was the best I could do.” He walks over, crouches in front of her. His eyes are level with hers and she sees genuine pain there. Regret. He sighs and shakes his head. “I'm sorry I had to do any of this.”

Louise's lip quivers before she can stop it. “Did you kill my mom?”

A deep sigh in answer.

His body language screams resigned sadness, and she can't tell if this is a very well-prepared act he's putting on, or if he actually feels remorse for the things he's done—the things Louise can't believe he's done. She thinks of her mother in the same situation she is currently in and retches to the side of her legs, dry heaves bile onto the floor. “It's not Dad. If it's not him, then where the hell is he?” Louise’s voice breaks and she has never felt so helpless. So alone. Bill was the last person in the world that was there for her, and now he has her tied up in a dark house in McLean. Tears force their way out, though Louise doesn't sob—they just fall, soundless.

A terrible feeling starts to form in her stomach. As Bill draws out the silence, she begins to realize what the answer to her question is.

“There was no other way. He found out what I was doing. The girls—look, it's a pastime. Not a good one, but something I just can't seem to stop. I do try to. But he figured it out.” He lowers his head, shoulders caving in. He makes himself small. Less of a threat. “I'm so sorry, kid. He forced my hand. The best cop I'd ever met, and he went to the grave proving that.”

A sudden, terrible calm washes through Louise, a numb ache on top of the physical one left by the taser. She is going to die in this house. She will die in McLean and the last thing she did before coming here was yell at the only person that had ever been kind enough to offer her friendship. Assume the worst of her. Wonder if she could be a killer.

Louise is going to end up in the Potomac like her mom.

She thinks of every true crime book she's ever read, every survivor's account, every piece of evidence that seemed insignificant but proved monumental in solving terrible crimes. Wayne Williams was caught after killing over twenty people because fibers from his carpet were found on his victims. Richard Evonitz was confirmed to have murdered several girls not far from where

Louise and Bill are now, furry handcuffs providing the threads that tied each victim to one another.

She begins picking at the worn skin around her thumbnail, a nervous habit she'd stopped long ago. Anything to leave a physical trace—something that could get swept aside, missed by the cop in front of her but found by another. If he'd even let the police get close to this house. “You've been misdirecting the search.”

He shakes his head, and stands up fully, starts pacing in front of her. “I've been purposefully directing the search towards someone other than myself. Stuart is going to be the sole suspect for these murders, and the trial in absentia will go forward.”

“So why help me at all? I got a lot of valuable evidence from the leads you gave me.” Not quite true, but she wants to explore any side of this conversation where she might have the upper hand. Her thumb stings, but she hasn't achieved what she needs to yet. She wishes she'd stopped cutting her nails so short.

Bill isn't bothered by this. He still walks too casually, a confidence in his movements despite his sadness. “You wouldn't have been able to use it. It's all circumstantial—most of it can point to any cop. The only reason Stuart became an actual threat is because he got pictures of me putting Rhiannon's body in the river. I saw them at the last Sunday dinner we all had together. Stuart left the memory card in his computer, and I had a feeling he was pulling away from me. I just had to check that he wasn't doing something stupid, but he was. I just did what he did. Investigated.”

At that Sunday dinner, Stuart and Bill had been smiling at each other, exchanging jokes over the dry pork that Alice cooked, enjoying each other's company like only old friends could. And her dad had known he was sitting across from a murderer, and Bill had known he was going

to kill his best friend. Things jumble in Louise's mind. Her body is screaming at her and her mind is numb, and she knows that if there is any hope of getting out of this situation, she will break down the minute she feels safe. But now is not the time. Something at the back of Louise's mind moves, slow and slithering. She's forgetting something.

“And then I had to set him up, too, to make him look guilty.” He tries to catch her eye, but she refuses to look at him. He walks towards her, feet quiet on the floorboards, and grabs her chin, raising her face towards him in a stern but gentle grip. When his thumb traces the curve of her chin she feels nauseous. “She didn’t suffer at all. I promise, it was over so fast. I didn't want her to be in pain, and I knew she would be in even more pain if her husband went missing, or was convicted of killing Jennifer. Her reputation would be in shambles. I think that was the thing she feared the most.”

Every single person in Louise’s life has lied to her, and she didn’t even suspect it. They lied and probably laughed behind her back because they thought she was too dumb to figure it out. The thought of Tammy once again pulls at her guilty brain, an admonishment and a regret. She should have trusted Tammy, who had been brave enough to tell the truth, even if it meant ruining everything they were working towards together. Her thoughts flash to Happy Ends. Jerking her face out of his grasp, she asks, “Does Morgan know?”

“God, no.” The idea seems incredulous to him, as if this entire situation isn't incredulous to some degree. “It would kill her. That's why I had to do it. I love you, and Stuart, and Alice, but I love her more. She's my whole world.”

She finally tears off a sizable chunk of skin, and hot blood runs down her thumb, pooling at its tip and dripping softly onto the floor. Even if he cleans it, takes bleach to the area and scrubs for hours, her blood will be in these floors, a vengeful piece of her staring out into the

room where she will spend her final hour. Blood seeps into wood. Forensic specialists can extract physical evidence from the grain.

She just has to bleed enough to ensure that it sticks, that her presence can't be thrown away as easily as her life.

“I wasn't going to kill you, kid. But you dug and kept investigating and that's why I gave you the leads. I know you like to keep busy, so I kept you busy. I realized I was going to have to remove you after we met in Georgetown—I could see how determined you were. You're so much like your father. You weren't going to be happy until you found out what I was doing. I was going to do it at Andrea's, but your friend was there, and she didn't have to get mixed up in things. Not if she didn't have to.”

She remembers the feel of the scratchy jackets on her face, the smell of mothballs. The feeling of her own heartbeat in her hands and footsteps coming towards her and Tammy's panicked grip. Had he come alone? Pretending there were other cops—another lie, carefully and wickedly executed. Again, that same sense of something to be remembered. What is she forgetting?

“I wish it could have ended there. Andrea was the perfect, cinching piece of evidence. I paid Jennifer to drop off Stuart's stuff, and every single loose end was going to be tied.” Louise almost thinks about what must have happened to Andrea, a woman that was kind and cold and smart, offering sweet tea to the daughter of someone she thought was a killer—but this is not the time.

“I couldn't give the evidence to the police because there were eyewitnesses there that had a story that didn't match mine. So, I'm making it easier for both of us. You can be reunited with your parents, and I can keep living the life I've taken so many pains to build. I'm removing the

eyewitness. Stuart's papers will go to the police. Things will fall into place like they should have days ago."

"And Tammy?" Her thumb is bleeding heavily now, the drops of blood hitting the floor faster, pooling beneath her and sinking into the floor. "She was there, too."

"A felon at a place that sells forged papers? If she even risks coming forward, she'd be arrested just for admitting she was there. I could pin almost anything on her. But she won't, because no one will believe her." He shakes his head, dismissing any notion of Tammy as a threat. "And I think she knows that. She's a sad girl. Quiet, no fight in her. Not like you."

The respect in his voice makes her feel like she's done something vile. She's forgetting something to do with Tammy. Her mind is a haze, but something almost solidifies within the fog, a beacon to guide the lost and weary.

"Sorry for talking so much. I figured I owed you an explanation after how long I've known you. I'm going to miss you. And I'm sorry to tell you this, but you can stop hurting yourself. I can see the blood on the floor." He puts a ruminative hand to his jaw, and despite the fact that he is the cause of all this, tears form in the corners of his eyes, now red-rimmed and heavy. "You're so smart. He really did raise you well. But I treat my floors with copper sulfate."

Louise's breath quickens, every single part of her body aching, straining against the ropes. The mention of copper sulfate means nothing to her, but it's stated so matter-of-factly that her heart falls into her stomach. She's in so much pain that she feels faint.

"They'll never be able to tell the blood from the stain. Now, come on. It's time." His hands flex, preparing for what comes next.

Louise knows he's lying about her mother—Alice struggled just like Louise is about to. This is the same woman who talked down every angry man at county board meetings, who could

yell in a voice so authoritative that anyone in hearing distance would turn and look and wait for orders, that could turn on an insidious level of charm whenever she needed to talk to voters or potential donators. Alice had been a fighter her whole life. *A Vote for Kemper is a Vote for Family*. The missing piece of the puzzle. Her father's voice, you're good at those, you're good at those, you're good at those. Tammy digging around the hydrangeas. She's fifteen and her dad is handing her a thousand-piece puzzle depicting *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Imagine fishing in that weather!

She laughs. She doesn't feel the sound bubble up before it comes from her mouth—it's an exclamation, an unhinged noise of victory. "You're such an idiot. Do you think that Dad didn't leave copies of the photos for other people to find? Detailed reports of everything he'd ever seen or suspected you of doing? I know exactly who has them and exactly when they'll be taken to the police, if they haven't already made it there."

For the first time since she has been tied up, Bill's body language changes. A sudden stiffness to his limbs, a tightness around the lips. He knows she's not bluffing. And when he charges at her with the nylon rope extended between his hands, his eyes no longer look sad.

She tries to kick upward, maybe get her chair to fall back on the floor. If she can roll over and get on her feet—

He's on her too quickly, putting his hands around her neck and squeezing, and all thought shoots from her head as her breathing comes to an immediate, concrete halt. With the most physical power she's ever expended, she twists her body, writhing against the ropes that cut into her skin. He can't keep control of her like this—she moves around enough that she can snap up quick gasps of air between periods of suffocation.

In retaliation, he tips the chair and slams her against the floor, her hands crushed between the chair's back and the hardwood that had been beneath her bleeding thumb. Blood coats her wrists, her back, slippery and warm, and she tries to roll out from underneath him. His grip tightens.

Stars appear in her vision, black and white spots ebbing against the planes of his face. Vortices of color and sound. Her whole field of vision just another reflection on the river. If she dies here, she'll have accomplished nothing.

She bucks hard, and her forehead hits his directly, skull to skull. His hands around her throat lose their hold only slightly, and then a hand covers her mouth, and his entire weight is pressed onto his outstretched arms, threatening to crush her trachea, break her jaw.

He convulses once, twice, and her vision fades in and out. His movements are erratic. Scattered. Contracting and then not. Air screams its way into her lungs when his hand removes itself from her throat, and she coughs loud and guttural, rolling onto her side, chest heaving with each breath. The ache in her body is nothing compared to how raw her throat feels, inside and out. Hands are on her face and her body writhes on instinct, trying to get away.

Coughing again, she throws her head away from the touch, slamming her temple against the floor, her brain rattling inside her head. The ache catches up at once, as if applying all retrospective pain—or maybe her skull reached its limit for hard knocks. The hands on her face again, a voice, fingers against her cheek that are cold where the ones just on her had been too warm. Soft where his had been rough.

Louise opens her eyes—she hadn't realized she'd closed them so tightly, having convinced herself she'd finally lost her sense of vision on the path to her death. Speech, sight,

smell, touch, sound. The last sense to go is hearing. The newly dead take whispered secrets to their graves.

“Louise, please, please look at me. We don't have a lot of time.”

Louise does as the person asks, and despite everything that's transpired in the past twelve hours, Tammy is here, mascara trailing down her face from their earlier encounter, or maybe from between then and now, her cheeks flushed red as if she just came in from the cold. It's not cold. Is it?

She had thrown Tammy's trust back in her face. Exposed every single one of her insecurities. And Tammy is still here for Louise, like none of that mattered—like their partnership is still intact. Louise wouldn't have done the same.

Her throat is too hoarse. Any reply she tries to give is cut short by another powerful cough, rolling through her body, causing tremors in bone. She tries to think through the pain. Tammy tased Bill—they have mere minutes before he'll be able to get up again, before his muscles unlock and his brain deems it safe to bring him back to full consciousness. Some tasers don't even knock people out. If she only lost a few minutes, he will be out for less. Louise wants to ask if Tammy called the police, but knowing her aversion to cops in general, it's doubtful.

The keys to Bill's car are on the living room table. Her feet are rocking back and forth even though she isn't moving her body. Slowly, she looks down and sees Tammy sawing at the rope that binds her feet with a swiss army knife. The one around her body is already limp, slipping off her body and into the blood. So much of it. The rope snaps apart and Louise's can feel her feet again, veins rediscovering their purpose, and Tammy helps her up carefully.

The room swims. There is sound and movement behind them—a groan, a scattering shift of something across the floor. Of course Bill would be better at taking a volt of electricity—they

probably trained him at the station. Even when cops get older, they still have to pass the department's yearly physical. Her dad could still run a mile in under eight minutes before—

Before he died. No, before he was killed. By his best friend.

“Come on, Louise.” Tammy pulls Louise forward, and her legs begin to obey her. Slow steps, shaky.

She points to the keys and rasps out something—enough that Tammy puts Louise's arm over her shoulder and takes on most of her weight, moving them quickly out of the dining room and towards the table. More noise behind them. Louise is not naive enough to think that Jeong isn't standing up right now, shaking off his stupor. She didn't know she still had room to feel more scared, more weak.

Tammy shouldn't have come. She's going to die, too.

The keys are hot in Louise's hands. Or maybe her skin is hot, and the keys are cold. Temperature doesn't feel regulated anymore. She could melt and it would be justified. This is what it feels like to be dying.

She's deadweight and can't remember how not to be deadweight, and Tammy is still dragging her towards the door, her small frame somehow keeping Louise upright through her sporadic steps.

A hand on Louise's shoulder, a vice grip she knows too well. She stumbles and falls to the ground as Jeong wrenches the two of them apart, spinning Tammy to face him.

Her hands go up in front of her face immediately, and she takes a step back.

The scene plays out before her dreamily, a private screening of a film that only she would attend. Jeong looks conflicted for only a moment, then his head snaps back, his feet slip on the blood, and Tammy pulls her hand toward herself, cradling it, the knuckles suddenly bloody.

There's a painting on the wall behind Tammy—a ballerina. Tammy's mother. Pretty pink tulle. Heavy frame. It's in Tammy's hands and then it's coming down towards the floor and there is a noise, a snap and a crunch, glass shattering, her head shattering, heavy breathing, more blood lapping at her useless legs, and then staticky quiet.

Tammy grabs Louise again and they make it to the door, time and space slipping between their steps. The air outside is sharp, a set of needles pricking Louise's face, her exposed arms. When had her jacket been taken off?

Jogging toward the car, Tammy tries to pull Louise into her rhythm. Her legs are working well enough now for her to keep up, but the night looks different from when she arrived. The sky is a pulsating violet instead of black. She can see stars. Too large to be the ones in the sky.

She hits the side of the car hard, air pushed out of her lungs. Tammy whispers an apology and shoves Louise into the back, then hops in the driver's seat. No sooner than the locks have clicked does the handle to Louise's left start clicking, being pulled hard enough for the car to wobble back and forth. Far away, the engine starts. Her head throbs in time with the stutters it makes while flipping over.

Like the sound is coming through thick cotton, a phone rings in Louise's head. A 911 operator asks what her emergency is. Someone responds that isn't Louise, and the glass is cool against her temple, and she lets herself fall, the boat hitting the water, Bill's body hitting the floor, the hatchback breaking the Potomac's surface. The impact doesn't even hurt.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tammy doesn't leave the hospital for days. Louise is in bad shape—a concussion, one nurse tells her, a split lip, a damaged cornea, a potential skull fracture. All because Tammy hadn't been fast enough. The information in the metal box that Stuart had left her, buried underneath the hydrangeas, had stacks of papers detailing Jeong's crimes, both confirmed and potential, photos, cigarettes in evidence bags. The worst, a list of names, local women, numbered down to twenty-three. She and Louise had barely found five.

The image of Bill's head giving under the picture frame is still fresh in Tammy's mind. She didn't have to do that. They could have left. They could have got to the car and sped off.

The request in Alice's blank face, the smile in Jennifer Sullivan's police photo, the numbered list. How could she leave him to escape when all those women were telling her what she needed to do?

This is the second crime she doesn't feel remorse for committing. Tammy is broken, she thinks, unable to feel that necessary human sense of regret. They'll probably arrest her once Louise is awake to give her witness testimony, but until then, a cop is shadowing her. She wonders if he knew Stuart.

When Louise is finally out of surgery, rested, not under the influence of enough drugs to knock out a bull, the nurse that Tammy makes small talk with when she feels like she's going to go insane in the quiet tells her that Louise is ready.

She should let her talk to the cops first. They'll probably use this against her in the court case, like she was trying to get Louise to change her statement to provide a better outcome. She just needs to make sure Louise is okay. She needs to see it for herself.

In the hospital room, there's that smell—the kind that reminds Tammy of the cisplatin in the IV bags connected to her mother's frail arms the day they went to the gallery. It makes her feel indelicate. Like she's not allowed to be here because her presence is a burden.

Louise smiles when she sees Tammy, the smallest, most broken expression, and that's all she needs.

Her face is bruised almost beyond recognition, and there is a long bandage wrapped around her head, covering her left eye. Ligature marks on her wrists. Red in the way they were on the bodies. If she'd been a second later, that could have been Louise too.

Tammy walks to Louise's bedside and sits, heavy, in the chair next to it. The nurse must have put it there for her. She'll have to thank her before she leaves. Before the cop carts her out of the hospital and into an interrogation room.

"I'm sorry." It's not what she thought she was going to say, but it's all she can think to provide in this moment. Her brain is like a sieve. She can't refine her thoughts into the right sentences. "I didn't mean to—"

"Tammy." Louise's expression is unreadable. The bruises. The bandage. Tammy has no idea what to expect, but Louise reaches a careful hand out to her and Tammy takes it and it's warm. "I shouldn't have said those things to you. I've been keeping my anger in for too long. I was awful to you and you *still* saved my life."

"I guess it's not exactly a fair trade." Tammy's hand is getting sweaty. She's nervous. It's in the way her voice shakes, too. She doesn't want Louise to have to feel it, even though this is probably the least of her concerns right now. "I would do it again, though."

"I'm sorry, too. Really. You're a good person."

Tammy attempts a smile. It's watery, but it's there. "Are we acquaintances now?"

“Maybe.” Louise gives Tammy that broken smile again, almost overshadowed by the ruin of her face. Her voice is warm. “Get someone to bring me a glass of water and we’ll see.”

After that, things are easier.

Louise takes the fall. She tells the police that she is the one, in a fit of delirious rage, that brought the picture frame down on Bill Jeong’s head. Self-defense. How could they doubt her when she looked like she did, bruised and battered and just barely on the cusp of alive?

The case is dropped. Tammy hands the shiny silver box over to the Third District police department, unlocked so she can keep the key. It sits on her desk, and when the sun hits the perfect spot it shines a little too bright, projecting spots of light onto the ceiling, the canvases, the unmade bed. The toothbrush stays in its cup on her sink. She’s still waiting.

In court, a trial in absentia because the accused is deceased, Bill is charged with nineteen counts of murder, four of the names that were on the list in the box only having circumstantial evidence to tie Bill to their deaths. Still, it’s enough. He’s dead, but it’s something.

Recompense, maybe. A kind of justice that’s flawed but satisfying.

Morgan closes Happy Ends for a while. Two months and three days. Tammy marks each one on the calendar she buys at the 7/11 where Jennifer Sullivan used to work, this month’s page a picture of Paris from above. Each month is a different major city. DC isn’t in it, though. She’s getting paid on retainer, and it feels wrong. Being paid by the wife of the man she killed.

Some nights, she wakes up and sees blood. Sees her own hands, covered, shaking. And if she can’t get back to sleep, she calls Louise, and if she’s already up as well, they don’t comment on it. They just talk until the feeling subsides. The guilt of coming out on the other side, even though there shouldn’t be any guilt tied to that.

Commissioner Chandran works with the city's environmental council to approve a dredging of the Potomac river. Piles of plastic and oily rot are pulled from the depths, and, somewhere in between, three cinder blocks, two steel kettlebells, and the five bodies attached to them. Four women, all young, DC locals, ligature marks visible on the wrists and ankles of the ones less decomposed.

The bodies were dredged from the section between Great Falls Park and Bear Island, barely a sliver of Bill's dumping ground. Louise tells Tammy over the phone one night that the Potomac River is four hundred and five miles long. The distance between Great Falls and Bear Island is just under seven.

When the fifth body is pulled from the river, all of Tammy's remaining questions are answered. She thinks Louise already knew but didn't know how to tell her. Stuart Kemper, still wearing his uniform, three stab wounds forming a neat trifecta over his aortic valve. She doesn't look at the pictures. She wants to keep the memories of him that she has. His laugh, his kind smile, his beautiful hands.

Tammy goes to Gravelly Park a lot. Sits on the bench that looks over the river. She used to eat lunch on this bench when she was on parole, its metal too hot in the summer. Burning. Now it's the opposite—cold enough to sting, even through her clothes. Today she's here to meet someone, though. Not to be alone.

There is a phantom scent—coffee, cinnamon. A memory of the bakery across the street. Stuart watching as she poured three stevia packets into her already sweet coffee. This feels like a challenge, he said. Grabbed his own stevia packets from the plastic container between them. Ran his thumb gently across the back of her hand, sweeter than anything.

A cup of coffee is presented to Tammy, and it takes a few seconds for her brain to catch up—a small hand holds it, familiar. Morgan’s.

“Take it or I’m dropping it.”

Tammy doesn’t hesitate after that.

Morgan sits down on the bench, quiet. She’s not wearing makeup and it makes her look younger. Less imposing. There are bags under her eyes too deep and purple to be healthy. Tammy has never seen Morgan outside of work. She’s so smart, so driven, so good at her job, but here, on the bench at Gravelly Point, her hair swaying gently in the early spring breeze, she’s just like Tammy.

Human. Flawed. Grieving.

“You’re the one that did it.” That killed her husband. That got blood on her hands. That is guilty of so, so much.

It’s not a surprise. Morgan is too smart. Her discoveries lead to everything that happened—things other morticians overlooked. Still, Tammy asks, “How did you know?”

“Took one look at Louise and knew that she couldn’t have done it that injured.” Morgan leans forward, elbows on her knees, head in her hands. “I have such a massive fucking headache. Do you have any pain pills?”

Tammy shifts, nervous. She feels like she’s being tested. Something is not quite right between them because it shouldn’t be. She finds a couple of loose Excedrin in her jacket, just a few of the things she’s been too lazy to clean out of her deep pockets.

Wordless, Morgan takes the pills and swallows them dry.

The river flows and stretches out in front of them. High tide. The water laps at the rocks that keep the park from eroding into the Potomac. A jagged separation of land and river. It makes everything colder, somehow, bringing in the wind with it.

“I told you to be careful.”

“I tried my best.” She failed so horribly. “I swear.”

Morgan sits back up, and Tammy sees that her nails are bitten down to the quick, light pink polish cracked and broken. They look like her own nails. A product of anxiety. “How do you know if you really know someone?”

The doubt that Tammy felt about Stuart—the fact that she thought he could have killed these women—presents itself, intrusive. She had known him so well and still she doubted him, just because someone directed her towards their own conclusion. “I don’t think you can. Trust is hard.”

Hard-earned. Lost easily. Morgan had trusted her husband more than anyone. She had a photo of him in her wallet that Tammy would see sometimes, dog-eared and worn, them at a party in college, Morgan’s tongue sticking out—pierced, then, though it isn’t now—and Bill right next to her. An arm around her shoulders, a proud smile on his face. He took her last name when they got married. He dropped off lunch for her sometimes, made careful at home. Morgan said he wasn’t a good cook but she would eat every single scrap of what he brought her.

When did he become a killer?

“We’re going to be working on the river bodies with the police,” she says, shaky. “I already called Chandran. He was happy to pass it off to someone else.”

“Morgan. You don’t have to do that.”

“What else can I do? He already killed them. I can at least try to give them some peace.” She shrugs, but it takes effort. A weight on her back. She looks out at the Potomac for a few seconds, and Tammy has never seen her so ungrounded. “Can I count on you to be there?”

She owes Morgan so much more than what she’s given her. The fact that she’s asking Tammy to come back—asking her to help the families of those that have been wronged like them—is something she doesn’t deserve. But she could never say no. Not now. “Of course.”

They sit for a while, staring at the river, listening to the sounds of gulls and the rising tide and the occasional airplane that flies overhead, sinking towards their destination at Reagan National.

Something in Tammy’s chest shifts, cracks, opens up. She can’t disconnect herself anymore. She’s forgotten how to compartmentalize. The careful boxes she files her negative feelings away inside of are all collapsing, spilling together, and she doesn’t deserve this kindness.

Morgan lets Tammy put her head on her shoulder, even though she killed Bill, tore a human life from the fabric of the world. They sit together until Tammy feels whole.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The funeral is held in Happy Ends Funeral Home's beautiful parlor on a day in early March. The cherry blossoms bloomed early this year, and they buttress the path leading up to the colonial, the ground gloved in their petals. Louise stands against the far wall of the parlor's viewing room, away from the table of potluck risottos and casseroles and pies that she will end up throwing away instead of wrapping up and freezing.

A casserole won't bring her dad back. Won't undo the wounds above his heart.

Her memories of the hospital are blurry. Tammy by her bedside when she woke up from uneasy dreams and watery moments of consciousness. Her dad had been there at one point, she thinks. An image produced by her mind. Or maybe she had been closer to death than she knew. Regardless, his presence was reassuring. Like a final goodbye. A thank-you for finishing what he started.

Neither of them have healed right. They both broke over her dad's death, and it felt good to have someone to cry with. That fear she'd felt before she went to Andrea's—the fear of doing something alone—had sat with her for so long.

Louise's wounds were more physical, but her vision has returned to normal, her head only pounding on particularly bright days. Usually, a sunny day like today would have kept her in bed, curtains drawn, drifting in and out of memory. The way the ropes felt around her hands. The blood on her back. But the parlor is nice, the sound to a minimum, the lights inside all yellow-toned Edison bulbs.

She hates that Tammy had to do what she did, but she finds a sick satisfaction in Bill's death. He finally got to know what it felt like to fail. What he deserved. And she will take the blame for it without blinking an eye, because Tammy would have gotten worse than she did.

It's terrible, but it's true. She's the daughter of a cop. She knows.

The urn that holds Stuart's ashes is in the corner, and neither her nor Tammy approach it like the other funeral-goers, cops and family friends and people Louise barely remembers. Later, they'll release his ashes into the Anacostia, his favorite fishing spot, and the bruises that ring Louise's neck will fade, and Tammy won't look as tired, and everything will seem normal except for the trauma sleeping beneath their skin.

Tammy reaches out, grips Louise's hand as if she knows where her thoughts have gone, and maybe she does.

Morgan has started examining the bodies pulled from the river, adding more names to the confirmed list of Bill's victims. Tammy is getting her mortician's license, putting her natural affinity for macabre work to good use.

The other day, when Louise visited Tammy's apartment to prepare for the funeral, she saw a new painting behind the television. One she didn't recognize. She didn't ask, but it was a landscape, rolling hills, a craggy cliff, storm clouds, a raging sea below. The cliffside covered in hydrangea bushes.

Louise will find a way out of this, too. She'll figure out how to shut her eyes without feeling someone's hands around her throat. She'll finally apply to the FBI like her dad wanted, and maybe she'll stop things like this from happening to women that live in cities like DC, where anyone can be swallowed up by the shifting streets in a moment and never given back.

All of these are things to work towards. The one thing she has achieved so far has been much harder. Allowing Tammy into her life, talking to her about Stuart. Sharing memories. Learning what her dad liked to do when he wasn't at work, finding out who he really was as a person when he didn't have the responsibility of being her dad.

It's strange, but it feels like they're honoring his memory.

It took her years to figure out the man she'd grown up admiring. He had never planned to die for this—he wasn't a martyr. He was a human that loved fishing and logic puzzles and too-sweet coffee, a man with idiosyncrasies that Louise can recognize in herself. Something more than his sense of justice had been passed down to her. She's learning that he didn't build her life for her, but he offered her everything he had and she took it all. Now it's time for her to give back.

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