



No Quarter

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Category: Thriller, Suspense, Mystery

Description: Former mental hospital patients are being found dead, and the FBI's elite criminally-insane unit is summoned to crack the pattern. The murders bear the signature of a psychotic killer, and Special Agent Valerie Law suspects that entering his mind may just bring her down a darker rabbit hole than she would ever dare to venture...

A page-turning crime thriller featuring a brilliant and haunted new female protagonist, the VALERIE LAW mystery series is packed with suspense and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you turning pages late into the night. Fans of Rachel Caine, Teresa Driscoll and Robert Dugoni are sure to fall in love.

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PROLOGUE

They hate me.

She had tried to sit in their company earlier in the evening, but she felt their eyes. She felt their thoughts.

Gillian couldn't bear the way the other patients stared at her in the communal area of Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat.

But the voices in Gillian's head didn't hate her. They told her nice things, most of the time. They remembered Gillian's favorite moments and spoke of them often.

Like when her first love ran his fingers through her hair as they sat by the side of a lake on a sunny day.

Like when her father brought her a teddy bear with a pink ribbon the first time she got sick.

Like the time she came first in a spelling bee, and she saw the proud faces of her loved ones staring up at her from the audience.

The voices remembered all of it, and they would talk to her about those memories. They were a constant companion, and a soothing one. Soothing enough to almost make her forget that her family no longer visited her anymore.

Soothing enough.

Almost...

The communal area was a safe space for residents at Elmwood. That's what they called them, but Gillian knew they were patients in all but name.

The room, with a piano, a television, some games, and arts and crafts, was large; it was the place where the patients would try to persuade themselves that everything was normal.

But things were not normal. Gillian's paranoid delusions made certain of that.

Gillian got up from a soft armchair beneath a picture of a snow-covered field and began walking to the rear of the room as the other patients talked, watched TV, and played games.

Outside, raindrops cascaded down the windows. Gillian thought the view through them would have been nice if it weren't for the bars covering them.

They were a constant reminder that she wasn't quite free. That she wasn't normal. And all because of the voices, as kind as they sometimes were.

But not always kind.

Walking slowly across the cold hospital floor, she felt the stares again. The delusion was coming. But in Gillian's skewed mind, she didn't see it as such. She saw the paranoid thoughts as revelations. They were the truth about the real world.

Out of the corner of her eye, she felt the piercing gaze of another patient, demonic and malevolent.

But when she turned to face him, the patient was looking down at a game of checkers

in front of him.

That was always the way. That was how they'd persuaded Gillian that she was mentally ill.

They always look away when I face them, she thought. Always.

Gillian looked down at her pale feet in hospital slippers. She remembered looking at those same feet when she was a teenager. When her dad had had her committed for the first time.

That was nearly fifteen years ago.

She had experienced four breakdowns since then, the last one being the worst. She had been found wandering three miles from where she lived wearing only a night dress.

That was why she was there at the hospital and had been for some time. It had been the straw that broke the camel's back for her family.

They seemed to worry more about the embarrassment such behavior would cause them rather than showing unwavering care for their daughter.

Gillian heard the shuffle of movement around her, the television blaring, and the orderlies trying to harangue patients to take their meds.

Quiet, she thought. I just need some quiet.

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She walked out of the room, trying to avoid staring at the demonic eyes around her. The hustle and bustle of the communal room soon faded to a distant hum as she walked the corridors of Elmwood.

Away from the noise, the hallways of the retreat were almost peaceful. The lighting wasn't as harsh there. It was softer somehow. But the walls still felt sterile, even with their occasional pastoral colors, and the floors appeared lifeless and shiny.

Gillian didn't like the way the floors caught the light and threw it back at her.

She looked down as she moved along the hall, the polished floor reflecting back a warped shadow at her.

What is that? She asked herself as she looked at it, frightened.

Panic ran through her blood. The shape looked just like the demon eyes staring at her in the communal room.

The real horror for her was that she knew it was her own reflection.

Am I a demon too?

The thought chilled her to the bone. Her heart began to race, and she knew then that she would soon be spiraling out of control. Her thoughts would turn, convulse, and, inevitably, she would end up strapped to her bed with a needle in her arm.

"Treatment," she whispered out loud. That was what the doctors called it. But she felt

like a pin cushion, and that the needle was just there to make the lives of Elmwood's staff easier.

To keep her blank.

Sedated.

No longer an embarrassment for her family.

A nothing. An empty vessel.

It was no life for a young woman.

Gillian tried not to look down at the shape on the floor reflecting up at her, instead she focused on the route ahead. Just a few simple steps and then around a corner. Then a few more, one slippered foot in front of the other, all the way to room 43.

Her room.

A place where she could finally be safe from the eyes of the demons. It was her one sanctuary.

As she turned a corner, steadying her breath, voices swirled in her head again. But this time, they were not kind. They were not describing a trip down memory lane.

No, this time the voices were warning Gillian. They felt something in the air.

Demons, they said. They're going to get you.

Gillian walked by an orderly in the hall. For a moment as he passed, she felt his piercing eyes. She saw out of the corner of her vision a bleak light shining from the

man's eye sockets. Cold and lifeless, a blue light shining.

Her pulse raced.

They'll get you soon, the voices said in her head.

Moving faster now, Gillian felt the panic coming. The dread of the things in her head. The pain of the voices when they got out of control.

She suddenly felt as though something was behind her. In her mind, she pictured a tall, blackened creature with claws, looming over her ready to tear at her soul.

And then she felt the thing's damp breath on the back of her neck.

She sprinted.

She ran as fast as she could down the corridor, speeding up each time she heard the thudding footsteps of the creature behind her, now almost within reach.

She imagined its claws reaching up to tug at her hair and pull her back into oblivion.

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Terror swirled around her head until she realized she was close to her room.

Room 41. 42. Yes, finally, room 43.

She opened the door to her room, slammed it shut behind her, then dived over to her bed.

Pulling the covers over her face, she felt the cool embrace of the sheets beneath her. It was a place of safety. A place of comfort.

There was a silence. But it felt to Gillian as if something occupied the air near her. She trembled and was certain: She was not alone.

Then she heard the voice of a man, low and unnerving.

My God, it's in the room, she thought.

She couldn't see anything with the blanket over her head, but she did hear the footsteps. Slow. Methodical. Nearing the bed.

"Gillian..." the voice whispered.

And she recognized it. Someone she knew.

Pulling the blanket down slowly from her face, the voice now came into view. Yes, someone she knew. A man, she thought.

And she didn't think he was a demon. At least, he didn't seem like one.

"Are ... are you here to save me?" she asked, relieved.

"Oh, yes," the figure said, sitting down on the bed beside her. "I'll help you."

Thank God, she thought. I am saved from the evil.

The figure reached out with slender fingers and caressed her face gently, smiling. He nodded as if he was seeing all her pain. Seeing all her discomfort.

In some ways, the figure reminded Gillian of her father.

She looked down at the figure's hands and noticed something white sitting in them.

Gillian only saw it for the briefest of moments. She only realized that it was a coiled-up bed sheet when the figure wrapped it around her neck and twisted it violently.

She could hear the cotton bristle against itself, sounding exactly like a hangman's noose.

Then the shadowy figure strangled the life from her by twisting the coiled sheet over and over again.

Gillian gasped for breath. She tried to scream.

They got me, she thought as the world faded to darkness, and the cold embrace of death finally washed over her.

CHAPTER ONE

Charlie looked in horror at the faces of his family around their dining table. A place usually of comfort, it was now the setting for a father and husband's worst fears.

His wife, two children, and brother all had black tape over their mouths to stop them from screaming. Their hands, likewise, were bound by the stuff.

Someone had taken them hostage and tied them up in Charlie's dining room.

He saw the terror in his wife Angela's eyes.

Get our children to safety, they pleaded, wide and panicked.

Charlie had been exhausted, having just returned home from his most recent case in Boston as part of the FBI's Criminal Psychopathy Unit. But the weariness from that case only dulled his senses so much.

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The adrenaline and fear of seeing his family held hostage woke him up.

A creak sounded from behind him.

Turning as fast as he could, he saw a man in a white mask leap out from behind the dining room door.

The intruder was powerful and quick, and he lurched toward Charlie with a handgun in his left hand.

The man pulled the trigger.

Charlie batted the man's hand away, the bullet from the gun lodging in the ceiling. The loud bang and splintering of plaster made Charlie's children scream through their taped lips.

Forming his right fingers into a spear shape, Charlie saw his opportunity. The intruder had lifted his chin too high, exposing his neck.

He thrust his hand into the man's throat with a snake strike. The man let out a gasp of pain and surprise. Charlie then pushed forward, relentlessly. He kicked with his right foot, deep into the man's stomach, and then pulled the gun from his fingers.

The masked attacker fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

But it wasn't over.

Somewhere else in the house, there was movement. A cold sweat broke out across Charlie's body. He was used to being in life and death situations, but never with his family's lives hanging by a thread. This was a fear he had never experienced before.

There's someone else in the house, he thought as he rushed around to Angela, tearing the tape from her wrists with his bare hands and then removing another strip of it from her mouth.

"The kids," she said, gasping for air.

Charlie reached over and removed the tape from his children, Richard and Georgina. Little Georgina, who was only three, was sobbing uncontrollably as Angela picked her up.

"Are you okay?" Charlie whispered to Richard, but the five-year-old could only put his arms around his dad and bury his face into his shoulder.

"It's all right," Charlie offered, soothingly.

But Charlie knew that it wasn't all right. Footsteps were moving down the hallway outside of the dining room. There were several other intruders in the house.

He needed back up.

Charlie took out his phone and unlocked it with his fingerprint.

"Are you calling the police?" Angela whispered, now cradling both her children.

"It's my panic button," he replied, activating an app with one push of his thumb.

It was something he'd had set up after joining the FBI. With one press, it alerted the

local police department that there was an intruder in his house and sent an automated message to his partner, Valerie.

Charlie put the phone back in his pocket and then pulled the tape off of his brother.

“I...” Marvin said.

“Save it for later,” said Charlie, angrily. “You know how to fire a gun, so here.” He passed Marvin the handgun he had taken from the masked man.

Charlie was furious with Marvin.

His brother had been staying at Charlie’s house while he was away on a case. But Charlie knew this had been a mistake. Marvin had a checkered past involving criminals, and now it seemed obvious that those same criminals were who had tied up his family.

Charlie moved to the door of the dining room. He listened. His hearing had always been far above average and knowing how his house should have sounded let him identify where other intruders were, to a degree.

“One in the hallway,” he whispered to Marvin. “One in the kitchen ... I think another upstairs. There may be more, I can’t be certain.”

“What should I do?” Marvin asked, checking that the handgun was loaded.

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Charlie looked to a second door in the room. His brain was already trying to strategize. His thoughts ran rampant searching for the best and safest solution.

Someone in the hall...

Can't take the family out that way...

The other door leads to the L shape hallway...

No escape...

This room is no good, two ways in and out.

Need a more defensible position.

One way in or out. Funnel them toward my gunfire.

In the blink of an eye, the plan was formulated in his head and kicked into gear.

"Through that door, left and then into the second room," Charlie whispered to his brother.

"We should take Angela and the kids out the back way!" Marvin protested in hushed tones.

"No good," Charlie said. "There's someone in the kitchen, maybe more. I can hear them. We'd have to cut through there. Just do as I say, Marvin."

“It’s a bad idea, Bro.”

“Just do it!”

Marvin backed down. He had no other choice. Despite their problems, Marvin knew Charlie had far more experience than he did.

Charlie moved to the other door and opened it as quietly as possible. Peeking out around the corner, his own gun now stretched out in his hand, Charlie nervously viewed the L part of the hallway. A hallway in a once peaceful family setting was now under threat from violent thugs.

Charlie listened.

The footsteps were moving toward the dining room and now he only had seconds to react and defend his family.

He waved Marvin on with his hand. Angela held both children close, leading them quickly through the door.

Pointing at the second door across the hallway, Charlie only took his eyes from the direction of the footsteps for one brief second. But it was long enough for him to hear the unmistakable handling noise of a revolver being cocked.

“Down!” Charlie screamed, jumping in front of his wife and kids.

Two shots fired as an assailant emerged from the corner of the hallway.

The third bullet that sounded was Charlie’s as he caught the attacker in the leg just above the knee.

The man crumpled to the ground, screaming and holding his leg.

“Let’s get out of here!” Marvin yelled.

But Charlie heard two sets of other feet rushing toward their position and more movement elsewhere in the house.

He pushed Marvin, the kids, and Angela through the door into the back room.

As he did so, several more shots were fired, splintering into the wall next to Charlie’s head as other assailants appeared in the hallway. His ears rang with the sound, but he had at least gotten his family into that room.

It was a small den with a lazy boy chair, a wardrobe, and a few other bits and bobs. But Charlie had chosen it because it had only one door and a small window to defend.

“Now what!” Angela cried out, looking around her.

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“Get the kids away from the door and hide behind this,” Charlie threw an old wardrobe on its side.

He and Marvin then piled every piece of furniture they could find in front of the door.

Gunshots sounded. Bullets poked through the barricade, and Marvin leaped to the ground. Charlie kept himself close against the wall by the door.

He listened.

He waited.

The sound of a footfall came.

Charlie knew someone was coming closer. And so, he used that as an opportunity to do some damage. He side-stepped and saw the shadow of someone through one of the bullet holes in the door.

He squeezed the trigger and heard a gasp as his own bullet shot through the small hole. Then, the unmistakable sound of a body hitting the floor.

“Did you get him?” Marvin asked, his voice laced with anxiety.

“There are at least three or four more,” Charlie whispered.

“What do they want!?” Angela yelled.

Charlie drew a look at his brother. Marvin appeared ashamed and avoided his gaze.

Four more shots sounded from outside the room, but this time the bullets were lower down the door. They splintered through a table propped up as part of the barricade. A piece of splintered wood half an inch in length struck Charlie's cheek, drawing blood.

He gave it no attention.

Instead, he fired back through the door as he crossed the room. Then, he moved to a small window, the only one there.

Looking out of it, his fears intensified. It was their only escape, if escape were possible, but he could already see another intruder on the path, gun in hand, looking in the windows trying to find out which one was theirs.

Charlie fired another shot at the door and then sunk down behind the window.

"Shoot through the door, Marvin," Charlie said.

And Marvin did just that. He wasn't as trained as Charlie, but he had handled a gun or two in his time.

As his brother fired some shots to deter anyone from trying to get through the barricade, Charlie waited.

And waited.

Suddenly, the light from the window dimmed slightly. That was when he knew it was time. One of the attackers was standing in front of it.

Leaping up from beneath the window, Charlie aimed his gun for a shot at the man

standing in front of it. But it was too late.

Glass smashed all around, cascading over Charlie like a hailstorm. The man had smashed it with the butt of his gun and grabbed Charlie by the neck.

“Daddy!” Charlie’s kids screamed, almost in unison.

Angela shielded them from the glass with her body.

Marvin stood up to help his brother, but as he did so, two shots sounded at the door, blowing one of the hinges off.

It was only a matter of time, now, before they got in.

The man on the other side of the broken window frame pulled at Charlie, dragging his face toward a large shard of glass sticking out of the wood.

Just as the glass was about to pierce his cheek, Charlie grabbed the man’s thumb, bent it back, and then applied a wrist lock on his hand.

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The man let go, and Charlie thrust his fist through the window frame, catching his attacker on the chin, forcing him back into the yard. The man crumpled to the ground, losing consciousness. But Charlie saw two more men farther down the path, taking cover but keeping their guns aimed at the window.

Escape looked impossible.

Reeling back from the window, Charlie leaped to the ground as bullets came through the wall next to him.

“They’re shooting from the next room!” Marvin yelled.

“You think!?” Charlie shouted.

Powdered plaster fell from the walls as another hail of bullets came.

The door.

The window.

The next room.

Charlie felt like he and his family were under siege. With limited ammunition, it was only a matter of time before they got in.

He knew this. A terror washed over him as he thought momentarily about what they might do Angela and his children.

Something barged against the door, the barricade shaking.

Charlie fired another shot into the door, but it was no good. It was giving in, and without being able to see exactly where the attackers were, he couldn't be sure he'd even hit any of them.

He only had one scenario left.

"Let them come in, Marvin," he said only loud enough for his brother to hear. "Then we take as many of them as we can when we can see them!"

Charlie saw the fear in his brother's eyes.

He turned to Richard and Georgina, both cowering under their mother. He touched their cheeks.

"It's going to be okay," he said, trying to sound as reassuring as possible.

He touched Angela's hand and smiled. But he could tell she knew.

There were too many of them. But he'd do his damndest.

Charlie pulled Marvin down to the ground and made him lie in a prone position with his gun trained on the makeshift barricade.

Charlie crouched down, his aim switching from the window to the door, back and forward.

A silence fell.

"Maybe they're gone," Marvin whispered, his voice tinged with hope.

Charlie shook his head. “They’re just getting ready.”

Footsteps sounded. A kick came to the door and the furniture behind it shook violently.

Charlie waited for it to give. He only had a few bullets left. He knew he’d have to make them count.

Another kick.

Now a shoulder against the barricade. This time, the table fell from the door and the door fell against it.

For the first time, Charlie saw the people behind the door. Three of them through a gap, their faces covered with ski masks.

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Charlie readied his gun to do his best and hoped he could take them down before they got him. But deep in his soul, he knew it was unlikely any of them were getting out of there alive.

His heart broke at that thought. Not for himself, but for his wife and kids.

He aimed his gun at the shapes behind the door, but then something other than the inevitable happened. A gun shot. Then another. And another. And they were not aimed at Charlie and his family. Someone was shooting at the attackers.

“FBI!” a familiar voice cried out. It was a voice filled with bravery. Filled with defiance.

The men behind the door now turned their attention to the voice, shooting in its direction.

Bullets rained down all around out in the hallway, and then, suddenly, there was silence, broken shortly after by groans of pain.

The intruders had been taken down.

“Charlie! Angela!” the voice now yelled. “Richard! Georgina!”

“We’re in here!” Charlie answered. He turned to Angela and kissed her.

Through tears, Angela then turned to her children. “It’s okay, babies. Your Aunty Val has taken care of it.”

Charlie stood up and embraced his family, making sure they were unharmed, and then pulled away what was left of the furniture they'd used as a barricade.

The door then fell into his hands, broken at the hinges, and he put it to the side.

Looking down on the ground, Charlie could see a couple of the intruders, still writhing around in pain from their gunshots. More bodies were strewn on the ground.

Valerie Law, Charlie's ever faithful partner was holstering her gun, backed up by several police officers.

She ran up to him.

"The kids..." she said, her voice trembling slightly. Valerie rarely showed emotion like that during or after a fire fight, but this was different. She really was like an aunt to Charlie and Angela's kids.

"They're all right," he said.

Marvin appeared from the room. He was smiling nervously. "Never thought I'd be glad to hear someone shout 'FBI.'"

That was it. Charlie had had enough.

He grabbed Marvin by the arms and thrust him into a wall. Those men had been there for him, because of something bad he had done. Charlie was certain of it.

"My kids. My wife. They could have died, Marvin."

"And your brother, Charlie," he said.

“I want you gone, Marvin,” Charlie said, his voice grave.

“But...”

“But nothing,” Charlie continued. “I know what you’re going to say. That none of this was because of you. But we both know that’s a lie. Whatever bad stuff you’re involved in, whatever reason behind these men coming for you ... I don’t want it near my family.”

Charlie backed away, letting go of his brother.

“Charlie,” Valerie said, softly. “Maybe we should calm down and assess this first.”

Charlie shook his head. He’d never been so angry.

“I thought I was going to lose them, Val,” he said, turning to his partner. “I thought my wife and kids were going to die tonight.”

“I’m sorry, Bro...”

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“Sorry doesn’t cut it, Marvin. Get your things and get the hell out of here.”

Charlie moved back into the room to see his family and didn’t for one second look back to see if his brother was still there.

“But we’re brothers!” Marvin shouted.

“I don’t have a brother,” Charlie replied loudly through gritted teeth. “Not anymore.”

CHAPTER TWO

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be there more,” Valerie said on her cellphone, sitting in a bright, peaceful lobby with peach and white walls.

“It’s okay, Val,” Charlie replied on the other end of the line. “We’ve both had stuff to deal with, and on that day, you saved us. You were there when I needed you, and I won’t forget that.”

“Looks like the local PD cleaned up after the attack at your house, though,” Valerie said, hopefully. “With most of the attackers in jail or wounded, I think you can rest easy.”

“Maybe,” Charlie replied. “We still don’t know why they were there or what they wanted with my brother. All I know is he brought it on himself and us.”

“Are you really done with Marvin?” Valerie asked.

“He’s gone,” Charlie said. “And I have no cellphone number or way to contact him, even if I wanted to. And right now, I don’t want to hear from him again.”

“Family is important, Charlie,” Valerie said softly, looking at Tom standing in the doorway of the reception area. He was talking to a nurse about Valerie’s sister, Suzie.

“I know it is,” Charlie said. “But sometimes you have to cut a person loose if they’re a lost cause.”

“No one’s a lost cause, Charlie,” Valerie said as Tom and a woman from reception approached. “I’m really sorry, I gotta go. We’ll catch up soon, okay?”

“Sure thing, Val,” said Charlie. “Tell Tom I was asking for him.”

“I will. The same to Angela and the kids.”

The call ended.

Tom took Valerie by the hand, reassuringly, and the receptionist led them through a door into a cheerful hallway lined with doors and soothing paintings.

For the first time in years, Valerie felt a glimmer of hope in her soul as the receptionist led her and Tom down the hallway.

Working with her friend and colleague Will Cooper, she’d been able to get her sister Suzie moved to a smaller private psychiatric hospital.

The new hospital was smaller, more intimate. And that intimacy had been able to give her sister more hands-on therapies.

Suzie was responding to treatment in a way that Valerie could have only dreamed of

months before.

As Valerie entered the main building of Shady Rest holding hands with her fiancé, Tom, she remained struck by the contrast.

Suzie's previous hospital had been cold and sterile, but Shady Rest was warm and glowing.

Welcoming pastoral colors adorned the walls, soothing music played over the lobby speakers, and those working there didn't wear white orderly uniforms. They were dressed casually.

It was a striking difference, but her friend Will had suggested the change might stir something in Suzie.

And it had.

Tom took a deep breath as the lady at the reception desk took them down a carpeted hallway toward where Suzie was staying.

"It's okay," Valerie said, soothingly.

"I'm just a bit nervous," Tom explained.

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It was a big day. Suzie had been so stable; she had said to Valerie that it would be nice to finally meet Tom. After all, he was going to be her brother-in-law.

“I hope she’ll feel comfortable with me here,” Tom said quietly. “I mean ... I’m nervous about finally meeting her. I don’t want that to affect her or set her back at all.”

Valerie knew implicitly what he was talking about. When she herself had met Tom’s family, a good while before they were engaged, it hadn’t exactly gone to plan. Valerie had a panic attack thinking about her own family history, and then had to leave their family table to tackle a case.

“She’ll be all right,” Valerie assured him. “Just remember, she has undergone a lot of changes recently, a lot of therapy and medication alterations. So, if she acts strange, just let me take the lead with it, okay?”

Tom nodded.

“Here we are,” the lady from the reception desk said. “Room 16. Suzie’s had her meds today already, so she might be a little sleepy, but she’s doing really well.”

Valerie smiled at the lady as she walked away.

“You ready?” Valerie asked.

“Are you going to ask her about you dad’s DNA test?” Tom inquired.

Valerie nodded, thoughtfully. Although her absent father had refused to take a test, Valerie needed to know if he was her biological parent. The question burned inside of her. For that reason, she had pocketed a cup he had been drinking from, hoping to get some DNA from that and have some colleagues at HQ run the test.

“Let’s do this then,” Tom said. “We are all going to be family soon enough, I’m just glad I’m finally going to meet your sister.”

Valerie felt a little apprehensive herself. This was a big step for all of them. She had met Tom’s parents, but that was the extent of the two families meeting. He hadn’t met any of hers, but then, her mother and sister were both under psychiatric care.

Deep down, Valerie worried that Tom might see the truth in her sister. That Valerie carried, in her mind at least, the same illness that had so debilitated her sister and mother.

It had shown itself in subtle hints. Seeing things out of the corner of her eye. Feeling paranoid. She had been able to hide it for the most part, but she knew that couldn’t last forever.

She feared Tom might leave her if he knew, or worse, he might stay in her life, forever weighed down by a series of her ongoing psychotic episodes.

She loved him. She couldn’t bear to think of him chained to her as her mind collapsed in on itself.

Taking a deep breath and shaking away those thoughts, Valerie knocked on the door before her.

“Hold on,” a voice said enthusiastically from the other side. This was followed by the sound of things being moved around.

Valerie laughed. “She was always a bit messy when we were kids. If she’s tidying up, it means she’s wanting to make a good impression.”

Footsteps moved toward the door, and then, it opened.

Suzie stood wearing a yellow robe with flowers on it. Her blond hair was brushed for once, held up with a yellow hair band.

Valerie was still staggered by the transformation, even though she had seen it firsthand over the last few weeks.

“Hello, you two,” Suzie said.

Valerie hugged her sister, sensing that she was very tired.

“Hey, Sis,” she said.

“Hi, I’m Tom.”

“It’s lovely to finally meet you, Tom. I’ve heard so much about you. I guess we’re going to be family soon, as long as I don’t put you off!”

There was a silence for a moment, and then Tom let out a loud laugh.

Suzie smiled in return and walked over to a cream armchair that was sitting by a window. She sat down, her movements a little older than her age.

Valerie saw the tiredness in her eyes.

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“The meds?” Valerie asked.

“Yes,” Suzie said. “They just knock me down a bit.”

“But better than...”

“Than being back in the psychiatric hospital staring at padded walls?” Suzie asked.

“Damn straight.”

Valerie looked around the room. It was a long way from the sterile padded rooms of the previous hospital. Suzie even had a Razor’s Hell poster on her wall, the same one she’d had as a teenager.

“Blackhole Maelstrom?” Valerie said, nodding toward the poster, depicting the band falling into a collapsing star.

“Is that a film?” Tom asked.

Valerie and Suzie laughed together.

“Tom,” Suzie said, wiping a tear from her eye. “I’m going to like you. Blackhole Maelstrom is the name of a Razor’s Hell album where that photo comes from.”

“Oh right, sorry,” he said. “I’m more a Motown kinda guy.”

Valerie stood for a moment, watching her fiancé and her sister exchange banter.

She almost felt normal. Almost.

There was a guilt in that.

It had been five weeks since the Boston case and the altercation at Charlie's home. Valerie knew things were changing for her family and her FBI partner's.

She felt as though something good was finally happening for hers, but Charlie's was in distress.

How the tables had turned. She wondered why life couldn't always be good across the board for everyone she cared about. Why did there always have to be something to sour it?

Something worse always seemed to be on the horizon. And for Valerie, that something was the question of whether Suzie and she knew their real father.

"Val?" Suzie said, quietly.

Valerie shook herself from the daydream and was suddenly aware that they were both looking at her.

"Sorry. I'm a little preoccupied. Nothing to worry about."

"You need to take care of yourself, Val," Suzie said. "What's on your mind?"

Tom gave Valerie a glance. He knew some of it. But she could almost feel him wondering if she was going to ask about the DNA test or not.

There was a moment of quiet.

Then, Tom changed the topic of conversation as though he concluded Valerie wasn't going to say anything.

“So, how do you feel about becoming a sister-in-law?”

“I'm just happy Valerie is getting on with her life,” Suzie said. “When my delusions take over, I'm not the easiest person to be around, neither is my mother, but Valerie is the one shining light in our family. The stable one. I'm very proud of her and all she's achieved.”

“How long did it take you to rehearse that?” Valerie joked.

“I'm proud of her too,” Tom said, squeezing Valerie's hand.

Valerie felt simultaneously happy and frightened. She was glad that her sister was acting so positively toward her and Tom, but Valerie had hidden her own mental health struggles for so long now that even her own sister wasn't aware of them.

Will she still be proud when I'm sick?She thought.

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“So, when is the big day?” Suzie asked.

“We haven’t set it yet,” Tom said, raising an eyebrow at Valerie.

“Same old Valerie,” Suzie said rubbing her brow.

“And what exactly does that mean?” asked Valerie, putting her hands on her hips.

“Uh oh, she’s entered big sister mode. You always put things off,” Suzie said.

“Remember the time Billy Jenkins asked you out to the prom?”

“Oh my God,” Valerie laughed.

“Should I be worried about this Billy Jenkins?” Tom inquired.

Suzie leaned forward in her seat. “Valerie was asked by a guy named Max to go to the prom with him. But she really wanted to go with Billy Jenkins. She told Max she’d think about it, meanwhile hoping that Billy would ask her out. Turns out, she waited so long that Max asked someone else, and Billy brought a girl from out of the neighborhood. She ended up going alone.”

“That’s not the Val I know,” Tom said. “She’s assertive as all hell.”

“With things that don’t concern her, yeah,” Suzie answered. “Like her job as an FBI agent. I bet she’s one of their top people, always leading from the front. But when it comes to her relationships, she has a tendency to dither. Not knowing what’s good for her.”

Valerie knew her sister didn't mean anything by those words, but they did irk her. Mostly, because of how true they were.

She hadn't set a date for the wedding because she still felt overwhelmed about it all.

"Why don't you two let me get used to being engaged before I'm dragged down the aisle, okay?" Valerie knew the second she said those words that she had hurt Tom's feelings.

"Dragged?" Tom asked. "I didn't think I'd have to do that."

"That's not what I meant..."

There was an awkward silence.

"I'm sorry," Suzie said. "My mind's a bit scrambled still, I didn't mean to cause an argument."

"It's fine," said Tom, unconvincingly. "There was something else Valerie wanted to ask you about."

"I'm feeling a bit tired..." Suzie said with a vacant look out of the window.

"It can wait for another time then," Valerie offered.

"No ... sorry ... you've come a long way," said Suzie, changing her mind. "What is it?"

Valerie felt the dread building deep inside. She didn't want to have this conversation, but she knew she had to.

“It’s about Dad and Mom,” she said, finally.

“What about them?”

“I visited Mom a few weeks ago and she said some wild things about Dad.”

“We all say wild things sometimes,” said Suzie. “Especially when you’re in a psychiatric ward, and they haven’t gotten your treatment right yet.”

Valerie didn’t know how to say it. So, she blurted it out.

“She made me question whether he was our real dad or not.”

Another silence. This time it was accompanied by a flicker of hurt in Suzie’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Suzie,” Valerie said, reaching over and touching her sister’s hand. “It might not be true. It might all be nonsense. But I wanted you to know that I was looking into it.”

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“It’s all right,” she said, patting Valerie’s hand. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter, considering he skipped out on us when we were young, and Mom started to lose her mind.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Valerie sighed. But she didn’t mean that. She had a deep urge to discover whether the man she had always thought of as an absent father was really her father at all.

“Did you see him, then?” Suzie asked, her voice with a slight tremble to it.

Valerie nodded. “I found him after some searching.”

“How is he?”

“He seems good,” Valerie explained. “He says he loves both of us, but it got too much for him with Mom spiraling out of control.”

Now Suzie appeared angry.

“So, he loved us so much that he left us with an unstable parent? I don’t buy it.”

Valerie was torn too. She had a few good memories of her father, but when he left, their mother got worse and ended up having debilitating delusions. Delusions that resulted in her trying to “cut the evil” out of Valerie with a knife. It was hard not to hold him partly responsible.

After that, social services swooped in. There was the court case, and Valerie’s family

crumbled. She and Suzie hung onto each other as much as possible, but eventually Suzie was haunted by the trauma.

If their dad had stayed, maybe it would never have gotten that far. She couldn't help but resent him.

"If I know you, Val," Suzie said. "You have another move in mind. Some itches you can't let go. I know how you work. You won't let this go."

"I have a DNA sample," Valerie blurted out with a sigh. "Given I work at the FBI, it's a simple procedure. But I haven't sent it in yet. The only thing is there's ... a complication."

"A complication?" Suzie asked, raising a tired eyebrow.

"Technically," Valerie explained. "Mom only cast doubt on whether he was my father or not."

"You think we might have different dads?" Suzie said, sitting up in her chair and looking forlorn.

Valerie held her sister's hand tightly. "No matter what, we're sisters. It wouldn't change anything, you know that, don't you?"

Suzie nodded. "But if it doesn't matter, then why do we need to know?"

Valerie didn't have the heart to tell Suzie the truth. It was more than just wanting to know exactly who her father was.

If she didn't have the same DNA as her sister, then it might give her hope that she wouldn't end up in a psychiatric ward like most of her family.

She felt ashamed of that thought. But it was the reality.

And there was something else...

“The way Mom was talking about it,” Valerie explained. “There’s something about Dad that she was holding back. I can feel it. I can’t really say more than that. It’s just that I want to be certain there’s nothing in our past that’s going to catch us off-guard.”

Suzie shook her head. “I think we’ve had enough of that sort of thing in our lives, Sis.”

“Agreed.”

“So, Tom, tell me about your work? What sort of thing do you do?” Suzie said, turning from Valerie. Even with her meds, sometimes it was difficult for her to stay on topic for too long.

The conversation blurred into the background for Valerie. She wasn’t focusing on the words that were being said, not completely. She was struck by how normal it was.

Her husband to be and her little sister chatting about life and the hum drum of everyday routine.

It felt nice.

Valerie had felt self-conscious about how well-balanced Tom’s family seemed in comparison to her own. For the first time in many, many years, she felt as though the possibility of saving her sister from her mental demons was within reach.

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If only I could do the same for Mom, she thought, looking out the window.

Something flew past the glass. It was a blur. Valerie wondered if she was the only one to have seen it or not.

As Tom and Suzie laughed and joked with each other, a sense of dread returned. She put her hand in her pocket and pulled out the small transparent bag.

“What’s that?” Suzie asked, breaking away from her conversation with Tom.

Valerie opened the bag and produced a cotton swab.

“It’s to swab the inside of your cheek,” she said.

“You really want to know if we have the same dad?” Suzie said. “I think you should leave it alone.”

Valerie looked at Suzie. She rarely pleaded with her.

“Valerie,” Suzie said, her tone now changing to frustration. “I don’t want to drag up stuff from the past. I’m barely functioning in the present. Can we just leave it?”

“I can’t,” Valerie said. “I have to know.”

“I don’t want any part of this,” she said, crossing her arms. “You never know when to leave things alone. Maybe the truth will be worse than our fiction.”

“Suzie, please...”

“No!” she said, loudly. “I can deal with Dad abandoning us. I know who he is and what he is. You bring this other stuff ... It’s going to set me back.”

Valerie leaned over and touched her sister’s hand. “Please, Sis. I can’t let this go. It’s keeping me awake at night. It’s all I think about. I feel sick.”

Suzie paused for a moment and then let out a sigh.

“Oh, hurry up, then,” Suzie said. “I can’t stand those puppy dog eyes.”

“Thank you, Sis.”

Suzie opened her mouth and Valerie swabbed the inside of her cheek before placing the swab in a small vial and sealing it.

“Thank you,” Valerie offered, again feeling guilty for pushing her sister into it.

“Now what?” Suzie asked.

“I send off Dad’s and yours to a friend in Quantico at the Mesmer building,” Valerie said. “He’ll test both against my own DNA. Then we’ll know.”

Suzie didn’t say much.

Something flew past the window again, but this time, Valerie only saw its shadow on the floor. No one else reacted to it.

Valerie’s phone suddenly rang. An obscure song from the Seattle sound played as the ring tone.

“You still love that song, huh?” Suzie smiled.

“Hello,” Valerie said, answering.

“Agent Law...”

Valerie knew the voice immediately. It was that of her boss Jackson Weller.

His voice carried with it a deep undertow of seriousness and worry.

Valerie knew there and then that she needed to put her family problems temporarily to the side, and that Charlie would have to as well.

Another killer was on the loose, and it was their job to catch him.

CHAPTER THREE

The room was dark, blanketing the killer in shadow. In his hand was a piece of rope, which he tied over and over again, doing and undoing the knots, feeling the rope tighten in his fingers.

He felt alive at the thought of wrapping it around someone's throat and strangling them to death.

A thick sheet lay over the window, blocking any invasive light. He had shut himself momentarily away from the world.

There was a comfort in this to him. He tried to think about why that was. Was it the safety of the womb? Or was it a reminder of those countless, safer days spent locked away for having a psychiatric illness?

He did not know.

All he could say to himself was that the darkened room felt like a sanctuary.

The rope tightened in his hand. It made a sound familiar to him, like the sound of someone hanging in an old horror movie.

He had killed more than once. Taking the life from another human being was entirely cathartic. He had power over those he perceived as weak.

The weak were unable to live full lives. They couldn't perceive things the way they should. They lacked intellect. They lacked the courage to do what needed to be done.

They lacked the ability to turn inward.

But the killer felt differently. He believed in introspection. There was much to learn about himself, and he could use that to perfect his murderous intentions.

Why did he do what he did?

What was it about throttling the life from a human that aroused and compelled him?

He breathed slowly in the room, taking the dark air in and out of his lungs. Thinking back, he pondered his most recent kill.

He thought of the tightened cotton coil of the bed sheets around the neck, wrapped with pleasure and strength around his last victim's throat. He pulled the rope tightly in his hands as the images ran through his mind.

He really loved the pulling of the bed sheets. The crushing of the neck by simply twisting the coil tighter.

But thinking of it would not be enough. It was never enough. Only the real thing would do. This he had gleaned from his most introspective moments.

He would have to do it again.

And again.

And again.

There would be no end to it. Of this, he was sure. There would be no way to sate his desires.

He was fine with that. He believed he should be able to move with impunity through the world of weaker, less talented people.

But the world had rules. False laws made by those weaklings. Laws made to impinge on the God given right of the strong to do as they please.

Yes, he would kill, but he would have to be strategic about it.

The longer things went on, the harder it would be to remain undetected.

But he was confident and smart. He felt he could outrun the kills. He could outthink the police and the FBI.

He smiled in the darkness of the room and squeezed the rope in his hands.

He would always be able to kill. And there was nothing anyone could do to stop him.

CHAPTER FOUR

A momentary glance in Valerie's handbag and one of the Mesmer building guards, the younger of the two with blond hair, pulled out a transparent plastic bag with a coffee cup inside and then another containing a small vial.

He looked at Valerie.

"Is something the matter?" Valerie asked, trying not to lose her patience.

She knew what it was like to be overly fastidious when starting a new job. However, the Mesmer building was where her FBI team was based, the place where she tracked down serial killers. But today, she had dual purposes. One was to work, the other was to have a friend in the labs test her father's DNA. She didn't have time for unnecessary security checks.

"No, Ma'am..." the security guard said, unconvincingly.

"It's evidence," Valerie said. "I'll need that back."

"Oh ... it's just ... shouldn't evidence be logged in proper evidence bags?" the guard said, his voice sounding uncertain.

Valerie leaned forward and took her handbag and the rest back. "Section 11, paragraph 3c of evidence procurement at the Bureau, my friend. Sometimes an agent won't have time to store everything strictly by the book while in the field, in exceptional circumstances."

The guard's cheeks flushed red with embarrassment. "Oh, I didn't know that."

"That's okay," Valerie leaned in and looked at his name tag. "Walt. It's great to know that we're all in such safe hands with someone being so by the book. Thank you."

The guard's cheeks flushed even brighter, but this time he smiled with pride. "Thank you very much, Agent Law."

Valerie said goodbye and walked toward the elevators. As she did, she stared at the bags in her hands. The coffee cup she had taken from her dad without his knowledge. The swab she had taken from Suzie.

In these bags, she thought. There's some truth about me.

But she wouldn't know that truth until Archie in forensics ran the test for her. She would drop them off to him later that day, but for now, she had to head up to her desk at the Criminal Psychopathy Unit.

Two women had been brutally murdered. And it was her duty to catch the killer before he killed again.

*

Valerie looked at her boss and wondered if the Criminal Psychopathy Unit and all its dealings with the most dangerous serial killers in the country was finally weighing down on him.

Jackson stood in front of the touchscreen in the briefing room. Dressed impeccably in a suit and black tie, he looked more forlorn than he usually was. His features were a little haggard, and there were dark patches beneath his eyes as though he hadn't slept well, if at all.

“These are the images that have been sent to us by the initial investigating officers,” Jackson said, moving his hand across a touchscreen and revealing two barbaric photographs of the victims.

Valerie heard footsteps at the glass door to the room. The door opened and in walked Charlie and Dr. Will Cooper. He was every bit her partner now as well, though he was first assigned to the team in a consultancy role.

Older than Valerie and Charlie, he still wasn’t as experienced in the field, but he was indispensable, being the leading expert in the country on serial killer psychology.

“Where have you two been?” Jackson snapped at them.

“Sorry, Chief,” Charlie said. “I found the doctor here trying to read the last rites to our coffee machine.”

“We should bury that machine out in the yard,” Will said, fixing his tie. “It nearly took my fingers off.”

Valerie laughed. “Technology and dusty academics don’t really go together.”

“Simmer down everyone,” Jackson said, his voice grave. “I have a pressing meeting after this briefing, so I’d like to get you on the road as quickly as possible.”

Valerie felt that there was something wrong with Jackson.

He was never usually that short with them. For the first time since she had known him, she felt concern for him. It was usually the other way around. He looked like a man under pressure, ready to crack.

“I was just showing Agent Law the images of our two victims,” he continued.

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Will turned to the images behind Jackson, and his face drained of color. “This is awful,” he said.

“Are we sure the two victims were definitely killed by the same person?” Charlie asked.

“Victim one was a 32-year-old woman by the name of Agatha Mitchell.” Jackson moved the image of Agatha’s body to the center of the touchscreen and zoomed in.

The woman’s body was lying on soil with weathered leaves around and underneath her. Her face was pale, with blood droplets on her cheeks beneath her eyes, and some sort of black cord was wrapped around her neck.

“Agatha was murdered three days ago,” Jackson continued. “She was taking a shortcut through woodland in the town she loved and was strangled to death with a pair of black shoelaces.”

Charlie sat down at the desk next to Valerie, while Will remained standing, examining the photographs in detail.

“What’s the connection?” Will asked.

“Victim two,” Jackson said moving the second photograph into the center of the touchscreen. “Her name was Gillian Pugh, and she was murdered yesterday.”

Valerie stood up and approached the touchscreen. She examined the photograph. It showed a woman in her twenties. She was inside some sort of hospital room. Her face

was purple. A coiled bed sheet lay alongside her.

“Strangulation again then?” Valerie said.

“Yes, Agent Law,” Jackson replied. “But there’s more than just the modus operandi to connect the two victims. Gillian Pugh was a patient at a psychiatric retreat about an hour’s drive from here. She was murdered inside the retreat. That retreat is on the outskirts of Buford Town, the place where Agatha was killed.”

“No CCTV inside the facility?” Charlie asked.

“It’s not a maximum-security facility, Agent Carlson,” Jackson explained. “They don’t have security cameras on every hall or room. Of the few that they do have, some of them aren’t working at the moment, and the ones that are operational don’t seem to have led local law enforcement toward any evidence or potential suspect.”

“Are there any other connections between Gillian and Agatha, the first victim?” Will asked Jackson.

“As a matter of fact, yes. Agatha was an ex-patient of that very same psychiatric unit,” Jackson said. “Given the way both victims died, their proximity to each other, and the fact that they were both connected to the same psychiatric treatment retreat, I’m quite confident that we have at the very least a dual killer, and at the very worst, a serial killer waiting to attack again.”

“But if victim two was killed by someone inside the psychiatric hospital,” Valerie offered, “how were they out in the first place to kill victim one? Could the killer have just recently been committed?”

“Or is it someone who works there?” Will asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jackson said. Suddenly, his attention was taken by someone standing at the glass door to the briefing room behind Valerie.

Valerie recognized him. He was a wide shouldered man named Heinlein. One of the higher-ranking bureaucrats at the FBI.

“I’ll be two minutes Mr. Heinlein,” Jackson said.

Heinlein, a man in his early sixties with slicked back, thinning hair and a look of a stocky pit bull, nodded gruffly and then walked away from the door.

Valerie looked at Jackson and saw a flicker of worry on his face.

“Boss, are you okay?” Valerie said.

“Yes...” he answered, unconvincingly.

“They’re not going to pull the plug on us, are they?” Charlie asked.

“No,” he said. Then he let out a sigh and his shoulders dropped as if he was about to release a great pressure from within. “It’s possible that you might have a new boss, however.”

Valerie stood up.

That was the last thing she wanted. Jackson had been a real mentor and leader to all of them. And outside of office hours, on more than one occasion, he’d been a friend. He’d even helped Valerie, off the record, track down her dad.

“Why would they get rid of you?” Valerie said, unable to hide her concern. “You’re the best damned department head in the entire Mesmer building.”

Jackson smiled, and for a moment, the forlorn look disappeared only to return momentarily. “Thank you, Agent Law. But I’m afraid you should know that it does relate to you.”

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Valerie felt her pulse begin to race. She wondered about using FBI resources to find her father. She wondered if her increasing internal turmoil had led her to do something she wasn't even aware of.

"What have I done?" She waited nervously for the answer.

"You haven't done anything wrong," Jackson said. "But when we were able to get you access to certain sensitive police reports regarding the Clawstitch Killer ... well, unbeknownst to me, that set off a chain of events. And now I'm being investigated for overreaching my purview."

Valerie felt a tremendous amount of guilt build up inside.

The Clawstitch Killer was her one great failure in her FBI career. A serial killer who had gotten away, due, in no small part, to a mistake Valerie had made.

That mistake had haunted her.

But she had regained the trust of many at the FBI through her detective skills as a member of the Criminal Psychopathy Unit.

She had hoped that was enough to one day get her another bite at that case.

While the killer seemed to have gone inactive for a while, Jackson had managed to pull some strings to let Valerie be unofficially part of the investigating team again. To have access to all the files, and, if time permitted away from the Criminal Psychopathy Unit, to even try to catch him should he start to kill again.

“Do you want me to explain to them that you were just trying to help me?” Valerie offered earnestly.

“It won’t do any good,” Jackson said. “Besides, Heinlein has had it in for me for years. He’s just been looking for an excuse to put my neck on the chopping block.”

He looked around at Valerie, Charlie, and Will.

“This is why it’s more important than ever that we stick to the book, and we keep making this unit a success. The last thing we need is for the higher ups to replace me with someone whodoesn’t believe in our mission statement. Believe me, with all the bureaucracy and red tape there is out there, that can happen. Sometimes new department heads are brought in just to find an excuse to shut said department down.”

“That’s preposterous!” Will interjected. “We have a long list of successful cases. We have saved countless lives through profiling and detective procedures. Surely, they can see that?”

“Perhaps,” Jackson said. “But it wouldn’t be the first time that the FBI made a silly mistake. They’ve shut down other successful departments before, all in the name of politics or cost-cutting. The point is, we can’t give them an easy excuse to do it to us. Let’s make it as difficult as possible for them to justify closing us down.”

Jackson stepped over to a desk and lifted a file from it regarding the current case. He then handed it to Valerie.

“I’ll let you know how this meeting goes with Heinlein and the others,” he said. “But try not to worry about it. And don’t worry about me. Focus on the job, Agent Law. Get your team together. Catch this sick murderer. Save lives. That’s all that matters.”

Valerie nodded, not sure what to say. Jackson simply turned and exited the room.

“What do we do now?” Charlie said, his voice uncharacteristically worried.

Valerie opened the file in her hands. She saw the two photographs of the murdered women, their faces blue and lifeless.

“Jackson said the victims aren’t far from here. Let’s go to this Buford Town, visit the psychiatric retreat, and see if we can catch this killer. The quicker we do that, the better chance we give Jackson to stay with us.”

“I hope we don’t need any back up,” Will said, mournfully.

“Why?” asked Valerie.

“Because with Jackson here fighting for his job and our unit,” Will said, his voice grave. “His hands will be tied when it comes to allocating resources until the matter is settled. However dangerous this killer is, I believe we will be facing him on our own.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Valerie watched the world pass by like a blur beyond the glass of the passenger seat. Her mind was troubled. They were heading into a sleepy town, one which had been awoken from its slumber by a violent killer.

She was surprised how quickly the miles had passed. The drive to Buford had only taken about forty-five minutes. The town itself was a pleasant one: filled with white picket fences, immaculate lawns, and the sweet smell of autumn breezing through its streets from the surrounding forests.

But something dark had come to Buford. Something malevolent and wicked.

“Here we are,” Charlie said.

But he didn’t need to say anything. Valerie saw the grounds of the psychiatric retreat nearing them up ahead. The walls were made of bright sandstone, and the gates were open, with no security guard to watch them.

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Valerie knew that for a place that treated mentally ill patients, this was more in line with where her sister Suzie now was than with the barred doors and secure wards of the psychiatric hospital where her mother was detained.

“Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat,” Will said from the backseat. “I don’t have any experience of this place. Have you ever encountered it?”

“No,” Valerie said. “In fact, I’m a little surprised that I’ve never heard of it considering how close it is to Quantico.”

“As far as I could see in that file,” Charlie said, driving through the gates and then steering the car along a winding road through the retreat grounds, “it only houses 156 patients. There are probably a bunch of places like this dotted around the country.”

“Yes,” Valerie said, with a little doubt in her voice. “But some of these smaller treatment centers have unusual practices. Unorthodox treatments that don’t work. We should keep our eyes and ears open for that sort of thing while we’re here. Not to ruffle feathers with the therapists, but unusual treatments can lead to unusual consequences, in some instances.”

The grounds consisted of pockets of golden-brown woodland, and then, at its heart, two buildings beckoned. Both of them were made out of unusual yellow brick.

Will pointed to the larger of the two, standing just two stories tall. “My guess is that’s the main treatment facility. That smaller building is probably for group therapy I would imagine, or maybe even some other residencies. Places like this sometimes have gymnasiums and that sort of thing as well, where they can do meditative

practices.”

“Ah, I get it,” said Charlie, finally. “It’s a hippie place.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge, Charlie,” Will said, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “Sometimes the greatest innovations in the psychiatric treatment industry only come about because smaller facilities decide to use alternative practices. It’s a proving ground for new treatments.”

Valerie didn’t agree. “Patients aren’t guinea pigs to be experimented on: They’re people.”

“That’s not what I was saying, Valerie,” Will said, sounding surprised that she would disagree with him on this. “But the only way we’ll ever find the perfect therapies for varying mental illnesses is to try out different avenues of treatment. Ethically of course. Always ethically.”

Valerie didn’t answer. She was too busy thinking of Suzie. She had been in a large psychiatric hospital, all sterile walls and locked doors. Yet she was doing better in the place Will had found her. And it reminded her of Elmwood.

Perhaps there was something in what he said. She just hoped that Suzie’s treatment wasn’t as experimental. She hated thinking of her sister as some sort of lab rat.

Charlie parked the car in the parking lot, and all three investigators got out.

There was a smell of pine and fallen leaves in the air, coming from the surrounding woodland. It was a fresh scent, but only reminded Valerie of the Bone Ripper case, where they had found more than one of the victims in such remote locations, surrounded by the sweet scents of nature.

She hoped this case would not be as difficult, after all, the Bone Ripper nearly killed Will.

Valerie shook that image from her mind.

She, Charlie, and Will walked up the steps and to the open doors of Elmwood psychiatric retreat. Just inside the doorway, a tall man in blue overalls was fixing one of the hinges with a screwdriver.

“Excuse me,” Valerie said, trying to get past.

“One second, please,” the man said, finishing his work, huffing and puffing to get the last screw in. “There! All better.”

He turned and looked at the three investigators. Looking at Valerie, then Charlie, then Will, he shook his head and wiped his brow. “You’ll be the FBI, then?”

“Yes,” Valerie said. “And you are?”

“Logan Saldana, I work here as one of the janitors.” He shook hands with Valerie. “Terrible business all this. I don’t think the place will ever be the same.”

“Do you know much about the murder here?” Valerie asked.

“No,” he said. Then he sighed and looked a little ashamed. “Truth be told, I keep my distance from the patients as much as I can. A lot of people with demons in there. A lot. I’d be careful if I were you. I’m always worried one of the loons might follow me home.”

“I don’t think the patients would like being called that,” interjected Will with disapproval.

“Oh, I don’t mean anything by that,” he said. “I just don’t think I’d have it in me to treat people with mental problems.”

He tapped the door he had just fixed.

“I like to stick with things I can understand. Wood, metal, spanners and screws; things that make sense. Anyway, I must be off. If you need anything, let me know. I hope you find the scum who did it.”

“We’ll do our best,” Charlie said.

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“That’s all anyone can do,” Saldana said, nodding politely and then disappearing back inside the building.

“Well, if the patients are half as colorful as the staff,” Will said. “This should be an interesting case.”

They crossed the threshold and entered into the embrace of Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat.

Valerie was instantly struck by the calm music that she heard and by the potted plants and pastoral colors of the lobby. In every way, it reminded her of where her sister Suzie spent her days and not of a place where a vicious murder had taken place.

Valerie knew to try and leave her baggage at the door, not to connect her personal life to her cases, but sometimes the parallels were undeniable. They could give insight at times, but they could also knock her off course and cloud her mind. She had to be wary of that.

Just as she and the others were about to approach the receptionist, the door to the left opened up and into the lobby stepped a man in a tweed suit. His hair was light brown, with a hint of gray about it. He wore thick glasses, and he looked exceedingly worried.

He stepped forward as soon as he laid eyes on Valerie.

“Are you Agent Law?” he asked, shaking her hand.

“Yes,” Valerie answered. “You must be Doctor Whitmore?”

“Yes, I’m the senior psychiatrist here. At your service,” he said kindly. “I’m so glad you could come. Gillian’s death has caused quite a stir among the patients and staff. People are frightened. And I’m worried about how this will affect everyone and their treatments.”

Doctor Whitmore looked over Valerie’s shoulder at Will.

“Pardon me, but you wouldn’t happen to be Doctor Will Cooper, would you?” he asked with an excited look in his eyes.

Will stepped forward and shook Doctor Whitmore’s hand. “I am indeed. Have we met before?”

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure,” Doctor Whitmore said. “But I’ve been to several of your symposiums. The talks you gave on the underlying mechanisms behind matricide were stunning. I had never looked at it that way before. I’ve actually been able to incorporate some of your theories here when dealing with patients who have resentment toward their parents.”

Will beamed with pride. “That’s very kind of you, Doctor Whitmore. When things are calmer, I’d be very interested to hear how you’ve implemented those ideas.”

“It would be an honor.”

Valerie looked at both men shaking each other’s hands. She smirked to herself. They could have been brothers. Both professorial. Intense, yet gentle.

Charlie had almost been ignored entirely. He then put himself into the conversation, regardless. “I’m Agent Carlson.”

They shook hands.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Agent Carlson, Agent Law, and Doctor Cooper,” Doctor Whitmore said. “I wish it were under better circumstances. I really hope we can catch whoever did this terrible thing to poor Gillian. We’re all just sickened that it happened at Elmwood.”

“We’ll do our best to catch the killer,” Valerie said. “But time is of the essence in a case like this. Could you take us to where Gillian’s body was found?”

*

Valerie looked down the corridor with dread. Again, it struck her how similar Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat was to where her sister Suzie was being treated. The same pastoral colors. The same peaceful jazz music playing through speakers hidden out of view.

She was even convinced that some of the paintings on the walls were the same. Clearly the environment had been created to be a therapeutic and comforting one.

But the yellow police tape cordoning off the entire corridor quickly unraveled that soothing atmosphere. They telegraphed to anyone near that something terrible had happened. A stain against the otherwise peaceful surroundings.

“Did you remove the other patients from the rooms along this hallway?” Will asked.

Valerie always liked that Will thought of others first. It made her feel that even in the face of evil, there was some good in the world.

“It was extremely difficult to find space elsewhere in the building,” Doctor Whitmore said. “But it was the first thing we did after calling the police. I’m not sure what we

will do now with these rooms. It's going to be difficult to bring patients back to this part of the building, but we can't afford to simply close down several rooms like this. The patients are going to be preoccupied with the terrible events that occurred here. And you know how much violent events can linger in the mind and affect well-being."

"Perhaps only new admissions should be brought to stay in this hall?" Will suggested. "They would have the same emotional connection to these rooms as those who were here during the murder. New patients needn't know what occurred here."

"That's a great idea, Doctor Cooper," Doctor Whitmore said, the gratitude clear in his voice.

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Valerie saw that Charlie was done with the formalities. He wanted to move forward with the investigation, and so did she.

Charlie stepped forward without saying anything and moved some of the police tape so he could continue down the corridor.

He walked up to a door with the number 43 on it. Police tape had sealed up the door along its hinges and frame. Charlie pulled the tape back.

Valerie and the others looked on.

“I take it this is where the victim was found?” asked Charlie, loudly.

“I’m afraid so,” Doctor Whitmore said.

“Did you know the victim?” Valerie asked, turning to the doctor.

“As senior psychiatrist, I don’t get to spend as much time with the patients as I would like to, but I make sure to be on speaking terms with each of them, checking in every week or so. I’ve known poor Gillian for some time. This was the third time she’s been here at Elmwood.”

“A repeating pattern of breakdowns?” Will asked.

“Yes,” Doctor Whitmore replied. “We have made real progress. But she had this running delusion about people being demoniacally possessed. She used to think she would see them around her. The descriptions were quite frightening.”

“Schizophrenia?” Valerie asked.

“Indeed,” said Doctor Whitmore.

“Did she have any delusional fixations with patients?” Valerie asked.

“What do you mean?” Doctor Whitmore asked.

“Was there anyone in the hospital that she spoke of? Someone she may have labeled as a demon?” Valerie was pondering whether Gillian Pugh could have somehow engaged with the person who had killed her, perhaps even on a regular basis.

“As I said,” Doctor Whitmore answered. “I’m not as intimately familiar with each patient’s case history. You’d have to ask Doctor Winters. She oversaw most of Gillian’s treatments.”

Winters. That name sounded familiar, but Valerie couldn’t quite place it.

“It’s not a comfortable thought,” Will asked. “But is there anyone you suspect might be the murderer? A patient perhaps that you are worried about? Someone with a violent history or perhaps even murderous fantasies?”

“Unfortunately, we have several patients with violent histories.” He scratched his chin deep in thought. “I can ask the Board here at Elmwood to give you a list of names, and of course, we’ll give you the freedom to interview anyone you want. All I ask is that you go easy on some of the patients. Some of them have very fragile mental states, for the moment at least.”

“We’ll be careful,” Charlie said loudly from along the hall. With a tear, he finally got rid of the last of the police tape from the door. Turning the handle, Charlie stepped inside, disappearing from view.

Valerie, Will, and Doctor Whitmore walked down the hallway and soon joined him.

Entering the room, Valerie got a chill up her back.

She'd entered far too many rooms in psychiatric hospitals. This one, with its cozy armchair and bookcase and little table that sat underneath the window ... all of it was too homely for Valerie to take.

It was just like Suzie's room.

She looked at the bed. It had been stripped completely of bedclothes, straight down to the mattress.

Valerie pulled out the file Jackson had given her from her handbag. She opened it up and took out a few photographs, each one depicting the state of the victim after the killer had been done with her.

She handed out copies to Will and Charlie.

Doctor Whitmore also glanced at them, and then padded his brow. "Poor girl," he said under his breath. "We've got to stop this animal."

Valerie could feel the doctor's pain. He was dismayed by what had happened to her. It seemed like a point of personal pride now for the killer to be caught. He wanted the killer behind bars as much as any of them.

"I will do anything to help you if I can," he said. "I don't normally talk this way about people with mental aberrations. But whoever did this, he's inhuman."

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“You think it’s a male?” Charlie asked, studying the photographs and looking at the bed where the woman’s body had been left.

“I’m not as informed about serial killers as all of you,” Doctor Whitmore offered. “But I do know that the vast majority of them are men.”

“Vast, but not all.” Valerie said without looking up from the pictures in her hand.

“Looking at the report,” Will began. “I saw that the sheet used to kill Gillian wasn’t from her room?”

“That’s right,” answered Doctor Whitmore. “We try to make sure that our patients don’t have anything they could harm themselves with. Our bed sheets clip in and lock on the mattresses—”

“To stop anyone from hanging themselves,” Charlie observed.

“Yes, Agent Carlson.” Doctor Whitmore looked around the room once more. “The extra sheet must have come from one of the storage closets.”

“And who has access to those?” Valerie said, looking up from the photographs.

“Most of the staff have keys,” Doctor Whitmore replied, before his expression changed to one of shock. “You don’t think someone who works here...”

“We’re not ruling anything out for the moment,” Valerie said. “But it might be a possibility we have to entertain if the patient leads don’t work out.”

“Can you give us access to employee files and patient records?” Valerie asked.

“Well,” the doctor seemed hesitant. “Isn’t that an infringement on their data protection rights? I’m not sure the Board would be so keen to easily hand that information over, I’m afraid. For ethical reasons.”

“From one doctor to another,” Will said, smiling. “Let me tell you, they’ll just get a Federal warrant.”

“I’m still not sure...”

Valerie knew getting access to those records was imperative. Doctor Whitmore or the Board at Elmwood could slow down that process if any of them dug their heels in about patient and employee confidentiality.

The longer it took to get those files, the longer it would take to catch the killer. Valerie knew she had to change tact.

“Can I level with you, Doctor Whitmore?” she asked, looking directly at him.

“Of course.”

“Three days ago, there was another murder.”

“At another hospital?” the doctor asked, sounding grim.

“No,” Valerie said. “But not far from here. The woman in question was strangled in a similar manner to Gillian here. And she was an ex-patient from Elmwood.”

“Oh no...” the doctor’s face had grown ashen. “I should have known there was more to it. You wouldn’t have Will Cooper with you otherwise. And how quickly the FBI

have gotten involved...”

“What I am telling you is confidential,” Valerie added.

“Yes, I understand,” said the doctor. “Who was the patient, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Agatha Mitchell,” Valerie revealed.

“Did you know her?” Charlie asked.

“Yes,” he replied, shaking his head. “She left here a couple of years ago. But she had been here more than once. I’d need to check her file to tell you more. A nice person as far as I remember.”

“What was her condition?” inquired Will.

“Again, I’d have to check. I suppose ethics don’t matter as much when the person is dead. But I think she might have had an eating disorder if memory serves.”

“So, Doctor,” Valerie continued. “I hope you can see why we need access to those files. There could be more murders, and it’s possible that the next one will be either a current or ex patient from here. If you want to save them...”

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“Say no more,” Doctor Whitmore said. “I’ll petition the Board to have the files made available as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you,” Valerie replied.

Charlie moved back to the door, stuck his head out into the hallway, and then turned back to face everyone.

“Doc,” he said to Whitmore. “I noticed that there is a security camera up there in the corner of the hall. What gives?”

“Ah, yes,” the doctor explained. “We do have a security camera system, but it’s so old that we are having it upgraded. There were some problems, and so half the system is down at the moment. I explained this to the local police officers who were here. They seemed concerned about that.”

“I bet they were,” Valerie said. “Thank you for all of your help, Doctor Whitmore. Could you arrange for us to get access to the employee and patient records within the hour?”

“I’ll absolutely do what I can,” he said. “If you can wait here for a moment, I’ll need to make a few phone calls to the Board to see what they say.”

“Of course, Doctor Whitmore,” Valerie said. “We appreciate all of your cooperation.”

“I just hope it’s not someone we should have been more careful with,” the Doctor

commented, sighing.

He then left the room.

Valerie turned to Will and Charlie. “It’s an inside job. They must have known the cameras wouldn’t be on.”

“There’s not really much to go on,” Will said. “I couldn’t even begin to build a profile from what little we have so far.”

“I know,” Valerie said. “As far as I can see from these photographs, there is no death ritual with the killer. He hasn’t treated the body in any specific way that would give us any kind of inclination about his motives.”

“Sometimes the simplest of killers are the hardest to catch,” Charlie mused out loud. “When they keep it simple, it means they’re keeping their heads. They’re not escalating carelessly. And they’re not over complicating things. That means fewer chances for them to slip up and get caught.”

Valerie thought for a moment. “Let’s not get too downbeat. The simplicity angle is a good one, Charlie. It might suggest a simplicity in the killer’s mind. We might be able to use that down the road to predict his movements.”

“I suspect we’re going to have to carry out a lot of groundwork on this one,” Will offered. “When we get access to Elmwood’s files—if we get access to them—there could be a list of hundreds, even thousands, of patients who have been in and out of here in recent years.”

“Agreed,” Valerie said. “We’ll need to narrow down that list. Charlie, you and Will make a few inquiries here at Elmwood. Find out who Gillian associated with the most among the other patients. I want to know who her friends were. Let’s see if we can

find something useful from them.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re going to be somewhere else?” Charlie said with a raised eyebrow.

“We need to split up to cover a bit more ground. I’ll be back later. I’m going to go and investigate the death of the first victim, Agatha Mitchell. I’ll speak with the family and see if there was anyone from Elmwood that Agatha was frightened of.”

“Fair enough,” Charlie said.

Valerie could feel that he disagreed with her. He probably thought they should focus on the retreat’s patients for a quick conclusion to the case. But there was no time for hanging around. If they split up, they’d have a better chance of identifying a suspect as quickly as possible. And Valerie felt that Doctor Whitmore would have a fight on his hands to get all the records they needed. They could be waiting days for that information.

It was Valerie’s style to move faster than that. She had a fervent desire that she would have the killer in handcuffs before sundown, before he could kill again, connected to Elmwood or not.

CHAPTER SIX

Charlie stared with incredulity at Doctor Whitmore.

The doctor sat behind his desk in his office, surrounded by files and various psychiatric awards and certificates.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said. “But the Board aren’t giving me permission to release those files.”

Charlie shook his head from the other side of the desk. “Do they realize other lives are on the line?”

“I tried my best,” the doctor replied. “But they wouldn’t budge. I don’t know why. But I suspect they’re worried the killer will end up being someone who works here, and the media frenzy will mean shutting the retreat down.”

“And what do you think?” Will asked, sitting beside Charlie.

“I told them that I thought it was more likely a current or ex patient,” the doctor replied.

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“Why do you say that, Doctor Whitmore?” Will said, moving uncomfortably in a wooden chair.

“Because we carefully vet all of our employees and staff,” the doctor said.

“But the staff are most likely to know about the problem with the cameras?” Charlie observed, feeling the impatience in his own voice.

“Yes,” said Doctor Whitmore. “Older patients, however, know the layout of this place as much as anyone. And we’re an open retreat. We don’t have very much security. Just a couple of guards and even then, people come and go. You’ve seen the gates opened outside. It’s one of the ways we promote a relaxed feeling here.”

“I wandered through the communal area earlier,” Will said, leaning forward in his chair, arms folded. “There were bars on the windows. That seems higher security than you’re letting on.”

“Oh, yes,” he answered. “We encourage all of our patients to mix with each other as much as possible in the communal area, but there have been previous times where altercations have occurred. I won’t bore you with the details, but one of our patients had a psychotic break in the communal area and tried to squeeze through a broken window.

“He cut himself up badly. We had the windows barred and reinforced after that to stop that from happening again. It also means that we can be sure to secure the communal area if we ever have to, like during a larger disturbance. Thankfully, we’ve never had to do that, yet.”

Charlie sat up in his seat. He was frustrated that they weren't going to get access to the employee and patient records without a fight, but the fact that a patient had reacted so violently made him wonder if it could be a lead.

"This patient, the one who cut himself on the window, is he still here?"

"Sadly, he is no longer with us."

"He moved on?" Will asked.

"No, he is no longer with us," Doctor Whitmore repeated.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Charlie offered. "How did he pass on?"

"He took his own life," Doctor Whitmore explained. "It's a horrible part of this job. For every successful treatment, there are several cases that end in tragedy."

Charlie felt Doctor Whitmore's pain. He clearly took it personally whenever something bad happened with patients there. And to Charlie, he was everything a doctor should be.

"We'll have to get a warrant for those files," Charlie said.

"Please do," Doctor Whitmore agreed. "I think it's scandalous that the Board won't at least release the names of our employees and patients to you. I wish there was something else I could do." He slumped down in his chair, defeated.

"I'll message my boss, Jackson Weller," Charlie explained. "He can be persuasive. We'll see if he can make the Board change their minds."

"That would be excellent," said Doctor Whitmore.

“You might still be able to help, though,” Charlie said. “We’re looking to speak with the other patients who Gillian spent the most time with. We’d like to speak to them, with your permission.”

The doctor’s eyes lit up. “Yes, I can do that. Gillian was quite a solitary person. She had visions of demonic creatures, and unfortunately, when those visions were at their worst, she believed her fellow patients were possessed.”

Will nodded, knowingly. “So, she stayed away from making relationships with people in here out of fear?”

“Yes,” Doctor Whitmore answered, sadly. “But there was one exception. A man named Jordie Fallon. I certainly saw them playing checkers on more than one occasion in the communal hall.”

He looked at his watch.

“In fact, it’s likely that he’s in there right now.”

“Excellent,” Charlie stood up. “We’ll go and interview him.”

“Be warned, however,” Doctor Whitmore cautioned. “He suffers from extreme anxiety.”

“Social, general, or health anxiety?” Will asked.

“A bit of everything, I’m afraid,” the doctor answered. “And when he goes into a spin under pressure, he can shut down completely.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” said Charlie. “We’ll go and talk to him.”

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The doctor looked at Charlie with concern.

“Don’t worry, Doctor Whitmore,” Charlie said. “I’ll be as gentle as a puppy.”

But from the doctor’s expression, it was clear that he didn’t believe him. And he was right.

*

Charlie felt unsure about Will’s strategy as they stood in a corridor outside of Elmwood’s communal patient area. Just beyond the door, they knew that Jordie Fallon was sitting among the other patients.

“I think we need to get him into an interview room and run the finger over him,” Charlie said for the second time. “Put some pressure on. We need some answers, fast.”

Will fixed the collar of his shirt and pushed the glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

“Charlie,” Will said as some inoffensive jazz music played over a small speaker somewhere behind a plant pot. “He’s an anxiety sufferer. And an extreme one by the sounds of it. Let’s just go in and talk to him calmly, maybe then we can find out if he knows anything about Gillian’s murder.”

“Anxiety can be good,” Charlie said gruffly. “Nervous people do one of two things: they either talk or they make mistakes.”

“Let’s hope it’s the former,” Will said. “And please, Charlie, let’s try and be diplomatic, at least at first.”

He didn’t want to agree, but Charlie was checking his disgruntlement at the door. He knew he was being more argumentative than usual. He had a lot on his mind. Ever since he’d kicked his brother out of his house, he’d been worried about him. The last words he’d said to Marvin were gnawing in his mind.

But that would have to wait for another day.

He pushed the door open and walked into the communal area with Will.

Will signaled to one of the orderlies who came over.

“Hello, can you tell us where Jordie Fallon is?”

The orderly politely pointed to a table where a pale, slight man in his thirties was sitting and staring at a checkers board by himself.

They approached him.

“Mr. Fallon?” Will asked.

The man looked up. He had a pale, doughy face and close-cropped ginger hair that seemed to grow in one direction, like a lawn that hadn’t taken to its fertilizer.

“What do you want?” he asked in a voice so quiet that it surprised them both.

“My name is Doctor Will Cooper, and this is ... my student Charlie.”

Charlie almost let out a laugh. Will was clearly holding back on telling Jordie Fallon

that Charlie was an FBI agent so as not to spook him.

“N ... N ... Nice to meet you,” Jordie said, looking back down to the checkers board.

“I’m n ... n ... n ... not in trouble, am I?”

“Oh no,” said Will. “Do you mind if we join you?”

Jordie looked like he wanted to say no. Like he wanted to be left alone. But Charlie guessed he was too nervous to cause offense.

“S ... Sure.”

Will and Charlie pulled up a seat.

“Playing by yourself?” Charlie asked.

Jordie looked sad. He started scratching his chest for a moment as though he had a rash. But Charlie could tell it was just a nervous reaction.

“I don’t like to play with other people,” Jordie said.

“What about Gillian?” Charlie prodded.

Jordie looked tearful. “I’m trying not to think about her.”

“It’s hard to lose a friend,” Will said, soothingly. “Were you close?”

“A l ... little. But she got sick again and said I was one of them.”

“One of who?” asked Charlie.

“A demon.”

“That must have been hard,” Will said.

“I thought she’d come around once th ... they got her meds and therapy right again, b ... but now she’s gone f ... f ... forever.”

He looked down at the board and let out a short sob before wiping his eyes and looking around nervously as though he hoped no one noticed.

“And how do you feel about Gillian’s murderer?” asked Will.

Charlie was surprised at the sudden directness coming from his friend and colleague. Will was usually softer than that.

“I hate him,” Jordie said.

“Do you know him?” Charlie asked.

But Jordie just looked down at the ground and shook his head.

Charlie felt it in his gut: The patient knew something.

Will gave Charlie a quick, knowing glance.

“Jordie,” Will continued. “We think we can catch the murderer. We can stop the person who did this. But only with your help.”

“H ... How can I help ... I’m n ... not good at that sort of thing?”

“By telling us,” said Will. “Can you think of any of the other patients Gillian might have angered or gotten into an argument with?”

“N ... Not really,” Jordie said. “Sh ... She mostly just talked to me. Th ... The other patients were demons to her.”

“What about someone who worked here?” Charlie interjected. “An orderly, a doctor or nurse, or a ...”

“S ... Security guard?” Jordie said, finishing Charlie’s sentence.

Charlie and Will looked at each other. Charlie felt as though they were onto something.

“Yes, Jordie,” offered Will. “Like a security guard.”

Jordie looked around, eyeing the communal room around him suspiciously. He looked afraid.

“I ... I can’t say.”

“Can’t or won’t?” asked Charlie.

But Jordie didn’t reply, he just looked down at his hands, nervously.

Charlie felt sorry for him. He seemed like a nice person, stuck in a maelstrom of nerves. But Charlie had to push on because lives were at stake.

“Jordie, you have to speak to us, buddy,” he said.

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“Or ...” Jordie said quietly, looking at his hands.

“You could go to jail for obstructing justice, if there’s something important that you’re not telling us.”

Jordie let out a strange heaving sound and then wrapped his arms around himself, rocking back and forward.

Charlie knew he had gone too far. If he wasn’t careful, Jordie was going to do exactly what Doctor Whitmore had said and lock up completely.

“Jordie,” Charlie said softly. “Look at me. It’s okay. I promise. Look at me.”

Jordie looked up.

Charlie put his hand in his pocket. “Can you keep a secret?”

Jordie nodded. “Y ... Yes.”

Pulling his hand out of his pocket, Charlie produced his FBI badge. “No one will hurt you. I won’t let them. But you could help us make sure the killer never hurts anyone else in here or outside ever again.”

For a moment, it looked as though Jordie was mulling over standing up and walking away. But instead, he leaned down low, and in a quiet voice said: “P ... Patrick Ives. H ... He hates all of us.”

“A security guard?” asked Will.

“Yes.”

“But why?” Charlie asked. “Why would Patrick hate the patients when it’s his job to protect them?”

“I ... I don’t know,” Jordie said, before looking down to the checkers board and picking up one of his pieces.

“Did you ever see him do anything to Gillian?” Charlie hoped for an answer.

“N ... Not exactly,” said Jordie. “B ... But he put Gillian in her room once and I ... I was in the hall. I ... I heard him hit her. A ... And then she cried.”

“No one went to the doctors about this?” Will now seemed to be holding his anger under his breath.

“W ... We are all af ... afraid of Patrick.”

Charlie put his badge away.

“Well, you don’t have to be afraid anymore, Jordie,” Charlie said. “I’m going to pay him a visit.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The ticking of the grandfather clock got under Valerie’s skin.

Each tick and tock felt like time slipping away. The sounds said in their own way that she had to try and gain an early breakthrough, otherwise someone else would almost

certainly die. That was how most killers operated. Once they started, they didn't stop, and the ticks and tocks, the time in between each kill, would grow shorter and shorter.

She was sitting in the living room of an old bungalow waiting to speak with the family of Agatha Mitchell, the first victim.

For the moment, Valerie was alone in the room. It was filled with figurines and antique furniture, and Agatha's grandmother, Margaret, was in the next room making coffee for them both.

This was the part of the job that Valerie hated the most. The true horror of any murder was that it left a wake in the lives of so many. Families, friends, colleagues, they would all wonder why their loved one had been brutally taken away.

Out in the hallway, the grandfather clock continued to tick as Valerie waited. For a moment, she zoned out. Her thoughts went back to a memory of her own grandmother.

Her father's mother. Long since dead.

Beneath the ticks and tocks of the clock, for the briefest of moments, she thought she heard her grandmother's voice.

"Here you go, Dear," Margaret said, appearing from the doorway.

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She handed Valerie a cup of coffee. The cup itself felt like a porcelain antique.

“Thank you,” Valerie said.

The old lady, her hair tied back in a gray bun, sat down in her armchair, and then pulled a brown cardigan over her legs to keep her warm.

“It’s all so unfair,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion. “Who would murder my beautiful Agatha?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out, Margaret,” Valerie said. “I really am sorry for your loss.”

“I don’t know if I can stand it,” the old lady said with a vacant expression. “You get old, and you lose so many, eventually you have had enough of life. I should go first. Not my granddaughter.”

Valerie reached out and squeezed her hand.

“I’ll catch the monster who did this,” she said.

Margaret tried to smile, but the effort was devoid of joy. Her eyes were empty of life, as though the grief for her granddaughter had used up the last of any remaining spark.

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Of course not,” Margaret said, forlornly. “I want to help. I don’t understand what

happened, I just want to help if I can.”

“Is there anyone that you think may have resented Agatha?”

“It’s hard to say,” Margaret said. “She was a beautiful girl. A bit of a lost soul, though. She didn’t know what she wanted to do with her life, and she wandered around town doing odd jobs.”

Valerie wrote down everything in her notebook.

“Would you say she was carefree?”

“Sometimes,” Margaret said. “But only when she wasn’t depressed.”

“She spent time at Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat for a while, didn’t she?” Valerie didn’t want to mention that there had been another murder. Not yet. If she upset Margaret, she might clam up.

“Yes,” Margaret answered, taking a sip of her coffee. “She got a good bit better after that.”

“Did she ever talk about her time there?” Valerie inquired, jotting down a few more thoughts in her notebook as she did.

“A little,” the old lady explained. “I think it was mostly a good experience.”

“You say ‘mostly,’ Margaret. Is there a reason for that? Did Agatha have any bad experiences there?”

“Well,” she said with a sigh. “Now, I don’t like to gossip, but she did say there was a security guard there. Oh, what was his name? P ... P ...”

“Paul? Peter? Patrick?”

“Yes,” Margaret replied with recognition. “Patrick.”

“What did she say about him?”

“That he was rude and nasty to her,” Margaret said.

“Did she tell you anything about him? What he looked like, anything?”

“She said he was a big fellow with a big bushy beard. He had brown hair.”

Valerie jotted down a few more notes.

“Did you ever meet this security guard?”

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Margaret shook her head. “No, my granddaughter only told me these things. She didn’t want me up there.”

“Did she tell you why he was mean to her?”

“I didn’t really understand,” Margaret said. “She said it was because they had a mutual acquaintance. Someone Agatha had dated for a while years ago, Terry Marshall. So, this Patrick ... Patrick Ives, that was his name, the guard. He didn’t like that she had seen this man.”

Valerie scribbled down a note to herself.

“Did she say anything more about that?”

“No.”

The grandfather clock ticked again. Valerie tried to block it out. An image of her own grandmother came into her mind again. Then a whisper from the hallway outside the room. Had she just imagined it?

Was the mental illness exerting itself again?

“Are you okay, Dear?” the old lady asked, kindly.

“Yes ... Yes, I am, thank you, Margaret. The coffee was lovely. But I think I have all I need now.”

“If I can do anything else ...”

“Please do let us know if you think of anything else,” Valerie said. She leaned over and squeezed the old lady’s hand again.

“You are a pretty one,” she said. “I don’t see a ring on that finger, though. You should get yourself a nice husband. I just wish my poor Agatha could have had all of that. A nice life ...”

Valerie smiled in sympathy and thought of Tom.

Husband, she thought to herself. Now that was unnerving. She’d never thought about calling him that. But soon enough, he would be just that, if she went through with the marriage.

Valerie thanked Margaret and walked out of the room. She avoided the grandfather clock and its ticking.

But she felt it looking at her.

Clocks have faces, she thought.

Her heart sank. Strange thoughts were coming to her again. And she began to suspect that the family illness was waiting to throw her into darkness at any moment.

Leaving the house, she breathed in the cool autumn air.

Looking down at her phone, she called Charlie.

“Wild,” he said, answering immediately. “We have a suspect.”

“So do I,” she replied. “Pa—”

“Patrick Ives,” Charlie interrupted. “I said it first, so I get the credit.”

Valerie laughed. “Do you have an address?”

“Yeah, I got one from Doctor Whitmore on the down low.”

“Text me it, let’s bring him in.”

Valerie looked back at the house. The little bungalow where Agatha Mitchell’s grandmother lived. And in her mind, the clock ticked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Valerie felt a chill in the air as she waited on the corner of Argent Street. It was more of a dirt track than a proper road. At the end of it, an old farmhouse sat on top of a diminutive hill.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:59 am

With the graying skies above and the clouds swirling with dark intent, a tiny light shone from the house in the early evening.

You're up there, Patrick Ives, Valerie said to herself, looking at the light. You're getting ready for work at the retreat, and you don't know what's about to hit you.

A car appeared on the horizon, moving up the empty road that led onto Argent Street.

Its headlights gave off a dull yellow hue as it pulled into the side of the road next to Valerie's car.

Charlie and Will got out.

"In the name of God," Will said, his foot sticking in some mud.

"You're not built for the outdoors, Will," Charlie laughed as he exited the car.

"I assure you, the outdoors are fine," Will answered. "As long as it's dry. This mud is wet. And these shoes are Italian leather."

"Leather is leather," Charlie said.

"And I suppose every football team across the nation is exactly the same, then? Should one just call them by the color of their shirts? Oh, look, I can't wait to celebrate the Blues. Or is it the Reds? The Greens, maybe? Perhaps they should all wear the same costumes."

“Uniforms,” Charlie sighed.

“Yes, it doesn’t matter what they wear, does it? Or perhaps there is a difference in what the teams wear. And maybe, just maybe, leather differs in quality too.”

Charlie turned to Valerie. “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

“We’ll get your shoes cleaned, Will, courtesy of the FBI,” Valerie said.

Will sighed, pulling his feet out of the mud.

Charlie patted him on the back. They smiled at each other and started laughing.

“Guys, reel it in,” Valerie said. “Look up there.”

Valerie pointed to the light in the farmhouse at the end of the dirt track.

“So, this is where the security guard Patrick Ives lives,” Will observed. “Reminds me of Ed Green’s farmhouse.”

“Ed Green?” Charlie asked as they began walking up the track to the house.

“Yes,” said Will. “He was a killer back in the fifties. After his mother died, he began to escalate his urges. It started with digging up bodies from the local graveyard just to be close to someone.”

“He sounds delightful,” Charlie said, grimly.

“Then,” Will continued, “he began to use the bodies to make furniture around his house, even clothes. After that, he escalated further to killing a local woman and bringing her remains to his house.”

“And this place looks like that?” asked Charlie.

“Yes,” said Will, side-stepping a pool of water in the ground. “When the local police officers entered Green’s house, it was, for want of a better term, a house of horrors.”

“It’s what inspired that chainsaw movie in Texas,” Valerie added.

“Well,” Charlie said, looking up at the looming, decrepit farmhouse. “Let’s hope Patrick Ives isn’t an Ed Green.”

At that comment, the door to the farmhouse suddenly opened up and a man stood there brandishing a shotgun. He was wearing his security guard uniform.

Patrick Ives was not an Ed Green: A wiry, emaciated recluse.

He was a gigantic, hulking man, whose arms were as thick as Charlie’s thighs.

Will took a step back.

“What’s yer business?” he said. “No one comes up here.”

Valerie put her hands up. “Easy, let’s stay calm. Are you Patrick Ives?”

“That’s certain, aye.”

“Lower the weapon, will you please, Mr. Ives?” Valerie said.

“Not before you tell me yer business,” he said, peering down the barrel of his gun toward them.

Charlie and Will looked at Valerie.

She was thinking it over. If she told him out right that he was a suspect in a murder hunt, he could get twitchy with the trigger of his shotgun. More than that, if he was guilty, he might decide to just start shooting regardless.

Lying about their business might also jeopardize any arrest for misconduct, and so Valerie picked a less difficult path. Technically, she didn’t need to lie.

“This is Doctor Will Cooper, a famous psychiatric therapist,” she said, her hands still up, nodding toward Will. “He’s been up to your place of work, Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat. And he has some questions for you.”

Yes, she didn't technically lie. All of that was true.

Will cleared his throat. "Yes. I am wondering if you could help me with something regarding the retreat. An insider's perspective, so to speak."

"How do I know you're who you say you are? ID's can be faked, ya know?" Patrick said.

Valerie thought his grip was tightening on the shotgun.

"You tell us, Patrick," Valerie said, trying to stay calm. "How can we persuade you?"

"Who's the main doc up there at Elmwood?"

Valerie couldn't believe it. They were being quizzed. "Doctor Whitmore," she answered.

"Well," Patrick Ives seemed unimpressed. "Ya could have found that out easily enough."

"Doctor Whitmore and I are colleagues," Will said, stretching the truth. "He spoke very highly of you. Honestly, I want to know..."

Valerie could feel Will searching for a way under Patrick's defenses.

"I want to know how you think we could improve security up at Elmwood?" he finally asked. "No one knows better than the guards."

For a moment, Valerie thought it hadn't worked, but then Patrick smiled, and his face lit up. "Finally! Someone wants to listen. I've got a lot of ideas."

He lowered his gun.

Valerie put her hands down and tried not to look too relieved. She gave Charlie a nod, and as soon as Patrick stepped away from the gun on the stairs, the agent pulled out his handgun.

“Hey! What’s this!” Patrick yelled.

Valerie took her gun out. “FBI! Down on the ground. Now!”

Patrick said nothing at first. He looked like he was mulling over grabbing his gun.

“Don’t even think about it,” Valerie said. “I will put you down in a heartbeat.”

He stared at her, locking eyes. It was enough to show him Valerie meant business.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:00 am

Patrick sank to his knees and then lay on his stomach.

“You lied to me! Dirty Feds.”

Valerie and Charlie rushed over and put the gigantic man’s hands in cuffs.

“No,” Valerie said, helping him to his feet. “I didn’t lie. This is Doctor Will Cooper. He is an expert. He does want your input about Elmwood Retreat. It’s just that we also want to question you about the murders of Agatha Mitchell and Gillian Pugh.”

“But I didn’t do anythin’!” he yelled.

But Valerie could hear it in his voice. He was guilty as sin. Of what, though, that was the real question.

CHAPTER NINE

Valerie smiled at the police officer behind the front desk.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

Valerie pointed to the two cars parked outside the glass doors in the parking lot. In one of them, Charlie and Will sat with their suspect, Patrick Ives, in cuffs.

“I’m Agent Law with the FBI,” Valerie said to the police officer. “I spoke with the Buford police department earlier about using your interview room.”

“FBI!” the young officer said, excitedly. “Of course! I’m Officer Teller, anything I can do, I will.”

“You don’t get the FBI here very often, I take it?” Valerie said, smiling at Teller. He must have been no more than twenty-five years old.

“No,” he said. “But I was thinking of applying to the Bureau one day.”

“You should,” she said. “We’re always on the lookout for people with a positive attitude.”

But the job can eat you up. You’ll see terrible things. You’ll chase shadows. In the end, you’ll see the best and worst in the world.

She thought this but didn’t say it out loud. She remembered being a rookie and being so enthusiastic. The last thing she wanted was to snuff out a dream before it had begun.

Will and Charlie entered the building with the hulking figure of Patrick Ives. Officer Teller gleefully led them and Valerie through to a small interview room at the back of the police department.

The town was small, and the police office was just as diminutive.

“Anything I can get you? Coffee or a snack?” Teller said as Valerie and the others sat down around a gray table in the middle of the room.

“No thanks, Teller,” Valerie said. “But you’ve been a great help.”

Teller smiled from ear to ear, his sandy hair moving slightly as he nodded happily before leaving the room.

“He’s a keen one,” Charlie said.

“Can we get on with this crap?” Patrick Ives said, sitting at the table, still wearing his Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat security guard uniform.

Valerie noticed something about him. The way he had looked with disdain at Officer Teller. There was something in his eyes.

Jealousy, she thought. Use it, Valerie. Use it to find out more.

The interview room had an antiquated tape system to record interviews. Up in the corner of the room was a dusty old camera. Together, they were supposed to make sure interviews were above board.

Valerie pushed the record button on the recorder at the side of the table and then smiled at Patrick Ives.

“Mr. Ives, do the names Agatha Mitchell and Gillian Pugh mean anything to you?”

Ives face turned white. “Yeah. But look, I got nothing to do with what happened to them two.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:00 am

“No one said you did,” Charlie said. “But you do know them?”

“Yeah, I know them ... Knew them.”

“You work at the Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat as a guard,” Valerie said. “I take it you know they were both murdered?”

“I don’t know nothin’,” he said, folding his arms. “I had nothing to do with what happened at Elmwood or anywhere else.”

“We think someone inside the retreat might be responsible,” Charlie said.

Patrick’s face fell.

His eyes went wide.

He had had a moment of realization.

“I wouldn’t do something like that. I had nothing to do with what happened to them.”

“Agatha Mitchell’s grandmother said Agatha didn’t get on with you when she was a patient at Elmwood.” Valerie left this as a statement. She just left it hanging there, letting the silence do the heavy lifting for her.

Patrick’s eyes met hers for a moment, as if he was searching for something. Then he glanced away.

“I didn’t do nothin’ to hurt her.”

“And Gillian Pugh?” Charlie said, leaning forward.

“I barely even knew her.”

“Yet they were murdered,” Valerie said. “And we’ve been informed that you may have hurt Gillian in her room one evening, not long before her death.”

Patrick’s eyes were wide again. He looked like the truth had hit him like a bolt of lightning. He knew he was in jeopardy of being a prime suspect.

“I ... I don’t know what to say.”

“What about ...” Charlie started.

“Killing them,” Valerie finished. “Is that what you’re trying to tell us?”

Patrick looked around the room wildly. His mouth was open, and he was breathing furiously.

“I didn’t hurt them,” he said.

Valerie thought this statement was strange. It was more the way he said it than anything else. He didn’t hurt them. But he did do something to them. She changed tact.

“I hear you weren’t happy about Agatha Mitchell’s old boyfriend. Was he someone you knew outside of Elmwood?”

“Terry Marshall was a jock from Buford High School,” Patrick said. “He picked on

me.”

“Picked on you?” Charlie said, incredulously. “I can’t imagine anyone picking on you, Patrick.”

“You’d be surprised,” he replied. “Being this big, people think you can fight. You can stick up for yerself. It isn’t always like that.”

“Did you ever see Terry Marshall at the facility?” Will now interjected.

“He visited a couple a times, I think. I had to stare at his face and smile, just ‘cause I’m a professional, ya know?”

“How did you feel about Agatha Mitchell?” Will continued. “Did you like her?”

“Eh ... She was just another patient.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:00 am

Valerie held back. Will was working his skills into the conversation and getting under Patrick Ives's skin.

“Did you ever have any sexual fantasies about Agatha Mitchell?”

“What the hell kinda question is that?” Patrick shot back. “I’m not some pervert.”

Valerie was fascinated by his reaction. It seemed like he was getting more and more defensive the longer they talked to him. Will must have seen it, too, because he decided to change tactics.

“What about Gillian Pugh? Did you ever fantasize about her?”

This time, Patrick's reaction was even more extreme. He stood up abruptly, knocking his chair over in the process. His face was red, and he was shaking with anger.

“I didn’t hurt them!” he shouted. “I didn’t do anything to them! I swear!”

Will remained calm in the face of Patrick's outburst. Valerie looked at her colleague and saw the keen intensity that always burned in them when he was close to a breakthrough. Will clearly knew that if he could keep Patrick talking, eventually he would slip up and reveal something important.

“Sit down, Patrick,” Valerie said calmly. “We’re not accusing you of anything. We just want to understand what happened.”

Patrick hesitated for a moment before finally sitting back down in his chair. He still

looked angry, but he seemed to have calmed down slightly.

“I didn’t do anything to them,” he repeated quietly. “I swear. I swear.”

Valerie focused in on that last statement. He had repeated himself. Valerie remembered one of her tutors back at the FBI in her academy days telling her that when a person repeated something, it was sometimes a deceptive attempt to appear more sincere.

Valerie wasn’t buying it.

Will had struck a nerve asking about Patrick’s attraction to the two victims. It was a nerve Valerie intended to squeeze harder.

“Patrick,” she said sternly, leaning in closer to him. “You didn’t hurt them. But you did do something to them, didn’t you?”

Patrick looked away, but not before Valerie saw the guilt flicker in his eyes. She knew she was right.

“What did you do to them, Patrick?” she asked, switching to a gentler tone. “Tell us what happened.”

Patrick shook his head, still avoiding her gaze. But Valerie could see the conflict written all over his face. He wanted to tell them what he had done, but he was clearly struggling with some kind of inner demons.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Patrick started to speak. “I didn’t mean to hurt them,” he said quietly. “I just wanted to ... I don’t know ... touch them.”

Valerie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She had heard this story a million times

before from other serial killers. They always claimed that they didn't mean to kill their victims, that it was just a momentary lapse in judgment or something beyond their control. But the truth was, they enjoyed it. They got off on the power and the control they had over another person's life and death.

"How did you touch them, Patrick?"

"If you don't tell us," Charlie interjected. "You could end up with a much harder sentence."

"Sentence?" Patrick said, his face in shock.

A cold dread began to wash over Valerie. Will winced slightly and gave her a quick glance. He had obviously noted it too.

Why would a guilty man be so surprised that he was going to go to jail?

"For killing Agatha and Gillian," Valerie said.

Patrick put his head in his hands. "No way, man. No way." He looked up. "You think I did it?"

"Isn't that what we're talking about?" Charlie asked. "You said you touched them."

"But I didn't kill them. I would never do that."

"What exactly did you do to them, Patrick?" Valerie asked again, her patience wearing thin.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:00 am

Patrick sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I touched them inappropriately a couple of times,” he said finally. “They got angry, and Gillian slapped me once. But I swear, I didn’t mean to hurt them.”

Valerie leaned back in her chair, trying to process what she had just heard. So, Patrick had admitted to touching the two victims, but he claimed it was accidental and that he didn’t mean to hurt them. Valerie could sense the defeat already. Patrick Ives had done terrible things, but it was possible that he wasn’t the killer.

“Did you ever touch them again after that?” she asked.

Patrick shook his head. “No, I stepped back. Kept myself away from them after that. I knew I was attracted to them, but I didn’t want to do anything that would make me lose my job.”

“So, you never had any kind of sexual contact with either of them?” Valerie pressed.

Patrick hesitated for a moment before answering. “No,” he said finally. “I never did anything else. I swear.”

Valerie didn’t believe him, not for a second. Abusers rarely told the truth. They very rarely confessed to anything they hadn’t been explicitly caught out on. And when they did, they blamed anyone and everyone but themselves.

Valerie was still conflicted about whether he was the killer or not, but even if he wasn’t, he was still a predator. She had no doubt that he had abused his position as a security guard at the retreat in an abhorrent way. And she suspected that, even if he

hadn't killed anyone, he would have escalated into even more dangerous behavioral patterns later on.

"We're going to need to look into your background a bit more," she said, rising from her chair. "But for now, stay here. One of our other agents will speak with you shortly."

Will and Valerie stepped out of the interview room, leaving Patrick Ives alone with his thoughts and the glare of Charlie.

"What do you think?" Will asked.

"I don't think he's our guy," Valerie replied. "He might be a creep, but I don't think he's a killer, not yet at least."

"I think you're correct, Valerie," Will said. "But he is still connected to both victims. We could be overlooking something about him."

Charlie joined them a moment later, closing the door behind him and shaking his head. "I don't know," he said in a low voice. "I still think there's a possibility he could be involved. The guy just seems like the type."

Valerie sighed. If it were only that simple. But the law had to be followed, and Valerie felt bound to the concept of innocent until proven guilty. Just because he seemed the type didn't mean he was.

She decided to take the middle ground.

"Okay, we don't rule him out," she said. "But we have him in custody now. He's going to be charged for his previous assaults. Of that, you can be sure. At least where he's going he won't be able to harm anyone else. But in terms of our case, we should

bring in an interviewer for him while we keep heading out into the field. I think it's safer to assume we haven't caught the killer than to down tools only for some other poor victim to turn up."

"What do we do now?" Charlie asked. "It's getting late."

"I'm not ready to rest yet. I want to talk with the staff at the retreat. Let's find out if anyone else thinks Patrick might be the killer."

CHAPTER TEN

As Charlie drove, Valerie sat in the passenger seat looking out to the darkened streets of Buford Town. They were on their way to Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat. But the town seemed different in the darkness.

An ominous feeling bubbled away beneath its tidy lawns and clean streets.

"This must be a nice place to live," Will said from the backseat.

"I was just thinking the exact opposite," Valerie replied.

"Why's that?" Charlie chimed in.

"Something about this town feels wrong," she said. "Like it's hiding a darker side to its idyllic façade."

She could feel the eyes of the townspeople watching them through twitching curtains as they drove by, their curiosity and suspicion seeping out into the night air.

Valerie wondered if they knew the FBI were around. The townsfolk certainly knew about the murders. And as the bodies piled up, so too would the pressure from the

media and the higher ups. Gossip was so easily turned into news pieces and news pieces turned into policy decisions.

But even if Will was right and Buford town was a nice place, there was still no way to know who or what lurked within these small towns out of sight. There could be danger around every corner, a threat just waiting to strike at the next unsuspecting victim. A wolf in sheep's clothing.

And Valerie knew she wouldn't stop until she uncovered all of those secrets, no matter what it took. Whether it was Patrick Ives or not, the killer had gotten away with his crimes for long enough. Others might do the same thing too. Copycat killers were always a risk. She couldn't let that happen—not while she still had breath in her body and a need to seek justice in her heart.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:00 am

“I think you should settle down in a small town with Tom,” Will said. “I think you’d both thrive in a place like this.”

Valerie hesitated for a moment before replying. “I don’t know ... I’ve always been a city girl. I’m not sure if I could handle living in a smaller town forever.”

That word forever frightened her.

Yes, Valerie, she thought. Forever. That’s what getting married meant. She imagined herself in a small cottage somewhere. A good life. A happy life. And then a flash of her being in a straight jacket in a psychiatric ward somewhere. Tom left with his life in ruins.

She didn’t know if she could put him through even the chance of that happening.

“I think you’d be surprised how much of a positive influence a place like this can have,” Will said. “There’s something to be said for the slow pace of life and the close-knit community. I think you’d find it refreshing. It might help.”

Charlie nodded in agreement. “There’s a lot to be said for small town living, that’s for sure. Some people find it boring though. Different strokes.”

Valerie thought about it for a moment before answering. “I’m quite happy in my apartment for now, thanks.”

“Does Tom want to move?” Charlie asked.

It was an innocent question. But it was just another question to add to the pile surrounding their engagement. They hadn't even told Tom's family yet. But it all seemed to be happening so quickly.

Out in the darkness, Valerie saw something for a moment. A flicker of white moving in the shadows next to a house. Was that a person in a shroud? she thought. The illness is still here ...

She shook the vision from her mind. "Elmwood is around this corner."

"Nice change of topic," Charlie joked. But he was right.

They drove around the turn and the looming gates of Elmwood appeared. By the side of the road, someone was standing with the hood of their car up, looking down at the car's insides.

Valerie rolled down her window.

"Doctor Whitmore," she said loudly, recognizing the man immediately.

"I'm afraid my car has broken down," the doctor said as Charlie parked beside him. "Can you give me a hand? I think I can get it going again with some help."

Charlie stepped out of the car and looked under the hood of Doctor Whitmore's car.

"Uh, Doc, I think you've got a gas leak somewhere. Can't you smell it?"

"Oh, no," the doctor said, laughing. "I'm afraid I don't have a very strong sense of smell. Back during my Arkham University days, a friend of mine botched an experiment with ammonia. The old nose has never been the same since."

“I don’t think this can be fixed easily,” Charlie said, closing the hood. “I think you’re out of luck for the night.”

Will appeared at the back of them. “I’m afraid I’m useless with this sort of thing.”

“Me too!” Doctor Whitmore laughed. “Perhaps it runs in the profession.”

Valerie felt the first few patters of rain on her face. Within seconds, those countless drops merged into a downpour.

“Might I advise that we get back to the car,” Will said over the thunderous rain.

“We’ll give you a lift, Doctor Whitmore,” Valerie offered.

“Thank you, I don’t fancy spending the night out here in this!”

“Come on!” Charlie said.

The four figures in the rain ran back to the car. Valerie thought they were momentarily like children, laughing at their predicament. She knew implicitly why. Such moments make you feel alive.

The four of them piled back into the car, shook the rain from their clothes, and closed the doors. The rain battered the car like a million thumping fingers, and Valerie was brought back to a memory as a child: sitting in a tent with her favorite uncle, listening to the rain outside trying to get in.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:00 am

“That was a close one,” Charlie said as he started the engine.

“I’m just glad we were able to help,” Valerie said.

“Yes,” Doctor Whitmore said. “You’ve saved me from a very wet and cold night.”

The group drove in silence for a moment, the rain still pounding against the windows. Valerie looked out at the shadowy trees, their gnarled branches reaching out like grasping hands. She felt uneasy and ill at ease, as if Elmwood itself was trying to push her away.

But she pushed those fears aside. After all, she was here to help others. She was there to catch a killer, and so far, his victims had a connection to the place.

Charlie kept driving, the car winding between the trees toward the retreat. To Valerie, it felt as though the elements were conspiring against them. That they could be snuffed out by the dark and the water, just like the killer had strangled the life from his victims.

“Might I ask,” the doctor said, still dripping of rain in the back seat next to Will. “Why have you come back to Elmwood tonight?”

“I’m sorry to tell you,” Will said from beside him. “But we’ve linked one of your security guards to the two victims.”

“Patrick Ives, know much about him?” Charlie asked.

“Patrick?” the Doctor sounded surprised. “He’s been with us for years. I can’t believe it.”

“We don’t know that he’s the killer,” Valerie said. “But we do know that he’s been inappropriate with at least two patients of yours. Now they’re dead. It could be a coincidence. Either way, he’s in custody, and we wanted to chat with you and some of the other staff about him.”

“I see,” Doctor Whitmore said. “I’ll have him suspended immediately, and then if your accusations are true, I’ll make sure he never works in the psychiatric or therapeutic industries again.”

“Did you ever suspect that he was off?” Charlie asked.

“Maybe,” the doctor replied. “But hindsight is 20/20. It’s easy for me to think of a hundred things about the man now that these accusations have arisen.”

“What would you have said about Patrick Ives before tonight?” Will asked, always able to reframe the question to get where they needed to be.

“I’d have said that he was abrasive at times, but on the whole, he took his job seriously. I certainly wouldn’t have thought he was a killer or an abuser.”

Valerie looked out at Elmwood as the car drove closer, watching the trees swaying in the wind. She couldn’t help but feel a sense of dread, but she pushed forward anyway.

“You can use my space,” Doctor Whitmore offered, pointing to an empty parking space near the front door.

Charlie parked the car. The rain hadn’t eased at all. If anything, it had gotten worse.

“Last one in’s a rotten egg,” Will said, leaping from the car.

They all followed. Their footsteps sloshed through a thick layer of water on the ground. Up the steps, the doors beckoned as the wind howled from above.

And then they were inside. They were embraced by Elmwood. But in its welcoming lobby lights and pastoral colors, Valerie felt that its peaceful nature was about to come undone.

Another victim could be found at any moment, and she would bet her apartment on that victim having a connection to Elmwood itself.

“Is there someone we can talk to about Patrick Ives?” Valerie asked the doctor.

“Of course,” he replied. “I’ll take you to meet with our head of security.”

The group made their way to the security guard’s office, which was located in a small alcove near the main entrance. The security guard on duty, a heavyset man in his early fifties, cast a suspicious eye on them as they approached.

“Davidson,” Doctor Whitmore said. “These are some colleagues from the FBI. They want to ask a couple of questions if that’s okay?”

“Of course, Doctor Whitmore. How can I help you?” he asked gruffly.

“We’re here to talk to you about Patrick Ives,” Valerie said.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “What about him?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:00 am

“He’s been detained in connection with two murders and by now charged with two incidents of assault,” Will said. “We were hoping you could tell us more about him.”

The man snorted. “I could tell you plenty about that guy. He was always strange.”

“In what way?” Charlie asked.

“He was just off, you know? Like he didn’t quite fit in with the rest of us. Kept to himself mostly, but when he did talk, it was like he ... Well, I think he had a bit of a thing for that poor Gillianwoman who died, if you ask me. I wouldn’t be surprised at all if he killed her.”

“Why would you say that?” asked Valerie.

“Because he told me once that he was gonna ask her out if she was ever discharged from here,” Davidson answered. “I told him that was against his employment contract, and so, if he did, I’d have him fired. After that, he kept his distance from her, but I could see him looking at her from time to time. And he paid her too much attention, it was creepy. Always hanging around the hall outside her room, staring at her in the communal spaces. There’s just something off about that guy, and the way he is with women. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to think he might have a screw loose.”

“Which security guard was on duty the night Gillian Pugh was murdered?” asked Valerie.

“He was.”

Valerie felt goosebumps on her arms.

They had discounted Ives, but if he was working that night, he'd have had an opportunity.

"Do you happen to have a sign in sheet from that night?" Valerie inquired.

"I sure do. Here." The security guard walked over to a sack of files and then brought out a single piece of paper, which he handed to Valerie.

"And this was everyone who signed in that night?"

"Indeed, it was," Davidson replied.

"Are any of these people in the building right now?"

"I would have said no, as we rotate our staff between night shifts and then day shift," he said. "But Mary Broland is in tonight. She's covering someone's shift because they're sick. She'll be in the kitchen right now, cleaning up all the dinner plates."

"Thank you, Davidson," she said. "We'll be heading to the kitchen now to speak with Mary Broland."

The group hurried through the lobby and down a flight of stairs, their footsteps echoing on the stone steps. Finally, they emerged in a quiet kitchen, the only sound coming from a solitary member of staff washing up a mountain of plates and cutlery.

"Hello, Mary," Doctor Whitmore said.

The person washing the dishes turned around.

She was a plump woman in her fifties with rosy cheeks. She wiped her hands on her apron and approached them. “You must be from the FBI!” she exclaimed when she saw Valerie, Will, and Charlie standing at the entrance to the kitchen with Doctor Whitmore. “Is there something wrong?”

Valerie nodded gravely as she approached Mary Broland. “There is, indeed,” she said. “We’re here to ask you about Patrick Ives.”

Mary’s eyes widened in shock. “Oh my goodness,” she gasped.

Valerie noticed something strange about her reaction. It was genuine shock, but she seemed to be upset about it.

“Do you know Patrick well?” Will asked, taking the words out of Valerie’s mouth.

Mary seemed to blush. She glanced at Doctor Whitmore as if she was afraid that she might say something that would jeopardize her job.

“It’s okay, Mary,” the Doctor said, gently. “Please just be honest. Did you know Patrick well?”

Mary looked at the ground as she talked. “Has he been arrested for killing Gillian Pugh?”

“He’s under suspicion and in custody, yes,” Valerie answered.

Mary gasped and shook her head. “I knew this would happen.”

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“You seem to want to tell us something, Mary,” Charlie offered. “If there’s something you know about his involvement with Gillian Pugh, you need to tell us.”

Valerie sensed, by the woman’s body language, that she had a deeper connection to Patrick Ives than she was letting on.

“Mary, did he like Gillian Pugh?”

“No!” Mary blurted out. “Well, not anymore.”

“Did he find someone else?” Valerie asked, certain more than ever that she was pushing the right buttons.

Mary nodded, looking like a bashful child.

“I’m sorry, Mary, I know that puts you in a difficult position. But if you know anything about Patrick that might help us ...”

“I know that he didn’t kill Gillian,” she said, finally.

“How do you know that?” Valerie asked.

Mary blushed again and looked down at the ground. “Because I was with him.”

“You were with him?” Charlie repeated, incredulous.

Mary nodded. “We sneaked away to one of the empty rooms on the top floor. We

were ... together ... when it happened.”

A tear rolled down Mary’s cheek and she brushed it away angrily. “I can’t believe this is happening,” she said. “Patrick is a good man.”

“When you say you were ‘together,’ do you mean ...” Will trailed off, not wanting to finish his question.

Mary nodded, her face red with embarrassment. “Yes,” she whispered. “We were having sex.”

“And are you willing to testify to that, if it comes to it?” Charlie asked.

Mary nodded. “It’s embarrassing, but he really was with me.”

“And how can we be sure you’re not just an accomplice?” Charlie pressed.

“One of the only working cameras is in that hall,” she said. “I didn’t find out ‘till afterwards. Patrick told me that he didn’t know either. I asked him if he could erase it, but he said he couldn’t touch it. We just had to hope no one would look at it. It should show us goin’ into the room and staying there for a while.”

“If that checks out, you might be off the hook,” Charlie said quietly. “With us at least. I’m not so sure about your employers.”

She turned to Doctor Whitmore. “I ... I’m so sorry, Doctor Whitmore.”

“So am I, Mary,” he said. “Patrick will most likely be fired over this and some of the other things he’s accused of. It’s highly likely the same will happen to you.”

Valerie felt for the woman. Although she had been highly unprofessional, she

wouldn't be the first person to fall in love with the wrong man and do something silly.

"Perhaps, Doctor," Valerie said, calmly. "If Mary cooperates fully with us, then we can vouch for her when the Board at Elmwood investigate her behavior?"

The doctor smiled. "That would definitely help Mary."

Mary began to sob.

"It's okay," Doctor Whitmore said, putting his arm around her shoulders. "We'll sort this out. At the very least, if the Board decides to terminate your employment, I have some friends at other treatment facilities who will take you on. You won't be without a job, Mary. I promise."

"Thank you," she said wiping tears from her eyes. "I guess I'll be suspended, so I should go home."

"We'll be in touch, Mary," Valerie said.

Mary left the kitchen, her footsteps somber on the hard floor.

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Valerie turned to her colleagues. “Well, that gives Patrick an alibi. Back to square one, if Mary is telling the truth.”

The rain grew in ferocity outside, lashing against the windows nearby.

“It’s going to be a fun drive back to Quantico tonight,” Charlie said, looking out.

“Oh, surely you’ll be staying in Buford while you try to catch the killer?” Doctor Whitmore said, sounding surprised.

“We haven’t arranged accommodation,” Will replied.

Doctor Whitmore looked in thought for a moment. “Allow me to assist. You can’t drive home in this terrible weather. We have some guest rooms here for visiting evaluators and family members. It would be my pleasure to have you stay at Elmwood tonight.”

Valerie didn’t like the idea of staying there. It was too close to a nerve. The place was too similar to where Suzie was being treated.

For Valerie, there was a fear deep down that staying in a psychiatric facility would lead to more hallucinations and more sickness. And in the end, a permanent stay, not as a guest, but as a patient.

“I do feel beat,” Charlie said. “Might be good to stay here and get straight into things tomorrow?”

“I agree,” said Will. “And it would be excellent to have an opportunity to talk with you, Doctor Whitmore, about the treatment procedures here.”

“I’d be delighted,” the doctor replied.

Valerie smiled and found herself saying. “Sure, we can stay here tonight.”

But all she could hear was the grim rain on the windows outside and the grim warning in her mind. Not just surrounding her fears of falling into mental illness, but that the killer might still be in the building, prowling around as they sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Melanie Adler felt pleased with her progress. Tomorrow was the biggest day yet of her recovery. She was going to be discharged from Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat.

It was time for her to rejoin the world and be with her family again. Her kids missed her. Her husband too. And she missed them.

Melanie’s mind ran rampant with excitement. She looked at the clock attached to the wall. It was nearly 2 AM.

She needed to sleep if she wanted to be rested for her big day, but her mind wouldn’t stop racing.

Eventually, Melanie gave up on trying to sleep and decided to get out of bed and go for a walk. She needed to burn off some energy.

Getting out of bed, she walked through the darkness of her room, opened the door silently, and entered the hallway.

The relaxing music of the retreat no longer played. But she often enjoyed going for a stroll around the retreat once most people were in bed. Only a few like-minded patients and the on-duty security guard and doctor would occasionally be seen.

Melanie walked down the long hallway, admiring the art on the walls. She made her way to the main hall and looked out the large window that overlooked the grounds.

The rain had stopped, but the wind still howled. The trees shook and branches swayed. Melanie felt a chill looking out at the dark night.

She turned away from the window and walked toward the other end of the hall. As she rounded a corner, she thought she heard something behind her.

She turned around quickly but saw nothing but an empty hallway lit by dim overhead lights.

Shaking off her nerves, Melanie continued walking, telling herself it was just her imagination playing tricks on her.

As she walked, she began to notice that there seemed to be more shadows than usual lurking in corners and lurking in doorways. And despite it being a warmer than usual autumn night, Melanie felt a cold chill run down her spine.

She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but Elmwood didn't feel as welcoming as it once had. This shouldn't have come as a surprise, but the death of Gillian Pugh was enough to put everyone on edge. In the back of her mind, Melanie thought that, perhaps, being out of her room at night was not a good idea, but she reasoned that the killer must have been long gone.

That's if there ever was one. There were rumors among the residents at Elmwood that Gillian Pugh had staged the entire thing herself. One last way to gain attention.

Melanie hoped that was true. Elmwood had been so good to her; it would have been so sad to think that a murder could actually take place there.

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She walked down the hallway, admiring the paintings that adorned the walls. Each one was made by a patient of the retreat, and they added a splash of extra color to the already pastel-colored walls.

She kept walking, determined to shake off the lingering uneasiness that seemed to be following her. The pictures always helped her when her mind was troubled.

And then she saw it.

The picture of the ocean. Its vast expanse of dark blue water glistening in the moonlight was a sight to behold. It almost looked magical and beckoned to Melanie, as if calling for her to step into the painting, into its embrace, and drift away on its waves.

Melanie took a deep breath, filled with longing for the sea. She had been so close all along, just a few steps away from the painting all this time.

The painting had calmed her many times before. Sometimes she thought her mind was like the raging sea, all those blue waves jostling with one another. And then the calm ocean would smooth out inside her mind, and a small portion of serenity would be within touching distance.

She sighed, and then decided that she'd go to the bathroom before going to bed.

Tomorrow will take care of itself, she thought.

Heading back in the direction of her room, she reached the nearest bathroom. Going

inside, the rubber floor was cool beneath her feet. The room was still, not even a drip of water disturbed her.

Melanie opened the door to one of the six stalls and sat on the toilet inside.

As she relieved herself, she heard a sound.

Footsteps.

Someone had entered the bathroom. They walked slowly along where the stalls were with slow footsteps and then entered the stall next to Melanie.

“Hello,” Melanie said, nervously wanting to cut the tension with a joke. “I feel the older I get the more I have to pee at night.”

But the person in the stall next to her said nothing. Not even a hint of laughter.

She quickly finished up and then flushed the toilet before standing up. She tried to silence the sounds her shoes made on the floor as she walked over to the door of her stall, but it was difficult with her heart pounding in her ears.

Reaching out, she slowly turned the handle and peeked out.

The first thing she saw was a black gloved hand holding a length of rope. And then she saw the murderer’s face.

Her blood ran cold as she stared into the eyes of her killer. There was no mercy there, no pity, only a cold, calculating ruthlessness.

In an instant, Melanie knew that she was going to die.

The murderer moved swiftly, wrapping the rope around Melanie's neck, and yanking her out of the stall. Melanie struggled desperately, but it was no use.

Tomorrow will take care of itself, she thought as the rope crushed her neck and death washed over her like the ocean.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Valerie opened her eyes to the darkness. They adjusted slowly, piece by piece, revealing the gray outline of a room bathed in night. For a moment, she was disorientated. She wasn't certain where she was or how she got there.

But as the fog of sleep cleared, she started to remember. She was on a case, and she was spending the night at Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat.

That thought sent a shiver up her back. She lay there trying to get back to sleep, but the voices in her head, the thoughts given sound, wouldn't let her.

You'll be in a much worse place than this, Valerie.

She sat up, covered in a cold sweat. Getting out of bed, she reached for a cup of water on a nightstand and drank it down in one gulp.

It didn't help.

The voices were still there, whispering in the darkness.

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You're not going to make it out of this, Valerie. You'll never escape your mother's sickness.

Valerie switched on a light. The sudden brightness made her blink, but it also chased away the shadows and the voices.

Standing up, Valerie pulled on her clothes and left the room behind. She couldn't stare at those walls any longer. They were a reminder that one day, a room much worse and far starker could be her permanent home.

Valerie stood in the hallway and listened. The building was quiet. The occasional creak of a wooden beam settling or the heating system spitting out its warm air was all that occasionally broke that stillness.

She walked, feeling like a zombie, down the hallway until she reached the woman's bathroom door.

Pushing open the bathroom door, Valerie stepped into the dimly lit room. She made her way to the mirror and looked at her reflection.

She was exhausted.

The dark circles under her eyes were a testament to that as well as the tension in her shoulders and back.

But she knew sleep wouldn't come easily. There was too much on her mind. The killer. The victims. Tom. The engagement. Her father's DNA test. Her mother's

sickness. Her own fragile mind.

It was a potent cocktail that would have knocked even the strongest of people off their feet. But somehow, Valerie had to hold on. People's lives were at stake. She had to pull herself together.

Stepping over to the sink, Valerie splashed some water on her face, feeling its coolness against her skin. As she stared at herself in the mirror, wondering if the worry would become a permanent feature of her face, she saw something out of place in the reflection over her shoulder.

Behind her, one of the bathroom stalls had its door slightly ajar.

Instinct kicked in.

Something is wrong here, she thought.

Turning, she spoke, "Hello?"

But there was no answer. And yet, she was certain that someone was in the stall.

Her heart began beating faster as she approached the door, curiosity getting the better of her despite all of her best efforts to stifle it.

With caution still in her mind, Valerie grasped the handle and slowly turned it until it clicked open. There, half lying on the floor inside the stall and half draped on the toilet seat, was a woman's lifeless body. The eyes stared back at Valerie, vacant and glassy. Her tongue protruded from her mouth, swollen and red. There was no pulse, and while the body was still warm, the neck had clearly been broken during the attack as it sat at an unnatural angle.

Valerie had found dead bodies before, but it was never any less shocking. She felt her heart thumping, and fear swelled up inside of her.

The body is fresh. The killer is still here, she thought.

Drawing her gun from its holster, Valerie slowly searched each stall one by one. She pushed on each door, waiting to see the eyes of the killer staring back at her from within the shadows. But they were empty.

A noise sounded from outside the bathroom. A door opened and shut. Footsteps followed.

Valerie pointed her gun at the door. There was no time for back up. She moved forward into the hallway.

Valerie's heart was pounding as she followed the noise of footsteps through the hallways. She had no idea what she was going to find, but she knew she had to be careful. The killer could be anywhere, and if they found her before she found them, it would all be over.

She crept through the building, her gun held out in front of her, finger on the trigger. She tried to keep her breathing steady, but it was hard when her heart felt like it was about to burst out of her chest.

The footsteps led her down a flight of stairs and into the basement. The air was musty and damp down there, and Valerie's shoes sank into the soft carpet with each step. There was now a banging noise coming from somewhere nearby.

The noise was coming from behind a door at the far end of the room. Valerie approached it slowly, listening for any movement from the other side. When she reached the door, she paused for a moment, gathering herself.

She took a deep breath.

She then kicked the door open and yelled, “Freeze! FBI!”

But all she found was an old storage room.

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Boxes and medical supply crates were stacked up so high on top of each other that she couldn't see if anyone was hiding behind them.

"Show yourself!" she yelled again, but there was no response.

Valerie began to search the room, her gun still held out in front of her. She moved boxes and crates out of the way, checking to see if anyone was hiding behind them. But there was no one there.

The killer must have gone another way, she thought. She pulled out her cellphone to call Charlie and Will, but there was no signal down there in the depths.

She was about to leave the room to see if the signal improved when something caught her eye. In the corner of the room, half hidden behind a stack of boxes, was a door that she hadn't seen before.

It's probably just a utility closet or something, she thought. But what if it isn't?

Her heart racing, Valerie approached the door cautiously. Her hand shaking, she reached for the handle and slowly turned it until it clicked open.

Peeking inside, she saw that it was a small janitor's closet. There was nothing out of the ordinary inside. Just some cleaning supplies, a mop, and a bucket.

That was when she heard a new noise. The sound of something banging and rattling at the back of the basement.

Maybe it's the furnace, Valerie found herself thinking.

She took a step back and looked behind her, then turned and looked down the hallway. She thought she saw something move at the end, but when she looked again, it was gone.

She braced herself and slowly walked down the hallway and stairs heading toward the furnace room. Every step was like a miniature leap of faith, and each one brought her closer to her doom.

She had to fight the urge to run, but she knew she had to do it now. The killer could be waiting just around the corner, waiting to strike as soon as she turned.

Valerie approached the furnace room slowly and carefully, gun held steady in her hand.

She reached out and turned the knob of the door until it opened, then entered. But there was no one there.

The rattling and banging were coming from a window next to the furnace. Valerie approached as silently as possible. She reached out her fingers and pulled at the window.

It's open, she thought.

Pulling the window back and latching it open in place, Valerie looked out to the night. The grounds of Elmwood were dark and moody. Trees roared in the wind. Valerie strained to listen through the noise. She thought for a moment that she could hear footsteps scrambling around somewhere nearby.

She peered into the darkness, searching for any sign of the killer. But there was

nothing there. Just the howling wind and blowing trees.

With a trembling hand, Valerie reached for her gun and lifted it up to take aim at the woods.

Determined to find the killer once and for all, she took a deep breath, steeled herself, then stepped out into the night. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she ran through the woods, following whatever sounds she could hear in hopes of finally catching her prey.

But as she sprinted deeper into the pitch-black forest, losing her sense of direction in the process, Valerie realized that maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. Maybe this had been a mistake.

But it was too late to turn back now. She had to keep going until she found whoever it was that was responsible for all this madness—even if it meant risking her own life in the process.

Where are you? she thought as she looked around her at a maze of trees. She wasn't sure which way to go. Using her flashlight, she looked at the ground for signs of tracks. That was more Charlie's department, but she thought she saw some impressions in the ground that could have been human footprints.

She followed them for a while, but they eventually disappeared into a mess of soil and undergrowth. She stopped and looked around, trying to get her bearings. It was then that she heard the sound of twigs snapping as the wind roared around her.

Someone's here, she thought.

Valerie spun around, gun at the ready. But there was no one there. Just more trees and darkness. She shone her flashlight around, but the beam only served to illuminate

how alone she really was out there.

Then, she heard it again. The sound of twigs snapping, but this time it was closer. And it sounded like it was coming from multiple directions. Valerie knew she had bitten off more than she could chew. As she reached for her phone to call for backup, she sensed at the last moment that someone was close, but before she could ready her aim, she felt something hard hit her on the back of the head. A blinding pain ran through her entire body, and everything went black.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dazed and groggy, Valerie slowly opened her eyes. She was in another room at Elmwood, her vision fuzzy and unclear. Suddenly, she felt a hand grasp hers tightly, and she looked up to see Will Cooper staring down at her, worry etched on his face.

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“Valerie! Thank God you’re awake,” he said breathlessly. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll live,” she said, rubbing the back of her head. She could feel a huge tender lump there.

Looking across the room, she saw Charlie standing, his expression equally worried. His arms were folded in a way that Valerie knew meant that he was mad. His trousers were covered in mud.

“Did you ...”

“Track you out into the woods?” he said with a frustrated tone. “Yes. And good thing too. You never should have gone alone.”

Valerie pulled herself up and moved her legs to the side of the bed. Trying to stand up, she lost her balance and sat back down again.

“Okay, so maybe I’m not quite ready to go chasing down killers just yet,” she said with a wry smile. “Give me an assist.”

Charlie reached out to help her, and Valerie took his hand gratefully. As they stood up together, she looked at him and saw the worry in his eyes.

“Valerie, you mustn’t be so reckless,” Will said, gently. “If Charlie hadn’t followed you out into the woods, you’d be dead.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” she said. “He was going to get away.”

“He got away in any case,” came Charlie’s solemn reply. “I couldn’t get a clear shot at him when he was standing over you.”

“Why didn’t you chase him?” Valerie asked.

“Because, you idiot,” he said with a smile and a shake of his head. “I didn’t know how badly you were hurt. I had to bring you back here and get Doctor Whitmore to check you over.”

“He wants you to see him so he can evaluate your head injury,” Will explained. “They actually have a CT machine here, apparently it was used for a research program a couple of years ago.”

Valerie sighed. She knew neither Will nor Charlie would let her avoid being looked over. Her head ached, and she only had some brain fog, but they would insist regardless.

Valerie heard her phone ping. She looked at it. Six messages and three missed calls.

She realized there and then how much she had been neglecting Tom. But the case had been moving so thick and fast. The text messages appeared to get more annoyed as they progressed. The last simply said: “I guess I’ll hear from you when I hear from you.”

She quickly typed out a message saying that she was fine, and that not much had been happening. That they had been buried in paperwork and she would call him tomorrow. Then she put the phone away.

“Was that Tom?” Will asked.

“Yes,” said Valerie.

“We phoned him and let him know that you’d been hurt, but that you’d be okay. He’s probably worried sick, though,” Charlie said.

Valerie’s stomach lurched. She’d been caught in a lie. A lie to stop him from worrying, but a lie, nonetheless. She had just told him nothing eventful had happened, and yet her partners had already told him about the attack.

Her phone pinged. She took it out and looked at it. “I’m glad you’re okay,” the message read from Tom. “But please don’t ever lie to me when you’re hurt. Come home, and I’ll look after you.”

She knew he would be livid that she’d kept things from him, but she also felt annoyed at how old fashioned he could be. She didn’t want anyone looking after her. That was partly why she had reservations about the engagement. She never wanted him to have to look after her if her mind declined.

But then there was no sure thing in life. In sickness and in health and all that. She blocked out the thoughts.

Doctor Whitmore entered the room. “Oh thank goodness you’re awake, Agent Law. Let me look you over.”

Valerie sat on the bed and Doctor Whitmore looked at her pupils, her neck movement, and her responses to different stimuli.

“You seem okay, but I still think it’s worth doing a scan, just to be careful.”

“Thank you, Doctor Whitmore,” she said. “We’ll do that, but first ...” A horrible thought came to her. “Did you find the body?”

“Yeah,” Charlie answered. “Some local PD are here now while we wait on

forensics.”

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“Who was the victim?” Valerie asked. She could see the emotion in Doctor Whitmore’s eyes.

“Melanie Adler,” he said. “I identified the body for the police. She was due to be discharged tomorrow.”

Valerie shook her head. It thudded dully. “If only I’d gotten up ten minutes earlier. I’d have caught him before he did it.”

“It’s not your fault, Valerie,” Will said.

“Are you certain that it’s a man, Val?” Charlie asked.

“Yes,” said Valerie. “But I didn’t get a good look at him. I’m certain he’s entering the building through a window in the basement. We need to up security here to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“If he’s entering the building, but all employees are accounted for,” Will mused. “It could be an ex-patient.”

“I’m leaning that way,” said Valerie. “Charlie, get forensics to check that window in the basement. Maybe we’ll get lucky with a fingerprint or DNA.”

“Doctor Whitmore, any luck getting the Board to let us access your patient records?” Valerie asked.

“As a matter of fact,” he said with enthusiasm. “I received an email during the night

from one of the board members putting it in writing that you should have complete access. Your boss, Jackson Weller, seems to have been very persuasive.”

“Probably threatened to have the whole place evacuated and shut down,” Charlie joked.

“I don’t think he was far off it,” Doctor Whitmore said. “In any case, you now have complete access to our files. The only issue is that most of our records aren’t digitized.”

Valerie let out a loud groan. “You’re kidding?”

“No,” Doctor Whitmore said, mournfully. “I’ve been telling them for years that we should scan all the files, so they are more readily searchable. But they say this is an unnecessary expense. I’m afraid the Board can be quite tight fisted when it comes to money.”

“How many patients have been here, Doctor Whitmore?”

“Thousands over the years, Doctor Cooper.”

“That’s going to be a nightmare to search through,” Charlie said, sighing. “We’ll need more feet on the ground, some extra agents.

“We need to somehow whittle down the search criteria so we can move faster. But I’m not sure how yet. We don’t really have a profile,” Valerie explained.

Valerie then noticed a look on Will’s face. His brow was furrowed, and he was tapping his temple with his index finger. This was always what he did when he was deep in thought.

“Will, do you have something?” Valerie asked.

“I think I might,” he said. “We’re always talking about escalation as a key motivator in most serial killer profiles. They start slowly, testing themselves, satisfying their murderous urges little by little. Pushing the envelope each time.”

Valerie saw that Doctor Whitmore was enthralled by his colleague’s skills at evaluating the human mind. He looked like a child, wide-eyed and enthusiastic for the wisdom of a mythical hero.

“First, they fantasize,” Will continued. “They bully if they can get away with it. Or they exhibit violence to other children. Then, they torture and kill animals. Finally, as adults, they eventually fantasize about killing people in the same way to fulfill a deep psychotic urge.

“But we know that it’s rare for killers to kill and then go dormant for long periods. Once the escalation of killing begins, the urge overwhelms them, and they keep going until they slip up. If we’re noticing the murders, it’s probable that these are among his first victims. That means our killer is at the start of his killing spree. And if he’s at the start, and his kills are all related to this facility, it’s highly probable that he’s only escalating now because of opportunity.”

A light bulb went off in Valerie’s mind. “You mean, the killer is more than likely someone who has been recently released from here?”

“Precisely,” Will said, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “He wouldn’t have had the same opportunity to kill both outside and inside the facility.”

“But how long would it take for a patient to be released, and then to escalate enough to start killing?” Doctor Whitmore asked, keenly.

“Research varies,” Valerie said. “But we’re probably looking at a two-year window at most. Statistically, it’s most likely to be someone who was released more recently. We should focus first on everyone released within two months before Agatha was murdered, then if they don’t pan out, move back through the records.”

“Doctor Whitmore,” Charlie asked. “Do you know of anyone who was released in that time frame who had a previous history of violence toward animals? They’re most likely in their twenties to early thirties.”

“And they would likely have been thinking about killing before they were released,” Valerie continued. “So, there would have been a marked change in their behavior weeks before their release.”

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“Right,” said Will. “The killer would have probably over compensated. So, we’re talking about someone who showed exceptionally good behavior before release, just to make sure they got out. Volunteering, being kind and helpful with staff and patients, etc. Does any of this ring a bell?”

But Valerie already knew the answer. Doctor Whitmore’s face had grown ashen.

“Peter Torben,” he said. “He fits what you’ve said to the letter. He was released three weeks before Agatha was murdered, and he did show a strange switch from erratic behavior to being overly helpful around the retreat.”

“And the animal killings?” Charlie asked.

Doctor Whitmore nodded. “Yes, there was the question of an old Labrador pet that was drowned in a creek out around the back of his house. Peter’s family were certain that he did it, though he never admitted to it.”

Valerie stood up again, a little shaky at first.

“Valerie, you should rest,” Will suggested.

But Valerie was having none of it. “Put me in the CT scan and then we’ll chase down Peter Torben. Give me my gun.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Valerie’s head still throbbed, and whenever Charlie took a sharp corner in the car, she

felt like her brain was bashing against the inside of her skull.

But the CT scan had been all clear.

Peter Torben, their suspect, lived in a small village not far from Buford. The hills sped by in the morning sun, shining on golden cornfields and tall bails of straw, piled high for when fall gave way to winter.

“A little more delicate, please, Charlie,” Will said from the back seat, his skin pale as though he was going to throw up his breakfast.

Charlie winked at Valerie in the passenger’s seat and took another corner a little faster than he needed to.

Will groaned. “Very funny. If I vomit, it’s going to be down the back of your neck.”

Charlie slowed down slightly. “Sorry, Will. You would have three portions of scrambled eggs for breakfast and a bowlful of bacon.”

“Don’t remind me,” he said. “The retreat is beautiful on the outside, but the cook should be committed too.”

“The scrambled eggs weren’t that bad,” Valerie said.

Will shot her a look of disbelief. “They had onions in them.”

“They were chives,” Charlie said.

“No, they were onions,” Will insisted. “I could taste them.”

“You’re just being picky,” Valerie said. But the truth was, she had found the eggs a

little heavy on the onions too.

“I’m not being picky, I have a sensitive palate,” Will retorted.

Charlie chuckled and pulled up outside Peter Torben’s house. It was a small, neat bungalow with a well-tended garden. There was no car in the driveway, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. Charlie killed the engine and they all sat for a moment, taking in the scene before them.

“What now?” Charlie asked.

“You go around the back,” Valerie said, “Make sure there’s nowhere for him to run. Will, you’re with me.”

“Delighted.”

Peter Torben’s house looked like something from a fairy tale. All crooked windows and even a tin roof on a shoddily constructed extension.

“Reminds me of Harry Potter,” Will said, as Charlie disappeared around the back.

“As long as there are no Death Eaters, we’ll be fine,” Valerie said. But she did understand the sentiment. The house looked like something out of time. All of them did. A row of eight, sitting on the outskirts of an old cornfield. Each house was of a different design, and each one was as crooked as the next.

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Valerie and Will headed into the overgrown yard. Chicken's clucked from a nearby coop.

"More eggs?" Valerie whispered as they passed it.

"This is probably where the retreat got theirs," he joked.

Valerie enjoyed the back and forth with her friends, but as they moved up the path to the front door of the crooked house, she said quietly, "It's game time, Will."

She nodded to a twitching curtain on the second floor. Someone was watching them.

"I see it," he said.

Valerie knocked on the door. "Peter Torben, this is the FBI."

She waited a beat, but there was no answer.

"We know you're in there," she called out. "We just want to talk to you."

Still no answer.

Will shrugged. "What now?"

Valerie tried the handle, and the door clicked open. It was dark inside, from what Valerie could see through the gap.

“Peter Torben,” she said again. “I’m coming in. And I’m armed.”

The house sat silently.

“I’m coming in,” Valerie repeated, this time pushing the door open.

Will followed her inside, his hand on his gun.

The house was musty and cluttered. Piles of newspapers and other junk were stacked up around. All of the blinds were closed. It took a moment for Valerie’s eyes to adjust to the darkness.

“Peter Torben,” she called out again. “This is your last warning.”

There was still no answer.

Valerie started to feel uneasy. Something wasn’t right. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder at Will, and he nodded, understanding her silent instruction. He pulled his jacket back and kept his hand near a small revolver he had in a holster.

The FBI had sanctioned him for the field after he was nearly killed during an earlier case. The higher ups didn’t think it would look good for them if one of the world’s leading experts in serial killers was killed under their watch, though he was only ever to use the gun in a last-ditch moment.

There was a rustling from upstairs and Valerie tensed, her hand going to her gun. She pointed it at the top of a rickety set of darkened stairs. But then a white cat appeared at the top of them and meowed.

“I nearly shot that poor thing,” Will said, letting out a gasp.

Valerie turned and looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “You’re not supposed to be scared of cats.”

“I’m not,” he said quickly. But his eyes were wide, and he was sweating. “You know, they are a bad omen in many cultures. Not that I put much faith in those older ideas.”

“There’s more things in heaven and Earth, Will.”

“I’m sure we’re quite safe from witches,” he whispered.

Valerie looked up, responding to a noise from the top of the stairs.

Will swallowed hard and stared upward, intently.

The cat padded down the stairs and rubbed against Valerie’s leg. It meowed again as if trying to tell her something.

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“What is it, boy?” she asked, bending down to stroke its head. The cat meowed again and then ran off into the darkness of the house.

“What the hell was that about?” Will whispered.

“I don’t know,” Valerie said. But she had a bad feeling about this place. She straightened up and started to move toward the foot of the stairs. She knew that twitching curtain was up there and whoever had been standing behind it.

There was no telling what kind of danger they were up against. But Valerie was determined to find Peter Torben and bring him down.

Valerie gripped her gun tightly as she ascended the stairs. She and Will moved together, their eyes fixed on the shadowy landing ahead of them. They would face whatever danger awaited them together.

The first thing that Valerie noticed was the smell. It was a nauseating mix of rotting food and something else she couldn’t quite identify. And it was getting stronger the closer she got to the top of the stairs.

Will gagged and covered his nose with his sleeve. “God, that’s rank.”

“Just breathe through your mouth,” Valerie said through gritted teeth.

She was trying not to gag herself. The stench was almost overpowering.

At the top of the stairs, they found a narrow hallway lined with doors. All of them

were closed except for one at the very end, which was slightly ajar. Light spilled out from the crack, along with that sickening smell.

Valerie inched forward, her gun at the ready. She could hear movement inside the room and someone muttering to themselves.

“This is it,” she whispered to Will. “Be ready.”

He nodded and followed her down the hall. But they never made it to the door.

There was a click, and the muttering stopped. Valerie froze as the door at the end of the hall swung open, letting in a shaft of sunlight.

A man stumbled into the hallway and Valerie went to grab him, but she was too slow. He slipped away, into the darkness of the rooms on either side of the hall.

“Get him!” she shouted, chasing after him.

But the man was quick and agile. She couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Which room?” Will shouted, coming to her side.

Valerie peered into the darkness and had no idea which one. But then she saw a shadow and pointed at it. “There.”

Will followed her as she burst through the open door.

The room was small and filled with rubbish, as though Peter Torben didn’t spend much time in it.

Valerie looked around, but there was no one there.

“Where did he go?” Will muttered.

Valerie shook her head. “He can’t have just vanished.”

She took out her flashlight and scanned it across the walls in the low light. Then she saw it: The old, flowered wallpaper was stained and ruined, but it also pulled back like the page of a book. Underneath, there was a hole.

“I’m not going in there,” Will said, as soon as he saw it.

“Do you want to live forever?” Valerie said, getting on her knees and shining the flashlight inside.

“Actually ...”

“Go back outside and stop him if he tries to escape out front,” Valerie said.

She couldn’t wait. She moved into the hole in the wall, all the while shouting for Peter Torben to stop running.

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The tunnel moved between two walls. Broken pieces of wood and plaster littered the floor as Valerie scrambled over it on her hands and knees. Her head still ached badly, and she started to worry that if Peter Torben decided to stop and fight, she might find it difficult to protect herself.

But she pushed these doubts aside and kept moving, determined to find the dangerous criminal before he could escape. The tunnel led to a wall at the end, and with it came another hole, but it didn't lead to another room. It led to the outside.

Valerie peered through it, her eyes adjusting to the light as the cool autumn air washed over her.

The hole emerged onto the tin roof of the shoddy extension, and she could see Peter Torben, half-naked and covered in dirt and cobwebs, climbing up further. Pieces of timber had been hammered into the side of the building to hang onto, and it appeared that Torben had placed them there deliberately to make his escape. He moved up the side of the building like a spider, all muscle and sinew.

Valerie gritted her teeth and gripped her gun tightly. She would not let him escape. She would do whatever it took to bring him down once and for all.

With a surge of adrenaline, she took off after him. She leaped up and grabbed onto the first piece of wood. She swung herself up and clung to it tightly as she continued to scramble toward Peter Torben.

He looked down at her with a mix of surprise and fear in his eyes, but he didn't stop moving. He kept going as Valerie struggled to keep hold of her grip on the pieces of

wood. She felt as though it was going to give. She didn't have long. She clung on with one hand and reached for her gun again, aiming it to the side of Torben on the wall of the house.

She squeezed the trigger. A loud bang sounded and the brickwork near his head fractured into pieces.

"Don't move," she said, panting hard from exhaustion. "You're not getting away this time."

Torben snarled back at her, hatred burning in his eyes as he made his final desperate move.

He let go, falling down toward Valerie, his arms outstretched. His body smashed into her, and there was no hope for her to hold on.

Valerie let out a scream as they tumbled down through the air. As they fell, Valerie angled her body to protect herself as much as possible, and she landed on the tin roof of the extension.

Peter Torben landed several feet away from her, smashing against the same surface. He groaned, and Valerie could barely breathe, having had the wind knocked from her. Her head throbbed, and she felt for a moment as though she was going to pass out.

Then she saw the snarling features of Peter Torben bearing down on top of her. She reached for her gun, but it was gone, lost in the fall. Instead, as her attacker stood over her with clenched fists, she clenched her own and stood up as fast as she could, uppercutting him square on the chin.

He let out a groan and staggered back. Valerie still could barely breathe.

I need air, she thought as she tried to power her legs. But she'd given all she had. Between the attack in the woods and the fight with Torben on the rooftop, she was exhausted beyond comprehension.

Peter Torben shook his head like a boxer shaking off a knockdown and then stopped for a second. At his feet was a large piece of brick that had splintered off the wall when Valerie had given her warning shot.

He reached down and picked it up. Then, panting heavily, blood dripping from his mouth, he stepped forward and raised the brick above his head.

Valerie put her hands in front of her face to defend herself. But it would do no good.

Torben let out a growl of hate and then a large piece of wood cracked across his back. It broke in two, but it only made the man angrier.

He turned around to face the person who had hit him. It was Will, and he was standing there now with only a small piece of broken wood in his hands.

"Oh dear," Valerie heard him say.

Then she watched in horror as Torben reached out, grabbed Will by the collar and began striking him mercilessly in the face. Valerie tried to pull herself to her feet, but she could only crawl on hands and knees toward her friend. She watched in horror as the man then began to strangle Will.

"Hey!" a voice then shouted.

At first, Valerie couldn't see anyone, but then she recognized the large brown hands scaling up onto the tin roof from below.

Charlie pulled himself up onto his feet and then ran full speed toward Peter Torben.

The man didn't seem to be afraid. But he should have been.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Valerie sat in the interview room of the Buford police department once more. She was battered. She was bruised. She needed a full night's sleep. But she was still in one piece.

She sat alongside Charlie, both of them staring down one Peter Torben, cuffed and lawyered up on the other side of the table.

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“You know our partner Will Cooper is receiving medical treatment,” Valerie said. “A broken nose, bruised ribs, and a possible concussion. He’s an FBI employee, you’re looking at a good amount of time for that.”

“Please don’t try to intimidate my client,” Torben’s lawyer said. He was a small man with red hair and a mustache to match, going by the name Mr. Linford.

“I’m not,” Valerie said. “But I do need some answers. Now.”

Torben stared at her in silence, his dark eyes menacing. He clearly wasn’t interested in talking.

“Do you know who we are?” Charlie asked, leaning forward with a cold intensity. “We’re from the FBI, and we have evidence linking you to one murder in Buford and another two up at Elmwood Retreat.”

Torben remained silent, his expression stony. But Valerie could sense the fear lurking just beneath the surface. They were close to getting what they needed out of him. But they would have to push harder to get it.

“Tell us what’s going on,” Charlie said firmly. He laid out three photographs on the table showing the three victims. “Why did you strangle these three women?”

Torben glanced at the photos, but still said nothing. His lawyer glared at them with frustration written all over his face.

“If you have hard evidence linking my client to these tragic deaths, I’d like to see it.”

Valerie felt frustrated. All they had was the fact that Torben fit their emerging profile. He had been violent. He had been a patient at Elmwood. And he ran at the first sign of the authorities.

“Your client is not helping himself,” Charlie said. “If he cooperates, we can go easy on him. If not, we’ll make sure he rots in jail for the rest of his natural life.”

Torben’s lawyer looked close to exploding with anger, but Torben himself finally spoke up.

“What do you want to know?” he asked, his voice a low growl.

Valerie felt the man’s guard dropping slightly out of tiredness. She would use that to prod deeper. She thought back to what Doctor Whitmore had told her about him. The question of whether he killed a family pet before he was originally sent to Elmwood

“Do you like dogs, Mr. Torben?” she said, leaning back in her chair.

The harsh fluorescent light above cast shadows on Peter Torben’s eyes. But it was clear this question affected him.

“What ... What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just answer the question,” Charlie said.

Torben stared down at his hands for a long time before finally replying.

“I used to have a Labrador,” he said eventually, his voice little more than a whisper.

“He was my best friend.”

Peter Torben’s eyes welled up with tears and Valerie knew they had struck a nerve.

“What happened to him?” she asked gently.

“I killed him,” Torben said, his voice breaking. “At least, they say I did. I don’t know ... I don’t remember ... They said I strangled him with my hands, but I go dark sometimes, and I can’t remember what I did and what I didn’t do.”

Valerie let the man’s confession hang in the air for a few moments before continuing.

“Why did you do it?” she asked.

Torben looked up at her, his eyes haunted.

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “I just ... I just couldn’t help myself.”

“Do you remember killing the dog, Mr. Torben?” Valerie asked, sensing uncertainty in him.

“No,” Torben said, shaking his head. “I don’t remember anything about it. But my family had me committed after it happened. They said I was a danger to myself and others.”

“And why did you agree to go to Elmwood?” Valerie asked.

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“I wanted to get better,” Torben said. “I wanted to prove to my family that I wasn’t a monster.”

“And do you remember killing these three women?” Charlie asked, holding up the photographs again.

Torben looked at the pictures but shook his head.

“No,” he said quietly. “I don’t remember that either.”

Valerie leaned forward, her face earnest. “Have you ever blacked out and not known what you did in the hours leading up to it?”

Torben nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve woken up in strange places, with no memory of how I got there. Sometimes I’ve even had injuries that I don’t remember getting.”

Valerie felt some sympathy building inside for the tormented man sitting across from her.

“It’s clear that you’ve been suffering from blackouts and memory loss for some time now, Mr. Torben,” she said. “And we believe that it may be connected to the deaths of these women.”

Torben looked utterly defeated as he slumped in his chair. He knew deep down that he was responsible for those deaths, and yet he couldn’t remember them at all.

“You need to tell us what happened,” Valerie urged him gently. “We can help you get the treatment you need so that this never happens again.”

Torben looked up at her with tears in his eyes, uncertainty written all over his face. But finally, he nodded.

“Blackouts don’t mean that he committed a murder,” Linford the lawyer interjected from across the table. “He could simply be misusing ...”

“Are you suggesting Mr. Torben medicates his psychiatric illness with alcohol?” Valerie said, finishing the lawyer’s point. “I’ve heard that excuse a hundred times among violent offenders. It’s never an excuse.”

But Valerie didn’t quite believe what she was saying. She felt there was something wrong here. A doubt was building in her mind.

“Mr. Torben,” she said. “You mentioned that you woke up in strange places with injuries you couldn’t remember getting. Can you describe one of these instances to me?”

Torben thought for a moment before replying.

“I remember one time I woke up in an alleyway,” he said. “I had a cut on my hand, and I was covered in blood.”

“And what did you do?” Valerie asked.

“I went to the hospital,” Torben said.

Valerie knew that the DNA results from the victims yielded no material from under their fingernails. But it was possible that Torben could have been struck or bruised

during a struggle.

“Had any blackouts recently?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Torben said. “I stopped drinking months ago. That’s why my parents let me leave Elmwood and go back and stay with my Uncle Bill.”

“Uncle Bill?” Valerie repeated. “So, you don’t live at home with your parents?”

“No,” he said, seeming far less threatening than he had done on the roof. “I stay with Uncle Bill in that house you chased me through.”

“Why did you run?” Valerie asked.

“I thought my parents were going to have me committed in a worse place than Elmwood.”

“So, you thought we were there to put you in another psychiatric ward?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah. I heard the stories about places like that from some of the other patients. There was no way I was going anywhere just because my parents think I killed our dog.”

“But you said yourself, you did?” Charlie added.

“Maybe ... I don’t know ...”

Valerie had an epiphany. “Wait a second. Mr. Torben, did you suddenly change your behavior in Elmwood before your release because you were frightened that you’d end up somewhere worse?”

“Yes!” he said, slamming his hand on the table. “I ... I know I have bipolar disorder, but I ... I didn’t want treatment at one of those bad places. I just want to be left alone. Uncle Bill leaves me alone all the time.”

“He’s not in the house much?” Valerie asked.

“No,” Torben answered. “It’s his second house. Falling to pieces. And he travels a lot, but he keeps an eye on me. Video cameras all over the place.”

Charlie leaned forward. “Are you telling me there’s 24-hour surveillance on the place?”

Torben nodded. And Mr. Linford smiled. “Well, it seems we could have a record of where my client was on the nights your three victims were killed.”

Valerie’s heart sank. “Mr. Torben, were you at home all last night?”

“Yes.”

“And did you come near Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat?”

“No,” he said. “Uncle Bill’s security cams will show that.”

Charlie let out a loud sigh. “You still assaulted Federal agents.”

“Because he was afraid,” the lawyer argued. He turned to Peter Torben “I’m sure with an agreement to undergo some in-home therapy and an apology, Mr. Torben here won’t see any significant jail time.”

Valerie stood up. “If he’s innocent. Please wait here, Mr. Torben. I’ll have an officer come in and process you. You’ll most likely spend the night here before being up in court in the morning.”

“I’ll have you home in an hour,” Mr. Linford whispered to his client, the smarm oozing out of him.

Valerie didn’t take the bait. She walked out of the room with Charlie by her side. But she knew that if the security cam feed showed Peter Torben was at home during the murders, there would be no case against him.

The killer would still be out there, lurking through the streets of Buford Town. Undetected, and no doubt grinning from the shadows.

Out in the hallway as they walked to the incident desk, Charlie said what Valerie was thinking. “What if he’s not our guy?”

“Then we keep looking. We redouble our efforts and search through Elmwood’s files, and we can ask the local PD to draw up a list of anyone in town they know who has been violent toward women. We’ve got to find something!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The killer sat on the park bench toward the end of Main Street. He sat in the autumn sun, watching the leaves trundle by in a cold wind.

The townsfolk of Buford went about their day, but he could sense it. News of his third kill had come, and they were frightened by it.

He had heard that the FBI had brought in an ex-patient from Elmwood. Rumors swirled around the town like confetti. Nothing could be kept secret for long.

He hoped they would pin it on the man. That would give the killer even more space to maneuver. Then he could enjoy the panic as they discovered a fourth body and the cold realization that the killer was still among them.

His was important work. And he had to complete that work.

Across the street, the killer watched an old man come out of a store and hobble around, looking like every step was a struggle.

The old man was having a hard time getting back across the street. He was using a cane, and he was slow. The killer watched him, wondering if he could kill him and get away with it. But he knew that was where others had failed. They had become reckless. He had to stop himself from falling into a blood lust

He watched as the old man made it to the other side and disappeared into a small crowd walking along Miller Street.

The killer was disappointed.

Although he knew it was folly, he fantasized about breaking the man's neck in the middle of that crowd, just to see how they would react. He liked the idea of killing someone in public, where anyone could see. It made him feel powerful.

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It was time to go. He stood up and headed off Main Street.

He thought about the old man as he walked back to his car and got in. He sat in the driver's seat, put the key in the ignition, and started the engine. But he sat with it rumbling away for a moment.

Could I kill that old man? Could I get away with it? Stupid, stupid ... Reckless ...

The killer didn't hit the brake as he backed up, but instead took off and turned right into the other lane of traffic. A car coming straight at him had to swerve to avoid him; he heard tires squealing behind him.

He chastised himself for letting the rush of fantasy make him noticeable. You've survived this long because people don't notice you.

He drove on, thinking about the old man. He was a man in his late seventies or early eighties, judging by his hair. He had short white hair, almost like a military cut, and was wearing a brown coat. His eyes were deep blue, at least in the killer's mind. He imagined seeing his own reflection in them as he strangled him.

But it wasn't really his eyes that stuck out to the killer. What stuck out was the cane—it was a metal cane, and it had a red tip on it.

The killer was almost sure it was the exact same cane that his father used to use when he was still alive. One that had been given to him by a hospital.

It had always been something of a joke between them. It was a hindrance to his

father, not ornate or fancy, a sterile white cane that reminded them all of the illnesses that slowly eroded his father until the bitter end. Crumbling his hip. Putting him in a wheelchair, and then the grave.

How he wanted to find that old man and beat him to death with it.

“Stop it!” the man shouted as he drove.

For the first time, he felt his methodical approach slipping. He had to think quickly and get away from people to be certain he wouldn’t start murdering the townsfolk of Buford indiscriminately.

Then, once he’d calmed, he would reward himself. Once more he would hunt down his prey tonight.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Valerie and Charlie sat in the small hospital waiting room. Buford Hospital wasn’t exactly a sprawling, highly oiled machine. It felt old, filled with locals who all knew each other.

Valerie felt like a stranger.

“Why is it taking so long?” Charlie asked. “We should be looking for the killer.”

“I know,” said Valerie, just as frustrated. “But Will said he was getting ready to be discharged. And we need him on this, Charlie. He’s always capable of being the difference between a killer profile that leads to a dead end, and one that leads to an arrest.”

Valerie’s cellphone rang. She looked down at it.

At first, Valerie was reluctant to answer Tom's call. She had a feeling that he'd be angry with her for not being in touch and keeping her injury from him. She was afraid of what he might say. However, she knew that it was important to put aside her fears and face him head-on.

"Valerie?"

"Hey, Tom," she said.

"How is your head?"

"Fine. I've had worse."

"I'm glad you're okay, I've been worried sick." He sounded concerned and frustrated in equal measure.

Valerie and Tom had a system. He wouldn't always call her while she was on a case, as long as she'd text at the end of each day to let him know that she was all right.

Last night while she lay down at Elmwood, she had forgotten.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said. "It's been hectic. I had to stay in a psychiatric retreat last night, and ... I found a dead body."

"Are you okay?" he said, his frustration momentarily melting away, replaced by concern.

"Yeah," she said. "You?"

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“Well, to tell you the truth ...” he hesitated.

“What’s going on?” Valerie pressed.

“My mom was going on and on at me about how I sounded different on the phone,” he explained. “She started to worry that there was something wrong and ... well ... I kind of told her that we were engaged. She’s delighted for us.”

“That’s great,” Valerie said, unsure about the “delighted” part. Tom’s parents were lovely, but the one and only time she’d met them she’d had a bit of a panic attack and then had to run off on a case. Not exactly the impression she wanted to leave.

“The thing is,” Tom continued. “She says Dad will be bitterly disappointed if I don’t tell him face to face. So, she hasn’t told him. And I haven’t told him.”

“If you’re asking my permission to tell your dad about our engagement ...”

Charlie was flicking through a magazine in the waiting room, clearly trying to pretend he couldn’t hear the entire conversation.

“No,” Tom said. “I’m asking you to come with me so we can tell him as soon as your case is finished.”

Valerie stayed silent for a moment. She had other things on her mind, and the last thing she needed was to go and see Tom’s parents again and make a fool of herself.

“Val?” Tom’s voice sounded hesitant.

“I do want to go,” she finally said. “But it might need to wait for a few weeks. I have to finish this case, and then I want to get the results from my own dad’s DNA test and sort through that mess. Can’t this wait for a little longer?”

“I’m getting fed up waiting,” Tom said, his voice dejected.

“I ... I know,” Valerie said. “If you want to tell your dad by yourself, that’s okay.”

“He’ll hate that,” Tom said. “He’s old fashioned about this sort of thing and will put pressure on me if we don’t do it like we should. We should both be there. It’ll make my life easier.”

“I’m marrying you, not your dad,” Valerie said, feeling agitated.

“His approval means a lot to me, Val,” Tom answered back, quickly.

“I’m starting to feel like this is more about what you want to do than your dad,” Valerie suggested, the tension rising in her voice.

“Maybe ...”

Valerie looked up and saw the bruised figure of Will Cooper walk into the waiting room.

“I’m sorry, Tom, I need to go.”

“Of course you do.”

The call ended, but Valerie would try to make it up to Tom later. She just had to get her head clear.

“How are you feeling?” Charlie asked Will, standing up.

“I’ll live, Old Chap,” he said. “But I could do with a holiday.”

Valerie patted Will affectionately on the shoulder.

Will winced in pain.

“Sorry,” she said. “Look, Will, if you don’t feel up to this, you can always go home.”

“And leave you two to get all the glory?” he said, smiling beneath the cuts and scrapes. “What’s the status quo?”

“Torben isn’t our man,” Charlie said, grimly. “Not only does he have an alibi, but it’s watertight. He’s on a security camera showing that he was at home during all three murders.”

“Damn,” Will said. “Any chance he’s faked that?”

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“Doubtful,” Valerie said. “Now we’re left to keep going through Elmwood’s records to see if we find another suspect that fits the profile.”

“We need more manpower,” Charlie said. “It could take months to look through all those files.”

“Agreed,” said Valerie. “Charlie, you contact the Buford Police Department, see if they can spare anyone to help. Maybe that young Officer Teller we met at the front desk.”

“I didn’t think he was your type, Valerie,” Will joked.

“He was extremely keen about being around the FBI. He said he might even want to sign up one day. We could use some of that youthful energy on this case.” Valerie walked toward the exit.

“And what about resources from Quantico?” Charlie asked.

“I’ll contact Jackson right now,” Valerie added.

Will and Charlie headed over to Charlie’s car outside in the parking lot of the hospital. Valerie breathed in the cold air and tried to forget the pressures of telling Tom’s father about their engagement.

She had enough pressure for now.

Taking out her phone, Valerie dialed the direct line to Jackson’s office.

It rang a few times before he answered.

“Hello?” Jackson said.

Valerie thought it was strange that he didn’t identify himself on the phone as department head of the Criminal Psychopathy Unit.

“Jackson?”

“Agent Law, is that you?” He sounded tired.

“Yes, Sir. Is everything all right?”

Jackson sighed. “I’m just preparing for an interview with the higher ups tomorrow. They’re really going after us.”

Valerie felt despondent. She felt like it was her fault, all because she wanted access to the Clawstitch Killer files, should he ever start killing again.

“I’m sorry, Chief,” she offered.

“It’s not your fault,” Jackson said with a tired voice. “As I told you before, Heinlein has it in for me. But I think if I prepare my arguments, hopefully the other higher ups will go along with me and not him.”

“And if they don’t?” Valerie dreaded the answer.

“I’ll be replaced, and who knows what will happen to the Criminal Psychopathy Unit after that.”

The line buzzed slightly. Then Jackson changed tone. “In any case, try not to worry.

How are things over in Buford? Any breaks in the case?"

"We have to review thousands of case files from Elmwood to try and close in on suspects, but they haven't been digitized. It's a manual search job. We need more manpower, if you can spare it."

"I'm sorry, Agent Law," Jackson replied. "Unfortunately, resource allocation is difficult while I'm under review. They don't want a department head burning through money and time, especially when they might replace him."

"Oh," was all Valerie could say. Without several more agents to trawl through Elmwood's antiquated file system, it could take several days to identify ex-patients who fit their profile.

"I might have a way around this," Jackson offered. "Unofficially of course. I could speak with a different department head who owes me a favor. If she has the resources free, she might be able allocate a couple of her agents to help at Elmwood. But I can't promise."

"Thanks, Chief," Valerie said. "But I don't want to get you into any more trouble trying to get us help under the radar. Notwhile the review is underway. I'm sorry if we've done anything to put you in this position."

"Valerie," Jackson always used her first name when he was trying to connect the most. "Youhaven't caused any of this. I need you to know that. But thank you for understanding how difficult things are at the moment. Now, focus on your case. Bring this guy in, and if needs be, I'll still do whatever I can for you on my end, regardless of the consequences."

"Thanks, Jackson. I appreciate it."

“Good luck.”

“You too,” she said, hanging up.

Valerie looked across the parking lot. Crisp, golden leaves from a nearby tree swirled past in the autumn wind. She approached Charlie and Will at the car.

“What’s the update?” Charlie asked.

Valerie wasn’t going to sugar coat it. She looked at her partners and her friends, her gaze grim.

“We might be on our own.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Valerie pulled up her jacket collar to shield herself from the cold wind.

She stood outside Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat, with the main building at her back. The trees nearby sounded like waves breaking against the shore.

It should have been peaceful; the place was designed to set people at ease. But Valerie felt the cold wind was an omen, carrying with it a sinister promise that things were going to get worse.

Will stepped out of the front door and joined her.

“It’s a bit chilly out here, why don’t you wait inside?” he said.

“Officer Teller should be here in a moment. I wanted to brief him on a couple of things straight away before he helps with trawling through these files.”

As if responding to her comments, an old beat-up pickup truck, with red paint flaking from its body, drove along the path and parked nearby.

The sandy haired, youthful Officer Teller stepped out, dressed in jeans, suede boots, and a checkered shirt. As if he didn’t realize how cold it was until now, he pulled a suede jacket from the passenger seat, turned to Valerie and Will, and waved at them.

“Is he off duty?” Will asked.

“I asked him to come in plain clothes,” Valerie replied. “Doctor Whitmore thought that the sight of more police might unnerve his patients. I agreed.”

“Good thinking,” Will said.

Will and Valerie walked over to meet Officer Teller.

“Sorry I’m a bit late,” he said, blushing slightly. “I had to pick something up from the station.”

He held up a large black box with a handle.

“What’s that?” Valerie asked.

“Oh, this?” He grinned and tapped the side of the box. “This is just my evidence kit.”

Valerie thought it endearing that Officer Teller was being as prepared as he possibly

could. But she didn't expect him to have to gather any evidence. What she needed was an extra set of eyes on the files at Elmwood to see if they could identify another suspect.

He shook Will's hand in turn. "So, what do you need me to do?"

"We need to review all the patient files from the last three years," Valerie explained. "But they haven't been digitized, so it's a manual search job."

"How many files are we talking about?" Teller asked.

"Around four thousand, give or take," she replied.

Officer Teller whistled slowly between his teeth. "That's a lot of reading."

"Yeah, we could really use some extra manpower on this," Will agreed.

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“I’ll do my best,” Teller said. “What exactly am I looking for?”

Valerie pulled out a piece of paper from her inside coat pocket. The wind rattled it around between her fingers as she passed it to Teller.

“I’ve drawn up a preliminary suspect profile based on the main details from each case,” she explained.

Teller’s eyes quickly scanned over the page, taking in the list of traits that Valerie had highlighted. He nodded as he read, his brow furrowing in concentration.

“It looks like you’re looking for any male patient, with a history of escalating violence and who has been released from Elmwood within the last two years,” he said. “Ah, violencetoward animals too ... that’s a common trait among serial killers, right?”

Valerie nodded solemnly. She knew that this search was crucial to finding out who was responsible for this series of brutal attacks. If they didn’t find someone soon, more people could get hurt. Or worse.

“We better get started,” she said. “Agent Carlson is already inside preparing everything.”

They walked back into Elmwood, the wind howling around them, and Valerie was thankful that they had at least bolstered their numbers by one.

*

Valerie, Will, and Teller found Charlie huddled amid a pile of boxes stacked high in an enormous storage room. He had headphones on, listening to something as he worked. He was surrounded by mountains of dusty old files, and his face looked strained as he pored over each one, searching for something that might give them a clue to the killer's identity.

Valerie approached him slowly, trying not to startle him as he worked. She could see the tension in the way his shoulders were hunched, and his brow was furrowed with concentration.

"Charlie?" she said gently, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Jesus!" Charlie said loudly, jumping, and pulling the headphones down around his neck. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Will laughed heartily. "Good to know you're as human as the rest of us, Old Chap."

"Less of the old," he said shaking his head. He then saw Officer Teller standing behind them. He shook hands.

"Agent Carlson, nice to see you again," Teller said.

"We're glad to have you, and please, call me Charlie."

"I think first names are probably a good idea if we're going to be cooped up in this room together for hours on end," Will said, pulling an old chair up in front of a wooden desk stacked with files.

"In that case, my name's Sam," Teller offered.

"Valerie, Will, and Charlie," Valerie said, pointing to herself then her two partners.

Charlie took the headphones from around his neck and placed them onto the desk he was working from.

“What were you listening to, Charlie?” Valerie asked.

He pointed to an old dicta-phone tape with a miniature cassette in it. “These things are great. They take me back to a simpler time. I was just listening to some observations Gillian Pugh’s doctor had recorded that haven’t been transcribed yet.”

“Anything useful?” Will asked.

“Not yet,” Charlie answered. “This Doctor Winters, though, she sure does have a soothing voice.”

That name had bothered Valerie since she’d heard Doctor Whitmore mention it when they first arrived. There was something familiar about it, but she couldn’t place it.

She shrugged off the unease and helped everyone arrange four desks among the files, so they each had a space from which to work.

The storage room was warm, cozy even. A solitary window held the winds outside at bay.

“Let’s get started,” she said.

The next three hours passed at a snail’s pace. Valerie kept looking at her watch with each and every case file she looked through.

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“These are such a mess,” Will finally sighed, throwing down some papers on to the desk in front of him. “There should be a patient summary at the beginning of each file, but instead, there are all of these in-depth notes. I mean, it’s great that they are so thorough here, but without the summary, we have to read through pages and pages in each file to make sure we haven’t missed something.”

“I know,” Valerie said, despondently.

She picked up the next file and saw that there was a green sticker on the front page. It was the fifth one she’d seen so far in the records. Most had yellow stickers on the front. A few red.

“I wonder what these green stickers indicate?” Valerie asked out loud. “It must be part of their filing system.”

“I’ve seen them before,” Teller said, looking up from his work. “I was called up here a couple of years ago because a patient had stolen some medication. He was a green sticker. It usually meant that the patient has the freedom to walk around the facility.”

“That’s interesting,” Valerie said, thinking. “So, not every patient is allowed free reign to go where they please?”

“I think an amber sticker,” Teller continued. “If I’m remembering right, means they’re allowed to walk around the communal area, the dining hall, and a couple of other places. Red means they’re not allowed out of their rooms unaccompanied. Green means they can walk wherever they please, even into the grounds.

Valerie stood up, a singular thought coursing through her mind. She walked over to a smaller desk they kept specifically for victim details. She sat down at the desk and opened the bottom drawer. She took out the box of patient files and placed it on the desk in front of her. She scanned the labels on the front of the files. They stared back at her, and a theory began to build in Valerie's mind.

"Gillian Pugh had an amber sticker," Valerie said. "So, that means she only had access to specific areas."

She rifled through the files.

"Melanie Adler had a green sticker, most probably because she was well enough to leave."

"So, she was able to go anywhere in Elmwood," Charlie observed.

"To the bathroom at night without calling for an orderly," Will offered.

"Maybe we're wrong, then. It could be somebody who works here," Valerie said. "At Elmwood. Somebody who knows which patients are allowed to walk around and where."

"An orderly or a nurse?" Charlie mused.

"Who was the doctor in charge of each victim, out of curiosity?" Will asked.

Valerie looked down at the files and she felt the adrenaline rush through her veins. "All three were overseen by Doctor Rebecca Winters."

That name was still familiar. It stuck in her mind like a thorn.

“Have you met Doctor Winters before, Sam?” Charlie asked.

“Sure. She drinks down at the tavern in Buford. She’s the nicest doctor here,” Teller said. “I can’t believe she’s a killer.”

“It’s worth questioning her, but we shouldn’t jump to conclusions just yet,” Valerie said. “We should take this slowly and thoroughly. This could all be a coincidence.”

“I agree,” said Will. “This retreat probably only has a handful of doctors working at it, so we shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves.”

“Still, it’s a lead.” Charlie nodded, hopefully. “But weren’t you certain the perp you chased out of the boiler room was a man, Val?”

“I could have been wrong.”

“Or there could be two killers,” Teller said.

That thought made Valerie uneasy. She didn’t think any of this had the hallmarks of a serial killer pact. Those were exceptionally rare.

“You and Sam keep looking for more potential suspects,” Valerie said. “Will, could you come with me, and we’ll question Winters?”

“Of course.”

With a sense of determination, Valerie led Will out of the records room and down the hallway toward Doctor Whitmore’s office.

As they walked, Valerie’s mind raced with questions. Who was this mysterious killer? Why were they targeting patients at the psychological retreat? And how were

they able to get away with it for so long without being detected?

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Finally, they reached the doctor's office door. Valerie knocked sharply, and she heard Doctor Whitmore shout from inside.

"Come in!" he called out.

With a deep breath, Valerie pushed open the door and entered Doctor Whitmore's office. He looked up from his desk and smiled.

"Ah, Agent Law, Doctor Cooper. What can I do for you?" he asked.

"We were wondering if we could speak to Doctor Winters," Valerie said. "We have a few questions for her about the murders."

Doctor Whitmore's brow furrowed with worry, the color draining from his face. "Oh dear. You don't think ..."

"We can't rule out anything at the moment, Doctor Whitmore," Will offered. "But we did want to chat with her about a couple of coincidences."

Doctor Whitmore sighed, his shoulders sagging with exhaustion. "I suppose it could be nothing. Doctor Winters is on administrative leave right now due to some personal issues, but I can surely arrange for you two to meet with her."

Valerie felt a flicker of unease. "Is she okay?"

Doctor Whitmore gave her an empathetic look. "It's nothing serious, I assure you. Just some stress and anxiety that comes along with being a doctor at this place. She'll

be fine.”

Despite her misgivings, Valerie nodded at first, but she saw something in Doctor Whitmore’s demeanor. He planted his feet more firmly on the floor beneath his desk.

She knew this was what was known as an “anchor movement”. When someone felt under pressure, they would move their feet, anchoring their weight more into the ground.

Sometimes it just meant they were stressed, but often it meant they were hiding something.

“I’ll be frank, Doctor Whitmore,” Valerie said. “You have been so helpful to us since we’ve been here, but I sense you’re holding back something regarding Doctor Winters. And that breeds mistrust.”

The doctor didn’t say anything, he just looked at Valerie and Will as if he were searching for something to say.

“Doctor Whitmore,” Will added, gently stepping forward. “Why is Doctor Winters on administrative leave?”

The doctor hesitated for a moment before he finally relented. “She has a drinking problem,” he whispered, as if he were afraid someone might overhear him.

“I see,” Valerie said. “And you were worried that if we spoke to her, she might say something ... incriminating?”

Doctor Whitmore shook his head, his eyes pleading with them to understand. “I’m more worried that she’ll spiral out of control and drink even more, especially if she thinks she’s suspected of murder.”

“We’re not here to judge Doctor Winters, Doctor Whitmore,” Will said. “We just need to speak with her about the murders.”

“Of course, of course,” Doctor Whitmore said. “I understand that. But she’s such a good doctor, I don’t want her struck off. I placed her on leave for stress thinking it was the best way to protect her. And I’ve organized for a friend at a detox facility to take her in next week.”

Valerie nodded, feeling a twinge of sympathy for Doctor Winters. She knew what it was like to struggle with a secret, and she could only imagine the pain that the doctor must have been going through.

“Do you think we can speak with her now?” she asked Doctor Whitmore. “We just need to ask a few questions about the recent murders. We’re not currently looking to arrest her.”

Doctor Whitmore thought for a moment, chewing his lip as he considered their request. Finally, he sighed and nodded.

“All right,” he said reluctantly. “I’ll take you to see her. But please treat her with kid gloves. She’s extremely fragile right now. She still hasn’t gotten over a bereavement from last year.”

Will said, “Thank you, Doctor Whitmore. Lead the way.”

“She’s not far. Come with me. She’s staying in the other building in one of the rooms.”

Valerie and Will followed Doctor Whitmore out of the main building. The wind howled, and the trees felt more menacing than they had before, as the skies darkened above.

They reached the residential building. The same place Valerie and her team had slept the night before.

It seemed that their prime suspect had only ever been a few steps away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Valerie noticed that Doctor Winters's room was on the other side of the residential building as they walked through the corridors.

"I see you put us as far away from Doctor Winters as possible," Valerie said.

"Not to deceive, I assure you," the doctor replied. "I just don't want anyone seeing her in the condition she's in. It would mean the end of her career."

"We understand," Will said, giving Valerie a sideways glance, clearly encouraging her not to be too hard on Whitmore about it.

As they walked, Valerie kept saying the name to herself over and over in her mind.

Winters ... Winters ... Winters ... Why is that name so familiar?

When they reached the door of Winters's room, Valerie smelled a faint whiff of wine coming from the other side.

"Rebecca," Doctor Whitmore said, softly. "It's Doctor Whitmore."

"Hold on," said a slurred woman's voice from the other side of the door.

There was a pause, and then the door opened.

Valerie caught her breath at the sight of Doctor Winters. Her blonde hair was messy,

and even in the dim light of the hallway, she could see dark circles under her bloodshot eyes.

But despite her obvious disheveled state, there was still something undeniably beautiful about her.

Valerie's mother had once been beautiful too. She knew all too well how quickly beauty could fade, revealing something more malevolent beneath.

The smell of stale alcohol was now rife in the air, undoubtedly coming from Doctor Winters.

Doctor Winters flinched when she saw that Whitmore wasn't alone.

"Who are you?" she said warily, glaring at both Valerie and Will with suspicious eyes.

"We're just here to talk, Rebecca," Whitmore said soothingly. "These are friends of mine. They just want to ask you a few questions."

"What about?" Winters demanded.

"About the recent murders," Valerie said, taking a step forward.

The other woman's eyes widened in alarm, and she took a step back, clutching the door frame for support.

"What do you know about them?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"I'm Special Agent Valerie Law with the FBI," Valerie said, holding up her badge.

"This is my partner, Doctor Will Cooper. May we come in?"

Doctor Winters looked over her shoulders at the mess of her own room. She looked embarrassed.

“Can we talk in the hallway?”

Valerie looked around at the other room doors.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said. “People might overhear us.”

“No one ever comes down this way,” Winters said pleadingly. “Please.”

Valerie relented and turned away from the door and stepped to the side into the hallway, Will following close behind her.

“Now, what do you know about the murders?” Valerie asked, keeping her voice low.

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“I ... I don’t know anything,” Winters stammered. “I swear.”

“Doctor Winters,” Will said. “You were overseeing Agatha Mitchell, Gillian Pugh, and Melanie Adler as part of your case load?”

Doctor Winters nodded. “Yes, but it’s just a coincidence.”

“Where were you the night each was killed?”

“I ... I don’t remember. My memory isn’t great at the moment.”

“You’re the second person to blame their memory on alcohol during this investigation,” Valerie said. “Tell me, do you remember if those three patients were given red, green, or amber privileges? And if those badges were changed at any time, say before they could be updated on their files?”

“Well, that’s simple,” Doctor Winters replied. “I’ve never been given anyone marked as potentially violent, with a red sticker. They need an orderly or security at all times when moving around. All of my patients are either amber or green. It’s true that if their status had changed, the files might not reflect that, but I would have been notified immediately, and the patient would have been given to someone more experienced with violent psychiatric residents.”

This was problematic. Valerie turned to Doctor Whitmore.

“Is this true?”

“Yes,” he said. “Rebecca ... Doctor Winters only works with our lower risk patients. Probability dictates then that she would have a good chance of overseeing all three victims, and still have nothing to do with their deaths.”

“Maybe,” Valerie said, observing Doctor Winters.

There was something about her. Something in the eyes. Something familiar ...

An image flashed before her mind. Valerie saw a man lying in a secure psychiatric hospital. He was covered in blood and had died a brutal death. But what remained of his face was sure. The family resemblance was unmistakable. And the names matched to.

Valerie looked at Will, and he moved his head as if seeing Valerie’s internal turmoil.

“Doctor Winters,” Valerie said, softly. “Doctor Whitmore here mentioned that you were having trouble recovering from a bereavement?”

Doctor Winters’s eyes welled up with tears. “Yes. My brother.”

Will then gasped as though he had seen in his mind the very same image as Valerie. “Did he work at the Culver Institute?”

“Yes,” Doctor Winters said, surprised. “He was murdered there last year. My drinking became a problem after that. I’ve found it difficult to get past it.”

Valerie’s heart went out to the doctor. Trauma could cause a person to spiral in more ways than one. Some turn to drinking. Some turn to drugs. Some turn to destruction. Only a few reach a place of contentment without passing through stages of extreme psychological turmoil.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Valerie said. “We worked that case.”

“Oh ... so you’re the one that chased down his killer?” Doctor Winters said. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Valerie, giving her a hug. “Thank you,” she whispered into Valerie’s ear.

It was rare for Valerie to be thanked so directly. She felt a pang of guilt at now having to put Doctor Winters on her list of suspects.

But duty came first.

Valerie sighed and reluctantly pulled away from the embrace.

“I’m sorry, Doctor Winters,” she said. “But I’m going to have to ask you to remain here until we get to the bottom of these murders. We’ll contact you if we need anything else.”

Doctor Winters nodded sadly. She seemed defeated, as though she had already accepted her fate. But Valerie knew that wasn’t the case. There was always a chance for redemption—no matter how slim it may be.

“Rebecca, I’ll check on you later,” Doctor Whitmore said.

Doctor Winters said thank you and went back into her room.

Valerie watched her go, feeling a mixture of sorrow and resolve. She knew she had to find the truth, no matter who it implicated.

As Valerie turned back toward the hallway, Doctor Whitmore pleaded, “Rebecca is no more a murderer than I am. She’s had enough tragedy in her life, but she has a desire to help and care for people.”

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Will sighed, "I think Doctor Whitmore is right."

"You don't know that," said Valerie. "She could be involved."

"Yes, she could," said Will. "But it's unlikely. She's brimming with empathy and care for others. Hence why she embraced you. I read that as someone who was worried that the burden of such cases must be difficult. And besides, look at her frame. She's slender and lightweight. I doubt she could strangle someone. It takes real physical power to do that."

"I get what you're both saying," Valerie said. "But I'm not taking her off our list of suspects for now. It's still possible that she's involved."

Neither Will nor Doctor Whitmore said anything in reply. The three forlorn figures left the residential building with more questions than answers, as the dark of night finally descended all around Elmwood Retreat.

A darkness Valerie was certain shielded the killer.

She began to muse about the victims and the probability of the next kill. The murders were happening in quick succession, and only one had taken place outside of the facility.

Valerie felt the dread emanating from the walls of Elmwood.

The next kill is here, and it will be soon, she thought.

She knew then that was worthwhile to investigate Elmwood in the dead of night.

CHAPTER TWENTY

If a murderer hadn't been on the loose, Valerie would have thought the surroundings cozy.

Doctor Whitmore's study in the residential building smelled of oak and luxury leather. A fireplace roared beneath a mantelpiece, and outside the winds caressed the building with autumn roar.

Valerie heard the jiggle of ice cubes as Doctor Whitmore filled each glass with a fine bourbon. He then put the bottle back with a few others in an open cabinet. He handed a glass to Valerie, then Will, Charlie, and Sam Teller.

"You come from Buford, don't you, Sam?" Doctor Whitmore said.

"Yes, Sir," he said, holding the bourbon. "So, I guess I shouldn't drink this if I'm going to head home soon. It's nearly midnight."

"Why not stay in one of the rooms?" Doctor Whitmore offered.

"We're all staying, Sam," Valerie said, somberly. "If you do the same, we can get back to searching the records first thing in the morning."

"This bourbon is delicious," Will said.

"Yeah, mighty fine," Charlie agreed.

Doctor Whitmore sighed, the flames dancing shadows over his face. He stared at the glass in his hand, watching the ice cubes slowly melt into his drink.

“I am sorry, Doctor Whitmore,” Will said. “This can’t be easy.”

“I’ve been here for twelve years, six as head psychiatrist,” he replied. “I’ve worked tirelessly to make this a haven for patients, and some thug has come here to take their lives. It doesn’t seem fair. I hardly think the retreat will survive this.”

“Do you think they’ll shut it down?” Doctor Whitmore asked.

“I’ve recommended to the Board that we move our patients to other psychiatric wards in the area,” he said. “It’s the only way I can safeguard them.”

“That’s a double-edged sword,” Valerie said. “Obviously the priority is to safeguard lives, but the killer might change his victim profile when the patients are gone.”

“Can I ask something?”

“Sure, Sam,” Charlie replied.

“Shouldn’t we put a guard on to protect the patients until they’re moved on?”

Valerie smiled. “Yes, Sam. That’s why we’re here. I want us to keep watch, two at a time, if you’re up to it?”

“Of course!” he said, enthusiastically.

“Great. You can do the first watch with me, then Charlie and Will can do the second,” Valerie explained.

“What about me?” Doctor Whitmore asked.

“You don’t need to put yourself in the firing line, Doctor Whitmore,” Charlie said.
“We can handle this.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” Doctor Whitmore said. “I’d like to help. I took an oath to do no harm, it seems to me that if I just go to bed waiting for another of my patients to be murdered, I’m not fulfilling that oath.”

Valerie admired the doctor’s sentiment. “Okay, but you’ll need to follow our instructions to the letter.”

“Agreed.”

The group then finished their drinks and left the study.

“Val, come get me if you need me,” Charlie said, seeming more concerned than usual.

“I’ll be fine,” Valerie said. “I have the intrepid Officer Sam Teller by my side.”

Sam blushed. “Thanks.”

“And me,” Doctor Whitmore added. “You know I did box once back at Harvard.”

“How did that go?” asked Charlie.

Doctor Whitmore smirked. “You should have seen the other guy... standing over me as I took a nap on the canvas.”

Charlie patted the doctor on his back. “It happens to the best of us.”

Valerie heard rainfall outside.

“Ah, we’re going to get soaked going into the main building,” Doctor Whitmore said. “But I suppose there’s nothing else for it.”

“It’s only rain,” said Valerie. “We could be about to face far worse.”

Valerie then headed toward the storm.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Doctor Whitmore hated to admit it, but he was enjoying himself. Valerie Law and Sam Teller had been good company for nearly two hours as they walked around the quiet hallways of Elmwood.

Valerie was extremely knowledgeable about psychiatric conditions, especially violent ones. And Sam Teller was a bundle of youthful verve, keen to learn anything he could.

They walked through the empty hallways of Elmwood. The only sound was the echo of their footsteps. Doctor Whitmore talked to Sam and Valerie, telling them how strange Elmwood seemed at night, without the hustle and bustle of patients moving

around. It was eerie.

“It’s like a different place,” Doctor Whitmore said. “I feel like I’m in a dream. Elmwood is usually so busy during the day. But now, it’s so quiet.”

“I know what you mean,” said Sam. “It’s like the whole place is haunted.”

Doctor Whitmore chuckled. “I don’t think it’s quite that bad. But it is strange, isn’t it?”

He looked out the window at the darkened grounds. There was a layer of fog hovering above the ground, swirling around the trees and bushes.

“It’s too dark to see much,” said Doctor Whitmore, “but I guess it’s just as well. There’s not much happening out there.”

Valerie looked out the window with him.

“Let’s hope there’s nothing happening at all.”

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“A quiet night is a good night as I used to say to my colleagues when I had my first placement,” Doctor Whitmore said.

“I feel the same at the police station,” Sam said, scratching his blond head and yawning. “But I have to say, until recently, every night is a quiet one in Buford.”

They kept walking and entered the dining hall. The tables and chairs stared back, empty and unnerving.

“Do you really think the killer might come back tonight?” the doctor asked. “It seems very risky.”

“If he’s escalating, he’ll get reckless. He won’t be able to help himself. For now, we’ll just have to keep our guard up,” Valerie said. “And hope that this serial killer is finally starting to lose control.”

As they walked through the dark and silent building, Doctor Whitmore could feel his heart racing with excitement. There was something thrilling about walking around in a group at night. It reminded him of the detective shows he loved as a kid.

“I think we’ve got the upper hand,” Sam said as they left the dining hall.

“What makes you say that?” asked Valerie.

“We know he’s coming. He doesn’t know we’re waiting for him,” Sam said. “And we have Elmwood.”

“What do you mean ‘we have Elmwood’?” the doctor asked.

“It seems to me,” Sam explained. “That unlike a lot of killers, we know the one place he wants to keep coming back to.”

“Unless he kills an ex-patient like Agatha Mitchell outside again,” Valerie said, her voice grim.

“Oh yeah, sorry, forget what I said,” Sam replied, sounding apologetic.

Valerie felt bad for stepping on his toes.

“No, Sam, you’re right,” Valerie said. “We do have the advantage of knowing there’s a good chance he’ll come back to Elmwood. And if he does, we’ll be here.”

“Pardon me, but I think I have to go to the bathroom,” Doctor Whitmore said.

“No problem, Doctor,” Valerie answered. “But stay alert. And shout if you see anything.”

With a nod, Doctor Whitmore headed off down the hallway toward the bathroom. He turned down one corridor, walked to the end of it, and then another. The farther he walked from Valerie and Sam, the more he felt the walls of Elmwood closing in on him, like a threat.

There was something in the air, an ominous foreboding that all was not right.

He tried to shake it off, telling himself that he had nothing to fear, but the doubts remained.

As he walked along a hallway nearing a bathroom door, he thought he heard

something behind him. He spun around, trying to catch a glimpse of what it was. But there was nothing there.

Calm down, he thought. You're just scaring yourself.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a shadowy figure leaped out from a closet door to the side of him and struck him across the head with something hard.

Doctor Whitmore felt blood seeping from the wound as he crashed to the ground. He tried to scream, but he was fighting against blacking out.

Panicked, he tried to get up, but everything around him was spinning and hazy. Desperately, he tried to call for help or find his phone, but it was all in vain. He wasn't thinking straight.

As Doctor Whitmore lay there on the cold floor of Elmwood, battered and afraid, a voice of clarity came to him: Move!

It was a survival instinct. He managed to steady himself, and as his attacker stood over him and the blood dripped over one of his own eyes, Doctor Whitmore reached out and struck a large decorative plant pot with his leg. Its presence was meant to soothe patients, but now it's only purpose was to save Doctor Whitmore's life. It clattered over, alerting others to his presence. The doctor could hear footsteps receding as someone sprinted away from behind him as he clawed his way along the hallway, back the way he came.

When he reached the corner, he was able to let out a shout.

Quickly, the footsteps of Valerie and Sam came running around the corner.

"Doctor Whitmore!" Sam shouted, catching the doctor as he nearly fainted.

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“What the hell happened?” Valerie said, helping Sam support the doctor’s weight.

“Someone came out of a doorway ... Hit me with something before I knew it.”

“Sam, take the doctor to his office and wake up one of the nurses to tend to his head injury.”

“I ... I’m okay. It’s too dangerous on your own ...”

“I’ll be fine,” Valerie said, drawing her gun.

The doctor felt a quiver of fear run through him when he saw it. Valerie Law had brought danger to Elmwood.

“Go, Sam,” she said. “And wake up Charlie and Will.”

With that, Valerie disappeared around the corner in the direction of Doctor Whitmore’s attacker. Alone, and rushing into the fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Valerie listened for any sign of movement in the corridor. There was none. But that didn’t mean that no one was nearby.

Looking down at the deep green carpet, she could see drips of blood and a spatter pattern on the opposite wall where Doctor Whitmore had been attacked.

Hopefully Sam had gotten a nurse to patch him up by now.

Moving along the corridor, revolver in hand, Valerie moved as quietly as she could along the carpeted floor.

She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she approached a corner.

Just as she was about to round the bend, she heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps coming toward her.

Her muscles tensed and her grip on the gun tightened. She braced herself for whatever was around that corner.

But as soon as she stepped out from behind it, there was no one there. The footsteps had stopped just short of where she stood.

Could they have been an illusion? A trick played by this cursed place?

Dread washed over Valerie.

It's your mind again, trying to get you killed.

She continued in that direction until she reached the door to the communal area. Pushing it open slowly, it creaked. The large room was bathed in darkness.

Taking out her flashlight, Valerie illuminated the empty chairs, tables, and couches.

Looking around, she saw no sign of Doctor Whitmore's attacker.

Feeling a mix of relief and disappointment, she turned to head back along another hallway when, all of a sudden, she heard the noise of the other door opening up ahead

in the room.

Nerves on edge, Valerie carefully made her way toward the source of the sound. As she drew closer, her grip on her gun tightened.

At last, she arrived at the door and made her way through it.

Again footsteps.

But are they real? Valerie thought.

She shook her head like a fighter shaking off a near KO and looked around.

Footsteps around the corner.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:00 am

She ran and followed them, having no option but to treat them as real. Suddenly, she was standing before a large door, and a strange fear washed over her.

It was the basement door again. The footsteps had led her there. Valerie started to believe they were echoes in her mind from the previous night.

Maybe there was damage when he hit me over the head, she thought. And the footsteps are just memories.

She stared at the door like it was a barrier between her and the beyond. She thought she heard the footsteps again, descending the stairs on the other side. But something inside of her resisted going back down there. She was terrified that her hallucinations were now in control.

Another noise came from behind the door, like someone moving something metal. She had to treat it as real, the killer had just attacked Doctor Whitmore, and if Valerie didn't keep going, the killer would do worse next time.

Valerie took a deep breath and opened the door. The stairs were dark.

She moved forward, shining her flashlight down into the abyss.

On the dusty floor at the foot of the stairs, Valerie saw a set of footprints leading down into the darkness.

With a pounding heart, she followed them down, knowing that if she stopped now, she could lose the killer for a second time. She had to keep going—no matter what

was waiting for her at the bottom.

Valerie's hand trembled as she reached the bottom of the stairs. Not because of the darkness. Not because of the killer. But because of the whisper she heard coming from the corner of the room.

It sounded like her mother, taunting her.

You'll never know, Valerie, she thought it said. But she couldn't quite make it out. Was the voice talking about her father's DNA test? Or was it taunting her because she was unable to catch the killer stalking patients and doctors at Elmwood?

Valerie swallowed back her fear and moved toward the voice. Whatever was waiting for her there, she knew she had to find it—even if it cost her her sanity.

The whisper grew fainter, and quickly Valerie felt as though she was chasing it through the subterranean world of Elmwood.

The voices echoed, and Valerie threw caution to the wind until she found herself lost in the darkness.

Which way were the footsteps? Which way was the exit?

But Valerie refused to be defeated by her internal torment. Silencing the voices with sheer will, she continued on.

With each step, the whispers grew weaker and fainter. And as she pushed forward, a new sense of determination filled her heart.

She was done letting her mind hold her back from saving others from the clutches of this twisted world.

With a deep breath, Valerie plunged forward into the void.

As she moved through the shadows, something caught her eye—a flicker of light.

Ignoring her fear and doubts, she sprinted toward it.

The light grew brighter and brighter until she was standing in front of a door.

And without hesitating, she threw it open and stepped into the light.

She found herself in a room, lit by a solitary incandescent bulb, its yellow hue casting shadows all around. The first thing that Valerie noticed was the smell. It was a mixture of bleach and oil.

In the corner of the room was a row of cleaning products, mops and buckets, and other equipment a janitor required for odd jobs around Elmwood. Then out of the corner of her eye, she saw the shape of a figure standing behind an open locker door.

She spun around and pointed her gun straight at it, only to realize that it wasn't a person at all. It was a janitor's uniform hanging up on the edge of the door. Valerie walked over to it and looked at the name tag: Saldana.

As she touched the uniform, she felt something weighty in one of the pockets. Reaching into it, she pulled out a long coil of electrical wire and a large knife.

Staring at them, Valerie imagined the janitor holding victims at knife point, only to wrap the electrical wire around their throats and then strangle them until the light went out of their eyes.

"Don't shoot," a familiar voice said.

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Valerie turned around, relieved to see the figure of Charlie walking through the door.

“Val, you ran off again. I thought we talked about that,” he said, sternly. “I saw the basement door open when I came looking for you and figured you were down here.”

“I’m a big girl,” she said. “Is Doctor Whitmore okay?”

“He’ll live,” Charlie said. “Did his attacker come down here?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered. “I might have heard him. But look ...” She showed the janitor’s uniform to Charlie, revealing the large knife and electrical wire in the pocket.

“Looks like we have a new suspect,” Charlie said.

Valerie nodded, and after doing one more search of the basement, they headed back out of the darkness into the lit corridors of Elmwood. Valerie was glad to leave the shadows behind, but she just hoped that she’d put the voices out of her mind for good.

“We need to keep looking if the janitor is still in Elmwood somewhere,” she said as they walked down a hallway.

“Where haven’t we looked?” Charlie asked.

A horrible thought washed over Valerie. “We’ve checked the hallways and communal places, but we haven’t checked the patients’ rooms!”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Valerie and Charlie reached an intersection between two corridors, both lined with doors.

“You check the left-hand side, I’ll check the right,” Valerie said, her breathing fast and frantic.

They had already searched several rooms and had only managed to wake up patients. There was no sign of the janitor yet. The man Valerie now suspected was the killer at Elmwood.

Valerie headed to the right on her own, knocking on the doors, sticking her head in, and explaining to patients that she was with the FBI looking for the janitor, Saldana.

She was worried about how frightened some of the patients were. Many had cried and begged her to leave them alone.

“Please, I’m scared,” a lady sitting in a chair by the door said.

“Don’t be scared, ma’am,” Valerie said, feeling slightly guilty as she checked the room. “I promise everything will be okay.”

She didn’t know what else to say.

The lady looked so scared and alone that Valerie almost didn’t want to leave her, but she had to keep going.

She eventually reached the corner of the corridor without finding anything. As she turned to search another line of doors, a scream rang out from somewhere nearby.

Valerie's heart leaped into her throat as she ran toward the scream.

She skidded to a stop in front of a door and tried the handle, but it was locked.

"Help me! Please, help!" a woman's voice cried from inside the room.

Valerie stepped back and then ran at the door, shoulder first. The impact sent a jolt of pain through her body, but the door flew open.

Inside, she saw a terrified woman curled up in bed, her hands clutching her throat.

Just then, a dark figure appeared in the corner of the room wearing blue overalls. She could see him holding something in his hand. It looked like a large crowbar.

Valerie raised her gun and shouted for him to stop, but the man, who she was now sure was the janitor, threw the crowbar at her, knocking the gun from her hand.

Valerie turned and charged at the man, taking him by surprise as he swung his arm at her. She quickly kicked him in the chest, causing him to slam into the wall with a loud thud.

Breathing hard, she stood over the man's body, but he wasn't done yet. He reached up, grabbed her left leg, and lifted her off the ground before smacking her against the room floor.

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Valerie felt an agonizing shock run up her body. She still wasn't 100 percent from her concussion, and now the janitor had the upper hand.

The woman on the bed screamed in terror.

"Get out!" Valerie cried at the patient as the janitor grabbed Valerie by the hair and yanked her up onto her feet.

"No!" The janitor shouted, his voice filled with rage. "You're not going to stop me!"

He then lifted Valerie up and slammed her against the wall.

Valerie struck out with her knee, catching the man in the abdomen. He gasped loudly, momentarily releasing his grip. Now was Valerie's chance.

With a quick movement, Valerie grabbed the man's wrist, putting him into a wrist lock. But he managed to pull his hand away. Valerie kicked at his knee and then struck his nose with a palm strike.

She saw a change in his demeanor. The man's anger was now replaced with fear and a gasp of pain. He staggered back, turned, and ran out of the doorway and along the corridor.

Valerie got up and ran after him, determined to stop him from getting away again. She rushed down the hallway, but just as she reached a corner, Valerie heard a loud crash and saw that the janitor had smashed a fire alarm, sending an alarm off all around Elmwood.

She stopped for a moment, cursing under her breath as psychiatric patients came running out of their rooms in droves, unnerved, and someone shouting “fire!” nearby.

Saldana was smart, she would give him that. Valerie pushed through the crowds of patients. She saw, up ahead in front of the janitor, Charlie looking around, surrounded by patients.

“Charlie!” Valerie screamed.

He looked up and saw her.

“The janitor!” she shouted, pointing at the man.

Charlie nodded and ran toward the janitor.

But the janitor had other plans. He ran into another room. As Valerie reached the door with Charlie, she could hear the man barricading the door with furniture. Charlie tried to knock the door down, but it was solid.

Suddenly, there was a sound of glass being smashed from inside the room.

“He’s going outside!” Charlie shouted above the commotion around them. The problem was that most of Elmwood was rushing outside at the same time.

Valerie and Charlie jostled past the patients as best they could, but they were like driftwood caught in a current. Eventually, they found their way, pushed along to the outside of the building.

Nurses and orderlies were trying to organize the patients as they waited for the Buford fire department to turn up.

Valerie scanned the area with her eyes.

“Do you see him!?” she shouted to Charlie.

Charlie was moving around, but it was hopeless. The janitor had managed to escape their net.

Valerie and Charlie had let the killer slip through their fingers.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Valerie sat once more by the glow of the fire in Doctor Whitmore’s study. Charlie and Will sat beside her. The room was thick with an atmosphere of defeat.

Doctor Whitmore was in a great deal of pain as he took a seat behind his desk and motioned for the others to help themselves to a drink. But they didn’t.

A nurse entered the room and began tending to the wound on the doctor’s head, putting on a fresh dressing.

“Sam Teller is organizing a search of Buford,” Charlie sighed. “Hopefully they’ll find Saldana before he escalates any further.”

“We were so close ...” Valerie felt the words escape her mouth like steam or smoke.

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“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” Will said, putting a hand on Valerie’s shoulder. “You did everything you could. It was just bad luck that Saldana got away.”

Valerie took a deep breath and nodded. She couldn’t afford to be too hard on herself right now. There was still a madman out there who needed to be caught and stopped. And she just hoped they would have plenty more opportunities to get him before it was too late.

“I’m so sorry,” Doctor Whitmore said with remorse. “I feel like this is all my fault.”

“No, it’s not,” Valerie said, shaking her head. “None of this is your fault. You did everything you could to stop this from happening. And he hasn’t managed to kill another patient.”

There was a palpable sense of relief in the room as they all realized that despite Saldana’s escape, they had still managed to stop him from hurting anyone else. And that was something to be proud of.

“Thank you,” Doctor Whitmore said. “But what I mean is, I was the one who got him his job here.”

“What can you tell us about him?” Valerie asked.

“Yes,” Will interjected. “Anything you can tell us might help us build a better profile and predict his next move.”

Doctor Whitmore sighed and looked out through the nearest window, the shadowy

trees still swaying in the dark. “I fought tooth and nail to get him that job as janitor here at Elmwood. He was a previous patient of mine, and we thought it would be good to have a well-treated patient to point to as an example to the other patients. I’m horrified that he’s the one who has killed all these people.”

“Normally ex-patients wouldn’t be allowed to work in that capacity, why did you push for it?” Valerie asked.

“It was a theory of mine,” the doctor said, sighing. “I thought the more contact patients had with ‘cured’ individuals, it would breed a sense of faith in what we were doing here.”

“Ah, clever,” Will said. “A bit like a positive placebo effect?”

“Precisely,” the doctor answered. “But I never thought for a second that Saldana would turn out to be violent. He has no history of previous violence.”

Valerie was shocked by that. She had been certain that the killer must have had a previous history of violence to have taken the leap toward killing.

“How did he get the job?” Charlie asked.

“I pulled some strings with the board of directors. I told them it would be good for all of the patients, but I think they just did it to humor me,” Doctor Whitmore said.

“Did he seem off at all, recently?” Valerie asked.

“No. He was a good worker, and he was always friendly,” Doctor Whitmore said. “Oh...”

Valerie sensed that Doctor Whitmore had just realized something important.

“What is it?” she asked as the fire beneath the mantel flickered and crackled.

“As part of the agreement when he started working here,” the doctor said. “Saldana agreed to do some continual therapy sessions. Just to check in and see how he was doing.”

“How often did you run those sessions?” asked Will.

“Thank you, Nurse Williams. That’s a great job,” Doctor Whitmore said to the nurse dressing the cut in his head. She smiled and said, “I’ll check on you in a couple of hours,” and then left.

“That’s the thing,” the doctor said, rubbing his brow with worry. “I didn’t run the therapy sessions. Someone else did.”

“Doctor Winters?” Charlie deduced.

“Yes,” replied Doctor Whitmore. “I am so sorry. With all of Doctor Winters’s problems, trying to hide it from the board and staff, trying to organize a detox clinic for her ... I forgot to check in with Saldana to make sure he was doing okay.”

“You mustn’t be too hard on yourself,” Will said, gently. “You didn’t know.”

The doctor looked up at Will from behind his desk. “Maybe I would have noticed something if I had spoken with him. Maybe I could have stopped the murders ...”

“No,” Valerie said, feeling sorry for him. “The only way we can stop anymore murders is to track him down.”

“Like I said, Sam is organizing a search of the town,” Charlie reminded Valerie.

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“And what about his address?” Valerie asked.

“They’ve already been over there,” Charlie answered. “He was nowhere to be found.”

“They’ve checked the grounds, extensively,” Valerie thought out loud. “And the weather is pretty bad, so I think we can rule out hunkering down outdoors.”

Charlie leaned forward: “Family?”

“He had a paternal grandmother,” Doctor Whitmore said. “But as far as I’m aware, she died recently at Buford Nursing Home.”

Valerie’s mind started to process this new piece of information.

“Did she have a history of being overbearing?” Will asked.

“Why, yes, as a matter of fact,” Doctor Whitmore replied.

Will stood up and started to pace. “Controlling? Demanding that he turn to her for his every need?”

“Yes,” Doctor Whitmore said again, surprised. “It’s as if you’ve read his case file already.”

“No,” Will said, smiling. “It would fit with some serial killer profiles. An overbearing mother figure. Domineering.”

“Emasculating,” Valerie added.

“The killer,” Will continued. “Could have developed a number of pathological personality traits because of this. A deep sense of anger toward women. And yet a fascination with them.”

“And a need to wield power over them where he could,” Charlie added. “Just to inflate their self-worth.”

“I see,” Doctor Whitmore replied. “I wish I had known this before.”

“Tell me, Doctor,” Valerie said, the warmth of the fire glowing in the faces around her. “Do you now if Saldana’s grandmother died in that house?”

“Actually,” he said. “If memory serves me, she died at Buford Nursing Home. Saldana used to visit there every Sunday until she passed.”

“And do you know if she was cremated or buried nearby?” Valerie needed to know this. It was imperative.

“She was buried at Buford Cemetery.”

Valerie stood up. “If this is all correct, and what Will says about Saldana’s relationship to his grandmother rings true, then there are three possible places where he might hide out when under threat. Like a kid running to a parent for comfort.”

She turned to Charlie and Will.

“Charlie, you head over to the nursing home. Will, grab Sam Teller and get him to accompany you to the house where the grandmother used to live.”

“And where are you going?” Charlie asked.

“I’ll go to the cemetery.”

“I thought you said it was unlikely that he would be outside in this weather?” Doctor Whitmore asked.

“There’ll be some buildings inside the cemetery for storage or internment,” she said.

“Right,” Doctor Whitmore said. “Allow me to accompany you.”

“I think you’ve seen enough action for tonight, Doctor Whitmore,” Valerie said.

“Please,” his eyes pleaded. “At least let me help. I might be able to talk to him.”

Valerie sighed. “Okay. Everyone stay in touch and keep your eyes open. We still have a few hours of darkness, and I don’t want anyone else getting hurt.”

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They agreed. It was time for one more push to track Saldana down and end this once and for all.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Valerie pulled up at the gates of Buford Cemetery, Doctor Whitmore alongside her. The sun hadn't come up yet.

The gates to the old cemetery were tall and foreboding in the autumn wind. The scene littered with fallen leaves swirling through the air. Charlie, Will, and Sam Teller were checking the other two locations across town.

Valerie turned to Doctor Whitmore. "Are you sure you want to come with me?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "I feel responsible for all of this."

"It could be dangerous," she said. "I've fought Saldana once already, and he put up a difficult fight. He's killed three victims and tried to kill you too. There's no telling what he'll do if he's here and emotionally vulnerable."

"Emotionally vulnerable?" he asked.

"Yes," Valerie explained. "If he's here, then he's going to his grandmother's grave. He knows we're on to him and he's running out of places to hide. Coming here would be because of the solace his grandmother's grave gives him. He'll be filled with emotion. On the edge. Persecuted. That's when a killer like this is the most dangerous."

“I’ve known Saldana for several years,” Doctor Whitmore said. “If I can help bring him in without anyone else getting hurt, then that’s some sort of atonement for me.”

“Okay then,” she said. “Stay with me at all times, and don’t do anything rash.”

Valerie took her gun out.

“Do you really need that?” the doctor asked.

“In my line of work, it’s a necessity, Doctor. Let’s just hope I don’t have to use it.”

They exited the car and Valerie led the way through the gates into the cemetery. It was dark, and the shadows played tricks on her eyes. She flicked on her flashlight and shone it ahead of her, sweeping it from side to side. Doctor Whitmore stayed close by her side.

The wind whipped through the trees, and the leaves crunched underfoot. It was a large cemetery, and Valerie knew it would take some time to search.

The headstones were old and weather worn. Some of them tilted precariously. It looked like it had been a long time since anyone had been here to tend some of the older graves.

“I wish we knew where his grandmother’s plot is,” Doctor Whitmore said, his voice frustrated.

“We need to be systematic about this,” she said. “He’ll see my flashlight. It makes us a sitting duck, but there’s no other option. Keep your eyes peeled. He could come at us at any moment.”

The two continued up the long gravel paths between the headstones, moving

methodically through the maze of graves and mausoleums. The cemetery seemed endless, with no clear end in sight.

The silence of the cemetery was deafening, broken only by their footsteps and the breeze in the trees.

As Valerie and Doctor Whitmore continued through the graveyard, they felt a sense of unease as they searched for Saldana's grandmother's grave. The air was filled with tension, and it seemed like every step could be their last.

Finally, they came to a large mausoleum near the back of the cemetery. There was an inscription on the stone that read "Saldana".

"It's too old to be his grandmother's," Doctor Whitmore said. "But maybe there are other family plots nearby."

Valerie nodded and continued searching.

She shone her flashlight into every nook and cranny, but there was no sign of Saldana. Suddenly, she heard a noise coming from the other side of the mausoleum. She turned off her flashlight and motioned for Doctor Whitmore to stay put.

She crept around the side of the mausoleum, gun drawn. Peeking around the corner, she saw a crouched figure by a grave.

Valerie lurched forward, her gun stretched out before her. But just as she was about to shout "freeze!", the beam of her flashlight lit the macabre figure. It was an old, weather worn statue of a kneeling angel.

Valerie let out a sigh of relief and lowered her gun. Doctor Whitmore came up behind her, and she could see the relief on his face as well.

“It’s just a statue,” she said. “But it scared the hell out of me.”

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“Me too,” he said. “I thought for sure we were going to find Saldana here. Maybe he’s long gone.”

“He could be at the nursing home where his grandmother died or at the old house where she used to live,” Valerie said. “But we still have quite a lot of ground to cover here before I’m ready to give up.”

They continued walking through the graveyard, scanning every headstone and mausoleum for any sign of Saldana. Even though they had been relieved to find that statue instead of a living person, Valerie knew that the hunt was far from over.

As they walked farther into the graveyard, Valerie sensed a strange energy in the air. She could feel something watching them from the shadows, following their every move. But just as quickly as it had appeared, it disappeared again.

She looked over her shoulder and thought she saw someone standing over one of the gravestones, but a flick of her flashlight exposed nothing but the blackness of the night.

Then, nearby, Valerie heard something.

“I heard that,” Doctor Whitmore said in a frightened voice.

“Stay here,” said Valerie.

She walked to the side where the noise had come from. It had been the subtlest of sounds, but a distinct one. The sound of metal on metal, clinking together.

Valerie knew she had to be patient. To wait for Saldana to make another mistake.

Just one more movement, Saldana, she thought as a night breeze chilled all around.

Then, in reply to the breeze, the same subtle clinking sound arrived. It was very, very close. Tightening her grip on her gun, Valerie walked to a small collection of tombstones surrounding an old vault, one with a large cross on top. There was something that drew Valerie to it. As if her subconscious mind had picked up the slightest movement coming from its open doorway.

Yes, she thought, taking a breath, and approaching until she was only inches from the gaping maw of the tomb. She felt someone staring back at her from the deep shadow of it. She reached out with the barrel of her gun.

“Hey! Don’t shoot!” a man said in a broad accent, stepping out of the tomb with his hands up. “Please!”

Valerie looked at him in disappointment. She saw that he had a tool belt around his waist. “Great, the caretaker.”

“Please don’t kill me,” he pleaded.

“I’m FBI,” she said with a sigh. “Have you seen anyone around here other than us?”

“No,” the man said, relieved and lowering his hands. “I’ve been doing some maintenance on this tomb.”

“At night?”

“You try and keep this place running during the day,” he said. “This tomb door fell off in the bad weather, and I just need to get it sealed up.”

“It’ll need to wait,” Valerie said. “There’s a dangerous criminal somewhere nearby, so I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

His face grew white. “You don’t have to ask me twice!”

He picked up his tools from inside the tomb and ran off down toward the gates.

Valerie sighed, frustrated, and then moved back along to see Doctor Whitmore.

“Any luck?” he asked.

“No, just the caretaker,” Valerie said. “Let’s keep moving.”

And they did, cautiously but with purpose.

Entering another overgrown area of trees and bushes, they came to the edge of a large clearing in the middle of the graveyard. The clearing was long and vacant, with no headstones or mausoleums. The moonlight sparkled on the dew-covered grass.

“I wish we could just find the grandmother’s grave,” the doctor said. “I’d be much happier once we’re done here.”

Valerie took a step forward and then heard a dull thud coming from nearby. And then another.

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At first, she thought it was her imagination, but when she looked at Doctor Whitmore, she could see the fear in his eyes.

“You heard that?” she whispered.

The doctor nodded.

“Keep going,” she said almost silently. “Let’s see if the sound follows.”

The two continued walking through the clearing in the middle of the graveyard with the sound of dull thuds following them. Valerie started to get more and more nervous. As the thuds began to grow more frequent, Valerie could swear she could hear whispers on the wind.

Not now, she thought. Leave me alone. It was one thing to hallucinate when she was on her own, another when she was with someone else, and their lives were at stake.

They were almost to the edge of the clearing when she heard a voice whispering, “Stop.”

Valerie froze in place and even Doctor Whitmore stopped dead in his tracks. They listened closely, but the voice was gone. Valerie shone her flashlight around the graveyard, but still found nothing.

“What was that?” Doctor Whitmore asked nervously. “I heard a voice.”

“Me too,” she said. Valerie was conflicted: happy that this was no hallucination, but

anxious that they were in real danger.

“Let’s go,” she said finally. “We’re almost out of here.”

They quickened their pace, not stopping until they reached the other side of the clearing. As they stepped out of the clearing, Valerie shone her flashlight on a new grave. The headstone read Martha Saldana.

“We found her,” she said.

“But no sign of Saldana?” the doctor observed.

“Not yet,” said Valerie as the wind whipped up, howling between the countless gravestones all around.

She studied the grave intently, looking for any sign of tracks or footprints that Saldana might have left behind. Reaching down, she felt the ground with her fingertips.

“Someone stood here recently,” she said, standing up and looking around at the empty cemetery.

“You think he’s been here?”

A shiver ran down Valerie’s spine as she looked at the tracks in the wet ground, all leading away from the grave. She felt a sudden sense of fear and dread wash over her, nearly overwhelming her.

“These footprints are fresh,” she said, turning to Doctor Whitmore with a worried look on her face. “He must have run off and hid somewhere nearby.”

Valerie then smelled something on the wind. It was faint, but definite. She recognized it immediately. It was the same smell as the janitor's room in the basement at Elmwood.

There was a faint smell of the same bleach and cleaning products coming from nearby.

She stepped close to Doctor Whitmore.

"Stay still, don't react," she said.

The doctor stared wide-eyed at Valerie and listened with the roar of the wind at his back.

"He's very close," she said. "I'm going to pretend I'm leaving you. Stay here by the grave."

He nodded almost imperceptibly. Valerie admired his bravery. She could tell he was scared, but real bravery was facing your fear, not being unmoved by it.

The doctor's face was pale, and he looked just as scared as Valerie felt.

"We should split up," Valerie said. "You stay here, and I'll have a look around. Shout if you see him."

She said this extra loud so that Saldana, who she expected was extremely close by, could hear and react accordingly.

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Without waiting for a response, Valerie turned and started walking away from the grave. She shone her flashlight into the dark corners of the graveyard, looking for any sign of Saldana. But there was nothing. No sound, no movement, nothing.

She moved in a circle between some graves and switched off her flashlight.

Above, broken shards of moonlight barely illuminated the gravestones.

She waited, her gun in hand, crouched behind a nearby headstone. The poor doctor's gray outline looming over Saldana's grandmother's grave.

There was a lull on the wind, and in that, she heard movement. The dullthudsof footsteps.

"You shouldn't have come here," a voice said to Doctor Whitmore from the shadows.

Valerie couldn't see where it was coming from. She had to wait until she knew where he was so she could try to arrest the killer.

"Logan?" Doctor Whitmore said to the night.

"Yes, Doctor, it's me."

Valerie listened intently, trying to pinpoint where the voice was coming from, but the wind swirled, making it almost impossible.

"Why are you here, Doctor?" the man's voice asked.

Valerie watched as Doctor Whitmore changed his body language. He was clearly trying to move away from anxiety to an open, welcoming stance to set Logan Saldana at ease.

“I’m here to help you, Logan,” the doctor said.

“Help?” Saldana said from the darkness. “I just want to be safe, Doctor.”

“And being here with your grandmother makes you safe?” the Doctor asked.

“Yes ...”

“Why did you attack me at the retreat?”

“You’re one of them,” Saldana said.

“Them?”

“Yes. You’re with the demons who want me dead. Gillian Pugh told me about them. And once she did, I saw them too. The irony is, she had been turned into one of them in the end. The evil that makes a person a demon ... It’s contagious. It grows from one person to the next. And you’re one too. I have to stop it.”

Valerie knew now that Logan Saldana was living in a fractured frame of mind. He was killing patients because he saw the same demonic creatures that Gillian Pugh had. And he believed he had to wipe them out like a contagious disease.

Valerie hypothesized there and then that Agatha, Gillian, and Melanie were all seen by Saldana as carriers of the demonic disease. He was trying to stop it from spreading.

But Valerie couldn't stop him until she knew where he was hiding.

As he spoke with Doctor Whitmore, she decided to move. Crouching down, she moved from behind one headstone to another, and another, and another.

But still the voice sounded like it could have been coming from several places.

"Logan, you can't run forever," Doctor Whitmore said. "Surely, deep down, you know all this talk of demons is the product of your mental illness returning?"

"No!" Logan Saldana's voice echoed through the cemetery with anger.

That shout did something. As if her brain was reinterpreting the sounds, Valerie now sensed that the voice had come from up ahead and to the right.

"Please, Logan, I want to help you."

"I think you came here to die tonight, Doctor," Logan Saldana said. "To join all these people, six feet under."

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“You don’t mean that, Logan,” the doctor continued.

“Don’t I!?” The voice swirled again in the wind.

Valerie felt he was about to break, about to rush out and attack the doctor at any moment. She had to be quick.

She moved forward again to another headstone, and then another, always crouched, always unseen.

“Logan,” the doctor said. “Come out. Talk to me face to face. I can help make you whole again.”

“Oh, I’ll come out,” Logan shouted. “Come over there and put my hands around your scrawny neck!”

Valerie saw, at the last moment, a piece of cloth hanging out from the side of a gravestone in front of her. It was the edge of an arm, and it moved as the person stood up.

The figure rushed toward the doctor, but Valerie had anticipated that. She pulled herself up onto the top edge of a headstone, then jumped to another, and then leaped at the figure.

She didn’t need to pull the trigger of her gun. All she needed was to bring the cold metal down onto Saldana’s head with ferocity and precision.

Doctor Whitmore recoiled back in fright as Saldana crumpled to the ground.

Valerie quickly turned his unconscious body over and cuffed Saldana. She looked up at Doctor Whitmore who gave her a relieved smile.

“Well done, Doctor. Well done,” she said. “Now let’s get the hell out of this cemetery.”

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Valerie said “when” to stop her glass being filled up too much with champagne. When Doctor Whitmore didn’t stop pouring, she laughed and said, “what the hell, why not?”

She stood there in Doctor Whitmore’s study, sipping her glass surrounded by the triumphant faces of Charlie, Will, Doctor Whitmore, and Sam Teller.

“I don’t see the problem,” Charlie said, taking a large gulp of his drink. “We’re not driving back until tomorrow in any case.”

“I’m not sure it’s appropriate, what with Melanie Adler’s funeral tomorrow,” Will said.

“Oh, come on,” Valerie said. “We caught the killer. We can celebrate that, can’t we?”

“I suppose you’re right,” Will said. “I’m just glad we could catch him before the funeral. Charging Saldana gives them some closure at least, though I can’t imagine what the families are going through.”

“Well, I’m glad you could catch him at all,” Doctor Whitmore said. “If it weren’t for you, he might have gotten away with it. I’d have never suspected Logan Saldana.”

“It was nothing, really,” Valerie said, modestly.

“Nonsense,” Doctor Whitmore said. “You were brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.”

“Yes,” Sam Teller said. “You were. And it’s been a real honor to be part of the case, even in a small capacity.”

“Speaking of that,” Charlie said, slapping Sam a little too hard on the shoulder. “We’ve had a little discussion and we’re each going to sign a letter of commendation, should you ever want to join the Bureau.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Sam blushed. “Thanks so much.”

Will looked at Sam and then back at Valerie, Charlie, and Doctor Whitmore. He smiled and raised his glass. “Here’s to catching killers.”

They all clicked their glasses together and took a drink. Doctor Whitmore then quickly filled up their glasses again.

“I do feel for Logan,” Doctor Whitmore said. “He’s a sick man.”

“There’s a good chance he might get to spend the rest of his life in a secure psychiatric ward, rather than a prison,” Valerie said.

“Is that justice?” Charlie asked.

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“I’m not sure,” replied Valerie. “But maybe there are no winners here, and that’s how it should be.”

After a couple more drinks, Doctor Whitmore was saddened to say, “I’m afraid I have some paperwork I need to complete for the Board, my friends. But please, here is another bottle of bubbly if you’d like to continue celebrating in your rooms.”

“Well, I don’t know ...” Will didn’t get to finish his sentence.

“Thanks, Doc,” Charlie said, grabbing the bottle. “Come on, Will, Val, it’s a party at Charlie’s place.”

“Please do drop in before you leave tomorrow,” Doctor Whitmore added.

“We will, thank you,” said Valerie.

Sam said his goodbyes as he had a date lined up that night in Buford Town. Charlie ribbed him slightly about it. But nothing too demoralizing.

*

Meandering through the corridors of the residential building back to their rooms, Will and Charlie seemed elated, but Valerie couldn’t quite celebrate. She had something she needed to do first. Something from her recent past she had to confront.

“You’re celebrating this one more than usual,” Valerie joked as Charlie sipped a glass of fizz in his hand, bottle of champagne under the other.

“I haven’t had a lot to celebrate lately, I think I’m making a point of it, tonight,” Charlie answered.

“Your brother on your mind, Old Chap?” Will asked.

“Yeah...” Charlie said, his tone changing. “I wish I hadn’t thrown him out so quickly after those thugs attacked my house.”

“You were right to be angry,” Will offered.

“But I didn’t even listen to his side of the story,” Charlie mused. “Now I have no idea where he is.”

“We’ll help you find him, Charlie,” Valerie said, softly.

“Thanks, guys. Anyway, look at me putting a dampener on things. We got the Elmwood Killer.”

“Is that what he’ll be called?” Will asked.

“Either you academics or the reporters always get to name them, I’m calling it this time.”

“And what will the press call us?” said Will.

“Tomorrow?” joked Charlie. “Hungover. That’s what they’ll call us.”

As Will, Charlie, and Valerie walked through the empty corridors of the residential building back toward their rooms, Valerie felt a tinge of sadness inside of her.

She thought of Doctor Rebecca Winters sitting in her room alone.

“You boys go and enjoy,” Valerie said. “I’m going to check in on Doctor Winters, if you don’t mind.”

“I hope you’re not feeling the need to go over the case with her brother,” said Will. “That Culver Institute business is in the past.”

“I know,” said Valerie. “But I feel like I should at least say goodbye.”

“Don’t be too long,” Charlie said. “I can’t promise you that there’ll be much of this fine champagne left.”

Valerie laughed and headed off to see Doctor Winters.

The other side of the building was almost silent. No one else was around. But Valerie felt a great sense of relief knowing that she and others were no longer under threat.

Finally reaching the door, Valerie took a deep breath and knocked gently. There was no answer for what seemed like an eternity, but then finally she heard the sound of footsteps approaching from within. There was a click as the lock was undone, but Doctor Winters didn’t open the door.

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Valerie waited, and then decided to do it for her to make sure that she was okay.

Opening the door slowly, Valerie found Doctor Winters sitting alone in her room on her bed. The light was low, casting shadows across her face as she looked up at Valerie in surprise.

“Hello,” said Valerie softly. “I just wanted to stop by and say goodbye before I left.”

Doctor Winters smiled sadly and nodded in understanding. She motioned for Valerie to come inside.

“I appreciate you coming around,” Doctor Winters said, still smelling of stale wine.

“I felt I should,” Valerie said. “It almost feels like ...”

“Fate?” said Doctor Winters. “That my brother was murdered on an unrelated case, and then you find me here, working somewhere where more people have died.”

“Uh, yes. Doesn’t it seem like an odd coincidence?”

“Maybe,” Doctor Winters said. “I’m just grateful that you caught his killer. And Doctor Whitmore says you’ve done it again. It was Logan Saldana?”

“Yes,” Valerie said. “I just wish we’d caught him before Melanie had been murdered.”

“It must be awful always dealing with death and destruction,” Doctor Winters said. “I

couldn't do it. I just want to make people better."

Valerie felt terrible that Doctor Winters had become mired in alcoholism dealing with the brutal murder of her brother a year previous. She always knew that murder caused carnage in people's lives, but the ripples of negativity continued on.

Valerie had guilt in her heart about that. She moved on at the end of each case, but the families could never do that. They would be changed forever.

"Did you start drinking after your brother died?" Valerie asked.

"Yes," said Doctor Winters. "I'd always enjoyed a glass of wine. But when my brother was killed. It became a bottle a night. Then two. It kept going until recently when I was drinking during the day. I can't even stop cold turkey because I'd go into withdrawal."

"I'm glad Doctor Whitmore has arranged for your rehab and is keeping your problems away from the Board here."

"Yes," said Doctor Winters. "He's my sweetheart. My anxiety has been through the roof recently. He even assured me he'd lock D tunnel when I was alone here in the residential building. I was afraid the killer would use it to come and find me."

"D tunnel?" Valerie asked, unsure what she meant.

"Yes, it's a tunnel that connects the residential basement to the basement in the main building with patients," Doctor Winters said.

This surprised Valerie.

"What's it used for?"

“We use it to transport equipment that’s stored here,” Doctor Winters said. “And occasionally when we have a patient who is more violent than usual, we use D tunnel to move them from the main building to the quiet of the residential building for more private treatment.”

“Oh...” Valerie felt something under her skin. It was a disquiet that was growing ever moment.

“Are you okay?” Doctor Winters asked. “You look quite pale?”

“Yes, just tired,” said Valerie. “Where is this D tunnel?”

“It’s just two lefts along the corridor. You can’t miss it,” she said.

“Thank you,” Valerie said. “I just wanted to wish you all the best, Doctor Winters. I really hope you can find some peace and get over any challenges you’re facing.”

“That’s very kind. I hope so too.”

They embraced. But Valerie left the room far more troubled than when she had entered it.

Drifting down the corridor, Valerie couldn’t shake that feeling of unease. As she followed the directions to D tunnel, her heart began to pound in her chest, and she felt a sense of dread clutching at her throat.

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Two lefts down the empty, silent hallway, and there it was: A large metal door with the words “D TUNNEL” emblazoned on it.

Valerie felt the cold of the metal and pushed against it, stepping inside. A large elevator stood before her. She pressed a red button and the elevator ascended from the bowels of the building. She got inside, closed the elevator door, and headed back into the depths.

She didn’t want to, but something was tearing at her nerves. It was doubt.

The elevator stopped with a shudder. Valerie opened the metal doors and found herself staring at a long tunnel with emergency lighting along it, glowing green.

The existence of that tunnel made her uneasy. At first, she thought it was an echo from a previous case, when a killer used tunnels around the city of Boston to claim his victims.

But no, it was more than that. The tunnel concealed something much worse. And Valerie had to find out if her suspicions were true.

Valerie walked slowly, methodically, the alcohol still buzzing around her head. As she reached the other end of the tunnel, she placed her hand on her gun.

Stay focused, she thought. But the champagne had dulled her wits momentarily back at the residential building. She knew she wasn’t currently at her best.

For a moment, she thought about going back and getting help. But she decided that

her suspicions were probably merely a paranoid mind overthinking things. Sometimes at the end of a case, an investigator will latch onto other things to fill the void. Valerie knew this. She had encountered this before in herself.

But why then did this thought not dispel her unease?

She suspected Charlie and Will were worried about her state of mind as it was, the last thing she wanted was to make herself worse by taking them on a wild goose chase.

As Valerie stepped into the basement of the Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat, a cold shiver ran down her spine. She didn't know what she would find, but she knew that something was very wrong here. And there was only one way to find out the truth.

With determination in her heart and fire in her eyes, Valerie pushed forward and began to search the basement for whatever it was that lurked within these halls.

Here again, she thought. Everything brings me back down here to this basement.

Almost in a daze, Valerie knew where her next destination had to be. She had to go upstairs and check the Elmwood records; only then would she know if her fears were true.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Valerie should have felt glad to be back upstairs in the patient building at Elmwood, but she felt no glee, only dread.

She walked through the corridors quickly and with purpose, moving through until she reached a storage room at the back of the building.

Reaching her hand out, she grabbed the cold metal of the door handle and sighed with relief when it turned, and she went inside, only to see the same room filled with files and notes that had been there since she and the others had been searching through Elmwood's records.

"Where is it?" she said out loud to herself.

Moving to the back of the room, she pulled some boxes of patient files out of the way. Then another box filled with nurse personnel files.

But what she was looking for was behind that. It was a green cardboard box with a medical sign on the front. Valerie thought she heard something and turned to look at the door behind her.

She walked over to it, opened the door, and then looked out into the hallway. But the corridor was quiet. Indeed, that section of the building was quiet as it was used for storage and away from the other patient rooms.

With a sigh, Valerie shut the door behind her and went back to her search. Her heart was pounding with anxiety as she pulled out the box from the back of the shelf, sat down at her desk, and opened it up.

Inside were several tightly bound personnel files. She had only given them a cursory glance during their original search. But now, they required more of her attention.

With a trembling hand, she took out the first file and began to read.

As her eyes scanned the contents, a wave of horror washed over her. The file showed that significant portions of the personnel file were covered over with blank ink. Everything of any importance was redacted. A note was attached to the file which read: Contact the Board for further details.

The truth was now filtering through her mind. The implications.

Taking out her phone, Valerie speed dialed Charlie and then put the phone between her neck and shoulder. She gathered up the files she needed, putting them under her arm as the phone rang.

And rang.

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And rang.

Frustrated, she knew Charlie was probably letting his guard down because the case had been concluded. Valerie stood up and left the room, files in hand.

She'd show Will and Charlie what she'd found. Hopefully they wouldn't be too inebriated to take it in.

Valerie closed the storage room door behind her and walked along the corridor. Somewhere nearby, an overhead light buzzed and flickered. She could hear it clicking. As she turned a corner, and then another, she walked straight into a man standing before her.

She jumped with a fright, but soon let out a loud sigh when she saw that it was Doctor Whitmore.

"Sorry, Valerie," he said. "I was just heading back to the file room you set up. I need to look over Saldana's records for the board. I just hope it doesn't cause me too much grief."

He smiled.

Valerie smiled back. "No problem. I was just back there. You should find the file you're looking for on one of our desks. I think Charlie had it. That's the desk in the middle of the room."

The doctor glanced down at the files under her arms. He joked, "I hope you're not

taking any of our files with you.”

“No,” she said. “I just have something I wanted to run past Charlie and Will for our records.”

“Righty ho,” he said. “Well, I won’t get in your way any longer.”

“We’ll drop by in the morning to say goodbye.”

“Please do.” The doctor smiled and disappeared around a corner.

Valerie hurried along the corridor, the files still under her arms. She hoped she didn’t bump into anyone else until she saw Will and Charlie.

Dialing again on her phone, she walked and listened.

It rang.

And rang.

Finally, Charlie picked up. “Sorry Val, I couldn’t hear you over Will boring me.”

“How rude,” Will quipped from somewhere nearby.

“What’s up?” asked Charlie. “The champagne is flowing.”

“Charlie,” she said. “Stop drinking and get over to the main building. Meet me in the dining room.”

“Why, what’s up?”

“It’s not Saldana. It’s ...”

A hypodermic needle was thrust into Valerie’s neck. Something cold coursed through her veins. She stumbled forward and then collapsed on the floor. The last thing she saw before she blacked out was the blank expression of Doctor Whitmore standing over her.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Valerie’s paralyzed body was heavier than Dr. Whitmore had anticipated. As he dragged her body across the carpeted floor, he noticed the cell phone lying next to her. He stopped, picked it up, and then continued dragging the agent’s body.

He cursed himself for having let Valerie make that call. He knew he should have been quicker. His greatest fear was that Charlie and Will would somehow put it together. That they would be after him as the murderer of Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat. Then there would be nothing to do but run.

But Dr. Whitmore had managed to pull the wool over the eyes of the FBI long enough. He wasn’t quite ready to give up just yet. There were many more victims out there for him to get his hands on. If he played this right, Saldana could still go down for the murders, and he would be free to continue his murder spree.

All of that would only be possible if he killed and disposed of Valerie in a clinical, strategic way.

As he dragged her body through the empty corridors of the storage area. The doctor worried that he would encounter another person from the staff looking for supplies or cleaning. He would then be forced to murder them in an unplanned way.

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That went against his strategy for avoiding detection. Planning had been his greatest strength.

He'd planned each murder carefully. He knew where patients would be while at their most vulnerable. He used this information that was given to him as a healthcare provider, and then twisted it against them in brutal fashion.

Valerie Law had thrown a spanner in the works of all that. Her snooping had forced his hand to change his approach. And he had been so close to selling the janitor, Saldana, as the killer.

Swapping out his medication with a placebo and using his therapy sessions to push him into erratic, violent behavior had almost worked.

Saldana really did have violent tendencies and a paper-thin hold on reality, all the doctor had had to do was light the paper and push him toward accepting Gillian Pugh's delusions as his own. He made a great suspect, and his arrest would have bought Whitmore time to kill more people.

One thing the doctor hadn't wanted was to be attacked. But that had led to an improvisation of sorts. Saldana really did attack him. Whitmore had just been able to further use all of that to his advantage.

With the "killer" caught, things would have been much simpler.

But why, Valerie? Why did you have to figure it out?

Doctor Whitmore knew the folder she had with her was his personnel file. It was unmistakable. He also knew that most of the information in the personnel file had been redacted at his own request through the Board.

The doctor hadn't wanted anyone to know that he had a long history of psychiatric issues growing up. That he had been committed to an institute in his teenage years. That he had then, supposedly, experienced a revelation and treatment. And then he dedicated himself to becoming a top psychiatrist himself, all to help others.

But that was all a ruse.

All he ever wanted was to ruin the psychiatric profession. He would make them pay. Make them pay for all the countless hours and days he spent locked away as a child in various psychiatric treatment facilities.

Make them pay for taking him away from his mother. A woman who died before he was finally released back into the community.

The best way to hurt the doctors was to take away their patients. To ruin their profession.

But that long-term plan, one decades in the making, was now under threat. Because of Agent Law. He knew she suspected that he was the killer. He was now forced to dispose of her once and for all.

He still wondered how exactly she had figured it out. But the answer to that would hopefully never come.

The cocktail of medications he had injected into her neck were always on hand. He kept a syringe in his pocket, should he ever have needed to incapacitate someone. Patient or victim.

The doctor pulled Valerie's unconscious body along the floor, dragging her first into a storage closet. But as he looked at her closed eyes on the floor, he knew the closet was no good. He had to store her somewhere no one would look. Least of all Charlie, Will, or any other law enforcement officers who decided to show their face.

But where?

Then he remembered.

He had seen the men who had been installing the new security system near where he was now a few weeks ago, pulling one of the panels off the wall, revealing a large space behind.

The doctor had inquired about that space, and one of the engineers told him it was an old alcove once used for heating pipes that were now redundant and had since been removed.

Perfect, he thought.

Sticking his head out through the doorway of the closet, he listened to make sure he was still alone. He listened carefully, but there was no sound of life, only the almost imperceptible buzz from the lighting above, in the ceiling of the hallway.

But that quiet would not remain for long. He had heard Valerie contacting Charlie by phone. He would come looking for her, like the loyal dog he was.

Doctor Whitmore knew he had to store Valerie somewhere and then think of a more permanent solution.

The doctor pulled at Valerie's arms, dragging her once more into the hallway and around a corner. He thought for a moment that she groaned, but he was sure that the

dose would keep her unconscious for at least a couple more hours.

If he could have, he would have strangled her, but there was no time for that. And if he used his hands, that would be evidence against him.

No, he had to think of a better idea.

Turning around another corner, Dr. Whitmore pulled Valerie along until he reached a section of the wall that looked familiar. He ran his hands over the metal of a large heating vent, and then pulled at it.

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With a loud pop, it opened, and the doctor pulled away the vent face to reveal the empty space the engineers had shown him before.

He smirked to himself. It was practically the perfect size to store a human body. He was sometimes skeptical of fate, but recent events with Saldana taking the heat off of him and now the cavity in the wall seemed highly coincidental. It sure felt like there was some divine intervention going on. If such a thing existed, he reasoned that his murders were well-thought of by the supernatural powers that be.

Shoving Valerie's body into the space, he then pushed the heating vent back into place. It clicked, and the doctor stood up looking at the panel. Anyone looking at it would never have known that behind its slatted face, the vent hid the paralyzed body of a woman soon to die at the hands of one of Elmwood's own doctors.

He walked away, feeling more confident in his purpose and his plan.

He giggled to himself as the thought of flames and heat entered his mind.

"Yes," he said quietly. "The furnace, that would be a good place to rid this world of another burdensome FBI agent."

But that would have to wait for later. He had to rush back to his office and pretend all was well. Then, when the dust settled, put Valerie in the furnace boiler and smell her body turn to ashes.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Charlie was worried. The phone call with Valerie had cut off quickly, and there had been some interference on her last words.

Will sat opposite Charlie, drinking a glass of champagne in Charlie's room. What was supposed to be a celebration of closing the case had now turned into a gathering of uncertainty.

"What's wrong, Charlie? Was that Valerie?" Will asked, putting his glass down on a table.

"Yeah, we got cut off," he explained. "I have a bad feeling about this."

He tried to phone Valerie back.

And again.

And again.

Each time there was no answer, and the call eventually ended with Valerie's voicemail recording.

Will stood up and grabbed his coat that was sitting on the edge of a chair. He put it on and pulled up the collar. "We better go look for her."

Charlie nodded, but he felt sick in his stomach. He had a terrible feeling that something had happened to her. He grabbed his gun, checked that it was loaded, and then holstered it on his chest.

"Let's go find her," he said. And they both left the room.

The residential building was quiet.

“She said that she was going to visit Doctor Winters,” Charlie said.

They walked at a fast pace to the other side of the residential building, coming to Doctor Winters’s room. Knocking on the door, Charlie still felt the same dread.

No one answered.

“Doctor Winters?” Charlie asked.

He could hear something from the other side of the door. A muffled breathing.

“Doctor Winters?” It was Will who asked loudly this time.

Again, there was no answer.

Charlie looked at Will and then took a step back. He was about to lower his shoulder and charge into the door to smash it open when Will stopped him, leaned forward, and opened the door with the handle.

“Not every door is locked, Old Chap,” he said with a wry smile.

They entered the room.

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The first thing that hit Charlie was the smell of alcohol. The second thing was the sight of Doctor Winters passed out on a single bed with two empty bottles of wine next to her.

“Is she okay?” Charlie asked.

Will stepped over and took her pulse. “A little worse for wear, but she’s just sleeping it off. Should we wake her?”

Charlie walked to her side and gave her a gentle touch on the shoulder. “Doctor Winters ... Doctor Winters ...”

She opened her eyes. They were wide with fright as she gasped.

“What ... What are you doing here!?”

“It’s okay,” said Charlie. “I’m with the FBI, remember? We’ve not been able to find Agent Law, and we were wondering if you saw her?”

“Yes,” she said, rubbing her temples in discomfort. “She was here about an hour ago, I think. Then she left.”

“Did she say where she was going?” Will asked.

“No. Oh wait, we talked a little about a tunnel that runs under this building. It connects with the main building. It’s called D Tunnel.”

“And you think she went down there?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t know, but we talked about it.”

“Where is it?” Charlie was growing increasingly worried.

“Two lefts from here, you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” Will said, gently. “You can go back to sleep now, Doctor Winters.”

Charlie had already rushed out of the room. He sensed his partner was in danger. His thoughts went back to how Valerie had saved his family when those thugs came looking for his brother, Marvin.

Valerie was more family to him now than anyone outside of his wife and kids.

Charlie rushed along the hallways, looking for the entrance to the tunnel.

“Wait, Charlie,” Will said. “I’m sure we don’t need to panic.”

Charlie didn’t reply. Instead, as soon as he found the large metal door to the tunnel elevator, he dived inside. He had to find Valerie.

They reached the elevator without saying anything more. They got inside and pressed the button. Descending down to the basement level of the residential building, Will mused, “It’s strange ...”

“What is?” Charlie said in hushed tones as the elevator juddered to a halt.

“This tunnel,” answered Will. “Doctor Whitmore never mentioned its existence.”

“Why would he?” asked Charlie, pulling the elevator doors open. The tunnel was before them. They didn’t wait to enter it.

As Will tried to keep up with Charlie, he said, “The night we were in the residential building, before we took turns keeping watch ...”

“What about—” But Charlie didn’t finish that sentence. A memory stirred in his mind. “We had to walk from the residential building to the main one in the pouring rain and wind.”

“Doctor Whitmore even complained about the fact that we’d all get soaked,” Will added.

As they reached the end of the tunnel and entered the basement beneath the main patient building, Charlie articulated the problem, “Why wouldn’t he tell us about this tunnel?”

Will didn’t answer, but the implication was one that bred distrust with Doctor Whitmore, a man who had been a pivotal part of their team since they first came to Elmwood.

They would have to pay him a visit and find out.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Charlie didn't knock, he just twisted the handle on the door and walked straight into Doctor Whitmore's office. Will rushed in behind him.

The doctor seemed startled from behind his desk. "Can I help you, Charlie? Will?"

"Valerie is missing," Charlie said in a somber voice. "And we can't get ahold of her."

"Oh, Dear. That is a worry. Perhaps she went for a walk and turned her phone off?"

"Her phone isn't off," Charlie said, taking out his phone and dialing the number.

Will stood, watchful and considering.

But Valerie's phone didn't even ring out anymore.

"It went straight to voicemail," shared Charlie, looking at Will with a worried expression.

"I wouldn't worry, gentlemen," the doctor said jovially. "Valerie has probably had a couple of drinks to celebrate, fallen asleep somewhere and her phone battery has run out. I'm sure she'll awake tomorrow with a terrible hangover."

The doctor laughed.

But Will and Charlie were not laughing.

“Valerie always keeps her phone well charged,” Will said.

“If it’s off,” mused Charlie. “It’s either broken or someone turned it off deliberately.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” the doctor said standing up. “But if it would help, I’d be happy to look for her with you?”

Charlie looked at Will. The two of them had no idea what to make of this situation, but they knew that something was very wrong with Valerie’s disappearance.

They agreed and followed Doctor Whitmore as he left the office and headed into the hallway outside.

“Should we split up?” the doctor asked. “I can cover the storage area at the back of the building, and perhaps Will could check the communal areas, and you the patient rooms, Charlie?”

“Why didn’t you tell us about D Tunnel?” Charlie asked, not responding to the doctor’s suggestion.

“What tunnel?” The doctor looked surprised and then a little flustered.

“The one that leads from the basement of this building to the residential area,” Charlie replied. “You know, the one we could have walked through instead of being caught in the pouring rain the other night.”

“That old thing? I didn’t think it was important. You know, half the time it’s cluttered with equipment, so I didn’t think it would be viable for us to use.” The doctor brushed it off like it was nothing.

“The tunnel is empty,” Will said.

“It must have just slipped my mind,” Doctor Whitmore said. “Does it matter?”

“A tunnel that runs from the two buildings? A tunnel the killer could have used if he wanted to reach the patient building without being detected?” Charlie said, his tone as grim and serious as his expression. “Yeah, I’d say that was important.”

“I’m very sorry,” the doctor said. “It’s all been a bit of a shock these last few days. I think I need a vacation.” He let out a laugh.

Charlie felt unease at that laugh, and for the first time, he noticed a slight mischievous look in the doctor’s eyes. More than that, a buried frustration.

But Charlie was too busy to think of that for now. He had to find Valerie and make sure that she was okay.

“Okay, let’s split up,” Charlie said. “Meet back in the lobby in 15 minutes. If we haven’t found Valerie, we’ll have to call in for some outside help.”

The three men went their separate ways, but in Charlie’s gut, he knew they wouldn’t find Valerie.

*

Charlie saw Will and Doctor Whitmore enter the lobby of the building, seeing only disappointment on their faces.

“No luck,” Doctor Whitmore said. “The storage areas are empty.”

“I couldn’t find any trace of her in the communal rooms and the dining hall,” Will said, his voice increasingly sounding more concerned. “What about you, Charlie?”

Charlie just shook his head, slowly.

“Have you called the Buford police?” Doctor Whitmore asked.

“Yes,” said Charlie. “Sam is coming up in a car right now. But they don’t exactly have a large pool of manpower.”

“Could we get some of the orderlies to help?” Will asked.

“We might struggle,” Doctor Whitmore said. “We’ve had a few call ins from staff tonight, we’re undermanned. In any case, where would we look?”

Charlie turned to the doors leading outside into the darkness. “Maybe it’s like you said, Doc. She went for a walk, but something happened. I’m not waiting any longer.”

Charlie felt a wave of desperation wash over him. He rushed toward the doors and

headed out into the cold night.

The weather was damp and cold, and the grounds of Elmwood smelled of rotten leaves.

“Wait, Charlie,” Will said, running up behind him. “I don’t want you getting hurt, either.”

“What if there was more than one killer, Will?” Charlie said, his voice breaking slightly with the frustration.

“Another killer?” Doctor Whitmore scuffed. “But Logan Saldana is our man.”

“Maybe,” Charlie thought out loud. “But what if we got it wrong and Valerie’s run afoul of the killer?”

“That doesn’t bear thinking,” Will said. “Let’s start searching, but together, not separated in the dark.”

Charlie agreed, reluctantly.

They searched the woods and the forests surrounding Elmwood, calling out Valerie’s name as they went, but there was no reply.

As Charlie plunged through the trees, he desperately hoped that their search would be in vain. That he would find his friend safe and sound again soon, just like always. But deep down inside him, Charlie knew it wouldn’t happen this time. Something terrible had happened to Valerie at Elmwood.

“This is hopeless,” Doctor Whitmore said. “I can hardly see a thing out here.”

Charlie stood for a moment. “I might be able to call the Bureau.”

“And ask for what?” Will inquired.

“I might be able to get a ping on Valerie’s phone from a nearby phone mast,” he said.

“But didn’t you say that it was off?” Doctor Whitmore asked, sounding a little breathless.

“Yes,” Charlie said. “But even when a phone is off, sometimes the tech guys can get a location, if we’re lucky.”

Charlie took out his phone.

“Wait!” Will said. “What’s that on the ground?”

Will moved to a patch of leaves nearby. He leaned down and retrieved something familiar.

“It’s Valerie’s phone,” he explained. “How did it get here? We just passed this spot a second ago.”

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“It’s hard to see in this light,” Doctor Whitmore said. “But it does seem that something bad has happened to Valerie. Are we safe out here?”

Charlie considered the doctor for a moment. It seemed awfully coincidental that he should have found Valerie’s phone just as he was about to apply for a trace on it.

Almost as if someone threw it away...

Something snapped nearby. A branch breaking in two under foot.

“A deer?” Doctor Whitmore asked.

“I hope so,” Charlie answered. He drew his gun and peered into the darkness of the woods.

“I don’t think it’s safe out here,” the doctor said. “Maybe we should head back inside and wait for the police to come.”

“We have to keep looking,” Charlie said, desperately. “She could be out here somewhere, hurt.”

“I just remembered,” he said. “I have to oversee an important medication prescription for one of my patients.”

“And you need to do that, now?” Charlie said, angrily.

“The patient is suicidal,” said Doctor Whitmore. “It will only take a few minutes to

sign off on it, and then I'll come straight back and help, okay?"

"No, it's not okay!" Charlie fumed. "Valerie could be out here bleeding to death for all we know ..."

"Charlie," Will interjected in a soft voice. "If the patient is in a moment of crisis, then the doctor is correct. He'll have to sign off on the medication so that the nurses can administer them. We'll see you shortly, Doctor Whitmore."

The doctor nodded and then rushed off back toward the main building.

"I can't believe you sided with him!" Charlie said.

Will stepped closer. "I didn't. Even in this dim light, I saw his reaction to your suggestion about the phone. He let out two large sighs. A classic anxiety defense when under pressure. And he then crossed his arms as if hugging himself. He feels under threat, as if we're close to finding out something. I'm not saying he knows what happened to Valerie, but he's definitely under strain."

Charlie looked back at Elmwood, now caught in a quandary. Should he follow Doctor Whitmore to see what he was hiding, or keep searching in the dark near where Valerie's phone had been found?

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Valerie felt the darkness of her conscious mind struggling through a fog. A tiny part of her will was pushing, telling her from the pitch-black to get up, to wake up. If she didn't, she would die a horrible death.

Slowly, her eyes opened. The world was dim. She started to remember.

Doctor Whitmore was the killer. She'd first suspected that he wasn't what he seemed when he blatantly withheld the information about D tunnel.

I bet he used that to move into the patient building without being seen, she thought.

But it wasn't just that. The file she had found in storage showed that his entire history had been redacted.

That meant his past was being hidden. Valerie had then thought back to Doctor Whitmore's conversation with Saldana at the cemetery. He had worded his questions so very carefully, almost with the precision of an FBI profiler.

Saldana was ill, but he was innocent. Whitmore was just using him as a smokescreen to get away with the murders.

I ... I can't feel anything, she thought as she stared at the darkness. Where am I?

But her head was at a slight angle, and when she trained her eyes to the side, she saw several thin slits that let in a paltry amount of light. To her horror, she could see that she was inside a wall in one of the corridors of the main building at Elmwood.

She heard something. Footsteps.

Two figures appeared and stopped in the hallway. She recognized them immediately. It was her two friends, her partners, Will and Charlie.

"Where did he go?" Will asked.

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“I don’t know,” said Charlie. “He wasn’t in his office, but he must be around here somewhere. We’ll find him.”

“I have a very bad feeling about Doctor Whitmore,” Will said. “The more I think about it, the more I’m convinced that he knows something about Valerie’s disappearance.”

“Come on, there’s no time to talk.” Charlie said, rushing away.

Will looked around as if he sensed something.

Valerie tried to open her mouth to scream, yell, cry out their names, anything, but the paralyzing medications were still in full flow. She watched with abject dread as Will ran after Charlie, their footsteps disappearing far away.

Valerie tried to move, again and again. But the only evidence that she had any control over her body was that she now had a slight tingling feeling in her right foot.

Suddenly, the wall came away, and the bright light stung Valerie’s eyes.

For a moment, all she could see was the light from the hallway, but then as her eyes adjusted, she made out the serious, evil expression of Doctor Whitmore. He was looking at her intently. All evidence of the man she had gotten to know the last few days had burned away. All that was left was an evil, twisted human being who was so good at deception that he’d managed to pull the wool over the eyes of the FBI’s best profilers.

All she could do was watch in horror as he sneered at her, before calmly reaching out and grabbing at her. He pulled her out onto the carpeted floor. But Valerie couldn't feel it. All she could feel were the pins and needles in her foot.

Doctor Whitmore's grip tightened. Valerie tried to wriggle free, but she couldn't move. She felt a dull sensation as her body was being dragged along the carpeted floor, like some kind of animal in a butcher's ready to be gutted and strung up.

Horried and terrified, she watched as Doctor Whitmore dragged her from one corridor to another. He didn't say a word; his eyes were cold and dead as he moved through the labyrinthine building with frightening efficiency that spoke of years spent at Elmwood Psychiatric Retreat.

"We're going back into the basement, Valerie," he whispered. "Just like the night you chased me down there. A fitting place to end your investigation, don't you think?"

Valerie tried to scream, but still, nothing came out.

The basement doors soon came into view, and after they were opened, Valerie was dragged down the stairs, thudding against each step until they reached the floor below in the dark.

"It's a good thing you thought poor Saldana was the killer," Doctor Whitmore said, now in a louder voice. "He would have been the only down here at this time of night. It's ironic that you've taken away the only person who might have saved you, if they'd stumbled across my little scheme."

Valerie felt something, a loosening in her throat. She was now able to let out a garbled noise, but still unable to scream.

The doctor looked surprised. "Well, you're stronger than I thought. You're really

fighting against that dose I gave you.”

He tugged at her feet, pulling her along the basement floor and then over to the boiler room.

“You know,” he said. “Elmwood isn’t that old, but it’s old enough to still have a working furnace. I think we’ll fire it up tonight, hmmm?”

Dropping Valerie’s legs, Doctor Whitmore turned to a large metal furnace in the corner of the room. Steam was already emanating from it. Valerie could see the doctor busying himself with it.

A fear Valerie had never known came to her.

He’s going to burn me alive, she thought.

With a surge of adrenaline, her heart raced. And in that moment of fear, a voice came from the darkness. It was her mother’s voice. Laughing. Cackling.

Valerie tried to push the hallucination away as she had done before, but being paralyzed, she had nowhere to look but to the shadowy corner of the room.

The voice was coming from there, and in the flickering orange glow that came from the now open mouth of the boiler, Valerie saw the pale face of her mother emerge from the darkness.

She was crawling on all fours, her clothes in tatters. She scuttled up to Valerie, just an inch from her face.

“You want to know about Daddy?” she barked, licking her scratched lips. “No time. No time.”

She looked up at Doctor Whitmore, who was oblivious to Valerie's internal hallucinations. Her mother laughed in his direction.

"You're going to cook real good. I might have a taste." She laughed and then moved backwards as if in reverse, until she was no longer there, melting into the shadows.

Valerie's mind almost shattered at the sight. The terror was overwhelming. But she held onto the thought, the hope, that the hallucination could do no more than scare her. She had more pressing matters to attend to: Her life.

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The doctor now turned around and grabbed Valerie by her feet again. He lifted her up.

As he did so, Valerie felt the feeling returning to her left leg. The tingle had become a complete sensation, but she could still barely move it.

The doctor pulled her close to the mouth of the furnace, and the heat made her sweat. She was terrified.

As he readied to throw her body into the flames, Valerie tried with all her might to regain control. Her hands moved and her fingers flailed, but she was too incapacitated.

This was the end for her.

The doctor pulled her up, and then threw her headfirst toward the open furnace and flames.

As she felt the heat about to consume her, she suddenly felt another sensation. The sensation of someone wrapping their arms around her waist and yanking her backwards away from the killer.

Doctor Whitmore's face was pallid in the flickering light. He looked like he saw his life draining away before him. His face then curled up into a horrid grimace, and in the flame-light Valerie thought for a moment that he looked like one of Gillian Pugh's demons.

“Valerie!” Charlie shouted pulling her back.

But Doctor Whitmore turned, grabbed a crowbar from the wall, and struck it toward Charlie’s head. In that moment, Valerie lashed out with the only part of her body she now had complete control of.

She kicked up as far as she could, and the impact thrust the doctor backwards against the boiling hot furnace. He screamed loudly from the pain and tumbled to the side, whimpering in the corner.

Will then appeared from the stairs, having clearly struggled to keep up with Charlie, and he leaped on top of Doctor Whitmore, pinning him to the ground.

When the doctor realized there was no escape, he let out a pitiful cry of anguish and sobbed like a young child.

EPILOGUE

Valerie stepped out of the car outside of her apartment in Quantico and marveled at the outside of the building.

She was home. And she couldn’t wait to go upstairs and see Tom.

Charlie and Will got out of Will’s car.

“Are you going to be okay?” Will asked.

“I’ll be fine,” she answered. “I just need to take a couple of weeks off to recuperate.”

“Might as well,” said Charlie. “What with Jackson under review and all. I think it might be a few weeks before we know if our department is going to continue or not.”

“Do you really think they’ll can the Criminal Psychopathy Unit?” Will asked, his expression pained. It clearly meant a lot to him.

“I don’t know,” Charlie said with a shrug. “Heinlein is a powerful man, and he’s got it in for Jackson. If he has his way, the whole department will be shut down.”

“All the good we’ve been doing ... just cast aside?” Will said, sounding downhearted.

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Valerie said. “Let’s try and stay positive for now. Hey, if we all get canned, maybe we should start up a private detective agency?” She joked.

“I’m not the gumshoe type,” Will said.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Valerie. “You’re just more of a Baker Street detective than a hard-boiled PI.”

Will hugged her. “If you need me, call.”

“I will,” she said.

Will nodded and then got back in the car.

Charlie remained on the sidewalk, the autumn breeze moving around them, and turned to Valerie. “You sure you’re going to be all right?”

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“I’m sure,” she answered with a smile. But that wasn’t true. The case had been mired by several hallucinations, and Valerie knew that it was only a matter of time before the FBI figures out that she isn’t fit for duty.

But she was strong. She’d fight the illness that had eroded her mother and sister’s sanity.

And maybe she’d win.

“Say hi to Angela and the kids for me,” she said to Charlie. “And let’s hope I don’t have to come over there and save you from the bad guys again.”

“I think we’re even on that score,” Charlie joked.

He got in the car and drove off into the distance. Valerie turned to her apartment building, but as she opened the front door, Tom was standing there.

“Hey,” he said, giving her a hug. But she felt as though it was only half meant.

He handed her an envelope. “I was checking your mail, this arrived from the Mesmer building. I figured it might be your dad’s DNA results.”

“Couldn’t it wait until we got inside?” Valerie asked.

“I ... I’m not going up with you, Val.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“You’ve been shutting me out,” he said, sighing. “And it feels like you don’t even want to go through with the engagement sometimes.”

“I do...”

“Look me in the eyes and say that, Val.” He stood there, waiting.

Valerie looked at him. She wanted to tell him about the hallucinations. She wanted to tell him about how she felt her mind was slowly crumbling piece by piece. But she couldn’t. That would have laid bare her doubts about their life together if she was destined for a psychiatric ward.

She couldn’t even tell him about how close she had come to death, and what she’d seen down in that boiler room.

“Your silence says everything,” Tom said. “I think you need to figure out what you want from me, Val. Do you even want to marry me? I’ll be waiting for an answer.”

“Tom...”

But she didn’t say any more than that, she just watched Tom walk away to his car and drive off. She felt numb inside.

As she walked up the stairs to her apartment, the exhaustion took over. The envelope felt heavy in her hand, but as she entered the apartment, she still opened it, not sure if she was ready for what it would say.

Valerie felt faint at the lab results. She staggered through to her couch and sat down, still reading it.

Not only was her dad not her biological father, but the boys in the lab at Quantico had made another startling finding. They had a DNA sample on record with a 96 percent

probability of being her paternal parent. His name was Jake Wilson, and he was dead. Killed in an as of yet unsolved homicide.

Valerie felt a storm of emotions in her mind. She couldn't process all of it emotionally, not yet. The only thing that was holding her together was her training. Training that taught her how to navigate true peril. In this case, it felt like Valerie's entire identity was the thing at stake.

She remembered her visit to see her mother. During one of her visits, she had, in a psychotic rage, almost mocked Valerie about her father. At the time, Valerie hadn't known what she meant.

But now she began to understand.

A cold sweat washed over her, and she knew in the pit of her stomach what her next move was. She would investigate the murder of her real father and try to figure out if her mother had been involved in his death.