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SILENT
WITNESS

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THE
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WITNESS

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organizations, places and events other than those clearly in the
public domain, are either the product of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or
dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

To Max and Sophie

CHAPTER ONE

Someone was in the house.

Angela's eyes sprung open, and she looked around the dark room. Her heart was hammering, but the bedroom door was still closed, and all she could make out were the familiar shapes and shadows of the furniture.

Then another small thump.

The thunderstorm might still be raging outside and playing tricks on her mind. She strained to listen but didn't hear the storm. The noise had to be her imagination.

She looked over at her daughter, who was wedged between her and her husband, Brett. Zoe's fear of thunder always sent her running into their room, and even though she was six, they didn't have the willpower to turn her away. Zoe was in a deep sleep, her favorite stuffed doll, Lucky, hugged to her chest. Her breathing was heavy, and her eyelashes were fluttering against her cheeks. Nothing like a child's carefree slumber.

Angela glanced at the clock on the nightstand beside her. *4:03 AM.*

She should be asleep herself, floating in a fictional world where there was no stress or worries, no doubts or concerns about the future. Even Brett was lightly snoring, off in some dreamland, escaping reality. This was ridiculous. She had to get some rest because she had to be at work in less than four and a half hours.

She closed her eyes.

The door banged against the jamb.

She bolted upright. The bedroom door only vibrated like that when an exterior door was opened and the air pressure changed. That wasn't in her head. Someone *was* in the house.

She strained to hear anything else but was met with the haunting assault of silence.

Still, she had this horrible feeling something wasn't right.

"*Psst*, Brett." She reached out, over Zoe, and poked his shoulder.

He mumbled something incoherent. Zoe squirmed, tugged from her dreams but not fully waking up.

"Brett," she repeated more urgently.

"Yeah... Huh... What?" Groggy, he flipped onto his side to face her.

"I think that someone is—" Fear froze her vocal cords, her words lodging in her throat.

Someone was on the staircase. The unmistakable groan of the third step from the bottom hit her ears.

Brett jumped from bed—he must have heard it too—and proceeded to nudge Zoe awake. "Come on, honey, time to wake up."

Zoe moaned. "What?"

Angela could feel her husband's gaze drilling through her in the dark, urging her to act.

"Zoe, let's play hide-and-seek," she said.

"Yes, Mommy's right. Let's..." Brett was now talking at a whisper, as was she. "Come on, it's important," he added.

"Right now?"

"Yes, and you can bring Lucky with you," Angela told her daughter.

Another groan on the staircase, this one about halfway up. They had to move.

"Hide," Brett pushed out urgently.

Angela grabbed her cell phone from the nightstand and pulled Zoe from bed. She looked around the room, thinking about places where Zoe could be protected. Even if whoever it was got to her and Brett, Zoe needed to be safe. They only had a matter of seconds. Her gaze landed on the perfect spot, and she got her daughter secured just as the landing creaked. Whoever was in the house was just on the other side of the bedroom door.

Her breath remained trapped in her lungs.

“Go!” Brett hissed and shoved her into action.

She ran past him to the walk-in closet and ducked into the corner behind a rack of clothing. She was having a hard time getting her fingers to work. It was just three digits that could save them, but her hands were shaking so badly.

9... 1... 1...

She held her phone to an ear. No ringtone. *What the hell?*

She tried again as the bedroom door was opened. She heard Brett and the intruder talking, but her heartbeat was pounding so loudly in her ears she couldn't make out what they were saying.

There was a bang, followed by Brett screaming. Two more cracks, and a thump on the floor.

Her brain was slow to process what had happened, but layer by layer the stark reality sank in. Brett had been shot! Probably killed!

Oh my God!

She gasped and slapped a hand over her mouth, shoving herself as far back into the closet as she could. She tried to hold her breath, but her body wasn't listening, and she was heaving in air.

Why is this happening?

Footsteps approached the closet door, and as she heard the handle turn, she knew she was next. The clothes were swept back, and she came face to face with her killer. Tears streaked down her face, but she no longer feared her fate. She closed her eyes and heard the click of the gun—three taps in quick succession. Time

slowed right down. At first it was like nothing had happened. Then, for the briefest of moments, a searing pain overwhelmed her entire system. Following this was a warmth accompanied by an incoming darkness. But just before she left this world, she sent up a silent prayer.

God, please, please let my little girl live. Please.

CHAPTER TWO

Triangle, Virginia
Tuesday, September 7, 4:05 PM

Solving murder was nothing like riding a bike. Every case was different and came with unique challenges. This one was a double homicide involving a missing girl. But Detective Amanda Steele appreciated her job more than ever after recently having been suspended, and she was especially invested when the victims were children. She'd been pulled from her mother's court trial for this one and hadn't been able to arrive on scene fast enough.

The girl was Zoe Parker, only six years old. The same age Amanda's Lindsey had been when she'd died. That thought made her nauseous, but she wanted to think positively about the girl's fate. In the photo, Zoe was smiling and waving at the camera. Her blond, curly tendrils reached a couple of inches past her shoulders, and her skin was milky white with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. She had the bright, blue eyes of a spitfire, with a zest for life. She looked fearless and ready to take on the world.

Amanda pulled back and straightened up. She'd been looking at the photo on Becky Tulson's phone. Becky was her lifelong friend and a police officer with the Dumfries Police Department. She had been a first responder to the Parkers' home in Triangle, a small town in Prince William County. Amanda and her partner, Trent Stenson, were homicide detectives with the PWCPD. Dumfries

PD called their unit when a death was suspicious. “You said the woman who found the Parkers provided you with this picture?”

Becky nodded. “Yeah, Libby Dewinter is her name. Says she’s a close family friend and Zoe’s godmother. Apparently, Mrs. Parker texted the photo to her last week before the Parkers left for vacation.”

It was the Tuesday after Labor Day weekend, and it wasn’t uncommon for people to get in a vacation just before the start of school.

“What was she doing here today?” Trent asked.

“She normally watches Zoe on Tuesdays and Thursdays from the close of school until Angela Parker gets home from work at six. Dewinter’s out back when you’re ready to talk to her.”

“Thanks,” Amanda said. “We’ll be there shortly. First we need to...” She pointed up the staircase to the second story. There was a slew of officers already searching for Zoe, and Amanda and Trent’s main responsibility was piecing together what had happened in the house, starting with the two murder victims.

“It’s not pretty,” Becky said. “I’ll give you that warning.”

“Murder never is.” With that, Amanda led the way upstairs to the primary bedroom, Trent following her. Becky headed in the opposite direction, toward the front door.

The home was certainly spacious, with three levels of living, or so she’d heard. She and Trent hadn’t yet taken the tour, but officers were searching every nook and cranny for little Zoe Parker. Amanda was holding out for a happy ending but had learned a long time ago not to get attached to the idea. Life had a way of blowing up in your face when you least expected it. Possibly cynical but born from having the ground fall out from beneath her feet.

She entered the bedroom and looked at the body of Brett Parker, age forty-five. Already silver-haired with a closely groomed mustache and beard, he had kept himself trim and fit. He’d been a handsome man in life, but death had a way of painting even the

most attractive with a macabre brush of horror. She'd witnessed many expressions on the dead during her years as a homicide detective. Everything from frowns to smiles to grimaces, but Mr. Parker's face relayed shock. His brown eyes were open wide, like the bullets had come as a surprise, but it would seem he might have been aware of the intruder and may have even confronted him or her.

He was on an area rug at the end of the king poster bed and was supine, as if the bullets that struck him had knocked him straight backward. To mock the tragedy of what had transpired, luxury was all around. A crystal chandelier was overhead, and flames in a gas fireplace to the right of the body flickered like sparkling diamonds in the large puddle of congealed blood. Amanda wasn't a medical examiner, but her experience with the dead told her Brett had been deceased for several hours, and the attack probably happened sometime in the night. That was also supported by the clothing he'd conceivably worn to bed—a pair of blue-plaid shorts and a white T-shirt.

"A double tap to the chest, one to the head," she said. "Looks small. Maybe a twenty-two caliber. This looks a lot like an execution."

"The work of a professional?" Trent pointed to the floor with the tip of his pen. "I'm not seeing any bullet casings."

She agreed. "Definitely looks like the shooter policed their brass. May also mean they have a record and don't want to leave anything behind that could lead us to him or her."

"A professional then." He smirked at her.

She shook her head but smiled. "Fine. Let's say a 'professional' for now. But we'll see just how professional if we get bullets from the bodies—and a lead as a result." She knew it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that a killer would remove bullets from their victims and/or use rounds that became forensically useless.

She took in the entire bedroom. It was more like a suite than just a place to sleep. There was the enormous bed, a bench at the

footboard, and nightstands on each side. A sitting area was off to the left with a full-size couch and more tables. A large flatscreen television was mounted above the fireplace and would have been viewable from anywhere within the room. There was an attached bathroom with a walk-in shower and a soaking tub—enough marble for a mausoleum—and another crystal chandelier. *For a bathroom?* Amanda might be the only woman who didn't get the fascination.

There was a walk-in closet where Mrs. Parker's body was, according to the recap from Becky when they'd first arrived. They'd get to her, but Amanda couldn't kick thoughts of the missing girl and the discrepancies. Parts of the house had been tossed. Even the nightstands had been ransacked, their drawers hanging out and bric-a-brac strewn on the floor in front of them. "What are we really looking at here?"

"I'd say burglary..." There was a question to Trent's voice, like he wasn't completely sold on the idea.

"But?" she prompted.

"It wouldn't explain the missing girl."

"What I'm thinking too. But if we're looking at a kidnapping gone wrong, why would someone want to take Zoe? Presumably the people that could have paid a ransom—if this was what it's about—are both dead." For now the question was rhetorical, but it was hard to get her mind off the girl. Libby Dewinter, the family friend, might be able to shed some light, but Amanda also thought it important to look at the crime scene in case it provided some insights. That was the only reason she and Trent were here and not talking to Libby right now or joining in the search for Zoe.

She started toward the walk-in closet, careful to not disturb the scene around Brett Parker. It was a long and rather narrow space with track lighting. The wife's clothing was on the left, the husband's on the right. Beyond that was an in-wall safe, its door swung open. But Amanda was more interested in the second body.

She stopped in front of Angela Parker. Just forty-one years old, the woman had long, blond hair the same shade as Zoe's that fanned down around her face. She and her husband had been an attractive couple. Angela was in the corner slumped slightly to her left side. Her head hung forward, her chin resting just above two bullet entry points that had scorched the fabric of her pajama top. It was part of a matching set she wore—pink cotton with white ribbons and daisies imprinted on the fabric.

Amanda crouched down and saw there was a hole in Angela's forehead to match her husband's. Clutched in one of her hands was a cell phone. She'd probably tried to call for help.

"She didn't stand a chance..." Amanda got back up and took a few breaths. She could only imagine how terrified the woman had been. A home invasion, her husband shot, then herself... but where had her daughter been, and where was she now? If someone had broken into her home, Amanda wouldn't have left her girl's side—that is unless she felt the child was safer elsewhere or had no say in the matter.

Amanda walked to the open safe and looked inside. Empty. "Completely cleared out," she informed Trent.

"None of this is looking good to me, Amanda," Trent said. "What I mean is, you have a professional shooter, a scene that looks like a robbery, but also a missing girl. The Parkers, it would seem, were targeted. But by whom—and why? What could they have done?"

"Everyone has enemies." A sad, but sober truth. She hated to think that even a young, innocent girl could have enemies, but Amanda's experience told her it was entirely possible.

CHAPTER THREE

Amanda was leaving the walk-in closet when Sergeant Malone called her name. She emerged to see him near the bedroom doorway.

“How’s it looking?” he said.

For a moment, she wasn’t sure what he was really asking. Scott Malone was her and Trent’s boss, but also a friend of her family. He was best buddies with her father, Nathan Steele, former police chief for the PWCPD. Malone had known that he’d pulled her from the opening day in her mother’s trial. What he didn’t know was that just before he’d called, her mother’s defense attorney, Hannah Byrd, was requesting the removal of a prosecution’s professional witness: crime scene investigator Emma Blair. Something that Amanda tried to put out of mind—easy to do with an ugly case like this one. But upon seeing Malone, it was all back. Not that she was a true fan of Blair’s, as the woman always treated her with disdain for no reason that Amanda could think of. But Blair was good at her job and had the evidence in order, so Hannah’s request really made no sense, and Amanda had to leave before getting the answer.

“Seems like it was a professional hit,” Trent answered Malone.

“Any sign of the girl yet?” The question hurt Amanda to raise, but she needed to know, even if the answer was a horrible one.

Malone shook his head. “So professional... Burglary gone wrong, a kidnapping, something else?”

Everyone wanted answers, but there weren't enough to go around. "Too soon to say," she told him. "We're just going to talk to Libby Dewinter, who found them. See if she knows of anyone who might have reason to kidnap the girl."

"Hopefully, she can help."

"Yeah." She gave Malone a pressed-lip smile as she walked around him and into the hall. He caught her in the crook of the elbow.

"You all right?"

Trent glanced at her on his way past and headed down the stairs.

"I'm good," she told Malone.

"If you need anything, Ida and I are here for you—for all your family. You know that?"

Ida was Malone's wife and a sweet woman. "I know. We all do."

He patted her shoulder, and she carried on down to the main level. Her thoughts wandered to her mother's trial. Her mother, Julie "Jules" Steele, had killed a man—cold and premeditated. Amanda had heard the confession, though it had never gone on the record. Everything was left in the prosecution's hands to prove beyond a doubt that Jules had committed the murder. Given the victim, Amanda carried some associated guilt herself. If she'd been there for her mother and the rest of the family and shared her grief with them about Lindsey—and Kevin, Amanda's husband, who had also died in the accident with their daughter—maybe things would look a lot different right now. Instead, she would have that regret with her for the rest of her life.

"Ms. Dewinter's on the back patio with Officer Tucker," Trent told her as she reached the first floor, interrupting her thoughts.

Three crime scene investigators entered the house, but they were probably only the beginning for a house of this size. One was a new face to Amanda. The other two she knew, including Emma Blair. They exchanged brief greetings, except for Blair, who just grunted in Amanda's direction. The CSI obviously held something

against Amanda, and all she'd been able to figure out was it was personal rather than professional. What that was specifically, Amanda had no idea. But today she seemed more miserable than usual. It was probably because her testimony had been dismissed, and she, sent packing.

Amanda and Trent walked to the back of the house, and she glanced through every doorway they passed. Some rooms were tossed while others appeared untouched. The dining room seemed unaffected, and she found that kind of strange. In a home like this there would likely be expensive silverware and china. Then again, if this had been a burglary, the thieves were probably looking for what would convert quickly to cash, such as electronics and jewelry. And it could be surmised given the size of the house and neighborhood that the Parkers would have had their fair share of such items.

Trent got the rear door for Amanda, and they stepped out onto a spacious deck with an iron-slatted railing that went the width of the house. It was south facing, and back here, the September evening sun still packed a lot of heat. She pushed up the sleeves of her shirt.

There were a couple of outdoor furniture sets and a built-in grilling station in the corner, but there was no sign of the woman or the officer. She heard voices, though, and followed them down a set of stairs to the yard. She found herself on a flagstone patio on the edge of a beautifully landscaped yard with more stone, a fire pit, a shed, and fencing that lined the entire perimeter. There was also one section devoted to Zoe with a large playground area that had swings and a slide.

There was another outdoor seating space nestled under the upper deck, and that was where she found the two people she and Trent were looking for. Like above, there were two groupings of furniture. One required cushions and remained bare, while

Officer Tucker and, presumably, Libby Dewinter sat in two of four cast-iron chairs that were positioned around a matching table.

The woman's head was bowed, and she held a pair of black-framed glasses in her left hand. She had been pinching the bridge of her nose when Amanda and Trent walked up, but now she let her hand slowly fall and looked up at them. Her eyes were blood-shot, and her cheeks blotchy. Tears had caused tracks through her makeup, and fat drops clung to her eyelashes and threatened to fall.

Officer Tucker rushed to his feet and, in the process, caused the legs of his chair to scrape across the stone. "Libby Dewinter"—he gestured with an open palm to each of them in turn—"this is Detective Steele and Detective Stenson."

"Please, call us Amanda and Trent," Amanda amended, wanting to offer up their first names to put the woman at ease. But Amanda wasn't about to let her guard down. It was possible that Libby was involved in all that had happened somehow and her "discovery" of the Parkers nothing more than a strategy to make her appear innocent.

Libby put on her glasses and sat just a bit straighter, but the display of strength quickly diminished. Her chin trembled, and she pulled a tissue from her jacket and dabbed her cheeks, pressing it carefully under the lenses of her glasses. Amanda would guess Libby was in her early forties, and she suited her pageboy cut and long bangs. "Did you find Zoe?"

Amanda shook her head. "Not yet. Do you know of anyone who might have wanted to take her?"

"I don't understand why any of this is happening... happened."

"What about any family members or estranged family that might have been around and wanted Zoe for themselves?" As sad as it sounded, it was far more common than one might think, and hiring a professional to take care of things was easier than anyone wanted to acknowledge.

“No.” A huge snuffle. “They had no one. Angela’s parents were never in the picture. She was put into the foster system when she was a young girl. I think she was only a couple of years old, if I remember right.”

“And Brett’s?” Trent asked, leaning forward, his right elbow on the table, a pen in one hand, his notebook in the other.

“His parents died a few years ago, within a year of each other.”

“That would have been rough,” Trent lamented in a way that left Amanda wondering if he knew that pain firsthand. She didn’t know about the losses he’d faced in life. They were relatively new partners—their pairing became official nine months ago, in January—but she tried to carve a line between the personal and the professional. It was getting harder to enforce given they worked together quite well, and he was one of the most loyal people she’d ever known.

“I just... I’m terrified for Zoe.” Libby wiped her brow.

“Did either Brett or Angela have any brothers or sisters?” Amanda couldn’t get sucked into the emotional aspect of the case. She had no problem being the strong one.

“I don’t think so.”

“We were under the impression you were close to the family.” Phrases such as *I don’t think so* didn’t fully support that claim. “How long have you known them?”

“I met Angela ten years ago when I had her firm do my personal tax return. We just hit it off.”

Amanda and Trent had been given a brief recap on the victims when they’d arrived, so they were aware of the Parkers’ places of employment. Angela was an accountant at Mind Your Own Business, and Brett worked at Falcon Strategic Technologies, a defense contractor out of Washington.

“Do you think Zoe has been taken for ransom?” Libby’s voice was small.

"I'm not seeing that at this point," Amanda admitted, without coming out and saying the Parkers couldn't exactly pay one.

A small nod. "I just can't imagine anyone doing this to them. I assume that Angela looked much like Brett? I turned around and left when I found him." A shiver visibly tore through Libby, and she rubbed her arms.

"I'm sorry to say this, but yes, Angela was also shot. She was found in the master walk-in closet."

Fresh tears fell down Libby's face.

"You're sure that Zoe Parker would have been here last night?" Trent asked delicately, earning Libby's gaze.

"Definitely. The unmade bed gave it away. The Parkers are—*were*—so meticulous. The beds would be made every morning. Who would have—" Libby gulped. "I just had a bad feeling something happened when Zoe didn't come to school today. They'd never let her miss the first day back. And Angie and Brett would have been due to return to work today."

"So just to rule this out, is there any possibility Zoe could have spent the night at a friend's?" Amanda asked, but doubted the likelihood. As a mother herself once, she never would have allowed a sleepover on the eve of the school year.

"I wouldn't say so." Libby traced a finger around a pattern in the tabletop.

"When was the last time you spoke to the Parkers?"

"I spoke to Angela on Saturday."

"This past one, three days ago?" Amanda asked.

"Yeah."

"How did she seem to you?" Amanda was trying to get a sense of what had happened here, what could have triggered a double murder.

A light danced in Libby's eyes, like something came to her mind but she didn't want to say it out loud.

“What is it?” Amanda was curious if the hesitation on Libby’s behalf was due to loyalty to the Parkers in some regard.

“She was a little upset.”

“Did she say why?” Amanda was starting to question the stability of the Parkers’ marriage, but she’d give it a few minutes before probing that area. Libby might get defensive of her friends if she pushed the matter too soon.

“Brett dragged them back early from vacation. They were supposed to return home this past Sunday, but they came home on Thursday.”

“Why was that?” Trent asked, angling his head.

“Apparently, Brett told her he wanted to beat the traffic.”

That could make for a valid point, but the timing of the cut-short vacation was noteworthy, though not necessarily related to the murders and Zoe’s disappearance. “But you and Angela sensed there was more to it?”

“Yeah.”

“Any idea what?” Amanda countered.

Libby shook her head.

“Where did they go for vacation?”

“Lake Chesdin. It’s less than a couple hours away. They rented a cabin on the water in Sutherland.”

“Oh, yeah, I know where that is.” Amanda’s parents used to bring her and her siblings there as kids. “Sounds like it would have been a peaceful getaway.”

“Should have been. They never vacationed.”

An out-of-character vacation *and* it was cut short. “Were Brett and Angela having marriage problems?” Amanda’s mind was spinning now with more theories. The Parkers had a beautiful house and family, but maybe it wasn’t so perfect behind closed doors.

Libby chewed on her bottom lip, then offered, “I don’t think so.”

“I realize it might be uncomfortable for you to talk about your friends’ marriage. You might even feel like you’re betraying them

in some way, but if you know something... You could help us find out who did this to them and where Zoe might be.”

“As far as I know, they were doing their best, working at it. Angie was the maddest I’d seen her at Brett about him cutting the vacation short. And for that, I don’t really blame her.”

Amanda was tossing that around along with the seeming secrecy surrounding the reason for returning home. He’d said it was to beat traffic, but was that really all it was? “You said ‘working at it.’ Did they have marriage problems before?”

Libby sighed. “I probably shouldn’t be talking about them now that they’re...” She hiccupped a sob, and Amanda gave her a moment to collect herself.

“Anything you know could help us.” The rare vacation, the marriage that was being worked on, doing their best... The most common motive for a domestic murder was infidelity. “Had Brett cheated on Angela or vice versa?”

Libby met Amanda’s eyes and blinked deliberately. “Angie, but it was several years ago now and long over.”

“How long ago?” Amanda asked.

“Six, seven years ago.”

Zoe Parker was six... “Was Brett Parker Zoe’s biological father, or was this other man?”

“Angie was adamant she was Brett’s, but I don’t know if she ever got a paternity test.”

“We’re going to need the name of this guy.”

Libby shrunk back. “I... I don’t know it. It was someone she worked with then, at the accounting firm. That’s all I know. She greatly regretted the affair.”

Could this mystery man have come after Zoe all these years later, thinking she was his? If so, why wait? It didn’t seem likely. Or had Angela been cheating on Brett with someone more recently? She could have ended things, and the man could have been of the mindset that if he couldn’t have Angela, no one could. But

how did that explain Zoe's disappearance? "Was she seeing anyone recently?" Amanda asked.

Libby shook her head. "I don't think so." This time as she said the words, her voice lowered.

"It's okay. We can find that out." A look at Angela's phone records and talking to other people in her life, starting with those at work, might reveal someone.

"I can't believe I might never see Zoe again. She sent me this..." Libby pecked on her phone before flipping the screen for Amanda and Trent to see. It was the photo of Zoe that Becky had shown them. "Angie said she just had to say good—" She sobbed and put her phone away again.

"We're very sorry for the loss of your friends, Ms. Dewinter," Amanda started. "But let's not give up hope about Zoe."

Libby sniffled and blinked more tears from her eyes.

"You were really close with her. Her godmother," Amanda said softly.

"I was—I *am*. You're right, I have to think positively that we'll find her, and she'll be all right."

"Exactly how we need to think of it." Amanda touched the back of Libby's hand, which was resting on the table.

Libby bobbed her head, blinking back more tears. She patted her wet cheeks. "I was more than a family friend to Zoe, more than a godmother... I was Aunt Libby. The Parkers were my family. I'm not in communication with any of my blood relatives. My parents are alive, as far as I know, and so are my brother and sister, but they all shunned me when I came out."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Libby waved a hand of dismissal, but it was rather easy to see the pain burrowed in her eyes. "I'm not the only one dealing with that. It's just their minds are too small to accept what is different from their norm. But I don't need them in my life, and through all the hurt and pain, I discovered my strength and what real love

is. I've read before that people don't leave us, but the universe gets them out of our way. I kind of like that... Comforting. And I have since found my soul family. The Parkers were very much a part of that."

"I'm so sorry for your loss." The words purged from Amanda's throat raw with meaning and settled as an ache in her chest.

"I appreciate your saying that. I just wish it would bring them back."

There was no response for that. Amanda had made the same wish a zillion times after losing her daughter, Lindsey, and her husband in the same accident. She'd even wished that she would have had a chance to meet the unborn baby she'd lost that day. Most of the time she couldn't bear to think that, because of her injuries, she was left unable to have any more children. It was just all too painful. "So, we need to ask you some questions. They're ones you've already answered, but I'd like to run through them again."

"Okay," Libby dragged out.

"What brought you here today?"

"I sit with Zoe on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school. Those are the days Angela works until six. Brett's rarely home before seven, given his commute into Washington and all. It's really no inconvenience for me. I teach third grade at Dumfries Elementary, so I'm already there to drive her straight home and then sit with her."

Amanda went to Dumfries Elementary growing up, and her niece Ava just graduated from there. She'd ask her about Libby Dewinter when she got the chance.

Libby continued. "When I found out that Zoe didn't show for class, I had a bad feeling, but I tried to dismiss it. Then Angie and Brett weren't answering their phones. They're tied to those things, so I figured something was wrong."

"Always trust your gut." Amanda's dad had drilled that into her.

"You're right, and I did. Wish it had been wrong this time, though. I got here and saw their cars in the driveway. I tried her

again, then Brett. No answer from either one of them, but then I peeked in the window and saw the mess in his office.”

Amanda recalled seeing the office right off the front entrance when they’d arrived. It was one of the rooms that had been tossed.

Libby went on. “I know I should have called the cops right away, and I really wish I had, but as you know, I went in the house, and I...” Libby’s eyes glazed over and took on a faraway look. The dropped words were obviously something to the effect of *found them*.

Amanda could reprimand her for going inside, but there was no point in making this woman feel worse than she already did. “You have a key to the house?”

“Uh-huh. Thinking back, I didn’t disarm the security system. It must have already been.” Her brow pinched in confusion.

“And that would be unusual, for the Parkers not to arm it before bed?” Trent asked.

“Oh yeah. They were meticulous. Very much about ritual.”

Amanda met Libby’s gaze. “Did you touch anything in the house?”

“Nope. Not a thing. I watch those cop shows and know better.”

Those same shows should have taught her to stay outside and call 911 rather than enter the home, but Amanda wasn’t going to beat Libby over the head. She did need to ask something else, though. “As a matter of procedure, where were you between last night and this morning?” It was a wide span of time, but she wanted to know if Libby’s schedule was accounted for.

“You need my alibi?” Libby sank into her chair, deflated.

“Just procedure,” Amanda reiterated.

“I was at home with my girlfriend all weekend—including last night. Never saw Angie, just spoke to her on the phone. This morning, I left my girlfriend at seven to go to work. Her name’s Penny Anderson. Would you like her number?”

“That would be great.” Trent had his pen poised over his notepad, ready to write it down.

Libby recited it from memory, and Trent scribbled in his book.

“Thank you for being so helpful, Ms. Dewinter.” Amanda stood and drew a business card from a pocket and extended it to Libby. “If you think of anything, all my information’s on there. Call any time, day or night.”

“I will. I won’t be sleeping until Zoe’s found.”

“We’ll update you as soon as we know anything. In the meantime, we’re going to have an officer escort you home. We’ll need you to stay in town and be available in case we have any more questions for you. We also might require that you formally ID the bodies.”

“I understand.” Libby tapped Amanda’s card against the table a couple times and then stuck it into her phone case.

Amanda could only imagine what the woman was going through. She’d shown up probably trying to convince herself she was being paranoid, only to find that her intuition had been right all along. The Parkers had been in trouble—only Brett and Angela no longer felt any pain. But what about Zoe?

Where are you, little girl?

Whoever had taken Zoe might not know it yet, but they had a whole lot of hell coming their way.

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