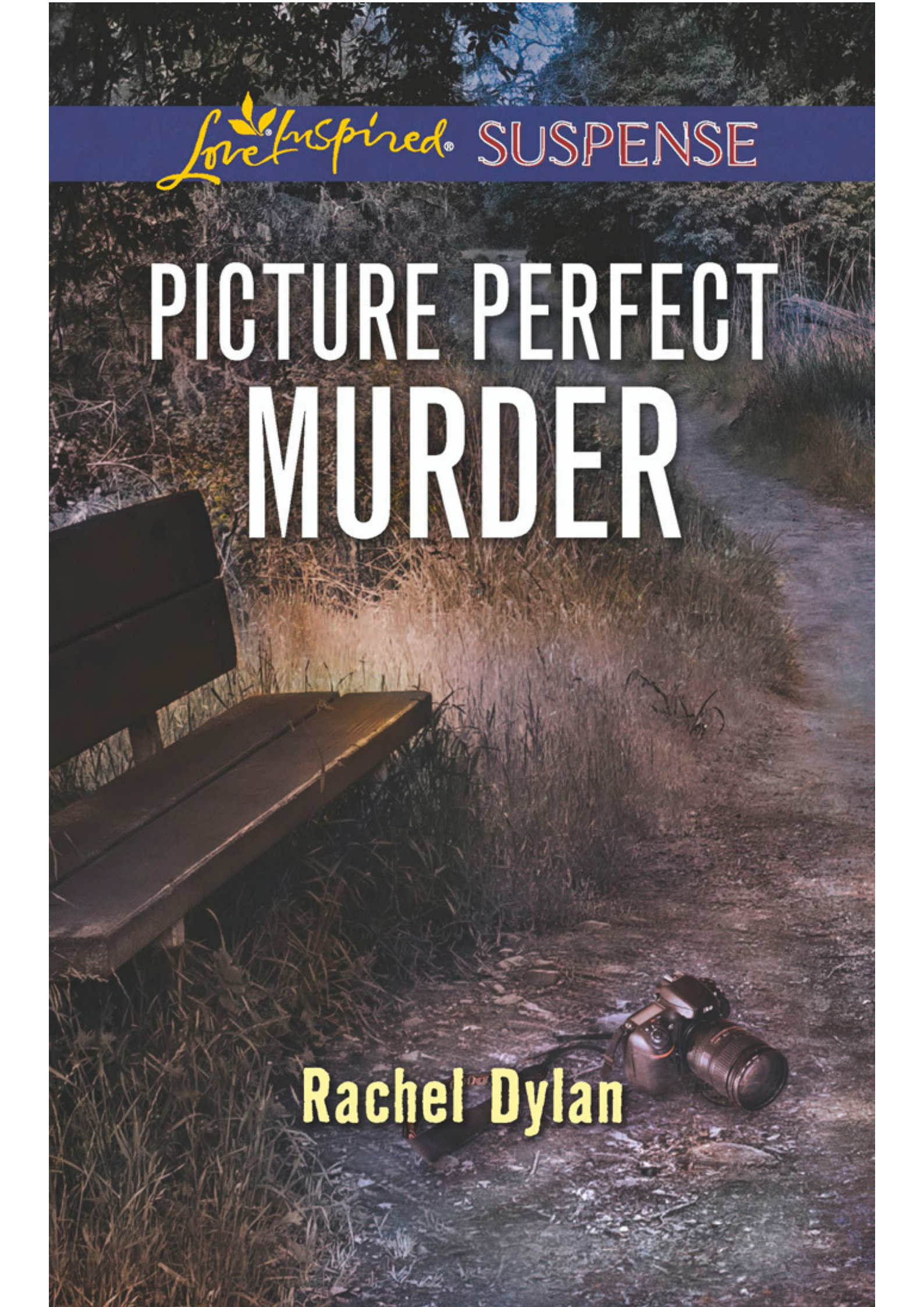




Love Inspired® SUSPENSE

PICTURE PERFECT MURDER

Rachel Dylan

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Picture Perfect Murder

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KILLER FOCUS When photographer Lily Parker escapes an attack, she doesn't want any help from the FBI agent who's convinced she's a serial killer's latest obsession. But after one of her photographs is found at a murder scene, it's clear that Special Agent Rex Sullivan was right. Lily, a former CIA agent, isn't used to relying on others, but she won't survive without Rex at her side. And Rex quickly sees that Lily isn't the typical victim in need of his protection, but a valuable partner who can help him bring down this madman. With the murderer growing bolder, Rex has to convince Lily to trust him with her safety—or she could become the killer's next victim.

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"It's him," Lily said. "He sent me another text. It's from a different account but it's our guy."

"What does it say?"

She looked down at her phone and then back up and then back down again. "Next time I won't miss." She handed the phone to him so he could read it for himself.

Rex nodded. "Just as I suspected. His fixation is growing stronger and stronger with each passing day that he hasn't accomplished his ultimate goal."

"We have to make sure that he never reaches that goal. And we also need to try to stop him before he goes on killing other women on his list."

"Agreed, but you know that's much easier said than done."

The phone chirped again. "Oh no," she said. "What is it now?"

Since he still had her phone in his hand, he opened the second message. Well, that was strange. He hadn't expected this twist.

"It's a picture of you."

RACHEL DYLAN writes inspirational romantic suspense. Although a Georgia girl at heart, she traded in the sunny South for the snowy Midwest. She lives in Michigan with her husband and five furkids—two dogs and three cats. She's an animal lover and enjoys adding furry friends to her stories. You can find Rachel at racheldylan.com.

Picture Perfect Murder

Rachel Dylan



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For we walk by faith, not by sight.

—2 *Corinthians* 5:7

For Susan—through all the years, the ups and downs,
the joy and pain, you've been there through it all.

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[ONE](#)

The loud barking didn't rouse Lily Parker from a deep sleep. No, she was still wide-awake even though her head had hit the pillow an hour ago. Sleep didn't come easily, because of the recurring nightmares involving her last mission with the CIA. The mission that had changed her entire life.

Her bedroom was dark, and she glanced over at the bright red numbers on her alarm clock. She'd been working late in her darkroom developing her latest photographs, so seeing that it was three in the morning wasn't much of a surprise.

"Grace," she yelled out to her yellow Labrador. But Grace kept barking loudly downstairs. She'd rescued Grace from an animal shelter in a rough part of Atlanta six months ago. Clearly her dog hadn't gotten the memo that it wasn't acceptable to bark in the middle of the night.

"Okay, I'm coming." Reluctantly, Lily threw back the down comforter, leaving the warmth of her bed, and stood up. She grabbed her fuzzy robe from the navy chaise in the corner and walked out of her bedroom. Grace's barking only grew more persistent.

When Lily was almost at the bottom of the stairs, she thought she heard something that couldn't have come from Grace. She paused for a moment, debating whether she should run back up the steps to grab her Glock from the nightstand.

However, as a former CIA agent, she wasn't easily rattled. Knowing Grace, she'd probably become fixated on a tree branch, a possum or even something as silly as a bag blowing in the wind. She proceeded down the rest of the stairs and flipped the switch for the hallway light. But no light came on. She stepped into the pitch-black living room and suddenly felt she wasn't alone. Was someone in her house?

Grace ran into the room, almost knocking her over. "Easy, girl." She reached down and gave Grace a quick pat on the head, trying to reassure her. Taking a deep breath, she started walking toward the kitchen. At least there she could grab a knife to protect herself. She was fairly certain that she'd set the alarm before she went to bed, but now she started second-guessing herself. She'd been so engrossed in her work she couldn't remember.

Another loud bark from Grace had Lily moving quickly through the kitchen. Even though it was dark, there was still a thread of moonlight coming in through the kitchen windows. Enough light for her to locate her butcher block and grab the biggest knife she had.

Lily knew she wasn't like most women. She'd spent five years in the CIA on highly dangerous operations overseas. But she'd never confronted danger in her own home. Although she wasn't afraid, she was angry at the possibility that someone had dared to invade her privacy. She clenched the knife in her right hand, ready to fight off any attacker.

Then she reached into the kitchen drawer, grabbed a flashlight with her left hand and scanned the bright light over the living room. Nothing.

Was it possible that there was just a power outage in the area? Possible, yes, but that wouldn't explain Grace's incessant barking. Grace stood beside her, now on high alert. The young Labrador was loyal and courageous, even if she still needed a bit of training.

Lily had had enough. She wanted to end this. "I'm calling the cops right now," she said loudly. "So you better get out of my house or show yourself, you coward."

She didn't have a landline, and her cell phone was in her bedroom. But the intruder didn't know that. Assuming there was an intruder. For a moment, she strained to listen but couldn't hear any noise now. She took a few steps back into the kitchen.

The lights flickered on and her microwave beeped, signaling the return of power to her house. Quickly, she ran up the steps to grab her gun from the nightstand, just to be on the safe side. Then she intended to clear the house room by room, as she had done many times before on missions.

But first she grabbed her cell and dialed 911, reporting to the operator that there was an intruder and she needed help right away. While she felt she could hold her own, she wasn't an idiot and would welcome some backup right now. Then her lights turned off again. Something was definitely wrong.

She quickly gave her address to the operator. She heard a sound behind her one second too late. Strong arms grabbed on to her, ripping her phone out of her hand. She didn't hesitate to act. Using years of self-defense and martial arts training, she was able to break his initial hold. Her response seemed to catch him off guard. He must've assumed that she would be a pliant victim. This man had no idea what she was capable of. He'd picked the wrong house to break into tonight.

It was dark in her bedroom, but she could see the outline of her assailant. She mentally cataloged what she could discern of his physical appearance. Male, approximately six feet tall and wearing a dark ski mask. She couldn't even get a good look at his eyes because she was too busy fighting him off.

She landed a hard right kick into his side, and he grunted loudly in pain. Not waiting for him to recover, she steadied herself into position and got in one more strong kick that made him stagger backward a few steps.

"The cops will be here any minute," she told him. Backup was on the way. But instead of what she was used to, other CIA agents backing her up—or stabbing her in the back—this would be the police.

She reached for the Glock from inside the bedside table drawer as her attacker took a few more steps back and then turned to run. He must have realized that the police had to be close to her house by now.

With the gun in her hands, she ran out of her room after him. He deserved to be arrested and face justice for what he'd done. Because if he'd done this to her, chances were he was a repeat offender.

But as she started down the stairs, she twisted her ankle and hit the ground hard. She groaned loudly. The attacker was going to get away. And there was nothing she could do about it.

* * *

FBI special agent Rex Sullivan looked over at Atlanta Police Department officer Sean Bishop, who had offered to give him a ride home. The FBI had been called in last week because the APD felt they had sufficient evidence to indicate that a potential serial killer was on the loose. Rex had been picked up earlier at the FBI field office and taken to the latest crime scene.

The woman's body had been discovered that afternoon, but she definitely hadn't been killed today. Due to the advanced state of decomposition, the coroner was placing the time of death at about two weeks ago. The victim had lived alone in a rental condo. Sadly, no one had reported the young woman missing, and it took her rent not being paid before the landlord entered the condo to find her lifeless body.

Another innocent victim of a totally heinous crime. Profiling and catching these twisted criminals was Rex's specialty. The perpetrators were most often male. And they typically possessed a lethal combination of the ability to blend in with society and the skills to be a cold-blooded killer.

The young officer with him was trying to hold it together after visiting the grisly murder scene that the FBI and APD were working together. But with the images fresh in his mind, Rex had to admit that he didn't look forward to going to bed, either. So when an emergency call had come across the radio a few minutes ago, Rex was actually relieved that they were close to the location where it came from.

"Thanks for understanding," Sean said.

"Totally understand. And I won't do anything to interfere. This is your jurisdiction." Rex was just happy to have the diversion.

"We don't even know the full details yet. Just that there was a distress call from a female citing a possible intruder and then the 911 operator lost contact. We'll be there soon, but back to today's crime scene for a minute, this makes murder number three in two months all with a similar MO," Sean said. "This guy doesn't show any sign of stopping. I'm guessing that after tonight, the FBI will officially label this guy a serial killer, right?"

Rex rubbed his chin. "I'm leaning toward that assessment, yes. We have three victims so far. All the women in their mid to late twenties, all living alone. All three of the victims had long, dark hair and light-colored eyes. But beyond that, my team is going to be working on finding other connections between the victims. It will be important to determine if there are ties between them or if he's just targeting randomly based upon looks."

Sean pulled the police car to a stop in front of the designated address. A two-story house with a big front porch. "This is it. Let's go check it out."

Rex didn't normally work active scenes. He was usually called in after the fact, once a murder had been committed. But he had finished at the top of his class at Quantico and had seen some heavy field action in his first couple of years. So he felt more than prepared to go in, and there was no way he was sending Sean into this house without backup.

They ran up the porch steps and entered the front door, which had been left unlocked. That first tidbit of information already had Rex uneasy.

"Atlanta Police. Anyone here?" Sean yelled.

Rex was met with a barking yellow Lab running full steam ahead, fur flying. The dog jumped up and put its paws on him. It seemed friendly but agitated. Probably from whatever had happened at the house. "It's okay," he told the Lab. "We're here to help."

"I'm up here," a female voice yelled loudly.

Rex followed the voice to the top of the stairs. And that was when he saw her. A beautiful woman with long, wavy, dark hair and bright blue eyes. A chill shot down his arm when he realized that she looked astonishingly like his other three murder victims.

"I'm Special Agent Rex Sullivan with the FBI, and this is Officer Sean Bishop with the Atlanta Police Department."

Sean crouched down beside her on the stairs. "The ambulance is on its way, ma'am. What happened?"

"I was attacked," she said. "The man got away."

"What's your name?" Rex asked.

"Lily Parker."

Just then, Rex's good buddy, Atlanta police detective Derrick McKinley, walked up the steps. "I heard the call for backup and I came over."

"What hurts?" Rex asked.

"My ankle," she responded. "I twisted it when I was trying to go after the guy."

"Wait. You were going after him?" Rex asked. This woman had guts.

“Yes. My Glock is right there.”³ She nodded down to the step just below her. “It’s mine. He knew that I’d made the 911 call. Once he couldn’t easily subdue me, he probably decided to cut his losses and get out of here.”

The EMT walked up the steps and went to work on Lily.

“We’ll let you get medical attention,” Rex said. “But then we’ll need your detailed statement.” She nodded. “Absolutely. Whatever you need.”

“My recommendation would be to transport her to the hospital. The doctors will need to take X-rays to determine if her ankle is broken,” the paramedic said.

“I think it’s just a mild sprain, if that,” she said.

“Still, you need to get it looked at,” he responded.

She gave a reluctant nod. “All right.”

The Labrador walked up a few steps and barked, getting Rex’s attention. It looked up at Rex with big chocolate-brown eyes. “What’s your name, buddy?” He leaned down and took a close look at the collar with a bone-shaped nameplate hanging off it. The green collar didn’t give away the gender. But the name did, along with a closer inspection of the pup.

“That’s Grace,” Lily said loudly from a few steps up. “She will be fine here while I’m at the hospital. I’m sure I won’t be gone too long,” Lily said.

Rex nodded. His mind went into overdrive analyzing the situation. It was entirely possible that this beautiful, mysterious Glock-carrying woman had just escaped being the fourth victim of a serial killer.

* * *

Lily awoke feeling completely disoriented but was quickly able to determine by the antiseptic smell that she was in a hospital. She recalled having been given a pain pill in the early-morning hours, even though she’d insisted that she didn’t really need it. But the doctor wanted to get the swelling down and had said it would make her more comfortable.

Looking around the space, her heart immediately warmed. Sitting in the hospital room were two of her friends from childhood. She’d become close with them again since she’d returned to Atlanta.

“Lily, you’re awake!” Alison Cruz said. Her petite, brunette friend squeezed her hand tightly and had tears in her eyes.

“How long have I been out?”

“Not that long. It’s just about eleven in the morning,” Jackson Bray said. She’d known Jackson since sixth grade. His dark brown eyes were filled with concern. “Guy wanted to be here, but he couldn’t get anyone to cover his shift at work. We are so glad to see you awake.”

“What actually happened to you? How did you hurt your ankle?” Alison asked. “We couldn’t get any specific information from the police officers or the hospital. We only found out you were here because we got concerned when you wouldn’t answer any of our calls or texts. So we went by your house and a police officer filled us in.”

Before Lily could respond, the man she recognized as FBI special agent Rex Sullivan entered the room. Standing at least six foot two, he was dressed in a dark suit with a navy tie. His brown hair was cut short.

“Ms. Parker, how are you feeling today?” Rex asked.

“A little groggy from the pain meds, but my ankle isn’t hurting as badly this morning.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’d appreciate it if I could have some time alone with you to get a full statement.”

“Anything you need to say can be said in front of my friends.”

He nodded. “I understand your feelings, but it’s protocol.”

Relenting, she looked over at Alison and Jackson. “I’m sorry, you two. Could you give us a few minutes?”

“Of course,” Jackson said. He gently touched her shoulder. “We’ll go grab some coffee and come back in a bit.” Her friends walked out of the hospital room, leaving her alone with Rex.

He took a seat and pulled out a notepad. “I just wanted to hear your full account of what happened last night. I’m working your case in conjunction with the Atlanta Police Department.”

She wondered why he’d be involved at all in a breaking and entering with an assault, but figured she would just go ahead and get this over with. “My dog Grace started barking around 3:00 a.m. I went downstairs to check things out. The power kept cutting off and on multiple times before you got there. I didn’t see anyone in the house, but I felt as if someone could’ve been there.”

“What else can you tell me?”

“I ran upstairs to get my cell to dial 911. I started making the call, and a man grabbed me before I could get to my Glock.”

“Yes, we took the Glock into evidence.” He paused. “What happened after he grabbed you? Did you see him?”

“It was dark in my bedroom. I estimate that he was about six feet tall, two hundred pounds, give or take. But he was dressed all in black and wore a ski mask. I couldn’t even see his eyes. However, I was able to fight him off.”

He nodded. “Are you trained in self-defense techniques?”

“Yes, I am. If you want my honest assessment, I think he was actually surprised I fought back. He seemed thrown off by it. And when I reminded him that the cops were coming, he started to retreat. I got my Glock and was going to go after him, but that’s when I twisted my ankle and fell on the stairs.”

He kept jotting down notes. “What do you do for a living, Ms. Parker?”

Here came the tricky part. Would he believe that she was a photographer? The problem was that he’d seen the Glock at the scene, so there was no escaping that. “I’m a photographer.”

“That’s your only job?”

“Yes. It keeps me fully occupied.” Which was the truth. It was her only current job. She’d left the CIA life behind.

“Do you know anyone that would want to hurt you?”

She kept a straight face. “Not that I know of.” There was no way she was divulging her CIA backstory to a man she’d just met, even if he was working her case.

He took a breath and stopped writing. “I don’t want to frighten you by telling you this, but I feel I have to.”

Her heartbeat sped up. “Tell me what?”

“I’m working in conjunction with the Atlanta Police Department, and we are investigating a string of murders that have occurred in the city.”

“String of murders? Are you talking about a serial killer? I was wondering why the FBI was responding to a police call.”

“I was working a crime scene not far away from your home when the 911 call came in last night.”

“Okay, but how do I fit into all of this?”

“Once again, there’s no cause for alarm at the moment. You’re safe.”

She nodded. “I understand. But please tell me what it is you’re trying to say.”

“Ms. Parker, here’s the situation. You look strikingly similar to the other three victims from the case. I’m assuming you’re in your twenties?”

“Yes, I’m twenty-seven.”

“You live alone?”

“Yes, just with Grace.”

“All of the victims have been attractive women in their twenties, living alone, with long dark hair and light-colored eyes.”

She felt her eyes widen. “Seriously?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Are you trying to say that the attacker was in my house trying to make me his next victim? That the man I came into contact with actually may be the serial killer that you’re trying to apprehend?”

“I can’t say with certainty that your attacker is the same man I’m trying to hunt down, but I don’t really believe in this many coincidences. The last victim was murdered approximately two weeks ago. You may have very well been his next target.”

“Wow.” She thought she’d left her life of danger behind when she quit the Agency.

She blew out a breath. “By any chance, did you find my cell at the house? The man who attacked me grabbed it away from me last night in the struggle.”

“We didn’t. Did you have any sensitive information on there like financial records—anything like that?”

“No.” Her time at the CIA had taught her to be wary of storing any intel on electronic devices. “But it did have a lot of my photos on it. Things I needed for work.”

“I’m sorry about your phone. We will attempt to track it, but I’m assuming that search will come up empty. I also suggest you get your locks changed.”

“Thanks. That’s a good idea.” She looked up and saw another man walk into her hospital room. She recognized him as one of the officers at the scene last night. He screamed law enforcement, with his dark, conservative suit. He was tall with thick, blond hair.

Rex looked at her. “Ms. Parker, I don’t think you officially met Derrick last night. This is Detective Derrick McKinley from the Atlanta Police Department. He’s also working your case.”

Derrick walked over and smiled. There was a kindness in his blue eyes. “How are you doing, Ms. Parker?”

“I’m ready to get out of here.”

“I can only imagine how you must be feeling. I just wanted to stop by and check on you. And to pick up this guy.” He nodded toward Rex. “The doctor said she was about to come in. Have you given Rex your statement?”

“Yes.” She looked over at Rex. “Did you have more questions?”

“Not at the moment, but I’m going to need to talk with you again to determine if there is any connection between you and the previous victims. Also, we’ve got an APD officer here at the hospital who will escort you home.”

The implication was clear. Rex thought that she may still be in danger, and she couldn’t object because she needed to seem like a photographer. Not a CIA agent fully capable of defending herself. She already knew that Rex was a bit suspicious of her having a Glock. And chasing after the guy. But she felt it was better to be straightforward in her statement to him. She knew all too well about how lies could start to spiral out of control.

Lily thanked both men again, and they walked out of the room as the doctor came in. She wore wire-frame glasses and her blond hair was pulled back in a bun. “Ms. Parker, I’m Dr. Grady. How are you feeling today?”

“Ready to get out of here.”

“Good news about your ankle. Not even a sprain. Just might be a little sore but shouldn’t slow you down too much. I also conducted a thorough physical exam and was unable to detect any trauma. But how are you feeling emotionally? If you need to talk to anyone, we have a full staff of psychologists.”

No way was she doing that. “I’m fine, Doctor. Just anxious to be home.”

She smiled. “I understand that.” She paused. “Ms. Parker, one other thing. An envelope was delivered for you.” The doctor pulled the small envelope out of her jacket. “It might be best if you involve the police, given the circumstances. But I thought I’d talk to you about it first in case you were expecting something.”

She wasn't. But she didn't want to discuss this with the doctor. "Oh, yes, it's probably from my friend who couldn't get off work this morning."

"Okay, then. It will just take the nurse a few minutes to process your discharge paperwork."

"Thank you."

Once the doctor left the room, she quickly opened the envelope. The words typed on the small card stared back at her.

Next time you'll be mine.

Her heart dropped. Was the FBI agent right? Could she have been the serial killer's latest target?

TWO

Lily settled down on her couch, snuggling up with Grace to watch the local evening news. It had been two days since the incident, and she was still on high alert after receiving that note. But she was skeptical about bringing in the police or FBI at this juncture. She didn't want anyone snooping into her life, because that would inevitably lead to questions about her past. Questions she really didn't want to answer.

How could she explain to law enforcement, those who lived and worked in between the lines, that her previous career had forced her to work outside them?

Yesterday she had gotten her locks changed and bought a new Glock—two, in fact. Along with a new phone, since the police presumably hadn't been able to locate hers. If this guy was coming after her again, she'd be ready this time. She'd been doing a lot of thinking about the past few weeks. There had been a couple of times when she was out shooting photos that she'd felt she was being watched. But she'd chalked that up to her CIA paranoia. She'd left the Agency and the life that went along with it, but she couldn't leave behind the training.

If she were being truthful with herself, she'd admit that she had enjoyed the challenge of being a CIA agent. But it was too painful to go there right now. She'd only been out for nine months.

She turned up the volume on the TV so that she could hear it over Grace's snoring. The blonde TV anchor didn't smile tonight as she looked into the camera with serious hazel eyes. "Good evening, everyone. Breaking news tonight. The FBI has officially declared that there is a serial killer roaming the streets of Atlanta. Four young women, all in their twenties, have been murdered over the past two months. The latest victim was found just last night by local police, and officials are estimating that she was killed yesterday. The FBI has gone on record to say that they, too, are on the hunt to bring justice to those who have been slain."

A shiver coursed through her body. Then the TV shot cut to a face she was familiar with—Special Agent Rex Sullivan. "We're asking everyone in the area to be vigilant. All four murders took place inside the city, but there's nothing saying that the killer will stick to his pattern. I would especially urge young women to remember that a serial killer may not look dangerous. He may come up to you in the grocery store parking lot and try to help you load bags into your car. He may approach you on a college campus. There are many different ways that a contact could occur, and I am advising everyone in the community to be on alert. If you see anything suspicious, please report it to the local police or the FBI field office in Atlanta immediately."

As the news anchor picked up the reporting, Lily's thoughts shifted to her situation. This man they were talking about might have been in her home with the intent to make her his next victim. And then it dawned on her that after he had failed with her, he'd gone out and found another innocent woman. The thought made her sick.

Her eyes went back to the screen, and she felt her mouth drop open. She reached for the remote and quickly pushed the volume up even louder. Blinking a few times, she stared at the TV.

"And tonight we have a WNB Atlanta exclusive. The photograph you are seeing was left at the latest murder scene, a fact that has been confirmed to us by the FBI. If anyone watching has information with regard to this photograph please contact the number on the bottom of your screen for the FBI field office in Atlanta immediately."

She jumped up from the couch and walked into the kitchen, trying to remember where she had put Rex's business card.

After locating it in one of the drawers, she grabbed her cell from the counter and dialed the number printed there.

After two rings, he answered. "Agent Sullivan."

"Hi. This is Lily Parker."

"Hey, Lily. How are you doing?"

"Not too good."

"I'm sorry about that. It's not uncommon to have difficulty after dealing with an attack in your own home. The Bureau has a lot of resources if you would like a referral to someone you can talk to about what happened to you."

She could hear papers shuffling around in the background. "No, please listen to me. You need to come over to my house right now. I have to talk to you."

"Are you okay?"

"Your serial killer case. I need to talk to you about that now."

"Okay. Did you think of something else that happened the night you were attacked? I can be on my way to your place in just a few minutes, but what is this about?"

"That photograph that was just televised on the local news. Is the reporting on the photo legitimate?"

"Unfortunately, yes. That photograph was found at the scene of the latest murder. The killer struck again yesterday. We found the body last night and the photo along with it."

She took a deep breath. "Agent Sullivan, I shot that photograph."

* * *

Rex sped all the way from his office, where he'd planned on working a late night, to Lily's house. A million thoughts raced through his mind, including why the killer would use one of Lily's photographs.

He also couldn't get a good read on Lily. He'd run some background checks on her and found some holes that he couldn't fill. Plus, it concerned him that she had gone after the killer when he'd attacked her. That wasn't something most people would've done under the circumstances. But even given all the question marks about Lily, she wasn't the problem. She was a potential target. The killer had zoned in on her and used her photograph to send some type of message.

Lord, more innocent women are going to be killed if I can't figure this out. Please guide me and give me strength. Rex couldn't imagine going through life without God. Especially in his line of work, where he dealt with some of the most evil people out there.

After fighting through Atlanta traffic on the interstate, he pulled into Lily's driveway. He rang the doorbell and heard Grace's loud bark. He couldn't help but smile. He really liked that dog. If he didn't work such crazy hours, he'd have one, too, but it just didn't seem fair given his lifestyle right now.

The front door opened and Lily stood on the other side. Her coloring was back to normal now, and her bright blue eyes didn't break contact with his. "Come on in."

He walked through the front door and was greeted by a very excited Grace. He knelt down for a moment to say hello.

"She really likes you," Lily said.

"I love dogs." He gave Grace another pat before he stood up.

"They're great. I'm so glad I have her here with me. Come on into the living room, and I'll try to explain everything."

The yellow Lab followed him closely as he walked into the living room and sat down in a big beige chair. Lily took a seat on the navy couch across from him, and Grace jumped onto it to join her.

"Why don't we just get right to it and you tell me about the photo," Rex said.

“All right. When I saw the news tonight, I instantly recognized the picture that they put up. I’d taken it at Westlake Park only a couple of weeks ago. I remember thinking the scene was pretty amazing. That photo was black-and-white, but I have a digital color version, too.”

He leaned forward. “So first things first. You’re certain that’s your photo?”

“Absolutely. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

“And how did you take the photo?”

“With actual film. I do a combination of traditional and digital photography. But for the specific photo they showed on TV, I used film. I have a darkroom here on the first floor down the hall. I had been developing those photos the night I was attacked.”

Rex frowned as he tried to process this information.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Just trying to put together a plausible scenario for what happened here at your house. The killer cuts your lights, breaks in and attacks you. You fight him off and he retreats, taking your phone and the photo from the darkroom.”

She nodded. “Instead of being able to make me his next victim, I messed up his plan.”

“When he failed to kill you, he found another innocent victim. But he still had your photo. And he decided to use it at the scene of his fourth murder. Have you looked to see if any other photos are missing?”

“Not yet. I haven’t even gotten that far in my thought process.” She took in a deep breath. “But I had photos on my phone, too. They weren’t high quality, just images of places I wanted to go back to with my camera.”

“That’s good to know. I’d like to look in your darkroom and get the team out here to do additional evidence collection.”

“Sure. There’s another thing that I need to tell you about.”

A knot formed at the pit of his stomach. “What?”

“You’re not going to be happy about this, but a note was delivered to me at the hospital.”

“What? What did the note say?”

“It said, ‘Next time you’ll be mine.’”

“Why in the world didn’t you tell us about this immediately?” he asked in a raised voice.

“I didn’t realize how this was all going to unfold. I’m sorry.”

“Do you still have the note? We need to run prints on it and do an analysis.”

“Yes, I’ve got it. It’s in the kitchen.”

“You should’ve told the police about this. From here on out, you have to be straight with me, Lily. Lives are literally on the line and we’re up against the clock to find the killer before he strikes a fifth time.”

“I understand. It won’t happen again. I realize this is a serious situation. The last thing I want is to hamper your investigation. I don’t want another woman killed by this guy.”

Now he had to lay something else on her, but he thought she could handle it. He was getting the very distinct impression that it would take a lot to rattle Lily Parker. “I’m not trying to alarm you, but when I examine all the facts, I think that you could still be in danger.”

“Why is that?”

“You were on the killer’s list of victims, but you managed to stop him. I can imagine a scenario in which he becomes obsessed with finishing the job because—let’s face it—you’re the one that got away. He took your photograph and placed it at the next murder scene. He also communicated with you directly via that note. I suspect he’ll come after you again.”

“Your theory makes sense.”

He wanted to know more from her, but he needed to be careful. If he pushed too much, she might clam up. He needed as much information from her as she was willing to share. But he’d been

an FBI agent long enough to know that this woman was hiding something. How many free-spirited photographers carried Glocks and seemed more annoyed than terrified at a home invasion?

“Let me show you the darkroom,” she said.

He followed her down the hallway. Once they entered the room, he surveyed the area, but nothing seemed out of place. There was a big table with large plastic containers on top of it. A sink, surrounded by shelves housing numerous bottles of liquids, sat in a corner. Then there were clips and other supplies scattered throughout. “And what about your digital photography?”

“I do that in my office across the hall. That’s where my computer and printer are.”

“I’ll need you to go through the darkroom and your computer and see if it looks as if anything else has been tampered with.”

“I understand. I’ll definitely do that.”

“And I’m going to call the crime lab and have them do another sweep for prints just in case they missed anything, as well as run a forensic analysis on your computer. They can also collect the note for examination. Excuse me for a second.” He pulled out his phone and made a quick call to his team. “They’ll be here within the hour. How many pictures do you estimate were on your phone?”

She blew out a breath. “Maybe a hundred, two hundred. But like I said, they aren’t top quality like the ones on my computer and in the darkroom.”

He didn’t like this at all. The serial killer had access to more of Lily’s photographs. And if he was going to start using photos as part of his deadly game, then the implications were staggering. Rex didn’t even want one more death on his watch, but the killer obviously had other, bigger plans.

“Agent Sullivan, you’re off in another world, aren’t you?”

“Please, call me Rex. And I’m sorry. When I get into a case, my mind goes into overdrive trying to connect the dots.”

She looked down and back up at him, her blue eyes sparkling. “Why would this guy focus on me of all people?”

“Because he has a distinct type. You meet all of his preselected physical requirements. We can’t know at this point why he chose to go after women who look like you. I’m going to coordinate with APD so we can figure out what makes sense for some sort of protective detail. Meanwhile, I’ll stay with you until the FBI team arrives. Then I’ll come back tonight.”

Frowning, she walked out of the darkroom, and he followed her back to living area. “That’s not necessary. My friends you met at the hospital are coming over soon. I won’t be alone.”

“Okay, but if that changes let me know. I’m also going to put FBI electronic surveillance in place. That should be set up by tomorrow.”

She winced as she took a seat on the sofa. “Is that really necessary at this point? That’s a pretty aggressive approach.”

“It is, but I think it’s needed. We have no idea how far this guy is going to take it with you. I find it deeply disturbing that he’s come after you once and has used your photo at a murder scene. I don’t take this threat lightly.”

“I have one request for you.”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“I don’t want my name to be associated with this photo in the news.”

“I understand. It’s not exactly the type of publicity you’d want for your business. We’ll try to keep a tight lid on the fact that it’s your image.”

“Thank you. I appreciate you trying to protect my privacy. No one wants to hire a photographer who’s linked to a serial killer.”

“No problem. I’ll touch base with you in the morning about the security setup and when to expect the installation. The FBI team will arrive soon, but if you end up needing me tonight, let me know. Now that we know the killer has developed a special interest in you, I don’t want you to be alone.”

“Don’t worry. My friends will be here, and I’ve also got my Glock.”

“That’s good.”

“And, Rex? Make no mistake about it. If that man comes into my house again, I will use it.”

* * *

Hours later, as she stared at her laptop screen, she felt anxious to hear the results of the analysis the FBI had performed earlier on her computer. Lily felt confident that the only picture taken from her darkroom was the one that had been shown on TV. What she felt far less confident about was whether anything had been taken from her computer. It would’ve been fairly simple to transfer pictures from her desktop. She no longer kept highly encrypted classified files, so she hadn’t been particularly focused on the security of her computer.

And unlike some of her former counterparts at the CIA, technology wasn’t her specialty. Tradecraft and human intelligence were her strengths. When she needed tech help, she called on others. So for now, she would have to wait for the FBI results to come in.

She walked over to the sink, and Grace nuzzled her hand while she finished up the dishes. Her pup could no doubt sense that she was feeling down about the whole situation. Though Alison and Jackson were supposed to come over, she had decided that she didn’t feel like company. So she’d told them that she would be fine for the night. And she could take care of herself. Rex’s concern was perfectly normal, but he assumed that he was dealing with an average citizen. Not a highly trained CIA operative.

Grace whined. “Okay, girl. This is your last time going out this evening.” Thankfully, she had a large fenced-in backyard that Grace loved. Lily let her out the back door and then went into the living room and took a seat on the couch.

Her thoughts returned to her CIA past. When the truth had come out to everyone at the Agency that James had been a double agent, it should’ve made her feel less guilty over what had happened on the mission. But she had loved him and his deception still stung.

She closed her eyes and for a moment thought about praying. But what good would that do? She and God weren’t exactly on good terms anymore. No doubt she’d made bad choices, and she had to live with those repercussions. Still, she blamed God for what had happened to her. How it had all played out and how she’d had to end things.

A loud crashing sound broke through her thoughts. Shards of glass from the window sprayed her body. Instinctively, she dropped to the ground and covered her head. Grace barked loudly from the backyard, but Lily was so thankful that she wasn’t inside right now.

She bear-crawled toward the kitchen, trying to avoid as much glass as possible. But there were pieces all over the living room floor. She felt a shard cut into her arm, but she didn’t stop until she reached the kitchen.

Grabbing her Glock from the kitchen drawer, she saw that her hand was covered in blood. She turned, her gun trained on a possible assailant, but she didn’t see anyone. She looked out the window to the backyard, where Grace was still barking.

Slowly, she proceeded back to the living room, gun drawn. This was the second time someone had invaded her home. That was a threat she didn’t take lightly.

The living room was covered with bits of glass from the broken window. Looking around, she saw the large brick that had been hurled through the glass. Was this guy trying to intimidate her? Scare her? Little did he know who he was dealing with. It wasn’t likely that one of her CIA enemies would do something like this. They’d just come after her directly with an assassin’s bullet. No, this felt like something else.

She grabbed her phone from the kitchen and dialed Rex.

“Lily, what is it?” he answered.

“Someone just threw a large brick through my living room window. There is glass everywhere.”

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice ragged.

“Just a few cuts. I don’t think they’re too deep.” She looked down and saw that there was a good bit of blood though the cuts were only superficial. “Thankfully, Grace was in the backyard when it happened.”

“I’m calling this in right now. Do not hang up.”

Seconds later, he returned to the line. “APD is less than five minutes away. I’m also on my way over. Are your friends with you?”

“That didn’t end up working out.”

“You should’ve called me, Lily. I didn’t want you alone tonight. I told you it was too dangerous. You’re not taking this threat seriously enough.”

She didn’t respond, because she couldn’t say anything at this point to make him happy.

“Stay on the line with me until APD gets there. I need to know that you are safe.”

“I’m right here.” She waited only a few minutes until Rex arrived at her place, along with an APD squad car.

He walked into her house and immediately started checking her over. “Are you sure you’re all right? Do you need medical attention?”

“I’ll be fine. It’s really nothing too serious.” She held out her arms to show him. “The cuts aren’t that deep. Just a little blood.”

He frowned and walked over to the officers who were starting to work the scene in her living room. Now that the police were in the house, she took the opportunity to get Grace safely back inside and put her into her bedroom away from the glass. She walked back down the stairs and into the kitchen, where Rex was waiting for her.

“They’re gathering evidence,” he said.

“It happened so quickly. What’s the connection here? Why would the killer do this to me?”

“Because he’s determined to finish the job he started, and extend his sick game along the way. You’ve proved to be a special challenge for him, and it’s one that he seems to have fully embraced.”

A chill shot down her arm. “That’s disturbing.”

“And, unfortunately, I have some more bad news.”

“What?” She was almost afraid to ask.

“We’ve got a report of a missing graduate student.”

“Oh, no.”

“She fits the victim profile perfectly,” he said quietly.

“You think he’s already struck again? He’s escalating quickly.”

“I’m thinking the worst-case scenario. We have search teams looking for her. I think this guy wants us to find his victims because that’s all part of the fun for him.”

Her phone chirped, announcing a text. She glanced at the screen but didn’t recognize the sender. It was a blank text with an attachment. Something told her that this was wrong. Still, she had to look. She opened up the attachment.

“Lily, what is it?” He took a step toward her.

Her heart thumped loudly in her chest. She looked down at the phone and saw the photo that had been on the news. But now it was marked with a bright red X. “Rex, you should look at this.” She handed him her phone. “I think I have the location for your latest victim.”

THREE

Lily went with Rex to the crime scene at Westlake Park while Jackson and Guy were busy at the house boarding up her living room window. Minutes after she received the text, Rex had contacted APD to check out Westlake Park. And unfortunately, her suspicion about the next victim had been right. Rex wasn’t crazy about the idea of her going to the crime scene, but she’d insisted and Rex didn’t feel safe leaving her with anyone else, so he had obtained approval for her to visit the scene. She wanted to be able to help in any way she could.

In the field, she'd seen some pretty heinous things. But nothing could've really prepared her for this crime scene. This killer was truly a psychopath. And the damage he'd inflicted on this innocent woman now lying lifeless in front of her was unthinkable.

She tried to push away the emotions bubbling up below the surface and focus on how she could be of help in catching this guy. Thankfully, due to her CIA training, she was able to compartmentalize her emotions.

Rex walked over to her. "The crime scene techs don't think she was murdered in the park. Just that this is where he dumped her body. But you need to come over here and take a look behind these bushes."

Following Rex, Lily prepared herself for what she was going to see. The victim's body had been found on the jogging trail so this had to be something else that lurked behind the bushes. She took a deep breath as he shone his flashlight. And that was when she saw it. Another photo. This time it was in color, and she recognized it as a picture she'd taken of a farmhouse about twenty minutes outside the city.

"I'm assuming this is your photograph?" Rex asked.

"Yes. But I don't get this, Rex. Why would he lead us to the location through pictures? Now that we know what he's doing, why wouldn't we just get an FBI team to stake out the farmhouse and catch him when he goes there? I know exactly where it is."

Rex shook his head. "Because that's not how this guy is going to operate. He did this once—using the picture as a means to tell us where the victim was. But he isn't stupid. He'll come up with another game. I just don't know what that is yet. What is clear to me is that he's formed a very unhealthy connection to you through all of this. The killer doesn't like missteps or failures. He can't let it go."

"Yes, I understand."

He reached out and touched her arm. "This all comes back to you, Lily. He's not going to let up, and unfortunately he's got you front and center."

"That's a place I do not want to be." She was used to being in the crosshairs but in a totally different type of deadly game. In this situation, she currently felt a severe lack of control, and that bothered her. She liked being in charge, not just sitting back and waiting for something bad to happen.

"I'm sorry you were put in this situation. But we need to talk about your personal security."

That was the last thing she wanted to talk about. She didn't want APD or the FBI providing her with protection. She could handle it herself. Especially since she knew she was a target. This wasn't a covert operation. This was an in-your-face threat. He was killing women and using her as a pawn in his game. She wasn't going to stand idly by and let him continue to use her.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it now, but we will need to at some point," he said. "We can't presume to understand how the mind of a sociopath like this operates."

She nodded. This man was trying to protect her. He was doing his job. It was just difficult for her to relinquish control. To trust someone. To provide full disclosure. After all, her life in the CIA had been all about withholding information. Her instincts told her that he was one of the good guys, but look how wrong she had been about James. How could she ever learn to trust again?

He gently took her arm and guided her away from the scene and back toward his SUV.

On the drive to her house, they rode in silence for a few minutes until he spoke. "You're from Atlanta, right?" he asked.

"Yeah. It was just me and my mom growing up. Times were tough, as you can imagine. She worked two jobs just to put food on the table. The house that I live in was my grandmother's. It was the only thing of value we had."

"Where is your mom now?"

"She died my freshman year of college. She had a lot of issues and got mixed up with the wrong guys. It led to her making bad decisions. But enough of my family drama. What about you?"

"I was born and raised in Georgia. My parents are still together. Not to say there weren't some really rough patches. But they're both really solid in their faith and decided to stick it out through the good and the bad."

Interesting, she thought. "And do you share their beliefs?"

"Yes. My faith is really important to me. Especially in my line of work. Sometimes God is all I have. He's the only one I can talk to about the awful things I experience."

Her heart hurt listening to him because there was a time when she'd felt the same way. Then everything had changed. God had taken everything away from her. And she still didn't know why.

"What about you?" he asked.

"That's a long story for another time."

"I get it." He pulled up in her driveway, and she was relieved that he wasn't pushing the topic right now.

She stepped out of the SUV and walked up her front porch steps. Guy's car was in the driveway. The living room window was boarded up. Grace started barking. "She knows we're home. It looks as if the guys are still here," she said.

"Good," he said. "If the killer is watching, it's good for him to know that you have a tight circle of friends. And you're about to have the FBI protecting you, as well."

They walked into the house and Grace greeted them warmly. They found Jackson and Guy sitting in the living room. The two of them were polar opposites. Jackson was tall with dark hair and eyes, while Guy was shorter with blond hair and blue eyes. But the one thing they had in common was their loyalty to her. She'd known Guy since eighth grade when he'd moved into town. He was a good man who was currently working his way through school to be an EMT.

"Thank you both for what you did with the window."

"You're not safe here by yourself, Lily," Jackson said. He was always very protective of her. Like the big brother she never had.

"I'm glad you're concerned," Rex said. "We are, too, and will be providing Lily with FBI protection."

"Will you be taking the lead?" Jackson asked.

"If I have it my way, then yes. There are a lot of moving parts, but Lily's security is my priority."

"Well, I'm glad she won't be left alone again for some psycho to attack her," Guy said, his blue eyes bright with frustration.

"You two should get home," Lily said. "I've already taken too much time out of your night."

"We're here for you if you need us," Jackson said.

"Jackson's right, Lily. Whatever you need," Guy added.

She followed them to the door and gave them both hugs. She was fortunate to have them in her life right now.

Grace barked and Lily leaned down and gave her some rubs. "I know, girl. There's a lot going on around here right now. But everything's going to be okay."

"Come on into the kitchen." She motioned for Rex to take a seat at the kitchen table. "Would you like something to drink? I could make coffee."

"To be honest, coffee sounds amazing right now. I can't see sleep in my future anytime soon."

She took the coffee out of the cabinet and put on a pot before sitting down across from him. "I've been thinking about the farmhouse photo."

"What about it?"

"I wasn't alone the day I went out there. Alison came with me."

"What else do you remember about that day? Anything at all, even if it seems like a minute detail, could be important."

Her head started to pound and the coffee couldn't brew fast enough. "Just that Alison tagged along. We thought it would be fun and we actually brought Grace, too, and made an afternoon of it."

After we got done there, Alison went home so she could get ready for a client meeting and Grace and I went to the dog park.”

“Do you remember talking to anyone at the dog park? Or did you notice anyone on the periphery, watching you play with Grace?” Rex asked, his brows drawn together.

Racking her brain for useful details but coming up empty, she sighed. “No. Nothing stands out in my memory.”

“A killer fitting this profile would like to terrorize. He’s probably been watching you for a while. He has to handpick his victims and make sure they fit his list of characteristics.”

Lily reached down for Grace, who licked her hand. “We’ve got to stop this guy. I don’t like being attacked in my own home.”

“If only it were that simple.”

She stood up and got two large mugs out of the cabinet. “How do you like your coffee?”

“Just sugar, if you have it.”

She poured them both a cup and put his in front of him along with the sugar and a spoon. She drank hers black. “We have to outmaneuver him. Figure out what his next move would be. Isn’t that what guys like you at the FBI do?”

“It is, but like I said, we only have so much to work with. We’ve got video surveillance set up here now, but he has to know that. He probably won’t be so bold as to come back to your house. He knows we’re watching.”

She took a big sip of coffee, letting the warmth flow through her. “You’re giving him a lot of credit.”

“Serial killers are often highly intelligent. Never underestimate the enemy, Lily. I know this is a totally different world for you.”

Actually, he had no idea who she really was or what she was capable of. But her CIA past had nothing to do with the serial killer, and thinking about it brought her down. It was a dark hole that threatened to consume her if she let it. It was better to face this issue as Lily Parker, photographer, rather than Lily Parker, CIA operative. “I’m not underestimating, but I think we have to try to get out ahead of him.”

He crossed his arms. “I’m sorry, but I just have to say something.”

“All right.” She eyed him warily.

“Something is off with you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me? Maybe it’s the fact that I was attacked in my home and then someone threw a brick through my window.”

“But that’s just it. You’ve been through some terribly traumatic events, but you don’t act like how I would think someone in your position should act under the circumstances.”

She laughed. “And how exactly is that? What am I doing wrong?”

“It’s not that you’re doing anything wrong, but like I said before, you’re holding back on me. The guns, the strategies, your reaction. You need to tell me what it is that I don’t know. Because even if you think it has nothing to do with the attacks, you could be wrong.”

“Believe me, I’m not withholding anything from you that could be helpful for the investigation.”

“Which means you are withholding something.”

“Don’t we all have secrets in our past?”

He didn’t respond immediately. “Yes, but some secrets are much more dangerous than others. I did a little digging on you. You haven’t lived in Atlanta your whole life.”

“No. I went away for college and then worked a few years in Virginia before coming back home. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“And what kind of work did you do after you graduated college?”

It was time to try to deflect. “What does this have to do with the case?”

“It’s not meant to be a trick question.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

He frowned. “But you still haven’t answered the question.”

This guy was FBI. If he put in the right calls and pulled a few strings her past would be revealed. When she’d been working for the CIA, her cover was as a state department employee. Even if that was all he found out, he’d have questions about any government work she may have done. If he was persistent enough, he’d discover the truth one way or the other. The question was whether she wanted him to hear it from her or get the Agency’s version of events.

He didn’t break eye contact with her. “Because what if there’s a missing piece of your past that somehow relates to the killer or potential future victims?”

“It’s just not so cut-and-dried.”

He leaned forward in his seat. “Lily, if you were doing something that might not have been on the proper side of the law, then it’s even more important that you come clean. I’m not asking any of these questions to get you in trouble. I’m only trying to protect you and other potential targets out there.”

She fought to keep any reaction from her face. “It’s not illegal. I can promise you that.”

“Well, if it’s not illegal, then why can’t you just tell me so we can move forward?” He took a breath. “Is it a profession that you’re embarrassed of?”

She hesitated for a moment, and he latched on to it, mistakenly thinking that he’d stumbled onto something.

“Believe me, Lily, there’s no shame in working odd jobs to make ends meet after college.”

“I think I’ve led you down a completely wrong path here.” What should she do?

“You need to come clean with me, Lily. Please.”

It was the please that got her, along with his sincere brown eyes. She took a deep breath. He was right. If there was even a small chance that there was a CIA connection to all of this, she had to tell him. Lives were literally on the line. “Are you really sure you need to know?”

He nodded. “Yes, I really need to know everything you can tell me.”

“Okay, then. There’s a reason I didn’t want the news to put out a story connecting me to the killer. I don’t want anyone to know I live here and what I do now.”

“Why?”

“Because I used to work for the CIA.”

* * *

Rex must be delusional because he thought that Lily had just said something that wasn’t possible. “Say that again?”

“The Central Intelligence Agency. I’m sure you’re very familiar with it.”

He had known some things about her didn’t add up, but being a spy wasn’t exactly what he had in mind. Or maybe she wasn’t a spy. Maybe she’d had a desk job. “And what did you do for the CIA?”

Her blue eyes were bright as she fixed her gaze on him. “My missions were classified. As a special agent with the FBI, I’m sure you can very well appreciate the sensitivity here. But I worked in the field.”

“How could you not think your career as a CIA agent was relevant to this investigation?”

“The guy clearly isn’t going after me because of my CIA background. My CIA life is over. It’s been over.”

“I didn’t say that the killer was someone in the CIA, but that expands the circle of connections you have in a unique way that we have to consider. How long have you been out?”

“Nine months.”

“That’s not that long, Lily. Why did you leave?”

“I’ve already said enough for now. I really don’t want to talk about the past anymore. I want to figure out how to catch this guy. If we can leverage my skills to do it, then I’m all for it. But what I’m not going to do is give you a play-by-play of my career at the CIA, not to mention the fact that I can’t.”

Lily was hiding even more than he had imagined. And he noticed something else. For the first time he saw pain in her eyes. Something bad had happened to her while she was at the CIA, and she didn't want to talk about it or perhaps couldn't. "Can you at least tell me what geographic regions of the world you worked?"

"Primarily Europe. I'm fluent in both French and German."

He was impressed. This woman was not only smart, beautiful and tenacious—she was dangerous. He'd heard many stories about field operatives with the CIA. They were tough and even deadly when they had to be. "We can't rule out that the killer is somehow connected to someone you knew while at the CIA, or that there's a possible link between someone in your CIA past and the other victims."

"Do you realize how many people I came into contact with at the Agency? That would be quite an expansive list spanning the entire world. I realize you want to be thorough, but I doubt that anyone I dealt with knows any of the victims." She let out a breath.

"You're probably right about that point, but we can't discount the possibility that there could be a common link between the victims. So I'm still going to need names of people you associated with."

"All right. I'll make a list."

"And you aren't going to like my next question, either, but I have to ask it."

"Go ahead."

"Are you currently seeing anyone?"

"You mean like a boyfriend?"

"Yes," he replied.

She looked down at her coffee cup. "No. There's no one."

"What about your exes? I'll need to run them down, starting with the most recent."

"The list is pretty short."

"Still, I'll need it."

"Well, there's only been one boyfriend of any significance."

He nodded. "And what's his name?"

"James Dexter." She stood up, poured more coffee and handed him back his cup.

"I'll run him down just to make sure he's in the clear and isn't connected in any way to the other victims."

"I'm afraid that's not going to be possible."

"Why not?"

"He's dead," she said quietly.

He wasn't expecting that answer. He reached out and touched her hand. "I'm so sorry, Lily. What happened?"

Lily looked up at him as a single tear fell down her cheek. "I killed him."

FOUR

"Did you just say that you killed him? As in literally?" Rex looked into the big blue eyes of the woman in front of him. And even though she said she'd worked for the CIA, she definitely didn't seem like a cold-blooded killer to him.

"I had no choice but to take action against James," she said, barely audible.

"Tell me what happened." His heart pounded as he waited to hear her explain.

"It's a long story." She looked away and then took a sip of coffee. She wiped the single large tear from her cheek, and thankfully, no more tears fell.

It killed him to watch a woman cry. He hated to push her to talk, but he had to explore every avenue when it came to his investigation. "I've got the time. I think I need to hear this."

She nodded. "On my last mission with the Agency, I found out that James was working both sides. Basically, a double agent."

This was only getting worse. He couldn't help but feel sorry for her. She'd obviously gone through a lot. "So James was a traitor."

"Exactly. And if you would've asked me to pick out someone on our team who was capable of selling this country out, he would've been the last one on my list. He was always so loyal, or so I thought. A real team player who would go the extra mile to help anyone who needed it. Now I can see that his attentiveness was really just opportunism, which allowed him to gain information that he could exchange for money."

"That's the way people like that work, Lily. They are master manipulators. That's how they can get away with it for so long. The FBI also has its fair share of traitors. It makes me sick."

"Well, imagine how it made me feel," she said in a raspy voice. "This was my boyfriend. Someone I thought I was potentially going to marry. The man I saw myself spending my entire life with. I don't think I have to spell out how much that hurt me."

"What did the Agency think about your relationship?"

She shrugged. "We tried to keep it quiet. But I think they knew and didn't care. There are a lot of romantic relationships that occur within the CIA, especially among field agents. We were both highly effective operatives. The most important thing from the Agency's perspective was that we were getting the job done. We both had stellar reviews and were climbing up the ladder. There was even talk about one of us being promoted to the third in command at one of the embassy hot spots. Which would've been a feat for someone our age. James was only two years older than me."

"So what happened on this last mission?"

"James wasn't even supposed to be there. Not from the CIA side anyway. I was working by myself. I can't go into the operational details of the mission because that's still classified."

"I understand."

"But I was meeting with one of my assets, and James showed up. He killed the person right there on the spot before I could get the critical information that I needed from them. It was in that moment that I knew he was working both sides. The realization hit me like a sledgehammer. I'll never forget that exact moment as long as I live. Talk about life changing."

"So you killed him in self-defense," he said softly.

She nodded. "I could say it's the hardest thing I've ever done, but honestly in that moment it was a pure survival reflex. I knew he was about to pull the trigger. He'd just killed my asset, and then he turned and pointed the gun at me. So I did the only thing I could do. I got the shot off before he could shoot me first."

He reached out and grabbed her hand. "Lily, no one should have to go through something like that."

"It was the lowest point of my life. Then I had to go back to the Agency and explain the entire situation. Literally over and over again. I was polygraphed three times by three different examiners. I was put on leave during the internal investigation. All of James's subterfuge came out, but it was a long and difficult process. And because of our relationship and the way things ended, I was also considered a security risk. So they had to make absolutely sure that I wasn't a double agent, too."

"I'm so sorry."

"At the end of the day, my name was completely cleared. But the damage was already done as far as I was concerned. I never went back to work, even after they told me I could. I left the Agency and moved here to my hometown. Started my photography business. A totally new and fresh start doing something radically different."

He had never met anyone like Lily before. Most people would've crumbled under the pressure and stress of such an ordeal, but she'd chosen to go after another dream instead. "That was a very brave move."

She laughed. "Some would call it more cowardly than brave. I did run away from my troubles. Instead of continuing with my CIA career, I just cut my losses and left it all."

“No, you made the best decision you could make for yourself at the time. You had to deal with James’s betrayal, not only as a CIA agent but also on a personal level. Those things don’t just resolve themselves easily. No one could question your motives for leaving.”

“It sounds as if you speak from experience.”

“Well, it was nothing like what you went through, but I have been betrayed before by someone I cared for.” He paused. This wasn’t the time to talk about the problems of his past. He wanted to focus on her. “But enough about me. I appreciate you telling me all of this. I know it wasn’t easy, but now I have a better understanding of your background and all you’ve dealt with as you transitioned from the Agency to your new life here in Atlanta.”

She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. “And now you can see why I don’t want to be in the news. There are people who would want to harm me if they knew I was an easy target sitting here in Atlanta.”

“You mean foreign agents?”

“Yes. I made a lot of friends while on the inside, but I made my share of enemies, too. It’s all part of the job. Also, it’s possible that the people James worked for would try to come after me if they knew where I lived. I’m not even sure exactly who he reported to. Just that it was a foreign government.”

“Which one?”

“I can’t say. And honestly, I’m not even a hundred percent certain myself, although I do have my theories.”

He was frustrated by all of the security clearance issues, but he understood protocol.

“I just don’t want any extra attention put on me,” she said. “It’s always best for former operatives to live a low-profile life, at least for a few years. Put some time in between themselves and the missions. Even if this weren’t happening, I’d still want to lie low. It’s one of the reasons I chose photography—in addition to really enjoying it.”

“I totally agree. There’s enough of a threat against you already without adding enemies from your CIA past. Even if the chance of any of them finding you and acting on it is small, there’s no reason to risk it unnecessarily.”

“I used many different aliases over the years. But I didn’t radically change my appearance for most jobs. That’s why I’m trying to keep my actual photo out of the news.”

“I’ll do my best. You know how reporters are, but we’ll try to prevent any leaks.”

“And you can see why I don’t think this killer has anything to do with my time at the Agency. If one of my enemies wanted me dead, they’d shoot to kill. Put a hit out on me. End of story. This dramatic game of cat and mouse is something very different. It’s not tradecraft, I can tell you that much.”

“I would tend to agree with you.” He finished up his coffee and set down the empty cup. “What about your past before the CIA? Boyfriends from high school or college? Even if they weren’t as serious as James, I’d like to be able to run them down, too, and check their connections to the other victims.”

Her cheeks flushed pink, and she shook her head. “It’s kind of embarrassing, but I was what you would call a late bloomer. I didn’t really date at all. I was so focused on school, and then after college I went straight to the CIA.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” he said.

“How do you think the killer found me?”

“It would be all speculation at this point. But it could’ve been something as simple as him seeing you out and about in your daily life. He targeted you because you met his checklist of qualifications. Once he’d honed in on his type and decided to kill women who fit his profile, there was nothing you could do.”

“But then he tried to kill me and failed.”

“Exactly. Which made this personal for him. He didn’t like being foiled by a woman. Lily, now you’re a special target to him because he can’t have a loose end, and he definitely can’t have failure. He’s probably a perfectionist with OCD tendencies. All of those characteristics get amplified in the mind of a serial killer to become a lethal combination.”

Her eyes narrowed. “We’ll catch him.”

“I don’t know if I like the sound of we. The FBI’s priority is to catch this guy, and right now my priority is to keep you safe. You aren’t actually responsible for finding him.”

“I appreciate that. But we can’t pretend that I’m a regular victim here. I think it helps that I have a lot of experience keeping myself safe.” She smiled for the first time since this conversation started. He couldn’t help but smile, too.

“Tell me more about your friends.”

“Alison Cruz and I have known each other since second grade. She’s my best friend. She has an interior design business and has an amazing eye for decorating. I met Jackson Bray in sixth grade and Guy Randolph in eighth grade.”

“What do the guys do for a living?”

“Jackson works in marketing for a technology company, and Guy is going to school to be an EMT. The four of us were a very close-knit group. We all kind of went our separate ways for college or jobs. Alison and Jackson left Atlanta to go to school in Athens at the University of Georgia. But they moved back after graduation. When I came back it was as if we all picked up where we left off.”

“I’d like to talk to them individually.”

“I’m sure they’ll help in any way they can. You could probably tell that the guys are very protective of me.”

Grace barked and he looked down at his watch. “It’s getting late, but I’m not leaving you alone. I know we haven’t discussed all the logistics, but as far as I’m concerned, you need 24/7 protective detail. Even if it’s not likely that the killer would come back to your house, I’m not willing to take that type of risk. The downside is just too high.”

“I’m not saying I like it, but I get where you’re coming from. I have a guest room down here on the first floor across from my darkroom that you or anyone else from your team is welcome to use.”

“Thank you, Lily. Get some rest. Nothing is going to happen to you on my watch.” And he was dead serious about that.

* * *

The next morning Lily couldn’t believe she had opened up to Rex about what had happened with James. She hadn’t told anyone about it other than the people she had to talk to at the Agency, including the psychologist she’d been ordered to visit. That session had been particularly painful. Mainly because she had absolutely zero interest in opening up to the person sitting in the chair, trying to get inside her head. Trying to break her down before the Agency was going to attempt to put her back together.

She headed downstairs with Grace, ready to take her for a walk. Rex was sitting at her kitchen table drinking coffee.

“Good morning,” he said. “How did you sleep?”

“Considering everything going on, I think I slept pretty decent. I need to take Grace on a walk.”

He stood up from the kitchen chair. “You know I’m coming with you.”

“I figured you’d say that.”

The doorbell rang and Grace started barking. “It’s okay, Grace.” She started walking toward the door and Rex grabbed her arm.

“Let me see who that is,” he said.

She could already tell she wasn’t going to adjust well to her new bodyguard. She was so accustomed to fighting her own battles. Taking care of herself. Watching her own back. It felt strange to have someone there doing that for her.

But, as directed, she remained standing in the kitchen while Rex went to the door. She heard male voices.

Derrick and Sean walked in with Rex. Both men were tall and presented themselves with confidence. She surmised that Sean was a few years younger than Derrick and fairly new to the job. He wore his brown hair cut shorter than Derrick's.

"Hey, guys," she said.

"We're sorry about all of this," Derrick said. He reached down and gave Grace a hearty pat on the rump.

"It's not your fault that there's a killer out there."

"Not just any killer," Sean said. "A serial killer with your name on his hit list." His brown eyes didn't show any sign of levity.

"Yeah, we were talking about that just last night," Rex added.

"What brings you to the house?" she asked.

"We wanted to regroup with Rex. The FBI is gathering additional resources to assist in the investigation, since Rex volunteered to take over your security in addition to working the case."

"Have there been any new developments since last night?" she asked.

"Thankfully, no," Derrick said. "We don't know how long this guy's cooling-off period is going to be. But there's a high likelihood that he will contact you again. Also, have you thought about what the photo he left at the last scene could mean? The one of the farmhouse?" Derrick asked.

"I thought about it a lot while I was trying to fall asleep last night, and I have no idea what he's trying to say with that picture. There's no special significance that I can think of."

"To you, maybe," Rex said. "But in the mind of a serial killer it could have meant something."

"Sorry to interrupt this discussion, guys, but I really need to walk Grace." Her sweet dog was waiting patiently, but she knew that Grace would need to go.

"Of course," Derrick said. "We'll wait here until you folks get back."

She leashed Grace up and walked out the front door with Rex right by her side. He was in full FBI alert mode. She didn't really think that she was in danger in broad daylight in the middle of her neighborhood. But it was Rex's job to be cautious and she appreciated that.

They were only about halfway down the street when they saw Alison and Jackson approaching them. "They were probably coming over to the house to check on me. Alison lives just down the block and Jackson is only an additional block away."

Grace excitedly tugged on her leash to greet them as they quickly approached.

"We were worried about you," Alison said. "I heard all about Jackson and Guy boarding up your window after it was smashed in. That's horrific. You could've really been hurt, Lily."

"I'm fine though, Alison. Just a few cuts from making my way through the glass. And, thankfully, Grace was outside."

"We saw on the news that they are no closer to catching this guy," Jackson frowned. "Or at least that's what they're reporting. The media is having a field day with this. Saying that this guy could turn out to be the deadliest killer that Atlanta has ever seen. Is that true?"

"I'm not going to attempt to minimize the threat here. We're adding more FBI resources, plus we have Atlanta police working the case, too," Rex said. "Bringing the killer to justice is a top priority for FBI and local law enforcement."

Alison reached out and touched her arm. "And what about you, Lily? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to keep on living my life and trying to help with this case any way I can." Grace tugged and Lily continued walking with her friends and Rex.

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