

Chapter One

Detective Reid Sylver stepped inside her captain's office and tossed him an oatmeal muffin. He caught it, one-handed, and set it on a paper plate. She pulled up a chair on the other side of his desk and took a swig from the mug of coffee he'd prepared for her—black, with just a pinch of cinnamon.

“Was beginning to think you wouldn't show,” Cap said without looking up as he peeled the paper from his muffin.

Reid glanced at the clock on the wall behind his desk: 4:38 a.m. Eight minutes late for their breakfast and workout routine was a new record for her. “Bakery opened late,” she lied. The owner of the hottest bakery in Boston always handed her a bag with two oatmeal muffins as she passed on her morning walk to work. She returned the favor by making sure his car never got towed from the one-way street it was illegally parked on.

Chewing, she took one last look around the captain's office before finally meeting his gaze. They held eye contact for long seconds in silence.

Reid had briefly considered not showing up at all this morning, but she didn't roll like that. Cap deserved better.

“Should I congratulate you or offer my condolences?” he asked, breaking the moment.

She threw a glance at Mugshot, who cocked his head and returned her gaze from his dog bed in the corner, an old tennis ball lodged firmly in his mouth. “He worked hard for that title,” she said proudly. They'd spent the weekend competing in Petaluma, California. Mug had won first place in the Ugliest Dog Contest.

“Had a feeling the votes might swing in your favor.” He opened a drawer, withdrew a red

gift bag, and slid it across the desk.

“What’s this?”

“Just open it.” He set a second gift bag on the floor and called Mug over.

Reid reached inside and pulled out a gray sweatshirt. ‘I’m with ugly’ was stitched in navy blue across the front. She watched as Cap slid a sweatshirt over Mug’s head that read: ‘Ugly and damn proud.’ He worked Mug’s front paws into the small holes provided for a perfect fit, digging into the gift bag again to hand Mug a new tennis ball.

Mug spit out the old tennis ball and trotted over with the new one. He set the ball in her lap and gazed up expectantly with his one remaining eye. Some asshole biker had set him on fire as a pup. Ironically enough, Mug’s breeding papers listed him as pick of the litter—a show-quality brindle Bull Mastiff. But nobody in their right mind would believe that now because he was a wrinkly, scarred, nearly-furless mess. His ears were burnt to nubs. One eye was sunken in and sealed shut. Damaged beyond repair by the flames, they’d had no choice but to remove it.

“We’ll play fetch later,” she promised. “Thanks, Cap.” Finished with her muffin, she stood and extended her hand across the desk, her vision blurred by tears.

Cap stood from his chair and returned the gesture with the calloused grip of a hardworking cop. “Catch up with you later, Sylver.”

With Mug on her heels, she walked to the door. From this point forward, Reid would be heading to the gym alone.

Cap spoke up behind her, “You really think there’s something on the other side?”

“I don’t *think*, sir.” She turned to face him. “I *know*.”

He studied her. “All these years, and we’ve never really talked about what you do. I didn’t want to know the details because, well, it scares the hell out of me.” He slid his hands in

his pockets, shrugged, and looked at the floor. "I'm real sorry about that."

"No need to apologize, Cap."

"You *deserve* an apology. I just"—he looked her square in the eye—"I just want you to know I think what you do is amazing. Gift or no gift, you're one hell of a detective, Sylver. Don't ever forget that."

All she could manage was a nod as she stepped out from his office and shut the door.

Mug followed her to the gym, happily chewing his new tennis ball as he kept pace on the treadmill beside her. They'd just finished mile three when the sound of a gunshot cracked like a whip through the air. She powered down both treadmills, withdrew her earbuds, and wiped the sweat from her face with the towel around her neck.

This was the part she was dreading the most. No way around it. Someone had to find the captain and call it in. As a homicide detective, she'd certainly seen more than her fair share of bodies. But this one was personal.

She'd been working under the captain's leadership for thirteen years. It hadn't taken him long to figure out something was up when she breezed through her own cases and then dug up cold cases, solving those in record time, too. She thought back to the day he'd called her into his office, closed the door firmly behind her, and instructed her to take a seat...

"What the hell is going on here, Sylver?" he asked.

"Boyle's being a whiney little dickwad, Cap."

He set his hands on his hips, towering above her. "Did you just use 'dickwad' to describe a fellow detective to your commanding officer?"

"I could throw out some alternative descriptions if you want," she said, unapologetic.

"Dickwad is the only G-rated word I could come up with on short notice."

Shaking his head, Cap took a seat behind his desk. He leaned back in his leather chair and pierced her with a look of disapproval, bewilderment, and just a hint of admiration—an expression with which she was already well acquainted. He finally shook his head and chuckled, surprising her. “Off the record, I don’t disagree with your assessment of said dickwad.”

Boyle had held the record for cases solved six years in a row. She’d effectively ousted him from his throne. Now his nose was out of joint, and he was stomping around like an angry toddler.

“I’ve read your reports, Sylver. Things just aren’t adding up. I need you to be frank with me. How the hell are you solving these cases?”

“What’s on the line, sir?”

“Your ass. My ass.” He threw his hands up in frustration. “The communal ass of this department.”

She thought for a long moment before warning him, “You won’t like it.”

“Does it involve you being corrupt?”

She shook her head.

“Then lay it on me.”

She sighed. “I can talk to the dead, Cap.”

He laughed heartily and slapped his desk.

But she said nothing more and looked away, embarrassed.

He stopped laughing. The room was quiet, save for the ticking clock behind his desk.

“Jesus Christ. You’re not joking, are you?”

“I’ll hand in my resignation first thing tomorrow,” she said, standing. Conversations like this would only lead to mandatory sessions with the department shrink. She refused to go down

that road.

“Just hold on a minute.” Cap ran a hand over his face. “I’m not done with you yet, Sylver. Sit down.”

She did.

“So, you’re telling me...”

“I can talk to dead people,” she finished for him. “Spirits. Ghosts. Apparitions. Whatever you want to call them.”

“Christ. Really?”

“Really.” She watched as he struggled to come to terms with this new information. She made a point of never telling anyone about her gift. She knew from experience it changed the way people looked at her. “By the way, your mom says you should never use the Lord’s name in vain.”

The captain narrowed his eyes. “You could’ve just pulled that out of your ass.”

“She also wants you to know she’s grateful you’ve kept her rose bush alive all this time. She loves the roses you leave at her grave every year.”

“Christ almighty.” The captain glanced at the ceiling. “Sorry, Ma.” He stood and paced the length of the room before turning to her. “How long’s this been going on?”

“As long as I can remember.”

“So, what, you interview a homicide victim, and they tell you who killed them and where to find the evidence?”

She nodded. That was pretty much the gist of it.

“Do you actually see them when they talk to you?”

She nodded again. “They look just like regular people. The only difference is—”

He held up his hand. "Forget it. I don't want to know." He paced the room some more, visibly stressed. "You can't breathe a word of this to anyone."

"Want me to cancel the press release I had scheduled for this afternoon?"

He stood in front of her, leaned against the front of his desk, and crossed his arms. "We need to find a way to plug up the holes in your reports before someone else figures this out."

"We?" she said, taken aback. "As in...you and me?"

"I'll keep you on with Homicide. You keep...doing whatever it is you do. We'll meet here every morning before shift and write your reports together. I'll help you cover your tracks."

She hesitated. "What's the catch?"

"No talk about anything...otherworldly."

Sensing there was more, she waited for him to go on.

"After we're finished dotting our i's and crossing our t's, we'll hit the gym. You can help me get back in shape." He patted his ample gut. "Wife's on a health kick and wants me to lose some weight."

Reid narrowed her eyes. "That's it?" she asked, suspicious.

"That's it."

She stood. They shook hands to seal the deal. As she turned to leave, Cap called out behind her, "Zero four thirty. Sharp."

"But, Cap, shift doesn't start 'til seven."

"Those are the terms." He returned to his leather chair. "Take it or leave it."

And that was how thirteen years of muffins, cinnamon coffee, and workouts was born—the best mornings of her life, by far. When Cap revealed he'd been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor and that his neurological demise was imminent, he'd informed her of his plan to take

his own life. He couldn't bring himself to do it at home or in his car—too painful a reminder for his wife. Sitting behind the desk from which he'd supervised countless detectives for nineteen years was where he wanted to be during his final moments.

She swallowed the lump in her throat as she realized her only friend in the world was now gone. He was the first person—the only person, ever, in her life—to have her back.

Reid left Mug in the gym and then waited by Cap's side until the medics arrived.

It was obvious the captain was gone. Out of protocol, the medic felt for a pulse, shook his head, and motioned to the medical examiner.

The Chief ME stepped inside and locked eyes on Reid. They'd sent the big gun for this one. No one messed around when it involved the death of a cop. "You found him?" Fred asked.

She nodded.

"Did he leave a note? Anything like that?"

"None that I found."

"You see him this morning?"

She nodded again. "We usually work out together. Said he wasn't feeling well, that he'd catch up with me later." Always best to stick with as much of the truth as possible.

Fred shook his head. She knew he and the captain went back a long time. His sadness was palpable. "Sorry you had to see him like this, Sylver."

"You, too, Fred." She cast one last look at the captain. "Take good care of him, huh?"

"Will do."

With a heavy feeling in her chest, she retrieved Mug from the gym, exited through the rear of the building, and drove home in an unmarked car. She set her duffel on the kitchen table, unzipped it, and stared at the two red gift bags inside.

Sensing her grief, Mug leaned against her leg in his characteristic show of support. She'd been wrong to think she'd lost her only friend. Mug was still here. She reached out to give him a reassuring pat on the back. Ever her faithful companion, he was her rock in life.

Reid slipped the sweatshirt over her head and grabbed a dry tennis ball from a bin near the back door. She played a long game of fetch with Mug in the backyard as a cold November breeze dried her tears.

Reid's cell vibrated noisily on the nightstand. Tennis ball in mouth, Mug pawed at her from his place on the bed until she leaned over and picked it up. "Sylver," she answered, yawning.

"You coming in today or what?" Boyle asked.

She sat up and threw a glance at the bedside clock: 5:22 a.m. "What the hell, Boyle? Why're you calling me so damn early?"

"Because nobody's seen you in over a week. Better get your ass in here. Today."

She rubbed her temples, trying in vain to stave off the imminent hangover. "Or what?"

"Or you'll have the entire squad running lights and sirens to your house and breaking down your door."

Shit. She hung up on Boyle without another word.

Reid gazed longingly at the empty beer bottles on her nightstand. Looked like her plans with Sam Adams would have to be postponed until tonight.

She swung her feet over the side of the bed, waited until the room stopped spinning, and

headed to the shower.

Officer London Gold opened the closet door and took one last look at herself in the full-length mirror. Her long navy-blue blazer, heather gray scoop-neck tee, charcoal slacks, and navy square-heel boots were the very definition of business casual. This was the big day. Everything needed to be perfect.

She reached behind her neck and fastened a gold chain with a small cross pendant—the one her parents gave her for her first communion. Even though she hadn't seen her parents in over a decade—their choice, not hers—she wore this necklace, faithfully, every day. Part of her was sad they weren't here to celebrate with her. Someday, maybe they'd change their minds.

With eight years under her belt as a patrol officer, she'd finally been promoted to detective. The timing couldn't be better. A spot had just opened up in Homicide.

Becoming a homicide detective had been her dream since she could remember. But she was even more excited about the opportunity to learn from Reid Sylver. The woman was legendary. Not a single homicide case that crossed her desk in the last thirteen-and-a-half years had gone unsolved. Those statistics were simply unheard of.

Reid was confident, intelligent, beautiful, and—if London's gaydar was functioning properly—gay.

London's heart picked up speed at the thought of spending her first few months as a detective with this incredible woman. Rubbing the cross between her fingers, she shook her head and sighed. *Don't mess this one up, London. Keep your crush in check.*

Chapter Two

Armed with her favorite travel mug, Red Sox ball cap, and the darkest pair of sunglasses she could find, Reid stepped off the elevator and made a beeline for her desk. The nation's Ugliest Dog followed at her heels. With any luck, no one would even notice they were there.

"Hey, guys!" Marino bellowed. "Look what the dog dragged in."

"What's with the sunglasses, Sylver? Tie one on last night?" Boggs winked.

"We can make these lights a little brighter if you want," Garcia said, jumping on the bandwagon.

"Talk a lot louder, too," O'Leary added at a volume that made her wince and wish she had earplugs.

"Fess up, boys." Reid calmly set her mug on the desk, took a seat, and spun around in her swivel chair to face the barrage of comedic detectives. "You missed me."

"Right." Marino scowled. "Missed you like bad B.O."

"Yeah." Boggs laughed and gave Marino a high five. "Missed you like a plumber's ass crack."

"Like a kick in the nuts," Garcia pitched in.

Everyone looked at O'Leary and waited as he crossed his arms and stared at the floor in thought. Long seconds ticked by.

O'Leary finally looked up. "We missed you like a maggot-riddled cadaver on a hot summer day," he said, beaming and clearly proud of himself.

No one said a word as they continued to stare at O'Leary.

"What?" O'Leary shrugged. "I've been taking that creative writing class, you guys."

C'mon. That was the best one!"

Undoubtedly, word had spread that she'd found the captain's body. She'd been working alongside these detectives for over a decade. Perverted as it was, this was their version of a warm welcome back. The more you were razzed, the higher their respect for you. She shook her head. Like it or not, this was the world she lived in.

Reid slid open her desk drawer and reached inside for a new tennis ball. Only five balls left. She'd have to replenish her stock soon. She picked up her trashcan and held it under Mug's chin.

He looked at her suspiciously.

"I'll give you a new one," she assured him.

With several more chews for good measure, he spit out the old ball and accepted the new one.

Boyle stepped out from the captain's office. "Sylver, a word?"

What the hell was Boyle doing in *there*? She took a swig of coffee, stood, and made her way across the room.

With Mug at her side, she stepped inside the captain's office. Boyle closed the door behind them. The smell of fresh paint slapped her in the face and made her hangover-induced nausea swell to seismic proportions. A stark contrast to the white walls that had yellowed with age, Cap's office was now a distinguished and very masculine dark-blue.

She looked around, stunned. Everything was different. New desk, new chairs, new leather couch, new cherry-wood file cabinet. Even the wood floors looked different. She'd never seen them so...*shiny*.

The only two things that remained the same were the clock and Mug's dog bed in the far

corner of the room—Boyle’s way of saying that she and Mug belonged here. The realization hit her hard. She was thankful for the dark glasses as her vision clouded.

Boyle took a seat behind the desk as Reid reached forward to pick up the new nameplate: ‘Lt. Adam Boyle.’

He watched her as she studied it. “Cap hounded me for years to take the exam. I finally did”—he shrugged—“just to shut him up.”

Reid nodded but said nothing. She couldn’t bring herself to speak just yet.

“Listen, Sylver. I’m not claiming I can fill Cap’s shoes—”

“Good. Because you can’t.” She felt a surge of righteous anger.

He fell silent and studied her once again.

The concern in his expression pissed her off even more. “Jesus, Boyle. What’s done is done. So, if you’re finished with this kumbaya shit”—she stood—“I have cases to solve.”

“I know what Cap asked you to do,” Boyle said gently. “He told me.”

Shocked into silence, she sat back down.

“That’s why I took the exam. Cap wanted me to step in for him, when the time came.”

Cap’s old walnut clock ticked in the resultant quiet. Curiosity got the best of her. “What else did he say?”

“Said you’re the best detective he ever knew. Made me swear I’d have your back, no matter what.”

“And?” she asked suspiciously, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Made me promise to quit smoking. Said to tell you I’m taking his place for the morning workouts.”

She laughed. Like *that* would ever happen. Boyle had been smoking a pack a day for as

long as she'd known him.

He shrugged out of his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeve to show her the nicotine patch on his arm. "Oh, and I like oatmeal muffins just fine," he added with a knowing smile.

Damn. She wasn't even that crazy about Boyle. "Fine. Be here at six a.m. tomorrow."

"He told me you'd try that. Schedule stays the same. See you at zero four thirty. Sharp."

"But shift doesn't start 'til seven."

"Rules are rules, Sylver. I'm not about to go back on my word to a dead man."

"Fine." *Damn you, Cap.* "But don't come crying to me if you keel over from a heart attack after the first lap."

Boyle called Mug over, pointed to a stainless-steel dual-compartment trashcan, and stomped on one of the pedals. The lid on the left side popped up, revealing a treasure trove of bright-yellow tennis balls. "Anytime you need a new one, buddy, you just come in here and help yourself." He showed Mug how to step on the pedal with his paw. "And if you run out, there's always a backup supply." When Boyle stomped on the right-side pedal, the lid lifted to reveal an equally well-stocked compartment.

Prancing in place excitedly, Mug poked his head inside, plucked a tennis ball from the lot with his mouth, and hurried over to deposit it in Reid's hand. He promptly returned to the trash can, stepped on the pedal like a pro, and reached in for seconds.

Six years ago, Boyle had taken an instant liking to Mug. If Reid hadn't adopted him, she knew Boyle would have.

She and Boyle had been on their way back to the precinct when an unspeakable crime unfolded at the corner of Mass Ave and Melnea Cass. They'd watched from afar as a heavysset man with a tattooed head and long beard poured gasoline over a puppy and set him on fire. Boyle

bolted from the car and tackled the bastard to the ground while Reid worked frantically to douse the flames with her jacket.

When patrol officers arrived, they turned over the handcuffed perp and drove to Angell Animal Medical Center with lights and sirens the whole way. She and Boyle enlisted fellow detectives to take shifts at the hospital. From the time he was admitted, Mug was never without a BPD detective by his side. They held his paw as he whimpered in pain, spoke soothingly in the once-floppy ears that were burnt to nubs. That's when Mug's tennis-ball obsession had started. It stopped him from whimpering. It kept him calm. He held the ball in his mouth like a pacifier.

Reid had no intention of keeping Mug. She'd never even owned a dog before. Boyle—along with everyone else on the planet—wanted to adopt him. It was Mug who chose *her*. His bandaged tail thumped loudly against the sides of his metal crate whenever he heard her voice. He wouldn't eat for anyone but Reid and wouldn't allow anyone else to change his bandages.

She'd always wondered if Mug somehow sensed they'd been through something similar. As crazy as it sounded, she'd lay down her life for this dog. She knew he'd do the same for her.

Boyle pointed to the trashcan. "I'll keep the right side stocked," he told her. "You take the left." He grimaced as Mug deposited a slimy ball in his hand and went back for thirds. "You could probably feed a small country with all the money you've spent on these things." He handed the ball to her and wiped his hands on his pants. "Figured the least I can do is share the expense."

"Thanks," Reid said, touched by the gesture. She stood, called Mug to her side, and turned to leave.

"One more thing, Sylver."

"What?"

“Fundraiser’s this weekend.”

Every year around Thanksgiving, Boston Police and Fire hosted a weekend-long softball tourney to raise money for homeless kids at Christmastime. She’d been pitching for Cap’s team for the last thirteen years. They’d never lost a single game. “I’m not playing this year,” she told him. It just wouldn’t feel right without the captain.

“Maybe this’ll change your mind.” Boyle yanked open a desk drawer, pulled out Cap’s old glove, and tossed it to her. “He left it in his locker.”

“So?”

“Turn it over.”

She did. In black marker, Cap had crossed out his name and added hers.

She felt the tears well up and spill down her cheeks against her will.

“Left this, too. Gave us both one.” Boyle stepped over and held up two navy-blue t-shirts. One had Boyle’s name and team number on the back. ‘Team Captain’ was printed on the front breast pocket.

“Good for you. You deserve it,” she said sincerely, her cheeks still wet.

“Read yours.” With her name and team number on the back, hers looked the same as always. She flipped it over and read the fine print on the left breast pocket: ‘Co-Captain (aka: Boyle’s muscle—watch out, she’ll kick your ass if you don’t listen to Boyle).’ Laughing through the tears, Reid finally removed her sunglasses.

Boyle grinned and slapped her on the back. “Practice is Wednesday. Same place and time.” He returned to the other side of his desk. “One more thing, Sylver.”

“You already said that.”

“Then...one more thing in addition to that other thing.”

She slid the well-worn leather glove over her hand, grateful to the captain for leaving it to her. “What?”

“You’ll call me Lieutenant from now on.”

“Fuck.” She wrapped the t-shirt around her neck and pretended to strangle herself. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead. And I’m assigning you a trainee.”

“That’s not one more thing. It’s two.” If the new lieutenant couldn’t add, then they were in serious trouble. “Boyle, there’s no way in hell—”

“Lieutenant,” he said, a biting edge to his voice. He set his hands on his hips. She’d seen that look before. He meant business. “You’ll address me as Lieutenant from now on.”

“With all due respect, *Lieutenant*, I’m not cut out to be anyone’s babysitter.”

“Her name’s London Gold. She was just promoted to detective. Exemplary record. Solid cop. We’re lucky to have her. You’ll show her the ropes. Teach her everything you know.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I guess another spot just opened up in Homicide,” he said, unflinching. He threw a glance over her shoulder at the window facing the squad room. “She’s sitting at your desk. Go make nice.”

London watched as Detective Sylver stepped out from the lieutenant’s office and marched straight toward her. She stood from the wooden chair. “London Gold,” she said, extending her hand with a smile. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Detec—”

“Can you run in those things?” Reid made no move to return the handshake.

“Run?” she asked, frowning.

“Those things you call shoes.” Reid glared at her square-heeled leather boots. “Can you run in them?”

“Oh. I—” London followed her gaze—“I don’t know. What do you mean by run?”

Reid sighed impatiently. “Can you do three miles on a treadmill?”

She looked up. Reid was even more beautiful up close. Short black hair accentuated piercing bright-green eyes. Even in flats, Reid was taller by at least a few inches. She looked strong, fit, and in control. “Probably not.”

“Then why the hell would you wear those here today?”

“Are we running on a treadmill?” she asked, confused. “Because I have workout clothes in the locker room.”

Reid set her hands on her hips. “If I have to chase after a suspect, will you be able to keep up during a foot pursuit in *those*?” Without giving London a chance to respond, Reid extended her index finger. “Lesson number one on how to be a good detective: dress for the job.”

London glanced at Reid’s sweatshirt. ‘I’m with ugly’ was written across the front. She raised an eyebrow. “I was told business casual was appropriate.”

“Sure, if you’re working IA. Did you *want* to work for IA? Maybe you’re in the wrong place.”

She met Reid’s green-eyed gaze. “I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be. And I’m excited to work with you, Detective Sylver.” She picked up her leather briefcase—the one she’d splurged on when she got the call about the opening in Homicide. Her initials were monogrammed on the side. “Give me a minute. I’ll go change into my sneakers.”

She headed off to the locker room, determined not to let Reid's lack of enthusiasm diminish hers. Fellow officers had already warned her about the detective's abrasive temperament, but London couldn't be knocked off course. Her mission to be the best homicide detective she could be was already locked and loaded in her mind. The surest path to being the best was to learn from the best. She'd had a feeling this partnership would start out rocky. She was prepared to deal with whatever Reid dished out.

She tossed her boots into the locker, laced up her Adidas running shoes, and headed back to the squad room. Reid was nowhere to be found. The dog that went everywhere with her was also gone. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the elevator doors slide shut. She watched as the button to the floor below lit up. Reid, it seemed, had used the shoes as an excuse to duck out and ditch her.

Without bothering to grab her coat, she headed to the stairwell and jogged down the four flights of stairs to the rear parking lot where detectives kept their undercover vehicles. She already knew which vehicle was Reid's. It was impossible to miss—the only black 1980 Camaro Z28 in the lot. She was already leaning against the car with her hands in the pockets of her blazer by the time Reid and the dog sauntered over.

Keys in hand, Reid looked up and sighed. "You again?"

"Me again."

"Thought I left you upstairs."

"You did. But I'm fast in these." She gestured to her purple and gray Adidas running shoes. "If you were trying to lose me, you should've kept me in the boots and sent me on a bogus coffee run."

Reid shook her head and sighed. "I'll keep that in mind for tomorrow. Get in." She

opened the car door and pushed the passenger's seat forward.

London stepped aside for the dog to jump in, but the dog merely sat beside Reid and looked up at her quizzically. Nobody moved. They all just stared at one another.

"You getting in or what?" Reid asked.

"In the back?"

"Where else? Front's only big enough for two."

Without argument, London climbed in and contorted her body to fit inside the tiny space. Reid released the front seat as it sprang back and pressed painfully against her knees. The dog jumped in and promptly turned to stare at her. *Whatever it takes*, she reminded herself.

Reid walked around the car, slipped behind the steering wheel, and started the engine. London was about to ask where they were headed when Reid turned on the radio, surfed some local rock stations, and finally settled on "Another One Bites the Dust." She cranked the volume to high.

Not missing the irony of the moment, London rode in the backseat, silent. She only hoped her eardrums would still be intact when they reached their destination.

Chapter Three

Reid tapped her thumbs on the steering wheel to the beat of the music as she drove. She couldn't believe the rookie had figured out her plan so quickly. Looked like this one was smarter than the average bear. She'd make a point to remember that moving forward.

London Gold. Maybe that's why Boyle had insisted on torturing her with this rookie. Sylver and Gold. Wasn't that just cute?

Who the hell named their kid London, anyway? Talk about a snobby, highfalutin name. Sounded like she was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Reid glanced in the rearview mirror as London gazed out the window. Ramrod straight, silky blond hair was cut in a perfect bob. She was the epitome of the wholesome all-American girl next door—large brown eyes, high cheekbones, full lips, and a petite nose with a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge. Manicured nails. Obviously smart, professional, well-mannered. Reid thought back to the Italian leather boots and expensive monogrammed briefcase. The rookie had Ivy League written all over her. Classic overachiever. What the hell was she doing at the BPD?

Reid turned down the music but kept her fingers on the knob. "Where'd you go to college?"

Chestnut-brown eyes met hers in the rearview mirror. "Why do you want to know?"

She shrugged. "Curious."

London looked away. "Harvard."

Figured. "How long were you in patrol?"

"Eight years."

She raised an eyebrow, surprised the rookie had lasted that long. A few weeks in

homicide should be enough to send her packing. Homicide was a very different world—much too dark and sinister for a wholesome, doe-eyed rookie.

“What about you?” London piped up from the back. “How long were you—”

Ignoring her, Reid turned up the volume, tapped her thumbs against the steering wheel to “Livin’ on a Prayer,” and focused on the road once again. She had no intention of sharing any information about herself whatsoever. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Her storefront was closed for business and had been for quite some time. Which is why she worked best alone.

With no cases to work and no clear destination in mind—her sole mission had been to make a quick getaway—she headed for her favorite coffee shop near The Common. She’d just banged a right on Tremont when she saw the old woman in the middle of the road.

Nobody was stopping or even slowing down. Vehicles rushed past, completely disregarding the disoriented elderly woman in her pale green bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. For all intents and purposes, the woman looked real enough. But Reid knew she wasn’t.

Her body had perished and was most likely somewhere nearby. What Reid now saw standing in the road was simply the old woman’s ghost.

Damn. With the rookie underfoot, this one could prove to be tricky. She pulled to the side of the road and switched on the emergency light bars in the front and rear windows. She grabbed her travel mug from the cup holder, turned in her seat, and held it out to London. “Can you grab me a refill?” She dug in her pocket for some cash and nodded toward Peet’s Coffee. “Grab yourself one, too. On me,” she said, holding out a twenty-dollar bill.

“You won’t get any points for originality if you drive away while I’m on a coffee run. Remember, that was my idea.”

“Car stays here. You have my word.”

London accepted the cash and narrowed her eyes. "Where will you be?"

"Just right there. Tadpole Park. Mug needs to do his business," she lied. Reid had a feeling that's where she'd find the old woman's body.

"At a kids' playground?" London asked, her tone disapproving.

Reid reached inside the glove compartment and held up a plastic grocery bag. "I always pick it up."

She glanced at her watch: 8:42 a.m. Just two weeks out from Thanksgiving, there was now a frosty chill in the morning air. It was still too cold for moms to bring their kids to the park, but the sun was out and it was supposed to warm up soon. Their arrival was imminent. She had no intention of letting a mother and child stumble upon the old woman's corpse.

She opened her car door and stood, walking around to the passenger's side to let Mug out. "Meet you back here in fifteen," she said as she held the seat forward for London.

"You never told me."

"Told you what?"

"How you like your coffee."

London climbed out from the cramped backseat space with considerable grace, Reid noted, impressed. "No need. They know me there."

"Right. But I'm not you," London replied, looking at her like she was missing the obvious.

Reid pointed to the travel mug in London's hand. "They'll know that." The mug had been with her since her days at the academy. It had survived countless tumbles to the pavement from the roof of her car as she drove off in a hurry. The original blue color had mostly peeled away. With countless scratches and dents, it looked like it had once been the target of a mallet-wielding

psychopath.

London held the mug up for inspection and grimaced. “You like this thing so much you named your dog after it?”

“His name is Mugshot.” She attached the leash to his collar as he sat and waited patiently. “Mug for short.” Without another word, she turned and headed toward Tadpole Park.

Thankful to be out of the rookie’s company, Reid let out a breath. No one had ever guessed that before. She had, in fact, named Mug after her lucky mug. It had been lengthened to Mugshot by default when Cap and the other detectives assumed that was his full name.

Looked like this rookie was even smarter than a smarter-than-average bear.

She made sure no one was around when she cupped her hands around her mouth and called to the old woman in the middle of the road. “I can see you. There. Standing in the road.”

The old woman gazed back at her with a look of surprise.

“Yes. You.” She waved the old woman over. “Walk with me.”

She watched as the old woman shuffled across the street in her pale green bathrobe and fuzzy slippers, oblivious to the cars that passed right through her. Hazel eyes were now focused on her.

Reid fought to keep her feet firmly in place on the sidewalk. Once she acknowledged a spirit, she felt drawn to them like an industrial-size magnet. It had taken her years to resist the urge to go to them. Instead, she now waited until they came to her. It was safer that way, particularly when a spirit was standing in the middle of a busy road.

The old woman stepped over the curb and stood beside her on the sidewalk. She gazed up, her face stitched with concern. “Something awful happened, dear.”

“I’m here to help,” Reid assured her. “Let’s go for a walk.”

The old woman nodded. "This way," she said, already leading Reid through the gates of Tadpole Park.

They walked in silence. Reid glanced over her shoulder to make sure London wasn't following. Satisfied the rookie was stuck in a long line of coffee lovers by now, she turned back to the old woman. "Can you tell me your name?"

"It's Beatrice, dear. Beatrice McCarty."

"Nice to meet you, Beatrice. I'm Detective Sylver. This is my partner, Mug." Mug wagged his tail at the mention of his name and looked directly into the old woman's eyes. Reid knew from their years on the streets together that Mug saw spirits just as clearly as she did. As far as she could tell, this wasn't the norm for dogs. She had an inkling Mug's close brush with death as a pup had something to do with it. But she would never know for sure.

"Kind of an ugly mug, wouldn't you say?"

"He's beautiful, once you get to know him."

Before she knew it, they were standing in front of the old woman's body. She'd been duct taped to one of the park's sand-colored slides, clad in the same pale green bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. She was lying down with her arms raised above her head and her eyes closed. Her face had been molded into an expression of joy. Whoever did this had staged the scene to make it look as though the old woman was enjoying herself on the playground slide.

The staging was obviously significant.

Careful not to touch anything, Reid ordered Mug to stay put and stepped over to get a closer look. Judging from the sunken in cavities below the frontal bone, it appeared the old woman's eyes had been removed and her eyelids sewn shut. There were no other visible wounds on Beatrice's body. "Can you walk me through what happened?"

“I was taking my mail out of the mailbox and felt a sharp pain in my back. Then another. And another. I fell down on my porch.” She looked over at Reid. “That’s all I remember.”

Sounded like Beatrice had been stabbed in the back, which would explain why there were no visible wounds on the front of the body. But she’d have to wait for the ME’s report to know for sure.

She stood, careful not to disturb the mulch underfoot as she returned to Beatrice’s side. “Did you see who did this to you?”

Beatrice shook her head. “I’m afraid not. The last thing I remember seeing was a yellow envelope from my granddaughter. I think there was a birthday card inside.” She smiled proudly. “Meghan always remembers my birthday.”

Reid suspected the murder had occurred sometime in the past twenty-four hours. Rigor mortis was in full swing. Beatrice’s body was as stiff as a tree trunk. Most people weren’t aware that there were two stages to rigor mortis: the rigor stage—where the muscles stiffen gradually over a period of about twelve hours and maintain that rigidity for another twelve hours, and the flaccid stage—where the muscles gradually become more relaxed over the next twelve hours. A corpse could effectively go from a state of unyielding rigidity to squishy pliancy in a thirty-six-hour period.

Reid cleared her throat. “Do you remember what day it was when you checked your mail?”

“Of course, dear. It was Saturday. I play bingo every Saturday at Saint Mary’s. It’s in Waltham,” she added as an afterthought. “I checked the mail that night as soon as I got home.”

“Around what time was that?”

“I’m not sure, exactly.” Beatrice thought for a moment. “Around ten, I think.”

If Beatrice was, in fact, murdered Saturday night, her body should have entered the flaccid stage by now. She frowned. Something wasn't adding up here. Maybe the ME would shed some light on the time discrepancy. "Do you remember your address?"

"Well, I should hope so! I've lived in that house for over half a century." Beatrice recited her address without skipping a beat.

Reid felt the next question was probably unnecessary, but she had to ask anyway. Instincts told her the killer was on the outer periphery of Beatrice's life—someone with whom this woman was probably unfamiliar. She couldn't explain how she knew this, but her instincts were usually right. At times, she wondered if these instincts were just thinly-veiled psychic abilities. She was often tempted to open her mind to other information, but she fought it. There was simply no room in her life for more weird shit. Communicating with dead people was where she drew the line. "Can you think of anyone who'd want to hurt you?"

Beatrice shook her head as she gazed down at her own body. "No one I know would *ever* do something like this."

"Is there anything else you can remember?" Reid asked. "Anything at all that might help me find who did this to you?"

Beatrice thought for a moment. Her face lit up as she met Reid's gaze. Even spirits could have an 'aha' moment. "Someone left a single white rose on my porch a few days ago," she recalled. "It was the most perfect flower I'd ever seen."

"Was there a note?"

"No note. Just the flower. I thought it was odd. I never did find out who left it there."

Interesting. "Did you keep it?"

The old woman nodded. "I put it in a vase and gave it some water. It's on my kitchen

windowsill.”

Reid made the call to dispatch, reported the body, and requested patrol officers for a perimeter around the park. With any luck, the park would be locked down before long. She ended the call and slipped Mug a biscuit from her pocket.

“Will you catch him?” Beatrice asked. “Before he does this to someone else?”

She shared Beatrice’s concern. Instincts kicked in once again, warning her there’d be more victims. “Truth be told, you’re not giving me a lot to go on here, Beatrice. I’ll do the best I can.” She cleared her throat self-consciously as she saw London approach from the corner of her eye.

London handed her the battered mug and froze, wide eyed, as she stared at the old woman’s body. “She’s dead?”

“Looks like that ivy league education paid off.”

Ignoring her, London quickly surveyed the park. “Who reported it?”

“Me.”

She turned her attention on Reid. “You sent me for coffee when you knew there was a body?”

“I didn’t *know* anything,” Reid said in her own defense. “I found her like this.”

“You expect me to believe you pulled to the side of the road on a whim and just, what, stumbled upon this crime scene?”

Reid shrugged. “Believe whatever you want.”

London narrowed her eyes as she took a sip from the Styrofoam cup her hands. “Who were you just talking to?”

“Dispatch. I called it in.”

“No. I saw you end that call and put your phone in your pocket. Then you said something to someone named Beatrice.”

Shit. Reid tried to think on her feet but came up empty. Best way out of this one was flat-out denial. Before she could open her mouth, two BPD bike officers raced toward them, braked in unison, and gaped at the body.

She held out her badge. “Detective Sylver,” she said, grateful for the well-timed rescue. “Block off all entry points. Make sure no one gets in.”

The female officer glanced over her shoulder. “Channel Four News was right behind us.”

The last thing she needed was help from an ambitious reporter. She already had her hands full with an ambitious rookie. Reid sighed. “Just keep them the hell away from my crime scene.” The minute local news learned a killer was targeting the elderly, all hell would break loose. Frightened senior citizens would be banging down the precinct doors.

Nodding, the patrol officers mounted their bikes and raced toward the park’s only entrance.

“We’re taking this case?”

“I’m taking this case. It’s in my jurisdiction and obviously a homicide.”

“But what if it’s not?”

“Not what?”

“A homicide,” London said, studying the body.

“You think the victim just duct taped herself to the slide, removed her own eyes and stitched her eyelids shut, and then—what—died of natural causes?”

“What if she died of natural causes and *then* someone brought her here?”

“Why the hell would someone do that?”

“I have no idea. My point is, we won’t know it’s a homicide until the ME reveals cause of death.”

“Cause of death was—” she stopped herself, realizing she’d almost gone too far.

“Was what?” London prompted, stepping toward the body for a closer look. “No signs of external trauma, from what I can see. Am I missing something?”

“We’ll know soon enough.” She watched as the forensics team unloaded their equipment from a white van and carried it over.

“So”—London started to shiver—“what now?”

For the first time since they’d left the precinct, she realized London wasn’t wearing a coat. She’d no doubt left it behind in her attempt to beat Reid to the car. “We wait,” she replied calmly, unaffected by the cold.