

THE WORLDWIDE BESTSELLER

SIDNEY SHELDON'S

THE SILENT WIDOW



TILLY BAGSHAWE

Sidney Sheldon

**Sidney Sheldon's The Silent
Widow: A gripping new thriller for
2018 with killer twists and turns**

«HarperCollins»

Sheldon S.

Sidney Sheldon's *The Silent Widow*: A gripping new thriller for 2018 with killer twists and turns / S. Sheldon — «HarperCollins»,

New York Times Bestselling Author Sweeping from Mexico City to the dark underbelly of LA, *The Silent Widow* has all the trademark glamour, suspense and unexpected twists of a classic Sidney Sheldon novel. A young American au pair, Charlotte Clancy, vanishes without a trace in Mexico City. The case is left cold, but its legacy will be devastating. A decade later, LA is shaken by a spate of violent murders. Psychologist Nikki Roberts is the common link between the victims, her patients at the heart of this treacherous web. When someone makes an attempt on Nikki's life, it's clear she is a marked woman. Nikki makes a living out of reading people, drawing out their secrets, but the key to this shocking pattern eludes her. With the police at a dead end Nikki drafts in Derek Williams, a PI who isn't afraid to put his hand into the hornet's nest. Williams was thwarted in the notorious Charlotte Clancy case all those years ago, but what he unearths in LA – and the mention of one name in particular – leaves him cold, and takes him on a dangerous path into the past. A shadowy manipulator has brought his deadly game to the streets of LA. In a crime spanning generations, it seems Nikki Roberts knows all too much – and a ruthless killer knows the price of her silence. In this crooked city, where enemies and friends are one and the same, Nikki must be the master of her own escape . . .

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TILLY BAGSHAWE



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Copyright

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Dedication

For Alice, with love.

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PROLOGUE

'No! Please no! I can't ...'

The old man's eyes widened in terror as he stared at the drill, straining against the ropes that bound him. He imagined the spiral metal bit grinding into his flesh, splintering his bones like shrapnel as they nailed him to the wooden beam.

As they crucified him.

Surely they knew he was good for the money? He would give them what they wanted – everything they wanted! He was no good to them dead.

How long had he been in the warehouse now? Days? Or only hours? Slipping in and out of consciousness between the beatings, he'd lost track, aware only of the pain in his body: the screaming burns on his skin, thin and creased with age like crepe paper. The fractured ribs and swollen eyes and lips. The tiny razor cuts to his genitals. They had tortured and humiliated him in every sadistic way imaginable, while the young woman stood in the corner impassively and filmed on her mobile phone. *Hateful bitch*. He despised her most of all, more even than his tormentors.

They appeared to be reaching a crescendo, some sort of grand finale with the drill. Or at least *he* did. Their boss. The ringmaster at this circus of terror.

The man with the brown eyes.

The devil incarnate.

'Please!'

The old man's sobs turned to screams as his torturers switched on the drill, passing it laughingly between them as they revved it louder and louder.

'I'll do anything! Oh God, no!' A warm river of liquid excrement exploded out of his bowels and streamed down his shaking legs.

The man with the brown eyes smiled.

'What's that you say?' he taunted, cupping a manicured hand to his ear. 'I'm sorry, my friend, with the sound of that drill I can't hear you.'

He looked on as his men did his bidding, aroused as always by the pleading and the shrieks and the blood, and finally by the silence, once the show was over. Aroused too by the young woman dutifully filming it all for his pleasure, as he'd commanded her to do. He preferred killing women. But ending a life, any life, was a high like no other. The ultimate expression of power.

Once, the battered old man hanging lifelessly from the beam in front of him had been rich and powerful. More powerful than him. Or so he'd thought.

But look at him now. Like a carcass in an abattoir.

'Should we cut him down, boss?' one of the goons asked his master.

'No.' The man with the brown eyes stepped forward. 'Leave him there.' Pulling a wad of hundred-dollar bills from his inside jacket pocket, he stuffed them violently into the corpse's mouth.

The stupid old man had never understood.

It was never about the money ...

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE
DR NIKKI ROBERTS
Brentwood, Los Angeles.
May 12, 11 p.m.

It never rains in Los Angeles in May, so the light mist falling on my bare arms is a surprise. The last surprise I will have on this earth. But that's OK. I've come to hate surprises.

Our yard looks beautiful, lush and green. I am standing under the magnolia tree Doug planted in the spring, just a month before his accident. *Accident*. I have to stop using that word. I know now that my husband's death was no random act of fate. The night that Doug crashed on the 405, burned alive in his beloved Tesla: that was the beginning.

Not that I knew it at the time. I didn't know anything back then.

The gun in my hand, a 9mm Luger, feels small and harmless, like a toy. The man who sold it to me called it 'a lovely gun for a woman', as if I were buying earrings or a silk scarf. I tried to take my own life once before, right after Doug's ... after he died. I took pills, more than enough, but I was unlucky. My housekeeper, Rita, found me and called 911. Not this time. This time my little toy gun will get the job done.

I'm not afraid of death. Never have been, although as a psychologist I've treated countless patients who are. It's a control thing, ultimately. Fear of the unknown. The way I see it, what I'm about to do is the ultimate act of control. Leaving the world on your own terms is a luxury.

Not everybody gets that chance.

Too many people have died because of me. Tonight another kind, decent man lost his life. A man I cared about. A man who cared about me.

This can't go on. I have to end it.

The rain is getting heavier. I wipe my hand on my jeans to dry it and make my grip less slippery. No mistakes this time. I raise the gun to my temple and turn around, looking back at the house that Doug and I built together. A white clapboard, East Coast 'estate', beautifully lit, with a romantic balcony off the master suite that has views all the way to the ocean. Our dream home. Back when we still had dreams. Before there were nothing but nightmares.

I close my eyes and see their faces, one by one, like patterns on a kaleidoscope.

The ones I loved: Doug. Anne.

The ones I could have loved. Lou. *We'll never know what might have been.*

The ones I let down: Lisa. Trey. Derek. *I'm so very sorry.*

My last thought is for the ones I hated.

You know who you are. May you rot in hell.

I start to cry. I know this is wrong. I wish there were another way.

But wishing never fixed anything.

CHAPTER TWO

CHARLOTTE

Ten years earlier ...

Charlotte Clancy felt the warm summer breeze caress her skin and with it a tingle of excitement. It was part sexual excitement, part happiness, and part the unfamiliar thrill of doing something illicit. Something naughty. Dangerous, even.

Charlotte wasn't usually the naughty type. At eighteen years old she'd always been a straight-A student at her San Diego high school, where the most trouble she'd ever gotten into was for allowing her girlfriend to crib her Social Studies paper on early Mexican civilizations. Charlotte just *loved* Mexico – the history, the language, the food. She'd literally had to beg and plead with her parents to allow her to work the summer in Mexico City as an au pair.

'I don't know, Charlie,' her dad said skeptically. Tucker Clancy was a firefighter and a deacon at the local Episcopal church, about as upstanding and conservative a family man as you could hope to find. 'You hear stories. People get kidnapped down there. And the drug gangs ... you read about beheadings and God knows what other terrible things.'

'That's true, Dad,' Charlotte countered. 'But those things are only happening in certain *parts* of Mexico. Not where I wanna go. It's El Salvador and Colombia where you really have to be careful. And this agency, American Au Pairs International, AAPI – they have an amazing safety reputation. Like, zero incidents in twelve years working down there.'

Tucker Clancy listened with pride to his only daughter's negotiating skills. One thing you could say for Charlie: she never did anything half-assed. As usual she had all the facts and figures at her fingertips. And she was a very sensible girl.

In the end though, it was Charlotte's mother, Mary, who had tipped the scales in her favor.

'I'm nervous too, honey,' Mary told Tucker over dinner at the Steak 'n' Shake one Friday night. 'But I don't think we should let our fears hold Charlie back. She'll be at college in the fall, living on her own, making all these decisions for herself. She needs some independence.'

'College is in Ohio,' Charlotte's dad countered. 'They don't cut people's heads off in Ohio.'

Mary frowned. 'Well, according to Charlie, they don't in Mexico City either. And the lady at the au pair agency was super-reassuring. This family they've got lined up for her sound wonderful. The parents are lawyers, they live on this phenomenal estate ... Come on, Tucker. Let the girl live a little.'

That conversation had been three months ago. Charlotte had been in Mexico for two months now, and boy, had she lived a *lot*. She'd smoked her first joint, got drunk for the first time, cheated on her boyfriend Todd for the first time and (she could hardly believe it, even when she said it to herself) fallen in love with a married man.

It wasn't the dad of the family she was working for, the Encerritos. That would be cheap and tacky, and besides, Charlotte really liked Señora Encerrito, her boss, and would never do that to her. Not that what she was doing was OK. She knew it was wrong to have an affair. In fact, it was worse than wrong. It was a sin, a mortal sin. Charlotte came from a solid 'church' family, and there wasn't much wiggle room when it came to morals, especially sexual morals. It wasn't that she didn't care, either. She cared plenty, and she felt guilty and all of that. But none of that mattered. Not when *he* was there. When he walked into a room, when he looked at Charlotte, when he said her name, even when she heard his voice on the telephone, everything else went out the window. Her caution, her values, her fear, her regrets. *Poof. Gone.* And when he took her to bed and made love to her? Good God. There were no words to describe the bliss, the absolute ecstasy. Charlotte had had sex with Todd hundreds of times, but never like this. Never, in Charlotte Clancy's wildest imaginings, had she believed sex could be this wonderful. So she wasn't going to heaven? Big deal. She had heaven

right here and his name was ... *Shhhh*. She giggled to herself. She mustn't say his name out loud. Not ever. Not to anyone.

'What we have is a secret, *cara*,' he told her, every time they made love. 'No one must ever know. You understand?'

Charlotte did understand. He was married, and much, much older, and an important man. Their affair had to be discreet. What she didn't understand was all his other secrets. The mysterious 'meetings' he would disappear off to in the middle of the night. The attaché cases stuffed full of US dollars that she'd seen him hand over to the local chief of police in one of the fancy hotels in town.

'You can tell me, you know,' she would whisper coquettishly in his ear in bed. 'I can keep a secret. I just ... I want to know everything about you. I want to be part of your life as much as I can. I love you so much!'

He always smiled, and kissed her, and assured her he loved her too and that he found her little outbursts 'adorable – like you'. But he never told her anything. 'It's for your own safety,' he would say, throwing in a thrilling element of danger to the already exciting situation.

In short, Charlotte Clancy was having the time of her life.

And tonight was going to be even better, the best yet.

Following the map he'd given her – so romantic! – she got out of her car and weaved her way on foot through the maize fields and down towards the river.

She'd taken a big risk a few nights ago, following him in the little Nissan the Encerritos had provided for her use, headlamps off so as not to be seen, only a few hundred yards behind him. It was hard to see along the bumpy roads, no more than tracks really, that he turned on to once they'd left the city. She'd started to panic, wondering how she would ever get back if somehow she lost him, but at that moment the track gave way to a hidden clearing in the trees and he came to a halt. She could make out rows of semicircular sheds, like giant pipes cut in half; inside, men were working at tables, their stations illuminated by old-fashioned oil lamps that made each shed glow softly in the moonlight. Charlotte watched as her lover got out of his car and moved from shed to shed, overseeing the work. It was all quite fascinating, but Charlotte couldn't see what the men were actually doing from where she was parked. With a boldness she didn't know she possessed till that moment, she'd got out of her car and walked over towards the shed where *he* was. She'd got to within about ten yards of the door when two men armed with machine guns leapt out in front of her.

Charlotte screamed so loudly they could probably hear it back in the city. 'Don't shoot! Please!'

Her lover turned around, a look of shock and anger on his face. But it quickly softened to a smile, and then a laugh.

'*Cara!*' he chuckled indulgently. 'You *followed* me?'

'I ... I wanted to know,' stammered Charlotte, her long legs still shaking involuntarily at the sight of the guns. 'You wouldn't tell me anything.'

He gestured for the men to let her pass, opening his arms wide and pulling her into a tight hug. 'I never would have thought you had it in you,' he grinned, ruffling Charlotte's hair as if she were a disobedient but adorable puppy. 'You're a brave little thing, aren't you, hm? I see I underestimated you.'

Charlotte swelled with pride and relief. He wasn't angry. He was pleased! She'd been right to take the risk, right to show him she was more than some silly little girl, some *au pair* he was having a summer fling with.

'Come.' He took her hand. 'As you're here, let me show you around.'

She'd seen it all then, all the workings of his empire.

Cocaine.

Even the word sounded dangerous to Charlotte, like something from an episode of *Miami Vice*. She'd never been offered coke in her life, never even seen it. And now, here she was, in the eye of the

storm, actually watching the stuff being produced. It was fascinating, and he showed her around with pride, as if this were any other factory or business he'd built. It was also extraordinarily complicated.

In one of the sheds, sheaves of dry coca leaves were being finely ground and dusted with lime before going under a misting machine like a weak garden sprinkler to be moistened with water. From there, the mixture was taken to another shed where it sat in giant vats like cement mixers, into which kerosene was added. The third shed was the 'extraction plant', where cocaine was first separated from the leaves, and then subjected to a complicated process of heating, filtering, pressing, siphoning and mixing with sulfuric acid, before being transferred to yet another building where eventually a gummy, yellow solid emerged that he identified as 'coca paste'. The paste was then carried to a purifying shed, where it was mixed with diluted ammonia and filtered to produce cocaine hydrochloride.

All the while Charlotte listened, and nodded, holding his hand, acting as if this entire experience were perfectly normal, the sort of thing she did back in San Diego all the time.

'Are you shocked?' he asked her at the end of the tour. 'Do you still want me, now you know I'm a *criminal*?' He grinned as he said the word, tongue in cheek. But it was true, Charlotte thought. He was a criminal.

'I'll always want you,' she told him, gazing up adoringly into his mesmerizing eyes. He took her back to his car then and made love to her, more passionately than ever before. Then he drove slowly back to the city, with Charlotte following.

Afterwards, she didn't hear from him for almost a week. She was starting to panic that something had happened, that he'd decided to end things, when she'd finally got his text this morning: *I've missed you, cara. Meet me here at 7 p.m.,* he wrote, sending her a link to a map as well as written directions. *I have a surprise for you!*

Charlotte's heart soared. He'd never written anything like this to her before. *I've missed you.* That wasn't his style at all. Nor were little maps and romantic surprises. Something had shifted between them since she'd learned the truth. *He sees me as an equal now. As a partner.*

A feeling of deep happiness surged through her. This, then, was love.

She was almost at the meeting spot, a place so remote and isolated there couldn't possibly be anything there. *Maybe he's set up a picnic?* Charlotte thought, imagining a soft blanket laid with silver and crystal, and buckets of champagne on ice. It was the sort of thing she could see him doing. Private but luxurious. Different, special, like he was. She felt sure now that her future lay with this man, despite his wife and the age difference and the dangerous things he did for a living. She couldn't see yet exactly how this future would come to pass. How she would ever reconcile her parents to this new life she'd found. But she trusted, somehow. She was Charlotte Clancy, Charlotte the brave. *He'd underestimated her, but only because she'd underestimated herself.*

I can be whatever I want to be.

Frederique didn't understand. 'Don't go, Charlotte. Or at least don't go alone,' her friend had begged her, when Charlotte showed her the 'secret' map. Frederique Zidane was an au pair too, and Charlotte's only close girlfriend in Mexico City. She knew about Charlotte's older, married boyfriend, but not enough to piece together who he was or what he did. 'These places aren't safe in the daytime, never mind at night. Anyone who lives here knows that. *He* must know it.'

'Stop being such a scaredy-cat,' Charlotte giggled. 'I'll be fine.'

But Frederique wasn't laughing. 'There are bandits out there. I'm serious. People get robbed, kidnapped, murdered. People disappear.'

'Well, I'm not going to disappear,' Charlotte replied robustly.

'And you know this because ...?'

'Because I won't be alone,' Charlotte said. '*He'll* be there, won't he? *He'll* protect me.'

It was the last conversation Frederique Zidane and Charlotte Clancy ever had.

CHAPTER THREE

LISA

‘So, Lisa. How has your week been?’

Dr Nikki Roberts leaned back in her faded black leather armchair and smiled warmly at her patient.

Lisa Flannagan. Twenty-eight years old. Former model and long-term mistress of Willie Baden, septuagenarian billionaire owner of the LA Rams. Recovering Vicodin addict. Narcissist.

‘Pretty good actually,’ Lisa smiled back and, pressing her palms together, leaned forward in a little bow of gratitude. ‘Namaste. I’m really feeling at peace about moving on from Willie. Like, I’m in a place of light, you know?’

‘That’s great.’ Nikki nodded encouragingly. Raindrops were tap-tapping against the window. This was her last session of the day, thank God. All she wanted was to get home. Switch off. Let the rain lull her to sleep.

‘I know, right?’ Lisa beamed. ‘Your advice in our last session helped me soooooo much.’

Lisa talked like this a lot: in clichés and exclamation points, like a teenage girl who’d swallowed her first self-help book whole, and now considered herself ‘a spiritual person’. As a psychologist, and a highly successful one at that, Nikki didn’t judge. She merely observed, and offered techniques to help her patient modify harmful behaviors and break destructive cycles.

As a person, however, it was a different story.

As a person, she judged plenty.

Lisa Flannagan was a user. A homewrecker. A baby-killer. A slut.

Sinking back into Dr Roberts’ soft, over-stuffed couch, Lisa Flannagan poured out her heart.

‘I moved out of the apartment,’ she announced proudly. ‘I actually did it.’

God, it felt good! *Such* a release, to come to a place where she was truly seen and understood and just let it all out.

‘Willie was, like, in shock. He was so mad, I thought he was going to hit me. Screaming and yelling and smashing things up.’

‘Did he threaten you?’ Nikki asked.

‘Oh yeah. Sure he did. “You can’t do this to me. I own you. I’ll destroy you. You’re nothing without me!” All of that. But I was super calm. I was like, “No, baby. You need to understand. This is something I need to do for *myself*. Like, I’m twenty-eight years old, you know? I’m not a child.”’

Lisa looked forward to her Wednesday-night therapy sessions at Dr Roberts’ plush Century City offices the way she used to look forward to scoring Vicodin, or getting laid by one of Willie’s big, black NFL players in the Beverly Hills apartment he’d bought for her two years ago. Back then, she hadn’t seen how totally controlling Willie was being. Like he was trying to buy her or something. Dr Roberts had totally opened her eyes on that score.

She’d also helped Lisa to realize how much inner strength she had. Like, kicking the pills was a big deal. Willie had picked up Lisa’s tab at Promises, but it was *Lisa* who’d agreed to go to rehab, *Lisa* who’d changed her own life.

I’m a good person.

If left the drugs behind, I can leave Willie Baden behind.

She would keep the apartment, of course. Or rather, she would sell it and keep the money. Ditto the Cartier sapphire-and-diamond necklace Willie had bought her for her twenty-fifth. New starts were all well and good, but Lisa Flannagan wasn’t about to walk away destitute from an eight-year relationship with a billionaire. That would be plain stupid. Besides, it wasn’t as if Willie needed the money back. Plus she’d done the responsible thing and terminated his baby, not hung around and

demanded baby-momma money for the rest of her life, like most girls would have. The way Lisa saw it, once Willie got over the initial blow to his pride, there was no reason why she and her married lover couldn't part as friends.

As she talked, sipping cucumber water from the jug on Dr Roberts' coffee table, Lisa Flannagan stole occasional glances at the woman sitting opposite her, the therapist she had grown to rely on and to think of almost as a friend.

Dr Nikki Roberts.

What was *her* life like, outside these offices?

Thanks to Google, Lisa already knew the basic facts: *Dr Nicola Roberts, née Hammond, thirty-eight years old. Graduated from Columbia before doing a postgrad in psychology at UCLA and an internship at Ronald Reagan Medical Center.*

Lisa wondered whether that was where Dr Roberts had met her husband, Dr Douglas Roberts, a neurosurgeon and specialist in addiction-related brain disorders. Unfortunately, she couldn't ask. Asking your therapist personal questions was against the rules.

What Lisa did know was that Dr Roberts' husband had been killed in a tragic car accident last year, right about the time she first started coming to therapy. The *LA Times* had reported on his death, because by all accounts Doug Roberts had been an amazing guy and a big deal in the LA charity world, campaigning tirelessly to help the city's addicts wherever he found them, from downtown's skid row to the mansions of Bel Air.

It was bizarre to think that the poised, attractive, professional woman sitting opposite Lisa, with her sleek brunette bob similar to Lisa's own hair, her slender figure and intelligent green eyes was actually a grieving widow, whose own inner life was presumably in total turmoil.

Poor Dr Roberts, Lisa thought. I hope she has someone to talk to.

She deserves to be happy.

'I'm afraid that's our time, Lisa.'

The therapist's mellow, soothing voice broke Lisa's reverie. She looked at the clock on the wall. 'Oh my God, you're right. Time passes so *fast* in here, it's crazy. Do you find that, Dr Roberts?' Nikki smiled diplomatically. 'Sometimes.'

Lisa Flannagan stood up to leave.

'Don't you have a coat?' Nikki asked. 'It's pouring out there.'

'Is it?' Lisa hadn't noticed the pounding on the windows.

She was dressed in a tiny denim miniskirt that barely skimmed the top of her thighs, and a tank top with the words 'ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE' emblazoned on the front, a garment so tiny it would have struggled to adequately cover a child's chest, never mind Lisa's ample bosom.

'You'll be soaked to the bone out there,' said Nikki. Standing up, she reached for her own trench coat, hanging on the back of the door. 'Here. Take mine.'

Lisa hesitated. 'Don't you need it?'

Nikki shook her head. 'I'm parked downstairs. I can take the elevator right to my car. You can return it at our next session.'

'Well, if you're sure ...' Lisa took the coat, smiling broadly. 'That is *so* kind of you, Dr Roberts. Really.'

She took the therapist's hand and squeezed it. It was little gestures like that, going the extra mile, that really set Dr Roberts apart from other therapists. She wasn't in this for the money. She actually cared about her patients. *She cares about me.*

Outside in the alley behind the Century Plaza Medical Building it was cold, wet and dark. His legs ached from crouching for so long. His skin burned and so did his throat. Every breath felt like he was gargling razor blades, and every drop of rain felt like acid, a tiny burning dagger slicing into his frayed nerves. When it was over, he would get what he needed. Pain, unimaginable pain, would be replaced with exquisite ecstasy. It wouldn't last long, but that didn't matter. Nothing lasted long.

The streets of Century City were full of cars, but the slick sidewalks were deserted. No one walked in LA, especially not in the rain.

She did, though. Usually.

Sometimes.

Would she come out tonight?

Come out, come out, wherever you are!

There she was. Suddenly. Too suddenly. He wasn't ready.

His heart began to pound.

She belted her coat and put her head down against the rain. No umbrella. She was walking fast, crossing the opening to the alley.

'Help!' He tried to shout, but his voice was so raspy. Would she hear him? She had to hear him! 'Help me!'

Lisa Flannagan turned. There was a figure, a man, or maybe a boy – he was tiny – slumped beside some trash cans.

'Please!' he called again. 'Call 911. I've been stabbed.'

'Oh my God!' Pulling out her phone, Lisa moved towards him, already punching out the numbers. 'What happened? Are you OK?'

He was bent double, clutching his stomach. That must be where the knife had gone in. She squatted down beside him. He was wearing a hoodie that was soaking wet, covering his face and hair.

'Emergency, what service do you require?'

'Police,' Lisa blurted into her phone. 'And ambulance.' She touched the boy lightly on the top of his lolling head. 'Don't panic. Help's on the way. Where are you hurt?'

He looked up and grinned. Lisa felt the vomit rise up inside her. The face beneath the hood wasn't human. It was the face of a monster, green and rotted, strips of flesh literally curling off the bones and hanging down, like the skin of some rancid fruit. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

'Ma'am, can you give me your location?'

He recognized the terror in her eyes as she crouched over him, open-mouthed. Still grinning, he plunged the blade deep into her abdomen and twisted. Oh, the scream came then all right! Loud and piercing and horrified. He pulled out the knife and plunged again, so hard that his fist followed the blade somewhere deep inside her, somewhere warm and wet and enticing.

'Ma'am, can you hear me? Ma'am? What's happening? Can you tell me where you are?'

Dr Nikki Roberts leaned back against the soft leather of her Mercedes X-Class seats and waited for the garage doors to open.

Traffic permitting, she'd be back home in Brentwood in twenty minutes. Another long, empty evening stretched ahead, but she would fill it with mindless television and a bottle of Newton unfiltered Merlot and Ambien and sleep, and it would pass. Everything would pass.

Nikki felt guilty. She'd only been half-present during today's session with Lisa. Maybe even less than half. That wasn't fair, whether she liked the patient or not.

The garage doors inched open, agonizingly slowly.

Nikki edged the car forwards, towards the alley.

Doors. Garage doors!

Lisa heard the grinding of mechanical gears and the close, familiar rev of an engine. Blood was pouring from her stomach and chest. Not oozing but pouring, like milk from a jug. She couldn't move. Couldn't stand or run. She could only scream, and she did, again and again and again, each time the monster sliced into her arms and breasts and thighs. He wasn't even trying to kill her any more. At least, not quickly. He was playing with her, like a cat with a mouse, delighting in the agony he was causing, in shredding her perfect body, piece by tiny piece.

The engine grew louder. Hope soared in Lisa's heart.

Someone's coming. Maybe it's Dr Roberts? Please God, let her see me!

She drew in her breath and screamed, surely the loudest scream anyone had ever made in their lives. She could hear her own blood bubbling in the back of her throat and feel her eyes bulge as if they might burst from their sockets. Headlamps swept over her and the monster, lit them up like a stage spotlight.

The stabbing stopped.

So did the engine.

Lisa sobbed with relief. *She's seen me!* She heard the monster's knife clatter to the floor. She could feel her pulse slowing, and waited for her attacker to run, or for the car door to open.

Seconds passed. *Two. Five. Ten ...*

Nothing happened.

Wait ... what's going on?

The car's engine started up again.

No!

Headlights lit up the alley.

NO! Please! I'm here! PLEASE!

Nikki's silver Mercedes glided past them along the alley, then turned slowly into the street.

Rotted, scaly hands coiled themselves around Lisa's neck from behind. In front of her eyes, the shiny blade glinted, already slick with her blood.

'Where were we?'

The last noise Lisa Flannagan heard was the monster laughing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Carter Berkeley III looked down at his expensively manicured nails and resisted the urge to bite them. What the hell was he doing here? He should be talking to the police, not a damn therapist.

Then he reminded himself that the police wouldn't help him. The police didn't believe him. No one did.

Carter thought about the two armed bodyguards he had waiting downstairs in the lobby, and tried to feel better. It didn't work. Then he tried imagining his therapist naked. That *did* work, at least a little. Dr Nikki Roberts was a deeply sensual woman. Carter pictured her gray, pencil skirt pushed up roughly around her hips, and her prissy white blouse ripped open. He imagined her ...

'Carter? Are you with me?'

Her voice made him startle, then blush, then scowl. A highly successful investment banker, handsome, educated and rich, Carter was used to having people jump to his command and scuttle to gratify his every desire. Especially women. He did not appreciate being called out like a naughty schoolboy.

'Tell me again what you think you saw last night,' Dr Roberts said.

'I don't "think" I saw anything,' Carter snapped. 'I know what I saw, OK? I am not crazy.' He ran a harassed hand through his thick blond hair.

'I never suggested you were.' The therapist's voice was calm. 'But even sane people can be mistaken some of the time, can't they? I know I often am.'

'Yeah, well I'm not,' Carter growled.

Jesus. They'd all be sorry when he was dead. When these bastards finally got him and strung him up with electrical cord and beat him to death in some godforsaken dungeon. They'd all wish they'd listened then: the police, Dr Roberts, all of them.

Nikki leaned forward earnestly while her patient rambled on, expounding the same conspiracy theory he'd been peddling since he first started seeing her, more than a year ago. Carter Berkeley believed he was being stalked by unnamed assassins. He never offered any reason for this, still less any evidence, other than the elaborate imaginings of his brilliant but tortured mind. And yet, no matter how many logical paths Nikki led him down, Carter's paranoid fears persisted. In fact, if anything, they were getting worse. Only last week he had informed Nikki solemnly that Trey Raymond, the sweet boy who ran her office and manned the front desk at Century Plaza, was a spy 'working for the Mexicans'.

'You can't trust him. What do you really know about Trey, Dr Roberts?'

'What do *you* know about him, Carter?' Nikki countered.

'Enough. I know enough,' Carter pronounced, cryptically. Although, again, he offered no evidence to back this up.

I'm not making him better, Nikki thought sadly. *I might actually be making him worse. Why am I even here?*

She knew the answer to that, deep down. She was here – at work, in her office, seeing patients – because she had nowhere else to be. Nowhere else except home, alone, with no Doug, and no answers. That prospect was quite unbearable.

Unbearable ...

The word took Nikki back.

It was only a year ago, but it felt like a lifetime.

Doug was smiling at her across the table at Luigi's, wolfing down his spaghetti vongole as if he hadn't eaten in weeks, talking at a million miles an hour, the way he always did when the two of them were together.

“It’s unbearable.” What do people even mean when they say that?’ Doug asked Nikki. ‘My patients say it to me all the time: “It’s unbearable, Doc. I can’t bear it.” As if they have any alternative.’

Nikki and Doug Roberts had been married for seven years and together for almost three times that long. But the thrill of each other’s company, of talking and sharing ideas and feelings and experiences, never faded. No lunch date with Doug was ever dull.

‘I guess they’re speaking metaphorically,’ Nikki observed, toying with her own crab salad. Luigi’s food was delicious, but even the salads were rich. Doug might be incapable of gaining weight, but since she turned thirty-eight Nikki found increasingly that she had to watch her figure. There was nothing worse than thinking you might be pregnant at long last, only to realize that your rounded belly was actually ugly, middle-aged fat.

‘They mean that they don’t want to bear it. It hurts. Don’t forget, these are desperate addicts we’re talking about.’

‘You’re right.’ Doug nodded, slurping down the last of his pasta before reaching for the bread basket. ‘I guess I just get frustrated sometimes. Because, at the end of the day, it really is that black and white. Do you want to get better or not? Do you want to die or not? That’s it. That’s the choice.’

To an outsider, Doug Roberts might sound compassionless toward his junkie patients, but Nikki knew that he was anything but. He’d raced to meet her for lunch today directly from the latest meth and opioid clinic he was busy setting up in Venice with his good friend from med school, Haddon Defoe. Helping LA’s most hardened, most helpless addicts had become Doug Roberts’ passion, his life’s work.

‘Anyway, enough about me.’ He looked at Nikki lovingly. ‘How’s your morning been, sweetheart? Did you do another test?’

‘Not yet.’ Nikki looked down shyly at her half-eaten food. ‘Maybe tonight.’

‘Why not now?’ asked Doug.

‘Because. If it’s negative and I feel shitty, it might distract me from my afternoon clients,’ said Nikki.

Doug reached across the table and squeezed her hand. ‘It could be positive, honey. No reason why it shouldn’t be.’

‘Yup,’ Nikki forced a smile. ‘No reason.’

Except that the last six times we tried, it was negative. And with every month that passes my eggs are getting older and more worn out. And some cruel god out there, some malicious force beyond our control, seems to have decided that we’ll never become parents.

She and Doug had everything else, after all. A wonderful, loving marriage. Wealth. Status. Meaningful, rewarding careers. Great friends. Great family. In what alternate universe did they deserve children, as well as all that?

‘I love you, Nik,’ Doug said softly.

‘I love you, too.’

‘It’ll happen. We still have time. So much time.’

That’s right, thought Nikki. We still have time.

‘Dr Roberts?’ Carter Berkeley sounded irritated. ‘Were you even listening to me?’

‘Of course.’ Nikki dutifully repeated everything her client had just said. She’d long ago learned the knack of ‘surface listening’, using one’s brain to multitask, in this case memorizing Carter’s words whilst actively focusing on something else entirely. It was a trick Doug had taught her.

Why did everything seem to come back to Doug?

‘Now, as we’re almost out of time, I suggest we finish up with a mindfulness exercise,’ Nikki told Carter, deftly regaining control of the session. ‘If you don’t mind putting your feet flat on the floor ...’

Once Carter Berkeley had left, Nikki wandered out into the lobby.

Trey Raymond, her PA, office manager and general right-hand man, was busy updating patient files. Not that there was much to update any more. Since Doug's death, patients had been deserting Nikki's practice like flies. Perhaps they thought her grief was contagious. Or that her loss might make her less focused, less effective as a therapist. Perhaps they were right about that. Whatever the reason, Nikki now only had four regular clients, down from almost twenty a year ago.

Inevitably, her final four were the most desperate, the ones who simply couldn't let go.

Carter Berkeley, the paranoid banker, who came once a week.

Lisa Flannagan, the deluded mistress, who typically came twice a week.

Anne Bateman, the insecure violinist, who was Nikki's most frequent flier, coming to therapy almost daily. Therapeutically, this was overkill, but like many people Nikki found she had a tough time saying no to the young and beautiful Anne. In fact it worried Nikki quite how often she thought about Anne, and how important her patient was becoming to her.

And finally there was Lana Grey, the actress, who regularly failed to pay Nikki's bills on time, or even at all. Poor lost Lana. Once a mid-level TV star, she was washed up now and borderline bankrupt.

'Lana ain't your client,' Trey would tell Nikki, repeatedly. 'Clients pay. She's your charity case. Your lost cause.'

'Oh really? My lost cause.' Nikki would smile. 'And what does that make you, I wonder?'

'Me?' Trey would grin. 'Oh, I'm the patron saint of lost causes. But you can't get rid of me, Doc. I jus' keep on coming back, like a bad penny.'

To which Nikki would reply that she didn't want to get rid of him. That she didn't know how she would manage without him. Both of which were true, but not because she needed an office manager. The reality was that Trey Raymond was a last link to her husband. Doug had helped Trey, picked him up off the streets and turned his life around. He'd done the same for countless others over the years. But for some reason Trey was different. Doug had loved him like a son.

The son I was never able to give him ...

Trey shot Nikki a sidelong glance now, as he finished his filing. 'You headin' home, Doc?'

'I was going to.' Nikki hesitated, casting around for reasons to stay. 'Do you need me for anything?'

'Nope.' The young man beamed, strong white teeth lighting up his ebony complexion. 'I got this covered.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm positive,' said Trey. 'I'll call you if anything comes up.'

Outside on the street, Nikki squinted. The sun was blinding, blasting out of the clear blue California sky with a vengeance after yesterday's unexpected rain.

Nikki used to love the rain but now she hated it. It reminded her of Doug, of the anguish and misery and rage – God, the rage! – that could never be washed away. She imagined the wheels of his Tesla, slick and slipping across the freeway. His panic as he hurtled towards the lights of the oncoming traffic. Nikki imagined Doug's foot stamping frantically on a useless brake pedal. Did he scream? *I hope he screamed.*

Up until that day, as far as Nikki knew, she and Doug had been happy in their marriage. Blissfully happy.

Clearly she was mistaken. That was the day it had all unraveled. All the smoke and mirrors had fallen away, and she was left staring at the raw truth. The ugly truth.

And now Doug was dead and she was alone, her life a never-ending nightmare of unanswered questions and 'what ifs'. Until the accident, Nikki wouldn't have believed it possible to love someone so much, miss them so much and hate them so much, all at the same time. But here she was, drowning in all three emotions, fighting simply to make it through the day.

She'd found solace in her work, to a degree. But sometimes, like Doug with his addicts, Nikki found herself so frustrated with her patients she wanted to pick them up by the scruff of the neck and shake them, like a terrier with a rat.

Get over it, for God's sake.

STOP WHINING!

She never used to be that way. Intolerant. Superior. Judgmental.

Grief had changed her.

Lisa Flannagan was a case in point. Nikki didn't approve of Lisa. Of her life, her choices. On the plus side, unlike Carter Berkeley, Lisa did at least sincerely want to change. Although, again unlike Carter, she was so stupid, so profoundly intellectually giftless, that getting her to see even the most simple correlation between her behaviors, thoughts and emotions was like trying to teach a swamp rat calculus. Was it frustration that had made Nikki so depressed after last night's session with Lisa? Or something else? Maybe it was envy. Envy at Lisa's positive outlook. Her happiness, her hope for the future. Hope was something that Nikki Roberts no longer possessed, in any area of her life. After last night's session she'd driven out into the rainy alley, so upset she'd had to stop the car to compose herself. Then she'd gone home, finished an entire bottle of wine alone (a nightly occurrence these days) and collapsed into bed, too drained even to cry. To her amazement, she slept deeply and well, not waking until almost nine this morning, feeling nauseous but more rested than she had in months.

The sleep had done wonders for her mood, carrying her through the morning on a mini wave of euphoria, right up until her trying session with Carter Berkeley. That had brought her down again. But now it was over, she made an effort to recapture her earlier good spirits.

Arriving home, she kicked off her shoes and turned on the TV news before running upstairs to change. Pathetic as it was, Nikki found that background noise from the television or radio made her feel less lonely, especially in the evenings. Up in the master bedroom it was off with the professional psychologist's clothes – skirt, pumps, silk jacket – and on with the shorts and sneakers. This evening, Nikki decided, she would run on the beach. She hadn't done that in forever, not since long before Doug's accident. Back then, in another life, running beside the ocean used to make her feel happy. Free. Blessed. She didn't expect any of those feelings today. That would be too much to ask. But getting out and moving had to be better than moping around the house. After all, if Lobotomized-Lisa Flannagan could take a step forward in her pampered, self-centered life, so could she.

The newscaster's voice droned on in the background as Nikki came back downstairs. She half tuned in.

'A young woman's body was found this afternoon, partially hidden in undergrowth close to the 10 freeway,' the anchor was saying. 'Initial reports suggest that the victim, a white woman in her late twenties, was stabbed multiple times, possibly even tortured.'

Was it Nikki's imagination, or did the newscaster seem to be lingering over the gruesome details?

'According to police, the injuries to the victim's face are so severe that no formal identification has yet been made.'

Nikki winced and grabbed a water bottle from the fridge. *Christ. There are some psychos out there.*

'Sports news now, and in a major setback for the LA Rams ...'

Nikki tuned out. Opening the door, she ran out into the still bright evening light.

She'd almost reached Sunset Boulevard when her phone rang. She stopped and answered, panting.

'Hello?'

It was Trey. He was crying, sobbing so violently it was hard to make out his words. Nikki slipped into doctor mode.

'Try to breathe, honey. Slow it down.'

Two long, rasping breaths shuddered down the line.

'Good,' said Nikki. 'Now can you tell me what's happened?'

'Lisa!' Trey blurted. 'Lisa Flannagan.'

Trey had always had a soft spot for Lisa. Nikki could tell. The way he stared at her when she walked down the hall to the restroom, the shy smile he gave every time she came to his desk to pay for a session.

'What about Lisa?' Nikki asked kindly. 'Whatever it is, I'm sure it can't be that bad, Trey.'

'She's dead!' Trey sobbed.

A low ringing had started in Nikki's ears. She watched the traffic crawl past her as if in a dream.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean she's dead. Murdered!' Trey started to weep uncontrollably. 'I heard it on the news.'

Nikki's knees buckled beneath her. She'd seen Lisa yesterday, alive and well and full of plans for her future. This couldn't be right. 'Are you sure?'

'I'm positive. Oh God, Doc, it's awful. Some sicko cut her to pieces! Dumped her by the side of the freeway.'

Nikki gasped. The news report she'd heard earlier! About the young woman dumped off the 10. That was *Lisa*?

'Dr Roberts? Dr Roberts, are you still there?'

Trey's voice whined out of her earpiece but Nikki didn't answer.

Guilt crept over her like a spider. While she'd been envying Lisa's hope and youth, while she'd been *judging* her, Lisa had been ... *Oh God*.

She tried not to think about it, but the horrifying images crowding into Nikki's brain wouldn't stop.

'I'll talk to you tomorrow, Trey,' she rasped, and hung up.

A new nightmare had begun.

CHAPTER FIVE

'We're looking for Dr Roberts. Dr Nicola Roberts. Now it's a simple question, son. Is she here or isn't she?'

The two cops hovered menacingly in front of Trey Raymond's desk. At least, it felt menacing to Trey. Then again, they were cops, and Trey was black and a former meth-dealer from Westmont, South LA's 'Death Alley', so the three men weren't ever going to be friends.

'She's with a patient right now.'

One of the cops, the shorter, fatter, older one with big, wet, larva-like white lips, regarded Trey with unadulterated contempt.

'In there?' he asked, nodding towards Nikki's office door.

He wasn't wearing uniform and he hadn't showed Trey his badge. Neither of them had, for that matter. But he spoke with the innate, entitled authority of a police officer. It didn't occur to Trey to question him.

'Yes, in there,' Trey confirmed. 'But like I said, Dr Roberts is with a patient. She can't be disturbed while she's in session.'

'Is that a fact?' The fat cop smiled unpleasantly, moving towards the door.

'Leave it, Mick.' His taller, younger, more attractive partner put a restraining hand on his shoulder. 'We can wait.'

'Wait?' Larva Lips looked furious, but his partner ignored him, smiling at Trey and taking a seat on the Italian leather couch in the waiting room. Picking up a copy of *Psychology Today*, he asked casually: 'It's fifty minutes, right? A therapy session? I remember from when my wife left me.'

'Which one?' Larva Lips snarled, obviously not best pleased to have been 'reined in' in front of Trey.

'All of them,' his partner grinned. 'I was a wreck every time.'

Larva Lips didn't smile back but sat down, lowering his ample backside into an armchair where he simmered belligerently. Trey had encountered scores of LAPD like him growing up: knee-jerk racists, Blue Lives Matter assholes who shot first and thought later. Or not. Dude might as well have had a swastika tattooed on his forehead, so obvious were his prejudices. For all Trey knew, his partner might be every bit as rotten inside, but he was better educated and he hid it better. Maybe he thought he'd get more out of Dr Roberts if he played nice with her office staff?

Trey Raymond figured he'd learned a lot, working in a psychologist's office.

'How much longer?' Larva Lips demanded, glaring at the clock on the wall as if it were to blame for his impatience.

'The session ends in fifteen minutes,' said Trey. He assumed the police were here to ask about Lisa, which only made him feel worse. The thought of these bozos, picking through Lisa's private life like vultures pecking at a carcass, made him feel sick.

Trey had seen a lot of death growing up. A lot of murder too, but that was different. That was shootings, gang violence, and where Trey grew up that was a fact of life. Sad, for sure. But not shocking.

Not like this. Lisa wasn't part of that world. She was white and rich and beautiful, part of a white, rich, beautiful world where shit like this didn't happen. Dr Roberts came from the same world. Trey didn't, but he'd been invited in by Dr Roberts' husband, Doug, before he died. More than invited. Welcomed. Like a son.

These son-of-a-bitch cops had no business here, bringing their dark world into this bright one.

'Can I get you something to drink?' Trey offered the politer officer.

'I'm fine thanks.'

'You can get me a Coke,' the fat one replied, without looking up from his phone. An unspoken 'boy' hung in the air.

Beneath the desk, Trey's fists clenched. He longed to refuse, to tell the man they were all out, sorry. But a deep-rooted survival instinct kicked in. *Don't mess with cops. Not to their face, anyway.*

Inside Nikki's office, Anne Bateman recrossed her slender legs beneath her long linen skirt. All her movements were so graceful, so thoughtful and composed. *Like a ballet dancer*, thought Nikki admiringly. Only last night Nikki had dreamed about Anne again, dreams that were not overtly erotic but that certainly had something obsessional about them, something voyeuristic. *Perhaps being a virtuoso violinist isn't so dissimilar to being a ballerina?* Nikki thought. Whatever the reason, Anne appeared to dance through life to the tune of some inner music, some rhapsody of her own creation.

'She was your patient, wasn't she? Like me,' Anne asked.

'You know I can't tell you that,' Nikki said gently.

Like everybody else, Anne had seen the grisly reports of Lisa Flannagan's murder on the TV news. She'd been distressed by them, and understandably wanted to talk.

'You don't have to tell me,' she said quietly, staring down at her lap. 'I know. I've passed her in the corridor a hundred times. Poor woman.'

'Yes,' said Nikki. She felt bad herself. Lisa had been so full of hope in their final session together, so focused on her future. A future that, as it turned out, didn't exist.

It was too late to help Lisa Flannagan now. But Nikki could still help Anne Bateman. Beautiful, intoxicating Anne. In fact, Anne was the one patient who Nikki felt she *was* helping, consistently. A violin prodigy with a coveted position at the LA Phil, at only twenty-six years old Anne was already wildly successful. Although childlike in some ways, in others she had already lived a life far beyond her years. As a teenager she'd traveled and performed all over the world, eventually marrying young to an extremely wealthy, charismatic, and much older man.

Anne was an attractive girl, in a tiny, fragile, doll-like way. Shy and meek in everyday conversation, with a violin in her hand Anne transformed into a frenzied, passionate woman, utterly lost in her own talent. Many men had been drawn to her on stage, to her alabaster skin and enormous, chocolate brown eyes, as well as to the intensity of her playing. But her husband had coveted her with an obsessive desire. After they married he had carried her off to his vast estate like a fairytale princess, showering her with gifts and clothes and attention and adoration, rarely letting her out of his sight.

It had taken immense courage for Anne to leave him and move back to her native Los Angeles. It wasn't that she didn't love him. But she'd married so young, and she'd changed, and her music was calling to her, its call becoming more and more insistent with each passing day. The collapse of her marriage was what had prompted Anne to start seeing a therapist, and she and Nikki had quickly formed a strong bond. Over the last three months, Anne had come to rely heavily on Nikki's support and advice in almost every aspect of her life.

'You mustn't feel frightened,' Nikki told her now. 'What happened to Lisa was terrible, but it had nothing to do with you. Don't internalize it. The fact that you happened to see her in this office doesn't mean anything. It doesn't tie the two of you together.'

'No.' Anne smiled shyly. 'You're right. I'm being silly.'

'Not silly,' said Nikki. 'Death is a traumatic event. Especially violent death. But you're still processing your own trauma, Anne. Try not to take on anyone else's, that's all I'm saying.'

Their time was up. Reluctantly, Nikki opened the door to the corridor to show Anne out. Most patients shook Nikki's hand at the end of a session, but Anne always hugged her, squeezing tightly like a child leaving its mother at the school gate. It was too intimate a gesture really, not appropriate between a patient and a therapist, but Nikki didn't have the heart to put a stop to it. The truth was that Anne's dependence on her felt good. Everything about Anne Bateman felt good.

This time, however, Nikki stiffened the moment Anne embraced her.

Two strange men were heading towards her from the waiting room, watching intently.

Extricating herself swiftly from Anne's arms, Nikki ushered her patient out before turning to the two men.

'Can I help you?' she asked curtly.

One of the men, the younger one, stood up and extended his hand politely.

'Detective Lou Goodman, LAPD. This is my partner, Detective Mick Johnson.'

Nikki shook Goodman's hand. 'I assume you're here about Lisa? Such a terrible thing.' She offered her hand to his partner as well, but the short, heavysset man jerked angrily away.

'Not here,' he barked rudely, with a sidelong, distrustful glance at Trey. 'In your office.'

Nikki bristled. *What's his problem?* She had the vague sense of having seen him somewhere before, but she couldn't place it. 'All right,' she said briskly, walking both men into her consulting room and offering them a seat, before closing the door behind them.

Back in the waiting room, Trey waited until he could hear the three of them talking before he picked up the phone.

'There's two cops here!' he whispered down the line. He was close to tears. 'What do I do? I'm scared, man.'

The voice on the other end of the line began to talk.

Trey listened, and nodded, trying to calm himself down.

They don't know.

Nobody knows.

Be cool.

Detective Mick Johnson watched and listened as Dr Nikki Roberts answered his partner's questions.

When did Nikki last see Lisa Flannagan?

The day she died.

Had Lisa mentioned anything in that session, or prior sessions, about being threatened, or having any fears for her safety?

No.

Did Nikki know of anyone who might have a reason to target Lisa, or hurt her?

No.

Goodman asked all his questions politely, and accepted all Nikki's one-word answers without question or comment, writing each one down in his little notebook like a schoolboy taking notes from a teacher.

Johnson watched in silent disapproval. He didn't trust Nikki and he didn't like her. The arrogant bitch didn't even remember him! But he remembered her. He would always remember her. Watching her now, poised and cautious, sweeping her shiny dark hair back out of her eyes as she talked with Goodman, he could feel the anger burn his chest like battery acid.

'Dr Roberts, you may have been the last person, other than her killer, to see Miss Flannagan alive,' Goodman was saying. Leaning forward in his chair, looking at Nikki intently, it was obvious he was smitten by her. 'It's vital that we understand as much as we can about exactly what happened, both in this office, and after she left here.'

'I understand that, Detective,' said Nikki. 'I'm not sure what I can add, that's all. The session was positive, as I told you. Lisa seemed happy. She'd made a break from her boyfriend—'

'Boyfriend? You mean her sugar daddy,' Johnson interjected. 'Willie Baden?'

These were the first words the angry little man had spoken since he sat down. There could be no mistaking the leer in his voice. The idea of a beautiful young girl like Lisa offering herself sexually to a dirty old man like Baden clearly turned him on, or at least amused him.

'Yes,' Nikki said evenly.

'But, to be clear, she didn't have a "boyfriend". She was sleeping with a rich old man, someone else's husband, for his money,' Johnson pressed the point, earning himself a dirty look from Goodman, as well as a horrified one from Nikki. 'She was a high-class whore, basically. Isn't that right?'

'I don't know why she was with him. It's not my place to judge my clients, Detective,' Nikki replied coolly, fighting down her distaste at this man's unabashed sexism. 'All I know is that in our session that evening, Lisa told me she'd taken steps to leave Willie, and she seemed to be feeling good about that. I'd say she left here in a happy, hopeful mood.'

'Did she plan to meet anyone after her appointment? A friend, maybe? Did somebody pick her up?' Goodman asked, glaring at Johnson as he resumed his questioning.

'No,' said Nikki. 'She left alone. Typically, she drove herself to our sessions but on Wednesday she didn't have her car with her.'

The two cops exchanged glances.

'Do you know why not?'

Nikki shook her head. 'No. Sorry. I only remember because it was raining, and she told me she was leaving on foot, so I lent her my raincoat.'

Forgetting his anger for a moment, Detective Johnson sat up eagerly. 'She was wearing the coat when she left?'

'Yes,' said Nikki.

'Can you describe the coat, Dr Roberts? In as much detail as possible.'

Nikki did so. It was a perfectly ordinary raincoat but both men seemed fascinated by it.

'Thank you, Dr Roberts,' Goodman said, smiling warmly. 'That's very helpful information.' He had an intense way of speaking, Nikki noticed, a sort of flattering, micro-focus that made you feel as if you were the only person in the room. It wasn't flirtatious exactly, but it wasn't far off.

By contrast, his partner was utterly charmless, firing off a few more questions without any sort of thanks, before both men took their leave. But even he, Johnson, had seemed excited by the raincoat revelation. *Could it really be that important?*

Once they'd gone, Trey knocked on Nikki's door.

'I'm sorry, Doc. I didn't know what to do,' he said anxiously to Nikki. 'I knew you wouldn't want them to interrupt your session, but I think the older guy didn't like that I made them wait.'

Nikki put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. 'That's OK, Trey. You did everything right. How are *you* feeling? I know you cared about Lisa.'

'I'm feeling OK, I guess,' he muttered awkwardly. 'I mean, I'm sad. Shocked.'

'Me too,' said Nikki.

'She was so beautiful.'

'Yes. She was.'

'Times like this, I wish Dr Douglas was here,' Trey blurted. 'You know?'

Nikki looked pained. Trey hung his head.

'Sorry, Doc. I shouldn't have said that. Not to you.'

'Of course you can say it, Trey,' Nikki said kindly. 'You miss him. I miss him too. I don't want you to feel Doug's name is taboo. He'd have hated that.'

Later, after Trey had gone home, Nikki sat in her office alone for a long time, thinking.

She thought about Doug, and what he'd have made of all this.

She thought about Lisa, about the horror of her death.

She thought about the angry detective, Johnson: *She was a whore, sleeping with someone else's husband.*

Nikki understood anger. Since Doug's death, it had been her constant companion.

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the card that the other detective had given her. The civil one. Detective Lou Goodman.

Lou.

How long would it be, she wondered, before she heard from him again?

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