

The background of the page is a light, faded floral pattern, likely peonies, which are scattered across the page. The flowers are rendered in a soft, monochromatic style, blending into the white background.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Anya*

**C**ome on, baby.  
Give it to me.

*There's no point in playing hide and seek.*

*I'm going to find it.*

*You know I always do.*

“You should go home,” someone says, cutting into the one-sided conversation I’m having with my computer in my head.

By the toneless inflection, I know who the owner of the voice is before I look up from my screen.

Mr. Lewis stands in the door frame with his briefcase in his hand. He’s donned his double-breasted summer coat and black Fedora hat. His neck is so short it appears as if his head is attached to his shoulders. Coupled with his ramrod straight pose, he reminds me of those boxy nutcracker dolls that stand at attention. The fact that his

face never betrays a hint of emotion adds to the illusion. So does the beard, except that his isn't white but brown. He doesn't sport a single gray hair despite being close to sixty. Does he dye the whole works, eyebrows included?

"I'm clocking out." He checks his watch with a brisk and precise lift of his arm, the movement almost mechanical. "It's late."

A glance at the hour on my menu bar confirms it's close to midnight. The open-plan office I share with three other junior accountants is long since dark and deserted. The only light in the room comes from the bluish glow of the desktop computer.

"You should go," Mr. Lewis repeats in his impassive manner.

I've been so absorbed in my work I didn't keep track of time. Frowning, I turn my attention back to the spreadsheet on my screen. The credits and debits don't balance, and I hate leaving a problem unsolved. I never let the numbers win.

"I'll just be another minute," I mutter as I do a quick mental calculation.

His reply is neutral, but it's more distracted than disinterested. "Remember to switch off the lights when you go."

"Kay."

I lift my head when he turns to leave. He carries his average height and thin frame with his habitual air of solemn dignity, but just before the dark hallway swallows his shape, his shoulders curl inward. The cardboard-like outline of his body stoops. The forlorn look is so foreign on him that it gives me pause.

He hasn't been himself lately. Ever since the two men in their fancy suits walked unannounced into his office a couple of weeks ago, he's been preoccupied and jittery.

“Mr. Lewis?”

He stops and looks back at me.

“Is everything all right?” I ask carefully, not wanting to overstep my boundaries.

Mr. Lewis is my boss, and he discourages familiarity at the office. He doesn’t share his personal life at work, let alone his problems. His dispassionate bearing makes him unpopular with both the staff and the managers, but I respect him for building this firm from the ground up. He’ll always have my gratitude for giving me an opportunity when no one else would. Fine, he only gave me the job because he owed Livy a favor, but he still took a chance on me.

“Sir?” I probe when he doesn’t answer.

His laugh sounds forced. “Of course.”

I get the message. He doesn’t want to talk about whatever is eating him. That doesn’t stop me from worrying. Besides, if the business is in trouble, it affects me too. I like this job. I need the money, now more than ever.

“If there’s anything I can help with—” I start, but he cuts me short.

“Just doing your job will do. That means nine to five, Ms. Brennan. I don’t pay overtime.”

I open my mouth to tell him I don’t mind, but he doesn’t give me the chance.

“You look tired,” he says.

Only, he’s not looking at me. He’s peering through the window behind me with a nervous twitch of his eyes.

What does he see that makes him so jumpy? I follow his gaze. The Meatpacking District of New York City stretches behind us under a blanket of lights. The top floor of the red-brick building that houses Frank Lewis’s accounting firm looks out over the High Line and the

Hudson River in the distance. The prime location alone is proof of his hard-earned success.

His voice reaches me from farther away. “Don’t forget to check that the guard sets the alarm when you leave.”

When I face forward again, he’s crossing the reception area in the dim light of the desk lamp. The click of the door announces his exit.

I chew my nail as I contemplate his uncharacteristic behavior. Judging by the big clients on his books, the firm is thriving. Then again, anything can look good on paper. I know that better than anyone. I hope the business is secure. Without a diploma, I won’t find a similar job anywhere in the city, and I can’t live in Livy’s building without paying rent forever. My position in the firm is nothing but charity. That’s why I’m working three times harder than everyone else. I want to show Mr. Lewis how grateful I am for his faith in me as much as I want to prove that I’m capable. Plus, there’s my professional pride. I don’t like failing. Until my probation period is over, nothing is certain. Once Mr. Lewis has signed my permanent contract, I’ll breathe easier. I’ll make sure he never regrets employing me. I’m not afraid of long hours and hard work.

Guilt needles my conscience when I think about the fact I omitted in my application. I must make myself indispensable before my secret becomes known. I hate lying. I just didn’t see another way. I can only hope Mr. Lewis will forgive me.

Rubbing my eyes that burn from tiredness, I push away the troubling thoughts and focus on the number puzzle in front of me. It’s not going to solve itself.

“Come on,” I coax. “Don’t be so stubborn. Give it to me. You know you want to.”

I do a few more subtractions, and then the erroneous formula jumps out at me.

“Gotcha,” I say with a victorious grin aimed at the screen.

I save the balance statement and email it to Mr. Lewis so that he can look it over first thing in the morning. He’d want to send it to the client as soon as possible.

My back is sore from being bent over my computer for hours. I stand and stretch to relieve the ache in my muscles. I should take better care of myself. The salad I gobbled down at my desk more than four hours ago wasn’t enough to sustain me. I’m already hungry again.

I grab my bag and do a quick tour of the floor to switch off the hallway lights. Mr. Lewis is a stickler for saving costs, and rightly so. We’re in the middle of a worldwide energy crisis.

The lock on the door is electronic. It opens with a code typed into a keypad. Locking up requires nothing more than shutting the door behind me. After flicking off the light switch on the landing, I take the elevator to the lobby where the night guard sits behind the reception desk.

“Hey, Zack.” I smile. “What are you reading tonight?”

He lifts his book to show me the cover.

“Another horror novel?” I bend sideways to read the title. “Is it good?”

He grins. “It certainly keeps me awake.”

“Well, that’s positive then,” I tease. “We can’t have you sleeping on the job, can we?”

“You’ll be sleeping on the job if you keep up the late hours.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” I tease. “It’s the first time I worked *this* late.”

“You should’ve left with Mr. Lewis.” Zack earmarks the page and closes the book. “He could’ve walked you home. It’s not safe for a woman out alone at this hour. You just missed him with a couple of seconds. If you hurry, you can

catch up with him. He's heading toward the subway on Fourteenth Street and Eighth Avenue."

"I don't live far," I say thoughtfully, stuck on what Zack said about Mr. Lewis leaving shortly before. "Wait. I thought Mr. Lewis left twenty minutes ago."

"He came downstairs but went to the archive room."

"The archive room?"

"He said he needed to do some filing."

That's odd. We have dedicated staff for filing, and Mr. Lewis never sets foot in the dusty underground vault. Whenever he needs a document, he calls down and asks that it's brought to his office.

"Best get going now," Zack says. "Don't let Mr. Lewis get too far ahead."

"I'll be fine," I say on my way to the door, still puzzled about the information Zack shared.

"You have my number if you run into trouble," he calls after me before adding with a hint of humor, "And don't worry, I won't forget to set the alarm upstairs."

It's no doubt an order Mr. Lewis repeats daily.

"Thanks," I shoot over my shoulder as I open the door.

I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. I make a mental note to ask Livy if she noticed anything strange about Mr. Lewis's behavior.

The early fall breeze is cool on my cheeks when I walk outside. Pulling my cardigan tighter around myself, I make my way down the quiet cobblestone street. Most of the buildings in the vicinity are offices, and the workers are long gone. My apartment building is only two blocks north. It's a short walk, but a shiver crawls down my spine as I pass in front of the deserted premises with their blackened windows. The sidewalks that are always bustling with pedestrians when I walk home are now eerily empty. I

often work overtime, but staying until after midnight is a first for me.

I take my phone from my bag and clutch it in my hand. Having all the emergency numbers as well as Zack's programmed in my quick dials makes me feel better. The rubber soles of my ballerina flats fall soundlessly on the concrete as I quicken my pace. A bar up ahead stays open late. Light spills from the windows. At least there's life around.

I'm at the corner of the building when a grunt comes from the alley. I jerk my face toward the sound, and then I freeze. Two men stand under the pale light that streams from an upstairs window, pushing a third against the wall. When the tallest of the two lifts his hand, I open my mouth to shout a warning, to demand what they're doing, but the scream dies on my lips when the shiny edge of a blade catches the light.

He brings his arm down in one fluent swoop, drawing a line across the throat of the man in his grip. In the grim light, the line runs black, the color spilling like a fountain of ink down the man's neck and into his collar.

I stand frozen in horror, unable to process the sight even as my brain catalogues the briefcase and the hat that lie on the ground. My mind takes stock of the familiar features of my employer as Mr. Lewis utters a gurgling sound. The man with the knife holds him up when his knees buckle. In a warped way, it looks like a gentle act, almost as if the killer is giving him comfort as my boss's gargling goes quiet and his body slumps.

I register everything about the man with the knife all at once—the well-tailored suit and the lean, broad body that fills it so well, the hard lines of the handsome square face, the modern cut of the midnight-black hair, and the chilling blue of his eyes. It's a face I saw only once but would

recognize anywhere. A face like that is too beautiful to forget. They're the men who paid Mr. Lewis a surprise visit at the office. They make a formidable, terrifying pair. The tall man's partner is bulkier, but he leaves less of an impression. The energy emanating from him isn't as dark and deviant.

A clang echoes through the alley. My heart jolts in my chest. My phone. It lies at my feet. The screen is dark. Cracked.

Aghast, I look from the cause of the noise to the men in the alley. The man loosened his hold on Mr. Lewis. My boss lies on his side next to his briefcase, staring at me with wide, glassy eyes.

"Fuck," the bulky man says, snarling as he trains his gaze on me.

Heatwaves of shock run through my body, propelling me back into action even as I lock eyes with the killer. Something passes between us—the knowledge that I'm done for. The way in which he tilts his head holds a strange kind of apology.

I don't think. If I do, I'm dead. I spin on my heel and run.

The stocky man's words follow me like a demon's promise down the dark street.

"Get her and finish her."