

AGENT OF ENCHANTMENT



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Agent of Enchantment

Book 1 of the Dark Fae FBI Series.

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CHAPTER 1



The fae lay on the ancient flagstones, candlelight dancing over his handsome features.

I had power over him now, and it intoxicated me. I was beyond taking things slow, beyond being careful. I was a fugitive, at the end of the line. I had very little to lose.

Standing below the towering stone arches of the ancient London church, I stared at him. Candlelight wavered around the nave, and high above me, thick shadows danced over the peaked vaults like malicious spirits. I took a deep breath, the battle over.

At least, I thought it was over.

As I drew closer, he seemed to rally, his lips curling into a grimace. With a roar, he leapt to his feet, charging me in a blur of movement. He moved impossibly fast, and yet to my eyes time seemed to slow

down. His powerful arms swung like heavy pendulums, as if he were moving through a sea of honey.

Reflexes took over as I slid aside and let his fist pass me. Then, with both hands, I grabbed his wrist. Dipping my hips, I used his momentum to send him flying into a stone pillar. The crunch of his bones echoed off the vaulted ceiling, and dusty stone rained down on us.

The asshole had wanted to keep me in a cage, to torture me for fun. He wasn't going to see my merciful side.

With a dark smile curling my lips, I stalked toward him. A trickle of blood ran down his forehead, and he glared at me with his good eye. He snarled, a bestial sound—a predator, unused to being prey. As I came within reach, he tried to punch me in the stomach.

I slapped his hand away, then backhanded him across the face. His head snapped right, and he fell to the floor. I picked him up by the collar and hurled him at a row of pews. When he crashed into them, his body splintered the wood.

And yet he kept going, dragging himself up again, breath rasping.

This time I charged fast, intent on beating seven shades of shit out of him, but he was reaching for his boot. A knife? No. I recognized the familiar shape of a Glock 17, rising to point at my chest. My heart thundered. *Shit shit shit.* I dove, but not in time.

A gunshot echoed off the stone. Pain ripped

through my side. Gasping, I fell back, clutching at my waist, my hands covered in blood.

He stood slowly, training the gun on me as I stumbled back, pain splintering my gut. The custom iron bullet seared me from within, and I fell to my knees.

Already the poison was spreading through my body, dizzying me. Quenching my magic. I gritted my teeth, mentally whispering my mantra. *Be prepared to kill everyone you meet.* Right about now, that wasn't working out so well for me.

His pale eyes flashing with fury, he pulled the trigger again, but it only clicked dully. The gun was empty. A small mercy.

"Well." He smiled wryly, walking toward me. "I guess I could always kill you the old-fashioned way."

I crawled away from him, gripping my gut, trying to block out the searing agony. "I should have known it was you. A fascination with power. Obsession with fear. You worship chaos..." Shivers wracked my body as the blood seeped through my fingers. "I profiled you all along."

"Mmm. Yet look where you are now, mongrel," he growled, eyes gleaming.

"Yeah, well..." I looked down at my blood-stained fingers. "I like to know that I got things right."

He kicked me in the stomach, right where he'd shot me. I gasped with pain, collapsing to my back, staring at the arched stone ceiling. Shadows writhed along the pillars, as if this place were cursed. And maybe it was—

Smithfield, the vortex of slaughter. Moaning, I gritted my teeth.

The fae smiled, apparently enjoying my grimace of pain.

At the sight of his shit-eating grin, rage flared in me. *Fight, Cassandra. Always fight.* If only there were some way I could use my remaining magic... I grasped around me for metal, glass, anything.

“No one to save you anymore.” He knelt over me, running a fingertip down my chest. “No more tricks. No more magic. Just me and you. Do you know what I think I’d like to do? Break your ribs, one by one. I want to see the fear in your eyes. What do you think, profiler? Will I enjoy it?”

A line of blood trickled from my mouth. “I think you need a more pro-social hobby.”

He leaned over me, his pupils black as coal, completely devoid of feeling. “Ready to die, mongrel?” he asked, pressing his knee on the gunshot wound.

I screamed.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” His fingers wrapped around my throat.

As if in a dream, I stared into his eyes. So soulless, so empty, that I could see nothing in them but my own reflection.

CHAPTER 2



FIVE DAYS EARLIER

Despite my Special Agent training, I nearly got myself killed three seconds after leaving Heathrow airport. I could handle snipers, knife attacks, poison, bombs—just not cars driving on the left side of the road.

But hey, in my defense, I was a bit preoccupied with the serial killer case I'd been called in to profile.

Anyway, three steps into the road, and it was all screeching brakes, honking, and the words “stupid twat” and “fuckwit” piercing the air.

And I'd been thinking everyone in England would be polite.

As the red-faced man continued his tirade (“Watch where you're going, fucking dozy mare!”), I jumped back to the sidewalk, cheeks burning. I took a deep

breath, forcing myself to focus. I was in England now. The land of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and—as I was quickly learning—inventive swearing. They drove on the *left* here, something I should really keep in mind.

Having oriented myself, I decided that maybe navigating my way to a bus in a foreign city in the middle of the night was beyond my capabilities right now.

I mentally scanned through everything I'd digested in my tourist guide on the plane: trains, the Underground, black cabs. Perhaps best to just get one of those. Supposedly, the black cab drivers were required to memorize the entire city, street by street.

I turned, catching a glimpse of the yellow *Taxi* sign by a long line of cabs. Pulling my suitcase behind me, I hurried across the crosswalk, back toward the terminal. As I hustled past the airport's gleaming windows, I caught a glimpse of myself: pale skin, rumpled blond hair, wrinkled skirt, and coffee stains on my white sweater.

Apart from the gloriousness of my favorite black boots, I looked like shit.

I reached the line of black cabs, and a bearded man rolled down the window, leaning over. "Taxi?"

"Yes, thank you," I said, relieved. "I need to get to the Bishopsgate police station."

"No problem." He smiled. "Hop in. I'll get your bags."

I let him put my carry-on in the trunk while I slid into the back seat. *At least some of them are polite.*

The driver got in, switched on the engine, and rolled into traffic. I relaxed into the soft leather seat.

I stared out the window at the dark West London streets. I was pretty sure we had a long drive ahead of us to the other side of London—the part called “the City.” It was the old section of London, the part the Romans had encircled with a wall nearly two thousand years ago. The wall had fallen, but the ancient Square Mile still had its own governing bodies, separate from the rest of London. The Square Mile even had its own City police force.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out. My stomach churned as I watched the contact name slowly scroll across the screen: *Under No Circumstances Should You Answer A Call From This Ballsack*, it read.

That would be my ex-boyfriend.

See? Brits aren’t the only ones who can swear creatively.

I’m not normally the angry sort, but when I’d come home to find that my boyfriend had left open a dating site on my computer (username: *VirginiaStallion*), the swears had just rolled off the tongue.

According to a quick Google search, the Virginia Stallion had also been quite busy swapping dating tips on bodybuilding forums. Apparently, wearing a nicely tailored suit attracts the ladies, and Valentine’s Day can be a nightmare when you’re “banging three chicks on the regular.” All things I’d learned in the past two weeks.

You’d think I’d be more careful about the kind of

men I let into my life. Lesson learned for the future.

Scowling, I shoved my phone back in my pocket.

The driver glanced back at me. "Did you come from America or Canada?"

"The US. It's my first time here." I bit my lip. "Have you ever encountered the phrase 'dozy mare?'"

"Did someone call you that, miss?"

"Based on the context, I'm assuming it wasn't a compliment."

"I wouldn't pay it any mind, love." He turned onto a highway. "You working with the police at Bishopsgate? I don't imagine you came all the way from America to report a crime."

"Just doing a bit of consulting," I said. "Insider trading cases in the City. White-collar stuff."

A lie, and one boring enough that he wouldn't ask any follow-up questions. I'd become quite used to lying after a few years with the Bureau, though I still lacked the skill of the Virginia Stallion.

"Right," he said. "The financial district. You ask me, half those people should be in jail. Mucking about with the stock market and all that. Screws it up for everyone."

"Couldn't agree more."

My lies bored even me, but I wasn't about to expose the fact that I was here to profile London's most famous serial killer since Jack the Ripper. Plus, it creeped people out when I said I was an FBI special agent. And it *particularly* spooked them if they learned I worked for the Behavioral Analysis Unit, as a psychol-

ogist who profiled criminals. All of a sudden, people got jittery, as if I were going to unearth their darkest secrets just by looking into their eyes.

We lapsed into silence as the cab sped along the M4. As we drove further into the city, I began to feel a change tingle over my body, as though my senses were becoming heightened. Here, in the center of the City, the streetlights seemed to burn brighter, washing the streets in white light. On a road called Chancery Lane, we drove past squat Tudor-looking buildings, the colored lights from the shops on their lower floors dazzling off puddles on the pavement. No one lingered on the dark streets at this hour, but for just a moment, I thought I heard the buzz of a crowd of people; then it faded into the distance again.

A shiver rippled over my body. I'd never been to London, and yet I had a strange sense of *déjà vu* here. *Get a grip, Cassandra.*

The driver turned to me. "You hear about the new Ripper murders in the City?" he asked.

"I did hear about them. It freaked me out. Nearly canceled my trip," I lied. "You don't normally get many murders around here, do you?"

"Not like you do. We don't have guns. But these murders... I wouldn't advise walking around at night if I was you. From what I hear, they didn't even put the worst of it in the papers. The girls they found, they was..." He cleared his throat. "Well, I don't want to scare you."

"I'll certainly be careful."

I didn't need him to tell me the details—I'd been poring over them for the entire flight, and before that, in my BAU office back at Quantico. I practically knew the depth of each laceration by heart. Still, the cab driver's concern was cute, and I appreciated it. I was quickly reviving my "polite" theory of Brits.

A few days ago, the City of London police had persuaded me to fly to the UK. The London FBI overseas office was slammed with other work, the attachés delving into investigations of terrorism cases and election interference. None of them had time for a serial killer, but I'd made my career off these cases. I'd been researching serial killers for the Bureau for years. The strange details of this case had piqued my Unit Chief's interest—enough that he was willing to foot the bill. And the City Police wanted to meet me as soon as I arrived—a Detective Constable Stewart was waiting for me, even at this late hour.

I rummaged in my bag, searching for some makeup and my mirrored compact. I pulled out a rose lipstick and dotted some pink on to my pale cheeks in the reflection. As I did, something glimmered in my blue irises—a hint of rushing water, like a rolling river.

I snapped the compact shut. *I am losing my mind.* I obviously needed sleep, or water, or perhaps several Manhattans.

I rubbed my forehead. I was supposed to head straight to the station to quickly meet the detective, and the details of the case nagged at the back of my mind.

The driver looked over his shoulder at me. "Lots of papers to go through, I imagine. With your sort of work."

"Oh, you have no idea. I'd better go through some of the financials now, in fact." Diving back into my bag, I pulled out the case reports the police had sent earlier that week. I flipped through them, taking care to shield the gruesome photos from the driver.

Over the past month, three young women had been found dead in London. The killer had slashed their throats and abdomens open. And just like Jack the Ripper, he'd claimed macabre trophies: a uterus from one, a kidney and heart from another. From the third victim, he'd taken her liver.

So was this a Ripper copycat? The papers certainly thought so. The UK tabloids were already gleefully declaring "The Ripper Is Back!"

I wasn't so sure we were dealing with the same mentality. The killer was almost certainly inspired by the Ripper, but he was killing at a much faster pace.

Staring at one of the crime scene photos, I shook my head. I'd never understood why Jack the Ripper had gotten so much attention. He was hardly the worst, in numbers or methodology. Perhaps it was the name that had inspired endless horror stories. Or the fact that the lack of resolution provided fertile ground for wild conspiracies. Whatever the reason, no one could quite let it go.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I grumbled

under my breath. But when I pulled it out to glance at the screen, it read *Unknown Number*.

Tentatively, I swiped the screen. "Hello?"

"Agent Liddell?" It was a British man with a deep voice. A faint London accent, I thought.

"Speaking."

"I'm Detective Constable Gabriel Stewart. I'm the detective in charge of the serial killer cases."

"Right. Hi. I'm on my way to meet you right now." Gabriel was supposed to be my contact.

He cleared his throat. "I think you should come directly to Mitre Square instead."

I glanced at the time. It was past midnight. "Why?"

"There's been another murder." He paused for a moment as a siren wailed in the background. "Mitre Square is the location of the crime scene."

* * *

IF I HAD any hope that the crime scene would be reasonably contained, it evaporated the moment I turned down the narrow covered alley leading to Mitre Square. Blocked by a line of police tape, a small crowd jammed one end of the passage, barring my way. One of the men seemed to be leaning against the wall, half asleep, and the entire passage smelled of piss and beer.

Pausing, I pulled out my phone to call Detective Stewart.

"Hello?" The detective answered almost immediately.

"Detective, it's Cassandra."

"Who?"

"Agent Cassandra Liddell."

"Oh, right! Are you close?"

"I'm standing just outside the crime scene perimeter in Mitre Passage," I said. "Do you want to let me inside?"

"Sure, just wait until Officer Holbrook comes over to you. Flash your badge, and he'll let you right through."

"Maybe I should be more discreet with all these spectators around?"

He went silent for a moment. "Good point," he finally said. "I'll come for you myself."

I hung up, gripping my suitcase a little tighter and scanning the crowd. For all I knew, the killer could be lingering around here to watch the action. It was one of those weird quirks of some serial killers, returning to the scene of the crime to relive it. I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking for, as his previous history suggested he wasn't overtly psychotic or disorganized. But it wouldn't hurt to memorize the faces for later. I looked at them hard for a long moment, imprinting the view in my mind. Satisfied, I relaxed and took a deep breath.

Despite the fact that half the people here were three sheets to the wind, I could sense an undercurrent of fear beneath their drunkenness. My guess was that whatever lay beyond in Mitre Square was sobering them up pretty fast.

In all honesty, it wasn't just that I could sense their fear. I could actually *feel* it, like a physical charge. And right now, it was building in my system.

As always, it started with my heart. It began pounding faster and faster, each beat thundering in my ears. My fingertips prickled with what felt like a delicate electrical current. Despite the chilly night breeze, my face flushed, heat waves rolling over my body.

The first time I had described this to my friends, they'd just stared at me. I'd assumed everyone felt this way occasionally. Sometimes you're hungry, sometimes you want to sneeze, and sometimes you feel like the emotional energy of the people around you powers your body like electricity. Right? *Right?*

Apparently not. This was not a sensation everyone experienced. This happened only to me. And after talking about it a few times, and getting very weird looks, I stopped mentioning it. Energy? What energy? Ha ha, the only energy I know is energy drinks. I'm totally like everyone else.

Whatever it was, it came from strong emotions. Going to a football game in my hometown was... intense. I'd walk out dazed, a grin on my face, and when someone asked me if I'd enjoyed the game that much, I would realize that I didn't even know what had happened on the field. I knew what had happened in the *crowd*. They were thrilled, or disappointed, or angry... and I felt it blazing through my body like a drug.

But no other emotion affected me like fear did. And

right now, an undercurrent of fear flowed through me. It focused me, sharpening my senses. Any fatigue from the flight dissipated completely.

I began shoving my way through the small crowd, rolling my stupid suitcase behind me. As I did, I glimpsed a media van parked in the road. Damn it. Nothing hurt a serial killer investigation more than public fear.

I reached the police tape, staring at the horrific scene before me. Spotlights bathed it in white light. About seventy feet away, on the other side of the square, a group of people surrounded a woman's body. Even from here, I could see the crimson pool glistening on the cobbles beneath her.

Most of the investigators surrounding the body wore white overalls that covered their bodies completely, surgical masks on their faces. Shoes were covered with white sterile wrappers, and their hands were gloved in blue latex. Only their eyes were visible as they scanned the scene intently, documenting and marking evidence.

A tawny-skinned man approached, eyeing me. Unlike the crime scene crew, he wore a suit and a gray coat.

"Gabriel?" I asked when he got closer.

He nodded, and motioned me through. I raised the tape and stepped under it, then leaned my suitcase against a wall before turning to him.

He shook my hand, his grip firm. I found it difficult to pull my eyes from his face. Broad-shouldered and

tall, he towered over me, and something about his hazel eyes drew me in. Plus, with his bronze skin and strong jawline, he kinda looked like a movie star.

His body seemed tense. "Agent Liddell," he said. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Call me Cassandra."

"Okay," he said, his tone cold. "Cassandra."

It didn't take a PhD in psychology to pick out the chilliness in his voice. I guess I had a few ideas why he might not be thrilled to have me there. For one thing, American law enforcement agents hadn't always done well with the British police. We tended to ignore their pesky legal systems and make our own rules. Plus, FBI consultants in general had a reputation of disregarding local expertise. And if all that weren't bad enough, he was probably terrified I was going to have a chirpy American attitude and say things like "good work, team," or force him to high-five at the end of the day.

"Come with me." He turned and walked away.

I followed him. As we drew closer, my mood darkened. I began to pick up the details—the red gash across her entire body, throat to belly, and the dark pool of blood beneath her. Lumps of flesh glistened under the lights. A woman stood above her, photographing the carnage.

"We can stop here," he said when we still stood twenty feet away. "It's intense, and I doubt you need to see it up close to profile the killer. We can provide you with photographs later on."

"Thanks for caring." I raised an eyebrow. "I think I can handle it."

I marched forward. When I reached the body, I crouched by a man who eyed me warily beyond a pair of glasses. I could have sworn I heard him mutter something about Americans under his mask, but I kept my focus on the victim.

Up close, bile began to rise in my throat. She was young, no more than twenty, her face full of pain and horror, mouth ajar in a voiceless cry, eyes staring emptily at the night sky. Her dark hair spread out on the pavement between her arms, giving the impression she was falling. The killer had torn her shirt, exposing the top of her ravaged body. A deep slice exposed her internal organs, or what was left of them. The glaring spotlights highlighted her white skin and bones, shockingly pale against her crimson blood. And as if that weren't bad enough, he'd mutilated her face, slashing perpendicular lines in her cheeks. Dread roiled in the back of my mind. Somehow, the marks looked eerily familiar, like something I'd seen in a nightmare, but I had no idea why.

I tried not to imagine what she would have felt in those final moments, but the images came anyway. The gash on her throat indicated that the killer was likely standing behind her, but her expression left no doubt—she had felt the hand that gripped her, the blade that cut her.

I could only hope that the shock of the attack had overwhelmed her, dulling the pain of the knife wounds

somewhat—that her mind hadn’t been able to process the horror of what was happening to her. I *hoped* most of the damage had been postmortem.

As my mind roamed over the horror of her final moments, I was almost sorry I hadn’t listened to Gabriel. But this was important. This was the murderer’s work, and I had to see it up close. This was his sadistic form of expression, how his mind worked. I pushed my visions of her death to the back of my skull, trying to focus.

A steady buzz drew my attention. Several flies roamed the open, bloody cavity. When a body was hours or days old, flies were valuable allies of the forensic team. A skilled investigator could estimate the time of death using fly and larvae samples taken from the body. But this corpse was fresh, and the flies were nothing but parasites, using the poor woman to feed their young.

I waved my hand to shoo the flies away. The coppery smell of blood overpowered me, and I quickly stood up. The flies returned, haunting the woman’s wounds again.

I struggled with the desire to close her eyes, to soothe the tortured stare from her face. Somehow, that was what hit me the hardest: her eyes. Wide open and in pain. Maybe I couldn’t feel her emotions on a visceral level, but they were written plainly on her face.

Stepping away from the body, I gritted my teeth, trying to picture the monster who would rip apart four

young women like this. How many more would he kill before someone stopped him? Would I be able to help?

I was pretty sure I would. This was what I did best. I helped find men like him and put an end to their murder binges.

From the perimeter around the police tape, I felt the crowd's horrified energy, and it began to build my resolution. I wouldn't return to the US until we'd put this monster in prison.

"Are you okay?" Gabriel asked, handing me a pair of latex gloves. I took them and put them on, the synthetic material somehow reassuring.

"I will be," I muttered. "Looks like the viciousness is increasing."

"That was our impression as well," Gabriel said. "This one is the worst so far."

I looked around the small city square. There were no shop fronts here, just the back entrances of buildings, a fenced-in parking lot, and a tiny road. Still, it seemed impossible that he'd slaughtered her in the center of the city without anyone noticing.

"Do we have any witnesses?" I asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "No. A passerby found her at twenty past eleven. He saw no one near the body."

"Do we have an estimated time of death?"

"Yeah. Between eleven and eleven twenty."

"So he found her only minutes after she had been killed."

"Yes."

I frowned. "This doesn't make sense. Someone killed

her and disemboweled her completely. It would have taken some time. How did he manage to do that without anyone noticing? Surely people must cut through here to get to the bars and restaurants I saw on Bishopsgate?"

"There isn't much light here without the spotlights. And most people out at this time in the City are likely plastered."

I looked around. The body was reasonably hidden from the nearby street, but anyone looking a bit carefully would surely have noticed it. "He must have been silent. And calm. This is... extraordinary."

"I agree. I've never seen anything like it."

"Any organs missing from the scene?" I asked, thinking of the previous cases.

"The heart, at least, but I'm not sure what else. We'll have a preliminary autopsy report tomorrow."

"Did you do a door-to-door? Did anyone hear anything?"

"We've only just found her," he countered. "And no one lives around here. Unless you wander further east, it's all empty banks and businesses at this hour."

I stared at the woman. "Do we have an ID?"

"Her name is Catherine Taylor," Gabriel said. "Nineteen years old. There was a driver's license in her purse, discarded by the body. We don't know if it's a coincidence yet."

"Coincidence?" I asked.

A sigh slid from him. "Jack the Ripper killed a woman called Catherine Eddowes in Mitre Square."

My throat tightened. Shit. Was he starting to mimic the actual Ripper? "The other victims weren't killed in places where the Ripper struck."

"This is the first that overlaps."

"And the other names didn't match the original Ripper's victims, right?"

"No. I imagine he is adjusting his signature as he goes along. But then, I'm no profiler, so perhaps I'd best leave all the complicated stuff to you."

I narrowed my eyes. Some British people were under the impression that Americans didn't understand sarcasm, and perhaps it was best if I just played along. "Right. Best leave it to the experts."

He stared at me for just a moment before the medical examiner interrupted. "Detective. Can you have a look at this?"

Gabriel crossed to the body. As he quietly spoke to the man, my gaze wandered to Catherine's eyes again. What had gone through her mind in her final moments? Had she thought of anyone she loved, or had the pain overwhelmed her?

My fingers tightened into fists. I wasn't sure if it was my own past coming to the surface, the way it sometimes did at times like this, but I suddenly had an overwhelming desire to catch her killer and kick the living shit out of him *before* I put him behind bars.

Gabriel knelt close to Catherine's mouth, inspecting it.

I leaned over to get a better look. "What is it?"

“There’s something here. It’s shoved into her throat. Hang on...”

The man crouching by the body handed Gabriel a pair of medical forceps. Carefully, Gabriel inserted them into the victim’s mouth, grimacing as the metal rattled against the teeth. He struggled with it for a second, before finally removing a small piece of paper, spattered in blood.

“What the hell?” he muttered.

Carefully, he unfolded it, and I peered over his shoulder.

It was a note, the cursive letters looping over the paper.

The King of Hearts
Tears minds apart,
Deep below the water;
From Bedlam’s den,
He lures them in,
Like lambs led to the slaughter.

For just a moment I heard the sound of a rushing river, before the noise disappeared again.

I shook sensation from my mind.

Gabriel rose, frowning. “What’s he playing at?” he asked, more to himself than anyone else.

Unnerved, I swallowed hard. “Jack the Ripper left notes, right?”

“Scribbles on a wall. Some tosh about Jews. But nothing like this.”

“And this is the first time our current Ripper has left a note?”

He was still staring at the paper. “The first one.”

“Well, if you want my input...” I stopped myself short. I needed to avoid coming off like a know-it-all, or I’d alienate him immediately. “Perhaps we can discuss this tomorrow morning. I’ll gather a few ideas during the day, and I’d be interested to know your thoughts as well.”

Gabriel nodded. “Right. I don’t suppose you have an initial assessment?”

“I’d prefer to do a bit of research first. But the note and the gruesome display indicate that the killer seems to enjoy the attention of being the next Ripper. Maybe part of his fantasy revolves around the media and the police. The tabloid headlines might increase his obsession. And if so, maybe he’d want to see us working his cases up close.”

I watched him carefully, interested if he’d get what I was implying. He stared at me for a long moment, before glancing over my shoulder, at the crowd beyond the tape. Then, he turned to the photographer—a middle-aged woman with a very expensive-looking camera.

“I want detailed pictures of the crowd,” he said in a low voice. “Don’t aim the camera straight at them. I don’t want anyone to avoid the picture.”

She nodded, pointing her camera at the blood spatter around the body. Slowly, she tilted the lens slightly higher, so that it would catch the people behind

the tape. She took a few photographs, nudging the camera left and right. She knew what she was doing. And so did the detective.

I'd already committed most of their faces to memory—the two men with beer guts in cheap suits who probably had low-level positions in one of the nearby banks; the man in the white hat with track marks up his arm; the cluster of teens who'd convinced someone to serve them beer, at least one of them more interested in trying to get laid than anything else going on here. But photographs would make it easier for other cops to study the crowd after the fact.

From a far corner of the square, a man in a gray suit approached us, a serious expression on his face. "Detective Stewart." He nodded at Gabriel. I pegged him at about fifty, his hair silvery gray. He wasn't bad-looking, like a giant George Clooney. He was at least as tall as Gabriel, and powerfully built. Standing next to them, I felt roughly the size of a young child. Was everyone in Britain a giant?

"Chief." Gabriel nodded at him, then motioned at me. "This is Agent Liddell from the FBI. Agent, this is Detective Chief Inspector Steve Wood."

"Oh, yes." DCI Wood's voice was deep, pure gravel. "The *profiler*."

He didn't sound thrilled either. It was becoming clear to me that the high brass had gone over everyone's head when they'd contacted the FBI. Still, he offered me his hand, and I shook it.

"So what are our preliminary findings?" he asked.

For a second I thought he was talking to me, but Gabriel cut in, "This murder is slightly different from the rest. More aggressive. More... public. And he left a note shoved in the victim's throat."

"Are we sure it's the same killer?" DCI Wood asked. "With the different MO—"

"The MO is the same," I interrupted. "The signature is different."

Damn it. I was doing that American thing.

The chief glanced at me. "Is that so?"

"Well, um, perhaps..." I blustered. *Ah, fuck it.* "The MO is the method used to commit the crime. In this case, cutting a young woman's throat with a knife is the MO. It's how he's killed all his victims. The signature is what he did later to satisfy his emotional needs. Mutilating her body postmortem—that's his signature. But this time he left a note. His signature has been modified."

"I see." He nodded slowly. "And what does a different signature indicate?"

It was a sensible question, but his tone clearly implied he thought I was full of shit.

"Serial killers modify their signatures constantly," I said. "They evolve and change after each murder. A different signature isn't unusual, but it suggests that his emotional needs may have changed."

He looked at Gabriel. "What are your thoughts, Detective?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I agree with her assessment so far."

The crime scene technicians were wrapping the body's hands with paper bags, and someone had rolled over a stretcher.

How long would it take to clean all this up? Would tomorrow's bankers stroll past the large stain on the cobblestones, not knowing why it was there?

As DCI Wood walked away, I nodded at the crowds. "How are Londoners handling the crimes?"

Gabriel frowned. "A mixture of fear and rage. They think it's a form of terrorism."

Irritation sparked. "It clearly isn't."

"For now, Wood is keeping the media in the dark, so they're creating their own narrative. Foreigners did it. That's the story."

I exhaled slowly. If Wood allowed this to continue, people could get hurt.

Gabriel stared at the body. Under his breath, I heard him say, "*The savage man is never quite eradicated.*"

Surprised, I turned to him. "Thoreau. He's from my home town."

He seemed to study me for a minute, as if his curiosity had been piqued. "Where are you staying? I can walk you to the hotel."

"No need. I'm only five or ten minutes away—the hotel connected to Liverpool Street Station. And I don't imagine our killer will be striking again within the next fifteen minutes."

"Are you sure?"

"Gabriel," I assured him. "I'm an FBI agent. I can take care of myself."