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 Montlake

CHAPTER ONE

"Cherish"

Episode from podcast *The Fringe*

Host of podcast, Jamal Whitaker

"Hello, welcome to *The Fringe*. Thanks for being here, Cherish. Very pretty name."

"Thanks. It's my real name, not just my street name. That's what my mom named me, Cherish Joy."

The interviewer, Jamal, sitting in a chair across from Cherish, smiles. He's a dark-skinned man with a shaved head who appears to be somewhere between forty and fifty. "Can you tell us a little about yourself?"

The young prostitute with the pale, sallow skin, wearing a pink crop top and jean shorts that barely hit the crease at the top of her thighs, brings her thin legs underneath her on the blue velvet sofa. "Who's us? You and the mouse in your pocket?"

"For now, just me and my cameraman, Franco, but the show has three and a half million subscribers."

Cherish repositions herself, sticks her hands between her knees, and then removes them almost as quickly. It's difficult to tell whether she's nervous or on something. "I was just jokin'. One of my stepdads used to use that line about the mouse. Can't remember which one, and I never really knew what it meant anyway. It seemed stupid, but here I am repeating it."

"How many of them were there?"

"Mice or stepdads?" She lets out a throaty laugh that fades almost immediately. "Sorry. I make dumb jokes when I'm nervous."

Jamal smiles kindly. "Don't be nervous. If, at the end of this conversation, you decide you don't want this interview aired, you have my word no one will ever see it."

She gives a jerky nod. "Anyway, yeah, there were a lot of stepdads. My mom only actually married two of them, or maybe three, but she made me call the rest of them dad, too, so that's what I did, and I guess that's also why they blend together."

"Did you grow up here in San Francisco?"

"Yeah. Over in the Mission."

"So, it sounds like your mom had a lot of men in her life while you were growing up. Other than that, what was your childhood like?"

Cherish plays with a long string on the edge of her shorts for a second and then shifts again. "Pretty shitty. I hated school and got in trouble a lot. My mom did drugs, so we never had much food in the house. She tricked, too, when there was no man in the house, and she'd bring me with her sometimes."

"Bring you with her?" Jamal's eyebrows rise, but his voice remains calm and almost unaffected in a way that makes it obvious he's used to hearing stories like Cherish's. "For what reason?"

Cherish shrugs, and she seems to zone out for a moment before sitting up straighter. "Sometimes I just watched, or I waited in the bathroom. Sometimes I went next."

"Went next?"

"Yeah, you know, the trick paid to have sex with me too."

"When did this start?"

"I don't know. Maybe six."

"Six years old?"

"Mm-hmm."

"What do you remember thinking about that?"

"It sucked. I didn't like it."

"Why do you think your mom let that happen? Even arranged it?"

Cherish's shoulder jerks, and she wraps her arms around herself as though suddenly cold. "She'd do anything for money, so she could buy her drugs."

"And do you take drugs? Now?"

"Yeah. Well, I'm tryin' to get clean.

But you know . . ."

"What's your drug of choice?"

"Heroin."

"Okay. And why do you think you followed in your mom's footsteps as far as the prostitution?"

Cherish shrugs. "I mean, I need money. What other way do I have, you know?"

"How far did you get in school, Cherish?"

She looks away for a moment as she twists a piece of her lank brown hair. "Ninth grade, I think? Maybe tenth? I can't remember. I was flunking out anyway, didn't matter, so I just stopped going." Her eyes meet his. "I never got good grades. When I was in elementary school, I used to try to hump the boys in my class. Freaked the teacher out."

"Did the school address it?"

She zones out again, then meets Jamal's eyes. "Address it? With who? With my mom?" She looks away. "I got sent to the principal's office a lot. But he was gettin' some too."

"The principal was molesting you?"

"I guess. But I was okay with that. He had this big bowl of candy on his desk, and he'd let me take as much as I wanted afterward. It wasn't so bad. But anyway, I never got taken away from my mom or nothin', so

I guess the teachers didn't call anyone but him."

Jamal remains quiet for a moment. "Has anything bad ever happened to you while working the streets?"

Cherish pauses, her eyes moving upward for a moment. "Sure. Yeah. I've got beat up a few times. Once real bad, spent some time in the hospital. And you know, I've been stiffed out of the money after servicing a trick."

"The streets can be rough."

Cherish nods, tucking her hands between her knees. "Yeah, they can. You gotta be careful. Especially if you don't have no one taking care of you."

"So you don't have a pimp, then? You work on your own?"

"I did have a man, but he got shot three months ago. Killed. So now I'm on my own."

"Killed? I'm sorry. That's awful."

She bobs her head, removes her hands from between her knees, and begins picking at a sore on her thigh. "Yeah. He was one of my sons' fathers, so . . . you know, that was hard."

"How many kids do you have?"

The first flutter of what might be despair moves across her expression before she sighs. "Two. I got two boys. They got taken by the system, though." She looks away, zoning again.

"I'm sorry." Jamal gives her a moment.
"How old are you now, Cherish?"

"I'm twenty."

"Twenty years old. You've been through a lot for someone so young."

"Yeah." Cherish laughs again, that same hollow sound. "Too much."

"Do you have any aspirations, Cherish?"

"Aspirations? Like goals?"

"Yeah."

Her eyes slide to the side again. "I'd like to get my kids back." She picks at that wound again. "But I don't know. I'm just tryin' to survive, you know? Just tryin' to stay alive."

CHAPTER TWO

The recently closed Surfside Motel was within walking distance of the homes featured in *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Full House*. Unfortunately, the people inside room 212 wouldn't be engaging in any tourist activities in the near future—or anything else, for that matter. One DOA was lying prone on the floor, only her legs visible, the two others supine on the bed.

She smelled blood, and also the evidence that the victims' bowels had emptied in death. "Hi, Sullivan," she said to the first-responding officer standing in the outdoor hallway to her left.

"Hi yourself, Lennon."

Lennon took a moment to glance around at what she could see of the motel room through the open door. Stained, dusty curtains, peeling striped wallpaper, and a myriad of brownish-yellow water stains on the ceiling.

A few furniture items remained: one bedside table, mostly blocked by the bodies; a writing desk; a black, unplugged minifridge with its door wide open; and the headboard and stripped mattresses, now featuring a large dark bloodstain on the side facing her.

She removed a pair of booties from her pocket that she'd taken from the kit in her trunk and started pulling them over her shoes, stalling as she mentally prepared herself to enter the room. "Just you here so far, huh?" she asked Sullivan.

"Yup. Except for them." He nodded his head back toward the room.

Them. The dead.

Damn. She snapped the bootie over her loafer and set her foot on the ground. She would never purposely drag her feet when a call came in for a triple homicide, but she didn't particularly like being the only one in the room with the recently deceased victims of a brutal killing. It was the very worst part of her job.

"Sucky wake-up call, huh?" Sullivan asked.

"It's not my favorite way to start the day," she said as she took out a pair of gloves from her pocket. "But I was already up and on a jog." She'd been running the path along the beach when the call had come in. She'd gone home, taken a quick shower, changed, and driven there. All that, and the sun was barely up. And no one else had arrived, other than the officers she'd passed on her way through the parking lot, who were stretching crime scene tape across a second set of stairs.

"It's not safe for a woman to be jogging alone in this city. Not anymore," Sullivan offered.

"I'm painfully aware of the crime rate, Sullivan. I'm good, I promise."

He gave a short grunt. "I hope so, because we can't afford to lose any more inspectors."

She glanced at him and then away as she stretched one glove over her hand. Sullivan was a good guy. He'd already been an officer for over a decade when she'd started at the SFPD, and while she'd worked to move up the ranks to homicide inspector, Sullivan was content to remain a beat officer. She respected that, and in his position, experience mattered a great deal. So did numbers, and he was right: they couldn't afford to lose any more staff of any rank.

"Who was it that called this in?"

"An anonymous call. I wouldn't be surprised if it was a homeless person looking for a place to sleep who came upon this. I'd bet anything it'll come back to a temporary burner phone someone stole from Walgreens."

She snapped on the second glove and then glanced down at the doorknob. It was hanging partway off the door, but whether that was because someone had kicked at it or just because this whole place was old and rickety and falling apart at the seams, she couldn't tell. Lennon leaned inside a little more. There was a door near the back that she assumed was the bathroom. "You clear it?"

"Yeah. All clear."

"This one looks similar to the others?" she asked.

"At first glance? Yeah."

"How far out are the criminalists?"

Sullivan glanced at his watch. "Ten minutes, give or take. I heard on the radio that there was a mass shooting in Bayview right before this was called in, so a few probably headed there first."

Lennon gave a succinct nod and stepped inside the room. During normal hours, it was more common that she arrived after the forensic team was already working on the scene, stepping into the hustle and bustle of coworkers collecting evidence and tagging items. As if murder kept to "normal hours."

She walked past the open closet near the door, one lone wire hanger dangling on the broken rod, and approached the bed. The scent of death and bodily fluids was far stronger inside the room. A minor wave of nausea came over her, and she took a moment to breathe through it. Beyond the unpleasant sensory experience, and even with the door open, the room felt stuffy, and eerily—*unnaturally*—still. It made the hairs on the nape of her neck stand up.

The skirt of the woman on the floor at the end of the bed had ridden up and was showing half her backside. It almost felt like Lennon's presence here was inappropriate, that she should look away and give these people the dignity they hadn't received in their final moments.

But her job was not to deliver dignity to the dead. Her job was to deliver justice. And to do so, she had to look and to probe and to consider these bodies from every angle. She had to try her best to

ignore that they'd once been people with their own busy lives and consider them as simply victims. *Part of the scene.* At least initially, on first sighting.

She squatted down and leaned to the side to better see the woman on the floor. Her light-brown hair was matted with blood, and Lennon used one gloved finger to lift some of it off her face and hold it aside. Lennon drew back slightly when she saw the expression on the woman's face—eyes wide and mouth open as if frozen in a never-ending scream. There were tear tracks through the heavy makeup on her pale skin. *God.* Sadness dropped over Lennon like an invisible net, and she did her best not to get tangled in it. It helped no one. *What living nightmare would cause an expression like that?* She looked away for a moment. She hated this. She really did. Nine years on the force, and she was still so damn affected.

Breathe out. Assess. Do your damn job. She looked back at the dead woman. *Young.* Late teens or early twenties.

"Sores that indicate drug use," she said aloud, breaking the quiet of the room, a verbal clinical assessment calming the nerves and the unwanted emotion that always transpired when standing amid a crime scene. The smell of urine was stronger near the body. "Victim urinated either in death or in fear." She'd wait for the criminalists to arrive to turn the young woman over fully and determine cause of death. But whatever it was, it'd been very bloody. Lennon's stomach churned. The pool from the woman's injuries had spread several inches beyond her body. Lennon used her gloved index finger to touch the pool. It was dry and cracked around the edges with a gelatinous center. It appeared this woman, at least, had been here for several hours.

Lennon's gaze moved downward to where the woman was clutching something, the item mostly underneath her, arm still wrapped around it. *Is that . . . ?* Lennon gently lifted the woman's stiff arm. Yes, just as she'd thought. It was a teddy bear, its beady eyes staring at her. She lowered the woman's arm again and covered the black, soulless eyes of the stuffed animal. "That's creepy as hell," she murmured.

She stood and walked around to the other side of the bed before leaning over to get a look at the man and the other female victim. The woman appeared older, perhaps in her fifties, and she estimated the man to be in his late twenties, his arms heavily tattooed.

At least these two didn't have expressions frozen in horror, though they also didn't appear to be sleeping, the way some DOAs did. Their faces were contorted, as if in pain, and this woman, too, had tear tracks through her makeup. And because of their positions, the cause of death was clear. They'd been stabbed, the blood pool indicative of the same timeline as the woman on the floor.

Lennon stood straight, glancing around the room, her gaze lingering on the array of sex toys on the bedside table that had been blocked by the bodies while she'd been standing in the doorway. *Okay, that's different.* A purple dildo, a studded dog collar, a few butt plugs. *Huh.* So whatever this had turned into, it'd started out as a sexcapade—whether purchased or otherwise—in an abandoned motel? Pretty seedy all around. But honestly? This job ensured she was well acquainted with *seedy.*

She looked around at the other surfaces. There didn't appear to be a weapon anywhere, unless it was still in the younger woman lying on the floor. There were, she noticed, items on the desk near the window. This was the similarity Sullivan had been referring to when Lennon had asked if it appeared to be connected to two other recent murders involving homeless victims. She leaned closer. There were the same pale-purple tablets with a "BB" imprint left at two other scenes, which had turned out to be homemade hallucinogens. Not that *homemade* meant there wasn't a lab involved, but it had been determined they were not an FDA-approved pharmaceutical product. Hallucinogens had been an oddity at the other scenes, and they seemed especially unusual amid sex toys. In fact, other than these recent cases, Lennon couldn't remember ever seeing psychedelics at a murder scene. *Weird.*

Then again, she'd never seen a purple dildo either.

She turned back toward the bodies, considering the scene as a whole, and then removed her phone and took photos of each of the victims.

Her gaze moved back to the numerous stab wounds on the man's body. The older woman's held almost as many. Had they turned a weapon on each other? Or had someone else been here? "What happened to you?" she asked out loud, almost expecting her ex-partner to chime in with a comment of some kind. God, it was times like these that she missed Tommy the most. She missed the level of comfort with each other they'd come by over the last five years they'd been partnered up, both speaking aloud at scenes and bouncing initial observations off each other so nothing got overlooked. She missed Tommy's ability to stay so even keeled at the most macabre of murder scenes. He'd provided an emotional buffer for her and sometimes a gallows humor that helped her separate herself from the victims so she could view the situation more objectively. She'd relied on him, and she knew that made her weak, and possibly not cut out for a job like this. But dammit, she'd been fine until he'd left.

Lennon turned when she heard feet ascending the outdoor steps, a woman's voice greeting Sullivan. *Thank God.* For the moment, she'd had all she could take.

Teresa Wong came through the door, and Lennon felt a small release of tension as Teresa set down the black case in her hand. "Hi, Lennon."

"Teresa. Hi. Is it just you?"

Teresa had been a criminalist with the SFPD about the same amount of time Lennon had been an officer, and they'd worked together often over the years. Teresa was excellent at her job, extremely fastidious and very professional. She also had an easygoing nature that put everyone on the scene at ease, even if the scene was one that naturally inspired upset, or even horror, in the most seasoned officers and inspectors.

"Just me for now," Teresa answered as she started suiting up. "Did you hear about the shooting?"

"Yeah, unfortunately. How many victims?"

"About twenty injured, and two dead, including a five-year-old." Lennon cringed.

"It looks gang related," Teresa went on, "but you never know."

"A five-year-old. What the hell is going on in this city?"

"The lunatics are running the asylum. Anyway, the other criminalists are headed to that scene, so you've got me."

"I've got the best. Thanks, Teresa."

Teresa nodded toward the room. "Same Benjamin Buttons?"

Lennon managed a smile as she remembered the conversation about what the "BB" might stand for when they'd first come across it. "Yeah, they're on the desk. I'm going to check outside while you do your thing. I'll be back shortly."

Teresa was already moving toward the woman on the floor and opening her bag.

Sullivan yawned as Lennon stepped outside. She peered down into the parking lot: her car, the two police vehicles, and now Teresa's were the only ones there. "I'm going to walk around the grounds and see if I spot anything," she said. "Maybe there's a car out back that brought the victims here."

Sullivan nodded. "A couple more uniforms are on their way to relieve me, so if I'm not here when you get back, it was nice to see you, Gray."

"You, too, Sullivan. Take care."

Lennon pulled in big breaths of dwindling morning fog as she descended the steps. The sun had fully risen, the yellowy light making the abandoned motel look all the more dilapidated and somehow unreal, like the wavery image from an old-fashioned film. This place appeared to have been built in the fifties and featured a pristine view of the bay. It was likely once used by tourists and businessmen who wanted to be central to a myriad of San Francisco attractions. Eventually they'd tear this place down, and all the stories of trips and perhaps honeymoons and weekend rendezvous would be carried away in an industrial-size garbage bin.

She made a slow walk around the parking lot, keeping her eyes peeled for anything out of place, but also allowing her heart rate to return to normal and her stomach to settle. She needed to regroup and get hold of her nervous system for a few minutes before she could begin attempting to analyze what might have happened in that upstairs room.

Thankfully she'd known better than to eat anything before answering this call. Once her equilibrium was mostly back to normal, she headed toward the motel and then took a few minutes to walk along the bottom corridor, peering into the rooms that had curtains open and trying a few door handles and finding them all locked.

She walked around the front office, noting a sign in the window that said **LOT FOR SALE** and had a phone number listed. She took a photo of it and continued around the corner just as she heard a car pulling into the lot behind her. The uniforms were here to relieve Sullivan.

The space behind the motel was a weedy plot of nothing. It wasn't even strewn with garbage, which told her that this motel, in general, probably wasn't well used by vagrants, at least not yet. Even so, she took a few minutes to wander around, looking for anything on the ground that might tell her a person or people had been there, but didn't find a thing. The crunch of the gravel beneath her feet further served to calm her nerves. *Good, that's good. You've got this.* And now that she'd had a moment to process the initial shock and horror of the scene, she could go back and at least pretend to be the professional she was supposed to be.

Lennon turned and ran solidly into a hard wall of man, then let out a surprised squeak. She jerked back, and hands gripped her elbows, steadying her. "Shit, sorry," she breathed.

His grip tightened as though she might still topple over. "Whoa. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She shook her arms, and his hands dropped before she stepped away. The stranger peering down at her was tall and good looking and had these *eyes* that took her aback as much as had her head smacking into his broad shoulder. *Bedroom eyes.* The thought took her

further off balance because she couldn't remember ever once using that phrase, but also because he was looking at her like he was trying to read her mind, and she certainly didn't want him to be privy to her first impression.

And there went her equilibrium, right out the door.

"Sir, this is a crime scene. I'm going to have to ask you to leave immediately." Her tone was a tad harsh, but he'd surprised her. She hadn't expected a civilian to interrupt her brief respite from death's gruesomeness.

"I know it's a crime scene," he said. He looked off behind her at the weedy lot, his gaze flickering around and then back to her in a way that made her think he knew she'd been basically hiding. "Are you Inspector Lennon Gray?"

Hearing him use her name caused a small jerk of her head. "Yes. Who are you?"

His heavy gaze met hers, slight breeze rustling his dark wavy hair. "I'm Agent Ambrose Mars. I'm with the FBI, and I'm your new partner."

CHAPTER THREE

New partner? FBI? She hadn't been told the feds were getting involved in these cases. "When did this get decided? And why?"

He'd unclipped the badge he had hanging on his pocket and now held it up to her as though she were a suspect who'd demanded identification. "Just yesterday. You were off. Which, ah, you probably know." He gave her a fleeting boyish smile. "Anyway, Lieutenant Byrd called thirty minutes ago and informed me about this call. I didn't expect there to be another scene this soon."

"No, neither did I."

"Same pills? Same victim description?" He looked over his shoulder to the second floor, where police activity was increasing, and then turned back to her.

"Yes," she said. "Was the bureau sent all available details regarding the two previous cases?"

"Yeah. I looked over the basics but haven't had a chance to read them in depth."

"Okay. Come on," Lennon said, moving around him and heading for the stairs. Whoever this Ambrose Mars was, he was temporary as far as she was personally concerned. She'd speak to Lieutenant Byrd the minute she got back to the station and shake the guy. She'd been told she was going to get paired up with someone else as soon as possible, but she'd expected it would be one of the other inspectors she already felt comfortable with. She had no desire whatsoever to work with some

stranger over others she already *knew* had her back, and was annoyed she hadn't received a heads-up. As if she needed one more thing to make her feel less than competent. But regardless, if the FBI had sent him here and he was going to work this particular case, he'd need to see the scene before anything else. And maybe Teresa had some information by now too.

He followed her to the room, where two officers were now standing guard, greeted each of them, taking a moment to pull on booties and gloves, and then stepped inside, where Teresa was just setting her camera back on top of her case. She'd lifted the woman slightly, and Lennon could now clearly see the stab wounds on her chest and torso too. Her heart clenched. That look on her face. *Jesus*. What had she experienced in her final moments? No one should die violently, but clearly, her death hadn't been quick. She'd cried. She'd screamed. She'd suffered.

"All three were stabbed, just like the others," Teresa said. She looked up, her gaze hanging on Ambrose for a moment.

"Does it look like they did this to each other?" Lennon asked.

"It's hard to say without an examination of the wounds, but I can't imagine how it would work for three people to stab each other to death. Wouldn't there be someone left standing?"

"Unless his or her injuries were so severe, they just lay down next to the others and died once it was all over."

Teresa appeared to consider that for a moment and then shrugged. "Anyway, again, no murder weapons present. Whatever was used might have been stolen from the first two scenes, but all three? Also, with three people, you'd definitely need more than one weapon." Her eyes moved back to Ambrose, who was looking around the room, a small frown hanging on his lips.

"Teresa Wong, this is Agent Ambrose Mars. He just got here yesterday." She hadn't even asked where he'd arrived from, but all that could wait. And didn't matter to her anyway.

"Hi, Agent." Teresa used her gloved wrist to push her glasses up her nose. "Welcome to the jungle."