

## CHAPTER 2

I listened to John Abbott's voice mail and wondered if this was the day he would kill his wife.

"Dr. Moore," he rasped, his voice uneven and emotional, "call me back. She's gonna leave me for him. I know it. This is it."

John—who always arrived five minutes early for our appointments, in pressed clothes and meticulous shape, who wrote my checks in painfully neat block writing-sounded as if he was falling apart. I listened to the end of his voice mail, then pressed the screen and played it again.

Sighing, I returned his call. I had determined, over a year of one-on-one psychiatry sessions, that John suffered from pathological jealousy. We had spent the first two months focused on his wife and her supposed infatuation with the landscaper. John was resistant to behavioral therapy and staunchly opposed to the thought of taking phenothiazines. After weeks of urging, he took my advice and fired the landscaper, which resolved the situation. He had now found a new source of worry—their neighbor. His suspicions seemed to be unfounded, which wouldn't be too alarming if he didn't also suffer from a growing compulsion to kill said wife.

As I waited for him to answer, I opened up the fridge and pulled out a gallon of milk. Whether John Abbott had the capacity to kill was up for debate. Still, the fact that he had consistently considered it for almost a year was validation enough.

He didn't answer, and I ended the call and set my phone on the counter. I poured a tall glass, then moved aside the stiff lace curtains and peered through the window above the sink. Through a fine layer of pollen, I saw my cat knead her claws along the polished red finish of my convertible's front hood. Knocking at the glass, I tried to get her attention. "Hey!"

Clementine ignored me. I downed the milk in one long gulp and tapped the window harder. No reaction.

Rinsing out the glass, I stacked it in the top shelf of my dishwasher and eyed my cell phone. This was the first time John Abbott had called my cell. Unlike Rick Beekon, who couldn't book a tee time without getting my approval, John was the sort of client who viewed a call for help as being weak and incapable. For him to leave a voice mail on a Tuesday morning was significant. Had he caught Brooke? Or had his paranoia and jealousy hit a breaking point?

*She's gonna leave me for him. I know it. This is it.*

Loss, for a man like John, could be a world-breaking concept, especially since he had a singular focus on and distorted view of his wife. That focus had grown into an obsession, one with a violent thread that hovered toward maniacal.

I called him again, my concern mounting as the phone rang and rang with no response. The possibilities appeared, unwelcome in my mind. The pharmacist with the perfect handwriting and two missed appointments this month standing over his wife, a bloody knife in hand.

No, I corrected myself. Not a knife. Not with Brooke. It would be something else. Something less hands-on. Poison. That had been his recent fantasy of choice.

I checked the clock on the microwave. Over two hours since he had called me. Anything could have happened in two hours. That's what I got for sleeping in. The Ambien, which had seemed like a great idea at 3:00 a.m., had cost me this missed call.

One more call, I told myself. I'd wait a little bit, then try him once more and then move on with my day. Obsession, as I frequently told my clients, never affected outside situations. They only made your internal struggles—and resulting personal actions and decisions—worse.

I fixed a piece of toast and ate it, chewing slowly and deliberately as I sat at my dining room table and watched an episode of Seinfeld on my cell phone. After I'd wiped down the counters, rebagged the bread, and washed my hands at the sink, I tried him again.

And just like the first two times, he ignored my call.

At nine forty-five, as I headed to the office for my first appointment, John Abbott failed to show up for his shift at Breyer's Pharmacy.

There was immediate concern. The man was a tyrant about punctuality, so much so that two junior pharmacists had quit in tears after being subjected to his long and almost violent rants on time accountability. After his tardiness stretched to ten thirty, then eleven o'clock, and repeated calls to his cell phone went unanswered, the three staff members convened at the back of the medical racks over what to do. The line of customers, which had never extended

past the adult-diapers section of the aisle, now stretched all the way into herbal remedies. At the front, a man with a bushy white mustache and cowboy hat cleared his throat.

A decision was made to find John's wife on Facebook and send her a message. With that task complete, they waited another fifteen minutes, then dispatched the most junior and expendable member of the team to drive to his home.

Joel Blanker was twenty-one years old and a pharmacy intern from Little Rock, Arkansas. He liked Dungeons and Dragons, Latin women, and chicken tenders with extra ketchup. As I listened to Phil Ankerly mull over a documentary he'd watched on Ted Bundy, Joel parked on the street and texted the assistant pharmacist to let him know that John's car was there, parked in the drive behind a white sedan. The instructions Joel received were simple: Ring the doorbell. Ask John if he's coming to work. Duck and cover if he starts to yell.

Joel began at the one-story home's front door, his armpits damp from the Los Angeles heat as he listened to the chime echo through the house. After a second ring, and with no sounds from inside the home, he moved around to the carport. Knocking gently on the side door, he waited, then hesitantly cupped his hands to the glass and peered in.

At the sight of the blood and the body, he stumbled back, his dress shoe catching on the carport's curb. His cell phone skittered across the ground and came to a stop against a support pillar. He crawled across the cleanly swept surface and picked up the phone. Ignoring the fresh spiderweb of cracks across its display, he unlocked the device and jabbed the digits for 9-1-1.

After my second morning appointment, I swung by the Forty-Fifth Avenue gym. My concerns over John Abbott's voice mail faded as I changed into gym clothes and climbed onto a treadmill. I dialed up the speed and scanned the row of television screens, zeroing in on one that showed a newscaster's face, the words BH KILLER in bold font under her chin. Settling into a comfortable jog, I kept my eyes on the press conference's closed-captioning thread, trying to understand what the update was covering. The camera view switched to show a handsome teenager in a button-up shirt and khakis standing beside his mother, a bashful grin on his face as she gripped him around his waist.

". . . grateful to have him home. Please give us privacy as we spend this time with our son . . ."

I jabbed the "Stop Session" button on the treadmill and grabbed my phone. Despite the halt in pace, my heartbeat increased. Had the latest Bloody Heart victim escaped? Along with most Angelenos, I'd spent the last three years glued to the coverage, following each tragic case from disappearance to death. An escaped victim, especially one in healthy condition, seemed impossible. This was the time frame when a victim's dead body was typically found, his penis crudely removed, his nude corpse given the same amount of care as a discarded cigarette.

This killer was unique and precise, his expertise proven through six victims. I was stunned that he would be careless enough to allow for an escape. Could this be a copycat killer? A hoax? Or a weak moment in strategy and execution? I unlocked my phone and searched for the latest news article, then glanced back up at the muted television.

". . . escaped from the BH Killer and ran for miles until he found his way home . . ."

There it was. Confirmation in black and white. How had Scott Harden escaped? I stepped off the machine, hurried through the busy car-dio area, and hit the stairs, jogging down the wide steps toward the gym's lower level. As I reached the bottom step, the phone's display changed and my ringtone sounded through the headphones. The call was from my office, and I put my second earbud in place and answered it. "Hello?"

"Dr. Moore?" Jacob spoke in a hushed tone. I pictured him at our reception desk, his wire-frame glasses slipping down his nose, a bead of sweat already halfway down one side of his acne-scarred forehead.

"Hi, Jacob." I pushed open the door to the ladies' locker room and grabbed a fluffy monogrammed towel off the top of the stack.

"There's a detective here to see you. Ted Saxe. He said it's urgent."

I squeezed past a cluster of neon-clad yoga enthusiasts and found my locker. "Did he say what it's about?"

"He won't tell me, and he's refusing to leave."

*Shit.* It had been almost six hours since my voice mail from John Abbott, and I'd heard nothing but silence. Had something happened? Or was this visit about one of my other clients? "I'll head back now." I balanced the cell phone against my shoulder as I worked my running shorts past my hips. "Oh, and Jacob?"

"Yes?"

"Don't let him go in my office. And don't give him any information. I don't care what he asks for."

Our part-time receptionist, who tuned pianos and ate shark-shaped gummy snacks for lunch, didn't miss a beat. "Done and done."

"Thanks." I ended the call and paused, my shorts around my ankles, my red-cotton thong in full display of anyone in the area. Scrolling down to John's voice mail, I quickly deleted the file, then went into my deleted voice mails and cleared out the backup record of it.

The act was instinctual. My psychiatry training would blame it on a childhood history of covering my tracks and hiding anything that would spur my alcoholic mother into rage. But here there wasn't a risk of a belligerent housewife slapping me across the face. The ramifications of John Abbott harming his wife-if that's what this was about-would be much worse. A potential investigation into my practice. A review by the medical board. Media attention on me and my clients-clients who demanded complete confidentiality.

After all, I didn't treat workaholics with insecurity issues. I specialized in killers. Depraved, volatile killers.

Setting my cell on the bench, I stepped out of the shorts and spun the combination dial of the locker, anxious to get to the office and get this over with.

Detective Ted Saxe was a tall officer in a cheap gray suit, his shield hanging from a lanyard around his neck. I unlocked my office and gestured to the duo of soft green chairs that faced my desk. "Please, take a seat."

Out of spite or stubbornness, he stayed on his feet. I made my way around and dropped my purse in the side drawer of my desk before sinking into my leather rolling chair. "How can I help you?"

Leaning forward, he dropped an evidence bag on the middle of the clean wooden surface. I picked up the clear bag and examined the item inside.

It was one of my business cards, the discreet style with just my name, doctor designation, and the office number. On the back was my cell phone number, written in my handwriting. I glanced back up at him. "Where'd you find this?"

"In John Abbott's wallet." He removed a set of aviator glasses off the top of his bald head and looped them through the neck of his button-up shirt. This guy was straight out of central casting. Thin and hard, with jet-black skin and a distrustful scowl. "Do you know Mr. Abbott?" he asked.

The lingering concern that John Abbott would act out morphed into alarm. What had he done? Placing the evidence bag down, I cleared my throat as my mind worked overtime through the possibilities. "Yes. He's a client of mine."

The American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct was firm on the confidentiality owed to clients. It was also clear that that confidentiality could be broken if I thought my client was a danger to himself or others.

John Abbott's prior sessions, in which he described his struggles with wanting to harm his wife, technically fell into reportable arenas. His voice mail this morning could easily classify as an alarming incident worthy of police intervention.

But it had only been a voice mail. An insecure man saying the same thing he had said to me in a year's worth of sessions. Just because he toyed with the idea of killing Brooke didn't mean he ever would, and if I called the police every time one of my clients thought about killing someone, I'd put a lot of innocent people in jail and deplete my client list.

The truth is, wanting to harm or kill someone is a common part of the human mental circus. While there are some moral saints out there who have never wished ill on anyone, twenty percent of human beings have weighed the pros and cons of killing someone at some point in their lives.

Five percent have the moral flexibility to act on the possibility.

A tenth of a percent obsess over it, and the best intentioned of those seek psychiatric help with their fixation. My clients were the best of the worst, and I felt a fierce sense of duty to protect them while treating their most honest confessions.

After all, their thoughts weren't actions. People didn't die from mental activities. It was only if those thoughts turned into actions . . . that was the dangerous risk in this game I played with clients on a daily basis.

Now, with a detective sitting across from me . . . the signs were clear. In John Abbott's game, I had lost and the risks had won.

Saxe cleared his throat. "John Abbott didn't show up to work this morning. His coworkers grew concerned, and one went by to see if he was okay. That's when the police were called."

I placed a hand on my chest, rubbing the soft silk of my dress shirt and willing my heartbeat to calm. I was about to ask if John was in custody when the detective continued.

"The bodies were both on the kitchen floor. The pharmacy employee saw Mr. Abbott's through the window."

All my thoughts skittered to a stop. Bodies? Mr. Abbott's?

"It looks like Brooke Abbott had a heart attack while they were eating breakfast. We found her husband next to her. An apparent suicide."

I frowned. "What? Are you sure?"

"The man was stabbed in the stomach. The angle and situation lead us to believe it was self-inflicted."

I tried not to picture Brooke Abbott, whom I had met just last month in a freak run-in at the grocery store. A pretty woman. Kind eyes. A friendly smile. She had greeted me warmly, with no idea of the dozens of conversations I'd had with her husband about why killing her was a bad idea.

A year of sessions, and Brooke Abbott had died of a heart attack within hours of him calling me? I didn't believe it.

"What were you treating John for?"

I clicked my tongue. "That's confidential, Detective."

"Oh, come on," he scoffed. "The patient's deceased."

"Get me a warrant," I said. "Look, I'm sorry, but I'm bound by a code of ethics."

"And I'm sure you stretch the boundaries of that code." He snorted. "We all know what your specialty is, Dr. Moore." He finally sat, which was unfortunate, because I was now ready for him to leave. "Doc of Death? Isn't that what they call you?"

I sighed at the moniker. "Violent tendencies and obsessions are my specialty, but they aren't the only type of disorders I treat. Many of my clients are perfectly normal and pleasant individuals." The lie rolled out smoothly. I hadn't had a normal client in a decade.

He smirked. "Killers," he said. "You treat killers. Current, future, and past. You'll have to forgive me, Doc. I call it like I see it."

"Well, like I said, I can't discuss Mr. Abbott."

"When's the last time you spoke with him?"

The tap dance was beginning. I chose my words carefully, mindful that they were probably already aware of his calls. "Our last appointment was two weeks ago. He canceled the one scheduled for this week. And he called me this morning. I missed his call and called him back several hours later, but he didn't respond."

Saxe didn't seem surprised by the information, which meant that they already had his call log. Thank God I hadn't left a voice mail. "What did he say when he called you?"

"Just asked me to give him a call."

"I'd like to hear that voice mail."

I sighed. "I deleted it. I'm sorry, I didn't think anything of it."

He nodded, as if he understood, but if he was looking at this as a heart attack and suicide, he didn't. "That number on your card, that's the one he called?"

"The number on the back, yes. That's my cell."

"You give your cell phone number to all your clients?" He frowned. "Even the dangerous ones?"

"It's a cell phone." I sat back in the chair. "It's not my home address or the code to my front door. If they abuse it, then I stop working with them. If I need to change the number, I'll change the number. It's not a big deal."

"Coming from someone who looks at dead bodies all day, I have to say, Doc-I don't think you take your safety seriously. You're an attractive woman. All it takes is one of these sickos becoming obsessed with you, and you're going to have a serious problem. "

"I appreciate the advice." I forced a smile. "But they aren't sickos. They're normal people, Detective. Some people struggle with depression; others struggle with violent urges. If my clients didn't care about protecting others, they wouldn't be in my office."

"Is that why John Abbott was seeing you? He didn't want to hurt people?"

I kept my features pleasant. "Like I said, I treat clients for a variety of things. Some just need someone to talk to. You want to know more than that, I need a warrant."

"Hey, I had to try," he said, raising his hands in surrender. Glancing toward my window, he studied the park view for a long moment. "Any reason I should look at this as anything other than a suicide?"

He was questioning the wrong death. "Not that I'm aware of."

"Would you swear to that under oath?"

"Absolutely." Just please don't ask about Brooke.

He nodded slowly. "I'll be in touch if I have any more questions, Dr. Moore." He pushed on the arms of the chair and stood. "Thank you for your time."

I walked him to the lobby and gave a reassuring smile to Jacob, who watched us with interest. Returning to my office, I closed the door and let out a shuddered breath.

The chances were high, very high, that this was my fault. I'd had one job to do, and I had failed in an epic way with Brooke-but also John. Because of that, two people were dead.

*Excerpted from The Good Lie by A. R. Torre with permission from the publisher, Thomas & Mercer. Copyright © 2021 by Select Publishing LLC. All rights reserved.*