

A person wearing a dark hooded jacket and carrying a backpack is walking away from the viewer down a path in a dense, misty forest. The trees are tall and thin, with bare branches, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somber.

IF SHE KNOW

A KATE WISE MYSTERY--BOOK 1

BLAKE
PIERCE

A Kate Wise Mystery

Блейк Пирс

If She Knew

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery. Blake Pierce did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone) IF SHE KNEW (A Kate Wise Mystery) is book #1 in a new psychological thriller series by bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) (a free download) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. 55 year old empty nester—and freshly retired FBI agent—Kate Wise finds herself drawn out of her quiet suburban life when her friend’s daughter is murdered in a home invasion—and she is implored to help. Kate thought she left the FBI behind after 30 years as their top agent, respected for her brilliant mind, tough street skills and her uncanny ability to hunt down serial killers. Yet Kate, bored with the quiet town, at a crossroads in life, is summoned by a friend she can’t turn down. As Kate hunts the killer, she soon finds herself at the forefront of a manhunt, as more bodies turn up—all suburban moms in perfect marriages—and it becomes apparent there is a serial killer stalking this quiet town. She unearths secrets from her neighbors she wishes she never knew, discovering that all is not what it seems in this picture of model streets and neighbors. Affairs and lying are rampant, and Kate must sift through the town’s underbelly if she will stop the killer from striking again. But this killer is one step ahead of her, and it may end up being Kate who is in danger. An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, IF SHE KNEW is book #1 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #2 in the KATE WISE MYSTERY series is coming soon!

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Blake Pierce

If She Knew. A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 1

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes thirteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising two books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting).

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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PROLOGUE

He saw no one watching him as he crept down the quiet suburban street at night. It was one in the morning and it was the kind of neighborhood where people went to bed at respectable times, a rowdy weeknight consisting of one too many glasses of wine while watching *The Bachelor*.

It was the kind of place he despised.

They paid property association dues, they scooped up their dogs' shit into little plastic bags as to not offend their neighbors, and their kids surely played sports not just in high school leagues but in private county leagues. The world was their oyster. They felt safe. Sure, they locked their doors and set their alarms, but ultimately, they felt safe.

That was about to change.

He walked up a particular lawn. Surely she would be home now. Her husband was away on business in Dallas. He knew which window was her bedroom window. And he also knew that the security alarm at the back of the house was faulty when it rained.

He shifted and felt the reassurance of the knife, tucked away in the small of his back, between the elastic of his boxer shorts and his jeans. He stuck to the side of the house, opening the bottle of water he carried, and when he came to the back of the house, he stopped. There was the glowing green light of the small security box. He knew that if he tried to damage it, the alarm would go off. He knew if he tried to open a door or pry it open, the alarm would go off.

But he also knew it messed up in the rain. It was something about the moisture, even though this type of system was supposed to be one hundred percent waterproof. With this in mind, he raised his bottle of water and doused it.

He watched as the little green light flickered, grew weak.

With a smile, he walked into the small strip of backyard. He made his way up the stairs of the screened in back porch. Using the knife to pry the screen door open was easy; it made very little noise in the quiet of the night.

He crossed to the wicker chair in the corner, lifted the cushion, and found the key underneath. He picked it up in his gloved hand, went to the back door, slid the key in, turned the lock, and stepped inside.

A small lamp was on in the thin hallway that ran out of the kitchen. He followed this hall to a stairway, and he began to climb.

Anxiety swirled in his guts. He was getting excited—not in a sexual way but in the way he used to get excited when he rode a roller coaster, the anticipation thrilling him as he ascended, clacking up the biggest hill on the tracks.

He gripped the knife, still in his hand from having pried open the screen door. At the top of the stairs he took a moment to appreciate the thrill of it. He breathed in the cleanliness of the upper-class suburban home and it made him a little sick. It was too familiar, too detached.

He hated it.

Gripping the knife, he walked to the bedroom at the end of the hall. There she was, lying in the bed.

She was sleeping on her side, her knees slightly bent. She was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of running shorts, nothing too impressive being that her husband was gone.

He walked to the bed and watched her sleep for a while. He wondered about the nature of life. How fragile it was.

He then raised the knife and brought it down almost casually, as if he were simply painting or swatting a fly.

She screamed, but only for a moment—before he brought the knife down again.

And again.

CHAPTER ONE

Of the many life lessons her first full year of retirement had taught Kate Wise, the most important was this: without a solid plan, retirement could get boring very fast.

She'd heard stories of women who had retired and picked up different interests. Some opened up little Etsy shops online. Some dabbled in painting and crochet. Others tried their hand at writing a novel. Kate thought these were all fine ways to pass the time, but none of them appealed to her.

For someone who had spent more than thirty years of her life with a gun strapped to her side, finding ways to be happily preoccupied was difficult. Knitting was not going to replace the thrill of an on-foot pursuit of a killer. Gardening was not going to recreate the adrenaline high of storming into a residence, never knowing what waited on the other side of the door.

Because nothing she tried seemed to even come close to touching the joy she had felt as an FBI agent, she had stopped searching after a couple of months. The only thing that even came close were her trips to the gun range, which she made twice a week. She would have made more if she didn't fear that the younger members at the range might start to think of her as nothing more than a retired agent who was trying to recapture a moment in time when she had been great.

It was a reasonable fear. After all, she supposed that's exactly what she was doing.

It was a Tuesday, just after two in the afternoon, when this fact struck her like a bullet between the eyes. She had just come back from the range and was setting her M1911 pistol back in her bedside drawer when her heart seemed to break out of nowhere.

Thirty-one years. She'd spent thirty-one years with the bureau. She'd been a part of more than one hundred raids and had worked as part of a special enforcement unit for high-profile cases on twenty-six occasions. She'd been known for her speed, her quick and often razor-sharp thinking, and her overall don't-give-a-damn attitude.

She'd also been known for her looks, something that still bothered her a bit even at the age of fifty-five. When she'd become an agent at the age of twenty-three, it had not taken her long to get crude nicknames like Legs and Barbie—names that would likely get men fired these days but which, back when she had been younger, had sadly been commonplace for female agents.

Kate had broken noses at the bureau because male agents would grab her ass. She had thrown one across a moving elevator when he'd whispered something obscene in her ear while behind her.

While the nicknames had stayed with her until well into her forties, the advances and leering looks had not. After word had gotten around, her male peers had learned to respect her and to look beyond her body—a body which, she knew with some degree of muted pride, had always been well-maintained and what most men would consider a ten.

But now at fifty-five she found herself missing even the nicknames. She had not thought retirement would be this hard. The gun range was fine, but it was just a whispering ghost of what her past had been. She had tried to shove the yearning for her past away by reading. She had decided she would read up on weapons in particular; she'd read countless books about the history of weapons use, how they were manufactured, the preference for certain weapons by military generals, and the like. It was why she now used an M1911, because of its rich history with being involved in a multitude of American wars, an early model of it being used as far back as World War I.

She'd tried her hand at reading fiction but could not get into it—though she did enjoy a lot of the cybercrime-related books. While she *had* revisited books she'd adored in her younger years, she could find nothing interesting in the lives of fake characters. And because she had not wanted to become the sad recently retired lady who spent all of her time at the local library, she'd ordered all of the books she'd read in the last year off of Amazon. She had more than one hundred of them stacked in boxes in her basement. She figured one day she'd build a few bookcases and turn the space into a proper study.

It wasn't like she had much else to do.

Rocked by the idea that she had spent the last year of her life doing not much of anything, Kate Wise sat slowly down on her bed. She stayed there for several minutes without moving. She looked to the desk across the room and saw the photo albums there. There was only a single family picture there. In it, her late husband, Michael, had his arms around their daughter while Kate smiled at his side. A picture from the beach that was poorly taken but had always warmed her heart.

All of the other pictures in those albums, however, were from work: behind-the-scenes shots, pictures of inner-bureau birthday parties, her in her younger years swimming laps, at the gun range, running track, and so on.

She had lived the last year of her life the same way the small-town jock who never leaves his small town would. Always hanging around anyone who would pretend to listen about all of the touchdowns he'd scored thirty years ago playing high school football.

She was no better than that.

With a slight shudder, Kate got up and went to the photo albums on her desk. Slowly and almost methodically, she looked through all three of them. She saw pictures of her younger self, evolving through the years until every picture ever taken was on a phone. She saw herself and people she had known, people who had died right beside her on cases, and started to realize that while these moments had been instrumental in developing her, they had not defined her completely.

The articles she had clipped and saved in the back of the album further told the story. She was the featured story in all of them. **SECOND-YEAR AGENT NABS KILLER ON THE LOOSE** read one title; **FEMALE AGENT LONE SURVIVOR IN SHOOTOUT THAT CLAIMED 11**. And then the one that had really started spurring the legends on: **AFTER 13 VICTIMS, MOONLIGHT KILLER FINALLY TAKEN DOWN BY AGENT KATE WISE**.

By all reasonable health standards, she had at least twenty more years in her—forty if she could somehow manage to really buckle down and fight death away. Even if she averaged it out and said she had *thirty* years left, kicking the bucket at eighty-five...thirty years was a lot.

She could do a lot in thirty years, she supposed. For about ten of those years, she could maybe even have some very good years before old age really started to sneak in and start plucking away her good health.

The question, of course, was what she might find to do with those years.

And despite having a reputation as one of the sharpest agents to go through the bureau in the last decade, she had no idea where to start.

Aside from the gun range and her almost obsessive reading habits, Kate had also managed to make a weekly habit out of meeting with three other women for coffee. The four of them made fun of themselves, claiming they had formed the saddest club ever: four women early in retirement with no idea what to do with their newly freed up days.

The day following her revelation, Kate drove to their coffee house of choice. It was a little family-owned place where not only was the coffee better than the overpriced gruel at Starbucks, but the place wasn't overrun with millennials and soccer moms. She walked inside and before she went to the counter to place her order, she saw their usual table in the back. Two of the three other women were already there, waving to her.

Kate grabbed her hazelnut brew and joined her friends at the table. She sat down beside Jane Patterson, a fifty-seven-year-old who was seven months retired from springing back and forth between companies as a proposal specialist for a government telecommunications firm. Across from her was Clarissa James, a little over a year into retirement ever since working part-time as a

criminology instructor with the bureau. The fourth member of their sad little club, a fifty-five-year-old recently retired woman named Debbie Meade, had not yet shown up.

Odd, Kate thought. *Deb is usually the first one here.*

The moment she took her seat, Jane and Clarissa seemed to go tense. This was particularly weird because it was not like Clarissa to be anything other than bubbly. Unlike Kate, Clarissa had quickly grown to love retirement. Kate supposed it helped that Clarissa was married to a man nearly ten years younger than her who competed in swimming competitions in his free time.

“What’s with you guys?” Kate asked. “You know I come here to try to get motivated about retirement, right? You two look downright sad.”

Jane and Clarissa shared a look that Kate had seen countless times before. During her times as an agent, she’d seen it in living rooms, interrogation rooms, and hospital waiting rooms. It was a look that translated one simple question without a spoken word: *Who’s going to tell her?*

“What is it?” she asked.

She was suddenly very aware of Deb’s absence.

“It’s Deb,” Jane said, confirming her fear.

“Well, not Deb exactly,” Clarissa added. “It’s her daughter, Julie. Did you ever meet her?”

“Once, I think,” Kate said. “What happened?”

“She’s dead,” Clarissa said. “Murder. So far, they have no idea who did it.”

“Oh my God,” Kate said, genuinely saddened for her friend. She’d known Deb for about fifteen years, having met her at Quantico. Kate had been working as an assistant instructor for a new crop of field agents and Deb had been working with some of the tech rats on some sort of new security system. They’d struck it off right away and had become fast friends.

The fact that Deb had not called or texted her with the news before anyone else showed just how quickly friendships could shift over the years.

“When did it happen?” Kate asked.

“Sometime yesterday,” Jane said. “She just texted me this morning about it.”

“They have *no* suspects?” Kate asked.

Jane shrugged. “She just said they don’t know who it is. No clues, no leads, nothing.”

Kate instantly felt herself go into agent mode. She figured it was the same way a trained athlete must feel after being away from their arena of choice for too long. She may not have turf or an adoring crowd to remind her of what her glory days had been like, but she *did* have her finely tuned mind for solving crimes.

“Don’t go there,” Clarissa said, trying on her best smile.

“Go where?”

“Don’t be Agent Wise right now,” Clarissa said. “Right now, just be her friend. I can see those wheels turning in your head. Jeez, lady. Don’t you have a pregnant daughter? Aren’t you about to be a grandmother?”

“What a way to kick me when I’m down,” Kate said with a smile. She let the comment go and then asked: “Deb’s daughter...did she have a boyfriend?”

“No idea,” Jane said.

An awkward silence sat over the table. In the year or so their little group of recently retired friends had been meeting, the conversation had always been mostly light. This was the first heavy topic and it did not fit with their routine. Kate, of course, was accustomed to it. Her time in the academy had taught her how to handle these situations.

But Clarissa was right. In hearing the news, Kate had so easily slipped into agent mode. She knew she should have thought like a friend first—thinking of Deb’s loss and emotional state. But the agent in her was too strong, the instincts still there at the forefront after having been on the shelf for a year.

“So what can we do to make her comfortable?” Jane asked.

“I was thinking a meal train,” Clarissa said. “I know a few other ladies that might get on board. Just making sure she doesn’t have to cook for her family in the next few weeks as she deals with all of this.”

For the next ten minutes, the three women planned out the most effective way to get a meal train going for their grief-stricken friend.

But for Kate, the conversation remained on the surface. Her mind was headed elsewhere, trying to dig up hidden facts and tidbits on Deb and her family, trying to find a case where there might not even be one.

Or there might, Kate thought. And I guess there’s only one way to find out.

CHAPTER TWO

After retirement, Kate had moved back to Richmond, Virginia. She'd grown up in the little town of Amelia, about forty minutes away from Richmond, but had gone to college right near the cusp of downtown. She'd spent her undergrad years at VCU, originally wanting to be an art major of all things. Three years in, she'd discovered that she'd had a heart for criminal justice through one of her elective courses in psychology. It had been a winding, crooked trail that had led her to Quantico and the thirty-year stretch of her illustrious career.

She now drove through some of those familiar Richmond streets. She'd been to Debbie Meade's house only once before but knew exactly where it was located. She knew where it was because she envied the location, one of those older-looking buildings on the streets off the center of downtown that were lined with trees rather than street lights and tall buildings.

Deb's street was currently awash in fallen leaves from the elms that overhung the street. She had to park three houses away because family and friends had already started to fill in the spaces in front of Deb's house.

She walked down the sidewalk, trying to convince herself that this was a bad idea. Yes, she planned to enter the house as only a friend—even though Jane and Clarissa had decided to hold off until later in the afternoon in order to give Deb some space. But there was something deeper there, too. She'd been looking for something to do these past few months, some better and more meaningful way to fill her time. She'd often dreamed about somehow picking up freelance work from the bureau, maybe even just basic research tasks.

Even the most minor of references to her work got her excited. For instance, she was due in court next week to testify at a parole hearing. She was not looking forward to facing the criminal again but just being able to delve back into her work for such a brief amount of time was welcome.

But that was next week—and right now that seemed like an eternity away.

She looked up at Debbie Meade's front porch. She knew why she was really there. She wanted to find some answers to questions that were storming in her head. It made her feel selfish, like she was using her friend's loss as an excuse to dip her toes back into waters that she had not felt in over a year. This situation involved a friend, which made it tricky. But the old agent in her was hoping it might evolve into something else. The friend in her, though, thought it might be risky. And all together, those parts of her wondered if maybe she should have stuck with simply fanaticizing about a return to work.

Maybe that's exactly what I'm doing, Kate thought as she walked up the stairs to the Meade residence. And honestly, she wasn't quite sure how to feel about that.

She knocked on the door softly and it was answered right away by an elderly lady Kate did not know.

"Are you with the family?" the woman asked.

"No," Kate answered. "Just a very close friend."

The woman scrutinized her for a moment before allowing her inside. Kate entered and walked down the hallway, passing by a living area that was filled with somber people sitting around one single person in a recliner. The person in the recliner was Debbie Meade. Kate recognized the man standing beside her and talking to another man as her husband, Jim.

She awkwardly entered the room and went directly to Deb. Without allowing Deb enough time to get out of the chair, Kate leaned down and hugged her.

"I'm so sorry, Deb," she said.

Deb was clearly drained from crying, managing to only nod into Kate's shoulder. "Thanks for coming," Deb whispered into her ear. "Do you think you could meet me in the kitchen in a few minutes?"

“Of course.”

Kate broke the hug and gave little nods of acknowledgment to the few other faces in the room that she recognized. Feeling out of place, Kate made her way to the end of the hallway which emptied into the kitchen. There was no one there but there were empty plates and glasses from where people had been not too long ago. There were a few pies sitting on the counter along with ham rolls and other finger foods. Kate set to cleaning up, helping herself to the sink to start washing the dishes.

Several moments later, Jim Meade made his way into the kitchen. “You don’t have to do that,” he said.

Kate turned to him and saw that he looked tired and impossibly sad. “I know,” she said. “I came by to show my support. It seemed like things were pretty heavy in the living room when I came in, so I’m supporting you guys by washing dishes.”

He nodded, looking like he might nod off right then and there. “One of our friends said she saw a woman come in a few minutes ago. I’m rather glad it’s you, Kate.”

Kate saw another person coming toward the kitchen behind him, looking equally tired and heartbroken. Deb Meade’s eyes were puffy and red from crying. Her hair was in disarray and when she looked at Kate to try on a smile, it seemed to fall right off of her face.

Kate put down the dish she was washing, quickly dried her hands on a hand towel by the sink, and went to her friend. Kate had never been much for physical touch but knew when a hug was needed. She expected Deb to start weeping in the midst of the hug but there was nothing, just her sagging weight.

She’s probably all cried out for now, Kate thought.

“I only just heard this morning,” Kate said. “I’m so sorry, Deb. Both of you,” she said, casting her eyes to Jim.

Jim nodded his appreciation and then looked down the hall. When he saw that no one else was lurking there, the slight murmur of their company still in the living room, he stepped closer to Kate as Deb broke the hug.

“Kate, we need to ask you something,” Jim said in a near-whisper.

“And please,” Deb said, taking her hand. “Let us get it all out before you shoot us down.” Kate felt a little tremble in Deb’s grip and her heart broke a little.

“Sure,” Kate said. Their pleading eyes and the overall weight of their sorrow hung over her head like an anvil that was sure to drop at any moment.

“The police have absolutely no idea who did it,” Deb said. Suddenly, her exhaustion morphed into something that looked closer to anger. “Based on some things we said and some texts they found on Julie’s phone, the police arrested her ex-boyfriend right away. But they held him for less than three hours and then let him go. Just like that. But Kate... *I know* he did it. It *has* to be him.”

Kate had seen this approach multiple times before during her time as an agent. Grieving families wanted justice right away. They’d look past logic and a sound investigation to make sure some sort of vengeance was taken out as soon as possible. And if those results weren’t speedy, the grieving family assumed incompetence on the part of the police or FBI.

“Deb...if they released him so quickly, there must have been some very strong evidence. After all...how long has it been since they dated?”

“Thirteen years. But he kept trying to connect with her for years, even after she was married. She had to get a restraining order at one time.”

“Still...the police had to have a good alibi for him to have released him so quickly.”

“Well, if there was, they aren’t telling me about it,” Deb said.

“Deb...look,” Kate said, giving Deb’s hand a comforting squeeze. “The loss is too recent. Give it a few days and you’ll start to think rationally. I’ve seen it a hundred times.”

Deb shook her head. "I'm certain of it, Kate. They dated for three years and not once did I trust him. We're pretty sure he hit her at least on two occasions but Julie never came out and said it. He had a temper. Even *he'd* tell you that."

"I'm sure the police are—"

"That's our favor," Deb interrupted. "I want *you* to look into it. I want you to get involved in the case."

"Deb, I'm retired. You know this."

"I do. And I also know how much you miss it. Kate...the man that killed my daughter got nothing more than a little scare and some time in an interrogation room. And now he's at home, sitting comfortably while I have to plan to put my daughter in the ground. It's not right, Kate. Please...will you look into it? I know you can't do it on an official basis but...anything you can do. I'd appreciate it."

There was so much heartache in Deb's eyes that Kate could feel it passing between them. Everything within her was telling her to stand firm—to not allow any false hope to enter into Deb's grief. But at the same time, Deb was right. She *had* missed her work. And even if what was being proposed was just a few basic phone calls to the Richmond PD or even to her former co-workers at the bureau, it would be *something*.

It would certainly be better than obsessively reflecting back on her career with lonely trips out to the gun range.

"Here's what I can do," Kate said. "When I retired, I lost all of my pull. Sure, I get calls for my opinion here and there, but I have no authority. More than that, this case would be completely outside of my jurisdiction even if I *were* still active. But I will make a few calls to my old contacts and make sure the evidence they found to free him was strong. Honestly, Deb, that's the best I can do."

The gratitude was evident in both Deb and Jim right away. Deb hugged her again and this time, she did weep. "Thank you."

"It's not a problem," Kate said. "But I really can't promise anything."

"We know," Jim said. "But at least now we know that someone competent is watching out for us."

Kate wasn't comfortable with the idea that they were looking to her as an inside force to assist them, nor did she like that they assumed the police didn't have their backs. Again, she knew it was all about their grief and how it was blinding them in their search for answers. So for now, she let it slide.

She thought about how tired she had been near the end of her career—not really physically tired but emotionally drained. She had always loved her job, but how often had she come to the end of a case and think to herself: *Man, am I tired of this shit...*

It had happened more and more often in the last few years.

But this moment was not about her.

She held her friend close, puzzling over how no matter how hard people tried to put their pasts behind them—whether it was relationships or careers—it somehow managed to always limp along not too far behind.

CHAPTER THREE

Kate wasted no time. She returned home and sat at the desk in her small study for a moment. She looked out of her study window, into her small backyard. Sunshine came in through the window, laying a rectangle of light on her wooden floors. The floors, like most of the rest of the house, showed the scars and scabs of its 1920s construction. Located in the Carytown area of Richmond, Kate often felt out of place. Carytown was a trendy little section of the city and she knew she'd end up moving elsewhere fairly soon. She had enough money to get a house just about anywhere she wanted but the very idea of moving exhausted her.

It was that sort of lack of motivation that had perhaps made retirement so hard for her. That and a refusal to let go of the memories of who she had been while with the bureau for those thirty years. When those two feelings collided, she often felt unmotivated and without any real direction.

But now there was Deb and Jim Meade's request. Yes, it was a misguided request but Kate saw nothing wrong with at least making a few calls. If it came to nothing, she could at least call Deb back to let her know that she had tried her best.

Her first call was to the Deputy Commissioner of the Virginia State Police, a man named Clarence Greene. She had worked closely with him on several cases over the last decade or so of her career and they shared a mutual respect for one another. She hoped the year that had passed had not totally obliterated that relationship. Knowing that Clarence was never in his office, she opted to skip his landline and called his cell phone.

Just when she thought the call was not going to be answered, she was greeted with a familiar voice. For a moment, Kate felt as if she had never left work at all.

"Agent Wise," Clarence said. "How the hell are you?"

"Good," she said. "You?"

"Same as always. I have to admit, though...I thought I was done with seeing your name pop up on my phone."

"Yeah, about that," Kate said. "I hate to come to you with something like this after more than a year of silence, but I have a friend who just lost her daughter. I gave her my word that I would look into the investigation."

"So what do you want from me?" Clarence asked.

"Well, the main suspect was the daughter's ex-boyfriend. It seems that he was arrested and then let go in about three hours. Naturally, the parents are wondering why."

"Oh," Clarence said. "Look...Wise, I can't really divulge that to you. And with all due respect, you should already know that."

"I'm not trying to interfere in the case," Kate said. "I was just wondering why no real reason has been given to the parents for letting the only suspect go. She's a grieving mom looking for answers and—"

"Again, let me stop you there," Clarence said. "As you well know, I deal with grieving moms and fathers and widows pretty regularly. Just because you happen to know one personally right now doesn't mean I can break protocol or look the other way."

"As closely as you've worked with me, you know I mean only the best."

"Oh, I'm sure you do. But the last thing I need is a retired FBI agent poking around in a current case, no matter how hands-off it may seem. You have to understand that, right?"

The hell of it was that she *did* understand it. Still, she had to try one last time. "I'd consider it a personal favor."

"I'm sure you would," Clarence said, a bit condescending. "But the answer is no, Agent Wise. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm about to head into court to speak to one of those grieving widows I just told you about. Sorry I couldn't help you."

He ended the call without a goodbye, leaving Kate to stare at that slowly shifting square of sunlight on the hardwood floor. She considered her next move, noting that Deputy Commissioner Greene had just revealed that he was about to head into court. She supposed the smart move would be to take his refusal to help her as a defeat. But his unwillingness to help only made her desire to keep digging that much stronger.

I was always told I had a stubborn streak as an agent, she thought as she stood up from her desk. It's good to see that some things haven't changed.

Half an hour later, Kate was parking her car in a parking garage adjacent to the Third Precinct Police Station. Based on where the murder of Julie Meade—married name Julie Hicks—had occurred, Kate knew it would be the best resource for information. The only problem was that aside from Deputy Commissioner Greene, she didn't really know anyone else within the department, much less the Third Precinct.

She entered the office with confidence. She knew there were certain things about her current situation that an observant officer would notice. First of all, she did not have her sidearm. She did have a concealed carry permit but given what she was up to, she figured it might cause more problems than it was worth if she was caught being even the slightest bit dishonest.

And dishonesty was really something she could not afford. Retired or not, her reputation was on the line—a reputation she had built with great care for over thirty years. She was going to have to walk a fine line in the next minutes, something she welcomed. She hadn't been this anxious in the entire year she had spent retired.

She approached the information desk, a brightly lit area separated from the central room by a pane of glass. A woman in uniform sat at the desk, stamping something in a ledger as Kate approached. She looked up at Kate with a face that looked as if a smile had not graced it in days.

"What can I do for you?" the receptionist asked.

"I'm a retired agent with the FBI, looking for some information about a recent murder. I was hoping to get the names of the officers in charge of the case."

"You got an ID?" the woman asked.

Kate got out her driver's license and slid it through the opening in the glass partition. The woman looked at it for a grand total of one second and then slid it right back. "I'm going to need your bureau ID."

"Well, like I said, I'm retired."

"And who sent you? I'll need their name and contact information and then they have to fill out a request to get you the information."

"I was really hoping to step over all of the legalities."

"I can't help you, then," the woman said.

Kate wondered how far she could push it. If she went too hard, someone would surely notify Clarence Greene and that could be bad. She racked her brain, trying to think of another course of action. She could only come up with one and it was much riskier than what she was currently attempting.

With a sigh, Kate gave a curt, "Well, thanks anyway."

She turned on her heel and walked back out of the office. She was a little embarrassed. What the hell had she been thinking? Even if she *did* still have her bureau ID, it would be unlawful for the Richmond PD to give her any information without approval from a supervisor in DC.

It was beyond humbling to walk back out to her car with such an absolute feeling—the feeling of being a basic civilian.

But a civilian who hates to take no for an answer.

She took out her phone and placed a call to Deb Meade. When Deb answered, she still sounded tired and far away.

“Sorry to bother you, Deb,” she said. “But do you have a name and address for the ex-boyfriend?”

As it turned out, Deb had both.

CHAPTER FOUR

While Kate did not have her old bureau ID, she did still have the last badge she had ever owned. It was propped up on the mantel over her fireplace like some relic from another time, no better than a faded photograph. When she left the Third Precinct station, she headed back home and scooped it up. She thought long and hard about also taking her sidearm. She looked longingly toward the M1911 but left it where it was in her bedside drawer. Taking it with her for what she had planned would be asking for trouble.

She did decide to take the handcuffs she kept in a shoebox under the bed with a few other treasures from her career.

Just in case.

She left her house and headed for the address Deb had given her. It was a place in Shockoe Bottom, a twenty-minute drive from her home. She was not nervous as she made the drive but she did feel a sense of excitement. She knew she should not be doing this, but at the same time, it felt good to be out and on the hunt again—even if it was in secret.

Just as she reached the address of Julie Hicks's former boyfriend, a guy named Brian Neilbolt, Kate thought about her husband. He popped up in her head from time to time but sometimes he seemed to pop up and sort of settle in for a while. That happened as she turned onto the destination street. He could see him shaking his head in frustration.

Kate, you know you shouldn't be doing this, he seemed to say.

She grinned thinly. She missed her husband fiercely sometimes, a fitting contrast to the fact that she sometimes felt she had managed to move on from his death rather quickly.

She shook the cobwebs of those memories away as she parked her car in front of the address Deb had given her. It was a rather nice house, split into two different apartments with porches separating the properties. When she got out of the car she could tell right away that someone was home because she could hear someone speaking very loudly inside.

When she climbed the porch stairs, she felt as if she had taken a step back in time, about one year ago. She felt like an agent again, despite the lack of the firearm on her hip. Still, being that she was in all actuality a retired agent, she had no idea what she would say after she knocked on the door.

But she didn't let that stop her. She knocked on the door with the same authority she would have one year ago. As she heard the loud talking inside, she figured she'd stick with the truth. Lying in a situation that she was already not supposed to be a part of would only make things worse if she was caught.

The man who answered the door took Kate a little off guard. He was about six feet three inches and was absolutely jacked. His shoulders alone showed that he worked out. He could have easily passed for a professional wrestler. The only thing that betrayed that façade was the anger in his eyes.

"Yeah?" he asked. "Who are you?"

She then made a move that she had missed very much. She showed him her badge. She hoped the sight of it would carry some weight to counter her introduction. "My name is Kate Wise. I'm a retired FBI agent. I was hoping you could speak with me for a few moments."

"About what?" he asked, his words quick and snappy.

"Are you Brian Neilbolt?" she asked.

"I am."

"So your ex-girlfriend was Julie Hicks, correct? Formerly Julie Meade?"

"Ah shit, this again? Look, the fucking cops already hauled me in and interrogated me. Now the feds, too?"

"Rest assured, I'm not here to interrogate you. I just wanted to ask some questions."

“Sounds like an interrogation to me,” he said. “Besides, you said you’re retired. Pretty sure that means I don’t have to do anything you ask.”

She pretended to be hurt by this, looking away from him. In reality, though, she was looking over his massive shoulders and the space behind him. She saw a suitcase and two backpacks leaning against the wall. She also saw a sheet of paper sitting on top of the suitcase. The large logo identified it as a printout of an Orbitz receipt. Apparently, Brian Neilbolt was leaving town for a while.

Not the best scenario for when your ex-girlfriend had been murdered and you had been taken in and then immediately released by the police.

“Where are you headed?” Kate asked.

“None of your business.”

“Who were you talking to so loudly on the phone before I knocked?”

“Again, none of your business. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

He went to close the door, but Kate persisted. She stepped forward and wedged her shoe between the door and the frame.

“Mr. Neilbolt, I’m only asking for about five minutes of your time.”

A wave of fury passed through his eyes but then seemed to subside. He hung his head and for a moment, she thought he looked sad. It was similar to the look she had seen on the faces of the Meades.

“You said you’re a retired agent, right?” Neilbolt asked.

“That’s right,” she confirmed.

“Retired,” he said. “Then get the fuck off of my porch.”

She stood resolute, making it clear that she had no intention of going anywhere.

“I said *get the fuck off of my porch!*”

He nodded and then reached out to push her. She felt the force of his hands when they struck her shoulder and acted as quickly as she could. Right away, she was amazed at how quickly her reflexes and muscle memory kicked in.

As she went stumbling backward, she wrapped both of her arms around Neilbolt’s right arm. At the same time, she dropped to a knee to stop her backward momentum. She then did her best to hip toss him but his bulk was too much to handle. When he realized what she was trying to do, he threw a hard elbow into her ribs.

The breath went barreling out of Kate’s chest but because he had thrown the elbow, his leverage was thrown off. This time when she attempted the hip toss, it worked. And because she put everything she had into it, it worked a little too well.

Neilbolt went sailing off the porch. When he landed, he hit the bottom two stairs. He cried out in pain and tried to get back to his feet right away. He looked up at her in shock, trying to figure out what had happened. Fueled by rage and surprise, he hobbled up the stairs toward her, clearly dazed.

She faked him out with a right knee to the face as he neared the top step. When he went to dodge it, she caught the side of his head and again went to her knees. She forced his head hard into the porch while his arms and legs scrambled for purchase on the stairs. She then freed the handcuffs from the interior of her jacket and applied them with a quickness and ease that only thirty years of experience can provide.

She stepped away from Brian Neilbolt and looked down at him. He was not fighting against the cuffs; he looked rather dazed, in fact.

Kate reached for her phone with the intention of calling the cops and realized that her hand was trembling. She was pumped up, flooded with adrenaline. She realized that there was a smile on her face.

God, I’ve missed this.

Although the blow to her ribs did hurt like hell—a lot more than it would have hurt five or six years ago for sure. And had the joints in her knees always ached this way after a skirmish?

She allowed herself a moment to revel in what she had done and then managed to finally make a call to the cops. Meanwhile, Brian Neilbolt remained groggy at her feet, perhaps wondering how a woman at least twenty years older than him had managed to so thoroughly hand his ass to him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Honestly, Kate had expected a little bit of blowback about what she had done, but nothing to the degree of what she experienced when she reached the Third Precinct Station. She knew something was coming when she saw the glances from the police who passed by in the midst of their office errands. Some of the looks were of awe while others stank of a sort of leering ridicule.

Kate let it slide right off of her back. She was still too riled up from the confrontation on Neilbolt's porch to care.

After she'd waited several minutes in the lobby, a nervous-looking officer approached her. "You're Ms. Wise, right?" he asked.

"I am."

A flash of recognition showed in his eyes. It was a look she had once gotten all the time when officers or agents who had only ever heard about her record met her for the first time. She missed that look.

"Chief Budd would like to speak to you."

She was frankly quite surprised. She was hoping to speak to someone more along the lines of Deputy Commissioner Greene. While he might have been a hard ass on the phone, she knew he could be persuaded more effectively in face-to-face meetings. Chief Randall Budd, though, was a no-nonsense kind of man. She'd only ever met him on one occasion a few years ago. She barely remembered the occurrence but *did* remember Budd leaving an impression of someone strong-willed and strictly professional.

Still, Kate did not want to seem intimidated or at all worried. So she got up and followed the officer out of the waiting area and back through the bullpen. They passed by several desks where she got more uncertain glances before the officer led her down a hallway. In the center of the hall they came to Randall Budd's office. The door was open, as if he had been waiting for her for quite some time.

The officer had nothing to say; once he had delivered her to Budd's doorway, he turned on his heel and left. Kate looked into the office and saw Chief Budd waving her in.

"Come on in," he said. "I won't lie. I'm not happy with you, but I don't bite. Close the door behind you, would you?"

Kate stepped inside and did as she was asked. She then took one of the three chairs that sat on the opposite side of Budd's desk. The desk was occupied with more personal effects than work-related items: pictures of his family, an autographed baseball, a personalized coffee mug, and some kind of sentimental shell casing sitting in a plaque.

"Let me start off by saying that I am well aware of your track record," Budd said. "More than one hundred arrests in your career. Top of your class in the academy. Gold and silver placement in eight consecutive kickboxing tournaments *in addition to* standard bureau training where you also kicked ass. Your name got around while you were running things and most of the people here in the Virginia State PD respect the hell out of you."

"But?" Kate said. She didn't say it in an attempt to be funny. She was simply letting him know that she was more than capable of being reprimanded...although she honestly didn't think she deserved much of it.

"But despite all that, you have no right to go around assaulting people just because you think they might have been involved in the death of one of your friend's daughters."

"I didn't visit him with intent to assault," Kate said. "I visited him to ask some questions. When he got physical with me, I simply defended myself."

"He told my men that you pitched him down the porch stairs and banged his head against the floor of the porch."

"I can't be blamed for being stronger than him, now can I?" she asked.

Budd looked closely at her, scrutinizing her. "I can't tell if you're trying to be funny, taking this lightly, or if this is really your everyday attitude."

"Chief, I understand your position and how a retired fifty-five-year-old woman beating up someone that your men had questioned briefly and then released could cause you a headache. But please understand...I only visited Brian Neilbolt because my friend asked me to. And honestly, when I learned a bit more about him, I thought it might not be a bad idea."

"So you just assumed my men didn't do an adequate job?" Budd asked.

"I said no such thing."

Budd rolled his eyes and sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to argue about it. Honestly, I would love nothing more than for you to leave my office in a few minutes and once we are done talking about this matter, it's done. I need you to understand, though, that you crossed a line and if you happen to pull something like this again, I might just have to place you under arrest."

There were several things Kate wanted to say in response. But she figured if Budd was willing to press all arguments down, so could she. She knew that he was well within his power to really bring the hammer down on her if he wanted, so she decided to be as civil as possible.

"I understand," she replied.

Budd seemed to think about something for a moment before interlocking his hands together on the desk, as if trying to center himself. "And just so you know, we are certain that Brian Neilbolt did not kill Julie Hicks. We have him on security cameras outside of a bar on the night she was killed. He went in around ten and didn't leave until after midnight. We then have a text message trail between him and a current fling that went on between one and three in the morning. He checks out. He's not the guy."

"He had bags and suitcases packed," Kate pointed out. "Like he was trying to leave town in a hurry."

"In the text thread, he and this fling of his discussed visiting Atlantic City. They were supposed to be leaving this afternoon."

"I see." Kate nodded. She did not feel embarrassed per se, but she did start to regret acting so aggressively on Neilbolt's porch.

"There's one more thing," Budd said. "And again, you have to view things from my position on this. I had no choice but to contact your former supervisors at the FBI. It's protocol. Surely you know that."

She *did* know that but honestly had not thought about it. A slight yet gnawing irritation started to bloom in her guts.

"I know," she said.

"I spoke with Assistant Director Duran. He wasn't happy, and he wants to speak with you."

Kate rolled her eyes and nodded. "Fine. I'll give him a call and let him know it's from your instruction."

"No, you don't understand," Budd said. "They want to see you. In DC."

And with that, the irritation she was feeling quickly morphed into something she hadn't felt in a while: legitimate worry.

CHAPTER SIX

Following her meeting with Chief Budd, Kate made the appropriate calls to let her former supervisors know that she had received their request to visit them. She was not given any information over the phone and never actually spoke to anyone in power. That left her to leave a few rather rude messages with two unfortunate receptionists—an exercise that actually helped to relieve some of her stress.

She left Richmond the following morning at eight o'clock. She was curiously more excited than she was nervous. She figured it was kind of like a college graduate revisiting their campus after a brief time away. She'd missed the bureau terribly over the last year or so and was looking forward to being back in that environment...even if it was to be disciplined.

She distracted herself by listening to an obscure cinema-based podcast—a suggestion made by her daughter. Within five minutes of the podcast, the commentators had been drowned out and Kate was instead reflecting on the last few years of her life. For the most part, she was not a sentimental person but for some reason she had never understood, she tended to get nostalgic and reflective whenever she got on the road.

So instead of focusing on the podcast, she thought of her daughter—her pregnant daughter, due in about five weeks. The baby was to be a girl, named Michelle. The baby's father was a good enough man but, by Kate's estimation, had never quite been good enough for Melissa Wise. Melissa, called Lissa by Kate ever since she'd started to crawl, lived in Chesterfield, an area technically within Richmond but considered different by those who lived there. Kate had never told Melissa, but that was why she had moved back to Richmond. It had not been only because of her ties to the city due to her college experience, but because that was where her family was—where her first grandchild would live.

A grandchild, Kate often thought. How did Melissa get that old? Hell, for that matter, how did I get that old?

And when she thought of Melissa and the unborn Michelle, Kate typically turned her thoughts to her deceased husband. He'd been murdered six years ago, shot in the back of the head while walking their dog at night. His wallet and phone had been taken and she'd been called to ID the body less than two hours after he'd left the house with the dog.

The wound was still fresh most of the time but she hid it well. When she had retired from the bureau, she'd done so with about eight months left before official retirement age. But she had been unable to commit her full time, attention, and focus to her work after having finally scattered Michael's ashes over an old derelict baseball diamond near his home in Falls Church.

Perhaps that was why she had spent the last year so depressed about leaving her job. She had left months before she'd legally had to. What might those months have offered her? What else could she have done with her career?

She'd always wondered about these things, but had never fallen on the side of regret. Michael had deserved at least a few months of her undivided attention. He actually deserved much more than that but she knew that even in the afterlife, there's no way he would have expected her to ditch her work for too long. He would have known that it would have taken some work for her to properly grieve—and that work had meant literally working at the bureau for as long as she had been emotionally capable after his death.

She was relieved to find as she drew closer to DC that she was not feeling as if she was betraying Michael. She did personally believe that death was not the end; she didn't know if that meant Heaven was real or if reincarnation was possible and quite frankly she was okay with not knowing. But she did know that wherever Michael might be, he'd be happy that she was heading back to DC—even if it was to be severely reprimanded.

If anything, he was probably having a laugh at her expense.

This made Kate smile in spite of herself. She cut the podcast off and focused on the road, her own thoughts, and how even if she'd screwed up, life somehow always ended up seeming cyclical in nature.

She didn't get a rush of emotion when she stepped through the front doors and into the large lobby at the FBI headquarters. If anything, she was very aware that she felt she no longer belonged here—like a woman revisiting her old high school to find that the halls now made her feel sad rather than nostalgic.

The sense of familiarity helped, though. Despite feeling displaced, she also felt like she really hadn't been away that long after all. She walked through the lobby, checked in at the front, and headed for the elevators as if she had been here just last week. Even the enclosed space of the elevator was comforting as it carried her up to Assistant Director Duran's office.

When she stepped off the elevator and entered Duran's waiting area, she saw the same receptionist who had been behind the same desk a little over a year ago. They had never really been on a first-name basis, but the receptionist got up from her desk and rushed to hug her.

"Kate! It's so good to see you!"

Thankfully, the receptionist's name came back to her just the right moment. "You, too, Dana," Kate said.

"I didn't think you'd do well with retirement," Dana joked.

"Yeah, it's sort of a big snore."

"Well, go ahead and go on in," Dana said. "He's waiting for you."

Kate knocked on the closed office door. She found that even the somewhat gruff response she got from the other side made her feel at ease.

"It's open," the voice of Assistant Director Vince Duran said.

Kate opened the door and stepped inside. She had been fully prepared to see Duran and had readied herself for it. What she had not been expecting, however, was the face of her old partner. Logan Nash smiled at her right away, getting up from one of the chairs in front of Duran's desk.

Duran seemed to look aside for a moment to allow the reunion. Kate and Logan Nash met at the visitor's chairs in a friendly embrace. She had worked with Logan for the last eight years of her career. He was ten years younger than she was but had been well on his way to piecing together an illustrious career for himself when she had left.

"It's good to see you, Kate," he said lightly into her ear as they hugged.

"You, too," she said. Her heart swelled and slowly, almost teasingly, she realized that no matter how she tried to paint it, she *had* dearly missed this part of her life over the past year.

When the embrace broke, they both awkwardly took their seats in front of Duran. During their time together as partners, they had sat in this exact same place numerous times. But it had never been for matters of discipline.

Vince Duran took a very deep breath and sighed it out. Kate could not yet tell just how upset he was.

"So, let's not dance around it," Duran said. "Kate, you know why you're here. And I have assured Chief Budd that I would handle the situation in a very effective way. He seemed fine with that and I am fairly certain the entire ordeal with you tossing a suspect from his front porch will be swept under the rug. What I would like to know, though, is how you even came to be on that poor man's front porch."

She knew then that whatever harsh conversation she had been expecting was not going to happen. Duran was a monster of a man, roughly two hundred and forty pounds and the majority of

that was nothing but muscle. He'd spent some time in Afghanistan in his early twenties and although she had never learned all he had done over there, the rumors were rampant. He had seen and done some harsh things and it often showed in the lines of his face. But today, he seemed to be in a good mood. She wondered if it was because he was no longer speaking to her as someone who worked under him. It almost felt more like catching up with an old friend.

That made it easy for her to tell him about the murder of Julie Hicks—the daughter of her good friend Deb Meade. She walked through speaking with them at a visitation at the Meade house and how certain the Meades had seemed. She then replayed the scene on Neilbolt's porch, explaining how she had started off by defending herself and then admittedly taking things perhaps a step too far.

On a few occasions, she got a soft chuckle from Logan. Duran, meanwhile, remained mostly expressionless. When she was done, she waited for his reaction and was confused when all she got out of him was a shrug.

"Look...as far as I'm concerned," he said, "it's a non-issue. While you *might* have been sticking your nose where it didn't belong, this guy had no business putting his hands on you—especially after you told him that you were former FBI. That was stupid on his part. The only thing I'd raise an eyebrow over is you slapping the cuffs on him."

"As I said...I admittedly went a little overboard."

"You?" Logan asked in mock surprise. "No!"

"What do you know about the case?" Duran asked.

"Just that she was killed in her home while her husband was away on business. The ex-boyfriend was the only real lead and the cops dismissed him in pretty quick fashion. I did find out later that his alibi was airtight, though."

"Nothing else?" Duran asked.

"Nothing that I've been told."

Duran nodded and then managed a cordial smile. "So aside from pitching grown men from their porches, how has retirement been treating you?"

"Like hell," she admitted. "It was great for the first few weeks but it got old fast. I miss my job. I've taken to reading an insane amount of true crime books. I'm watching far too many crime shows on the Biography Channel."

"You'd be surprised how often we hear that from agents in their first six to twelve months after retirement. Some of them call begging for some sort of work. Anything we have. Even paperwork of bullshit wiretaps."

Kate said nothing but nodded to indicate that she could identify.

"But yet you didn't call," Duran said. "If I'm being honest, I expected you to. I didn't think you could just drop it so easily. And this little incident proves me right."

"With all due respect," Kate said, "did you call me down here to slap me on the wrist over this or to rub my nose in how I can't outgrow my old job?"

"Neither," Duran said. "I was looking through your files yesterday after I got the call from Richmond. I noticed that you've been asked to testify at a parole hearing. Is that correct?"

"It is. It's for the Mueller case. Double homicide."

"Is it the first time you've been contacted about work since you retired?"

"No," she said, pretty sure he already knew the answer. "I had an assistant to an agent call me about two months after I retired to ask questions about a cold case I last worked on back in 2005. Some of the guys in records and research have reached out a few times about my methodology on some older cases, too."

Duran nodded and reclined back in his chair a bit. "You should also know that we have instructors at the academy using some of your earlier casework as examples for coursework. You left your mark here in the bureau, Agent Wise. And honestly, I was rather *hoping* you'd be one of those agents who started calling up to see what you could do to help even after you had retired."

“Are you saying you want me to start assisting with some cases, then?” Kate asked. She did her best to keep the hopeful tone out of her voice.

“Well, it’s not that cut and dried. We were thinking of perhaps bringing an agent or two with an exceptional track record to work on cold cases. Nothing long term or full time, mind you. And when we have discussed it, your name was the only one that kept coming up in unison. Now, before you get too excited, please know that this is not an immediate thing. We still want you to relax. Take some time off. *Real* time off.”

“I can do that,” Kate said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Duran said. “It could be a few months. And I’m afraid I’m going to have to revoke the offer if you go back home and start beating up men much younger than you on their porches.”

“I think I can restrain myself,” Kate said.

Again, Logan couldn’t help but let out a little muffled laugh from beside her.

Duran seemed just as amused as he got to his feet.

“Now... if you truly are going to assist, I’m afraid we have to revisit one of the less spectacular parts of the job.”

Assuming he meant paperwork, Kate sighed. “Forms? Documents?”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” Duran said. “I’ve scheduled a meeting to get this going. Figured it would be the best way to keep all channels up to date.”

“Ah, I hate meetings.”

“Oh, I know,” Duran said. “I remember. But hey... what better way to welcome you back?”

Logan chuckled beside her as they got to their feet and followed Duran out of the office. For Kate, it all seemed eerily familiar.

Really, it turned out not to be a bad meeting at all. There were only three other people waiting for them in the small conference room at the end of the hallway. Two of them were agents, one a male, the other female. As far as Kate could tell, she had met neither of them before. The third was a man who looked vaguely familiar; she was pretty sure his last name was Dunn. As Duran closed the door behind them, one of the agents got to his feet and instantly extended his hand.

“Agent Wise, I’m so pleased to meet you,” he said.

She took his hand awkwardly and shook it. As she did, the agent seemed to realize that he had made a small spectacle of himself.

“Sorry,” he said under his breath as he quickly returned to his seat.

“That’s fine, Agent Rose,” Duran said as he took a seat at the head of the table. “You aren’t the first agent to be floored by the presence of near-legendary Agent Kate Wise.” He said this with a bit of sarcasm and cut a thin smile Kate’s way.

The man she thought was named Dunn stood out from the other two—both clearly younger agents. He was a supervisor of sorts; it was clear from his stoic expression to his finely pressed suit.

“Agent Wise,” Duran said, “these two agents are Agent Rose and Agent DeMarco. They have been partners for about the last seven months, but only because myself and Assistant Director Dunn have had problems finding a place for them. They both come with their own set of unique strengths. And if you do end up taking the lead on this case in Richmond, one of them will likely be assigned to work with you.”

Agent Rose still looked embarrassed but refused to break his concentration. Kate couldn’t remember the last time someone had been so visibly shaken to meet her. It had been somewhere around the next-to-last year of her career when someone from Quantico had ended up working with her for a day in the labs. It was humbling but also a little off-putting.

“I should add,” Assistant Director Dunn said, “that Deputy Director Duran and I are the ones that have pushed for this program to bring recently retired agents in. I don’t know if he has told you yet, but your name was the first that came up.”

“Yes,” Duran agreed. “Needless to say, we’d really appreciate it if you kept it under wraps for now. And, of course, knock it out of the park.”

“I’ll try my best,” Kate said. She was beginning to understand that there was now a bit of pressure being applied here. Not that she minded, really. She usually operated better under pressure.

“Great,” Duran said. “For now, do you want to go over the details of this case as you understand them?”

Kate nodded and instantly fell back into her old role. It was as if she had never missed a day, much less a year. As she filled them in on what was going on in Richmond and how she had gotten involved, Agent Rose and Agent DeMarco held steady eye contact with her, perhaps studying her to see how they might work alongside her.

But she didn’t let that distract her. As she went over the details of the case, she felt as if she had stepped back in time.

And it was far superior to the present she had been living.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Three hours later, Kate and Logan were sitting at an outdoor table beneath a canopy at a small Italian restaurant. Logan was eating a meat-packed sub while Kate was eating a pasta salad and enjoying a glass of white wine. She did not drink often and almost never before five in the afternoon, but this was a special occasion. Even the mere idea of a reality where she might once again become active within the bureau was cause for celebration as far as she was concerned.

“So what kind of cases are you working on right now?” Kate asked.

“All things that would bore you, I’m sure,” he said. But she knew he’d tell her; he’d tell her because he loved the job just as much as she did.

“Trying to crack some scammers that have been tampering with ATMs for the most part. I’m sort of working in a partnership with a few other agents in what might be a small prostitution ring coming out of Georgetown, but that’s about it.”

“Yikes,” Kate said.

“Told you. Boring.”

“So a far cry from these cold cases Duran mentioned? What do you know about that anyway? How long has that little side project been cooking?”

“A while, I think. I was only brought in to the loop two weeks ago. Duran and some of the other behind-closed-door types were asking about some of the cases we had worked on that never got solved. Not looking for methodology or anything like that, just asking for details and old case files.”

“And they didn’t give you a reason?”

“No. And...wait, why do you sound suspicious? I thought you’d be jumping all over this opportunity.”

“Oh, I plan to. But it makes me wonder if there is one particular cold case they are more interested in. *Something* had to have spurred on this sudden interest in cold cases. I seriously doubt it’s just so Duran could find some way to bring me back.”

“I don’t know,” Logan said. “You’d be surprised. You’ve been missed around here. Some of the newer agents still talk about you like you’re some kind of mythological character.”

She ignored the compliment, still stuck on her train of thought. “Also, why would he call me in only to send me back, telling me he wanted me to take some more time before starting? It makes me wonder if whatever the *real* reason behind it is might not quite be fleshed out just yet.”

“Well, you know,” Logan said. “Based on the way you’re overthinking this whole thing, maybe he’s right. Relax, Kate. Like he said...there are tons of retired agents who would die for this chance. So yeah, go back home. Relax. Do absolutely nothing.”

“You know me well enough to know that’s not how I am,” she said. She took a sip from her wine, thinking that maybe he was right. Maybe she *should* just revel in the joy of coming back to work...sort of.

“Retirement didn’t change that, huh?” Logan asked.

“No. If anything, it made it worse. I can’t stand to sit still. I hate an idle brain. Cross word puzzles and knitting aren’t going to cut it for me. Maybe deep down Duran knew that I’m too young to be put out to pasture.”

Logan smiled and shook his head. “Yeah, but the grass in those pastures is pretty lush and green.”

“Yeah, and there’s cow shit everywhere.”

Logan sighed as he took the final bite of his lunch. “Okay,” he said. “Some of us need to get back to work.”

“Cheap shot,” she said, taking the last sip of her wine.

“So what are you going to do?” he asked. “Head back home?”

She honestly wasn't quite sure yet. Part of her wanted to stay in DC just for the hell of it. Maybe she'd get some shopping done or go out to her favorite spot at the National Mall and just sit to reflect. It was certainly a gorgeous day for it.

But then again, she wanted to be back home, too. While she had struck out in terms of Brian Neilbolt, the fact remained that *someone* had killed Julie Meade. And it seemed that the police were at a loss so far.

"I'm not sure," she said. "I may hang around town for a bit but I'll likely head back home before nightfall."

"If you change your mind, give me a call. It was really nice seeing you, Kate."

They paid their checks and left the table after a brief embrace. Even before Kate left, her mind seemed to have snagged on one particular thought, one that had come out of nowhere, it seemed.

Julie was killed in her home, while her husband was out of town. If there was a break-in of any kind, no one mentioned it to me. Not the police while I was being lectured, and not Debbie or Jim. If there had been a break-in, you'd think that would have been mentioned.

It made her wonder...did the killer enter the house because he was invited? Or did they perhaps, at the very least, know where a spare key was hidden?

Those questions settled it. Once she'd given her glass of wine enough time to run its course, she was going to drive back to Richmond. She'd promised Assistant Director Duran that she would not beat anyone else up.

But she'd said nothing about not investigating.

Of course, the funeral was first. She'd pay her respects and do her very best to be there for Deb tomorrow. And after that, she'd step back into her role—perhaps with a bit more excitement than she cared to admit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next afternoon, Kate was standing in the back row of mourners as the Meade family and their closest friends assembled at the cemetery. She stood with her little breakfast crew—Clarissa and Jane dressed in black and looking genuinely heartbroken—who had managed to love on Debbie earlier in the morning. Debbie seemed to be doing much better than she had on the day she had asked Kate to look into the murder. She wept openly and let out a single anguished moan of sorrow, but she was still *present*. Jim, on the other hand, looked like a very broken man. A man who would go home and think long and hard about how sometimes, life just wasn't very fucking fair at all.

Kate couldn't help but think of her own daughter. She knew she'd have to call Melissa when the funeral was over. She hadn't known Julie Meade very well but based on conversations she'd had with Debbie, Kate assumed she had been around the same age as Melissa, give or take a few years.

She listened as the preacher went through the familiar Biblical passages. While her thoughts were very much with Debbie, they were also still slightly obsessing over how this could have happened. She had not come out and asked directly if there had been a break-in since she had gotten back from DC but she had kept her ears open. She had noticed that neither Jane nor Clarissa had ever mentioned a break-in, either. And that was odd because Clarissa somehow had a knack for knowing everything thanks to her nose for gossip.

She looked up at Debbie and Jim, noticing that there was a tall man standing by Jim. He was relatively young and dashing in a clean-cut sort of way. She lightly nudged Jane beside her and asked: "The tall guy next to Jim. Is that Julie's husband?"

"Yeah. Tyler is his name. They hadn't been married long. Less than a year, I think."

It occurred to Kate that maybe her little breakfast clique really didn't know one another very well after all. Sure, they knew all about their former jobs, favorite caffeinated beverages, and wishes and dreams for retirement. But they had never really gone much deeper. It had been sort of a mutual silent understanding. They had rarely talked about their families, keeping conversation surface level, fun, and entertaining.

There was nothing wrong with that, of course, but it left Kate knowing very little about the Meade family. All she knew was that Julie had been their only child...in the same way that Melissa was *her* only child. And while she and Melissa were not as intimately close as they had once been, it still hurt to even think about losing her.

Once the service was over and the crowd started to disperse in a tangle of hugs and awkward handshakes, Kate and her little coffee group follow suit. Kate, however, hung back where a few people had kind of hidden themselves away for a cigarette. While Kate was not smoking (she thought it a disgusting habit), she wanted to stay out of sight for a while. She scanned the crowd and found the tall figure of Tyler Hicks. He was speaking to an elderly couple, both of whom were openly weeping. Tyler, however, seemed to be doing his best to remain calm.

When the elderly couple left, Kate made her way toward him. Tyler was heading in the direction of a middle-aged woman and her two children, but Kate made a point to reach him first.

"Excuse me," she said, angling herself in front of him. "You're Tyler, right?"

"I am," he said. When he turned to face her, she could see the grief all over his face. He was drained, tired, and looked to be empty of just about everything. "Do I know you?"

"No, honestly," she said. "I'm a friend of Julie's mother, though. My name is Kate Wise."

A flicker of recognition sparkled in his eyes for a moment. It made his face look almost alive for a split second. "Yeah, I heard Debbie mention you. You're an FBI agent or something, right?"

"Well, recently retired. But yes, that's the gist of it."

"Sorry she sent you looking into what happened to Julie. I can imagine that made for an awkward situation."

“No need to apologize,” Kate said. “I can’t even imagine what she’s been going through. But look...I’ll make this quick. I won’t want to take up too much of your time. I know that Debbie wanted me to look into the ex-boyfriend and while I haven’t been able to speak with her about it yet, he *is* clean.”

“Mrs. Wise, you don’t have to do this for her.”

“I know,” she said. “But I was wondering if you could maybe answer a few really quick questions for me.”

He looked insulted at first but then resigned himself. A curious and sad look crossed his face as he asked: “Do you think there are questions worth asking?”

“Perhaps.”

“Then yes, I’ll answer a few. Quickly, please.”

“Of course. I was wondering if you had seen anything around the house once you returned home that might have seemed strange or out of place. Maybe something that didn’t seem like that big of a deal considering what has just happened to Julie. Maybe something you thought you’d look into later, when things had calmed down a bit.”

He shook his head slowly, looking back to the place where his wife would be lowered into the ground within the hour. “Not that I can think of.”

“Not even any signs of a break-in?”

His attention went back to her and now he looked a little spooked. “You know, I’ve started to wonder about that myself,” he said. “All of the doors were locked when I got home that next day. I rang the doorbell because my keys were in one of my bags and I didn’t want to dig for them. But Julie never answered. I didn’t even bother to think about that until yesterday, when I was trying to get to sleep. Someone came in easily, without breaking in. And then they locked the door behind them. So they *knew* how to get in. But that doesn’t make sense.”

“And why not?”

“Because there’s a code for the security system that only Julie, myself, and our cleaning lady knows. We change it every two months.”

“Any suspicion about the cleaning lady or her family?”

“Well, she’s pushing sixty and we don’t know her family. The police were looking into it but found nothing.”

“Well, how about you?” Kate asked. “Is there anyone you can think of that would have even considered doing this?”

He shook his head without giving it much thought. “I’ve spent every waking moment since I came home and found her body trying to think of someone who would have any reason to kill her—to even be *angry* with her. And I keep coming up blank.” He paused here and then looked at her skeptically. “You said you’re retired. So why are you so interested in this case?”

She gave the only answer that would be acceptable. “I just wanted to do everything I could to ease Debbie’s mind.”

She knew that there was a deeper truth, though. And it was a selfish one.

Because being just a little involved in this case is the most purposeful I’ve felt since I retired a year ago.

“Well, I appreciate your help,” Tyler said. “And if you need anything else from me, please let me know.”

“I will,” she said as she gave him a lame sympathetic clap on the back and left him to his sorrow. The truth was, though, that she doubted she’d ever speak to him again. She’d been an agent long enough to know an innocent and truly heartbroken man when she saw one. She’d bet everything she owned on the fact that Tyler Hicks had not killed his wife. She already felt terrible for hijacking him after his wife’s funeral. She’d stay away from Tyler from this point on; if he could be of any further help, let the cops handle it.

She went to her car and pulled out into the slumbering line of traffic that was leaving the graveyard. She drove back toward her house in silence, her thoughts continually drifting to Melissa and her forthcoming granddaughter.

Her phone rang, obliterating the train of thought. There was a number, not a name, on the display screen. She answered it suspiciously, still shaken over the funeral and how the experience was making her think long and hard about her own daughter.

“Kate Wise?” a man on the other end asked.

“Yes, this is Kate,” she said.

“This is Randall Budd. How are you?”

“Somber,” she answered honestly, a little pissed that she was having to speak to Chief Budd in that particular moment.

“You go to the funeral today?” he asked.

She was rather surprised that he even knew Julie had been buried today. Maybe she should cut the guy some slack after all. “Yeah,” she answered. “Just left about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Well, look. I wanted to call to let you know that at about eight o’clock this morning, we got an anonymous tip. An arrest was made in the death of Julie Hicks. We’ve still got the guy here in interrogation. Some guy that came out to fix their Internet a few weeks back. He’s got some intimate knowledge of the family *and* he has a previous arrest record for—get this—sexual misconduct. We’re looking into his story and accounts and it all looks solid.”

“Who is it?”

Budd sighed, a sound that was like static electricity through the phone. “Ms. Wise, you know I can’t tell you that.”

“Of course you can. I’ll do nothing with the information other than try to help you.”

“Yes, but with all due respect, I have not asked for your help.”

“Can you at least tell me if the suspect knew the victim personally?”

The other end of the line was quiet for about three seconds, finally broken by a thick sigh and Budd’s voice saying: “No.”

She almost pushed harder but left it at that. If she really wanted to know, all she’d have to do was place a call to Logan. It would be a cheap thing to do but at least the option was there.

“And it’s looking like he’s the guy?”

“It’s certainly a possibility,” Budd said. “Once we have enough to book him for it, we’re going to notify Debbie and Jim Meade. So please keep it to yourself for now. I just thought I’d do you the courtesy of knowing...in the hopes that you don’t go all vigilante on us again.”

“Thanks for that,” she said. “Have a good day, Chief.”

She hung up with a sense of relief. Case closed. That was a good thing. Now Debbie and Jim could maybe begin to start looking at what grieving was like with closure involved.

But then she thought about what Tyler Hicks had said about the security code. And even the things he had not said. About how someone would have to know how to get in unseen. How someone would have to know the family well enough to get inside the house after dark, past the security measures and locked doors.

By the time she got back to her house in Carytown, that relief was gone. If anything, it had morphed into an entirely new kind of certainty.

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