

A misty forest scene with a person walking away on a path. The trees are tall and thin, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somber.

IF  
SHE  
SAW

A KATE WISE MYSTERY--BOOK 2

BLAKE  
PIERCE

A Kate Wise Mystery

Блейк Пирс

**If She Saw**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2018

## **Пирс Б.**

If She Saw / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,  
2018 — (A Kate Wise Mystery)

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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 SAW (A Kate Wise Mystery) is book #2 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. When a couple is found murdered and no suspects are apparent, 55 year old empty nester Kate Wise, after a 30 year career with the FBI, finds herself called out of retirement (and her quiet suburban life) to come back and work for the bureau. Kate’s brilliant mind and unrivaled ability to enter the mind of serial killers is just too indispensable, and the FBI needs her to crack this baffling case. Why were two couples found murdered, 50 miles apart, and in the same manner? What can they possibly have in common? The answer, Kate realizes, is urgent— as she is certain the killer is about to strike again. But in the deadly game of cat and mouse that follows, Kate, entering the dark canals of the killer’s twisted mind, may just find herself a moment too late. An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, IF SHE SAW is book #2 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #3 in the KATE WISE MYSTERY series is now also available for pre-order.

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# **Blake Pierce**

## **If She Saw. A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 2**

**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 three 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 three 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](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.

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## PROLOGUE

Growing up, Olivia never thought she'd see a day when she was actually *glad* to be home. Like most teens, she'd spent her high school years dreaming of getting away from home, of going to college and starting a life on her own. She'd followed through on her plan, getting out of Whip Springs, Virginia, and attending the University of Virginia. She was in her junior year now, heading into a summer that would be ripe with job opportunities and, by the end of the summer, an apartment search. Olivia enjoyed living on campus, but as a senior she figured it was time to live elsewhere in the city.

For now, though, it was a full month back with her parents in Whip Springs. And she knew her high school self would never forgive her for the relief and surge of love she felt as she pulled into her parents' driveway. They lived just off of a secondary road in Whip Springs—a sleepy little central Virginia town with a population of less than five thousand that was surrounded by forest on all sides, plus a stretch of forest that ran through most of Whip Springs.

It was beginning to get dark when she pulled into the driveway. She had fully expected her mother to have turned the porch light on for her, but there was no glow lighting up the front door. Her mom knew she was arriving this afternoon; they'd discussed it on the phone two days ago and Olivia had even texted three hours ago to tell her she was on the way.

Sure, her mother had not texted back, which was unlike her. But Olivia figured she was probably working overtime to make Olivia's childhood bedroom presentable and forgot to return her text.

As Olivia got closer to the house, she noted that not only was the porch light not on, it seemed as if every single light in the house was turned off. She knew they were home, though. Both of their cars were parked in the driveway, her mother's car parked right behind her father's truck, just like they had been doing for as long as Olivia could remember.

*If these cheeseballs are trying to throw me some sort of surprise welcome home party, I might just cry,* Olivia thought as she parked beside her mother's car.

She popped the trunk and got her luggage out, just two suitcases but one of which seemed to weigh a ton. She hefted them up the sidewalk and toward the porch. It had been almost a year since she had been back here for a visit; she'd nearly forgotten how absolutely secluded the place felt. The closest neighbors were less than a quarter of a mile away, but the trees surrounding the property made it feel like the house was completely isolated...especially when compared to the crowded dorm spaces back at school.

She wrestled the suitcases up the porch steps and then reached out to ring the doorbell. When she did, she noticed that the door was partially open.

Suddenly, the lack of light from inside seemed sinister—like an alarm of sorts. “Mom? Dad?” she called out as she slowly reached out and opened the door with her foot.

It swung open, revealing the foyer and small hallway that she knew so well. The house was indeed dark but as she stepped inside against the advisement of her growing fear, she was instantly put at ease. From elsewhere in the house, she heard the television—the familiar *dings* and applause of *Wheel of Fortune*, a staple in their home from as far back as Olivia could remember.

As she neared the end of the hallway and approached the living room, she saw the wheel on the TV, which was mounted above the fireplace, a very large screen indeed, making it seem as if Pat Sajak was right there in the living room.

“Hey, guys,” Olivia said, looking around the darkened living room. “Thanks so much for helping me with my stuff. Leaving the door cracked open was a—”

It was meant as a joke but when the words hung in her throat, there was nothing funny about it.

Her mother was on the couch. She could have very well been asleep and nothing more than that if it weren't for all the blood. It was all over her chest and soaked into the couch. There was so much

of it that Olivia's mind couldn't quite comprehend it at first. Seeing it to the sounds of the clacking of the *Wheel of Fortune* wheel made it somehow even harder to comprehend.

“Mom...”

Olivia felt as if her heart had stopped. She backed slowly away as the reality of what she was seeing sank in. She felt like a small part of her mind had come unhinged and was floating off into space somewhere.

Another word formed on her tongue—*Dad*—as she backed slowly away.

But that's when she saw him. He was right there, on the floor. He was lying just in front of the coffee table and he had just as much blood on him as her mother had. He was lying face down, motionless. But it looked like he was in a crawling position of sorts, as if he had tried to get away. As she took it all in, Olivia saw what looked to be at least six very visible stab wounds in his back.

She suddenly understood why her mother had not answered her text. Her mother was dead. Her father, too.

She felt a scream rising into her throat as she did her best to unlock her legs. She knew that whoever did this might still be here. That thought did it—it brought the scream out, it brought the tears on, and it unlocked her legs.

Olivia dashed out of the house and ran—and ran—and didn't stop running until her screams finally caught in her throat.

## CHAPTER ONE

It was funny how quickly Kate Wise's attitude had changed. When she had spent a year in retirement, she'd done everything she could to avoid gardening. Gardening, knitting, bridge clubs—and even book clubs—she had avoided like the plague. They had all seemed like cliché things that retired women did.

But a few months back in the FBI saddle had done something to her. She was not so naïve to think that it had reinvented her. No, it had simply reinvigorated her. She had purpose again, a reason to look forward to the next day.

So maybe that's why she found it okay that she had *now* resorted to gardening as a pastime. It wasn't relaxing, as she had thought it would be. If anything, it made her anxious; why put the time and energy into planting something if you were working against the weather to make sure it stayed alive? Still, there was a joy in it—putting something into the ground and seeing the fruits of it over time.

She'd started with flowers—daisies and bougainvilleas at first—and then went on to planting a little veggie garden in the back right corner of her yard. That's where she was currently mounding dirt over a tomato plant and slowly coming to the realization that she had not had any interest in gardening until she had become a grandmother.

She wondered if it had something to do with the evolution of her nurturing nature. She'd had friends and books tell her that there was something different about being a grandmother—something that a woman never truly tapped into while serving as a mother.

Her daughter, Melissa, had assured her that she had been a good mother. It was an assurance that Kate needed from time to time, given the way she had spent her career. She had admittedly put career over family for far too long and she counted herself lucky that Melissa had not ever resented her for it—except for a period after she had lost her father.

*Ah, the one downside to gardening,* Kate thought as she got to her feet and dusted off her hands and knees. *Thoughts tend to wander. And when that happens, the past starts creeping in, uninvited.*

She left the garden, walking across the backyard of her Richmond, Virginia, home and to the back porch. She was careful to kick off her dirt-smeared Keds at the back door. She also dropped her gloves beside them, not wanting to get any dirt in the house. She'd spent the last two days getting the house clean. She was babysitting Michelle, her granddaughter, tonight and even though Melissa wasn't a neat freak, Kate wanted to have the place sparkling clean. It had been almost thirty years since she'd been in the company of a baby and she didn't want to take any chances.

She glanced at the clock and frowned. She was expecting company in fifteen minutes. That was yet another negative aspect of gardening: time easily slipped away from you.

She freshened up in the bathroom and then went to the kitchen to put a fresh pot of coffee on. It was about halfway through percolating when the doorbell rang. She answered right away, happy as always to see the two women she had been spending a few hours with at least twice a week over the last year and a half or so.

Jane Patterson stepped through the doorway first, carrying a plate of pastries. They were homemade Danishes and had won the Carytown Cooks contest for two years straight. Clarissa James came in behind her with a large bowl of freshly sliced fruit. They were both dressed in cute outfits that would work either at a brunch at a friend's house or casual shopping—which was something they both did quite a bit of.

“You've been gardening again, haven't you?” Clarissa asked as they set their food down in the kitchen island.

“How can you tell?” Kate asked.

Clarissa pointed to Kate's hair, just below the shoulders where it came to a tapered end. Kate reached back and found that she had missed a bit of stray dirt that had somehow ended up in her hair. Clarissa and Jane chuckled at this as Jane took the plastic wrap off of her Danishes.

"Laugh all you want," Kate said. "You won't be when those tomato vines are loaded down."

It was a Friday morning, which automatically made it a good one. The three women situated themselves around Kate's kitchen island, sitting on barstools and eating their brunch and drinking coffee. And while the company, the food, and the coffee were all good, it was still hard to overlook the missing piece.

Debbie Meade was no longer a part of the group. After her daughter had died, one of three victims of a killer Kate had taken down in the end, Debbie and her husband, Jim, had moved. They were living somewhere out near the beach in North Carolina. Debbie would send pictures of the coast from time to time, just to jokingly rub it in. They had been living there for two months now and seemed to be happy—to be moving on from the tragedy.

The conversation was mostly light and pleasant. Jane talked about how her husband was eyeing retirement next year and had already started planning to write a book. Clarissa shared news about both of her kids, now in their mid-twenties, and how they'd both recently received promotions.

"Speaking of kids," Clarissa said, "how is Melissa doing? She loving motherhood?"

"Oh yes," Kate said. "She's absolutely insane about her little baby girl. A little baby girl that I will be babysitting tonight, in fact."

"First time?" Jane asked.

"Yes. It's the first time Melissa and Terry are going somewhere without the baby. Like an actual overnight thing."

"Has Grandma Mode kicked in yet?" Clarissa asked.

"I don't know," Kate said with a smile. "I guess we'll find out tonight."

"You know," Jane said, "you could go back in time and babysit like I used to in high school. I'd bring my boyfriend over with me and as soon as the kids went to bed..."

"That's pretty disturbing," Kate said.

"Do you think Allen would be up for it, though?" Clarissa asked.

"I don't know," Kate answered, trying to imagine Allen with a baby. They had been dating seriously ever since Kate and her new partner, DeMarco, had wrapped the serial case right here in Richmond—the same case that had taken Debbie Meade's daughter. There had been no real talk of the future; they hadn't slept together yet and rarely got physical at all. She was enjoying her time with him, though, but the thought of bringing him into the grandmother part of her life made her uncomfortable.

"Things still going well with you two?" Clarissa asked.

"I think so. The whole dating thing still seems weird to me. I'm too old to date, you know?"

"Hell no," Jane said. "Don't get me wrong... I love my husband, my kids, and my life in general. But I'd give anything to be back on that dating scene for just a while, you know? I miss it. Meeting new people, sharing firsts..."

"Yeah, I guess that *is* pretty nice," Kate conceded. "Allen finds the idea of dating strange, too. We have fun together but it's...it gets sort of weird when things start leaning towards the romantic end of things."

"Blah blah," Clarissa said. "But do you think of him as your boyfriend?"

"Are we really having this conversation?" Kate asked, starting to feel herself blushing a bit.

"Yes," Clarissa said. "Us old married ladies need to live vicariously through you."

"And that also goes for your sort-of job," Jane said. "How's that going?"

"No calls for about two weeks, and the last one was just to help with some research. Sorry, girls...it's not as adventurous as you're hoping it is."

"So are you back to being retired?" Clarissa asked.

“Basically. It’s complicated.”

That comment ended the questioning as they delved back into local topics—upcoming movies, a music festival in town, construction on the interstate, and so on. But Kate’s mind had gotten snagged on the topic of work. It was comforting to know that the bureau was still considering her as a resource but she had been hoping for a more active role after she had tied things up with the last case. But so far, she’d only heard from Deputy Director Duran a single time, and that was to get a performance review on DeMarco.

She knew how strange it seemed to her friends that she was still technically an active agent while also leaning into her role as a grandmother. Hell, it was strange to her as well. Throw in a slowly blossoming relationship with Allen and she supposed her life *was* quite interesting to them.

Honestly, she counted herself lucky. She’d be fifty-six years old at the end of the month and she knew that many women her age would be envious of the life she lived. She always told herself this when she felt the pressing need to be more active at work. And some days, it worked.

And as it just so happened, with her granddaughter coming to visit for the first time since her birth, today was one of those days.

\*\*\*

One thing that made it difficult to balance her new role as grandmother with her desire to get her hands deep into another case was trying to think like a grandmother. That afternoon, she left her house and walked down to some of the thrifty little shops in the Carytown district of Richmond. She felt like she had to get Michelle a gift to celebrate her first overnight stay at Grandma’s house.

It was hard to push sidearms and suspects aside to focus on stuffed animals and onesies instead. But as she checked out a few shops, it became somewhat easier. She found that she actually enjoyed shopping for her granddaughter, even though she wasn’t even two months old yet and would, honestly, not care about any gift she got. She found it hard not to snatch up every cute thing she found and buy it. After all, wasn’t it the responsibility of a grandmother to spoil her grandchildren?

As she paid for her purchases at the third shop she visited, she received a text. She wasted no time in checking it. Over the last few weeks, she’d had a small hope every time she got a call or a text, thinking it might Duran or someone else within the bureau. She mentally scolded herself when she was disappointed to find that it was not the bureau, but Allen. Once she got over the sting of not being called upon by the bureau again, she realized that she was happy to hear from him—was *always* happy to hear from him, in fact.

“Allen, you have to help me,” she joked as she answered the phone. “I’m shopping for Michelle and everything I see, I want to buy for her. Is that normal?”

“I don’t know,” Allen said. “Neither of my sons have settled down and made me a grandpa yet.”

“Take it from me. Start saving up.”

Allen chuckled, a sound that Kate was growing to like quite a bit. “So tonight’s the big night, huh?”

“It is. And I know I raised a kid already and I know what to expect, but I’m a little terrified.”

“Ah, you’ll be great. You want to talk terrified...I’m going out with my boys for drinks tonight. And I haven’t had more than two drinks in a single sitting in about five years.”

“Have fun with that.”

“I was wondering if you might want to get together tomorrow for dinner. We can share our survival stories of tonight.”

“I’d like that. You want to come by my place at seven or so?”

“Sounds like a plan. You have fun tonight. Is little Michelle sleeping through the night yet?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Ouch,” Allen said, and ended the call.

Kate pocketed her phone, juggling her bags of purchases as she did. She smiled in spite of herself. She was standing in the sunshine in her favorite part of town, having just gone shopping for a two-month-old granddaughter, whom she was babysitting tonight. Given the way her day was going, did she *really* want the bureau to call at all?

She was walking back to her home—a three-block walk from where she had taken Allen’s call—when she saw a little girl with a *My Little Pony* T-shirt. She was walking with her mother hand in hand, just a few feet ahead of her, traveling in their direction. She was five or six years old, her blonde hair up in a ponytail only a mother’s care could create. She had blue eyes and a sharp end to her nose that looked rather pixie-like. And it was that feature that sent a spike of despair through Kate’s heart.

An image flashed through her mind, a little girl who looked almost identical to this one. But in this image, the little girl had dirt and grime on her face, and she was crying. The lights of police cars flashed behind her.

The image was so strong that it caused Kate to stop walking for a moment. She tore her eyes away from the girl, not wanting to appear creepy or strange. She clung to that image in her head and did her best to find the memory associated with it. It came to her gradually and when it did, it unrolled itself slowly, as if she were reading the case report.

*Five-year-old girl, found three days after reported missing. Stored in a fishing cabin in Arkansas with the dead bodies of her parents. The parents were the fifth and sixth victims of a serial killer that had terrorized Arkansas for the better part of four months...a killer Kate had eventually taken down, but only after he had claimed a total of nine people.*

Kate was aware that she was suddenly standing as still as a statue on the street but couldn’t seem to move. That case had haunted her for a while. So many dead ends, so many false leads. She had been running around in circles, unable to find the killer while he continued to add to his body count. God only knew what he had planned for that little girl.

*But you saved her, she told herself. In the end, you saved her.*

Kate slowly started to walk again. It was not the first time a random image from her past work had slammed itself across her mind and caused her to zone out. Sometimes they came casually, albeit out of nowhere. But there were other times when they came on strong and fast, like a post-traumatic stress flashback.

The image of the girl from Arkansas was somewhere in between. And Kate was thankful for that. That particular case had nearly caused her to step down as an agent back in 2009. It had been soul-shattering, enough for Kate to request two weeks off from work. And all of a sudden, for just a split second while walking back home with gifts for her granddaughter in her hand, Kate felt like she had been pushed back in time.

Nearly ten years had passed since she had rescued that girl. Kate wondered where she was—wondered if she had outlived the trauma.

“Ma’am?”

Kate blinked, jumping a bit at the sound of an unfamiliar voice in front of her. There was a teenage boy standing in front her. He looked concerned, as if he wasn’t sure if he should be standing there or running away.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You look...I don’t know. Sick. Like you’re about to pass out or something.”

“No,” Kate said, shaking her head. “I’m good. Thanks.”

The kid nodded and carried on his way. Kate started walking forward again, ripped out of some hole in the past that she assumed had not yet quite closed up. And as she drew closer and closer to home, she started to wonder just how many of those holes from her past had been left uncovered.

And if the ghosts of her past would continue to haunt her until she, too, became a ghost.

## CHAPTER TWO

Kate spent the next hour or so tidying up the house, even though she had already done so before leaving to go shopping. It made her feel off to be so anxious to have Michelle coming to her house. Melissa had lived in this house during her high school years so when she came to visit (which wasn't often enough in Kate's opinion), Kate didn't feel the need for the place to be spotless. So why was she so concerned about how it looked for a two-month-old?

*Maybe it's some odd kind of grandmother nesting,* she thought while she scrubbed the sink in the powder room...a room she was well aware that her granddaughter would not even see, much less actually use.

As she rinsed the sink out, her doorbell rang. She was flooded with an excitement that she had not quite been ready for. She was smiling from ear to ear when she answered the door. Melissa stood on the other side, carrying Michelle in her car seat. The baby was fast asleep, a thick blanket tucked around her legs.

"Hey, Mom," Melissa said as she stepped into the house. She took a quick look around and rolled her eyes. "How much did you clean today?"

"I plead the fifth," Kate said as she gave her daughter a hug.

Melissa set the car seat down carefully on the floor and slowly unbuckled Michelle. She picked her up and handed her softly to Kate. It had been almost a full week since Kate had visited Melissa and Terry, but when she took Michelle into her arms, it felt like much longer.

"What do you and Terry have planned for tonight?" Kate asked.

"Not much, really," Melissa said. "And that's the beauty of it. We're going to go out for dinner and drinks. Maybe some dancing. Also, we changed our minds about asking you to watch her overnight because we realized we're not quite ready for that. The unbroken sleep is much needed, but I just can't be away from her for that long."

"Oh, I think I can understand that," Kate said. "You guys go out and enjoy yourselves."

Melissa shrugged the diaper bag from her shoulder and set it by the car seat. "Everything you need is in here. She's going to want to eat again in about an hour and she'd going to fight sleep. Terry thinks it's cute but I think it's of the devil. If she gets gassy, there are gas drops in the back pocket and—"

"Lissa...we'll be fine. I *have* raised a child, you know. She turned out pretty good, too."

Melissa smiled and surprised Kate by giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Mom. I'll pick her up around eleven or so. Is that too late?"

"Nope, that's perfect."

Melissa gave one final look to her baby, a look that made Kate's heart swell. She could remember being a mother and having that internal feeling of love fill her—a love than translated to the sheer will of doing anything and everything to ensure this human you'd created would be safe.

"If you need anything, call me," Melissa said, though she was still looking at Michelle and not Kate.

"I will. Now *go*. Have fun."

Melissa finally turned away and headed out the door. As she closed it, little Michelle stirred awake in Kate's arms. She gave her grandmother a sleepy little smile and let out a tiny yawn.

"So what do we do now?" Kate asked.

The question was playfully directed at Michelle but she felt a weight behind it that made her wonder if she was simply voicing a rhetorical question to herself. Her daughter was grown up now, with a daughter of her own. Now here she was, nearing fifty-six and with her first grandchild in her arms. So...*what do we do now?*

She thought about that pull to return to work in any capacity and, for perhaps the first time, it felt small.

Smaller even than the little girl she now held in her arms.

\*\*\*

By eight o'clock that night, Kate was wondering if Melissa and Terry had simply managed to create the most well-behaved baby in recorded history. Not once did Michelle cry or even get fussy. She was simply content to be held. After two hours in Kate's arms, Michelle nodded off to sleep. Kate carefully placed Michelle on the center of her queen-sized bed and then stood at the doorway for a moment to watch her granddaughter sleep.

She wasn't sure how long she had been standing there when her phone buzzed from the kitchen table behind her. She had to tear her eyes away from Michelle but managed to get to the phone within a few seconds. The single buzz meant that it was a text rather than a call and she was not at all surprised to see that it was Melissa.

**How's she doing?** Melissa asked.

Unable to resist, Kate smiled and responded: **I limited her to just three beers. She went out with some guy on a motorcycle about an hour ago. I told her to be back by 11.**

The response came quickly: **Oh, you're not funny at all.**

The back-and-forth banter made her nearly as happy as the sleeping baby in her bedroom. After her father died, Melissa had become withdrawn—especially toward Kate. She'd blamed Kate's work for her father's death and even though she had come to understand that was not the case later on in life, there were times when Kate felt that Melissa still resented the time she had spent in the bureau after his death. Oddly enough, though, Melissa had shown some interest in pursuing a career in the FBI herself...despite a less-than-positive attitude about the events of the last year concerning her mother's interrupted retirement.

Still smiling, Kate took her phone into the bedroom and snapped a quick picture of Michelle. She sent it to Melissa and then, after some thought, she also sent it to Allen, only his had the message: **Partied out!**

She found herself wishing he was there with her. She found herself feeling this quite often as of late. She was not naïve enough to think she loved him, but she could see herself falling *in* love with him if things kept going the way they were. She missed him when he wasn't around and whenever he kissed her, it made her feel about twenty years younger.

She found herself smiling yet again when Allen responded with a picture of his own. It was a selfie of him with two younger men who looked exactly like him—his sons, presumably.

As she studied the picture, her phone rang in her hands. The name that appeared on the screen sent a flurry of excitement through her that she was unable to stop.

Deputy Director Vince Duran was calling her. This would have caused a stir of excitement regardless, but the fact that it was after eight o'clock on a Friday night set off alarm bells in her head—alarm bells that she enjoyed the sound of.

She took a moment, still staring at little Michelle, and then answered. "This is Kate Wise," she said, keeping her excitement in check.

"Wise, it's Duran. Is this a bad time?"

"It's not the absolute best, but that's okay," she answered. "Is everything okay?"

"That depends. I'm calling to see if you'd be interested in taking on a case."

"Are we talking a cold case like we've been discussing?"

"No. This one...well, it looks and feels like one you cracked rather quickly back in ninety-six. As it stands, we've got four bodies at two different sites in Whip Springs, Virginia. Looks like

the murders occurred no more than two days apart. Right now, Virginia State Police are running the scene but I've spoken to them. If you want the case, it's yours. But you'd have to move now."

"I don't think I can," she said. "I've got a commitment I need to keep." Looking at Michelle, this was easy to say. But nearly every nerve in her body fought against her newly acquired grandmother instincts.

"Well, listen to the specs anyway, would you? The murders are married couples, one in their early fifties, the other in their early sixties. The most recent were the fifty-somethings. Their daughter discovered their bodies when she came home from college earlier today. The murders occurred within thirty miles of one another, one in Whip Springs and the other one just outside of Roanoke."

"Couples? Any link between them other than they were married?"

"Not yet. But all four bodies were cut up pretty badly. The killer is using a knife. Making it slow and methodical. As far as I'm concerned, it points to another couple going down within two days or so."

"Yeah, it sounds like a serial in the making," Kate said.

She thought back to the case in 1996 that Duran had mentioned. In the end, a crazed woman who had been working as a nanny had taken the lives of three couples within the span of just two days. It turned out that she had worked for all three of the couples within a ten-year period. Kate had apprehended the woman when she was on the way to kill a fourth couple and then, according to her testimony, herself.

Was she *really* going to say no to this? After the intense flashback she'd had today, could she truly pass up another opportunity at stopping a killer?

"How long do I have to think about it?" she asked.

"I'll give you an hour. No more than that. I need someone on this now. And I thought you and DeMarco could work well on it. One hour, Wise...sooner if you can."

Before she could give an *OK* or a *thanks*, Duran ended the call. He was typically warm and friendly, but when he did not get his way he could be very irritable.

As quietly as she could, she went to the bed and sat down on the edge. She watched Michelle sleeping, the gentle rise and fall of her chest so slow and methodical. She could clearly remember Melissa being this small and had no idea where the time had gone. And that was where her problem sprung from: she felt that she had missed so much of her life as a mother and wife because of her job but she felt a strong duty to it nonetheless. Especially when she knew that she could be out there right now, doing her part to bring a killer to justice.

What kind of a person would she be if she turned the offer down, leaving Duran to choose another agent who might not have the same skillsets as she did?

But what kind of grandmother and mother was she being if she had to call Melissa, telling her to come pick up her daughter early and end her night out because the FBI had come calling again?

Kate stared at Michelle for about five minutes, even lying down next to her and placing her hand on the baby's chest just to feel her breathe. And seeing that little flicker of life, of a life that had not yet learned about the kinds of evil that existed in the world, made the decision much easier for Kate.

Frowning for the first time that day, Kate picked up the phone and called Melissa.

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Once, when Melissa was sixteen, she'd snuck a boy into her room late at night when Kate and Michael were already asleep. Kate had stirred awake at some noise (which she later found out was likely someone's knee hitting the wall in Melissa's bedroom) and went up to investigate. When she opened her daughter's door and found her topless with a boy in her bed, she had thrown him off the bed and screamed at him to get out.

The fury in Melissa's eyes that night was dwarfed by what Kate saw in her daughter's stare as she buckled Michelle into the car seat at 9:30—just a little over an hour after Duran had called her about the case in Roanoke.

"This is messed up, Mom," she said.

"Lissa, I'm so sorry. But what the hell was I supposed to do?"

"Well, from what I understand, people actually *stay* retired once they've retired. Maybe try that!"

"It's not that easy," Kate argued.

"Oh, I know, Mom," Melissa said. "It never was with you."

"That's not fair..."

"And don't think I'm just pissed because you cut my *one night* to relax short. I don't care about that. I'm not *that* selfish. Unlike *some* people. I'm pissed because your job—which you were supposed to be done with over a year ago, mind you—continues to win over your family. Even after everything...after *Dad*..."

"Lissa, let's not do this."

Melissa picked up the car seat with a softness that was not present in her voice or her body's strained posture.

"I agree," Melissa spat. "Let's not."

And with that, she walked out of the front door, slamming it behind her.

Kate reached out for the doorknob but stopped. What was she going to do? Was she going to continue this argument outside, in the yard? Besides, she knew Melissa well. After a few days, she'd cool down and would actually listen to Kate's side of the story. She might even accept her mother's apology.

Kate felt like a traitor as she picked up her cell phone. After she'd called Duran, he informed her that he'd planned on her showing up for the case anyway. As it stood, he had someone from the Virginia State Police lined up to meet with her and DeMarco at 4:30 in the morning down in Whip Springs. As for DeMarco, she had left DC half an hour ago with an agency car. She'd be at Kate's house sometime around midnight. Kate realized she could have easily kept Michelle until the originally planned on eleven o'clock and avoided the confrontation with Melissa. But she couldn't dwell on that now.

The suddenness of it all had taken Kate slightly off guard. Even though the last case she had taken had seemed to come out of nowhere, it had at least had some sort of stable structure to it. But it had been quite a while since she had been assigned a case at such an hour. It was daunting but she was also very excited—excited enough to be able to momentarily push Melissa's anger toward her to the back of her mind.

Still, as she packed a bag while waiting for DeMarco to arrive, a stinging thought pierced her. *And it's that right there—your ability to push everything to the side for the sake of the job—that caused so much trouble between the two of you in the first place.*

But that thought too was easily pushed to the side.

## CHAPTER THREE

One of the many things Kate had learned about DeMarco during their last case was that she was punctual. It was a trait she was reminded of when she heard a knock on her door at 12:10.

*I don't remember the last time I had a visitor this late, she thought. College, maybe?*

She walked to the door, carrying her single packed bag with her. Yet when she answered the door, she saw that DeMarco had no intention of just rushing out to drive to the crime scene.

“At the risk of seeming rude, I really need to use your bathroom,” DeMarco said. “Chugging two Cokes to stay awake for the ride was a *bad* idea.”

Kate smiled and stepped aside to let DeMarco in. Given the speed and urgency Duran had instilled in her during their phone calls, DeMarco's abruptness was the kind of unintentional comic relief she needed. It also made her feel comfortable to know that even after almost two months apart, she and DeMarco were picking back up on the same comfort level they had shared before parting ways after the last case.

DeMarco came out of the bathroom a few minutes later with an embarrassed smile on her face.

“And good morning to you,” Kate said. Maybe it was because of the caffeine intake, but DeMarco did not seem any worse for the wear, apparently not fazed by the early hour.

DeMarco looked at her watch and nodded. “Yeah, I suppose it *is* morning.”

“When did you get the call?” Kate asked.

“Around eight or nine, I guess. I would have left earlier, but Duran wanted to make one hundred percent sure you were on board.”

“Sorry about that,” Kate said. “I was babysitting my granddaughter for the first time.”

“Oh no. Wise...that sucks. I'm sorry this is screwing with that.”

Kate shrugged and waved it away. “It'll be fine. You ready to get going?”

“Yeah. I fielded a few calls on the way over while this was being managed by the guys back in DC. We're scheduled to meet with one of the guys from Virginia State PD at four thirty at the Nash residence.”

“The Nash residence?” Kate asked.

“The most recent couple to be murdered.”

They fell into step together back toward the front door. As they made their way out, Kate turned the living room light off and picked up her bag. She was excited about what might lie ahead, but she also felt like she was leaving her home rather irrationally. After all, just a few hours ago, her two-month-old granddaughter had been snoozing on her bed. And now here she was, about to drive straight to a murder scene.

She saw the standard bureau sedan parked in front of her house, right along the curb. It looked surreal, but also inviting.

“You want to drive?” DeMarco asked.

“Sure,” Kate said, wondering if the younger agent was offering the role as a show of respect or because she simply wanted a break from driving.

Kate got behind the wheel while DeMarco pulled up directions to the location of the most recent murder. It was in the town of Whip Springs, Virginia, a little hole-in-the-wall town situated at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains just outside of Roanoke. They spent only a little time on small talk—Kate filling DeMarco in on how it felt to be a grandmother, while DeMarco remained mostly silent, mentioning only yet another failed relationship after her girlfriend left her. This came as a surprise, as Kate had not pegged DeMarco as being gay. If anything, it showed her that she really needed to spend some more time getting to know the woman who was more or less her partner. Punctuality, she had picked up on. Homosexuality, she had missed. What the hell did that say about her as a partner?

As the crime scene drew closer, DeMarco read over the reports that Duran had sent them pertaining to the case. As she read them, Kate kept looking for any traces of the sun breaking the horizon but saw none.

“Two older couples,” DeMarco said. “Sorry...one in their late fifties...so no offense.”

“None taken,” Kate said, not sure if this was DeMarco’s weird attempt at humor.

“At first glance, they appear to have nothing in common, other than location. The first scene was right in the heart of Roanoke and this most recent one was no more than thirty miles away, in Whip Springs. There appear to be no signs that the husband or the wife were the preliminary targets. Each murder was gruesome and a little overdone, indicating that the killer enjoys it.”

“And that typically points to someone who feels that they have been wronged by the victims in some cases,” Kate pointed out. “That or some twisted psychological craving for violence and bloodshed.”

“The most recent victims, the Nashes, had been married for twenty-four years. They have two children, one who lives in San Diego and another who is currently attending UVA. She’s the one who discovered the bodies when she came home yesterday.”

“What about the other couple?” Kate asked. “They have any kids?”

“Not according to the reports.”

Kate mulled all of this over and for reasons she could not grasp, found herself thinking of the little girl she had passed on the street earlier in the day. Or, rather, the flashback that little girl had spurred up in her mind.

When they arrived at the Nash residence, the horizon had finally started to catch some of the light from the rising but still absent sun. It peeked through the tree line that surrounded most of the Nashes’ yard. In that light, they could see a single car parked in front of the house. A man stood propped against the hood, smoking a cigarette and holding a cup of coffee.

“You guys Wise and DeMarco?” the man asked.

“That’s us,” Kate said, stepping forward and showing her ID. “Who are you?”

“Palmetto, with Virginia State PD. Forensics. I got the call a few hours ago that you two would be taking the case. Figured I might as well be here to hand off what I have. Which, by the way, isn’t much.”

Palmetto took one final drag from his cigarette and tossed it to the ground, snuffing it out with his foot. “The bodies have obviously been moved and there was very little evidence found anywhere. But come on inside anyway. It’s...eye opening.”

Palmetto spoke with the emotionless tone of a man who had been doing this for quite some time. He led them up the Nashes’ sidewalk and onto the porch. When he opened the door and led them inside, Kate could smell it: the smell of a crime scene where a lot of blood had been spilled. There was something chemical to it, not just the coppery smell of blood, but of recent movement and people with rubber gloves looking over the scene recently.

Palmetto turned each light on they made their way into the house—through the foyer, down a hallway, and into the living room. In the bright glare of overhead lights, Kate saw the first splotch of blood on the hardwood floor. And then another and another.

Palmetto led them to the front of the couch, pointing to the bloodstains like a man simply confirming the fact that water is indeed wet.

“The bodies were here, one on the couch and one on the floor. It appeared that the mother was killed first, probably from the cut to her neck, although one did seem to land pretty close to her heart, but through the back. It’s theorized that there was a struggle with the father. There was bruising on his forearms, some blood coming out of his mouth, and the coffee table had been knocked askew.”

“Any early ideas on the time that passed between the murders and the daughter discovering them?” Kate asked.

“No more than a day,” Palmetto answered. “And it was probably more like twelve or sixteen hours. I’m sure the coroner will have something a little more concrete at some point today.”

“Anything else of note?” DeMarco asked.

“Yes, actually. It’s a piece of evidence... just one single piece.” He reached into the inner pocket of his thin jacket and pulled out a small evidence baggie. “I kept this. Got permission, so don’t get all spooked. I figured you’d want to take it and run. It’s the only evidence we found, but it’s pretty unnerving.”

He offered the clear plastic baggie to Kate. She took it and eyed the contents inside. From what she could tell, it was a simple piece of cloth, about six-by-three inches. It was thick, blue in color, and had a fluffy texture to it. The entire right side of it was stained in blood.

“Where was this found?” Kate asked.

“Stuffed into the mother’s mouth. It was pushed deep down there, almost down her throat.”

Kate held it up to the light. “Any idea where it came from?” she asked.

“No idea. Looks to be just a random scrap.”

But Kate wasn’t so sure. In fact, her grandmother’s intuition started storming to the front. This was not some random piece of fabric. No...it was soft, it was light blue, and looked to be quite fluffy.

This was part of a blanket. Perhaps a child’s security blanket.

“You holding any other surprise evidence for us?” DeMarco asked.

“No, that’s it out of me,” Palmetto said, already heading back for the door. “If you ladies need any help from this point on, feel free to give us a call at the State PD.”

Kate and DeMarco shared an annoyed look behind his back. Without having to say anything, they each knew that the term *you ladies* had pissed the other off.

“Well, that was brief,” DeMarco said as Palmetto gave them a noncommittal wave from the front door.

“Just as well,” Kate said. “This way we can start looking the case over with our own eyes, without the influence of what anyone else has found.”

“You think we need to speak to the daughter next?”

“Probably. And then we’ll look into the first crime scene and see if we can find anything there. Hopefully we’ll find someone who’s a bit more sociable than our friend Palmetto.”

They headed back out of the house, turning off the lights as they went. As they headed back outside, the sun finally peeking out from the edge of the world, Kate carefully placed what she thought was a scrap of a child’s blanket into her pocket and could not help but think of her granddaughter sleeping under a similar blanket.

Walking toward the sun did nothing to suppress the chill that crept through her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Breakfast consisted of a Panera Bread drive-thru in Roanoke. It was there, while waiting in the small early-morning line, that DeMarco placed several calls to set up a meeting with Olivia Nash, daughter of the recently slayed couple. She was currently staying with her aunt in Roanoke and was, by her aunt's own words, an absolute wreck.

After getting the address and approval from the aunt, they headed for the aunt's house just after seven o'clock. The early hour was not an issue because, according to the aunt, Olivia had refused to sleep ever since having discovered her parents.

When Kate and DeMarco arrived at the house, the aunt was sitting on the porch. Cami Nash stood when Kate got out of the car but made no move to come meet them. She had a cup of coffee in her hand and the tired look on her face made Kate think it was certainly not the first she had enjoyed this morning.

"Cami Nash?" Kate asked.

"Yeah, that's me," she said.

"First and foremost, please accept my sympathies for your loss," Kate said. "Were you and your brother close?"

"Pretty close, yeah. But right now, I have to look past that. I can't... *grieve* right now because Olivia needs someone. She's not the same person I spoke with on the phone last week. Something in her is broken. I can't even imagine...what it must have been like to find them like that and..."

She trailed off and sipped down some of her coffee very quickly, trying to distract herself from the onslaught of tears that seemed to be rapidly approaching.

"Is she going to be okay to speak with us?" DeMarco asked.

"Maybe for a while. I told her you were coming and she seemed to understand what I meant. That's why I'm meeting you out here before you go in. I feel like I need to tell you that she's a normal, well-rounded young woman. In the state she's in now, though, I didn't want you to think she had some sort of mental issues or something."

"Thanks for that," Kate said. She had seen people absolutely devastated by grief before and it was never a pretty sight. She couldn't help but wonder how much experience DeMarco had with it.

Cami led them into the house. It was as quiet as a tomb inside, the only sound coming from the hum of the air conditioner. Kate noticed that Cami walked slowly, making sure not to make too much noise. Kate followed suit, wondering if Cami was hoping the silence would help Olivia finally fall asleep or if she was simply trying not to alarm the already-fragile young woman in any way.

They entered the living room, where a young woman was half-sitting, half-lying on the couch. Her face was red, her eyes slightly swollen from recently weeping. She looked as if she hadn't slept in about a week rather than just a day or so. When she saw Kate and DeMarco enter, she sat up a bit.

"Hi, Ms. Nash," Kate said. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us. We're so sorry for your loss."

"It's Olivia, please." Her voice was hoarse and tired—almost as worn out as her eyes seemed to be.

"We'll make this as quick as possible," Kate said. "I understand that you had just come in from college. Do you know if your parents had planned to have anyone else over that day?"

"If they did, I didn't know about it."

"Please forgive me for asking, but do you know if either of your parents had any long-standing grudges with anyone? People they might have considered enemies?"

Olivia shook her head firmly. "Dad was married once before...before he met Mom. But even with his ex-wife, he was on good terms."

Olivia started crying noiselessly. A series of tears slipped from her eyes and she did not bother trying to wipe them away.

“I want to show you something,” Kate said. “I don’t know if it has any significance to you or not. If it does, it could be quite emotional. Would you be willing to take a look and let us know if it looks familiar to you?”

Olivia looked alarmed, maybe even a little scared. Kate really didn’t blame here and almost didn’t want to show her the scrap of fabric Palmetto had handed them—the scrap Kate felt certain was part of a blanket or quilt. A bit reluctantly, she pulled it out of her pocket.

She knew right away that Olivia didn’t recognize it. There was an immediate sense of relief and confusion on the young woman’s face as she looked at the plastic bag and what it held inside.

Olivia shook her head but kept her eyes locked on the clear plastic bag. “No. I don’t recognize it. Why?”

“We can’t reveal that right now,” Kate said. Truthfully, there was nothing unlawful about revealing it to the next of kin...but Kate didn’t see the point in traumatizing Olivia Nash any further.

“Do you have any idea who did this?” Olivia asked. She looked lost, like she did not recognize where she was...maybe not even herself. Kate couldn’t recall the last time she had seen someone so clearly detached from everything around her.

“Not right now,” she said. “But we will keep you posted. And please,” she said, looking from Olivia and then to Cami, “contact us if you can think of *anything* that might help.”

At that remark, DeMarco withdrew a business card from the inner pocket of her jacket and handed it to Cami.

Perhaps it was the years she had spent in retirement or feeling guilty for having to abandon her post as grandmother last night, but Kate felt awful when she left the room, leaving Olivia Nash to her intense grief. As she and DeMarco made their way out onto the porch, she could hear the young woman let out a low moan of distress.

Kate and DeMarco shared an uneasy glance as they headed to the car. From within her inner pocket, Kate could feel the presence of that scrap of fabric and it suddenly felt very heavy indeed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

As Kate left the small town of Whip Springs and headed for Roanoke, DeMarco used her iPad to pull up the case files on the first set of murders. It was nearly an exact copy and paste of the Nash crime scene; a couple had been murdered in their home in a particularly gruesome fashion. Preliminary results turned up no likely suspects and there had been no witnesses.

“Does it say anything about anything left behind in the throats or mouths of either of the victims?” Kate asked.

DeMarco scanned the reports and shook her head. “Not from what I can see. I think it’s maybe a—no, wait, here it is. In the coroner’s report. The fabric wasn’t discovered until yesterday—a day and a half after the bodies were discovered. But yes...the report says that there was a small piece of fabric lodged in the mother’s throat.”

“Does it give a description?”

“No. I’ll give the coroner a call and see if I can get a picture of it.”

DeMarco wasted no time, making the call right away. While she was on the phone, Kate tried to think of anything that might be able to link two seemingly random couples, given what had been found in the throats of the females. While Kate had yet to see the piece of fabric that had been taken from the throat of the first female victim, she was fully expecting it to match the one that had been found in the throat of Mrs. Nash.

DeMarco’s call was over three minutes later. Seconds after she ended the call, she received a text. She glanced at her phone and said: “We’ve got a match.”

Approaching a stoplight as they inched their way further into the city of Roanoke, Kate looked over to the phone as DeMarco showed it to her. As Kate expected, the fabric was soft and blue in color—an exact match for the one found in the throat of the Nash mother.

“We’ve got pretty extensive records on both couples, right?” Kate asked.

“Decent, I suppose,” she said. “Based on the records and case files we have, there might be *some* stuff missing, but I think we’ve got quite a bit to go on.” She paused here as the GPS app on the iPad dinged. “Turn left at this light,” DeMarco said. “The house is half a mile down this next street.”

Kate’s mental wheels were turning quickly as they neared the first crime scene.

*Two married couples, slaughtered in a brutal way. Remnants or scraps of some sort of old blanket found in the throats of the wives...*

There were many ways to go with the clues they had been given. But before Kate could focus on a single one and put it together, DeMarco was speaking up.

“Right there,” she said, pointing to a small brick house on the right.

Kate pulled up alongside the curb. The house was located on a thin side street, the kind that connected two main roads. It was a quiet street with a few other small houses taking up the space. The street had an almost historic feel to it, the sidewalks faded and cracked, the houses in a similar state.

Faded white letters on the mailbox read LANGLEY. Kate also spotted a decorative L hanging on the front door, made of aged wood. It stood out against the bright yellow of the crime scene tape that hung from the porch railings.

As Kate and DeMarco headed for the front porch, DeMarco half read, half recited the information they had in the reports on the Langley family.

“Scott and Bethany Langley—Scott fifty-nine years of age, Bethany sixty-one. Scott was found dead in the kitchen and Bethany was in the laundry room. They were found by a fifteen-year-old boy who was taking private guitar lessons from Scott. It’s estimated that they had only been killed a few hours before the bodies were discovered.”

When they entered the Langley residence, Kate stood in the doorway for a moment, taking in the layout of the place. It was a smaller house, but well kept. The front door opened into a very small

foyer which then became the living room. From there, a small bar top counter separated the kitchen from the living room. A hallway stood off to the right, leading to the rest of the house.

The layout of the house alone told Kate that the husband had likely been killed first. But from the front door, there was pretty much a clear view into the kitchen. Scott Langley would have had to have been quite busy not to notice someone walking through the front door.

*Maybe the killer came in some other way,* Kate thought.

They entered the kitchen, where bloodstains still stood out prominently on the laminate floor. A frying pan and a can of cooking spray were sitting by the edge of the stove.

*He was about to cook something,* Kate thought. *So maybe they were killed right around dinner time.*

DeMarco started for the hallway, and Kate followed her. There was a small room immediately to the left, the door opening to reveal a crowded laundry room. Here, the blood splatter had been much worse. There were bloodstains on the washer, the dryer, the walls, the floor, and on a load of neatly folded clean clothes sitting in a hamper.

With the bodies already removed, there seemed to be very little the Langley residence could offer them. But Kate had one more thing she wanted to check. She walked back out into the living room and looked at the pictures on the walls and atop the entertainment center. She saw the Langleys smiling and happy. In one picture, she saw an older couple with the Langleys posing by the end of a pier at the beach.

“Do we have a breakdown of the Langleys’ family life?” Kate asked.

DeMarco, still holding the iPad in her right hand, scrolled through the information and started to read out the details they had. With each one, Kate found that the hunch she had been sitting on for a few minutes was likely true.

“They were married for twenty-five years. Bethany Langley had a sister that died in a car accident twelve years ago and neither of them have any surviving parents. Scott Langley’s father passed away recently, just six months ago, from an aggressive form of prostate cancer.”

“Any mention of kids?”

“Nope. No kids.” DeMarco paused here and seemed to catch on to what Kate was speculating on. “You’re thinking about the fabric, right? That it looks sort of like a kid’s blanket.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking. But if the Langleys didn’t have kids I don’t think there would be any obvious connection to be found.”

“I don’t know that I’ve ever seen an *obvious* connection to anything,” DeMarco said with a shaky little laugh.

“That’s true,” Kate said, but she felt like there had to be one here. Even with the seemingly random victims, there were a few things they *did* have in common.

*Both couples were both in their mid-to-late fifties, early sixties. Both were married. The wife of each couple had a piece of what appears to be a blanket shoved down her throat.*

So yes...there were similarities, but they were leading to no real links. Not yet, anyway.

“Agent DeMarco, do you think you could make a call or two and make sure we can get some office space at the local police department?”

“Already done,” she said. “I’m pretty sure Duran handled all of that before we even arrived here.”

*He thinks he knows me so well,* Kate thought, a little irritated. But then, on the other hand, it appeared that he *did* know her pretty damned well.

Kate glanced around the house again, at the pictures, at the bloodstains. She was going to have to get deeper into the details of each couple if she wanted to get anywhere with this. And she was going to need to get some kind of forensic results on the fabric pieces. Given the similarities between the two scenes, she assumed some good old basic research more than anything would uncover some leads and clues.

They returned to the car, Kate again reminded that they had started this day ridiculously early. When she saw that it was just after ten in the morning, she was somewhat invigorated. They still had most of the day ahead of them. Maybe, if she was lucky and the case broke the way she felt it might, she'd be back in Richmond by the close of the weekend to see Michelle one more time—if, that was, Melissa would allow it.

*See, some wiser part of her spoke up as she got back behind the wheel of the car. Even in the midst of multiple bloody murders, you're thinking of your granddaughter—of your family. Doesn't that tell you something?*

She supposed it did. But even as she stepped foot into the later quarter or so of her life, it was still very hard to admit that there was something more to life than her work. It was especially hard when she was on the trail of a killer and knew that at any moment, he could be killing again.

## CHAPTER SIX

A small conference room in the back of the City of Roanoke Police had been set aside for Kate and DeMarco. Once they arrived at the station, a small portly woman at the front desk led them through the building and to the room. As soon as they sat down and started to set up a makeshift workstation, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Kate said.

When the door opened, they saw a familiar face—Palmetto from the State PD, the somewhat curmudgeonly man who had met them in front of the Nash residence much earlier in the day.

“I saw you guys headed back this way while I was signing all of my paperwork,” Palmetto said. “I’m on the way out, driving back to Chesterfield in a few hours. I thought I’d check in to see if there was anything else I could help with.”

“Nothing big,” Kate said. “Did you happen to know that there was also a scrap of that same fabric discovered in the throat of Bethany Langley?”

“I didn’t until about half an hour ago. Apparently, one of you called the lab to ask them to send a picture.”

“Yeah,” DeMarco said. “And it seems to be a match with the one you gave us.”

At the mention of the scrap of fabric, Kate set the plastic bag Palmetto had given her on the table. “As of right now, it’s the only solid evidence we have that links the murders in any concrete way.”

“And forensics found pretty much nothing on that one,” Palmetto said. “Aside from Mrs. Nash’s DNA.”

“The forensic report I’m seeing from the scrap from the Langleys offers up nothing, either,” DeMarco said.

“Still might be worth a trip to the forensics lab,” Kate said.

“Good luck with that,” Palmetto said. “When I spoke with them about the Nash scrap, they were clueless.”

“Were you at all involved with the scene at the Langley home?” Kate asked.

“No. I came in right after it had happened. I saw the bodies and checked the place over, but there was nothing. When you talk to forensics, though, ask them about the stray hair found on the clean laundry. It didn’t seem to belong to Mrs. Langley, so they’re going to run some tests on it.”

“Before you go,” Kate said, “do you want to offer up any theories?”

“I don’t have one,” Palmetto said dryly. “From the digging I’ve done, there seems to be absolutely *no* link between the Nashes and the Langleys. The fabric in the throats, though...something that personal and explicit to the killer *has* to link them somehow, right?”

“That’s my thought,” Kate said.

Palmetto gave the door a playful slap and then Kate saw him smile for the first time. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out. I’ve heard about you, you know? A lot of us on the State PD have.”

“I’m sure,” she said with a smirk.

“Mostly good things. And then you came out of retirement to bring someone down a few months ago, right?”

“You could say that.”

Palmetto, seeing that Kate wasn’t going to just sit there and soak in accolades, gave her a shrug. “Give the state boys a call if you need anything on this one, Agent Wise.”

“I’ll do that,” Kate said as Palmetto took his leave.

When Palmetto had closed the door behind him, DeMarco playfully shook her head. “You ever get tired of hearing people sing your praises?”

“Yes, actually,” Kate said, but not in a rude way. While it was uplifting to be reminded of all that she had done throughout her career, she knew deep down that she had always just been doing her job. Perhaps she done her job with a bit more passion than others had, but it had been just that—a job well done... a job she could not seem to leave behind her.

Within a few minutes and some help from the station’s systems administrator, Kate and DeMarco had access to the station’s database. They worked together, looking into the pasts of the Nashes and the Langleys. Neither family had records of any kind. In fact, both families had records that made it hard to imagine anyone having a grudge against them. As for the Langleys, they had served as foster parents for a few years of their lives, so they’d had to undergo rigorous background checks several times throughout the course of their lives. The Nashes were heavily involved in their church and had been on several mission trips in the past twenty years, most notably to Nepal and Honduras.

Kate gave up after a while and started pacing the floor. She used the conference room’s dry erase board to jot down notes, hoping that seeing everything written down in one place would help her to focus. But there was nothing. No link, no clues, no clear course of where to go.

“You, too, huh?” DeMarco said. “Nothing?”

“Not so far. I think maybe we just go with what we *do* have rather than trying to find something new. I think we need to reevaluate the fabrics. While the forensics tests came up with nothing, maybe the fabric itself can point us somewhere.”

“I don’t follow you,” DeMarco said.

“That’s fine,” Kate said. “I’m not sure I do, either. But I’m hoping we’ll know it when we see it.”

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Kate felt the first true pangs of fatigue as she and DeMarco drove from the police station to the forensics lab. It was a stark reminder that she had not slept in about twenty-seven hours and that her work day had started insanely early. Twenty years ago, this would not have bothered her. But with fifty-six staring her right in the face from a few weeks across the calendar, things were different now.

The drive to the lab was only five minutes, located in close proximity to a little network consisting of the PD, the courthouse, and a holding jail. After showing their IDs, they were escorted past the front desk of the forensic sciences lab and into the central laboratory area. They were asked to sit in a small lobby for a moment while the technician who had been in charge of the fabric swabs was paged.

“You think there’s any chance the fabric is just some kind of calling card for the killer?” DeMarco asked.

“It could be. Might not have anything to do with the *why* of the case. It could just mean something to the killer. Either way, right now it seems that the fabric—from a blanket of some kind, I feel quite sure—is our only real connection to him.”

It made Kate recall a gruesome case she’d once been a part of early in the nineties. A man had killed five people—all ex-girlfriends. Before killing them by choking them, he had forced each one to swallow a condom. In the end, he had no real reason for doing so other than his hatred for wearing condoms during sex. Kate could not help but wonder if these fabric fragments would turn out to be just as insignificant to the case.

Their wait was a short one; a tall older man came hurrying out of a door directly across from them. “You’re with the FBI?” he asked.

“We are,” Kate said, showing her ID. DeMarco did the same and the man studied each one quite carefully.

“Nice to meet you, Agents,” he said. “I’m Will Reed, and I ran the tests on the fabric from the recent murders. I assume that’s why you’re here? Agent DeMarco, I believe you are the one I sent the picture to earlier?”

“That’s right,” DeMarco said. “We were hoping you could shed some more light on those scraps.”

“Well, I’d be more than happy to assist with whatever you need, but if it’s about those two scraps of fabric, I’m afraid there’s nothing I can offer. It seems that the killer not only went through great lengths to shove the fabric into the mouths of the victims, but that he was also quite careful about not leaving any traces of himself behind.”

“Yes, we understand that,” Kate said. “But without any firm physical results to go on, I was wondering if there’s anything you could tell me about the fabric itself.”

“Oh,” Reed said. “That, I *can* help with.”

“I’m of the opinion that both scraps came from the same source material,” Kate said. “Most likely a blanket.”

“I think that’s a safe bet to place,” Reed said. “I wasn’t too sure until I saw the second scrap. They fit together rather well—color, texture, and so forth.”

“Is there any way to tell how old the blanket might be?” Kate asked.

“I’m afraid not. What I can tell you, though, is what the blanket is made up of. And it stuck with me because as far as I know, it’s an odd fabric combination for a traditional blanket as you’d think of one. The vast majority of the blanket is made of wool, which, of course, is not uncommon at all. But the secondary material used in the fabric is bamboo cotton.”

“Is that all that different from *regular* cotton?” Kate asked.

“I’m not positive,” he said. “But we see a lot of clothes and fabric-related material come through here. And I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve come into contact with something with noticeable traces of bamboo cotton. It’s not a very rare material but it’s just not as widespread as your basic cotton.”

“In other words,” DeMarco said, “it wouldn’t be too hard to locate companies that use it as a primary material?”

“That, I *don’t* know,” Reed said. “But you may be interested to know that bamboo cotton *is* present in lots of fluffier blankets. It’s quite breathable from what I’ve seen. You’re probably looking for something on the pricier side. As a matter of fact, there’s a warehouse just outside of town that manufactures the very sort of thing I mean. Pricy blankets, throws, sheets, that sort of thing.”

“Do you know the name of it?” DeMarco asked.

“Biltmore Threads. They’re a smaller company that nearly went belly up when everyone started buying everything online.”

“Anything else you can tell us?” Kate asked.

“Yes, but it’s sort of grisly. With the Nash woman, I believe the fabric was shoved so far down that she nearly vomited, even that close to death. There was stomach acid on the fabric.”

Kate thought about the amount of force and effort it would take for someone to do that...about how much of one’s hand would go into the victim’s mouth.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Reed,” Kate said.

“Certainly. Let’s just hope I don’t see a third piece to that blanket anytime soon.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Eerily enough, the drive to the Biltmore Threads warehouse took Kate and DeMarco down the same stretch of road they had taken into Whip Springs at four o'clock that morning. The factory and warehouse were located down a two-lane road that snaked off of the main highway. It was tucked away, along with the stretch of dying grass that served as its landscaping, in the very same woods that had hidden the Nash home from the main road.

From the looks of the parking lot, Biltmore Threads wasn't doing quite as badly as Will Reed had suggested. The place looked to employ at least fifty or so people, and that was based on just this time of day. With a factory like this, Kate assumed there was shift work involved, meaning another fifty or so would probably come in later on for the night shift.

They made their way inside, walking into a dingy lobby. A woman sitting behind a counter looked up at them with a peculiar expression. It was evident that they didn't get many visitors.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

DeMarco went through the round of introductions and after they showed their IDs, the woman at the counter buzzed them in through a door on the far end of the lobby. That same woman met them there and then led them down a small hallway. At the end of the hall, she opened a set of double doors that led onto the Biltmore Threads production floor. Several sets of looms and other equipment Kate had never seen were thrumming with life. On the far side of the large work floor, a compact forklift was carrying a pallet of stacked cloth elsewhere into the warehouse.

After leading them carefully around the edge of the floor, the woman stopped at another door and led them inside. Here, there was a thin hallway adorned with five rooms. The woman brought them to the first one and knocked.

"Yeah?" a man's voice boomed from inside.

"We've got visitors," the woman called before opening the door. "Two ladies from the FBI."

There was a few seconds' pause and then the door was opened from the other side. A dark-haired man wearing thick glasses greeted them. He looked them up and down, not out of nervousness but sheer curiosity.

"FBI?" he asked. "What can I do for you?"

"Can we have a minute of your time?" Kate asked.

"Sure," he said, standing aside and allowing them into his office.

There was only one seat in the office other than the one behind his desk. Neither Kate nor DeMarco took it. The dark-haired man did not take his seat either, electing to stand with them.

"I assume you're the supervisor?" Kate asked.

"I'm the regional manager and day shift supervisor, yes," he said. He extended his hand quickly, as if embarrassed he had forgotten to do so earlier than this. "Ray Garraty."

Kate shook the offered hand and then showed her ID. She then reached into her pocket and withdrew the scrap of fabric from the Nash scene.

"This is a scrap of fabric from a recent crime scene," she said. "And we believe it could be key in catching a killer. The forensics lab found bamboo cotton in it, and I understand that Biltmore Threads uses bamboo cotton rather regularly."

"We do," Garraty said. He reached for the bag and then hesitated before asking: "Do you mind?"

Kate shook her head and handed it to him. Garraty looked it over closely and nodded. "Without actually tearing it further apart, I can't give you any guarantees, but yeah, it looks to have some in it. Do you know where the fabric came from?"

"I'm assuming a blanket," Kate said.

"Looks like it," Garraty said. "And while I'm not one hundred percent sure, I think it might have been designed and manufactured here."

“Right here at Biltmore Threads?” Kate asked.

“Perhaps.”

Garraty handed the plastic bag back to Kate and then walked to an old beaten-up filing cabinet tucked away in the back corner of the small office. He opened the bottom drawer and after fishing through its contents for a while, pulled out two different books. They were both quite large and as he started leafing through one, Kate saw that they were both inventory catalogues.

“The color and the design you can sort of make out look familiar,” Garraty explained as he went through the pages. “If it was made here, it will be in one of these books.”

It was an exciting thought, but Kate wasn’t quite sure what it would mean. If the blanket in question *was* made in Biltmore Threads, did it really even open up that many possibilities? There were many more questions to ask before coming to such a conclusion.

“Right here,” Garraty said. He turned the book toward them and pointed to one of several different blankets listed on a page about three-quarters of the way through one of the books. “Does that look like a match to you?”

Kate and DeMarco both studied the page. Kate looked back and forth, making sure she wasn’t *making* herself see some semblance of similarity. But after a few seconds, DeMarco answered for her.

“I mean, the fabric we have is faded, but it’s the same. Even that little faded white checkered pattern.”

“Well, it’s faded because it’s an older product,” Garraty said. He pointed to a line from the item description. “Right here, it says it started being produced in 1991 and was eliminated from our production cycle in 2004.”

“So you made this same blanket for thirteen years?” DeMarco asked.

“Yes. It was a very popular item, which is how I was able to recognize it so quickly.”

“In other words, the last time you would have passed this blanket out of your warehouse was 2004,” Kate said. “Meaning that this sample is somewhere between fifteen and thirty years old.”

“That’s correct.”

*Well, even if there could be a link due to the blanket, Kate thought, that thirty-year window makes it very hard.*

“Mr. Garraty, how long have you been in your position here?”

“Going on twenty-six years,” Garraty said. “I’ve got retirement coming up next year.”

“While you’ve been here, has Biltmore Threads employed Scott or Bethany Langley, or Toni or Derrick Nash?”

Garraty thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. “The names don’t ring any bells for me, but if we’re looking over a span of more than ten years, I’d refer you to records. There are a lot of employees that come in and out of here.”

“How soon can you find out for sure?” DeMarco asked.

“Within the hour.”

“That would be appreciated,” Kate said. “And if you don’t mind, just one more question. Have you had any employees cause problems for you or the factory in the past month or so? Any troublemakers or just someone you and other management knew to keep an eye on?”

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