



BLAKE
PIERCE

IF

SHE

RAN

A KATE WISE MYSTERY--BOOK 3

Блейк Пирс If She Ran

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Аннотация

“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 RAN (A Kate Wise Mystery) is book #3 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 FBI agent Kate Wise is called back in from retirement when a second husband from a wealthy suburb is found murdered, shot to death on his way home. Can it be a coincidence?

There was one case that has haunted Kate her entire career, the one that she couldn't solve.

Now, 10 years later, a second husband is killed in the same way—and from the same, exclusive town.

What is the connection?

And can Kate redeem herself, and solve it before it goes cold again?

An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, *IF SHE RAN* is book #3 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #4 in the *KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES* will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

If She Ran. A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 3

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fifteen 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 four books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising three 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 to learn more and stay in touch.

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CHAPTER ONE

Her nerves were on fire and she felt like she might get sick at any moment. The boxing gloves on her hands felt foreign and the head gear was suffocating. Neither of these things were new to Kate Wise—she had been training for about two months now, but this was her first time sparring with an actual partner. While she was aware that it was all in good fun and just part of the workout regimen, it was still making her nervous. She'd be throwing actual punches at someone's body and that was not something she had ever taken lightly.

She looked across the ring at her sparring partner, a younger woman whom she was trying her best not to view as an *opponent*. She was another member of the small gym who had been undergoing the boxing program. The woman's name was Margo Dunn and she was taking the course for the same reason as Kate; it was a great full body exercise that, at its core, didn't involve too much running or weightlifting.

Margo grinned at Kate as her trainer slipped in her mouth guard. Kate nodded back in response as her trainer slid hers in as well. When it fell in perfectly around her teeth, Kate felt as if a switch had been flipped. She was in boxing mode now. Yes, the nerves were still there and she was uneasy with the whole situation, but it was time to go. It was time to work. There was only an audience of seven—made up of trainers and two other

gym members who were just curious.

By the side of the ring, someone rang the little bell to signify the start of the fight. Kate walked out to the middle of the ring, where she met with Margo. They tapped gloves and took two respectful steps back.

And then it was on. Kate circled a bit, finding the rhythm with her feet she had been taught to remember as if she were dancing. She stepped forward and threw her first jab. Margo blocked it easily, but it was good to just get warmed up. Kate jabbed again, a little rabbit punch with her left hand. Margo blocked this one and then countered with a left that caught Kate right along the side of the head. The punch was soft by design—this was, after all, just a sparring match—and fell right along the cushion of the head gear. But still, it was enough to rock Kate a bit.

You're fifty-six, she thought to herself. What the hell were you thinking?

She considered the question as Margo threw a right-handed hook. Kate sidestepped it. Dodging it so easily gave her more confidence. When she also managed to effortlessly block the jab Margo followed with, it stirred up the need to excel.

You know why you're doing this, she thought. Nine weeks in and you've lost eighteen pounds and have the best muscle tone you've had in your life. You feel about twenty years younger and let's be real...have you ever felt this strong?

No, she hadn't. And while she was nowhere near mastering the art of boxing, she knew that she had the basic skills down.

With this mentality locked in place, she stepped forward in a near-strafting position, faked a left jab, and then delivered a right hook. When the hook landed right along Margo's chin, Kate sent out the left jab...and then another. Both landed true, rocking Margo a bit. A light of surprise shone in her eyes as she staggered back against the ropes. She grinned, though. Like Kate, she knew this was more or less just practice and she had just learned a lesson: be on the lookout for hard fakes at all times.

Margo responded with two jabs to the body, one that connected with Kate's ribs. The wind went rushing out of her for a moment and by the time she had caught it again, she saw the heavy right hook coming from her left. She tried moving but hadn't caught it in time. It slammed into the side of her padded head and shook her backward.

She was dizzy for a moment. Her vision blurred and her knees felt a little weak. She thought about falling, just to catch a break.

Yeah...too old for this.

But then the counter to that was: *You know any other women over fifty who could take this punch and remain standing?*

Kate responded with two jabs and then a blow to the body. Only one of the jabs landed but the body blow struck its target. Margo went back into the ropes, staggering a bit. She then came back off of the ropes and threw an impatient uppercut. It was not designed to land. It was just meant to cause Kate to bring her arms up to block it so Margo could then deliver jabs to her exposed core. But Kate saw the slight hesitation in the delivery,

knowing the purpose behind it. Instead of blocking the punch, she stepped hard to the right, waited for the full delivery to swing through, and then threw a hard right-handed jab that connected with the side of Margo's head.

Margo went down right away. She fell on her stomach and rolled over quickly. She slid back to her corner and popped out her mouth guard. She smiled at Kate and shook her head in disbelief.

"I'm sorry," Kate said, kneeling down in front of Margo.

"Don't be," Margo said. "It honestly makes no sense how you manage to be that fast. I feel like I need to apologize. Because of your age, I assumed you'd be...slower."

Kate's trainer—a grizzled sixty-something man with a long white beard—climbed between the ropes, chuckling. "I made that same mistake," he said. "Had a black eye for about a week because of it. Caught the exact same punch that just knocked you down."

"Don't feel so apologetic," Kate said. "That one to my head was huge. It almost got me."

"It *should* have gotten you," the trainer said. "Honestly, it was a little harder than I like to see in these simple sparring matches." He then looked to Margo. "Up to you. You want to keep going?"

Margo nodded and pulled herself up. Again, her trainer put her mouthpiece in. Both women returned to their respective corners and waited for the bell.

But it was not the bell that Kate heard. Instead, she heard the

ringing of her phone. And it was the assigned ringer she used for all calls that came from the bureau.

She pushed her mouthpiece out of her mouth and held her gloved hands out to her trainer. "Sorry," she said. "I have to take that."

Her trainer knew about her part-time job as a special agent. He thought it was hard-ass (his word, not hers) that she refused to entirely retire from such a job. So when he untied her gloves for her, he did so as quickly as possible.

Kate slid between the ropes and ran to her gym bag, which was sitting by the wall. She always kept it out and not in the locker room just in case she got such a call. She grabbed the phone and her heart surged with excitement and despair all at once when she saw Deputy Director Duran's name on the display.

"This is Agent Wise," she said.

"Wise, it's Duran. You got a second?"

"I do," she said, glancing back at the ring with longing. Margo's trainer was working with her on how to avoid fake-outs. "What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping you could come in on a case. It's effective immediately, and I'd need you and DeMarco to fly out tonight."

"I don't know," she said. And that was the truth. It was very sudden and she had spoken to Melissa, her daughter, several times in the last few weeks about not being so readily available for the last-minute jobs. She had been spending much more time with Melissa and Michelle, her granddaughter, over the last

month or so and they finally had a good thing going—something like a routine. Something like a family.

“I appreciate you thinking of me,” Kate said. “But I don’t know if I can come in for this one. It’s very last minute. And flying out...that makes it seem like it’s pretty far away. I don’t know that I’m prepared for a long trip. Where is it, anyway?”

“New York. Kate...I’m pretty sure it has ties to the Nobilini case.”

The name sent a chill through her. Her head started ringing, and it wasn’t from the blow Margo had delivered moments ago. Flashes of a case from nearly eight years ago cascaded through her head—leering, taunting.

“Kate?”

“I’m here,” she said. She then looked back to the ring. Margo was stretching and lightly jogging in place, ready for their next bout.

It was a shame she wouldn’t get it. Because as soon as Kate heard the name, she knew she’d take the case. She had to.

The Nobilini case had gotten away from her eight years ago—one of the true defeats she’d ever had in her career.

This was her chance to close it—to bolt shut the one case that had truly bested her.

“When’s the flight?” she asked Duran.

“Dulles to JFK, leaves in four hours.”

She thought of Melissa and Michelle, her heart sinking. Melissa wouldn’t understand, but Kate could not turn this

opportunity down.

“I’ll be on it,” she said.

CHAPTER TWO

Kate managed to pack and make it out of Richmond in less than an hour and a half. When she met her partner, Kristen DeMarco, outside of one of the many Starbucks in Dulles International Airport, they had only ten minutes remaining before takeoff; most of the plane's passengers had already boarded.

As DeMarco started power-walking toward Kate with her coffee in hand, she smiled and shook her head. "If you'd just go ahead and move to DC, you wouldn't be rushing and borderline late all the time."

"No can do," Kate said as they joined together and starting hurrying for the gate. "It's enough that this so-called part-time job is keeping me away from my family more than I'd like. If it was a requirement that I live in DC, I wouldn't be doing it at all."

"How *are* Melissa and little Michelle?" DeMarco asked.

"They're doing well. I spoke with Melissa on my way here. She said she understood and wished me luck. And for the first time, I think she actually meant it."

"Good. I told you she'd come around. I assume it would be cool as hell to have a bad-ass for a mother."

"I'm far from a bad-ass," Kate said as they reached the gate. Still, she thought of what she had been doing when she received the call and thought it might be okay to accept that moniker...

at least a little.

“Last I heard,” Kate said, “you were working a triple murder case out in Maine.”

“Yeah, I was. We wrapped it about a week ago—about six agents in all on that thing. When I got the call from Duran about this case, he told me he planned to send you out and asked if I wanted to partner with you. I, of course, jumped at the chance. I told him I’d like to be partnered with you whenever possible in the future.”

“Thanks,” Kate said. She left it at that, though. It actually meant a lot to her but she didn’t want to get sappy on DeMarco.

They boarded the plane together and took their seats, right beside one another. When they were settled, DeMarco reached into her carry-on and pulled out a thick folder crammed with papers and documents.

“This is everything on the Nobilini file,” she said. “Based on your history with it, I assume you know it inside and out?”

“Probably,” Kate said.

“It’s a pretty quick flight,” DeMarco pointed out. “I’d much rather hear it from you instead of notes and files.”

Kate would have felt the same way. What surprised her was how eager she was to share the details of the case with DeMarco. The case had been like a nagging itch at the back of her mind over the years but she had always managed to push it away, not wanting to focus on the one true failure of her career.

So as the plane started to position itself toward the runway,

Kate started to go back over the specifics of the case. As she did, stopping for the annoyance of the pre-flight announcements, she realized that it all felt new now. Maybe it was all the time that had passed since she had last truly dwelt on it, or the almost-retirement (or both), but the case now felt alive and active.

She told DeMarco the details of the case in a high-end suburb just out of New York City. Just one body, but the case had been pushed by someone in Congress, as the victim was closely linked. No prints, no clues. The body, one Frank Nobilini, was found in an alley in the Midtown district. The best guess was that he had been headed for work, walking the single block from the parking garage to his office. Just a single gunshot wound to the back of the head. Execution style.

“How could it be execution style if someone clearly abducted him and dragged him into the alleyway?” DeMarco asked.

“That’s another unanswered question to the case. It was assumed that Nobilini was roughed up a bit, forced to his knees, and then shot in the back of the head. Blood and bits of skull were all over the side of the wall of the building beside the body. His BMW keys were still in his hand.”

DeMarco nodded and allowed Kate to continue.

“The victim was from a small town, a well-to-do little suburb called Ashton,” Kate said. “It’s the sort of town that draws in visitors for its pretentious antique stores, overpriced dining, and immaculate real estate.”

“And that’s the thing I don’t get about it,” DeMarco said. “A

place like that, people tend to gossip, right? You'd think *someone* would have known something or heard rumors about who the killer was. But there's nothing in these files." She said this last bit as she thumped her fingers against the folder.

"That always unnerved me," Kate said. "Ashton is an upscale place. But outside of that, it's also a very tight community. Everyone knows each other. For the most part, everyone was polite to one another. Neighbors helping neighbors, big turn-outs for school bake sales, the whole nine yards. The place is squeaky clean."

"No motives for the killer?" DeMarco asked.

"None that I ever knew about. Ashton has a population of just over three thousand. And sure, while it does attract its fair amount of people from New York City and other outlying areas, it has an incredibly small crime rate. So even though the murder didn't actually occur in Ashton, it's why the Nobilini murder was such a big deal eight years ago."

"And there were never any other murders like this one?"

"Nope. Not until today, apparently. My theory is that the killer noted the FBI presence and got spooked. In a town that size, it would be easy to notice the presence of the FBI." Kate paused here and took the file folder from DeMarco. "How much did Duran tell you?"

"Not much. He said we were in a rush and asked that I read over the case files."

"Did you see what sort of gun was used for the murder?" Kate

asked.

“I did. A Ruger Hunter Mark IV. Seemed weird. Seemed *professional*. That’s an expensive gun for some random murder with no apparent motive.”

“I agree. The bullet and the casing we found made it an easy one to recognize. And despite the expensive and very nice gun that was used, the fact that it was used at all told us all we needed to know: it was someone that knew jack shit about killing people.”

“How’s that?”

“Anyone that knew what they were doing would know that the Ruger Hunter Mark IV would leave behind a casing. Which makes it a terrible choice.”

“I assume this latest man was killed by a similar weapon?” DeMarco asked.

“According to Duran, it’s the exact same weapon.”

“So this killer decided to do it again eight years later. Weird.”

“Well, we’ll have to wait and see about that,” Kate said. “All Duran told me was that the victim looked as if he had been set up like a prop. And that the weapon used to kill him was the same kind that killed Frank Nobilini.”

“Yeah, and this one is in Midtown in New York City. I wonder if this latest victim is also connected to Ashton.”

Kate only shrugged as the plane experienced a bit of turbulence. It had done her a great deal of good to go through the case details. It had essentially knocked the cobwebs off of the

case and made it feel new again. And maybe, Kate figured, eight years of space between her and the original case might allow her to look at it with fresh eyes.

It had been a while since Kate had been to New York. She and Michael, her late husband, had come here for a weekend getaway not long before he died. The congestion and absolute busyness of the place never ceased to awe her. It made the gridlock of Washington, DC, seem trivial by comparison. The fact that it was nearing nine o'clock on a Friday night was not helping matters.

They arrived at the scene of the crime at 8:42 p.m. Kate parked their rental car as close to the crime scene tape as she could. The scene was in a back alley located on 43rd Street, the hustle and bustle of Grand Central Station a few blocks over. There were two police cars parked nose to nose in front of the alley, not blocking the yellow crime scene tape or the alley itself, but making it known to anyone who wanted a peek at what was going on that there would be repercussions for their curiosity.

As Kate and DeMarco reached the alleyway, a bulky policeman stopped them at the crime scene tape. But when Kate showed her badge, he shrugged his shoulders and lifted the tape for them. She noted that he made no real attempt to check out DeMarco when she bent down to go under the tape. She wondered idly if DeMarco, an openly homosexual woman, took

offense when a man checked her out or if she considered it a compliment.

“Feds,” the officer said with a huff. “I heard they called you in. Seems a bit much to me. Pretty open and shut case from the looks of it.”

“Just checking on something,” Kate said as she and DeMarco walked into the dark alley.

The police cars at the mouth of the alley had been parked at a light angle to allow the headlights to shine into the darkness. Kate’s and DeMarco’s elongated shadows added an air of eeriness to the scene.

At the back of the alleyway—which dead-ended along a brick wall—there were two policemen and a plainclothes detective standing in a small semicircle. There was a slight lump against the wall in front of them. The victim, Kate presumed. She approached the three men and introduced herself and DeMarco as they again showed their ID.

“Nice to meet you,” one of the officers said. “But if I’m being honest, I don’t quite know why the FBI was so insistent on getting someone out here.”

“Ah, Jesus,” the plainclothes detective said. He looked to be in his forties and a bit grungy. Long dark hair, five o’clock shadow, and a pair of glasses that reminded Kate of every picture she’d ever seen of Buddy Holly.

“We’ve been through this,” the detective said. He looked at Kate, rolled his eyes, and said: “If it’s a crime that’s older than a

week or so, NYPD doesn't want to touch it. It blows their minds that anyone would want to dig back up an unsolved murder case from eight years ago. I was actually the one that called the bureau. I know they were hot and heavy on the Nobilini case when it was active. Some sort of friendship with someone in Congress, right?"

"That's right," Kate said. "And I was the lead agent on that case."

"Oh. Good to meet you. I'm Detective Luke Pritchard. I sort of have an obsession with cold cases. This one pinged my interest because of the weapon that seems to have been used as well as the fact that it was carried out execution style. If you look closely, you can see scuff marks on the forehead where the killer apparently had him lean against the brick wall right here." He placed his hand on the side of the building to their right where there was dried blood splattered everywhere.

"May we?" Kate asked.

The two policemen shrugged and stepped back. "By all means," one said. "With a detective and the bureau on this, we'll happily leave you to it."

"Have fun," the other cop said as they turned away and headed back to the mouth of the alleyway.

Kate and DeMarco crowded in around the body. Pritchard stepped back to allow them some extra room, but kept close.

"Well," DeMarco said, "I'd say the immediate cause of death is pretty clear."

This was true. There was a single bullet hole in the back of the man's head, the hole rather clean but the rim of it charred and gory—just like Frank Nobilini's. It was a man, in his late thirties or early forties if Kate had to venture a guess. He was wearing high-end athletic wear, a thin zip-up hoodie, and nice jogging pants. The laces of his expensive running shoes were tied perfectly and the Apple ear buds he had been listening to sat neatly to his side, as if placed there intentionally.

“We have an ID yet?” Kate asked.

“Yeah,” Pritchard said. “Jack Tucker. The ID in his wallet places his residence in the town of Ashton. Which, to me, was an even stronger connection to the Nobilini case.”

“Are you familiar with Ashton, Detective?” Kate asked.

“Not very. Been through there a few times, but it's not my kind of place. Too perfect, too quaint and sickeningly sweet.”

She knew what he meant. She couldn't help but wonder what he was going to feel like, having to return to Ashton.

“When was the body discovered?” DeMarco asked.

“Four thirty this afternoon. I arrived on the scene at a quarter after five and made all those connections. I had to beg them not to move the body until you guys got here. I figure you'd need to see the scene, body and all.”

“I bet that made you popular,” Kate commented.

“Oh, I'm used to it. I wish I was joking when I tell you that a lot of the cops around here call me Cold Case Pritchard.”

“Well, I think on this one, you made the right call,” Kate said.

“Even if it turns out not to be connected, there’s still someone out there that shot this man—someone that we need to find just in case this isn’t an isolated incident.”

“Yeah, no clue on my end,” Pritchard said. “I have a few voice memos with my observations if you’d like to check them out.”

“That could be helpful. I assume forensics has already snapped pictures?”

“Yeah. The digitals are probably already available.”

With that, Kate got to her feet, her eyes still on Jack Tucker’s body. His head was tilted to the right, as if he were staring longingly at the earbuds that had been so carefully placed by his side.

“Has the family been notified?” DeMarco asked.

“No. And I fear that because I asked the PD to hold off on moving the body and getting the case moved along, they’re going to task me with it.”

“If it’s all the same, I’d prefer to do it,” Kate said. “The fewer channels the details are being processed through, the better.”

“If that’s what you want.”

Kate finally looked away from the body of Jack Tucker and then to the mouth of the alley where the two cops were congregating with the cop who had lifted the tape. She had delivered such devastating news more times than she cared to count and it was never easy. In fact, somehow, it seemed to get harder and harder.

But she had also learned that strangely enough, it was in the

sharp and agonizing throes of grief that those suffering loss seemed to be able to remember the most minute of details.

Kate hoped it would hold true in this case.

And if so, maybe an unsuspecting new widow could help her close a case that had haunted her for nearly a decade.

CHAPTER THREE

It was only a twenty-minute drive from midtown to Ashton. It was 9:20 when they left the crime scene and the Friday night traffic remained stubborn and grueling. As they came out of the worst of the traffic and onto the freeway, Kate noticed that DeMarco was unusually quiet. She was in the passenger's seat, staring almost defiantly out the window at the passing cityscape.

"You okay over there?" Kate asked.

Without turning toward Kate, DeMarco answered right away, making it clear that something had been on her mind since leaving the crime scene.

"I know you've been at this awhile and know the ropes, but I've only ever had to break the news of a dead family member one time before. I hated it. It made me feel awful. And I really wish you had checked with me before volunteering us for it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't even think about that. But it *is* part of the job in some cases. At the risk of sounding cold, it's best to start getting used to it right off the bat. Besides...if we're running the case, what's the point in delegating this miserable task to that poor detective?"

"Still...how about a little heads-up on things like that in the future?"

The tone in her voice was one of anger, something she had not heard from DeMarco before—not directed toward her, anyway.

“Yeah,” she said, and left it at that.

They drove the rest of the way into Ashton in silence. Kate had worked enough cases where she had to break the news of a death to know that any tension between partners was going to make the matter so much worse. But she also knew that DeMarco wasn't the type who was going to listen to any lessons she had to deliver while she was pissed off. So maybe this one, Kate thought, would be something she could simply learn by living it out.

They arrived at the Tucker residence at 9:42. Kate was not at all surprised to see that the porch light, as well as just about every other light in the house, was on. From the looks of Jack Tucker's attire, he had been out for a morning jog. The question of why his body had been in the city, though, presented many questions. All of those questions presumably led to one very concerned wife.

A concerned wife who is about to find out she's now a widow, Kate thought. *My God, I hope they don't have kids.*

Kate parked in front of the house and got out of the car. DeMarco followed suit, only slower, as if to make sure to let Kate know that she was not at all happy about this particular detail. They walked up the flagstone walk toward the steps and Kate watched as the front door opened before they even made it to the porch.

The woman at the door saw them and froze. It looked as if she were working very hard to come up with what words she wanted to speak. In the end, all she could muster was: “Who are you?”

Kate slowly reached into her jacket pocket for her ID. Before

she could even fully show it or give her name, the wife already knew. It showed in her eyes and the way her face slowly started to crumple. And as Kate and DeMarco finally reached the porch steps, Jack Tucker's wife went to her knees in the doorway and began to wail.

As it turned out, the Tuckers *did* have kids. Three of them, in fact, ages seven, ten, and thirteen. They were all still awake, lingering in the living room while Kate did her best to get the wife—Missy, she managed to introduce herself through her wailing and sobs—inside and sitting down. The thirteen-year-old came rushing to her mother's side while DeMarco did her best to keep the others away while their mother came to terms with the devastating news that she had just been handed.

In a way, Kate realized that maybe she *had* jumped the gun on DeMarco. The first twenty minutes she spent in the Tucker home that night were gut-wrenching. She could only think of one other moment in her career that was as heartbreaking. She looked over at DeMarco, both during and after she had tried to corral the kids, and saw the defiance and anger there. Kate figured this might be something that DeMarco held against her for a very long time.

Somewhere in the midst of it all, Missy Tucker realized that she was going to have to find someone to sit with her kids if she

was going to try to be of any help to Kate and DeMarco. Through thin wails, she called her brother-in-law, having to break the news to him as well. They also lived in Ashton and his wife left almost immediately to come sit with the kids.

In an effort to give Missy and the Tucker children some privacy to deal with their grief, Kate got Missy's permission to look around the house for any signs of what might have occurred to have resulted in someone wanting to murder her husband. They started in the master bedroom, searching through the Tuckers' bedside tables and private items to the sound of a sobbing family downstairs.

"This really sucks," DeMarco said.

"It does. I'm sorry, DeMarco. I really am. I just thought it would be easier for everyone involved."

"Is that really what it is?" DeMarco asked. "I know I don't know you all that well yet, but one of the things I *do* know about you is you have a tendency to go out of your way to put as much pressure on yourself as you can. It's why you can't figure out the rather simple struggle of balancing your time with the bureau with the time for your family."

"Excuse me?" Kate asked, feeling a flare of anger.

DeMarco shrugged. "Sorry. But it's true. Local cops could have done this and we could have probably already been elsewhere, digging into this case."

"With no witnesses, the wife is the best bet," Kate said. "It just so happens she's also having to deal with the death of her

husband. It sucks for everyone involved. But you have to get over your own discomfort. In the grand scheme of things, who is more uncomfortable right now? You or the freshly grieving widow downstairs?”

Kate wasn't aware of her loud and irritated tone until the last few words were out of her mouth. DeMarco stared her down for a moment before shaking her head like some spoiled teenager with no rebuttal, and left the room.

When Kate also left the room, she saw that DeMarco was looking through an office and miniature library just down the hallway. Kate left her to it, opting to head outside to look for any clues. She wasn't expecting to find anything as she skirted around the house but knew it would be irresponsible not to go through the routine.

Back inside, she saw that Jack Tucker's brother and wife had come. The brother and Missy were in a trembling embrace while the wife knelt by the kids and gave them all a hug. Kate saw that the thirteen-year-old—a girl who looked very much like her father—had a blank look on her face. Seeing it, she didn't fault DeMarco for being pissed at her.

“Agent Wise?”

Kate turned as she was about to head back up the stairs and saw Missy coming down the hallway toward her. “Yes?”

“If we're going to talk, let's do it now. I don't know how much longer I can hold it together.” Already, she was starting to let out little whines and moans again. Being that the news of her

husband's death was barely one hour old, Kate admired her for her strength.

Missy said nothing else, but walked up the stairs with a quick glance back toward the living room where her kids and relatives were gathered. DeMarco joined them from where she was checking the medicine cabinet in the upstairs bathroom and the three of them went into the master bedroom—the bedroom Kate and DeMarco had already checked.

Missy sat on the edge of the bed like a woman waking up from a very bad dream, only to realize the dream was still taking place.

“You asked me earlier why he was in New York City,” she said. “Jack worked as a senior accountant for a pretty big firm—Adler and Johnson. They've been working night and day on this big overhaul for a nuclear decommissioning company in South Carolina. On the really late nights, he's just been staying in the city.”

“Were you expecting him back tonight or were you thinking he'd be staying in a hotel?” DeMarco asked.

“I talked to him at about seven this morning, before he left for his morning run. He said not only did he plan on being home today, but probably pretty early—maybe around four or so.”

“I assume you started trying to call or text him at a certain point when you realized it was getting late?” Kate asked.

“Yeah, but not until seven or so. When those guys get deep into their jobs, time sort of goes out the window.”

“Mrs. Tucker, the FBI was called in on your husband's murder

because the situation reflects the details and circumstances of a case from eight years ago. The victim was another man who lived here in Ashton, also killed in New York,” Kate explained. “There is no *hard* evidence to support it, but it’s close enough to have alarmed the bureau. So it is very important that you try to think about any people that your husband might have made enemies with.”

Kate could tell that Missy was once again fighting with tears. She gulped down the need to let out the grief, trying to get through it.

“I can’t think of anyone. I’m not just saying it because I love the man, but he was extremely kind. Outside of a few little arguments at work, I don’t think he ever had a heated argument his entire life.”

“What about any close friends?” Kate asked. “Are there any friends, men in particular, that he hung around with who might have seen another side of him?”

“Well, he was a little silly with this group of friends out at the yacht club, but I don’t think they’d describe him as anything negative.”

“Do you have the names of some of these friends that we could talk to?” DeMarco asked.

“Yes. He had this core group. . . him and three other guys. They get together at the yacht club or hang out at the cigar bar and watch sports. Football, mostly.”

“Do you happen to know if any of them have people they

might consider enemies?” DeMarco asked. “Even jealous ex-wives or estranged family members?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know them that well and—”

The sound of uncontrollable sobbing from downstairs interrupted her. Missy looked in the direction of the bedroom door with a frown that made Kate’s heart ache.

“That’s Dylan, our middle child. He and his father were...”

She stopped here, her lip quivering as she tried to keep herself together.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Tucker,” DeMarco said. “Go to your kids. We’ve got enough to get started.”

Missy got up quickly and sprinted for the door, already starting to cry. DeMarco followed behind her slowly, casting an angry look back at Kate. Kate stood in the bedroom a moment longer, getting a grip on her own emotions. No, this part of the job never got truly easier. And the fact that they had gotten very little information from the visit made it even worse.

She finally headed back out into the hallway, understanding why DeMarco was mad at her. Hell, she was a little angry with herself.

Kate walked back downstairs and head out the door. She saw that DeMarco was already getting into the car, wiping tears from her eyes. Kate closed the door softly behind her, the grief and weeping of the Tucker family pushing her along like an usher that led her deeper and deeper into a case that already seemed lost.

CHAPTER FOUR

By nine o'clock the following morning, news of Jack Tucker's murder had started making the rounds around Ashton. It was the main reason why it was so easy for Kate and DeMarco to get in touch with Jack's friends—the names and numbers of which Missy had given them last night. Not only had his friends already heard the news, they had started to come up with plans on how to help Missy and the kids as they dealt with their loss.

After a few quick phone calls, Kate and DeMarco had set up a meeting with three of Jack's friends at the yacht club. It was a Saturday, so the lot was already starting to fill up, even at nine in the morning. The club was located right along the Long Island Sound and had what Kate thought was probably the best view of the sound without all of the pretentious boat traffic getting in the way.

The club itself was a two-story building that looked nearly Colonial in style, with a modern twist, particularly to the exterior and landscaping. Kate was greeted by a man who was already standing at the doors. He was dressed in a simple button-down shirt and a pair of khakis—probably what passed for weekend casual for someone who belonged to a yacht club like this one.

“You Agent Wise?” the man asked.

“I am. And this is my partner, Agent DeMarco.”

DeMarco only nodded, her anger and bitterness from the

previous night still very much present. When they had parted ways at the hotel last night, DeMarco hadn't said so much as a single word. She *had* managed a simple "good morning" over their quick breakfast but that had been it so far.

"I'm James Cortez," the man said. "I spoke with you on the phone earlier this morning. The other guys are out on the veranda, ready and waiting with coffee."

He led them through the club, its high ceilings and warm environment utterly charming. Kate wondered how much it cost to be a member here for a year. Out of her price range for sure. When they stepped out onto the veranda that overlooked the Long Island Sound, she became certain of this. It was beautiful, looking directly out onto the water with the tall shapes and haze of the city on the other side.

There were two other men sitting at a small wooden table that held a large plate of pastries and bagels as well as a carafe of coffee. Both men looked up at the agents and got to their feet to greet them. One of the men looked rather young, certainly no older than thirty, while James Cortez and the other man were easily in their mid-forties.

"Duncan Ertz," the younger man said, extending his hand.

Kate and DeMarco both shook the men's hands as they went through a quick round of introductions. The older man was Paul Wickers, freshly retired from his job as a stockbroker and more than willing to talk about it, as it was the second thing that came out of his mouth.

Kate and DeMarco took a seat at the table. Kate took one of the empty coffee cups and filled it, doctoring it up with the sugar and cream that sat by the plate of breakfast pastries.

“It hurts to think about poor Missy and those kids this morning,” Duncan said, biting into a Danish.

Kate recalled the trauma of last night and felt that she needed to check in on the poor woman. She looked across the table at DeMarco and wondered if she needed to check in on her, too. Removed from the situation, Kate was starting to understand that perhaps DeMarco had taken it so hard because of something in her past—something she had still not gotten over yet.

“Well,” Kate said, “Missy specifically mentioned you gentlemen as those closest to Jack outside of his family. I was hoping to get some insights into the sort of man he was outside of his home and work.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” James Cortez said. “From what I know, Jack was the same man no matter where he was. A straight shooter. A kind soul that always wanted to help others. If he had any flaws, I’d say it was that he was a little too involved with his work.”

“He was always good for a joke,” Duncan said. “They weren’t funny most of the time, but he loved to tell them.”

“That’s for sure,” Paul said.

“There were no secrets he told you guys about?” DeMarco asked. “Maybe an affair or even thoughts of an affair?”

“God no,” Paul said. “Jack Tucker was insanely in love with

his wife. I'd feel safe saying that man loved everything about his life. His wife, kids, work, friends..."

"That's why this makes no sense," James said. "I mean this in the most respectful way possible, but from an outsider's perspective, Jack was a pretty standard guy. Boring, almost."

"Any idea if he might have any connections to the victim of a murder that occurred eight years ago?" Kate asked. "A guy named Frank Nobilini who also lived in Ashton and was killed in New York."

"Frank Nobilini?" Duncan Ertz said, shaking his head.

"Yeah," James said. "Worked for that big-ass ad agency that does all the sneaker jobs. His wife was Jennifer...your wife probably knows her. Nice lady. Into community beautification projects and is very active with the PTA and things like that."

Ertz shrugged. Apparently, he was the newbie of the group and knew none of this.

"You think Jack's murder is linked to Nobilini's?" Paul asked.

"It's far too early to know that just yet," Kate said. "But given the nature of the murder, we have to look at it from that viewpoint."

"Do any of you happen to know the names of anyone Jack worked with?" DeMarco asked.

"There's only two people over him," Paul said. "One of them is a guy named Luca. He lives in Switzerland and comes over three or four times a year. The other is a local guy named Daiju Hiroto. I'm pretty sure he's the supervisor over the Adler and

Johnson NYC offices.”

“According to Jack,” Duncan said, “Daiju is the kind of guy that practically lives at work.”

“Was it common for Jack to have to work weekends?” Kate asked.

“Here and there,” James said. “He’d done it a lot lately, actually. They’re in the middle of some huge job to help bail out a nuclear decommissioning company. Last time I spoke with Jack, he said if they straightened it all out in time, there could be a *lot* of money involved in it.”

“I’d bet good money you’ll find almost the entire crew working today,” Paul said. “They might be able to tell you some things we don’t know about.”

DeMarco slid one of her business cards over to James Cortez and then picked a cherry Danish from the plate in front of them. “Please give us a call if you think of anything else over the course of the next few days.”

“And maybe keep the idea of the case from eight years ago to yourself,” Kate said. “The last thing we need is for the people living in Ashton to get into a frenzy.”

Paul nodded, sensing that she was speaking directly to him.

“Thanks, gentlemen,” Kate said.

She took one more long sip of her coffee and left the men to their quiet breakfast. She glanced out at the sound where a sailboat was slowly coasting out into the water, as if tugging in the start of the weekend behind it.

“I’ll get the address to Jack Tucker’s office at Adler and Johnson,” DeMarco said, pulling out her phone. And even in that, her tone was distant and cold.

She and I are going to have to hash this out before it gets out of hand, Kate thought. Sure, she’s a hard-ass but if I have to put her in her place, I won’t hesitate to do so.

The offices of Adler and Johnson were located in one of the more glamorous-looking high rises in Manhattan. It was located on the first and second floors of a building that also contained a law firm, a mobile applications developer, and a small literary agency. As it turned out, Paul Wickers had been correct; most of the team Jack Tucker had worked with was in the office. The workspace smelled of strong coffee and though there was a great deal of busyness among the eight people working, there was a somber mood as well.

Daiju Hiroto met with them right away, escorting them into his large office. He looked like a man torn—perhaps between his need to get this massive project finished on time and the humane reaction to the death of a co-worker and friend.

“I learned the news this morning,” Hiroto said from behind his large desk. “I had been at work since six this morning and one of our workers—Katie Mayer—came in with the news. There were fifteen of us here at the time and I gave them all the option of

taking the weekend off. Six people thought it best to leave to pay their respects.”

“If you did not have this team to oversee, would you have done the same?” Kate asked.

“No. It is a selfish answer, but this job has to be done. We have two weeks to finish everything and we are a bit behind. And more than fifty people’s jobs are at risk if we don’t pull it off.”

“Of your team, who do you think would have known Jack the best?” Kate asked.

“Probably me. Jack and I worked very closely together on several large jobs over the last ten years or so. We’ve traveled all over the world together and pulled late nights and meetings that the rest of the team didn’t even know about.”

“But you said someone else knew about his death first?” DeMarco asked.

“Yes, Katie. She lives in Ashton and is fairly good friends with Jack’s wife.”

Kate wanted to say something about how it seemed a little offensive that Hiroto was not calling it a day so that he, as well as the others who had dutifully stayed behind, could grieve. But she knew the demons that sometimes drove men who were possessed by their work and knew that it was not her place to make such a judgment.

“In all of your time with Jack, did you ever know him to keep secrets?” DeMarco asked.

“Not that I can think of. And if he did, I apparently wasn’t

someone he wished to divulge them to. But between the three of us, I find it very hard to believe that Jack had a secret life. He was on the straight and narrow, you know? A good guy. Polished around the edges.”

“So you can’t think of any reason someone might have wanted to kill him?” Kate asked.

“No. The idea is insane.” He paused here and looked out through the glass walls of his office and to the rest of his team. “And it was here in the city?” he asked.

“It was. Did you not call him when you realized he had not come in?”

“Oh, I did. Several times. When he didn’t answer by noon or so, I let it go. Jack was always very sharp, very smart. If he needed a few hours just to get away—which he did from time to time—I let him have it.”

“Mr. Hiroto, would you mind if we spoke to some of the others out there?” Kate asked, nodding toward the other side of the glass walls.

“By all means. Help yourself.”

“And could you get the contact information of those that decided to leave?” DeMarco asked.

“Certainly.”

Kate and DeMarco ventured out into the workspace of cubicles, large desks, and rich coffee. But even before they had spoken to a single person, Kate got a pretty good feeling that they were going to get more of the same. Usually, when more

than one person described someone else as being very plain and uneventful, it usually turned out to be true.

Within fifteen minutes, they had spoken with the eight other workers currently in the office. Kate had been right; everyone described Jack and sweet, kind, not one to rock the boat. And for the second time that morning, someone referred to Jack Tucker as boring—but in a good, non-offensive way.

In the back of her head, Kate felt something stir, some memory or saying that she had heard somewhere along the roads of her life. Something about watching out for a bored wife or spouse—how the boredom might make them snap. But it wouldn't come to her.

After stopping by Hiroto's office one last time to get a list of the people who had elected to leave work, Kate and DeMarco headed back out into the gorgeous New York City Saturday morning. She thought of poor Missy Tucker, sitting under the weight of this beautiful day, trying to adapt to a life that, for a while anyway, might not seem so beautiful at all.

They spent the rest of their morning visiting with the ones who had decided to leave work. They encountered many tears and even a few who were enraged that a man as innocent and as kind as Jack Tucker would have been murdered. It was exactly the same as speaking to the others in the office, only not as stifling.

They spoke with the last person—a man named Jerry Craft—shortly after lunchtime. They arrived at his home just as Jerry was getting into his car. Kate parked behind him in his driveway, catching an irritated look. She stepped out of the car as Jerry Craft approached them. His eyes were red and he looked quite melancholy.

“Sorry to bother you,” Kate said, showing her ID. DeMarco stepped up beside her and did the same. “We’re agents Wise and DeMarco, FBI. We were hoping you might have some time to speak with us about Jack Tucker.”

The irritation quickly left Jerry’s face and he nodded and propped himself up against the back of his car.

“I don’t know what I could offer than what I’m sure you’ve already heard from everyone else. I assume you spoke with Mr. Hiroto and everyone else at the office?”

“We have,” Kate said. “We’re now speaking with those that left today—as it would seem they had a closer connection with Jack.”

“I don’t know if that’s necessarily true,” Jerry said. “There were only a few of us that ever really hung out outside of work. And Jack usually wasn’t among them. A few of them probably took Hiroto up on his offer just to get a day off.”

“Any idea why Jack wasn’t one to hang out after work hours?” DeMarco asked.

“No reason, I don’t think. Jack was something of a home body, you know? He’d rather be at home with his wife and kids

in his free time. The job had him working crazy hours as it was—no sense in hanging at a bar with those same people you just left work with. He loved his family, you know? Always doing extravagant things for birthdays and anniversaries. Always talking up his kids at work.”

“So you also think he had the perfect life?” Kate asked.

“Seemed that way. Although, really, can any of us have a *perfect* life? I mean, even Jack had some strain with his mother from what I know. But don’t we all?”

“How’s that?”

“Nothing big. There was this one day at work where I heard him talking to his wife on the phone. He was out in the stairwell for privacy, but I was using one of the older workstations right by the stairwell door. It stands out because it was the only time I heard him speaking to or about his wife with anything but happiness in his voice.”

“And it was a conversation about his mother?” Kate asked.

“Pretty sure. I sort of teased him about it when he came back in but he wasn’t in a joking mood.”

“Do you know anything about his parents?” Kate asked.

“No. Like I said, Jack was a great guy, but I wouldn’t really call him a *friend*.”

“Where are you headed right now?” DeMarco asked.

“I was going to go grab some flowers for his family and drop them by their house. I met his wife and kids a few times at Christmas parties and company barbecues, things like that. A

great little family. It's a damned shame what happened. Makes me a little sick, you know?"

"Well, we won't keep you any longer," Kate said. "Thank you, Mr. Craft."

Back in the car, Kate backed out of Jerry's driveway and said. "You want to grab Jack's mother's information?"

"On it," DeMarco said a little coldly.

Kate again found herself fighting to stay quiet. If DeMarco was going to draw out her little irritation about last night's events, that was her choice. Kate sure as hell wasn't going to let it affect her progress on this case.

At the same time, she also found herself having to bite back an ironic smile. She had spent so much time wrestling with whether or not her new position was keeping her away from her family yet here she was, working with a woman who reminded her so much of Melissa at times that it was scary. She thought of Melissa and Michelle as DeMarco was bounced back and forth along the departments within the bureau, searching for information on Jack Tucker's mother. She thought of how Melissa had behaved and acted the first time she, Kate, had been so enthralled in the Nobilini case. That had been eight years ago; Melissa had been twenty-one, still slightly rebellious and pretty much against anything her mother wished of her. There had been one stretch of time where Melissa had tried out coloring her hair purple. It had actually looked quite good but Kate had never been able to bring herself to say it out loud. It had been a trying time in their

lives, even when Michael, her husband, had still been alive and there to help her do the parenting as Melissa had gotten older.

“That’s interesting,” DeMarco said, pulling Kate out of her trip down memory lane. She was setting her phone down and looking ahead with an excited little sparkle in her eyes.

“What’s interesting?” Kate asked.

“Jack’s mother is one Olivia Tucker. Sixty-six years old, lives in Queens. A squeaky clean criminal record, but with one minor ding.”

“What’s the ding?”

“She had the cops called on her two years ago. The call was placed by Missy Tucker, on the same night Olivia Tucker was trying to force her way into their house.”

They shared a look and in it, Kate could feel some of that tension between them start to melt away. Good leads, after all, had a tendency to bring even the most estranged partners together.

Feeling as if she was finally getting somewhere, Kate turned the car around and headed toward Queens.

CHAPTER FIVE

Olivia Tucker lived in a basic run-of-the-mill apartment in Jackson Heights. When Kate and DeMarco arrived, she was being visited by a local preacher. It was the preacher who answered the door, a tall black man who looked very somber and sad. He regarded the agents skeptically and sighed softly.

“Can I help you ladies?”

“We need to speak with Mrs. Tucker,” DeMarco said. “Who might you be?”

“I’m Leland Toombs, the pastor of her church. And who might you be?”

They went through the usual routine of showing their IDs and introducing themselves. Toombs took a tentative step back and gave them a disapproving look.

“You understand she is in a very distressed state, right?”

“Of course,” Kate said. “We’re trying to find her son’s killer and we are hoping she might be able to shed some light to help.”

“Who is that?” a shaky voice called from elsewhere in the apartment. A woman stepped into view from another room and started for the door.

“It’s the FBI,” Leland told her. “But Olivia, I’d suggest you take a moment to think about if you are ready to speak with them.”

Olivia Tucker came to the door looking an absolute mess.

Her eyes were bloodshot and it looked like she was even having trouble walking. She looked at Kate and DeMarco and then placed a reassuring hand on Toombs's shoulder.

"Yes, I think I need to," she said. "Pastor Toombs, would you give me a moment?"

"I think maybe I should be here when they speak with you."

She shook her head. "No. I appreciate it, but I need to do this part on my own."

Toombs frowned and then looked at Kate and DeMarco. "Please be kind. She is not taking this well." He then gave Olivia one final look and stepped out of the door while calling over his shoulder, "Please call me if you need anything, Olivia."

Olivia watched him go and then slowly closed the door behind her. "Please, come on into the living room."

Her voice was soft and ragged and she still walked as if her legs weren't quite sure what they were doing.

"Did you know," she said as they entered the living room, "that the cops called me and told me what had happened a full six hours after his body was found?"

"Why so long?" Kate asked.

"I suppose they assumed Missy would call and tell me. They told her first, of course. But it was later, after Missy had refused, that the police finally called."

"Are you sure she *refused*?" DeMarco asked. "Given the nature of what happened, do you think she simply forgot?"

Olivia shrugged, but not as an *I don't know* gesture. It was

more of an *I don't care*.

“Do you mean to tell me that you think Missy would have done something like that on purpose?” Kate asked.

“Honestly, I just don't know. The woman is vindictive as hell. I wouldn't put much of anything beyond her. She probably *forgot* so she wouldn't have to speak to me or, God forbid, *see* me.”

“Want to tell us why you seem to dislike her so much?” DeMarco asked.

“Oh, I never liked her, not really. She was quite charming at first, when she was trying to earn my good graces. But the moment Jack put that engagement ring on her finger, she became some other person. Controlling. Manipulative. She has never appreciated the plush little life she has. She may have loved Jack deep down in some sick, twisted way—I don't doubt that. But she never appreciated him.”

“Can you explain that a bit more?” Kate asked.

“She was always wanting something else—wanting more. And she made no secret of it. Everything she had, no matter what it was—kids, wealthy husband, beautiful house, you name it—it was never enough. Nothing Jack ever did was good enough for her.”

Kate noticed the look of absolute venom in Olivia's face as she spoke. She believed every single word she was saying. But from the little bit of time Kate had spent with Missy Tucker, she found it all very hard to believe.

“Do you know if Jack felt this way about her?”

“God, no. He was so blinded by it all. By her and her little act.”

“So you’d comfortably rule out the idea of him being involved in an affair?”

Her look of shock was all the answer Kate needed. But Olivia had some choice words, too. “Given what I’ve been through the last few hours, how dare you ask such a stupid question? Are you *trying* to be insensitive and rude?”

“I ask only because that would at least give us somewhere to start looking. If he was involved in something like that, it would give us a series of leads to pursue. Because quite frankly, as of now, we have no witnesses and no suspects.”

“Suspects? Honey, I’ve already told you who did it. It was his hateful wife.”

Kate and DeMarco shared an uneasy glance. Whether Olivia Tucker’s statement was true or not, this case was going to get quite awkward before it was brought to a close.

Kate let the comment hang in the air for a moment before going on. When she did, she was sure to use her words carefully, choosing each one with great purpose.

“Are you sure you want to make such a bold statement?” Kate asked. “If you’re serious about that, I have to consider it a lead and start pursuing Missy Tucker as a potential suspect.”

“You do your job the way you want,” Olivia said. “But I know that woman. She wanted something different. She wanted out, but without the risk of losing everything in the process. Now you tell me some easier way to go about doing that than killing your

husband.”

Throughout all of her career, Kate didn't think she'd ever met anyone who was so blinded with hatred for someone else—in-laws, estranged siblings, and so on, she'd seen it all. But Olivia Tucker took things to a whole different level.

“I have to point out,” DeMarco said, “that a great deal of time on our trip out here was spent going over everything there was to know about both Jack *and* Missy. While we don't have full reports by any means, there was more than enough to see that there was no marital discord strong enough to ping any legal issues.”

“That's right,” Kate said. “Additionally, there were no financial troubles, no marks on her criminal record, nothing like that. You, on the other hand, do have a slight mark on your record. Do you want to tell me about the night Missy had to call the cops because you were trying to get into their home?”

“Jack was having a hard time at work. He'd had a panic attack. I called to check on him and to talk to my grandkids, but Missy wasn't allowing it. She told me that Jack was too nice to say anything, but that *I* was part of the reason for his panic attack. She hung up on me when I called so I decided to go to their house. We had it out and she shoved me out the door, refusing to let me into the house. After that...well, I let my temper get the best of me and she called the police.”

“If we need to, we'll look into that,” Kate said “But honestly, there is nothing we have seen and nothing in the records to

indicate that Missy would have had any reason at all to kill her husband. There's no motive that we can see."

"Well, if you're that convinced, why the hell are you even here to speak with me?"

"Honestly?" DeMarco said. "It's because your name came up. One of Jack's co-workers overheard him having a heated conversation with his wife about you. We checked your records just to cover our bases and found out about the police call."

Olivia smiled the sort of smile often seen on tired villains in movies. "Well then, it seems you already have your mind made up about me."

"That's not the case at all. We just—"

"If you ladies don't mind, I'm going to politely ask you to leave. I'd like to properly grieve my son."

Kate knew that their time with Olivia Tucker was over; if she kept pressing, the woman would only shut down. Besides that, she had been useless for information—unless the vile feelings she had toward her daughter-in-law could be seen as truth. And Kate doubted there was anything to it.

"Thank you," Kate said. "And we are truly sorry for your loss."

Olivia nodded, got up, and walked out of the room. "I'm sure you remember where the door is," she said, before disappearing elsewhere into the house.

Kate and DeMarco took their leave, no closer to a solid lead but having been thoroughly rattled by Olivia Tucker's views on Missy.

“You think there’s a shred of truth to any of it?” DeMarco asked. She seemed to be coming out of her funk, apparently motivated by the case.

“I think in this moment, while she’s searching for answers to what happened, she thinks some of it is true. I think she’s taking little nuggets of fears she’s had over the years and amplifying them just to have some object to place her blame and rage on.”

DeMarco nodded as they got into the car. “Whatever it was, it was ugly.”

“And I think it rules her out of any foul play. We may want to keep an eye on Missy, though, just to keep her safe. Maybe even let local PD know how unhinged Olivia seems to be.”

“And then what?”

“And then we regroup. Possibly over a glass or two of wine back at the hotel.”

It sounded like a good idea but Kate continued to think of Missy Tucker and how her world was now very much an empty shell of what it had once been. Kate remembered all too well what it felt like to lose the man you loved, the man who knew you like a book he’d read millions of times. It was heartbreaking beyond words and drained the life out of you.

Revisiting that feeling in that moment, as she headed toward the hotel, made her more motivated than ever. It made her reach back into her memories to where details of the first case rested, back where the Nobilini case had started.

Her mind tried to latch onto a name—a name she knew well

but that had faded into the deeper regions of her memory. It was a name she was reminded of earlier in the day, when they had met with Jack Tucker's friends at the yacht club.

Cass Nobilini.

You know there are answers there, Kate thought.

There might be. And she'd go looking for them if it came to that.

But she really hoped it wouldn't. She hoped she could make it the rest of her life never seeing Cass Nobilini again. But she also knew the chances of that were very slim—that she may, in fact, be seeing her sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER SIX

They settled in at the hotel's bar just as the dinner rush started to pack the place out. While the prospect of a glass of wine was indeed promising, Kate found that she was a bit more excited about the burger she ordered. Usually when on a case, she'd somehow forget to eat lunch, leaving her ravenous at the end of the day. As she sank her mouth into the burger for the first bite, she saw DeMarco giving her a small smile. It was her first authentic smile of the day.

"What?" Kate asked through a mouthful of burger.

"Nothing," DeMarco said, picking at her grilled chicken salad. "It's reassuring to see a woman of your size and age eat like that."

Swallowing down the bite, Kate nodded and said, "I was gifted with an amazing metabolism."

"Oh, what a bitch."

"It's worth it to be able to eat like this."

A brief silence passed between them, which was shattered by both of them laughing together at the exchange. It felt good to be able to lower her guard around DeMarco after the tense day they'd shared. DeMarco seemed to feel the same way, based on what she said after sipping from her glass of wine.

"Sorry I was so bitter all day. The whole thing of breaking news like that to a family...it's hard. I mean, I know it's hard, but it's especially hard on me. I had this thing happen in my past that

jarred me. I thought I was over it, but apparently, I'm not."

"What happened?"

DeMarco took a moment, perhaps considering whether or not she wanted to delve into the story. With another large sip of wine, she decided to go ahead with it. She let out a sigh and began.

"I knew I was gay when I was fourteen. I had my first girlfriend when I was sixteen. When I was seventeen, my girlfriend Rose and I—she was nineteen—decided that we were going to go ahead and come out. We both had kept it a secret, particularly from our parents. So there we were—about to break the news. I was supposed to meet her at her house and we were going to tell her parents, who, I might add, assumed that Rose and I were just really good friends. I was always at her house and vice versa, you know? So I'm sitting there on her parents' couch when I get a phone call. It's from the police, telling me that Rose was in a car accident and that she had died right away, upon impact. I was called rather than her parents because they found her cell phone and saw that I took up about ninety percent of her call history.

"So I break down right away and her parents are sitting there, wondering what the hell happened—why I'm suddenly in tears, on my knees in the floor. And I had to tell them. I had to tell them what the policeman had just told me." She paused here, poked at her salad a bit, and then added, "It was the absolute worst moment of my life."

Kate found it hard to look at DeMarco; she was delivering the story not as an emotional part of it, but as if she were a robot,

reciting back a series of events. Still, the tale was more than enough to explain DeMarco's attitude the previous night when she, Kate, had volunteered them to break the bad news to Missy Tucker.

"If I'd known any of that, you know I wouldn't have volunteered us," Kate said.

"I know. And I knew it then. But my emotions strangled any reason or logic. Quite honestly, I just needed to sit and stew in it for a while. Sorry you caught the brunt of it."

"Water under the bridge," Kate said.

"Have you done that a lot in your career? Breaking news like that?"

"Oh yes. And it never gets easy. It becomes easier to detach yourself from it, but the act itself is never easy."

The table fell into silence again. The waiter came by and refilled their wine as Kate continued to work on her burger.

"So how's your man?" DeMarco asked. "Allen, right?"

"He's doing good. He's just about to the point in the relationship where he worries about me still being involved in the FBI. He'd prefer that I take a desk job. Or stay retired."

"So it's getting serious, huh?"

"It feels that way. And part of me is excited for it. But there's a small part of me that feels like it would be a waste of time. He and I are both quickly approaching sixty. Starting a new relationship at that age feels...odd, I guess." Sensing that DeMarco would latch onto the topic if she was allowed to do so, Kate quickly

redirected the conversation.

“How about you? Has the love life picked up at all since the last time we had this awkward conversation?”

DeMarco shook her head and smiled. “No, but that’s by choice. I’m still enjoying the Land of One-Night Stands while I still can.”

“Does that make you happy?”

DeMarco seemed genuinely shocked by the question. “It sort of does. I don’t need the responsibilities and requirements that come with a relationship right now.”

Kate chuckled. She had never been in the Land of One-Night Stands. She’d met Michael while in college and married him a year and a half later. It had been the kind of relationship where she had started to understand that they would spend their lives together as soon as their first kiss.

“So where’s the next step in this case?” DeMarco asked.

“I’m thinking about revisiting the initial case rather than just using it as a reference. I’m wondering if there’s new information that might have come up within the Nobilini family. But...well, like your story about your girlfriend being killed while you sat on her parents’ sofa, it’s not territory that is easily ventured back into.”

“So more awkward visits and conversations tomorrow?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure yet.”

“Is there anything worth filling me in on before I step blindly into it?”

“Probably. But trust me...it would be better saved for the morning. Going into it right now is only going to keep us up late and screw with my sleep.”

“Oh. *Those* kinds of stories.”

“Exactly.”

They finished their current glasses of wine and paid their checks. On the way up to their rooms, Kate thought about the story DeMarco had just told—of that sad glimpse into her past. It made her very aware that she knew very little about her partner. If they were working in a normal relationship, seeing one another nearly every day rather than once or twice every few months, that would certainly be different. It made her wonder if she was doing her part to truly get to know DeMarco.

They parted ways at their rooms—Demarco’s directly across the hall from Kate’s—and Kate felt the need to say something. Anything, really, to let her know that she appreciated DeMarco’s willingness to open up.

“Again, I apologize about last night. It’s dawning on me that I don’t know you well enough to be making decisions like that for both of us.”

“It’s fine, really,” DeMarco said. “I should have told you about it last night.”

“We need to be intentional about getting to know one another. If we’re trusting each other with our lives, it’s kind of necessary. Maybe outside of work sometime.”

“Yeah, that would be nice.” DeMarco paused here as she

opened her door. “You said you had some thinking to do... about the old case. The Nobilini case. Let me know if you need someone to ping ideas off of.”

“I’ll do that,” Kate said.

With that, they entered the rooms, ending the day between them. Kate kicked off her shoes and went directly to her laptop. As she booted it up, she called Director Duran. As she’d expected, he did not answer his phone but the line was then redirected to his assistant director, a woman named Nancy Saunders. Kate put in a request to have digital copies of the Nobilini files sent to her email as soon as possible. She knew that DeMarco had brought a few, but it was just the overview of the case. Kate felt the need to get back into the grittiness of the case, right down to the finer details. Saunders committed to getting it done, letting her know she’d have them by nine o’clock the following morning.

Cass Nobilini, Kate thought.

She’d thought of the woman almost right away, after Duran had told her about the possible connection. She’d thought of her again when she’d heard the wails and screeches of Missy Tucker as she grieved her murdered husband, and then again while talking to Jack Tucker’s friends.

Cass Nobilini, the mother of Frank Nobilini. The woman who had found it insulting and darkly improper for the media to latch onto the event of her son’s murder just because he had once worked closely with a few popular men in Congress as a financial

advisor. Kate felt that she had been a fool to even pretend that this case was not going to lead her back to Cass Nobilini in some way.

It was that thought that remained with her for the remainder of the night, clinging to the forefront of her mind as she eventually lay down in bed and drifted off to sleep.

She could still see the crime scene in her head. The wear and tear of memory made it a little faded and rusty, but the haziness was stripped away whenever she dreamed about it. In her dreams, it was as clear as if she were watching television.

And she saw it that night, managing to fall asleep shortly after nine yet twitching and moaning slightly in her sleep as the midnight hour approached.

The scene: Frank Nobilini, killed in the alley and still holding his BMW keys. The case had eventually led her back to his home, a four-bedroom house in Ashton. She'd started in the garage, which had smelled faintly of lawn trimmings from a recent grass-cutting. She'd felt like she was in some haunted place, like Frank Nobilini's spirit was there somewhere, waiting for her. Maybe in the empty space where his BMW was supposed to be but, at that time, had sat in a parking lot several blocks away from where his body had been found. The garage had been cold and like some weird tomb. It was one of the handful of scenes from her past that

always came back vividly for reasons she had never understood.

There had been no clues of any kind at the house, no signs of why someone might want to kill him. One would think that maybe it was for his very nice car, but the keys had been in his hand. The house had been clean. Almost eerily so. No paperwork trails, nothing of note in the address books or the mail. Nothing.

In her dream, Kate was standing there, in the alley. She was touching the still-sticky smear of gore on side of the wall in the same experimental way a child might touch a stray drop of syrup on the kitchen table. She turned and looked behind her, wanting to look down the alleyway, but saw the interior of the Nobilinis' garage instead. As if she had been invited inside, she walked to the wooden stairs that led to the door that would take her into the kitchen. She then moved in the way that only dreams allow, fluidly, almost being projected rather than moved by her legs. She somehow ended up in the bathroom, looking to the large tub/shower combo installed in the wall. It was filled with blood. Something was moving beneath the surface, causing little bubbles to rise to the top of the blood. When one would pop, it would send tiny droplets against the porcelain side of the wall.

She backed away, stepping through the bathroom doorway and into the hall. There, Frank Nobilini was walking toward her. Behind him, his wife, Jennifer, simply watched. She even gave Kate a harmless little wave as her dead husband lurched down the hallway. Frank walked very zombie-like, slowly and with an exaggerated gait.

“It’s okay,” someone said from behind her.

She turned and saw Cass Nobilini, Frank’s mother, sitting on the floor. She looked tired, defeated...as if she were waiting for an executioner’s blade.

“Cass...?”

“You were never going to solve it. It was over your head. But time...it has a way of changing things, doesn’t it?”

Kate turned back to Frank, still advancing. As he came by the bathroom door, Kate saw that some of the blood had come out of the tub and into the floor, seeping out into the hallway. When Frank stepped in it, it made a wet sucking sound.

Frank Nobilini smiled at her and raised his hand to her—slightly decayed and mottled. Kate slowly backed away, raising her own hands to her face, and let out a scream.

She woke up, feeling the scream lodged in her throat.

That damned house. She had never understood why it had rattled her in such a way. Maybe because of Jennifer Nobilini’s screams and wails, laced with the picture-perfect house...it had all seemed surreal. Like something out of an artsy horror movie.

Kate sat up and slowly inched her way to the edge of the bed. She collected a few deep breaths and looked at the clock: 1:22. The only light in the room came from the numbers on the alarm clock and the faint glow of the security lights outside, barely shining in through the closed blinds.

She’d had dreams concerning Cass Nobilini and that first case before, but this one had been a doozy. Her heart was still

hammering in her chest as she got out of bed and walked to the mini-fridge for a bottle of water. She sipped some down as she walked over to the bedside table where she had set her laptop up.

She flicked on the bedside lamp and logged into her email. She had only one new one, and that had come from Assistant Director Saunders. She'd tasked an agent with digging up the Nobilini files and they had been delivered to her shortly before midnight.

She knew that there was no way she'd return to a deep sleep, so she opened them up one by one, a bit uncomfortable by how natural it seemed and how familiar those old files felt. She looked through them briefly at first, in the same way someone visiting a somewhat familiar location might give the area a once-over before truly starting to study the place. When she came to the last of the twenty-six pages, she went back to the beginning. But before getting deep into it, she went to the little complimentary coffee maker and set a pot to brew. As it started to percolate, she made the bed, relocated the laptop to the small table against the far wall, and made herself a little workstation.

Within five minutes, she was reading each of the files line by line and sipping on a cup of very dark, very cheap coffee. The account of Frank Nobilini felt like an old friend, the sort of friend that only called with bad news. The case detailed every conversation she'd had with neighbors and friends in Ashton. As she read over them all, she was unsettled with how similar they all were to the conversations she'd recently had concerning Jack

Tucker.

The only thing that had even remotely resembled anything of merit had come from twenty-two-year-old Alice Delgado, a nanny for a family in Ashton who had cared for two kids, ages eight and eleven. Alice had admitted to making sexual advances toward Frank Nobilini when they had crossed paths at a local park. Frank had responded with flattery and polite rejection. While that had been the extent of it, the news of Frank's death had made Alice feel incredibly guilty—so guilty that she had contacted Jennifer Nobilini to confess. Jennifer, the caring and apparently flawless woman she was, had forgiven her almost right away.

Aside from that one detail, there had been nothing. Not in conversations, not at the crime scene, not in the Nobilinis' home. And nothing in the criminal records for Frank or Jennifer—no history of criminal activities, no enemies to speak of...nothing.

Kate had remained on the case for six months, then took a step back, working on it only as a background project for another eight months before the case was totally given up on. It had not been the only unsolved case in her career, but it *had* been the only unclosed case with such a degree of strangeness to it.

As she read through, she did her best to apply Jack Tucker's death to it. And the more she read and reacquainted herself with the case, the more certain she became that Jack's murder was linked. It was either done by the exact same killer or a copycat.

It was 4:10 before she felt she had given the notes and files

their proper attention. She stared at her second cup of coffee for a moment and then slowly picked up her cell phone. She placed a call to the twenty-four/seven resource line at the bureau. It was a bit slower than a direct call to Saunders or Duran during the day but it was better than nothing.

After giving her name and badge number, she was greeted by a voice that was far too warm and pleasant for a quarter after four in the morning.

“Agent Wise, how can we help you?”

“I need the current address and phone number for a woman that probably lives somewhere in New York. Cass Nobilini.”

“Okay, and is this going to be the best number to send that information to?”

“It is. Thanks.”

But even before she ended the call, Kate felt guilty as hell. There was a very large part of her that hoped Cass Nobilini had decided to move. If Kate could make it through this case without having to cross paths with Cass, she'd consider herself fortunate.

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