

A person is walking away from the viewer down a path in a forest. The scene is bathed in a warm, orange-red light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The trees are silhouetted against the bright light, and the path is covered in fallen leaves. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

IF
SHE
HID

A KATE WISE MYSTERY--BOOK 4

BLAKE
PIERCE

Блейк Пирс If She Hid

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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 HID (A Kate Wise Mystery) is book #4 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.

Two parents are found dead, and their twin 16 year old daughters are missing. With the case quickly growing cold, the FBI, stumped, must summon their most brilliant agent: retired 55 year old FBI agent Kate Wise.

Was this a random murder? The work of a serial killer?

Can they find the girls in time?

And does Kate, haunted by her past, still have the ability to solve cases as she used to?

An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **IF SHE HID** is book #4 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #5 in the **KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES** will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

If She Hid (A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 4)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fourteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising eleven 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 four books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising four books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising four 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

There are moments in every woman's life when they are expected to cry: weddings, giving birth, maybe during their children's first dance or marriage. But one moment Kate Wise had not expected to turn on the waterworks was watching her granddaughter crawl for the very first time.

She was babysitting for Melissa and Terry, as she had been doing once a week for the past month. They had made a commitment to make sure their marriage stayed fresh and exciting, pledging to have at least one date night a week. Kate kept little Michelle on those nights and, for the past five weeks, had been watching her granddaughter experiment with placing weight on her knees and forearms until, about five minutes ago, cooing and smiling, she had rocked back and forth in a push-up position.

"You're going to do it," Kate said, getting on the floor with Michelle. She could feel the tears even then, surprised by them but welcoming them at the same time.

Michelle looked at her, clearly pleased by the cheer in her grandmother's voice. She rocked forward then back...and then she crawled. She only made it forward by two motions before her arms went out from under her. But then she picked herself right back up and did it again.

"There you go," Kate said, clapping her hands. "Good girl!"

Michelle cooed at her again and then continued ambling forward on her clumsy little hands and feet.

Kate understood that it might not be the fact that Michelle was crawling that was making her cry. It was the look on the baby's face, the unadulterated trust and happiness in her little eyes when they found Kate's face. Michelle looked very much like Melissa had as a baby and the entirety of the situation was just too much.

They were sitting on a blanket on the floor, the blanket doubled over for added thickness in the event Michelle wobbled over. Other than the one time, though, she had not toppled at all. In fact, she was currently slapping at Kate's legs, as if demanding more attention. Kate picked her up, plopped her between her legs, and let Michelle grip her thumbs.

Kate simply enjoyed the moment. She'd watched her daughter grow up impossibly fast, so she knew how fleeting these moments could be. She did feel a little guilty that Melissa and Terry were missing this milestone, though. She nearly called Melissa to let her know, but she didn't want to interrupt their date.

As she sat on the blanket playing with Michelle, someone knocked on her door. Kate had been expecting the knock, but Michelle jerked her little head in the direction of the door with an uncertain expression.

Kate wiped the last remnants of tears away from her face before saying, "Come on in."

The front door opened and Allen entered. He was carrying Chinese carry-out bags and, Kate was delighted to find, his

overnight bag.

“How are my two favorite girls?” Allen asked.

“We’re very mobile,” Kate said with a smile. “This little stinker just crawled for the first time.”

“No way!”

“Yes, she did.”

Allen walked to the kitchen and took two plates out of the cupboard. As he divvied out their dinner onto the plates, Kate smiled. He knew his way around her house now. And he knew her well, too; for instance, he knew that she hated eating Chinese food out of those flimsy little containers and much preferred to eat it off of actual plates.

He brought dinner over to the living room, setting it on the coffee table. Michelle showed great interest in it and reached up. When she realized she could not reach it, she turned her attention to her toes.

“I saw you brought your overnight bag,” Kate said.

“I did. Is that okay?”

“That’s wonderful.”

“I figured we could leave early in the morning and make that drive down to the Blue Ridge Mountains we keep talking about. Take in a few wine tours, maybe stay at a quaint little bed and breakfast in the mountains.”

“That sounds nice. And spontaneous, too.”

“Not too spontaneous,” Allen chuckled. “We *have* been talking about it for about a month now.”

Allen sat down across from her and opened his arms for Michelle to come over to him. She knew his face well enough and assumed the crawling position. She started over toward him, cooing all the way. Kate watched it all unfold, trying to remember a time when her heart had been this full.

She started to eat her dinner, watching Allen play with her granddaughter. Michelle was doing her little rocking-back-and-forth act while Allen cheered her on.

When Kate's phone rang, all three of them looked toward it. Even Michelle knew the sound of a cell phone ringer, her little hands reaching out for it as she moved into a seated position on the blanket. Kate plucked the phone from the coffee table, assuming it would be Melissa calling to check on Michelle.

But it wasn't Melissa. The name on the display read: Duran.

She was torn when she saw the name. A large part of her was excited at the prospect of helping out with a case. But the part that was enamored in the current moment didn't want to answer the phone. While it could be Duran simply calling with a question or research request—something he had been doing more and more these last few months—she also knew that it could be something more pressing and time consuming.

Kate could tell that Allen had already pieced together who was calling. Maybe he figured it out by the indecision on her face.

She answered the call dutifully, still quite proud that she was still actively working with the bureau despite being on the tail end of fifty-six.

“Hello, Director,” she said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Good evening, Wise. Look...we’ve got a situation not too far from your neck of the woods. A double homicide and missing person. All the same case. It’s got a small-town feel to it—so small that the local PD is admitting that they are unprepared for it. Because there’s a missing persons element to it—the missing person being a fifteen-year-old girl—I’d like for you and DeMarco to try to wrap it quietly before the news hears about it and makes it a much harder case than it has to be.”

“Any details yet?” Kate asked.

“Not many. But here’s what I know so far.”

As she listened to Director Duran, letting her know why he was calling and what he’d need her to do over the next twelve hours or so, she looked sadly at Allen and Michelle.

The call ended three minutes later. She set the phone back down and caught Allen looking at her. There was a tired smile of understanding on his face.

“So maybe we can try the winery and bed and breakfast thing some other weekend?” she said.

He smiled back sadly, then turned away.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said.

He stared out the window, as if staring at their future, and Kate could see his uncertainty.

She couldn’t blame him; she herself didn’t know what her own future held.

But she knew one thing: someone was dead out there, and she

damn sure was going to find out who did it.

CHAPTER TWO

While Kristen DeMarco was significantly younger than Kate (she had turned twenty-seven just a week ago), Kate had a hard time thinking of her as a young kid. Even when she was excited about starting on a new case, she managed to steep the excitement in the logic and gravity of the facts.

She was doing that now, as she and Kate headed west to the small town of Deton, Virginia. Kate had never been through Deton but had heard of it: a small rural town among a string of similar rural towns that dotted the northwestern edge of Virginia before West Virginia took over.

Apparently, DeMarco knew the town was nothing more than a small speck on the map as well. There was excitement in her voice as she went over the details of the case, but no real sense of urgency or expectation.

“Two nights ago, a Deton pastor visited the Fuller residence. He told police that he was there to collect several old Bibles from Wendy Fuller, the wife. When he arrived there, no one answered the door but he heard the television on inside. He tried the front door, found it unlocked, and shouted into the house to announce that he was there. According to the pastor, he saw blood on the carpet, still wet. He went inside to check things out and found both Wendy and Alvin Fuller dead. Their fifteen-year-old daughter, Mercy, was nowhere to be found.”

DeMarco paused for a moment and then looked away from the file she had brought with her from DC. “Do you mind me doing this?” she asked.

“Going over the case? Not at all.”

“I know it seems cheesy. But it helps me to retain the information.”

“That’s not cheesy,” Kate said. “I used to carry a voice recorder on me at all times. I’d do exactly what you’re doing right now and keep the recording on me at all times. So please...keep going. The details Duran gave me on the phone were scant at best.”

“The coroner’s report says the cause of death was multiple gunshot wounds, made with a Remington hunting rifle. Two shots to the father, one to the mother, who was also clubbed, probably with the butt of the gun. Local PD has checked hunting records and can confirm that the husband, Alvin Fuller, was a registered hunter and owned that very same rifle. But it was nowhere to be found on the scene.”

“So the murderer killed him with his own gun and then stole it?” Kate asked.

“Seems that way. Other than those notes, the local PD could come up with nothing, nor has the state PD found any real leads. Based on testimony from friends and family, the Fullers were considered to be good people. The pastor who discovered the bodies says they were at church almost every Sunday. He was collecting the Bibles from the Fullers to send overseas to

missionaries in the Philippines.”

“Good people don’t always attract other good people, though,” Kate pointed out.

“But in this kind of town...everyone knows everyone. It makes me think that if no one has offered any sort of evidence or theories, the killer might be an outsider.”

“That’s likely,” Kate said. “But I think the fact that a fifteen-year-old girl is missing might be more important. Locals are of course going to assume that the girl was taken. But if we take that small-town filter away from it and don’t assume that everyone is a good person, what other theories does that bring up?”

“That the daughter may not have been taken,” DeMarco said. She spoke slowly, as if considering the idea very carefully. “That she may have run away. That she may be the killer.”

“Exactly. And I’ve seen this sort of thing before. If we get into Deton spouting off that theory, we’re going to get sour looks and closed doors.”

“I assumed as much.”

“That’s not to say we don’t treat it like a kidnapping case from the start. But we also can’t go in assuming the daughter is the killer, either.”

“Not until we know more about her,” DeMarco said.

“That’s right. And I feel like that’s where we need to start. Because if everyone in town sees the Fullers as good people, I can pretty much promise you that no one is properly looking into the daughter as a suspect.”

“So that’s where we start,” DeMarco said.

“Yes, but maybe under the radar. If they find out we’re starting off with the fifteen-year-old daughter of the recently deceased as the primary suspect, this case is going to be much harder than it has to be.”

It was a foreboding statement, one that seemed even more pressing as they passed by a sign that told them Deton was only seven miles ahead.

Deton wasn’t quite as small as Kate had been expecting, but it was still quite rural. It seemed as if any business of any real importance was located along the main strip of highway that ran through the town. There was no Main Street, just a patch of Highway 44 that ran through it. Secondary roads meandered off of 44, snaking their way back into Deton’s less populated area.

The bulk of the town consisted of a Rite Aid, a Burger King, a Dollar General, and several smaller local businesses. Kate had seen hundreds of little towns just like this during a career that had taken her all across the country and she felt that they all looked the same. Of course, that did not mean the people and their cultures were the same. To think such a thing would be a huge mistake.

The Fuller residence lay about three miles off of the main stretch of town, on one of the secondary roads. It was a simple

two-story house in need of new siding and roofing. Its rustic look betrayed the other things that Kate and DeMarco noticed as Kate pulled into the driveway.

There was a news van parked in the driveway. A good-looking female reporter and a cameraman were talking something over by the front of the van. A single police car also sat in the driveway, an officer simply sitting inside. He saw Kate and DeMarco arrive and slowly started to get out of his car.

The reporter looked up as Kate and DeMarco got out of the car. Like some dedicated bloodhound, the reporter instantly came rushing over. The cameraman jostled his equipment, trying to follow behind, but fell a few steps short.

“Are you detectives?” the reporter asked.

“No comment,” Kate barked.

“Do you have the authority to be here?”

“Do *you*?” Kate asked, biting back fast.

“I have a responsibility to report the news,” the reporter said, giving a canned answer.

Kate knew the reporter would be able to find out the FBI had been called in within an hour or so. Therefore, she was fine with showing the reporter her badge as she and DeMarco walked toward the house.

“We’re with the FBI,” Kate said. “Keep that in mind if you get any ideas about following us inside.”

The reporter stopped in her tracks, the cameraman nearly colliding with her. Behind them, the officer approached. Kate

saw by the name tag and badge pinned to his uniform that this was the Deton sheriff. He grinned at the reporter as he passed them.

“See,” he told the reporter rather gruffly. “It’s not just me. No one wants you around.”

He stepped in front of Kate and DeMarco, leading them to the front door. Under his breath, he added: “You know the laws as well as I do. I can’t boot them because they’re technically doing nothing wrong. Damned vultures are hoping a relative or someone will come by.”

“How long have they been parked there?” DeMarco asked.

“There’s been at least one news van parked there every day since this happened two days ago. At one point yesterday, there were three. This whole thing has made pretty big news around here. There have been news vans and crews located all around the county police station, too. It’s pretty infuriating.”

He unlocked the front door and ushered them in. “I’m Sheriff Randall Barnes, by the way. I have the displeasure of being the lead on this thing. The Staties found out the bureau was on the way and decided to step aside. They’re still pursuing the manhunt for the daughter, but are leaving the murder part of the whole thing on my doorstep.”

They stepped inside as Kate and DeMarco also introduced themselves. There was no conversation afterward, though. The sight before them, while not nearly as bad as some murder scenes Kate had seen, was jarring. The dried maroon splotches on the

blue carpet were very much in-your-face. There was a stale feel to the place, something Kate had felt at scenes like this before—something she had tried describing countless times but always failed.

Out of nowhere, she thought of Michael. She had tried explaining the feeling to him once before, stating that it was almost as if a house itself could sense loss and that feeling of staleness in the air was the house's reaction. He had laughed at her and said it sounded almost spiritual in a weird way.

She was fine with that...mainly because it's exactly what she felt as she took a look around the Fuller home.

"Agents, I'm going to step back out onto the porch," he said. "Make sure we don't get any prying eyes. Holler if you need anything. But I'll tell you right now...anything you want to know that's not already in the reports we sent over is going to have to come from one of my other officers—a fella named Foster. Here in Deton, we're not exactly used to cases like this. We're discovering just how unprepared we are for such things."

"We'd love to speak with him after this," DeMarco said.

"I'll give him a call and make sure he's at the station, then."

He left back through the front door quietly, leaving them to the scene. Kate stepped around the initial blood splatters on the carpet. There were some on the couch, too, and splatters on the wall just above the couch. A small coffee table sat in front of the couch and a few things on it seemed scattered—a few bills, an empty but overturned plastic cup, and the television remote. It

could indicate signs of a quick struggle, but if so, it was not a particularly fierce one.

“No real signs of struggle,” DeMarco said. “Unless their daughter is very strong and athletic, I don’t see how she could have done this.”

“If it *was* the daughter, they may not have seen it coming,” Kate argued. “She could have come right into the room, hiding the gun behind her. One of them could have been dead before the other had any clue what was happening.”

They studied the area for a few minutes, finding nothing out of the ordinary. There were a few pictures on the wall, several of which were family pictures. It was the first time she saw the girl she assumed was Mercy Fuller. The pictures showed her in varying stages of age: from around five to her current age. She was a cute girl who would likely become a beautiful girl sometime around college. She had black hair, brown eyes, and a radiant smile.

They then ventured deeper into the house, coming to a room that obviously belonged to a teenage girl. A bedazzled journal sat on a desk that was littered with pens and papers. A ceramic pink pineapple sat at the edge of the desk, a picture holder of sorts with a wire holder at the top. A picture of two teenaged girls, smiling widely for the camera, was held within it.

Kate opened up the journal. The last entry was from eight days ago and was about how a boy named Charlie had kissed her very quickly while they changed classes at school. She scanned a few

of the entries before that and found similar scribblings: struggling with a test, wanting Charlie to pay more attention to her, wishing that bitch-face Kelsey Andrews would get hit by a train.

Nowhere within her room were there any indications of homicidal intent. They checked the parents' bedroom next and found it similarly disinteresting. There were a few adult magazines hidden away in the closet but other than that, the Fullers seemed to be squeaky clean.

When they exited the house after twenty minutes, Barnes was still on the porch. He was sitting in an old tattered lounge chair, smoking a cigarette.

"Find anything?" he asked.

"Nothing," DeMarco answered.

"Although I do wonder," Kate added. "Did you or the state police happen to find a laptop or cell phone in the daughter's room?"

"No. Now, on the laptop...that's not much of a surprise. Maybe you could tell by the state of the house, but the Fullers weren't exactly the type of family that could afford a laptop for their daughter. As for a phone, the Fullers' cell phone plan shows that Mercy Fuller did indeed have her own phone. But no one has been able to trace it just yet."

"Maybe it's powered down," DeMarco said.

"Probably," Barnes said. "But apparently—and this was news to me—even when a phone is off, it can be tracked back to the place where it was powered down...the last place it was on. And

the state guys figured out it was last powered on here, at the house. But, as you pointed out, it's nowhere to be found."

"How many men do you have actively working the case?" Kate asked.

"Three at the station right now, just basically running interviews and digging through things like last purchases, last known places they visited and things like that. There's one guy left behind from the States that's helping, though he's not too happy about it."

"And you have one guy on your force that you'd consider the lead on it other than yourself?"

"Correct. As I said, that would be Officer Foster. The man has a mind like a lock box."

"Could you lead us to the station for a quick debrief meeting?" Kate asked. "But just yourself and this Officer Foster. Let's keep it small."

Barnes nodded grimly as he got up from the chair and flicked the last of his cigarette into the yard. "You want to talk about Mercy as a suspect without letting too many people know about it. Is that right?"

"I think it's foolish to rule it out as a possibility without looking into it," Kate said. "And while we look down that path, yes, you're right. The fewer people that know about it, the better."

"I'll make the call to Foster on our way to the station."

He walked down the steps, staring down the reporter and her cameraman. It made Kate wonder if he'd had at least one bad

altercation with a news crew sometime during the last two days.

As she and DeMarco got into their car, she also gave the news crew a distrustful glance. She knew that in communities like Deton, a murder like this could be earth-shattering. And because of that, she knew that news crews in these areas would usually stop at nothing to get their story.

It made Kate wonder if maybe there was more of a story here than she was seeing—and if so, what she might need to do to get all of the pieces.

CHAPTER THREE

The Deton police station was about what Kate had expected. It was tucked away on the far end of the main stretch along the highway, a plain brick building with an American flag billowing at the top. A few patrol cars sat parked along the side of it, their meager numbers a reflection of the town itself.

Inside, a large bullpen area took up most of the space. A large desk sat at the front, unattended. Actually, the place looked basically deserted. They followed Barnes to the back of the building, down a thin hallway that boasted only five rooms, one of which was labeled by a placard on the door with *Sheriff Barnes*. Barnes led them to the last room on the hall, a very small room set up as a conference room of sorts. An officer sat at the table inside, rifling through a small stack of documents.

“Agents, meet Officer Foster,” Barnes said.

Officer Foster was young man, probably creeping up on thirty years of age. He wore his hair in a buzzcut and had a scowl on his face. Kate could tell that he was a no-nonsense officer. He would not be cracking jokes to ease any tension and probably wouldn't bother with small talk to get to know the agents sitting in front of him.

Kate decided that she liked him right away.

“Officer Foster has basically served as the hub for this case ever since we got that call from Pastor Poulson,” Barnes

explained. “Any piece of information that has come through here has gone through his ears or eyes and he’s added it to the case files. Any questions you have, he can probably answer.”

“That’s some lofty praise,” Foster said, “but I can certainly do my best.”

“Well, what do we have on information regarding who all three of the Fullers spoke with—aside from one another—before the murders occurred?” Kate asked.

“Alvin Fuller spoke with an old friend of his from high school as he was checking out at the Citgo out on Highway 44,” Foster said. “He was coming home from work, stopped by to grab a six-pack of beer, and they ran into each other. The friend says they simply chatted about work and family. Very surface-level stuff just to seem polite. The friend said Alvin did not seem strange in any way.

“As for Wendy Fuller, the last person to speak to her other than her family was a co-worker. Wendy worked at the little shipping warehouse just outside of town. The co-worker in question said the last thing they spoke about was how Wendy was concerned that Mercy was starting to show a lot of interest in boys. Mercy had apparently had her first kiss recently and Wendy was afraid of what that could mean. But other than that, things seemed pretty much the same as always.”

“And what about Mercy?” DeMarco asked.

“The last person she spoke with was her best friend, a local girl named Anne Pettus. We’ve spoken with Anne twice, just to

make sure she told the same story. She said the last conversation they had was about a boy named Charlie. According to Anne, this Charlie kid was not Mercy's boyfriend. Anne also told us something that sort of bumps up against what her parents might have known about her."

"Like a lie?" Kate asked.

"Yes. According to Wendy's co-worker, they spoke about this supposed first kiss. But according to Anne Pettus, that's not true. Apparently, Mercy had her first kiss a very long time ago."

"Was she promiscuous?"

"Anne would not say as much. She just said that she knew for a fact that Mercy had done much more than kiss a boy."

"In regards to her disappearance, where does the evidence lean at this point?" Kate asked. "That she was taken or that she left of her own accord?"

"Unless the two of you found something new in the house, there is no evidence to suggest that Mercy was taken against her will. If anything, we have small pieces of circumstantial evidence that suggests she might have left on her own."

"What sort of evidence?"

"According to Anne, Mercy had a small amount of cash saved up. She even knew where she kept it: at the bottom of her sock drawer. We checked and there was about three hundred dollars hidden there. That actually goes against her leaving on her own because she would have taken that money, right? However, the last thing put on Mercy's credit card was a full tank of gas.

She got it about two or three hours before her parents' bodies were found. Before that, two days prior, she purchased a few travel-sized cosmetics at a Target in Harrisonburg: toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant. We have that in her credit card history as well as confirmation from Anne Pettus, who went shopping with her that day."

"Did she happen to ask Mercy why she needed travel-sized cosmetics?" Kate asked.

"She did. Mercy said she was just low on stuff at home and hated to feel like a child asking her parents to buy her stuff."

"And no known boyfriend?" Kate asked.

"Not according to Anne. And she seemed to know just about everything about Mercy."

"I'd like to speak with Anne," Kate said. "Do you think she'd be open to it or are we going to get pushback?"

"She'd be very open to it," Foster said.

"He's right," Barnes added. "She's even called us a few times in between questioning to see if we have any new information. She's been very helpful. So have her folks, letting us talk to her. If you want, I can call and set something up."

"That would be fantastic," Kate said.

"She's a strong girl," Foster said. "But between you and me... I think she might be hiding something. Maybe nothing big. I think she just wants to make sure she doesn't convey anything bad about her missing best friend."

That's understandable, Kate thought.

But she also knew that the fact that they *were* best friends would be more than enough reason to hide something.

Anne's parents had understandably allowed her to stay home from school. When Kate and DeMarco arrived at the Pettus residence—located down a road very similar to the one the Fullers had lived on—the parents were standing at the front door, waiting. Kate could see them both through the glass screen door even as she parked the car in their U-shaped driveway.

Mr. and Mrs. Pettus stepped out onto their porch to meet the agents. The father kept his arms crossed, a sad look on his face. The mother looked tired, her eyes bloodshot and her posture worn down.

After a quick round of introductions, Mr. and Mrs. Pettus cut right to the chase. They were not rude or insisting, but simply concerned parents who did not intend to put their daughter through any unnecessary hell.

“She seems to get better each time she talks about it,” Mrs. Pettus said. “I think as more time passes, she starts to understand that her best friend is not necessarily dead. I think the more the idea that she might simply be missing sinks in, she wants to be of more help.”

“That being said,” Mr. Pettus added, “I would greatly appreciate it if you kept the questions brief and as hopeful as

possible. Make no mistake...we won't interfere as you question her, but if we hear anything at all that seems to upset her, your time with our daughter is over."

"That's more than fair," Kate said. "And you have my word that we will tread carefully."

Mr. Pettus nodded and finally opened the front door for them. When they stepped inside, Kate saw Anne Pettus right away. She was sitting on the couch with her hands clasped between her knees. Like her mother, she looked tired and worn out. It then occurred to Kate that teenage girls tended to bond rather strongly with their best friends. She was unable to imagine the kind of emotions this young girl must be going through.

"Anne," Mrs. Pettus said. "These are the agents we told you were coming. Are you still okay with speaking to them?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm fine."

Both parents gave Kate and DeMarco a little nod as they sat down on either side of their daughter. Kate noticed that Anne didn't start to truly look uncomfortable until her parents flanked her.

"Anne," Kate said, "we will keep this quick. We've been filled in on everything you've already told the police, so we won't ask you to repeat all of those things again. Well, with one exception. I'd like to know about the shopping trip you and Mercy took out to Harrisonburg. Mercy purchased several travel-sized things, right?"

"Yeah. I thought it was weird. She just said she was running

out of that stuff at home. Toothpaste, a small toothbrush, deodorant, things like that. I asked why she purchased them and not her parents but she sort of brushed it off.”

“Do you feel she was happy at home?”

“Yeah. But I mean...she’s fifteen. She loves her parents but hates it around here. She’s been talking about moving away from Deton ever since we were ten years old.”

“Any idea why?” DeMarco asked.

“It’s boring,” Anne said. She looked over at her parents apologetically. “I mean, I’m a just a bit older than Mercy; I’m sixteen and have a license and she and I go here and there sometimes. Shopping. The movies. But you have to drive like an hour to do any of that stuff. Deton is *dead*.”

“Do you know *where* she wanted to move?”

“Palm Springs,” Anne said with a laugh. “She saw some show where people were partying in Palm Springs and thought it was pretty.”

“Did she have any particular college she had her eye on?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, at the little thing they had for us at school, she looked pretty hard at material from UVA and Wake Forest. But...yeah, I don’t know.”

“Can you tell us anything about Charlie?” Kate asked. “We saw her name in her journal and know they were at least familiar enough to share a quick kiss between classes. But the police told us that you said Mercy doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

“She doesn’t.”

Kate noticed right away how Anne's tone shifted a bit at this comment. Her posture seemed to go a little rigid as well. Apparently, this was a sensitive topic. But, being that she was only sixteen and her parents were both sitting beside her, Kate knew she could not directly accuse the girl of lying. She'd have to take another approach. Maybe there were some dark secrets concerning her friend that she simply did not want to voice.

"So are she and Charlie just friends?" Kate asked.

"Sort of. I mean, I think they maybe liked each other but just didn't want to date. You know?"

"Did she and Charlie ever do anything other than kiss that you know of?"

"If they did, Mercy never told me. And she tells me everything."

"Do you know if there were any secrets she was keeping from her parents?"

Again, Kate noticed an uneasiness settle across Anne's face. It was brief and barely there, but Kate recognized it from countless cases in the past—particularly where teenagers were involved. A quick dart of the eyes, shifting uncomfortably in their seat, either answering right away without thinking about their answer or taking far too much time to come up with an answer.

"Again, if she did, she never told me."

"What about a job?" Kate asked. "Was Mercy working anywhere?"

"Not recently. She was working like ten hours a week as

a tutor for middle school kids a few months back. Algebra, I think. But they shut that down because there weren't enough kids interested in getting the help."

"Did she enjoy that?" DeMarco asked.

"I guess so."

"No horror stories from when she was tutoring?"

"None that she told me."

"But you feel confident that Mercy told you everything about her life, right?" DeMarco asked.

Anne looked slightly uncomfortable at the question. Kate wondered if it was perhaps the first time she'd been questioned in such a confrontational way—questioning something she had spoken as truth.

"I think so," Anne said. "We were...we *are* best friends. And I say *are* because she's still alive. I know it. Because if she's dead..."

The comment hung in the air for a moment. Kate could see that the emotion on Anne's face was real. Based on her expression, she could tell that girl would start crying soon. And if it came to that, Kate felt certain her parents would ask them to leave. It meant they likely didn't have much time—and that meant that Kate was going to have become a bit of a bully if she hoped to get some answers.

"Anne, we want to get to the bottom of this. And, like you, we are working under the assumption that Mercy is still alive. But, if I can be honest with you, with missing persons cases,

time is the enemy. The more time that passes, the smaller our chances of finding her become. So please...if there is anything you might have been reluctant to tell the local Deton authorities, it's important that you tell *us*. I know in a town this small, you worry about what others will think and—”

“I think that’s enough,” Mr. Pettus said. He got to his feet and walked toward the door. “I don’t appreciate you implying that our daughter has been hiding something. And you can look at her and tell that she’s starting to get upset.”

“Mr. Pettus,” DeMarco said. “If Anne is—”

“We’ve been more than fair about letting her speak with the authorities, but we’re done here. Now, please...leave.”

Kate and DeMarco shared a defeated look as they got to their feet. Kate made about three steps for the door before she was stopped by Anne’s voice.

“No...wait.”

All four adults in the room turned toward Anne. There were tears rolling down her cheeks and a stern kind of understanding in her eyes. She looked at her parents for a moment and then quickly away, as if ashamed.

“What is it?” Mrs. Pettus asked her daughter.

“Mercy *does* have a boyfriend. Sort of. But it’s not Charlie. It’s this other guy...and she never told anyone because if her parents found out, they would have gone nuts.”

“Who is it?” Kate asked.

“It’s this guy that lives out near Deerfield. He’s older...

seventeen.”

“And they were dating?” DeMarco asked.

“I don’t think it was dating. They were sort of seeing each other. But when they got together, I think...well, I think it was just physical. Mercy liked it because there was this older guy giving her attention, you know?”

“And why would her parents not approve?” Kate asked.

“Well, the age thing for one. Mercy is fifteen and this guy is almost eighteen. But he’s sort of bad news. He dropped out of high school, runs with a rough crowd.”

“Do you know if the relationship was sexual?” Kate asked.

“She never told me. But I think it might have been because whenever I would joke with her and tease her about it, she’d get all quiet.”

“Anne,” Mr. Pettus said. “Why did you not tell the police?”

“Because I don’t want people thinking bad of Mercy. She’s... she’s my best friend. She’s kind and nice and...this guy is scum. I don’t understand why she liked him.”

“What’s his name?” Kate asked.

“Jeremy Branch.”

“You say he’s a dropout. Do you know what he does for a job?”

“Nothing, I don’t think. Tree work here and there, like cutting limbs and helping logging crews. But according to Mercy, he sort of just sits around his older brother’s house and drinks most of the day. And I don’t know for sure, but I think he sells drugs.”

Kate almost felt sorry for Anne. The looks on the faces of her

parents made it clear that she would be getting a stern talking to when Kate and DeMarco were gone. Knowing this, Kate walked over to Anne and sat in the place her father had been sitting only a minute before.

“I know this was hard for you,” Kate said. “But you did the right thing. You’ve given us a lead and now maybe we can get to the bottom of things. Thank you, Anne.”

With that, she gave a polite nod to Anne’s parents and showed herself out. On the way to the car, DeMarco pulled out her phone. “You know where Deerfield is?” she asked.

“About twenty minutes deeper into the woods,” Kate said. “If you thought Deton was small, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

“I’ll call Sheriff Barnes and see if we can get an address.”

She was doing exactly that as they got back into the car. Kate felt a sudden feeling of energy wash over her. They had a lead, the involvement of the local PD, and most of the day still ahead of them. As she pulled out of the Pettuses’ driveway, she couldn’t help but feel just a little hopeful.

CHAPTER FOUR

Although DeMarco had gotten a very clear address from Barnes, Kate couldn't help but wonder if Barnes had been wrong or if something had been lost in the transfer of communication. She saw the address five minutes after passing into the Deerfield town limits, plastered on the side of a dingy mailbox in black letters. But, like most everything else in Deerfield, Virginia, everything beyond the mailbox was open field and forest.

Roughly two feet from the mailbox, she saw the sketch-like lines of what she assumed was a driveway. Weeds had sprouted up along the side, hiding most of the entrance. She turned into the driveway and found herself on a narrow dirt road that led to a wider open space several yards ahead. She guessed she was looking into a large front yard that had simply not seen a mower in a very long time. There were three cars, two of which looked like total losses, parked in the yard. They were positioned along a dirt strip that served as the end of the driveway.

A few feet away from the cars, tucked not too far away from the tree line of the expansive forest beyond, was a doublewide trailer. It was the type that was decorated very much like a house from the outside and, if it had been properly cared for, would look like a rather nice place. But the front porch looked slightly slanted, one of the railings having fallen completely off. There was also a loose gutter on the right side of the house and, of

course, the savagely overgrown yard.

Kate and DeMarco parked behind the junked cars and slowly made their way to the house. The grass, which was mainly weeds, came up to Kate's knees.

"I feel like I'm on some deranged safari," DeMarco said. "Got a machete?"

Kate only chuckled, her eyes on the front door. Stereotypes and Anne Pettus's information made her feel like she already knew what they would find inside: Jeremy Branch and his older brother, sitting around doing nothing. The place would probably smell like dust and mild garbage, maybe even like marijuana. There would be beer bottles scattered round cheap furniture, all of which would be pointed at a relatively nice television set. She'd seen the set-up countless times before, particularly when it came to young freeloaders living in rural areas.

They made their way up to the porch and Kate knocked on the door. She could hear the murmur of music coming from inside, something heavy but at a low volume. She also heard heavy footsteps approaching the door. When it opened several seconds later, she was greeted by a young-looking man dressed in a tank top and a pair of khaki shorts. A five o'clock shadow bordered his face. His entire left arm was covered in tattoos and both ears were pierced.

He smiled at the sight of the two women on his porch at first but then the reality of the situation seemed to catch up with him. It wasn't just two women—it was two women dressed in a

professional manner with serious looks on their faces.

“Who are you?” he asked.

DeMarco showed her badge, taking a step closer to the door. “Agents DeMarco and Wise,” she said. “We were hoping to get a word with Jeremy Branch.”

The young man looked legitimately confused and slightly scared. He took a small step back away from the door, looking back and forth between them with caution. “That’s...well, that’s me. But what do you need me for?”

“We assume you’ve heard the news about a girl over in Deton by now,” Kate said. “A girl by the name of Mercy Fuller.”

The look on his face told Kate all she needed to know. Without saying a word, Jeremy all but confirmed that he knew Mercy. He nodded and then looked back into the trailer, maybe for assistance from his older brother.

“Can you confirm that for me?” Kate asked.

“Yeah, I heard. She went missing. Her parents were killed, right?”

“Right. Mr. Branch, can we please come in and talk for a moment?”

“Well, it’s not my place. It belongs to my brother. And I don’t know if he...”

“I don’t know if you know how this works or not,” Kate said. “We’d like to come in and chat. We can do it here or, based on what we’ve heard about you, we can do it at the police station over in Deton. It’s your choice.”

“Oh,” he said. The kid looked absolutely cornered, like a threatened animal looking for a way out. “Well, then, I guess I can—”

He then interrupted himself by slamming the door in their faces. After the thunderous slam and a quick jerk back from the unexpected action, Kate could hear quick footfalls in the house.

“He’s on the run,” Kate said.

But before she could open the door again, DeMarco was already leaping down from the porch and heading to the back of the trailer. Kate drew her sidearm, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

She heard just a few more footsteps from further in the trailer and then the sound of another door opening. *A back door*, Kate thought. *Hopefully DeMarco will cut him off.*

Kate raced through the house, finding that her assumptions were right. There was a very faint aroma of pot, mixed with the smell of spilled beer. As she ran through the kitchen, she entered a hallway that led back toward two bedrooms. There, at the end of the hall, a back door was still wobbling in its frame from someone having just run out of it. She sprinted to the door and pushed it open, ready to attack if necessary. But she had seen the fear in Jeremy’s eyes. He was not going to attack at all; he had every intention of outrunning them. And if he made it to the woods no more than fifteen feet away from the back door, he might very well be able to do it.

She saw him, streaking toward the tree line, but then she also

saw DeMarco. She was closing in from the left side of the house. She wasn't bothering to draw her weapon or to scream for Jeremy to stop. Kate was astounded by just how fast her partner was, barreling after Jeremy at a speed that easily bested the teenager's.

She caught up to him just as Jeremy had reached the first line of trees that led into the forest. DeMarco reached out, grabbed his shoulder, and spun him around to face her. In doing so, Jeremy ended up spinning like a top, making an entire three-hundred-sixty-degree spin before losing his balance and falling to the ground.

Kate hurried down a shaky set of back steps and joined DeMarco, helping her to handcuff Jeremy Branch.

"When you run," Kate said, "it makes us think you have something to hide. And you also just made our choice easier. We'll be talking to you down at the station."

Jeremy Branch had nothing to say to this. He panted heavily as DeMarco hauled him to his feet with his hands cuffed behind his back. He looked bewildered and out of sorts as they walked him to their car. And when he looked nervously back toward the trailer, Kate was pretty sure she'd find enough suspicious evidence to get Jeremy and his brother in quite a bit of trouble, even aside from the disappearance of Mercy Fuller.

The search inside the house did not take long. While DeMarco

remained outside, Kate scoured the place and within fifteen minutes, had found more than enough to get the Branch brothers into a lot of trouble.

Half a pound of cocaine had been found in one of the bedrooms, along with half a dozen ecstasy pills. In the other bedroom, there were several plastic baggies of pot, another dozen ecstasy pills, and a few containers of prescription pain medicine. The real kicker had come when Kate had found a small black notebook beneath the bed of the second bedroom. It looked to be a tally book of sorts, recording who owed money and for what.

She also figured out that the first bedroom she'd checked was Jeremy Branch's. She knew this because of a rather provocative picture sitting on his bedside, featuring himself and Mercy Fuller, who was mostly undressed. But she could find no journals, no laptop, nothing that might lend clues as to his involvement in her disappearance or the deaths of her parents.

She did find one thing of note, though. Something that answered at least one question. In the small bathroom just off of Jeremy's bedroom, Kate found a new travel-sized toothpaste, female deodorant, and a new miniature-sized toothbrush. Apparently, Mercy had bought those things to keep here, trying to cover up any traces of having been physical with a boy before she went home.

She headed back outside, wading through the tall grass for the car. "All of the travel-sized stuff is in Jeremy's bathroom. Apparently, Mercy was keeping it all here."

“That’s...cute, I guess?”

“Or a bit obsessive,” Kate suggested as she got behind the wheel. “Also, we now know one of the reasons he ran.”

From the back, Jeremy spoke up, his voice panicked and ringed with fear. “All of that stuff is my brother’s.”

“So he was just keeping some of it in your room, then?”

“Yeah, he sells it and...and...”

“Save your wind for the station,” Kate said. “Truth be told, the drugs are only secondary right now.”

“I had nothing to do with Mercy or her parents,” he said. “I swear.”

“I hope not,” Kate said as she started the car forward. “But I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

CHAPTER FIVE

This time, when they entered the Deton Police Station, the large desk at the front of the bullpen was occupied by a woman who looked like she had been planted there and had never left. She was easily sixty years of age and when she looked up at Kate, DeMarco, and Jeremy Branch, she gave a well-rehearsed smile. When she realized what was going on, though, the smile faded and she was all business.

“You the agents?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am,” DeMarco said. “Where can we park Mr. Branch here?”

“The interrogation room for right now. I’ll get the sheriff on the phone and let him know you’re here. Follow me.”

The older woman led them alongside the bullpen, down the same hallway Barnes had led them down earlier. She opened the door to the second room on the right. It looked pretty much the same as the one they had met Officer Foster in earlier in the day. There was an old scarred desk with one chair parked on either side.

“Sit down,” DeMarco said, giving Jeremy a light push in the direction of the table.

Jeremy did as he was asked, not resisting at all. When his butt was in the seat, he folded his handcuffed hands in front of him and stared at them.

“What was the relationship between you and Mercy Fuller like?” Kate asked.

“I barely knew her.”

“I saw a picture in your bedroom that says otherwise.”

“What would you say if I told you she was that...well, that *friendly* to most guys?”

“I’d say that’s a pretty daring accusation to point at someone. Especially in a town like this one, about a girl who just lost both of her parents.”

Jeremy sighed and gave a shrug. His nonchalance was aggravating Kate but she did her best to remain professional.

“I told you...I don’t know *anything* about that family.”

“You’re lying,” Kate said. “And here’s the thing. You can keep lying, but this is a small town, kid. I can unwrap your lie pretty easily. And if I do find out you’re lying to me, *then* we’ll start digging into the drugs. Maybe find some of the people your not-so-bright brother has listed in that black notebook under his bed. Maybe tell them that you told us where to find the book.”

Jeremy’s eyes widened at this thought and he started to shift in his seat. Kate also wondered if there might be a card to play in terms of his older brother. She wondered which of the two might crack under pressure first.

But apparently, she was not going to have to go that route. She could practically see the moment when Jeremy Branch decided that his own self-preservation was the most important thing.

“Fine, I know her. But we weren’t like dating or anything. We

just hooked up every now and then.”

“So it was a sexual relationship?”

“Yes. And that’s about all it was.”

“Did you not care that she was fifteen?”

“I kind of did. I figured I’d just break it off with her when I turned eighteen. So I wouldn’t get in trouble, you know?”

“When was the last time you saw her?” DeMarco asked.

“Maybe a week or so ago.”

“Did she come to your place?”

“Yes. We had this sort of blueprint. When she wanted to come over, she’d text me and I’d pick her up over on Waterlick Road. She’d tell her folks she was going to a friend’s house and I’d pick her up and we’d go back to my place.”

“How long had this been going on?” Kate asked.

“Four or five months. But look, I know it sounds dirty or whatever, but I really don’t know her all that well. It was just sex. That’s all. I was her first...and she was sort of curious, you know? She wasn’t like sex crazy or anything, but we met up a lot.”

“I thought you said she was *friendly* with most guys,” DeMarco said.

His only response to this apparent lie in an attempt to save face was a shrug.

“What about her parents?” Kate asked. “What can you tell me about them?”

“Nothing. I knew who her dad was, you know? I mean, it’s a small town. You sort of know everyone. Plus, she always used to

joke that if her dad found out we were fu—having sex,” he said, apparently not finding it appropriate to drop other terminology in front of two female agents, “he’d kill me.”

“And did you believe her?”

“I don’t know. But I guess. A guy never really wants to think about the father of the girl he’s sleeping with finding out. I didn’t know what to think about her parents. I mean, she hated them. Like *loathed* them, you know?”

“She did?”

“Based on the way she talked about them, yeah I think so. If I can...”

He stopped here and seemed to think about something for a minute. He then looked at Kate and DeMarco as if he were trying to figure out his boundaries.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

“Look. Yeah, it was messed it up that we slept with each other like twenty times or so and I didn’t know her all that well. But I always thought it was sort of weird to hear her talk about her parents like that.”

“Like what?”

Before he could answer, there was a knock on the door. Sheriff Barnes opened it and poked his head inside. There was a quick look exchanged between Barnes and Jeremy, making Kate think this was probably not the first time Jeremy had spent time in this room.

“Jeremy Branch?” he asked. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“You want to tell him or should we?” DeMarco asked. She gave Jeremy a few seconds and when he did not start talking, she brought Barnes up to speed. “He was sleeping with Mercy Fuller...as recently as last week. He was just telling us how he found it strange that Mercy would speak so negatively about her parents. How she hated them.”

“Sleeping with her?” Barnes asked. “Damn, son...how old are you?”

“Seventeen. I don’t turn eighteen for another month.”

“Go on,” Kate said, redirecting him back toward the point. “Tell us what kind of stuff Mercy would say about her parents.”

“Just how they never let her do anything. How they didn’t trust her. I think she had some really bad beef with her mother because I know there were at least two or three times where she said something like ‘I just want to kill that bitch.’ She *hated* her mom.”

“Did she ever talk about the relationship between her parents?” Kate asked.

“No. She rarely talked about them. She’d vent for a while, get sort of mad, and then that’s usually when we’d have sex. I just... I don’t know. I never thought she’d actually do it.”

“Do what?” Barnes asked.

Jeremy then looked up at them as if they had missed the entire point. “Seriously? Look...like I said. She seems sort of innocent, aside from being sort of a nympho, but if you’re looking for her parents’ killer...find her. I guarantee you Mercy killed her

parents and then just split town.”

CHAPTER SIX

So far, no one had actually taken the seat on the opposite side of the desk; Kate, DeMarco, and Barnes were all still standing. But when Jeremy made such a bold statement, Sheriff Barnes walked slowly to the chair and sat down directly across from the teenager. There was a mixture of sadness and fury in his eyes as he pointed an accusatory finger in Jeremy's face.

"I've been sheriff in this town for sixteen years. I knew Wendy and Alvin Fuller quite well. And as far as I know, Mercy Fuller was a stand-up young woman. Certainly not a trouble-making piece of shit like you. So if you're going to sit here and make such an accusation, I suggest you have a damn good story to back it up."

Jeremy nodded, clearly very scared now. "I do."

Barnes folded his arms, leaned back in the chair, and sneered at Jeremy. As Jeremy started to talk, his eyes never left Barnes. If Kate had to venture a guess, he was probably concerned that Barnes might launch himself across the table at any moment to strangle him.

"We'd been fooling around for maybe three or four weeks the first time she ever mentioned running away from home. She asked me if I'd go with her. Said she wanted to go somewhere to North Carolina or something like that. I made fun of her because I didn't see the point in moving just one state away, you know?"

Plus, I didn't like her like that. My brother joked with me how the first guy a girl sleeps with, she gets obsessed. I guess she sort of did. Anyway, there was no way I was going to run away with her. But the way she talked about it...you could tell she had actually thought about it."

"Do you think she wanted to run away because of just how much she disliked her parents?" Kate asked.

"I guess. I mean, it's the only real reason I could think of that would make her want to leave home. I mean...my parents are assholes, too. But I didn't run away or nothing."

"No," Barnes said. "You just moved two miles away into your older brother's trailer. Maybe Mercy didn't have an option like that."

"Still," Kate said, making sure Barnes didn't take them too far off-topic. "Are you certain she was being for real when she spoke of running away? Not just filling your head with fantasies so you'd stay with her?"

"No. But she kept talking about how her mother would go crazy trying to find her—not because she'd actually *want* to find her but because she'd feel like Mercy got one over on her by running away."

"Do you know if there was any abuse in her home?" DeMarco asked.

"I don't think so. Not recently, anyway. She did tell me one time about how her mother hauled off and just hit her right in the face when she was like eleven or twelve."

“And you swear she never actually came out and said she was *going* to kill them?” Kate asked.

“A few times, she did. She would say ‘I can’t wait to kill them.’ And then she talked about whether she’d do it with a knife or a gun. She really liked talking about it. But I told her to shut up. When me and Mercy got together, it was just for the sex. And I didn’t want to hear about her thinking about killing her parents before we got down to it, you know?”

Kate considered it all as Jeremy stopped talking and looked around at all three of them. He had lied about Mercy being promiscuous. Kate wondered if everything else he had said was also a lie.

She leaned down close to a still-sitting Sheriff Barnes and whispered into his ear: “Can we speak outside for a moment?”

He nodded and got up, practically having to tear his eyes away from Jeremy. He didn’t just walk out of the room—he *stormed* out. Before he said a word to Kate or DeMarco as they followed him, he went straight into his office. He held the door open for them and closed it when they were both inside.

Right away, he said: “Shit.”

“You think he’s telling the truth?” Kate asked.

“I think there are enough truthful tidbits in his story to make it believable. That little story about Wendy Fuller punching Mercy...that really happened. Mercy called the police. She wasn’t sad when she did it, either. It was about five years ago, but I remember it well. She was vindictive about it. Wanted to make

sure her mom got into trouble. But in the end, all it took was a little sit-down with the family and all was well. Wendy had a drinking problem back then. From what I understand, she's been clean and sober for about two years now. As for this shit with Mercy hating her parents with a passion...I just don't know for sure."

"Everything he's telling us is the exact opposite of what Anne Pettus said. She said Mercy loved her parents...that they got along really well."

"Here's where I get stuck," Barnes said. "Jeremy Branch and his older brother are nothing but troublemakers. I've busted his brother twice for possession of drugs and once for lewd conduct in the back of his truck out on the back roads. As for Jeremy, I've had him in here just once—for petty larceny. But I always figured it would be just a matter of time before he became more of a regular."

"Would he have any need to lie about Mercy potentially being the killer?" DeMarco asked.

"I just don't know. But...it makes a lot of sense, right? Girl gets fed up with her parents, kills them, and then runs away."

Kate nodded. She recalled her own imagined scenario of Mercy approaching her unsuspecting parents and killing them both before the second one she killed was even sure of what was happening.

"How long has Jeremy been living with his brother?" Kate asked.

“I don’t know. For good, maybe a year or so. Even before that, though, he would live with his brother off and on. His brother is Randy Branch—a twenty-five-year-old permanent screw-up. Their parents divorced about ten years ago. Randy got his own place as soon as he could, that miserable old double-wide out on the edge of the woods. For a while, I think Jeremy bounced back and forth between his parents but then their mother moved in with family down in Alabama. After that, I think their father just sort of stopped caring.”

“But he lives around here?”

“Yeah, out on Waterlick Road.”

“Any idea if Jeremy ever stays with him at all?”

“Not personally. I hear rumors, though. And one of those rumors is that Randy has these pretty raunchy parties. Orgies, I guess, I don’t know. And he doesn’t let Jeremy hang around. So from what I hear, the weekends he has these parties, Jeremy stays with his old man.” He paused here and then, almost skeptically, added: “You don’t think it was Mercy?”

“You *do*?”

He shrugged. “I don’t want to believe it, but it’s starting to look like it. If I’m being honest, it’s a conclusion I started to consider even before you showed up.”

“Let’s hold Jeremy here for a bit longer,” Kate said. “In the meantime, do you think you could have someone trace down the address and contact information of Jeremy’s father?”

“Yeah, I’ll get Foster on it,” he said, reaching for his phone.

“He’ll be glad to be able to add a little more information to his case files.”

Kate and DeMarco stepped outside of the office, walking back toward the bullpen area. Speaking under her breath, DeMarco asked: “Do you think Jeremy Branch is telling the truth?”

“I just don’t know. His story certainly adds up and connects a lot of dots. But I also know that with all the drugs I found in that house, he has every reason in the world to cover his ass and get the attention off of him.”

“I can’t help but wonder if *he* was in on the deaths himself,” DeMarco said. “An older guy, wanting to keep a younger girl under lock and key. If she truly hated her parents and he was crazy enough, wouldn’t he be a suspect?”

It was a promising train of thought, one that Kate had considered herself. She had not ruled it out, hoping that a visit to Jeremy’s father’s house would give them some more information.

“Agents?”

They both turned to see Barnes coming out of his office. He handed a slip of paper to Kate and nodded. “That’s the address for Floyd Branch. Fair warning, though...he can be a bit of a bastard. Badges and all that don’t really bother him.”

“It’s the middle of the day,” Kate said. “Are you even sure he’ll be home?”

“Yeah. He works on small engines and stuff like that out of his garage.” Barnes checked his watch and smiled. “It’s just about

three thirty, so I bet you just about anything that he's already started drinking. If I were you, I'd head out that way soon... before he gets hammered. Want some backup? He's kind of a hillbilly. I don't know how else to put that. He's going to see two women he doesn't know and not take you seriously."

"Sounds lovely," Kate said. "Sure. Come on along, Sheriff. The more, the merrier."

She honestly didn't believe in that little tidbit but she did know the sort of man Barnes was describing. She'd seen a lot of it in the South, especially. There were some rural areas where men had simply not caught up to the world, not only disrespecting women but unable to see them as equals... even when they were carrying a badge and a gun.

They left the station together, heading for the bureau's rental that DeMarco had driven in from DC. *Wow, that was just this morning*, she thought.

It made her think of Allen and the plans he had tried making for them—a quick escape away to the mountains to drink wine, sleep in, and other things in a bed that weren't exactly *sleeping*.

And while she was still rather down about missing out on such a thing, she was also willing to admit that she was just as excited right now, with a case unfolding in front of her. She still had some work to do in keeping a proper balance between her personal life and her unique bureau schedule but for now, she felt that she was exactly where she needed to be.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Floyd Branch's property was a living embodiment of all Southern stereotypes. As DeMarco pulled the car into the lightly graveled driveway, the lyrics to about a dozen country songs all presented themselves in the form of Floyd Branch's trailer, yard, and scattered possessions.

The grass was only slightly better than what they had previously seen at Jeremy's place. Portions of the lawn around the trailer had at least been mown, dead spots showing through here and there. The mower itself—an old riding mower with a rusted hood, was parked directly beside a shed to the back of the house. Two junked trucks—one completely missing its back end—sat on concrete blocks next to it. Beside the shed was a weak-looking dog pen, made primarily of wooden planks, a few metal poles, and what looked like chicken wire. As DeMarco parked the car and they all got out, two pit bulls inside the pen started to make ungodly noises, something between a bark and a roar.

Kate, DeMarco, and Barnes had taken only a few steps away from the car before a middle-aged gaunt-looking man came out of the shed. He carried a broom with him, looking angrily toward the pen and cursing at the dogs. He then saw that he had visitors. His anger dropped and he tossed the broom back into the shed as if embarrassed by it.

“Hey there, Sheriff.”

“Floyd, hey yourself. How are you today?”

“Okay, I guess. Working on an old dirt bike motor for the Wells family. The bike is older’n hell. Seems like a waste to me, but he already paid, so...”

He stopped here, clearly distracted as he tried to take in the two women on either side of Barnes. He looked both shaken and slightly excited. Not because there were women on his property, but because it was something unexpected—something new and out of the ordinary.

“Floyd, these two ladies are with the FBI. They’d like to ask you some questions.”

“FBI? What the hell for? I ain’t done nothing.”

“Oh, I don’t expect you have,” Barnes said. “But tell me, Floyd: when was the last time you spoke with Jeremy?”

“Ah shit, what’s he done?”

“We don’t know yet,” Kate said. “Maybe nothing at all. We’ve come here to find out for sure.”

“He’s been involved with Mercy Fuller,” Barnes explained. “Alvin and Wendy’s daughter. We have him down at the station for questioning. I thought you should know that.”

“What? Damn, Sheriff.” Floyd shrugged and shook his head. “It’s no wonder, though. That boy never tells me anything. It’s probably been about three weeks since I saw him. He stayed here a few nights while Randy was tending to his own stuff. But I’m pretty sure he came by for a little while a few nights ago when I was out at the bar. He left the light on in his room. He comes over

here sometimes to watch movies. Porn, mostly, I think. Little weirdo.”

“And he never mentioned Mercy Wheeler?” Kate asked.

“No. Hell, we barely even spoke at all. Talked football, some. How the Redskins are going to shit. He asked about his ma but I wasn’t about to have that conversation, you know?” He paused here, as if suddenly struck but a thought. “Damn. The Fullers? I heard about what happened to them. Did Mercy get killed, too?”

“No,” Barnes said. “In fact, she’s gone missing.”

“We spoke to Jeremy about his involvement with her,” Kate said. “He told us that Mercy didn’t like her parents and he’s suggesting that Mercy had something to do with their murders.”

“I don’t know why he’d lie about it,” Floyd said. He did not sound offended that they were making such an accusation. In fact, he seemed rather detached from the whole situation, like he simply didn’t care at all. “Were they dating?”

“Jeremy says it was just a physical relationship,” DeMarco said. “But he also said that she would confide in him—telling him how she hated her parents. How she wanted to kill them.”

“Forgive me for asking such a dumb question,” Floyd said, “but why are you here? Hell, Sheriff Barnes...you probably know Jeremy better than I do.”

“Does he have a room here?” Kate asked.

“Yeah. Last one down the hallway.”

“Would you allow us to look around it?”

Floyd hesitated here, unsure of how to answer. He looked to

Barnes, as if for help or backup of some kind.

“You got something in that trailer I might not approve of, Floyd?” Barnes asked.

Instead of answering outright, Floyd asked: “Just Jeremy’s room. Right?”

“For now,” Barnes said with some skepticism. “Thanks, Floyd.”

Barnes escorted Kate and DeMarco to the trailer. As they walked up the rickety porch, Kate looked back out at Floyd Branch. He was walking back into his shed, seemingly unaffected by the exchange.

“He wasn’t nearly as bad as you were letting on,” Kate said.

“Apparently he’s getting a late start on drinking today.”

They walked inside the trailer and Kate was surprised by what she saw. She had been expecting it to be in a state of disrepair, cluttered and messy. But Floyd apparently owned very little, including anything that could consist of clutter. The place was fairly clean, though it had the same sort of smell Kate had experienced at his son’s trailer earlier: stale beer and something slightly pungent that was probably old pot smoke.

The hallway was thin and only held three rooms: a bedroom, a bathroom, and a smaller bedroom near the back. Kate and DeMarco entered Jeremy’s room while Barnes hung back.

“I’m here for any support you need,” he said. “But there’s barely enough room for the two of you in there, much less the three of us.”

He was right. The room was very small, taken up mostly by a twin mattress sitting on the floor and an old desk that was piled up with DVDs and CDs. A small television and dusty DVD player sat on the floor at the foot of the mattress, their wires and cables snaking around the floor. A cell phone sat on top of the television, hooked to a charger that ran to a multi-outlet adapter that also powered the TV, DVD player, and the small box fan in the window.

Kate picked the phone up. It was an iPhone, about three models behind the most current. When she pressed the Home button, the screen instantly popped up. No password needed. The home screen showed only a few apps: a few games, settings, photos, and clock. She figured this was just a passed down phone, one with no service but still used for games. She had a few friends who had eased their older kids into owning a cell phone this same way. Before gifting them with a full-service phone, they had allowed their kids to have a hand-me-down without full services, capable of only texting selected users and playing games that did not require Wi-Fi.

Behind her, DeMarco was flipping through the movies. “Floyd really wasn’t kidding about his son watching porn back here. Half of these are amateur porn titles. The other half are Cinemax-style sex stuff.”

Kate kept looking through the phone. She opened up photos and found that it was packed. Some were of girls, all partying. A few were topless. A few were kissing one another, the expressions

on their faces a clear indication that they were wasted. There were a few videos of these events, all rather brief. She slid right past these until she came to one that was just under five minutes long. In the thumbnail of the video, she saw Mercy Fuller's face.

She pressed Play and it took her less than three seconds to understand what she was seeing before she shut it off. In the video, Mercy was lying on her back, being videoed from just above her. The director was apparently Jeremy, filming while having some fairly rough sex with her. It was not forced, if the sounds coming from Mercy were any indication.

"Jesus," Kate said, sliding out of Photos.

"What was that?" DeMarco asked.

"Proof that Jeremy Branch was telling the truth about at least one thing: they were definitely having sex."

Kate saw that while the phone in her hand had no access to Contacts—it did not need it, as calls were impossible from it—she did see that there were a few text threads. She opened up the messages and saw only three conversations. One was with a contact that had been titled BRO and the texts made it obvious that they were to and from his brother, Randy. One of the others was to a guy named Chuck and the entire thread was about which celebrities they would like to have sex with and why.

The third message thread was from a contact Jeremy had titled BOOTY CALL. The little picture above the name was Mercy Fuller, head tilted and making a kissing face.

"I might have hit the jackpot over here," Kate said.

DeMarco came over and they both started reading through the thread. It was quite long, spanning back over the last several months. The vast majority of it consisted of long drawn-out messages from Mercy with very short, often only one-word responses from Jeremy. The more they read, the clearer it became that Jeremy Branch had been lying to them. He may have been truthful about the nature of their relationship, but the picture he had painted of Mercy and her parents was totally untrue.

And that raised a very important question.

If he was lying about that, what else was he hiding?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kate walked back into the interrogation room as calmly as she could. DeMarco was with her and while she, too, was irritated, she had agreed to let Kate run the bulk of this second interrogation. Similarly, Barnes was also hanging back, fielding a few calls about other local interests in his office.

Kate sat down across from Jeremy, her expression blank. She could already tell that Jeremy was nervous, his eyes shifting back and forth between Kate, DeMarco, and the surface of the desk between them.

“The good news is that you’re a very convincing liar,” Kate said. “The bad news is, you aren’t particularly bright.”

Jeremy said nothing. He continued to sit there, looking dumbfounded, waiting to see where Kate took the conversation next. Kate took the old cell phone out of her pocket and placed it on the desk.

“You left this in your bedroom at your father’s place,” she said. “Stored away with all of your porn. We noticed that some of your own amateur stuff is also on this phone. Of course, I can tell by the look on your face that you know there is more than just incriminating pictures on here.”

Jeremy still remained silent. He was not being defiant; he was simply at a loss. He had nothing to say. So Kate went on, assuming that if she kept pushing, he’d end up talking.

“There are very long conversations between you and Mercy Fuller on this phone,” Kate said. “Several times during those conversations, she talks about her parents—her father in particular. In one of those conversations, she goes so far as to say that she likely has the coolest father in the world, the exception being his taste in music. She also, at one point, tells you that she’d like for you to meet her parents, even if only for you to taste how delicious her mother’s homemade lasagna is. She also talks about being excited for college and how the only real thing that makes her afraid to leave home when college time comes around is leaving her parents behind. Now...that does not sound like a girl who hated her parents and not *at all* like a girl who was planning to kill her parents.”

Slowly, Jeremy reached for the phone. Kate promptly grabbed it back up and got to her feet. “Why’d you lie to us, Jeremy? Are you hiding something?”

“No,” he said. “I just wanted you running in circles for coming after me. The law in this stupid county is always after my brother. Gave my old man a hell of a hard time back in the day, too.”

“Trying to stick it to the law?” Kate asked. “You really *aren’t* very bright, are you? This is not you just screwing with some local investigation, wasting the time of the cops. This is interfering with a federal case. And based on all of the drugs I found in your brother’s house, your little act—your bullshit story—could get you in a lot of trouble.”

Jeremy looked genuinely scared now. It had not taken much

and the way he was shifting between emotions—from prideful to stubborn to scared—told her all she needed to know about him. He had lived his life wanting to appease someone—probably his brother or father—and was seldom thinking for himself. And now here he was with his tough-guy act crumbling before him, looking down a path that could lead him to some very serious trouble.

“Look...I don’t know anything about what happened to her.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” Kate said.

“I swear, I don’t! I’ve done some messed up shit, but I would never kidnap someone. And I wouldn’t k-k-kill someone.”

His stutter and the glistening of tears in the corners of his eyes made Kate believe that he was right. No matter how good of a liar he was, it was very hard to fake that sincere sort of emotion.

“Where is Mercy, Jeremy?”

“I swear, I don’t know!” He slapped at his own face as a tear trailed down his cheek.

“When was the last time you saw her?” DeMarco asked.

“Last week. It was just for a little while. Usually we at least talk and hang out a bit before I take her back to Waterlick Road. But that last time...”

“What? It’s okay,” Kate said. “No need to be modest on us now.”

“Well, she was really into it. It was quick and sort of rough and when we were done, she said she wanted to go home. Right away.”

“And that was unlike her?”

“Yeah. She usually liked to cuddle up and talk when we were done. Maybe smoke a little weed.”

Kate waited for about thirty seconds before she tried again. She leaned across the table and, as menacingly as she could muster without actually accusing him, she asked: “Where is she, Jeremy?”

“I don’t know!”

“How do I know you’re not lying to us about this, too?”

“I’m not! I’m telling you the truth!”

Kate crossed her arms, stared him down for a moment, and then headed for the door. When she walked out, DeMarco followed closely behind her.

“It’s not him,” Kate said quietly.

“I’m getting that vibe, too,” DeMarco agreed.

“You feel like staying overnight in Deton?”

“It wouldn’t be on my bucket list, if that’s what you mean. But I’d rather stay here than drive back to DC and repeat it all over again tomorrow morning.”

“I think we need to have Sheriff Barnes hold Jeremy for a while. The longer he’s here, the more he’ll start to worry about his brother. The more he’ll start to worry about his own fate. If he *is* hiding something else, time will pull it out of him. Besides... based on his lies, the drugs, some of the stuff on his phone, and his relationship with Mercy, there’s plenty to hold him on.”

“Maybe we should get one last meeting in before the day ends.

Get Foster back in here and go over what we know.”

“Good idea. And while we’re doing that, maybe some more truths will come tumbling out of Jeremy Branch.”

But really, she thought Jeremy had been as truthful as he could be. While he showed no real remorse for the disappearance of the underage girl he was sleeping with, the fear she’d seen in his eyes made her believe he’d given them everything he had. And at the end of the day, it hadn’t been all that much.

At 6:15, a very small meeting was held in the conference room. It consisted of Kate, DeMarco, Barnes, and Foster. Barnes had considered bringing one more officer in on it but decided not to. The Deton police force consisted of six active-duty cops and, as Barnes had explained, Foster was the only one Barnes trusted not to blab about the case all over town.

“So you went out to Floyd’s place?” Foster asked.

“We did,” Kate said. “That’s where we found the phone.”

“I assume Floyd did absolutely nothing about the fact that his youngest son was spending time at the station?”

“Hardly,” Barnes said. “I’ve already explained to the agents the type of stand-up father Floyd Branch is. He won’t be a factor in whatever happens to Jeremy.”

“That’s what we need to figure out,” Kate said. “I don’t think Jeremy is guilty. Not of Mercy’s disappearance and not the

murders. If he had something to do with her disappearance, I don't see him so casually answering the door for us the way he did this morning. And if he killed the Fullers, there's no way he would stick around town."

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