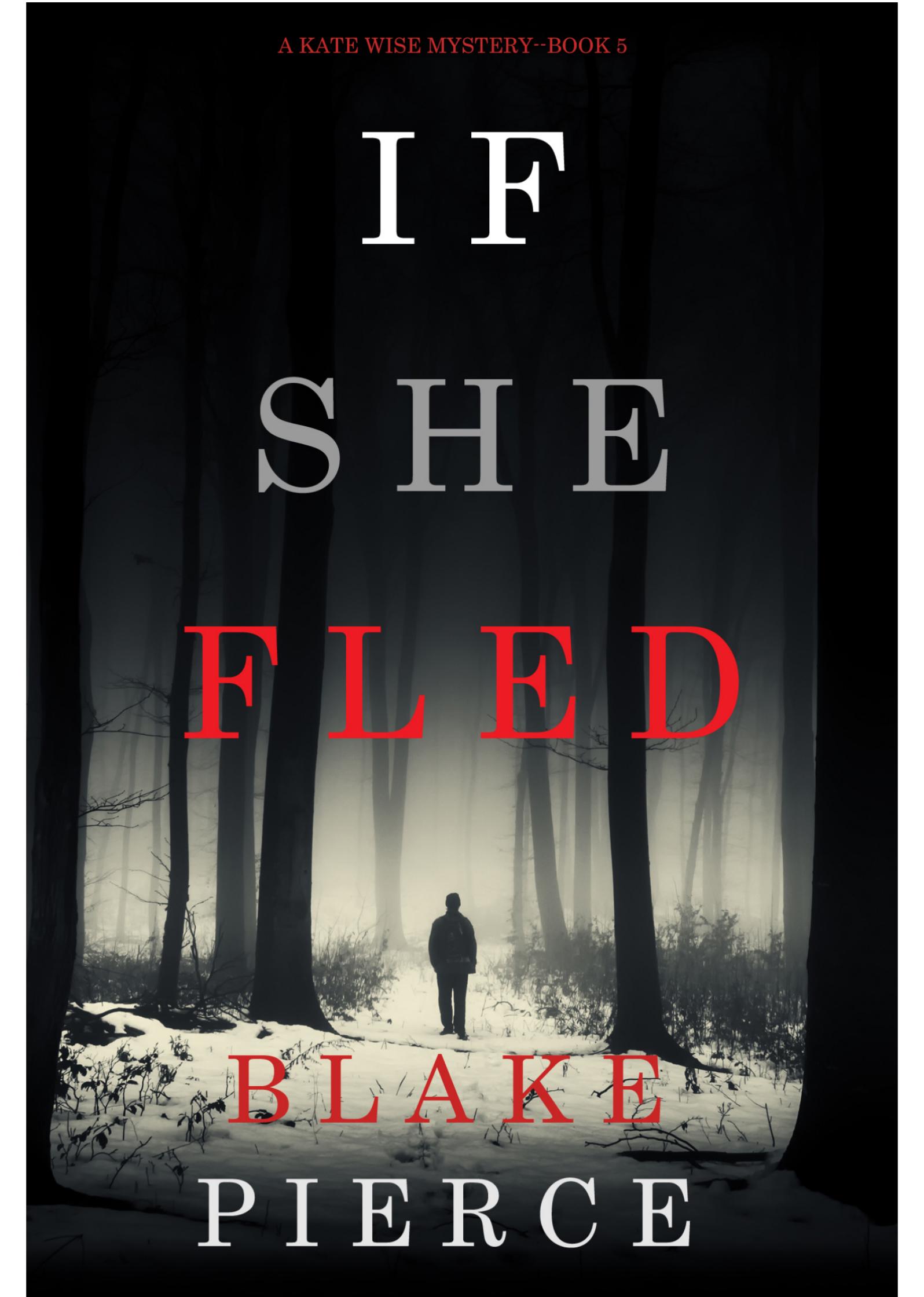


A KATE WISE MYSTERY--BOOK 5

A person stands in the center of a snowy forest, looking away from the viewer. The trees are tall and thin, their branches bare. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow. The overall atmosphere is dark and mysterious.

IF
SHE
FLED

BLAKE
PIERCE

A Kate Wise Mystery

Blake Pierce

If She Fled

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

If She Fled / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (A Kate Wise Mystery)

ISBN 978-1-64-029754-8

“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 FLED (A Kate Wise Mystery) is book #5 in a new psychological thriller series by bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) (a free download) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. When another 50 year old woman is found dead in her home in a wealthy suburb—the second such victim in just two months—the FBI is stumped. They must turn to their most brilliant mind—retired FBI agent Kate Wise, 55—to come back to the line of duty and solve it. What do these two empty nesters have in common? Were they targeted? How long until this serial killer strikes again? And is Kate, though past her prime, still able to solve cases that no one else can? An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, IF SHE FLED is book #5 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #6 in the KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

IF SHE FLED

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 thirteen 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 six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting).

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

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PROLOGUE

Most days, Karen Hopkins enjoyed working from home. She stayed busy, which was good because her little web optimization business was only supposed to be a side gig but had somehow become a full-time thing—a full-time thing that was going to help her and Gerald, her husband, retire in two or three years. But there were some days when the clients were so damned stupid that she almost yearned for the years when she'd answered to someone else. The ability to pass troublesome clients off to someone higher up the chain would have benefited her greatly far too often.

She was staring at an email, wondering how she could respond to her client's asinine question with a response that would not make her sound rude. She had one of her classical playlists currently playing on Spotify—but not the kind with multiple strings that drowned out the piano. No, she preferred just the piano. Currently, she was trying to enjoy Erik Satie's *Gymnopedie No. 1*.

The key word was *trying*. She was distracted by the email and the occasional question from the man in the den. The den was separated from her office by a single wall, meaning that whenever the man had a question, he basically had to scream it at her. He was friendly enough but good grief, she was starting to wish she had never called him.

"This is a gorgeous rug you have in here," he said, his voice bellowing through the wall, through Erik Satie, and through her collected thoughts concerning this damned email. "Is it Oriental?"

"I believe so," Karen said, calling over her shoulder. Her back faced the entryway to the hallway and the den beyond, forcing her to have to speak rather loudly.

She tried to keep her voice polite...chipper, even. But it was hard. She was too distracted. This email was an important one. It was a repeat client that looked to be bringing in even more work several months from now, but the people running his business were apparently idiots.

She started typing her response, choosing each word carefully. It was hard to sound professional and reasonable when you were angry and questioning the intelligence of the person you were writing to. She knew this very well, as she felt like she had to endure it several times a month.

She made it four seconds in before the man in the parlor called out again. Karen cringed, wishing she had never called him. The timing was all bad. What the hell had she been thinking? This whole thing could have waited until the weekend, really.

"I see the pictures of your kids on the mantel. How many are there? Three?"

"Yes."

"How old are they now?"

She had to bite her lip to not curse at the man. It was important to keep up appearances, though. Besides, she never knew when she might have to call on him again.

"Oh, they're all grown now—twenty, twenty-three, and twenty-seven."

"A beautiful bunch of kids for sure," he replied. He then went quiet. She heard him moving around in the den, including the occasional bit of low-drone humming. It took Karen a moment to realize that he was humming along to the music from her office, which had transitioned into another piece by Satie. She rolled her eyes, really wishing he would stay quiet. Sure, she had called him over to perform a service but he was already irritating her. Didn't most workmen just come over, work in silence, and then leave happily paid? What was this guy's problem?

"Thank you," she managed to say, really not liking the idea of him looking at pictures of her kids.

She lowered her head and got back to the email. Of course, it was no use. Apparently, her visitor was bent on having a conversation through the wall.

"They live around here?" he asked.

“No,” she said. She was rather short and blunt this time, going so far as to turn her head all the way to the right so he could perhaps hear the irritation in her voice. She did not intend to give him the locations of each of her children. God only knew what kind of questions he could make out of that.

“I see,” he said.

If she had not been so preoccupied with the email in front of her, she might have recognized an eerie chill in the silence that followed this question. It was a pregnant silence, the type that promises something else to follow.

“You expecting any other visitors today?”

She wasn’t sure why, but something about this question sparked fear in her. It was an odd question for a stranger to ask, particularly one she had hired for a service. And had she heard something different in his tone with that question?

Concerned now, she turned away from her laptop. There seemed to be something going on with him. And now she was no longer just irritated by his questions, she was growing scared as well.

“I have a few friends coming over for coffee later,” she lied. “Not sure when, though. Most of the time, they usually just swing by whenever they feel like it.”

To this, she got no response and that was scarier than anything else. Slowly, Karen rolled her chair back and stood up. She walked to the doorway that connected her office to the den. She peeked inside to see what he was doing.

He was not there. The tools of his trade were still there, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Call the police...

The thought raced through her mind and she knew it was good advice. But she also knew she was prone to overexaggerating. Maybe he had gone back out to his truck or something.

No way, she thought. Did you hear the door open and close? Besides, he’s been chatty from the get-go. He would have told you he was heading back outside...

She froze, a few steps into the den. “Hey,” she said, her voice wavering a bit. “Where’d you go?”

No response.

Something is wrong, that voice in her head screamed. Call the police now!

With terror blooming in her gut, Karen slowly backed out of the den. She started to turn back toward her office, where her cell phone sat on her desk.

As she turned, she collided with something hard. She could smell sweat for just a moment but barely had time to register it.

That’s when something went around her neck, pulling tight.

Karen Hopkins struggled, fighting against whatever was around her neck. But the harder she fought, the tighter the thing on her neck became. It was rough, cutting and digging in deeper as she struggled. She felt a thin stream of blood trailing down over her chest at the same time she realized she found it difficult to breathe.

She fought regardless, doing what she could to pull the attacker into the office so she could grab her cell phone. She felt more blood running down her neck, nothing major, still just a trickle. The thing around her neck grew even tighter. She slowly sagged as she came within several feet of her desk. As she did, all her eyes could see was the laptop screen in front of her. That white screen, with an incomplete email that she would never send.

She watched the cursor blinking insistently, waiting for her next word.

But it would never come.

CHAPTER ONE

One of the many things that surprised Kate Wise in this, her fifty-fifth year of life (with the fifty-sixth just a few weeks away), was how getting ready for a date never failed to make her feel like an insecure teenager again. Was her makeup right? Was it too much? Should she start coloring her hair darker to combat the grays that seemed to be slowly winning the battle for her hair? Should she wear a sensible bra that was all about comfort or one that would be easy for Alan to remove when the date came to its end?

It was a nice sort of anxiousness, one that reminded her she had been through this before. When she had been married, she'd felt the same way in getting ready for a date all the way up through the first year. But now with Alan, the first man she had dated since Michael died, she had been forced to learn how to date all over again.

It was getting easier quite fast with Alan. They were both in their mid-fifties, so there was a sense of urgency to each date—an unspoken knowledge that if this relationship was going to come to something other than dating, they needed to fully invest in it. So far, through a few obstacles here and there, they had done exactly that. And to this point, it had been pretty incredible.

Tonight's date was to be dinner, a movie, and then back to her place, where they'd spend the night together. That was another thing their age allowed them to do in dating: to skip the will-we-won't-we when it came to the bedroom. The answer for the last few months had been an unequivocal yes—a yes that carried over after nearly every date (something else that surprised Kate about dating at the age of fifty-five).

As she applied her lipstick—just a bit, like she knew Alan liked—a knock at her front door startled her. She checked her watch and saw that it was only 6:35, a full twenty-five minutes earlier than she had been expecting Alan.

She smiled, assuming he had come by early. Maybe he wanted to swap the order of the date and go ahead and do the bedroom part first. It would be a pain to get undressed moments after she'd *gotten* dressed, but it would be worth it. With a smile on her face, she left her bedroom, walked through the house, and answered the door.

When she saw that it was Melissa on the other side, she went through several emotions quite quickly: surprise, disappointment, and then worry. Melissa was carrying the car seat in her right hand as little Michelle stared out. When Michelle's eyes found her grandmother, she beamed and started reaching out, making clutching motions with her little hands.

"Melissa, hi," Kate said. "Come in, come in."

Melissa did as asked, frowning as she looked her mother over. "Crap. Are you going out? A date with Alan?"

"Yeah. He's coming over in about twenty minutes. Why? What's up?"

It was then, as they settled down on the couch, that Kate noticed something seemed to be troubling Melissa. "I was hoping you could watch Michelle tonight."

"Melissa...I'd love to any other time. You know that. But as you can see, I already have plans. Is...is everything okay?"

Melissa shrugged. "I guess. I don't know. Terry has been weird lately. Honestly, he's been weird ever since Michelle's health scare. He's just not there sometimes, you know? It's been worse the last few days, and I don't quite know why."

"So you two need some time together? A date of your own?"

Melissa shook her head, frowning. "No. We just need to have a talk. A very long, serious talk. And there might be yelling. And as distant as he's been lately, he and I both agree that we're never going to yell at each other while there's a child in the house."

"Is he...is he mistreating you?"

“No, nothing like that.”

Kate looked down at the car seat, slowly taking Michelle out. “Lissa, you should have called. Given me a heads-up.”

“I did. I tried, about an hour ago. But it rang a few times and went to voicemail.”

“Ah hell. I left it on silent after I went to the dentist today. I’m so sorry.”

“No, *I’m* sorry. I hate to ask you for this favor so last minute when you clearly already have plans. But...I don’t know what else to do. I’m sorry if it feels like I’m taking advantage of you, but you’re...you’re all I have, Mom. But lately, it feels like you’re moving on. You have Alan and your sort-of job with the bureau now. I feel like you’re forgetting about me...that Michelle and I are more of a nuisance than anything else.”

It broke Kate’s heart to hear those words. She sat Michelle on her lap, holding her little hands and bouncing her lightly.

“I have not forgotten about you,” Kate said. “If anything, I think I’ve been trying to rediscover myself. Through work, through Alan...through you and Michelle. You’ve never been a nuisance.”

I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come over after you didn’t answer your phone. We can do this some other time, maybe a few days from now...does that sound good?”

“No,” Kate said. “Tonight. Take tonight.”

“But your date...”

“Alan will understand. He’s grown pretty fond of Michelle, you know.”

“Mom...are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

She leaned over and wrapped Melissa up in a hug. Michelle squirmed in her lap, reaching up with a free hand to clutch her grandma’s hair. “I was scared when Michelle was going through all of that hospital mess, too,” she said as they embraced. “Maybe Terry just never processed it. Give him a chance to explain. And if he gives you a hard time, remind him that your mother carries a gun.”

Melissa laughed as they broke the hug. Michelle laughed too, clapping her chubby little hands together.

“Tell Alan I said I’m sorry,” Melissa said.

“I will. And if things get weird tonight, let me know. You’re always welcome to stay here if you need a break from it all.”

Melissa nodded and kissed Michelle on the head. “You be good for Grandma, okay?”

Michelle had no response to this, as she was currently slapping at one of the buttons on Kate’s shirt. Kate watched Melissa leave and could clearly see just how torn she was. It made Kate wonder if things were worse at home than she was letting on.

Once the door was closed, Kate looked down at Michelle and gave her a smile. Michelle happily returned it as she reached up for her grandmother’s nose.

“Is Mommy happy at home?” Kate asked. “Are Mommy and Daddy doing okay?”

Michelle grabbed her nose and squeezed, as if reminding her of her duties. Kate grinned and stuck her tongue out, realizing that maybe watching Michelle could be a date in its own right.

When Kate answered the door for Alan fifteen minutes later, he looked both happy and confused. His eyes were alight and sparkling as they usually were when they took in the sight of Kate. He then saw the ten-month-old baby in her arms, causing his eyes to narrow into confusion. He smiled regardless, as Kate had told Melissa the truth less than half an hour ago; Alan loved Michelle almost as much as Kate did.

“I think she’s a little young to be serving as a third wheel,” Alan said.

"I know. Look, Alan, I'm sorry. But there's been a change of plans...like in the past half an hour. Melissa and Terry are going through a hard time. Terry is being really distant and weird. They have to work through some stuff..."

Alan shrugged nonchalantly. "Am I still invited in?"

"Of course."

He kissed them both—first Kate on the lips and then Michelle on the forehead—before stepping inside. Kate's heart warmed toward him at once. First of all, he looked handsome as always. He'd dressed nicely for their date, but not *too* nice. He managed to always dress in a way that made it look like he could fit in at a cocktail patio on the beach or a swanky downtown restaurant.

"You think they'll be okay?" Alan asked.

"I think so. I think Michelle's health scare rocked Terry more than he knew. It's just now starting to catch up with him and I think it might be affecting their marriage."

"That's rough," Alan said. He opened his hands to Michelle and she instantly reached for him. As he snuggled her close and she slapped at his cheek, Alan regarded Kate with what wasn't quite concern, but something close.

"Did she not even call?" he asked.

"She tried and...*damn*. I still forgot to take it off silent. Went to the dentist for a checkup."

She took her phone out of her purse and switched the ringer back on. She saw at once where Melissa had indeed tried to call her an hour and twenty minutes ago.

"Well, you know, we can have the date here," he said. "We can call up some Thai food and watch a movie. And the ending part of it all could be the same."

Kate nodded and smiled, but her attention was still on her phone. She had missed another call as well. And the number had tried calling twice, having left a message the last time.

It was a call from DC—from Director Duran.

"Kate?"

She blinked and looked away from the phone. She hated that she felt like she had been caught doing something bad.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It's just...work called, too. About three hours ago."

"Return the call then," Alan said. He was pretending to dance with Michelle and although he wore a happy face, Kate could sense some irritation lurking beneath. But she also knew that he'd only press her harder to go ahead and make the call if she refused.

"One second," she said, walking into the kitchen and returning Duran's call.

The phone rang only twice before it was answered. Even in something as simple as "*hello*," Duran sounded pissed.

"Kate, there you are. Where have you been?"

"My phone was on silent. Sorry. Is everything okay?"

"Well, when you didn't answer the last time, I've sort of been scrambling around."

"Over what?"

"There's a case out in Illinois—two murders that seem related but there's no hard link. It's pretty much stumped the local PD, and the field office out of Chicago pointed out that you were familiar with the area...the Fielding case you cracked in 2002. They said they're glad to put their own agents on it, but were asking if you'd rather take it. They're kind of excited about the idea of getting you back out there."

"When?"

"I'd like to get you on a plane tonight. Get you and DeMarco out there nice and early in the morning."

"What are the details?"

"I can send you what I have, but there's still some stuff coming in. Police reports, forensics, all of that. Can I count on you?"

Kate looked back over at Alan, still dancing with Michelle. She was bopping him on the nose and on the mouth while he sang a Bob Dylan song to her. If she took the case, she'd have to call Melissa back and tell her she couldn't keep Michelle. Not tonight. And she'd also have to cancel plans with Alan.

"What happens if I can't?" she asked Duran.

"Then I'm going to pass it over to the field office in Chicago. But I really think you're the perfect match for this. All I need you to do is find some leads and get it rolling. After that, local agents can roll with it."

"Let me think about it?"

"Kate, I need to know now. I have to let the local PD and the Chicago field office know what's going down."

In her heart, she knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to take it. She wanted to take it very badly. And if that made her selfish, then...then so what? There was a huge difference between putting family first and denying herself the opportunities and the chance to live her own life. She knew if she turned this opportunity down just because she had stepped in to watch Michelle for Melissa at the last minute, she'd feel resentful toward them both. It hurt to admit it, but there it was, the honest and raw truth.

"Okay, yes, count me in. Are there flight details yet?"

"DeMarco is taking care of all of that," Duran said. "She'll be contacting you soon."

Kate ended the call, her eyes again traveling over to Alan and Michelle. The strained look on Alan's face told her that he had heard the conversation.

"When are you leaving?" he asked.

"I don't know. DeMarco is in charge of the itinerary. Sometime tonight. Alan...I'm sorry."

He said nothing, looking away as he sat down on the couch with Michelle. "It is what it is," he finally said. "And don't feel too bad...I still have a pretty hot date here."

"Don't be silly, Alan. I'll call Melissa and explain things to her."

"No. If they need the respite, let them have it. As you might know, I am fully capable of watching after this little one."

"Alan, I couldn't possibly ask you to do that!"

"And you never would. Which is why I am volunteering it."

Kate came over to the couch and sat next to him. She rested her head on his shoulder. "Do you know how incredible you are?"

He shrugged. "Do you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, sensing some resentment in his tone.

"I mean, this thing with you and your work. It was supposed to be an every now and then thing, right? And honestly, to be fair, it has been. But when it's on, it's *on*. They want you to drop everything and come running when they call."

"It's part of the job, though."

"A job you retired from two years ago. Did you really miss it that much?"

"Alan...that's not fair."

"Maybe not. I won't pretend to know what kind of lure that job holds over you. But I'm on the same sidelines as Melissa and Michelle. There's only so much more of this I'm going to be able to take."

"If you feel so strongly, I won't take this one. I'll call Duran back and—"

"No. You need to take it. I don't want you taking it out on me or your daughter if you let it pass you by. So, go. Take it. But coming from someone who is rapidly falling more and more in love

with you, I feel I should tell you that you need to have some hard conversations when you come back. With me, your daughter, and maybe even yourself.”

Kate’s first reaction was one of anger and resentment. But maybe he was right. After all, hadn’t she realized her decision was borderline selfish just several moments ago? She’d be fifty-six in three weeks. Maybe it *was* time she finally drew up some boundaries in terms of her work. And if it meant that her special little set-up with Duran and the bureau came to an end, so be it.

“Alan...I need you to be honest. If me taking this is going to strain us...”

“It won’t. Not this time. But I don’t know how much longer it can go on into the future.”

She opened her mouth to respond but her phone rang, interrupting her. She checked the display and saw that it was Jo DeMarco, the young woman who had been serving as her partner for the last year, riding along on this little experiment between her and the FBI.

“It’s DeMarco,” she said. “I need to get travel details.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “You don’t have to clear it with me.”

What she didn’t say but felt deep in her heart was: *Then why do I feel like I have to?*

It was a question she did not feel like wrestling with at the moment. And, as she had been doing when presented with questions like this over the last few months, she turned her attention to work. With a sting of guilt, she answered the call.

“Hey, DeMarco. What’s up?”

CHAPTER TWO

Both Kate and DeMarco had managed to grab a bit of sleep on the red-eye flight from DC to Chicago. But in Kate's case, it had been a very broken nap at best. When she stirred awake during descent into Chicago at 6:15, she didn't feel very rested. Her thoughts instantly turned to Melissa, Michelle, and Alan. The guilt slammed into her like a brick as she had watched Chicago appear in the soft light of dawn through the plane window.

She spent that first moment in Chicago hating herself. It got better as she and DeMarco made their way through the airport and to the rental car desk.

Now, as they drove into the small town of Frankfield, Illinois, the guilt was still there but little more than a ghost in her head, rattling chains and creaking floorboards.

DeMarco was behind the wheel, sipping on Starbucks she had picked up in O'Hare. She glanced over at Kate, who was looking out the window, and nudged her.

"Okay, Wise," DeMarco said. "There's a big fat elephant in the room and it *stinks*. What's going on? You look miserable."

"We at the *let's-go-deep* level yet?"

"Weren't we always?"

Kate sat up and sighed. "I was babysitting Michelle when I realized I missed a call from Duran. I had to bail. Worse than that, I left her with Alan because Melissa and her husband are going through some stuff. It's kind of eating me up."

"I'm glad you're here with me," DeMarco said. "But you could have just told him no. You're not under a strict contract or anything, right?"

"Right. But saying no isn't as easy as you'd think. I fear I'm putting too much into this. I think it's how I'm finding my purpose."

"Being a grandmother isn't enough purpose?" DeMarco asked.

"Oh, it is. I just...I don't know."

She trailed off here and DeMarco let her have her silence...for a moment. "So, this case," DeMarco said. "Looks pretty plain, right? You read the files?"

"I did. And it does seem pretty cut and dry. But with no leads or clues or even the slightest suggestion from local law enforcement, it's going to be a challenge."

"So...the latest victim was a fifty-four-year-old woman. At home alone two afternoons ago. No signs of forced entry. Discovered by the husband when he arrived home from work. Looks like it was brutal strangulation that cut deep into her neck."

"And that might be the smoking gun right there," Kate said. "What the hell do you strangle someone with that has the ability to also saw into your neck?"

"Barbed wire?"

"There would have been more blood," Kate commented. "The scene would have been beyond gruesome."

"And the reports say this place was pretty clean."

"So that explains why the local PD is having such problems. But there has to be *some* starting place, right?"

"Well, let's find out," DeMarco said, slowing the car to a crawl and nodding ahead and to the right. "We're here."

There was a single policeman waiting for them when they pulled into the U-shaped driveway. He was sitting in his patrol car, sipping on a cup of coffee. He gave Kate and DeMarco a polite nod when they approached his car. He was dressed in uniform, and the star-shaped badge indicated he was the sheriff. If Kate had to guess, he would not be holding that position for much longer. He was easily pushing sixty; it showed the most in his brow and the almost completely gray sheen on his hair.

“Agents Wise and DeMarco,” Kate said, showing him her badge.

“Sheriff Bannerman,” the aging policeman said. “Glad you could make it up here. This case has us baffled as hell.”

“Care to walk us inside and give us the details?” Kate asked.

“Of course.”

Bannerman led them up the wide stairs onto the minimally decorated porch. Inside, the house was equally minimalist, making the already huge house look even larger. The front door opened onto a tiled foyer that gave way to a wide hall and a set of curved stairs leading to the second floor. Bannerman led them down the hallway and to the right. They entered a spacious den, the far wall occupied by a single enormous built-in bookcase. The den itself held a single elegant couch and a piano.

“The victim’s office is right through here,” Bannerman said, leading them through the den and into an area tiled in the same fashion as the foyer. A simple desk sat against the far wall. To the right, a window looked out onto a keyhole garden. A large vase of cotton plant fragments sat in the corner. It looked simple and was clearly fake, yet it fit the room nicely.

“The body was discovered at her desk, in this very chair,” Bannerman said. He was nodding toward a very plain-looking desk chair. But it was the sort of plain that would usually boast a steep price tag. Just looking at it made Kate’s back and backside feel comfortable.

“The victim was Karen Hopkins, a local for most of her life, I believe. She was working when she was killed. The email she never finished was still on the screen when her husband discovered the body.”

“The reports say there were no signs of forced entry, is that right?” DeMarco asked.

“That’s right. In fact, the husband told us all the doors were locked when he got home.”

“So the killer locked up before he left,” Kate said. “Not unusual. It would be a surefire way to try to throw off any investigation. Still, though...he had to get in somehow.”

“Mrs. Hopkins is the second victim. Five days ago, there was another. A woman of about the same age, killed in her home while her husband was at work. Marjorie Hix.”

“You said Karen Hopkins was working when she was killed,” Kate said. “Do you know what she did?”

“According to the husband, it wasn’t really a job. Just a side hustle to make some extra cash to speed up retirement. Online marketing or something like that.”

Kate and DeMarco took a moment to look around the office. DeMarco checked the waste bin by the desk and the few pieces of paper in the small tray at the edge of the desk. Kate scanned the floor for any possible fragments, finding herself once again standing by the vase of fake cotton. Almost instinctively, she reached out and touched the soft head of one of the stalks. Just as she imagined, it was fake but its softness was almost calming. She noted a few broken stalks before returning her attention to the desk.

Bannerman kept a respectful distance, meandering back and forth between the edge of the den and the window, looking out to the garden outside of the office.

Karen noted right away that the office desk was facing the wall. This wasn't too uncommon; as she understood it, it was a great way for people with short attention spans to improve their focus. She also knew it meant she likely never even knew what was coming until it had happened.

Her suspicions automatically turned to the husband. Whoever had killed her had entered the house quietly and made very little noise.

That, or they were already in here and she wasn't suspecting a thing.

Again, all signs pointed to the husband. But that was a dead end because based on everything they knew, the husband had a solid alibi. Sure, she could check up on it but history told her that when someone had alibis pertaining to work, there were seldom any cracks in those alibis.

Before stating such a thing to DeMarco or Bannerman, she stepped into the den. In order to get into the office, one had to pass through the den. The floor was covered in a very nice Oriental rug. The sofa looked like it was rarely used and the piano looked as if it were an antique—the sort that was never played but was nice to look at.

The books on the walls were an assortment of titles, most of which she assumed had never even been opened...just coffee table books to look nice on shelves. Only near the end of the furthest shelf did she see any books that showed signs of wear and tear: some classics, a few thriller paperbacks, and some cookbooks.

She looked for anything odd or out of place but saw nothing. DeMarco stepped into the den as well and gave her a frown and a shrug.

"Thoughts?" Kate asked.

"I think we need to speak with the husband. Even with the rock solid alibi, maybe he can uncover some small nugget of information."

Bannerman stood by the entryway of the den, his arms crossed as he looked at them. "We've questioned him, of course. His alibi is pretty much bulletproof. At least nine people at his work saw him and spoke to him while his wife was being killed. But he's also stated that he's willing to answer as many questions as we have."

"Where is he staying?" Kate asked.

"At his sister's place, about three miles from here."

"Sheriff, do you have a file on the first victim?"

"I do. I can have someone email you a copy of it if you like."

"That would be great."

Bannerman's age brought with it experience. He knew the agents were done in the Hopkins home. Without being told, he turned and headed for the front door with Kate and DeMarco behind him.

As they walked back to their cars, thanking Bannerman for meeting with them, the sun had finally reached its place of permanence in the sky. It was just past eight o'clock and Kate felt as if the case were already on the move.

She hoped that was a good omen.

Of course, when they got into the car and she noticed a few gray storm clouds meandering in, she tried to ignore them.

CHAPTER THREE

Bannerman had called ahead to give the husband a heads-up that the FBI was coming by to speak with him. When Kate and DeMarco arrived at his sister's house ten minutes later, Gerald Hopkins was sitting on the porch with a cup of coffee. As they climbed the stairs to meet him, Kate saw that the man was exhausted. She knew what grief looked like, and no one wore it well. But when exhaustion was part of the equation, it made it so much worse.

"Thank you for agreeing to speak with us, Mr. Hopkins," Kate said.

"Of course. Anything I can do to find who did this."

His voice was haggard and wispy. Kate imagined he had spent a great deal of the last two days crying, sobbing, and perhaps even screaming. And getting very little sleep in between. He gazed into his cup of coffee, his brown eyes looking like they might droop closed at any minute. Kate thought that if he had not been overcome with such horrendous grief, Gerald Hopkins was likely a rather handsome man.

"Is your sister here?" DeMarco asked.

"She is. She's inside, handling the...arrangements." He stopped here, took a deep breath to fight off what Kate assumed was a bout of weeping, and then shuddered a bit. He sipped some coffee and went on. "She's been amazing. Handling it all, fighting for me. Keeping the nosy assholes in this city away."

"We know the police have already questioned you, so we'll keep it brief," Kate said. "If you can, I'd like for you to describe the last week or so you spent with Karen. Could you do that?"

He shrugged. "I guess it was like just about any other week. I went to work, she stayed at home. I came home, we did our basic married couple stuff. We had gotten into a routine...sort of boring. Some couples might call it a rut."

"Anything bad?" Kate asked.

"No. We just...I don't know. The last few years, ever since the kids were all moved out, we sort of stopped trying. We still loved each other but it was just very plain. Boring, you know?" He sighed here and then shuddered once more. "Ah, shit. The kids. They're all on their way here. Henry, our oldest, should be here in the next hour or so. And then I have to...have to go through it..."

He lowered his head and let out a desperate mewling sound that tapered into a hiccup-style weeping. Kate and DeMarco stepped away, giving him his space. It took about two minutes for him to regroup. When he did, he wiped his eyes and looked up apologetically.

"Take your time," Kate said.

"No, it's okay. I just wish I'd been a better husband at the end, you know? I was always around, but never really *there*. I think she was feeling lonely. I actually, I know she was. I just didn't want to put forth any extra effort. Isn't that just miserable of me?"

"Do you know of anyone she might have met with the last few days?" Kate asked. "Any meetings or appointments, anything like that?"

"No clue. Karen sort of ran the house. I don't even know what was going on in my own house... my own fucking *life* half the time. She did it all. Balanced the checkbooks, made appointments, set the calendars up, planned dinners, planted that damned keyhole garden of hers, kept up with family birthdays and get-togethers. I was pretty much useless."

"Would you allow us to have access to her calendars?" DeMarco asked.

"Anything you need. Anything. Bannerman and his men already have access to our synced calendar. We did everything on our phones. He can get you on there."

"Thank you. Mr. Hopkins, we'll leave you for now but please...if you think of anything of interest, could you please contact us or Sheriff Bannerman?"

He nodded, but it was clear that he was only a few moments away from weeping again.

Kate and DeMarco took their leave, heading back to their car. It hadn't been a very productive meeting but it did help to convince Kate that there was no way Gerald DeMarco had killed his wife. You just can't fake grief like that. She'd seen plenty of men try it during the course of her career and it had never come off as authentic. Gerald Hopkins was beside himself with grief and she felt incredibly sorry for him.

"Next stop?" DeMarco asked as she got behind the wheel.

"I'd like to go back to the Hopkins house...maybe talk to the neighbors. He mentioned that keyhole garden, right outside the office window. There was a neighbor just within sight of that window. It's a long shot, but maybe one worth taking."

DeMarco nodded and pulled the car out of the driveway. They drove back toward the Hopkins residence as the first of those storm clouds started to creep in front of the sun.

They started with the neighbor directly to the right of the Hopkins residence. They tried the front door but got no answer. After waiting thirty seconds, Kate knocked again but to the same result.

"You know," Kate said, "after working neighborhoods like this one long enough, you almost expect at least one member of the couple to be home."

She knocked one more time and when no one answered the door, they gave up. They left, crossing across the Hopkinses' yard to venture over to the other neighbor. As they did, Kate peered across the lawn between the two houses. She could just barely see the edge of the house that was visible through Karen Hopkins's office window. She was looking at the back of that neighboring house, the front of it situated along a street that apparently intersected the one the Hopkinses lived on.

As they made their way to the house on the left, Kate noticed the first few droplets of rain coming from the scattered storm clouds overhead. They started for the stairs just as she felt her cell phone buzzing in her pocket. She pulled it out and checked the display. It was Melissa. A small knot of guilt gripped her heart. She was sure her daughter was calling to bemoan the fact that she had left Michelle with Alan last night. And now, a bit farther removed from the decision, Kate felt that Melissa had every right to be pissed.

But it was certainly not a conversation she was ready to have right now, as they climbed the stairs to the neighbor's house. DeMarco knocked this time. The door was answered almost right away by a young-looking woman carrying a child who might have been sixteen or eighteen months old.

"Hello?" the young woman said.

"Hi. We're Agents Wise and DeMarco with the FBI. We're investigating the murder of Karen Hopkins and were hoping to get some information from the neighbors."

"Well, I'm not exactly a neighbor," the young woman said. "But I might as well be. I'm Lily Harbor, a nanny for Barry and Jan Devos."

"Did you know the Hopkins couple well?" DeMarco asked.

"Not really. We were on a first-name basis, but I maybe spoke to them like once or twice a week. And even then, it was just a quick hello as we passed one another."

"Did you get any sense of the kind of people they are?"

"Decent enough from what I could gather." She stopped here as the child in her arms started to tug at her hair. He was starting to get a little fussy. "But again, I didn't know them on a deep level."

"Do the Devos know them well?"

"I suppose. Barry and Gerald would borrow things from one another every now and then. Gas for the lawnmowers, charcoal for the grills, things like that. But I don't think they ever really hung out. They were polite to one another, but not really friends, you know?"

"Do you know of anyone in the area that *did* know them well?" Kate asked.

“Not really. People around here are pretty private. This isn’t really the block party kind of neighborhood, you know? But...and I feel bad even saying this...if you want to know anything about practically anyone in the neighborhood, you might want to check with Mrs. Patterson.”

“And who might that be?”

“She lives on the next street over. We can see her house from the Devos’s patio. I’m pretty sure it would be visible from the Hopkinses’ back porch.”

“What’s the address?”

“I’m not sure. But it’s easy enough to find. She’s got these scary-looking cat statues everywhere on her porch.”

“You think she’d be much help?” DeMarco asked.

“I’d think she’d be your best bet, yeah. I’m not exactly sure how truthful any of her information will be, but you never know...”

“Thanks for your time,” Kate said. She gave the little boy a smile, making her miss Michelle. It also reminded her that she very likely had an angry voicemail from her daughter waiting on her phone.

Kate and DeMarco went back to their car. By the time they were in and backing out onto the road, the rain had started to come down a bit harder.

“It sounds like this Mrs. Patterson who lives in a house that is visible from the Devos’s patio could very well be the one I saw through Karen Hopkins’s office window,” Kate said. “All those connected back yards with only fences to break them up...that could be a paradise for a snooping older lady.”

“Well,” DeMarco said, “let’s see what Mrs. Patterson has been up to.”

Kate could not help but notice how wide Mrs. Patterson’s eyes got when she realized two FBI agents were standing on her porch. It wasn’t a look of fear that touched her face, though; it was one of excitement. Kate imagined the older lady was already planning how she’d tell the story to all of her friends.

“I heard all about what happened to Karen, yes I did,” Mrs. Patterson said as if it were a badge of honor. “Poor dear...she was such a charming and kind woman.”

“You knew her then?” Kate asked.

“A bit, yes,” Mrs. Patterson said. “But please...come in, come in.”

She ushered Kate and DeMarco into her house. As they went in, Kate looked back at the several items that had clued them in to the fact that this was indeed the right house. There were eight different statues of cats, ornaments that looked like they had been plucked directly from some weird swap meet or yard sale. A few of them *did* look unnerving, just as Lily Harbor had suggested.

Mrs. Patterson led them into her living room. The TV was on, tuned to *Good Morning America* with the volume quite low. This made Kate assume that Mrs. Patterson was a widow who could not get used to being alone. She’d read somewhere that older people tend to always have a television or stereo on in the house after they lose a spouse, just so the house seems alive and active at all times.

As Kate settled down into a recliner, she looked out of the living room window that sat on the east side of the house. She saw the street and did her best to estimate the layout of the yard and the street. She was pretty sure they were indeed in the house she had spied from Karen Hopkins’s office window.

“Mrs. Patterson, clear something up for me, please,” Kate said. “When we were in the Hopkins home, I looked out Karen’s window and saw a house right across the right edge of their back yard. It was yours, right?”

“Yes, it is,” Mrs. Patterson said with a smile.

“You said you know the Hopkinses *a bit*. Could you elaborate?”

“Sure! Karen would ask me questions about her little garden from time to time. She has one right there outside her office window, you know. She didn’t grow much in it, just herbs used for cooking: basil, rosemary, some cilantro. I’ve always had something of a green thumb. Everyone in the neighborhood knows it and they usually come to me for advice. I have my own garden in the back, if you’d like to see it.”

“No, thank you,” DeMarco said politely. “We’re sort of against the clock here. We just need you to tell us what you know about the Hopkinses. Did they seem happy when you saw them together?”

“I suppose. I don’t know Gerald all that well. But from time to time, I’d catch them sitting out on their back porch. Fairly recently, I’ve seen them holding hands out there. It was quite nice to see. Their kids are all grown and moved out, I suppose you know. I liked to imagine they were talking about their retirement plans, making travel plans and whatnot.”

“Did you ever suspect they were having issues of any kind?” Kate asked.

“No. I never heard anything or saw anything that would suggest such a thing. As far as I know, they were just a standard couple. But I guess any couple could have potential issues after the kids are out of the house. It’s not uncommon, you know.”

“Did you see either of them within the past week or so?”

“Yes. I saw Karen out in her little garden, snipping at something. This would have been about four or five days ago. I can’t be sure. I turned seventy-four this year and my mind is sort of like soup sometimes.”

“Did you speak with her at all?”

“No. But there is something I thought about yesterday...something I didn’t necessarily forget about but never really bothered to think twice about. And honestly...I don’t even know what day this happened, so...”

“When what happened?” DeMarco asked.

“Well, I’m quite sure it was Tuesday...the day Karen was murdered from what I understand. I’m quite certain I saw someone walking around in their back yard. A man. A man that was *not* Gerald Hopkins.”

“Did it appear as if this man was trying to break in?” Kate asked.

“No. He looked like he belonged there, if that makes sense. He was walking around like he had been invited, you know? He was wearing some sort of suit or uniform. There was a little badge or patch right here.” She tapped the area above her left breast to indicate where she was talking about.

“Did you get a good look at the patch?”

“No. All I can tell you is that it was mostly white and looked sort of like a star shape. But that could be wrong...my sight is about as good as my memory these days.”

“But in terms of communicating with either of the Hopkinses, you say there was nothing over the past week?”

“No. The last time I spoke with Karen was when she came over to ask for my recipe for a pineapple upside down cake. And that’s been nearly three weeks ago, I believe.”

Kate racked her brain, trying to think of any other avenues Mrs. Patterson may be able to help them open up, but came up with nothing. Besides, they had this man in a uniform to check out, so it was not like they would be leaving empty-handed.

“Mrs. Patterson, thank you so much for your time. If you do happen to think of anything else, feel free to call the local police. They can get a message to us.”

“I feel like I do need to ask...but with the FBI involved, can I assume the murder from earlier is connected? It’s been what...about a week or so ago? I think her name was Marjorie Hix.”

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Kate said. “Did you happen to know Marjorie Hix?”

“No. I’d never even heard the name, honestly, until one of my friends told me about what had happened.”

Kate nodded and headed out of the room. “Again, thank you for your time.”

DeMarco joined her and they headed back outside, where the rain was coming down steadily, despite the sun still shining through.

Kate nearly took her phone out to see if Melissa had left a voice message, but decided against it. All it would do would be to give her one more thing to stress out over. And if she didn't learn to separate her personal life from her bureau life, she may as well hand her gun and badge back in now.

She hated herself for it a bit, but she pushed Melissa out of her mind for the moment as they headed back for the car.

In the back of her head, a little ghost voice spoke up, haunting the halls of her mind. *Remember what happened when you pushed her aside earlier in your career? It took a long time to repair that damage. You really want to go through all that again?*

No, she didn't. And perhaps that was why she found herself fighting off tears as DeMarco pulled out of Mrs. Patterson's driveway.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sheriff Bannerman was back at the police station when Kate and DeMarco arrived. He waved them back into his office, Kate noticing a shuffling hitch to his steps as they followed him. He held the door open for both of them and then closed it behind him.

“Any luck?” he asked.

“We spoke to a Mrs. Patterson, the woman who lives in the house that you can see from the window in Karen Hopkins’s office,” Kate said. “She says she recalls someone in the back yard on the day Karen was killed.”

“She says she *thinks* it was that day,” DeMarco added.

“Sheriff, can you think of any companies around the area that have a logo that is star-shaped and mostly white in color? The employees may be wearing dark-colored suits.”

Bannerman considered this for a minute and then started to nod slowly. He typed something into the laptop on his desk, made a few clicks with the touch pad, and then turned the screen to them. He had typed *Hexco Internet Providers* into a Google search and pulled up the first image.

“There’s this,” he said. “This is the only one that comes to mind straight away.”

Kate and DeMarco both studied the logo closely. It was an almost identical match to what Mrs. Patterson had described. It was indeed in a star shape, only the back arm was stretched and slightly curved. A small trail of lines followed the star, the center one containing the word *Hexco*.

With speed like that of a gunslinger, DeMarco pulled out her phone and instantly started dialing the number beneath the logo. “Let’s see if there was a service call of some kind to the Hopkins residence on Tuesday.”

She sat down, waiting for the phone to start ringing. As she did, Bannerman turned the laptop back around and closed the lid. In a soft voice, as to not interrupt DeMarco as someone answered the phone, he looked at Kate and asked: “You got any initial thoughts?”

“I think we’ve got a killer that has a certain type of victim he’s targeting. Both Karen Hopkins and Marjorie Hix were in their mid-fifties, at home alone. The assumption is that the killer knew the husbands would not be there. And I also assume he had studied the houses, as there was no sign of forced entry. So...our killer has a definite type, and he does his homework. Other than that... I’m at a dead end.”

“I can try to add to that,” Bannerman said. “There were no signs of struggle, either. So the killer knew how to get into the houses without tripping security and then was also able to strike without the victims knowing. It makes me think the victims invited the killer in. That they *knew* him.”

Kate had assumed the same thing but decided to let Bannerman get it all out. She rather enjoyed hearing him speak. His older age made him sound very wise and she greatly appreciated his experience. She usually felt as if working closely with anyone from the local police force could be a hindrance, but she was already starting to like Bannerman.

As she nodded her agreement, DeMarco ended her call. “I got confirmation that Hexco Internet did indeed send a tech out to the Hopkins residence on Tuesday. The woman I spoke with said there had been reports of spotty internet service all over the neighborhood around that time, starting Monday night. There were about a dozen other similar calls for maintenance that day.”

“Well, it’s a huge jump to make, but being a tech for an internet company during interrupted service would grant pretty easy access into just about any house,” Kate said.

“Well, it’s not too big of a jump, actually,” DeMarco said. “I also asked if there had been any Hexco techs sent to the Hix residence lately. Turns out, there was a request put in by Joseph Hix two weeks ago. And according to their records, the same technician replied to both calls.”

“Sounds like a suspect to me,” Kate said.

"I agree," Bannerman said. "You should know, though, that Hexco is a relatively new provider around Frankfield. A small company. I'd be surprised if they have more than three or four technicians. It might not be such a huge deal that the same tech was at both addresses."

"Still, I'd like to talk to that tech," Kate said. "Did you get a name?"

"I did. The operator I spoke to has sent out a page for him to call me right away."

"In the meantime, I'd like to visit the Hix residence," Kate said. "I know the reports indicate that the scene was essentially clean, but I'd like to see it for myself."

"I've got the key in the case files," Bannerman said. "You can—"

He was interrupted by the ringing of DeMarco's phone. She answered it right away and when Kate heard her formally introduce herself, Kate knew it was the Hexco tech. Kate listened in, so she already knew the details before DeMarco spoke them out loud.

"We're meeting with him in fifteen minutes," DeMarco said. "He seems very willing to meet, but sounded a little scared, too."

As Kate opened the door, Bannerman got to his feet. "Need anything from me?"

Kate thought about it and then, with a bit of hope in her voice, said: "Maybe just get a room ready for interrogation."

The technician's name was Mike Wallace, a twenty-six-year-old who looked very nervous when Kate and DeMarco met him at the little coffee shop three miles away from the Frankfield PD. He looked back and forth between the agents in a way that reminded Kate of those weird geckos that could move their eyes in such a way as to look in two directions at once.

He had a tablet with him, covered with a scarred leather case. The Hexco logo stood out in embossed trim on the front of it.

"Mike, for now this is just standard procedure and you have absolutely nothing to worry about," Kate said. "At present, it seems that you are just having a bit of bad luck and circumstance."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, in the course of the last two weeks, you have been assigned to homes where two women have been killed. The most recent was this past Tuesday."

"I visited a lot of houses Tuesday. There was a pretty bad service interruption in two different neighborhoods."

"You have your service calls on that tablet, right?" DeMarco asked, nodding to the device he carried.

"Yes, I do."

"Can you pull up the entry for the Hopkins residence on Tuesday?"

"Sure," he said. He tapped a few different places, scrolled a bit, and then scanned the page with his finger. As he did, Kate noted a slight tremor in his hands. He was clearly nervous; the trick was to find out if he was scared because he was hiding something or if he was simply nervous being in the presence of a pair of FBI agents.

"Right here," he said, sliding the tablet over to them. "I arrived at ten forty-two a.m. and was gone at ten forty-six."

"That seems very fast," Kate said. "I don't think I've ever had any sort of utility fixed so fast. What was the nature of the outage?"

"There was a bigger one out closer to Chicago. In order to fix that one, we had to downgrade some service in other places. Frankfield never quite came back up the way it was supposed to. It was an easy fix, though. For all but one of those calls on Tuesday morning, it was just a manual reset at the install boxes at each house."

"And it only took five minutes?" Kate asked.

“Really, each reset only takes about two or three minutes. For each stop, Hexco requires me to start the clock on each visit. Once the timer starts, I have to log the visit and then walk to the box. The reset itself only takes about two minutes. After the reset, I hook a test device up to the box to make sure it’s working. That takes about thirty seconds. Then I walk back to the truck, enter in a status report, and log out.”

He was fidgeting and still trembling the slightest bit. He seemed to notice this and attempted to stop the tremors in his hands by clasping them together on the tabletop.

“So all of that was done at the Hopkins residence between ten forty-two and ten forty-six?” Kate asked.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Did you interact with Karen Hopkins during the visit?”

“No. Hexco sent out a mass text and email notice that techs were being sent out. Whenever that’s done and the fix doesn’t get billed to the customer, we aren’t required to meet with them to get a signature. I doubt she even knew I was there.”

It all checked out, but Kate did the math in her head. Four minutes was more than enough time to get into the house and strangle someone. Of course, the fact that his report showed where the reset and test had been conducted and logged in knocked that four minutes down to practically nothing.

“Can you find an entry for the Hix residence two weeks ago?” Kate asked.

“Yeah. You got a first name?”

“Marjorie, or maybe her husband, Joseph,” DeMarco said.

Mike went through his routine again and had the results within twenty seconds. Again, he slid the tablet over to them. As they scanned the information, he did his best to explain it.

“Right there...exactly two weeks ago. This was a response to a complaint about the speed of their service. They’d called to get their speed and data upgraded but it never took. It sometimes happens when done remotely, on the phone. I went over there and did it myself.”

“According to this, it took about fifteen minutes,” Kate said.

“Yeah, the little device I use to test the strength of the signal was giving me a hard time. If you want, I can show you the request I put in to Hexco to get a new one.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Kate said. “I see here that Marjorie Hix signed for the service. Did you go inside her house?”

“Yes ma’am. I needed to check her modem. I recommended they get a new one, because the one they had was a little outdated.”

For a third time, Kate noted a nervous trembling in his hands. It was too evident to ignore at this point.

“Was her husband home?” she asked, not letting him see that she was noticing his nervousness.

“I don’t think so.”

Kate looked over the report one more time. Based on the reports and his story, everything seemed to check out. But it seemed too damned coincidental to her. She eyed Mike for a moment, looking for some crack in his façade, but saw none.

“Thanks very much, Mike,” she finally said. “We’re done here. I don’t want to keep you from your work any longer. Thanks for your help.”

“Absolutely,” Mike said, taking the tablet back. “I hope you catch the guy.”

“Yeah,” DeMarco said. “Same here.”

The three of them left the coffee shop together, Mike giving an awkward wave as he got behind the wheel of the Hexco service truck.

“He seems to check out,” DeMarco said as they got back into the car.

“Yeah, he does. But the coincidence factor...”

“Yeah, it kind of nags at you, doesn’t it?”

“Well, that and the fact that he was shaking like a whore in church...”

“Nice metaphor,” DeMarco said with a chuckle.

They both watched as Mike pulled out of his parking spot. Neither of them spoke, though Kate found herself reaching for her phone, still wanting to find out if Melissa had left her a message... and just how upset she was.

Later, she told herself. Got to keep my priorities straight.

But that thought, like the potential waiting voice message, felt like a bomb tucked away in some long forgotten place, ticking down and waiting to explode.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Hix residence was about eleven miles away from the Hopkins' address. Located just outside of the Frankfield city limits, it was close enough to the town to offer Bannerman and his crew authority over the case. Chicago loomed just twenty minutes to the south, giving the section between something of a gray area when it came to jurisdiction. The neighborhood was a little less extravagant than the Hopkinses', though not by much. The yards were smaller, most of them separated from the next by towering elms and oaks. In the falling rain, the trees made the houses and their yards look a little gothic as Kate and DeMarco pulled into the Hixes' driveway.

DeMarco used the key Bannerman had given them to enter. From what they had been told, the husband had moved just up the road to Chicago, to stay with his brother directly after the funeral. There was no indication as to when he might return.

However, not too long after Kate and DeMarco had allowed themselves in, another car pulled into the driveway behind them. The agents waited at the door to see who the visitor was. They watched as a middle-aged blonde woman got out of a very nice Mercedes. Kate noted that the car had Realtor plates.

"Hey there," the woman—presumably a Realtor—said as she neared the stairs. She was clearly confused. "Can I ask who you are?"

Kate flashed her badge, not being showy but also not wanting to beat around the bush. "Agents Wise and DeMarco, FBI. You're a Realtor, I take it?"

"That's right. Nadine Owen. I'm here to give the house a final walkthrough before we put it on the market."

"I wasn't aware it was going on the market," Kate said.

"We got the call yesterday morning. Mr. Hix won't be returning. He's got a moving crew coming in tomorrow to start packing everything up. I'm doing a checklist today to make sure the moving crew leaves it as is. Lord knows it'll be a hard enough sell as it is."

"Why is that?" DeMarco asked.

Kate knew the answer, having been involved in several cases in the past where a Realtor had come into play. "Realtors have to disclose when there has been a recent murder on a property," Kate said.

"That's right," Nadine said. "And in this case, Mr. Hix is donating just about everything he has. He was a mess when I spoke with him. He just doesn't want all of the reminders of his wife in whatever place he chooses as his next home. It's quite sad, actually."

That's pretty suspicious if you ask me, Kate thought.

"How long has Mr. Hix been in Chicago?" she asked.

"He left the day after the funeral...so I'd say three days, I believe."

"If you don't mind, we'd like to look the place over before you go about your checklist," Kate said.

"By all means."

The three women entered the house. Kate found it in immaculate shape. Again, it wasn't quite as nice as the Hopkins home, but it was still more than Kate would ever have been able to afford. It wasn't just the house, either; all of the furniture looked to be very expensive as well.

As they walked through, DeMarco trailed behind Kate, scrolling through the electronic police reports. She read aloud the important parts as they did a walkthrough of the house.

"Marjorie Hix was found dead in her bedroom, half in and half out of the master bathroom," she read. "She, too, was choked to death but there was no blood or cuts as there were with Karen Hopkins. There was bruising around her throat but no signs of hand imprints. It is believed she might have been strangled with a belt or some sort of smooth rope."

The downstairs was mostly an open floor plan, the living room and kitchen separated only by one large column. The other area appeared to serve as the living room, a small but expensive-looking television situated between two bookshelves. An elegant-looking piano also helped to separate the areas. Kate knew very little about pianos but was fairly certain this one was a baby grand Steinway... and that it was likely valued at one year of her salary. It was hard to imagine the husband simply donating such an item rather than selling it. It sent a little red flag up in Kate's brain.

A reading area and mini-office space sat to the far left, tucked in a corner and looking out onto a spacious porch via a picture window. All in all, it looked rather plain and idyllic.

"Remind me again what the reports say about evidence taken by the police," Kate said.

"The husband willingly handed over his own laptop, which was given back pretty quickly," DeMarco said, still reading from the reports. "He also handed over Marjorie's laptop and cell phone. There was a belt in the upstairs closet that was taken in by forensics as a potential murder weapon, but it was conclusively determined *not* to have been used."

After a bit more looking downstairs, they walked up the stairs on the right side of the floor plan, the stairs running parallel to the little office space. The upstairs consisted of a wide hall and four rooms: a bathroom, two guest rooms, and a massive master suite. They went directly to the master suite and stopped just inside the doorway, taking the place in.

The bed was unmade, but other than that the room was spotless. Kate looked to the area in front of the bathroom and tried to picture a body there. She knew the crime scene photos were in the case files and she was sure she'd look at them later. For now, though, she was trying to picture the room like a killer might—a killer who had likely been invited in for some reason or another.

The room was situated in a way where someone coming out of the bathroom would not immediately see someone coming into the room. If the killer had managed to sneak into the room while Marjorie Hix had been in the bathroom, he would have gone completely unseen.

"No clues of any kind in the bedroom, huh?" Kate asked.

"None listed in the report. Not even a single drop of blood. Nothing."

Kate walked around the room and stopped at the window closest to the bed. She had to draw the curtains back, but she saw that it looked out onto a back yard with a wooded lot beyond. She then went into the bathroom. It, like most everything else in the house, was large and boastful. She hunkered down on her haunches and peered beneath the little thin spaces between the bottoms of the counters under the sinks and the floor. Other than a few stray dust bunnies, there was nothing.

"What's the security system like?" Kate asked.

"Um," DeMarco said as she scanned through the reports. "Apparently, there's no actual security system. But they do have one of those doorbell cameras."

"That's perfect. Did the PD get access to it?"

"Yes. It says here that the husband gave Bannerman the passcode. Apparently, it's all accessible through the camera's mobile app."

"Any idea what the app is?"

"It doesn't say. I'm sure Bannerman has it, though."

"Hold that thought," Kate said. She left the bedroom with DeMarco trailing behind her, still scrolling through the records.

They found Nadine Owen checking over the living room walls, apparently looking for preexisting scuff marks before the movers arrived. "Ms. Owen," Kate said. "Would you happen to know the name of the app the Hixes used for their doorbell camera?"

"I do, actually," she said. "When the husband called to list the house, he gave me their passcode so I could go in and kill the account before someone else moved in."

"Have you killed it yet?"

“No.” Nadine seemed to understand where this was all headed. A look of brief excitement crossed her face as she pulled out her cell phone. “I can log in under his account if you need to check it.”

“That would be great,” Kate said.

Nadine sat down at one of the barstools along the kitchen counter and opened up the app. Kate and DeMarco watched as Nadine logged in under the Hix account. Within a few seconds, the address of the Hix home popped up. Nadine clicked on it and a page with a calendar appeared on the screen.

“The app allows us to go back sixty days. Anything more than that and it all gets stored on the cloud.”

“Sixty days is more than enough. In fact, there are just two days I need you to check.”

“I assume one would be from eight days ago, right? The day she was killed?”

“Yes, please.”

“How exactly does this work?” DeMarco asked.

“There’s a sensor on the doorbell,” Nadine said. “When anyone comes up on the porch, it activates the camera. It then records until the person is either inside the house or has otherwise left the porch.”

“So there will only be a video entry on the day of her murder if someone walked up on the porch, correct?” Kate asked.

“That’s right. And...here we are. There are two videos from last Wednesday...the day she was killed.”

The three women hunched around Nadine’s phone, watching the somewhat grainy color playback from the app’s video feed. The first video was easy to dismiss right away. It was a UPS driver, placing a box on the front porch and then quickly walking away and returning to his truck. The box was not very large and was adorned with the Amazon logo on the side. Three seconds after the driver was gone, the camera cut off.

Nadine then pulled up the second video and pressed Play. A woman came up onto the porch and rang the doorbell. It was answered several seconds later. There was no audio, but it was clear the woman on the porch was conversing with whoever had answered the door—presumably Marjorie. This was made clear a few moments later when Marjorie stepped out onto the porch, chatted with the woman for about a minute, and headed back inside. The woman called something out over her shoulder as she went down the stairs, and then the video was done.

“Any idea who that woman is?” DeMarco asked Nadine.

“No, sorry. Now, you said there was some other date you needed to check out?”

“Yes. Exactly two weeks ago. Are there any entries there?”

Nadine did some scrolling and then stopped when the calendar stopped fourteen days ago. There were two entries that day as well. Nadine played the first one right away, without being asked to do so.

Instantly, Kate recognized the man who came up onto the porch, ringing the doorbell: Mike Wallace. He was wearing the same Hexco uniform they had seen him in less than an hour ago. After several seconds, the door was answered, he spoke to someone for about ten seconds, and was then invited inside.

Nadine looked to them both, as if to see if there was any reaction. When she saw that there was none, she tapped at the next entry—particularly at the time stamp. “This next one is only fourteen minutes later.”

She pressed play and they watched as the exact opposite of what they had just seen happened. Mike Wallace came out of the front door, back into the frame. He turned and spoke to someone at the door—again, presumably Marjorie Hix. The conversation lasted about twenty seconds and then Mike headed down the stairs. Before Mike’s exit had a chance to kill the feed, the little sensor picked

up more movement. Marjorie Hix stepped out onto the porch with a watering can and set to watering a pot of lilacs on the porch rail.

While it didn't prove much, the fact that there were no security videos of Mike Wallace on the day of her death was a pretty strong alibi.

"Anything else?" Nadine asked.

Kate and DeMarco shared a look and they both shook their heads simultaneously. Kate wasn't sure if DeMarco was thinking the same thing she was or not, but she knew there was a good chance.

The security footage had basically ruled out Mike Wallace. But the husband...

"There's a garage on the side of the property," Kate said. "Looks like it's on some sort of sublevel to the house, is that right?"

"It is. Would you like to see it?"

"No, that's not necessary. But would you happen to know if that's where Mr. Hix always parked?"

"I'm fairly certain, yes."

"And I assume there's a primary entrance into the house through that garage?"

"Of course." She pointed to a door at the very back of the house, just off of the kitchen and inside a mudroom area. "Right there."

So he would never even have to go past that doorbell sensor, Kate thought.

So while the videos had ruled out Mike Wallace, they had done nothing to help stave off her suspicions of the husband.

Kate looked back into the den—to the furniture, the knickknacks, and other expensive items. She found it hard to think that someone would just abandon it all.

"Would you happen to know where Mr. Hix is staying?"

And in that, Nadine continued to be very helpful.

CHAPTER SIX

It appeared as though Marjorie Hix's husband—fifty-three-year-old Joseph Hix—had done much better for himself than his brother. Whereas Joseph Hix had managed a home in an affluent suburb and, according to the police reports, worked a job that had netted nearly four hundred thousand dollars the year before, his brother, Kyle, was living in a rather rundown apartment complex. It was located in an okay part of town, separate from a not-so-okay part of town by only a few blocks.

The apartment building had been constructed to look as if the open breezeways containing stairs separated little townhouses, but Kate had seen enough of these types of complexes to know that was not the case. She walked up two flights of the stairs and came to Kyle Hix's apartment. Kate knocked on the door, not expecting an answer.

So when it was answered almost right away, she was surprised. Not only that, but it was answered in such a loud and abrasive way that she jumped back a bit, nearly going for her gun.

The man who answered the door looked out of his mind—exhausted, angry to have been disturbed, and squinting from the sunlight.

"Who're you?" the man asked.

"Are you Joseph Hix?" Kate asked.

He grunted, as if he wasn't too sure of this himself. It was also clear that he had no intention of answering. As she waited, Kate caught a whiff of alcohol—something strong. Whiskey, she thought.

DeMarco took out her ID first, then Kate followed suit. Kate let DeMarco take the lead, always trying to remain aware that part of her special arrangement with Duran and the bureau could also be a great training opportunity for DeMarco.

"Agents DeMarco and Wise," DeMarco said. "We're on location in Frankfield, looking into the murder of your wife."

The man nodded and stepped away from the door. He swayed a bit when he did, making Kate wonder if that whiff of whiskey had been from a very recent drink—and here it was, not even two in the afternoon yet.

"Well, yeah...I'm Joseph. And I could have saved you the trip. I can tell you who killed her. Come on in...I'll help you out." He grinned, apparently amusing himself, and headed back inside.

"Whoa, hold on," DeMarco said. "You can't just make a statement like that. Do you for sure know who killed her?"

"I have no proof, but I have a damned good idea."

"Maybe you let us be the judges of that," Kate said. "What do you have?"

"I'll show you."

They followed him inside and Kate started to feel a bit uneasy. She wasn't sure if Hix was in a perpetual state of grief and drunkenness or if he was a little off the rails—or both. But what she did know was men handled grief very differently. And the tired, I-don't-give-a-shit look she had seen when he opened the door never led to anything good.

The apartment was modestly furnished but was limited in space. Hix led them directly to the kitchen, where he didn't even bother trying to seem like a well-adjusted guy. He grabbed a bottle of whiskey that had been sitting on the counter and poured himself a tumbler. He shrugged to the agents and downed it in one gulp.

"It doesn't bring her back," he said with a grimace, "but it makes it hurt a hell of a lot less."

"This is your brother's place, right?" Kate asked.

"Yeah. It's a shithole, but Kyle...he's all I got now."

"Mr. Hix, would you be willing to answer some questions for us?"

"Yeah. But like I said, I can tell you who killed her. I told the cops, too...but you see how far that got me."

Kate didn't want to take his bait, not wanting to let a grief-stricken and drunk man lead them down a rabbit hole that would likely go nowhere. Apparently, DeMarco felt the same because when she asked her next question, she did her best to veer the conversation elsewhere.

"You work as a proposal specialist, right?" DeMarco asked. "Something with telecom?"

"Yes. They've given me two months...like it's a favor. I work sixty hours almost every week and stay in France for them at least two months total out of every year."

"Did it strain your marriage?" Kate asked.

Hix nodded and pulled the bottle back to him. He looked at it longingly, desperate for another shot. She could see him considering it.

"Of course it did. She was unhappy most of the time, I guess. She acted like she was happy when I was actually around and never got too confrontational when I was away so much. At the risk of sounding like a bastard, she enjoyed the money. She always joked about it, but there was a whole lot of truth to it, you know? And there seemed to be a lot more joking after our son was gone."

"Gone?"

"Yeah...as soon as he left for college, things seemed to get a little more tense."

"How long ago was that?"

"Nine or ten years. Don't get me wrong...we loved each other very much. I don't know how that woman loved me as much as she did, but..."

He decided to go ahead and take that other shot. He did it as if he were set on a mechanical spring, going through the actions like someone with far too much practice.

"We always talked about taking trips after he was gone. Rome, Sydney, Madrid...those were the big ones. But I think she knew they'd never happen; it would take too much commitment on my part."

Listening to him talk, Kate was reminded of the call she had ignored from Melissa. It made her feel bad, as she wondered if the issues Melissa and Terry had been having were similar. Of course, neither of them made enough money to promise trips to one another, but an absentee spouse was an absentee spouse no matter how you cut it. Inexplicably, she felt the need to speak with Melissa quite badly in that moment.

But DeMarco, getting very adept at questioning potential suspects, kept the ball rolling quickly and efficiently.

"Were you at work when Marjorie was murdered?"

"I was. I was actually on a flight back from Seattle. I'd been there on business for three days. I landed at O'Hare and got a barrage of missed calls and texts from the police before I even got off of the plane."

"You claim to know who did it," DeMarco went on. "Did you think you knew even then?"

"More or less, yes. But now, almost a week afterwards without a single suspect, I become more and more certain."

"And who might you have in mind as the suspect?"

"A guy named Andrew Bauer."

"And why do you think he did it?"

"Because he's always had a thing for Marjorie...ever since they graduated college and found out they were living less than ten minutes away from one another. The guy is a sleazebag. I know it might sound pretentious and judgmental, but I don't care—the guy is single and living in a neighborhood that is predominantly married couples with children. And he's at home for days on end, sort of just stalking around the neighborhood and befriending all of the lonely women who have men that work long hours."

"And how do you know this?"

"It's pretty common knowledge. Andrew is a pilot. He works a few days, he's home a few days. I'm not the only man in the neighborhood that had to have a word with him."

“What sort of word?” Kate asked

“About a year ago, I came home and found him standing in my yard while Marjorie was pulling weeds in her flowerbed. He had this evil grin on his face. I don’t know how to explain it. He’s just slimy.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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