

BLAKE PIERCE

FACE

OF

DEATH

(A ZOE PRIME MYSTERY--BOOK 1)

A Zoe Prime Mystery

Blake Pierce

Face of Death

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

Face of Death / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (A Zoe Prime Mystery)

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“A MASTERPIECE OF THRILLER AND MYSTERY. Blake Pierce did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone) FACE OF DEATH is book #1 in a new FBI thriller series by USA Today bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) (a free download) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. FBI Special Agent Zoe Prime suffers from a rare condition which also gives her a unique talent—she views the world through a lens of numbers. The numbers torment her, make her unable to relate to people, and give her a failed romantic life—yet they also allow her to see patterns that no other FBI agent can see. Zoe keeps her condition a secret, ashamed, in fear her colleagues may find out. Yet when a serial killer strikes across the Midwest, strangling women in remote places and seemingly at random, Zoe, for the first time, is stumped. Is there a pattern? Can there be no pattern at all? Or is this killer as obsessed with numbers as she is? In a mad race against time, Zoe must enter the diabolical mind of a killer who always seems to be one step ahead of her, and stop him from claiming his next victim before it's too late. At the same time, she must keep at bay her own demons, which may ultimately prove to be even more threatening. An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, FACE OF DEATH is book #1 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Books #2 and #3 in the series—FACE OF MURDER and FACE OF FEAR—are also available for pre-order.

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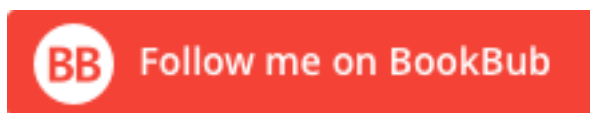
Blake Pierce

Face of Death (A Zoe Prime Mystery—Book 1)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes sixteen 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 five 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); of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising two books (and counting).

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



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AUTHOR NOTE:

You may have noticed that this book was first published with the author name “Stella Gold.” Occasionally I like to experiment and try new genres, and when doing so, I might use a pen name to keep it separate and prevent confusion for my fans. I initially published this book with the Stella Gold pen name. Soon after publishing it, I was happily surprised by the reception and reader feedback, and I realized that this book and series would indeed be a good fit for all Blake Pierce fans. So I’ve changed the author name back to Blake Pierce. If this is your first time reading one of my books, welcome to the Blake Pierce universe! Feel free to discover my other series. I have made the first books—and audiobooks—in most of my series free to enjoy!

FACE:

--The front part of the head that in humans extends from the forehead to the chin and includes the mouth, nose, cheeks, and eyes.

--In math, the shape that is bounded by the edges of a 3 dimensional object.

--One of the polygonal surfaces of a polyhedron.

PROLOGUE

Linda settled back in her chair, trying to get comfortable on the old, worn-out cushions. The seat, which had supported the weight of innumerable gas station attendants over the past fifteen or twenty years, was in about as good repair as the rest of the place.

At least she had a chair. And the TV, even if it was tiny and so out of date that she could only just make out faces through the noise on the screen.

Linda sighed and tapped the side of the TV a few times, trying to get a clearer picture. She was waiting for her favorite show to come on, and she wanted to at least be able to make out which character was which.

At least she wasn't likely to be disturbed. This corner of western Missouri was not exactly well frequented, and she could go hours between customers. No one lived for miles around, and the road had been supplanted by a new highway that took people to their destinations on a more direct route. It was probably only a matter of time before the place shut down, so Linda was enjoying her rest while she could get it.

The theme tune of her show came on, reassuringly familiar despite the tinny quality to the sound. Linda wriggled against the backrest again, trying to get as comfortable as possible, and helped herself to a bag of chips from the display behind her.

"Oh, Loretta," the character on the screen said. "How could you do this to me? Don't you know we're—"

The dialogue was drowned out by the bell above the door jingling. Linda shot to her feet, almost tripping over herself in an attempt to look as though she had been paying attention. Guiltily, she stuffed the open packet of chips on a shelf under the counter.

"Hi there," the customer said, smiling. He looked amused, but friendly, as if they were both sharing a private joke. "Uh, could I please use your restroom?"

He was pleasant enough. A skinny, boyish kind of man. He couldn't be thirty if he was a day. Linda liked him instantly. She had this kind of a sixth sense about customers. She could tell right away whether they were going to cause her any trouble.

"Sorry, hon," she said. "It's for paying customers only."

"Oh," he said, casting around him. There was a display of cheap candy by the side of the counter, designed to lure in kids who would tug at their parents' sleeves. "I'll take these."

He grabbed a bag of hard-shelled candy and tossed it gently onto the counter, right in front of her. He dug in his pocket for a handful of coins, and the correct change followed the bag.

"Here you are, sir," Linda said, sliding one of the bathroom keys across to him. "It's right at the back of the building. Just head outside and around the corner."

"Oh, thanks," the man said, taking it and tapping it against one thumb as he looked out to the parking lot. "But, uh. Would you mind showing me where it is?"

Linda hesitated. Her show was on, and she had missed so much of it already. And despite her feeling that this guy was perfectly good and normal—even handsome, if she was ten or fifteen years younger—she had a little niggling doubt in the back of her mind. Should she really abandon the counter to show him to the restroom? Go alone, in the dark, with a stranger, out of sight of the road?

Oh, Linda, she thought to herself. You're just trying to sneak some more time with your show. Now, you go on and get yourself up out of that chair and do your job.

"Sure," she said, though still somewhat reluctant. "Follow me."

The sun had gone down maybe half an hour ago, so it was really no wonder that he wanted a hand finding the bathroom. An unfamiliar place in the dark wasn't easy to navigate. Linda began to lead him in the right direction, stepping over the weeds growing out of the concrete.

"This place sure is deserted, huh?" he said.

“Yeah,” Linda said. Bit of an odd thing to bring up in the dark, wasn’t it? Maybe he was feeling a little spooked himself, wanted some reassurance. Not that she enjoyed the isolation any more than he did. “We don’t get a whole lot of traffic out here these days.”

“I always think you can tell a whole lot about a place from its gas stations. There are these little signs, you know. Patterns you can pick up on. Like how rich a community is, or what kind of food is popular.”

“I guess I never really thought of that.” Privately, Linda could not care less about his explanation of the intricacies of gas stations across the country. She wanted to get out to the bathroom and get back inside as quickly as possible, with no weird stuff. But she didn’t want to be rude and tell him that.

“Oh, yeah. I like visiting different ones. Some of them are huge, you know. Then some are little, beaten-up, out of the way places, like this one. And you can learn a lot about the people who work there, too.”

That sent a prickle down Linda’s spine. He was talking about her. She didn’t want to ask what he could learn about her, or what he knew already. She didn’t think she would like it.

“It’s a strange job, out here in the middle of nowhere,” he continued. “You must spend a lot of time alone. If you need help, well, it must be hard to get it. There’s a certain type of person takes this kind of job. From there you can predict all kinds of things about behavior based on the patterns. Like how far you would be willing to go to serve a customer.”

Linda quickened her steps across the dark ground, feeling the need to get away from him now. The reminder that she was vulnerable was not one she wanted to hear at that moment. It sent another shiver down her spine, even as she told herself she was being stupid. She felt the hard metal of the front door key in her pocket, and slipped it between two of her fingers, where it could be a weapon.

She didn’t say anything. She didn’t want to trigger him into saying something else—or doing something. Though she couldn’t say what she expected him to do, whatever it was, she was certain she didn’t want it. They walked through the empty parking lot—the customer’s car must have been parked around front at the pumps.

“There’s your bathroom, over there,” Linda said, pointing. She didn’t particularly want to go any further. If he went on alone, she could get back to her counter, where there was a phone to call for help and doors she could lock.

The customer didn’t say anything, but he pulled out his packet of candy and opened it up. He wasn’t even looking at her, but seemed carefully concentrated on his task as he upended the packet and poured it all out.

The colorful balls of candy scattered and skipped across the concrete. Linda yelped and took a step back in spite of herself. Whoever heard of throwing candy all over the ground like that? Just to spook her, or what? Linda’s hand flew to her chest, trying to calm her racing heartbeat.

“Look at that!” The customer laughed, pointing down at the candy. “It’s always the same, you know? There’s no such thing as randomness. You get the same patterns and fractals, and there’s always something there. Even if you try not to see it, your head grabs onto a pattern, just like that.”

Linda had heard enough. This guy was some kind of nutcase. She was alone out here, in the dark, as he had taken pains to point out. She had to get away from him, get back to the counter. Get back where it was safe.

Linda took the fastest route to that she could think of. She quickly marched the last few steps to the bathroom and unlocked it for him, the light above the door flickering on automatically.

“Oh!” the young man said. “There, look. On your hand. Another pattern.”

Linda froze and looked down at her freckles, now visible in the pale orange light. His attention on her skin was like an insect, something she wanted instinctively to shake off.

“I have to get back in the store,” Linda blurted out. “Just in case there are any more customers. Just leave the key when you’re done.”

She started hurrying back toward the front of the gas station, to the door and the safety of the counter. There was something off about this young man, something very odd indeed, and she did not want to spend another second in his company—even if it meant coming back for the key on her own later. All the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up, and her heart would not calm down.

Maybe she should call someone. She thought about her ex-husband, sitting miles away in his home, probably with his feet up in front of the TV. Or her boss, who for all she knew might have been in Canada for as often as she saw him. Would they even answer? And if they did, what could they do to help?

The police, maybe? No—surely that was an overreaction.

Linda almost tripped on a loose piece of candy that had skittered further than the rest, and tried to place her feet more carefully, checking the ground ahead. Her heart was racing, and she could hear her own footsteps crunching far too loudly as she rushed toward the corner of the building. She wished she could make less noise, go faster, just get back to the doors.

She was almost running, her breath catching in her chest. She turned the corner, feeling a sense of relief at seeing the familiar doors ahead.

But something was pulling her back—something tightening around her neck.

Linda's hands flew up instinctively, grasping at the thin, sharp wire that sliced at her fingers as she fought to get a purchase on it. Her feet tried aimlessly to move her body forward, the momentum only forcing her head further back. She had to get back to the doors. She had to get inside!

Panic clouded her vision, and the agonizing pressure intensified until there was a rush of release, something wet and hot gushing over her chest and down. There was no time to make sense of it all, only to gasp for air and feel a wet sucking sensation where the wire had been, and to notice the ground beneath her knees, and then her head, and then nothing at all.

CHAPTER ONE

FBI Special Agent Zoe Prime looked at the woman beside her in the passenger's seat and tried not to feel intimidated.

"How about getting thrown in at the deep end?" Shelley joked.

Zoe knew what she meant. The two of them had only just been partnered up, and here they were speeding toward a crime scene. A big crime scene, actually. One that would make serious headlines.

But that wasn't what was making Zoe feel uncomfortable. It was the fact that she had been partnered with a new agent who was already making waves at the Bureau. Shelley Rose had an open, kind face and manner, and was rumored to be able to get a confession out of anyone with just a smile. When you had a secret to hide, getting paired up with someone like that was more than enough to send a tickle of paranoia down your spine.

Not to mention the fact that Zoe, not considered the best at anything at the Bureau so far, was harboring a not-so-little amount of envy over the level of respect that her rookie partner already commanded.

Shelley had an almost-symmetrical face, just 1.5 millimeters off from being perfect, a slight variance between her eyes. There was no wonder she elicited automatic trust and amiability from those around her. It was classic psychology. A tiny flaw that made her beauty more human.

Even knowing that, Zoe couldn't help but find herself liking her new partner, too.

"What do we know so far?" Zoe asked.

Shelley leafed through the pile of papers she held in her hands, tucked inside a folder. "Convict busted out of Tent City, in Phoenix," she said. Outside the car, Arizona desert flashed by. "Fled on foot. Apparently, that hasn't slowed him down. Three known homicides so far."

"Guards?" Zoe asked. Her mind was flashing ahead. Counting the miles a man could get on foot in this heat. Not far, without rest, shelter, and water. Calculate for the sucking surface of the sand, and it reduced even further.

"No, randoms. Two hikers first." Shelley paused, sucking a breath in through her teeth. "The murders were... vicious, by all indications. Latest vic was a tourist on their way to the Grand Canyon."

"That is where we are headed now," Zoe assumed. The map of the area unfolded in her mind, carving out the roadways and paths each victim was likely to have taken in order to cross paths with their man.

"Right. Looks like we should brace ourselves."

Zoe nodded silently. She had noticed that it was harder for people like Shelley to turn up at a crime scene and see the victim's body. They felt the pain and suffering that had been inflicted. Zoe always just saw a body—meat. Meat that might hold clues that could help the investigation, and the numbers that circled around it.

That was probably what had allowed her to pass all the entrance exams and become a Special Agent in the first place—staying calm and controlled, analyzing the facts instead of the emotions. But it was her quiet nature and tendency to fall back on a blank facial expression that had left her in need of a new partner. Apparently, her last one had felt Zoe was too quiet and aloof.

She had attempted to remedy this on her first case with Shelley by purchasing two coffees in foam cups and supplying one to her partner when they met, in recognition of a seemingly ancient ritual between co-workers. It had seemed to go down well. Shelley was personable enough for the both of them, which was why Zoe was hopeful that this might actually work out.

It wasn't difficult to spot the site. Local cops milled around in uniform under the hot sun, a blazing ferocity that bore down heavily on her exposed arms as soon as Zoe stepped out of the air-conditioned car. Skin would burn in forty-five minutes if not protected. She would likely have some bronzing on her cheeks, nose, and hands by the time they got back into the car.

Shelley introduced them, and they both flashed their badges at the officer in charge before heading closer to the scene. Zoe only listened with half an ear, happy to let Shelley take charge. Even though Zoe was the superior officer, she did not begrudge Shelley throwing her weight around. Zoe was already searching, looking for the keys that would unlock everything for her. Shelley gave her a nod, an unspoken agreement that she would deal with the locals while Zoe examined the surroundings.

"I don't know as you'll find too much," the chief was saying. "We've been over everything about as closely as you can get."

Zoe ignored him and carried on looking. There were things that she could see, things that others couldn't. Things that might as well have been written in ten-foot-high letters, but were invisible to normal people.

This was her secret; her superpower. She spotted his footprints in the sand and the calculations appeared next to them, telling her everything she needed to know. It was as easy as reading a book.

She crouched slightly, getting a better look at the closest prints and how they stretched away from the victim's body. The perp was six foot two inches, his stride told her. The depth of his footprints easily indicated a weight around two-ten. He had been running steadily, approaching the victim at three point eight miles per hour to the attack, according to their spacing.

Zoe shifted over, examining the body next. The convict had used a seven-and-a-half-inch shiv, which he stabbed overhand into the body at a forty-nine-degree angle. Flight was in the northwest direction, at a faster jogging pace of five point nine miles per hour.

The blood in the sand told her it happened less than four hours ago. The calculations were easy. Using an average rate of fatigue and allowing for the heat of the day, Zoe looked up and squinted into the distance, picturing exactly how far away they would find him. Her heart quickened as she pictured bringing him in. They would catch him easily. Already fatigued, no water, and no way of knowing they had already discovered his crimes. This would be over soon.

Her attention strayed to the shrubs and small trees that grew across the distance, scattered growths that offered not enough shelter for a human. She saw the distances between them, numbers appearing before her eyes, telling her the story behind the pattern. Scattered far from each other, low natural resources. Clustered together, roots seeking out an underground water source and nutrient-rich ground. Even though they looked random to the unsuspecting eye, the placement of each was design. The design of the natural world.

"Anything?" Shelley asked. She had an expectant look, like she was waiting for her more experienced partner to solve everything.

Zoe looked up, starting guiltily. She rose to her feet and quickly shook her head. "Guess he ran that way," she said, pointing in the obvious direction of his receding footprints. There was an outcrop of rocks in the far distance, a good spot for a rest. The formation told her of wind patterns, of thousands of years of scooping and sculpting. "Maybe he will stop for shade over there. It is a hot day."

A secret was a secret. There was no way she could admit to what she knew. No way that she could say out loud that she was a freak who understood the world in a way that no one else did. Or admit the rest—that she didn't get how they saw it, either. But she could give them this much. The kind of hint that a normal person might see.

The chief cleared his throat, interrupting. "We already scouted in that direction and found nothing. The dogs lost the scent. There's some rockier ground over there which doesn't take footprints. We figure he would have carried on running straight ahead. Or even been picked up by a vehicle."

Zoe narrowed her eyes. She knew what she knew. This man was running in desperation, his stride long, body low to the ground as he pitched forward for speed. He wasn't heading to a rescue, and he wasn't so far away they wouldn't be able to find him.

"Humor us," Zoe suggested. She tapped the FBI sigil on her badge, still held in her hand. There was one great thing about being a special agent: you weren't always expected to explain yourself. In fact, you played into stereotypes if you didn't.

Shelley turned back from studying Zoe's face to liaise with the chief again, an air of determination about her. "Send up the chopper. You have the dogs ready?"

"Sure." The chief nodded, though he looked none too pleased. "You're the boss."

Shelley thanked him. "Let's drive out," she suggested to Zoe. "I have the pilot on the radio. He'll keep us updated when they spot anything."

Zoe nodded and got back into the car obediently. Shelley had supported her, backed her up. That was a good sign. She was grateful, and had no sense of ego at Shelley being the one to give the orders. It was all the same, so long as lives got saved.

"Whew." Shelley paused, resting in the passenger's seat with a map open in her hands. "Doesn't get any easier, does it? A woman on her own like that, no provocation. She didn't deserve that."

Zoe nodded again. "Right," she said, not sure of what else she could add to the conversation. She started the car and began driving, to fill the space.

"You don't talk a whole lot, do you?" Shelley asked. She paused before adding, "It's all right. Just getting to know how you work."

The murder was undeserved, that was true. Zoe could see and understand that. But what was done, was done. They had a job to do now. Seconds ticked on, beyond the normal limitations of an expected reply. Zoe cast about but could find nothing to say. The time had passed. If she spoke up now, she would only sound stranger still.

Zoe tried to focus on holding a sad expression while she drove, but it was too difficult to do both at once. She stopped struggling to do it, her face relaxing into her natural blank stare. It wasn't that she wasn't thinking, or that there were no emotions at all behind her eyes. It was just difficult to think about how her face looked and consciously control it, while her mind calculated the exact distance between each marker on the road and ensured she stayed at a speed which would prevent the car from flipping if she had to swerve on this type of tarmac.

They took the road, following the smoother surface as it curved around through the flat landscape. Zoe could already see that it would move the right way, allowing them to catch up with him if he ran in a straight line. She put her foot down hard on the pedal, using the advantage of tarmac to speed onward.

A voice crackled over the radio, breaking Zoe out of her inner thoughts.

"We've got eyes on the suspect. Over."

"Roger that," Shelley replied. She was precise and wasted no time, which Zoe appreciated. "Coordinates?"

The helicopter pilot rattled off his position, and Shelley directed Zoe from her map. They didn't have to adjust their course—they were right on target. Zoe clenched the wheel tighter, feeling that thrill of validation. She'd been correct with her assumptions.

It was only a few moments more before they sighted the chopper hanging steadily in the air above a local patrol car, whose two occupants had apparently gotten out and tackled the convict to the ground. He lay in the sand, newly disturbed and shifting around him, and swore.

Zoe pulled the car to a stop and Shelley hopped out immediately, relaying information over her handheld radio. A small group of men with dogs were already approaching from the southeast, the dogs barking in excitement at finding the source of the scent they had picked up.

Zoe picked up the map that Shelley had discarded, checking it against the GPS. They were within an eighth of a mile of where she had guessed he would be, on a direct trajectory. He must have run from the outcropping when he heard the dogs.

She allowed herself a victory smile, jumping out of the car to join them with renewed vigor. Out under the burning sun, Shelley flashed her a matching grin, obviously happy to be closing their first case together already.

Later, back in the car, the quiet settled in again. Zoe didn't know what to say—she never did. Small talk was an absolute mystery to her. What was the correct number of times to mention

the weather before it became an obvious cliché? For how many drives could she engage in dry conversation about things that didn't really matter before the silence became companionable, rather than awkward?

"You didn't say much out there," Shelley said, breaking the silence at last.

Zoe paused before answering. "No," she agreed, trying to make it sound friendly. There wasn't much more that she could do beyond agreeing.

There was more silence. Zoe calculated the seconds inside her head, realizing it had gone beyond what would be considered a normal break in conversation.

Shelley cleared her throat. "The partners I had in training, we practiced talking through the case," she said. "Work together to solve it. Not alone."

Zoe nodded, keeping her eyes fixed ahead on the road. "I understand," she said, even though she felt a rising sense of panic. She didn't understand—not fully. On some level she understood the way people felt around her, because they were always telling her. But she didn't know what she was supposed to do about it. She was already trying, trying as hard as she could.

"Talk to me next time," Shelley said, settling deeper into her seat as if it was all resolved. "We're supposed to be partners. I want to really work together."

This didn't bode well for the future. Zoe's last partner had taken at least a few weeks to work himself up to complaining about how quiet and aloof she was.

She had thought she was doing better this time. Hadn't she bought the coffees? And Shelley had smiled at her before. Was she supposed to buy more drinks, to tip the balance? Was there a certain number she should aim for in order to make their relationship more comfortable?

Zoe watched the road flash in front of the windshield, under a sky that was starting to darken. She felt like she should say something else, though she couldn't imagine what. This was all her fault, and she knew it.

It always seemed so easy for other people. They talked, and talked, and talked, and became friends overnight. She had observed it happening so many times, but there didn't seem to be any rules to follow. It wasn't defined by a set period of time or number of interactions, or the amount of things people needed to have in common.

They were just magically good at getting on with other people, like Shelley was. Or they weren't. Like Zoe.

Not that she knew what she was doing wrong. People told her to be warmer and more friendly, but what did that mean, exactly? No one had ever given her a manual explaining all of the things she was supposed to know. Zoe gripped the steering wheel tighter, trying not to betray how upset she felt. That was the last thing she needed Shelley to see.

Zoe realized that it was she herself who was the problem. She wasn't delusional about that. She just didn't know how to be any way other than what she was, and other people did, and she was embarrassed that she had never learned. To admit that would be, somehow, even worse.

The plane journey home was even more awkward.

Shelley flipped casually through the pages of a women's magazine that had been on sale in the airport, giving each page no more than a cursory glance before she gave up and moved on. After finishing it cover to cover, she glanced at Zoe; then, seeming to think better of starting up a conversation, she opened the magazine again, spending more time on the articles.

Zoe hated reading things like that. The pictures, the words, everything jumping out at her from the page. Clashing font sizes and faces, contradictory articles. Images purporting to prove a celebrity had plastic surgery, showing only the normal variance for changes in the face over time and with age, calculable easily to anyone with a basic grasp of human biology.

Multiple times, Zoe tried to force herself to think of something to say to her new partner. She couldn't talk about the magazine. What else might they have in common? The words wouldn't come.

"Good solve on our first case," she said at last, murmuring it, almost not brave enough to say even that.

Shelley looked up in surprise, her eyes wide and blank for a moment before she lapsed into a grin. "Oh, yeah," she said. "We did good."

"Hopefully the next one will be just as smooth." Zoe felt her insides shriveling. Why was she so bad at small talk? It was taking every ounce of concentration to find the next line to say.

"Maybe we can make it quicker next time," Shelley suggested. "You know, when we're really in tune with each other, we'll be working much faster."

Zoe felt that like a blow. They could have caught the guy quicker, gotten the helicopter above his precise location from the moment they arrived, if Zoe had just shared what she knew. If she hadn't been so cautious about how she knew it that she kept it hidden.

"Maybe," she said, noncommittal. She tried to direct a smile Shelley's way that might be reassuring, from a more experienced agent to a rookie. Shelley returned it with a little hesitation, and went back to her magazine.

They didn't speak again until they landed.

CHAPTER TWO

Zoe pushed open the door to her apartment with a sigh of relief. Here was her haven, the place where she could relax and stop trying to be the person that everyone else accepted.

There was a soft mewling from the direction of the kitchen as she switched on the lights, and Zoe headed straight over there after depositing her keys on the side table.

“Hi, Euler,” she said, bending down to scratch one of her cats behind the ears. “Where is Pythagoras?”

Euler, a gray tabby, only mewed again in response, looking across to the cupboard where Zoe kept the bags and cans of cat food.

Zoe didn’t need a translator to understand that. Cats were simple enough. The only interaction they really craved was food and the occasional scratch.

She took a new can out of the cupboard and opened it, spooning it into a food bowl. Her Burmese, Pythagoras, soon caught the scent and padded over from some other part of their home.

Zoe watched them eat for a moment, wondering if they wished they had another human to look after them. Living alone meant that they were fed when she got home, no matter what time that might turn out to be. Doubtless, they would have appreciated a more regular schedule—but there were always the neighborhood mice to track down if they got hungry. And looking at them now, Pythagoras had put on a couple of pounds lately. He could do to diet.

It wasn’t as if Zoe was about to get married anyway—for the cats or for any other reason. She’d never even had a properly serious relationship. After the upbringing she’d had, she had almost resigned herself to the fact that she was destined to die alone.

Her mother had been strictly religious, and that meant intolerant. Zoe had never been able to find anywhere in the Bible where it said you had to communicate like everyone else and think in linguistic riddles instead of mathematical formulae, but her mother had read it there all the same. She had been convinced that something was wrong with her daughter, something sinful.

Zoe’s hand strayed to her collarbone, traced the line where a silver crucifix had once hung on a silver chain. For many long years of her childhood and adolescence, she hadn’t been able to take the thing off without being accused of blasphemy—not even to shower or sleep.

Not that there had been much she could do, without getting accused of being the devil’s child.

“Zoe,” her mother would say, shaking a finger and pursing her lips. “You just quit that demon logic now. The devil is in you, child. You’ve got to cast him right out.”

Demon logic, apparently, was mathematics, especially when present in a child of six years old.

Over and over again, her mother would bring up how different she was. When Zoe didn’t socialize with the children her own age in kindergarten, or school. When she didn’t take up any after-school clubs except for extra study in math and science, and even then didn’t form groups or make friends. When she understood ratios in cooking after watching her mother bake things just once.

Very quickly, Zoe had learned to suppress her natural instinct for numbers. When she knew the answers to the questions people asked without having to even work them out, she kept quiet. When she figured out which of the kids in her class had stolen the teacher’s keys and hidden them, and where they must have been hidden, all through proximity and the clues left behind, she didn’t say a word.

In many ways, not much had changed since that scared little six-year-old, desperate to please her mother, had stopped saying every little weird thing that came into her mind and started pretending to be normal.

Zoe shook her head, bringing her attention back to the present. That was more than twenty-five years ago. No use dwelling on it now.

She glanced out of her window at the Bethesda skyline, looking as she always did in the precise direction of Washington, DC. She had figured out the right way to look the day she had signed

the lease, noting several local landmarks which lined up to show her a compass direction. It wasn't anything political or patriotic; she just liked the way they matched up, creating that perfect line on the map.

It was dark out, and even the lights of the other buildings around hers were being extinguished, one by one. It was late; late enough that she should be getting on with things and going to bed.

Zoe fired up her laptop and quickly tapped in her password, opening her email inbox to check for any updates. The last task of her day. There were a few she could quickly delete—junk mail, mostly messages about sales for brands she had never shopped for and scams from supposed Nigerian princes.

Clearing the junk left her with a few more she could read and then discard, missives that needed no reply. Updates from social media, which she rarely visited, and newsletters from websites that she followed.

One was a little more interesting. A ping through from her online dating profile. A short but sweet message—some guy asking for a date. Zoe clicked through to his page and examined his images, considering them. She quickly assessed his actual height, and was pleasantly surprised to find that it matched up with what he had written in his details. Maybe someone with a little honesty about him.

The next was yet more intriguing, but even so, Zoe felt an urge to put off reading it. It was from her mentor and former professor, Dr. Francesca Applewhite. She could predict what the doctor was going to ask before she read it, and she wasn't going to like it.

Zoe sighed and opened it anyway, resigned to the need to get it over with. Dr. Applewhite was brilliant, the kind of mathematician she had always dreamed of being until she realized she could put her talents to use as an agent. Francesca was also the only other person who knew the truth about the way her mind worked—the synesthesia that turned clues into visual numbers into facts in her head. The only person she liked and trusted enough to talk about it with.

Actually, Dr. Applewhite had been the one to turn her on to the FBI in the first place. She owed her a lot. But that wasn't why she was reluctant to read her message.

Hi Zoe, the email read. Just wanted to ask whether you've contacted the therapist I suggested. Have you been able to schedule a session? Let me know if you need any help.

Zoe sighed. She had not contacted the therapist, and she didn't truly know whether she was going to. She closed the email without replying, relegating it to one of tomorrow's problems.

Euler jumped up onto her lap, obviously having satisfied himself with his dinner, and started to purr. Zoe gave him another scratch, looking at her screen, deciding.

Pythagoras let out an indignant mew at being neglected, and Zoe glanced at him with an affectionate smile. It wasn't exactly a sign, but it was enough to push her into action. She went back to the previous message, from the dating site, and typed out a response before she could change her mind.

Would love to meet. When is good for you?—Z.

"After you," he said, smiling and gesturing toward the breadbasket.

Zoe smiled back and picked up a piece of bread, her mind automatically calculating the width and depth of each piece to pick one that was somewhere in the middle range. Didn't want to look too greedy now.

"So, what do you do, John?" Zoe asked. It was easy enough to get the conversation started this way—she had been on enough dates to know that it was standard form. Besides that, it was always a good idea to make sure that he had a good income.

“I’m a lawyer,” John said, taking his own serving of bread. Biggest piece. Somewhere in the region of 300 calories. He would be halfway to full before their main course came. “I mostly deal with property disputes, so there’s not much overlap between your work and mine.”

Zoe noted the average salary for a property lawyer in their area and nodded mutely, calculations flashing through her mind. Between them they would probably be well set for a mortgage on a three-bedroom property, and that was just for starters. Room for a nursery. Enough career scope to upgrade later on down the line.

His face was almost symmetrical, too. Funny how that was coming up lately. There was just one twist, a certain way he had of smiling that lifted up his right cheek while the left stayed more or less in position. A lopsided smile. There was something charming about it, perhaps because of the asymmetry. She counted the correct number of perfectly straight, white teeth flashing between his lips.

“So, how about your family? Any siblings?” John tried, his tone faltering a little.

Zoe realized she had been expected to at least make some kind of comment on his work, and picked herself up mentally. “Just me,” she said. “I was raised by my mom. We are not close.”

John lifted an eyebrow for the barest second before nodding. “Oh, that sucks. My family is pretty tight. We get together for family meals at least once a month.”

Zoe’s eyes flicked over his lean physique, and she decided that he must not have been eating too badly at those dinners. Mind you, he clearly went to the gym. What could he bench? Maybe 200 pounds, judging by those arm muscles rippling under his blue striped shirt.

There had been silence between them for a few moments now. Zoe ripped off a piece of bread and shoved it into her mouth, then chewed it as fast as she could to free her mouth again. People didn’t speak while they ate, at least not in polite society, so that served as kind of an excuse, as far as she was concerned.

“Is it just you and your parents?” Zoe asked, as soon as the bite had sunk down her throat, thick and clinging. *No*, she thought. *Two siblings, at least.*

“I have an older brother and sister,” John said. “There’s only four years between us, so we get along pretty well.”

Behind him, over his shoulder, Zoe saw their five-foot-three waitress struggling with a heavy tray of drinks. Two bottles of wine split amongst seven glasses, all destined for a rowdy table at the end of a line of booths. All the same age. College friends, having a reunion.

“That must be nice,” Zoe said distantly. She didn’t think it would have been nice, really, to have older siblings. She didn’t have a clue at all about what it must have been like. It was just a different experience that she had never had.

“I’d say so.”

John’s responses were getting more distant. He wasn’t asking her questions anymore. They hadn’t even gotten through to the main course yet.

It was with some relief that Zoe saw the waitress bringing over two plates, balanced expertly on her arm, the weight distributed evenly between elbow and palm.

“Oh, our food is here,” she said, just to distract him more than anything else.

John looked around, moving with a lithe grace which certainly underscored his commitment to the gym. He was a good enough man. Handsome, charming, with a good job. Zoe tried to focus on him, to apply herself. When eating it should be easier. She stared at the food on her plate—*twenty-seven peas, exactly two inches thick on the steak*—and tried not to let anything distract her from what he was saying.

Still, she heard the awkward silences just as much as he did.

At the end, he offered to pay for everything—\$37.97 *her fair share*—and Zoe gratefully accepted. She forgot that she was supposed to argue at least once, to give him the chance to insist,

but she remembered it when she saw the slight downturn at the corners of his mouth as he offered his credit card to the waitress.

“Well, it’s been a great night,” John said, looking around and buttoning up his suit jacket as he stood. “This is a lovely restaurant.”

“The food was wonderful,” Zoe murmured, getting up even though she would have preferred to sit for longer.

“It was nice to meet you, Zoe,” he said. He offered her his hand to shake. When she took it, he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, as briefly as possible, before moving away again.

No offer to walk her to her car, or drive her home. No hug, no request to see her again. John was pleasant enough—all lopsided smile and careful gestures—but the message was clear.

“You too, John,” Zoe said, allowing him to walk out of the restaurant ahead of her while she gathered her purse, so that there would be no awkward small talk on the journey to the parking lot.

In the privacy of her car, Zoe slumped into the driver’s seat and buried her head in her hands. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Imagine being so preoccupied with the stride length of the various members of the wait staff that you can’t even focus on your charming, handsome, extremely eligible date.

Things were going too far. Zoe knew it, in her heart of hearts, and had maybe known it for a while. She was getting so she could barely concentrate on social cues at all without getting her head turned by calculations and exploration of patterns. It was bad enough that she didn’t understand all of the cues when she heard or saw them, but not to notice them at all was even worse.

“What a freak,” she muttered to herself, knowing she was the only person who would hear it. That made her want to laugh and cry at the same time.

The whole drive home, Zoe tossed and turned the events of the evening through her mind. Seventeen awkward pauses. Twenty occasions, at least, when John must have wanted her to show more interest. Who knew how many that she didn’t even notice. One free steak dinner—not enough to make up for feeling like the kind of outcast who was going to die alone and lonely.

With cats, of course.

Not even Euler and Pythagoras, mewling and attempting to rival one another for the right to jump into her lap on the sofa, could make her feel better. She scooped them both up and settled them down, not at all surprised when they both immediately lost interest and started prowling along the back of the sofa.

She opened the email from Dr. Applewhite one more time, looking at the number she had sent her for the therapist.

It couldn’t hurt, could it?

Zoe entered the number into her cell one digit at a time, even though she had memorized it at a glance. She felt her breath catch as her finger hovered above the green call button, but forced it down anyway, the cell up to her ear.

Ring-ring-ring.

Ring-ring-ring.

“Hello,” said a female voice on the other end of the line.

“Hello—” Zoe started, but cut herself off immediately as the voice continued.

“You have reached the offices of Dr. Lauren Monk. Apologies, but we are currently out of office hours.”

Zoe groaned internally. Voicemail.

“If you would like to book an appointment, change an arranged appointment, or leave a message, please do so after the t—”

Zoe yanked the cell away from her ear as if it was on fire, and cancelled the call. Into the silence, Pythagoras mewed heartily, then jumped from the arm of the sofa up onto her shoulder.

She was going to have to make the appointment, and she was going to have to do it soon. She promised herself that. But it wouldn’t hurt to leave it one more day, would it?

CHAPTER THREE

“You’ll burn in hell,” her mother announced. She had a triumphant look on her face, a kind of madness lighting up her eyes. Looking closer, Zoe realized it was the reflection of flames. “Devil child, you’ll burn in hell for all eternity!”

The heat was unbearable. Zoe struggled to get to her feet, to move, but something was tying her down. Her legs were like lead, anchored down to the floor, and she could not lift them. She could not get away.

“Mom!” Zoe cried out. “Mom, please! It is getting hotter—it hurts!”

“You’ll burn forever,” her mother cackled, and in front of Zoe’s eyes, her skin turned red as an apple, horns growing from the top of her head and a tail sprouting behind her. “You’ll burn, daughter mine!”

The shrill ring of her cell woke Zoe from her dream with a start, and Pythagoras opened one baleful green eye on her before scrambling off his position on top of her ankles and stalking away.

Zoe shook her head, trying to get her bearings. Right. She was in her own bedroom in Bethesda, and her cell was ringing.

Zoe fumbled with the device to accept the call, her fingers slow and thick from sleep. “Hello?”

“Special Agent Prime, I apologize for the late hour,” her boss said.

Zoe glanced at the clock. Just after three in the morning. “That is okay,” she said, dragging herself to a sitting position. “What is it?”

“We’ve got a case in the Midwest which could use your help. I know you just got home—we can send someone else if it’s too much.”

“No, no,” Zoe said hastily. “I can take it.”

The work would do her some good. Feeling useful and solving cases was the only thing that made her feel like she might have something in common with her fellow humans. After last night’s debacle, it would be a welcome relief to throw herself into something new.

“All right. I’ll get you and your partner on a plane in a couple of hours. You’re going to Missouri.”

A little south of Kansas City, the rental car rolled up outside a little station and came to a stop.

“This is it,” Shelley said, consulting the GPS one last time.

“Finally,” Zoe sighed, relinquishing her tight grip on the steering wheel and rubbing her eyes. The flight had been a red-eye, chasing the sun as it rose across the sky. It was still early morning, and she already felt like she had been awake for a whole day. A lack of sleep followed directly by a rush to catch a plane could do that to you.

“I need some coffee,” Shelley said, before jumping out.

Zoe was inclined to agree. The flight, brief as it was, had been interruption after interruption. The rise into the air, stewardesses offering breakfast and juices no fewer than five times, and then the descent—no time to snatch a little more sleep. Even though the two of them had spent most of the journey in silence, discussing only their plans for landing and where they would get the rental car, they had not gained any extra rest.

Zoe trailed after Shelley into the building, once again belying her role as the superior and more experienced agent. Shelley might have received more praise, but Zoe was no green rookie. She had more than enough cases under her belt, the days of her training faded so far into the distance that she barely remembered them. Still, it felt more comfortable to follow.

Shelley introduced herself to the local sheriff, and he nodded and shook hands with both of them when Zoe parroted her own name.

“Glad to see you folks coming in,” he said. That was something of note. Usually the locals were resentful, feeling that they could take care of the case themselves. It was only when they knew they were out of their depth that they were glad of the help.

“Hopefully, we can get this tied up nicely and be out of your hair by the end of the day,” Shelley said, throwing an easy grin at Zoe. “Special Agent Prime here is on a roll. We got our first case together closed in a matter of hours, didn’t we, Z?”

“Three hours and forty-seven minutes,” Zoe replied, including the time that it had taken to get their escaped convict through processing.

She wondered briefly about how Shelley could give her that open, easy smile. It looked genuine enough, but then Zoe never had been good at telling the difference—not unless there was some kind of tic or sign in the face, a crease around the eyes at the right angle to indicate that something was off. After their last case, not to mention the almost silent plane and car ride here, she had expected there to be some tension between them.

The sheriff inclined his head. “Would be mighty good to get you on a plane back home by nightfall, if you don’t mind me saying so. Would mean a weight off my shoulders.”

Shelley laughed. “Don’t worry. We’re the guys you never want to see, right?”

“No offense meant,” the sheriff cheerily agreed. He weighed one hundred and eighty-five pounds, Zoe thought, watching him walk with that particular wide-foot angle that was common to the overweight.

They moved into his office and started going over the briefing. Zoe picked up the files and started leafing through.

“Hit me with it, Z,” Shelley said, leaning back in her chair and waiting expectantly.

It seemed like she had a nickname already.

Zoe looked up with some surprise, but seeing that Shelley was serious, she began to read aloud. “Three bodies in three days, it looks like. The first one was in Nebraska, the second in Kansas, and the third in Missouri—here.”

“What, is our perp going on a road trip?” Shelley scoffed.

Zoe marked the lines in her head, drawing a connection between the towns. A mostly southeastern direction; the most likely continued course was down through the rest of Missouri to Arkansas, Mississippi, maybe a bit of Tennessee down near Memphis. Presuming, of course, that they didn’t stop him first.

“The latest murder occurred outside of a gas station. The lone attendant was the victim. Her body was found outside.”

Zoe could picture it in her head. A dark and lonely gas station, a postcard picture of any other lonesome gas station in this part of the country. Isolated, the lights above the parking lot the only ones for miles around. She started to rifle through the photographs of the scene, handing them over to Shelley when she was done.

A firmer picture was emerging. A woman left dead on the ground, facing back toward the entrance—returning from somewhere. Was she lured outside and then attacked as she let her guard down? Some kind of noise she could pass off as coyotes, or maybe a customer complaining of car trouble?

Whatever it was, it was enough to lure her outside into the dark, at night, in the cold air—away from her post. It had to have been something.

“All female victims,” Zoe continued reading. “No particular match in their appearance. Different age groups, hair color, weight, height. Their only thing in common is their gender.”

As she spoke, Zoe pictured the women in her head, standing up against a mugshot board. One five foot four, one five foot seven, one five foot ten. Quite a difference. Three inches each time—

was that a clue? No; they were killed out of order. The short woman was the heaviest, the taller one light and therefore thin. Probably easier to overwhelm physically, despite her size.

Different altitudes. Different distances from crime scene to crime scene—no hint of a formula or algorithm that would tell her how far away the next one would be. Topography at the murder sites was different.

“They look... random.”

Shelley sighed, shaking her head. “I was afraid you would say that. What about the motive?”

“Crime of opportunity, maybe. Each woman was murdered at night, in an isolated place. There were no witnesses and no CCTV cameras turned on at any of the sites. The CSIs say there was hardly anything left behind in the way of evidence at all.”

“So, we have a psycho with a need for murder, who has just now decided to go on a rampage, and yet has enough control to keep himself safe,” Shelley summarized. Her tone was dry enough that Zoe could tell she was feeling just as uneasy as Zoe herself.

This wasn't going to be the easy, open-and-shut case she had been hoping for.

CHAPTER FOUR

The gas station was eerily quiet when Zoe pulled up, alone, at the crime scene. There was tape everywhere, holding off would-be spectators, and a single officer stationed at the front door to keep watch for rebellious teenagers.

“Morning,” Zoe said, flashing her badge. “I am going to take a look around.”

The man nodded his consent, not that she required it, and she passed him, ducking under the tape to head inside.

Shelley had known the best way to deploy their unique and particular skills. Without prior discussion, she had suggested that she would go and interview the family, dispatching Zoe to the scene of the latest murder after a drop-off at the home. That was only right. Zoe could find the patterns here, and Shelley would know how to read emotions and lies there. Zoe had to give her that.

So, she had agreed, and given only the pretense of being in charge. It was only Shelley’s warm nature—and Zoe’s overall lack of care for the command structure’s correct adherence, so long as the case was solved—that made it feel all right. Shelley had even seemed almost apologetic, so keen to show that she knew the ropes that she was overstepping her bounds by accident.

She hesitated at the door of the gas station, knowing things must have started there. There were faint marks left on the ground, footprints marked by small flags and plastic triangles. The woman—the older woman with sensible shoes and a short stride—had led the way. This gas station was so isolated that she couldn’t have had more than a few customers that day, and the marks were clear of any confusion only a few paces away from the door.

The woman had been followed, though perhaps she had not known it. The numbers appeared before Zoe’s eyes, telling her everything she needed to know: the distance between them indicated an unhurried stride. There were no other footsteps to indicate whether the perpetrator had come from inside the gas station or somewhere in the parking lot. The woman had walked calmly, at a steady pace, toward the corner. There was a mess here, but Zoe passed it, seeing the steps continuing and knowing she would be back again eventually.

First, the footsteps continued at a slightly faster pace. Was the woman aware now that she was followed?

Here—right by a few scattered pieces of candy that littered the ground, perhaps from a botched delivery or a clumsy child—they had stopped. The woman had turned to look at the man, before spinning on her heel and rushing onward toward a door at the back of the building.

There was a key still hanging from the lock, swinging slightly every now and then in the breeze. The ground was slightly scuffed here, where the victim had stopped to turn it in the lock and then hurried away.

Her retreating steps showed a much longer stride, a quicker pace. She had been almost running, trying to get away and back to the store she tended. Was she afraid? Cold in the dark? Just wanting to get back to her desk?

The man had followed her. Not immediately; there was an indentation here, a scuff of raised dirt at the edge of a heel print where he had slowly turned to watch her. Then he had loped after her with what was likely an easy, light gait, directly approaching her, cutting inside her path to reach her at the corner.

Ah, the mess again. Zoe squatted on her heels, examining it closer. The ground was more profoundly disturbed here, scuff marks clearly visible where the victim had kicked for purchase for perhaps a few seconds or less. More noticeable was the heavier imprint of the man’s shoes here, where he must have taken some of her weight on the garrote.

The body had already been taken away, but the blood spoke for itself.

It must have been fast; she would not have struggled for long.

Zoe peered down for a closer look at the footprints she had seen, those of the male culprit. What was interesting was their appearance. While she could make out a faint pattern in the marks left by the victim—enough to give an idea of brand and the comfortable style of shoe—his footprints were a vague outline only, an impression of a heel for the most part.

Zoe retraced her steps, checking as she went. There were only two places where she could make out his steps: near the door, where he had waited, and here, at the moment of death. In both cases, all identifying marks—including the length and width of the shoe—had been erased.

In other words, he had cleaned up after himself.

“There was no physical evidence left other than the body?” Zoe asked the guard, who had not yet moved from his position by the door.

He had his thumbs hooked in his belt loops, his eyes squinting up and down the road in either direction. “No, ma’am,” he said.

“No hair follicles? Tire tracks?”

“Nothing that we can pinpoint to a perpetrator. Looks like all of the tire tracks in the parking lot were erased, not just his.”

Zoe chewed her lip, thinking. He might have been choosing his victims at random, but he was far from being a crazed madman. Just like Shelley had said—he was in control. More than that, he was patient and meticulous. Even killers who planned their attacks weren’t usually this good.

Zoe’s ringtone blazed out across the quiet of the empty road, making the guard jump in his boots. “Special Agent Prime,” she answered automatically, without even checking the caller display.

“Z, I’ve got a lead. Abusive ex-husband,” Shelley said. No standing on ceremony for her. Her tone was rushed, excited. That thrill of the first hint. “Looks like the divorce was just being finalized. You want to come pick me up and check it out?”

“Not much to see here,” Zoe replied. There was no sense in both of them walking the scene, if there were other leads to be followed. Besides, she got the feeling that Shelley very much did not want to see the place where a woman had lost her life. She was still a little green in many ways. “I will be with you in twenty minutes.”

“So, where were you last night?” Shelley pressed, leaning in to make the guy feel as though it was their little secret.

“I was at a bar,” he grunted. “Lucky’s, over on the east side of town.”

Zoe was listening, but only just. She had known from the moment they walked in that this was not their murderer. The ex-husband might have liked to throw his weight around when they were married, but that was exactly the problem: his weight. He was at least a hundred pounds too heavy to have left those imprints, and too short, besides. He had the height to take out his wife—a smaller woman who had no doubt been subjected to his fists many times over—but not the tallest victim. He was five foot seven, six and three-quarters at a better guess. It would have been too much of a reach.

“Can anyone verify you were there?” Shelley asked.

Zoe wanted to stop her, prevent any more wasted time. But she didn’t say a thing. She didn’t want to try to explain something that was as obvious to her as the sky being blue.

“I was passed out,” he said, throwing his hand in the air in a gesture of frustration. “Check the cameras. Ask the bartender. He kicked me out well after midnight.”

“The bartender has a name?” Zoe asked, flipping out a pad to make a note. At least it would be something they could easily verify. She noted down what he told her.

“When did you last see your ex-wife?” Shelley asked.

He shrugged, his eyes moving sideways as he thought. “I don’t know. Bitch was always getting in my way. Guess a few months ago. She was getting all het up about alimony. I missed a few payments.”

Shelley visibly bristled at the way he spoke. There were some emotions that Zoe found hard to read, elusive things that didn't quite have names or that came from sources she couldn't identify with. But anger was easy. Anger might as well have been a red flashing sign, and it was going off over Shelley's head at that moment.

"Do you consider all women to be inconveniences, or just the ones who divorced you after a violent assault?"

The man's eyes practically bulged out of his head. "Hey, look, you can't—"

Shelley interrupted him before he could finish. "You have a history of harming Linda, don't you? We have several arrests for various domestic violence complaints on your record. Seems you made a habit of beating her black and blue."

"I..." The man shook his head, as if trying to clear it. "I never hurt her like that. Like, bad. I wouldn't kill her."

"Why not? Surely you'd want to be rid of those alimony payments?" Shelley pressed.

Zoe tensed, her hands making fists. Any longer, and she was going to have to intervene. Shelley was getting carried away, her voice rising in pitch and volume at the same time.

"I ain't been paying them anyway," he pointed out. His arms were crossed defensively over his chest.

"So, maybe you just saw red one last time, is that it? You wanted to hurt her, and it went further than ever before?"

"Stop it!" he yelled out, his composure breaking. He put his hands over his face unexpectedly, then dropped them to reveal moisture smeared from his eyes down his cheeks. "I stopped paying the alimony so she would come see me. I missed her, all right? Stupid bitch had a hold on me. I go out and get drunk every night 'cause I'm all alone. Is that what you want to hear? Is it?"

They were done—that much was clear. Still, Shelley thanked the man stiffly and handed over a card, asking him to give them a call if anything else came to mind. The things that Zoe might have done, if she had thought it would do any good. Most people didn't call Zoe back.

On this occasion, she very much doubted that Shelley would get a call either.

Shelley blew out a heavy breath as they were walking away. "Dead end. Sorry, no pun intended. I buy his story. What are you thinking we should do next?"

"I would like to see the body," Zoe replied. "If there are any more clues to be found, they are with the victim."

CHAPTER FIVE

The coroner's office was a squat building beside the precinct, along with just about everything else in this tiny town. There was just one road that swept right through, stores and a small elementary school and everything a town needed to survive placed either to the left or the right.

It made Zoe uncomfortable. Too much like home.

The coroner was waiting for them downstairs, the victim already laid out on the table for them like a grisly presentation. The man, an older fellow just a few years from retirement with a certain amount of waffle and bumble about him, began a long and winding explanation of his findings, but Zoe filtered him out.

She could see the things he would tell them laid out before her. The slash wound at the neck told her the precise gauge of wire they were looking for. The woman weighed just over 170 pounds despite her smaller stature, though a fair amount of that had gushed out of her along with almost three liters of her blood.

The angle of the incision and the force applied to it told her two things. First, that the killer was between five foot ten and six foot nothing. Secondly, that he was not relying on strength to commit the crimes. The victim's weight did not hang on the wire for long. When she collapsed, he let her go down. That, combined with the choice of wire as a weapon in the first place, likely meant that he was not very strong.

Not very strong combined with tall enough likely meant that he was neither muscular nor heavy. If he had been either, his own body weight would have served as a counterbalance. That meant he likely had a slim build, quite in line with what one would normally picture when thinking of an average man, of average height.

There was only one thing that she could say for certain was not average, and that was his act of murder.

As for the rest, there was nothing much to go on. His hair color, his name, what city he came from, why he was doing this—none of that was written in the empty and abandoned shell of the thing that used to be a woman in front of them.

"So, what we can tell from this," the coroner was saying slowly, his voice querulous and long-winded. "Is that the killer was likely of an average male height, perhaps between five feet nine and just above six feet tall."

Zoe only just restrained herself from shaking her head. That was far too wide an estimate.

"Has the victim's family been in touch?" Shelley asked.

"Nothing since the ex-husband came to identify." The coroner shrugged.

Shelley clasped a small pendant at her throat, tugging it back and forward on a slim gold chain. "That's so sad," she sighed. "Poor Linda. She deserved better than this."

"How did they seem when you interviewed them?" Zoe asked. Any lead was a lead, although she had by now become firmly sure that the selection of this Linda as a victim was nothing more than the random act of a stranger.

Shelley shrugged helplessly. "Surprised by the news. Not heartbroken. I don't think they were close."

Zoe fought back wondering who would care about her or come to see her body if she died, and replaced that thought instead with frustration. It was not difficult to find it. This was yet another dead end—literally. Linda had no more secrets left to tell them.

Standing around here commiserating with the dead was very nice, but it was not getting them any closer to the answers they were looking for.

Zoe closed her eyes momentarily and turned away, to the other side of the room and the door they had entered through. They needed to be on the move, but Shelley was still conversing with the coroner in low, respectful tones, discussing who the woman had been in life.

None of it mattered. Didn't Shelley see that? Linda's cause of death was very simple: she had been in an isolated gas station, by herself, when the killer came through. There was nothing else of note about her entire life.

Shelley seemed to pick up on Zoe's desire to go, drifting over to her side and politely distancing herself from the coroner. "What should we do next?" she asked.

Zoe wished she could say more in response to that question, but she couldn't. There was only one thing left to do at this point, and it was not the direct action that she wanted. "We will create a profile of the killer," she said. "Put out a broadcast over the neighboring states to warn local law enforcement to be on the watch. Then we will go over the files for the previous murders."

Shelley nodded, falling easily into step as Zoe headed for the door. It was not like they had far to go.

Up the stairs and out through the doors of the office, Zoe looked around and caught sight of the horizon line again, easily visible past the small collection of residences and facilities that made up the town. She sighed, folding her arms against her chest and whipping her head around to the precinct and where they were headed. The less time she spent looking at this place, the better.

"You don't like this little town, do you?" Shelley asked by her side.

Zoe felt a moment of surprise, but then again, Shelley had already proven herself to be both perceptive and attuned to others' emotions. Truth be told, Zoe was probably being obvious about it. She couldn't shake the foul mood that settled over her whenever she ended up somewhere like this. "I do not like small towns in general," she said.

"You just a city girl, or?" Shelley asked.

Zoe bit back a sigh. This was what happened when you had partners: they always wanted to try to get to know you. To dig up all of the tiny little pieces of the puzzle that was your past, and mash them together until they fit in a way that suited them. "They remind me of the place where I grew up."

"Ahhh." Shelley nodded, as if she saw and understood. She did not see. Zoe knew that for a fact.

There was a break in their conversation as they passed through the doors of the precinct, heading back toward a small meeting room that the locals had allowed them to use for their base of operations. Seeing that they were alone in there, Zoe placed a new pile of papers onto the table, starting to spread out the coroner's report along with photographs and a few other reports from officers who had been first on the scene.

"You didn't have a great childhood, then?" Shelley asked.

Ah. Maybe she did see, more than Zoe had given her credit for.

Perhaps she should not have been surprised. Why shouldn't Shelley be able to read emotions and thoughts the same way that Zoe could read angles, measurements, and patterns?

"It was not the best," Zoe said, tossing her hair out of her eyes and focusing on the papers. "And not the worst. I survived."

There was an echo in her head, a yell that came to her across time and distance. *Devil child. Freak of nature. Look what you've made us do now!* Zoe shut it out, ignoring the memory of a day locked in her bedroom as punishment for her sins, ignoring the long and hard loneliness of isolation as a child.

Shelley moved quickly opposite her, spreading out some of the photographs they already had, then lifting the files from the other cases.

"We don't have to talk about it," she said, softly. "I'm sorry. You don't know me yet."

That yet was ominous: it implied a time, even if it was in the distant future, when Zoe would be expected to trust her enough. When she would be able to spill all of the secrets locked inside of

her since she was just a child. What Shelley did not know, could not guess from her gentle probing, was that Zoe was not going to tell anyone what had happened in her childhood—ever.

Except maybe that therapist that Dr. Applewhite had been trying to get her to see.

Zoe pushed it all away to give her partner a tight smile and nod, then took one of the files from her hands. “We should go over the previous cases. I will read this one, and you can read the other.”

Shelley retreated to a chair on the opposite side of the table, looking at the images in the first file as they spread across the table, while chewing on one of her fingernails. Zoe tore her gaze away and focused on the pages in front of her.

“The first victim, killed in an empty parking lot outside a diner which had closed half an hour before,” Zoe read aloud, summarizing the contents of the report. “She was a waitress there, a mother of two with no college education who had apparently stayed in the same area for her whole life. There was no sign of any forensic evidence of value at the scene; the methodology was the same, death by the wire and then the careful sweeping away of footprints and marks.”

“Nothing to help us track him down, yet again,” Shelley sighed.

“She had been locking up the place after cleaning up, on her way home after a long shift. The alarm was raised fairly swiftly when she did not arrive home as usual.” Zoe flicked ahead to the next page, scanning the contents for value. “Her husband was the one to find her—driving out to look after she failed to answer her phone. There is a strong possibility that he contaminated evidence by grasping hold of his wife’s body upon the discovery.”

Zoe looked up, satisfied that this case was as empty of clues as the other. Shelley was still concentrating, playing with that pendant on her chain again. It was swallowed by her thumb and finger, small enough to disappear completely behind them.

“Is that a cross?” Zoe asked, when her new partner finally looked up. It was something to chat about, she thought. Fairly natural for an agent to speak to her partner about the jewelry she habitually wore, as it seemed she did. Right?

Shelley looked down at her chest, as if she had not realized what her hands were doing. “Oh, this? No. It was a gift from my grandmother.” She moved her fingers away, holding it out so that Zoe could see the arrow-shaped gold pendant, complete with a tiny diamond set into the pointed head. “Lucky thing that my grandfather had good taste. It used to be hers.”

“Oh,” Zoe said, feeling a little relief wash over her. She had not realized how much tension she had been holding since she had first noticed Shelley pull out the chain and play with it. “An arrow for true love?”

“That’s it.” Shelley smiled. Then she furrowed her brow slightly, obviously having picked up on the shift in Zoe’s mood. “Were you worried about me being overly religious or something?”

Zoe cleared her throat slightly. She had barely even recognized in herself that that was her reason behind asking. But of course it was. It had been a long time since she was that shy little girl with an overzealous God-fearing mother, but she still carried a fair amount of caution around people who considered the church to be the most important thing in their lives.

“I was just curious,” Zoe said, but her voice was tight, and she knew it.

Shelley frowned, leaning over to pick up the next file from the table. “You know, we’re going to have to spend a lot of time working together if we stay partners,” she said. “Maybe it will go a little smoother if we don’t keep things from each other. You don’t have to tell me why you were worried about it, but I would appreciate the honesty.”

Zoe swallowed, looking down at the file she had already finished reading. She gathered her pride, closing her eyes momentarily to shut off the voice telling her *no, not matching, one is approximately five millimeters thicker*, and met Shelley’s gaze. “I do not have a good history with it,” she said.

“Religion, or honesty?” Shelley asked with a playful smirk, opening her file. After a moment, during which time Zoe struggled with wondering what to answer, Shelley added: “That was a joke.”

Zoe flashed her a weak smile.

Then she turned to the new case file and started examining the crime scene photographs, knowing this was the only thing that would take away the burning sensation traveling across her cheeks and neck and the awkwardness in the room.

“The second victim is another version of the same story,” Shelley said, shaking her head. “A woman found murdered at the side of a road which wound along the edge of a small town. The kind of road you might walk alongside if you were heading home after a late night at work, which she was. She was a teacher... a bundle of marked papers spread around her where she had dropped them after her throat was cut by the wire garrote.”

Shelley paused to scan through the photographs, finding the one with the papers. She held it up for a second, biting her lip and shaking her head. She passed it over to Zoe, who tried to feel the same level of pity and found that she could not. The papers made it no more poignant than any other death, in her mind. Indeed, she had seen far more brutal slayings that seemed more worthy of pity.

“She was found by a cyclist early the next morning. His eye caught the papers moving in the wind, trailing across the sidewalk and over to the body slumped half in long grass,” Shelley summarized, recapping the notes in her file. “It looks as though she stepped to one side, as if helping someone. She was lured over there somehow. Damn... she was a good woman.”

A number of scenarios flitted through Zoe’s head: a fictitious lost dog, a stranger asking for directions, a bicycle with a loose chain, a request for the time.

“No footprints on the hard ground, no fibers or hairs on the body, no DNA under her fingernails. Just as clean as the other crime scenes,” Shelley said, putting the file down in front of her with another sigh.

Whatever it had been that left her vulnerable—perhaps even just the element of surprise and a step off the sidewalk as she struggled against the wire around her throat—that was all they had to go on.

Zoe let her eyes rove over the paper aimlessly, trying to connect dots in ways that would fit all three cases.

Two happily married, one divorced. Two mothers, one who was childless. Different jobs for each of them. Different locations. One with a college degree, two without. No particular pattern to their names or connections through the companies they worked for.

“I don’t see a link,” Shelley said, breaking the silence between them.

Zoe sighed and closed the file. She had to admit it. “I do not either.”

“So, we’re back where we started. Random victims,” Shelley blew out a breath. “Which means random next target, too.”

“And a much lower chance that we can stop it,” Zoe added. “Unless we can get enough of a working profile together to track this man down and catch him before he has a chance.”

“So let’s work on that,” Shelley said, with a determination in the set of her face that actually gave Zoe a modicum of hope.

They set up a sheet of blank paper on an easel pad in the corner of the room and started going through what they knew.

“We can see his path,” Zoe said; something she had already submitted out loud, and easy enough for anyone to work out. “He is on the move for some reason. What could that be?”

“Could be that he travels for work,” Shelley suggested. “A trucker, a salesman or rep, something like that. Or he might be traveling just because he wants to. He could be homeless, too.”

“Too many options for us to make a clear decision there,” Zoe wrote *traveling* on the board, then tried to follow the implications. “He must sleep on the road. Motels, hotels, or perhaps in his car.”

“If it’s in his car, we don’t have a lot of hope of tracking him down,” Shelley pointed out, a downturn pushing the edges of her mouth. “He could be using fake names at the hotels, too.”

“Not much to go on there. But he must travel in some way. By vehicle, judging on the distances between the kill sites and the time elapsed.”

Shelley scrambled to tap on her cell phone, bringing up maps and checking the locations. “I don’t think there’s a clear train route. Maybe bus or car.”

“That narrows it down somewhat,” Zoe said, adding those possibilities to the list. “He could be a hitchhiker, though it is less common nowadays. What about his physical characteristics?”

“Traditionally, the garrote is used by those who are not physically muscular. So we could perhaps surmise that he is of a more average build.”

Zoe was glad that Shelley had spotted it; one less thing for her to raise suspicions with. “Average, but not perhaps too small or petite. I feel that we have already become certain this is the work of a man. With too little strength, or height, the victims may have been able to overpower him and struggle free.”

“And if he was too short, he wouldn’t be able to reach well,” Shelley added. “The victims were likely all killed while standing, which means he had to be able to easily reach their necks.”

Zoe had to admit that she was impressed—even if only inside her own head. She wrote *average or above average height—five foot seven to six foot one*, based on the coroner’s report, and *average or skinny build* on the board.

“Now, let us talk psychology,” Zoe said. “There is something that is driving him to kill, even if it is not something that we would consider logical. If there is no real link between the victims, we have to look at that driving force as coming from within.”

“They seem like crimes of opportunity to me. He only goes after women, perhaps because they are weaker. They are alone, defenseless, in an area not covered by working CCTV, and with a low possibility of being interrupted.”

“I see two possibilities. The first is that he is driven to kill, and therefore seeks out these victims who fit the perfect profile for him to avoid being caught. For some reason, he is doing this now and all at once—so we would be looking at a trigger event,” Zoe said, tapping the end of the pen against her chin. “The other possibility is that he is triggered specifically by these victims. In that event, he does not even know that he will kill them until it comes to the moment.”

“In other words, he’s either seeking out women to kill deliberately, or he is killing purely based on opportunity and something about the women themselves that sets him off,” Shelley said, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“Think about it.” Zoe shook her head, pacing in front of the easel pad. “It is too perfect to be that random. One a night—that signifies a compulsion. If he was only driven to kill by trigger moments, we would see time between the attacks. He would be at home some nights, or just would not meet someone who set him off. No, this is deliberate and calculated. There is some reason why he has to kill each one, some message or ritual here.”

She stepped forward again and wrote *one murder a day—ritual* on the board.

“What about the locations?” Shelley asked. “Maybe there’s something there.”

There was a map on the wall already, marked with three red pushpins where the three bodies had been found. Zoe regarded it for a moment, then used the edge of a piece of paper to line them up. It was a straight line between the first and the third. The second had deviated a little, but it was still on the overall path.

“What are those towns?” Shelley pointed toward the end of the piece of paper, after the last pin, at the settlements lying along the same path.

Zoe rattled off a list, reading them off the map, with a little deviation to either side in case he strayed off as he had before. “We should call the authorities in each of these towns. Make sure that they are all aware of what could be coming. Tightened security, and law enforcement with their eyes open, might help to catch him.”

They both regarded their profile together in silence, thinking their own thoughts. On Zoe's part, she was trying to see the pattern. There were only three things that made sense to her: the fact that all were women, the timeline, or something to do with the locations. But what was it?

She thought back to the scattered, colorful candy that had been all over the ground at the gas station. Scattered not far from Linda's body, across the parking lot, across the path she must have taken to the rear of the building and back. It was so strange. It was altogether possible that some kid had dropped it earlier that day after stopping by with their parents, but... something about it was nagging at her.

Maybe it was simply the incongruity of it. Bright and cheerful candy at the scene of a brutal nighttime murder. Spots of color across a ground that was otherwise stained red. Maybe it didn't mean a thing at all.

"We do not have much," she sighed, at last. "But it is a start. Add to this that he is probably a young man, at least below middle age, according to statistics on the age at which serial killers begin their work, and we have narrowed it down enough to present something. I will ask the coroners to give us some more concrete numbers based on their findings, and we can at least give a description to be on the lookout for."

Which was not much of a consolation at all, she thought, if the killer was going to claim another victim tonight—and they were nowhere near close enough to do anything about it.

CHAPTER SIX

There would be another body tonight.

It was the fourth night, and that meant there must be a fourth body.

He had been driving for the whole day, moving closer and closer to his goal. Despite making good time, he was still growing more and more nervous as the sun moved overhead. When the evening set in, he had to be in the right place, or everything would go to waste.

He could not fail now.

He glanced over again at the cell balanced on his dashboard, hooked into a holder attached to his vents. The online map was slow to update out here, less signal to rely on. The highway was long and straight, at least, with no need to turn off. He would not get lost, nor would he miss his destination.

He knew precisely where he needed to go. It was all mapped out for him, written in the stars. Except for the fact that this pattern was far more precise than the mass of winking dots up there in the night sky, and far more easy to read. Of course, an expert could find those patterns, even way up there. But his pattern needed to be read even by those who did not normally see—and they would see, by the time he was finally done.

Who it would be was another question. Where, and when—yes, those were dictated by the pattern. But the who was more a matter of luck, and it was this that had him jiggling his leg up and down over the brake, his knee bouncing up and almost hitting the steering wheel each time.

He took a deep, calming breath, sucking in the rapidly cooling air. It was easy to sense that the sun was heading down across the sky, but it was not too late yet. The patterns had told him what he was supposed to do, and now he was going to do it. He had to trust in that.

The tires of his sedan thrummed endlessly across the smooth tarmac of the road, a steady background noise that was calming. He closed his eyes briefly, trusting the car to stay straight, and took another deep breath.

He tapped his fingers on the seal of the open window, falling into an easy repetitive beat, and breathed easier again. It would all be fine. Just as this car had stood him well for the years he had owned it, always reliable and dependable, the patterns would not let him down. So long as he checked the oil and took it in for servicing every now and then, it would run. And if he put himself into the right place at the right time, the patterns would be there.

They were all around him: the lines of the highway, stretching out into the distance straight and narrowing, telling him exactly where to go. The streaks of cirrus clouds which also seemed to point in the same direction, long fingers encouraging him onward. Even the flowers by the sides of the highway were bent, leaning forward in anticipation, like go-faster stripes swallowing the miles underneath his wheels.

It was all falling into place, just like the way the candy had fallen before he had killed the woman at the gas station. The way it had told him exactly what he needed to do next, and allowed him to see that he had already found the right place and the right victim.

The patterns would see him right, in the end.

Despite all of his mental reassurances, his heart was starting to race with anxiety as the sun began to fall lower and lower, dipping toward the horizon, and he still had not seen anyone suitable at all.

But now luck had found him again—the serendipity of being in the right place at the right time, and trusting the universe to do the rest.

She was walking backward along the shoulder of the highway, one arm stretched out to her side, thumb raised. She must have turned as soon as she heard him approach, his engine and the thrum of the wheels a giveaway long before they could see one another. She was carrying a heavy-looking backpack with a sleeping bag rolled up under it, and as he drew closer, he could see that she was young. No more than eighteen or nineteen, a free spirit on her way to a new adventure.

She was butter-soft and sweet, but that wasn't what mattered. Things like that never did. It was the patterns that mattered.

He slowed the car, coming to a stop just past her, then waiting patiently for her to catch up.

"Hi," he said, winding down the passenger's side window and inclining his head to look at her. "Are you looking for a ride?"

"Um, yeah," she said, looking at him mistrustfully, biting her lower lip. "Where are you headed?"

"Into the city," he said, gesturing ahead vaguely. It was a highway. There would be a city at the end of it, and she could fill in her own blanks as to which. "I'm glad I spotted you. Not many other cars on the road this time of day. It would be a cold night out here."

She gave a half-smile. "I would be fine."

He returned the smile broader, kinder, made it reach his eyes. "We can do better than fine," he said. "Hop in. I'll drop you outside a motel on the city limits."

She hesitated still; a young woman getting into a car with a man, alone—it didn't matter how nice he was. He understood that she would always be nervous. But she glanced up and down the road, and must have seen that even now, as the night was beginning to fall, there were no headlights in either direction.

She opened the passenger's side door with a gentle click, shrugging the backpack off her shoulders, and he smiled, this time for himself. All he had to do was trust, and things would work out the way the patterns told him they would.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“All right, listen up,” Zoe said. She was already uncomfortable, and even more so when the idle chatter in the room ceased and every pair of eyes swung her way.

Having Shelley at her side did little to dissuade the feeling of awkward pressure, the weight of expectation hanging over her shoulders. The attention turned on her like a hose, palpable and shocking. The kind of thing she tried to avoid every day of her life, if she could help it.

But sometimes the job demanded it, and as much as she wanted to, she couldn’t force Shelley to present a profile on her own. Not as the senior agent.

She took a breath, glancing across all of the officers seated in cramped rows of temporary chairs in the sheriff’s largest briefing room. Then she looked away, finding a point on the far wall to speak to, something less threatening.

“This is the profile we are looking for,” Zoe continued. “The male suspect will be around the height of five foot eleven, according to the calculations of all three coroners and what little physical evidence we found at the scenes. We also believe that he will be of thin to medium build. He is not particularly strong, forceful, or intimidating.”

Shelley took over, stepping forward for her moment in the spotlight—something she seemed to relish rather than fear, her eyes taking on a gleam. “He will present as non-threatening to most people, until the moment of murder. We believe he has been able to entice his victims into conversations and even led them away from relative safety and into an open space where he could physically manipulate the situation to get behind them. He may even be charming, polite.”

“He is not a local,” Zoe added. “He will have out-of-state plates on his car. While we have not been able to determine his state of origin, he is on the move, and will likely continue to be.”

Images of the women whose lives he had taken appeared on the projector screen behind them. They were all three alive, smiling at the camera, even laughing. They were normal, real women—not models or facsimiles of the same look or anything that would set them apart as special. Just women, who until three nights ago had all been living and breathing and laughing.

“He is targeting women,” Zoe said. “One every night, in isolated places with little chance of being caught in the act or on surveillance footage. These are dark areas, away from the beaten track, places that give him the time and room to go through with the kill.”

“How are we supposed to catch him with a profile like that?” one of the state cops piped up from the middle of the bristling copse of chairs in front of her. “There must be thousands of tall, thin guys with out-of-state plates around here.”

“We realize this is not much to go on,” Shelley stepped in, saving Zoe from the annoyance that had threatened to make her blurt out something unfriendly. “We can only work with what we have. The most useful course that we can take with this information at the present moment is to put out a warning to avoid isolated areas, and, particularly if approached by a man fitting this description, to be on guard.”

“Across the whole state?” This question came from one of the locals, the small team working under the sheriff whose Missouri station they had taken over for both their investigation and this briefing.

Zoe shook her head. “Across several states. He has already moved through Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri. That is a fair indication that he will continue to travel long distances in order to carry out his crimes.”

There were small noises of disagreement throughout the room, mumblings and growls of discontent.

“I am aware that it is a large area,” Zoe said, trying to be firm. “And I am aware that it is a vague warning. But we have to do what we can.”

“Who’s going to do the press conference?” the local sheriff asked. He had an air of battered authority about him, as if he were being crushed under the weight of all the other law enforcement officials crammed into his tiny station.

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