

BLAKE PIERCE



IF

SHE

HEARD

A KATE WISE MYSTERY--BOOK 7

A Kate Wise Mystery

Blake Pierce

If She Heard

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

2020

Pierce B.

If She Heard / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
2020 — (A Kate Wise Mystery)

ISBN 978-1-09-431293-4

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery. Blake Pierce did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone) IF SHE HEARD (A Kate Wise Mystery) is book #7 in a new psychological thriller series by bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) (a free download) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. Two teenagers, home for their winter break from college, are found murdered in their hometown. There is clearly a serial killer on a rampage, and the FBI is stumped—but can FBI agent Kate Wise, 55, still recovering from giving birth, enter his twisted mind and stop him before another girl dies? An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, IF SHE HEARD is book #7 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #8 in the KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES will be available soon.

ISBN 978-1-09-431293-4

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Blake Pierce

If She Heard (A Kate Wise Mystery—Book 7)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. 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 six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising seven books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); and of the new ADELE SHARP mystery series.

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

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CHAPTER ONE

Even before the baby arrived, people were calling Kate Wise the Miracle Mother. Upon learning that she was going to be giving birth at the age of fifty-seven, Kate had told no one other than Allen and Melissa. She hadn't even told anyone at work. Not DeMarco, not Duran...no one. But somehow, word had gotten out. By the time she was five months pregnant, everyone at the bureau knew about it and there were journalists and reporters calling.

Oddly enough, the first journalist who had called her was on her mind as the doctor checked to see how much she was dilated. She'd found the idea of her pregnancy being newsworthy a little ridiculous. But as her doctors had told her and as some Google research had verified, it was rare for a woman beyond fifty to get pregnant—and even more rare for that woman to carry the baby to full term.

But here she was, her water having broken eight hours ago, with her doctor telling her she was eight centimeters dilated and it was almost time.

The first reporter had been a woman from *Mother and Baby* magazine. Kate had only taken the call out of a need to not be rude. They'd spoken on the phone twice; the second call ended up being more focused on her ability to maintain a second career within the FBI. The reporter had spoken to her as if Kate were some sort of superhero. Kate had never known why, but something about the interview had sat wrong with her for the entirety of her pregnancy.

Because no one should look to me as an example, Kate thought as another contraction went tearing through her more-than-half-a-century-old body. *This is torture.*

She did not remember her pregnancy with Melissa being this hard. Of course, that had been almost thirty years ago. That had been planned, and there had been no reporters. There had been no thirty-second blips on the evening news about her pregnancy, no nicknames like Miracle Mother to live up to.

"Kate?" the doctor said. His voice tore her out of her thoughts, managing to find a way in through the pain of the latest contraction. "You still with me?"

"Uh-huh."

It was true, though the world was something of a haze. The pregnancy was high risk. There had been issues from the fourth month on. Worries of low birth weight, a scare where the baby's heartbeat had been far too slow, and now here he was, three weeks early and projected to weigh about a pound and a half under what the doctor considered safe.

"He's here, Kate. I need you to push, okay? One more big push and your baby boy will be—"

Kate pushed, and the room spun. She was vaguely aware of Allen by her side. He was holding her hand, his face next to hers as he coached her on and encouraged her. Kate let out a moan, doing everything she could not to scream. The world started growing dim just as she heard the first cries of her newborn baby son.

Her vision was hazy at best when the doctor placed her son on her chest. She cradled him in her arms and started to cry. She hated the word *miracle*, as it was tossed around far too often. But feeling the warmth of her baby in her arms, held against her nearly sixty-year-old body, she supposed that's what this was...a miracle.

It was a nice thought to hang on to as exhaustion swept over her and her vision went from hazy to a complete and perfect field of black.

In the coming weeks, Kate was overcome with a huge wave of depression. Now that her son was here—named Michael, after her late husband—she started to obsess over the negatives of being a new mother at the age of fifty-seven. First of all, she had to accept the fact that in the past eighteen months, she had become both a grandmother *and* a new mother. There was also the fact that by the time this new kid was old enough to go to college, she'd be pushing eighty. And thinking of college opened her eyes to the added expense. She had enough money saved up, but she had made plans for it—namely a lot of traveling after sixty. But now those plans would have to change.

She also wondered how Allen was going to truly handle it all. Sure, he had been great so far. He had been genuinely excited through most of the pregnancy, but now the baby was actually here and changing their lives...especially Allen's. First of all, Michael had stayed in the hospital for three weeks. He'd been in NICU while a team of doctors made sure he was going to gain weight. Kate missed most of this, as her own recovery was much harder than she'd expected. The strain of the birth had thrown her back out and her femoral nerves had also been damaged, causing her to occasionally lose feeling in her legs. She was finally officially released from the hospital after eleven days.

Twenty days after he was born, Michael was allowed to go home. He weighed five pounds seven ounces when Kate rested him in his bassinet for the first time. For the two days that followed, Kate had been an almost obsessive mother. She'd make sure he was breathing at least five times during each of his naps and at night; she hovered over Allen when he held their son, and she would not even let Melissa hold him.

Those two days had worn her out and that, she supposed, was what brought the depression on. She stayed in bed for eight full days, only getting up to use the bathroom and to shower on three occasions. Allen was essentially a single parent in that time, and during one of her nights of being holed up in her bed, Kate heard him sobbing.

On that eighth day, it was Melissa of all people who convinced her to get out of bed. There was a knock at the bedroom door. She assumed it was Allen and answered with a groggy "Come in."

When she saw that it was Melissa, she wanted to cry but wasn't sure why. She propped herself up on her left elbow, surprised at how much it hurt to do so. Staying in bed had made her quite sore.

"Lissa," she said. "What a surprise."

Melissa sat on the edge of the bed and took her mother's hand. "How you doing, Mom?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "Tired. Wiped out. Depressed."

"Still having issues with your legs?"

"No, they seem okay. Haven't lost feeling in them since I got back home."

"Good. Knowing your legs are okay is going to make me seem like less of a bully with what I say next."

"What is it?" Kate asked.

"I love you, Mom. But it's time to get your ass out of bed."

"I want to, I really do. But I—"

"No, Mom. Allen has been busting his ass this past week. I've helped where I can, but he only lets me do so much because he's afraid of how you'll react. Look...I get how weird and scary this has to be, but you need to face it. You're fifty-seven and you just had a baby. And you survived it. Now it's time to be a mother. And I can tell you from personal experience that you're pretty good at it."

Kate sat up and looked sternly at her daughter. "Allen...is he okay?"

"No. He's exhausted and he's afraid you're in some bad place you won't come back from. But I told him to get that right out of his head. You're a rock star. He told me how you pushed through that pregnancy. And I've watched you reclaim a career as a female FBI agent even after you retired."

You handled that...so you can handle this. More importantly, you were excited to start your career again at fifty-five. So now it's time to be excited for this baby at fifty-seven."

Kate nodded, and when the tears started to come, she did not fight them.

"There's just one thing I need to let you know," Melissa said.

"What's that?"

"If you need me to tell you how babies are made, I can do it. Seems to me at this age, you'd know how to be safe."

Kate burst out laughing. It hurt her sides, her stomach, and her head, but it also felt good at the same time. Melissa laughed right along with her, taking Kate's hand again. "I mean, for real. My daughter is older than her own uncle. How the hell does that even work?"

Kate laughed even louder and leaned into her daughter. They embraced and stayed that way for so long that after a while, Kate could not tell where the laughter stopped and the crying began.

Slowly, Melissa helped Kate out of bed. She coached her through getting in the shower and even put on a pot of tea while her mother washed off. Taking a shower, as simple as it was, helped to bring Kate around a lot. But, to her amazement, it was also exhausting. She felt like an invalid as she struggled to put her clothes on.

As she fought to get her arms into a T-shirt, Melissa came into the room and helped. "I don't know that I've ever helped you into your clothes," Melissa said. "Good thing I've had Michelle to practice on. I bet she never would have thought her grandmother would need help getting dressed."

"Were you always such a smart ass?" Kate asked.

"Always."

Together, they left the bedroom and walked into the living room. Kate looked around, amazed at how clean and quiet the place was. "Where's Allen and Michael?" she asked.

Allen took him out for a walk around the block. He's done it twice a day for the last three days."

"God, have I been *that* out?"

"You have." Melissa took the kettle off of the stove and poured hot water into waiting cups with tea bags in them. "Mom...are you going to be able to do this?"

"I think so. Eventually. It's just overwhelming. And it took way too much out of me."

"I thought I was going to die when I had Michelle. I can't imagine giving birth at your age." She smirked here and added: "You old fart."

"You know," Kate said, "somehow, it became much easier to be apart from you over the years."

This time it was Melissa who broke out laughing. It was like music to Kate. It warmed her heart in a way that she had missed. Sadly, she realized that she could not remember the last time she'd heard Melissa laugh so hard.

It made her wonder what else she had missed and taken for granted.

Director Duran kept his distance in the months that followed. He sent a card and a care package of diapers and wipes a week after Michael's birth, but refrained from any emails or phone calls. Kate appreciated the gesture but started to feel a creeping sort of certainty about her future with the bureau. Having a baby at the age of fifty-seven and becoming something of a local celebrity for it likely meant her brief resurgence at work was now over.

On the other hand, she couldn't help but wonder if the bureau might enjoy some of the free press. Not only free press, but uplifting and uncontroversial press for once.

She wished she could be fine with it, but she wasn't. She grew to love Michael more and more every day. There had been a few days where she had resented him, but it did not last long. After all, Melissa's speech had been accurate. Had she and Allen been more careful, she would not have

gotten pregnant. Then again, the idea of being careful sexually when you were fifty-five tended to look different than it did for other dating adults.

Three months after she had been coaxed out of bed by Melissa, Kate was able to see this last stretch of her life for what it was. It would be a life of domestication and learning how to be a mother again. It would be learning how to love and trust a man with not only her life, but the life of their child.

Ultimately, she was fine with it. Hell, she was sure there were some grandmothers who would do anything to experience that feeling of being a new mother again. And here she was, with that chance.

Allen seemed fine with it as well. They had not yet talked about what the rest of their lives would look like in terms of marriage and co-parenting. He was still loving her well and seemed absolutely nuts about little Michael, but he seemed timid a lot of the time. It was like he was running underneath a cliff, waiting to be brained by a boulder that was sure to fall on him at any moment.

She wasn't sure what was bothering him until her phone rang on a Wednesday afternoon. Kate was sitting on the couch with Michael. Allen picked the phone up from the kitchen counter and brought it to her. He wasn't necessarily spying when he looked down to see the display; it was just something they did now, a level of comfort she had been totally fine with.

Yet when he handed the phone to her, he had a sour expression on his face. She took the phone, he took Michael from her, and she looked to the display as she answered the call.

It was Duran.

Kate and Allen locked eyes for a moment and she understood his strain.

Her heart racing, Kate answered the call.

Allen walked into the kitchen; the shadow of that falling boulder may as well have been growing larger and larger, covering him completely.

CHAPTER TWO

Sandra Peterson woke up fifteen minutes before her alarm was set to go off. She had been waking up to that same alarm, at 6:30 every morning, for the last two years or so. She'd always been a good sleeper, managing seven to nine hours every night and never waking before the alarm. But this morning, she was stirred awake by excitement. Kayla was home from college and they were going to spend the entire day together.

It would be the first time they'd spent more than half a day together since Kayla started college last year. She was home because one of her childhood friends was getting married. Kayla had been raised in Harper Hills, North Carolina, a small rural town about twenty miles outside of Charlotte, and had opted to enroll in an out-of-state college as early as she could. Going to school at Florida State meant their times together were few and far between. They'd last seen each other at Christmas, and that had been almost a year ago for only a period of ten hours before Kayla had left to visit her father in Tennessee.

Kayla had always handled the divorce well. Sandra and her husband had split when Kayla was eleven and she never really even seemed to care. Sandra supposed it was one of the reasons Kayla had never played favorites. When she visited one parent, she made a point to visit the other. And because of that torturous trip—from Tallahassee, to Harper Hills, to Nashville—Kayla didn't visit very often.

Sandra shuffled out of the bedroom in her pajamas and bedroom slippers. She walked down the hallway toward the kitchen, passing by Kayla's room. She didn't expect her daughter to wake up any time before eight, and that was fine. Sandra figured she could put some coffee on and prepare a nice breakfast for when she was awake.

She did just that, scrambling up some eggs, frying some bacon, and making a dozen silver dollar pancakes. The kitchen was smelling amazing by seven o'clock, and Sandra was surprised the smells hadn't stirred Kayla awake yet. It had worked when Kayla had been at home, especially when the high school years had come about. But now the smells of her home cooking apparently did not have the same effect on her daughter.

Anyway, Kayla had been out with friends last night—some friends she hadn't seen since high school graduation. Sandra hadn't felt right sticking with her daughter's old curfew now that she was in college, so Sandra had simply left it at: *Come home in one piece and preferably sober.*

As the morning crept on toward eight and Kayla had still not come out of her room, Sandra started to worry. Rather than knock on the bedroom door and potentially wake her up, though, Sandra looked out the living room window. She saw Kayla's car in the driveway, parked right behind her own car.

Relieved, Sandra went back to making breakfast. When all of the food was ready, it was 7:55. Sandra hated to wake her daughter (she was sure it would be seen as rude and uncool), but she simply couldn't help it. Maybe after breakfast, Kayla would take a nap and rest up before they started their day of shopping and a late lunch in Charlotte. Besides...the eggs were going to get cold and Kayla had always made a point to mention how gross cold eggs were.

Sandra walked down the hall to Kayla's room. It felt surreal and comforting at the same time. How many times had she knocked on this door in her adult life? Thousands, for sure. To be doing it again made her heart warm.

She knocked, paused a moment, and then added a sweet-sounding: "Kayla, honey? Breakfast is ready."

There was no response from inside. Sandra frowned. She was not naïve enough to think that Kayla and her friends had not been drinking last night. She had never seen her daughter drunk or enduring a hangover and did not want to see it at all if she could help it. She wondered if Kayla was simply hungover and not ready to face her mother.

“There’s coffee,” Sandra added, hoping it might help.

Still no response. She knocked one more time, louder this time, and opened the door.

The bed was still perfectly made. There was no sign of Kayla.

But that makes no sense, Sandra thought. Her car is out front.

She then recalled a particularly ungraceful moment from her own teenage years where she had driven home drunk out of her mind. She’d managed to make it home but had passed out in her car, in the driveway. She found it hard to imagine Kayla behaving in such a way but there were only so many other possibilities to consider.

As Sandra closed Kayla’s bedroom door and walked back through the kitchen, a little ball of worry bounced around in her stomach. Maybe Kayla had been hiding some drinking or drug problems from her. Maybe they’d spend their day talking through such things rather than their planned day of fun.

Sandra steeled up her courage to have such a conversation as she opened the front door. Just as she stepped out onto the porch, she froze. Her left leg literally paused in the air, refusing to set down.

Because if she set her foot down, she was stepping into a new world—a world where what she saw on her front porch was going to have to be faced and accepted.

Kayla was lying on the porch. She was on her back and staring up with unblinking eyes. There were red abrasions around her throat. She was not moving.

Sandra finally brought that other foot down. When she did, the rest of her body followed it. She fell into a crumpled ball by her dead daughter, thoughts of breakfast and shopping completely forgotten.

CHAPTER THREE

It never got any easier to step into a meeting with Director Duran. He had always been fair with Kate and she even considered him a good friend. But the nature of the call and the way the last few months of her life had gone made Kate think that this was going to be a tense meeting—perhaps a meeting that would put an end to her briefly resurrected career as an FBI agent.

When she stepped into his office, he greeted her with the no-nonsense smile she had come to know and appreciate ever since he had taken over for the director who had overseen the first half of her career. She and Duran were roughly the same age (she had never bothered to ask how old he was because it seemed rude) and had a mutual appreciation for one another.

“Hey, Kate, have a seat.”

She was immediately alarmed that he had used her first name. It was very informal, something he had only ever done in after-hours situations or when conversations had gotten heated.

“Kate, huh?” she asked. She was beyond the point of being nervous around him. She made the comment in jest, as if basically painting the situation for what it was and placing it neatly on the desk between them.

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, you’re still on your extended maternity leave,” he said. “Seemed silly to call you agent. However, as you might have imagined, all of that is sort of why I wanted to speak with you.” He let out a deep breath here and looked her straight in the eyes. “How are you, Kate?”

“Good. Confused, I guess.”

“Feeling like the Miracle Mom?”

“I suppose I do fit right in with the celebrity circles, don’t I?” she joked. “I need to hurry this up, by the way. I have a lunch scheduled with Ryan Seacrest right after this.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

Kate shrugged. Humor had never really been a part of their relationship anyway.

“I won’t lie,” Duran said. “It was sort of cool around here. People quick to say they knew you. Sharing links and articles about the Miracle Mom.”

“You know, I only did two interviews. How that turned into more than forty articles, I’ll never know.”

“That’s social media for you. It was nuts. Anyway…tell me, Kate. Has your newfound fame made you think twice about returning to the bureau?”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “No. If anything is going to keep me from coming back, it would not be my brush with fame.”

“But something *could* stop you?”

“Maybe. My baby, for one. My age for another.”

“You’ve been out for three months now,” he said. “A little more, actually. I suppose I don’t need to point out that you’re not getting younger. Still…your body of work post-retirement is pretty impressive.”

“Forgive me for being so blunt and to the point,” Kate said. “But what do *you* want? Do you want me back?”

“In a perfect world, yes. But there have been meetings here and there. All of those articles not only highlight that you gave birth at fifty-seven, but that you are also still an active FBI agent. You go back out there, I don’t know what that’s going to be like in terms of media attention.”

Kate reclined back in her seat. She hadn’t even thought of that.

“Let’s be real for a minute,” Duran went on. “Yes, I want you back. But that’s being selfish. You’re a great asset and, if I’m being *very* real, it would do wonders for the bureau. The media loves you right now. You’re like some weird C-list celebrity, right up there with those kids that react to

new music on YouTube. But I'm not going to try to sway you. If you want out, you can have out and I think everyone would understand."

"I miss it, though," Kate said. She hadn't even fully realized it until it was out of her mouth.

"I figured you did. So what I can do—for the next few months, anyway—is set you on some low-risk cases. Just some things to keep your mind busy and your focus sharp. That is, if you feel that you've had enough time to rest and you're ready to head back out."

"I am," she said. The idea of placing Michael into daycare hurt her heart, but she knew it would be good for him...as well as for her and Allen. Though, if she were being honest, she wasn't sure she was quite ready for it yet. Before she could get dragged down by those thoughts, she carried on with the conversation. "How has DeMarco been doing? I've only spoken to her three times since I've been out and every time I asked her about work, she was quick to change the subject."

"That might be because she's been quite busy. I'm allowed to tell you because she's technically still listed as your partner...but she has been involved in two high-profile cases. Three weeks ago, she arrested two men who had been getting heroin out on the streets. A week before that, she single-handedly brought in a guy who killed three people in West Virginia and was on the run, passing through Maryland."

"Seems she *has* been busy."

"And now that you mention DeMarco, she's just been given a briefing on a case in North Carolina. Seems like a cut-and-dry stalker-type case. Two dead young women, college-aged. DeMarco is on a roll and I'm sure she'd love to have you back. If this one is as simple as it seems on paper, it could be a great fit for both of you, in your different situations."

"And what is my situation?"

"You know what I meant, Kate. If you want to try to get back into the swing of things, this might be a good case to do it. It is, of course, one hundred percent up to you."

"It sounds nice, but I don't want to get in her way if she's doing well for herself."

"I'm sure she'd love to have you. And, again sticking with honesty, if we don't know how much longer you're going to work, I think it makes more sense to have you paired with someone you know well."

"Makes sense."

Duran considered things for a moment before getting to his feet. "She's due to leave tomorrow morning. Does that give you and your husband enough time to sort things out? If you don't mind my asking, has it even been a conversation?"

"It has," she said. "Maybe an unspoken one, but it's been on our minds. I think he knows I'm not done, but..."

"But what?"

"But that it's close. That my time with the bureau is coming to an end."

There was another question on Duran's mind. She could see him debating whether or not to ask it. But she knew what it was and she was grateful he kept it quiet.

Is this your last case?

She was glad he left it unspoken because she had no idea how to answer it.

It was the sole topic of conversation at dinner. Allen took it well, mainly because he'd known it was coming. The moment Duran had called earlier in the day, he had known. The conversation had gone surprisingly well, though there was an underlying tension hovering over the dining room table.

"Here's the thing," Allen said, shoving his now-empty plate to the side. He'd made teriyaki chicken for dinner and it had been amazing. It was another of those small ways he treated her well. "There's a very large part of me that is thrilled you're going back. The last month or so, it's been

almost painful to watch you stalking around the place, looking like you lost your keys and had no idea where to look for them. I know you miss it and in terms of this case, I'm happy to agree to it. But it raises some questions."

"A lot of questions," Kate agreed. "Let's tackle them."

"Great. While I am pretty much retired at this point, I *will* still have to take calls and attend meetings here and there for the next year or so to wrap up those last-minute deals. So I'll ask that your job not automatically overrule mine. That being said, we need to go ahead and pull the trigger on lining up daycare for Michael."

"Agreed. Now, for this case, are you open for the next week or so?"

"I am. I have nothing on the calendar for another three weeks, actually."

"And would you mind being a single father for several days if I take this case?"

"Sure thing. Boy time will be fun."

"What other questions do you have?"

"I'm thinking of the safety factor. I know you can hold your own and it's one of the reasons I love you. But I also don't like the idea of my fifty-seven-year-old wife out there chasing after men half her age that have no problem killing her. It's not like you're one of these agents that sit behind a desk or parked in a car."

"Duran and I talked about that. This case in particular should be a pretty simple one. He's also aware of the age factor, though he was a bit more pleasant about how he worded it."

"One more." Allen leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his wine. He looked over to the bouncy seat Michael had been snoozing in while they ate and smiled. "How long are you going to keep at it? Honestly? How much longer can you push it? I can't imagine putting your body through the stress of having a child has made it any easier."

"It's a difficult question to answer," she said. "This whole situation... I could have never dreamed it up. A baby at fifty-seven. A supervisor and a partner who still want me active. It's more than I can honestly wrap my head around and... I just don't know. I don't think I will until I get back out there."

She watched how he thought about it, how the right corner of his mouth ticked down into an almost-frown the way it often did when he was deep in thought.

"Then I think you need to get back out there," he said. "For now. Maybe we revisit this in three months and see what it looks like. Does that seem fair?"

"It seems more than fair."

She wanted to tell him how lovely and accommodating he had been through this entire relationship. But he already knew it, because she said it all the time. She knew that it appeared that she chose work over him the majority of the time; if she was honest with herself, that was exactly what she had done. But now they had a baby and the future all but beckoned a marriage. This was her life now, her new life, and she finally had a chance to not let work control it all. She'd done that once before and it had nearly caused a rift between her and Melissa.

She knew right away that something had changed. In the past, she would have wasted no time—she'd leave the table right away and start packing for the trip down to North Carolina tomorrow. But now, following the meeting with Duran and the conversation with Allen, all she wanted to do was sit there with him. He was her future, not her work. Allen, Michael, and Melissa could be the center of her life and that would be just fine.

All she had to do was make sure her heart was centered. To make sure she was able to settle in on a life that seemed so perfect.

And for now, sitting there with Allen, it seemed pretty damn perfect indeed.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Kate and DeMarco met up at the car in the bureau lot, it felt like they had not missed a beat. Still, there was something noticeably different about DeMarco that came down to more than just her appearance, which was pretty much the same as it had been since they'd last seen one another nearly six months ago.

"Agent Wise, it's nice to see you again," DeMarco said.

"Likewise."

They hugged briefly, and that was when, in something as simple as that quick show of affection, Kate could tell that there was something different about DeMarco. It had been less than eleven months since they had last worked together, but the woman had changed in ways that weren't easily identifiable. It was more than just the time apart and the way Duran had made her seem during their meeting. DeMarco looked different, too. Kate's first thought was that she looked older, but that wasn't quite right. She had the look of someone who held her head high, looking upward and forward without the need for someone else to hold her up. In that sense, yes, DeMarco appeared to be older. Having just had a baby, Kate finally figured out a fitting analogy: DeMarco's shift in appearance had gone from the naïve woman who wants to be a mother to the woman who had just had a baby, had become a mother, and was being guided by maternal instinct.

Another noticeable thing that had changed was the connection between Kate and DeMarco. It was noticeable from the very start—from the moment they tossed their bags into the trunk of the bureau sedan to start the drive to North Carolina. It was nothing negative. They were both ecstatic to see one another again, perhaps even more excited to be working a case again after nearly six months. But there was a sense of leadership change. DeMarco was no longer the subordinate, looking up to Kate and following her every lead. Now there was more confidence in DeMarco. She was an up and coming agent, cracking cases on her own.

Nothing was said—not from DeMarco nor from Duran—but Kate knew even before they were out of DC that DeMarco was the lead on this case. It was an intangible thing that Kate felt. And truth be told, she didn't care. It actually felt sort of *right*.

Most of the trip down was spent playing catch-up. There were six hours to do it and it went by far too fast. Kate shared stories about Michael and how it felt to have a newborn younger than her granddaughter. She talked about trying to stay active and to keep a sharp mind away from work when her world had been essentially making formula, changing diapers, and getting every bit of available sleep she could.

DeMarco, in turn, told her about her life. She kept the personal details to a minimum, giving only the bare essentials about a new woman she was dating and a cancer scare her father had lived through. But it was mostly about work. When she started discussing some of the highlights, she did so in an almost embarrassed way.

"There's no need to be timid about it," Kate said. "Duran told me how well you've been doing, particularly over the past several weeks. Now...when he said you *single-handedly* brought that killer in, what exactly did he mean?"

"You really want to hear about that?" She sounded surprised but, deep down, a little excited.

"Of course I do!"

"Well, I don't want to sound like I'm bragging. But yeah...this guy had killed a married couple in upstate New York and then attempted to kill and rob someone in DC. We found out he was here and a manhunt ensued. I wasn't the lead initially, but the lead came down with the flu and I was sort of forced into the role. I ended up cornering the killer and one of his friends in this old house just outside of Georgetown. I had to shoot the friend. Took out his left knee. Took the killer down in a pretty quick wrestling match. I accidentally dislocated his hip and fractured his wrist."

“*Accidentally* dislocated his hip?” Kate asked with a laugh.

“Yes, accidentally. Besides...he was high. Found out later that he was coming down off of some sort of psychedelic. Had he been of sound mind and knew what was going on, it might have ended very differently.”

“Still, that’s incredible. Maybe it’s just the newfound mom coming out in me, but I’m proud of you.”

“What’s this *newfound* crap? Bitch, you’re the Miracle Mom!”

They both laughed hard at this, setting the tone for the remainder of the trip. By the time they arrived in the small town of Harper Hills, it was almost as if they had not missed a beat. But still, that sense of a power shift was unmistakable. Kate accepted it warmly as DeMarco pulled their car into the police department parking lot, killed the engine, and eagerly opened the driver’s side door.

The interior of the Harper Hills PD reminded Kate of what a police department from an ’80s TV show might look like. And not one of those shows that took place in New York or L.A. No, this place was just a step or two above Mayberry, something that might be featured in a Hallmark movie where the so-called detective was also a great cook or a children’s book author. There was a central entry area that she supposed was the lobby. Beyond that, there were three desks, only one of which was occupied. Behind those desks was a thin hallway and nothing more.

The desk that was occupied was filled by an overweight gentleman with what Kate thought might be considered a mullet, adding to the ’80s vibe. He nodded at them and got up from his seat quickly. The name tag on his left breast read **Smith**.

“You must be the agents,” Smith said, hurrying to the lobby to greet them.

Kate took a step back, letting DeMarco know that she had the floor.

“That’s us,” DeMarco said. “Agents DeMarco and Wise. We were told we were to meet with Sheriff Gates.”

“Yeah, that’s right. He’s back in his office.” Smith waved them on to follow him. They did so, tailing him into the hall where he stopped at the first doorway on the right. “Sheriff?” he asked, knocking on the frame of the opened door. “The FBI agents are here.”

“Come on in!” came the response.

DeMarco led the way, Kate following behind. The sheriff got to his feet and extended his hand to greet them. Kate bit back a grin at the idea that she had seen the police department as a few steps above the station from Mayberry in *The Andy Griffith Show*. Sheriff Gates actually looked like a younger, modernized version of Sheriff Andy from the titular show. He shook their hands and looked them in the eye in a way that told her he was perfectly fine working with women, but that he was also likely going to be treating them with some good old southern hospitality.

“Sheriff,” Kate said, “I figured the station would be jumping, given the nature of this case.”

“Well, it was a while ago. The State PD came in and I had two of my men go out with them. They’re canvassing some of the back roads; there’s a lot of them around here, you know. I stayed behind because I wanted to meet with you.”

“We appreciate that,” DeMarco said. “What exactly can you tell us about the case? We’ve been briefed in DC, of course, but I’d prefer to hear it straight from the source.”

“Well, there’s been two murders in a town that has only boasted a single homicide in the last ten years. Both have been young women—ages nineteen and twenty. The first victim was killed five nights ago, in a bowling alley parking lot. The other was found yesterday morning on the front porch of her mother’s house. There’s no clear link between the girls other than their age and that they were both locals. The latest victim, Kayla Peterson, was home from college for a few days.”

“An in-state college?” DeMarco asked.

“No, somewhere down in Florida.”

“Any links at all in the families of the women?” Kate asked.

“The only thing similar between them is that they both came from families of divorce. But we’ve spoken to all of the immediate family and everything seems to check out in terms of alibis. You, of course, are welcome to retread where we’ve already stepped.”

“Thank you,” DeMarco said. “Do you mind taking us out to the location where the second victim was found?”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

Gates slipped on a jacket and exited the office ahead of them. Kate noticed how DeMarco seemed to carry herself differently now. It was a very slight difference, and not anything Kate could actually name, but it was there. She was more confident, more self-assured. It was present in the way she had interacted with the sheriff, even in that brief amount of time. It was also in the way she followed him but also led Kate.

She’s still so young, Kate thought. She’s going to end up being an exceptional agent.

It warmed her heart and made her incredibly glad to be back by DeMarco’s side. More than anything though, it made her happy to be on this case, even though she was now quite sure it would be one of her last.

On the way to the latest murder scene, they passed through most of Harper Hills. There were four stoplights in the town and the most recognizable businesses were a Burger King and a Subway, both situated along the very short and mostly non-eventful Main Street. Near the end of Main Street, Gates turned his patrol car onto a back road, and DeMarco followed closely behind in the bureau sedan.

The back road turned into another and that one into yet another. It was a peculiar area, though. Kate had seen many backwoods towns set up in a similar way, but Harper Hills was almost like a rural subdivision without all the fringe, tucked away in the wooded flatlands of North Carolina. The neighborhood Gates led them into was not so much a neighborhood as a collection of wooded lots separated by thick groves of trees.

Kate leaned forward in her seat as Gates turned into a gravel driveway. DeMarco followed, both agents noticing that there was one other car in the driveway. She parked behind Gates and the three of them met one another at the start of the sidewalk.

“This is the Peterson residence,” Gates said. “The mother, Sandra, is currently staying with an old family friend out near Cape Fear. She just couldn’t stand to be around here. I get that, I suppose. She was torn up about it all. Catatonic.”

He then handed DeMarco a manila envelope. DeMarco took it, opened it, and looked inside. Kate peered over her shoulder and saw that it was the case files. They had received most of those files digitally in DC, but not all of them. She always made a point to look at the physical files even when she had the digital ones. Something about seeing the information in print—especially crime scene photos—made the case seem more pressing.

“Were you the first on the scene?” DeMarco asked.

“No, that was Smith. But I was right behind him.”

“Can you walk me through what you saw?”

Kate liked this approach. Rather than instantly looking through the offered files. DeMarco wanted to make sure she was seeing the scene as it had played out on the morning the body had been found. Photographs and notes were excellent tools, but rarely as good as hearing the events told from the mouths of those first on the scene.

“According to the mother, Kayla Peterson was home for a friend’s wedding. She went out with some friends two nights ago and the next morning, she wasn’t in her room. But her car was right there in the driveway. When the mother opened the door to check the car, she found Kayla dead on the porch. She’d gotten so far as putting her front door key into the lock before the killer attacked; they were still hanging from the knob when Smith and I got here. From the moment I saw the body, it was quite apparent she had been strangled.”

“Was she fully clothed?” Kate asked.

“She was. The medical examiner said there was no indication that she had been raped or otherwise sexually assaulted. Seems like murder was the only thing the killer was interested in. Same goes for the first victim.”

“Did the ME have any hints at what was used to strangle her?” DeMarco asked.

“He thinks some sort of cord, likely made of plastic. And the force with which he did it was a lot. The ME thinks the killer must be rather strong.”

“Is that Kayla’s car down there?” DeMarco asked, nodding to the only other car in the driveway.

“It is.” He fished around in his pocket and took out a key fob that had been marked with an evidence tag. He handed it over to DeMarco and said, “Help yourself.”

The three of them trotted back down the porch stairs to the driveway. Kayla had driven a 2017 Kia Optima. It looked exactly what Kate would expect a college girl’s car to look like: fairly clean, the console littered with Chapstick, a half-empty plastic bottle of water, and a phone charger. Other than that, there was nothing of note in the car—certainly nothing that would help them determine who had been following her that night.

Following the car, Gates unlocked the front door. He explained to them that when Sandra Peterson had left town, she’d given Gates the keys to her home to help with the investigation.

“Any chance she’d be a suspect?” Kate asked.

“Even if I had the slightest inkling that she was—and I don’t—it would not explain the first victim.”

“That was three days before Kayla, right?” DeMarco asked.

“That’s exactly right. While there is certainly no way to rule her out for certain, I interviewed every single person that was at the bowling alley when it closed up. Not a single person reported seeing Sandra Peterson. One woman knew exactly who I was talking about and thought it was outrageous that I was even asking. Besides...I go back to what the ME said. Whoever strangled Kayla Peterson was incredibly strong. And if you ever end up meeting Sandra Peterson, you’d have a hard time lining that up. She’d quite waifish. Lost a ton of weight when her husband left. And not by going to the gym. She looks almost malnourished. Sickly, at times.”

Kate and DeMarco looked around the room Kayla had been staying in. It showed signs of the girl she once was, the residue of Hannah Montana stickers on the side of a dresser, faintly faded squares on the walls where posters once hung. They found two packed bags sitting at the foot of the bed. One had clearly been designated as the bag for all things related to the wedding celebration. It was filled with nicer clothes, makeup, and what looked like notes for a toast. The other bag was much less formal, with several outfits tossed in along with a paperback book and some toiletries. But there was nothing at all to help them with the case.

“Have you talked to any of the friends she was out with the night she was killed?” DeMarco asked.

“All but one of them. From what I gathered, there were four of them in all, including Kayla.”

“I’d like to speak with all of them,” DeMarco said. She then looked back to Kate, as if seeking approval. Kate only gave a quick nod of the head, appreciating the gesture of having DeMarco seek her opinion.

“Well, it’s Monday afternoon, and they’re all working. I could make some calls and see what I can do to get them all together. Maybe at the station.”

“What about a bar or diner or something?” DeMarco asked.

Gates looked baffled, but nodded slowly. “Yeah, there’s a bar or two in town. Well, right outside of it, actually. Pretty sure a few of the girls frequent one of them, a place called Esther’s Place. I can have them meet you there at six or so.”

“Make sure they know it’s not optional,” DeMarco said. “If they can’t make it, we’ll come to their house.”

Kate smiled. It wasn’t the path she would have taken, but it was an effective one. She knew what DeMarco was thinking. Typically, when the questioning of witnesses was done outside of interrogation rooms or even homes, the flow of conversation tended to be more natural. Kate had never preferred this approach, as the possibility of distraction became an issue. But this was DeMarco’s show and she was going to let DeMarco run it her way.

The trio exited the house and by the time they reached their respective cars, Sheriff Gates was already on the phone, trying to organize the meeting.

“I wonder why he just let the mom leave like that,” DeMarco said as they got into their car.

“The woman just lost her daughter. Unless there is substantial evidence that she is guilty or knows something worthwhile, there’s no point in dragging her through this. Plus, the case files said she has no family or friends around here. And family and friends is exactly what she needs right now.”

DeMarco chuckled. “Damn, I missed you, Kate. I was beginning to worry I put people’s emotions in the back seat when it came to a case.”

“It’s easy to do,” Kate said. “After a while, as sad as it sounds, it can become easy to stop seeing the people we meet on the cases as actual people. We just have a puzzle to solve and they are the tools to help. It’s a shitty way to think, but I think all agents slip into it at some point or another.”

“I can’t see you behaving like that.”

Talk to Melissa, she thought. She’ll tell you all about how I put the job above everything.

The thought brought a sudden sting of tears to her eyes, which she wiped away. It was one more tug from life, pulling her closer. Yes, she had been a miserable mother to Melissa, usually choosing work over her.

She found herself back there again, only now twenty years later and with Michael. She had a chance to get it right this time.

And as that last thought still stung at her mind, she thought, when it was all said and done, she *would* get it right.

CHAPTER FIVE

The bar wasn't really a bar at all, but a drinking area within a greasy-spoon sort of diner. There were dartboards and even a by-God jukebox, but the diner section seemed to be why the establishment was there at all. The bar area within Esther's Place was pushed to the back, as if the owner might be ashamed of what took place there. But when Kate and DeMarco stepped inside at 5:45 to meet with the friends of Kayla Peterson, it seemed like a nice enough—if not slightly outdated—place.

There were three young women sitting at a booth in the far corner. Kate noticed right away that none of them were drinking alcohol, presumably because they were all under twenty-one. Two had waters, and another had what looked to be either seltzer water or Sprite. All three of them seemed to notice the FBI agents at the same time. They didn't look scared per se, but certainly on edge. Kate wondered how long the girls would wait until after the interview before they went out in search of a drink or two by illegal means.

DeMarco took the lead as they approached the table. "Are you ladies Claire Lee, Tabby Amos, and Olivia Macintyre?"

"That's us," the girl in the middle said. She had gorgeous red hair and a tall slender figure that came into view when she stood up and offered her hand. "I'm Tabitha Amos," she said. "Tabby to most, though."

"I'm Claire Lee," the girl on the left said. She was also quite pretty, but in a plain sort of way. She was wearing a thin hoodie and looked comfortable in it; she was clearly not the type that felt the need to look spectacular every time she left the house.

"And that makes me Olivia Macintyre," the last girl said. She had dark blonde hair that looked almost brown in the dim bar lighting. She wore a pair of stylish eyeglasses and had a mousy look about her.

"We're Agents DeMarco and Wise," DeMarco said. She showed her badge discreetly as she approached the table. "Mind if we join you?"

The trio of girls scooted closer together to allow room for Kate and DeMarco to sit at the booth. The moment they sat down, a waitress came over to take their orders. They both ordered waters and, having missed lunch, also a cheeseburger each to go. The girls seemed a little off put by this and Kate could see right away that DeMarco's decision to meet them here had been a smart one.

"So, as I'm sure Sheriff Gates told you," Demarco said, "we want to talk about Kayla Peterson. We especially need to know anything you can tell us about that last night you all spent together."

The girls looked at one another somberly. They all looked upset about current events but mostly well-centered. Kate wasn't too surprised to find that Tabby Amos was the mouthpiece for the group. Most people would view her as the prettiest, and therefore the most outwardly confident, of the group. She had also been the first to stand and introduce herself.

"Well, it was my idea. The four of us were very tight in high school. Then Kayla and Claire over there decided to go to college and we rarely saw one another. We all got together last Christmas... that was the last time the four of us were together. I thought it would be cool to have one last hurrah before the wedding."

"When *is* the wedding?" Kate asked.

"This coming Saturday," Olivia said.

"Who's getting married?"

"My brother," Olivia said.

"He was sort of a big brother to all of us when we were in high school," Tabby said. "Had rough words with some of the creeps that asked us out and couldn't handle the rejection."

"I'm one of the maids of honor," Olivia said. "And I invited all of my friends, of course."

“But we figure it would be stupid to have a rip-roaring night of fun the day before the wedding,” Tabby said. “So we decided to do it Saturday night.”

“What did you all do?” DeMarco asked.

“Hung out at my house for a while,” Claire said. “Well, I suppose it’s my parents’ house. But they were away for the weekend, knew I was in town and wanted to hang out with my friends. So they were cool with everyone coming over. We watched some movies, drank some wine, ate some pizza.”

“Did you go anywhere else at all?”

“Kayla and I went out to the supermarket in Glensville to get more wine,” Olivia said.

“Where is Glensville?”

“About twenty minutes away from Harper Hills.”

“You couldn’t just get wine somewhere in town?” Kate asked.

“No,” Tabby said. “We’re all under twenty-one and everyone knows everyone else in this town.”

“Yeah,” Olivia said. “Plus, there’s this guy in Glensville that I used to date, a few years older than me. He knows the manager at the supermarket in Glensville. They didn’t card and let us get some drinks.” She paused here and then added: “Shit. They aren’t going to get into trouble, are they?”

“They should,” DeMarco said. “But that’s smalltime compared to what we’re dealing with right now. Now...did anything of note happen in Glensville?”

“Nothing,” Olivia said. “We went in, got three bottles of wine, and left.”

“Any cross words with this guy you used to date?”

“No. Hell, I barely even spoke to him. He had his new girlfriend with him anyway. He was sort of in a rush to get out of there.”

“Did anyone end up drinking too much that night?” Kate asked.

“All four of us,” Tabby said. “I was sort of pissed when I found out Kayla had left. Her mom’s house is only like ten minutes from Claire’s house, but still. It was irresponsible of her to drink and drive. Of course, then I found out she had been killed and...”

“What do you mean *when you found out Kayla had left*?” DeMarco asked.

“Well, near midnight Claire brought out some of her folks’ liquor,” Tabby said. “We had a little too much to drink. I faded out sometime around one.”

“I blinked out shortly after that,” Claire said.

“Yeah,” Olivia added. “Kayla and I were the last ones hanging in there. I don’t think she drank any of the liquor. Sure, she was sort of buzzed, but I don’t think she was flat out drunk. Not when I passed out, anyway.”

“So you all think she just saw that everyone had passed out and decided to go home?” DeMarco asked.

“Seemed that way,” Claire said.

“And she didn’t call or text any of you when she left?” Kate asked. “She didn’t leave a note or anything?”

“Nothing,” Olivia said.

“I just assumed she was a little embarrassed,” Tabby said. “She was never a huge drinker in the first place. I don’t think that changed when she went to college. Of course, maybe she was just embarrassed to be hanging out with a few friends that never decided to get out of Harper Hills and go to college. I don’t know.”

“Was she acting any different than you can remember her acting in the past?” Kate asked.

“No, and that’s the weirdest thing of all,” Claire said. “She was the same old Kayla. Cracking jokes, open, honest. It was almost like nothing at all had changed since we’d graduated high school.”

DeMarco asked a few more questions, specifically about the conversation they could remember having the night Kayla had died. While she orchestrated the question, Kate did her best to size up the demeanor and body language of the three girls. She had no reason to suspect that any of them would

be hiding something, but her attention did keep coming back to Olivia. She was fidgeting slightly and her eyes would not stay in one place for very long.

She's the only one that was alone with Kayla on the night she died, Kate thought. Maybe we could get more out of her if the other two weren't here. She made a mental note and filed it away as DeMarco wrapped up the last of her questions.

The waitress brought their burgers and the agents gave their farewells. DeMarco ended the conversation by giving each of the girls one of her business cards, instructing them to call her if they thought of anything else or heard any murmurs about what had happened to Kayla.

“What do you think?” DeMarco asked Kate as they walked back out to their car.

“I think Olivia may have had more to say if her friends hadn't been around. She seemed antsy. And she was the only one that spent any alone time with Kayla.”

“You think something happened when they went out for that extra wine?”

“I don't know. But even if not, I wonder if they maybe talked about something that might have been related to what happened later. It's all speculation, but...”

“No, I saw that she was sort of uneasy, too.”

They both considered this as they got into the car. Night was slowly falling and though the day felt long, Kate knew it was not over yet. DeMarco had always been a night owl, milking every last minute and ounce of productivity out of the day.

And that was fine with Kate. Because as the first day of the case came toward a close, something in her heart became more and more certain that this may be her last case. If that were true, she intended to make the most of it.

CHAPTER SIX

DeMarco was doing everything she could to not overthink things. But she also had to be honest with herself. For a moment, as brief as it may have been, she had been a little pissed off when Duran informed her Kate would be joining her for this case. That disappointment had quickly been replaced by joy, though. Her partnership with Kate Wise had been, at first, almost like a mentorship. But as they had grown and learned each other's habits and mannerisms, it had become something more. Still, along the way, DeMarco had always felt that she had been a junior agent...someone still learning the ropes, hoping to impress Kate as her own skillset continued to develop and mature.

DeMarco knew this case was hers. Kate had come on board at the last minute and was going out of her way to remain in the back seat. While DeMarco appreciated the gesture more than she could express, it was making her feel uncomfortable. Kate was a born leader and something about watching her knowingly give up control was odd.

It also made DeMarco wonder what might be going on behind the scenes. How was Kate viewing her career now that she was the so-called Miracle Mom and had finally come back to work?

DeMarco wasn't sure, but had a feeling she'd know by the time this case came to a close. First, of course, they had to close it.

She pulled into Larry's Lanes and Arcade at 6:15. The parking lot was mostly empty, colored a strange red in the faded neon of the word ARCADE in the sign out front. DeMarco parked as close to the front as she could, not sure where the body of the first victim had been found. As she and Kate walked inside, DeMarco paged through the contents of the case reports, having filed them to memory last night before going to sleep.

The victim was Mariah Ogden, nineteen years of age. She had been found by the owner of Larry's Lanes and Arcade at 10:40 on Wednesday night. She had been lying on the pavement behind her car. Though Larry had not seen them, the coroner's report detailed the bruising around her neck and the evidence of immense pressure against her windpipe. Mariah, like Kayla, had been strangled by someone who appeared to be quite strong. So far, it seemed no one had seen what had happened and there were no leads at all.

DeMarco and Kate approached the shoe rental counter, where a man of sixty or so was standing by a small television. He looked extremely bored. A quick glance of the fifteen lanes behind her revealed that only two lanes were occupied—one by five middle-aged women and another, all the way at the far end of the building, by a lone man.

The man behind the shoe rental counter nodded to them as they approached, giving them a strange look. The lapel on his shirt read LARRY. "Can I help you?"

DeMarco acted quickly before there could be any odd tension between her and Kate. She showed her badge and ID and said, "Agents DeMarco and Wise, with the FBI. I was hoping to get some information about the death of Mariah Ogden."

"I already told the cops everything I know," Larry said. "But if it'll help find who's been killing these girls, I don't mind."

"You said girls," Kate said. "As in more than one. I assume you heard about the second victim?"

"Can't help but hear terrible news like that pretty quickly in a town as small as this one. Yeah... it was Kayla Peterson, right? Home for a wedding, from what I hear."

"Larry, how did you find Mariah's body?" DeMarco asked.

"I had closed the place down. Walked out to my truck and saw a car still in the parking lot, all the way over near the edge. Sometimes the teenagers hang out over there after they've bowled. So I walked over to see what was going on. Figured maybe just someone left their car there while going out somewhere else with a friend. But as I got closer to it, I saw a sneaker. And then I saw a leg attached to it. And there was Mariah Ogden, right behind her car."

“Already dead?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think for very long. I heard there was bruising on her throat. But I didn’t see any when I found her like that.”

“Had she been in here that night?”

“Not that night, no. But she would come in here from time to time with her friends.”

He was about to say something else, but was interrupted by the clatter of pins falling and cheering from the crowd of middle-aged ladies. When the noise quieted down, Larry continued.

“She was a lovely girl, really. Very polite, well-mannered.”

“Do you know anyone in the crowd she typically hung around with?” DeMarco asked.

“Not really well, no. But you may want to check with him.” He nodded behind him, in the direction of the man who was bowing by himself.

“Who’s that?”

“His name is Dwayne Patterson. He would sometimes be with the crowds Mariah would come in with. Bashful kid. He’s here a lot, sometimes by himself, but usually sort of meanders from crowd to crowd. I have no real evidence to support this, but the way he sometimes looked at Mariah and laughed at anything she said...I think he might have fancied her a bit.”

“Thank you, Larry,” Kate said.

He gave a wink to them both as they turned and headed for the lane all the way to the left. As they approached, Dwayne Patterson rolled a ball that left him with a dreaded 7-10 split. He angled his head as if hoping to see something different and then approached the ball return machine. As he waited for his ball, he spotted DeMarco and Kate. There was no mistaking where they were headed; he knew they were coming to speak to him and it showed in his eyes. He looked like a trapped cat, cornered by two feral dogs.

“Mr. Patterson,” DeMarco said as they approached the ball machine. “Larry over there says you might be a good resource for information about Mariah Ogden.”

It was clear that Patterson had not yet decided if he should be fearful or not. He eyed them skeptically and asked: “And just who the hell are you?”

This time, DeMarco and Kate moved at the same time, showing their IDs in tandem like a well-rehearsed magic trick. “Agents DeMarco and Wise, FBI. Now, do you want to be just a bit more accommodating?”

Slowly, Patterson took a seat behind the scorekeeping machine. “Sorry. I had no idea. Um... yeah, I mean, I knew her. Not super great or anything, but I knew her.”

“How old are you, Mr. Patterson?” Kate asked.

“Nineteen.”

“Would you say you and Mariah were friends?”

“Sure. We were friends through most of school, just not best friends, you know?”

“Sure,” Kate said. “How about this past Wednesday night? Did you see her then?”

“Yeah, that was the night she died. I was here, bowling with a friend. When he and I left, I saw that Mariah and a few of her friends were hanging out in the parking lot.”

“Is that something she did a lot?”

“Not a lot, no. But from time to time. There’s not really much else to do around here, you know?”

DeMarco did know. She’d grown up in a similar town where the only thing to do after hours was hang out in convenience store parking lots, smoking cigarettes and maybe making out when the coast was clear.

“Did you go over to hang out?” DeMarco asked.

“Just for a little while. At first, I mean. I took my friend home and then swung back by just to check in.”

“Check in on what, exactly?” Kate asked.

Patterson frowned, sensing that he might be venturing into dangerous territory. Slowly, he started to do his best to explain. There were nerves in his voice, as well as something else. Regret, maybe? DeMarco wasn't sure.

"Well, she was hanging out with some of the regulars...some friends of hers from high school and a new girl she met at the community college in Charlotte. But there was this other guy with them, some dude I've seen a few times and just...I don't know...sort of avoided. I went back by later to check on Mariah to see if he was still around."

"Why would you avoid this guy?" DeMarco asked.

"He's sort of creepy, you know? The type that used to hang around the high school parking lot a few years after he had already graduated. He's got to be at least twenty-five."

"And what were the ages of the crowd you and Mariah hang out with?"

"Between nineteen and twenty-one or so. I hate to stereotype someone like that, but he's sort of a loser. But anyway...that night, it was clear that he was drunk. Being loud and belligerent, you know?"

"What's this guy's name?" Kate asked.

"Does anyone need to know I was the one that told you?"

"Absolutely not."

"Jamie Griles." There was some grit and anger in his voice as he said it. "There's no hard proof, but a lot of people think he goes to high school parties to get girls drunk and then sleeps with them. So when I saw that he was hanging out with Mariah and those younger girls, it felt creepy."

"And was he still here in the parking lot when you came back by?"

"No, he had already left. One of Mariah's friends said there was a party somewhere and even joked that Jamie went because there were younger girls there."

"Is Jamie Griles a local?" DeMarco asked.

"Yeah. Born and raised. He'll die here, too. Loser won't ever amount to anything." Patterson chuckled and shook his head. "Says the nineteen-year-old mechanic bowling by himself on a Monday night."

"Have you spoken to the police?"

"No. No one bothered talking to me. Like I said...I wasn't best friends with her. Just...a guy that knew her."

The way he said this made DeMarco think Larry had been right; Dwayne Patterson had feelings for Mariah Ogden. She wondered if he ever told Mariah. The way he was handling it made her think he had not—that he had kept his feelings bottled up.

"Did you not think to talk to them about Jamie Griles?" Kate asked.

"Well, I didn't even pause to think he might have been the one to kill her. Yeah, the guy is a creep and a loser, but I don't know that I'd put murder within his reach."

"You said he was loud and belligerent," DeMarco said. "Do you know if there was anyone in particular he was upset with?"

"No clue."

DeMarco looked around the bowling alley, as if searching for more questions to ask. When it was clear that they were done, she handed out yet another one of her business cards. "Please don't hesitate to call if you think of anything else or even hear about anything that might be about Mariah's murder."

"I will," Patterson said, pocketing the card. "Thanks."

The *thanks* seemed a little odd, but DeMarco could tell by the resigned look on the young man's face that he was happy to have helped, even if only in the slightest of ways. He was already picking up his ball to try managing that 7-10 split when DeMarco and Kate turned and walked away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“You think it’s too late to make a house call?” DeMarco asked.

Kate laughed as she buckled her seatbelt. As soon as Dwayne Patterson had given them Jamie Griles’s name, she knew they would be making at least one more stop before calling it a day. She envied the drive and energy DeMarco had and could clearly see why she was so quickly making a name for herself in the bureau.

“Not for someone with the lifestyle that Jamie Griles seems to lead,” Kate said. “I assume that’s the stop you’d like to make?”

“Figured it might be worth a shot. It’s not even seven o’clock yet.”

“I’ll call Gates and see if he can pull up an address.”

Kate placed the call to Gates, only to find that he wasn’t at the precinct. He patched her through to Smith’s desk. The officer seemed happy enough to help, coming up with an address within twenty seconds.

Just as Kate plugged the address into the map app on her phone, her hand started to buzz as Gates called her back.

“Can I ask what you’re looking into Griles for?” Gates asked.

“We got word that he was hanging out with Mariah Ogden’s group of friends on the night she was killed. He was apparently loud and possibly intoxicated.”

“I should warn you that he’s a creep of the highest degree. But I honestly don’t see him as the sort to kill anyone.”

“That’s what we’re hearing. Now, can you define *creep*?”

“I’ve arrested him at last three times in the past few years. Small stuff, mostly. He’s got a DUI on his record, as well as a charge for disturbing the peace when he decided to start a little bar brawl at Esther’s Place. And, as I’m sure you may have already heard, he has something of a habit of trying to impress younger girls...often by purchasing alcohol for them. We haven’t been able to bust him for that yet, but it’s pretty much common knowledge.”

“Yeah, we’re hearing all of that, too.”

“Let me know if you need a hand.”

Kate ended the call, starting to wonder if Griles might be more of a lead than she had originally thought. She checked the address in her GPS and saw that it was only sixteen minutes away from the Larry’s Lanes and Arcade.

“You thinking the killer might be some sort of jilted or rejected ex-boyfriend or something?” Demarco asked as she guided them to the address.

“In a small town like this, it’s where my mind automatically goes at first,” Kate said. “But until we can accurately look at any links between the two girls, that’s going to be hard to nail down. It’s the one reason I really wish the mother was still here.”

“Maybe we can call her tomorrow,” DeMarco said. It was more of a question, though—a veiled way to ask: *Would we be total monsters if we bothered the grieving mother tomorrow?*

“If nothing pans out tonight, we may have to,” Kate said.

“The thing that’s hanging me up is *where* Kayla Peterson was killed. Right there on her front porch. I mean, she even got the key in the door. Makes me think she had the guy *with* her.”

“Maybe trying to sneak him into her house?” Kate asked.

“Maybe.”

“There’s another possibility, too. Maybe he was there, waiting for her.”

DeMarco nodded gravely. “Neither one of those scenarios is particularly pleasant.”

As DeMarco drove to the address they had been given, Kate looked over the notes on the iPad DeMarco had been uploading all of the case files to. So far there wasn't much to look at, but there were small things to pick up on here and there.

"Both victims went to the same high school," Kate noted as she read through the notes. "Although in a town this small that's really not too much of a surprise."

"Different colleges," DeMarco pointed out. "Kayla Peterson went way off to Florida for college. Mariah Ogden went to Western View Community College, just outside of Charlotte."

"I would be curious to know if Jamie Griles knew Kayla. If so, that would basically be the only link between them."

"And that wouldn't be good news for Griles," DeMarco said, thinking it over.

It was the last thing either of them said, though Kate was pretty sure DeMarco was feeling the same stirrings of excitement she was. They were on their way to question their first concrete lead and that was always an exciting moment. Kate allowed herself to enjoy it, though as they drove through the night she could not ignore just how badly she was starting to miss Michael.

She felt the old stings of feeling like a bad mother, of leaving her family behind. It was more than the guilt of any mother who went back to work after maternity leave, though. No, these were stings from the past, stings she had suffered through and thought she had managed to put behind her.

But these stings...these were fresh. And they seemed to be reiterating the same cries of her heart. Maybe this *was* her last hoorah.

Maybe she shouldn't even be here at all.

They covered the rest of the trip to Jamie Griles's residence in silence. When they arrived, they found themselves pulling into a small gravel parking lot in front of what appeared to be a four-plex. It looked like one large house, divided into four different living spaces or apartments. Each apartment had its own mailbox at the mouth of the parking lot. Kate noted that the one marked 3 held the name J. GRILES.

DeMarco parked beside a beaten-up old GMC pickup, parked slightly crooked in front of the third apartment. As they got out, Kate heard the rumbling of a stereo coming from one of the apartments. She was rather proud to find she knew the song as "Battery" by Metallica. Melissa had gone through a Metallica phase in her youth and had been both surprised and humiliated to find that her mother hadn't outright hated the music.

As they approached the door with a bronze 3 in its center, she realized the music was not coming from inside. However, someone was home: a soft light filled the window, mostly blocked by lopsided blinds. As Kate stepped onto the stoop, DeMarco knocked.

"Yeah!" was the response from inside. "One minute!"

There was some brief commotion from inside and then, about twenty seconds after knocking, the door was opened. Jamie Griles was an average-sized man. His black hair was held up in a style that nearly reminded Kate of Elvis, held in place by stiff-looking product. He had small eyes and a chiseled jaw that was covered in five o'clock shadow. He wasn't handsome, but he was far from unattractive as well. It didn't take much effort for Kate to imagine impressionable young girls to give him some attention in exchange for beer or other things.

He smiled at the two women and said: "Can I help you ladies?"

DeMarco apparently took offense to the way he was looking at them. When she took out her ID and badge, she basically thrust them at him. "Agents DeMarco and Wise, FBI. Are you Jamie Griles?"

"I am," he said. The smile was gone, replaced by what appeared to be genuine confusion. "But... FBI? What for?"

"We're investigating a case here in Harper Hills and would like a word with you."

He looked back and forth between them, maybe trying to figure out if this was some sort of prank. When it was clear that he had no intention of inviting them in, Kate took a single step forward. “Mr. Griles, can we come inside?”

“I mean...yeah, sure, but...what for?”

Kate noticed that DeMarco took him up on the invitation before explaining the purpose of the visit. It was a good move, as Griles would have surely become protective and defensive if he knew they were going to ask him about two recent murders in the area.

Kate followed DeMarco into a small and messy living room. The television against the far wall was tuned to a baseball game. There was a bottle of cheap whiskey on the coffee table and a still-burning cigarette in an ashtray next to it.

DeMarco started right away, before Griles even had time to close his door. “Mr. Griles, do you have any idea why we might be here?”

“No,” he said. He was clearly scared, but there was a growing irritation beneath it. He did not enjoy being questioned—to be made to feel as though he was less than. “And I don’t think you should make me guess.”

It was interesting for Kate to watch the back and forth, the cat and mouse. DeMarco had set a trap, and Griles had sidestepped it. Kate would have tried the exact same thing, though. The vague question from DeMarco had given Griles the opportunity to confess to buying alcohol for minors—which was a very serious charge in the state of North Carolina. But Griles had dodged it and put the ball right back into DeMarco’s court.

“Mr. Griles, it’s a small town,” DeMarco said. “Can I assume you’ve heard about the recent murders in the area?”

“I have. Word does get around.”

“You know their names?” Kate asked.

“Yes,” he said. He was being careful with the way he spoke. It was clear that this was not the first time he had been questioned by someone in authority. She could picture Griles and Sheriff Gates having this same sort of back and forth quite easily.

“Tell me, please,” DeMarco said.

“Why? Are you here because you think I had something to do with it?”

“I said no such thing,” DeMarco said. “But in investigating the murders, we discovered today that you were included in a small group of people who last saw one of the victims.”

Griles nodded at this and actually seemed a little relieved. “You mean Mariah?”

“Yes. Mariah Ogden. We have a witness that saw you with her and a group of other underage kids outside of Larry’s Lanes on the night she died. What do you say to that?”

“I say there are some nosy-ass people in this town.”

“You make a habit of hanging out with younger girls, Mr. Griles?” Kate asked.

“Sometimes,” he said. “But anything I do is consensual. I’m not one of those rapist assholes.”

“Our witness says you were loud and a little off the hinge that night,” DeMarco said. “Had something been bothering you?”

“No. And I don’t recall being loud and out of control.”

“Had you been drinking?”

“A bit, yes.”

“We have it on good authority that you left that group and went somewhere else,” Kate said. “Could you give us a timeline of events after you left the Larry’s Lanes parking lot?”

“I can. And I have a few people that could back me up if...”

He paused here, sat down in a ratty old recliner, and looked at both women as if they had just hurt his feelings.

“Something wrong, Mr. Griles?” DeMarco asked.

“You *do* think I’m a suspect.”

“An older man who is known for trying to impress younger girls just admitted to hanging out with a recent murder victim on the night she died,” DeMarco said. “Yes. Any agent worth a damn would question you. So give us that timeline.”

He plucked the cigarette from the ashtray, took a drag, and settled into the chair. “I left the bowling alley with a buddy of mine, Gary. We went to Esther’s for a couple of drinks and some buffalo wings. After that, we went to a house party for a while.”

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