

BLAKE PIERCE

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(A ZOE PRIME MYSTERY--BOOK 3)

A Zoe Prime Mystery

Blake Pierce

**Face of Fear**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Pierce B.**

Face of Fear / 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 FEAR is book #3 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. Women are turning up dead in Los Angeles, with no pattern other than the fact that they are all heavily tattooed. With a dead end in the case, the FBI calls in Special Agent Zoe prime to find a pattern where others cannot—and to stop the killer before he strikes again. But Zoe, in therapy, is battling her own demons, barely able to function in her world plagued by numbers and on the brink of quitting the FBI. Can she really enter this psychotic killer’s mind, find the hidden pattern, and come out unscathed? An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, FACE OF FEAR is book #3 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #4 will be available soon.

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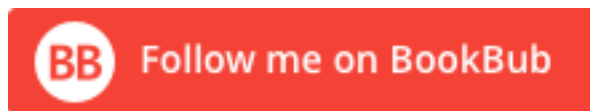
# Blake Pierce

## Face of Fear (A Zoe Prime Mystery—Book 3)

**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](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.



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## CHAPTER ONE

Callie shoved her hands deeper into her pockets, hooking her elbow in such a way that it pressed the handbag over her shoulder further against her side. It was the kind of precaution that she always took when visiting Javier, a friend of hers with a serious talent for art.

They'd met at college, and while Callie had already been forced into an office job, Javier was at least taking a shot at his dreams. Of course, living as an artist with student debt meant he didn't live in the best of neighborhoods. There were times when Callie, being an attractive young woman, didn't feel safe here.

But that, she reminded herself as the backs of her fingers brushed against the cool exterior of the canister, was why she always carried pepper spray in her pocket.

She had an exit plan, too: spray and run, depending on where she had managed to get to. There was a little alleyway she had to cross through to get to Javi's studio apartment, and it also represented the turning point. Before she reached it, she knew the quickest route was to run back on her footsteps, out to the main street where she could find safety in numbers. Past the halfway point, she would run to Javi's door and scream into the intercom until he buzzed her in.

It wasn't that she spent all of her time preoccupied with the potential dangers of the place she was walking toward. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Callie had come up with this plan the second time she had ever visited Javi there, and since then she was free to daydream on the way over to his place. To daydream about the tattoo he was drawing for her, and what it would look like.

They had been working on designs together for a couple of years, ever since she got her first. She'd loved it so much that she had begged him to make her another, and this would be the third time one of his designs decorated her body. There was something strangely intimate about it, though they had never been lovers. Something about the way his work trailed across her skin, the one gesture of rebellion against the corporate lifestyle she was no doubt going to have to endure for decades.

Or maybe not. Maybe she could find a way out, to do the things she really loved. Start her own business, even though she hadn't figured out what it would be yet. Callie could still hope.

She stepped down into the alleyway, past an overturned garbage can and a mural of graffiti that had since been tagged over by kids with spray cans. Art, covered by the kind of inane scrawl that made cities want to crack down on graffiti in the first place. It was a shame. The California sun that had been shining down on her face disappeared, replaced with the cool shade between tall buildings, leaving her eyes to adjust to new gloom.

At the opposite end of the alley, a man entered, coming in her direction. Callie stiffened a little, taking him in while trying to pretend she was looking at the ground to his left. He had a hoodie pulled up over his head, his face in shadows, his hands deep into his pockets just like hers.

She couldn't make out his identity. That could be bad news, in a place like this. It could mean that he didn't want his identity known. A bad sign.

Callie's fingers curled and wrapped around the pepper spray, her arm muscles tensing as she thought about using it. She would pull it out in one swift motion, aim it at his face—she used the tip of her index finger to find the nozzle so that it would be the right way around—and then spray. Spray and run.

She stepped up her pace, thinking that the quicker she passed him, the less chance he would have of getting the upper hand. She looked down the distance between them, trying to figure it out. A glance up at the sky. Was she halfway yet? Would it be quicker to run forward or back? Javi was expecting her. Maybe if she ran to him, he would let her in quicker. Yes, she would run to Javi.

She held her breath as the man came closer, trying to keep walking forward as if nothing was happening, but gripping the pepper spray harder than ever. She was primed, ready to go—

He passed by her without incident.

Callie breathed again, mentally telling herself off for being so paranoid. That was what happened to people who were overprepared. Who thought too much about getting attacked in alleyways.

Javi would laugh about this. She would tell him, even though it was embarrassing. He would laugh warmly and tell her he would protect her from the big scary men. It would be a bonding moment between them.

Unexpectedly, Callie was pulled off balance, just when she was breathing easy again. Something from behind. Him, she realized—it had to be. He had her around the shoulders, one of his arms pulled around her. Back toward him. Her shoulder blades collided with his chest, and something was pulling across her throat—something sharp—something—

She wanted to yell for help, yell for Javi, scream, but when she tried, the air only bubbled out through her throat, through the new opening he had made. He had cut her throat. Something hot was cascading across her chest—she knew what it was—her own blood.

With a moment of clarity unlike any she had ever felt, Callie Everard knew that she was going to die.

Dying, even. It was happening, right now, actively, and she was never going to see Javi to get that tattoo design and she was never going to follow her dream of being her own boss and she was never going to own that Mercedes she had set her eyes on when she read that a famous fashion editor drove one. Callie's hands clutched at her throat, slipping on the blood, and she could only grasp at the edges of the new opening, the geography of which made no sense to her searching fingers.

Callie fell, unaware that she was doing it until she registered that she was looking up at the sky and therefore had to be on her back. She strained one last time to make a noise, desperately sucking in air through her open mouth and trying to expel it again in a shout. All she heard was another gush of blood from her wound, the oxygen bubbling out in it, not even reaching her lungs.

It was only another moment before Callie stopped seeing anything at all, and stopped breathing, and then it was only her body that lay abandoned in the alleyway. A shell. Her soul, or her consciousness, or whatever it was that was Callie, long gone.

## CHAPTER TWO

Zoe set down her glass on the table, trying not to let herself calculate the volume of water still remaining inside it. It was a losing battle, of course. She was always going to see the numbers, whether she wanted to or not.

“What do you think?”

“Hmm?” Zoe looked up guiltily, meeting John’s waiting brown eyes.

She expected him to lose his patience, but she still had never managed to push him that far. Instead he gave her a gentle smile, one of those lopsided smiles of his that went higher on the right side of his face than the left. He always seemed to be giving her those smiles, forgiving her for something or other. Zoe didn’t really know that she deserved it.

“What’s on your mind?” John asked.

Zoe tried to mold her face into something that would convincingly tell him she was fine. “Oh, nothing,” she said, and then, feeling that perhaps this wasn’t the best answer: “Just work stuff.”

“You can tell me about it, you know,” John said, slipping his hand over hers on the table. She felt his calm heartbeat thumping slowly through his thumb where it pressed on her skin, slower than hers. Slower by a long shot.

Great. Zoe had made up a quick excuse, and now he was asking for details. Now what was she supposed to do? “It is an open case,” she said, shrugging, hoping he buy it. “I cannot really talk about the details until it goes to trial.”

John nodded, seeming to accept this. Zoe breathed an internal sigh of relief. She had to focus, not count the four times his head tipped forward at a thirty-degree angle and the shine on his well-kept brown hair appeared in the lights, or the six glasses going by on the tray held by the five-foot-six waitress or the—

Zoe blinked, trying to refocus her eyes on John and her ears on what he was saying.

“So, I had to say to him, ‘Sorry, Mike, but it’s such a shame I have to go out on a date tonight,’” he laughed.

Zoe frowned. “You could have rescheduled if the date is inconvenient to you,” she said. “I would not mind.”

“What? No!” John said, at first leaning back in alarm and then grasping her hand again. “God, no, Zoe. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again. That was just—I was being sarcastic. Or ironic, or something. I always forget which is which. Honestly, I wouldn’t cancel our date just for a work thing.”

Zoe’s eyes flicked down to her plate, by now empty of the excellent salmon roulades with lemon beurre blanc that had been her main course. This was the most recommended date spot in Washington, D.C., for a meal, and she could barely remember eating it.

She wasn’t sure that she could say that she would always put John first. After all, she was an FBI agent. She was expected to drop her life in order to pursue a case, not the other way around. She reached up self-consciously to tuck a strand of her short brown hair behind her ear, feeling as she did that it was one centimeter longer than she liked to have it cut. Things had been hectic lately. No time for the daily tasks that kept life going.

“I mean, of course I get it that you might have to cancel sometimes,” John said, sipping at his wine nonchalantly as if he hadn’t just managed to read her mind. “You have to stop serial killers from going on murder sprees. Your job is important. No one’s going to be upset if I don’t stay at the office all night trying to figure out if there’s a common property line across three different surveys from the 1800s and whether they can be applied to my client’s case. Except maybe my client, and he will be benefitted by the excellent mood I’ll wake up in tomorrow knowing that I spent my evening with you.”

“You are too nice to me,” Zoe told him. “Always. I do not understand it.”

It was true; she didn't. She had messed up their first date completely, and on their second, she had dragged him out to a hospital to try and trace the records of a potential killer. Then he'd waited for her in the cold, because she—unthinkingly—had not bothered to tell him that she could find her own way home. Not many men would have wanted to sign up for a third date—and this was their fifth.

"You don't have to understand it," John said, smoothing his tie for the eleventh time that night in a gesture that she was beginning to recognize. "You just have to accept my opinion that you deserve it. I'm not being too nice. I'm being just nice enough. In fact, I could be nicer."

"You could not be nicer. It would be against the laws of physics and nature."

"Well, who needs those, anyway?" John flashed her that bright smile of his again and leaned back as the waiter collected their empty plates.

"So, what are you working on at the moment?" she asked, thinking she should try to take more of an interest in his life. He was always so attentive in asking about hers. Was she messing everything up? She was messing everything up, wasn't she?

"Like I told you, it's the ancestral property line row," John said, giving her a little puzzled frown. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

Zoe looked up at him, meeting his eyes with pupils that were just slightly dilated in the dim light of the restaurant, hearing the four beats of the gentle piano music in the background and how each note moved one up, one down, one up, half a note up, one down. If only she could turn the numbers off, or at least dim their volume. She needed to focus on John and what he was telling her, but nothing in her brain would stop. She just needed it to stop. Everything was spiraling, and she was no longer sure that she could regain control.

"I guess I am a little tired," she said. As far as excuses went, it seemed like it might be semi-acceptable. If there could ever be any excuse for failing to give him the courtesy of her attention.

He didn't know about her ability to see the numbers everywhere, in everything, and she wasn't about to tell him. Not for the fourteen hundred fifty-three dollars and nineteen cents' worth of dishes and drinks she had seen pass by their table in the hands of the wait staff since they sat down one hour and thirteen minutes ago.

"I have had a wonderful night," she said. The worst part was that she meant it. When John spent all of their time together being accommodating and making her feel good, why couldn't she at least listen to him?

"Well, I had an awful time. Shall we do it again next week?" he said, wiping his smile with a napkin. Even though he glimmered at her, his eyes sparking with a mischievousness that match the uneven curves of his mouth, it still took her a moment to realize he was joking. The words cut her to the core at the thought she might have ruined everything

"I would like that," Zoe said, nodding, holding her emotions inside. "Next week it is."

She got up to go, knowing by now that he would refuse to allow her to pay the ninety-eight dollars and thirty-two cents they had racked up on the bill, plus the tip.

Though it flashed through her mind, she didn't say out loud that it would take luck for her to keep their appointment. Being an active agent meant that you never knew when your next case would come in, or where you would be required to go.

By this time next week, who knew where she might be?

Even right at this moment, their next killer was probably doing his work, setting them a puzzle—and there was always a chance that the next one would be the one she couldn't solve. Zoe fought the uneasy feeling in her gut, somehow convincing her that she knew: this time next week, she would be in deep on a case that would make all the others seem like child's play.

## CHAPTER THREE

Zoe adjusted her position on the seat, settling further into the comfortable old armchair. She was getting used to sitting here, strange as it sounded even to her own ears that she was becoming accustomed to therapy.

Talking to someone week on week about her personal issues had once seemed like Zoe's own idea of hell, but having Dr. Lauren Monk on her side so far hadn't turned out so badly. After all, Dr. Monk was the one who had encouraged her to go on more dates with John, and that had, so far at least, been a good decision.

On her part, anyway. She was beginning to wonder whether John could say the same.

"So, tell me about this date. What happened?" Dr. Monk asked, adjusting her notebook on her knee.

Zoe sighed. "I just could not concentrate," she said. "The numbers were taking over. It was all I could think about. I missed whole sentences of his conversation. I wanted to give him my full attention, but I could not switch it off."

Dr. Monk nodded seriously, resting her hand on her chin. Since the session when Zoe had come clean about her synesthesia—her ability to see numbers everywhere and in everything, like the fact that Dr. Monk's pen was heavier than average due to the slight fifteen-degree angle of droop as it rested on the edge of her fingers compared to that of a BIC—she had been finding the therapy even more helpful. It was freeing in many ways, to be able to really admit what was going on and how she was struggling.

There were few people in the world who knew about Zoe's synesthesia. There was Dr. Monk, and Dr. Francesca Applewhite, who had been Zoe's mentor since her college days. Then there was her partner at the bureau, Special Agent Shelley Rose.

And that was it. She didn't even need all of the fingers on her hand to count them. Those were the only people that she had ever trusted enough to tell since her first diagnosis—from a doctor whom she hadn't seen since that day. Deliberately so. For a long time, she had thought that there might have been some way to run away from or ignore the ability that her mother called the devil's magic.

But so long as it was helping her to solve crimes, Zoe couldn't say that she wanted it gone. Not anymore. It just would be useful if it would quiet down when she was trying to forge a romantic relationship, which didn't require specific measurements of the liquid in each glass or the distance between John's eyes.

"What might be helpful is if we come up with some ways, together, that could help you turn down the volume—quiet your brain down, so to speak," Dr. Monk said. "Is that something that you'd like to explore?"

Zoe nodded, startled by the lump that had taken over her throat at the thought of being able to do that. "Yes," she managed. "That would be great."

"All right." Dr. Monk thought for a moment, tapping the pen absentmindedly against her collarbone. Zoe had noticed this habit, always an even number of taps.

"Why do you do that?" she blurted out, only to be embarrassed a second later that she had asked.

Dr. Monk was looking at her in surprise. "You mean, tapping on my collarbone?"

"Sorry. That is your personal business. You do not have to tell me."

Dr. Monk smiled. "I don't mind. Actually, it's something I picked up when I was a student. It's a calming exercise."

Zoe frowned. "You do not feel calm?"

"I do. It's become something of a habit now, even when I'm thinking. It allows me to go down into a more Zen state. I used to get panic attacks when I was younger. Have you ever experienced a panic attack, Zoe?"

Zoe thought back, trying to figure out what would qualify. “I do not think so.”

“Whether it’s a full panic attack or something less severe, what we need is for you to have something that can calm you down, fade out the numbers. We want your mind to stop racing, allowing you to focus on one thing at a time.”

Zoe nodded, tracing her fingers over the cracks in the leather arm of her chair. “That would be nice.”

“Let’s start with a meditative exercise. What I think you should start to do is to undertake meditation practice every night, perhaps just before you go to bed. This is going to be an ongoing aid which will improve your ability to control your mind over time. It’s not an instant fix, but if you stick with it, you will see results. With me so far?”

Zoe nodded mutely.

“Good. Now, listen to my instructions. I want you to give it a try right now, and then you’ll be able to practice it on your own tonight. Start by closing your eyes and counting your breaths. Try to shut everything else out of your mind.”

Zoe closed her eyes obediently and started to breathe deeply. *One*, she thought to herself. *Two*.

“All right. As soon as you get up to ten, you just start again from one. Don’t let yourself count any further. You just want to keep counting those breaths, until you start to feel relaxed.”

Zoe tried, attempting to force other thoughts out of her mind. It was hard. Her brain wanted to tell her that there was an itch on her right leg, or that she could faintly smell Dr. Monk’s coffee, or to remind her how strange it was to be sitting in someone’s office with her eyes closed. Then it wanted to tell her that she was doing the exercise wrong and allowing herself to be distracted.

Was she breathing at the right pace, anyway? How quickly was one supposed to breathe? Was she doing it right? What if she had been breathing wrong for this whole time? For her whole life? How would she know?

Despite her doubts, she kept at it in the silence, and eventually started to feel herself relaxing.

“You’re doing great,” Dr. Monk said, her voice quieter and lower now. “Now I want you to picture a sky. You’re sitting, looking up at that sky. Beautiful blue, just one little cloud floating by above, nothing else on the horizon. It stretches out over a calm blue sea. Can you see it?”

Zoe wasn’t the best at imagining things, but she remembered an image she had recently seen, an advertisement for a travel company. A family happily playing in the sand, an impossibly blue paradise behind them. She put herself there, focusing on that. She gave a small nod to let Dr. Monk know she was ready to continue.

“Good. Feel the warmth of the sun on your face and your shoulders. It’s a beautiful day. Just a light breeze, exactly the kind of weather you would ask for. You’re sitting in a small inflatable boat, just off the shore. Feel it rocking gently in the motion of the sea. It’s so peaceful and calm. Isn’t the sun wonderful?”

Zoe would normally have laughed at something like this, but she did as she was told, and she could almost swear that she could feel it. Real sun, beating down on her brow. Not too oppressive: the kind of sun that made you think you were getting a tan, not skin cancer.

Skin cancer. Shouldn’t have thought about skin cancer. *Focus, Zoe. Rocking in the current.*

“Look over to the side. You’ll see the island behind you. The beach where you just came from, and behind it the rest of this paradise. What do you see?”

Zoe knew exactly what she saw when she looked over there: another image from a travel advertisement. A place she had wanted to go. Except it had been advertised as a honeymoon destination, and she had been single at the time, and it had only made her feel more alone.

“Golden sand,” she said, the sound of her own voice strangely distant and unfamiliar. “Then lush undergrowth. Behind it, tropical trees reach up to the sky, ten feet and more. The sun is coming down at a harsh angle, shadows only half a foot long. I can’t see beyond them. There’s a tree leaning

right out at a forty-five-degree angle over the water, with a seven-foot hammock tied beneath it. It's empty."

"Try to focus more on the scene than the numbers. Now, listen. Can you hear the waves gently washing onto the sand? Can you hear bird calls?"

Zoe breathed deeply, letting this new layer of sensation wash over her. "Yes," she said. "Parrots. I think. The waves come at intervals of three seconds. Bird calls every five."

"Feel the warm sun on your face. You can close your eyes, stop counting. You're safe there."

Zoe breathed, still watching the island in her mind. Her eyes kept straying to the hammock. Who was it for? For herself, or would someone join her one day? John? Did she want him there, on this personal island of hers? It was sized for a man. She was only five foot six herself. The hammock hung two feet above the water.

"That's great, Zoe. Now, I want you to focus on your breathing again. Count down from ten, just like we did before but in reverse. As you do, I want you to slowly come back from your island. Let it fade out, and let yourself wake up, a little at a time. Gently, now. That's it."

Zoe opened her eyes, a little embarrassed to find how much mellower she felt—and now aware of how strange it seemed, to have been away on a little island in her head while her therapist watched her sit straight-backed in an armchair.

"You did really well." Dr. Monk smiled. "How do you feel now?"

Zoe nodded. "Calmer." Still, she felt doubt. The numbers had been there. They had followed her, even into that space. What if she could never get rid of them?

"That's a great start. You'll find it more peaceful the more you do the exercise. And that's a great thing, because it can be a calm place that you return to whenever you feel stressed out or overwhelmed." Dr. Monk dashed out a few notes in her book, her pen making quick and spidery lines that Zoe could not guess at.

"What if I need to shut the numbers out fast? Like, in an emergency situation?" Zoe asked. "Or if I can't tell the other person why I need to calm down?"

Dr. Monk nodded. "Try just counting your breaths as you did to enter the meditation. We'll need to test this out in a real scenario, but it's my belief that counting one thing—your breath—may allow you to stop seeing the numbers elsewhere. It's a distraction tactic—keeping the numbers side of your brain occupied while you focus on something else."

Zoe nodded, trying to cement that into her head. "Okay."

"Now, Zoe, about not wanting to explain to people why you need to shut out the numbers—or the fact that you can see them. Why is it that you're still determined to hide this gift?" Dr. Monk asked, tilting her head in a way that Zoe had come to recognize as meaning a change of tack.

She struggled to answer that one. Well, no, she didn't: she knew the reason. There was a fear that had gripped her since she was a young girl, reinforced by screams of *devil child* and enforced praying sessions that kept her on her knees all night, wishing for the numbers to go away. It was just hard to say that out loud.

"I do not want people to know," she said, picking a piece of imaginary lint from the knee of her trousers.

"But why is that, Zoe?" Dr. Monk pressed. "You have a wonderful ability. Why don't you want to share it with others?"

Zoe struggled. "I... do not wish them to think of me differently."

"You're afraid that your peers will perceive you differently from how they do now?"

"Yes. Maybe..." Zoe hesitated, shrugging her shoulders. "Maybe they might try to—to do something with it. To exploit it in some way. I do not wish to be a puppet for someone else to use. Or the victim of tricks and pranks. Or a performance piece for people to test."

Dr. Monk nodded. "That's understandable. Are you certain that's all you are afraid of?"

Zoe knew the answer. She even whispered it in her head. *I am afraid that they will all know—that they will see I am not normal. I am not one of them. I am a freak of nature. I am afraid they will hate me for it.* But, “Yes, I am sure,” she said, out loud.

Dr. Monk studied her for a moment, and Zoe was sure that the game was up. Dr. Monk was a therapist—of course, she could tell when someone was lying to her. She would press the point, get Zoe to admit the secret fear she had buried deep inside of herself for so very long.

But all she did was close her notebook and place it carefully on her desk, turning on a brilliant smile. “We made some fantastic progress today, Zoe. We’re at the end of our session, so please put that meditation into your nightly habits and try to stick with it. I’d like to hear if you’ve made any progress when we next meet.”

Zoe stood and thanked her and left, feeling like she was saved by the bell.

And then there was a more literal bell, a ringing coming from her pocket. She dug her cell out as she walked through the waiting room, seeing Shelley’s name on the caller ID.

“Special Agent Zoe Prime,” she said. It felt good to use the proper, official address, even when she knew who was calling.

“Z, it’s me. Chief needs you to come to the airport right away. We’ve got a case in LA. Grab an overnight bag, and I’ll meet you there.”

“How long do I have?” Zoe asked.

“Forty-five minutes, then we fly.”

“See you there,” Zoe said. She hung up the phone and strode more purposefully through the hall, calculating how much time she would have for packing after allowing for travel time to the airport.

Inside, she thrilled, just a little. It had been a while since their last case, all paperwork and court dates and bureaucracy. Even if she wasn’t exactly happy that someone had died, it would be good to get stuck into a nice, easy murder case—and she mentally crossed her fingers that that was what they were going to get.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Zoe looked out the window at the clouds, passing by under the plane's wing. Perhaps there should have been a kind of peace in that for her. There was nothing to count, after all. But she didn't enjoy the sensation of being so far above the ground, and she never would. She hated the thought that someone else was fully in control of and responsible for her life.

"SAIC Maitland left us these files," Shelley said, proffering a couple of manila folders to get Zoe's attention.

Zoe turned back from the window, blinking her eyes to get herself to focus. "All right. What are we looking at that is so urgent we could not wait for a briefing in person?" Shelley's blonde hair was neatly tucked into a bun behind her head, her makeup as neat and precise as ever. Zoe wondered briefly how she always managed to look so put-together, even with a young child at home—and even when getting on a plane at short notice.

"Two victims," Shelley said. She spread the files apart. "Evidently the team on the ground felt that they were never going to get anywhere without Bureau help. They turned it over voluntarily."

"Voluntarily?" Zoe's eyebrows shot up. "No wonder Maitland wanted us over there as quickly as possible. He probably thought they might change their minds."

It wasn't often they got a case that was voluntarily handed over. Law enforcement tended to be territorial, to want to see a case through from beginning to end. Zoe understood that. Still, it usually led to tense atmospheres and only the most begrudging assistance. The officers tended to suspect that the FBI were there to take their jobs and report them as not fit for duty, even though that usually had no grounding in reality. It might be refreshing to actually be welcomed somewhere.

Shelley opened up the first file and started reading from it. "The first victim to be found was a male, Caucasian, early thirties. Name of John Dowling, although it took the locals a good while to ID him."

Zoe tried to ignore the name and the way it had cut into her heart. John was a common enough name, after all. She shouldn't need to imagine John bleeding out or shot or strangled in order to get past it. "Why so?"

"The body was heavily burned. Postmortem says that his throat was cut first, and then he was taken elsewhere and burned before discovery."

"Do we know where the crime was committed?"

Shelley studied the notes. "No location yet on the actual killing. It's thought it may have happened in a private home, since there would be a lot of blood, and nothing has been reported. The body was taken out to an isolated street and burned in the middle of the night. By the time a local resident noticed and was brave enough to go check it out, a lot of damage had been done."

Shelley wordlessly handed over a photograph. It showed a blackened and twisted body, almost to the point of being unrecognizable as a human. It looked like a movie prop, not a real person. Zoe had to hand it to whoever had managed to determine cause of death. They must have had a real job on their hands.

There was another photo in the file, a smiling image of a young man. John Dowling in life, probably taken from one of his social media pages. He was in a dark room, with people visible in the background—probably a party. He looked happy.

"Any leads so far on him? Enemies, grudges?"

"Nothing yet. Investigation is ongoing."

"All right. And the second one?"

Shelley closed the first file and picked up the other, sucking in a breath through her teeth. "Similar story. Throat cut, then burned. A young woman, Callie Everard. Mid-twenties. She was pretty, too."

Zoe just managed to refrain from rolling her eyes. It never failed to amaze her that people, even her esteemed partner, could put weight on such things. Young, old, pretty, ugly, thin, fat—dead was dead. Any life taken was something that should be investigated, any killer someone who should be punished. The particulars made little difference.

“The location?”

“This time it all took place in the same alley. Looks like the killer approached her, cut her throat, let her drop down dead, and then set her on fire. That’s one small mercy. She wouldn’t have been conscious for the burning.”

This, at least, was a sentiment that Zoe could agree with. There were very few pleasant ways to go, and burning to death was not one of them. “How about her? Could she have had a target on her somehow?”

“The local cops haven’t finished looking into it. She was just found yesterday, only managed to get the ID early this morning. They’ve managed to inform the next of kin, and that’s it.”

Zoe reached out for the photographs. This body was less burnt, even if only by degrees. It was still possible to make out that she was a woman, and there were shreds of flesh on the body that shone red and raw through the blackened mess.

“Are you getting anything from the images?” Shelley asked.

Zoe looked up to realize that she was being watched intently. “Not yet. I do not see anything that I can use. The fire, it corrupts things and distorts them. I could not even reliably tell their height and weight if we did not have their medical files.”

“Both healthy young people. Maybe this will just be a crime of passion. They have a mutual friend, or ex-friend, who lost it and decided to set the world on fire.”

“We can hope.” Zoe sighed and settled her head back against the chair. Why did airplanes always have to be so uncomfortable? She’d read that premier class passengers had beds. Not that the Bureau was ever going to swing for something like that.

“How are things, anyway?” Shelley asked. She tucked the files back away into her carry-on and settled back into her seat with a conspiratorial air. “Did you see John again yesterday?”

It was Friday night, and John had seemingly been happy with the habitual way that Zoe ran her life. The same things at the same time. The only difference was the venue. “Yes, I did.”

“Well?” Shelley asked impatiently. “Details, Z. It’s going well with you two, isn’t it?”

Zoe shrugged, turning her head toward the window again. “Well enough, I suppose.”

Shelley sighed with exasperation. “Well enough? What does that mean? Do you like him or not?”

“Of course I like him.” Zoe frowned. “Why else would I go on so many dates with him?”

Shelley hesitated, her reflection tipping its head to one side behind her. “I guess that’s fair. Although some people just carry right on even when something doesn’t really appeal to them. But you know what I mean. Are the dates getting serious?”

Zoe let her eyes slip shut. Maybe Shelley would take the hint and think she was trying to get some rest. “I do not know what that means, and I do not think I want to answer it anyway.”

Shelley paused, saying nothing for a long moment. Then, quietly: “You know, you don’t have to keep pushing me away. You know you can trust me. I’m not going to tell anyone about anything. I didn’t spill your secret, did I?”

There was the small matter of the time when Shelley had mentioned to their superior, Maitland, that Zoe was “good with math”; Zoe, however, didn’t see any use in bringing that up.

She didn’t answer, at least not at first. What could she say? It was true that she kept herself to herself, and that was the way she had always been. Did she even need to justify it? First Dr. Monk and now Shelley were talking like she had a problem. Like it was unreasonable to want to keep one’s private life private.

“I don’t even know why you still keep it a secret,” Shelley carried on. “You could do serious good.”

“How?”

“Putting your skills to use. Catching killers.”

“I already catch killers.”

Shelley sighed. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I really do not,” Zoe replied, more ready than ever to move on from this conversation. “How long is left on this flight?” She started jabbing at the screen in front of her, changing it to show their flight path and progress, even though she knew full well exactly where they would be and how much longer they would fly for.

“It’s something to think about, anyway,” Shelley said. “It feels like you’re happier when you’re around the people who know. You get tense, bottle things up, when you think it’s not safe. Maybe you would have a more comfortable life overall if everyone knew.”

“Fifty-six minutes,” Zoe said, as if she hadn’t heard her. “We should prepare. We will want to go straight to the most recent crime scene from the airport. Have you got the address?”

Shelley said nothing, only giving her a long and searching look before returning to the files and searching for the details that they needed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Zoe squinted, looking both ways up and down the alleyway, into the sky. It was a crisp, clear day. A small strip of pale blue ran above them, narrowing off into the distance, hemmed in by grimy bricks on apartment blocks and warehouse storage facilities on either side.

It was a far cry from the luxury and waving palm trees of Beverly Hills. The streets and sidewalks were cracked and faded, and the nearest building at the end of the alley was a homeless shelter. Still, the studio apartments rising tall on the other side probably cost more than her childhood home in rural Vermont.

There was still something lingering in the air, despite the removal of the body. Zoe could still smell it. It probably wouldn't go away for a long time. The stench of burning human flesh and hair tended to stick around.

Zoe returned her attention to the ground, and the patch of scorched markings that ran across the tarmac of the street and littered bricks, garbage bags, and needles. Most of them were burned and twisted up themselves now, made into unrecognizable black plastic shapes that only added to the eyewatering aroma. The killer, it seemed, hadn't cared so much about the presentation.

Or maybe they had, and they were making a statement about this young woman—this Callie Everard—being just another piece of trash.

Shelley was talking to a local police officer nearby, while the others were all but packing up. The forensics team had been over the site already, and the body had been taken for testing. All that remained was to pick up all of the little pieces of evidence left behind in the debris of the murder. A female officer with short-cropped hair and a small stature was gingerly placing them, one by one, into plastic evidence bags.

Zoe watched her with only vague interest. Her mind was working along its own paths, tracing what her eyes saw. The woman had been lying with her head next to the overturned trash bags, her feet pointing toward the middle of the alleyway, at a thirty-degree angle to what would have been the center line. She had fallen backward, most likely, after her throat was cut. There were still some traces of blood, beneath the scorching and the melted bodily fluids, that shored this theory up.

They knew a lot about her already, about Callie. The rest they would know when they interviewed her friends and family, found out who she was and what she did. Why someone might want to kill her.

But the killer himself, though: that was a different question. Where was he, or she? Zoe could see nothing on the ground of the alley, no particular sign that might give them away. There were no footprints, not on an alleyway that was no doubt traversed by tens if not hundreds of people a day. There was no discarded lighter or stub of a match, no empty gas can. Any evidence that might have betrayed their presence had been washed away when someone dumped water over the body in an attempt to put it out and save a life that had already ebbed away.

What had he used for fuel? For accelerant? Where had he stood? What kind of weapon had he used to cut the throat? Or she, Zoe tried to remind herself, in an effort to stay open-minded; the statistics were clear, however. This level of violence would usually point at a male suspect.

It was the “usually” that was the problem. Zoe liked to rely on her gut, but unless she was above ninety percent sure of something, she wasn't willing to bet everything on it. And even when she'd been that sure in the past, she had occasionally been wrong. Right now, she had nothing at all to be sure about, not where this killer was concerned.

Perhaps she would know more when they took a look at the body. She walked back over to Shelley, who was just wrapping up her conversation.

“There is nothing here,” Zoe announced, as soon as Shelley was done.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” Shelley replied. She was glancing up at the windows of the apartments above, blackened not by the rising smoke from a human corpse, but by years of dirt and neglect. “No one in the neighborhood saw anything. They said they smelled the smoke first. A few local residents rushed out with a bucket of water to try to help, but that was all. No suspects, no one standing and watching. No witnesses that saw anyone enter the alley around that time.”

“Is there any footage?” Zoe nodded upward to a security camera perched just at the entrance on the side they had walked in by.

Shelley shook her head. “The cops say it’s not even connected. Every time they tried to get it working, kids would come and spray-paint over the lens or cut the wires. They kept it up as a scare tactic, just in case, but it hasn’t worked properly for years.”

“Locals would know that,” Zoe pointed out.

“So would anyone who did a preliminary walk around the block and saw the state it’s in.”

Zoe glanced around one more time, satisfied that there was nothing more to read here. The only story the numbers were telling her was about the construction of the buildings and the alley itself. Since she doubted the height of the walls had any bearing on the crime, they were done here. “To the coroner, then,” she said with determination, striding away toward their rental car.

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Zoe wrinkled her nose, then modulated her breathing. It was all about focus. She breathed in through her mouth, thus avoiding the worst of the smell, and out through her nose. Shelley was struggling not to gag, but Zoe tried not to let it put her off.

“It’s a bad one, all right,” the coroner said. She was a tall young woman with bronzed blonde hair and a tan, and altogether too much eyeshadow for someone working in a medical office—even if it was only the dead she was working with.

Zoe ignored her, too, and kept her attention on the body. If it even fit under the definition of a body anymore; charcoal was a more fitting description. The man, the one Shelley had named as John Dowling, was no longer a man. There was a certain shape—legs twisted together and to one side, arms close in across the body, a round jut where the head had been—but it would have been just as easy to imagine that it was a bit of scrap, part of the belly of a ship or an ancient piece of machinery that had burned in the ruins of Pompeii.

The second body was more recognizable, though only just. Somehow, even though the burning had not taken hold so badly, the smell was worse with that one. Maybe because she had been left out in the heat of the California sun in the middle of the day. The young woman. The bits of ragged and scorched flesh that still clung to her seemed somehow obscene. Five inches of leg above the foot, two inches at each elbow, a chunk of hair from the back of the head that had been protected by contact with the damp ground. Any longer in the flames, and she would have been just as much ash as he was.

“Ante-immolation wounds?” Zoe asked, without looking up.

The coroner hesitated for a second.

“Before they were burned,” Zoe added for clarification.

“I know what immolation means,” the coroner replied, a hint of tension for the first time in her calm, beachy voice. Everything about her was irritating to Zoe. “As far as I can tell, with the state the bodies are in, there was only the single cut to the throat. Enough to kill on its own. Besides being set on fire, nothing else was done to them.”

Zoe leaned closer, examining the throat. The girl’s hands had been up at hers, and the fingers had fused together and melted against the neck when she burned. There was, however, still a distinct and visible wound behind them, gaping open where her head had tilted back.

“This was precise,” she said, more to herself than anything else.

“It was a quick attack,” the coroner agreed. “Whoever the killer was, they knew what they were doing. Straight in from behind, a single slash across the neck to open it fully, in both cases.”

Zoe straightened her back and looked at Shelley—to make it clear that this next observation was for her, not for the irritating presence in the room. “This was not a crime done on impulse. It was planned out, the location chosen carefully.”

“Do you think the victims were chosen on purpose?”

Zoe chewed her lip for a moment, casting her eyes back between them. What did they have in common, other than being burnt to a crisp?

“It is too early to say,” she decided. “We need to learn more about Callie Everard. If we can find a connection between them, good. If not, there may be a bigger message at play.”

“A serial killer?” Shelley groaned. “I hope they’re secret lovers or something. I had my fingers crossed we could get home for the weekend.”

“Good luck,” the coroner put in, a statement that was absolutely unnecessary.

Zoe turned a baleful glance in her direction, and was at least a little pacified by the way the woman shrank away and busied herself with a nearby metal tray of instruments instead of meeting her gaze again.

“We’ve got a room waiting for us at the local precinct,” Shelley said. “The cop I spoke to assured me that the coffee is awful, but also that the air conditioning is completely inefficient, so we have lots to look forward to.”

“Lead the way,” Zoe said, wishing she could at least find that funny to lessen the blow.

## CHAPTER SIX

With a sigh, Zoe chose a chair and sank down into it, reaching for the first file that had been left for them.

“Thank you, Captain Warburton, we really appreciate your help,” Shelley was saying near the door, making good work of the small talk and pleasantries that Zoe had never enjoyed.

It felt good to be part of a team that worked. Where each of them had their own separate roles. Shelley was to understanding people what Zoe was to numbers, and though neither of them could really comprehend what the other did, at least it made everything flow easier.

After a good twenty minutes of studying the files, they were no closer to getting anywhere. Though the locals had managed to amass some family statements and get a lot more information than the initial files they had reviewed on the plane, none of it seemed to be helpful. Zoe threw her pages down on the table with a groan of frustration.

“Why can it not ever be a simple connection?”

“Because then the locals could do it, and we’d be out of a job,” Shelley said calmly. “Let’s go over what we know. Talk it out. Maybe something will click.”

“I doubt that very much. The two of them were such different people.”

“Well, let’s start with that. John was a healthy guy, right? A gym rat.”

“His housemate said that he spent almost all of his spare time at the gym. He was in good shape.”

“And a nice guy, too.”

Zoe made a face. “He donated money to charity and helped out at a soup kitchen on Sundays. That does not necessarily mean he was a nice guy. Lots of people do things like that because they are hiding a darkness.”

“You’re grasping at straws,” Shelley said, shaking her head. “We can’t read anything else into that. He had a clean lifestyle. No drugs, no convictions, not even any disciplinary record at work.”

“And she was the opposite.” Zoe directed this last statement at a photograph of a smiling Callie Everard, beaming at the camera and holding up a bottle of beer while an inebriated-looking young man held his arm around her shoulders.

“Well, maybe not. Yes, she had some trouble with drugs earlier in her life. But she went in and out of rehab when she was twenty-three, completed the course, kicked the habit. She had been clean for a couple of years. Back on track.”

Zoe considered this. “Maybe there could be something there. Both of them into clean living, even if only recently.”

“What, like a fitness cult or something?” Shelley asked.

Zoe gave her a dark look.

“Well, it’s possible,” Shelley said. “Just look at all that stuff with the exercise bikes. And that self-help cult, the one that was tricking women into sleeping with the founder and giving all their money away.”

“I suppose I have to concede that point.” Zoe wasn’t familiar with all of the ins and outs, but she had heard mention of the cases. Shelley was right, in a way. You never really knew what might be going on under the surface until you dug down far enough.

She lifted photographs of the pair of them, looking for similarities. It was always frustrating to come in on a case like this. With a single victim, you could analyze the evidence single-mindedly, fixate on every small detail of that one person. With three or more victims, you had enough data points to build a pattern. To recognize that the killer was travelling in a certain direction, or only targeting blondes under five foot ten, or that they revealed themselves in a certain tic that showed up at each scene.

With two, it was much harder. You couldn't put things together in the same way. A similarity in numbers might just be a coincidence that would be broken by another body. You might notice that each of their ages were prime numbers only for that to turn out to be meaningless. You couldn't tell what was important and what was just a red herring, thrown out by your own brain and holding no deliberate intentions.

"There is one thing they have in common," Zoe said, tapping the pictures. "Tattoos. Dowling had a tiger on his left bicep. Everard had a rose on her right thigh, picked out in dotwork. She was on her way to see a friend about getting another one, too."

Shelley shrugged. "Does that really warrant a connection? A lot of people have tattoos."

Zoe was flipping through more photos, noticing more marks on areas of skin that were visible in different shots. They were almost all taken from the victims' social media profiles, and it looked as though they were both proud of their tattoos. Of showing them off. Did that mean something? "It was not just one tattoo each. Look. Both of them were covered in them. Dowling had the whole of one leg done, right down to the foot. And Everard, here, on her back and stomach."

"I still don't know that it means anything. It's just a cultural thing nowadays."

Zoe wrinkled her nose. "A cultural thing?"

"Yeah. You haven't noticed? A lot of people are getting inked in their early twenties now. Covering their whole bodies. Even faces and hands. There've been a lot of celebrities getting it done. Justin Bieber, Ariana Grande, you know? Rappers and singers and sports players. It's considered cool right now."

"Face and hand tattoos sound like remarkably bad ideas," Zoe said, making a face. "Imagine never being able to hide the mistake that you made at a young age, of choosing to get something stupid put onto your body forever."

"There must be some kind of connection between them somewhere," Shelley breezed on. "I'm betting it would be in their personal lives. Maybe they both knew the same people, somewhere in their lives. A bar or a club, a group of friends, a cousin who knew a cousin. Maybe they were at the same event together without even knowing it. We just have to keep digging until we get to it."

Zoe nodded. "Well, then, I know where we should start." She lifted Callie Everard's file, made a note of the address listed in it. "The friend she was going to see: Javier Santos."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Zoe walked around the small studio space, taking in the illustrations and drawings that littered every possible surface. Whether Javier was talented or not was for someone else who had more interest in the arts to say. The fact that he was prolific, however, was not up for debate.

“These are all for tattoos?” she asked, scanning them mentally.

“Yeah, sure.” Javier nodded. “Most of them have been used. I can whip you up something unique, though, if you’d like.”

Zoe shot him a look to see if he was joking. He seemed earnest, which was worse.

“I do not think so,” she said, settling for these simple words and hoping that he would not press the issue. She would not like to spoil the interview before it even properly kicked off by telling him exactly what she thought of people who would get tattoos.

Especially tattoos like these: random, indiscriminate pieces of art. Zoe could understand someone liking the cartoonish form of a woman’s face as a piece of art, something to put on a wall or in a book. But to have it inked onto one’s body for the rest of your life? To wear this person’s face—this fictional person, who meant nothing to you or to anyone else, who was only born from an artist’s random daydreams?

It was strange beyond measure, and she did not know if she could trust someone who would be willing to make a permanent statement out of something so meaningless.

“Suit yourself.” Javier shrugged, apparently not bothered by her disinterest. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with the design I made for Callie. I was thinking about putting it on myself, but that might be kinda weird.”

“Why so?” Zoe asked, latching onto his words. In her experience, if someone involved in a murder case thought that something seemed “weird,” it was usually worth checking out.

“Well, it was a memorial piece in the first place. Look, I’ll show you.” Javier began rooting around on a desk littered with stray scraps of designs on tracing paper, and pulled out a more finished-looking design on an artist’s pad. It was inked with heavy black strokes, outlining the shape of a bird in flight.

“What is it?” Zoe asked, ignoring the dirty look that Javier shot her for not immediately getting his art.

“It’s a raven. Based on the myth of Muninn,” he began.

“From the Old Norse, memory,” Zoe cut him off. Here, at least, she could demonstrate that she knew something. “A bird who attended the god Odin. This is why you called it a memorial piece.”

“That and the flowers.” Javier pointed to sprays of flowers behind the black bird, carefully colored in shades of lilac and violet. “They’re zinnias, representing the memory of a lost friend.”

“In whose memory?” Shelley asked softly, examining the design from over Zoe’s shoulder.

“An old friend.” Javier twisted his mouth, shrugged. “An old boyfriend, really. Back when Callie was, um...”

“On drugs?” Zoe supplied. She sensed Shelley physically wince slightly beside her, but did not react. What was the point in beating around the bush? They all knew what they were talking about. It was no secret to any of them.

“Yeah,” Javier said, one of his hands going up to rub the back of his neck. “I was going to say in with a bad crowd, but yeah.”

“What’s the story?” Shelley asked. Her tone was much more sympathetic than Zoe’s had been. Somehow, she had the knack of asking those same direct questions but making them sound so much... nicer.

“He was bad news. One of the group that got her into drugs in the first place. From what I understand, if they weren’t stoned, they were drunk. And if they weren’t stoned or drunk, they were

snorting coke in the bathrooms and screwing each other.” Javier shook his head, taking a deep breath. “Sorry. I don’t like thinking of her like that. That’s not who she really is. Who she’s been, these past years that I’ve known her.”

“She got herself cleaned up after college, isn’t that right?” Shelley asked.

“Right. I helped. She couldn’t afford the rehab at first, so we did an art fair. Raised some money for her, me and some of the others from our class. We stayed in touch since then.”

“This ex-boyfriend,” Zoe pressed, trying to keep him on track.

“He was killed, I think. Or, I don’t know. Callie didn’t like to talk about him much back then. The past few years, she started to come to terms with it, move on. I think she’d finally accepted that he was bad for her, toxic. But that what they had also mattered. That’s why the flowers. Not lost love, but just a lost friend.”

Killed? That sparked Zoe’s attention in a very real way. “Do you know what the circumstances of his death were?”

“It wasn’t an overdose. The police were investigating, but I don’t know if they ever caught anyone. That’s it. That’s all I know.”

Zoe mused on the idea. It would be a very tempting thread, if first this mysterious boyfriend was murdered and then Callie. All they needed to do was find a connection to Dowling, and they’d have something. Maybe something to do with the drugs.

Shelley said it was all just popular culture, but the tattoos... Zoe had never been a fan. They represented a subsection of society that she more often saw behind bars than in respectable positions. You couldn’t get a good job with a tattoo. Certainly couldn’t be in law enforcement, not with prison teardrops on your face or your kid’s name all across your throat.

The tattoo that Javier had designed for Callie was big. Seven point three inches, top to bottom. It wasn’t something you would be able to hide away. It was designed to be seen. People with visible tattoos, like hers and like Dowling’s—they weren’t usually good people.

Things were beginning to stack up. Callie and her boyfriend were in the drugs underworld. Hanging about with the wrong type of people. Even though she was clean when she died, she had the kind of past that attracted murder. Just because Dowling had a clean lifestyle now, didn’t mean he hadn’t been involved in something before.

“Thank you, Javier,” Zoe said briskly. “That will help us a lot.”

“Wait,” Shelley interrupted. “I just have a couple more questions.”

Zoe motioned for her to go on, stepping back toward the door where she could wait out of the way. As far as she was concerned, they were done, and she wanted to be in a position to leave soon. She didn’t want to waste any more time looking at these pointless tattoo drawings and talking to Javier, who had already given them the most interesting thing they needed to know.

“Are you aware of anyone who would have wanted to harm Callie?”

Javier shook his head no. “I already told the cops earlier. She was a sweet girl. These days. I mean, she really changed. No one wanted any harm to come to her.”

Had she really changed, though? Zoe wondered. Could a leopard change its spots? Callie certainly couldn’t change hers—not the ones etched forever onto her body. Forever, that was, until her killer had burned them off.

Maybe all of this was connected. Maybe she had gang tattoos that needed to be burned off. Maybe someone saw her as the last link in a murderous game that had been running for a long time. The last bit of revenge for a drug-runner released from prison, or a biker gang looking to purge themselves of someone who had broken their rules.

“What about this morning, last night, yesterday? Have you noticed anyone unusual hanging around?” Shelley was asking.

“No, not at all,” Javier said. His weight left him and he collapsed onto a low bench slung against a table, burying his head in his hands. “I wish I knew more. I wish I could say something that would find whoever did this to her. She didn’t deserve this.”

But maybe someone thought she did. That was for Zoe and Shelley to work out, and they weren’t going to get anywhere closer to doing that here.

“We will leave you with your thoughts,” Zoe said, a phrase she had heard before that she thought sounded at least mildly sympathetic. “If you think of anything that might be useful, please do get in touch.”

Ignoring the reproachful look that Shelley was giving her for not being friendly enough, she walked out of Javier’s tattoo den, pleased to be breathing free air and no longer surrounded by all of the distraction of his garish designs.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

He watched her from across the street.

She didn't know him, and he didn't know her. Not personally. But he knew enough.

He watched her, and he knew things about her that others didn't. He knew where she lived, alone on the ground floor of an apartment building downtown. He knew that she worked part-time at a store three blocks away, to support herself while she studied. He knew that she'd taken a while to find herself and what she wanted to do with her life.

He knew that she had a tattoo on her inner right forearm, and that she dyed her hair. He had seen her collection of costume jewelry trotted out one day after another, and knew that she liked to mix up her look every time she went out. He knew that she left the house at precisely 8:32 a.m. on the days when she needed to work, because she had her journey down to an exact science. He knew that she would pick up a coffee on the way which she pre-ordered from an app to avoid the lines, and that she would go to the back room in order to change into her uniform before emerging to serve customers.

He knew when her shift ended, and the route she took to walk home.

He knew that she needed to die.

He could barely stand to look at her, but he knew that he needed to watch. He needed to observe. He tapped absently on the screen of his cell phone, as if he was engrossed in its contents, watching her through sunglasses that hid his eyes. He had been scoping out her routine for a few days now, and he knew she would pass by here before she did. This bench, placed perfectly to watch her go.

The world was going to be a much safer place when she was gone. That much was clear to him.

He watched her walk by, exactly on schedule, and pass out of his field of vision. Not that it mattered. He knew exactly where she was going. Slowly, as if he had all the time in the world, he got up from his bench and began to stroll along the sidewalk in the same direction she had gone.

On Saturdays, she pulled a double shift. She was paying for her own tuition, and she needed the money. With no lectures to attend on a Sunday morning, it made sense. Her co-workers were all too happy not to have to work Saturdays themselves, at least not as often as they would if she didn't take both shifts. It was an arrangement that suited everyone.

It suited him especially, because when she finally left and locked up to go home, it would be dark. He would be hidden. She would never see him coming.

He followed her at a long distance until he reached the store, glancing inside to see her just emerging from the staffroom. Good. He didn't linger. There was no point. She was where he needed her to be, and that meant everything was going to plan.

He seethed as he thought of her, of the very fact that she existed. She had no right. She shouldn't dare to put everyone else in danger the way that she did. How could she not see, not know?

She was training to be a teacher. That was the biggest joke of it all. Imagine someone like her, being allowed to be around children. To be entrusted with their education, with looking after them. A position of trust like that for someone like her.

The world was going to be much better off without her in it.

For now, there was nothing that he could do but wait. He had his research, and he liked to spend his spare time looking people up, rooting out the evil that threatened everything if he did nothing about it. He had plenty to occupy his time.

And tonight, when it was time for her to end her shift, he would be there. Watching. Waiting. Ready to cleanse the world of her sins.

## CHAPTER NINE

Zoe waited for the search operation to run, leaning back in her chair and folding her arms over her chest.

“Got anything yet?” Shelley asked.

“Give the system a minute,” Zoe said. She was still feeling a little grouchy from earlier, and she was too comfortable around Shelley to bother to hide it. “This is not a movie. Things actually take time to process here.”

“All right, all right,” Shelley said. “I’m just excited. This could be a big lead.”

Zoe eyed her darkly, wondering how someone could swing from emotion to emotion so powerfully. How Shelley could be distraught and brought to the verge of tears when viewing a body or interviewing a loved one, then as excited as a schoolchild at the prospect of getting the case solved.

The screen in front of her blinked, drawing her attention back as a list of results flooded back onto it. It seemed that their second victim, Callie Everard, had been a busy girl for a few years. There were multiple records of her in the local police precinct’s system, including a couple of arrests for possession of illicit substances.

“Here we are,” Zoe said. “She was interviewed a few times about the death of one Clay Jackson. That must be him.”

“Clay Jackson? All right,” Shelley repeated, typing in her own search on the computer that had been brought into their temporary investigation room.

It was exhausting sometimes, working like this. Always on the move from city to city. Just managing to get settled in and then going off somewhere else. Coming back only for the court dates, which were always unwanted and inevitably inconvenient.

Zoe clicked his name on the system to go through to the records of the investigation. She was still waiting for the page to load in when Shelley spoke up. To the surprise of none, any and all search engines on the internet worked quicker than the county police system.

“Here’s something. Clay Jackson memorial social media page. It has a smattering of posts every year on the anniversary of his death and birthdays, but there’s pictures, too. He had a lot of tattoos.”

“A lot?”

“More than Callie. And I think I might recognize one or two of them as having particular street meaning. This gang theory could hold some water.”

Zoe snorted, shaking her head. She got up to look over Shelley’s shoulder, taking in the images of Clay Jackson. He was six foot one, a hundred and forty pounds in his last images. Strung out, barely eating between fixes. He had the look of someone who had been fit and healthy, muscular, before his addiction took over his life. He was slowly shrinking in the photographs. He had never followed that course through to its conclusion—he was killed midway through the transformation.

“Why do criminals do that?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Mark themselves out for us. Make it easy with their gang tattoos.”

“I don’t think that’s the point of the practice,” Shelley said, giving her a wry smile over her own shoulder. “It’s social conformity. Showing that you belong to a particular group. Sometimes, the boost of loyalty and companionship that someone gets from that sense of belonging overrides the need to protect themselves or the logic to avoid arrest.”

“I would never get a gang tattoo. Even if it was a requirement for joining the gang. In fact, especially so if that was the case. What a stupid rule to have.”

Shelley swiveled her chair slightly, giving Zoe an amused look now. “You wouldn’t join a gang anyway, would you? It would require a lot of small talk. I don’t think you would like that.”

“I would not get a tattoo under any circumstance, anyway,” Zoe replied, pointing out the other part of the problem with what she had said. “I do not understand why anyone would. What could possibly be so significant that it requires inking onto the body in a permanent fashion?”

“You really don’t like tattoos, do you?”

Zoe couldn’t tell if Shelley was laughing at her or not. “They are a mark of lower intelligence. Offenders are far more statistically likely to have tattoos than law-abiding citizens are. And after time passes, they inevitably look stupid. Why are you smiling like that?”

“Because there’s something about me that you don’t know.” Shelley pushed her chair a little way back from her desk and lifted her foot up onto the seat of her chair. Before Zoe had a chance to protest or ask her what she was doing, Shelley had lifted up the hem of her trousers to reveal the bare skin on her lower leg.

A miniature poppy was etched there, in brilliant red and black, almost realistic enough for Zoe to think she could reach out and pluck it.

“You have a tattoo?” Zoe said, even though it was stating the obvious. It was too much of a shock. She would never have imagined Shelley to be someone who would defile her body with ink.

“Still looks pretty good, I think,” Shelley said. She was smiling, and though Zoe thought it might be good-naturedly, she couldn’t completely tell. “I got it when I was in college. My grandmother’s name was Poppy. After she passed, I thought it might be a nice way to remember her.”

Zoe returned to her own chair and sank down into it. She felt like the wind had been blown out of her sails. “Do you have any others?”

“No,” Shelley laughed. “This one hurt like hell. I swore off them after that.”

“I did not know about... this part of you.”

“What part? The criminal, low intelligence part?”

Zoe swallowed. She may have struggled with human emotions and social norms a lot of the time, but she knew this: there was an apology owed.

“I did not mean that about you,” she said. “I did not know that...”

“You made an assumption,” Shelley said. “I know you don’t think I’m a bad person, so you must see already that your assumption wasn’t totally correct. It’s not just criminals and idiots who get tattoos.”

Zoe nodded, measuring her words carefully. “I concede that a mark of respect and remembrance toward a lost loved one may also be a valid reason to commit to such a thing.”

“That’s progress, at least,” Shelley said. She was still smiling, and Zoe got the feeling that it was still at her expense. But she had messed up and said something that might have been hurtful, so that seemed fair. “How’s your search going?”

Zoe took the unsubtle hint and returned to her monitor, where Clay Jackson’s police records had finally loaded. She gave a low whistle, shaking her head at the sheer length of the results that had come up. “He has a record, all right. Looks as though he was affiliated with a local gang as we suspected.”

Now it was Shelley’s turn to come over and lean over Zoe’s shoulder. They read the results together. They didn’t tell a pretty tale.

Clay Jackson had been a member of a gang in LA, a notorious street crew who were heavily involved in the trade of illegal drugs, amongst other things. The kind of drugs that Callie had been messing around with. It wasn’t hard to see where she might have gotten her supply.

Clay’s tattoos were just the start of it. He was a key member of the gang, suspected of leading attacks on rival turf and of being the mastermind behind several deals that went down to connect the gang with suppliers and buyers. He had multiple cautions, for drug possession and for possession of weapons, each of which was followed by an actual arrest and various punishments. He had spent some time in jail, in and out after a few months each time, never quite getting caught badly enough to go down for good.

Until the moment it had all ended—gunned down in an alleyway, his body left in a bloody heap to be discovered by the police after shots were reported by residents in the area. There was never any real evidence as to who did it, only circumstantial links and suspicions, which were easily visible in the pattern of interviews and arrests that followed the crime.

“Look at this,” Zoe pointed out, tapping on her screen. “The only charge they managed to make stick during the entire investigation was possession of an illegal firearm. The guy they thought was most likely to have done it, only they could not prove it. This was all they could get him for. He got five years.”

“Search him up,” Shelley said. “What’s his name? Cesar Diaz?”

“That is right,” Zoe replied, waiting for the page to load again. “His gang had close links with Mexican smugglers. It seems they would have been fighting over territory. Who got the right to sell in that area.”

“It all fits. If Clay was a big shot in his organization, getting new deals and closing new sales, then their rivals would have wanted him taken out in particular. Make a big statement about who owns what.”

Cesar Diaz’s information blinked up on the screen.

They both read the latest update, then paused and looked at one another.

This was big.

“Cesar Diaz was paroled a few months ago,” Shelley said, voicing it out loud.

“Cesar Diaz is out on the streets, and maybe looking for revenge. It explains Callie. Erase the things Clay cared about in order to make a noise about being back, show that he has not softened. That he is still in charge.”

“But what about John Dowling? That still doesn’t make sense to me.” Shelley frowned. “Is there any connection between John and Cesar?”

Zoe scanned his page, looking for anything that jumped out. Nothing seemed to. On a whim, she tapped the back page in the system, returning to Clay Jackson’s profile.

Underneath his name and image, along with his vital statistics, were a few links that led to larger sections. One of these was known affiliations, and Zoe clicked on this to carry on scanning down the text.

“Wait a second,” she said, noticing something that tugged at her memory. “Alicia Smith. It seems like a common name, but...”

She got up, picking up John Dowling’s file from where they had left it on the central table. She leafed through a few pages before she finally found what she was looking for.

“What is it?” Shelley asked, watching her anxiously, her fingers playing with the arrow pendant that hung around her neck.

“Alicia Smith. Interviewed a couple of days ago by uniformed officers as part of the investigation into John Dowling’s death.”

“What connection does she have?”

Zoe smiled, a little bit of victory. “Alicia Smith is John Dowling’s mother.”

“But what...” Shelley leaned forward, examining the screen again. “Wait. Alicia Smith is also Clay Jackson’s aunt, on his mother’s side.”

“John Dowling is Clay Jackson’s cousin. That is how he is connected to Callie Everard.”

And just like that, all of the pieces were falling into place.

Shelley jumped into action, typing onto Zoe’s screen and moving the mouse impatiently while the page loaded again. “I’ve got Cesar Diaz’s parole details. We’d better go pay him a visit.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Zoe watched from the side of the room, where she had gone ostensibly to examine the certificates hanging on the wall. From there she could see and listen, but did not have to take any part in the conversation itself until she was ready.

Craig Lopez didn't look like your average parole officer, at least not the kind that you pictured in your head when you heard the term. He was built strong, six foot four and around two hundred pounds of muscle. Not only that, but most of those muscles that were visible around the polo shirt he was wearing were heavily tattooed. Ranging from scrawled doodles to elaborate pieces of art, he had clearly been collecting his ink for a very long time.

Then there was the ragged scar across the side of his neck, where a bullet had once torn its way through his flesh without killing him.

Evidently, he had been hired because of his unique perspective. Having been a member of several gangs in his youth, he could speak to those who were involved in them on their level. He knew what it was like for them.

"Cesar is in trouble again?" he asked, his whole demeanor heavy and disappointed. "He swore to me he was going clean. Getting out of the gang and into something better."

"We don't know for sure yet," Shelley pointed out. "We need to question him."

Craig opened the drawer of a filing cabinet and leafed through the contents before drawing out a piece of paper. "This is his parole address. You should proceed with caution. If he is mixed up in gang business again, he'll likely have an entourage. He did time for the gang, so he's gained some prestige. They'll want to protect him. If you go in all guns blazing, they could react badly.

"Understood," Shelley said. "If we go in alone, just the two of us? Show we just want to talk?"

Craig inclined his head. "Safer. But make sure someone knows where you are. Just in case."

Shelley drew in an unsteady breath as she nodded. Zoe observed this, thinking that Shelley had probably never been in this kind of a situation before. With how well she handled herself, it was sometimes easy to forget that she wasn't long out of Quantico. There were plenty of scenarios that would still be daunting to her, fresh and new.

When it came to gangs, Zoe couldn't say she was altogether confident herself.

"You are a bit of a local expert on these gangs?" Zoe asked, directing her question toward Craig.

He looked up in surprise—it was the first time she had spoken during the whole exchange—and shrugged. "I guess you could say that. At least the closest thing on this side of the law. Why? Do you need some information?"

"It is about Clay Jackson, the man Cesar likely killed," Zoe said.

"Oh, he killed him. Just did it smooth enough they couldn't catch him," Craig said. "I've heard next to a confession from him, though he's too smart to come out and really say it."

Zoe nodded, glad for the confirmation at least. "His aunt, Alicia Smith. She was questioned about the murder at the time."

Craig narrowed his eyes and then flicked them toward the ceiling, thinking. "Not sure the name rings a bell."

"Her son, John Dowling, is one of the murder victims that we are currently investigating."

Craig took the hint. "You're asking me about their relationship. Whether Cesar would murder this John Dowling as soon as he got out to make a point."

"Precisely."

Craig pursed his lips, drumming his fingers on his desk. "I just can't see it. Clay Jackson was like a lot of these guys. The gang was his family. Real blood relations paled in comparison. As far as I remember, he wasn't in contact with most of his relatives. His parents wanted nothing to do with a son that was in a gang."

That was interesting. It was a hole in their theory, but then again, it wasn't proof. Craig knew these men, but he wasn't part of the gangs. Not anymore. There were things that they might be able to hide from his suspicion.

"Thanks," Shelley said, reaching over to shake his hand. "We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

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The address listed on the scrap of paper that Craig had written out for them was a rundown, single-story building with beaten up old cars parked across what should have been the front yard. One of them was on cinderblocks instead of tires. Not exactly what you might expect from the home of a drug kingpin.

Maybe Craig was right, and Cesar really was out of the game. That didn't mean he was done with his revenge, Zoe thought, chewing her lip as she examined the view.

There didn't seem to be anyone around who looked out to cause them any harm. No one watching them from windows or porches, no cars moving slow through the neighborhood. No sign of anyone stirring inside the house.

"We should go in," Zoe decided, opening the driver's side door and getting out.

Shelley followed her after a beat. It wasn't a long delay, but it was a delay. Zoe wondered if Shelley was getting cold feet about going down this gang route. Whatever they did, they were going to have to investigate it somehow. No matter what kind of delay they instigated, they were going to end up here at some stage.

Zoe tried to exude confidence that she herself did not really feel as she walked up to the front door and knocked hard, three sharp raps that could not fail to be heard throughout the small home.

There was no response.

She exchanged a glance with Shelley, now standing close behind her, and knocked again. Harder. Five times. Not so easy to ignore.

There was nothing. Not the creak of a floorboard or a flicker of movement behind the flimsy curtains. The living room window, visible from where they stood, gave onto an empty room.

"No one is here," Zoe said after a moment, deciding that it did not feel like they were simply being ignored.

"What now, then?" Shelley asked, looking back at the car. "Do we sit and wait?"

Zoe followed her gaze and saw an elderly Hispanic man who had come out to sit on the steps of a property on the other side of the street. Seventy-three years old, she estimated. "Maybe. Maybe not," she said, setting off at a casual walking speed toward him.

It was always awkward, moving toward someone like this. The old man was watching them and knew that they were approaching him. Knew that they were coming to talk to him, but he was still too far away to yell a greeting. Where did you look? At the ground? Into the distance, ignoring the presence of the man, as if you were planning to just go on right past him? At his face, to create eye contact that would be awkward for the long stretch of time it took you to reach speaking distance?

Zoe settled for a mixture of all three, which was somehow even more awful, and ended up calling out to him as soon as she was halfway across the road just to make it stop.

"Excuse me, sir?"

He didn't get to his feet, eyeing them both with a heaping of mistrust, but he gave them his attention.

"We are looking for the man who lives at this address. Do you know where he might be at this time?" Zoe asked, keeping her words somewhat neutral. No need to give everything away at once.

The old man grunted. "You mean Cesar?"

That cat was out of the bag, then. “Yes, sir.” Zoe kept it respectful. She had noticed that the level of cooperation one found from elderly witnesses was often directly correlated to the amount of times you called them sir or ma’am.

“Out at the pit.”

“The pit?” Zoe repeated. There was nothing like interacting with local knowledge as an outsider to make you feel stupid.

The old man grunted again, giving her an impatient shrug of his shoulders. “The pit. Where all them boys go.”

“Do you mean the gang members, sir?” Shelley took over, her tone low and soft.

The Hispanic man rubbed fingers gnarled with arthritis across the top of his head, almost bald but for a few lingering strands, and nodded. “All them boys. No secret around here.”

“Could you give us directions, sir?” Shelley asked. “We’re not locals.”

The old man looked her up and down, then burst into a laugh that exposed three missing teeth. “No, you ain’t,” he said, then laughed again, long and hard.

Zoe tapped on Shelley’s arm. “Better off calling the local PD,” she said, gesturing with her head back toward the car before setting off in that direction. Behind them, across the twenty-four steps back to the car, the old man’s laughter still pealed out, following them like a bad smell.

Zoe sank into the driver’s seat and slammed her door, perhaps harder than necessary.

“What’s the plan?” Shelley asked breathlessly. There was pink in her cheeks. This whole encounter had been out of her depth.

“I am going to call the station,” Zoe said. “We get some backup, and the location. The locals will know what it means. And then we go in.”

She dialed the number on her phone, already weighing up the amount of force they were going to need to ask for—and whether it was going to be prudent to ask for bulletproof vests, too.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Zoe adjusted the straps on her vest one more time, feeling the reassuring grip of the Velcro against its counterpart and how tightly they held together.

The back of the police van was cramped. Shelley sat opposite her, and then eight men and women from the SWAT team, all of them outfitted in full assault gear. Zoe was unused to the feeling of the helmet on her head, the way the padded sides pushed at her cheeks. Still, it was better than going in as an exposed target.

They were idling on a dead-end road a short distance from their target, the hangout that the gang members called home. The Pit. It turned out to be a bar, or at least a front of one, the kind of place where outsiders were very much unwelcome. Going in was going to be a full-out raid situation. The local captain had made it clear to them that there was no other option with men like this. Go in unarmed, unprotected, and as a cop, you'd come out dead.

They had a map stretched out between them, a printed plan of the venue. It amounted to little more than black square outlines, approximations based on what had been observed on previous raids in combination with city blueprints.

"There are three exits—here, here, and here." The unit commander was pointing them out, one in all compass directions but south. "This one is the main entrance, where we will enter, off the road. The other two will both be used. From experience, the gang will split roughly half in each direction, trying to divide our forces as well."

"What is this structure here?" Zoe asked, pointing to a rectangle within the building itself.

"That's the bar area. Normally we will expect to see the highest concentration of bodies around there, with tables and chairs scattered around this area here. Back there, behind double doors, is the more private clubhouse. Senior members spend their time in there."

"That is where we will find Cesar," Zoe said. It was a comment, rather than a question. They all knew that he was senior enough. That was one of the unwritten rules of a gang like this: once you did time for your fellow members without ratting, you were one of the inner circle.

"Over here, we have the garage. It's only a covered roof. The front and back are both open to give them a quick getaway. They'll have a number of SUVs in there, probably motorbikes and smaller vehicles as well, depending on which members happen to be in the clubhouse at this time."

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