

F A C E

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MURDER

(A ZOE PRIME MYSTERY--BOOK 2)

BLAKE PIERCE

A Zoe Prime Mystery

Blake Pierce

**Face of Murder**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Pierce B.**

Face of Murder / 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 MURDER is book #2 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. When women are found murdered, their bodies branded with mysterious numbers, outside Washington, D.C., the FBI, stumped, calls in Special Agent Zoe Prime to decipher the mathematical riddle and find the serial killer. Yet the numbers make no sense. Are they a pattern? A formula? Or do they have no meaning at all? Zoe, reeling from her own personal troubles, hasn't the luxury of time, as more bodies pile up, and as all eyes turn to her to solve an equation that, perhaps, cannot be solved. Will she catch the killer in time? An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, FACE OF MURDER is book #2 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #3 in the series—FACE OF FEAR—is also available for pre-order.

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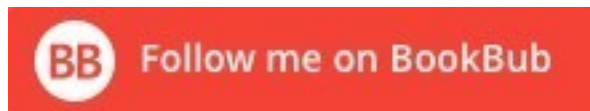
# **Blake Pierce**

## **Face of Murder (A Zoe Prime Mystery—Book 2)**

**Blake Pierce**

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes sixteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising two books (and counting).

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



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## PROLOGUE

Professor Ralph Henderson sighed, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and fished around in the pocket of his coat for his car keys. It had been a long evening of marking English papers, and either his students were getting more stupid or he was getting more tired of the job. He was more than ready to prop himself up in bed for the night with a small glass of whiskey and one of the classics.

The Georgetown parking garage was almost empty, most of the other faculty members having had enough sense to go home long ago. It was chilly and gloomy, the electric strip lights flickering overhead as moths bumped into them with suicidal intent. Henderson cut across the empty spaces, taking a shortcut to his car. He briefly trifled with the idea of stopping off somewhere for a takeout coffee on the way back. Or would it be better just to get home as soon as possible, to the safety and warmth of one's own domain?

His footsteps echoed with an eerie resonance through the garage, the concrete ceiling and the concrete floor throwing the sounds back and forth. It was on nights like these that the garage transformed into a different kind of beast. A place where unsavory types might lurk in the shadows, ready to pounce. The kind of thinking that you couldn't shake, even when you repeatedly told yourself you were an adult and shouldn't be afraid of the dark anymore.

Mind you, there was a good reason to be nervous tonight. The campus had been buzzing with news of a murder that had taken place right there, under their own noses. A student that Henderson had known. Maybe that was the reason the hairs stood up on the back of his neck as he crossed the garage, and why he couldn't help but dart furtive and wide-eyed glances into the shadows, trying to see if there was someone hiding within.

He tried to distract himself. There was more to think about. There was a kid he'd had to throw out of the class for failing yet another paper. It was so frustrating to teach—to see these kids with so much potential getting caught up in parties and not taking their studies seriously. It was with regret that Henderson had had to flunk him, but he felt more than justified now after getting an email from the student.

Full of vitriol, the email was borderline threatening. Apparently, the kid didn't appreciate being kicked out and wanted to make sure that Henderson knew it. As if such a gesture was somehow going to get him reinstated to the course. Ha! The kid had a lot to learn about life, and about how people reacted to the way you treated them.

Henderson reached the car and fumbled with his keys, his fingers thick and slow from having written out so many comments while grading the students. He cursed himself, a shaking taking over his hands, driven by the isolation of the parking garage at night. He was being silly. He was a grown man, for god's sake, and he walked through this garage in the light of day without ever a second thought.

Anyway, he thought to himself darkly, if anyone was going to be after him, it would be that angry student. And he wasn't smart enough to stalk a professor in the dark of a parking garage. He was the kind of kid who sent angry emails and left a trail. Nothing to worry about, really. Henderson would report it to the dean tomorrow, and that would be that.

What was that noise? A footstep? Something was wrong here. He had been dismissing his fears all this time, but now he was less sure. The prickling feeling on the back of Henderson's neck increased, something like a premonition, but before he could turn, his head was hitting the car window with a sharp crash.

Henderson barely had time to register this fact and the flooding pain coming from his nose before the hand on the back of his head smashed it into the side of the car again. He was slipping lower, taken down by the shock and the injury, his body going limp. He tried to twist away a little,

his briefcase flying forgotten to the floor, but he couldn't fight the next blow, or the next. Over and over his head hit the red chassis, his temple, the top of an eye socket, his jaw just below the ear.

He felt the damage with a kind of detached shock. The crack of a bone breaking. The thought of bruises blossoming across his face, then of cuts and abrasions, then of something more serious. All he could think, stupidly, was that his face was going to be ruined. All he had time to think before it was seemingly over.

The gripping hand released him, and Henderson sank unceremoniously to the floor, hitting a shoulder on the way down. He barely felt it, against all the rest. He was twisted enough now to groggily turn his head and look, though his vision was blurred. Maybe from the blows. Maybe from blood falling into his eyes. Maybe because his eye socket had to be broken, at the very least.

Who was that? A vague shape, a whisper only, as if it were a ghost that stood over him and not a man. But it was a man. It had to be a man. If only he could make out just who—but Henderson's consciousness was slipping out of him like sand through his fingers, and he could no longer hold on. Something was flowing out of him, leaving him cold and empty. He knew it was almost over. The world was going black around him, the watery shape above watching in silence.

The shadow stretched above him and lifted his head one last time and slammed it down into the concrete, an impact that Henderson barely even sensed before he tumbled down headfirst into that blackness.

The job was done.

He would not wake up again.

## CHAPTER ONE

Zoe traced cracks across the arm of the leather chair, seeing how their pattern revealed a tale of aging, of so many different hands and arms lying on this exact spot. She couldn't decide whether that was a comfort, an indication of experience, or just gross. Who knew what kind of germs lurked within this fabric?

"Zoe?" Dr. Lauren Monk prompted her, from a similarly comfortable chair placed opposite her.

Zoe looked up guiltily. "Sorry, was I supposed to answer that?"

Dr. Monk sighed, tapping her pen against a pad of paper in her hand. Despite the recorder sitting on the desk which archived all of their sessions, it seemed that Dr. Monk was still a fan of traditional methods. "Let's change tack for a moment," she said. "We've had a few sessions together now, haven't we, Zoe? I'm noticing that you sometimes have trouble with social cues."

Ah. That. Zoe shrugged, trying to give off an air of indifference. "I do not always understand the ways in which people seem to react."

"Or the ways in which they expect you to react?"

Zoe shrugged again, her gaze traveling toward the window. Then she mentally slapped herself; she was supposed to be taking an active part in these sessions, not acting like a moody teenager. "My logic is different from their logic."

"Why do you think that is?"

Zoe knew why she was the way she was, or at least thought she did. The numbers. The numbers that were everywhere she looked, every moment of the day. They told her even now what prescription Dr. Monk wore in her glasses (barely strong enough to require any kind of aid), that there was half a millimeter of dust on the certificate frames on the wall but only a quarter of a millimeter on the psychology degree (indicating a stronger sense of pride in this than her other achievements), and that Dr. Monk had written down exactly seven words during their conversation so far.

She wanted to say it, or at least some parts of her did. She still had not admitted to Dr. Monk that she had an ability that no one else seemed to. No one except for the occasional serial killer, if the case she had worked a month or so ago was anything to go by.

But there was another part of her, still the stronger part, that could not bear to admit anything at all.

"I was just born this way," Zoe said.

Dr. Monk nodded, but did not write anything down. Apparently, this was not a significant enough answer. "How does it feel when you miss those social cues? Does it bother you?"

Maybe it was the fact that they had done enough sessions together now for the initial awkwardness to fade away. Maybe it was just the freedom of talking to someone with whom she had no real professional or personal connection. Either way, Zoe's mouth blurted out a truth that her mind had kept hidden from now, without her conscious permission. "Shelley finds it so easy."

Zoe cursed herself immediately. What kind of thing to say was that? Now they would spend the rest of the session digging into this jealousy she felt toward Shelley, instead of working on real problems. Until this moment she had not even really acknowledged to herself that the envy was there.

"Agent Shelley Rose," Dr. Monk said, consulting her notes from a previous afternoon in her office. "You feel more comfortable with her than your previous partners, you indicated to me previously. But you feel jealousy towards her. Can you expand on that?"

Zoe took a breath. Of course she could, though she did not want to. Reluctantly, she studied her own fingers, thinking it best to just get it over with. "Shelley has a way with people. She talks them into admitting things. And they like her. Not just suspects. Everyone."

"Do you feel that people don't like you, Zoe?"

Zoe shifted uncomfortably. This was all her own fault. She shouldn't have said something like that. Admitting a weakness was an invitation for someone to dig into it. This was why she had not mentioned the numbers yet. Even if this therapist had been suggested by Dr. Applewhite, her most trusted friend and mentor, that didn't mean that Zoe could trust her with her deepest and darkest secret. "I do not have many friends. Partners usually request to transfer away from me," she admitted instead.

"Do you think this is linked to your struggle with social cues?"

The woman was asking an obvious question. "That, and other things."

"What things?"

The obvious question. Zoe groaned inwardly. She had set herself up for that trap. "My job is difficult. I am gone often. There is not much time to put down roots."

Dr. Monk nodded thoughtfully. She was smiling encouragingly, as if Zoe was really getting somewhere. The part of her that craved the positive attention and affection she had never received from her mother thrilled at that, even though she did not want it to. Being in therapy was, so far, only serving to highlight all of her flaws. "What about Shelley? Does she have roots?"

Zoe nodded, swallowing down an unbidden lump. "She has a husband and a young daughter. Amelia. She talks about her a lot."

Dr. Monk put her pen to her lips, tapping it three times meaningfully. "You want a family of your own."

Zoe looked up sharply, then remembered not to be surprised that a therapist could discern the truest thoughts lurking behind whatever else you said. "Yes," she said, simply. There was no point in denying it. "But I am very far from that point."

"When we met for our first session, you told me you'd been on a date." Dr. Monk did not have to check through her notes for this, Zoe saw. "He contacted you, didn't he? Did you reply?"

Zoe shook her head no. "He has sent me a few emails, and tried to call. I did not answer."

"Why is that?"

Zoe shrugged. She couldn't exactly say. She reached up self-consciously to touch a few strands of her brown hair, kept cropped short for convenience rather than fashion. There were many things about her that were not perhaps conventionally attractive, and she knew that, even if she didn't exactly understand how other people saw her. "Maybe because the first date was awkward. I was too distracted. I could not focus on what he was saying. I was boring."

"But he didn't think so, did he? This...?"

"John."

"This John, he seems interested. He keeps trying to get in touch. That's a good sign."

Zoe nodded. There was nothing else that she could say. Dr. Monk was making sense, even if she hated to admit it.

"Let me tell you what I see," Dr. Monk continued. "You have expressed to me that Shelley has the kind of life you want. She is happily married with a child, doing well in her career, has skills that you don't have. We will always be jealous of those who can do things we can't. That's human nature. The important thing is not to let it consume you, and to focus on the things that you can achieve."

She waited for Zoe to nod again, to give an indication that she was listening, before she continued.

"Things don't happen on their own. Or to put it another way, it's unlikely that you are going to get married if you never go on any dates. My advice to you is to give John a call, and go out for that second date. Maybe it won't turn out so well. Maybe it will turn out great. The only way to find out is to give it a try."

"You think I should marry John?" Zoe frowned.

“I think you should go on a date with him.” Dr. Monk smiled. “And if he doesn’t work out, I think you should go on a date with someone else. That’s how you work towards your goals. One step at a time.”

Zoe was not entirely convinced, but she nodded all the same. Besides, she had something important to take care of now. “I think that is the end of our time.”

Dr. Monk laughed. “That’s my line,” she said, getting up to escort Zoe to the door. “And don’t think I am so easily distracted. Next session, we’ll circle back to this issue of social cues and seeing things differently from how others do. We’ll get to the bottom of it, even if you aren’t ready to be fully honest with me.”

Zoe avoided her therapist’s eyes as she headed out of the office, not wanting to betray the hope she had held that Dr. Monk really would forget.

## CHAPTER TWO

At least lunch was something for Zoe to get excited about. It had been a long while since she had been able to meet with her mentor in person, and she had been looking forward to it. It was enough to get her through the therapy session and out the other side, knowing that there was something good coming.

Dr. Francesca Applewhite, a professor of mathematics who had worked at Zoe's college, had turned out to be one of the best introductions Zoe had ever had in her life. Back then, still a teenager and way out of her depth in the social atmosphere of the dorms, she had been skeptical about one more meeting with one more specialist. But it turned out that the doctor understood her completely—saw that she had a special gift, something which needed to be nurtured. They had started with private tutoring, designed to lift her skills to another academic level. Everything else had developed from there.

“Doctor,” Zoe greeted, reaching their table and dropping herself down into the free chair. Dr. Applewhite had no doubt been there for some time, judging by the half-drunk cup of coffee and the worn paperback in her hands. Zoe could not help but notice that the streaks of gray were gaining strand by strand against her once-dark hair, a stark contrast to the version of the doctor in her memory of that first time.

Dr. Applewhite slipped a bookmark between the pages and put it to one side, smiling as she looked up. “My favorite graduate. How is the Bureau treating you?”

She had good reason to ask the question. It had been her suggestion, after all, that put Zoe on the path toward law enforcement. After her colleague, one of Zoe's math teachers, had connected them, Zoe's whole life had changed. She knew exactly who she had to thank for that.

“Good. My new partner is going well,” Zoe said. She picked up the menu to scan the items, but she barely needed to. She already knew what she was going to order. A scan of the column and row sizes told her that nothing new had been added, and they always met for lunch at this place.

Dr. Applewhite leaned over to grab the attention of a waiter, and while the doctor watched him walking over, Zoe watched her instead. She remembered that first meeting. How Dr. Applewhite had shown an actual interest in what Zoe had to say, one of the few people in her life who had actually really listened to her. The older woman had put on several pounds since that time, but had never lost an ounce of the compassion she showed to a young woman who had no idea of her place in the world.

Their relationship had grown over time. Zoe was slow to trust, slow to let her in. But eventually she had had to take a chance, to admit her secret. To tell her about the numbers.

It hadn't been easy. After so many years of Zoe's mother telling her that her gifts were given her by the devil, she had found the words caught in her throat many times. But Dr. Applewhite had been excited, not appalled, to learn of Zoe's abilities. From then on, their bond had only strengthened.

“How about Dr. Monk?” Dr. Applewhite asked after Zoe had placed her order, her eyes twinkling slyly. “She told me you took me up on my recommendation.”

Zoe couldn't contain a chuckle. “Checking up on me?”

“I always have to keep an eye on my favorites,” Dr. Applewhite laughed. It was an ongoing joke between them. Dr. Applewhite was not, of course, supposed to have favorites. But in many ways, Zoe had helped her career just as much as Dr. Applewhite had set Zoe on the way to hers. Dr. Applewhite had ended up specializing in the study of synesthesia with regards to math, and now mentored a number of others who had the same abilities that Zoe did. More or less, anyway.

“The sessions are going well,” Zoe acknowledged. “Dr. Monk has some good insights. I can see why you like her.”

“She has a very good reputation. Any progress you can share with me? Or is it all too personal?”

Zoe shrugged, studying the two inches of water in the bottom of the vase on their table, which would not be enough to sustain the two chrysanthemum stems for long. The internal calculations of how long it would take for a total wilt distracted her enough to allow her to say what was on her mind. “She said I should go on more dates.”

Dr. Applewhite grinned heartily, her own wedding ring glittering in the light from the sun as she raised her coffee cup to her lips. “She could be right.”

“I really do not think it will be the solution to all my problems,” Zoe huffed, lifting the fresh cup of coffee brought by the waiter to her lips.

“Maybe not all of them, but some,” Dr. Applewhite said, serious now. “I’m not saying that you have to feel bad about who you are. You’re functional—more than that. You have turned it into an advantage in your work. Others aren’t as capable as you are. I just worry about you. You know I do.”

Zoe nodded. “I appreciate that,” she said. She figured that, with all things considered, Dr. Applewhite might be the only person in the world to actually worry about her. That was a comfort, to have at least one person.

Before she could complete the thought, and even go so far as to take the recommendation to call John seriously, her cell rang in her pocket. Zoe grabbed it out and answered the call, seeing Shelley’s name on the display.

“Special Agent Zoe Prime.”

“Hey, Z. Hope you’re not doing something nice right now.”

Zoe sighed, looking down at her half-finished plate of food. Not that she had even really noticed the taste, with her mind on other things. “I take it we have a case.”

“I’ll meet you at HQ in thirty minutes. The chief says this is a big one.”

Zoe offered Dr. Applewhite an apologetic smile, but the doctor was already waving her away. “Go do your duty, Agent. But there’s one more thing I have to tell you...” Dr. Applewhite hesitated, taking a breath. She seemed reluctant to speak, but forged on, looking down at Zoe’s half-empty plate as she did. “One of the others in my research group—another synesthete. We thought he was doing better, but... I’m sorry to say, he killed himself last week. Without a support network beyond myself, he was struggling. Humans need other humans around us, to help us emotionally. All of us do. Even those who think a bit differently.”

Zoe paused, staring down into her coffee cup and the several millimeters by which it had been underfilled, leaning back against the chair for support. She had never gone to meet any of Dr. Applewhite’s “research group”—test subjects, Zoe called them in her head when she was being unkind—but all the same, it was a blow to hear. Someone like her, who wanted to die for the sole reason that he was exactly like her. That was something to swallow, all right.

She picked up her bag mechanically, walking away without really seeing anything around herself. In her head she was reframing. Thinking back on Dr. Monk’s comments. *Work towards your goals. One step at a time.*

What did she have in her life, really? One mentor, who served as the closest thing to a mother figure she was ever going to find. A partner—Shelley—who was the closest thing she had to a friend. Two cats, Euler and Pythagoras—and though she loved them both, she knew that it was in the very nature of cats that they would be just fine if she was gone and they lived with someone else. A career that seemed to be on the rocks more than it was on the up and up, even if right now was one of the better times. A small apartment to call her own.

And a condition, or an ability, or whatever you wanted to call it, that made her so different it drove people like her to kill themselves.

It was a sobering thought to confront.

## CHAPTER THREE

Zoe strode along the corridors of the vast FBI HQ building in Washington, DC, heading toward the particular briefing room where Shelley had said she would be waiting. Buildings like this were soothing for Zoe: built long enough ago but with enough planning and precision that each floor was easy to predict and navigate.

The J. Edgar Hoover building had been built with intent. Although from the outside it was square and gray, the kind of architecture people described as an eyesore, the blocky, geometric composition was exactly what Zoe loved about it. The corridors branched off in the exact same way no matter where you got off the elevator, and the rooms were numbered in a logical way. Room 406, quite naturally, was the sixth door that you would come to after getting off on the fourth floor. That was immeasurably pleasing. Not all buildings were created equal.

Sure enough, Shelley was already sitting in the briefing room, studying notes and color photographs placed at neat intervals along a boardroom table. She looked up and smiled as Zoe entered.

Zoe could not quite figure out how Shelley, with a young child at home and no particular advantage in distance from her home, could beat her to the HQ. Not only that, but how she could be neatly dressed in a suit that fit her curvy yet slim frame, accentuating the angles between her hips and waist and breasts, without a speck of the normal dirt one would expect to accumulate around an infant. Even how she could be perfectly made up, with a slight hint of pink lipstick on her lips, and her blonde hair tied just-so into a chic chignon. But there it was.

Their superior, Special Agent in Charge Leo Maitland, stood at the front of the room, waiting with the coiled impatience of a jaguar on the hunt. He was an Army vet with a soldier's bearing, and after a successful career through the ranks he had come home to switch to law enforcement. That had all been fifteen years ago, but the graying hair at his temples gave no indication that he was any less the fighter he had once been. He stood at six foot three, with a forty-five-inch chest and fifteen-inch biceps that still strained at the hems of his uniform.

"Ah, Special Agent Prime," he said. "Welcome. I've handed out the briefing notes to your partner. Please take a seat and go over them."

Zoe sat as she was bidden, setting down a takeout coffee in front of Shelley. It had become a habit of theirs. Zoe provided the coffee, and Shelley would provide all the polite conversation that was needed during the case. Each of them taking care of something that they could actually manage.

"Special Agent Rose has all the information, but I'll give you an overview. We have two bodies on our hands already, and this looks like a local case, so you won't need to travel." Maitland folded his arms over his chest, causing the material of his suit to visibly strain at the shoulders. "We'll be under some pressure from the local press given that one of the victims was high-profile in the community. You are no doubt also familiar with the urgency of preventing a third death and having the term 'serial killer' attached by journalists."

Zoe nodded. That kind of reporting could cause hysteria and end up impeding the case. It was also likely to spread the news further—and that meant more national or even international press to deal with. FBI agents were used to dealing with high-pressure situations, but that did not mean they were welcome. Particularly for Zoe, who would be counting microphones and analyzing the lengths of television camera cables rather than concentrating on her press conference speech.

"Given your lateness..." Maitland continued. Zoe felt her mouth beginning to open in protest, but she clamped it shut. She had arranged to take some time off this morning for her brunch, exchanging some of the many, many hours of unpaid overtime she had worked. She was hardly late. But one did not argue with the Special Agent in Charge of the J. Edgar Hoover Building. "I have

already briefed your partner. I will leave her to dispense the details to you. Given your proclivity for math, we thought this would be an excellent fit for your skillset. Don't let me down."

Maitland swept out of the room without pausing to look back. Zoe noted his hand straying immediately to his pocket as he left the room, and figured the inch-thick bulge was likely a cell phone. He was a busy man, with calls to make and further briefings to give. It wasn't likely that they would see him much until the case was done—unless they messed something up, in which case he was liable to come down like the figurative ton of bricks.

Given Maitland's size, and that a ton was two thousand pounds, he wasn't really like a ton of bricks at all. More like a tenth of that value.

"Two victims," Shelley said, grabbing Zoe's attention without so much as a polite triviality to start the conversation. She was starting to know Zoe better, and she must have realized by now that such comments would make no positive difference to their relationship. Zoe had noticed at least a seventy percent decrease in small talk since they had begun working together. "Both of them in our own backyard. DC metro area."

"I hope not in either of our actual backyards. As federal agents, you would think we might notice."

Shelley's eyes flashed with a spark as she nudged Zoe in the ribs. "Was that an actual joke? What's in this coffee?"

"I was with an old friend this morning. I suppose it put me in a good mood."

"Then I'm sorry to break that." Shelley pointed to the two victim files, spread out carefully and separated in a deliberate way. "This is the first victim, from about a week ago. He was a young grad student, found on the grounds of the Georgetown campus. His head was bashed in with a heavy object—forensics say that it was probably a bat."

"Six days," Zoe murmured, her eyes scanning the file. She picked up his information: six feet tall, one hundred eighty pounds, twenty-three years old.

"Sorry, yes." Shelley was evidently still getting used to the precision that Zoe expected, even if they were finding it easy to settle in in other ways. "The second victim was last night. An English professor at Georgetown, his head was smashed repeatedly against the side of his own car until irreparable cranial damage had been inflicted."

"The college is the connection."

"Not just that." Shelley shuffled the photographs, drew out overhead shots that showed the crime scene in full. "Both of them had their shirts ripped open—and I mean ripped, with some violence. It seems the act of killing wasn't enough to sate the killer's anger. Then there are these... well, see for yourself."

Zoe all but snatched the images from Shelley's hands. She had already begun to recognize the form of the markings scribbled across both men's torsos, and a closer look confirmed it. They had both been emblazoned with complex mathematical equations—complex enough that Zoe pulled out a chair and sank into it without taking her eyes away.

"Have these been shown to any potential witnesses? Friends, faculty members, students?"

"In the case of the first victim, yes. The local cops showed the image around. Heavily cropped to just the equation itself, of course. They just finished circulating the other shot this morning, though we may still be able to dig up a few more leads, I suppose."

"And?"

Shelley shrugged. "No one knows what it means."

Zoe knew well enough that the math department at Georgetown had a good stock of professionals, and if they couldn't figure it out, that meant that this was some serious kind of equation. "It looks like quantum math."

"That's what a few of the professors said. But they don't recognize it as anything that any of them have seen before, or been working on."

Zoe continued staring at the equation, her mind racing along and through all the complex signs and numbers and letters, trying to find at least an entrance into the pattern. “What other leads do we have?”

Shelley sifted through a few more pages. “I was just getting there when you came in. Let me see... the student’s roommates and friends have all been questioned, as well as his family and teaching staff. He was in an area of the campus which isn’t covered by cameras, right in a dead spot.”

“Convenient,” Zoe sighed. She wished that just once, they would get hold of a case that had been committed in full sight of witnesses or caught on camera. Of course, they didn’t usually call in the FBI for the ones that were easy to solve.

“As for the professor, looks like there were only cameras at the entrance to the parking lot. So many people come in and out of there all day, and we don’t have eyes on one of the pedestrian exits at all. Nothing suspicious caught on camera.”

“No leads at all,” Zoe noted, propping her chin on one hand as she went over the equation for the seventeenth time already. Slower, faster, it wasn’t making much difference. This was like nothing she had ever come across. Far beyond the level that she had studied during her own time in college.

She switched to the other one, the professor. It seemed just the same. What was this?

“What do you want to do first?” Shelley asked, completing her own study of the files.

“Just a second.” Zoe had not even taken the time to check the second victim’s particulars yet, but there was time for that. She took out her notebook and pen and started writing, making quick and sharp indentations on the page as she began to sketch out an initial working. Greek letters, lines, brackets, downward-pointing triangles—all symbols in quantum math had an equivalent meaning that would reveal a number.  $M$  divided by  $t'$  minus  $t'$ , one divided by  $s'$  then added to one divided by  $s''$ , and so on and so forth, all to find the value of  $B^1$  which could later be inserted back into another line of the equation to work out the value of another figure.

The workings started easily enough. If the value of  $M$  was equal to the value of  $r'$ , then the first two lines made perfect sense; but then the third line disrupted it all, and appeared to give a totally different value for  $M$ . Fine; she worked it through another way. Perhaps  $M$  was, in fact, double the value of  $r'$ , which still made enough sense there, and made the third line work—but by the sixth line, the value of  $M$  had to be shown to reach zero, and there again it all made no sense.

When Zoe looked up again, she had no idea how much time had passed. At some point, Shelley had sat down opposite her, and was thumbing through something on the screen of her cell.

“This does not make any sense,” Zoe announced.

Shelley looked up, lifting a carefully shaped eyebrow. “You can’t work them out?”

Zoe’s lips flattened into a thin line before she could make herself admit it. “I cannot work them out *yet*,” she said. “Maybe we are missing some kind of clue. This is definitely all of it? There was not something written on their backs, or arms, or elsewhere?”

“I know as much as you know,” Shelley said. “I’ve been reading up on the professor. Nothing stands out from his academic history, or from what I can see of his personal life that has made it online.”

“Check the photos again,” Zoe suggested, handing her a bundle and picking up some for herself. She pored over the shots, her eyes taking in the angles of bones, the degree at which a leg had bent in death, the length of the rips in their shirts versus the visible strength of the material and its stitching. Nowhere could she see any connection. Not in their heights, weight, their ages—and no hint of any other ink slashed across their skin.

The worrying thing, of course, was that mathematical patterns became easier to predict the more data you had. Two numbers could seem unconnected, any number of possibilities between them, too many to decide on a definite course. Three numbers, well, that would allow one to make more of a case, begin a formula. But that would require another death.

And they certainly didn’t want another death.

“I’ve got nothing,” Shelley said, shaking her head.

“Swap,” Zoe suggested, handing her bundle over and taking Shelley’s in return. “The only thing of note is the angle of the impact on the first victim’s head. The attacker was a little shorter, probably five nine.”

And again, it was the same. The same frustrating nothing. No hint of ink on clothing, no trailing off of the numbers underneath fabric, nothing in the general vicinity. The parking garage spaces were not numbered, and nor were there numbers on the walls, on the concrete columns holding up the ceiling, on the grass near where the student was found.

Nothing.

Zoe gave up, shaking her head. “I need to see the professor’s body,” she said. “It is the only way we are going to spot something that the photographs do not already tell us.”

“Great,” Shelley said. It was possible that she was being sarcastic; Zoe had always had a hard time telling the difference. “Then let’s go take a close look at a dead guy.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Zoe tapped her fingers on the steering wheel as they drove over to the local coroner, glancing sideways at Shelley. There was something about this case that was already bothering her, and she had to voice the doubts that were creeping into her head before they became obsessive. “It’s funny that Maitland knew I would want to work on a math-based case. I have never discussed with him that I enjoy working with numbers.”

Shelley cleared her throat slightly, not turning to meet Zoe’s eyes. “Well, I volunteered us for this one. I just happened to hear it coming in, and, well, the chief agreed we could take it.”

Zoe digested this for a moment. She didn’t usually get things from her boss just because she asked for them. “Just like that? You did not need to persuade him?”

Shelley was twisting the pendant she wore, a gold arrow set with a diamond that she had inherited from her grandmother, around and around in her fingers. “I told him that since you were really good with math, we would be able to get a better start on it than anyone else.”

Zoe resisted the urge to slam on the brakes, keeping the car steady and smooth. She focused on the road until the rushing in her head had slowed down, and spoke deliberately and calmly. “You said I was ‘good with math’?”

“That’s all I said, I swear. I didn’t tell them the truth. Not about, you know, what you can do.”

Shelley sounded apologetic, but that was not quite enough to make the roaring in Zoe’s ears go away. Good with math. That was close to the truth, too close to be comfortable. It was almost an admission.

Maybe she had made a grave mistake, trusting Shelley to not give away her secret. But her partner had sworn, so many times over, that she would never reveal it to anyone without Zoe’s consent. While she technically had still not done that, it was close. Too close.

“Look, it’s fine, isn’t it?” Shelley asked. Her voice had risen in pitch now. “I’m really sorry if you didn’t want me to say that, but it’s just a little piece of the way things really are. Not the whole picture. And anyone can be good at math, you know? It doesn’t make you that much different.”

Zoe’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel, so tight the rubber grips made a quiet noise, and she worked her jaw stiffly. “It was not up to you to tell them that.”

“I just—I didn’t think it would be a big deal, to say that much.” Shelley sighed, slumping back against the passenger seat headrest. “I messed up, I can see that now. I’m sorry. But after you solved our big case in Kansas, surely they would have to figure that you’re good with numbers anyway. I know I can’t tell anyone, and I won’t, but I don’t know why you feel you need to hide it.”

Zoe gritted her teeth. Of course, Shelley didn’t understand. Shelley hadn’t been there. She hadn’t been forced to pray by her bed on the cold floor all night, her mother shrieking and sermonizing about the devil’s gift. She hadn’t been scolded at school for her distraction, or made fun of and ostracized by the other children for the uncanny things she could tell just by looking at them.

She hadn’t been there through every failed relationship Zoe had endured, misunderstood time and time again, left with nothing but the label “freak” and another broken heart.

“It is my secret to tell, or not, as I choose,” she said firmly, once her heart was beating slow enough again that she could say the words instead of spit them, and Shelley had the wisdom to forgo a reply.

They pulled up outside the coroner’s office and Zoe slammed the car door behind her, stalking over to the entrance. Then she stopped. It would do no good at all to go into the examination with this kind of energy hanging over her. She had to forget it, put it on a shelf inside her mind and come back to it later. For now, she had to be professional.

The coroner, a trim Asian woman in her mid-forties with sharp eyes and hair cut at a sharp ninety-degree bob in line with her chin, was obliging enough. She showed them the professor's body, and stood back respectfully while they made their examination.

Lying naked on the metal gurney, the man was reduced to nothing more than white meat. Take the sheet away, and it was hard for Zoe to connect and keep connected the lines between this hunk of dead flesh and the man it had been. Whoever he was had long gone. She could see it still, in the yellowed fingertips that spoke of a nicotine habit and the small inch-long impression over his left ear where he had spent years wearing ill-fitting glasses. But the essence, the being, whatever it was that had once filled this body and animated it, was nowhere to be found.

It was better that way. People distracted her. They hid their true selves behind words and gestures that she could not always understand. But bodies could not lie. They were as they were, no more and no less.

It didn't hurt, of course, that his face was gone. Smashed inward. The nose had been reduced to an entirely flat plane of the face, all the bumps and curves pressed against the inside of his skull now. The right side of the head, too, was cracked and squashed, bearing clear lines of impact. No one could have survived that. Even one of his eyes was gone.

The equation was there on his torso, written out sideways from the top of his chest to just below his navel. It was all as it seemed in the photographs—the full piece had been captured faithfully. Wearing uncomfortable white disposable gloves, Zoe turned over each of his arms and legs, and even hefted him onto his side with Shelley's assistance. Nowhere could they see any other trace of ink, or indeed any marking that could hint at being a missing part of the equation.

"They didn't miss anything," Shelley said out loud, confirming the growing frustration that was building in the center of Zoe's forehead.

"The other one." Zoe turned to look at the coroner. "We need to see the student as well."

The coroner shrugged, making a gesture that seemed to suggest she thought it pointless, and walked over to open another tray of the metal filing cabinet that served as a temporary resting place. She tugged it open with a long scraping sound of well-oiled metal on metal, and stepped back to allow them access to the resident.

The college student looked even younger than he had in the photographs, lying on the cold metal tray with all the blood drained out of his cheeks and the color with it. The top of his head was a mess, open and crushed inward. He was covered with a respectful sheet, but respect was only an obstacle in this case. Zoe stepped closer and tugged it aside, noting Shelley's reluctance to do so.

For a long second, Zoe stared, unable to comprehend what she was looking at. Then she briefly wondered if they had pulled out the wrong body, but she had recognized his face from the crime scene photos. Finally, disbelief reigned, and she turned on the coroner with a glower that had the other woman backing away.

"Where are the equations?" Zoe asked, her tone low and flat, menacing enough to tell anyone about the anger behind it.

"Well, we performed the autopsy," the coroner stuttered, feeling for a metal table behind her to steady herself. "We always wash the bodies to perform the autopsy."

"You scrubbed away the evidence."

Shelley stepped closer to lay a gentle hand on Zoe's arm, perhaps warning her to cool down. Zoe ignored it. She was seething, every muscle in her body wanting to explode in a burst of energy and throw something at the wall. Maybe at the coroner.

The only reason she didn't was that it was very clearly against the professional code of conduct. How could they have allowed something like this to happen?

"Who authorized the cleaning?" Shelley asked, her tone quiet and calm. She stepped forward, slightly in front of Zoe, as if shielding her.

The coroner fumbled for paperwork, still stuttering, her face gone pale. Zoe couldn't take any more. She stalked out of the room with a growl in the back of her throat, slamming the door behind her for good measure. It being a swing door, the movement lost some of its effect, but it released some of the tension in her body all the same.

Shelley joined her a couple minutes later, finding her pacing up and down at the end of the corridor.

"We should have them written up for tampering with evidence," Zoe said, as soon as Shelley was close enough to hear.

"They were within the scope of their instructions," Shelley sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "The photographer felt they had captured everything. We're just going to have to take their word for it."

"They should be punished anyway. Do they not have common sense? It was *clearly* evidence. And the lead investigators not having even seen the body yet!"

"Well, in fairness, this was a local case when they did the autopsy, not a federal one. What's done is done. We just have to work with what we have."

Shelley was being rational; too rational. Zoe didn't like it. She wanted a justification for the frustration she felt, dammit, a common feeling between the two of them. She hated being made to feel like she was the freak with the problem. Things being done incorrectly was a problem. People were supposed to do the jobs they were paid for. That was how society *worked*.

"Something like that should have been obviously important," Zoe said, trying one last attempt at lulling Shelley into her own rage.

It was not to be. "We've got to keep moving anyway," Shelley said, stepping outside and looking back to make sure Zoe was following her. "Should we go talk to the professor's wife next?"

Zoe nodded, giving up. Maybe she was overreacting. She had been told that she could do that, on occasion.

There was more to this case than the physical evidence on the bodies. Of course, the math was tantalizing, as was the target of a respected university. But there was always another story to be heard from the family of the victims, the people who knew them.

Perhaps Mrs. Henderson would be able to shed some light on her husband's death—and get this frustrating case wrapped up sooner rather than later.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Shelley took the driver's seat, an uncommon occurrence when she was driving with her partner. Shelley knew that Zoe was normally carsick, but today she was so preoccupied with her equations that she hardly seemed to notice the roads flashing by. She wasn't even clutching at her seatbelt, her usual tell for discomfort.

Shelley glanced over whenever she had a chance—waiting at intersections or paused in a line of traffic. What Zoe was scribbling down frantically across multiple pages of her notebook made no sense at all to her. They might as well have been hieroglyphics.

Zoe had a real gift when it came to numbers, but there were other sides to that too. A single-minded obsession could take over at times, like now. As much as Shelley wanted to help, she had no idea what was required—and Zoe wasn't about to tell her. She was like that fairly often, too. Quiet, closed off. Shelley had heard the stories about her previous partners, and it wasn't hard to extrapolate that she maybe had given up on trusting people with her thoughts a long time ago.

Zoe was used to working alone. If she had her way, Shelley was going to change that. It just might take her a long while to get there. In the meantime, she would have to keep prompting her and reminding her to share her thoughts.

Just maybe not about math. Shelley could trust her to work on the math alone.

The English professor lived across town, in one of the flashier suburbs, white-painted houses with wide lawns and matching white fences. Shelley pulled up outside, killing the engine, and waited for Zoe to notice.

She didn't even look up.

There were times when Shelley felt that she needed to tread carefully around Zoe—to handle her with the utmost care. With kid gloves. Which was somewhat ironic, given that Shelley spent all of her time at home being a parent. There were more than a few times that she felt she was doing the same thing at work, even if Zoe was the older of the two of them.

"We're here," Shelley said, softly, not wanting to startle Zoe out of the middle of the calculations she was working on.

Zoe's pen hesitated in midair, and she looked up at last. She seemed surprised to be anywhere other than the coroner's office parking lot. "I just need to finish..."

Shelley raised an eyebrow. "Z, is it going to take less than two minutes to finish? Because if not, maybe we should go and talk to the professor's wife, and come back to the equation later."

Zoe sighed noisily, but seemed to agree. She stowed her notebook away in a pocket and got out of the car, which Shelley took as a signal to do the same. She revised her earlier thought: dealing with Zoe wasn't exactly like dealing with a child. More like a surly teenager, at times.

Mrs. Henderson seemed to have been waiting for them, or at least for someone. She was dressed neatly in a dark floral dress, the muted colors conveying something of what she was going through. Her eyes were rimmed with red, but open and sharp, assessing Shelley and Zoe within moments of their meeting at the threshold.

"I'm Special Agent Shelley Rose, and this is Special Agent Zoe Prime. We'd like to come in and talk about your husband, Mrs. Henderson."

The woman nodded, gesturing them inward, stepping out of the way so that she could close the door after they entered. The house was furnished in an understated classic style, all dark wood and comfortable cushions and throws. Mrs. Henderson led them through into a lounge area, where Shelley gratefully accepted the offer of coffee on both Zoe's and her own behalf.

"She's taking it very well," Shelley murmured, casting an eye around their new setting. It was neat, not a single item out of place. No dust on the low, marble-topped coffee table or the dark sideboard weighed down with mementos and tchotchkes. Several pieces of fresh fruit rested in a

burnished bowl in the center of the table. It looked more like a television set than a home that was actually lived in.

Maybe Mrs. Henderson's way of dealing with her grief was to clean and tidy the home, ready for visitors. It wouldn't be completely unusual. Shelley had seen it before. It was tied to denial—the thought that if she just made sure that everything was perfect, her husband might come back in through the door.

The busywork, too, put off the grief.

A framed photograph sat on the mantelpiece: the professor and his wife, in happier times. Shelley looked at it and tried not to see the horrific mess that the professor's head had been turned into.

"Seventeen figurines," Zoe muttered. Shelley followed her gaze to the sideboard and knew that Zoe was doing what she always did: looking for numbers. In this case, however, they had already taken on a new significance. She was looking for a clue that would lead to a breakthrough with the equations.

The mistress of the house returned after only a few minutes, carrying a tray laden with three hot cups of coffee. The dainty porcelain design of Mrs. Henderson's cup was offset by the plain practicality of the other two. Two personalities, coming to bear on the contents of a home. Maybe a statement that the visitors she had received today were not worthy of the best china.

"This must have come as a great shock to you," Shelley said, lifting her cup and blowing gently across the surface of the coffee before taking a sip. Questions or statements like this, open and inviting, often encouraged more information to spill forth. The kind of information that you might not even think to ask for otherwise.

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Henderson sighed deeply, settling back into the armchair which must have been her habitual place. "I still can't quite believe it. My Ralph, gone just like that. And so violently, too. I just can't fathom it."

"Can you think of a reason behind the level of violence, Mrs. Henderson?"

The older woman closed her eyes briefly, a hand fluttering up to her forehead. It was adorned still with a plain gold wedding band, alongside a more elaborate concoction of small diamonds. Perhaps an engagement ring, decades old. "At first I thought they meant to steal something. His car, or his wallet. But the police said nothing was gone."

"The psychologists tell us that there's evidence of great rage in the scene. That kind of anger, well, it usually comes from knowing someone personally. Is there anyone you can think of? Someone who would be angry with your husband, enough to wish him harm?"

An embroidered handkerchief came up to dab at her eyes, the ringed hand lifting to brush away a strand of her mousey brown hair. "I can't think of it. I mean, Ralph was—he was *Ralph*. He never hurt a fly. He got on well with his colleagues, was liked by his students. We have a few friends in the neighborhood who would come over for dinner now and then. He never so much as argued with strangers. There was nothing controversial about him. Everyone loved him!"

"All right, so no known enemies," Shelley said, nodding encouragingly even though she felt frustrated by the answer. It was always better to have somewhere to go next. "Through his whole career, do you think? He never had any trouble at all?"

Mrs. Henderson sniffed, shrugging her shoulders up and down. "Well, there was always something small," she said, though her tone indicated she thought it could not possibly mean anything. "He was a professor. There were students who didn't agree with their grades. Or those who flunked out for not attending class or turning in their work on time. They all think they ought to be given special treatment. But that's normal. Just part of the job. No one would kill over something like a *grade*, would they?"

Shelley could see that Mrs. Henderson was really asking the question—looking for reassurance. Sadly, Shelley knew that she could not give it to her. People killed for all kinds of reasons. There

was not always rationality behind it. Sometimes it was simply the final straw that made them snap, on top of everything else.

Maybe it was an idea worth exploring. Rich, entitled kid given everything in life, suddenly starts to fail for the first time? Throws a fit driven by privilege? Or some down and out student with nothing left to live for—parents recently deceased, girlfriend broken up with him, lost his part-time job, and then a bad grade on top of all the rest? It was something to look into, at the very least.

“Let’s hope not,” she volunteered, along with a small smile intended to convey her sympathies. “Can you think of anything unusual that might have happened in the past days or weeks—even months?”

Mrs. Henderson shook her head, dabbing at her eyes again. “I’ve thought about it, over and over. Everything was just—normal. That’s why it was such a shock. Totally out of the blue. I don’t know why anyone would want to hurt my Ralph at all.”

The woman was getting more and more distressed. Perhaps it would be prudent to wrap the interview up, leave her to her peace. “Is there anything else you can tell us—anything at all? It might not even seem relevant, but every little bit of information is another piece of the puzzle.”

Mrs. Henderson shook her head helplessly.

“All right, one last question. Do you recall your husband ever talking about a student named Cole Davidson?”

“Not until his name was in the papers,” Mrs. Henderson said. “That poor boy. Do you... do you think they are connected? They must be, mustn’t they? Two murders within such a short space of time?”

“It’s not useful for us to speculate at this stage.” Shelley took a final gulp of her coffee, regretting the need to leave behind half of what had been a very decent cup. “But we’ll be in touch if we can tell you more.”

Shelley stood, then hesitated as Zoe joined her. “Mrs. Henderson, do you have someone to keep you company today?”

She nodded slowly, getting up to escort them to the door. “My daughter is flying home. She should be here by tonight.”

That put Shelley’s heart at ease. Leaving a woman alone with her grief never quite sat right, no matter how many family interviews she did. “Then we’ll be in touch, Mrs. Henderson. In the meantime, try to get some rest.”

They got back into the car, Zoe pulling out her notebook immediately to start scribbling again. Shelley wondered if she had even heard a word of the interview, or if she had immediately dismissed it as useless and spent the entire time thinking about numbers.

Whichever it was, Shelley couldn’t get mad. Right now, the equations were the only real clues they had. As they drove back to base, Shelley couldn’t help but worry that they would not find anything of more value that would break the case open. With Zoe so fixated on the numbers, it was going to be up to Shelley to find something else that would make a difference.

The problem was figuring out where to look.

## CHAPTER SIX

Zoe resented every moment of wasted time spent on the walk through the building, from the parking lot to the room they had taken over for their investigation. Nearly five hundred steps of distance that could have been spent on working. Nice as it was to be working on something that had happened, as Shelley put it, in their own backyard, Zoe was already getting irritable. The equations were refusing to give up their secrets to her, remaining obtuse and opaque.

As soon as she reached the table, Zoe sat down and resumed her notes, trying to work through every element of the professor's equation, bit by bit. His was the one they had seen in person, after all, the one that they could be sure was whole.

"I'm going to go through his faculty email account," Shelley announced, dumping her bag onto a chair and digging out her phone.

"Is that necessary?" Zoe asked, wrinkling her nose. There was no point in rushing around after some kind of clue like that. The answer was in the equations, not in the professor's personal life. It had to be. There was no link between Cole Davidson and this English professor, not without the equations.

"I'm not good at math, so I can't help you work through the numbers on this one," Shelley pointed out. "Something Mrs. Henderson said made me think. It could always be something to do with a student. Someone who felt slighted in some way. It's possible that there are many people who knew both Cole and Professor Henderson from campus."

Zoe hesitated, her objections waiting on the tip of her tongue. She felt like it would be a waste of time, poking through a dead man's emails. But what did it matter? Shelley was right—she couldn't help with the equations. And maybe it was time that Zoe started trusting her to investigate things in her own way.

Maybe, also, it would be good for Zoe if this case was solved off the back of a disgruntled email, rather than through the numbers. After Shelley had pointed out to their superiors that Zoe was good with math, Zoe wasn't exactly at pains to prove it. In fact, it would be better if she could pass that off as a partner's misplaced confidence.

But not, of course, if it compromised the case. Stopping the killer was still the most important thing.

Zoe returned her attention to the equations while Shelley called the university to get the access she needed. The thing was, she had gone about as far as she could go—with both of them. It was true that there was still the possibility of something missed on the student's body, but they had checked the professor for themselves.

So, what was she missing?

There was another possibility, of course: that she simply wasn't advanced enough to solve it. There was a difference between being able to see numbers—distances, dimensions, angles—and being able to solve quantum math problems. There were other skills involved, skills that other people spent their whole lives developing. Zoe might have had a gift, but she had devoted it to the pursuit of killers, not to the study of math.

Which brought another idea to her mind.

She got up, leaving Shelley still chatting with a receptionist on her cell, and carried a sheaf of photographs down the hall to the elevator. Up two floors, and down an identical corridor to the one she had left—except that the rooms on this floor had rather more power exuding from each of them.

Zoe took a breath before knocking on her boss's door. How many times had she been summoned here, to be chewed out for losing another partner or discharging her firearm?

But this was not like those times, and she entered when bidden, trying not to feel nervous.

With his imposing frame and larger than average musculature, it was easy to see how Special Agent in Charge Maitland would have been intimidating in the field. Criminals would have taken one look at him and then run.

Zoe was trying very hard not to feel the same.

“Sir,” she said, hesitating in the doorway.

Maitland looked up from his paperwork, then continued scrawling his signature at the bottom of a request. “Go on, Special Agent Prime. Don’t wait out in the corridor all day.”

Zoe stepped forward, letting the door close behind her with a little reluctance. She squared her shoulders, however, and faced him with the straight back she always felt inspired to uphold in his presence. “Sir, it is regarding the case Special Agent Rose and I are working on. The college kid and the professor, found with equations written on their bodies.”

Despite the large caseload which must necessarily have gone through the DC field office, Maitland didn’t skip a beat. “I know it. What do you need?”

“The equations are extremely high-level,” Zoe said, feeling a little like a failure for even admitting they were too much for her. Still, it had to be done. Eyeing the neat ninety-degree angles of everything arranged on Maitland’s desk, instead of watching his expression, she pushed herself onward. “I believe we would do better if we brought in a subject matter expert. Someone who could work on the equations from a professional mathematics standpoint.”

Maitland nodded, then paused in his writing as he realized that she was done. “Do you have someone in mind? Special Agent Rose reminded us that you studied math once upon a time.”

“I do, sir.”

“Good.” Maitland’s attention returned to the paperwork, effectively dismissing her. “Permission granted. Have the paperwork turned in ASAP.”

“Yes, sir.” Zoe turned and almost fled for the door, happy to have such a positive outcome. She was not going to stick around and wait for him to change his mind, by any stretch of the imagination.

There was work to do—and someone very important to bring into the case.

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Zoe waited expectantly, watching her mentor examine the images.

“These are... disturbing.” Dr. Applewhite shook her head, holding her lower lip between her teeth for three seconds as she slipped the photograph to the back of the pile in her hands and studied the next one. “I sometimes forget that you have to look at this kind of thing day in and day out. It must take a toll.”

Zoe shrugged. “Dead bodies are dead. It is the not solving them that bothers me.”

“And this is one that you haven’t yet been able to solve.” It was not a question. Zoe had already primed the doctor with the fact that she needed help. Dr. Applewhite knew that it was an open, ongoing case, and that permission had had to be sought for them to even be having this conversation. She understood also that time was of the essence. With every passing hour, it became less and less likely that they would find the person who did this.

The thing about homicides was that the first twenty-four hours were crucial. Everyone knew that. Forty-eight hours without an arrest, and you were starting to head into dangerous territory. The kind of cases that would become episodes of late-night TV shows.

The college kid had been dead for well over forty-eight hours.

“I need to know what it means,” Zoe explained. “Right now, this is the only lead that we have. There does not seem to be any connection between the professor and the student, beyond the fact of their locations. No witnesses, no coverage of surveillance cameras. We have to figure out what kind of message the killer is trying to send if we are going to stop him.”

Dr. Applewhite was frowning down at the images, and she placed them beside Zoe's notes to run through the calculations Zoe had already made.

"Your working seems sound," she said, after a while had passed. "I can't see anywhere else to take it that you haven't already gone. This is extremely advanced—beyond even the level that I work at."

Zoe's heart sunk in her chest. She had been sure, so sure, that Dr. Applewhite would have the answers. Now, it seemed, those hopes were dashed.

She was already thinking through alternatives, trying to figure out what she was going to say to Shelley, when Dr. Applewhite spoke up again.

"I know some people who might be able to help," she said. "Professors. A couple of mathematicians who work in other fields. If I can show this to them, I might be able to get a bit further with it. This is the kind of challenge that they will all love, so at least we're bound to get some skilled hands on deck."

Zoe nodded her approval. "That would be helpful."

Dr. Applewhite tucked her graying bob behind one ear and looked up, fixing Zoe with that same curious stare now. "How are you holding up on this one? It's not often a math question comes up that has you stumped."

Zoe considered lying for a brief moment, but then let her shoulders slump. "A little like a failure. This is my specialty. I should at least be able to work it out. If I cannot, who in the FBI is going to?"

In anyone else's voice, it would have sounded like a brag. To Zoe, it was pure fact. Analysts and their like might spend all day working with numbers, but they didn't have the instinctive grasp on them that she did. They couldn't look at an equation on the page and see the answer as clearly as if it was written out beside it. At least, that was the case for her usually.

This one was something else.

"You can't be expected to solve everything. No FBI agent in the history of the Bureau ever had a one hundred percent solve rate."

Zoe smiled a wan smile. "I am sure that there have been examples. Agents who were killed or retired just after solving their first case, for example."

Dr. Applewhite rolled her eyes. "Trust you to find the loophole. All right, I will make some calls and get these equations out in front of some of my colleagues. I won't tell them what it's for—just that it's urgent and a big challenge. That should intrigue them enough to get them working on it. I will let you know the moment anyone makes a breakthrough."

"Or anything else, too," Zoe prompted. "If someone finds a mistake, or a sign that something is missing. We were not able to fully check the first body to see if anything was missed by the photographer. Bear in mind that we also do not know whether this is intended to be one equation or two separate problems."

"Understood." Dr. Applewhite placed the photographs down on the desk in front of her, two inches off to the right, closer to her laptop. A gesture that reassured Zoe of her intention to begin work as soon as she had the chance. "Now, what about Dr. Monk's recommendations? Have you thought anymore about—"

Zoe's ringtone blasted out from her pocket, accompanied by strong buzzing. Saved by the bell, she thought, as she made an apologetic face and answered the call.

"Special Agent Prime."

"Z, it's me. I got a hit in the professor's emails."

"I am on my way," Zoe told her, ending the call and jumping out of her seat with a nod to her mentor. Whatever it was, it had to be more promising than the nothing that they had.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Zoe pulled the car into the campus parking lot. At this time of night, the evening drawing down rapidly, it was fairly full—the cars belonging to students who lived in the various dorms and apartments scattered around. Each of them bore a university permit stuck to their front windshield. Zoe's car had something better—an FBI sticker.

“Read it to me again?” Zoe asked. She was still unsure about Shelley's theory. Being angry about a dropped grade was one thing, but angry enough to kill?

Shelley brought up the email on her phone without even a sigh of frustration, to her credit. She had saved the screenshot and brought it along as proof—proof they would need if they were going to confront the student who had sent it.

“Professor,” she read. “I can't believe you flunked me. Like, are you serious? I tried really goddamn hard on his paper and you just decided to kick me off the course! Teachers are supposed to help and support. Thanks a whole fucking bunch. You're the worst professor I ever had. I hope you get fired. I'm not the only one who hates your guts. You're going to get hauled over the coals if the dean listens to our complaints. Try sleeping well tonight, asshole.”

Zoe had already zoned out by the time Shelley was done. She had heard it a couple of times before, and this time had not changed her opinion. It was student bluster, that was all. Threats made to his career, not to his life.

Not to mention that the student in question was studying English, not math. It was not a close enough connection. How could this barely literate student have known to write out complex equations? Complex enough to stump experts?

And besides, even if this kid was angry with the professor, it didn't at all explain why he would have gone after the first victim—the student.

“Well?” Shelley prompted.

Zoe realized that she had been sitting in silence, failing to respond to Shelley's reading. She shrugged her shoulders now. “It sounds like nothing.”

“Come on, he's directly threatening the professor, Z,” Shelley said. “And this allusion to other disgruntled students—what if he knows others who might have done it? At the very least, we need to bring him in for questioning.”

Zoe stared out across the dark campus, her arms folded across her chest in front of the steering wheel. “If you say so.”

It clearly was not the answer that Shelley had been hoping for, as she made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat and turned away.

Her phone buzzed at almost precisely the same moment, and she looked down to read the incoming message. “I've just had an email from a secretary in the admissions department. She sent over Jones's schedule.”

“Jones?” Zoe interrupted.

This time, Shelley did sigh and roll her eyes. “Jensen Jones, the student we're here to see. I know you don't think it's much of a lead, but I thought you were at least paying attention.”

Zoe shrugged again, offering no apology. She had better, more important things to focus on. The equations. The fact that she still wasn't any closer to solving them. Waiting around for Dr. Applewhite's contacts to look at them and get back to her was like agony.

“Anyway, this is important. Jones was also taking a physics class. And guess who happened to be the student instructor for that class?”

Zoe stared back at her, unflinching. She wasn't about to play this game.

Shelley pushed on, undeterred. “Cole Davidson. As in, victim number one. Jones has a personal connection to both of the victims.”

“But he does not take math.” Zoe couldn’t hold it back any longer. She refused to believe that there was any way the equations were random, just scrawling meant to distract them. They had a key part to play in this case. They had to.

Because if they didn’t, then Zoe wasn’t as useful to this case as she thought she was, and it was all just a boring, run of the mill murder. Why it bothered her so much that that might be the case, she couldn’t fully say. All she knew was that she needed to solve the equations, and for them to be the key.

“Look, I know you could pull rank if you wanted to. You’re the senior agent. But I don’t want to end up with an unsolved case and not be able to say that we left no stone unturned. I’m going in to question him,” Shelley said decisively, opening her door and getting out of the car.

Zoe sat for a moment, then sighed and opened her own door. At the end of the day, they were partners. They worked together. Even if Zoe had no belief at all that this was a viable need, she was still supposed to support her partner.

So, she would.

She caught up with Shelley, who was striding as fast as her legs could take her across the campus, some minutes later. There was a crackling energy coming from the other woman, an anger that bristled from her like the spines on a porcupine. Zoe was familiar with that kind of sensation. She was always provoking anger in others, often at times when she couldn’t work out what she had done wrong.

At least this time, she knew.

“I will take your lead,” Zoe said. “If you feel that this kid will give us something, I will back you up.”

Shelley’s steps faltered a little, before she resumed her course. “Thank you,” she said, a little too primly. Zoe gathered that she was still upset, but why? She had given Shelley what she wanted, hadn’t she?

Such questions would have to be left for later, or preferably never at all, because they had arrived outside an apartment building just off the side of the campus. Shelley had closed the map application on her phone, by which Zoe understood that they must have arrived. She also knew just standing there in the street that the music booming out of the windows, even though they were closed, was above city regulations for the volume of noise audible in public at night.

A college student, looking to be nineteen years old at most, was stumbling out of the doorway as they approached. He had a red cup in his hand, and his hands were fumbling with a cigarette. When he looked up and saw the two women coming toward him, his eyes widened to almost a comical degree. The one fluid ounce of liquid in the cup was thrown over his shoulder to land on some bushes, and he walked away quickly, clutching the now-empty plastic receptacle as if his life depended on keeping it out of their hands.

“Party,” Zoe said, recognizing enough of the signs.

Zoe pulled her phone out again and brought up a photograph of Jensen Jones from his college registration. He was young, fairly clean-cut. Brown hair, a wide nose, brown eyes. Nothing at all special.

Which was bad news, because of what Shelley said next. “We’ll have to keep an eye out for him. I guess most of them will scatter and run as soon as we get there. We kind of obviously look like FBI, or at least cops. Might have to catch him as he tries to get away.”

“Having a party right after murdering two people?” Zoe asked. “Is that really considered a normal reaction?”

“Not normal, no, but it has happened,” Shelley said. “I could cite a couple of cases, but it’s probably more efficient for us to grab him and find out for sure.”

“After you,” Zoe suggested, gesturing toward the door.

Shelley drew a deep breath as if she were steeling herself, then nodded. “Let’s go.”

Beyond the door of the apartment building, the noise was much louder. To complicate their search, there were three open doors on the ground floor alone—the residents of each of the apartments opening their own spaces up to be a new area of the party. It had spilled across the corridor, up the stairs, and—judging at least by the sheer number of teenagers moving in all directions—through every apartment in the building.

The appearance of Zoe and Shelley was not immediately noted. A couple of students saw them and ducked past them out the door, no doubt wanting to get themselves as far away from trouble as possible.

But then the worst possible thing happened: one of the kids, a jock standing at six feet with the build of a quarterback, yelled out in panic. “The cops are here!”

The call went through the building like wildfire, and panic started to set in. There was no use in trying to stay incognito. Zoe reached into her inner jacket pocket for her badge and brandished it in the air. “FBI. This party is breaking up. Now!”

The effect was immediate and palpable. Thirty students ran past her in quick succession, all of them from down in the lower apartment rooms. The word was spreading up the stairs, too, and people were clattering down, sloshing their beers onto the carpet as they tripped and stumbled.

Zoe waited in the downstairs lobby while Shelley went into all three of the ground floor rooms in turn, scattering more students out through them as she did so. Even from where she stood, making no attempt to catch any of the students who continued to run by her, Zoe could see that the place was a mess. Crumpled red cups, spilled food and drink, and no doubt the occasional patch of vomit covered every surface in sight. It had been a big one—the legendary kind of party that kids talk about for months. Too bad they had ended it.

Zoe couldn’t say she felt any kind of misplaced nostalgia for them. She had rarely been invited to parties of any kind, and it was even rarer that she attended them. Then, as now, this kind of party was too overwhelming. The noise, the people in all directions, the intoxication and temptation of forbidden alcohol—and, judging by the smells in the air, other substances, too.

With the benefit of extra years of experience, it was still all Zoe could do to concentrate on studying the faces of those who ran by her. She checked each of them for the youth in the photograph, but although there were plenty of near matches, none of them were the real Jensen Jones. She felt like a stone in the middle of a river, the current washing around her. There were plenty of interesting things that caught her eye, angles and figures and signs, but they went by so quickly that she was barely even able to register them before they were gone.

Shelley reemerged from the third room, shaking her head. Zoe tore her eyes back toward the stairs, just in time to see someone charging down them. A young woman wearing a collection of twelve bottle tops all strung together around her neck, clattering against one another as she ran—

“There!” Shelley shouted.

Zoe pulled her attention back from the girl too late, seeing only another blur passing by her. By the way Shelley was pointing, Zoe knew that it must have been their guy. She swore under her breath—he was through the door already.

She twisted on her feet and sprang after him, keeping him in her sights as he raced away. He was five foot ten, built athletically, muscles straining easily in his calves as his arms pumped up and down. Young, in shape, and clearly an experienced runner.

Zoe had barely gone five steps before she knew she didn’t have a hope in hell of catching him.

In her head, the campus spread out before her like a map, topography and angles of incline included. He was snaking away toward the left, making for a group of small buildings that dotted the edge of the campus. Behind them was a fence, built to maintain a barrier between the college and the surrounding town.

Zoe thought faster than she could run. His path would necessarily have to be curved, following the line of the fence, before he reached a gap and a gate for pedestrians to pass through. That was

if he had even brought his student ID with him, which she knew already was needed for exiting at that point, right next to several college facilities.

“Keep on him!” she yelled over her shoulder, seeing Shelley from the corner of her eye as she herself peeled away to the right. At this speed, he would always outrun her. But she could cross a shorter distance in the same time, and calculating his miles per hour against hers, she knew that she could meet him at the gate.

But only if she cut a straight line across an open quad, through a narrow corridor between two buildings, and then directly across the parking lot behind it.

Only if someone didn’t get in her way.

Zoe pumped her arms and legs harder, speeding up even when she thought she was at her limit, straining against the cold night air streaming into her lungs. It was not often, these days, that she had a real athletic challenge to cope with. And she wasn’t as young as he was. But she pushed, intending to make damn sure that she would be there in time—even if there was a stumbling block in her way.

The quad passed by in a blur, then it was a shot through the corridor, the thin gap thankfully empty of any other bodies to stumble into her path. The ground underfoot changed to the harsh, jarring feel of tarmac, punishing her feet for choosing to be clothed in plain dress shoes instead of trainers.

Zoe could still not see the fence on the other side of the buildings, but she could see the gate. She rushed forward with another surge of adrenaline. If she didn’t get there in time...

## CHAPTER EIGHT

There was no time to lose. Zoe gave a final, hard push, forcing her body beyond its natural breaking point.

Zoe's heart pounded in time with her feet across the parking lot, and she crashed to a halt as her body collided with another. She thrust out her arms instinctively to keep hold of him, and pushed Jensen Jones up against the ten-foot fence so that he could not use his superior build to get away.

Shelley was only a few moments behind. She was heavily out of breath and red in the face with strands of hair flying out of her chignon, but she was there. She assisted Zoe in slapping a pair of handcuffs around his wrists, behind his back, as they panted out warnings about running from law enforcement and the right to question him. He only hung his head, trying to catch his own breath as well.

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