

College teacher and criminal investigation consultant Nikki Jaeger, invited to an archaeology site to take pictures, ends up embroiled in a homicide investigation that could land an innocent man in prison and cost Nikki her life.

Blackberry Summer

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R. GRIFFITH TURNER



BLACKBERRY SUMMER

A NIKKI JAEGER CRIME NOVEL



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A Nikki Jaeger Crime Novel

R. Griffith Turner

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Chapter 1

Friday, August 7, 12:54 A.M.

The wind blowing down the hollow was humid, redolent of honeysuckle and humus. The night scent was mixed with a faint odor of kerosene from the log cabin hunkered beneath a stand of pin oaks at the mouth of the hollow. Creeper vines all but covered the sagging roof and mostly shrouded a stone chimney. The gibbous moon floating in an ultramarine sky gave the vines a dull, mottled gleam. Amber light from a kerosene lamp flickering on the mantel of the fireplace made the cabin windows amiable accents against the curtain of night.

The moon vanished behind drifting clouds and a tall, wiry man appeared out of the trees, onto the dirt track that led to the cabin. Coming abreast of a black Suburu SUV some fifteen yards from the cabin's porch, he paused briefly then continued toward the cabin.

He put one foot carefully onto the front porch. Testing. Better to find one that didn't squeak. He crouched with one foot on the porch and pulled himself up slowly to stand motionless in the deep shade under the porch roof. The plaintive cooing of mourning doves and a symphony of crickets were disrupted once by the sinister call of a barn owl. In the wake of that short hymn to mortality, there was only the rippling of wind through locust and oak leaves.

Inside the cabin a woman giggled.

The tall man moved closer to the window, close enough for light within to cast his hawk-like nose, scarred upper lip, and deep-set eye sockets into relief. If someone had been lurking

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nearby as an observer, they might have thought of a carnival mask. The scarred upper lip pulled itself into a bow shape when the man smiled. He was smiling now. Watching.

Chapter 2

Thursday, July 27, 11:35 A.M.

Nikki Jaeger looked down at her lecture notes. A young man, too large for his desk, baseball cap turned backwards on his head, nibbled a No. 2 pencil eraser and gazed absent-mindedly at the professor's breasts. A pale-faced blonde on the front row sat with her legs crossed, hunched forward, scribbling rapidly in a notebook.

Nikki looked up, scanned the twenty-two faces and turned to the overhead image on the screen behind her. She paced slowly across the front of the room, waving a hand toward the figures written across the illuminated rectangle.

"We can tell something about the motivations for homicide – in America at least – by looking at murder rates by geographic region, gender, age, social class – that sort of thing." She glanced at the blonde scribbling away on the front row. Maybe she noticed her because about a third of the students were tapping away on laptops. It was vaguely interesting to see a student so clearly devoted to paper and pen. "We call those kinds of measures demographics. Demographic measures."

A black girl with a burr cut looked at Nikki with an expression resembling reproach. Latoya French. "What about race?" she said. Latoya was a bright girl burdened by an attitude. Nikki figured she'd probably earned it. Unlike most of the students in this class, who were from the squeaky clean middle class suburbs of Northern Virginia or Tidewater, Latoya was from Brooklyn. Bedford Stuyvesant.

Nikki smiled at her. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I'm just looking at those numbers up there."

“Pretty grim, huh?” She looked over her shoulder at the table projected on the screen for a moment. “The homicide rate, looking at figures for commission or for victims, is higher for black males under 24 than for any other demographic category. In some urban areas, the chances of a young black man being murdered before reaching age 21 are about 1 in 5.”

Latoya’s eyes studied Nikki’s face impassively.

“Maybe you have an idea why?” Nikki prodded gently.

A sophomore named Paul raised his hand and spoke at the same time. “Drugs,” he said.

“Latoya?” Nikki said gently.

The girl turned to face the white boy. “Yeah, it’s drugs sometimes. But that’s not all it is.” She was glaring when she turned back to Nikki. “They don’t have jobs ‘cause there aren’t that many to get. Young boys get into gangs; drop out of school. Think they got juice if they carryin’ a gun. Lots of reasons.”

Paul the sophomore, wearing a faded Pink Floyd T-shirt and a wide-eyed expression said, “Yeah, maybe so, but it’s still mainly drugs.”

Nikki decided to defuse the tension. “Let’s just say Latoya’s got the point, but, Paul, you’re at least partly right. O.K.?” She smiled and walked behind her lectern, leaning on it casually. “There’s never one simple reason behind homicide. Social conditions make a difference – like having a gang culture in the neighborhood, or availability of illegal drugs. Social class makes a difference. Availability of firearms makes a difference. Your parents’ education makes a difference.” She gave the class one of her famous Dr. Jaeger looks – a sort of appraising scan accompanied by a slight turn to one corner of her mouth. “Want to know what the main factors are behind the typical homicide?”

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Silence. The blonde girl stopped writing and looked up, her eyes seeming out of focus as though she'd missed a punch line.

"Three main demographic factors. Gender. Age. Poverty. Race is a factor, probably, in part, because America is still a racist society, but it's not the main factor."

Latoya looked at Nikki with inscrutable eyes.

"The typical homicide occurs in some kind of a social setting, a bar, maybe a living room, maybe a parking lot – between two lower class males, usually white, typically under age 30, over nothing that would make sense to most of you." She paused. "Or, at least I hope not."

Laughter.

"Murder happens over a spilled drink, a real or imagined comment about somebody's wife or girl friend. The fatal spark might be an argument over whose car has the dandiest displacement or which kind of camshaft delivers more horsepower. The dispute can be over anything: Ball teams, politics, favorite TV shows. The reason for a dispute isn't the issue." Nikki paused. "Loss of face is the issue."

Chapter 3

Friday, August 7, 1:07 A.M.

The tall man on the cabin porch watched his cousin's naked buttocks in motion. She was doing what she was expected to do. The male pelvis underneath Tracy Lou's ass was busy, and Tracy Lou was doing her job with less giggling and more enthusiasm. But she was no fool, even if she was a damn slut. Pictures were supposed to be taken through the window and Tracy Lou had spread out the sleeping bag on the cabin floor about right. She knew the scam and how to work it. She'd done it before. There had to be good shots of the mark's face.

Turning slowly, Henry Weed's gaunt face turned cold in the flickering light. Tracy Lou, humping up and down, looked once toward the window. The expression on her face partly indolence and partly inquiry.

She was ready for her cousin to close the deal. Weed's twisted smile pulled his upper lip again. He was expressing what, for him, might be called patience, waiting for the mark to get off. S'um bitch was sure taking his time. He fished a white latex glove out of his front pocket, slipped it onto his right hand, and took the .38 special from his back pocket. It cast a sinister silhouette in the faint light.

The .38 caliber revolver was standard police issue until 9-millimeter semi-automatics replaced them. This one had wooden handgrips. The bluing had worn off the barrel tip and the edges of the cylinder from years of abrasion against a leather holster. The new nylon holsters didn't wear the bluing off, didn't give a gun character. The .38 felt comfortable, familiar, in Weed's sinewy fingers.

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Cindy Lou was making cooing, female-fucking sounds that had an edge of impatience to them. The man groaned. Tracy Lou didn't.

"Show time," said Weed under his breath and burst through the door of the cabin.

Tracy Lou screamed. She was supposed to, but the shrill sound irritated Weed and he said, "Fuck," under his breath, gritted his teeth, and leveled the .38 in the direction he thought best suited to the situation. Tracy Lou was already across the room in a defensive crouch, holding her dress in front of her, well before the sun-bronzed man sat up and focused his eyes on the gun pointing at his privates.

"What in the hell do you want?" he said. His expression was more about anger and perplexity than fear of the gun.

Cocky s'um bitch, Weed thought. He favored the man with a cold smile. "Tell you what, you get your pecker back in your pants right quick before I take a notion to shoot it off, then we'll talk about it."

Tracy Lou was already pulling her panties on, fiddling with her bra. "Bastard," she blurted at Weed, playing her part. "He's my goddam cousin, is who he is. You have a good time spying on me?"

"Damn fine time," Weed said through his cold smile. "Got pictures and everything."

"Is that what this is all about?" the mark said, beginning to shake a little with anger. "You want money?" He was on his feet now, fumbling to pull on his briefs. Fancy-type underpants. Maroon.

Weed grinned. It looked like a snarl. "You can leave your faggot panties off. Just put on your trousers so I don't have to look at your shriveled up dick no more."

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“Jesus. Why?”

“Let’s just say I need a little proof for cousin’s long-suffering hubby.”

The man said. “Jesus Christ,” tossed his bikini briefs away from him and began to stagger around in the awkward business of pulling on his trousers. He looked maybe 50 or more, but beefy. Muscular arms. Weed figured he’d have to take him out with a headshot if he got rough. He took a step forward to make sure he wouldn’t miss.

“I don’t see no camera,” said Tracy Lou. She was pulling on her dress, eyeing the latex glove. “Where’s the fucking camera?”

“Left it on the porch. Don’t trouble your big ass ‘bout that. Used that special kind of film, too. I bet they’ll come out real good.”

“What’s the point with the glove?” the mark asked, fastening his trousers. For the first time there was an edge of genuine fear in his voice.

“If I have to shoot you, I gotta make it look like a suicide. See what I mean? But I don’t guess you’re stupid enough to get tough, are you now?”

“He ain’t gonna shoot you,” Tracy Lou breathed in the mark’s direction. Then, to Henry Weed, “You ain’t gonna shoot him, are you?”

“Lest I have to, cousin. I’d just as soon not.”

The tension in the mark’s face seemed to ease a little.

Weed smiled, watching the man eyeing him nervously, buttoning his shirt. “Now we can get down to business. Hand me your wallet.”

The mark reached into his back pocket, handed Weed an expensive looking leather wallet. Engraved and initialed. Weed

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tossed it to Tracy Lou, who caught it awkwardly with both hands. "Take out the credit cards and his driver's license. Show 'em to me."

"What's the idea?" the mark said, his jaw rigid, working like he was chewing down his molars.

Weed didn't answer him. He looked at the handful of bills and plastic cards in Tracy's hand. "O.K., cousin, you're doin' good. Now hand me that American Express. Then write down the name and address from the driver's license. Got something to write with?"

Tracy Lou nodded mutely and handed Weed the green plastic card. She moved to the mantel, found her purse beside the kerosene lantern and fumbled through it.

Weed turned the card over and studied the signature on the back, tilting the card to catch the light. "All right, then," he said. The mark began to look restless. Weed glanced at Tracy Lou, scribbling away with a ballpoint pen on a scrap of grocery store receipt. "When you got down that address, put all the shit back in his wallet and hand it to me."

"Why only the American Express?" the mark asked.

"Cause I ain't greedy," Weed said with an odd glint in his eyes.

Tracy Lou handed the wallet to her confederate. Her face was clouded with uncertainty. Her hand trembled. This wasn't going the way she'd imagined. Henry always made her nervous, but now, for some reason she couldn't name, he was scaring the hell out of her.

"Now what?" the mark asked. His face looked haggard. The flush of hormones had gone away. Nothing left but anxiety and shifting eyes.

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“We use your address to track down folks you know, in case they’d like to see some pretty pictures. The card is for expenses. How big was your last charge on it?”

“Ah, shit. I don’t know. Airline ticket. \$750.”

“You ever take out more than that in cash advance?”

“Sometimes.”

“Just for expenses,” Weed said with a grin that showed a missing premolar. “All you got to do is remember to pay the bill with a cheerful heart.”

“That’s all?”

“I’m here on family business, friend. That’ll do jest about right. He tossed the wallet back to the mark. “Now let’s us take a walk back down to that fancy vehicle of yours.”

Chapter 4

Thursday, July 27, 11:40 A.M.

Nikki Jaeger paced slowly in front of the class. “Here’s the main point: Most murders happen in the heat of the moment, mostly between people who know each other. That’s why homicide rates are highest in the summer months, on weekends, and around holiday periods – like Christmas. That’s when people who know each other are most likely to interact. Argue. Get jealous. Pissed off.”

Laughter.

“One criminologist, Alex Thio, calls the typical murder a ‘character contest.’ That’s why poverty and homicide are so closely linked. A lot of men hold to the American ideal of self-reliance, but can’t quite make it. They have crappy jobs that barely cover the bills, insecure jobs, or, too often, no jobs. Men who can’t quite support their families feel a lot of despair, a lot of shame. You might say, for people like that, the veneer of self-esteem is about as thick as the wax on a cafeteria floor. Not much there, but it’s slippery when wet. Worse, it can be wiped away altogether by a dirty look, a chance comment.” Nikki paused, looking around the room.

“Being poor doesn’t mean people have to steal or murder,” said a quiet girl with wide, gray eyes. Carrie Wingate represented another kind of minority at Rutherford College. Although it struck Nikki as ironic that it should be that way. Carrie was from a small town about an hour and a half north and west of the town of Ingles. Her background wasn’t urban middle class or even urban working class. She was from McDowell County, West Virginia. Coal Country. Appalachian heartland. She was

smart in a studied, thoughtful way, but reticent, shy. Her mountain dialect came through sometimes. Her clothes were conservative, simple, never quite “in.” Nikki doubted that she’d been rushed by any of the elite sororities at Rutherford.

Nikki’s eyes closed on Carrie’s for a brief, compassionate moment. She smiled. “Of course not. As a matter of fact even in the roughest urban neighborhoods most crimes are committed by a fairly small proportion of the people who live there. If simple factors like age, gender, and poverty explained everything, I’d have to get another job, wouldn’t I?”

The boy nibbling his pencil grinned. Several people in the back of the room laughed.

But Carrie still had her point to make. “Where I was raised, we never had to lock our doors or any of that.”

Nikki nodded. “That’s one of the factors, one of the variables related to all kinds of crime, Carrie. Community bonds. Kinship bonds.”

Carrie nodded, seeming satisfied. Nikki sighed to herself. She’d save the data on rural homicide rates for another class. This didn’t seem like the time to point out that, as a proportion of the population, homicide rates in parts of the South, including parts of Appalachia, were actually higher than in cities like Boston or even Detroit. Maybe she’d talk about that later.

“What about the stuff on TV we see all the time?” asked a boy who grinned a lot, “Is that all just made up?” Another sophomore. Bart Crandall? No. Cranwell. He had a way of glancing around to see who’d appreciated his savvy comments. Hadn’t quite shed his high school ways. A girl in a black tank top with a nose stud and a braid piled on her head gave the guy a brief, contemptuous look. Nikki recalled that she was a senior. Drama major. For some reason, drama majors preferred black.

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“TV is for entertainment,” Nikki said pacing slowly across the room. “Most upper-class or upper-middle-class crime is about money, not murder – at least not intentional murder.” She smiled ruefully. “Depends on how you look at it. Any of you remember the Ford Pinto?” She paused, turned to the class.

Silence.

“Well, I guess that’s ancient history. Anyway, the car was designed with a flaw. The gas tank might explode from a rear-end collision. So, was it felonious intent or cost accounting that allowed a car like that go into production?”

The blonde girl began writing furiously in her notebook again. Nikki watched her write, realizing that some of the students from local rural areas just might be driving the re-built remains of Ford Pintos. “O.K.,” Nikki said, “let’s put it this way. Murder happens for lots of reasons. Serial murder is real, grim stuff. Mass murders, like those at Columbine, do happen. But all of these account for, oh, three to six percent of felony murders on the FBI Uniform Crime Index from, say, 1990 through the last figures out. 2008. Professional murder happens too, because organized crime is more than fiction. It’s been part of life in America since long before Prohibition. And let’s face it: some of those professional hits are hidden, never cleared by arrest, sometimes never detected at all. And, yes, once in a while an upper middle-class professional person murders another professional person. You may recall the case of the Scarsdale Diet Doctor.”

Blank looks.

“Didn’t mean to catch you off guard there. The case is in your assigned readings.” Nikki smiled. “Anyway,” she continued, “we hear about cases like those, precisely because they are statistically rare – like plane crashes. The son of a German

diplomat, Jens Soering and his girl friend, Elizabeth Haysom, were both described as honor students at the University of Virginia. Depending on how you read the trial transcript, one or both of them murdered Elizabeth's prosperous, socially upscale parents. It happens; the Menendez brothers murdered their parents."

The last reference brought murmurs and nods of recognition. They must have read that assignment. Score one for Dr. J.

Nikki grinned. "Maybe even, once in a while, the butler goes berserk and beats Lady Gotrocks to death with a silver candlestick in the drawing room."

Laughter.

"But, statistically, calculated murder is rare, professional murder is rare, and Hannibal Lechters are, fortunately, very rare birds. Authentic psychopaths exist, but mostly they are the stuff of fiction. I think most of them are Hollywood actors, actually."

Laughter.

"The average homicide cop will never see a Jeffery Daumer in his – or her – entire career. A classic movie you may have seen, *The Silence of the Lambs*, was great drama, but murder is typically a sudden, messy, and very unintelligent business among people who know each other."

Chapter 5

Friday, August 7, 1:12 A.M.

Tracy Lou's eyes were clouded. She stood near the mantel, holding her purse in one hand, her mouth working like she was about to say something. But she didn't speak. Henry Weed gave her a cold look. "You stay here, cousin, while I see your boy friend off, then you and me'll have words."

Tracy Lou Givens wasn't a woman who had many illusions about life. It was mostly hard, often cruel. A body took pleasures where they lay and opportunities when they were offered. She could fuck for money when she had to, for pleasure when she had the right man for an hour or a few weeks. The sun would come up whatever she did, she figured, kind of like a hangover. Wasn't nothing didn't have a cost. But something here was way out of kilter. She walked to the door of the cabin. Henry and the mark were about half way to the black SUV. She'd been in it and knew it was fancy as hell. Moon roof. CD player. One of those GPS gismos. Leather seats. The dumb fuck was rolling in money from the look of that car. They could've taken him for a hell of a lot more than a credit card. She wanted to scream. She wanted to know what in the name of hell and tarnation Henry Weed was up to before she was up to her ass in alligators. Briefly, her eyes scanned the porch. It was too dark to be sure, but she couldn't see a camera anywhere. She halfway knew there wasn't one.

The shocking crack of the .38 seemed to Tracy Lou to have a helpless inevitability to it. She couldn't have said why. She didn't actually think about it, anyway; it was something she

just felt, like a bad attack of the cramps. The next moment she was off the cabin porch and running.

The mark was on his knees with his head down, clutching at his chest. Weed was standing behind him, holding him up by his neck.

Tracy Lou screamed. "Gawd-a-mighty, Henry! Jesus! Why'd you go and do that!" She was abreast of the two men.

The mark was drooling, shuddering. "Why?" he said. "Jesus, why? I can't feel my legs. Oh, God. Oh, my God."

Weed slapped his cousin hard enough to knock her down. But there wasn't much malice in it, just tension and nervous energy. He said, "Shut the fuck up."

Tracy Lou sat on the ground like she'd been whipped, sobbing, mascara running down her cheeks. The mark didn't say anything more. Tracy Lou was glad of that. Somewhere in her deep mind she was glad, even as she shook and sobbed. But she knew, as long as she lived, she'd never forget what he'd already said.

"He's about passed out," Weed said. "That's good. Now cousin, I'm guessing you got that sleeping bag out of this here SUV. That about right?"

Tracy Lou nodded.

"I want you to go back into the cabin and fetch it. Bring it here. Soon as you do that you need to take off that dress again. Right smart. You can lay it there on the vehicle so's it don't get messed up. I'm gonna need your assistance."

"Jeezus, no! Shit!" Tracy Lou flopped down onto her rear end and kicked her feet in the red dirt and pine needles like a little girl having a tantrum.

Weed eyed her for a moment and his words were cold as a gravestone, smooth as Satan winning over souls for the

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legions of hell. “Tracy Lou, now you get a grip on yourself. This here is mountain justice. This city dude went and raped one of our own. Flat out raped her. Three months pregnant, too.”

“Who?”

“Not a girl you know. A decent Mercer girl, married to a good man.”

“What’s her name?”

“Jobeth Hatfield.”

Tracy was merely trembling now. “You done got me into a murder, Henry Weed. I’m gonna end up in fucking prison because of you.”

“No you won’t. Not if you do like I tell you. Now get your ass up off the ground. This here business is bought and paid for and you got one thousand dollars comin’ to you. I got it right here in my pocket in hundreds and fifties. Now get the fuck up! Go fetch that sleeping bag!” Now!”

Tracy Lou sat very still for an instant before beginning to climb to her feet. “I don’t want no blood money,” she said.

“Fuck you don’t.”

The mark didn’t talk again while he was being hauled over brush and dirt. He was merely moaning softly now. And Henry Weed had nothing to say since he had a flashlight tucked between his teeth to illuminate their path. Tracy Lou was glad of that – on both counts. Even so, dressed as she was in nothing but her shoes and her bra and panties, the humid air teasing her skin felt like the varnish of evil. By the time Henry told her they’d gone far enough, she was panting and sweaty. Tears were rolling down her cheeks and she felt like she was going to throw up.

“Help me lift him up off the sleeping bag,” Weed commanded. “Put him down just there, like he is, on his back.”

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The mark was now rolling his head back and forth, shuddering, his chest heaving like he was trying to cough, but couldn't. One side of his shirt was soaked in blood, some of it spreading down across the waist of his trousers. "Turn around," Weed said.

"Why?"

"Just do what I say."

The crack of the .38 made Tracy Lou jump. The concussion hurt her ears and she felt another wave of nausea. She said, "Jesus. Jesus, God," but didn't turn around again. Her ears were still ringing when Weed led her, sobbing again, back toward the cabin.

When they were back at the SUV, Henry tossed the sleeping bag into the back of the vehicle, then showed his cousin a wad of bills he'd fished out of his pocket. "This here's for you. But first you got to help me get everything out of that cabin that wasn't there before your . . . date." He grinned. "I don't want nothin' suspicious left in there, not a single curly cunt hair."

"Fuck you. Murdering sack of mule shit."

Weed honored Tracy Lou with a cold smile. "Yes ma'am. Now yer gettin' yer blood back up in yer head. You just help me get that place cleaned out."

"Then what?"

"Then you clean yourself up, best as you can – down at that crick, yonder. Put your dress back on and get all tidy. You think you can drive this fancy car?"

"Yeah, I can drive it." Tracy Lou glowered at him. "I don't guess I want people findin' my finger prints all over it, though."

"Now yer thinkin' clear, cousin. That'll be taken care of. Now, soon as we've done what needs doing here, you're gonna drive me back to where I left my pickup – just down the track a

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bit. Drop me off there. I'll come on back up here to do some tire-track sweeping and what not."

Tracy Lou just nodded. She suddenly felt too numb to think, much less speak.

"And like I said, cousin, don't you worry yourself none about this here SUV. There's a fella gonna clean it up real good. Knows what to do."

"Mm-kay."

"All right now. Soon as we've done our house keeping chores and you clean yourself up, you can put this here money in a nice safe place on your person and drive this here car somewhere's near the Trailways Station, but not too near. You listening good?"

Tracy Lou shook her head, trying to wake from a bad dream. "Yeah. I'm hearing you."

"Good. You leave the keys in the SUV, in the glove compartment. Leave the car unlocked. Then you get yourself on the bus. Get your ass back to Tennessee. Don't ever say what you seen, not so much as a whisper to a jaybird. You see what I mean?"

"I hear you. What about my car?"

"Jackson or someone'll bring it on back to Black Fork. You'll get it back in a day or two."

"Shit," she breathed.

"You done good, Tracy Lou." He slapped her on the buttocks. "You done real good."

Chapter 6

Thursday, July 27, 11:52 A.M.

Nikki glanced at her watch. She was running over. But she acknowledged the waving hand near the window. Short haircut, one earring, broad shoulders that stretched a gray, cut-off football jersey with the orange and black Rutherford College crest emblazoned across its front. Nikki nodded toward him. “Jason?”

“You said movies like *Silence of the Lambs* are just fiction. But you do behavioral profiling yourself.” Several of the students, including the drama major, looked at Nikki with curious eyes.

Nikki didn’t normally say much about her off-campus work. But it got around. And every semester there were a few students who drifted into her office to ask her about it. The FBI behavioral science unit had been hot ever since *Silence of the Lambs* and its legion of CSI imitators. About a third of her student interns had dreams of joining that elite unit. Nikki would only nod and smile. Most of them hadn’t a clue what it would take, how much training they would need, even to be considered for the FBI, much less for the elite Behavioral Science Unit at Quantico, Virginia.

“Is that right?” asked the drama major.

“Ah, yes, I do. But my work is on profiles and behavioral patterns of rape and sexual assault. Also spouse abuse. I do some consulting and lecturing.”

Jason was persistent. “You worked on the Nancy Wheeler case. My Dad said he read about it in the papers when I told him I had you for this class. That was a homicide.” His expression was grave and guileless.

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Right, Nikki thought, wincing inwardly. She'd been in a gloomy space for the last week. She didn't feel like dragging memories of Nancy Wheeler through her mind. But, in fact, Nikki's work on that case, four years earlier, had earned her a certain reputation. Since then she had consulted on several police investigations, including three rape-homicides cases in two neighboring states. All but one had involved crimes on or near college campuses.

"O.K.," Nikki said, "we're running over. I'm not supposed to talk about police investigations. It's not professional." Or comfortable for me, Nikki failed to add. "Next class, we wrap it up and review for the final. Right now, it's lunch time and I'm hungry whether you are or not."

Laughter. Notebooks slammed shut, laptops were closed, and students began to rise from their desks. "Class dismissed," Nikki said with a wry grin.

College teacher and criminal investigation consultant Nikki Jaeger, invited to an archaeology site to take pictures, ends up embroiled in a homicide investigation that could land an innocent man in prison and cost Nikki her life.

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