



BLAKE PIERCE

BEFORE
HE
COVETS

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 3

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Blake Pierce
Before He Covets

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

Before He Covets / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (A Mackenzie White Mystery)

ISBN 978-1-63-291869-7

In BEFORE HE COVETS (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 3), newly minted FBI agent Mackenzie White graduates the FBI Academy in Quantico only to find herself thrown into an urgent serial killer case. Women are turning up dead while camping in a remote national park in West Virginia. Yet the park is vast, and no connection can be found between them. At the same time, Mackenzie receives a call from Nebraska urging her to come home. After many years, a new clue has surfaced about her father's murder. The case no longer cold, Mackenzie desperately needs to help solve it. But the FBI's killer is ratcheting up, and there is no time for distraction as more women turn up missing in the psychological game of cat-and-mouse that follows. This killer is more diabolical—and smarter—than Mackenzie could have imagined. As she goes down a road she fears to travel—deep into her own psyche—she finds a double twist waiting for her that even she could not expect. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, BEFORE HE COVETS is book #3 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

ISBN 978-1-63-291869-7

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Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes six books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); and of the new KERI LOCKE mystery series.

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

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PROLOGUE

Pam took a seat on the fallen log at the edge of the campsite and lit up a cigarette, energized after sex. Behind her, Hunter's tent was set up in a dented dome shape. She could hear him snoring lightly inside. Even here in the woods, it was the same; here she was, awake and energized in the afterglow of their lovemaking, while he was dead asleep. Here in the woods, though, she didn't mind so much.

She dug a little hole in the ground for the ashes of her cigarette, well aware that smoking in the forest during what had so far been a dry autumn was pretty reckless. She stared up into the sky, looking at the stars. It was a very cool night, as fall had staked its claim on the East Coast and dropped the temperatures significantly, and she hugged her shoulders against it. She wished Hunter's tent had one of those netted tops where you could look out, but no such luck. Still, there had been something romantic about it – getting away from home, being alone in the forest. It was the closest to living together she'd allow until the idiot finally proposed. Given the night sky, the perfect weather, and their crazy chemistry, it was one of the happier nights she'd had.

She wanted to go back inside, to warm up against him, but first she needed to go to the bathroom. She edged into the woods and took a moment to get her bearings. It was hard to make out where she was headed now that it was dark; the starlight and half-full moon provided some light, but not enough. She studied the layout around her and was pretty sure she just needed to cut hard to the left to find the rest area.

She crept out a few feet further and went in that direction for about thirty seconds. When she turned around she could not see the tent.

"Damn," she breathed, now starting to panic.

Get a grip, she told herself as she continued to walk. *The tent is right back there and —*

Her left foot caught on something, and before she was aware of what had happened, she was falling to the ground. She managed to throw her hands out at the last second, keeping her face from striking the ground. The wind went out of her in a solid little gasp and she pushed herself up right away, embarrassed.

She looked back to the log she had tripped over, angry at it in an almost childlike way. In the dark, the shape looked odd and almost abstract. She knew one thing for certain, though. It was not a log.

It had to be the night playing tricks on her eyes. It *had* to be some weird play of the shadows in the dark.

But as a cold fear crept over her, she knew it for what it was. There was no denying it.

A human leg.

And from what she could tell, that's *all* it was. There did not appear to be a body to go along with it. It lay there on the ground, partially hidden by foliage and other woodland debris. The foot was covered in a running shoe and a sock that was soaked in blood.

Pam let out a scream. And as she turned and ran back through the black of night, she never stopped screaming.

CHAPTER ONE

Mackenzie sat in the passenger seat of a bureau-issued sedan with a standard-issue Glock in her hand – a weapon that was becoming as familiar to her as the feeling of her own skin. But today, it felt different. After today, *everything* would be different.

It took the voice of Bryers to break her from her mini-trance. He was sitting in the driver's seat, looking at her in a way that Mackenzie thought was similar to the stare of a disappointed father.

"You know...you don't have to do this," Bryers said. "No one is going to think any less of you if you sit this out."

"I think I *do* have to. I think I owe it to myself."

Bryers sighed and looked out of the windshield. In front of them, a large parking lot was illuminated in the night by weak streetlights that were positioned along the edges and in the center of the lot. There were three cars out there and Mackenzie could also see the shapes of three men, pacing anxiously.

Mackenzie reached out and opened the passenger side door.

"I'll be okay," she said.

"I know," Bryers said. "Just...please be careful. If anything happens to you tonight and the wrong people find out I was here with you –"

She didn't wait. She stepped out of the car and closed the door behind her. She held the Glock down low, walking casually into the parking lot toward the three men standing by the cars. She knew there was no reason to be nervous, but she was all the same. Even when she saw Harry Dugan's face among them, her nerves were still on edge.

"Did you *have* to have Bryers bring you?" one of the men asked.

"He's looking out for me," she said. "He doesn't particularly like any of you."

All three of the men laughed and then looked to the car Mackenzie had just gotten out of. They all waved to Bryers in perfect sync. In response, Bryers gave a fake smile and showed them his middle finger.

"He still doesn't even like me, huh?" Harry asked.

"Sorry. Nope."

The other two men looked to Harry and Mackenzie with the same resignation they had gotten used to over the last few weeks. While they weren't a *couple* per se, they were now close enough to cause the slightest bit of tension among their peers. The shorter of the men was a guy named Shawn Roberts and the other, a massive man who stood at six-foot-seven, was Trent Cousins.

Cousins nodded to the Glock in Mackenzie's hand and then unholstered his own from his hip.

"So are we going to do this?"

"Yeah, we probably don't have much time," Harry said.

They all looked around the parking lot in a conspiratorial fashion. An air of excitement started to thicken the air among them and as it did, Mackenzie came to a sudden realization: she was actually having fun. For the first time since her early childhood, she was legitimately excited for something.

"On three," Shawn Roberts said.

They all started swaying and bouncing on their feet as Harry started the countdown.

"One...two...three!"

In a flash, all four of them were off. Mackenzie took off to the left, headed for one of the three cars. Behind her, she already heard the gentle sound of shots being fired from the guns the others carried. These guns, of course, were mock-ups...paintball guns created to look and feel as close to the real thing as possible. This was not the first time Mackenzie had operated in a simulated

munitions environment, but it *was* the first time she'd gone through one without an instructor – or pads of any kind.

To her right, a red smear of paint exploded on the pavement no more than six inches from her foot. She ducked behind the car and quickly slid to the front end of it. She dropped to her hands and knees and saw two different sets of feet separating further ahead of her, one of which was going behind another car.

Mackenzie had been scoping out the lay of the land while they were standing together. She knew that the best spot to be in the parking lot was going to be at the base of the stone pillar that held the streetlight in the center of the lot. Like the rest of Hogan's Alley, this parking lot was set up as randomly as possible, but with an eye toward educating academy trainees. Given that, Mackenzie knew there was always an optimal location for success in every setting. For this lot, it was that streetlight column. She'd not been able to get to it right away because there had already been two of the guys standing in front of it when Harry had counted down to three. But now she had to figure out how to make a run for it without getting hit.

She'd lose the game if she was shot. And there was five hundred dollars at stake here. She wondered how long ago this little pre-graduation ritual was implemented by trainees and how it had come to be a little hidden legend among the top of every class.

As these thoughts went through her head, she noticed that Harry and Cousins had engaged in a little back-and-forth shootout on the other side of the parking lot. Cousins was behind one of the cars and Harry was pressed against the side of a dumpster.

With a grin, Mackenzie took aim at Cousins. He was well hidden and she could not actually shoot him from where she was, but she could spook him. She aimed at the top corner of the car and fired. A blue spray of paint burst up as her shot landed dead on. She saw Cousins jerk back a bit, distracted from Harry. Harry, meanwhile, took advantage and fired off two shots.

She hoped he was keeping count. The whole point of their little unauthorized late-night exercise was to come out the only one not shot. Each player had the same weapon – a gun that fired paint pellets – and they were each only allowed the standard number of rounds that came with the sort of Glock their paint guns were modeled after. That meant they each had only fifteen rounds. Mackenzie now had fourteen left and she was pretty sure the three men had fired at least three or four each.

With Harry and Cousins occupied, that left only Shawn to contend with. But she had no idea where he was. To be so damn tall, he did a fine job of being stealthy.

She carefully got to her knees and lifted her head out from the side of the car, looking for Shawn. She did not see him, but she heard the little puff-like sound of a gun being fired nearby. She jerked back at the same moment a paint pellet struck the edge of the car's bumper. Some of the green paint splattered on her hand as she backed away but that did not count as a shot.

To be eliminated, you had to be shot in the arm, leg, back, or torso. The only thing that was off limits was headshots. Even though the pellets were small and made of thin plastic, they had been known to cause concussions. And if one took you in the eye, you could be blinded for life. That was one of the big reasons this little exercise was so frowned upon by the bureau. They knew it happened every year but they typically let the graduates have their little secret fun, turning a blind eye.

The shot gave Mackenzie a good idea of where Shawn was hiding, though. He was hunkered down behind the concrete post. And, just as she had planned for herself, he now had a great shot at just about anyone. He turned away from Mackenzie and fired off a quick shot at Harry. The shot missed, striking the top of the dumpster a few inches above Harry's head. He dropped to the ground as both Cousins and Shawn started firing at him.

Mackenzie attempted to get a shot off on Shawn and nearly took him in the shoulder. He ducked back down just as she fired, though, and the shot went wild. Meanwhile, she heard Cousins yell out in frustration and pain.

"I'm out," Cousins said, walking slowly to the edge of the lot. He sat down on a bench, where those who were eliminated were to sit in silence. Mackenzie saw a splotch of yellow paint on his ankle where Harry had landed a shot.

Harry took advantage of this distraction and dashed out from his hiding spot behind the dumpster. He was heading for the third parked car with his usual speed.

As he ran, Shawn rolled out from his hiding spot. He first fired at Mackenzie to keep her in hiding and then swiveled around to catch Harry. He fired another shot at Harry and it struck the ground about two inches away from Harry's left foot just as he leaped behind the car.

Mackenzie took the moment to move to the rear of the car, thinking she could draw Shawn out. She fired to the left of the concrete pillar, the same place she had aimed at while at the front end of the car. When the paint pellet exploded there, he waited a moment and then swiveled out with his eyes at the front of the car. When he did this, Mackenzie dashed out from the rear of the car and advanced quickly and quietly. When her angle was right, she fired off a shot that took him directly in the hip. Green paint exploded on his pants and shirt. He was so shocked by the attack that he fell back on his rear end.

"I'm out," Shawn yelled, giving Mackenzie a sour look.

No sooner had he started walking to the edge of the lot to join Cousins than Mackenzie saw a flicker of motion from her left.

Sneaky bastard, she thought.

She dropped to the ground and hunkered down behind the concrete post. The light shone bright above her head, like a spotlight. But she knew that this could work to her advantage when her attacker was in shadows. The light could be *too* bright, throwing off his aim the slightest little bit.

Just as she pressed her back against the concrete, she heard a paint pellet strike the back of the post. In the silence that followed, she heard Cousins and Shawn chuckling on the bench.

"This should be fun to watch," Cousins said.

"You say *fun*," Shawn said. "I say painful."

Through their thin laughs, Mackenzie couldn't help but smile at the situation. She knew Harry would shoot her; they didn't have the type of relationship where he fawned all over her and would just let her win. They were both in the same boat – graduating tomorrow as new agents.

However, they had spent a lot of time together both in an academic setting and in friendlier situations. Mackenzie knew him well and knew what she needed to do to get him. Almost feeling bad for doing so, Mackenzie leaned out slowly and fired, striking the wheel on the car he was hiding behind.

He came out of hiding right away, popping up over the hood. She faked to the right, as if she were going back behind the post. Predictably, that's where he fired. Mackenzie reversed her direction and rolled to the left. She leveled out on her stomach, brought her gun up, and fired.

The shot took Harry in the right side of his chest. The yellow paint was almost as bright as the sun in the shadows he was hiding in.

Harry dropped his shoulders and tossed his gun out into the lot. He came out from around the car and shook his head, amazed.

"I'm out."

Mackenzie got to her feet and tilted her head, frowning at him.

"You mad?" she asked teasingly.

"Not at all. That was a sweet move."

Behind them, Cousins and Shawn were clapping. Further behind them, Bryers stepped out of his car and joined in. Mackenzie knew he had been worried about her but he'd also been honored to

come with her. One part of the tradition to this exercise was that one seasoned agent had to tag along just in case something went wrong. It happened from time to time. The way Mackenzie had heard it, some guy had been hit in the back of the knee back in '99. He'd had to graduate on crutches.

Bryers joined them as they gathered together at the bench. He then reached into his pocket and withdrew the five hundred dollars that he had been holding for them – cash they had all contributed to the pot. He handed it over to Mackenzie and said:

“Was there really ever any doubt, guys?”

“Good work, Mac,” Cousins said. “I’d rather it was you take me out than one of these jokers.”

“Thanks, I think,” Mackenzie said.

“I hate to sound like an old fart,” Bryers said, “but it’s nearly one in the morning. Get home and get some rest. All of you. Please don’t come to graduation all tired and out of it.”

That bizarre feeling of happiness spread through Mackenzie again. This was her group of friends – a group of friends she had come to know well ever since returning to a somewhat normal life following McGrath’s little experiment with her nine weeks ago.

Tomorrow, they’d all be graduating from the academy, and, if everything shook out the way it was supposed to, they’d all be agents within the following week. While Harry, Cousins, and Shawn had no delusions about starting their careers off on illustrious cases, Mackenzie had more to look forward to...namely, the special group of agents McGrath had mentioned to her in the days following her last unexpected case. She still had no idea what that entailed, but she was excited about it nonetheless.

As their small group broke up and went on their separate ways, Mackenzie felt something else that she had not felt in quite some time. It was the sense that the future was still very much ahead of her, still unfolding and within her reach. And for the first time in a very long time, she felt like she had a great deal of control over the direction in which it was headed.

*

Mackenzie looked at the bruise on Harry’s chest and even though she knew her first emotion should have been compassion, she couldn’t help but laugh. The place where she had hit him was flaming red, the irritation spreading about two inches in all directions. It looked very much like a bee sting and, she knew, hurt much worse.

They were standing in her kitchen and she was wrapping an ice pack in a dishcloth for him. She handed it to him and he held it there comically. It was clear that he was embarrassed but also touched that she had invited him back to make sure he was okay.

“I’m sorry,” she said sincerely. “But you know, maybe I can take you out for coffee on the winnings.”

“That must be some damn good coffee,” Harry said. He drew the ice pack away from his chest and scrunched up his nose when he looked down to the spot.

As Mackenzie watched him, she realized that although he had been to her apartment more than a dozen times and they had kissed on a few occasions, this was the first time he’d ever had his shirt off in her apartment. It was also the first time since Zack that she had seen a man this close to her partially undressed. Maybe it was the adrenaline from winning the contest or because of graduation tomorrow, but she liked it.

She stepped forward and placed her hand on the unharmed side of his chest, over his heart. “Does it still hurt?” she asked, stepping even closer.

“Not right now,” he said, grinning nervously.

She slowly slid her hand over to the mark and touched it gingerly. Then, working only on the female instincts she had long ago shoved down and replaced with obligation and boredom, she leaned in and kissed it. She felt him tense up immediately. Her hand then found his side, pulling

him closer to her. She kissed his collarbone, then the base of his shoulder, then his neck. He sighed and drew her even closer.

As was usually the case with them, they were kissing one another before either of them knew what was happening. It had only happened four previous times but each time, it had occurred like some force of nature, something unplanned and without any expectations.

It took less than ten seconds before he had her pressed lightly against the kitchen counter. Her hands explored his chest while his left hand found its way up her shirt. Her heart hammered in her chest and every muscle in her body told her that she wanted him, that she was ready for this.

They'd come close before – twice before, actually. But on both occasions, they had cut it off. Actually, *she* had stopped it. The first time, she had put an end to it just as he had started fumbling with the button on her pants. The second time, he'd been pretty drunk and she'd been far too sober. Neither of them had ever stated as such, but the hesitancy to sleep together came down to a mutual respect for one another and an uncertainty for the future. Also, she thought far too much of Harry to simply use him as a sexual release. She was growing more and more attracted to him, but sex had always been a very private matter. Before Zack, there had only been two men, and one of those had essentially been an issue of assault rather than mutual sex.

As all of this rocketed through her head while kissing Harry, she realized that her hands were now much lower than his chest. He apparently noticed this, too; he tensed up again and drew in a sharp breath.

She pulled her hands away suddenly and broke the kiss. She looked down to the floor, afraid that she'd see disappointment in his eyes.

"Wait," she said. "Harry...I'm sorry...I can't –"

"I know," he said, clearly a little frustrated and out of sorts. "I know it's –"

Mackenzie took one large collective breath and then stepped away from him. She turned away, unable to handle the confusion and hurt in his eyes. "We can't. I can't. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he said, still clearly flustered. "Tomorrow is a big day and it's late. So I'm going to go before I have time to care that I've been shot down yet again."

She turned back around to face him and nodded. She didn't mind the barbed comments. She sort of deserved them.

"That might be for the best," she said.

Harry slid his shirt back on, complete with splattered paint, and slowly headed for the door. "Good job tonight," he said as he left. "There wasn't any doubt you'd come out the winner."

"Thanks," Mackenzie said, without much expression. "And Harry...really, I'm sorry. I don't know what's stopping me."

He shrugged as he opened the door. "It's okay," he said. "Just...I can't really do this much longer."

"I know," she said sadly.

"Goodnight, Mac."

He closed the door and Mackenzie was left alone. She stood in the kitchen, looking at the clock. It was 1:15 and she wasn't remotely tired. Maybe the little exercise at Hogan's Alley had driven too much adrenaline into her bloodstream.

Still, she tried going to bed but spent most of the night tossing and turning. In some sort of half-sleep state, she had dreams she barely remembered, but the one consistent thing to each of them was the face of her father, smiling, proud of her that she had made it this far – that she was graduating from the academy tomorrow.

But despite that smile, there was another consistent thing to the dreams, something she had long ago gotten used to as a frequent haunt once the lights went out and sleep came: the dead stare in his eyes and all of the blood.

CHAPTER TWO

Even though Mackenzie had set her alarm for eight o'clock, she was stirred awake by the vibrating of her cell phone at 6:45. She groaned as she came awake. *If this is Harry, apologizing for something he didn't even do, I'm going to kill him*, she thought. Still half-asleep, she grabbed her phone and read the display through hazy eyes.

She was relieved to see that it wasn't Harry, but Colby.

Puzzled, she answered it. Colby was not traditionally an early riser and they hadn't spoken in over a week. Anal retentive to the core, Colby was probably just freaking out about graduation and the uncertainty of the future. Colby was the one female friend Mackenzie had here in Quantico, so she had done whatever she could to make sure the friendship stuck – even if it meant answering an early call on the morning of graduation, after she'd only gotten four and a half broken hours of sleep the night before.

"Hey, Colby," she said. "What is it?"

"Were you asleep?" Colby asked.

"Yeah."

"Oh my God. I'm sorry. I figured you'd be up at the crack of dawn this morning, with everything that's going on."

"It's just graduation," Mackenzie said.

"Ha! I wish that's all it was," Colby said in a slightly hysterical voice.

"Are you all right?" Mackenzie asked, slowly sitting up in bed.

"I will be," Colby said. "Look...do you think you could meet me at the Starbucks on Fifth Street?"

"When?"

"As soon as you can get there. I'm heading out now."

Mackenzie did *not* want to go – she really didn't even want to get out of bed. But she had never heard Colby quite like this. And on such an important day, she figured she should try to be there for her friend.

"Give me about twenty minutes," Mackenzie said.

With a sigh, Mackenzie got out of bed and took care of only the basics in terms of getting ready. She brushed her teeth, tossed on a hooded sweatshirt and running pants, put her hair in a sloppy ponytail, and then headed out.

As she walked the six blocks down to 5th Street, the weight of the day started to sit on her. She was graduating from the FBI academy today, just before noon, nestled in the top five percent of her class. Unlike most of the graduates she had gotten to know over the last twenty weeks or so, she would not have any family in attendance to help her celebrate this accomplishment. She would be on her own, as she had been for most her life, since the age of sixteen. She was trying very hard to convince herself that it didn't bother her, but it did. It did not create sadness within her, but a weird sort of angst that was so old its edges had become dulled.

As she reached the Starbucks, she even noticed that traffic was a little thicker than usual – probably the family and friends of other graduates. She let it slide right off her back, though. She had spent the last ten years of her life trying not to give a damn about what her mother and sister thought of her, so why start now?

When she stepped into the Starbucks, she saw that Colby was already there. She was sipping from a cup and staring contemplatively out the window. There was another cup in front of her; Mackenzie assumed it was for her. She took a seat across from Colby and made a show of how tired she was, narrowing her eyes in a grumpy fashion as she took the seat.

"This is mine?" Mackenzie asked, taking the second cup.

“Yes,” Colby said. She looked tired, sad, and all around grumpy.

“So what’s wrong?” Mackenzie asked, skipping any attempt Colby might have of beating around the bush.

“I’m not graduating,” Colby said.

“What?” Mackenzie asked, genuinely surprised. “I thought you passed everything with flying colors.”

“I did. It’s just...I don’t know. Just being in the academy burned me out.”

“Colby...you can’t be serious.”

Her tone had come with some force but she didn’t care. This was not like Colby at all. Such a decision had come with some soul-searching. This was not a fluke, not some drama-filled last gasp of a woman plagued with nerves.

How could she just quit?

“But I am serious,” Colby said. “I haven’t really been passionate about it for the last three weeks or so. I’d go home some days and cry by myself because I felt trapped. I just don’t want it anymore.”

Mackenzie was stunned; she hardly knew what to say.

“Well, the day of graduation is one hell of a time to make this decision.”

Colby shrugged and looked back out the window. She looked beaten. Defeated.

“Colby...you can’t drop out. Don’t do that.” What was on the tip of her tongue but she did not say was: *If you quit now, these last twenty weeks mean nothing. It also makes you a quitter.*

“Ah, but I’m not really dropping out,” Colby said. “I’ll go to graduation today. I have to, actually. My parents came up from Florida so I sort of have to. But after today, that’ll be it.”

When Mackenzie had started the academy, the instructors had warned them that the drop-out rate among potential agents during the twenty-week academy session was around twenty percent – and had been as high as thirty in the past. But to think of Colby among those numbers simply didn’t make sense.

Colby was too strong – too determined. How the hell could she be making such a decision so easily?

“What will you do?” Mackenzie asked. “If you actually leave all of this behind, what do you plan to do for a career?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe something along the lines of preventing human trafficking. Research and resources or something. I mean, I don’t *have* to be an agent, right? There’s plenty of other options. I just don’t want to be an agent.”

“You’re actually serious about this,” Mackenzie said dryly.

“I am. I just wanted to let you know now because after graduation, my parents will be fawning all over me.”

Oh, you poor thing, Mackenzie thought, sarcastically. *That must be so terrible.*

“I don’t get it,” Mackenzie said.

“I don’t expect you to. You’re awesome at this. You love it. I think you were built for it, you know? Me...I don’t know. Crash and burn, I guess.”

“God, Colby...I’m sorry.”

“No need to be,” she said. “Once I send Mom and Dad back to Florida, all the pressure will be off. I’ll tell ’em I just wasn’t cut out for whatever bullshit assignment I was handed off the bat. And then it’s off to whatever I want, I guess.”

“Well...good luck, I guess,” Mackenzie said.

“None of that, please,” Colby said. “You’re graduating in the top five percent today. Don’t you dare let my drama bring you down. You’ve been a very good friend, Mac. I wanted you to hear this from me now rather than just noticing that I wasn’t around in a few weeks.”

Mackenzie made no attempt to hide her disappointment. She hated to feel like she was resorting to childish tactics, but she remained silent for a while, sipping on her coffee.

“How about you?” Colby asked. “Any family or friends coming up?”

“None,” Mackenzie said.

“Oh,” Colby said, a little embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know – ”

“No need to apologize,” Mackenzie said. It was now her turn to look blankly out the window when she added: “I sort of like it this way.”

Mackenzie was underwhelmed by graduation. It was really nothing more than a formalized version of her high school graduation and not quite as classy and formal as her college graduation. As she waited for her name to be called, she had plenty of time to reflect back on those graduations and how her family had seemed to fade further and further into the background with each one.

She could recall nearly crying while walking to the stage at her high school graduation, saddened by the fact that her father would never see her grow up. She’d known it through her teen years but it was a fact that struck her like a rock between the eyes as she had walked up to the stage to receive her diploma. It was not something that had stirred her as much in college. When she had walked the stage during her college graduation, she had done so with no family in the crowd. It was, she realized during the academy ceremony, the pivotal moment in her life when she decided once and for all that she preferred to be alone in most things in life. If her family had no interest in her, then she had no interest in them.

The ceremony ended without much fanfare and when it was over, she spotted Colby taking pictures with her mother and father on the other side of the large lobby that the graduates and their guests all filed out into afterward. From what Mackenzie could tell, Colby was doing an excellent job of hiding her displeasure from her parents. All the while, her parents beamed proudly.

Feeling awkward and with nothing to do, Mackenzie started to wonder just how quickly she could get out of the assembly, get home and out of her graduation garb, and open the first of what would likely be several beers for the afternoon. As she started heading for the doors, she heard a familiar voice from behind her, calling her name.

“Hey, Mackenzie,” the male voice said. She knew who it was at once – not just because of the voice itself, but because there were few people who called her *Mackenzie* in this environment rather than just *White*.

It was Ellington. He was dressed in a suit and looked just about as uncomfortable as Mackenzie felt. Still, the smile he gave her was a little *too* comfortable. Yet in that moment, she didn’t really mind.

“Hi, Agent Ellington.”

“I think in a situation like this, it’s okay to call me Jared.”

“I prefer Ellington,” she said with a brief smile of her own.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

She shrugged, realizing just how badly she wanted to get out of there. She could tell herself all the lies she wanted, but the fact that she had no family, friends, or loved ones in attendance was starting to weigh on her.

“Just a shrug?” Ellington asked.

“Well, how *should* I feel?”

“Accomplished. Proud. Excited. Just to name a few.”

“I’m all of those things,” she said. “It’s just...I don’t know. The whole ceremony aspect of it seems a little much.”

“I can understand that,” Ellington said. “God, I hate wearing a suit.”

Mackenzie was about to come back with a comment – maybe about how he actually wore the suit well – when she saw McGrath approaching from behind Ellington. He also smiled at her but, unlike Ellington's, his seemed nearly forced. He extended his hand to her and she took it, surprised at how limp his grip was.

"I'm glad you made it through," McGrath said. "I know you have a bright and promising career ahead of you."

"No pressure or anything, right?" Ellington said.

"The top five percent," McGrath said, not allowing Mackenzie a chance to say a single word. "Damn fine work, White."

"Thank you, sir," was all she could find to say.

McGrath leaned in close, all business now. "I'd like for you to come to my office Monday morning at eight o'clock. I wanted to get you deep inside the inner workings as soon as possible. I already have your paperwork drafted up – I actually took care of that a long time ago, so it would all be ready when this day came. That's how much faith I have in you. So...let's not wait. Monday at eight. Sound good?"

"Of course," she said, surprised at this uncharacteristic display of glowing support.

He smiled, shook her hand again, and quickly disappeared into the crowd.

When McGrath was gone, Ellington gave her a perplexed look and a wide grin.

"So, he's in good spirits. And I can tell you that doesn't happen very often."

"Well, it's a big day for him, I guess," Mackenzie said. "A whole new talent pool for him to pick and choose from."

"That's true," Ellington said. "But all jokes aside, the man is really smart with how he utilizes new agents. Keep that in mind when you meet with him on Monday."

An awkward silence passed between them; it was a silence that they had gotten used to and that had become a staple of their friendship – or whatever it was that was going on between them.

"Well, look," Ellington said. "I just wanted to say congrats. And I wanted to let you know that you're always welcome to call me if things get too real. I know that sounds dumb but at some point – even for the infamous Mackenzie White – you're going to need someone to vent to. It can catch up to you pretty quickly."

"Thanks," she said.

Then, suddenly, she wanted to ask him to come with her – not in any sort of romantic way, but just to have a familiar face with her. She knew him relatively well and even though she had conflicted feelings about him, she wanted him by her side. She hated to admit it, but she was starting to feel that she should do *something* to celebrate this day and this moment in her life. Even if it was just spending a few awkward hours with Ellington, it would be better (and likely more productive) than sitting around feeling sorry for herself and drinking alone.

But she said nothing. And even if she could have mustered the courage, it would not have mattered; Ellington quickly gave her a little nod and then, like McGrath, slipped back into the crowd.

Mackenzie stood there for a moment, doing her best to shrug off the increasing feeling of being utterly alone.

CHAPTER THREE

When Mackenzie showed up to her first day of work on Monday, she could not shake Ellington's words, running through her head like a mantra: *The man is really smart with how he utilizes new agents. Keep that in mind when you meet with him on Monday.*

She tried to use that to ground herself because if she was being truthful, she was nervous. It didn't help that her morning began when she was met by one of McGrath's men, Walter Hasbrook, now her department supervisor, and he escorted her like a child to the elevators. Walter looked to be pushing sixty and was roughly thirty pounds overweight. He had no personality and while Mackenzie held nothing against him, she didn't like the way he explained everything to her as if she were stupid.

This did not change as he led her to the third floor, where a maze of cubicles spread out like a zoo. Agents were posted at each cubicle, some talking on the phone while others typed into their computers.

"And this is you," Hasbrook said, gesturing to a cubicle in the center of one of the outer rows. "This is the central for Research and Surveillance. You'll find a few e-mails waiting for you, giving you access to the servers and a bureau-wide contact list."

She stepped into her cubicle, feeling a little disenchanted but still nervous. No, this was not the exciting case she'd hoped to start her career on but it was still the first step on a journey toward everything she'd been working for ever since she'd gotten out of high school. She pulled her rolling chair out and plopped down in her seat.

The laptop sitting in front of her was hers now. It was one of the bullet items Hasbrook had gone over with her. The desk was hers, the cubicle, the whole space. It wasn't exactly glamorous, but it was *her* space.

"In your e-mail, you'll find the details of your first assignment," Hasbrook said. "If I were you, I'd start on it right away. You'll want to call the case's supervising agent to coordinate, but you should be deep into it by the end of the day."

"Got it," she said, turning on the computer. Part of her was still angry with being saddled with a desk job. She'd wanted something in the field. After all McGrath had told her, that's what she'd been expecting.

No matter how great of a history you have, she told herself, you can't expect to start out an all-star. Maybe this is your way of having to pay your dues – or McGrath's way of showing you who's boss and putting you in your place.

Before Mackenzie could respond any more to his dry and monotone instructions, Hasbrook had already turned away. He was headed back to the elevators quickly, as if he were happy to be done with the day's minuscule chore.

When he was gone and she was alone in her cubicle she logged in to her computer and wondered why she was so damned nervous.

It's because this is it, she thought. I worked hard to get here and it's finally mine. All eyes are on me now so I can't mess up – even if it's some random desk job.

She checked her e-mail and fired off the necessary responses to get started on her assignment. Within an hour, she had all of the necessary documents and resources. She was determined to do her best, to give McGrath every reason to see that he was wasting her talent by having her ride a desk.

She pored over maps, cell phone records, and GPS data, working to pinpoint the location of two potential suspects involved in a sex trafficking ring. Within an hour or so of getting deeply involved, she found herself committed to it. The fact that she was not out on the street actively working to bring men like this down did not bother her in that moment. She was focused and she had a goal in mind; that's all she needed.

Yes, it was menial and borderline boring, but she would not let that hinder her work. She broke for lunch and came back to it, working with fervor and getting results. When the day came to a close, she e-mailed the department supervisor her results and headed out. She had never had an office job before but that's very much what this felt like. The only thing missing was the time clock to punch her card.

By the time she got to her car, she allowed herself to wallow in the disappointment again. A desk job. Stuck behind a computer and trapped between cubicle walls. This was not what she had envisioned.

Despite this, she was proud to be where she was. She wouldn't let ego or high expectations derail the fact that she was now an FBI agent. She couldn't help but think of Colby, though. She wondered where Colby was right now and what she'd have to say if she discovered that Mackenzie had been assigned a desk job to start off her career.

And a small part of Mackenzie couldn't help but wonder if Colby, having made her own decision to leave, had been the smarter of the two.

Would she ride this desk for years?

Mackenzie showed up the next morning determined to have a good day. She'd made some great progress on her case the day before and felt that if she could provide prompt and efficient results, McGrath would take notice.

Right away, she found that she had been bounced to another case. This one involved green card fraud. The attachments to the e-mails provided her with more than three hundred pages of testimonies, government files and documents, and legal jargon to use as resources. It looked incredibly tedious.

Fuming, Mackenzie looked to the phone. She had access to the servers, which meant she could get McGrath's number. She wondered how he'd respond if she called him and asked why she was being punished in such a way.

She talked herself out of it, though. Instead, she printed off every single document and created different stacks and piles on her desk.

Twenty minutes into this mind-numbing task, she heard a small knock at the entrance to her cubicle. When she turned around and saw McGrath standing there, she froze for a moment.

McGrath smiled at her in the same way he had approached her following graduation. Something in that smile told her that he honestly had no idea that she might feel demeaned by being stuck in a cubicle.

"Sorry it's taken me so long to get to you," McGrath said. "But I just wanted to come by and see how you're getting along."

She bit back the first several responses that came to mind. She gave a half-hearted shrug and said: "I'm doing fine. Just...well, I'm just a little confused."

"How so?"

"Well, on a few separate occasions, you told me that you couldn't wait to have me as an active agent. I guess I just didn't think that would involve sitting behind a desk and printing green card documents."

"Ah, I know, I know. But trust me. There's a rhyme and a reason to it all. Just stick your head down and forge head. Your time will come, White."

In her head, she heard Ellington's voice again. *The man is really smart with how he utilizes new agents.*

If you say so, she thought.

"We'll touch base soon," McGrath said. "Until then, take care."

Like Hasbrook the day before, McGrath seemed to be in a huge hurry to get away from the cubicles. She watched him go, wondering what sort of lesson or skills she was supposed to be picking up. She hated to feel entitled, but God...

What Ellington had said about McGrath... was she really supposed to believe that? Thinking of Ellington, she wondered if he knew what sort of detail she was on. She then thought of Harry and felt guilty for not calling him over the last few days. Harry had stayed quiet because he knew that she hated to feel pressured. It was one of the reasons she continued to see him. No man had ever really been this patient with her. Even Zack had his breaking point and the only reason they had lasted as long as they had was because they had gotten comfortable with one another and didn't want to be bothered with the inconvenience of change.

Mackenzie made the final stack of papers just as noon came around. Before diving into the madness waiting for her in the forms and notes, she figured she'd go out to grab lunch and a very large coffee.

She made her way down the hall and to the elevators. When the elevator arrived and the doors slid open, she was surprised to find Bryers on the other side. He seemed surprised to see her but smiled widely.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

"I was actually coming to see you. I thought you might want to grab lunch."

"That's where I was headed. Sounds great."

They took the elevator down together and grabbed a table at a little delicatessen a block down the street. When they were sitting down with their sandwiches, Bryers asked a very loaded question.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"It's...well, it's going. Stuck behind a desk, trapped in a cubicle, and reading over endless reams of paper isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"Coming from any other brand new agent, that might come off as sounding spoiled," Bryers said. "But, as it just so happens, I agree. You're being wasted. That's why I'm here: I've come to rescue you."

She looked up at him, wondering.

"What sort of rescue?"

"Another case," Bryers answered. "I mean, now, if you want to stay on your current workload and keep studying up on immigration fraud, I understand. But I think I've got something that is more within your interests."

She felt her heart start to beat faster.

"You can just pull me off of this?" she asked, suspicious.

"Indeed I can. Unlike last time, you have everyone's full support. I got the call from McGrath half an hour ago. He's not a *huge* fan of you jumping right into the action, but I twisted his arm a bit."

"Really?" she asked, feeling relieved and, as Bryers had indicated, just a little spoiled.

"I can show you my call history if you want. He was going to call and tell you himself but I asked for the favor of being the one to tell you. I think he knew ever since yesterday that you'd end up on this but we wanted to make sure we had a solid case."

"And you do?" she asked. A small ball of excitement started to grow in the pit of her stomach.

"Yes, we do. We found a body in a park in Strasburg, Virginia. It very closely resembles a body we found around the same area close to two years ago."

"You think they're linked?"

He waved off her question and took a mouthful of sandwich.

"I'll tell you about it on the way. For now, let's just eat. Enjoy the silence while you can."

She nodded and nibbled at her sandwich, although she was suddenly not very hungry at all. She felt excitement, but also dread, and sadness. Someone had been murdered.

And it was going to be up to her to make things right.

CHAPTER FOUR

They left Quantico immediately after lunch. As Bryers drove, headed southwest, Mackenzie felt like she was being rescued from boredom, only to be brought to certain danger.

“So what can you tell me about this case?” she finally asked.

“A body has been discovered in Strasburg, Virginia. The body was found in a state park, in a condition that resembled a body that was discovered very close to the same area about two years ago.”

“You think they’re linked?”

“Has to be, if you want my opinion. Same location, same brutal style of murder. The files are in my bag in the back seat if you want to have a look.”

She reached into the back seat and grabbed the portfolio-style case Bryers usually carried with him when there was going to be research involved. She slid a single folder out of it, continuing to ask questions as she did.

“When was this second body discovered?” she asked.

“Sunday. So far we haven’t a trace of anything to point us in any direction. This is *not* a trail, like last time. We need you.”

“Why me?” she asked, curious.

He looked back, curious himself.

“You’re an agent now – and a damned good one at that,” he said. “People are already whispering about you, people that didn’t quite know who you were when you first came to Quantico. While it’s atypical for a new agent to land a case like this, well, you aren’t exactly a typical agent, now are you?”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Mackenzie asked.

“That depends on how you perform, I guess,” he said.

She let things rest there, turning her attention to the folder. Bryers snuck a few peeks as she made her way through the contents – either to gauge her reaction or to see what she was currently looking at. As she made her way through the folder, he narrated the case.

“It took only a few hours before we were pretty sure the murder was linked to another body that was discovered about thirty-five miles away nearly two years ago. The pictures you see in the folder are from that body.”

“Two years ago,” Mackenzie said suspiciously. In the picture, she saw a body that had been badly mutilated. It was so bad, she had to look away for a moment. “How would you so easily link the two murders with such a huge expanse of time between them?”

“Because both bodies were found in the same state park and in the same very butchered condition. And you know what we say about coincidences in the bureau, right?”

“That they don’t exist?”

“Exactly.”

“Strasburg,” Mackenzie said. “I’m not familiar with it all. Small town, right?”

“Eh, close to medium-sized. Population of around six thousand. One of those southern towns that’s still clinging hard to the Civil War.”

“And there’s a state park out there?”

“Oh yeah,” Bryers said. “That was news to me, too. Pretty big one, too. Little Hill State Park. About seventy miles of land all told. It damn near creeps in to Kentucky. It’s popular for fishing, camping, and hiking. A lot of unexplored forest. That kind of state park.”

“How were the bodies discovered?” Mackenzie asked.

“A camper found the latest one on Saturday night,” Bryers said. “The body that was discovered two years ago was a pretty gruesome scene. The body was discovered weeks after the

murder. There were rotting factors and some of the wildlife had taken some nibbles, as you see in the pictures.”

“Any clear indication of how they were murdered?”

“Not that we can identify. The bodies were mutilated pretty badly. The first one two years ago – the head had been mostly severed, all ten fingers were cut off and never found, and the right leg was missing from the knee down. This most recent one was sort of spread all over the place. The left leg was discovered two hundred feet away from the rest of the body. The right hand was severed and has yet to be found.”

Mackenzie sighed, overwhelmed for a moment by the evil in the world.

“That’s brutal,” she said softly.

He nodded.

“It is.”

“You’re right,” she said. “The similarities are too eerie to ignore.”

He stopped here and let out a huge cough, which he covered with the inside of his elbow. It was a deep cough, one of the long and dry ones that often come directly following a nasty cold.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Fall is on the way. My stupid allergies flare up every year at this time. But how about *you*? Are you okay? Graduation is over, you’re now officially an agent, and the world is your proverbial oyster. Does that excite or terrify you?”

“A bit of both,” she said honestly.

“Any family come up to see you on Saturday?”

“No,” she said. And before he even had time to make a sad face or to express his regrets, she added: “But that’s fine. My family was never really very close.”

“I hear that,” he said. “Same thing here. My folks were good people but I became a teenager and started *acting* like a teenager and then they sort of shrugged me off. I wasn’t Christian enough for them. Liked girls a little too much. That sort of thing.”

Mackenzie said nothing because she was in a bit of shock. It was the most he had said about himself since she had known him – and it had all come in a sudden, unexpected, twelve-second burst.

Then, before she was aware that she was even doing it, she spoke up again. And when the words were out of her mouth, she almost felt like she had vomited.

“My mom sort of did that to me,” she said. “I got older and she saw that she wasn’t really in control of me anymore. And if she couldn’t control me, then she didn’t want much to do with me. But when she lost that control over me, she lost control over just about everything else, too.”

“Ah, aren’t parents grand?” Bryers said.

“In their own special way.”

“How about your father?” Bryers asked.

The question was like a sting to the heart but she again surprised herself by answering. “He’s dead,” she said with a crisp tone to her voice. Still, a part of her wanted to tell him about her father’s death and how she had discovered the body.

While their time apart had seemed to improve their working relationship, she still wasn’t quite ready to share those wounds with Bryers. Still, despite her cold answer, Bryers now seemed much more open, talkative, and willing to engage. She wondered if it was because he was now working with her with the assurance and blessing of those that supervised him.

“Sorry to hear it,” he said, passing over it in a way that let her know he’d picked up on her unwillingness to talk about it. “My folks...they didn’t understand why I wanted this for a job. Of course, they were very strict Christians. When I told them that I did not believe in God when I was seventeen, they basically gave up on me. Since then, I’ve seen both of my parents to the grave. Dad

hung in there for about six years after mom passed. Dad and I made some unstable sort of peace after mom died. We were friendly again before he died of lung cancer in 2013.”

“At least you got a chance to patch things up,” Mackenzie said.

“True,” he said.

“Did you ever get married? Any kids?”

“I was married for seven years. I got two daughters out of it. One is in college in Texas right now. The other is somewhere in California. She stopped talking to me ten years ago, right after she left high school, got knocked up and engaged to a twenty-six-year-old.”

She nodded, finding the conversation too awkward to continue. It was odd that he was opening up to her in such a way, but she appreciated it. Some of what he had told her made some sense, though. Bryers was a fairly solitary man, and that lined up with having had a strained relationship with his parents.

The information about two daughters that he rarely spoke to, though – that had been a huge revelation. It made some sort of sense as to why he was so open with her and why he seemed to enjoy working with her.

The next two hours were filled with scant conversation, mostly about the case at hand and Mackenzie’s time in the academy. It was nice to have someone to talk to about such things and it made her feel a little guilty for shutting him down he had asked about her father.

It was another hour and fifteen minutes before Mackenzie started seeing signs announcing the exit for Strasburg. Mackenzie could practically feel the air within the car shifting as they both switched gears, tucking personal matters away and focusing solely on the job at hand.

Six minutes later, Bryers turned the sedan onto the Strasburg exit. When they entered the town, Mackenzie felt herself tense up. But it was a good sort of tension – the same kind she had felt as she had stepped into the parking lot the night before graduation with the paintball gun in her hand.

She had arrived. Not just in Strasburg, but into a stage of her life she had dreamed about ever since taking her first demeaning desk job back in Nebraska before she’d been given a proper chance.

My God, she thought. Was that only five and a half years ago?

Yes, it was. And now that she was literally being driven toward the realization of all of those dreams, the five years that separated that desk job from the current moment in the passenger seat of Bryers’s car seemed like a barricade of sorts that kept those two sides of her apart. And that was just as well as far as Mackenzie was concerned. Her past had never done anything but hold her back, and now that she had finally seemed to outrun it, she was glad to leave it dead and rotting in the past.

She saw the sign for Little Hill State Park, and as he slowed the car, her heart quickened. Here she was. Her first case while officially on the job. All eyes would be on her, she knew.

The time had come.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Mackenzie stepped out of the car in the Little Hill State Park visitor's lot, she braced herself, feeling immediately the tension of murder in the air. She did not understand how she could sense it, but she could. It was a sort of sixth sense she had that sometimes she wished she hadn't. No one else she had ever worked with seemed to have it, too.

In a way, she realized, they were lucky. It was a blessing, but also a curse.

They walked across the lot and to the visitor's center. While fall had not yet fully gripped Virginia yet, it was making its presence known early. The leaves all around them were beginning to turn, teasing an array of reds, yellows, and golds. A security shack sat behind the center, and a bored-looking woman regarded them from the shack with a wave.

The visitor's center was a lackluster tourist trap at best. A few clothing racks displayed T-shirts and water bottles. A small shelf along the right side contained maps of the area and a few brochures on fishing tips. In the center of it all was a single older woman a few years beyond retirement, smiling at them from behind a counter.

"You folks are with the FBI, right?" the woman asked.

"That's right," Mackenzie said.

The woman gave a quick nod and picked up the landline phone sitting behind the counter. She punched a number in from a scrap of paper sitting by the phone. As she waited, Mackenzie turned away and Bryers followed.

"You said you haven't spoken directly with the Strasburg PD, right?" she asked.

Bryers shook his head.

"Are we walking in as friends or an obstacle?"

"I guess we'll have to see."

Mackenzie nodded as they turned back to the counter. The woman had just hung up the phone and was looking to them again.

"Sheriff Clements will be here in about ten minutes. He'd like for you to meet him at the guard shack outside."

They walked back outside and headed for the guard shack. Again, Mackenzie found herself nearly hypnotized by the colors blooming on the trees. She walked slowly, taking it all in.

"Hey, White?" Bryers said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Why do you ask?"

"You're trembling. A little pale. As a seasoned FBI agent, my hunch is that you're nervous—*very* nervous."

She clenched her hands together tightly, aware that there was indeed a slight tremor in her hands. Yes, she *was* nervous but she had hoped she was hiding it. Apparently, she was doing a very poor job.

"Look. You're into the real deal now. You can be nervous. But work *with* it. Don't fight it or hide it. I know that sounds counterintuitive but you have to trust me on this."

She nodded, a little embarrassed.

They continued on without saying another word, the wild colors of the trees around them seeming to press in. Mackenzie looked ahead to the guard shack, eyeing the bar that hung from the shack and across the road. As cheesy as it seemed, she could not help but feel her future was waiting for her on the other side of that bar and she found herself equally intimidated and anxious to cross it.

Within seconds, they both heard the small engine noise. Almost immediately after that, a golf cart came into view, coming around the bend. It looked to be going at top speed and the man behind the wheel was practically hunched over it, as if willing the cart to go faster.

The cart sped forward and Mackenzie got her first glimpse of the man she assumed to be Sheriff Clements. He was a forty-something hard-ass. He had the glassy stare of a man who had been dealt a rough hand in life. His black hair was just beginning to go gray at the temples and he had the sort of five o'clock shadow bordering his face that looked like it was probably always there.

Clements parked the cart, barely regarded the guard in the shack, and walked around the bar to meet Mackenzie and Bryers.

"Agents White and Bryers," Mackenzie said, offering her hand.

Clements took it and shook it passively. He did the same to Bryers before turning his attention back to the paved trail he had just come down.

"If I'm being honest," Clements said, "while I certainly appreciate the bureau's interest, I'm not so sure we need the assistance."

"Well, we're here now, so we may as well see if we can lend a hand," Bryers said, being as friendly as he could.

"Well then, hop on the cart and let's see," Clements said. Mackenzie was trying her best to size him up as they loaded up on the cart. Her main concern from the start was trying to determine if Clements was simply under immense stress or if he was just as ass by nature.

She rode alongside Clements in the front of the cart while Bryers clung to the back. Clements did not say a single word. In fact, it seemed like he was making an effort to let them both know that he felt inconvenienced by having to usher them around.

After a minute or so, Clements swerved the cart to the right where the paved road forked off. Here, the pavement ended and became an even thinner trail that barely allowed for the width of the cart.

"So what instructions has the guard at the guard shack been given?" Mackenzie asked.

"No one comes through," Clements said. "Not even park rangers or cops unless I've given prior permission. We already have enough people farting around out here, making things harder than it has to be."

Mackenzie took the not-too-subtle jab and tucked it away. She wasn't about to get into an argument with Clements before she and Bryers had gotten a chance to check out the crime scene.

Roughly five minutes later, Clements hit the brakes. He stepped out even before the cart had come to a complete stop. "Come on," he said, like he was talking to a child. "This way."

Mackenzie and Bryers stepped down from the cart. All around them, the forest loomed high over them. It was beautiful but filled with a sort of thick silence that Mackenzie had come to recognize as an omen of sorts – a signal that there was bad blood and bad news in the air.

Clements led them into the woods, walking quickly ahead of them. There was no real trail to speak of. Here and there Mackenzie could see signs of old footpaths winding through the foliage and around the trees but that was it. Without realizing she was doing so, she took the lead in front of Bryers as she tried to keep up with Clements. On occasion, she had to swat away a low-hanging branch or wipe away stray strands of cobwebs from her face.

After walking for two or three minutes, she started to hear several mingled voices. The sounds of movement grew louder and she started to understand what Clements had been talking about; even without seeing the scene, Mackenzie could tell that it was going to be overcrowded.

She saw proof of this less than a minute later as the scene came into view. Crime scene tape and small border flags had been set up in a large triangular shape within the forest. Among the yellow tape and red flags, Mackenzie counted eight people, Clements included. She and Bryers would make ten.

"See what I mean?" Clements asked.

Bryers came up beside Mackenzie and sighed. "Well, this is a mess."

Before stepping forward, Mackenzie did her best to survey the scene. Of the eight men, four were local PD, easily identified by their uniforms. There were two others that were in uniforms

but of a different kind – state PD, Mackenzie assumed. Beyond that, though, she took in the scene itself rather than let the bickering distract her.

The location seemed to be random. There were no points of interest, no items that might be seen as symbolic. It was just like any other section of these forests in every way Mackenzie could see. She guessed that they were about a mile or so off of the central trail. The trees were not particularly thick here, but there was a sense of isolation all around her.

With the scene thoroughly taken in, she looked to the bickering men. A few looked agitated and one or two looked angry. Two of them weren't wearing any sort of uniform or outfit to denote their profession.

“Who are the guys not in uniform?” Mackenzie asked.

“Not sure,” Bryers said.

Clements turned to them with a scowl on his face. “Park rangers,” he said. “Joe Andrews and Charlie Holt. Shit like this happens and they think they’re the police.”

One of the rangers looked up with venom in his eyes. Mackenzie was pretty sure Clements had nodded this man's way when he'd said *Joe Andrews*. “Watch yourself, Clements. This is a state park,” Andrews said. “You’ve got about as much authority out here as a gnat.”

“That might be,” Clements said. “But you know as well as I do that all I have to do is make a single call to the precinct and get some wheels moving. I can have you out of here within an hour, so just do whatever it is you need to do and get your ass out of here.”

“You self-righteous little fu – ”

“Come on,” a third man said. This was one of the state cops. The man was built like a mountain and wore sunglasses that made him look like the villain from a bad '80s action movie. “I have the authority to throw both of you out of here. So stop acting like children and do your jobs.”

This man noticed Mackenzie and Bryers for the first time. He walked over to them and shook his head almost apologetically.

“Sorry you’re having to hear all of this nonsense,” he said as he approached. “I’m Roger Smith with the state police. Some scene we’ve got here, huh?”

“That’s what we’re here to figure out,” Bryers said.

Smith turned back to the seven others and used a booming voice when he said: “Step back and let the feds do their thing.”

“What about *our* thing?” the other ranger asked. *Charlie Holt*, Mackenzie remembered. He looked to Mackenzie and Bryers with suspicion. Mackenzie thought he even looked a little timid and afraid around them. When Mackenzie looked his way, he looked to the ground, bending over to pick up an acorn. He moved the acorn from hand to hand, then started to pick at the top of it.

“You’ve had enough time,” Smith said. “Just back up for a second, would you?”

Everyone did as asked. The rangers in particular looked unhappy about it. Doing everything she could to ease the situation, Mackenzie figured it would help if she tried involving the rangers as much as possible so tempers didn't flare.

“What sort of information do rangers typically need to pull from something like this?” she asked the rangers as she ducked under the crime scene tape and started to look around. She saw a marker where the leg had been found, marked as such on a small clipboard marker. A good distance away she saw another marker where the remainder of the body had been found.

“We need to know how long to keep the park closed down for one thing,” Andrews said. “As selfish as it might sound, this park accounts for a pretty good chunk of tourism revenue.”

“You’re right,” Clements spoke up. “That *does* sound selfish.”

“Well, I think we’re allowed to be selfish from time to time,” Charlie Holt said rather defensively. He then regarded Mackenzie and Bryers with a stare of contempt.

“Why’s that?” Mackenzie asked.

“Do either of you happen to know what sort of crap we have to put up with out here?” Holt asked.

“No, actually,” Bryers asked.

“Teenagers having sex,” Holt said. “Full-blown orgies from time to time. Weird Wicca practices. I’ve even caught some drunk guy out here getting frisky with a stump – and I’m talking pants all the way down. These are the stories the Staties laugh about and the local PD just use as fodder for jokes on the weekends.” He bent down and picked up another acorn, picking at it like he did with the first one.

“Oh,” added Joe Andrews. “And then there’s catching a father in the act of molesting his eight-year-old-daughter just off of a fishing path and having to stop it. And what thanks do I get? The girl yelling at me to leave her daddy alone and then a firm warning from local and state PD to not be so rough next time. So yeah...we can be selfish about our authority from time to time.”

The forest went quiet then, broken only by one of the other local cops as they made a dismissive laughing sound and said: “Yeah. Authority. Right.”

Both rangers stared the man down with extreme hatred. Andrews took a step forward, looking as if he might explode from rage. “Fuck you,” he said simply.

“I said *stop this nonsense*,” Officer Smith said. “One more time and every single one of you are out of here. You got it?”

Apparently, they did. The forest fell into silence again. Bryers stepped behind the tape with Mackenzie and when everyone else busied themselves behind them, he leaned over to her. She felt Charlie Holt’s eyes on her and it made her want to punch him.

“This could get ugly,” Bryers said quietly. “Let’s do our best to get out of here post-haste, what do you say?”

She went to work then, combing the area and taking mental notes. Bryers had stepped out of the crime scene and was resting against a tree as he coughed into his arm. She did her best not to let this distract her, though. She kept her eyes to the ground, studying the foliage, the ground, and the trees. The one thing that made little sense to her was how a body in such bad shape had been discovered here. It was hard to tell how long ago the murder had occurred or the body had been dumped; the ground itself showed no signs of the brutal act being carried out.

She noted the location of the placards that marked where the different parts of the body had been found. It was too far apart to have been an accident. If someone dumped a mutilated body and placed the parts so far apart, that spoke on intentionality.

“Officer Smith, do you know if there were any signs of bite marks from possible wildlife on the body?” she asked.

“If there were, they were so minuscule that a basic exam didn’t reveal any. Of course, when the autopsy comes in we’ll know more.”

“And no one on your crew or with local PD moved the body or the severed limbs?”

“Nope.”

“Same here,” Clements said. “Rangers, how about you guys?”

“No,” said Holt with an evil sneer in his voice. He now seemed to be taking offense to just about everything.

“Can I ask why that might matter in terms of finding out who did it?” Smith asked her.

“Well, if the killer did his business here, there would be blood everywhere,” Mackenzie explained. “Even if it happened a long while ago, there would be at least trace amounts scattered around. And I don’t see any. So the other possibility is that he maybe dumped the body here. But if that’s the case, why would a severed leg be so far away from the rest of the body?”

“I don’t follow,” Smith said. Behind him, she saw that Clements was also listening attentively but trying not to show it.

“It makes me think the killer *did* dump the body out here but he separated the parts so far apart on purpose.”

“Why?” Clements asked, no longer able to pretend he wasn’t listening.

“It could be several reasons,” she said. “It could have been something as morbid as just having fun with the body, scattering it around like it was nothing but toys he was playing with. Wanting to get our attention. Or there could be some sort of calculated reasons for it – for the distance, for the fact that it was a leg, and so on.”

“I see,” Smith said. “Well, some of my men already wrote up a report that has the distance between the body and the leg. Just about every measurement you could ask for.”

Mackenzie took a look around again – at the gathered group of men and the seemingly peaceful forest – and paused. There was no clear reason for this location. That made her think that the location was random. Still, to be so far off of the beaten path spoke of something else. It indicated that the killer knew these woods – maybe even the park itself – fairly well.

She started walking around the scene, looking closer for trace amounts of dried blood. But there was nothing. With every moment that passed, she became more and more certain of her theory.

“Rangers,” she said. “Is there any way to get the names of people that frequent the park? I’m thinking about people that come here a lot and know the area well.”

“Not really,” Joe Andrews said. “The best we can do is provide a list of financial donors.”

“That’s not necessary,” she said.

“You have a theory to test?” Smith asked.

“The actual murder was done elsewhere and the body was dumped here,” she said, half to herself. “But why here? We’re almost a mile away from the central path and there appears to be nothing significant about this location. So that makes me think that whoever is behind this knows the park grounds fairly well.”

She got a few nods as she explained things but got the overall feeling that they either doubted her or just didn’t really care.

Mackenzie turned to Bryers.

“You good here?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Thanks, gentlemen.”

Everyone looked at her in silence. Clements seemed to be sizing her up.

“Well, come on then,” Clements said, finally. “I’ll give you a ride back to your car.”

“No, that’s okay,” Mackenzie said a bit rudely. “I think I’d rather walk.”

Mackenzie and Bryers took their exit, heading back through the woods and toward the walking trail Clements had brought them down.

As they sank back into the forest, the stares of the state police, Clements and his men, and the park rangers at their backs, Mackenzie couldn’t help but appreciate the grand scale of the forest. It was eerie to think about how endless the possibilities were out here. She thought about what the ranger had said, about the countless crimes that took place in these forests, and something about that sent an icy chill through her.

If someone had it in them to slaughter people like the person who had been discovered within this taped-off triangle *and* they had a fairly decent knowledge of these forests, there were virtually no limits to the amount of menace they could cause.

And she felt sure that he would strike again.

CHAPTER SIX

Mackenzie settled down in her office just after six in the evening, exhausted from the long day and tidying up her notes to prepare for the debrief she had requested on their way back from Strasburg.

A knock came on her door and she looked up to find Bryers, looking as tired as she felt, holding a folder and a cup of coffee. He looked like he was trying his best to hide his exhaustion and it then occurred to her that he had been hands-off back in the state park, allowing her to take the lead with Clements, Smith, Holt, and the other egotistical men out in the forest. That, plus his coughing, made her wonder if he was coming down with something.

"The debrief is ready to roll," he said.

Mackenzie got up and followed him to the conference room at the end of the hall. When she entered, she glanced around at the several agents and experts that made up the team on the Little Hill State Park case. There were seven people in all and while she personally thought that was too much manpower for a case this early on, it was not her place to say such a thing. This was Bryers's and she was simply happy to be along for the ride. It was much better than reading up on immigration laws and swimming in paperwork.

"We have a busy day today," Bryers said. "So let's start things off with a quick recap."

If he *had* been tired when he came in, he had shrugged it off. Mackenzie watched and listened with rapt attention as Bryers filled in the seven people in the room with what he and Mackenzie had discovered in the woods of Little Hill State Park that day. The others in the room took notes, some scribbling on pads, others typing it into tablets or smartphones.

"One thing to add," one of the other agents said. "I got a ping about fifteen minutes ago. The case has officially hit the local news. They've already started calling this guy the Campground Killer."

A moment of silence filled the room, and inwardly, Mackenzie sighed. This would make life much harder for them all.

"Man, that was fast," Bryers said. "Damned media. How in the hell did they get their hands on it so fast?"

No one answered, but Mackenzie thought she knew. A small town like Strasburg was filled with people who loved to hear their town's name on the news – even if it was for bad news. She could think of a few park rangers or local police that might fit into that category.

"Anyway," Bryers went on, undeterred, "the last piece of information we got came from the state PD. They handed off details of the crime scene to forensics. We now know that the severed leg and the body to which it was formerly attached were exactly three and a half feet apart. We obviously have no idea if that is significant, but we'll be looking into it. Also –"

A knock at the door interrupted him. Another agent dashed into the room and handed a folder to Bryers. He whispered something quickly to Bryers and then made his exit.

"The coroner's report from the newest body," Bryers said, opening up the folder and looking inside. He scanned it quickly and then started to pass the three sheets around to the team. "As you'll see, there were no marks from hungry predators on the body, though there were slight bruises along the back and shoulders. It's believed the leg and right hand were severed with a rather dull knife or some other large blade. The bones looked to have been more broken than sawed through. This differs from the case from two years ago but, of course, that could just be because the killer doesn't take care of his tools or weapons."

Bryers gave them all a moment to look at the report. Mackenzie barely looked it over, perfectly fine with relying on Bryers's rundown. She had already grown to trust him and while

she knew the value of files and reports, there was nothing better than a straight verbal report as far as she was concerned.

“We also now know the name of the deceased: Jon Torrence, twenty-two years of age. He went missing about four weeks ago and was last seen at a bar in Strasburg. Some of you will have the not-so-fortunate task of speaking to his family members today. We’ve also dug up some information on the victim from two years ago. Agent White, would you like to fill the team in on that victim?”

Mackenzie had read the details in a document sent over from Officer Smith and his state PD team on their drive between Strasburg and Quantico. She’d memorized the details within ten minutes and, as such, was able to recite them to the team with confidence.

“The first body was that of Marjorie Leinhart. Her head was almost completely severed from her body. The killer cut off all of her fingers and her right leg from the knee down. None of the severed parts were ever discovered. At the time of her death, she was twenty-seven years old. Her mother was the only surviving relative as Marjorie was an only child and her father died while stationed in Afghanistan in 2006. But Mrs. Leinhart committed suicide a week after her daughter’s body was discovered. Vigorous searches revealed only one other relative – an estranged uncle living in London – that knows nothing about the family. There were no boyfriends and the few close friends that were questioned all checked out. So there is literally no one to question there.”

“Thank you, Agent White. So there you have it. That’s all we have for right now. So I’m going to want some of you on family detail, one or two of you to help with forensics, and someone else to do some digging about any violent crimes in or around Little Hill State Park over the last twenty-five years or so. Does anyone else have anything to add?”

“This could be ritualistic,” one of the older agents offered. “Dismemberment in such a capacity is telltale of ritualistic murders. I’d be interested to see if there have been any reports of Satanism or cultlike gatherings in or around Strasburg.”

“Good point,” Bryers said, making a quick note on one of his papers.

Mackenzie raised her hand. A few of the agents within the room – all seasoned and well-decorated – rolled their eyes. *Of course you have something to add*, they all seemed to think.

“Yes, Agent White?” Bryers asked. He gave her a knowing little smile as the rest of the room looked her way.

“Looking through some old case files that the state PD sent over, I found a documented case of a child abduction right around the Little Hill area nineteen years ago. A boy named Will Albrecht. He was taken right from under his parents’ noses. When the parents were questioned, they stated that their son loved to ride his bike around the trails in Little Hill State Park. The connection is tenuous at best but, I think, worth looking into.”

“Absolutely,” Bryers said. “Can you make sure everyone on the team gets that file?”

“I’m on it,” she said, already pulling the e-mail up on her phone.

“And why would that be relevant?” another agent asked.

Never one to back down from a challenge, Mackenzie answered right away. “I’m working on the theory that whoever did this knew the area well. To randomly dump a body in such a non-selective place speaks of a knowledge of the forest. Throw in Marjorie Leinhart from two years ago and that only backs it up further.”

“I still don’t see how that stacks up with a kidnapping,” yet another agent said.

“To take a kid while his parents were very close by and get away with it...you’d have to know the lay of the land. They never even came *close* to finding the abductor.”

That apparently gave them enough to dangle on. She got a few appreciative nods but most everyone else in the room simply looked to their phones or the table in front of them.

“Anything else?” Bryers asked. As he waited for a response, he let out a hearty cough into his elbow.

“That’s it then,” Bryers said after three seconds of silence. “Let’s get to work and land ourselves a killer.”

The team started to murmur and mumble excitedly as they filed out. Mackenzie stayed behind, curious to see if Bryers needed anything else before they called it a day.

“You know,” Bryers said. “I’m going to task someone with looking into that abduction you mentioned. If it turns out to be nothing, you’re going to have an enemy or two.”

“So, business as usual?”

“I guess so,” he said with a grin. “But you know...maybe you and I handle that detail. We’ll drive back up to Strasburg tomorrow and kill two birds with one stone. We’ll also talk to the family of Jon Torrence. You up for another drive out into the country?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

They arrived in Strasburg shortly after nine o'clock the following morning and as they drove into the town, Mackenzie thought she could understand the charm of a place like this. To be rooted so deeply in history had, to her, seemed a little silly at first. But there was also something rustic and respectable about it as well. American flags hung nearly everywhere (along with Confederate flags here and there, a staple of small-town Virginia, she assumed) and a lot of the local businesses had been named after Civil War troops.

Mackenzie knew that it was a foolish trap to think that the most deranged killers came from these sorts of unsuspecting towns. Statistics showed that a crazed killer was just as likely to step out of New York or LA as they were a small backwoods town in Virginia. Still, there was something quiet and just a bit morose about a town like this – a town where everything seemed perfect while passing through, making it easy to forget that there were dark secrets possibly hiding behind every charming little front door.

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