

The background of the cover is a photograph of a person standing in a field at sunset. The person is silhouetted against the bright orange and yellow light of the setting sun. To the right of the person is a large, leafless tree. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

BEFORE HE LAPSES

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 11

BLAKE PIERCE

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Before He Lapses

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From Blake Pierce, #1 bestselling author of *ONCE GONE* (a #1 bestseller with over 1,200 five star reviews), comes *BEFORE HE LAPSES*, book #11 in the heart-pounding Mackenzie White mystery series. *BEFORE HE LAPSES* is book #11 in the bestselling Mackenzie White mystery series, which begins with *BEFORE HE KILLS* (Book #1), a free download with over 500 five-star reviews! FBI Special Agent Mackenzie White, six months pregnant, calls off her formal wedding with Ellington and they elope instead. On their honeymoon, they finally have some downtime together—when a call comes in for an urgent case: women are being strangled at a rapid rate in the D.C. area by what appears to be a serial killer. Even more disturbing: this killer is so meticulous that he leaves absolutely no trace. Mackenzie comes up with a radical theory for who he might be, but pursuing it may jeopardize her own job—and her own life. In her most intense game of cat and mouse yet, she finds herself struggling to keep her baby and her sanity while up against a diabolical psychopath, her own agency, and the hunt of her life. Even with her all of her wits, it may be too late for her to save the next victims—or herself. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, *BEFORE HE LAPSES* is book #11 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Also available by Blake Pierce is *ONCE GONE* (A Riley Paige mystery—Book #1), a #1 bestseller with over 1,200 five star reviews—and a free download!

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Blake Pierce

Before He Lapses. (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 11)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fifteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising twelve books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising three books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books (and counting).

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

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PROLOGUE

Christine had only seen snow once before in her life. So when it started to come down around her as she made her way home from her boyfriend's house, she smiled. She figured that if she hadn't drunk so much tonight, she'd be able to enjoy it better. She was twenty years old but could not help but stick her tongue out to catch a few flakes. She chuckled under her breath at the feel of it...plus the fact that she'd come a long way from her home in San Francisco.

She'd transferred to Queen Nash in Maryland with a desire to focus on political science. Winter break was nearing its end and she was currently looking forward to dominating the coming spring's course load. It was one of the reasons she and her boyfriend, Clark, had been hanging out tonight—for one last hoorah before the semester began. There had been a little party of sorts and Clark, as usual, had too much to drink. She'd decided to walk home, just three blocks away, rather than stay there and have Clark's friends hit on her while their girlfriends shot her nasty looks. That's usually how any get-together at Clark's place ended when it didn't go the whole way with her going to his bedroom.

Besides...she was feeling overlooked. Clark was terrible about that, always choosing work, school, or getting drunk over her. There was someone else she could call when she got back to her apartment. Sure, it was late, but he had made it very clear that he was available for her at all hours. He'd proven it before, so why not tonight?

As she crossed a street between two blocks, she took note of how the snow was already sticking to the sidewalks. The storm had been expected so the roads had been treated and salted, but the white blanket of falling snow adhered to the sidewalks and the small strips of grass in front of and between the apartment buildings she passed.

By the time Christine reached her apartment, she almost decided to go back to Clark's place. It was cold and the snow was sending a little surge of childlike wonder through her. As she reached for her key to unlock the door to the apartment building, she nearly turned around and did just that.

The only thing that convinced her otherwise was knowing that she would not sleep well if she went back. Her own bed awaited her here, her warm blankets and at least a solid eight hours of sleep.

She walked inside and headed for the elevators. She pushed the three button and waited for the elevator to arrive. She was not drunk, just a bit tipsy, and she started to toy with the idea of having one more glass of wine when she got to her apartment and then making a call...to the man she'd been sort of seeing on the side for the last few months.

This was what was on her mind when the elevator arrived. She stepped on and took it up to her floor, liking the way her buzzed head felt as the elevator shifted upward.

She stepped off into her hall and found it empty. This made sense, as it was after one o'clock on a Wednesday night. She approached her door and again pulled her keys out. As they jostled in her still-cold hands, a voice from behind her gave her a jump.

"Christine?"

She turned at the sound of her name. She smiled when she saw him standing there. She wasn't going to have to call him after all. It was like he had anticipated her wanting him. It had been about a week or so, after all.

"Hey," she said.

He walked closer to her, his stride purposeful. He was looking at her in the way he usually did, with a fire in his eyes that made it clear what he wanted. The look alone turned her on—that, and the fact of who he was. He was off limits. He was...well, he was sort of dangerous, now wasn't he?

They met at her door, practically crashing into one another. The kiss was a little clumsy because it was so fierce. Her hands started exploring instantly. She grabbed the waist of his pants, pulling him closer. His hand traced the edges of her body, sliding down between her thighs as they clung to one another in the hallway.

“Inside,” she managed to say between the kiss and her already heated breath. “Now.”

She unlocked the door as he nibbled at her neck. She moaned, on edge for what was about to happen. She didn’t even know if she’d be able to make it to the bedroom. Maybe not even the couch. The door unlocked and she pushed it open. When he came instantly to her, kicking the door closed, she pushed him away. She leaned back against the small kitchen counter and removed her shirt. He liked it when she undressed for him. It was a weird control thing, making him feel like she was serving him even before the sex started.

When she pulled her top up over her head, already reaching for the clasps of her bra, she looked into his eyes...and froze. He was standing still, that fire in his eyes gone now. Now, there was something else. Something new...something that scared her.

He cocked his head, as if examining her for the first time, and then he was on her. He’d been rough with her before, but this was new. This was not sexual in any way. He pressed his full weight against her and wrapped his hands around her neck. There was nothing playful about it; his grip was fierce, and she could feel her windpipe being squeezed right away.

It took less than ten seconds for her lungs to start to panic. When they did, she slapped at him furiously even as she felt her knees giving out.

She felt her chest growing tighter, as if there was some sort of force inside of her that was pushing the air out. When she fell to the floor, the back of her head struck the kitchen counter. His hands never left her neck, seeming to grow tighter and tighter the weaker she got.

She gave one final slap, but it was so weak that she wasn’t even sure if it landed. When she hit the floor, he was on top of her. He continued to choke her, pressing his excited manhood against her. Her hands flailed for something—for anything—but all they found was the shirt she had just removed for him.

She barely had time to wonder why he was doing this before the darkness came rushing forward, relieving her of that terrible pain in her chest.

CHAPTER ONE

Mackenzie was standing in her bathroom, leaning against the sink and looking at the toilet. She'd looked at the toilet a lot lately, riding out her first trimester in a way that was almost *too* by-the-book. Her morning sickness had been particularly bad between weeks eight and eleven. But even now, as she was about halfway through week fifteen, it tended to be rough. She didn't have it nearly as often now but when it did hit, it was nasty.

She had already thrown up twice this morning and her stomach was hinting at a third time. But as she sipped some water and did her best to steady her breaths while bracing against the sink, she felt the third wave start to recede.

Mackenzie looked down at her stomach and placed her hand lovingly along the area that had just barely started to protrude over the last week or so. "Those are my intestines, little one," she said. "Not a foot rest."

She exited the bathroom and stood in the doorway for a moment, making sure she was done. When she felt that she had control of herself, she went to the closet and started getting dressed. She could hear Ellington in the kitchen, the clinks from the cupboard leading her to believe he was pouring coffee. Mackenzie would have loved a cup of coffee but as her luck would have it, it was one of the foods that the baby did not agree with when these episodes hit.

As she put on her pants, she noticed they were fitting a little more snug. She figured she had another month or so before she'd need to look into maternity clothes. And it would be around that time, she supposed, that she was going to have to tell Director McGrath that she was pregnant. She hadn't told him yet out of fear of how he might react. She was not quite ready to do nothing more than ride a desk or pull research duty for some other agent.

Ellington came to the doorway with a frown. He was indeed holding a cup of coffee. "Feeling any better?" he asked.

"Get that coffee out of here," she said. She tried to sound playful but it had come out a little bitterly.

"So, my mom keeps calling, wanting to know why we still haven't settled on a location for the wedding."

"Does she understand that it's not *her* wedding?" Mackenzie asked.

"No. I don't think she does understand that."

He stepped out of the room for a moment to set the coffee down and then came over to Mackenzie. He dropped to his knees and kissed her stomach as she searched for a shirt to wear.

"You still don't want to know the sex?" he asked.

"I don't know. Not right now, but I'll likely change my mind."

He looked up at her. From his position on the floor, he looked like a small child, looking up to a parent for approval. "When do you plan on telling McGrath?"

"I don't know," she said. She felt silly standing there half-dressed while he pressed his face against her stomach. Still, it also made her realize that he was here for her. He'd asked her to marry him *before* the baby and now, faced with an unexpected pregnancy, he was still here with her. To think that he was the man she would likely spend the rest of her life with made her peaceful and content.

"You afraid he'll sideline you?" Ellington asked.

"Yes. But another week or two and I don't think I'll be able to hide this baby bump."

Ellington chuckled and kissed her on the stomach again. "That's one sexy baby bump."

He kept kissing her, each one languishing a bit. She laughed and playfully tore herself away from him. "No time for all of that. We've got work. And, if your mother won't shut up, a wedding to finally plan."

They'd looked at venues and had even started to look into caterers for what they planned to be a small reception. But neither of them could really get into the flow of it. Through it all, they were finding that they had a lot in common: an aversion to all things fancy, a fear of dealing with organization, and an affinity to put work above all else.

As she got dressed, she wondered if she was cheating Ellington out of the experience somehow. Was her lack of enthusiasm toward planning the wedding making him think she didn't care? She hoped not, because that was not the case at all.

"Hey, Mac?"

She turned back to him as she started buttoning up her shirt. The nausea had mostly passed now, leading her to believe that she'd be able to tackle the day without any further ordeals. "Yeah?"

"Let's not plan it. Neither of us wants to. And really, neither of us wants a big wedding. The only person upset would be my mother and, quite frankly, I think I'd enjoy seeing that."

A smile crossed her face but she bit it back as quickly as she could. She'd like to see that as well.

"I think I know what you're saying. But I need you to say it, just to be sure."

He came back across the room to her and took her hands in his. "I'm saying I don't want to plan a wedding and I don't want to wait to marry you anymore. Let's just elope."

She knew he was being authentic because of the way his voice started to catch halfway through his comment. Still...it seemed too good to be true.

"Are you for real? You're not just saying it because..."

She stopped here, unable to finish the question, looking to her stomach instead.

"I swear to you it isn't just that," Ellington said. "While I'm very excited about raising and potentially scarring a kid with you, it's you I want right now."

"Yeah, *we are* going to scar the hell out of this kid, aren't we?"

"Not on purpose." He drew her close and hugged her. He then whispered in her ear and hearing his voice that close to her made her feel comfortable and content all over again. "I mean it. Let's do it. Let's elope."

She was nodding in agreement before they broke the hug. When they *were* face to face again, both of them had little glistening hints of tears in their eyes.

"Okay..." Mackenzie said.

"Yeah, okay," he said, a little giddy. He leaned in, kissed her, and then said: "So what do we do now? Shit, I guess there's still planning no matter which way we go here."

"We need to call the courthouse to book a time, I would think" Mackenzie said. "And one of us needs to get in touch with McGrath to ask for the time off for the ceremony. *Not it!*"

"Damn you," he said with a smile. "Fine. I'll call McGrath."

He took out his phone, meaning to do it right there and then, but then pocketed it. "Maybe this is a conversation I should have face-to-face with him."

She nodded, her arms trembling a bit as she finished buttoning her shirt. *We're going to do this*, she thought. *We're really going to do this...*

She was excited and nervous and elated, all of those emotions stirring within her all at once. She responded in the only way she could—by walking back over to him and taking him in her arms. And when they kissed, it only took about three seconds for her to decide that maybe there *was* time for what he had tried to start moments before.

The ceremony was two days later, on a Wednesday afternoon. It lasted no more than ten minutes and it ended with them exchanging the rings they had helped one another pick out the day before. It was so easy and carefree that Mackenzie wondered why women put themselves through the hell of all of that planning and scheduling.

Because at least one witness was needed, Mackenzie had invited Agent Yardley to attend. They had never really been friends, but she was a good agent and, therefore, a woman whom Mackenzie trusted. It was in asking Yardley to fill the role that she was once again reminded that she really didn't have any friends. Ellington was the closest thing to it and as far as she was concerned, that was more than enough.

As Mackenzie and Ellington came out of the courtroom and into the main hallway of the building, Yardley gave them her best effort at an encouraging parting speech before heading out quickly.

Mackenzie watched her go, wondering why she was in such a rush. "I won't say that was rude or anything like that," Mackenzie said, "but it looked like she could not wait to get out of here."

"That's because I spoke with her before the ceremony," Ellington said. "I told her to haul ass when we were done."

"That was rude. Why?"

"Because I convinced McGrath to give us until next Monday. I took all the time and stress I would have put into planning a wedding into planning a honeymoon."

"What? Are you kidding me right now?"

He shook his head. She wrapped him up in a hug, trying to remember a time when she had been this happy. She felt like a little girl who had just gotten everything she wanted for Christmas.

"When did you manage to do all of that?" she asked.

"Mostly on company time," he said with a smile. "Now, we have to hurry. We have bags to pack and sex to have. Our plane leaves in four hours for Iceland."

The destination sounded strange at first but then she remembered the "bucket list" conversation they'd had when she discovered she was pregnant. What were some things she wanted to get done before they brought a child into the world. One of Mackenzie's items had been to camp beneath the northern lights.

"Yeah, then let's go," she said. "Because with the way I'm feeling right now and the things I plan to do to you when we get back home, I don't know that we're going to make it to the airport on time."

"Yes ma'am," he said, hurrying her toward the door. "One question, though."

"What's that?"

He grinned at her and asked: "Can I call you Mrs. Ellington now?"

Her heart nearly leaped as he asked. "I suppose you can," she said as they headed out the door, entering the world for the first time as a married couple.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder had not been at all what he had expected. He had thought there would be some degree of *what have I done?* Maybe a moment of life-defining guilt or a sense that he had somehow altered the entire course of a family's life. But there had been none of that. The only thing he had felt after the murders—after killing both of his victims—was an overwhelming sense of paranoia.

And, if he was being honest, joy.

Perhaps he had been stupid to go about it so casually. He had been surprised by just how normal it had felt. He'd been terrified about the idea until he actually put his hands to their necks—until he squeezed down and robbed the life right out of their beautiful bodies. The best part had been watching the light go out in their eyes. It had been unexpectedly erotic—the most vulnerable thing he had ever seen.

The paranoia, though, was worse than he could have ever imagined. He had not been able to sleep for three days after he'd killed the first one. He had prepared for such an obstacle after the second, though. A few glasses of red wine and an Ambien directly after the murder and he had slept quite well, actually.

The other thing that was bothering him was how hard it had been to leave the scene of the crime the second time around. The way she had fallen, the way the life had gone out of her eyes in an instant...it had made him want to stay there, to stare into those freshly dead eyes to see what secrets might be in there. He'd never felt such a craving before, though to be fair, he would have never dreamed of killing anyone up until about a year or so ago. So apparently, much like taste buds, a person's morals were apt to change from time to time.

He thought about this as he sat in front of his fireplace. His entire house was quiet, so eerily still that he could hear the sound of his fingers moving against the stem of his wine glass. He watched the fire burn and pop as he drank from a glass of dark red wine.

This is your life now, he told himself. *You have killed not one but two people. Sure, they were necessary. You had to do it or your life might very well have been over. While neither of those girls technically deserved to die, it was all out of necessity.*

He told himself this over and over again. It was one of the reasons the guilt he had been expecting had not yet crippled him. It might also be why there was so much room for that paranoia to creep in and take root.

He was waiting for a knock at his door at any moment, with a police officer standing on the other side. Or maybe a SWAT team, complete with a battering ram. And the hell of it was that he knew he deserved it. He had no illusion about getting away with this. He figured that some day, the truth would be revealed. That's just the way the world worked now. There was no such thing as privacy, no such thing as living your own life.

So when the time came, he thought he'd be able to take whatever justice was dealt to him standing up like a man. The only question that remained was how many more would he have to kill? A small part of him begged him to stop, trying to convince him that his work was done now and that no one else had to die.

But he was pretty certain that was not true.

And worst of all, the prospect of having to go out and do it again stirred an excitement within him that shimmered and burned just like the fire in front of him.

CHAPTER THREE

She was very much aware that it was really only a change of setting that had done it, but sex in the Icelandic wilderness, right under the majestic swirl of the northern lights, was phenomenal. On the first night, when she and Ellington had wrapped up their festivities, Mackenzie slept better than she had in a very long time. She fell asleep happy, physically satisfied, and with the sensation of life growing inside of her.

They woke up the following morning and had very bitter coffee over a small fire at their campsite. They were in the northeastern part of the country, camping about eight miles away from Lake Mývatn, and she felt like they were the only people on the face of the planet.

“What would you say about fish for breakfast?” Ellington asked her out of the blue.

“I think I’m okay with the oatmeal and coffee,” she said.

“The lake is only eight miles away. I can pluck a few fish out and have ourselves a real camping meal.”

“You fish?” she asked, surprised.

“I used to do it a lot,” he said. He got a faraway look in his eyes, one that she had long since learned meant that whatever he was talking about was a part of his past and likely tied to his first marriage.

“This I have to see,” she said.

“Do I hear skepticism in your voice?”

She didn’t say another word as she got to her feet and headed over to their rented four-by-four. “Fish sounds great,” she said.

They piled into the four-by-four and made their way to the lake. Mackenzie enjoyed the open lands and the fjords, the countryside looking at times like something out of a fairytale. It was a stark contrast to the hustle and bustle she was growing accustomed to in DC. She looked over to Ellington as he drove them toward Lake Mývatn. He looked ruggedly handsome, his hair still slightly tousled from a night in the tent. And while they had plans to check into a small motel for the night, mainly just to get showers before returning to camp, she had to admit that there was something alluring about seeing him a little grimy, a little rough around the edges. Seeing him like this somehow made it much easier to fathom the idea of spending the rest of her life with him.

They were at the lake twenty minutes later, Ellington sitting on a rickety old dock with a rented fishing pole in his hands. Mackenzie only watched him, the two of them sharing nothing more than small talk. She was enjoying the moment of seeing him doing something that she had not even *thought* he would enjoy. It only clued her in to the fact that there was so much more about him that she had to learn—a sobering thought while looking at the man she had married only two days ago.

When he brought in his first fish, she was very surprised. And by the time he had three on the dock, tossed in a small bucket, she was equally surprised in herself and the fact that she was rather attracted to this side of him. She wondered what other outdoorsy-type activities Ellington was good at that he had been hiding from her.

They rode back to the campsite, the Jeep smelling of the three fish that would be their breakfast. Back at the site, she saw that his fishing expertise stopped at taking them out of the water. He was a little clumsy in scaling and gutting them; although they did end up having some delicious fish over a campfire, it was in ragged, small morsels.

They made plans for the day, plans that included horseback riding, a waterfall tour, and a journey to the small motel outside of Reykjavík to shower and get a proper meal before driving back out through the gorgeous countryside to the campground as night fell. And after eating their breakfast of fresh fish, they carried that plan out step by step.

It was all very dreamlike and, at the same time, a very vivid way to start their life together. There were moments, holding him or kissing him amidst this incredible scenery, that she knew she would remember all throughout her life, perhaps down to her final breaths. She had never felt more content in her life.

They returned to their campsite, where they restocked the campfire. Then, freshly showered and with a good, full meal in their stomachs, they retired to the tent and made a *very* long night of it.

With just two days remaining in their honeymoon, they went on a private glacier tour along Iceland's Golden Circle. It was the only day of the trip where Mackenzie had been stricken with morning sickness and, as a result, opted out of their chance to go glacier climbing. She watched as Ellington took part, though. She enjoyed watching him tackle the task like an overeager child. It was a side of him she had seen here and there, but never to this extent. It then dawned on her that this was the most time they had ever spent together outside of work. It had been like some sporadic paradise and had opened her eyes to just how much she loved him.

As Ellington and the instructor started their descent down the glacier, Mackenzie felt her cell phone vibrating in her coat pocket. They had turned all sound off as they had gotten on their plane to start the honeymoon but, given their careers, had not allowed themselves to kill the phones completely. To occupy herself while Ellington came down from the glacier, she pulled the phone out and checked it.

When she saw McGrath's name on the display, her heart dropped. She'd been on an emotional high these last few days. Seeing his name made her believe that it was going to come to a pretty quick end.

"This is Agent White," she said. She then thought: *Damn...missed my first chance to refer to myself as Agent Ellington.*

"It's McGrath. How's Iceland?"

"It's nice," she said. And then, not caring that she was being a little too vulnerable with him, corrected herself. "It's amazing. Really beautiful."

"Well, then, you're going to hate me for calling, I'm sure."

He then told her why he was calling, and he was right. When she ended the call, she *was* quite upset with him.

Her hunch had been correct. Just like that, their honeymoon was over.

CHAPTER FOUR

The transition had been easy enough. The hurrying and rushing for their flight and then having to catch a red-eye back to DC made the magic of their honeymoon slowly dissolve back into the boundaries of real life. Mackenzie was quite pleased to feel some of that magic still existing between them, primarily in realizing that even here, back in the States and surrounded by their jobs, they were still married. Iceland had been magical, sure, but it had not been the only thing bonding them over those few days.

What she had not been expecting was just how prominent her wedding ring felt on her finger as she and Ellington walked into McGrath's office just fourteen hours after he had interrupted their honeymoon. She was not so naïve as to feel like it made her a new person, but she did see it as a sign that she had changed—that she was capable of growing. And if that was true in her personal life, then why not her professional life?

Maybe it will start once you tell your superior that you're currently fifteen weeks pregnant, she thought.

With that thought lodged in her head, she also realized that the case they had been called in for would likely be the last one before she had to come clean about her pregnancy—though the thought of trying to track down murderers with a baby belly did make her grin.

"I appreciate you two coming in early on this," McGrath said. "And I also want to congratulate you on your marriage. Of course, I don't like the idea of a married couple working together. But I want this one wrapped up very quickly, as there could be the potential for mass panic on a college campus if we don't get it wrapped very soon. And you two undeniably work well together, so here we are."

Ellington looked over at her and smiled at the last comment. Mackenzie was nearly disarmed at how strongly she felt for him. It was a beautiful thing but also made her a bit uncomfortable as well.

"The latest victim is a sophomore at Queen Nash University in Baltimore. Christine Lynch. She was killed in her kitchen very late at night. Her shirt had been removed and was found on the floor. She was very obviously strangled. From what I understand, there were no prints on her neck, indicating the killer was wearing gloves."

"So the murder was premeditated and not situational," Mackenzie said.

McGrath nodded and slid over three photos of the crime scene. Christine Lynch was a very pretty blonde and in the pictures, her face was turned to the right. She was wearing makeup and, as McGrath had said, her shirt had been removed. She had a small tattoo on her shoulder. A sparrow, Mackenzie thought. The sparrow seemed to be looking up toward the area where the bruising around her neck started; the bruising on her neck was obvious even in the photos.

"The first," McGrath said, opening up another folder, "was a twenty-one-year-old named Jo Haley. Also a Queen Nash student. She was found in her bedroom, in bed and completely naked. The body had been there for at least three days before her mother called to report suspicious activity. There were signs of strangulation but not quite as vicious as what we see on Christine Lynch. CSI found evidence of sexual activity just prior to her death, including an empty condom wrapper."

He slid the crime scene photos over to them. There were more pictures of Jo Haley, primarily the bruising around her neck from where someone had apparently strangled her. She, like Christine Lynch, was fairly attractive. She was also very thin, almost to the point of being waifish.

"So the only real lead we have is that two pretty girls from Queen Nash have been killed, probably during or just prior to sex?" Mackenzie asked.

"Yes," McGrath said. "Given the coroner's estimated time of death for Jo Haley, they were killed no more than five days apart."

"Do we have estimated times of the night they were killed?" Mackenzie asked.

“No. Nothing concrete, but we do know that Christine Lynch had been seen at her boyfriend’s apartment up until about one in the morning on Wednesday. Her body was discovered by her boyfriend the following day when he went to her apartment.”

Ellington studied the last of the pictures and slid them back to McGrath. “Sir, with all due respect, I’m a married man now. I can’t just go approaching pretty young women on college campuses anymore.”

McGrath rolled his eyes and looked at Mackenzie. “I wish you the best of luck with this,” he said, nodding toward Ellington. “In all seriousness...I want this wrapped as soon as possible. Winter break is over next week and I don’t want panic on campus as all of these students are returning from home.”

As if swapping personalities at the flip of a switch, Ellington became all business. “I’ll grab the case files and we’ll get started right away.”

“Thank you. And seriously...enjoy this case together. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you two to be working together now that you’re married. Consider this case my wedding gift to the two of you.”

“Really, sir,” Mackenzie said, unable to help herself, “I would have much preferred a coffee maker.”

She could barely believe it when the flicker of a smile spread across McGrath’s lips. He bit it back right away as Mackenzie and Ellington headed out of his office with their first case as husband and wife and, subsequently, their final case as a team.

CHAPTER FIVE

Per Mackenzie's usual approach, they began with the scene of the most recent crime. It was the equivalent to looking over a warm body—the warm body much more prone to giving up clues or indications more so than a body that had been cold for a while. On the drive up to Maryland, Mackenzie had essentially read the case files out loud while Ellington drove.

When they arrived at Christine's apartment in Baltimore, they were met by a deputy from the local police department. He was an older gentleman, probably on his last year or two with the force and given clean-up on cases like this one.

"Good to meet you," he said, shaking their hands with the kind of good cheer that made him almost obnoxious. "Deputy Wheeler. I've been sort of overseeing this one."

"Agents White and Ellington," Mackenzie said, again realizing she still wasn't quite sure how to address herself. It was not something she and Ellington had discussed yet, although their marriage certificate did refer to her as Mackenzie Ellington.

"What can you tell us from your perspective?" Ellington asked as they stepped into Christine Lynch's apartment.

"Well, we got here, my partner and me, and met with the boyfriend and went in. She was right there, on the kitchen floor. Had her shirt off, laying on her side. Her eyes were still open. She was very clearly strangled and there were no signs of a struggle or anything like that."

"It was snowing on the night it happened," Ellington said. "Were there no wet footprints in the hallway?"

"No. From what we can gather, the boyfriend didn't come in until the following afternoon. Anywhere between ten and sixteen hours could have passed between the last time he saw her and the moment she was killed."

"So it was a clean scene, then?" Mackenzie asked.

"Yeah. No clues, no snowy or wet footprints. Nothing of any interest."

Mackenzie thought back over what she had read in the case files—particularly of a rather personal note the coroner had added to the file no more than six hours ago. In preparing the body for examination, they had found evidence of sexual arousal when removing Christine's underwear. This, of course, could have been the result of time spent with the boyfriend. But if she had been found here, with her shirt removed and in her kitchen...well, it pointed to the fact that maybe someone had met her here after she'd left her boyfriend's apartment. And maybe they hadn't wanted to take the time to make it to the bedroom.

"Did local PD ask to see security tapes?" Mackenzie asked. "I noticed at least two on the sides of the building when we were coming in."

"We've got someone working on that right now," Wheeler said. "Last I heard, which was about two hours ago, there's nothing of note on the footage. You're welcome to check it out for yourself, though."

"We may take you up on that," Mackenzie said as she left the kitchen and stepped into the living area.

Christine had lived a very neat life. Her small bookcase on the right side of the living room was neatly stacked and the titles, many of which were biographies and old political science textbooks, were alphabetized. There were a few pictures placed here and there on the two end tables and the walls. Most of them were of Christine and a woman who was clearly her mother.

She then moved to the bedroom and looked around. The bed was made and the rest of the room was just as proper as the living room. The few items that were displaced on her bedside table and desk revealed very little: pens, pocket change, an iPhone charger, a pamphlet for a local politician,

a glass with just a swallow of water remaining in it. It was evident that nothing of a physical nature had occurred in this room on the night Christine had died.

It opened up many questions and conclusions, all of which Mackenzie sorted out in her head as she made her way back out into the kitchen.

Someone met her here when she returned from her boyfriend's apartment. Was she expecting them or did they surprise her?

The fact that her body was discovered inside the apartment and her shirt was off likely means that, expected or a surprise, she invited the killer in. Did she invite him in having absolutely no idea that she was in danger?

When she got back into the kitchen, Ellington was taking down notes as he spoke to Deputy Wheeler. She and Ellington exchanged a look and a nod. It was one of the many ways they had learned to fall into sync with one another on the job—a non-verbal language that saved many interruptions and awkward moments.

“Well, Deputy Wheeler, I think we’re good here,” Ellington said. “By chance, were you also placed on the Jo Haley murder from a few days ago?”

“No. But I know enough about the case to help if you need it.”

“Great. We’ll call on you if it comes to that.”

Wheeler seemed pleased with this, smiling to them both as they left Christine Lynch’s apartment. Outside, Mackenzie looked to the sidewalk, where there were only sparse indications that it had snowed at all. She smiled thinly as she realized that she and Ellington had likely been about to get married when this poor girl had died.

Christine Lynch won’t ever have the privilege of a wedding or a husband, Mackenzie thought. It made her feel a pang of sorrow for the woman—a sorrow that deepened when she realized that there was another rite of womanhood that she would also never feel.

Wrapped in that sadness, Mackenzie placed a hand on her barely bulging stomach, as if protecting what was inside.

After a call to the bureau, Mackenzie and Ellington discovered that Christine’s boyfriend was a twenty-two-year-old fellow Queen Nash student. He worked part-time with a public health office to get his feet wet for whatever career awaited him after graduating with his public health degree. They found him not at work, but at his apartment, apparently having taken the loss of Christine much harder than a typical boyfriend.

When they arrived at his apartment, Clark Manners was habitually cleaning what already looked to be a sparkling clean apartment. It was clear that he had not slept well recently; his eyes were glazed over and he walked as if some unseen force was having to push him along. Still, he seemed enthusiastic when he invited them into his apartment, eagerly wanting to get to the bottom of what had happened.

“Look, I’m not stupid,” he said as they sat down in his immaculately cleaned living room. “Whoever killed her...they were going to rape her, right? That’s why her shirt was off, right?”

Mackenzie had wondered this herself, but the crime scene photos told a different story. When Christine had fallen to the floor, she’d landed on the shirt. That seemed to indicate it had come off rather easily and had been discarded on the floor. If Mackenzie had to wager a bet, she’d bet that Christine had taken it off herself, likely for whomever she had invited in—whoever had ended up killing her. Plus...Mackenzie wasn’t so sure the murderer had intended to rape Christine. If he’d wanted to, he could have. No...Mackenzie thought he had come by to kill her and that was all.

But this poor guy didn’t need to know that.

“It’s just too early to tell,” Mackenzie said. “There are several different ways it could have gone down. And we were hoping you could maybe provide some insights to help us figure it all out.”

“Sure, sure,” Clark said, clearly in need of a long nap and less coffee. “Anything I can do, I’ll do.”

“Can you describe the nature of your relationship with Christine?” Ellington asked.

“We’d been dating for about seven months. She was the first real relationship I’ve ever had—first one that lasted more than two or three months. I loved her...I knew that after about a month.”

“Had it reached a physical level yet?” Mackenzie asked.

With a faraway look in his eyes, Clark nodded. “Yeah. It got there pretty quickly.”

“And on the night she was killed,” Mackenzie said, “I understand that she had just come from here, from this apartment. Did she stay over often?”

“Yeah, once or twice a week. I’d stay over there sometimes, too. She gave me a key to just come and crash whenever a few weeks ago. That’s how I was able to get into her place...that’s how I found her...”

“Why did she not stay here that night?” Ellington asked. “It was late when she left. Was there an argument between the two of you?”

“No. God, we rarely argued about anything. No...we’d all been drinking and I had far too much. I kissed her goodnight while she was still out here with some of my friends. I went to bed and passed out, feeling a little sick. I was sure she’d eventually join me but when I woke up the next morning, she was gone.”

“Do you think any of your friends might have given her a ride?” Mackenzie asked.

“I asked all of them and they said no. Even if they’d offered, Christine would have said no. I mean, it’s only like three blocks and she likes the cold weather...likes to walk around in it. She’s from California, so the snow is this cool magical thing, you know? I even remember...that night she was excited because there was snow in the forecast. She was joking about taking a walk out in it.”

“How many friends were here with you that night?”

“Including Christine, there were six of us in all. From what I gather, they all left not too long after she did.”

“Can we get their names and contact information?” Ellington asked.

“Sure,” he said, pulling out his phone and starting to locate the information.

“Is it common for you to have that many people over on a weekday night?” Mackenzie asked.

“No. We were just sort of getting together for one last hoorah before winter break came to an end. Classes start next week, you know? And with work schedules and visiting family, it was the only time we could all get together.”

“Did Christine have any friends outside of your group?”

“A few. She was sort of an introvert. There was me and then two of my friends that she hung out with, but that’s about it. She was really close with her mother, too. I think her mom was planning to come out here before the end of the semester—like to move out here for good.”

“Have you spoken with her mother at all since this all happened?”

“I did,” he said. “And it was weird because it was the first time I ever spoke to the woman. I was helping her out with...”

He paused here, his tired eyes showing signs of tears for the first time.

“...with funeral arrangements. She’s having her cremated here in town, I think. She flew in last night and she’s staying at a hotel somewhere out here.”

“Any family with her?” Mackenzie asked.

“I don’t know.” He hunched over and looked at the floor. He was both exhausted and sad, a mixture that looked to have finally devastated him.

“We’ll leave you alone for now,” Mackenzie said. “If you don’t mind, do you have Mrs. Lynch’s hotel information?”

“Yeah,” he said, slowly pulling his phone back out. “Hold on.”

As he pulled up the information, Mackenzie looked over to Ellington. As always, he was being hyperaware, looking around the place to make sure they weren't missing anything obvious. She also noticed, though, that he was tinkering with his wedding ring as he studied the place, turning it slowly around and around on his finger.

She then looked back at Clark Manners. She was pretty sure they may end up questioning him again—and probably soon. The fact that he was obsessively cleaning his house after his girlfriend's death made sense from a psychological standpoint but it could also be seen as an attempt to get rid of any evidence.

But she had seen people broken over grief before and she felt deep down in her gut that Clark was likely innocent. No one could fake this sort of grief and inability to get a good night's sleep. They may need to speak with some of his friends at some point, though.

As Clark found the information, he handed over his phone so Mackenzie could take it down. She also took down the names and numbers that Clark had pulled up for all of the friends that had been at his apartment on the night Christine was killed. As she took the information down, she realized that she had also been fidgeting with her wedding ring. Ellington had noticed her doing it, managing a quick smile at her in spite of the situation. She stopped rotating the ring when she took the phone from Clark.

Margaret Lynch was just about the exact opposite of Clark Manners. She was cool and collected, greeting Mackenzie and Ellington with a smile when they met with her in the lobby of the Radisson she was staying in. She led them to a couch near the back of the lobby, though, showing her first sign of weakness.

"If I end up crying, I'd rather not do it in front of everyone," she remarked, pressing herself into the couch as if she was fairly certain this would indeed happen.

"I'd like to start with asking how well you know Clark Manners," Mackenzie said.

"Well, I spoke to him for the first time two days ago, after all this had happened. But Christine had mentioned him a few times on the phone. She was quite taken with him, I think."

"Is there any suspicion on your part?"

"No. Of course, I don't know the boy but based on what Christine told me about him, I don't see him being the one who did this."

Mackenzie noted that Mrs. Lynch was doing everything she could to avoid words like *killed* or *murdered*. She figured the woman was able to keep her head because she was doing a good job of distancing herself from it. It was probably made easier by the fact that the two of them had been living on separate ends of the country for a while.

"What can you tell me about Christine's life here in Baltimore?" Mackenzie asked.

"Well, she started college in San Francisco. She wanted to be a lawyer, but the school and the course load...it wasn't a good fit. We had a long talk about her applying to Queen Nash University. A *long* talk. Her father passed away when she was eleven and really, it's just been Christine and I since then. No uncles, no aunts. It's always been a small family. She has one surviving grandmother, but she has dementia and is in a home out near Sacramento. I don't know if you know yet or not, but I'm having her cremated here, in Baltimore. No sense in going through the process of getting her back to California just to have the same thing done. We have no ties to the area, really. And I know she enjoyed it here, so..."

This poor woman is going to be all alone, Mackenzie thought. She was always aware of these sorts of things when interviewing and interrogating people, but this thought seemed to slam into her like a boulder.

“Anyway, she got in and within a single semester, she knew she loved it here. She was always very apologetic, worried that I was this lonely old woman living alone without her. She kept in touch, calling about twice a week. She’d tell me about how classes were going and, like I said, she ended up telling me about Clark.”

“What did she say about him?” Ellington asked.

“Just that he was cute and very funny. She did mention from time to time that he wasn’t very exciting and that he had a tendency to drink too much whenever they were in social situations.”

“But nothing negative?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“Please forgive me for asking,” Mackenzie said, “but do you know if they were exclusive? Was there a chance Christine might have also been seeing anyone else?”

Mrs. Lynch thought about this for a moment. She didn’t seem to take offense to the question; she remained just as calm as she had seemed when they had first come into the lobby and met her. Mackenzie wondered at what point the poor woman was going to eventually snap.

“She never mentioned any competition for her heart,” Mrs. Lynch said. “And I think I know why you’re asking. I was told what the scene looked like—her being topless and all. I had just assumed...”

She stopped here and took a moment to collect herself. The words that were coming next caused something to stir inside, but she managed to get it down before the emotions took over. When she resumed, she was still stone-faced.

“I had just assumed it was a rape gone wrong. That maybe the man got frustrated for some reason and wasn’t able to go through with it. But I suppose there’s a chance there was another man in her life. If there was, I just didn’t know about it.”

Mackenzie nodded. The would-be-rapist theory had gone through her head as well, but the way the shirt had been tossed to the floor and then her head haphazardly lying on it...none of it seemed to add up.

“Well, Mrs. Lynch, we don’t want to bother you any more than we absolutely have to,” Mackenzie said. “How long do you intend to stay in town?”

“I don’t know yet. Maybe a day or two beyond the service.” At the word *service*, her voice cracked the tiniest bit.

Ellington handed her one of his business cards as he got to his feet. “If you happen to think of anything or hear anything during the funeral or the services, please let us know.”

“Of course. And thank you for looking into this.” Mrs. Lynch looked forlorn as Mackenzie and Ellington left. *I suppose so*, Mackenzie thought. *She’s all alone in a city she doesn’t know, having come to take care of her deceased daughter.*

Mrs. Lynch saw them to the door and waved them off as they walked to their car. It was the first moment in which Mackenzie realized that her hormones were officially all over the place as a result of her pregnancy. She felt for Mrs. Margaret Lynch in a way she might not have before she’d found out she was pregnant. To create life, then raise and nurture it only to have it wrenched away from you in such a brutal fashion...it had to be miserable. Mackenzie felt absolutely wretched for Mrs. Lynch as she and Ellington pulled out into traffic.

And just like that, Mackenzie felt a flush of determination. She’d always had a passion for righting wrongs—for bringing killers and other evil men and women to justice. And whether it was hormones or not, she vowed to find Christine Lynch’s killer, if for no other reason than to bring some closure to Margaret Lynch.

CHAPTER SIX

The first name on the list of friends Clark Manners had given them was a guy named Marcus Early. When they tried contacting him, the call went straight to voicemail. They then tried the second name on the list, Bethany Diaggio, and were able to set up an interview right then and there.

They met Bethany at her place of employment, a law firm where she was interning as part of her course load at Queen Nash. As the day was winding down to dinnertime, she simply clocked out half an hour early and met with them in one of the small conference rooms in the back of the building.

“We understand that you were at Clark Manners’s apartment on the night that Christine was killed,” Mackenzie said. “What can you tell us about that night?”

“It was just getting together to have some fun. We had a bit to drink—maybe a little too much. We played some card games, watched some reruns of *The Office*, and that was about it.”

“So there were no arguments of any kind?” Mackenzie asked.

“No. But I did see that Christine was starting to get irritated with Clark. Sometimes when he drinks, he tends to go a little overboard, you know? She never said anything that night, but you could tell she was starting to get irritated.”

“Do you know if it ever caused problems with them in the past?”

“Not that I know of. I think Christine just sort of dealt with it. I feel pretty sure that she knew their relationship wasn’t this forever sort of thing.”

“Bethany, did you know a woman named Jo Haley? About your age, also a Queen Nash student?”

“I did,” she said. “Not quite as well as I knew Christine, but we were on a friendly basis. It was rare that we ever hung out. But if we crossed paths at a bar or something like that, we’d usually end up sitting together and chatting.”

“I assume you know that she was murdered several days ago as well?” Ellington asked.

“I did. In a very cruel twist of irony, it was actually Christine that broke the news to me.”

“Do you know how she found out?” Mackenzie asked.

“No clue. I think they shared some of the same classes. Oh, and they had the same academic advisor, too.”

“Academic advisor?” Ellington asked. “Is that just some fancy way of saying *guidance counselor*?”

“More or less,” Bethany said.

“And you’re certain Jo and Christine had the same one?” Mackenzie asked.

“That’s what Christine said. She mentioned it when she told me Jo had been killed. She said it felt a little too close to home.” Bethany paused here, perhaps understanding the eerie precognitive weight of the comment for the first time.

“Would you happen to have the name of this advisor?” Mackenzie asked.

Bethany thought for a moment and then shook her head. “Sorry. No. She mentioned it when we were talking about Jo, but I don’t remember it.”

No big deal, Mackenzie thought. A quick call to the university will get that information for us.

“Is there anything else about either Jo or Christine you might be able to tell us?” Mackenzie asked. “Anything that might give anyone reason to want them dead?”

“Nothing at all,” she said. “It doesn’t make any sense. Christine was very focused and drama free. It was all about school and trying to get an early start on her career. I didn’t know Jo enough to really make a judgment there, though.”

“Well, thank you for your time,” Mackenzie said.

As they left the office and Bethany readied to leave for the day, Mackenzie tried to imagine these two dead women crossing paths in the hallways and concourses of the university. Maybe they

passed by one another as one left their advisor's office while the other was walking toward an appointment. The idea of it was a little creepy but she knew far too well that things like this tended to happen quite often in murder cases where there was more than one victim.

"University offices are still closed for the holiday break," Ellington pointed out as they got back into the car. "Pretty sure they reopen tomorrow."

"Yeah, but I'd assume there's some sort of employee directory on the website. Based on some of the books I saw in Christine's apartment and some political literature in her bedroom, I think it's safe to assume she's a political science major. We could narrow it down that way."

Before Ellington was able to tell her what a good idea this was, Mackenzie was already on her cell phone. She opened up her web browser and started scrolling. She was able to find a directory, but, as she had assumed, there were no direct or personal numbers; they were all numbers to the advisors' offices. Still, she located the two different advisors that were assigned specifically to the political science department and left messages for each one, asking them to call her back as soon as they got the message.

As soon as she was done with that, she scrolled a bit more, this time through her contacts list.

"What now?" Ellington asked.

"There are only two of them," she said. "Might as well see if we can get some sort of a background check running on them—see if there are some red flags."

Ellington nodded, smiling at her quick train of thought. He listened to her as she placed the information request. Mackenzie could feel his eyes flitting over to her every now and then, a caring and watchful sort of stare.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

She knew what he meant, that he was veering away from the case and asking about the baby. She shrugged, seeing no point in lying to him. "All of the books say that the nausea should be coming to an end soon, but I'm not believing it. I felt it a few times today. And, if I'm being honest, I'm pretty tired."

"So maybe you need to go back home," he said. "I hate to sound like that domineering husband type, but...well, I'd really rather you or my baby not get hurt."

"I know. But this is a series of murders on a college campus. I doubt it's going to get dangerous. It's probably just a testosterone-laced guy that gets his rocks off on killing women."

"Fair enough," Ellington said. "But will you be honest with me and tell me if you start to feel weak or just out of sorts?"

"Yes. I will."

He eyed her suspiciously, yet playfully, as if he wasn't sure if he should trust her. He then reached out and took her hand as he headed back toward the center of town to find a hotel for the night.

They'd barely had enough time to settle into their room when Mackenzie's phone rang. Ignoring the unfamiliar number, she answered it right away. She could feel the ticking clock McGrath had placed on them, ticking away second by second. She knew that if this thing wasn't solved by the time classes started next week—in just five days, in fact—it would be increasingly harder to wrap up with all of the students back in the area.

"This is Agent White," she said, answering the call.

"Agent White, this is Charles McMahon, an academic advisor over at Queen Nash University. I'm returning a message you left for me."

"Great, and thanks for the promptness. Are you at the college right now?"

"No. I have a bit of a heavy workload right now, so I had all of my voicemail from the office rerouted to my personal phone."

"Oh, I see. Well, I was wondering if you might be able to answer a few questions about a recent murder."

"I assume it's about Jo Haley?"

"No, actually. There's been another murder, two days ago. Another Queen Nash student. A young woman named Christine Lynch."

"That's terrible," he said, sounding genuinely shocked. "Is it...well, with two women in such a short amount of time...do you think it's a trend? A serial?"

"We don't know quite yet," Mackenzie said. "We were hoping you might be able to fill in the pieces. I saw on the college website that there are only two academic advisors for the political science department, and that you're one of them. I also happen to know that both Jo Haley and Christine Lynch shared the same advisor. Would that happen to be you?"

There was a tense nervous chuckle from McMahon's end of the phone. "No. And actually, this is one of the primary reasons I have such a heavy workload right now. The other academic advisor within our department, William Holland, quit his job about three days before winter break. I got the majority of his students...and I'll likely be handling that load until they find a replacement. We have an assistant that is helping where I need it, but I've been swamped."

"Do you have any idea why Holland quit?"

"Well, there were rumblings that he had gotten involved with a student. As far as I know, there was never any evidence to support this, so I thought it was just a rumor. But when he just simply quit like that, out of nowhere, it made me wonder."

Yeah, that makes me wonder, too, Mackenzie thought.

"As far as you know, did he ever do anything else that might have been shady? Was he the type of man where news like this shocked you?"

"I can't answer with any certainty. I mean...I knew him only because we worked together. But I didn't know him much outside of work."

"So I'm going to assume you have no idea where he might live?"

"Sorry, no."

"While I have you on...Mr. McMahon, when was the last time you spoke with either Jo or Christine?"

"I never did. I was assigned them both when I was handed Holland's students, but the most I ever communicated with them was a mass email that was sent to all of the affected students." He paused here and added: "You know, given the nature of all that's happened, I could probably get Holland's address for you. I just need to make a few calls."

"I appreciate that," Mackenzie said. "But there's no need. I can get that information as well. But thank you very much for your time."

With that, she ended the call. Ellington, sitting on the edge of the bed with one shoe off and the other on, had been listening the entire time.

"Who is Holland?" he asked.

"William Holland." She filled Ellington in on all she had learned via her brief conversation with McMahon. As she did, she also sat down on the edge of the bed. She didn't realize just how tired she truly was until her feet were off the floor.

"I'll make a call to get his information," he said. "If he works at the college, the chances are pretty good he lives around here somewhere."

"And if he *is* our guy," Mackenzie said, "my calling and leaving a message has probably freaked him out."

"Then I guess we need to act fast, then."

She nodded and realized that she had once again placed her hand on her stomach. It was almost habitual now, like someone chewing on their nails or nervously popping their knuckles.

There's life in there, she thought. And that life, if the books are right, is feeling the same emotions I'm feeling. It's sensing my anxiousness, my happiness, my fears...

As she listened to Ellington hunting down a physical address for William Holland, Mackenzie wondered for the first time if she had made a mistake in keeping the pregnancy from McGrath. Maybe she was taking a huge risk by remaining an active agent, out in the field.

Once this case is over, I'll tell him, she thought. I'll focus on the baby and my new life, and—

Her thoughts had apparently snagged her full attention, because Ellington was looking at her now, as if waiting for a response.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was somewhere else there for a minute."

He smiled and said, "That's okay. I got an address for one William Holland. He lives here in town, in Northwood. You feel up for a visit?"

Honestly, she didn't. The day had not been overly grueling but coming into a case directly off of a trip to Iceland and not sleeping much in the past thirty-six hours, it was all starting to catch up to her. She also knew that the growing baby inside of her was sucking some of her energy away and the thought of that actually made her smile.

Besides, even if the guy was capable of questioning or taking into custody, it probably wouldn't take that long. So she put on her best go-get-'em face and stood back up.

"Yeah, let's go pay him a visit."

Ellington stepped in front of her, making sure they were looking eye to eye. "You sure? You look tired. You even told me less than half an hour ago that you felt a little wiped out."

"It's okay. I'm good."

He kissed her on the forehead and nodded. "Okay, then. I'm going to take you on your word." With another smile, he reached down and caressed her stomach before heading for the door.

He's worried about me, she thought. And he's already so in love with this child that it's overwhelming. He's going to be such a good father...

But before she could latch on to that thought, they were out the door and headed for the car. They moved with such speed and purpose that it served as a reminder that she would not be able to truly focus on thoughts about their future together until this case was solved.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was shortly after seven p.m. when Ellington parked their car in front of William Holland's house. It was a small house tucked away on the outer edges of a nice little subdivision, the sort of house that looked more like a misplaced cottage than anything else. A single car was parked in the paved driveway and several lights were on inside the house.

Ellington knocked on the door in an almost assertive way. He was not being rude about it by any means, but he was making it clear to Mackenzie that while he was worried about her health, he would be taking the lead in just about every facet of the case: driving, knocking on doors, and so on.

The door was answered by a well-groomed man who looked to be in his late forties. He wore a pair of trendy eyeglasses and was dressed in a blazer and khakis. Based on the smell wafting out of the door from behind him, he was enjoying Chinese takeout for dinner.

"William Holland?" Ellington asked.

"Yeah. And who are you?"

They both showed their badges at the same time, Mackenzie taking a single step forward as they did. "Agents White and Ellington, FBI. We understand that you left your job at Queen Nash recently."

"I did," Holland said with some uncertainty. "But I'm confused. Why would that warrant a visit from the FBI?"

"Can we come in, Mr. Holland?" Ellington asked.

Holland took a moment to think before conceding. "Sure, yeah, come on in. But I don't...I mean, what is this about?"

They entered the doorway without answering. When Holland closed the door behind them, Mackenzie took note. He'd shut it slowly and firmly. He was either nervous or scared—or, more likely, both.

"We're here in town investigating two murders," Ellington finally answered. "Both Queen Nash students, both females, and, as we've learned today, both advised by you."

They'd entered Holland's living room by then and Holland wasted no time in plopping down into a small lounge chair. He looked up to them as if he truly did not understand what they were telling him.

"Hold on...you're saying *two*?"

"Yes," Mackenzie said. "Did you not know?"

"I knew about Jo Haley. And the only reason I knew that was because we're notified by the provost whenever a student that we work with passes away. Who is the other one?"

"Christine Lynch," Mackenzie said, studying his face for a reaction. There was a flicker of recognition there, but very little. "Do you recognize the name?"

"Yes. But I...I can't recall the face. I had over sixty students, you know."

"That's another thing," Ellington said. "The *had* of it all. We hear that you quit your job shortly before winter break. Did that have anything to do with the rumors that you were seeing one of your students?"

"Ah, Jesus," Holland said. He leaned back in his chair and removed his glasses. He massaged the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Yes, I'm dating a student. I knew word was getting around and what that might do to both my career and her academic career. So I quit my job."

"Just like that?" Mackenzie asked.

"No, not *just like that*," Holland snapped. "We'd been sneaking around for months and I've fallen in love with her. She feels the same. So we talked long and hard about it, trying to figure out what to do. But during that time, it somehow became public knowledge. And that sort of made the decision for us. But...what does any of this have to do with the murders?"

“We’re hoping nothing,” Ellington said. “But you have to see this the way we see it. We have two murdered students and the only firm link between the two of them is that they share you as an academic advisor. Add to that the fact that you’re having a fairly open relationship with a student...”

“So you think I’m a suspect? You think I killed those girls?”

Saying the words out loud seemed to make him sick. He placed his glasses back on and sat up in the chair, hunched over.

“We’re not sure what we think right now,” Mackenzie said. “That’s why we’re here to speak with you.”

“Mr. Holland,” Ellington said, “you just told us that you could not really place Christine Lynch’s face. How about Jo Haley?”

“Yes...I knew her rather well, actually. She was a friend of the woman I’m currently seeing.”

“So Jo Haley knew about the relationship?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think that Melissa—that’s my girlfriend—would tell her. We tried our best to remain very discreet.”

Mackenzie took a moment to think. The fact that his girlfriend had known one of the victims—and that the victim could have potentially known about the taboo relationship—certainly painted Holland in a worse light. It made her wonder why he would so voluntarily offer up all of this information without much of a fight.

“Forgive me for asking,” Mackenzie said, “but was this girlfriend of yours—this Melissa—the first student you’ve ever been involved with?”

A knot of frustration worked its way across Holland’s face and he got to his feet in a sudden flash of movement. “Hey, fuck you! I can’t...”

“Sit back down right now,” Ellington said, stepping directly into Holland’s path.

Holland appeared to realize his mistake right away, his expression going from one of resigned regret to anger, back and forth as he tried to settle on an emotion.

“Look, I’m sorry. But I’m sick and tired of being judged for this and I truly don’t appreciate being accused of screwing around with *all* students just because I happen to be involved in a current, responsible relationship with a consenting of-age woman.”

“How old are you, Mr. Holland?” Mackenzie asked.

“Forty-five.”

“And how old is Melissa?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Have you ever been married?” Ellington asked, taking a step back and relaxing his posture.

“Once. For eight years. It was miserable, if you must know.”

“And how did that marriage end?”

Holland shook his head and started making his way to the edge of the living room, where the foyer joined it. “Yeah, this conversation is over. Unless you plan on charging me with something, you can both get the hell out. I’m sure there are others at the college that can answer the rest of your questions.”

Slowly, Mackenzie made her way to the door. Ellington followed reluctantly behind. Mackenzie turned back to him, her gut telling her there was something here.

“Mr. Holland, you understand that by failing to cooperate, it makes it look much worse for you.”

“I’ve dealt with that for the last month or so of my life.”

“Where’s Melissa right now?” Ellington asked. “We’d like to speak with her as well.”

“She’s...” But Holland stopped here, again shaking his head. “She’s been dragged through the mud, too. I won’t have you bothering her over this.”

“So you aren’t answering any more of our questions,” Ellington said. “And you’re refusing to give us the location of someone else we need to speak with. Is that correct?”

“That’s *absolutely* correct.”

Mackenzie could tell that Ellington was getting riled up. She could see his shoulders going tense and his posture going as rigid as a stone slab. She reached out and gently touched his arm, anchoring him.

"We'll take note of that," Mackenzie said. "If we need to speak with you again in regards to this case and it's discovered that you aren't home, we'll consider you a viable suspect and you *will* be arrested. Do you understand that?"

"Sure," Holland said.

He crowded them into the foyer as he opened the door for them. The moment they were standing on the porch, Holland slammed the door.

Mackenzie started toward the porch stairs but Ellington held his ground. "You don't think it's worth pursuing?" he asked.

"Maybe. But I don't think anyone that is guilty would willingly share some of those details. Besides...we know his girlfriend's first name. If it's really pressing, we can probably weed her full name out from his records. The last thing we need, though, is the hasty arrest of an academic advisor who is already on thin ice and in a bit of controversy."

Ellington smiled and joined her heading down the stairs. "See...it's things like this that are going to make you an amazing wife. Always keeping me from doing something stupid."

"I suppose I *have* had ample practice these last few years."

They got back into the car and when Mackenzie was in the seat, she again realized how tired she was. She would never admit it to Ellington, but maybe she *did* need to take it easy.

One or two more days, little one, she thought to the growing life inside of her. *Just a few more days and you and I will be getting all the rest we want.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

She knew she shouldn't be doing this, but it was hard to resist. Besides...with a new semester on the way, this would be a good way to kick things off. One last fling. One last night of absolute craziness. And if it went the way it usually did, she'd leave feeling empowered—so empowered that it would easily override those quick little flashes of regret.

And it would be a great way to start the new semester.

Marie hadn't even tried to talk herself out of it. The moment she'd parked her car in the garage, she knew this was where she would end up tonight. All she'd had to do was make the call, to let him know that she was back in town and wanted to see him. He had never denied her before and after three weeks apart, she highly doubted he would deny her now.

And of course, he hadn't.

It was 11:05 when she walked to the back of the apartment building. It was in a sketchy part of town, but not so bad that she felt endangered by walking alone at night. Besides, it was only about eight miles away from campus and she knew that the crime rate anywhere near campus was incredibly small. Anyway, she was so excited about what the next few hours would bring that any sense of danger was long gone.

When she reached the door at the back of the building, Marie was not at all surprised that it was locked. She buzzed his apartment number and was rewarded with the sound of the lock disengaging right away. He said nothing to her through the speaker, just unlocked the door. That made her smile; he would probably be in a very serious mood. Dominant, even.

Cute, she thought. But we know who always ends up as the aggressor...

That thought made her even more excited as she stepped inside. She didn't even bother with the elevator, wanting to get to his apartment on the second floor as quickly as possible. She took the steps two at a time, her heart rate spiking from the exertion as well as the anticipation of what was waiting for her. The expectancy of it, from her drive down from New York to right now, approaching the apartment, was its own delicious foreplay.

It had been a long drive. She was stressed out. Tense. Man oh man, she was going to wear him out...ride him right into the ground...

When she reached his apartment, she found the door unlocked. She opened it just a crack and saw that the lights were out. Still, there was some illumination coming from the back of the main area, maybe a candle or something.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice sultry. She closed the door behind her and locked it.

"Waiting for you," came the answer.

"Good. But...you can't have me unless you tell me exactly what you want."

She heard him chuckle lightly somewhere in the darkness. As her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, she could see his shape in the living room, lying on the couch. She smiled and started to walk over to him.

The apartment smelled dusty and unused—mainly because that's exactly what it was. She knew he had a better place, but she also knew that he did not like to have her there. He liked to keep his personal life private. From what she understood about him, he spent very little time at home. She'd only seen the outside of it, usually meeting with him here or, on a few occasions, the back seat of his car or a hotel. While she understood the need for privacy, she also wished she could just ravage him in a huge bed for once, maybe with some mood lighting and music.

But keeping it all hidden was sexy, too. It was part of the allure. It was why she was practically fighting back to the urge to pounce on him right then and there.

But their trysts had always been about the build-up. Teasing, some rough foreplay, even some playfully derogatory remarks from time to time.

“Come to me, Marie,” he said.

She did, approaching the couch and finding him still fully dressed. That was fine with her; it would just stretch the foreplay out for longer.

“That’s cute,” she said as she knelt on the floor in front of him. She kissed him softly, flicking her tongue against his lips in a way she knew he liked.

“What’s cute?” he asked.

“You, thinking you’re in control here.”

“Oh, I am,” he said, sitting up.

“I’ll let you think that for a while,” she said, nibbling at the soft flesh of his neck. He stirred against it and she felt his hands on her—one at her back, another at the back of her head. “But we both know the tr—”

Without warning, he grabbed her by the back of the head and jammed her head forward. She was pushed forward with violent speed, her forehead slamming into his knee.

“What the...”

But before she could get the question out, he was on top of her, pressing his full weight into her back. Her head reeled from the strike and for a moment, Marie legitimately had no idea where she was.

As she got her hands under her to fight back against him, his hands were in her long blonde hair again. This time, he drove her head hard into the wood floor. Marie fought against it for a moment, but she quickly started to feel the world swimming away as a flaring pain radiated in the back of her head.

Somewhere very far away, she was aware of him grabbing her by the waist of her pants and pulling them down. Then the world went black for a moment and she only came to after that because she felt his mouth on her, roaming seemingly everywhere.

It made no sense. She would let him do just about anything to her and would, in return, do just about anything for him. So why would he...?

This thought was also interrupted by the floating darkness that came and went. But this time when it came, it stayed for quite a while.

It had involved more work than he’d thought but he was finally able to relax around two in the morning. The hardest part of all had been knocking her unconscious. He simply didn’t think he’d have it in him. Strangling people was one thing. It was just a matter of convincing yourself to do it and then applying the pressure once their neck was in his hands. But slamming Marie’s head into the floor had taken more grit than he had been expecting.

When she was out, the rest of the work was hard but enjoyable. And as he went about the tasks, he started to feel comfortable with the decision he had made.

He’d killed Jo Haley and Christine Lynch outright. With Jo, he’d slept with her, enjoyed the encounter immensely, and then strangled her when round two had gotten started. And perhaps the sex was to blame, but he had almost changed his mind—had almost chickened out. He’d learned a lesson there and opted to skip the sex when it had come to Christine. And then her body had been found and he’d seen the story on the news—just a blip, really, but an eye-opener all the same. It had made him rethink things...that he couldn’t *just* kill them.

But he had to retain them. The ones beyond Christine, the ones that needed to be silenced. There would be more, including Marie. And if he could not kill them outright and just leave them where they fell, that meant he had to do something else. He had to be more discreet, more careful.

He looked at his work and thought he would be fully capable of getting away with it. He stood in front of the opened coat closet that was located in the hallway. Marie was in the closet, completely nude and hanging by her bound wrists from the coat rack that ran horizontal across the width of

the closet. There were also three strips of reinforced duct tape covering her mouth. Her body was hanging downward but her arms were stretched up over her head from where he had tied her wrists together. It was an oddly seductive pose and it made him regret not sleeping with her before he'd taken her captive.

He'd been standing there, staring at her and enjoying the sense of power and accomplishment, for nearly fifteen minutes before Marie started to stir. She let out a little groan, trying to lean forward and sleepily realizing that she was being held in place. This seemed to alert her, her eyes flaring open and her legs standing upright. She looked around feverishly, taking in her situation: aching head, stark naked, bound to an iron bar in a coat closet, being watched with malicious intent by a man she had been sleeping with quite regularly over the past two months.

She tried to speak, a single syllable trapped by the duct tape. A sound that he thought as a question: "What?"

It was the only word she could get out as the severity of the situation came slamming into her.

He walked up to her and cupped her chin in his right hand. She jerked back away from him only to find that it caused her bound arms to pull back at an awkward angle. He slowly ran his hand down from her chin, across her right breast, toward her inner thighs. For the first time since they had started sleeping together, she closed her legs to him as he explored downward.

He laughed at her. In return, she tried screaming through the tape. It sounded like someone might be running a vacuum cleaner elsewhere in the apartment. He had shut her mouth off well, stretching the tape from ear to ear, reinforced three times.

"No need for that," he said. He did his best to ignore his flesh-driven needs and the excitement that pinged every nerve in his body. There were important things to get down to here—things to discuss and sort out.

She moaned in response, silenced by the tape.

"There are some things you and I need to talk about," he said. He then showed her the gun he had been hiding behind his back—a gun he had picked up two years ago and had never used. He'd only ever picked it up a single time since purchasing it. And he honestly had no intention of using it now.

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