

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 4

# BEFORE HE TAKES



BLAKE PIERCE

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Blake Pierce

**Before He Takes**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

## **Pierce B.**

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From Blake Pierce, bestselling author of *ONCE GONE* (a #1 bestseller with over 800 five star reviews), comes book #4 in the heart-pounding Mackenzie White mystery series. In *BEFORE HE TAKES* (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 4), newly minted FBI agent Mackenzie White is ordered to take on a new and disturbing case. Women are going missing in rural Iowa, and a pattern is emerging. It is feared a serial killer is on a rampage, his pace increasing. Given her Midwestern roots, Mackenzie is chosen as the perfect fit. But Mackenzie is reluctant to return to the Midwest, this time to a starkly rural setting that reminds her too much of her upbringing, of her own ghosts in her closet. She also seeks her own father's murderer, with darkness haunting her at every turn of her trip. Plunged deep into the world of farms, of silos, of slaughterhouses, of long stretches on empty highways, Mackenzie feels as if she's falling back into the depths of her psyche, and into the nightmares she always feared to face. In the deadly game of cat-and-mouse, she finally realizes the psychosis of the killer she is up against, and comes to realize that the land of her upbringing is holding even darker and more twisted horrors than she could imagine. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, *BEFORE HE TAKES* is book #4 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #5 in the Mackenzie White Mystery series will be available soon. Also available by Blake Pierce is *ONCE GONE* (A Riley Paige mystery—Book #1), a #1 bestseller with over 800 five star reviews!

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# **Blake Pierce**

## **Before He Takes (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 4)**

**Blake Pierce**

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seven books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising four 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](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.

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## PROLOGUE

This would be the last time she did a book signing in some small town no one had ever heard of. She needed to speak to her publicity manager and let him know that just because a town has a bookstore, it is not a major metropolis. Sure, she might seem like a high-maintenance diva by making such a request, but she didn't care.

It was 10:35 at night and Delores Manning was driving down a two-lane road in some long-forgotten neck of the woods in Iowa. She was well aware that she had made a wrong turn about ten miles back because it was shortly after that when her GPS had crapped out. No signal. Of course. It was just the cherry on top of what had been a miserable weekend.

Delores had been on this stretch of road for at least ten minutes. She'd seen no stop signs, no houses, nothing. Just trees and a surprisingly gorgeous night sky overhead. She was seriously thinking about just stopping in the middle of the road and pulling a U-turn.

The more she thought about it, the more that seemed like a good idea.

She was about to hit her brake pedal to come to a stop when a popping sound filled the car. Delores cried out in fear and surprise, but her scream was drowned out by the sudden *thunk* of the car as it seemed to drop several inches and then careened hard to the left.

She managed to jerk the car back into a somewhat straight course but realized that she could not fight against it—there was too much drag. Giving up the fight, she managed to guide the car to the side of the road, parking it a little more than half off of the pavement. She cut her hazard lights on and let out a heavy sigh.

"Shit," she said.

*That sounded like a tire, she thought to herself. And if that's the case...hell, I don't even remember if there's a spare in the trunk. That's what I get for taking this deathtrap of a car with me everywhere. You're about to be a bigshot author, girl. Spring some money on planes and rental cars every now and then, huh?*

She popped the trunk release, opened the door, and stepped out into the night. There was a nip to the air, as winter was bearing down on the Midwest, sneaking in behind fall. She pulled her coat tight to her body and then pulled her cell phone out. She was not at all surprised to see the No Service reading; she'd been seeing it continuously for the last twenty minutes or so, ever since her GPS app had stopped working.

She looked at her tires and saw that both the front and the rear on the driver's side were flat. More than that, they were pancaked. She saw something glimmering out of the front tire and dropped to a knee to see what it was.

*Glass, she thought. Really? How did glass pop my tires?*

She looked to the back tire and saw several large shards of it sticking through. She glanced back down the road and could see no signs of anything. But that meant nothing because the moon was mostly hidden behind the treetops and it was dark as hell out.

She went to the trunk, already knowing that anything she found would be pointless. Even if there *was* a spare back there, she needed two.

Furious and a bit scared, she slammed the trunk, not even bothering to check. She grabbed her phone and, feeling like an idiot, scrambled up onto the back of the car. She held her phone up, hoping for just a single bar of service.

Nothing.

*Don't freak out, she thought. Yes, you're in the middle of nowhere. But someone will come by eventually. All roads lead somewhere, right?*



Unable to believe the way this weekend had gone, she got back in her car, where the heater was still doing its work. She angled her rearview mirror so she'd see any headlights approaching from behind and then looked ahead to keep an eye out for any coming straight ahead.

As she ruminated on the failed book signing, the small publicity mix-up, and her most recent trouble of having two blown tires on the side of the road, she saw headlights approaching from ahead. She'd only been waiting for about seven minutes, so she counted herself lucky.

She cracked her door open, providing the overhead light to join the already blinking hazards lights. She stepped out and stayed close to the car, flagging down the approaching truck. She was instantly relieved when she saw that it was slowing down. It veered over into her lane and parked nose to nose with her. The driver switched on his hazards and then stepped out.

"Hey there," said the forty-something man who stepped out of the truck.

"Hey," Delores said. She sized him up, still too pissed at the situation to be cautious of a random stranger who had pulled over so late at night to help her.

"Car trouble?" he asked.

"Tons of it," Delores said, gesturing to her tires. "Two blown tires at once. Can you believe it?"

"Oh, that's terrible," he said. "Have you called Triple A or a garage or anything?"

"No service," she said. She almost added *I'm not exactly from around here* but then decided not to.

"Well, you can use mine," he said. "I usually get at least two bars out here."

He stepped forward, reaching into his pocket for his phone.

Only it was not a phone he pulled out. She was actually very confused at what she was seeing. It made no sense. She couldn't figure out what it was and—

Suddenly, it was coming at her face, very quickly. A split second before she was struck, she saw the shape and shine of what he had slipped over his fingers.

Brass knuckles.

She heard the sound of them striking her forehead, felt a flash of pain, and then a moment later her knees buckled, and she felt herself collapsing onto the hard road. The last thing she was aware of was the man reaching down for her almost caringly, his headlights shining in her eyes, before the world went black.

## CHAPTER ONE

Mackenzie White stood beneath a black umbrella and watched the casket get lowered into the ground as the rain picked up to a steady downpour. The weeping of those in attendance was nearly drowned out by the raindrops on the cemetery grounds and the nearby tombstones.

She watched with a pang of sadness as her old partner spent his last moments among the world of the living.

The casket inched into the grave on the steel runners it had been sitting on during the service while those closest to Bryers stood by. Most of the procession had scattered after the pastor's final words, but those closest to him remained.

Mackenzie stood to the side, two rows over. It occurred to her that although she and Bryers had put their lives in each other's hands on several occasions, she really had not known him all that well. This was proven by the fact that she had no idea who the people that had stayed back to watch him lowered into the ground were. There was a man who looked to be in his thirties and two women, huddled together under the black tarp, having one last moment with him.

As Mackenzie turned away, she noticed an older woman standing another row back, holding her own umbrella. She was dressed in all black and looked quite pretty standing in the rain. Her hair was completely gray, pulled back in a bun, but she looked young somehow. Mackenzie gave her a nod as she headed past her.

"Did you know Jimmy?" the woman asked her all of a sudden.

*Jimmy?*

It took her a while to realize that the woman was talking about Bryers. Mackenzie had only ever heard his first name one or two times. He'd always just been Bryers to her.

*Maybe we weren't as close as I thought.*

"I did," Mackenzie said. "We worked together. How about you?"

"Ex-wife," she said. With a shaky sigh, she added: "He was such a good man."

*Ex-wife? God, I really didn't know him.* But in the back of her head, she could recall a conversation during one of their long car rides where he had mentioned having been married in the past.

"Yes, he was," Mackenzie said.

She wanted to tell the woman about the times Bryers had guided her in her career and even saved her life. But she figured there was a reason the woman had distanced herself rather than join the three huddled figures under the tarp.

"Were you close to him?" the ex asked.

*I thought I was,* Mackenzie said, looking back to the graveside with regret. Her answer was simpler, though. "Not very."

She then turned away from the woman with a grieved smile and headed for her car. She thought about Bryers...his dry smile, the way he rarely laughed but when he did it was nearly explosive. She then thought of what work might be like now. Sure, it was selfish, but she couldn't help but wonder how her working environment would be changed now that her partner and the man who had essentially taken her under his wing was dead. Would she get a new partner? Would her position change and have her sitting behind a desk or on some lousy beat with no real purpose?

*God, stop thinking about yourself,* she thought.

The rain continued to pelt down on the umbrella. It was so deafening that Mackenzie almost didn't hear her phone ringing in her coat pocket.

She fumbled it out of her pocket as she unlocked her car door, stowed the umbrella away, and stepped inside out of the rain.

"This is White."

“White, it’s McGrath. Are you at the graveside service?”

“Leaving just now,” she said.

“I truly am sorry about Bryers. He was a good man. A damned fine agent, too.”

“Yeah, he was,” Mackenzie said.

But when she peered back through the rain to the graveside, she felt like she hadn’t really known Bryers at all.

“I hate to interrupt, but I need you back here. Come by my office, would you?”

She felt her heart skip a beat. It sounded serious.

“What is it?” she asked.

He paused, as if debating whether to tell her, then finally said:

“A new case.”

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When she arrived outside of McGrath’s office, Mackenzie saw Lee Harrison sitting in the waiting area. She remembered him as the agent who had been assigned as her temporary partner when Bryers had fallen ill. They had gotten to know one another over the last several weeks but had not really had the chance to work together yet. He seemed like an okay agent—maybe a little too cautious for Mackenzie’s tastes.

“He called you, too?” Mackenzie asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “It looks like we might get our first case together. I figured I’d wait for you before I knocked.”

Mackenzie wasn’t sure if he had done this out of respect for her or fear of McGrath. Either way, she thought it was a smart decision.

She knocked on the door and was greeted by a quick “Come in” from the other side. She waved Harrison on and they walked into the room together. McGrath was sitting behind his desk, typing something into his laptop. There were two folders sitting to his left, as if waiting to be claimed.

“Have a seat, Agents,” he said.

Mackenzie and Harrison each took one of the chairs in front of McGrath’s desk. Mackenzie saw that Harrison was sitting rigid and his eyes were wide...not quite with fear but certainly filled with a nervous excitement.

“We’ve got a case from rural Iowa,” he began. “Being that it’s where you grew up, I thought you’d be good for this one, White.”

She cleared her throat, embarrassed.

“I grew up in Nebraska, sir,” she corrected.

“All the same, isn’t it?” he said.

She shook her head; those who weren’t from the Midwest would just never get it.

*Iowa*, she thought. Sure, it wasn’t Nebraska, but it was close enough, and the mere idea of heading back out that way made her uneasy. She knew she had no reason to fear the place; after all, she had made it to Quantico and made something of herself. She had achieved her dream of landing a role in the FBI. So why did the idea of traveling back there for a case unnerve her so quickly?

*Because everything bad in your life is back there*, she thought. *Your childhood, your old colleagues, the mysteries surrounding your father’s death...*

“There has been a string of disappearances, all women,” McGrath went on. “And so far it seems that they are being taken right off the road on these lonely little stretches of highway. The latest one was taken last night. Her car was found on the side of the road with two busted tires. There was a ridiculous amount of glass on the road, making the local PD assume there was foul play.”

He slid one of the folders over to Mackenzie and she took a look. There were several photos of the car, especially the tires. She also saw that the stretch of road was indeed isolated, surrounded by

tall trees on both sides. One of the pictures also showed the contents of the latest victim's car. Inside there was a coat, a small toolbox bolted to the side, and a box of books.

"What's with the books?" Mackenzie asked.

"The latest victim was an author. Delores Manning. Google tells me she just had her second book published. One of those trashy romance deals. She's not a big-time author by any means so we shouldn't get any media interference...*yet*. The road has been closed off and detours set up by the state transportation department. So, White, I need you on a plane as soon as possible to get out there. Rural or not, the state obviously doesn't want the road closed down for very long."

McGrath then turned his attention to Harrison.

"Agent Harrison, I want you to understand something. Agent White has ties to the Midwest, so she was a no-brainer for this case. And while I *have* assigned you as her partner, I want you to stay here for this one. I want you here at headquarters to work behind the scenes. If Agent White calls with a research request, I want you on it. Not only that, but Delores Manning has an agent and publicist and all of that. So if this is not wrapped up quickly, the media *will* hop on it. I want you to handle that side of things. Keep things smooth and calm here at headquarters if the shit hits the fan. No offense, but I want a more experienced agent on this."

Harrison nodded, but the disappointment in his eyes was impossible to miss. "No offense taken, sir. I'm happy to assist however I can."

*Oh no*, Mackenzie thought. *Not a brown-noser*.

"So am I going solo on this?" Mackenzie asked.

McGrath grinned at her and shook his head. It was almost a playful kind of gesture that showed her that she had come a long way with McGrath since their first awkward and borderline hostile meetings.

"No way am I sending you out there by yourself," he said. "I've arranged to have Agent Ellington work this one with you."

"Oh," she said, a bit stunned.

She wasn't sure how to feel about this. There was a weird sort of chemistry between her and Ellington—there had been ever since she had first met him while working as a detective out of rural Nebraska. She had enjoyed working with him for that short span but now that things were different... well, it would make for an interesting case to say the least. But there was nothing to worry about. She felt confident that she could easily divide whatever personal feelings she had for him from the professional ones.

"Might I ask why?" Mackenzie asked.

"He's got a brief history of working with the local field agents out there, as you know. He's also got an impressive record when it comes to missing persons cases. Why?"

"Just asking, sir," she said, easily recalling the first time she and Ellington had met when he had come out to assist with the Scarecrow Killer case when she was still working for the PD out there. "Did he...well, did he *ask* to work with me on this?"

"No," McGrath said. "It just so happens that you're both perfect for this case—him with his connections and you with your past."

McGrath stood up from his chair, effectively ending the conversation. "You should be getting e-mails about your flight within a few minutes," McGrath said. "I believe you'll be flying out at eleven fifty-five."

"But that's only an hour and a half away," she said.

"Then I suggest you get moving."

She exited the office quickly, looking back only once to see Agent Harrison still sitting in his seat like a lost puppy, unsure of what to do or where to go. But she had no time to worry about his potentially hurt feelings. She had to figure out how to pack and get to the airport in less than an hour and a half.

And on top of that, she had to figure out why she dreaded the idea of working a case with Ellington.

## CHAPTER TWO

Mackenzie arrived at the airport running, with barely enough time to reach her gate. She rushed onto the plane five minutes after the flight had started to board and ambled down the aisle slightly out of breath, frustrated and thrown off. She briefly wondered if Ellington had made it on time but, quite frankly, was just glad she had not missed the flight. Ellington was a big boy—he could take care of himself.

Her question was answered when she located her seat. Ellington was already on the plane, sitting comfortably in the seat beside hers. He smiled at her from his place by the window seat, giving her a little wave. She shook her head and sighed heavily.

“Bad day?” he asked.

“Well, it started with a funeral and then a meeting with McGrath,” Mackenzie said. “I then had to rush home to pack a bag and run through Dulles to barely make the flight. And it’s not even noon yet.”

“So things can only get better then,” Ellington joked.

Shoving her carry-on into the overhead compartment, Mackenzie said: “We’ll see. Say, doesn’t the FBI have private planes?”

“Yes, but only for extremely time-sensitive cases. And for superstar employees. This case is not time sensitive and we are most certainly not star employees.”

When she was finally in her seat, she took a moment to relax. She peered over at Ellington and saw that he was thumbing through a folder that was identical to the one she had seen in McGrath’s office.

“What do you think of this case?” Ellington asked.

“I think it’s too soon to speculate,” she said.

He gave her a roll of his eyes and a playful frown. “You’ve got to have some sort of first reaction. What is it?”

While she didn’t want to offer her thoughts only to be proven wrong later on, she appreciated the effort of jumping on things right away. It showed that he was indeed the hard worker and committed agent McGrath painted him to be—the same kind of worker she had kind of *hoped* he was.

“I think the fact that these are being called *disappearances* rather than *murders* gives us some hope,” she said. “But given that the victims are all being taken from rural roads also tells me that this guy is a local that knows the lay of the land. He *could* be kidnapping the women and then killing them, hiding their bodies somewhere in the forests or some other hiding spot only he knows about.”

“You read deep into this yet?” he asked, nodding at the folder.

“No. I haven’t had time.”

“Help yourself,” Ellington said, handing it over.

Mackenzie read over the scant information as the flight attendants walked through the safety lecture. She was still studying it moments later when the plane took off toward Des Moines. There wasn’t much information in the file, but enough for Mackenzie to map out an approach to take when they got there.

Delores Manning was the third woman to be reported missing in the past nine days. The first woman was a local, reported missing by her daughter. Naomi Nyles, forty-seven years of age, also taken from the side of the road. The second was a Des Moines woman named Crystal Hall. She had a slight record, mostly promiscuous stuff in her youth, but nothing serious. When she was abducted, she had been visiting a local cattle farm in the area. The first case had shown no traces of foul play—just an abandoned car on the side of the road. The second abandoned vehicle had been a small pickup truck with a busted tire. The truck had been discovered in the midst of having its tire changed, the jack still under the axle and the flat propped against the side of the truck.

All three instances appeared to have occurred during the night, sometime between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m. So far, nine days after the first abduction, there was not a single shred of evidence and absolutely zero clues.

As she usually did, Mackenzie scanned the information several times, committing it to memory. It wasn't hard in this case, as there wasn't much to take in. She kept going back to the pictures of the rural settings—the back roads that wound through the forests like a massive snake with nowhere to go.

She also allowed herself to slip into the mind of a killer using those roads and the night as cover. He had to be patient. And because of the darkness, he had to be used to being by himself. Darkness would not concern him. He may even prefer to work in the darkness, not only for the cover but for the sense of solitude and isolation. This guy was probably a loner of some sort. He was taking them from the road, apparently in different stressful situations. Car repair, busted tires. That meant he was probably not in this for the sport of killing. He just wanted the women. But *why*?

And how about the latest victim, Delores Manning? *Maybe she was a local with a past history of the area*, Mackenzie thought. *Either that or just brave as hell to travel those back roads at such an hour...I don't care how good a shortcut it is, that's pretty reckless.*

She hoped this was the case. She hoped the woman was brave. Because bravery, no matter how staged, could often help people deal with tense situations. It was more than just a badge of honor, but a deep psychological trait that helped people cope. She tried to envision Delores Manning, the up-and-coming writer, winding down those roads at night. Brave or not, it simply wasn't a pretty picture.

When Mackenzie was done, she handed the folder back to Ellington. She looked past him and to the window beyond where white tufts of clouds were drifting by. She closed her eyes for just a moment and took herself back there, not to Iowa but to neighboring Nebraska. A place where there was open land and towering woods rather than mangled traffic and tall buildings. She didn't really miss it but found that the idea of returning to it, even for work, was exciting in a way she did not fully understand.

"White?"

She opened her eyes at the sound of her name. She turned to Ellington, a little embarrassed that he had caught her zoning out. "Yeah?"

"You sort of went blank there for a minute. You okay?"

"I am," she said.

And the hell of it was that she *was* okay. The first six hours of the day had been physically and emotionally draining, but now that she was sitting down, suspended in the air and with an unlikely temporary partner, she felt *okay*.

"Let me ask you something," Mackenzie said.

"Shoot."

"Did you put in a request to work with me on this?"

Ellington didn't answer right away. She could see the cogs turning behind his eyes before he replied and wondered why he might have any reason to lie to her.

"Well, I heard about the case and, as you know, I have a working relationship with the field office in Omaha. And since that's the closest field office to our target in Iowa, I threw my hat in the ring. When he asked if I minded working with you on the case, I didn't argue."

She nodded, starting to feel almost guilty for wondering if he had any other reason for wanting the job. While she had been harboring some sort of feelings for him (whether strictly physical or somehow emotional, she had never been sure), he had never given her any reason to assume he felt the same. It was far too easy to recall coming on to him when she had first met him out in Nebraska and then getting rejected.

*Let's just hope he's forgotten all about that*, she thought. *I'm a different person now, he's far too busy to worry himself with me, and we're working together now. Water under the bridge.*

"So how about you?" she asked. "What are your initial thoughts?"

"I think he has no intention of killing the women," Ellington said. "No clues, no showing off, and, like you, I think it's got to be a local doing it. I think he's maybe collecting them...for what purpose, I won't speculate. But that worries me, if I'm right."

It worried Mackenzie, too. If there was someone out there kidnapping women, he would eventually run out of room. And maybe interest...which meant he'd have to stop sooner or later. And while that was theoretically a good thing, it also meant that his trail would go cold without any further scenes to possibly leave evidence at.

"I think you're right about him collecting them," she said. "He's coming after them in a vulnerable state—while they're messing with cars or busted tires. It means he's sneaking up rather than being in your face. He's likely timid."

He grinned and said, "Huh. That's a good observation."

His grin turned into a smile that she had to look away from, knowing that they had a habit of locking eyes and letting the stares linger a bit too long. Instead, she turned her eyes back out to the blue sky and the clouds while the Midwest quickly approached below them.

\*\*\*

With very little luggage between them, Mackenzie and Ellington made their way through the airport without any trouble. During the tail end of the flight, Ellington informed Mackenzie that plans had already been made (presumably while she had been rushing to her apartment and then to the airport). She and Ellington were to meet two local field agents and work with them to get the case wrapped up as quickly as possible. With no need to stop by the luggage carousel, they were able to meet with the agents with no problem.

They met in one of the countless Starbucks in the airport. She let Ellington lead the way because it was apparent that McGrath saw him as the lead on the case. Why else would he leave Ellington in charge of knowing where to meet the field agents? Why else would Ellington have been given a proper heads-up, with plenty of time to comfortably make his flight on time?

The two agents were hard to miss. Mackenzie sighed internally when she saw that they were both men. One of them, though, looked like he was brand new. There was no way the guy was any older than twenty-four. His partner looked rather hardened and older—probably reaching fifty any day now.

Ellington headed straight for them and Mackenzie followed. Neither of the agents stood but the older one offered his hand to Ellington as they approached the table.

"Agents Heideman and Thorsson, I take it?" Ellington asked.

"Guilty," the older man said. "I'm Thorsson, and my partner here is Heideman."

"Good to meet you," Ellington said. "I'm Special Agent Ellington and this is my partner, Agent White."

They all shook hands in a way that had become almost tedious to Mackenzie ever since she had joined the bureau. It was almost like a formality, an awkward thing that needed to be done in order to get to the task at hand. She noticed that when Heideman shook her hand, his grip was weak and sweaty. He didn't look nervous but perhaps a bit shy or introverted.

"So how far out are the crime scenes?" Ellington asked.

"The closest one is about an hour away," Thorsson said. "The others are all within ten or fifteen minutes of one another."

"Have there been any updates since early this morning?" Mackenzie asked.

"Zero," Thorsson said. "That's one of the reasons we called you guys in. This guy has taken three women so far and we can't generate as much as a single scrap of evidence. It's gotten so bad that the state is considering the use of cameras along the highway. The hurdle there, though, is that you can't really keep over seventy-five miles of back road under surveillance with cameras."



“Well, you technically could,” Heideman said. “But that’s a ton of cameras and a huge chunk of change. So some folks at the state level are only viewing it as a last-ditch effort.”

“Can we go ahead and see the first scene then?” Ellington asked.

“Sure,” Thorsson said. “Do you guys need to handle hotels and things like that first?”

“No,” Mackenzie said. “Let’s get to work for now. If you guys are saying there’s *that* much road that needs to be covered, we can’t waste any time.”

As Thorsson and Heideman stood, Ellington gave her a peculiar look. She couldn’t tell if he was impressed with her dedication to get out to the first scene as quickly as possible or if he found it amusing that she wasn’t letting him take the *entire* lead on this. What she hoped he couldn’t sense was that the thought of going anywhere near a hotel with Ellington made her feel far too many emotions at once.

They left the Starbucks in something of a single file line. Mackenzie was slightly touched when Ellington waited for her, making sure she didn’t bring up the back of the line.

“You know,” Thorsson said, looking back over his shoulder, “I’m glad you guys want to get out there right away. There’s a bad vibe going around about this whole thing. You can feel it when you talk to the local police force and it’s starting to rub off on us, too.”

“What kind of vibe?” Mackenzie asked.

Thorsson and Heideman shared a foreboding look between them before Thorsson’s shoulders slumped a bit and he answered: “Like it’s just not going to happen. I’ve never seen anything like it. There’s not a single clue to be had. The guy’s like a ghost.”

“Well, hopefully we can help with that,” Ellington said.

“I hope so,” Thorsson said. “Because as of right now, the general feeling among everyone working this case is that we might never find this guy.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Mackenzie was rather surprised that the local office had provided Thorsson and Heideman with a Suburban. After her own clunker and the template rental cars she'd been stuck with over the past few months, she felt like she was traveling in style while sitting in the back with Ellington. When they arrived at the first scene an hour and ten minutes later, she was almost glad to be out of it, though. She wasn't used to such nice perks with her position and it made her feel a little uncomfortable.

Thorsson parked along the edge of State Route 14, a basic two-lane back road that wound through the forests of rural Iowa. The road was bordered with trees on both sides. During the few miles they had been on this road, Mackenzie had seen a few small dirt roads that seemed to have been long forgotten, chained off by a thin cable and two posts on either side of the tracks. Other than those few breaks, there was nothing more than trees.

Thorsson and Heideman led them past a few local cops who gave perfunctory waves as they passed. Up ahead, in front of two parked police cars, was a little red Subaru. The two driver's side tires were completely flat.

"What's the police force like around here?" Mackenzie asked.

"Small," Thorsson said. "The nearest town to here is a little place called Bent Creek. Population of about nine hundred. The police force consists of one sheriff—who is back there with those other guys—two deputies, and seven officers. They had a few suits from Des Moines come in but when we showed up, they stepped back. It's the FBI's problem now. That kind of thing."

"So they're glad we're here, in other words?" Ellington asked.

"Oh, absolutely," Thorsson said.

They approached the car and all circled it for a moment. Mackenzie took a look back at the officers. Only one of them seemed legitimately interested in what the visiting FBI agents were doing. As far as she was concerned, that was fine with her. She'd had her fair share of meddling small-town police officers making things harder than they had to be. It would be nice to work a job without having to tiptoe around the sensitivities and egos of the local PD.

"Has the car already been dusted for prints?" Mackenzie asked.

"Yeah, earlier this morning," Heideman said. "Help yourself."

Mackenzie opened the passenger side door. A brief look around told her that while the vehicle might have been dusted for prints, nothing had yet been removed and tagged as evidence. A cell phone still sat in the passenger seat. A pack of gum sat on top of a few scattered and folded pieces of paper in the center console.

"This is the author's car, correct?" Mackenzie asked.

"It is," Thorsson said. "Delores Manning."

Mackenzie continued checking the car. She found Manning's sunglasses, a mostly empty address book, a few copies of *The Tin House* scattered in the back seat, and spare change here and there. The trunk offered only a box of books. There were eighteen copies of a book called *Love Blocked* by Delores Manning.

"Was everything back here dusted for prints?" Mackenzie asked.

"No, I don't think so," Heideman said. "It's just a box of books, right?"

"Yes, but some are missing."

"She came from a signing," Thorsson said. "Chances are pretty good she sold some or gave some away."

It wasn't anything worth arguing about so she let it go. Still, Mackenzie flipped through two of the books. They had both been signed by Manning on the title page.

She put the books back into the box and then started to study the road. She walked along the edge, looking for any indentations where something might have been set up that would have flattened

the tires. She looked over to Ellington and was pleased to see that he was already studying the flats. From where she stood, she could see the glittering shards of glass still sticking out of the tires.

There was more of the glass in the road ahead. The bit of sunlight that managed to break through the tree branches overhead bounced off of them in a way that was eerily pretty. She walked over to it and squatted down for a better look.

It was obvious that the glass had been placed there intentionally. It was located primarily close to the broken yellow lines in the center of the road. It was scattered here and there like sand but the main concentration had been spaced out to ensure that anyone driving along would run directly over it. A few larger shards remained in the road; the car had apparently missed these, as they had not been ground down into crumb-like bits. She picked up one of these larger pieces and studied it.

The glass was dark at first glance but as Mackenzie took a closer look, she saw that it had been painted black. *To kill the glare of approaching headlights*, she thought. *Someone driving at night would see glass in their headlights...but not if it was painted black.*

She selected a few pieces from the debris and scratched at a few larger pieces with her fingernail. The glass underneath was two different colors; most of it was clear but some of it had a very slight green tint to it. It was far too thick to be from any sort of drinking bottle or common jar. It had the thickness of something that a potter might make. Some if it looked to be easily as much as an inch and a half in width even after it had been broken and then shattered by Delores Manning's car.

"Anyone notice that this glass has been spray-painted?" she asked.

Along the side of the road, the officers were looking to one another as if confused. Even Thorsson and Heideman gave one another a quizzical look.

"That's a *no*," Thorsson said.

"Has any of it been bagged and analyzed yet?" Mackenzie asked.

"Bagged, yes," Thorsson said. "Analyzed, no. But there's a team on it right now. We should have some sort of results in a few hours. I guess they would have eventually gotten back to us on the spray paint."

"And this glass was not at any of the other scenes, is that correct?"

"That's right."

Mackenzie got to her feet, looking down at the glass as she started to paint a picture of the kind of suspect they might be looking for.

*No glass at the previous scenes*, she thought. *That means the suspect was purposeful about this one woman. Why? Maybe the first two disappearances were just coincidence. Maybe the subject just happened to be in the right place at the right time. And if that was the case, he's definitely a local—a rural killer, not an urban one. But he's smart and calculated. He's not just doing his tasks by the seat of his pants.*

Ellington came over to her and inspected the glass for himself. Without looking up at her, he asked: "Any initial thoughts?"

"A few."

"Such as?"

"He's a rural guy. Likely a local, as we thought. I also think this one was planned. The flat tires...he did it on purpose. If the glass was not present at the other scenes, he set it out only this time. It makes me think he had no control over the other two. It was just luck on his part. But this one...this one he had to work for."

"You think it's worth speaking to family?" Ellington asked.

She could not tell if he was quizzing her in some weird way like Bryers had once done or if he was genuinely interested in her methodology and approach.

"Might be the fastest way to get any answers for right now," she said. "Even if it nets nothing, it's a task completed."

"That sounds like a robot talking," Ellington said with a smile.

Ignoring him, Mackenzie walked back over to the car where Thorsson and Heideman had been watching them.

“Do we know where Delores Manning lives?” she asked.

“Well, she lives in Buffalo, New York,” Thorsson said. “But she has family out near Sigourney.”

“That’s in Iowa, too, right?”

“It is,” Thorsson said. “Her mother lives about ten minutes outside of the town. Father is deceased. No one has informed them of her disappearance yet. From what we can tell, she’s only been missing for twenty-six hours or so. And while we can’t confirm it, we can’t help but wonder if she paid her family a visit while she was so close because of her book signing in Cedar Rapids.”

“I think they should probably be informed,” Mackenzie said.

“Same here,” Ellington said, joining them.

“Be my guest, then,” Thorsson chuckled. “Sigourney is about an hour and fifteen minutes away. We’d love to tag along,” he added sarcastically, “but that wasn’t in our orders.”

As he said this, one of the policemen joined them. The badge he wore indicated that this was the sheriff of the area.

“You need us around for anything?” he asked.

“Nope,” Ellington said. “Maybe just the name of a decent hotel around here.”

“There’s only one back in Bent Creek,” the sheriff said. “So that’s the only one I can really recommend.”

“Well then, it looks like we’ll take your recommendation. And we’ll also need one for a rental car in Bent Creek.”

“I can get you fixed up,” the sheriff said, leaving it at that.

With a slight sense of feeling displaced, Mackenzie walked back to the Suburban and took her place in the back seat. As the three other agents piled in, Mackenzie started to think about those little dirt tracks off of State Route 14. Who owned that property? Where did the roads lead?

As they headed toward Bent Creek, the country roads seemed to present more and more questions in Mackenzie’s mind...some menial but some very pressing. She collected them all as she thought about the broken glass in the road. She tried to imagine someone painting that glass with the clear intention of causing someone’s car to break down.

It spoke of more than just intent. It indicated careful planning and knowing the flow of traffic along State Route 14 at that time of night.

*Our guy is smart in a dangerous sort of way, she thought. He’s also a planner and seems to be going after women only.*

She started to put a profile together for such a suspect and instantly started to feel a sense of pressure...of the need to move quickly. She felt he was somewhere within this little rural hole of trees and winding roads, breaking up more glass, spraying it with spray paint.

And planning to capture another victim.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Delores Manning was thinking of her mother when she opened her eyes. Her mother, who lived in a shit-kicking mobile home park just outside of Sigourney. The woman was very proud, very stubborn. The plan had been for Delores to visit her after the signing in Cedar Rapids. Having just signed a contract for a three-book deal with her current publisher, Delores had written a check for \$7,000, hoping her mother would take it and use it wisely. Maybe it was snobby, but Delores was embarrassed that her mother was on welfare, that she had to use food stamps to buy groceries. It had been that way since her father died and—

The foggy thoughts of her mother drifted off as her eyes started to grow accustomed to the darkness she found herself in. She was sitting down with her back pressed against something very hard and almost cool to the touch. Slowly, she got to her feet. When she did, she struck her head on something that felt exactly like the surface against her back.

Confused, she reached up and could not extend her arms very far at all. As panic started to creep in, her eyes realized that there were tiny slats of light falling into the darkness. Directly in front of her were three rectangular bars of light. The bars alone filled her in on her situation.

She was in some kind of container...she was pretty sure it was made of steel or some other kind of metal. The container was no more than four feet tall, not allowing her to fully stand. It seemed to be no deeper than four feet and about the same width. She started to take shallow breaths, instantly feeling claustrophobic.

She pressed herself against the front wall of the container and drew in fresh air through the rectangular slats. Each slat was roughly six inches tall and maybe three inches across. When she drew in the air through her nose, she detected an earthy smell and something sweet yet unpleasant.

Somewhere further off in the distance, so faint it may as well have been on another world, she thought she heard a sort of squealing noise. Machinery? Maybe some type of animal? Yes, an animal...but she had no idea what kind. Pigs, maybe?

With her breaths coming more naturally now, she took a step back in her crouched position and then peered through the slats.

Outside, she saw what looked to be the interior of a barn or some other old wooden building. Perhaps twenty feet ahead of her, she could see the door to the barn. Murky sunlight came in through the warped frame where the door did not set flush against it. While she could not see much, she saw enough to gauge that she was probably in very serious trouble.

It was evident in the edge of the bolted door she could just barely see through the slats of the container. She whimpered and pushed against the front of the container. There was no give—not so much as a creaking noise.

She felt panic creeping up again so knew she'd have to use the little bit of logic and calmness she now possessed. She ran her hands along the bottom of the container's door. She was hoping to find hinges, maybe something with screws or bolts that she could potentially work on. She wasn't very strong, but if even one screw was either loose or crooked...

Again, there was nothing. She tried the same thing on the back and found nothing there as well.

In an act of absolute helplessness, she kicked at the door as hard as she could. When that did no good, she went to the back of the container and got a running start to throw her right shoulder into it. All that accomplished was having her rebound and fall backward. She hit her head on the side of the container and fell hard to her backside.

A scream rose up in her throat but she didn't know if that would be the best thing to do. She could easily recall the man from the truck on the road and how he had attacked her. Did she *really* want him to come rushing to her?

No, she did not. *Think*, she told herself. *Use that creative brain of yours and figure a way out of this.*

But she could think of nothing. So, while she was able to choke down the scream that wanted to come out, she was unable to hold back the tears. She kicked at the front of the container and then fell into the back corner. She wept as quietly as she could, rocking back and forth in a seated position and looking to the shafts of dusty light that spilled in through the slats.

For now, it was all she could think to do.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Mackenzie did not like the fact that her mind brought up dozens of clichéd stereotypes as she and Ellington pulled into the entrance of the Sigourney Oaks Mobile Home Court. The mobile homes were all dusty and looked to be on their last legs. The vehicles parked in front of most of them were in the same shape. In the dead yard of one of the trailers they passed, two men sat shirtless in lawn chairs. A cooler of beer rested between them, as well as several empty and crushed cans...at 4:35 in the afternoon.

The home of Tammy Manning, Delores Manning's mother, was located directly in the middle of the park. Ellington parked the rental car behind a beaten up old Chevy pickup. The rental car looked better than the vehicles in the park, but not by much. The selection at Smith Brothers Auto had been meager and they had ended up selecting a 2008 Ford Fusion that was in dire need of a paint job and a new set of tires.

As they walked up the rickety front steps to the door, Mackenzie made a quick sweep of the place. A few kids were rolling toy cars along in the dirt. A pre-teen girl walked blindly with her eyes glued to a cell phone, her belly exposed through the dirty shirt she wore. An old man two trailers down was lying on the ground, peering up under a lawnmower with a wrench in his hand and oil on his pants.

Ellington knocked on the door and it was answered almost instantly. The woman that answered the door was pretty in a plain way. She looked to be in her fifties and the strands of gray in her otherwise black hair stood out in a way that was almost like decoration rather than the signs of age. She looked tired but the smell that came off of her breath when she said "Who are you?" made Mackenzie pretty sure that she'd been drinking.

Ellington answered but made sure not to step in front of Mackenzie when he did so. "I'm Agent Ellington and this is Agent White, with the FBI," he said.

"FBI?" she asked. "What the hell for?"

"Are you Tammy Manning?" he asked.

"I am," she said.

"Can we come in?" Ellington asked.

Tammy eyed them in a way that was not suspicious but something closer to disbelief. She nodded and stepped back, allowing them in. The moment they walked inside, the thick smell of cigarette smoke engulfed them. The air was filled with it. A lone cigarette burned in an ashtray of dead butts on an old coffee table.

Another woman sat on the couch on the opposite side of the coffee table. She looked a little uncomfortable. Mackenzie thought she actually appeared a little grossed out to be sitting there.

"If you have company," Mackenzie said, "perhaps we should speak outside."

"She's not company," Tammy said. "This is my daughter Rita."

"Hi," Rita said, standing to shake their hands.

It was apparent that this was Delores Manning's younger sister by about three or four years. She looked very similar to the photo of Delores that Mackenzie had seen on the back cover of *Love Blocked*.

"Oh, I see," Ellington said. "Well, maybe it's a good thing that you're here too, Rita."

"Why?" Tammy asked, plopping down next to her younger daughter. She plucked the cigarette from the ashtray and took a deep inhale.

"Delores Manning's car was discovered abandoned with two flat tires on State Route 14 late last night. No one has seen her or heard from her since then. Not her agent, not any friends, no one. We were hoping you might know where she is."

Before Ellington was done, Mackenzie had gotten the answer from the look of shock on Rita Manning's face.

“Oh my God,” Rita said. “Are you sure it was her car?”

“We’re certain,” Ellington said. “It was complete with half a box of her latest book in the back. She had just come from a signing in Cedar Rapids.”

“Yeah,” Rita said. “She was...probably on the way here. That was the plan anyway. When she didn’t show up by midnight, I figured she just decided to stay at a motel somewhere.”

“Had you made plans for her to stay here?” Mackenzie asked. She was looking at Tammy when she asked it, but Tammy appeared to be more interested in enjoying her cigarette.

“Sort of,” Tammy said. “She called me last week and said she’d be in Cedar Rapids. Said she wanted to come by to visit, so I told her that was fine. I let Rita know and she got here yesterday right after lunch. Sort of a surprise.”

“I drove all the way up from Texas A and M,” Rita said.

“When was the last time you spoke with Delores?” Ellington asked Rita.

“About three weeks ago. We usually do an okay job of staying in touch.”

“What state of mind was she in the last time you spoke?” Mackenzie asked.

“Oh, she was on cloud nine. She had just signed on to do another three books with her publisher. We made plans to go out on the town drinking the next time she was in Texas.”

“You’re a student, I take it?” Ellington asked.

“Yes. A senior.”

“Mrs. Manning,” Mackenzie said, making sure the mother knew that she was being spoken to and not the daughter, “if you don’t mind my saying so, you don’t seem too bothered by this.”

She shrugged, exhaled a mouthful of smoke, and then ground the butt out in the overflowing ashtray. “I guess someone from the FBI knows more about how I should feel about something like this than I do?”

“I wasn’t saying that, ma’am,” Mackenzie said.

“Look...we’re talking about Delores here. She’s got a good head on her shoulders. I’m sure she called Triple A or some shit when the tires went flat. She’s probably already halfway back to New York by now. Making money, traveling the country. If she was in some kind of trouble, she would have called.”

“So she wouldn’t have been embarrassed to call for your help?”

Tammy actually thought about this for a minute. “Probably not. She would have called for help and then raised hell if I asked even one question. It’s just how she is.”

The resentment in her voice was almost as thick as the smoke in the air throughout the tiny trailer.

“So you have no idea where she might be?” Ellington asked.

“None. Wherever she is, she didn’t bother calling me to tell me about it. But that’s not too big of a surprise. She never really tells me much of anything.”

“I see,” Ellington said. He looked around the room with a frown. Mackenzie could tell that he was thinking the same thing she was thinking: *That was a wasted hour-and-ten-minute drive.*

Mackenzie looked directly toward Rita, currently a little pissed at the lack of help from Tammy. “We’ve got Bent Creek PD on it, as well as agents from two different offices. From what we know, she’s been missing for roughly twenty-nine hours. We’ll be in touch the moment we find anything.”

Rita gave a nod and a soft “Thank you.”

Both Mackenzie and Ellington paused a beat to give Tammy a chance to add anything. When she did nothing more than light up another cigarette and reach for the TV remote on the coffee table, Mackenzie headed for the door.

When she was outside, she breathed the fresh air in deeply and walked straight for the car. She was already opening the passenger side door when Ellington finally made it down the steps.

“You okay?” he asked her as he approached the car.



"I'm fine," she said. "I just can't stomach people that have no concern at all for the safety of their own flesh and blood."

She was about to get into the car when the front door of Tammy Manning's trailer opened. They both watched as Rita came down the stairs in a quick little jog. She came over to the car and let out a shaky sigh.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry about that," she said. Mackenzie saw that Rita also seemed to be breathing much easier now that she was outside. "Things with Mom and Delores haven't been the best ever since Dad died. And then when Delores became this well-to-do writer, something about it almost offended Mom."

"You don't have to explain personal problems," Ellington said. "We see it from time to time."

"Be honest with me...this thing with Delores...do you think she'll be found? Do you think she might be dead somewhere?"

"It's far too early to tell," Mackenzie said.

"Was it...well, was there anything like foul play?"

Mackenzie recalled the spray-painted glass. She was pretty sure she still had some of the black flakes of the paint under her fingernails. But it was far too soon in the course of events to give such information to family members—not until more information could be obtained.

"Again, we just can't know for sure yet," she said.

Rita nodded. "Well, thanks for letting us know. When you *do* find out anything, just call me directly. Forget about Mom for now. I don't know what her problem is. She's just...I don't know. An aging woman that let life beat the hell out of her and never bothered to pick herself back up."

She gave them her number and then slowly walked back up the stairs. She gave them a quick wave goodbye as Ellington backed out of the parking spot and headed back through the trailer park.

"So what do you think?" Ellington asked. "Was this a wasted trip?"

"No. I think we now know enough about Delores to know that she would have called if her plans changed and she *could* have called."

"How do you know that for sure?"

"I don't know *for sure*. But from what I gathered from Tammy and Rita, Delores was trying to reconnect with her family. Rita said there was a strained relationship there. I don't think Delores would have bothered calling to ask to come by for a visit if there was no hope for reconciliation. And if that's the case, she surely would have called if plans changed."

"Maybe she had a change of heart."

"I doubt it. Daughters and mothers...when they get estranged...it's tough. Delores would not have made the move of calling only to back out."

"You're analyzing this like a shrink," Ellington said. "That's impressive."

Mackenzie barely noticed the compliment. She was thinking about her own mother—a woman she had not spoken to in a very long time. It was easy to strain a relationship that was supposed to be so pivotal to a woman's life. She knew all about mothers who let their children down, so she could relate to Delores.

She wondered if Delores Manning was thinking of her mother in her desperate time. That was, of course, if Delores Manning was still alive.

## CHAPTER SIX

Mackenzie knew that the closest FBI field office to Bent Creek was in Omaha, Nebraska. The thought of returning to Nebraska in an official capacity was intimidating, yet at the same time, almost fitting. Still, she was beyond relieved when Heideman called them to let them know that the current base of operations for the case was in the Bent Creek police department.

She and Ellington arrived there just after six that evening. As she walked toward the front doors of the station with Ellington, feelings of working as a woman in law enforcement in the Midwest came creeping back in. It was in the nearly misogynistic way some of the men in uniform looked at her. The change of clothes and title had apparently done nothing. Men were still going to see her as second class.

The only difference now was that she didn't give a shit if she offended anyone or hurt their feelings. She was here on bureau business to help a small and fledgling police force figure out who was kidnapping women from their back roads. She was not going to be treated the same way she had been the last time she worked in the Midwest as a detective for the Nebraska State Police.

She quickly discovered that part of her assumptions upon entering the station were wrong. Maybe the change of title and stature *did* mean something. When they were escorted back to the primary conference room, she saw that the local PD had ordered Chinese food for them. It was spread out on a small coffee bar in the back of the room, along with a few two-liter bottles of drinks and snacks.

Thorsson and Heideman were already enjoying the comped dinner, shoveling portions of lo mein noodles and orange chicken onto their plates. Ellington gave her a *what are ya gonna do?* sort of shrug and headed for the table as well. She did the same as a few other people filtered in and out of the room. While she was sitting down at the conference table with a portion of sesame chicken and a crab rangoon, one of the officers she had seen on the side of State Route 14 approached her and extended his hand. Again, she saw his badge and recognized him as the sheriff.

"Agent White, right?" he asked.

"I am."

"Good to meet you. I'm Sheriff Bateman. I hear you and your partner went up near Sigourney to talk to the mother of the most recent victim. No results?"

"Nothing. Just a potential source of information to cross off the list. And a pretty good confirmation that we're not dealing with a case of a daughter that simply decided not to call her mother when plans changed."

Clearly disappointed by this, Bateman nodded and turned back for the front of the room where two other officers were in conversation.

As Ellington took a seat beside Mackenzie, they both looked to the front of the room. A man who had earlier introduced himself as Deputy Wickline was placing pictures and printouts on a dry erase board with magnets. Another officer—the only other female in the room—was writing a series of notes along the other side of the board.

"Looks like they run a tight ship around here," Ellington said.

She had been thinking the same thing. She had come in assuming this would be something of a sloppily put together circus as it had been with the Nebraska State PD when she had worked there. But so far, she was impressed with how the Bent Creek PD was organizing things.

Several minutes later, Sheriff Bateman checked in with the officers at the board and ushered the two male officers out. The female stayed behind and took a seat at the table. Bateman closed the door and went to the front of the room. He glanced around at the four FBI agents and three remaining officers in the room.

“We got dinner because I have no idea how long we’ll be here,” he said. “We don’t generally get a lot of bureau presence in Bent Creek so this is new to me. So please, Agents, let me know if there is anything we can do to make things smoother. For now, I’ll turn this over to you agents.”

He took a seat, leaving Ellington and Thorsson to give one another a quick confused look. Thorsson grinned and gestured to the front of the room, giving the responsibility to the agents from DC.

Ellington nudged Mackenzie lightly under the table as he said: “Yes, so Agent White will walk us through the information we have so far, as well as any current theories we have.”

She knew he was trying to rib her by throwing her under the bus in such a way, but she didn’t mind. In fact, a small selfish part of her wanted to be in front of the room. Maybe it was some girlish revenge fantasy to come back to this area of the country and run a conference room in a way she had never been allowed to do in Nebraska. Whatever the reason, she went to the front of the room and took a quick look at the dry erase board that had been put together.

“The work your officers did here,” she said, pointing to the board, “pretty much spells the story out for me. The first victim is a resident of Bent Creek. Naomi Nyles, forty-seven years of age. She was reported missing by her daughter and was last seen two weeks ago. Her car was found on the side of the road in no apparent state of disrepair. I believe officers within this very building were able to crank the car just fine and bring it back here.”

“That’s correct,” Deputy Wickline said. “The car is still in the impound lot, as a matter of fact.”

“The second missing person was twenty-six-year-old Crystal Hall. Her employer is Wrangler Beef in Des Moines and they have confirmed that she was sent to a cattle farm just outside of Bent Creek. The owner of the farm confirms that Crystal did show up for a planned meeting and left the property shortly after five in the afternoon. Her credit card history shows that she grabbed dinner at the Bent Creek Subway at five fifty-two.” She pointed to where one of the helpful officers had already jotted this information down on the board.

“The question that raises,” Bateman said, “is when she was abducted. Her car was not discovered until around one thirty in the morning. For someone to not notice her car or at least report it, even on State Route 14, means that there’s a good chance she was elsewhere in town before heading back home. I seriously doubt someone would have been bold enough to nab her between six thirty and seven thirty. And if they *were* that bold...”

He trailed off here, as if not liking how he needed to end the comment. So Mackenzie took the liberty and finished for him.

“Then it means it would be someone familiar with the area,” she said. “Particularly with the traffic patterns on State Route 14. However, the profile for this type of guy doesn’t line up with being so bold. He lurks in darkness. He sneaks up on them. There’s nothing at all overt about this guy.”

Bateman nodded at this, his eyes wide and a smile on his face. She’d seen the look before. It was the look of a man who was not only impressed by the way she thought, but *appreciated* it. She saw the same look on the face of the female officer and an overweight man at the end of the table, still enjoying the free dinner. Deputy Wickline was nodding at her comment, scribbling notes down in a legal pad.

“Sheriff,” Ellington said, “do we have any idea the average amount of traffic that goes through that route at that time of day?”

“A state-sanctioned traffic monitor and report from 2012 estimates that between six in the afternoon and midnight, there’s an average of about eighty vehicles that will pass through State Route 14. It really isn’t a very busy road. But keep in mind, it’s just been the author and Crystal Hall that were taken from 14. The first missing person, Naomi Nyles, was abducted off of County Road 664.”

“And what’s the traffic like there during that time of day?” Mackenzie asked.

“Almost nothing,” Bateman said. “I think the number was around twenty or thirty. Deputy Wickline, do you know any different?”

“Sounds about right,” Wickline said.

“And speaking of the author,” Mackenzie continued. “Delores Manning, thirty-two. She lives in Buffalo but has family just outside of Sigourney. Her tires were flattened by broken glass fragments in the road. The glass is quite thick and had been painted black to prevent glare and shine from the headlights. Her agent reported her as missing about half an hour after her car was discovered by a passing truck around two in the morning. Agent Ellington and I spoke with her mother and sister today and they could provide no solid leads. As a matter of fact, there seem to be no solid leads at all to any of these disappearances. And unfortunately, that’s all we have.”

“Thank you, Agent White,” Bateman said. “So where do we go from here?”

Mackenzie smirked a bit and nodded to the Chinese food on the back table. “Well, it’s a good thing you planned ahead. I think the best place to start is to go over any unsolved disappearances within a one-hundred-mile radius over the last ten years.”

No one objected but the looks on the faces of Bateman, Wickline, and the other officers said enough. The female officer shrugged in defeat and raised her hand dutifully. “I can get on records and pull all of that,” she said.

“Sounds good, Roberts,” Bateman said. “Can you have results for us in an hour? Get some of the desk-riders out front to help.”

Roberts got up and left the conference room. Mackenzie noticed that Bateman watched her a bit longer than the other men in the room.

“Agent White,” Bateman said. “Do you happen to have any ideas as to what kind of suspect we should be looking for? In a fairly small town like Bent Creek, the quicker we can rule people out, the quicker we can point you to the sort of person you’re looking for.”

“Without clues of any kind, it could be hard to pinpoint,” Mackenzie said. “But so far, there are a few certain things we can assume. Agent Ellington, would you like to take over on this part?”

He smiled at her as he took a bite out of an egg roll. “Please, keep going. You’re doing just fine.”

It was an odd back-and-forth between them that she hoped wasn’t too obvious to others in the room. She had been trying to show respect—to show him that she was not trying to run the show. But he, in turn, had shrugged it off. For now, it seemed that he almost appreciated the fact that she was assuming the lead.

“First of all,” she said, doing her best not to be thrown off course, “the suspect is almost certainly a local. His ability to study traffic patterns along these back roads shows a rigorous kind of patience that makes him a bit easier to profile. If the suspect has gone through this much trouble to abduct these women, then past cases involving kidnapping and abduction suggest that he is not taking these women to kill them. As I said, he seems to be sneaky. Everything we know about him—attacking when they are vulnerable, in the dark, and apparently planning the act—points to a man with non-violent tendencies. After all, what’s the point of painstakingly plotting an abduction only to kill the victim moments later? It indicates that he is *collecting* these women, for lack of a better term.”

“Yes,” Roberts, the female officer, said. “But collecting them for what, exactly?”

“Is it terrible to assume it’s a sex thing?” Deputy Wickline asked.

“Not at all,” Mackenzie said. “In fact, if our suspect *is* shy, that’s one more check mark on the profile for us. Shy men that go after women in such a way are usually too shy or otherwise burdened socially to romance women. It’s usually the case with rapists that do everything they can to not hurt the women.”

She got a few more of those admiring glances from around the room. But given the topic that was being discussed, she couldn’t appreciate it.

“But we can’t know for sure?” Bateman asked.

“No,” Mackenzie said. “And that’s where the pressure is on us. This isn’t just a killer that we are hoping won’t strike again. This man is psychotic, and dangerous. The longer it takes to find him, the longer he has to do whatever he wants with these women.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Filled with Chinese food and an abundance of information on the three abductees, Mackenzie and Ellington left the Bent Creek PD at 9:15. The only motel in town—a Motel 6 that looked like it hadn't been painted, decorated, or looked at twice since the '80s—was five minutes away. It was no surprise at all to find two vacant rooms, which they booked for the night.

When they left the office and stepped back out into the night, Mackenzie looked around the parking lot. Bent Creek truly was a very small town. It was so small, in fact, that the business owners apparently worked together to ensure an efficient use of space. This was evident in the fact that a small bar sat on the other side of the parking lot from the Motel 6. It made sense, Mackenzie thought. Anyone that needed to stay in a motel in Bent Creek was likely going to need a drink.

She certainly could go for one.

Ellington patted her on the back and started in that direction. "Drinks are on me," he said.

She was starting to enjoy the dry and rather basic humor that existed between them. They both knew that there was a shifting awkwardness between them but it had been buried. To get around it, they had created a tentative friendship based on their jobs—jobs that insisted they think logically and approach things with a no-nonsense attitude. So far, it was working quite well.

She joined him as they crossed the parking lot and when they stepped inside the bar—unoriginally named Bent Creek Bar—the gloom of the night was replaced by a smoky and dank sort of twilight that only existed in small-town bars and honkytonks. An old Travis Tritt song was playing on a dusty jukebox in the corner as they took a seat at the edge of the bar. They both ordered beers and, as if that staple of a bar visit had been their cue, Ellington somehow went straight back into work mode.

"I think those offshoot roads off of State Road 14 are worth looking into," he said.

"Same here," she said. "I find it odd that it wasn't mentioned in any of the copious notes the police put up on that board."

"Maybe they just know the geography of the place better than we do," Ellington suggested. "For all we know, they could just be little dirt tracks that dead end. Any reason you didn't ask about them while you were running the conference room?"

"I almost did," she said. "But they'd put it all together so well...I didn't want to step on any toes. This whole thing of a cooperative police department bending over backwards for us is new to me. I'll get to it tomorrow. If it was crucial or important, they've either already checked them or they would have at least mentioned it to us."

Ellington nodded and took a gulp of his beer. "Hell, I nearly forgot," he said. "I was sorry as hell to hear about Bryers. I only worked with him a few times and it wasn't in a close capacity. But he seemed to be a genuinely nice man. One hell of an agent, too, from what I hear."

"Yeah, he was pretty awesome," Mackenzie said.

"I don't know if you'd want to know this or not," Ellington said, "but there was quite a bit of controversy about pairing you with him when you came in. Bryers was something of a hot commodity. One of the best. But when the idea was given to him, he was all for it. I think deep down, he always wanted to be a mentor. And I think he got a good one for his first try."

"Thanks," she said. "But I don't quite feel as if I've proven myself just yet."

"Why not?"

"Well...I don't know. Maybe it will hit me when I can wrap a case without getting McGrath pissed off at me over some detail or another."

"He only does it because he expects so much out of you. You came in like this fuse on a stick of dynamite that had already been lit."

"Is that why he has me partnering with you right now?"

“No. I think he just wanted me on this because of my connection with the Omaha field office. And between you and me and no one else, he wants you to succeed on this one. He wants you to knock it out of the park. With me on board, you won’t be able to resort to one of your patented solo endings that you’re so prone to.”

She wanted to argue this point but she knew he was right. So instead, she drank from her beer. The jukebox was now churning out Bryan Adams and somehow, she was ordering her second beer.

“So tell me,” Mackenzie said. “If I wasn’t on this one with you, how would you be handling it? What approaches?”

“Same as you. Working closely with the PD and trying to make friends. Taking notes, coming up with theories.”

“And do you have any?” she asked.

“None that you didn’t already nail in that conference room. I’m thinking we’re onto something... thinking of this guy as a collector of sorts. A bashful loner. I feel pretty safe in saying he’s not getting these women just to kill them. I think you’re exactly right on all those points.”

“The thing that gets under my skin,” Mackenzie said, “is thinking of all of the other reasons he would be kidnapping and collecting women.”

“Did you notice that Sheriff Bateman kept a female officer in the room the whole time?” Ellington asked.

“Yeah. Roberts. I assumed it was to keep the conversation centered on the facts and not speculations. Speculations regarding why the suspect would be keeping women. Talking about rape and sexual abuse is a little easier when there isn’t a woman around.”

“That kind of stuff bother you?” Ellington asked.

“It used to. Sadly, I’ve gotten almost jaded about it. It doesn’t bother me anymore.” This wasn’t one hundred percent true, but she didn’t want Ellington to know it. The truth of the matter was that it was often things like these that drove her to be the absolute best she could be.

“Sucks, doesn’t it?” he asked. “That part of your humanity that sort of becomes numb to things like this?”

“Yeah, it does,” she said. She hid herself behind her beer for a moment, a little shocked that Ellington had just taken such a step. It had been a small step for him but it also showed a degree of vulnerability.

She finished her beer and slid it to the edge of the bar. When the bartender came over, she waved him off. “I’m good,” she said. Then, turning to Ellington, she said: “You said you were paying, right?”

“Yeah, I got it. Hold on a second and I’ll walk you to your room.”

The slight excitement she felt at this comment was embarrassing. To stop it in its tracks before she could even entertain it, she shook her head. “Not necessary,” she said. “I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can,” he said, sliding his own empty glass toward the edge of the bar. “Another for me,” he told the bartender.

Mackenzie waved to him as she made her way out. As she walked across the parking lot, that small and eager part of her couldn’t help but wonder what it might be like to walk back to the motel with Ellington by her side, pushed forward by the uncertainty that would await them once the doors were closed and the blinds were drawn.

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It took less than twenty minutes for the sting of lust to subside. As usual, she used work to distract herself from such lures. She opened up her laptop and went directly to her e-mail. There, she found several e-mails that had been sent to her by the Bent Creek PD over the last half a day or so—just another way they were starting to spoil her, really.

They had provided maps of the area, the only four missing persons reports within the area over the last ten years, the traffic analysis conducted by the state of Iowa in 2012, and even a list of all arrests made in the last five years that involved subjects with a history of assault. Mackenzie pored through it all, taking a bit of extra time to look at the four missing persons cases.

Two of them were assumed to have been runaways and after reading the reports, Mackenzie agreed. They could both be used as a template for angst-ridden teenagers who were tired of small-town life, leaving home earlier than their parents would have liked. One of them was a fourteen-year-old girl who had actually contacted her family two years ago to let them know she was living quite comfortably in Los Angeles.

The other two were a little harder to understand, though. One case involved a ten-year-old boy who had been abducted from a church playground. He'd been missing for three hours before anyone even raised much of a fuss about it. Local gossip mills suggested it was the grandmother who took him because of a hairy family situation. The family drama, plus the gender and age of the victim, made Mackenzie doubt there was any connection to the current kidnappings.

The fourth case was more promising but still seemed a little thin. The first red flag was that it involved a car accident. In 2009, Sam and Vicki McCauley had been run off of the road during an ice storm. When police and the ambulance arrived, Sam was barely alive and died on the way to the hospital. He had begged to know how his wife was. From what they could tell, Vicki McCauley had been thrown from the vehicle, but her body had never been found.

Mackenzie looked through the report twice and could not find any descriptions of what had caused the car to leave the road. The term *icy road conditions* was used several times and while that was a good reason, Mackenzie thought it might be a good idea to go deeper. She went through the report several times and then reread Delores Manning's report. The fact that there was a car accident of some kind seemed to be the only connection between the two.

She then shifted gears and tried to weave the current three victims into those scenarios. It was nearly impossible, though. The two unexplained cases were assumed runaways and while both were female, it left far too many options open. More than that, the three current victims were taken from their cars. Maybe because being stranded on the road was a fairly common occurrence. It was a far cry from nabbing a teenage runaway. It simply didn't fit.

*This guy doesn't want runaways or troubled teens that storm out to get a rise out of mom and dad. He's going after women. Women that are, for some reason or another, out in their cars at night. Maybe he realizes the hope that the apparent kind stranger instills in people—women especially.*

On the flip side of that, though, was the fact that she knew most women would assume the worst of a strange man on the side of the road. Especially when their cars were busted and it was dark.

*Maybe they know him, then...*

That seemed like a stretch, too. From the information they had gathered from Tammy and Rita Manning, Delores likely didn't know anyone in Bent Creek.

She went back to the McCauleys' case, mainly because it was the only one with even the thinnest thread of similarity to it. She pulled her e-mail back up and opened the most recent mail from the Bent Creek PD. She replied to it and wrote:

*Thanks so much for the help. I was wondering if I could get a few other things as soon as possible. I'd like to get a list of family members related to the McCauleys that live within a fifty-mile radius, along with contact information. If you have the number for Delores Manning's agent, that would be great, too.*

She felt almost lazy requesting the information in such a way. But if they were offering to help so effortlessly, she wanted to use the Bent Creek PD as a resource as much as she could.

With that done, Mackenzie opened up another file...a file that she had managed to tuck away and not obsess over for nearly three weeks now. She opened it up, cycled through the files, and pulled up a single photograph.

It was a business card with her father's name scrawled on the back. On the other side, showed in another photo, was a business name in bold lettering: **Barker Antiques: Old or New Rare Collectibles**.

And that was it. She already knew that no such place existed—not as far as she or the FBI could tell—which made it all the more frustrating. She eyed the card and felt a pull at her heart. She was about two and a half hours away from the place her father had died and maybe three hours away from where the business card in the photo had been found—nearly twenty years after her father's death.

It was not her case...not really. McGrath had given her something of an under-the-table pass at assisting when she could but so far, the case had remained cold. She thought of Kirk Peterson, the detective who had uncovered the new clues that had reopened her father's case. She nearly called him up but realized that it had somehow gotten to be 11:45. And besides that, what would they talk about other than the silence coming from the current and reopened cases?

But she needed to call him. Maybe after this case, when she could give Peterson and the case her full attention. It was about time she got that damned monkey off of her back.

She readied herself for bed, brushing her teeth and changing into a thin pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. Just before she settled into bed, she checked her phone one last time for any late incoming mails.

She saw that her e-mail request for information from the Bent Creek PD had already been responded to, having come in a mere seventeen minutes after she had sent it. She jotted the information down in her files and made a mental schedule for the following day. She then finally allowed herself to turn off the lights and go to bed.

She did not like ending a day and turning out the lights on unanswered questions. It was an unsettling feeling that she supposed she'd never get used to. But she had adapted long ago, finding a way to sleep a few fitful hours while the answers to her questions lurked in the darkness of night comfortably out of her grasp.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Mackenzie had just finished getting dressed when someone knocked on the door of her motel room. She checked through the peephole and saw Ellington standing there. He was holding a small cardboard box with two cups of coffee perched on top. She opened the door and let him in, not sure how to feel about him being ready for the day before her. She had always prided herself on her promptness and her tendency to be early. It now looked like she might have some competition in that area.

“Am I interrupting the complicated morning flow of a woman getting ready?” he joked as he set the box and the coffees down on the small table by her already-made bed.

“No, I just finished up,” she said, gladly taking the coffee.

Ellington flipped the box open and revealed half a dozen donuts. “Sure, it’s a cliché,” he said. “But damn...is there anything better than fresh donuts?”

In response, she picked one up and took a bite.

“So what’s today look like?” he asked.

“Why are you asking me?”

He shrugged and took up his own donut. “Let’s shoot straight, White. I know enough about you to know that you work better when you’re in control. That’s not to say that you aren’t a good backup or partner. But facts are facts. I have no problem with you running things here. I want to see you shine just as much as McGrath. So, I repeat my question: What’s today look like?”

“Well, I looked through the missing persons cases over the last ten years last night,” Mackenzie answered. “There was only one case that was worth looking into—a car accident during an ice storm where a woman was thrown from the car and her body was never found. Vicki McCauley.”

“How long ago was this?” Ellington asked.

“It happened in 2009. I got the information for a single family member within the area and think it might be worth looking into. I also want to give Delores Manning’s agent a call. Maybe they know personal details about her life that might help us. The fact that Manning has family so close to the areas where the disappearances are occurring makes me think her personal life might be worth looking into.”

“Well then, let’s get to it,” Ellington said.

Mackenzie checked her phone and saw that it was 7:50. She grinned at him and sipped from her coffee. It was black, which she usually didn’t care for, but she wasn’t going to complain.

“You’re a morning person, huh?” she said.

“It depends on the case. The more answers there are to find, the easier it is for me to roll out of bed.”

“Well, seeing as how we have a grand total of *no* answers for this one, I guess you were up very early this morning.”

He gave a nod and took a gulp of his coffee as they headed out of her room and to the parking lot. As they got into the car—Ellington in the driver’s seat and Mackenzie already pulling up the number for Delores Manning’s agent—Mackenzie thought Ellington was on to something. It *was* a bit easier to hit the ground running when there were no answers at their disposal. The sense that there was something to be discovered out there that could lead them to the three missing women made the morning seem a little more promising. And it made her all the more anxious to get to work.

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When Mackenzie got Harriett Wheeler on the phone, she knew right away that she had woken the woman up. Wheeler, who had been Delores Manning's agent for the last four years, sounded tired and cranky when she answered the phone on the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ms. Wheeler. This is Agent Mackenzie White with the FBI. I was wondering if you might be able to answer a few questions for me."

"About Delores, I assume?"

"Yes, about Delores. I apologize for the early call, but as I'm sure you understand, time is of the essence."

"Yes, I get that. I jumped at the phone just now because I was kind of hoping you'd be a policeman or maybe even Delores herself to tell me everything was good now. But I assume she's still missing?"

"Yes. So any new information you can provide is going to help us find her much faster."

"Well, I already spoke to the police."

"I know. My main question concerns people Delores knew. For instance, did you know that her family lived out here in Iowa?"

"I did, but she never really talked about them. I got the feeling that she was sort of ashamed of her family situation."

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