

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 6

BEFORE HE FEELS

BLAKE PIERCE

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Блейк Пирс
Before He Feels

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In BEFORE HE FEELS, FBI special agent Mackenzie White is stunned to be assigned a case with victims matching no profile she has ever seen: shockingly, all of the victims are blind. Does this mean that the killer himself is blind, too? Plunged into the subculture of the blind, Mackenzie struggles to understand, finding herself out of her element as she crisscrosses the state, racing from group homes to private houses, interviewing caretakers, librarians, experts and psychologists. And yet, despite the best minds in the country, Mackenzie seems unable to prevent the spree of killings. Has she finally met her match?

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Содержание

PROLOGUE	7
CHAPTER ONE	11
CHAPTER TWO	14
CHAPTER THREE	18
CHAPTER FOUR	22
CHAPTER FIVE	24
CHAPTER SIX	28
CHAPTER SEVEN	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

Blake Pierce

BEFORE HE FEELS

Blake Pierce

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

He'd read the book at least a dozen times, but that was okay. It was a good book and he had even gone so far as to give each character his or her own voice. It also helped that it was one of his favorites—*Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury. To most, it might seem like an odd book to read to the residents of a home for the blind, but everyone he'd ever read it to seemed to like it.

He was nearing the end, and his latest resident was eating it up. Ellis, a fifty-seven-year-old woman, had told him she'd been born blind and lived the past eleven years in the home, after her son had decided he didn't want the baggage of a blind mother anymore, and placed her in the Wakeman Home for the Blind.

Ellis seemed to like him right away. She'd later told him that she told very few of the other residents about him because she enjoyed having him to herself. And that was fine with him. As a matter of fact, that was pretty much perfect as far as he was concerned.

Even better, about three weeks ago she had insisted that they leave the grounds of the home; she wanted to enjoy his storytelling in the fresh air, with the breeze on her face. And while there wasn't much of a breeze today – it was, actually, gruelingly hot – that was fine by him. They were sitting in a small rose garden about half a mile away from the home. It was, she'd said, a place she visited a lot. She liked the smell of the roses and the buzzing of the bees.

And now, his voice, telling her Ray Bradbury's story.

He was glad that she liked him so much. He liked her, too. Ellis didn't interrupt his reading with hundreds of questions like some of the others did. She simply sat there, looking into space she had never properly seen, and hung on each and every word.

As he came to the end of a chapter, he checked his watch. He had already stayed ten minutes beyond his usual time. He didn't have any others he planned to visit today, but he did have plans for later in the evening.

Placing his bookmark between the pages, he set the book down. Without the story to distract him, he realized just how oppressive the southern heat was on his back.

"Is that it for today?" Ellis asked.

He smiled at the observation. It never failed to amaze him how well the other senses made up for lack of sight. She'd heard him shift on the small bench near the center of the garden, then the soft noise of the book being placed on his leg.

"Yeah, I'm afraid so," he said. "I've already worn out my welcome by ten minutes."

"How much is left?" she asked.

"About forty pages. So we'll knock it out next week. Sound good?"

"Sounds perfect," she said. She then frowned slightly and added: "Do you mind if I ask you... well, you know... it's so dumb, but..."

"No, that's fine, Ellis."

He leaned in close to her and let her touch his face. She ran her hands along the contours of it. He understood the need for it (and Ellis wasn't the only blind woman who had done this to him) but it still weirded him out. A brief smile came to her mouth as she made her way around his head and then removed her hands.

"Thanks," she said. "And thanks for reading. I was wondering if you had any ideas for the next book?"

"Depends what you're in the mood for."

"A classic, maybe?"

"This is Ray Bradbury," he said. "That's about as classic as I get. I do think I have *The Lord of the Flies* lying around somewhere."

"That's the one about the boys stranded on the island, right?"

“Boiled down, yes.”

“Sounds good. But this one...this *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is brilliant. Great choice!”

“Yeah, it’s one of my favorites.”

He was rather glad that she could not see the devious smile on his face. *Something wicked this way comes, indeed*, he thought.

He picked up his book, well-worn and battered from years of use, first opened about thirty years ago. He waited for her to stand with him, like an impatient date. She had her walking stick with her but she rarely used it.

The walk back to the Wakeman Home for the Blind was a short one. He liked to watch the look of concentration on her face as she started walking. He wondered what it must be like to rely on all of your other senses to move around. It must be exhausting to maneuver around a world without being able to see it.

As he studied her face, he hoped, most of all, that Ellis had enjoyed what she’d heard of the book.

He held his book tightly, almost a little disappointed that Ellis would never find out how it ended.

*

Ellis found herself thinking of the young boys from *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. It was October in the book. She wished it was October here. But no...it was the end of July in southern Virginia, and she didn’t think it could get any hotter. Even after planning her walk just before twilight, the temperature was still a cruel ninety degrees according to Siri on her iPhone.

Sadly, she had come to know Siri well. She was a great way to pass the time, speaking in her snooty little robotic voice, filling Ellis in on trivia, weather updates, and sports scores.

There were a few tech people at the home who always made sure all of her computer gadgets were updated. She had a MacBook stocked with iTunes and a pretty substantial music library. She also had the latest iPhone and even a top-of-the-line app that responded to an attached gadget that allowed her to interact in Braille.

Siri had just told her that it was eighty-seven degrees outside. That seemed impossible, seeing as how it was almost 7:30 in the evening. *Ah well*, she thought. *A little sweat never hurt anyone*.

She thought about just forgetting her walk. It was a walk she took at least five times a week. And she’d already taken it once today to meet with the man who read to her. She didn’t need the exercise but...well, she had certain rituals and routines. It made her feel normal. It made her feel sane. Plus, there was something to the sound of the afternoon while the sun was setting. She could *feel* it setting and *hear* something like a soft electric hum in the air as the world fell quiet, pulling dusk in with night on its heels.

So she decided to go for a walk. Two people within the home said goodbye to her, familiar voices – one filled with boredom, the other with a dulled cheer. She relished the feel of fresh air on her face as she stepped out onto the main lawn.

“Where the hell are you going, Ellis?”

It was another familiar voice – the manager of Wakeman, a jolly man named Randall Jones.

“My usual walk,” she answered.

“It’s so hot, though! You be quick about it. I don’t want you passing out!”

“Or missing my ridiculous curfew,” she said.

“Yeah, or that,” Randall said with a bit of scorn.

She carried on with her walk, feeling the looming presence of the home fall away behind her. She felt an open space ahead of her, the lawn waiting for her. Beyond that was the sidewalk and, half a mile later, the rose garden.

Ellis hated the idea that she was nearing sixty and had a curfew. She understood it, but it made her feel like a child. Still, other than her lack of sight, she had it pretty sweet at the Wakeman Home for the Blind. She even had that nice man who came in to read to her once a week – and sometimes twice. She knew that he read to a few others, too. But those were people at other homes. Here at Wakeman, she was the only one he read to. It made her feel special. It made her feel like he preferred her. He'd complained to her that most of the others enjoyed romance novels or best-seller drivel. But with Ellis, he could read things he enjoyed. Two weeks ago, they'd finished up *Cujo* by Stephen King. And now there was this Bradbury book and —

She paused in her walk, cocking her head slightly.

She thought she'd heard something close to her. But after pausing, she did not hear it again.

Probably just an animal passing through the woods on my right, she thought. It was southern Virginia after all... and there were lots of woods and lots of critters living in them.

She tapped her cane out ahead of her, finding a weird sort of comfort in its familiar *click click* noise as it struck the sidewalk. While she obviously had never seen the sidewalk or the road alongside of it, they had been described to her several times. She'd also put something of a mental picture together in her mind, connecting smells with the descriptions of flowers and trees that some of the home's aides and caretakers had given her.

Within five minutes, she could smell the roses several yards ahead. She could hear the bees buzzing around them. Sometimes she thought she could even smell the bees, covered in pollen and whatever honey they were producing elsewhere.

She knew the path to the rose garden so well that she could have made her way around it without the use of her cane. She'd lapped it at least one thousand times in the course of her eleven years at the home. She came out here to reflect on her life, how things had gotten so difficult that her husband had left her fifteen years ago and then her son eleven years ago. She didn't miss her bastard of an ex-husband at all, but she did miss the feel of a man's hands on her. If she was being honest with herself, it was one of the reasons she enjoyed feeling the face of the man who read to her. He had a strong chin, high cheekbones, and one of those southern drawls to his voice that was addictive to listen to. He could read her the phone book and she'd enjoy it.

She was thinking of him as she felt herself enter the familiar contours of the garden. The concrete was crisp and hard under her feet but everything else in front of her felt soft and inviting. She paused for a moment and discovered that, as was usually the case in the afternoons, she had the place to herself. No one else was there.

Again, she stopped. She heard something behind her.

Feel it, too, she thought.

"Who is that?" she asked.

She got no answer. She had come out this late because she knew the garden would be deserted. Very few came out after six in the afternoon because the town of Stateton, in which the Wakeman Home for the Blind was located, was a tiny speck of a place. When she had stepped outside fifteen minutes ago, she'd listened for the movement of anyone else who might be out on the front lawn and had heard no one. She'd also heard no one else on the sidewalk as she had come down to the garden. There was the possibility that someone could be out with the intention of sneaking up on her and scaring her, but that could be risky. There were repercussions to such behavior in this town, laws that were enforced by a tried and true southern police force that didn't take shit when it came to local teens and bullies trying to pick on the disabled.

But there it was again.

She heard the noise, and the feeling that someone was there was stronger now. She smelled someone. It was not a bad smell at all. In fact, it was familiar.

Fear ran through her then, and she opened her mouth to yell.

But before she could, suddenly, she felt an immense pressure around her throat. She felt something else, too, radiating off of the person like heat.

Hate.

She gagged, unable to yell, to speak, to breathe, and she felt herself sinking to her knees.

The pressure tightened around her throat and that feeling of hate seemed to penetrate her, as pain spread throughout her body, and for the first time, Ellis was relieved that she was blind. As she felt her life slipping from her, she was relieved she would not have to lay eyes upon the face of evil. Instead, she had only that all-too-familiar darkness behind her eyes to welcome her into whatever awaited her after this life.

CHAPTER ONE

Mackenzie White, always on the go, was perfectly happy being confined to her little cubicle space. She was even happier when, three weeks ago, McGrath had called her up and told her that there was a vacant office thanks to a round of government layoffs, and that it was hers if she wanted it. She'd waited a few days, and when no one else had taken it, she went ahead and moved in.

It was minimally decorated, with only her desk, a floor lamp, a small bookshelf, and two chairs across from her desk. A large dry-erase calendar hung on the wall. She was staring at the calendar as she took a break between answering emails and making calls in her attempt to find details about one particular case.

It was an older case...a case linked to the single business card that she had on the dry-erase calendar, hanging there by a magnet:

Barker Antiques

It was the name of a business that apparently never existed.

Any lines of investigation that popped up were usually dashed right away. The closest they had come to getting anywhere was when Agent Harrison had discovered a place in New York that was a possible link. But that had turned out to be nothing more than a man who had sold old knock-off antiques in his garage in the late '80s.

Still, there was the sense that she was *this* close to finding some thread that would lead her to the answers she had been looking for – answers regarding the death of her father and the apparently linked murder that had occurred earlier in the year, just six months ago.

She tried holding on to that sense of something being out there, dangling unseen yet somehow also right in front of her face. She had to on days like today when she'd had three possible leads die in their tracks via phone calls and emails.

The business card had become a puzzle piece to her. She stared at it every day, trying to figure out some approach she had not yet tried.

She was so enamored with it that when someone knocked on her office door, she jumped a bit. She looked to the door and saw Ellington standing there. He poked his head in and looked around.

"Yeah, an office setting still doesn't suit you."

"I know," Mackenzie said. "I feel like such a fraud. Come on in."

"Oh, I don't have a lot of time," he said. "I was just wondering if you might want to get lunch."

"I can do that," she said. "Meet me downstairs in about half an hour and –"

Her desk phone rang, interrupting her. She read the display and saw that it was coming from McGrath's extension. "One second," she said. "This is McGrath."

Ellington nodded and made a playfully stern face.

"This is Agent White," she said.

"White, it's McGrath. I need to see you in my office as soon as possible about a new assignment. Round up Ellington and bring him with you."

She opened her mouth to say *Yes sir*, but McGrath killed the call before she could so much as draw up a breath.

"Looks like lunch has to wait," she said. "McGrath needs to see us."

They shared an awkward glance as the same thought passed between them. They'd often wondered how long they'd be able to keep their romantic relationship a secret from their co-workers, particularly McGrath.

"You think he knows?" Ellington asked.

Mackenzie shrugged. "I don't know. But he did say he needs to see us about an assignment. So if he *does* know, that's apparently not the purpose behind the call."

"Let's go find out then," Ellington said.

Mackenzie logged out of her computer and joined Ellington as they headed through the building and toward McGrath's office. She tried to tell herself that she really didn't care if McGrath knew about them. It wasn't grounds for suspension or anything like that, but he would likely never allow them to work again if he *did* find out.

So while she tried her best to not care, there was also some worry there. She did her best to swallow it down as they neared McGrath's office while trying to purposefully walk as far away from Ellington as possible.

McGrath eyed them suspiciously as they took the two seats across from his desk. It was a seat Mackenzie was growing used to, sitting there and getting either lectured or praised by McGrath. She wondered which it would be today before he handed them their assignment.

"So, let's deal with some housekeeping first," McGrath said. "It's become clear to me that there's something going on between you two. I don't know if it's love or just a fling or what...and I honestly don't care. But this is your one and only warning. If it gets in the way of your work, you'll never be partnered up again. And that would be a damned shame because you work really well together. Am I understood?"

Mackenzie didn't see the point in denying it. "Yes sir."

Ellington echoed her response and she smirked when she saw that he looked embarrassed. She figured he wasn't the sort who was used to getting reprimanded by those above him.

"Now that we have *that* out of the way, let's get to the case," McGrath said. "We got a call from the sheriff of a small southern town called Stateton. There's a home for the blind located there – and that's about all there is, from what I gather. Last night, a blind woman was killed extremely close to the premises. And while that's certainly tragic enough, it's the second murder of a blind person in the state of Virginia within ten days. In both cases, there appears to be trauma to the neck, indicating strangulation, as well as irritation around the eyes."

"Was the first victim a member of a home as well?" Mackenzie asked.

"Yes, though a much smaller one from what I gather. It was originally speculated that the killer was a family member, but it took less than a week for everyone to be cleared. With a second body and what appears to be a very specific set of targets, it's likely not just coincidental. So you can understand the urgency of this situation, I hope. Honestly, I get a creeping sort of small town feel to this one. Not many people down there, so it should be easier to find a suspect quickly. I'm assigning this to the two of you because I fully expect you to have it wrapped within forty-eight hours. Less would be even better."

"Is Agent Harrison not being involved on this one?" Mackenzie asked. Having not spoken to him since the passing of his mother, she felt almost guilty. While he had never truly felt like a partner, she still respected him.

"Agent Harrison has been tasked elsewhere," McGrath said. "For this case, he will be a resource to you...research, expedited information, and things of that nature. Are you uncomfortable working with Agent Ellington?"

"Not at all, sir," she said, regretting that she had said anything at all.

"Good. I'll have human resources book you a room in Stateton. I'm not an idiot...so I've requested just one room. If nothing else comes out of this little fling between the two of you, at least it will save the bureau on lodging costs."

Mackenzie wasn't sure if this was McGrath's attempt at humor. It was hard to tell because the man seemed to never smile.

As they got up to head out on their assignment, it occurred to Mackenzie how vague McGrath's response about Harrison had been. *He's been tasked somewhere else*, Mackenzie thought. *What's that supposed to mean?*

That wasn't for her to be concerned with, though. Instead, she had been assigned a case that McGrath was expecting a quick turnaround on. Already, she could feel the challenge brewing inside of her, pushing her to get started right away.

CHAPTER TWO

Mackenzie felt a chill pass through her as Ellington guided them down State Route 47, deeper into the heart of rural Virginia. A few cornfields popped up here and there, breaking the monotony of sprawling fields and forests. The number of cornfields was no match for what she was used to in Nebraska, but the sight of them still made her a bit uneasy.

Luckily, the closer they got to the town of Stateton, the fewer cornfields she saw. They were replaced by freshly leveled acres of land that had been torn up by local lumber companies. In doing research on the area on the four-and-a-half-hour drive down, she'd seen where there was a fairly large lumber distributor in a neighboring town. As for the town of Stateton, though, it was the Wakeman Home for the Blind, a few antique stores, and very little else.

"Anything those case files tell you that I'm not privy to yet? It's hard to read the constant flow of emails from over here in the driver's seat."

"Nothing, really," she said. "It looks like we'll need to go through the same procedures as always. Visiting the families, the home for the blind, things like that."

"Visiting the families...should be easy in an inbred little town like this, huh?"

She was shocked at first but then let it pass. She had learned after a few weeks together as what she supposed could be considered "a couple" that Ellington had a relatively active sense of humor; it could be dry at times, though.

"You ever spend much time in a place like this?" Mackenzie asked.

"Summer camp," Ellington said. "It's a chunk of my teenage years I'd really like to forget. You? Was it ever this bad out in Nebraska?"

"Not quite like this, but it was desolate sometimes. There are times when I think I prefer the quiet out here, in places like this, more than I enjoy the packed traffic and people in places like DC."

"Yeah, I think I could see that."

It was fun for Mackenzie to be able to get to know Ellington better without the trappings of a traditional dating relationship. Rather than learning about one another over fancy dinners or long walks in a park, they had gotten to know one another over car rides and time spent in FBI offices or conferences rooms. And she'd enjoyed every minute of it. Sometimes she wondered if she'd ever get tired of getting to know him.

So far, she wasn't sure it would be possible.

Up ahead, a small sign along the side of the road welcomed them to Stateton, Virginia. A simple two-lane road led them through more trees. A few houses and their lawns broke the monotony of the forest for about a mile or so before any real signs of a town took over. They passed by a greasy spoon-type diner, a barbershop, two antique stores, a farm supply store, two mini-marts, a post office, and then, about two miles beyond all of that, a perfectly square brick building just off the main road. A very military-style sign out front read Staunton County Police Department and Correctional Facility.

"Ever seen that before?" Ellington asked. "A police department and the county jail in one building?"

"A few times in Nebraska," she said. "I think it's pretty common in places like these. The closest actual prison to Stateton is in Petersburg, and that's about eighty miles away, I think."

"Jesus, this place *is* small. We should have this wrapped up pretty quickly."

Mackenzie nodded as Ellington turned into the driveway and into the parking lot of the large brick building that looked as if it sat literally in the middle of nowhere.

What she was thinking but did not say was: *I hope you didn't just jinx us.*

Mackenzie smelled dark coffee and something like Febreeze when they stepped into the small lobby at the front of the building. It looked quite nice inside, but it was an old building. Its age could be seen in the ceiling cracks and the obvious need for new carpet in the lobby. An enormous desk sat along the far wall and while it also looked as old as the rest of the building, it looked well-kept.

An older woman sat behind the desk, sorting through a large binder. When she heard Mackenzie and Ellington enter, she looked up with a huge smile. It was a beautiful smile but it also showed her age. Mackenzie guessed her to be reaching seventy.

“You the agents with the FBI?” the aging lady asked.

“Yes ma’am,” Mackenzie said. “I’m Agent White and this is my partner, Agent Ellington. Is the sheriff around?”

“He is,” she said. “In fact, he’s asked me to direct you straight to his office. He’s quite busy fielding calls about this latest horrible death. Just head down to the corridor to your left. His office is the last door on the right.”

They followed her directions and as they headed down the long corridor that led to the back of the building, Mackenzie was taken aback by the silence of the place. In the midst of a murder case, she’d expected the place to be abuzz with activity, even if it *was* the middle of nowhere.

As they headed for the back of the corridor, Mackenzie noticed a few signs that had been posted on the walls. One said: **Prison Access Requires Keycard**. Another read: **All Prison Visits Must Be Cleared by County Officials! Approval Must Be Presented At Time of Visit!**

Her mind started to race with thoughts of the maintenance and regulations that must have to be in place for a prison and a police department to share the same space. It was quite fascinating to her. But before her mind could get going any further, they reached the office at the back of the corridor.

Gold letters had been painted on the upper glass portion of the door, reading *Sheriff Clarke*. The door was partially open, so Mackenzie slowly opened it to the sound of a man’s burly voice. When she peeked inside, she saw a heavysset man behind a desk, speaking loudly into his desk phone. Another man was sitting in a chair in the corner, furiously texting something on his cell phone.

The man behind the desk – Sheriff Clarke, Mackenzie presumed – interrupted himself on the phone as she opened the door.

“One minute, Randall,” he said. He then covered the mouthpiece and looked back and forth between Mackenzie and Ellington.

“You with the bureau?” he asked.

“We are,” Ellington said.

“Thank God,” he sighed. “Give me a second.” He then uncapped the mouthpiece and continued with his other conversation. “Look, Randall, the cavalry just arrived. Will you be available in fifteen minutes? Yeah? Okay, good. See you then.”

The heavysset man hung up the phone and came around the desk. He offered a meaty hand to them, approaching Ellington first. “Good to meet you,” he said. “I’m Sheriff Robert Clarke. This,” he said, nodding toward the man sitting in the corner, “is Officer Keith Lambert. My deputy is out patrolling the streets right now, doing his best to find *some* sort of lead on this rapidly growing clusterfuck.”

He nearly forgot about Mackenzie when he was done shaking Ellington’s hand, offering another handshake to her almost as an afterthought. When she shook it, she did the intros, hoping it would clue him in to the fact that she was just as capable of leading this investigation as the men in the room. Instantly, old ghosts from Nebraska started rattling the chains in her head.

“Sheriff Clarke, I’m Agent White and this is Agent Ellington. Will you be our liaison here in Stateton?”

“Sweetie, I’ll be just about your everything while you’re here,” he said. “The police force for the entire county numbers a whopping twelve people. Thirteen if you count Frances out there at the front desk and dispatch. With this murder spree going on, we’re spread just a little thin.”

“Well, let’s see what we can do to lighten your load,” Mackenzie said.

“I wish it was that easy,” he said. “Even if we solve this fucking thing today, I’m going to have half the board of supervisors for the county up my ass.”

“Why is that?” Ellington asked.

“Well, the local papers just got wind of who the victim was. Ellis Ridgeway. The mother of an up-and-coming scum-sucking douchebag politician. Some say he might make the senate within another five years.”

“And who is that?” Mackenzie asked.

“Langston Ridgeway. Twenty-eight years old and thinks he’s John Fucking Kennedy.”

“Is that so?” Mackenzie said, a little shocked that had not been included in the reports.

“Yeah. How the local paper got that information is beyond me. The morons can’t spell right half the time, but this they get.”

“I saw signs for the Wakeman Home for the Blind on our way in,” Mackenzie said. “It’s only six miles from here, is that correct?”

“On the money,” Clarke said. “I was just talking to Randall Jones, the manager over there. That’s who I was on the phone with when you came in. He’s over there right now to answer any questions you have. And the sooner the better. He’s got the press and some county bigwigs calling him and bugging the shit out of him.”

“Well, let’s head over there,” Mackenzie said. “Will you be coming with us?”

“No way, sweetie. I’m swamped as it is here. But please do come back by when you’re done with Randall. I’ll help you however I can but really...I’d love for you two to take this ball and run with it.”

“No problem,” Mackenzie said. She wasn’t quite sure how to handle Clarke. He was up front and bluntly honest, which was good. He also seemed to really love dropping curse words. She also thought that when he called her *sweetie*, he wasn’t being insulting. It was that weird sort of southern charm.

Also, the man was stressed beyond his means.

“We’ll come right back here when we’re done at the home,” Mackenzie said. “Please call us if you hear anything new between now and then.”

“Of course,” Clarke said.

In the corner, still texting on his phone, Officer Lambert grunted in agreement.

Having spent less than three minutes in Sheriff Clarke’s office, Mackenzie and Ellington walked back down the corridor and exited through the lobby. The older woman, whom Mackenzie assumed was the Frances that Clarke had mentioned, waved at them briskly as they made their exit.

“Well, that was...interesting,” Ellington said.

“The man is in over his head,” she said. “Give him a break.”

“You just like him because he calls you *sweetie*,” Ellington said.

“And?” she said with a smile.

“Hey, I can start calling you sweetie.”

“Please don’t,” she said as they got into the car.

Ellington drove them half a mile down Highway 47 and then took a left onto a back road. Right away, they saw a sign for the Wakeman Home for the Blind. As they got closer to the property, Mackenzie started to wonder why someone would have chosen such a random and isolated location for a home for the blind. Surely there was some sort of psychological meaning behind it. Perhaps being located in the middle of nowhere helped them to relax, removed from the constant droning noises of a larger city.

All she knew for sure was that as the trees grew thicker around them, she started to feel more choked off from the rest of the world. And for the first time in a very long time, she almost yearned for the familiar sights of those cornfields of her youth.

CHAPTER THREE

The Wakeman Home for the Blind did not look at all like Mackenzie was expecting. In contrast to the Staunton County Police Department and Correctional Facility, the Wakeman Home for the Blind looked like a marvel of modern design and construction – and that was a view Mackenzie arrived at before they even stepped foot inside.

The front of the place was made of large glass windows that seemed to make up the majority of the walls. Halfway down the sidewalk toward the entrance, Mackenzie could already see inside. She saw a large lobby that looked like something straight out of some sort of spa. It was friendly looking and inviting.

It was a feeling that only intensified once they stepped inside. Everything was very clean and looked new. In the research she had done on the way to Stateton, she'd discovered that the Wakeman Home for the Blind had only just been built in 2007. When it had been built, there had been a slight hurrah within Staunton County, as it brought in new jobs and commerce. Now, however, while it was still one of the more prominent buildings in the county, the excitement had died down and the home seemed to have gotten swallowed up by its rural surroundings.

A young woman sat behind a curved counter along the back wall. She greeted them with a smile, though it was clear that she was troubled. Mackenzie and Ellington approached her, introduced themselves, and were promptly asked to take a seat in the waiting area while Randall Jones came out to meet them.

As it turned out, Randall Jones was very anxious to meet with them. Mackenzie had been sitting for no more than ten seconds before a set of double doors leading to the back of the building opened up on the other side of the waiting room. A tall man wearing a button-down shirt and khakis stepped through. He tried on a smile as he introduced himself, but, just like the receptionist, he could not hide the fact that he was tired and very troubled.

"I'm glad you're here so soon," Jones said. "The sooner we can get this wrapped up, the better. The small-town grapevine is on fire with this one."

"We'd like to get it knocked out as soon as possible as well," Mackenzie said. "Do you know exactly where the body was found?"

"Yes. It's a rose garden about half a mile from here. It was originally going to be the site for Wakeman but some weird county zoning regulations messed it all up."

"Could you take us there?" Mackenzie asked.

"Of course. Anything you need. Come with me."

Jones led them through the double doors he had come through. On the other side, there was a very small alcove that led directly into the home. The first few doors they passed were offices and storage spaces. These were separated from the residents' rooms by an open office area where one man and one woman sat behind a counter space much like a hospital wing.

As they passed by the rooms, Mackenzie peeked inside one that was open. The rooms were quite spacious and decked out with nice furniture. She also saw laptops and smartpads in a few of the rooms.

Despite being located in the middle of nowhere, there apparently isn't a shortage of funds to keep the place going, she thought.

"How many residents live here?" Mackenzie asked.

"Twenty-six," he said. "And they come from all over. We have one older man who came all the way from California because of the exceptional service and quality of life we can offer."

"Forgive me if it's an ignorant question," Mackenzie said, "but what sort of things do they do?"

"Well, we have classes that cover a wide variety of interests. Most have to be specialized to cater to their needs, of course. We have cooking classes, exercise programs, a board game club, trivia

clubs, gardening classes, crafts, things like that. Also, a few times out of the year, we organize outings to allow them to hike or swim. We even have two brave souls who have taken to canoeing whenever we go out.”

Hearing all of this made Mackenzie feel both insensitive, yet happy as well. She had no idea that people who were completely blind could become adept at things like canoeing or swimming.

Near the end of the hallway, Jones brought them to an elevator. When they stepped inside and headed down, Jones leaned against the wall, clearly exhausted.

“Mr. Jones,” Mackenzie said, “do you have any idea how the local papers would have already learned about the murder?”

“No idea,” he said. “That’s one of the reasons I’m so tired. I’ve been extensively questioning my staff. But everyone checks out. There’s certainly a leak but I have no idea where it’s coming from.”

Mackenzie nodded. *Not really much of a concern there, she thought. A leak in a little town like this is almost a certainty. It shouldn’t get in the way of the investigation, though.*

The elevator came to a stop and let them out at a small finished basement of sorts. A few chairs were spread out here and there but Jones led them to a door straight ahead of them. They stepped outside and Mackenzie found herself behind the building, facing an employee parking lot.

Randall led them to his car and when they got in, he wasted no time blasting the air conditioning. The inside of the car was like a furnace, but the air started its work right away.

“How did Mrs. Ridgeway get to the garden?” Ellington asked.

“Well, being that we’re in the middle of nowhere, we do allow our residents a certain amount of freedom. We have a curfew of nine o’clock during the summer – which drops to six o’ clock in the fall and winter when it gets dark earlier. The rose garden we’re headed to is a spot some of the residents go just to get out. As you’ll see, it’s a quick walk without any hazards.”

Randall backed them out of the lot and turned onto the road. He was headed in the opposite direction of the police department, revealing a new stretch of the road to Mackenzie and Ellington.

The road was a straight stretch that veered farther back into the woods. But within thirty seconds, Mackenzie could see the small cast-iron gates that bordered the rose garden. Randall pulled into a thin strip of a parking lot where there were only three other cars parked, one of which was an unattended police car.

“Sheriff Clarke and his men have been out here most of last night and early this morning,” Randall said. “When he heard you guys were coming, he had it abandoned. He really doesn’t want to get in the way, you know?”

“We certainly appreciate that,” Mackenzie said, stepping out of the car and back into the stifling heat.

“We know for a fact that this was the last place Ellis Ridgeway visited,” Randall said. “She passed two other residents on her way out, as well as me. Further proof of this can be seen on the security cameras at the home. She’s very obviously heading in this direction – and everyone in the home knows she liked to take late evening walks here. She did it at least four or five times on most weeks.”

“And no one else was here with her?” Mackenzie asked.

“Not anyone from the home. Honestly, not many people come out here in the dead center of summer. I’m sure you’ve noticed that we’re in the middle of a pretty rough hot spell.”

As they came to the east side of the garden, Mackenzie was almost overwhelmed with the smells. She caught whiffs of roses, hydrangeas, and what she thought might be lavender. She supposed it must be a nice getaway for the blind – a way to truly enjoy their other senses.

When they reached a bend in the trail that curved farther back to the east, Jones turned and pointed back behind them. “If you look through that break in the trees on the other side of the road, you can see the backside of Wakeman,” he said sadly. “She was *this* close to us when she died.”

He then stepped off of the walkway and squeezed past two large flowerpots containing red roses. Mackenzie and Ellington followed him. They reached a back gate that had been mostly hidden by all of the flowers, trees, and vegetation. There was a space of about four feet that was empty, save for some stray grass.

As they walked through, she could instantly see how it might seem like a perfect place for a patient killer to strike. Randall Jones had said it himself – no one came out here much when it got so hot. The killer certainly knew about this and used it to his advantage.

“This is where I found her,” Jones said, pointing to the empty space between the larger pots and the black cast-iron gates. “She was lying face down and bent into a sort of U shape.”

“You found her?” Ellington asked.

“Yes. At about nine forty-five last night. When she didn’t make it back for curfew, I started to worry. After half an hour, I figured I should come check to see if she’d fallen or panicked or something.”

“Were all of her clothes in place?” Mackenzie asked.

“As far as I could tell,” Randall said, clearly surprised by the question. “In the moment, I wasn’t really thinking in such a way.”

“And there’s absolutely no one else on that video footage at the home?” Ellington asked. “No one following her?”

“No one. You’re welcome to look at the footage for yourself when we get back.”

As they headed back through the garden, Ellington brought up a question that had been brewing on Mackenzie’s mind. “It seems very quiet today in the home. What gives?”

“I guess you’d call it mourning. We have a very tight-knit community at Wakeman and Ellis was so loved. Very few of our residents have come out of their rooms all day. We also made an announcement over the PA that we’d have agents from DC coming to look into Ellis’s murder. Ever since then, hardly anyone has come out of their room. I guess they’re freaked out...scared.”

That, plus no one following her out of the home rules out the murderer being a resident, Mackenzie thought. The meager file on the first victim stated that the murder occurred between eleven o’clock and midnight...and a pretty good distance away from Stateton.

“Would it be at all possible for us to speak to some of your residents?” Mackenzie asked.

“It’s absolutely fine with me,” Jones said. “Of course, if they’re uncomfortable with it I’ll have to ask you to stop.”

“Of course. I think I could – ”

She was interrupted by the ringing of her phone. She checked it and saw an unfamiliar number in the display.

“One second,” she said, taking the call. She turned away from Jones and answered: “This is Agent White.”

“Agent White, it’s Sheriff Clarke. Look, I know you just left here but I’d really appreciate it if you could hustle back down as soon as you can.”

“Sure. Is everything okay?”

“It’s been better,” he said. “I’ve just got this jerk-off waste of space Langston Ridgeway down here. He’s demanding to speak with you about his mother’s case and he’s starting to cause a bit of a scene.”

Even in the sticks, you can’t escape politics, Mackenzie thought.

Irritated, she did her best to respond in a professional manner. “Give us about ten minutes,” she said and killed the call.

“Mr. Jones, we’re going to have to head back to the sheriff for now,” she said. “Could you have that security footage cued up for us when we come back?”

“Of course,” Randall said, leading them back to his car.

“And in the meantime,” Mackenzie added, “I want a list of anyone you have even the slightest suspicions about. I’m talking employees and other residents. People that would know the reach of the security camera in the garden.”

Jones nodded somberly. The look on his face told Mackenzie that this was something he had considered himself but had not dared put much belief into. With that same expression on his face, he started the car and took them back to Wakeman. Along the way, Mackenzie again noticed the silence of the little town – not tranquil, but more like the calm before a storm.

CHAPTER FOUR

The first thought that popped into Mackenzie's head when she saw Langston Ridgeway was that he looked like a praying mantis. He was tall and skinny, and he moved his arms like awkward little pinchers when he talked. It didn't help that his eyes were huge with fury as he yelled at everyone who tried speaking to him.

Sheriff Clarke had ushered them into the small conference room at the end of the hallway – a room that wasn't much bigger than his office. Here, with the doors closed, Langston Ridgeway stood as tall as he could while Mackenzie and Ellington endured his wrath.

"My mother is dead and gone," he moaned, "and I'm inclined to blame the incompetence of the staff at the damned home. And since this sorry excuse for a sheriff refuses to let me speak to Randall Jones in person, I'd like to know what you two FBI goons intend to do about it."

Mackenzie waited a beat before responding. She was trying to gauge his level of grief. With the way he was behaving it was hard to tell if his anger was an expression of his loss or if he was genuinely just an atrocious man who liked to shout orders at others. So far, she couldn't tell.

"Quite frankly," Mackenzie said, "I agree with the sheriff. You're angry and hurt right now, and it seems like you're looking to pass blame. I am very sorry for your loss. But the worst thing you could do right now is to confront the management at the home."

"Blame?" Ridgeway asked, clearly not used to people not simply folding and agreeing with him right away. "If that place is responsible for what happened to my mother, then I –"

"We've already visited the home and spoken with Mr. Jones," Mackenzie said, cutting him off. "I can assure you that what happened to your mother was the influence of outside sources. And if it is internal, then Mr. Jones certainly knows nothing about it. I can tell you all of that with absolutely confidence."

Mackenzie wasn't sure if the look of shock that came over Ridgeway's face was the result of her disagreeing with him or because she had interrupted him.

"And you gathered all of that from one conversation?" he asked, clearly skeptical.

"I did," she said. "Of course, this investigation is still quite young so I can't be certain of anything. What I *can* tell you is that it's very hard to conduct an investigation when I get calls that end with me having to leave a crime scene just to listen to people yell and complain."

She could nearly feel the fury coming off of him now. "I just lost my mother," he said, each word like a whisper. "I want answers. I want justice."

"Good," Ellington said. "We want the same thing."

"But for us to get it," Mackenzie said, "you need to let us work. I understand you hold sway around here, but quite frankly, I don't care. We have a job to do and we can't let your anger, grief, or arrogance get in the way."

During the entire exchange, Sheriff Clarke sat at the small conference table. He was doing his very best to contain a smile.

Ridgeway was quiet for a moment. He looked back and forth between the agents and Sheriff Clarke. He nodded and when a tear slid down the side of his face, Mackenzie thought that it might be real. But she could also still see the anger in his eyes, right there at the surface.

"I'm sure you're used to throwing instructions around at small-town cops and suspects and whatnot," Langston Ridgeway said. "But let me tell you this...if you drop the ball on this case, or, for that matter, disrespect me again, I'll make a call to DC. I'll talk to your supervisor and bury you."

The sad thing is, he thinks he's fully capable of such a thing, Mackenzie thought. And maybe he is. But I'd sure as hell love to be a fly on the wall when someone like Langston Ridgeway starts barking at McGrath.

Rather than escalate the situation, Mackenzie decided to stay silent. She glanced beside her and saw that Ellington was clenching and unclenching his fist...a little trick he resorted to whenever he was on the verge of getting irrationally angry.

In the end, Mackenzie said, "If you let us do our job unhindered, it won't come to that."

It was clear that Ridgeway was searching for something else to say. All he could come up with was a muffled *hmmph*. He followed this by turning quickly away and leaving the room. It reminded Mackenzie very much of a child in the midst of a tantrum.

After a few seconds, Sheriff Clarke leaned forward with a sigh. "And now you see what I've been having to deal with. That boy thinks the sun rises and sets around his spoiled ass. And he can go on and on about losing his mother all he wants. All he's worried about is the media in bigger cities finding out that he dumped her in a home...even if it is a nice one. He's worried about his own image more than anything else."

"Yeah, I got that same feeling," Ellington said.

"Do you think we can expect any more interference from him?" Mackenzie asked.

"I don't know. He's unpredictable. He'll do whatever he thinks might improve his chances of getting public attention which will later turn to votes for whatever tainted sea he guns for."

"Well then, Sheriff," Mackenzie said, "if you have a few minutes, why don't we sit down and go over what we know?"

"That won't take long," he said. "Because there ain't much."

"That's better than nothing," Ellington said.

Clarke nodded and got to his feet. "Come on back to my office, then," he said.

As they made their way down the small hallway, both Mackenzie and Ellington jumped a bit when Clarke shouted, "Hey, Frances! Put on a pot of coffee, would you, darlin'?"

Mackenzie and Ellington exchanged a bewildered look. She was starting to get a very good feel for Sheriff Clarke and the way he ran things. And while they might be a bit rustic, she was finding that she liked him quite a bit – foul language and unintentional sexism aside.

With the evening inching closer to night, Mackenzie and Ellington huddled around Clarke's desk and went over the existing material on the case.

CHAPTER FIVE

Shortly before Frances brought in the coffee, Officer Lambert returned. Now that he was not texting on his phone, Mackenzie saw that he was a younger man, in his early thirties. She found it odd that an officer was serving as Clarke's right-hand man rather than a deputy but didn't think much of it.

Small town, she thought.

The four of them sat around Clarke's desk, going over the material. Clarke seemed to be more than happy to let Mackenzie run with it. She was happy to see that he appeared to be coming around quickly...accepting her as more than an equal.

"So let's start with the most recent," she said. "Ellis Ridgeway. Fifty-seven years old. As I'm beginning to learn, she has a very arrogant and self-important son. Other than the fact that she was obviously blind, what else can you tell me about her?"

"That's about it, really," Clarke said. "She was a sweet lady. From what I can gather, everyone at the home loved her. What scares me about this whole situation is that the killer has to be familiar with her, right? They had to have known she had left the home to target her in such a way."

"My brain wanted to go there, too," Mackenzie said. "But if these deaths are connected – and it certainly seems they are – that means that for someone local who knows her to have done it, there would have been a lot of traveling involved. The other death was what...two and a half hours away?"

"Almost three," Clarke said.

"Exactly," Mackenzie said. "You know, I even wondered for a while if it could have been another resident, but I got it on good authority from Randall Jones that no one followed her yesterday. There's apparently video evidence of this which we haven't seen yet, thanks to Langston Ridgeway's interference. And in terms of residents or employees leaving the home when Mrs. Ridgeway was absent, there is no evidence to support anyone else leaving during that time – not residents, not employees, no one."

"And then, going back to that first murder," Ellington said, "we'll need to head over to speak to family members soon. What can you tell us about the first victim, Sheriff?"

"Well, it was at another home for the blind," he said. "And all I know about it is in that same file you have, I'm sure. Like I said, it's almost three hours from here, nearly up in West Virginia. A rundown sort of place from what I gather. Not really a home, but like a school, I think."

He slid a sheet of paper over to her and she saw the brief police report from the first scene. It was in a city called Treston, about twenty-five miles away from Bluefield, West Virginia. Thirty-eight-year-old Kenneth Able had been strangled to death. There were slight abrasions around his eyes. He'd been discovered stashed in the closet of the room he stayed in most of the time within the home.

The facts were very robotic, with no details. While there were notes about the investigation being ongoing, Mackenzie doubted it was anything serious.

I bet it is now, though, she thought.

This new death was too explicit to deny. The victims were far too similar, as were the signs of abuse on the bodies.

"I've got Randall Jones compiling a list of employees or others associated with the home that could be even the least bit possible," Mackenzie said. "I think our next best bet is to speak with this place in Treston to see if there are any links at all."

"The downside here is that Treston is so damned far away," Ellington pointed out. "Even if this turns out to be a cakewalk, there will be some travel involved. Seems we might not get it all buttoned up as quickly as the illustrious Mr. Ridgeway would like."

"When will a full forensics workup be done on Mrs. Ridgeway?" Mackenzie asked.

"I'm expecting to hear something within a few hours," Clarke said. "A preliminary investigation showed nothing obvious, though. No fingerprints, no visible hairs or other materials left behind."

Mackenzie nodded and looked back to the case files. As she had just started to properly dig into it, her cell phone rang. She snatched it up and answered: "This is Agent White."

"It's Randall Jones. I have a list of names for you, like you asked. It's short and I'm pretty sure they'll all check out, though."

"Who are they?"

"There's a guy on the maintenance crew that isn't very reliable. He worked all day yesterday, clocking out just after five. I've asked around and no one ever saw him come back in. There's another man that works for a special outlet of social services. He comes in and plays board games sometimes. Sort of just hangs out and jokes around with them. He'll do some volunteer stuff like cleaning or moving furniture from time to time."

"Can you text me their names and any contact information you have?"

"Sure thing," Jones said, clearly not happy to even be considering either of the men as suspects.

Mackenzie ended the call and looked back to the three men in the room. "That was Jones with two possible candidates. A maintenance worker and someone that comes in to volunteer and hang out with the residents. Sheriff, he's going to text me the names any moment now. Could you look them over and –"

Her phone dinged as she received the text in question. She showed Sheriff Clarke the names and he shrugged, defeated.

"The first name, Mike Crews, is the maintenance guy," he said. "I know for a fact he wasn't killing anyone after hours last night because I had a beer with him down at Rock's Bar. That's *after* he went by Mildred Cann's house to fix her air conditioner for free. I can tell you right now that Mike Crews is not your man."

"And what about the second name?" Ellington asked.

"Robbie Huston," he said. "I've only ever seen him in passing. I'm pretty sure he's sent by some sort of social services outlet out of Lynchburg. But from what I understand, he's like a saint up at the home. Reads to the residents, is really friendly. Like I said, he's out of Lynchburg. That's about an hour and a half away from here – right on your way to Treston, as a matter of fact."

Mackenzie looked back to Jones's text and saved the number he had provided for Robbie Huston. It was a flimsy lead at best, but at least it was something.

She looked at her watch and saw that it was nearing six o'clock. "When are your deputy and other officers due to report back in?" she asked.

"Pretty soon. But no one has called in with anything yet. I'll keep you updated if you want to head out and get your bearings."

"Sounds good to me," Mackenzie said.

She gathered up the case files as she got to her feet. "Thanks for your help this afternoon," Mackenzie said.

"Of course. I just wish I could offer you more assistance. If you want, I could get the State PD back out here to assist. They were here this morning but scattered pretty quick. I think there might even be a few of them staying here in town for a day or so."

"If it comes to that, I'll let you know," Mackenzie said. "Good night, gentlemen."

With that, she and Ellington took their leave. The front lobby was empty now, Frances having apparently clocked out for the day.

In the parking lot, Ellington hesitated for a moment as he took the keys out. "Hotel or a trip to Lynchburg?" he asked.

She thought about it and although the lure of continuing the investigation even into the later hours was a strong one, she felt that trying to get in touch with Robbie Huston on the phone would yield the same results as a trip to Lynchburg. More than that, she was already starting to believe that Sheriff Clarke knew what he was doing – and if he had no real reservations about Huston, then she would rely on that for now. It was one of the better things about working a case in a small town –

when everyone knew everyone else on an almost intimate basis, the opinions and instincts of local police could often be heavily relied upon.

Still worth calling him once we settle down, she thought.

“Hotel,” she said. “If I can’t get what I want out of a call to him tonight, we’ll stop by Lynchburg tomorrow.”

“On the way to Treston? Seems like a lot of driving.”

She nodded. It *was* going to be a lot of back and forth. They may be more successful if they split up tomorrow. But they could discuss strategy after they were checked into a room with the case files before them and an air conditioner blasting away beside them.

Never one for the lure of luxury, the idea of an air conditioner in this oppressive heat was too good to resist. They got into the blazing hot car, Ellington rolled the windows down, and they headed west, into what served as the heart of Stateton.

Stateton’s only motel was a surprisingly well-kept little square of a building called the Staunton County Inn. It held only twelve rooms, nine of which were vacant when Mackenzie walked into the lobby and requested a room for the night. Now that McGrath knew about their relationship, she and Ellington no longer worried about renting two rooms just to hold up appearances. They booked a single room with one bed and, after a stressful day of driving in the heat, made good use of it the moment the door closed behind them.

Afterward, as Mackenzie showered, she couldn’t help but appreciate the warm feeling of being wanted. It was more than that, though; the fact that they had started peeling off clothes the moment they were alone and had access to a bed made her feel like she was about ten years younger. It was a good feeling, but one she tried very hard to keep in check. Yes, she was enjoying things with Ellington, and whatever was occurring between them was one of the most exciting and promising things to happen to her in recent years, but she also knew that if she wasn’t careful she could let it interfere with her work.

She sensed that he knew this, too. He was risking the same things as she was: reputation, mockery, and heartbreak. Although lately, she wasn’t sure if he was too worried about heartbreak. As she got to know him better, she was pretty sure Ellington was not the type of guy who slept around or treated women poorly, but she also knew that he had just come out of a failed marriage and was being very cautious about their relationship – if that’s what they were choosing to call it.

She was getting the sense that Ellington would not be too shaken up if things ended between them. As for her...well, she wasn’t sure how she might take it.

As she stepped out of the shower and dried off, Ellington was there, in the bathroom. It looked like he had planned to join her in the shower but had just missed his chance. He was giving her a look that held a bit of his usual slyness but also something concrete and stoic – something she had come to think of as his “work expression.”

“Yes?” she asked playfully.

“Tomorrow...I don’t want to do it, but maybe we should split up. One of us head up to Treston while the other stays here and works with the local PD and the coroner.”

She smiled, realizing just how in sync they could become from time to time. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“You have a preference?” he asked.

“Not really. I’ll take Lynchburg and Treston. I don’t mind driving.”

She thought he was going to argue, wanting to take the time on the road instead. She knew he didn’t particularly like driving, but he also didn’t like the idea of her being out on the road all by herself.

“Sounds good,” he said. “If we can wrap the day up with new information from the home in Treston with whatever information we get from the coroner down here, we could maybe get this thing tied up quickly like everyone is expecting.”

“Sounds great,” she said. She planted a kiss on his mouth as she passed by.

A thought passed through her mind as she headed back out into the room, one that made her feel almost lovesick but could not be denied.

What if he doesn't feel the same way about me as I feel about him?

He'd felt slightly distant over the last week or so, and while he had done his best to hide it from her, she'd seen it here and there.

Maybe he realizes just how much this could affect our work.

It was a good reason – a reason she often thought about herself. But she couldn't worry about that right now. With a coroner's report being delivered any moment now, this case had the potential to get rolling pretty quickly. And she knew that if her mind were on matters of Ellington and what they meant to one another, it might roll on by completely.

CHAPTER SIX

When they split up the following morning, Mackenzie was surprised to notice that Ellington seemed particularly somber about it. He hugged her a bit longer than usual in the motel room and looked rather depressed when she dropped him off at the Stateton PD. With a wave through the windshield as he walked inside, Mackenzie headed back for the main road with a two-hour-and-forty-minute drive ahead of her.

Being in the woods, the signal on her phone was spotty. She was not able to place a call to Jones's second potential suspect, Robbie Huston, until she was about ten miles outside of Stateton city limits. When she finally got the call to go through, he answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Is this Robbie Huston?" she asked.

"It is. Who's asking?"

"This is Agent Mackenzie White with the FBI. I was wondering if you'd have time to chat this morning."

"Um...can I ask what about?"

His confusion and surprise were genuine. She could tell even over the phone.

"About a resident of the Wakeman Home for the Blind that I believe you know. I can't reveal more than that over the phone. If you could give me just five or ten minutes of your time this morning, I'd appreciate it. I'll be coming through Lynchburg in about an hour."

"Sure," he said. "I work from home, so you're welcome to just come by my apartment if you want."

She ended the call after she got his address. She plugged it into her GPS and was relieved to see that getting to his apartment would only add another twenty minutes to her drive.

On the way to Lynchburg, she found herself far too distracted by the facts of this current case, bogged down with the hundreds of unanswered questions surrounding her father's old case and the new death that had brought it back to light. For some reason, the same people who had killed her father had killed someone else in a very similar fashion.

And once again, they had left a cryptic business card behind. But why?

She'd spent weeks trying to figure it out. Maybe the killer was just cocky. Or maybe the cards were supposed to lead investigators to something else...like a twisted sort of cat and mouse game. She knew that Kirk Peterson was still on the case – a humble and dedicated private detective back in Nebraska whom she didn't know well enough to trust completely. Still, the fact that *someone* was actively keeping the trail as fresh as possible was reassuring. It made her feel like the puzzle might be nearly shut to her but that someone had snuck a piece off of the table and was holding on to it, determined to put it in at the very last moment.

She'd never felt so defeated by anything else in her life. It was no longer a question of whether or not she could bring her father's killer to justice, but more about putting a decades-old mystery to rest. As her mind was wrapped around it all, her phone started ringing. She saw the sheriff's number in the display, answering and hoping for some sort of clue to the current case.

"G'morning, Agent White," Sheriff Clarke said on the other end. "Look, you know the cell reception down here in Stateton is crap. I've got Agent Ellington here, wanting to speak to you really quick. His cell phone couldn't get the call out."

She listened to the phone being jostled on the other end as it was handed over to Ellington. "So," he said. "Lost without me yet?"

"Hardly," she said. "I'm meeting with Robbie Huston in a little over an hour."

“Ah, progress. Speaking of which, I’m looking at the coroner’s report right now. Hot off the presses. I’ll let you know if I find anything. Randall Jones is coming in pretty soon, too. I might see if he’ll let me speak to a few of the other residents up at the home.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be driving past cow pastures and empty fields for the next three hours.”

“Ah, the glamorous life,” he said. “Call if you need anything.”

And with that, he ended the call.

This was how they exchanged barbs back and forth all of the time. It made her feel a little foolish for her earlier worries about how he was feeling about whatever it was that was evolving between them.

With the phone call having brought thoughts of her father’s old case to a close, she was able to better focus on the case at hand. The digital thermometer on her car’s dash told her that it was eight-eight degrees outside already...and it wasn’t even nine o’clock yet.

The trees along the side of the back roads were impossibly thick, hanging over the road like an awning. And while there was something mysteriously pretty about them in the weak light of an early southern morning, she couldn’t wait for the wider expanses of major highways and four lanes that would lead her toward Lynchburg and Treton.

Robbie Huston lived in a trendy little apartment complex near the central heart of Lynchburg. It was surrounded by college-owned bookshops and coffee corners that likely only thrived due to the large private Christian college that loomed over most of the city. When she knocked on his door at 9:52, he answered almost right away.

He looked to be in his early twenties – wiry, uncombed hair, and the sort of soft complexion that made Mackenzie think any work he’d ever done was from behind a desk. He was cute in a frat boy sort of way and was on the verge of either excitement or nervousness to actually have an FBI agent knocking on his door.

He invited her inside and she saw that the inside of the apartment was just as nice and modern as the outside. The living area, kitchen, and study were all one large room, separated by small ornate dividers and flooded with natural sunlight that poured in through two huge picture windows on opposite walls.

“Um...can I get you some coffee or something?” he asked. “I’ve still got some left in my morning pot.”

“Coffee would be great, actually,” she said.

She followed him into the kitchen where he poured her a cup and handed it to her. “Cream? Sugar?”

“No thanks,” she said. She took a sip, found it quite good, and got to the point. “Mr. Huston, you often volunteer at the Wakeman Home for the Blind, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“About how often?”

“It depends on my workload, really. Sometimes I can only make it down once or twice a month. There have been months when I was able to make it down once a week, though.”

“How about lately?” Mackenzie asked.

“Well, I was there on Monday of this week. Last week, I went on Wednesday and the week before that I was there on Monday and Friday, I think. I can show you my schedule.”

“Maybe later,” she said. “Speaking with Randall Jones, I found out that you will go to play board games and maybe help move furniture and clean. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Every now and then I’ll read to them, too.”

“Them? Which residents in particular have you read to or played board games with in the past two weeks?”

“A few. There’s an older gentleman by the name of Percy that I play Apples to Apples with. At least one caretaker has to play, too...to whisper what the cards say to him. And last week, I talked quite a bit with Ellis Ridgeway about music. I also read to her for a while.”

“Do you know when you spent this time with Ellis?”

“The last two trips down there. Monday, I let her listen to Brian Eno. We talked about classical music and I read her an article online about some of the ways classical music is used to stimulate the brain.”

Mackenzie nodded, knowing it was time to throw her biggest card on the table. “Well, I hate to tell you this, but Ellis was found murdered Tuesday night. We’re trying to find out who did it, and as I’m sure you understand, we had to look into anyone who had spent time with her recently. Especially volunteers that aren’t always in the home.”

“Oh my God,” Robbie said, his face going paler and paler by the moment.

“Before Mrs. Ridgeway, there was another murder in a home in Treston, Virginia. Have you ever been there?”

Robbie nodded. “Yes, but only twice. Once was for a sort of community service thing we do through Liberty, my alma mater. I helped remodel their kitchen and did some landscaping. I went back a month or two later to help where I could. It was mostly just relationship-building stuff.”

“How long ago was this?”

He thought about it, still shaken by the news of the two murders. “Four years, I’d say. Maybe closer to four and a half.”

“Do you recall meeting a man named Kenneth Able when you were there? He was also killed recently.”

Again, he seemed lost in thought. His eyes almost seemed frozen. “The name doesn’t sound familiar. But that doesn’t mean I never spoke to him while I was there.”

Mackenzie nodded, growing more and more certain that Robbie Huston was *far* from a killer. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw his eyes gleaming with tears as she gulped down some of the coffee he had given her.

Can’t be too careful, though, she thought.

“Mr. Huston, we know for certain that Mrs. Ridgeway was killed half a mile away from Wakeman’s grounds sometime between seven-oh-five and nine forty on Tuesday night. Do you have any sort of alibis for that stretch of time?”

She saw that searching look for a third time but then he started to nod very slowly. “I was here, in the apartment. I was on a conference call with three other guys. We’re starting this small little organization to help the homeless downtown and in other surrounding cities.”

“Any proof?”

“I could show you where I logged in. I think one of the other guys keeps pretty good notes of the calls, too. There will be all kind of time-stamped message threads, note edits, and things like that.” He was already heading for his laptop, sitting on a desk in front of one of the large windows. “Here, I can show you if you want.”

She was now positive that Robbie Huston was innocent but she wanted to see it through. Given the way the news had affected him, she also wanted Robbie to feel like he had contributed something to the case. So she watched over his shoulder as he went to the conference platform site, logged in, and pulled up his history not just for the last few days, but the last several weeks as well. She saw that he had been telling the truth: he’d been taking part in a conference call and planning session from 6:45 to 10:04 on Tuesday night.

The whole process took him less than five minutes to get through, showing her the notes and edits, as well as when he logged in and signed out of the call.

“Thanks so much for your help, Mr. Huston,” she said.

He nodded as he walked her to the door. “Two blind people...” he said, trying to make sense of it. “Why would someone do that?”

“I’m trying to find that out for myself,” she said. “Please do call me if you think of anything that might help,” she added, offering him one of her cards.

He took it, waved a slow goodbye, and then closed the door as she made her exit. Mackenzie almost felt like she’d just delivered the news of the murders to family members rather than a kind-hearted young guy who seemed to genuinely care about both of the deceased.

She almost envied that...feeling genuine remorse for strangers. Lately, she had seen the dead as nothing more than corpses – unnamed mounds, ripe with potential clues.

It wasn’t the best way to live a life, she knew. She couldn’t let the job wipe out her sense of compassion. Or her humanity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mackenzie pulled up in front of the Treston Home for the Blind at 11:46, having made better time than her GPS had estimated. Although, when Mackenzie parked in front of the building, she double-checked the address Clarke had given her. The home looked small, no bigger than a casual storefront. It was located on the far west side of the town of Treston, which, while much larger than Stateton, still wasn't much to brag about. While the town was many steps up from the rural squalor of Stateton, it boasted just two stoplights. The only thing that made it the least bit urban was the McDonald's along Main Street.

Confident that she had the right address – which was further proven by the sign that sat in front of the property in a state of disrepair – Mackenzie stepped out of her car and walked up the cracked sidewalk. The front door was separated from the sidewalk by only three concrete stairs that looked as if they had not been swept in years.

She walked inside, stepping into what served as a lobby and waiting area. A woman sat behind a counter along the front wall, speaking on the telephone. The wall behind her was painted a startling shade of white. A dry erase board contained a smattering of notes to her left. Other than that, the wall was plain and featureless.

Mackenzie had to walk up to the counter and stand there, pressed against it and doing her best to suggest that she needed assistance. The woman behind the counter looked horribly annoyed at this and begrudgingly ended her call. She finally looked up at Mackenzie and asked: "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to speak with the manager," she said.

"And you are?"

"Agent Mackenzie White, with the FBI."

The woman paused for a moment, as if she didn't believe Mackenzie. This time it was Mackenzie's turn to give the annoyed look. She flashed her badge and watched as the woman suddenly sprang into action. She picked up the phone, pressed an extension, and spoke briefly with someone. She avoided eye contact with Mackenzie the entire time.

When the woman was done, she finally looked up at Mackenzie again. It was clear that she was embarrassed but Mackenzie did her best not to take too much joy in it.

"Mrs. Talbot will see you right away," the lady said. "Head on back. Her office is the first one you'll come to."

Mackenzie walked through the only other door in the lobby and entered a hallway. The hallway was rather short, containing only three doors. At the end of the hall, a set of double doors were closed. She assumed the residences were behind these doors and hoped the rooms were in much better shape than the rest of the building.

She approached the first floor along the hallway. A nameplate along the side of the doorframe read Gloria Talbot. The door was standing partially open, but Mackenzie still knocked. The door was answered right away by an overweight woman who wore a thick pair of bifocals.

"Agent White, please come on in," Talbot said.

Mackenzie did as she was asked, taking the single seat that sat on the opposite side of the small and cluttered desk.

"I'm going to assume that this is about Kenneth Able's murder?" Talbot asked.

"Yes ma'am, it is," Mackenzie said. "We have another murder in a town about two and a half hours south of here. Another blind person – a member of a home for the blind."

"Two and a half hours away?" Talbot asked. "That's got to be the Wakeman Home for the Blind, right?"

"It is. And the manner in which this victim was killed seemed to be identical to Kenneth Able. I was hoping you could show me around the home, including the closet where his body was found."

“Absolutely,” Talbot said. “Come with me.”

Talbot led her back out into the hall and then through the double doors Mackenzie had spotted on her way to Talbot’s office. They entered a large open space that emptied into what appeared to be a sort of common room. Within the open space, Mackenzie counted eight rooms.

“These,” Talbot said, “are the rooms the residents stay in. Unlike Wakeman, we don’t have ritzy up-to-date accommodations.”

She did not say this apologetically. In fact, Mackenzie thought she heard some venom in Talbot’s voice.

“This one,” Talbot said, leading Mackenzie to the second door on the right, “was Kenneth’s room.”

Talbot unlocked the door and they stepped inside. The room smelled of dust and some sort of chemical cleaner that seemed far too strong. Mackenzie did her best not to seem taken aback by the state of the room in comparison to what she had seen at Wakeman. She observed the bed, the small writing desk, the bureau, and the closet door. Everything looked aged, dulled and from another time.

She walked to the closet and opened it. As she looked into the empty space inside, she asked Talbot: “Can you walk me through how the body was discovered?”

“There’s another resident here, Margaret Dunwoody,” Talbot said. “She and Kenneth joked that they were dating – which is hilarious because Kenneth was thirty-eight and Margaret is pushing sixty. They were always together, having conversations in the common room, eating meals together, and things like that. Anyway, she came to his room in the afternoon to see if he wanted to step out for a bite to eat at McDonald’s. When he didn’t answer the door, she came inside. She said she knew something was wrong right away. She said the room felt too still. She was freaked out, so she went to the security guard that was here that night – a young guy named Tyrell Price. Tyrell found Kenneth in the closet, dead.”

“Strangled, with contusions around his eyes, correct?” Mackenzie asked.

“That’s right,” Talbot said.

Mackenzie looked into the closet, taking the small Maglite from her belt and shining it inside. She felt around the carpet and the doorframe but found no signs that the killer had left intentional clues. The only thing to be found in the closet was a stray coat hanger, dangling from the tension rod near the top of the frame.

This is a lot more daring than what happened to Ellis Ridgeway, she thought. Someone actually came into the room to kill him. Which meant someone let him inside. Did they know who he was? Did Kenneth Able know who it was?

“What’s the security like here?” Mackenzie asked.

“Not much to speak of,” Talbot said. “There’s a single camera outside that films the parking lot, but it’s been broken for the last month or so. We have two security guards that rotate shifts on the weekdays. And that’s about it.”

“Any plans to get that camera fixed?” Mackenzie asked, a little upset.

“Oh yeah. But as you can see, we’re not exactly the shining example that Wakeman is. Our budget is a joke and getting that camera fixed will cost upwards of three hundred bucks.”

“Is there someone here at all hours of the day?” Mackenzie asked, deciding to let the camera issue go for now.

“Yes. Between myself, two caretakers, the two security guards, and, on occasion, Tori out front, there is always someone here.”

“Would there be any way to see who came in and out of the building on the day Kenneth died?”

“No,” Talbot said regrettably. “Again...we don’t get much money for what we do here. We don’t have the good fortune of having generous donors like they have down at Wakeman.”

This is the sort of home people are sent to in order to be forgotten,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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