

BLAKE PIERCE

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 9

BEFORE
HE
PREYS

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Before He Preys

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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— (A Mackenzie White Mystery)

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From Blake Pierce, bestselling author of ONCE GONE (a #1 bestseller with over 900 five star reviews), comes BEFORE HE PREYS, book #9 in the heart-pounding Mackenzie White mystery series. FBI Special Agent Mackenzie White finds herself stumped. Victims are turning up dead, unrecognizable, their bodies hurled from the highest of heights. A deranged serial killer, obsessed with heights, is killing his victims from the highest locations. The pattern seems random. But is it? Only by entering into the darkest canals of the killer's mind can Mackenzie begin to understand what his motive is—and where he will strike next. In a deadly chase of cat and mouse, Mackenzie drives herself to the brink to stop him—but even then, it may be too late. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, BEFORE HE PREYS is book #9 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Also available by Blake Pierce is ONCE GONE (A Riley Paige mystery—Book #1), a #1 bestseller with over 900 five star reviews—and a free download!

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Blake Pierce

Before He Preys

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

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

Once, when she was a girl, Malory Thomas had come to this bridge with a boy. It was Halloween night and she was fourteen. They'd been looking down into the water one hundred and seventy-five feet below, looking for the ghosts of those who had committed suicide from the bridge. It was a ghost story that had circulated through their school, a story Malory had heard all her life. She let that boy kiss her that night but had pushed his hand away when it went up her shirt.

Now, thirteen years later, she thought of that innocent little gesture as she hung from that same bridge. It was called the Miller Moon Bridge and it was known for two things: being an awesome and secluded make-out spot for teens, and the number one suicide location in all of the county – maybe in the entire state of Virginia for all she knew.

In that moment, Malory Thomas did not care about the suicides, though. All she could think about was holding on to the edge of the bridge for dear life. She was clinging to the side with both hands, her fingers curled against the rugged wooden edge of it. Her right hand could not get a good grip because of the enormous bolt that went through the wood, affixing the strut along the side to the iron beams beneath it.

She tried to move her right hand to get a better grip but her hand was too sweaty. Moving it even an inch made her fear that she'd lose her grip completely and go falling all the way down to the water. And there wasn't much water there. All that awaited her below were jagged rocks and countless coins stupid kids had tossed off the side of the bridge to make pointless wishes.

She looked up to the rails along the edge of the bridge, old rusted trestle rails that looked ancient in the darkness of the midnight hour. She saw the shape of the man who had brought her here – a far cry from that brave teenage boy from thirteen years ago. No...this man was hateful and dark. She did not know him well but knew enough to now know for sure that something was wrong with him. He was sick, not right in the head, not well.

“Just let go,” he told her. His voice was creepy, somewhere between Batman and a demon.

“Please,” Malory said. “Please...help.”

She didn't even care that she was naked, her bare rear end dangling from the edge of the Miller Moon Bridge. He had stripped her down and she was afraid he would rape her. But he hadn't. He'd only stared at her, run a hand along a few places, and then forced her to the edge of the bridge. She thought longingly of her clothes scattered on the wooden beams behind him, and had a sick sort of certainty that she would never wear them again.

With that certainty, her right hand cramped up as it tried to get used to the shape of the bolt beneath it. She cried out and felt all of her weight slip over to her left hand – her much weaker hand.

The man hunkered down, kneeling and looking at her. It was like he knew it was coming. Even before *she* knew the end was there, he knew it.

She could barely see his eyes in the darkness but she could see enough to tell that he was happy. Excited, maybe.

“It's okay,” he said in that odd voice.

And as if the muscles in her fingers were obeying him, her right hand gave up. Malory felt a tightness all the way down through her forearm as her left hand tried to hold up her one hundred and forty pounds.

And just like that, she was no longer clinging to the bridge. She was falling. Her stomach did a cartwheel and her eyes seemed to tremble in their sockets as they tried to make sense of how fast the bridge was moving away from her.

For a moment, the wind rushing past her felt almost pleasant. She tried her best to focus on that as she scrambled for some kind of a prayer to utter in her final moments.

She only managed a few words —*Our Father, who art...*— and then Malory Thomas felt her life leave her body in a sharp and crushing blow as she slammed into the rocks below.

CHAPTER ONE

Mackenzie White had fallen into something of a routine. This did not sit particularly well with her because she was not the kind of woman who liked routine. If things stayed the same for too long, she felt they needed to be shaken up.

Only a few short days after finally bringing the long and miserable chapter of her father's murder to a close, she had come back to her apartment and realized that she and Ellington were now living together. She had no problem with this; she had been looking forward to it, actually. But there were nights during those first few weeks where she lost some sleep when she realized that her future now seemed stable. For the first time in a very long time, she had no real reason to chase hard after anything.

There had been her father's case, eating at her since she had first picked up a badge and a gun back in Nebraska. That was now solved. There had also been the uncertainty of where her relationship with Ellington was headed. They were now living together and almost sickeningly happy. She was excelling at work, gaining the respect of just about everyone within the FBI. Even McGrath seemed to have finally warmed up to her.

Things felt stationary. And for Mackenzie, she couldn't help but wonder: was this simply the calm before the storm? If her time as a detective in Nebraska and an agent with the FBI had taught her anything, it was that life had a way of snatching away any sort of comfort or security without much warning.

Still, the routine wasn't all bad. After Ellington had healed up from his wounds following the case that had brought her father's killer to justice, he was ordered to stay at home and rest. She tended to him as well as she could, discovering that she could be quite nurturing when she needed to be. After Ellington had fully recovered, her days were pretty standard. They were even enjoyable despite the horrid degree of domestication she felt.

She would go to work and stop by the firing range before returning home. When she got home, one of two things happened: either Ellington had already prepared dinner and they ate together like an old married couple, or they went directly to the bedroom, like a newly married couple.

All of this was going through her head as she and Ellington were settling down for bed. She was on her side of the bed, half-heartedly reading a book. Ellington was on his side of the bed, typing out an email about a case he had been working on. Seven weeks had passed since they'd closed the Nebraska case. Ellington had just started back to work and the routine of life was starting to become a stark reality for her.

"I'm going to ask you something," Mackenzie said. "And I want you to be honest."

"Okay," he said. He finished typing the sentence he was on and stopped, giving her his full attention.

"Did you ever see yourself in this kind of routine?" she asked.

"What routine?"

She shrugged, setting her book aside. "Being domesticated. Being tied down. Going to work, coming home, eating dinner, watching some TV, maybe having sex, then going to bed."

"If that's a routine, it seems pretty awesome. Maybe don't put *sometimes* in front of the sex part, though. Why do you ask? Does the routine bother you?"

"It doesn't *bother* me," she said. "It's just...it feels weird. It makes me feel like I'm not doing my part. Like I'm being lazy or passive about...well, about something I can't really put my finger on."

"You think this stems from the fact that you've finally wrapped your dad's case?" he asked.

"Probably."

There was something else, too. But it wasn't something she could tell him. She knew it was pretty difficult to emotionally hurt him but she didn't want to take the chance. The thought she kept

to herself was that now that they had moved in and were happy and handling it like pros, it really only left one more step for them to take. It was not a step they had discussed and, honestly, not a step Mackenzie *wanted* to discuss.

Marriage. She was hoping Ellington wasn't there yet, either. Not that she didn't love him. But after that step...well, what else was there?

"Let me ask *you* something," Ellington said. "Are you happy? Like right now, in this very moment, knowing that tomorrow could very well be an exact duplicate of today. Are you happy?"

The answer was simple but still made her uneasy. "Yes," she said.

"Then why question it?"

She nodded. He had a good point and it honestly made her wonder if she was overcomplicating things. She'd be thirty in a few weeks, so maybe this was what a normal life was like. Once all of the demons and ghosts of the past had been buried, maybe *this* was what life was supposed to be like.

And that was fine, she supposed. But something about it felt stagnant and made her wonder if she'd *ever* allow herself to be happy.

CHAPTER TWO

Work was not helping the monotony of what Mackenzie was coming to think of as The Routine – capital *T* and capital *R*. In the nearly two months that had passed since the events in Nebraska, Mackenzie's case load had consisted of surveilling a group of men that were suspected of sex trafficking – spending her days sitting in a car or in abandoned buildings, listening to crude conversations that all turned out to be about nothing. She'd also worked alongside Yardley and Harrison on a case involving a suspected terrorist cell in Iowa – which had also turned out to be nothing.

The day following their tense conversation about happiness, Mackenzie found herself at her desk, researching one of the men she had been surveilling for sex trafficking. He was not part of a sex trafficking ring, but he was almost certainly involved in some sort of deranged prostitution set-up. It was hard to believe that she was qualified to carry a weapon, to hunt down murderers and save lives. She was starting to feel like a plastic employee, someone who served no real function.

Frustrated, she got up for a cup of coffee. She had never been one to wish anything bad upon anyone, but she was wondering if things in the country were really so good that her services might not be needed somewhere.

As she made her way to the small lobby-like area where the coffee machines were housed, she spotted Ellington putting the top on his own cup. He saw her coming and waited for her, though she could tell by his posture that he was in a hurry.

"I hope your day has been more exciting than mine," Mackenzie said.

"Maybe," he said. "Ask me again in half an hour. McGrath just called me up to his office."

"For what?" Mackenzie asked.

"No idea. He didn't call you, too?"

"No," she said, wondering what might be going on. While there had been no direct conversation about it with McGrath ever since the Nebraska case, she had just assumed that she and Ellington would remain partners. She wondered if maybe the department was finally deciding to separate them based on their romantic relationship. If so, she understood the decision but would not necessarily like it.

"I'm getting tired of riding my desk," she said as she poured her coffee. "Do me a favor and see if you can get me on whatever he sticks you on, too."

"Gladly," he said. "I'll keep you posted."

She walked back to her office, wondering if this small break in normalcy might be the one thing she had been waiting for – the crack that would start to chip away at the foundation of routine she'd been feeling. It wasn't often that McGrath summoned just one of them to his office – not recently, anyway. It made her wonder if she was perhaps under some kind of review that she didn't know about. Was McGrath digging harder into the last case in Nebraska to make sure she had done everything by the book? If that was the case then she might be in some hot water because she had most definitely *not* done everything by the book.

Sadly, wondering what the meeting between Ellington and McGrath was about was the most interesting thing that had happened in the last week or so. It was what occupied her mind as she sat back down in front of her computer, once again feeling like nothing more than another cog in the wheel.

She heard footsteps fifteen minutes later. This was nothing new; she worked with her office door open and saw people walking back and forth up and down the hallway all day. But this was different. This sounded like several pairs of footsteps all walking in unison. There was also a sense of quiet – a hushed tension like the atmosphere just before a violent summer thunderstorm.

Curious, Mackenzie looked up from her laptop. As the footsteps got louder, she saw Ellington. He quickly glanced through the doorway, his face tight with an emotion she couldn't quite place. He was carrying a box in his hands while two security guards followed closely behind him.

What the hell?

Mackenzie jumped up from her desk and ran into the hall. Just as she was coming around the corner, Ellington and the two guards were getting on the elevator. The doors slid closed and once again, Mackenzie just barely caught sight of that tense expression on his face.

He's been fired, she thought. The idea was absolutely ridiculous as far as she was concerned, but that's what it seemed like.

She ran to the stairwell, pushing the door open quickly and heading down. She took the steps two at a time, hoping to make it out before Ellington and the guards did. She rushed down the three flights of stairs, coming out along the side of the building directly next to the parking garage.

She came out of the door at the same time Ellington and the guards exited the building. Mackenzie rushed across the lawn to cut them off. The guards looked on edge when they saw her coming, one of them stopping for a moment and facing her as if she might actually be a threat.

"What is it?" she asked over the guard, looking at Ellington.

He shook his head. "Not right now," he said. "Just...let it go for now."

"What's going on?" she asked. "The guards...the box...have you been fired? What the hell happened?"

He shook his head again. There was nothing mean or dismissive about it. She figured it was the best he could do in the situation. Maybe something had occurred that he *couldn't* talk about. And Ellington, loyal to a fault, would not speak if he had been asked to stay quiet.

She hated to do it, but she didn't press him any farther. If she wanted direct answers, there was only one place to get them. With that in mind, she ran back into the building. This time she took the elevator, taking it back to the third floor and wasting no time marching down the hall toward McGrath's office.

She didn't bother checking in with his secretary as she headed for his door. She heard the woman call her name, trying to stop her, but Mackenzie went in. She did not knock, just walked right into the office.

McGrath was at his desk, clearly not at all surprised that she was there. He turned toward her and the calmness on his face infuriated her.

"Just remain calm, Agent White," he said.

"What happened?" she asked. "Why did I just see Ellington escorted from the building with a box of his personal belongings?"

"Because he's been released from duty."

The simplicity of the statement did not make it any easier to hear. Part of her was still wondering if there had been some huge mistake. Or if this was all some huge elaborate joke.

"For what?"

She then saw something she had never seen before: McGrath looking away, clearly uncomfortable. "It's a private matter," he said. "I understand the relationship between the two of you, but this is information I can legally not divulge due to the nature of the situation."

In all of her time working under McGrath, she had never heard so much legalistic bullshit come out of his mouth at one time. She managed to quash her anger. After all, this was not about her. There was apparently something going on with Ellington that she knew nothing about.

“Is everything okay?” she asked. “Can you tell me *that* much?”

“That’s not for me to answer, I’m afraid,” McGrath said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m actually pretty busy.”

Mackenzie gave a little nod and backed out of the office, closing the door behind her. The secretary behind her own desk gave her a nasty look that Mackenzie ignored completely. She walked back to her office and checked her mail to reconfirm that the remainder of her day was a slow void of nothing.

She then hurried out of the building, doing her best not to look like something was troubling her. The last thing she needed was for half of the building to be aware that Ellington was gone and that she was rushing out behind him. She’d finally managed to overcome the prying eyes and almost legendary rumors of her past within the workplace and she’d be damned if she’d create another reason for the cycle to start all over.

She felt confident that Ellington had simply gone back to their apartment. When she’d first met him, he’d been the kind of man who would maybe go directly to a bar in an attempt to drown his sorrows. But he had changed in the last year or so – just as she had. She supposed they owed that to each other. It was a thought she kept in mind as she opened the door to her apartment (*their* apartment, she reminded herself), hoping to find him inside.

Sure enough, she found him in the small second bedroom they used as an office. He was unpacking the things he’d had in his box, tossing them haphazardly onto the desk they shared. He looked up when he saw her but then quickly looked away.

“Sorry,” he said with his head turned. “You’re not exactly catching me on my best day.”

She approached him but resisted placing a hand on his shoulder or an arm around his back. She had never seen him so out of sorts. It alarmed her a bit but, more than anything, made her want to see what she could do to help.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Seems pretty obvious, doesn’t it?” he asked. “I’ve been suspended indefinitely.”

“What the hell for?” She again thought of McGrath and how uncomfortable he had looked when she had posed this same question to him.

He finally turned to her again and when he did, she could see embarrassment on his face. When he answered her, his voice was trembling.

“Sexual harassment.”

For a moment, the words didn’t make much sense. She waited for him to smile at her and tell her that he was just kidding, but that never happened. Instead, his eyes locked on hers, waiting for her reaction.

“What?” she asked. “When was this?”

“About three years ago,” he said. “But the woman just came forward with the allegations three days ago.”

“And is the allegation a valid one?” she asked.

He nodded, taking a seat at the desk. “Mackenzie, I’m sorry. I was a different guy back then, you know?”

She was angry for a moment, but she wasn’t sure at who: Ellington or the woman. “What sort of harassment?” she asked.

“I was training this younger agent three years ago,” he said. “She was doing really well so one night, a few agents took her out to celebrate. We all had a few drinks and she and I were the last ones left. At the time, the thought of hitting on her had never crossed my mind. But I went to the restroom and when I came out, she was right there waiting for me. She kissed me and it got heated. She pulled away – maybe realizing it was a mistake. And then I tried to go back in. I’d like to think that had I not been drinking, her pulling away would have been the end of it. But I didn’t stop. I tried to kiss her again and didn’t realize she wasn’t returning it until she pushed me away. She pushed me off of her and just stared me down. I told her I was sorry – and I meant it – but she just stormed out. And that was it. A sad little encounter between bathrooms. No one forced themselves on anyone else and there was no groping or other misconduct. The next day when I got to work, she had asked to be transferred to another agent. Within two months, she was gone, transferred to Seattle, I think.”

“And why is she bringing this up now?” Mackenzie asked.

“Because it’s the popular thing to do these days,” Ellington snapped. He then shook his head and sighed. “Sorry. That was a shitty thing to say.”

“Yes, it was. Are you telling me the whole story? Is that all that happened?”

“That’s it,” he said. “I swear it.”

“You were married, right? When it happened?”

He nodded. “It’s not one of my prouder moments.”

Mackenzie thought of the first time she’d spent any significant time with Ellington. It had been during the Scarecrow Killer case in Nebraska. She had basically thrown herself at him while she had been in the midst of her own personal dramas. She could tell that he had been interested but in the end, he had declined her advances.

She wondered how heavily the encounter with this woman had been weighing on his mind during that night when she’d offered herself to him.

“How long is the suspension?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It depends. If she decides not to make too big of a stink about it, it could be as little as a month. But if it goes big, it could be much longer. In the end, it could lead to a total termination.”

Mackenzie turned away this time. She couldn’t help but feel a little selfish. Sure, she was upset that a man she cared very deeply about was going through something like this, but at the root of it all, she was more concerned with losing her partner. She hated that her priorities were so skewed, but that’s the way she felt in that moment. That and an intense jealousy that she *loathed*. She was not the jealous type...so why was she so jealous of the woman who had reported the so-called harassment? She’d never thought of Ellington’s wife with any hints of jealousy, so why this woman?

Because she’s causing everything to change, she thought. That boring little routine I was falling into and growing comfortable with is starting to crumble.

“What are you thinking?” Ellington asked.

Mackenzie shook her head and looked at her watch. It was only one in the afternoon. Pretty soon, her absence would be noticed at work.

“I’m thinking I need to get back to work,” she said. And with that, she turned away from him again and walked out of the room.

“Mackenzie,” Ellington called out. “Hold on.”

“It’s okay,” she called out to him. “I’ll see you in a little bit.”

She left without a goodbye, a kiss, or a hug. Because even though she had said it, things were *not* okay.

If things were okay, she wouldn’t be fighting back tears that seemed to have come out of nowhere. If things were okay, she wouldn’t still be trying to push away an anger that kept trying to claw its way up, telling her that she was a fool to think that life would be okay now, that she was finally due a normal life where the haunts of her past didn’t influence everything.

By the time she reached her car, she had managed to bring the tears to a stop. Her cell phone rang, Ellington's name popping up. She ignored it, started the car, and headed back to work.

CHAPTER THREE

Work only provided distance for a few more hours. Even when Mackenzie checked in with Harrison to make sure he didn't need assistance on the small wiring fraud case he was working on, she was out of the building by six. When she arrived back at the apartment at 6:20, she found Ellington behind the stove. He didn't cook often and when he did, it was usually because he had idle hands and nothing better to do.

"Hey," he said, looking up from a pot of what looked like some sort of stir-fry.

"Hey," she said in return, setting her laptop bag down on the couch and walking into the kitchen. "Sorry I left the way I did earlier."

"No need to apologize," he said.

"Of course there is. It was immature. And if I'm being honest, I don't know why it upsets me so much. I'm more worried about losing you as a partner than I am about what this might do to your professional record. How messed up is that?"

He shrugged. "It makes sense."

"It *should* but it doesn't," she said. "I can't think about you kissing another woman, especially not in a way like that. Even if you *were* drunk and even if she *did* initiate things, I can't see you like that. And it makes me want to kill that woman, you know?"

"I'm sorry as hell," he said. "It's one of those things in life I wish I could take back. One of those things I thought was in the past and I was done with."

Mackenzie walked up behind him and hesitantly wrapped her arms around his waist. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Just mad. And embarrassed."

Part of Mackenzie feared that he was being dishonest with her. There was something in his posture, something about the way he couldn't quite look at her when he talked about it. She wanted to think it was simply because it was not easy to be accused of something like this, to be reminded of something stupid you'd done in your past.

Honestly, she wasn't sure what to believe. Ever since she'd seen him walking by her office door with the box in his hands, her thoughts toward him were mixed up and confused.

She was about to offer to help with dinner, hoping some normalcy might help them to get back on track. But before the words could come out of her mouth, her cell phone rang. She was surprised and a little worried to see that it was from McGrath.

"Sorry," she said to Ellington, showing him the display. "I should probably take this."

"He probably wants to ask if you've ever felt sexually harassed by me," he said snidely.

"He already had the chance earlier today," she said before stepping away from the sizzling noises of the kitchen to answer the phone.

"This is White," she said, speaking directly and almost mechanically, as she tended to do when answering a call from McGrath.

"White," he said. "Are you home yet?"

"Yes sir."

"I need you to come back out. I need to speak with you in private. I'll be in the parking garage. Level Two, Row D."

"Sir, is this about Ellington?"

"Just meet me there, White. Get there as quickly as you can."

He ended the call with that, leaving Mackenzie holding a dead line in her hand. She pocketed it slowly, looking back toward Ellington. He was removing the pan from the stove, heading to the table in the little dining area.

"I have to grab some to go," she said.

“Damn. Is it about me?”

“He wouldn’t say,” Mackenzie said. “But I don’t think so. This is something different. He’s being really secretive.”

She wasn’t sure why, but she left out the instructions to meet him in the parking garage. If she was being honest with herself, something about that didn’t sit well with her. Still, she grabbed a bowl from the cabinets, spooned some of Ellington’s dinner into it, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Both of them could tell that it felt mechanical and forced.

“Keep me posted,” Ellington said. “And let me know if you need anything.”

“Of course,” she said.

Realizing she hadn’t even yet removed her holster and Glock, she headed directly for the door. And it wasn’t until she was back out into the hallway and heading for her car that she realized that she was actually quite relieved to have been called away.

She had to admit that it felt a little cliché to be slowly creeping along Level 2 of the parking garage across from headquarters. Meeting in parking garages was the stuff of bad TV cop dramas. And in those dramas, shady parking garage meetings usually led to drama of some kind or another.

She spotted McGrath’s car and parked her own car a few spaces away. She locked up and strolled down to where McGrath was waiting. Without any formal invitation to do so, she walked to the passenger side door, opened it, and climbed in.

“Okay,” she said. “The secrecy is killing me. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong per se,” McGrath said. “But we’ve got a case about an hour or so away in a little town called Kingsville. You know it?”

“Heard of it, but never been there.”

“It’s about as rural as you can imagine, tucked away in the last stretch of backwoods before all of the commotion and interstates of DC take over,” McGrath said. “But it actually might not be a case at all. That’s what I need you to go figure out.”

“Okay,” she said. “But why couldn’t we have this meeting in your office?”

“Because the victim is the deputy director’s nephew. Twenty-two years old. It looks like someone tossed him from a bridge. The local PD in Kingsville say it’s probably just a suicide, but Deputy Director Wilmoth wants to make sure.”

“Does he have any reason to believe it was a murder?” she asked.

“Well, it’s the second body that’s been found at the bottom of that bridge in the last four days. It probably *is* a suicide if you want my opinion. But I had the order passed down to me about an hour ago, straight from Director Wilmoth. He wants to know for sure. He also wants to be informed as soon as possible *and* he wants it kept quiet. Hence the request to meet with me here rather than in my office. If anyone saw you and I meeting after hours, they’d assume it was about what is going on with Ellington or that I had you on some special assignment.”

“So...go to Kingsville, figure out if this was a suicide or murder, and then report back?”

“Yes. And because of recent events with Ellington, you’ll be flying solo. Which shouldn’t be an issue as I expect you’ll be back late tonight with news that it was a suicide.”

“Understood. When do I leave?”

“Now,” he said. “No time like the present, right?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Mackenzie discovered that McGrath had not been exaggerating when he had described Kingsville, Virginia, as *backwoods*. It was a little town that, in terms of identity, was tucked somewhere between *Deliverance* and *Amityville*. It had a creepy rural vibe to it but with the small-town rustic charm of what most people likely expected of smaller southern towns.

Night had completely fallen by the time she arrived at the crime scene. The bridge came into view slowly as she carefully drove her car down a thin gravel road. The road itself was not a state-maintained road yet was also not completely closed off to the public. However, when she closed in to less than fifty yards of the bridge, she saw that the Kingsville PD had put up a row of sawhorses to keep anyone from going any farther.

She parked alongside a few local police cars and then stepped out into the night. A few spotlights had been set up, all shining down the steep bank to the right side of the bridge. As she approached the drop-off, a young-looking policeman stepped out of one of the cars.

“You Agent White?” the man asked, his southern accent cutting into her like a razor.

“I am,” she answered.

“Okay. You might find it easier to walk across the bridge and go down the other side of the embankment. This side is steep as hell.”

Thankful for the tip, Mackenzie walked across the bridge. She took out her little Maglite and inspected the area as she crossed. The bridge was quite old, surely having long ago been shut down for any sort of practical use. She knew that there were many bridges scattered across Virginia and West Virginia that were very similar to this one. This bridge, called Miller Moon Bridge according to the basic research she’d managed to do on Google during traffic-light stops along the way, had been standing since 1910 and shut down for public use in 1969. And while that was the only information she’d been able to get on the location, her current investigation was pulling out more details.

There wasn’t much graffiti along the bridge, but the amount of litter was noticeable. Beer bottles, soda cans, and empty bags of chips were tossed to the edges of the bridge, pushed against the metal edging that supported the iron rails. The bridge wasn’t very long at all; it was around seventy-five yards, just long enough to span over the steep embankments and the river below. It felt sturdy under her feet but the very structure of it was almost feeble in a way. She was very aware that she was walking on wooden boards and support beams nearly two hundred feet in the air.

She made her way to the end of the bridge, finding that the police officer had been right. The land was much more manageable on this other side. With the help of the Maglite, she saw a beaten path that wound through the high grass. The embankment went down at close to a ninety-degree angle but there were patches of ground and rocks jutting out here and there that made the descent quite easy.

“Hold on a minute,” a man’s voice said from below. Mackenzie glanced forward, toward the glare of the spotlights, and saw a shadow emerging and coming her way. “Who’s there?” the man asked.

“Mackenzie White, FBI,” she said, reaching for her ID.

The shadow’s owner came into view moments later. He was an older man with a huge bushy beard. He was wearing a police uniform, the badge over his breast indicating that he was Kingsville’s sheriff. Behind him, she could see the figures of four other officers. One of them was taking pictures and moving slowly in the shadows.

“Oh, wow,” he said. “That was quick.” He waited for Mackenzie to draw closer and then extended his hand. He gave her a hearty handshake and said, “I’m Sheriff Tate. Good to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Mackenzie said as she reached the end of the embankment and found herself on flat land.

She took a moment to take in the scene, expertly illuminated by the spotlights that had been set up along the sides of the embankment. The first thing Mackenzie noticed was that the river wasn't much of a river at all – not in the location beneath Miller Moon Bridge, anyway. There were what looked like a few meandering puddles of stagnant water hugging the sides and sharp edges of rocks and large boulders that took up the area the river should have passed through.

One of the boulders among the rubble was massive, easily the size of two cars. Splayed out on top of this boulder was a body. The right arm was clearly broken, bent impossibly beneath the remainder of the body. A stream of blood was trailing down the boulder, mostly dried but still wet enough to seem as if it was still flowing.

“Hell of a sight, ain't it?” Tate asked, standing beside her.

“Yes, it is. What can you tell me for sure at the moment?”

“Well, the victim is a twenty-two-year-old male. Kenny Skinner. As I understand it, he's related to someone higher up on your ladder.”

“Yes. The nephew of the FBI's deputy director. How many men out here currently know that?”

“Just me and my deputy,” Tate said. “We already spoke with your pals in Washington. We know this needs to be kept quiet.”

“Thanks,” Mackenzie said. “I understand there was another body discovered here a few days ago?”

“Three mornings ago, yeah,” Tate said. “A woman named Malory Thomas.”

“Any signs of foul play?”

“Well, she was naked. And her clothes were found up there on the bridge. Other than that, there was nothing. It was assumed to be just another suicide.”

“You get many of those around here?”

“Yeah,” Tate said with a nervous smile. “You could say that. Three years ago, six people killed themselves by jumping off of this fucking bridge. It was some kind of record per location for the state of Virginia. The year after that, there were three. Last year, it was five.”

“Were they all locals?” Mackenzie asked.

“No. Out of those fourteen people, only four living within a fifty-mile radius.”

“And to your knowledge, is there maybe some sort of urban legend or reasoning behind these people taking their lives off of this bridge?”

“There's ghost stories, sure,” Tate said. “But there's a ghost story tied to just about every decommissioned bridge in the country. I don't know. I blame these screwed up generation gaps. Kids these days get their feelings hurt and think offing themselves is the answer. It's pretty sad.”

“How about homicides?” Mackenzie asked. “What's the rate like in Kingsville?”

“There were two last year. And so far, only one this year. It's a quiet town. Everyone knows everyone else and if you don't like someone, you just stay away from them. Why do you ask? You leaning towards murder for this one?”

“I don't know yet,” Mackenzie said. “Two bodies in the span of four days, at the same location. I think it's worth looking into. Do you happen to know if Kenny Skinner and Malory Thomas knew one another?”

“Probably. But I don't know how well. Like I said...everyone knows everyone in Kingsville. But if you're asking if maybe Kenny killed himself because Malory did, I doubt it. There's a five-year difference in age and they didn't really hang with the same crowds from what I know.”

“Mind if I have a look?” Mackenzie asked.

“Be my guest,” Tate said, instantly walking away from her to join the other officers who were scouring the scene.

Mackenzie approached the boulder and the body of Kenny Skinner apprehensively. The closer she got to the body, the more aware she became of just how much damage had been done. She'd seen some pretty grisly things in her line of work, but this was among the worst.

The stream of blood was coming from an area where it appeared Kenny's head had smashed against the rock. She didn't bother examining it closely because the black and red illuminated in the spotlights wasn't something she wanted popping back into her head later in the night. The massive fracture in the back of his head affected the rest of the skull, distorting the facial features. She also saw where his chest and stomach looked as if they had been puffed out from within.

She did her best to look past all of this, checking over Kenny's clothes and exposed skin for any signs of foul play. In the harsh yet inefficient beam of the spotlights, it was hard to be sure but after several minutes, Mackenzie could find nothing. When she stepped away, she felt herself start to relax. Apparently, she'd been tensed up while observing the body.

She went back to Sheriff Tate, who was speaking with another officer. They sounded as if they were making plans about notifying the family.

"Sheriff, do you think you could have someone pull the records for me on those fourteen suicides over the last three years?"

"Yeah, I can do that. I'll make a call here in a second and make sure they're waiting for you at the station. And you know...there's someone you might want to call. There's a lady in town, works out of her home as a psychiatrist and special needs teacher. She's been on my ass for the last year or so about how all of the suicides in Kingsville can't *just* be suicides. She might be able to offer something you might not find in the reports."

"That would be great."

"I'll have someone include her information with the reports. You good here?"

"For now, yes. Could I please have your number for easier contact?"

"Sure. But the damned thing is glitchy. Need to upgrade. Should have done it about five months back. So if you call me and it goes to voicemail right away, I'm not ignoring you. I'll call you right back. Some stupid thing with the phone. I hate cell phones anyway."

After his rant on modern technology, Tate gave her his cell number and she saved it into her phone.

"I'll see you around," Tate said. "For now, the coroner is on the way. I'll be damn glad when we can move this body."

It seemed like an insensitive thing to say but when Mackenzie looked back at it and saw the gore and broken state of the body, she couldn't help but agree.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was 10:10 when she walked into the police station. The place was absolutely dead, the only movement coming from a bored-looking woman sitting behind a desk – what Mackenzie assumed served as dispatch at the Kingsville Police Department – and two officers talking animatedly about politics in a hallway behind the dispatch desk.

Despite the lackluster feel of the place, it was apparently very well run. The woman at the dispatch desk had already copied all of the records Sheriff Tate had mentioned and had them waiting in a file folder when Mackenzie arrived. Mackenzie thanked her and then asked for a motel recommendation in the area. As it turned out, Kingsville only had a single motel, less than two miles away from the police department.

Ten minutes later, Mackenzie was unlocking the door to her room at a Motel 6. She'd certainly stayed in worse places during her tenure with the bureau, but it wasn't likely to get any glowing Yelp or Google reviews. She paid little attention to the lacking state of the room, setting the files down on the little table by the single bed and wasting no time in diving into them.

She took some notes of her own while she read through the files. The first and perhaps most alarming thing she discovered was that of the fourteen suicides that had occurred in the last three years, eleven of them had been from the Miller Moon Bridge. The other three included two gun-related suicides and a single hanging from an attic beam.

Mackenzie knew enough about small towns to understand the allure of a rural marker like the Miller Moon Bridge. The history and the overall neglected creepiness of it was appealing, especially to teens. And, as the records in front of her showed, six of the fourteen suicides had been under twenty-one years of age.

She pored over the records; while they weren't as explicitly detailed as she would have liked, they were above par for what she had seen from most small-town police departments. She jotted down note after note, coming up with a comprehensive list of details to help her better get to the bottom of the multiple deaths that were linked to the Miller Moon Bridge. After an hour or so, she had enough to base a few rough opinions.

First, of the fourteen suicides, exactly half had left notes. The notes made it clear that they had made the decision to end their lives. Each record had a photocopy of the letter and all of them expressed regret of some form or another. They told loved ones they cherished them and expressed pains that they could not overcome.

The other seven could almost be looked at as typical suspected murder cases: bodies discovered out of nowhere, in rough shape. One of the suicides, a seventeen-year-old female, had shown evidence of recent sexual activity. When the DNA of her partner had been found on and in her body, he had provided evidence in the form of text messages that she had come to his house, they'd had sex, and then she'd left. And from the way it looked, she had launched herself off of the Miller Moon Bridge about three hours later.

The only case out of the fourteen that she could see that would have warranted any sort of closer look was the sad and unfortunate suicide of a sixteen-year-old male. When he had been discovered on those bloodied rocks beneath the bridge, there had been bruises on his chest and arms that did not line up with any of the injuries he had suffered from the fall itself. Within a few days, police had discovered that the boy had been routinely beaten by an alcoholic father who, sadly enough, attempted suicide three days after the discovery of his son's body.

Mackenzie finished off the research session with the freshly put together file on Malory Thomas. Her case stood out a bit from the others because she had been nude. The report showed that her clothes had been found in a neat pile on the bridge. There had been no sign of abuse, recent

sexual activity, or foul play. For some reason or another, it simply seemed that Malory Thomas had decided to take that leap in her birthday suit.

That seems odd, though, Mackenzie thought. *Out of place, even. If you're going to kill yourself, why would you want yourself exposed like that when your body is found?*

She pondered it for a moment and then remembered the psychiatrist Sheriff Tate had mentioned. Of course, now that it was nearly midnight, it was too late to call.

Midnight, she thought. She looked to her phone, surprised that Ellington had not tried reaching out. She supposed he was playing it smart – not wanting to bother her until he thought she was in a good place. And honestly, she wasn't sure what sort of place she was in. So he'd made a mistake in his life long before he knew her...why the hell should she be so upset about that?

She wasn't sure. But she knew that she *was*...and in that moment, that was really all that mattered.

Before turning in for bed, she looked at the business card the woman at the station had placed in the file. It was the name, number, and email address of the local psychiatrist, Dr. Jan Haggerty. Wanting to be as prepared as possible, Mackenzie fired off an email, letting Dr. Haggerty know that she was in town, why she was there, and requesting a meeting as early as possible. Mackenzie figured if she had not heard from Haggerty by nine tomorrow morning, she'd go ahead and place a call.

Before turning out the lights, she thought about calling Ellington, just to check on him. She knew him well enough; he was probably having a pity party for himself, likely downing several beers with plans of passing out on the couch.

Thinking of him in that state made the decision much easier for her. She turned out the lights and, in the darkness, started to feel like she might be in a town that was darker than others. The kind of town that hid some ugly scars, forever in the dark not because of the rural setting but because of a certain blemish on a gravel road about six miles from where she currently rested her head. And although she did her best to clear her thoughts, she fell asleep with images of teenagers falling to their deaths from the top of Miller Moon Bridge.

CHAPTER SIX

She was stirred awake by the ringing of her cell phone. The bedside clock told her that it was 6:40 as she reached for it. She saw McGrath's name on the display, had just enough time to wish it were Ellington instead, and then answered it.

"This is Agent White."

"White, where are we on this case with Director Wilmoth's nephew?"

"Well, right now it seems like a clear-cut suicide. If it plays out the way I think it will, I should be back in DC this afternoon."

"No foul play at all?"

"Not that I can see. If you don't mind my asking... is Director Wilmoth *looking* for foul play?"

"No. But let's be real... a suicide in the family for a man of his position isn't going to look good. He just wants the details before the public gets them."

"Roger that."

"White, did I wake you?" he asked gruffly.

"Of course not, sir."

"Keep me in the loop on this," he said and then ended the call.

A hell of a way to wake up, Mackenzie thought as she got out of bed. She went to the shower and when she was done, a towel wrapped around her, she walked out of the bathroom to the sound of her phone going off yet again.

She did not recognize the number, so she picked it up right away. With her hair still wet, she answered: "This is Agent White."

"Agent White, this is Jan Haggerty," said a somber-sounding voice. "I just finished reading your email."

"Thanks for getting back to me so soon," Mackenzie said. "I know it's asking a lot for someone in your profession, but is there any way you and I could meet for a chat sometime today?"

"That's not a problem at all," Haggerty said. "My office is out of my home and my first appointment isn't until nine thirty this morning. If you give me half an hour or so to prepare for my day, I can see you this morning. I'll put on some coffee."

"Sounds great," Mackenzie said.

Haggerty gave Mackenzie her address and they ended the call. With half an hour to spare, Mackenzie decided she should do the grown-up thing and give Ellington a call. It would do neither of them any good to hide away from the issue at hand and just hope the other simply forgot about it or was able to sweep it under the rug.

When he answered the call, he sounded tired. Mackenzie assumed she had woken him up, which wasn't all that surprising since he tended to sleep in on the days he had off. But she was pretty sure she also detected some hopefulness in his voice.

"Hey," he said.

"Good morning," she said. "How are you?"

"I don't know," he said almost right away. "Out of sorts would be the best way to describe it. But I'll survive. The more I think about it, the more sure I am that this will all blow over. I'll have a little blemish on my professional record, but as long as I can return back to work, I think I'll manage. How about you? How's your super-top-secret case?"

"Pretty much over, I think," she said. When she had called him last night on her way to Kingsville, she had not shared too much information with him, just letting him know that it was not a case that would place her in any danger. She remained careful not to spill too much information now. It sometimes tended to happen among agents when a case was closed or close to being closed.

“Good,” he said. “Because I don’t like how things ended with us when you left. I don’t... well, I don’t know what I need to apologize for. But I still feel like I’ve done you a disservice in all of this.”

“It is what it is,” Mackenzie said, hating the sound of such a cliché coming out of her mouth. “I should be back by tonight. We can talk about it then.”

“Sounds good. Be careful.”

“You, too,” she said with a forced chuckle.

They ended the call and while she felt a bit better having spoken to him, she couldn’t deny the tension she still felt. She didn’t allow herself time to dwell on it, though. She headed out into Kingsville in search of a bite to eat to pass the time before heading to Dr. Haggerty’s house.

Dr. Haggerty lived alone in a two-story Colonial-style house. It sat in the center of a beautiful front yard. A thick group of elms and oaks in the backyard hovered behind the house like nature’s own form of drop shadow. Dr. Haggerty met Mackenzie at the front door with a smile and the scent of freshly brewed strong coffee right behind her. She looked to be in her late fifties, with a head of hair that was still managing to maintain most of its chestnut brown. Her eyes took Mackenzie in from behind a small set of glasses. When she invited Mackenzie inside, she gestured through the front door with rail-thin arms and a voice that was little more than a whisper.

“Thanks again for meeting with me,” Mackenzie said. “I know it was short notice.”

“No worries at all,” she said. “Between you and me, I hope we can come up with enough cause for me to have Sheriff Tate put a bug in the county’s ear to demolish that damn bridge.”

Haggerty poured Mackenzie a cup of coffee and the two women sat down at the small table in a quaint breakfast nook just off the kitchen. A window by the side of the table looked out to those oaks and elms in the backyard.

“I assume you’ve been informed about the news from yesterday afternoon?” Mackenzie asked.

“I have,” Haggerty said. “Kenny Skinner. Twenty-two years old, right?”

Mackenzie nodded as she sipped from her coffee. “And Malory Thomas several days before that. Now... can you tell me why you’ve been on the sheriff’s case about the bridge?”

“Well, Kingsville has very little to offer. And while no one living in a small town wants to admit it, there is never anything for a small town to offer teens and young adults. And when that happens, these morbid landmarks like the Miller Moon Bridge become iconic. If you look back at the town records, people were ending their lives on that bridge as early as 1956, when it was still in use. Young kids these days are exposed to so much negativity and self-esteem issues that something as iconic as that bridge can become so much more. Kids looking for a way out of the town go to the extremes and it’s no longer about escaping the town... it’s about escaping life.”

“So you think that the bridge gives suicidal kids an easy way out?”

“Not an easy way out,” Haggerty said. “It’s almost like a beacon for them. And those that have jumped off of the bridge before them have just led the way. That bridge isn’t even really a bridge anymore. It’s a suicide platform.”

“Last night, Sheriff Tate also said that you find it hard to believe that these suicides can’t all *just* be suicides. Can you elaborate on that?”

“Yes... and I believe I can use Kenny Skinner as an example. Kenny was a popular guy. Between you and me, he likely wasn’t going to amount to anything extraordinary. He’d probably be perfectly fine to ride out the rest of his life here, working at the Kingsville Tire and Tractor Supply. But he had a good life here, you know? From what I know, he was something of a ladies’ man and in a town like this – hell, in a *county* like this – that pretty much guarantees some fun weekends. I personally spoke with Kenny within the last month or so when I ran over a nail. He patched it up for me. He was polite, laughing, a well-mannered guy. I find it very hard to believe he killed himself in such a way. And if

you go back through the list of people that have jumped off of that bridge in the last three years, there are at least one or two more that I find very fishy...people that I would have never pegged for suicide.”

“So you feel that there’s foul play involved?” Mackenzie asked.

Haggerty took a moment before she answered. “It’s a suspicion I have, but I would not be comfortable saying as much with absolute certainty.”

“And I assume this feeling is based on your professional opinion and not just someone saddened by so many suicides in your small hometown?” Mackenzie asked.

“That’s correct,” Haggerty said, but she seemed almost a little offended at the nature of the question.

“By any chance, did you ever see Kenny Skinner or Malory Thomas as clients?”

“No. And none of the other victims from as far back as 1996.”

“So you *have* met with at least one of the suicides from the bridge?”

“Yes, on one occasion. And with that one, I saw it coming. I did everything I could to convince the family that she needed help. But by the time I could even manage to get them to consider it, she jumped right off that bridge. You see...in this town, the Miller Moon Bridge is synonymous with suicide. And that’s why I’d really like for the county to tear it down.”

“Because you feel that it basically calls to anyone with suicidal thoughts?”

“Exactly.”

Mackenzie sensed that the conversation was basically over. And that was fine with her. She could tell straightaway that Dr. Haggerty was not the type to exaggerate something just to make sure her voice was heard. Although she had tried to downplay it out of a fear of being wrong, Mackenzie was pretty sure Haggerty strongly believed that at least a few of the cases weren’t suicides.

And that little bit of skepticism was all Mackenzie needed. If there was even the slightest chance that either of these last two bodies were murders and not suicides, she wanted to know for certain before heading back to DC.

She finished off her coffee, thanked Dr. Haggerty for her time, and then headed back outside. On the way to her car, she looked out to the forest that bordered most of Kingsville. She looked to the west, where the Miller Moon Bridge sat tucked away down a series of back roads and one gravel road that seemed to indicate all travelers were coming to the end of something.

As she thought about those bloodstained rocks at the bottom of the bridge, the comparison sent a small shiver through Mackenzie’s heart.

She pushed it away, starting the engine and pulling out her cell phone. If she was going to get a definitive answer on any of this, she needed to treat it as if it *was* murder case. And with that mindset, she supposed she needed to start speaking to the family members of the recently deceased.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Before visiting the family of Kenny Skinner, Mackenzie called to get explicit permission from McGrath. His response had been short, clear, and to the point: *I don't care if you have to talk to someone on the fucking Little League baseball team, just get it figured out.*

That confirmation pushed her toward the residence of Pam and Vincent Skinner. The way McGrath explained it, Pam Skinner was formerly Pam Wilmoth. An older sister to Deputy Director Wilmoth, she worked from home as a proposal specialist for an environmental agency. As for Vincent Skinner, he just happened to be the owner of Kingsville Tire and Tractor Supply, having provided a job for his son since Kenny was fifteen.

When Mackenzie knocked on the door, neither of the Skinners greeted her. Instead, it was the pastor of Kingsville Presbyterian Church. When Mackenzie showed him her ID and told him why she was there, he let her in and asked her to wait in the foyer. The Skinner family lived in a nice house on a corner lot in what she assumed would be considered Kingsville's downtown area. She smelled something cooking, wafting down from a long hallway. Elsewhere in the house, she could hear the ringing of a cell phone. She also heard the muffled voice of the pastor, letting Pam and Vincent Skinner know that there was a lady from the FBI there to ask a few questions about Kenny.

It took a few minutes but Pam Skinner eventually came to meet her. The woman was red-faced from crying and looked as if she had not slept a wink the night before. "Are you Agent White?" she asked.

"I am."

"Thanks for coming," Pam said. "My brother told me you'd be coming by at some point."

"If it's too soon, I can –"

"No, no, I want to get it out now," she said.

"Is your husband at home?"

"He's elected to stay in the living room with our pastor. Vincent took this incredibly hard. He fainted twice last night and goes through these little moments where he just refuses to believe it's happened and –"

As if out of nowhere, a huge sob escaped Pam's throat and she leaned against the wall. She hitched her breath and swallowed down what Mackenzie was sure was grief that needed to come out.

"Mrs. Skinner...I can come back later."

"No. Now, please. I've had to stay strong all night for Vincent. I can manage a few more minutes for you. Just...come on to the kitchen."

Mackenzie followed Pam Skinner down the hallway and toward the kitchen, where Mackenzie started to recognize the smell she'd noticed earlier. Apparently, Pam had put some cinnamon rolls in the oven, perhaps in an effort to continue putting off her sorrow for her husband. Pam checked on them half-heartedly as Mackenzie settled down at a stool by the kitchen bar.

"I spoke with Dr. Haggerty this morning," Mackenzie said. "She's been lobbying to have the Miller Moon Bridge torn down. Your son's name came up. She said she finds it very hard to believe that Kenny would have taken his own life."

Pam nodded emphatically. "She's absolutely right. Kenny would have never killed himself. The idea is absolutely ridiculous."

"Do you have any strong and valid reasons to suspect that someone would want to harm your son?"

Pam shook her head, just as furiously as she had nodded it moments before. "I thought about that all night. And it brought up some harsh truths about Kenny, sure. He had some guys that might not have cared too much for him because Kenny tended to steal women away from their boyfriends. But it never came to anything serious."

“And in the past few weeks, you hadn’t heard Kenny say anything or act in a certain way that might indicate that he was having thoughts about hurting himself?”

“No. Nothing of the sort. Even when Kenny was in a bad mood, he managed to light up a room. He rarely even got angry about anything. He wasn’t a perfect child but by God, I don’t believe there was a single ounce of anger or hatred in him. I just find it absolutely beyond comprehension that he would have killed himself.”

Another sob escaped her throat between the words *killed* and *himself*.

“Do you know if he had any sort of ties to that bridge?” Mackenzie asked.

“No more than the other teens and young adults in town. I’m sure he likely did some drinking or some flirting down there, but nothing out of the ordinary.”

Mackenzie could sense the dam about to break within Pam Skinner. Another minute or two and she was going to snap.

“One more question, and please know that I have to ask it. But how certain are you that you knew your son well? Do you think there might have been some second life secrets he was keeping from you and your husband?”

She thought for a moment as tears trailed down her eyes. Slowly, she said, “I suppose anything is possible. But if Kenny *was* hiding some sort of second life from us, he was doing it with the skill of a spy. And while he was a great kid, he was not very committed to things. For him to have to hide something like that...”

“I follow you,” Mackenzie said. “I’m going to leave you to deal with this now. But please, if you think of anything else in the coming days, call me right away.”

With that, Mackenzie got to her feet and placed her business card on the countertop. “I’m so very sorry for your loss, Mrs. Skinner.”

Mackenzie left quickly but not in a rude way. She could feel the weight of the family’s loss until she was back outside, the door closed behind her. And even then, on the way to her car, she could hear the sounds of Pam Skinner finally letting out her grief. It was beyond haunting and it broke Mackenzie’s heart a little bit.

Even when she was out of the driveway, the noise of Pam Skinner’s crying swept through her head like a fall breeze rattling dead leaves across an abandoned street.

CHAPTER EIGHT

There was no coroner in the entire county. Even the Office of the Medical Examiner was an hour and a half away from Kingsville, located in Arlington. Rather than driving back to DC only to most likely head right back to Kingsville, Mackenzie returned to her motel room and made a series of calls. Ten minutes later, she was phoning into a Skype session with the coroner who had overseen the Malory Thomas's and Kenny Skinner's bodies. Kenny Skinner's body was not yet fully prepared and ready to evaluate, so that made things a bit harder.

Still, Mackenzie placed the call and waited for an answer. The man on the other end was one whom Mackenzie had worked with a few times on other cases, a middle-aged man with wiry gray hair named Barry Burke. It was nice to see a familiar face after the morning she'd had. She still couldn't quite shake the sounds of loss that had come out of Pam Skinner as she left their house.

"Hey there, Agent White," Burke said.

"Hey. So I'm being told that there's not much we can get from the body of Kenny Skinner yet, is that right?"

"I'm afraid so. At the risk of sounding crude, it's a pretty big mess. If you let me know what you're looking for, I can send it to the top of the priorities list."

"Any fresh scratches or bruising. Any signs that he might have been involved in a struggle."

"Will do. Now...I assume you need to know the same about Malory Thomas, right?"

"That's right. Do you have anything?"

"You know, we might. I hate to say it, but when we get a body that is pretty obviously a suicide, there are certain things that instantly drop to the bottom of our list of priorities. So yes... we found something on Malory Thomas that, in all honesty, could be nothing. But if you're looking for scratches..."

"What do you have?" she asked.

"Give me one second and I'll shoot you a picture," he said. He clicked around for a while and then the paperclip icon popped up in the Skype window.

Mackenzie clicked it and a JPEG opened up on her screen. She was looking at the underside of Malory Thomas's right hand.

Mackenzie zoomed in on the picture and saw what Burke was talking about right away. Between the first and second knuckle of three of the fingers, there were very apparent cuts and abrasions. The cuts looked very ragged and, while not bloody, raw and grisly all the same. There were two very large scratches on the upper part of her palm that looked like they might also be fairly recent. Lastly, there appeared to be some form of very faint indentation in the meat of her hand just above the palm, making a small half-circle shape. For some reason, this one stuck out more so than the others. It seemed odd, and that usually meant it was the smoking gun she was looking for.

"Does that help you at all?" Burke asked.

"I don't know yet," Mackenzie said. "But it's more than what I had a minute ago."

"Also, this might be of note...one second." Burke rolled away from his desk for about ten seconds and then came back into view. He was holding a small plastic bag. Inside of it was what looked like a piece of tree bark. He held it closer to the camera. Mackenzie saw a piece of wood about an inch wide and an inch and a half long.

"This was in her hair," Burke said. "And the only reason we found it interesting is because it was the only piece of it in her hair. Usually when something like this is found on a body, particularly in the hair, there's a good amount of it. Wood chips, mulch, things like that. But this was the only piece."

"Weird question for you," Mackenzie said. "Can you snap a picture of that and send it to my email?"

"Hey, that's one of the *least* weird requests I've gotten this week. Job perks, you know..."

“Thanks for the meeting,” Mackenzie said. “Any idea when you’ll be able to get a better look at Kenny Skinner?”

“I’m hoping within a few hours.”

“I hope to be back in DC tonight. I’ll reach out when I get back and hopefully be able to make it by there.”

With those plans set in place, they ended the call. Mackenzie emailed the picture of Malory Thomas’s palm to her cell phone and then headed out at once. She thought of the scrapes and the barely there indentation on the woman’s hand, as well as the single piece of wood. It all meant something... she could feel it trying to click into place in her head.

Rather than puzzle it over in the motel, she figured there was no better place to go over it than the scene of the alleged crime. Her only hope was that Miller Moon Bridge was less somber and sinister-looking in the light of day.

When she reached the turn-off that led to the gravel road that dead-ended at Miller Moon Bridge, she was pleased to see a county police car parked along the edge. The bored-looking officer looked up when she pulled her car in alongside his. She flashed her badge and he waved her on after squinting closely at it.

Within a quarter of a mile, she reached the END STATE MAINTENANCE sign. It was at this point that the road became nothing but gravel. She took it slowly, listening to the crunch of pebbles beneath the car while it kicked up dust. After another mile or so, the first white struts of Miller Moon Bridge came into view, rising slightly in the air at a slanted angle. She came around a bend and then saw the whole thing, stretched out over the drop-off where a very dry riverbed sat underneath. While it didn’t look quite as spooky in the daylight, the structure *did* show its age.

She parked several feet away from where the wooden planks began. She tried to imagine driving a car to the other side of this thing thirty or forty years ago and the mere thought of it terrified her. As she stepped onto the planks, she looked to the other side. There were two concrete barriers standing about four feet tall between the end of the bridge and the start of a road that was clearly no longer being used. It quite literally felt like she was stepping out onto the very edge of the world, where everything came to an end.

As she walked slowly along the bridge, she pulled up the picture of Malory’s palm. She also opened the attachment in the email Burke had sent her after the Skype call. She opened up the image of the small piece of wood, having them both at the ready. She had no idea what she was looking for but felt confident she’d know it when her eyes fell on it.

As it turned out, that didn’t take very long.

She’d made it about ten feet across the bridge when she noticed the layout of the beams and struts that ran along the sides of the bridge. They all, of course, ran underneath it for support, but on the other side of the white rails that separated the bridge from the open space beyond, there was a single iron strut that stuck out about two feet wider than the bridge. It was just wide enough for someone to step out onto.

She looked down the length of the bridge and counted three different struts. She went to the rail and hunkered down to get a closer look. The strut in front of her also supported five smaller struts than ran beneath the bridge. These smaller ones were attached to the larger ones with large bolts. The bolts were capped off with what looked like smooth metal caps, worn and rusted with age.

Mackenzie looked at the picture of Malory’s palm, zooming in on the indentation in her skin. Slightly circular, the curves looking very much like the circumference of the metal caps on the strut.

She ran her finger carefully over the metal cap. Yes, it was smooth – probably put there to hide the rougher edging of whatever industrial bolt had been used to attach the struts – but the edges of the caps were a little rough around the edges.

Mackenzie got back to her feet and slowly walked a bit farther down the bridge. She saw the same layout, one after another. Five bolts, the ends of which were covered by those smooth iron caps. There would then be a break in the spacing of the caps, and then there would be five more. She counted three sets of five in the first iron strut, and then five in the next.

She didn't get to the third iron strut on the last portion of the bridge, though. When she was about halfway down the bridge, she came to a spot where the wooden base of the bridge's frame poked out just a bit from beyond the iron strut. Not much...maybe three inches. But it was enough for Mackenzie to realize that the beams and struts beneath the bridge were partially made of wood – perhaps just the original frame or additional construction.

She again went to her knees and leaned a bit out past the safety railings. She ran her hand along the little bit of exposed wood. It was old and brittle but quite hard. She compared the color and texture of the wood to the small piece that Burke had bagged and showed to her. Even with the glare of her cell phone, she could tell that it was the same.

But if she jumped, how the hell did it get into her hair?

She was pretty sure the picture of Malory's palm answered that question.

If the indentation of one of those caps was on her palm, she didn't jump. She was hanging from the bridge...maybe trying to save herself. And the wood chip in her hair...if she was hanging from this very spot, it's not too hard to believe that this old wood might have flaked off into her hair as she tried to regain her grip.

She ran her thumb over the five caps along the strut in front of her one by one. At the one second to the end, she felt a roughness to the cap's ending. It was certainly rough enough to cause those paper-thin abrasions on Malory's hand.

With her heart in her chest, Mackenzie looked down over the rail. The rocks that had ultimately killed Malory Thomas and Kenny Skinner waited down there. Even from this height, she could see the discoloration where there had been blood less than twelve hours ago.

I'm standing where they stood, Mackenzie thought. They were standing right here moments before they died.

She then looked back to the picture of the indentation in Malory's palm, and then back to the bolt caps. And then she corrected her thought: *They were standing right here moments before they were murdered.*

CHAPTER NINE

Mackenzie did not have cell phone reception until she was back off of the gravel road so she wasn't able to call McGrath with an update for another ten minutes. His secretary said he was out of the office and he did not answer his cell phone. She decided not to leave a message and, instead, called up Sheriff Tate.

Tate didn't answer either but as his voicemail kicked on, she remembered him telling her how his outdated phone had been misbehaving. She hung up, frustrated, but before she had time to get angry, Tate called her directly back.

"Told ya," he said. "This damned phone. Anyway, what can I do for you, Agent White?" he asked.

"How quickly can you meet me at the station with a few of your best men?"

"I'm at the station right now. And if it's concerning Kenny Skinner, then the only other person that knows is my deputy, like I told you last night. I can have him back here in about twenty minutes. Why? What's up?"

"Just some things I want to fill you in on."

"You find something?" he asked, instantly curious. He also sounded a bit excited and Mackenzie wasn't sure how to take that.

"I'd really rather wait until I can meet you there. By the way...do you have any way for me to dial in to DC?"

"Just a standard old touchtone phone. We can conference someone in if we need to."

She felt a little spoiled when she found this disappointing. Regardless, she thanked him and ended the call.

She was five minutes away from the Kingsville PD when McGrath called her back. After she went over the details of what she had found, he went silent for a moment. Finally, just as she was about to pull into the station's lot, he spoke.

"You're certain of this?" he asked.

"I'm certain enough to say that it strongly warrants an investigation."

"That's good enough for me. Find some way to bring me into this meeting you're about to have. I want to stay close on this one."

"Will do. Give me a few minutes."

She parked and went into the station. Sheriff Tate was sitting behind the little bullpen area, waiting for her. When she came into the lobby, he walked quickly to meet her right away. As he escorted her to the back of the small building, he spoke to her under his breath.

"I did manage to get one of my guys to figure out a way to hook you up with a video call sort of thing on one of our laptops. I'm sure it's not as high tech as what you're used to in DC, but it's all we got out here."

"It's okay. That should be fine."

Tate led her into a conference room where a rather old MacBook was sitting on a small wooden table. Another man sat at the end of the table, giving her a wave as she came in. He then stood up and offered his hand.

"Deputy Andrews," he said. "Nice to meet you, Agent White." He was a short and stout man, a little on the heavy side, with the sort of gritty southern charm that could be either charming or off-putting. Mackenzie couldn't decide where Andrews fell just yet.

"So, this is the best we could do," Tate said, turning the MacBook in her direction. "My guy just made sure FaceTime was operable on it. That's high-tech shit for Kingsville."

She pulled McGrath's number from her contact list and typed it in. When she placed the call, it took a few moments before it connected. When McGrath's face came on the screen, Tate and Andrews crowded in behind Mackenzie.

A quick round of introductions were made – nothing more than a formality really, as she was sure McGrath couldn't care less about Kingsville's finest.

"For the sake of all being on the same page," Mackenzie said, "I'm going to go over everything one more time. There were very minor abrasions on Malory Thomas's left palm. There was also a very faint indentation of sorts, as if she had been clutching on to something moments before her death. After visiting the Miller Moon Bridge this morning, I was able to determine that the indentation was the exact shape of the end caps placed on the bolts along the struts on the edge of the bridge.

"Additionally, there was a piece of wood found in her hair – which the coroner found off because it was the *only* piece. It just so happens that the scrap of wood in her hair is the exact same as the wooden planks along and underneath the bridge, right down to the tone and texture. Put all of this together with the fact that she was nude and her clothes were discovered on the bridge, it makes me think she did not jump. It seems more like she was dangling on the edge of the bridge. Pretty tightly, I might add, based on that indentation. And if she was going to kill herself, why would she struggle to hold on to the edge?"

"Makes sense to me," Tate said.

"Yes, it does," McGrath said. "But that then leads us to more questions. Was it just Malory Thomas who might have been murdered? Can we also lump Kenny Skinner in with her? And if so, why not everyone else who has jumped from that bridge?"

"I spoke with Dr. Jan Haggerty, a psychiatrist here in town. She says that based on what she knew of Kenny Skinner, there was no way he committed suicide. His mother strongly agrees. And if you look at the dates of the suicides, it's been almost two years since a body was found on the rocks beneath the bridge. Now, two years later, we have two within the span of four days. I think it's a safe assumption to say that Kenny Skinner's death might be worth looking into as a murder as well. The timing makes it too concrete to be a coincidence."

"Sheriff Tate, we've discussed the importance of the Skinner kid already," McGrath said. "I ask that in the coming days you please consider giving Agent White any assistance she needs. And please let her have full run of this case. She's among my best agents and I trust her completely. Can you do that for me?"

"Absolutely. Just let us know how we can help."

"Agent White, do you have any leads to pursue at this point?"

"Nothing solid," she said. "But I imagine it wouldn't be too hard to find some people to speak with in regards to the lives of the victims. I'm continuously being told how this is one of those towns where everybody knows everybody. Speaking to Kenny Skinner's mother gave me a few ideas."

"Good. Get to it, and keep me posted. Sheriff Tate, thanks again for your cooperation."

"No pro – "

But McGrath had hung up, the screen glitching for a moment and then the call coming to an end.

"Don't take it personally," Mackenzie said. "He does that to me all the time."

With a shrug, Tate asked, "So what do you need from us?"

Mackenzie thought for a moment, trying to determine the best course of action. "Can you get me the police records for any of the people who have committed suicide from the bridge in the last five years or so?"

"I can get that for you," Miller said. "But I don't think there will be too much to look at."

"That's fine, just – "

Her phone rang, interrupting her. She answered it and heard Pam Skinner's somber voice on the other end.

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