

A person in a dark jacket and pants is walking away from the viewer down a path. The path is covered in numerous footprints, suggesting many people have walked there. The background is a hazy, light-colored landscape with rolling hills. The overall color palette is muted, with a lot of greys and light blues.

BLAKE PIERCE

BEFORE
HE
ENVIES

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY — BOOK 12

Blake Pierce
Before He Envies
Серия «A Mackenzie
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Аннотация

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

Mackenzie took a deep breath and closed her eyes, bracing herself and trying to stop the pain. She had read so much about the whole breathing method thing and now, as Ellington rushed her to the hospital, all of it seemed to have slipped right out of her head. Maybe it was because her water had broken and she could still feel it along the leg of her pants. Or maybe it was because she had felt her first legitimate contraction about five minutes ago and she could feel another one coming on.

Mackenzie pressed against the passenger seat, watching the city pass by in a blur of darkness, sprinkling rain, and streetlights. Ellington was behind the wheel, sitting rigid and staring out the windshield like a man possessed. He laid down on the horn as they approached a red light.

“E, it’s okay, you can slow down,” she said.

“No, no, we’re good,” he said.

With her eyes still closed against Ellington’s driving, she placed her hands on the large bump of her stomach, grappling with the idea that she would be a mother in the next several hours. She could feel the baby barely stirring, perhaps just as scared of Ellington’s driving as she was.

I’ll see you soon, she thought. It was a thought that brought more joy than worry and for that, she was grateful.

The streetlights and signs went blaring by. She stopped paying

attention to them until she saw the directional signs pointing toward the hospital emergency room.

A man stood outside at the curb, waiting for them under the awning with a wheelchair, knowing they were coming. Ellington carefully brought the car to a stop and the man waved and smiled to them with the sort of lazy enthusiasm most nurses in the ER at two in the morning seemed to have.

Ellington guided her to it as if she were made of porcelain. She knew he was being overprotective and urgent because he, too, was a little scared. But more than that, he was good to her. He always had been. And he was proving now that he was going to be good to this baby, too.

“Hey, hold on, slow down,” Mackenzie said as Ellington helped her into the wheelchair.

“What? What is it? What’s wrong?”

She felt another contraction coming but she still managed to flash a smile at him. “I love you,” she said. “That’s all.”

The spell he’d been under for the last eighteen minutes—between hopping out of bed to her announcement that she was going into labor to him helping her into the wheelchair—broke for a moment and he smiled back. He leaned down and kissed her softly on the mouth.

“I love you, too.”

The man at the wheelchair handles looked away, a little embarrassed. When they were done, he asked, “You guys ready to have a baby?”

The contraction hit and Mackenzie cringed against it. She remembered from the reading that they would only get worse the closer the baby came to arriving. Still, she looked past it all for a moment and nodded.

Yes, she was ready to have this baby. In fact, she could hardly wait to hold it in her arms.

*

She had only dilated four centimeters by eight o'clock that morning. She had gotten to know the doctor and the nurses well, but when they switched shifts, Mackenzie's mood started to change. She was tired, she was hurting, and she simply didn't enjoy the idea of another doctor coming in and poking around under her gown. But Ellington, as dutiful as ever, had managed to get her OBGYN on the phone and he was doing his best to get to the hospital as soon as he could.

When Ellington came back into the room from making the call, he was frowning. She hated to see him having crashed from his high of being her protector last night, but she was also glad she was not the only one who was experiencing a mood swing.

"What is it?" she asked.

"He'll be here for the delivery, but he won't even bother coming over until you're at least at eight centimeters. Also...I was going to bring you some waffles from the cafeteria, but the nurses say you should eat light. They'll be bringing you some Jell-

O and ice chips any minute now.”

Mackenzie shifted in the bed and looked down at her stomach. She preferred to look there rather than the machines and monitors they had her hooked up to. As she traced the shape of her stomach, there was a knock at the door. The newer doctor came walking in, holding her charts. He looked happy and fully refreshed, coming in off of what appeared to have been a restful night’s sleep.

Bastard, Mackenzie thought.

The doctor thankfully kept the conversation to a minimum as he checked her over. Mackenzie didn’t pay much attention to him, honestly. She was tired, drifting off to sleep even when he put the jelly on her stomach to check the baby’s progress. She drifted off into a half-sleep for a while until she heard the doctor speaking to her.

“Mrs. White?”

“Yes?” she asked, irritated that she could not get a small nap in. She had been trying to sneak them in between contractions... anything for just a bit of rest.

“Are you feeling any new discomfort?”

“Nothing other than the same pains I’ve had since we got here.”

“Have you felt the baby moving a great deal in the last hours?”

“I don’t think so. Why...is something wrong?”

“No, not *wrong*. But I believe your baby has turned. There’s a very good chance that this will be a breach delivery. And

I'm getting an irregular heartbeat...nothing terribly out of the ordinary, but enough to raise concerns."

Ellington was at her side at once, taking her hand. "Breach... is that risky?"

"Hardly ever," the doctor said. "Sometimes we know the baby is already breach a few weeks out from delivery. But your baby was in the correct position during the last checkup...was even perfectly positioned when you checked in last night. But he or she has turned a bit and unless something drastic changes, I don't see your kiddo getting back into the right position. Right now, it's this heartbeat that I'm concerned about."

"So what do you recommend?" Mackenzie asked.

"Well, I'd like to do a thorough check on the baby just to make sure its sudden position change has not placed it in distress—which is what the erratic heartbeat might be. If it hasn't—and there's no reason to believe it has—then we will schedule an operating room for you as soon as we can."

The idea of skipping traditional labor was appealing, sure, but adding surgery to the birth process didn't particularly sit well with her, either.

"Whatever you think is best," Mackenzie said.

"Is it safe?" Ellington asked, not even attempting to hide the tremble of fear in his voice.

"Perfectly safe," the doctor said, wiping away the excess jelly from Mackenzie's stomach. "Of course, as with any surgery, we have to mention that there is always a risk when someone's on the

table. But cesarean deliveries are very common. I've personally performed more than fifty. And I believe your OBGYN is Dr. Reynolds. She's older than I am by a stretch...don't tell her I said that...and I guarantee she's done more than I have. You're in good hands. Shall I reserve a room?"

"Yes," Mackenzie said.

"Great. I'll get a room and make sure to let Dr. Reynolds know what's going on."

Mackenzie watched him leave and then looked back down to her belly. Ellington joined her, their hands interlocking over the temporary home of their child.

"That's sort of scary, huh?" Ellington asked, kissing her on the cheek. "But we'll be okay."

"Of course we will," she said with a smile. "Think of our lives and our relationship. It almost makes sense that this kid would come into this world with a bit of drama."

She meant every word of it, but even then, in one of their most vulnerable moments together, Mackenzie was hiding more fear than she cared to let on.

Kevin Thomas Ellington was born at twelve twenty p.m. He weighed seven pounds six ounces and, according to Ellington, had his father's misshapen head and red cheeks. It wasn't quite the delivery experience Mackenzie had been expecting but when

she had heard his first little cries, taking in his first breaths, she didn't care. She could have given birth to him in an elevator or some abandoned building. He was alive, he was here, and that was the important thing.

Once she heard Kevin's cries, Mackenzie allowed herself to calm down. She was lightheaded and out of it from the anesthesia from the C-section procedure and felt sleep pulling at her. She was dimly aware of Ellington at her side, complete with his white operating room cap and blue gown. He kissed her forehead and was doing nothing to hide the fact that he was openly crying.

"You did amazing," he said through his tears. "You're so strong, Mac. I love you."

She opened her mouth to return the sentiment but wasn't fully sure she'd said it. She drifted off to the beautiful sounds of her still-crying son.

The next hour or so of her life was a fragmented kind of bliss. She was mostly under and still feeling nothing when the doctors sewed her back up. She was out of it completely when she was moved to a recovery room. She was barely aware of a series of nurses looking over her, checking her vitals.

However, it was when one of the nurses stepped into the room that Mackenzie started to get a better grip on her thoughts. She reached out clumsily, trying to grab the nurse's hand, but missed. "How long?" she asked.

The nurse smiled, showing that she had been in this situation many times before. "You've been out for about two hours. How

are you feeling?”

“Like I need to hold the baby that just came out of me.”

This elicited a chuckle from the nurse. “He’s with your husband. I’ll send them both in.”

The nurse left and while she was gone, Mackenzie’s eyes remained on the doorway. They stayed there until Ellington entered shortly afterward. He was pushing one of the hospital’s little rolling bassinets. The smile on his face was unlike any she had ever seen from him before.

“How you feeling?” he asked as he parked the bassinet by the side of her bed.

“Like my insides have been ripped out.”

“They were,” Ellington said with a playful frown. “When they brought me into the operating room, your guts were in a few different pans. I know you inside and out now, Mac.”

Without having to be asked, Ellington reached into the bassinet and took out their son. Slowly, he handed Kevin to her. She held him to her chest and instantly felt her heart reaching out. A surge of emotion passed through her. She wasn’t sure if she had ever experienced tears of happiness in her entire life, but they came as she kissed the top of her son’s head.

“I think we did good,” Ellington said. “I mean, my part was easy, but you know what I mean.”

“I do,” she said. She looked into her son’s eyes for the first time and felt what she could only describe as an emotional *click*. It was the feeling of her life being forever changed. “And yes,

we did do good.”

Ellington sat down on the edge of the bed. The shifting hurt her abdomen, the surgery now barely more than two hours ago. But she said nothing.

She sat there in the crook of her husband's arm with their newborn son in her arms, and could not remember a single moment in her life when she had felt such absolute happiness.

CHAPTER TWO

Mackenzie had spent the last three months of her pregnancy reading just about every book on babies she could find. There seemed to be no unequivocal answer as to what to expect the first few weeks back home with a newborn. Some said that as long as you slept when the baby slept, you should be okay. Others had said to sleep when you could with the help of a spouse or other family members who were willing to help. All of it had made Mackenzie sure that sleep would only be a precious memory of the past once they got Kevin home.

This proved correct for the first two weeks or so. After Kevin's first checkup, it was discovered that he had severe acid reflux. This meant that anytime he ate, he had to be held upright for fifteen to thirty minutes at a time. This was easy enough, but became grinding during the later night hours.

It was during this stretch of time that Mackenzie started to think about her mother. On the second night after being instructed to hold Kevin upright after feeding, Mackenzie wondered if her own mother had dealt with anything like this. Mackenzie wondered what sort of baby she had been.

She'd probably like to see her granddaughter, Mackenzie thought.

But that was a terrifying concept. The idea of calling her mother just to say hello was bad enough. But then throw in a

surprise granddaughter, and that would be chaotic.

She felt Kevin squirming against her, trying to get comfortable. Mackenzie checked the bedside clock and saw that she'd had him upright for a little over twenty minutes. He seemed to have dozed off on her shoulder, so she crept over to the bassinet and placed him inside of it. He was swaddled and looked quite comfortable and she took a final look at him before returning to bed.

"Thanks," Ellington said from beside her, half asleep. "You're awesome."

"I don't feel like it. But thanks."

She settled down, getting her head comfortable on the pillow. She had her eyes closed for about five seconds before Kevin started wailing again. She shot up in bed and let out a little moan. She bit it back, though, worried that it might turn into a bout of weeping. She was tired and, worst of all, she was experiencing her first toxic thoughts about her child.

"Again?" Ellington said, snapping the word out like a curse. He got to his feet, nearly stumbling out of the bed, and marched to the bassinet.

"I'll get him," Mackenzie said.

"No...you've been up with him four times already. And I know...I woke up for each and every one of those times."

She did not know why (probably the lack of sleep, she thought idly), but this comment pissed her off. She practically lunged out of bed to beat him to the wailing baby. She rammed her shoulder

into him a little harder than necessary to be considered playful. As she picked Kevin up, she said: “Oh, I’m sorry. Did he wake you?”

“Mac, you know what I mean.”

“I do. But Jesus, you could be helping more.”

“I have to get up early tomorrow,” he said. “I can’t just sit...”

“Oh God, *please* finish that sentence.”

“No. I’m sorry. I just...”

“Get back in bed,” Mackenzie snapped. “Kevin and I are fine.”

“Mac...”

“Shut up. Get back in bed and sleep.”

“I can’t.”

“Is the baby too noisy? Go to the couch, then!”

“Mac, you—”

“Go!”

She was crying now, holding Kevin to her as she settled back into bed. He was still wailing, slightly in pain from the reflux. She knew she’d have to hold him upright again and it made her want to cry even harder. But she did her best to hold it back as Ellington stormed out of the room. He was muttering something under his breath and she was glad she couldn’t hear it. She was looking for an excuse to explode on him, to berate him and, honestly, just to get out some of her frustration.

She sat back against the headboard holding little Kevin as still and upright as possible, wondering if her life would ever be the same.

Somehow, despite the late-night arguments and lack of sleep, it took less than a week for their new family to slip into a groove. It took some trial and error for Mackenzie and Ellington to figure it out, but after that first week of the reflux issues, it all seemed to go well. When the meds knocked the worst of the reflux out, it was easier to manage it. Kevin would cry, Ellington would get him out of the crib and change his diaper, and then Mackenzie would nurse him. He was sleeping well for a baby, about three or four hours at a stretch for the first few weeks following the reflux, and wasn't very fussy at all.

It was Kevin, though, who started to open their eyes to just how broken the families they had come from were. Ellington's mother came by two days after they got home and stayed for about two hours. Mackenzie had been polite enough, hanging around until she realized it would be an opportune time for a break. She went to the bedroom to sneak in a nap while Kevin was preoccupied with his father and grandmother, but Mackenzie was not able to sleep. She listened to the conversation between Ellington and his mother, surprised that there seemed to be some attempt at reconciliation. Mrs. Nancy Ellington left the apartment about two hours later, and even through the bedroom door, Mackenzie could feel some of the remaining tension between them.

Still, she'd left a gift for Kevin in her wake and had even asked about Ellington's father—a subject she almost always tried to avoid.

Ellington's father never even bothered to come by. Ellington made a FaceTime call to him and though they chatted for about an hour and a few tears even came to his father's eyes, there were no immediate plans for him to come see his grandson. He'd started his own life long ago, a new life without any of his original family. And that, apparently, was how he wanted it to stay. Sure, he'd made a sweeping financial gesture last year in regards to trying to pay for their wedding (a gift they eventually denied), but that had been help from a distance. He was currently living in London with Wife Number Three and was apparently swamped with work.

As for Mackenzie, while her thoughts did eventually turn to her mother and sister—her only surviving family—the idea of getting in touch with them was a horrifying one. She knew where her mother was living and, with a little help from the bureau, she supposed she could even get her number. Stephanie, her younger sister, would probably be a little harder to track down. As Stephanie was never one to stay in a place for very long, Mackenzie had no idea where her sister might be these days.

Sadly, she found that she was okay with that. Yes, she thought her mother deserved to see her first grandchild, but that would mean opening up the scars that she had closed up a little over a year ago when she had finally closed the case of her father's

murder. In closing that case, she had also closed the door on that part of her past—including the terrible relationship she'd always had with her mother.

It was odd just how much she thought about her mother now that she had a child of her own. Whenever she held Kevin, she'd remind herself of how distant her mother had been even before her father's murder. She swore that Kevin would always know that his mother loved him, that she would never let anything—not Ellington, not work, not her own personal issues—come before him.

It was this very thing that was on her mind on the twelfth night after they had brought Kevin home. She had just finished nursing Kevin for his late-night feeding—which had started to fall somewhere between one thirty and two in the morning. Ellington was coming back into the room from having placed Kevin in his crib in the next room over. It had once been an office where they had stored all of their miscellaneous bureau paperwork and personal items but had easily become a nursery.

“Why are you still awake?” he asked, grumbling into his pillow as he lay back down.

“Do you think we'll be good parents?” she asked.

He propped his head up sleepily and shrugged. “I think so. I mean, I know you will. But me... I imagine I'll push him way too hard when it comes to youth sports. Something my dad never did for me that I always feel I missed out on.”

“I'm being serious.”

“I figured. Why do you ask?”

“Because our own families are so messed up. How do we know how to raise a child the right way if we have such horrible experiences to draw from?”

“I figure we’ll just take note of everything our parents did wrong and don’t do any of it.”

He reached out in the dark and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She honestly wanted him to wrap her up in his arms and spoon her, but she wasn’t fully healed up from the surgery just yet.

They lay there next to one another, equally exhausted and excited for their lives going forward, until sleep took them both, one right behind the other.

Mackenzie found herself walking through rows of corn again. The stalks were so high that she could not see the tops of them. The ears of corn themselves, like old yellow teeth poking through rotted gums, peeked out into the night. Each ear was easily three feet long; the corn and the stalks on which they grew were ridiculously big, making her feel like an insect.

Somewhere up ahead a baby was crying. Not just *a* baby, but *her* baby. Already, she could recognize the tones and pitches of little Kevin’s wails.

Mackenzie took off through the rows of corn. She was slapped

in the face, the stalks and leaves drawing blood a little too easily. By the time she reached the end of the row she was currently in, her face was covered in blood. She could taste it in her mouth and see it dripping from her chin down to her shirt.

At the end of the row, she stopped. Ahead of her was wide open land, nothing but dirt, dead grass, and the horizon. Yet, in the middle of it, a small structure—one she knew well.

It was the house she had grown up in. It was where the crying was coming from.

Mackenzie ran to the house, her legs moving as the corn was still attached to her and trying to draw her back out into the field.

She ran harder, realizing that the stitching around her abdomen had torn open. When she reached the porch to the house, blood from the wound was running down her legs, pooling on porch steps.

The front door was closed but she could still hear that wailing. Her baby, inside, screaming. She opened the door and it opened easily. Nothing squeaked or screeched, the age of the house not a factor. Before she even stepped inside, she saw Kevin.

Sitting in the middle of a barren living room—the same living room she had spent so much of her time in as a child—was a single rocking chair. Her mother sat in it, holding Kevin and rocking him softly.

Her mother, Patricia White, looked up at her, looking much younger than the last time Mackenzie had seen her. She smiled at Mackenzie, her eyes bloodshot and somehow alien.

“You did good, Mackenzie. But did you really think you could keep him from me? Why would you want to, anyway? Was I that bad? Was I?”

Mackenzie opened her mouth to say something, to demand that her mother hand over the baby. But when she opened her mouth, all that came out was corn silk and dirt, falling from her mouth to the floor.

All the while, her mother smiled and held Kevin close to her, nuzzling him to her breast.

Mackenzie sat up in bed, a scream pushing behind her lips.

“Jesus, Mac...are you okay?”

Ellington was standing at the doorway to the bedroom. He was dressed in a T-shirt and a pair of jogging shorts, an indication that he had been working out in his little space in the guest bedroom.

“Yeah,” she said. “Just a bad dream. A very bad dream.”

She then glanced at the clock and saw that it was almost eight in the morning. Somehow, Ellington had allowed her to sleep in; Kevin had been waking up around five or six for his first feeding.

“Has he not woken up yet?” Mackenzie asked.

“No, he did. I used one of the bags of frozen milk. I know you wanted to save them up, but I figured I’d let you sleep in.”

“You’re amazing,” she said, sinking back into the bed.

“And don’t you forget it. Now go back to sleep. I’ll bring him to you when he needs to be changed again. Fair deal?”

She made an *mmm* sound as she drifted off to sleep again. For a moment, there were still ghost images of the nightmare in

her head but she pushed them away with thoughts of her loving husband and a baby boy who would be happy to see her when he woke up.

After a month, Ellington went back to work. Director McGrath had promised that he would get no in-depth or intense cases while he had a baby and nursing mother at home. More than that, McGrath was also quite lenient in terms of hours. There were a few days when Ellington left at eight in the morning and returned back home as early as three that afternoon.

When Ellington started going back to work, Mackenzie truly started to feel like a mother. She missed Ellington's help very much on those first days, but there was something special about being alone with Kevin. She came to know his schedule and quirks a bit better. And although most of her days involved sitting on the couch to heal while binging shows on Netflix, she still felt the connection between them growing.

But Mackenzie had never been one to sit around aimlessly. She felt guilty for her Netflix binges after a week or so. She used that time to instead start reading true crime stories. She utilized online book resources as well as podcasts, trying to keep her mind active by figuring out the answers to these real-life cases before the narrative reached the conclusion.

She visited the doctor twice in those first six weeks to ensure

that the scar from the C-section was healing properly. While the doctors beamed over how quickly she was healing, they still stressed that a return to normalcy so soon could cause setbacks. They warned against something as common as even bending over to pick something up from the floor that had any significant weight to it.

It was the first time in her life that Mackenzie had ever truly felt like an invalid. It did not sit well with her, but she had Kevin to focus on. She had to keep him happy and healthy. She had to keep him on a schedule and, as she and Ellington had planned during the pregnancy, she also had to prepare for separating from him when it came time for him to start daycare. They had found a reputable in-home daycare and already had a spot reserved. While the provider cared for children as young as two months old, Mackenzie and Ellington had decided not to put him into care until five or six months. The spot they had reserved opened just after Kevin turned six months, giving Mackenzie plenty of time to feel comfortable with not only Kevin's own development, but to prepare herself for the separation.

So she had no problem waiting to heal so long as she had Kevin there with her. While she did not resent Ellington for returning to work, she did find herself wishing he could be there during the day from time to time. He was missing all of Kevin's smiles, all of the cute little mannerisms he was developing, the coos and the variety of baby sounds.

As Kevin started to hit milestone after milestone, the idea of

daycare began to loom larger in her mind. And with it, the idea of returning to work. The thought of it excited her but when she looked into her son's eyes, she did not know if she could live a life of running into danger, a gun on her hip and uncertainty at every corner. It seemed almost irresponsible for both her *and* Ellington to work such dangerous jobs.

The prospect of returning to work—to the bureau and anything remotely dangerous—became less and less appealing as she grew closer to her son. In fact, by the time the doctor cleared her for light exercise a little shy of three months, she wasn't sure if she wanted to go back to the FBI at all.

CHAPTER THREE

Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

Bryce sat on the edge of the rock face, his feet dangling out into the open air. The sun was setting, casting a series of golds and bright oranges that flared into red closer to the horizon. He massaged his hands and thought of his father. His climbing gear was behind him, stowed away and ready for the next adventure. He had a hike of about a mile and a half before he'd return to his car—making a total of about six miles he had covered on foot—but for now, he wasn't even thinking about his car.

He wasn't thinking of his car, his home, or his new bride. His father had died one year ago today and they had scattered his ashes here, right off the southern edge of Logan's View. His father had died seven months before Bryce had gotten married and just a week shy of what would have been his fifty-first birthday.

It was right here, on the southern face of Logan's View, that Bryce and his father had celebrated Bryce's first full scale of the view. Bryce had known that it wasn't considered that difficult of a climb, though it certainly had been for his seventeen-year-old self that, to that point in his life, had only scaled much smaller rock faces further out in Grand Teton National Park.

Honestly, Bryce didn't see what was so special about this place. He wasn't sure why his father had requested his ashes be

buried at this site. It had required Bryce and his mother to park down at the general use lot a mile and a half away from where he now sat—where, a little less than a year ago, they had scattered his father’s ashes. Sure, the sunset was pretty and all, but there were lots of scenic views along the park.

“Well, I came back up, Dad,” Bryce said. “I’ve been climbing here and there, but nothing as brutal as the stuff you did.”

Bryce smiled at that, thinking of the picture he had been given shortly after his father’s funeral. His father had tried Everest but had busted his ankle after only a day and a half of climbing. He’d climbed glaciers in Alaska and numerous unnamed rock formations all throughout the American deserts. The man was like a legend in Bryce’s mind and that’s the way he intended to keep it.

He looked out at the sunset, sure that his father would have enjoyed it. Though, honestly, with all of the sunsets he’d seen from different vantage points in his climbing years, this one was likely just a generic one.

Bryce sighed, noticing that the tears weren’t coming as they usually did. Life was slowly starting to feel more natural without his dad. He still mourned, sure, but he was moving on. He got to his feet and turned to pick up the backpack with his climbing gear. He stopped short, though, alarmed at the sight of someone standing directly behind him.

“Sorry to startle you,” the man standing less than three feet away from him said.

How the hell did I not hear him? Bryce wondered. *He must have been moving very quietly...and on purpose. Why was he trying to sneak up on me? To rob me? To take my equipment?*

“No worries,” Bryce said, choosing to ignore the man. He looked to be in his early thirties, with a thin growth of beard covering his chin and a thin beanie-style stocking cap covering his head.

“Nice sunset, huh?” the man asked.

Bryce picked up his bag, hefted it on his back, and started moving forward. “Yeah, it sure is,” he answered.

He started by the man, intending to pass him by without so much as another glance. But the man reached out and blocked his path with his arm. When Bryce tried to step around him, the man grabbed him by the arm and shoved him backward.

As he stumbled back, Bryce was very aware of all of the open space that was waiting less than five feet behind him—somewhere around four hundred feet of open space, at that.

Bryce had only thrown one single punch in his life; it had been in second grade, on the playground, when some jerk kid had told him some dumb Your Mama joke. Still, Bryce found himself making a fist in that moment, fully prepared to fight if he had to.

“What the hell is your problem?” Bryce asked.

“Gravity,” the man said.

He made a motion then, not a punch but more like a throwing action. Bryce threw a wrist up to block it, realizing what was in the man’s hand just as he caught the golden glitter of the sunset’s

reflection off of its metal surface.

A hammer.

It struck his forehead hard enough to make a sound that, to Bryce, sounded like something that might come out of a cartoon. But the pain that followed was not funny or comical at all. He blinked, absolutely dazed. He took a single step back, every nerve in his body trying to remind him that there was a four-hundred-foot drop behind him.

But his nerves were slow, the blunt attack to his forehead sending a blinding pain through his skull and a numbing sensation down his back.

Bryce crumpled, falling to one knee. And that's when the man reached out with his foot and kicked Bryce directly in the center of the chest.

Bryce barely felt the impact. His head was a blazing fire. But the kick sent him flying backward, his side striking the ground hard enough to send him bouncing back even farther.

He felt gravity claim him at once but was confused as to what, exactly, had happened.

His heart raced and his pain-filled mind went into panic mode. He tried to draw a breath as his muscles took over, flailing for any sort of purchase.

But there was nothing. There was only the open air, the wind off his descent passing by his ears and, seconds later, the briefest explosion of pain when he hit the hardpan dirt below. In the single breath left within him, he saw the red tint on the side of

the wall he had just climbed, his final sunset ushering him out.

CHAPTER FOUR

What had at first felt like paradise quickly started to feel like a prison of sorts. While she still loved her son more than she could even start to explain, Mackenzie was getting stir-crazy. The occasional stroll down the block just wasn't cutting it anymore. When the doctor had cleared her for light exercise and to start picking up the pace around the house, she instantly thought of jogging or even some light weights. She was out of shape—perhaps more than she had been in over five years—and the abs she had often prided herself on were buried beneath scar tissue and a layer of fat that she was unfamiliar with.

In one of her weaker moments, she started to weep uncontrollably one night when getting out of the shower. Ever the dutiful and loving husband, Ellington had come rushing into the bathroom to find her leaning against the sink.

“Mac, what is it? Are you okay?”

“No. I'm crying. I'm not okay. And I'm crying over stupid shit.”

“Like what?”

“Like the body I just saw in the mirror.”

“Ah, Mac...hey, you remember a few weeks ago when you told me that you'd read that you would start crying over random things? Well, I think this is one of them.”

“That C-section scar will be there for the rest of my life. And

the weight...it's not going to be easy to get it off."

"And why does this bother you?" he asked. He wasn't taking the tough love approach, but he also wasn't coddling her. It was a stark reminder of how well he knew her.

"It shouldn't. And honestly, I think the crying is over something else...it just took the sight of my body to bring it all out."

"There's nothing wrong with your body."

"You have to say that."

"No I don't."

"How can you even look at this and want it?" she asked.

He smiled at her. "It's quite easy. And look...I know the doctor cleared you for light exercise. So, you know...if you let me do all of the work..."

With that, he gave a flirtatious glance back through the bathroom door and into the bedroom.

"What about Kevin?"

"Taking his late-afternoon nap," he said. "He'll probably be up in a minute or two, though. Just so happens, though, that it's been a little over three months. So I don't expect anything that happens in there to take long."

"You're such a dork."

He responded with a kiss that not only cut her off but instantly erased the way she had been feeling about herself. He kissed her deeply and slowly and in it, she could feel the three months that were pent up within him. He led her gently to the bedroom and,

as he had suggested, he did all of the work—carefully and with skill.

Kevin's timing was perfect. He woke up three minutes after it was over. As they walked into the nursery together, Mackenzie pinched his butt. "I think that was a little more than light exercise."

"You feel okay?"

"I feel exceptional," she said. "So exceptional that I think I might try the gym tonight. You think you can watch little man while I head out for a bit?"

"Of course. Just don't overdo it."

And that was all it took to get Mackenzie motivated. She never half-assed anything. That included working out and, apparently, being a mother. Perhaps that was why a little over three months after bringing Kevin home, she felt guilty for going out for the first time. She'd gone to the grocery store and the doctor before, sure, but this was the first time she had headed out knowing that she would be away from her baby for more than an hour or so.

She got to the gym just after eight, so most of the crowd had thinned out. It was the same gym she had frequented when she had started with the bureau, before she had relied on the bureau's own facilities. It felt good to be back here, on a treadmill like anyone else in the city, fighting with the out-of-date resistance bands and working out just to be active.

She only managed half an hour before her abdomen started to hurt. She also had a severe cramp in her right leg which she tried

to work out but to no avail. She took a break, tried the treadmill again, but decided to call it a day.

Don't even try to be hard on yourself, she thought, but it was Ellington's voice in her head. *You've grown a human inside you and then had it cut out. You're not going to go back into this thing like Superwoman. Give it some time.*

She had broken a sweat, and that was good enough for her. She went back home, showered, and fed Kevin. He was so content that he fell asleep while nursing, something the doctors advised against. But she allowed it, holding him there until she, too, felt tired. When she put him down for bed, Ellington was at the kitchen table, working on some research issues with his current case.

"You good?" he asked her as she passed back through the living room.

"Yeah. I think I might have overdone it at the gym. I'm a little sore. Tired, too."

"Need me to do anything?"

"No. Maybe in the morning help me out with some light exercise again?"

"Happy to help, ma'am," he said with a smile over his laptop screen.

She was smiling, too, when she went to bed. Her life felt complete and she had a sore cramping in her legs, the feeling of her muscles starting to learn what they had once been used for. She drifted off within a minute, freshly exhausted.

She had no idea that she'd have the dream of the huge cornfield again, of her mother holding her baby.

And, likewise, she had no idea just how badly it would affect her this time.

When the nightmare stirred her awake this time, the scream *did* come out of her mouth. When she sat up in bed, she did so with so much force than she nearly fell off the mattress. Beside her, Ellington also sat up, a gasp rising in his throat.

“Mackenzie...what is it? Are you okay?”

“Just a nightmare. That’s all.”

“Sounds like it was terrible. Is it anything you want to talk about?”

With her heart still hammering in her chest, she lay back down. For a moment, she was sure she could taste the dirt from the nightmare in her mouth. “Not in depth. It’s just...I think I need to see my mother. I need to let her know about Kevin.”

“That’s fair,” Ellington said, clearly still baffled by the nightmare and its effect on her. “That makes sense, I guess.”

“We can talk about it later,” she said, already feeling the lure of sleep. The images of the nightmare were still there with her, but she knew if she didn’t get back to sleep soon, it was going to be a long night indeed.

She woke up several hours later to the sound of Kevin crying.

Ellington was already starting to get out of bed, but she reached out and placed her hand on his chest. “I got him,” she said.

Ellington didn't put up much of a fight. They were slowly starting to get back on a relatively normal sleep schedule, and neither of them were keen to start testing it. Besides, he had a meeting in the morning, something about a new case where he was going to be the lead with a surveillance team. He'd told her all about it over dinner but she had been too lost in her own thoughts. Lately, her attention had been all over the place and it was hard to focus—particularly whenever Ellington talked about work. She missed it and was envious of him but could not quite dream of leaving Kevin just yet, no matter how good the daycare was.

Mackenzie went into the nursery and gently took him out of the crib. Kevin had gotten to the point where he would put a stop to his crying (mostly) the moment one of his parents came to him. He knew he was going to get what he needed and had already learned to trust his own little instincts. Mackenzie changed his diaper and then set herself down in the rocking chair and nursed him.

Her mind drifted to her parents. She could obviously not remember feeding as a baby. But the mere idea that her mother had once breastfed her was too much to even imagine. Still, she now knew that motherhood brought with it a whole new filter through which to see the world. Perhaps her own mother's filter had been skewed—and perhaps even totally destroyed when her husband had been murdered.

Have I been too hard on her all this time? she wondered.

Mackenzie finished feeding Kevin, thinking long and hard about her future—not just for the coming weeks, when her maternity leave would come to an end, but to the months and years ahead and how she might best spend them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mackenzie's clothes were finally starting to fit again, and a few repeat trips to the gym had her feeling as if regaining her physique from a year or so ago might not be as hard as she thought. She was nearly fully healed from the surgery and she was beginning to remember what her life had been like before she had loaned out her body to the growth and development of her son.

As Mackenzie's maternity leave drew closer and closer to its end, she started to understand that it was going to be harder to go back to work than she had thought. But even before that, there was the issue of her mother to contend with. It had come up here and there in conversations with Ellington ever since she had last had the nightmare but she had made sure not to commit. After all, it was not normal for her to have a strong desire to see her mother. She usually avoided any interaction with her or even conversations about her at all costs.

But now, with only eight days remaining in her maternity leave, she had to make the decision. She had been using Kevin as the primary excuse not to make the trip, but he had been in daycare for a week now and seemed to be doing quite well with the adjustment.

Besides, in her heart, she had already made her decision. She was sitting at the bar between the kitchen and the living room,

already certain that she was going to go. But actually pulling the trigger on the trip was much different than accepting the idea of it.

“Can I ask you what might sound like a dumb question?” Ellington asked.

“Always.”

“What’s the worst that could happen? You go, it’s awkward and nothing is accomplished. You come back here to your happy baby and drop-dead sexy husband and life resumes as normal.”

“Maybe I’m afraid that it will go well,” Mackenzie offered.

“Now *that*, I’m not too sure about.”

“What if it goes well and she wants to be a part of my life? Of *our* lives.”

Kevin was sitting in the bouncer seat, staring at the little aquatic creatures mobile attached to the front of it. Mackenzie looked at him with the last comment, doing everything she could not to think of that image of her mother from the nightmares, sitting in that damned rocking chair.

“You’d be okay here with Kevin, by yourself?” she asked.

“I think I can handle him. We can have some dude-time.”

Mackenzie smiled. She tried to picture Ellington the way she had originally met him nearly two and a half years ago, but it was hard to do. He had matured beyond measure, but at the same time, had also managed to become more vulnerable with her. There was no way he would have showed such a nurturing or goofball side of himself when they had first met.

“Then I’m going to do it. Two days, that’s it—and that’s just so I won’t be constantly traveling.”

“Yeah. Get a motel room. A good one, with a hot tub in the room. Sleep in. After six months of learning to be a mom and constantly adjusting sleep schedules, I think you’ve earned it.”

His encouragement was genuine and though he had not said as much, she was pretty sure she knew why. He had essentially given up on any sort of normal grandparent scene on his side of the family. Perhaps if he could mend some fences with her mother, Kevin might have some kind of normal grandparent. She wanted to ask him about this but decided not to. Maybe after she got back and knew whether the trip had been a bust or not.

She grabbed her laptop, sat on the couch, and went online to purchase her tickets. When she finished filling everything out and hit that final mouse-click, she felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders. She shut the top of the laptop and let out a sigh. She looked down to Kevin, still in his bouncer seat, and gave him a bright smile, sticking her nose out at him. She was rewarded by a slowly dawning smile.

“Okay,” she said, looking back at Ellington. He was still in the kitchen, cleaning up from dinner. “Tickets purchased. My flight leaves tomorrow at eleven thirty in the morning. You okay to pick little man up from daycare?”

“Yes. And that will start two days of absolute man-fueled debauchery. I’m afraid neither of us may ever be the same.”

She knew he was doing his best to keep her thinking positive.

It was helping to some extent, but her mind was already on something else—one last errand she wanted to tackle before leaving DC.

“You know,” she said, “if it’s okay with you, I might get you to drop him off at daycare, too. I think I need to speak with McGrath.”

“You finally make a decision about that, too?”

“I don’t know. I want to go back. I don’t know what the hell else I would do with my life, honestly. But...being a mother... I want to give Kevin what I never had when it came to a parent, you know? And both of us working as FBI agents...what kind of a life would that be for him?”

“This is all heavy stuff,” he said. “I know we’ve talked it out a few times before, but I don’t think it’s a decision you need to make right now. I think you’re right; talk it over with McGrath. You never know what that man is thinking. Maybe there are ways around it. Maybe a...I don’t know...maybe a different role?”

“As in, no longer an agent?”

Ellington shrugged and came over to sit beside her. “That’s why I feel like I can actually understand what you’re going through,” he said, taking her hand. “I literally can’t see you being anything other than an agent.”

She smiled at him, hoping he knew just how good he was at knowing exactly what to say. It was just the boost she needed to pick up the phone and place a call to McGrath after hours. She hadn’t done it much in her career—and never when it wasn’t

about a case—but she felt the urgency of it all of a sudden.

And it only grew stronger as she listened to the phone start to ring in her ear.

She fully expected McGrath to be irritated by meeting with her at such an early hour. But when she found his office door already open at eight o'clock, McGrath was already perched behind his desk. He had a cup of coffee in his hands as he went over a small stack of daily reports. When he looked up to her as she entered, the smile on his face looked genuine.

“Agent White, it’s so good to see you,” he said.

“Likewise,” she said, taking a seat on the opposite side of his desk.

“You look well rested. Is the baby finally on a normal sleep schedule?”

“Normal enough,” she said. She already felt awkward. McGrath was not one who typically engaged in small talk. The idea that he truly was glad to see her back in the building crossed her mind and made her feel almost guilty for the reason behind the meeting.

“Okay, so you asked for this meeting, and you have about half an hour before my next one,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“Well, my maternity leave is up next Monday. And if I’m being honest, I don’t know if I’m ready to come back.”

“Is it a physical thing?” he asked. “I know healing from a C-section can be exhausting and take a great deal of time.”

No, that’s not it. The doctors have basically cleared me for just about everything. If I’m being honest, I just feel torn about what to do.” She was alarmed to feel the stinging of tears at the corners of her eyes.

Apparently, McGrath saw them too, and felt for her. He did his best to appear casual as he leaned forward and spoke, looking away to give her the dignity of wiping her tears away before they escaped.

“Agent White, I’ve been with the bureau for almost thirty years now. In my time here, I’ve seen countless female agents get married and have children. Some of them left the bureau or, at the very least, took on a role with less risk. I can’t sit here and tell you that I understand what you’re going through because that would be a lie. But I *have* seen it. Sometimes it was with agents I would have never expected to walk away. Is this sort of where you’re headed?”

She nodded. “I want to come back. I miss it...more than I care to admit, really. I honestly don’t even know what I’m asking for. Maybe a few more weeks? I know that’s sort of asking for special privilege or whatever, but I just can’t make this decision right now.”

“The best I can do is to give you another week. If you want it. Or you can come back and I can just assign you something of a desk job. Research, numbers, mobile surveillance, something

like that. Would that interest you?"

Honestly, none of it interested her. But at least it was something. It was McGrath giving her the proof she needed that there were options available to her.

"Maybe it would," she said.

"Well, take the weekend to think it over. Maybe get away somewhere and sort out your thoughts."

"Oh, I'm going somewhere, all right. Back to Nebraska for a visit."

She wasn't sure why she had told him that. She wondered if McGrath had always been this easy to speak to or if he perhaps had some kind of softer aura about him, making him more approachable. It was weird. She'd only been away for three months and McGrath suddenly seemed like a different person—more caring, more friendly.

"Good to hear it. Leaving Ellington alone with the baby? Isn't that a bit brave?"

"I don't know," she said with a smile. "He seems to be looking forward to it."

McGrath nodded politely but it was clear that his mind was elsewhere. "White...did you ask for this meeting to ask my advice? Or just to get a gauge on how I might react if you told me you were thinking of walking away?"

She only shrugged as she answered: "Maybe a bit of both."

"Well, I can say without a doubt that I'd much prefer for you to stay. Your record speaks for itself and, as much as I hate to admit

it, your instincts are almost supernatural. I've never seen anything quite like it in all my years with the bureau. I do believe it would be an absolute waste for you to leave your career behind at such an early age. On the other hand, I've raised two children—one boy and one girl. They're both grown now, but raising them was one of the most enjoyable and rewarding experiences of my life.”

“I had no idea you had kids,” she said.

“I tend not to talk too much about my personal life while at work. But in a case like this, with something as valuable as your career on the line, I don't mind giving you a behind the scenes peek.”

“I appreciate that.”

“So...go enjoy your weekend back home. Do you want to meet again on Monday to figure out what comes next?”

“That sounds fine,” she said. But Monday seemed every far away. Because as she got up from the chair, she knew that her next stop was the airport. And after that, she'd be back in Nebraska.

As she made her way back through the FBI building, she felt as if she were setting a trap for herself. For most people, the ghosts of their pasts tended to haunt them. But as she prepared to head back to Nebraska to meet with her mother, Mackenzie felt as if she was not only awakening those ghosts, but giving them ample opportunity to prepare for their haunting.

CHAPTER SIX

It was one fifteen Nebraska time when her plane landed in Lincoln. She had spent the bulk of the flight trying to plan out how the trip would go. But it wasn't until she heard the wheels squealing on the landing strip that she knew she simply needed to pull the bandage off and get it over with. She could still enjoy that night to herself in a luxurious motel room—which she had already booked. And she could do it after getting the hard part out of the way.

She'd used bureau resources in a kind of sketchy way to find out that her mother was still working in the same position she had been when they'd crossed paths a little over a year ago. She was still part of the cleaning crew at a Holiday Inn located in the small town of Boone's Mill. And as it just so happened, Boone's Mill was two hours away from Belton, the little town she had grown up in—a town she planned to visit before she headed back home.

Another urge struck her as she sidled up to the rent-a-car station in the airport twenty minutes later. She knew that about half an hour from this very airport was the building where she had started her career as a detective. She thought of the man she had worked with for nearly three years before the FBI had courted her—a man named Walter Porter who, somewhere behind his distaste of having to work with a woman and his ingrained sexism, had actually taught her a great deal about what it took to

be an effective enforcer of the law. She wondered what he was up to. He'd likely be retired by now, but being back here, so close to the station, made her want to catch up with him.

One scab at a time, she told herself as she collected the keys from a grouchy woman behind the counter.

Once she got on the road, Mackenzie pulled up the number to her mother's Holiday Inn, just to make sure she was working. As it turned out, her shift ended in half an hour, which would put Mackenzie about an hour outside of being able to meet her mother at the hotel. That wasn't too big of a concern, though, as Mackenzie also had her mother's home address to go by.

She was surprised to find that the flat land and familiar atmosphere of Nebraska calmed her significantly. There was no anxiety or fear about meeting her mother. If anything, the open land and sky made her miss Kevin. When she realized that she had not been away from him for this long, her heart sagged in her chest. For a moment, it was hard to breathe. But then she thought of Ellington and Kevin, together in the apartment as the day came to a close. Ellington was an outstanding father, in ways that were still surprising her on a daily basis. She started to understand that perhaps Ellington needed this time alone with his son just as badly as she needed this time to venture back into her past to try to mend bridges with her mother.

If these are the emotions all parents go through, she thought, *maybe I have been giving my mother too hard of a time.*

Of all of the thoughts that had been rolling through her head

as soon as she had stepped foot on the plane in DC, it was this one that brought tears to her eyes. She knew her father had dealt with a few of his own demons, though the nature of them had been vague at best because her mother had never trashed him in front of her or Stephanie. Mackenzie tried to then apply that to the fact that her mother had been left a widow, with two girls to raise. It was very possible (and this was something Mackenzie had considered before) that she'd held such a high opinion of her father because he had died when she'd been young. As a young girl, she'd had no reason to doubt him or to see him as anything other than her own personal hero. But what about the mother who had tried to raise two girls, ultimately fail, and then receive the scorn of not only most of the community, but one of her own daughters as well?

Mackenzie managed a thin smile through the tears as she wiped them away. She wondered if these thoughts were suddenly becoming so clear because now she, too, was a mother. She'd heard about women changing many facets of their attitudes once they had a child but had never really considered it. But here she was, living proof of that theory, as she felt her heart begin to soften for a woman she had essentially demonized for most of her life.

Nebraska rolled by outside of the car, ushering Mackenzie back to her past. And for the first time since leaving the state, she found herself nearly eager to step back into that past and let the cards fall where they may.

Patricia White lived in a two-bedroom apartment six miles away from the Holiday Inn where she worked. It was located in a small complex that was not quite run down but definitely in need of some maintenance and attention. Mackenzie held her phone in her hand, the address and apartment number on her screen courtesy of some underhanded bureau resource use.

When she approached her mother's second-floor apartment, she did not hesitate at the door or freeze in her thoughts as she had expected. She knocked right away, doing her best not to think about it too much. The only real question was how to start the conversation...how to ease into the waters rather than jumping in and dog-paddling uselessly.

She heard footsteps approaching after a few moments. When the door opened and she saw the look of surprise on her mother's face, *that's* when Mackenzie froze up. She wasn't sure when she had last seen her mother smile, so the one that spread across her face made Mackenzie feel like she was looking at a different woman.

"Mackenzie," her mother said, her voice thin and excited. "Oh my God, what are you doing here?"

"I had some time off and figured I'd come out and say hello." It wasn't a total lie, so she was okay with it for the time being.

"No call first?"

Mackenzie shrugged. “I thought about it, but I also knew how it would go. Besides...I just needed to get away for a while.”

“You okay?” She sounded genuinely concerned.

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“Well, come in, come in. The place is a wreck, but hopefully you can look past it.”

Mackenzie stepped inside and saw that the place was not a wreck at all. In fact, it was quite tidy. Her mother had decorated minimally, making it easy for Mackenzie to spot the old picture of her and Stephanie sitting on the small end table by the couch.

“How have you been, Mom?”

“Good. Very good, actually. I’ve been saving up some money here and there, so I was finally able to get out of debt. I got a promotion at work...it’s still not much for a job, but the money is better and I manage a few ladies on the crew. How about you?”

Mackenzie sat down on the couch, hoping her mother would do the same. She was thankful when she did. She had never been a believer in saying *You might want to sit down for this* because it was far too dramatic.

“Well, I do have a bit of news,” she said. She started the slow process of opening up Photos on her phone and scrolling for a particular picture. “You know that Ellington and I got married, right?”

“Yes, I know. Funny that you still call him by his last name. Is that like a work thing?”

Mackenzie couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yeah, I think it is. Are

you mad you missed out on a wedding?”

“God no. I hate weddings. That might be the smartest decision you’ve ever made.”

“Thanks,” she said. Her nerves were bubbling like lava as the next words came out of her mouth. “Look, I came out here because I have something else to share with you.”

With that, she held out her phone. Her mother took it and looked at the picture of Kevin in his little hospital blanket, two days old just before they left the hospital.

“Is this...?” Patricia asked.

“You’re a grandmother, Mom.”

The tears were instantaneous. Patricia dropped the phone to the couch and put her hands over her mouth. “Mackenzie...he’s precious.”

“He is.”

“How old is he? You look too good to have just had him.”

“A little over three months,” Mackenzie said. She looked away from the slight sting of pain that crossed her mother’s face. “I know. I’m sorry. I wanted to call sooner, to let you know. But after that last time we talked...Mom, I didn’t even know if you’d want to know.”

“I get that,” she said right away. “And it means the world to me that you showed up to tell me in person.”

“You’re not upset?”

“God, no. Mackenzie...you could have never told me. I would have never known the difference. I think I was fully prepared to

never even see you again and...and I..."

"It's okay, Mom."

She wanted to reach out to her, to take her hand or embrace her. But she knew anything of the sort would feel forced and strange to both of them.

"I got a new blender last week," her mother said, out of nowhere.

"Um...okay."

"You drink margaritas?"

Mackenzie smiled and nodded. "God, yes. I haven't had a drink in about a year."

"Are you nursing? Can you drink?"

I am, but we've got enough stored up in the freezer."

Her mother made a confused face but then burst into laughter. "I'm sorry. But this is all so surreal...you having a baby, storing breast milk..."

"It *is* surreal," Mackenzie agreed. "And so is being here. So... where are we on those margaritas?"

"It was your last visit up here that did it," Patricia said.

They were sitting on the couch, each holding a margarita. They sat on opposite ends, clearly still not comfortable enough with the situation.

"What about that visit?" Mackenzie asked.

“You weren’t overly rude or anything, but I saw how well you were doing. And I thought to myself, *she came from me*. I know I wasn’t a great mother...not at all. But I *am* proud of you, even if I didn’t have much to do with the way you turned out. It made me feel like I could make something of myself, too.”

“And you can.”

“I’m trying,” she said. “Fifty-two years old and finally out of debt. Of course, working at a hotel isn’t the grandest of careers...”

“Are you happy, though?” Mackenzie asked.

“I am. More so now that you’ve come to visit. And told me this wonderful news.”

“Ever since I closed Dad’s case...I don’t know. If I’m being honest, I think I just tried to push any thought of you right out of my head. I figured if I could put what happened to Dad in the past, I might as well put you there, too. And I was fully prepared to do that. But then Kevin came along and Ellington and I realized that we weren’t really giving our baby much of a family beyond the two of us. We want Kevin to have grandparents, you know?”

“He has an aunt, too, you know,” Patricia said.

“I know. Where *is* Stephanie?”

“She finally went ahead and made the move to LA. I don’t even know what she’s doing, and I’m afraid to ask. I haven’t spoken to her in about two months.”

Hearing this stung Mackenzie a bit. She had always known

that Stephanie was something of a loose cannon when it came to any kind of stability in life. But still, she rarely stopped to think that Stephanie was yet another daughter who had chosen to live a life mostly detached from her mother. Sitting there on the couch, margarita in hand, it was the first time Mackenzie had ever bothered to wonder what it must be like for a mother to know that both of her children had decided that their lives would be better off without her in them.

“I feel like I should tell you I’m sorry,” Mackenzie said. “I know I pushed you away pretty much after Dad’s funeral. I was only ten, so maybe I wasn’t aware that’s what I was doing, but... yeah. I just kept doing it for the rest of my life. And here’s the thing, Mom...I want Kevin to have a grandmother. I really do. And I hope you might want to work on getting there with me.”

Patricia was again choked up by tears. She leaned across the couch, closing the distance between them, and wrapped her arms around Mackenzie. “I wasn’t there, either,” Patricia said. “I could have called or made some kind of an effort. But when I realized you had checked out—even as a kid—I let it go. I was almost relieved. And I hope you can forgive me for that.”

“I can. Can you forgive me for pushing you away?”

“I already have,” Patricia said, breaking the hug and sipping from her margarita to stem the flow of tears.

Mackenzie could feel her own tears coming on, and she wasn’t quite ready to be *that* open in front of her mother. She stood up, cleared her throat, and downed the rest of her drink.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said. “Let’s grab dinner somewhere. My treat.”

A look of disbelief crossed Patricia White’s face which was slowly dissolved by a smile. Mackenzie could not remember ever seeing her mother smile so wide; it was like seeing a different person. And maybe she *was* a different person. If she gave her mother a chance, maybe she would find that the woman she had pushed away for so long was not quite the monster she had convinced herself she was.

After all, Mackenzie was definitely a different person than she had been at ten. Hell, she was a different person than she had been a little over a year ago when she had last spoken with her mother. If having a baby had taught Mackenzie anything, it was that life could change pretty quickly.

And if life itself could change so quickly, why not people?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mackenzie woke up the next morning with a very gentle hangover. Reconnecting with her mother over dinner had been nice, as had the few drinks they'd had afterward. Mackenzie had made it to her hotel room—the luxurious one she and Ellington had agreed upon—and slipped into the hot tub with a bottle of wine she had ordered from room service. She knew the two extra glasses she'd had while relaxing in the tub might be a bit too much, but she figured she deserved it after gestating a human being in her womb and having to forgo alcohol the entire time—not to mention the additional time without a drink while she was actively breastfeeding and pumping.

The slight headache she had as she got out of bed and started to get dressed was a small price to pay. It had been nice to be alone after slowly starting to mend things with her mother. They had caught up, shared some stories, shared some pains, and then called it a night. With plans to reconnect in a week or so, after Mackenzie had gotten back home and decided what to do about work, there was only one other thing on Mackenzie's list of things to do while visiting Nebraska.

She felt like she had come full circle. Traveling here alone, seeing her mother, relishing the wide open spaces the state had to offer. Even though she was not one for sentiment, she could not ignore the draw to go back by her old station—the station

where she started her career as a detective almost six years ago.

After grabbing breakfast, she did just that. It was an hour and a half drive from her hotel in Lincoln. Her plane did not leave for DC for another seven hours, so she had plenty of time. She honestly didn't even know why she was going. She had not cared much for her supervisor and, as ashamed as she was to admit it to herself, she could barely remember anyone she worked with. She did, of course, remember Officer Walter Porter. He had served as her partner for a small stretch of time and had been by her side during the Scarecrow Killer case—the case that had eventually attracted the attention of the FBI and their pursuit of her.

All of the memories came trickling back as she parked her car across the street from the station. It looked so much smaller now, but in a way that made her proud to know it. More than nostalgia, it was a heartwarming familiarity.

She crossed the street and stepped inside, unable to stop the smile from touching the corner of her lips. The small entryway led to a receptionist-type desk, which was paneled in with a sliding glass. Behind the woman sitting at the desk, a small bullpen of sorts was set up and looked exactly the same as it had when Mackenzie had last stepped foot in the building. She approached the glass, delighted to find a familiar face, albeit one she had not thought of in a very long time, sitting behind the glass.

Nancy Yule looked as if she had not aged a bit. She still had the pictures of her kids perched at her desk, and the same little

plaque by her phone, reciting a bit of scripture that Mackenzie could not remember.

Nancy looked up and it took her a few seconds to realize who had just walked in the door. “Oh my God,” Nancy said, getting to her feet and rushing to the door on the far side of the paneled wall. The door came open and Nancy came rushing out, capturing Mackenzie in a hug.

“Nancy, how are you?” Mackenzie said in the grip of the hug.

“Same old, same old,” Nancy said. “How are *you*? You look fantastic!”

“Thanks. I’m good. I just came out to visit my mother and thought I’d stop by to see my old haunts before I headed back home.”

“Is home still in DC?”

“It is.”

“Still with the bureau?”

“I am. Sort of living the dream, I don’t mind saying. Got married, had a child.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Nancy said, and Mackenzie didn’t doubt she meant it. A little flicker of sadness came to her face, though, when she added: “Though, I’m not so sure your visit here is going to be prove very happy. Just about everything around here has changed.”

“Like what?”

“Well, Chief Nelson retired last year. Sergeant Berryhill stepped up and filled in his place. Do you remember him?”

Mackenzie shook her head. “No, I can’t say that I do. Hey, would you happen to have an address or phone number for Walter Porter? I have a number for him but it hasn’t worked in quite some time.”

“Oh, sweetie, I forgot you were his partner there for a while. I...well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Walter died about eight months ago. He had a pretty massive heart attack.”

“Oh,” was all that Mackenzie could think to say. She also wondered if she was a terrible person for not being too terribly saddened by the news. Honestly, though, he seemed like nothing more than a passing acquaintance at best.

“That’s terrible,” she said. She glanced back through the glass, into the bullpen and the hallways beyond where she had spent nearly five years of her life. This was the epicenter of where she had made her first arrest, solved her first case, pissed off her first male supervisor numerous times.

They were all fond memories, but they felt like nothing more than faded photographs.

“There might be a few officers out on patrol that you once worked with,” Nancy commented. “Sauer, Baker, Hudson...”

“I don’t want to interrupt anyone’s day,” Mackenzie said. “I was really just taking a walk down memory lane and—”

The buzzing of her cell phone from her pocket interrupted her. She grabbed for it instantly, assuming it would be Ellington with a story about something cute Kevin had done—or some medical issue. Their baby boy had been healthy for his entire three and

a half months of life and they were just waiting for that first doctor's visit.

But the name she saw on her display was absolutely not one she had been expecting while on her little sabbatical out to Nebraska. The display read **McGrath**.

"Excuse me, Nancy. I need to take this."

Nancy gave a little nod and stepped back through the doorway toward her desk as Mackenzie took the call.

"This is Agent White."

"Based on how you're answering the phone, can I assume you're going to stay with us?" McGrath said. There was no humor in his voice. If anything, it almost sounded as if he were trying to convince her.

"Sorry. Habit. I still don't know yet."

"Well, maybe I can help. Listen... I respect what you're going through and appreciate the honesty you showed in my office the other day. But I'm calling to ask you something of a favor. Not a favor, really, because it's technically part of a job you still have. But I got a call about a case an hour or so ago. It's in Wyoming, so it's out your way. And since you just happen to be out there, I thought I'd give you first crack at it. Seems like an easy one. You may not have to do much more than show up, check out a crime scene, and question a few people."

"I thought you said you respected the conversation we had in your office."

"I do. Which is why I'm offering you the case first. You're

already out that way, it looks to be simple...and I figure it could be a good test to see if your heart is still in it. You've also recently worked another case that was sort of similar from the looks of it. If you say no, that's perfectly fine. I can get someone out there as soon as tomorrow morning."

The feeling of her life coming full circle washed over her again. Here she was, standing in the station she had started out in as a hopeful officer with ambitions of being a detective—ambitions that she achieved in a very short time. And now here she was, speaking to a director with the FBI not even seven years later.

She looked to the other side of the glass, to the desks and offices and hallways. It was easy to see that space and recall the sense of purpose she'd had back then. She still felt it, but it was quite different as a cop just starting out, a woman on a force that was primarily men, wanting to make a difference in the world.

"How simple are we talking?" she asked.

"There's suspicions that someone is pushing people to their deaths off of popular climbing sites. The latest one was in Grand Teton National Park. So far, there are believed to be two victims."

"How do we know these aren't just typical rock-climbing accidents?"

"There's evidence of violence before the falls."

Already, Mackenzie's thoughts were sorting themselves out, trying to come up with answers even at this early stage. And

because of that, she knew what her answer for McGrath would be. It had been nearly eight whole months since she had last done anything considered *active* in regards to her job; the amount of excitement that quickly overtook her as she gave her answer was welcome, but unexpected.

“Send me the case details and trip itinerary. But I want to be back home within two or three days.”

“Of course. I don’t see that being a problem. Thanks, Agent White. I’ll send everything I have to your e-mail.”

Mackenzie ended the call and felt as if she were standing in the middle of a very surreal dream for a moment. Here she was, standing in the first police station she’d ever worked in, ruminating on her past and trying to sort out her future. And now there was this call from McGrath, this unexpected case coming out of nowhere in the middle of it all. It felt like the universe was trying to sway her in her decision-making.

“Mackenzie?”

She was torn away from the absurdity of it all by Nancy Yule’s voice. She smiled and shook her head. “Sorry. Zoned out for a bit.”

“Seemed like an intense call,” Nancy said. “Is everything okay?”

Mackenzie surprised herself a bit when she nodded and said: “Yes. I think everything is just fine, actually.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Seven hours later, she was in the sky somewhere over northern Nebraska, headed for Wyoming. Everything had happened so quickly that she had not had a chance (or any proper location available) to print out the materials that McGrath sent over to her concerning the case out at Grand Teton National Park. Because of that, she was forced to go over all of it on her iPhone.

There honestly wasn't too much to go over. The police reports were scant at best, as were the forensics reports. When a body fell from such a height, the cause of death wasn't typically debated all that much. She scanned the documents several times but found nothing—not because of her own skills, but because of a lack of information. Even the details she'd received on the victims wasn't much to go on. Two people had been involved in fatal rock climbing accidents, but there was evidence to suggest that they may not have been accidents at all. There was a severed rope involved in one of the cases, and a wound on one of the bodies that did not seem to line up with injuries expected from a fall.

Mackenzie made some notes in her phone, wondering if the father had some sort of tie to the cause of his son's murder. It wasn't much to go on but given the lack of information she had, at least it was something.

As the plane made its descent into Jackson Hole airport, Mackenzie was able to look out her window and see the peaks

of mountains from Grand Teton National Park. It was quite beautiful in the crisp blue sky of the evening, making the idea that there might be a killer running rampant down there all the more unnerving.

The sight also stirred an ache in her heart—an ache for Kevin. She felt like a failure for leaving him behind, like a heartless mother who had already placed certain priorities over her child. But she had read more than enough information on this sort of thing; she knew that such feelings were typical for new parents. Still, it didn't make the feeling any less real.

When she stepped off of the plane several moments later, she didn't quite feel like she was on a case. She had come into Jackson Hole in the same clothes she had been wearing when she had walked into the police station and spoke to Nancy Yule. She had obviously not packed her bureau attire for her trip to see her mother, nor had she packed her service weapon. This was something she'd have to sort out with the local PD. Hopefully there would be no hold-ups because there was no FBI field office in Wyoming; the office out of Denver covered the states of Colorado and Wyoming.

This realization made her feel like she was in the middle of nowhere—a feeling that only intensified when she stepped into the airport. It was a nice enough airport for sure, but the thin stream of bodies moving through it made the bustle of Dulles back in DC absolutely chaotic.

It was the lack of human traffic walking through the

concourse that made it very easy for Mackenzie to see the woman standing at the end of her gate, dressed in police blues. She looked to be about forty or so, her blonde hair hitched up in a ponytail to reveal a pretty and angular face. She seemed to be watching each and every person that got off of Mackenzie's flight. When they locked eyes, the female officer nodded politely and met Mackenzie on the concourse floor.

"Are you Agent White?" the woman asked. The silver tag above her left breast identified her as Timbrook.

"I am."

"Good. I'm Sergeant Shelly Timbrook. I figured I'd meet you here and save you the trouble of renting a car. Besides...the sooner I can get you out to the site, the better. The second victim—a twenty-two-year-old male named Bryce Evans—was found at the bottom of Logan's View and since that's located within the park, there's the worry of the public eye and all that."

"How far from here is the park entrance?" Mackenzie asked.

"Not even ten minutes. Add another five to that to get us to Logan's View."

"Then lead the way," Mackenzie said.

Timbrook took the lead and headed for the airport exit. Mackenzie followed behind, texting Ellington to let him know that she had arrived and met with local PD. When she had called to tell him about the call from McGrath, he had already known; he said McGrath had called him right after he'd gotten off the phone with her. Ellington had seemed excited for the

opportunity, claiming it seemed just like the sort of thing she'd need to get focus.

The hell of it was that he was right. And she wished he could be there with her. Not only was it the longest she had been away from Kevin since he'd been born, but she and Ellington had not spent any more than ten hours apart ever since her maternity leave had started one month before Kevin had arrived.

She missed him. It made her feel far too young and immature, but it was the truth. But she managed to push it to the side for now. She'd make sure to Facetime him and Kevin whenever she was able to check into a hotel. But based on the terrible lack of information in the police reports, she suspected she was in for a rather long afternoon.

"I'll go ahead and get this out of the way," Timbrook said. "I'm sort of a fan of yours. I know that sounds stupid. But when that whole Scarecrow Killer thing went down in Nebraska a couple year years ago, that was impressive. Do you mind me asking... is that how you ended up with the FBI?"

"More or less."

"It was refreshing to see you—a young woman—take charge of a force that was primarily men. Made me feel good."

Mackenzie wasn't sure how to handle that sort of compliment, so she skipped it entirely and went straight to business.

“I’ve studied the reports on both of the victims and there’s very little there,” she said. “I know the second victim was only discovered yesterday, but why the hold-up on any details for the first victim?”

“Because for the first half a day or so, everyone assumed it was just a tragic accident. Or maybe a suicide. I was even thinking along those lines myself. The body was found at the bottom of Exum Ridge. Mostly likely had been there for several days.”

“How far apart at Logan’s View and Exum Ridge?”

“It’s about two and a half miles. There are a few central trails that run between the two.”

“And the murders are believed to be about four days apart, right?”

“As far as we can tell. That’s based on that the coroners are saying. You have to keep in mind...both bodies were discovered by hikers. We have no way of knowing for sure how long the bodies had been there. Speaking to family and putting together the schedules of the victims, we can only come up with a pretty good idea, but nothing absolute.”

“Can you walk me through what you know of the first victim?”

“Sure. A woman named Mandy Yorke, twenty-three years of age. Her body was discovered at the base of Exum Ridge. She was a good distance away from any of the normal advertised climbing spots, indicating that she was something of a pro. It happens a lot...climbers that get quite good don’t stick to the traditional climbs. They’ll go off the beaten path to find

something more challenging. That's why it was assumed her death was an accident. But when we started looking over the evidence from the crime scene, we saw that her climbing rope had been cut."

"Intentionally?"

"Sure looked like it. It was a clean cut. We compared it to some old broken ropes at the park. The difference in appearance. A rope that had been frayed and Yorke's clean-cut one were very different."

"Any idea *where* the rope was cut?"

"At the top. It's as if the killer was waiting there, waiting for Yorke to reach the top and then cut it."

"Any sabotaged equipment from the second victim?" Mackenzie asked.

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