

A person in a dark jacket and pants is walking away from the viewer down a long, straight, paved road. The road is flanked by grassy fields and is shrouded in a thick, grey fog that obscures the horizon. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

BLAKE PIERCE

BEFORE

HE

HARMS

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 14

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Blake Pierce

Before He Harms

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

Before He Harms / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (A Mackenzie White Mystery)

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From Blake Pierce, bestselling author of ONCE GONE (a #1 bestseller with over 1,000 five star reviews), comes book #14 in the heart-pounding Mackenzie White mystery series. BEFORE HE HARMS is book #14 in the Mackenzie White mystery series, which begins with the #1 bestseller BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1), a free download with over 600 five-star reviews. Young women are turning up dead in rural Utah, members of a commune of fundamentalist polygamists. Can Mackenzie White penetrate their closed ranks to find out who may be wanting them dead? And can she enter the mind of a killer and stop him before it's too late? A dark psychological thriller filled with shocking twists and heart-pounding suspense, BEFORE HE HARMS is book #14 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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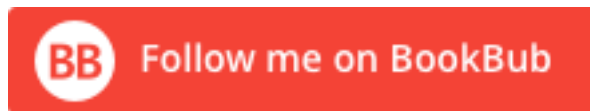
Blake Pierce

Before He Harms (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 14)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; 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 six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising seven books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); of the new ADELE SHARP mystery series; and of the new EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series.

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



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CHAPTER ONE

She was nearly slipping with each step, her feet sliding in her open-toed sandals as she ran through the damp field. It was night now, and there were little wisps of mist covering the ground from where the afternoon's drizzle of rain had passed through. It didn't seem like much, but she couldn't help but wonder if that little bit of moisture in the bottom of her sandals was going to be responsible for her death.

They had found her. She had no idea how, but they had.

The only chance she had of getting through this night alive was getting to Amy. The way she figured it, she had about another two miles of running. If she could make it through this stupid wet field, Amy's neighborhood was two miles away.

Irritated with the slipping and sliding, she stopped long enough to take the sandals off. If she'd had more time to prepare, she would have put on her sneakers but it had all happened so fast...

She held the sandals in her right hand and continued to run. It was a bit easier, though her tender feet started to complain instantly about the hard earth beneath the grass. She looked past the pain and ran as hard as she could. She had to get to Amy.

She glanced back behind her and saw only the staggered shape of the forest—trees rising and falling in the darkness like some strange graph. If there was someone following her, she could not see them. She wasn't naïve enough to think they weren't on to her, though. Certainly someone was looking for her, making sure she told no one.

The field came to an abrupt stop and suddenly, she found herself leaping across a ditch and onto a two-lane road. When she landed on the road, she skidded a bit, the tar biting into her heels. She looked to her right and saw the glow of streetlights in the distance. Amy would be there, somewhere in the midst of all of that glowing. This knowledge had her legs pumping even though they were screaming in pain from the several miles she had already run through the forest and the fields to get here.

She ran down the road, figuring there was at least half a mile between her and those glowing lights. She thought of her cell phone, lost somewhere back in the forest, and thought of how easy it would be to just call. She could have cried at the frustration.

As she ran, she did allow herself to cry. She ran and wept and dug deep into her lungs for her next breath.

Somehow, she came to the neighborhood. Her legs felt like jelly and she was so out of breath that she saw little black fireworks in her field of vision. But that was okay, because she was here now. She'd get to Amy. Amy would know what to do. She wasn't sure if it was even worth trying to contact the police, but that might not matter. All she needed to do was to get in touch with Amy. The thought of it was a relief.

She nearly started calling Amy's name as she neared her house. Just four or five more houses down and she'd be safe. The streetlights were rather dim thanks to the mist from the recent rain and the entire neighborhood looked like something out of a horror movie, but Amy's house was up there somewhere like a lighthouse.

She was putting so much focus on the shape of the houses that she did not hear the purring engine behind her. When she finally heard the car, she looked over her shoulder. When she saw it screaming toward her with its headlights off, she tried dashing hard to the right, but it did little good.

The car struck her hard on the right side. Everything went numb for a moment as she did half a cartwheel three feet in the air. But the pain all came racing on in a fury when she struck the pavement. Her head rocked off of the road and the world went mostly black.

This was why she was unable to see the face of the figure that parked the car in the middle of the street, got out, and pulled a knife on her.

She knew the person was slitting her throat, but the pain in her head and back blissfully masked that one particular pain.

The life went rushing out of her as the killer walked back to their car.

He and the car were both gone as she took her last breath on the rain-slicked road.

CHAPTER TWO

The apartment smelled like rosemary and lemon as dinner cooked on the stove, the first bottle of wine had been opened, and The Cure was playing on Spotify. To any random visitor, it might appear as if Mackenzie White was having a splendid afternoon. But what they would not see was the internal struggle and the anxiousness that had her nerves and stomach on edge.

The chicken was done and the asparagus was in the oven. Mackenzie sipped from a glass of red wine, trying to find something to do. Ellington was on the living room floor with Kevin, reading him a book. He looked up at her and rolled his eyes. When he came to an appropriate stopping point—where the Poky Little Puppy once again crawled under the fence—he hefted Kevin up in his arms and entered the kitchen.

“It’s just your mother,” he said. “You’re acting like we’re about to be visited by the IRS or something.”

“You’ve haven’t met her,” Mackenzie said.

“She anything like you?”

“Aside from the whole abandonment thing, yeah.”

“Then I’m sure she’s fine. You just tell me how much charm I need to lay on.”

“Not too much. She won’t get your jokes.”

“I take it back then,” Ellington said. “I hate the woman already.” He kissed Kevin’s forehead and shrugged. “She does have the right to meet her grandson, though. Aren’t you at all glad she wants to be involved?”

“I want to be. But it’s hard for me to trust her.”

“I get that,” Ellington said. “I don’t exactly get the warm fuzzies when it come to my mom either.”

“Yes, but at least she came knocking when you had a child, right?”

“That she did. But let’s not assume that’s a good thing. It might be years before we realize the traumatic impact that has on Kevin.”

“I’m not joking here, E. The woman is toxic. She’s just—”

She trailed off, not sure of how to end the comment. She’s just *what*? Selfish would be a fitting word. Immature would be another. The woman had essentially closed herself off after her husband had been killed and, as such, Mackenzie and her sister had been left without much of a mother-figure at all.

“She’s your mother,” Ellington said. “And I’m excited to meet her.”

“I’ll remind you of those words about an hour into her visit.”

They shared a kiss and Ellington returned to the living room to continue reading about the misadventures of the Poky Little Puppy. Mackenzie listened in as she sipped from her wine again and started to set the table. She glanced to the clock, noting that there were only six minutes left before her mother was set to show up. She had to admit, dinner smelled delicious and Kevin was looking more adorable than ever. He was getting too damned old for her liking. He was pulling himself up and scooting; they were fully expecting him to take his first steps any day now.

It was a good reminder of how long it had been since she’d seen her mother. Her son was about to walk now and her mother hadn’t—

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. She gave Ellington a startled look, to which he grinned, picked Kevin back up, and extended his free hand toward her. He’d been free of the cast from his previous injuries for about a week now, and it was good to see him using both arms comfortably.

She took it and he pulled her to him. “You take down some of the roughest people our society has to offer,” he reminded her. “Certainly you can make it through this.”

She nodded, and they walked together to the door. When they answered it, Mackenzie had to take a moment to collect her thoughts.

Her mother looked beautiful. She had taken care of herself in the months that had passed since she'd last seen her; Mackenzie thought that might have been almost a year at this point but wasn't quite sure. She looked healthy and actually *happy*. Her hair was done nicely and she looked maybe ten years younger than her actual age of fifty-three.

"Hey, Mom," Mackenzie said. "You look nice."

"You do, too." She looked past Mackenzie and then to Ellington, holding Kevin. "Sorry," she said. "We haven't officially met."

Watching her mother and Ellington shake hands was beyond surreal. And when Mackenzie saw Kevin studying the strange woman at their doorstep, her heart broke a bit. She had given something of an open invitation to her mother a little less than a year ago when she had gone out to Nebraska to tell her she was a grandmother. And it had taken her *this* long to take her up on it. To her credit, though, she had declined Mackenzie's offer to pay for the plane fare.

"Come on in, Mom," Mackenzie said.

Patricia White stepped into her daughter's apartment as if she were entering some sort of cathedral—with reverence and respect. As soon as the door was closed behind her, she looked at Kevin and then, with tears in her eyes, back to Mackenzie.

"Can I hold him?"

"You're his grandmother," Mackenzie said. "Of course you can."

When Ellington handed Kevin over, he did so without any hesitation. He was watching his mother-in-law's expression of awe and gratitude with the same focus as Mackenzie. While Mackenzie was glad to see her mother holding Kevin, there was certainly something surreal about it all.

"He looks just like you," Patricia said to her daughter.

"A good thing," Ellington said with a chuckle.

Mackenzie led her mother deeper into her apartment, bringing her into the living room. They sat down together, Mackenzie and Ellington sharing a look over Patricia's head as they settled down. Ellington gave her an *I-told-you-so* look which she returned with a scowl.

"You didn't already check into a hotel, did you?" Mackenzie asked.

"I did. Already dropped my stuff off." She never took her eyes away from Kevin as she spoke. Mackenzie wasn't sure she had ever seen her mother smile so big in her life.

"You didn't have to do that, Mom. I told you that you're welcome to stay here."

"I know," she said, finally taking her eyes away from her grandson as she bounced him on her knee. "But you both have busy jobs and I didn't want to get in the way. Besides, I have a hot tub in my room for tonight and some sightseeing to do tomorrow. I've never been to DC before, so..."

She stopped here, as if that ended the entire conversation. And as far as Mackenzie was concerned, it did.

"Well, dinner is just about ready," Mackenzie said. "Another few minutes. The table is already set if we want to move in there."

They did just that, Patricia taking Kevin with her as Ellington moved Kevin's highchair to the edge of the dining table. As they all settled in, Ellington pouring wine for himself and Patricia, Mackenzie brought the dinner in bit by bit. She'd always had something of a knack for cooking, but she had to stick to simple things. Tonight's offering was a simple four-ingredient rosemary-lemon chicken with potatoes and asparagus. Patricia looked as if as if this, too, surprised her.

"You know how to cook?" she asked.

"Somewhat. I'm not great."

"She's being modest," Ellington said.

"She always was."

And just like that, dinner began. The conversation was a bit awkward, but not painful. Ellington spent most of the time talking, letting Patricia know more about him: where he was raised, how long he'd been an agent, and his version of how his relationship with her daughter had started. Mackenzie was also surprised at how much it meant to her when her mother complimented her cooking. The entire time, Kevin sat in his highchair, eating little bits of chicken that Mackenzie cut off for him. He was getting quite good at feeding himself with his hands, but a good amount of food still ended up on the floor.

By the time everyone's plate had been cleaned and the bottle of wine was empty, Mackenzie realized that there was a very good chance this was not going to be the train wreck she had feared. With dinner over, Ellington tidied up Kevin and gave him a few yogurt melts before clearing off the table. Mackenzie sat across from her mother while the sounds of Ellington filling the dishwasher came from the kitchen.

"I don't suppose you've spoken with your sister lately?" Patricia said.

"No. The last time we spoke, you said she was in LA, right?"

"Yes. And if that's changed, she hasn't reached out to speak with me. I swear, it seems like she just became even more distant once you wrapped the case concerning your father. I never understood how she—"

She was interrupted by a knock at the apartment door... which was curious, because it was rare that she and Ellington ever got visitors.

"Babe, can you get that?" Ellington called from the kitchen. "I'm elbow-deep in dirty dishes."

"One second, Mom," Mackenzie said, getting up from the table. She gave Kevin a playful little tweak on the nose as she passed by. She was surprised at how well this was going. She might even dare say she was enjoying the visit. The afternoon was going remarkably well.

She answered the door with a slight spring her step. Yet, when she answered it, the spring snapped and the real world came roaring back toward her.

"Hello, Mackenzie," said the woman at the door.

Mackenzie tried on a fake smile that didn't quite fit. "Hey, E," she called out over her shoulder. "Your mom is here."

CHAPTER THREE

Mackenzie honestly had nothing against Frances Ellington. She'd been something of a saving grace when Mackenzie had gone back to work, stepping in and watching Kevin for them. It also didn't hurt that Kevin loved his Grandma E very much. But the idea of having both grandmothers in the same place at the same time was incredibly unsettling. Mackenzie felt she knew both women well enough to know that it was the equivalent of pushing a powder keg down a hill where a raging fire was growing.

Slowly, timidly, Mackenzie led Frances into the dining room. The moment Kevin saw her, his face lit up and he held his arms out. Behind them, Ellington came into the room with a dumbfounded look on his face.

"Mom...what are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by to take you guys out to dinner, but it looks like I was a little late."

"You would have known that if you'd called."

Frances ignored her son, spotted Patricia sitting at the table, and flashed a huge smile. "I'm Frances Ellington, by the way."

"And I'm Patricia White," Patricia said. "It's good to meet you."

There was an incredibly tense silence that everyone could feel. It seemed even Kevin was taken aback, looking around the room to see if something was wrong. His eyes finally landed on Mackenzie and when she gave him a big smile, that seemed to be the end of it for him.

"Well, if we're all going to be here, I may as well break out dessert," Ellington said. "It's not much, just an ice cream cake that was calling my name at the grocery store yesterday."

"It sounds lovely," Frances said as she sat down in the chair next to Kevin. Kevin gave her his undivided attention, his new grandmother now totally forgotten.

"Frances watches him from time to time," Mackenzie explained to her mother. She hoped that simple statement was mindful because to Mackenzie's ear, it sounded almost like an accusation. *She keeps him from time to time because she chose to be a part of his life from the start.* That's how it sounded to Mackenzie.

Ellington brought in the cake and started slicing. When he gave Kevin a little piece, he responded by promptly slamming his hand down onto it and giggling. This elicited laughter from both grandmothers which, in turn, resulted in another attack on the cake from Kevin.

"Wait now," Patricia said. "Isn't he too young for cake like that?"

"No," Mackenzie said. "Kevin loves ice cream."

"I don't remember ever giving you ice cream that young."

Mackenzie thought, but did not dare say: *I'm surprised you remember much of anything from my childhood.*

"Oh yeah," Frances said. "He especially loves strawberry ice cream. But not chocolate. You should see the yucky faces this kid makes when he tries anything chocolate."

Mackenzie watched her mother's face and saw the ghost of the woman she had once been. There was disappointment there, and a look of embarrassment. She instantly started to straighten her posture into a defensive stance and Mackenzie knew right away that things were going to get dicey if they continued on this way.

"Don't worry, though, Mom," Mackenzie said. "He gets plenty of healthy stuff, too."

"I wasn't questioning, I was just...curious. It's been a while since I raised a child..."

"Isn't it odd?" Frances said. "You think you're done with being ensnared by the magic of children when your own leave home and then...*bam!* You're a grandparent."

“It is, I suppose,” Patricia said, looking at Kevin. She reached out with one hand and he grasped it, coating her index finger in vanilla ice cream.

“As you can see,” Frances said, “he’s quite good at sharing, too.”

Patricia chuckled at this, a noise that earned a big smile from Kevin. Mackenzie could see the tears in her mother’s eyes, but she continued to laugh all the same. And by the time her laughter was at a fever pitch, Kevin was cackling right along with her, as if they had just shared a very private joke.

“I assume he gets his sense of humor from your side of the family,” Frances said. “God knows my kids were never much for laughter.”

“Hey,” Ellington said. “A lot of people happen to think I’m funny! Right, Mac?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Have I ever met any of them?”

He rolled his eyes at her as their mothers had a laugh at his expense. Kevin joined in again, continuing to slap at the ice cream cake as he shoved some into his mouth.

It’s like the twilight zone, Mackenzie thought as she watched the entire exchange. Their mothers were actually getting along. And it wasn’t forced. Sure, it had only been a few moments but something about it felt natural. Something about it—God help her—felt *right*.

She was sure she was staring, but she couldn’t help it. And there was no telling how long she might have kept staring if the phone had not rung and broken her out of it. She jumped at the chance to get away from the table, hurrying to her phone on the kitchen counter without even wondering who it might be.

That all changed when she saw Director McGrath’s name on the caller ID screen. It was after five in the afternoon and whenever McGrath called at such a time, it usually meant she was going to have a busy few days on her hands. She picked up the phone and looked through the entryway into the dining area, hoping to lock eyes with Ellington. As it was, though, he was speaking to his mother and cleaning up some of the ice cream from Kevin’s hands and face.

“This is Agent White,” she answered.

“Hey, White.” McGrath’s voice was somber as always. It was hard to tell his mood by those two simple words. “I believe I have a case that might be tailor made for you. It’s sort of a rush, though. I’d need to you get prepped tonight and be on a plane very early tomorrow morning, headed for Utah.”

“That’s fine, but why aren’t local agents out there handling it?”

“It’s a special circumstance. I’ll explain it all when you get to my office. How soon can you and Ellington get here?”

She was a little disappointed in herself to be so relieved to have an easy out—a viable excuse to step away from this weirdness with her mother and Frances.

“Soon, actually,” she said. “We sort of have a built-in babysitter at the moment.”

“Excellent. Half an hour work for you?”

“That’s perfect,” she said. She ended the call and then, still staring into the dining area and trying to make sense of it all, she called out: “Hey, E? Can you come here a second?”

Perhaps it was the tone in her voice or the simple deduction that no one ever called them other than people they worked with, but Ellington came right away, and with an expectant smile on his face.

“Work?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Great,” Ellington said. “Because quite frankly, whatever is going on in there is just straight up weird.”

“I know, right?”

Then, as if to punctuate this, both of their mothers chuckled at something from the dining room, and it was followed by their son’s bright cackling laughter.

CHAPTER FOUR

While it felt odd to leave Kevin with *both* grandmothers, Mackenzie could not deny that it did her heart some good to know that her mother was finally getting in some quality time with her son. Her only fear was that her mother's stubborn and rather selfish side would pop up and get defensive when it became clear that Kevin and Frances had already formed something of a bond. She was astounded that there were no worries about the situation as she and Ellington made their way through the emptying halls of FBI headquarters to McGrath's office.

When they entered, it was clear that he was shutting things down for the day. He was placing a few folders into his briefcase and seemed to be in a rather chipper mood.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," he said.

"No problem," Ellington said. "You actually sort of did us a favor."

"Is that so?"

"Extended family stuff," Mackenzie said.

"None of my business then. So I'll make this short and sweet. We have a dead woman out in Utah. The bureau was called in on it because as far as local law enforcement can tell, the woman has no identity. No records, no social security number, no birth certificate, no known addresses, nothing."

"And why call agents in DC to handle it rather than field agents in Salt Lake City?" Mackenzie asked.

"I don't know all of the details, but the bureau down there is in a bit of a pickle. Due to some past issues in the area with certain protected individuals, the Salt Lake City branch has to be incredibly careful about how they handle investigations in the area."

"That's rather vague," Ellington said.

"Well, it's all I have for you right now. I can also offer that there was a conflict of interest and after things went to court, the bureau ended up being in the wrong. So the Salt Lake City heads called us today to see if we could get some DC agents out there on it to work discreetly. And given the nature of the killing, it seemed like something the two of you would knock out rather easily. Get down there, figure out who she is and who killed her. And why. Then hand it over to the local police and come back home."

"And what *is* the nature of the murder?" Ellington asked.

"I'll have the full reports emailed to you. But it appears that this young woman was running away from someone late at night. The working assumption is that while she was running, she was struck by a vehicle and then had her throat cut. There was also a strip of tape placed across her mouth but the medical examiner thinks it was done after the death."

Mackenzie figured it *was* right up their alley. She wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"When do you need us out there?" Ellington asked.

"There are flights booked for both of you at five fifteen tomorrow morning. I'd like to have you on that flight and looking at the crime scene by noon tomorrow. I know childcare might be an issue for a case like this one, but—"

"For once, I think that might be taken care of," Ellington said.

"Wait. I don't know if—"

"Is this the extended family stuff?" McGrath asked. He was done packing up, looking longingly at the door.

"Yes, sir."

"Like I said, then. None of my business. If there's a problem with childcare and only one of you can go, let me know."

And with that said, he pointed them toward the door.

“I’ll just say it,” Mackenzie said on the way back to the apartment. “I wasn’t overly comfortable with your mom keeping Kevin the last time we were on a case. A few hours here and there, absolutely. I’m fine with it. But for several days...”

“Oh, I feel you on that. But, if we’re speaking candidly, the thought of leaving him with *your* mother for a few days doesn’t make me feel warm and safe, either.”

“Oh, God no.”

“If you’re really bothered by the idea of my mother keeping him, I can be the dutiful husband and just stay back. Sounds like a pretty basic job out there and—”

“No. McGrath actually asked us *both* to run this. As a team. Three months ago, he thought pairing us was a bad idea, so we must be doing something right. If he’s giving us this chance, I think we need to take it.”

“I agree,” Ellington said.

“So what do we do?”

They were quiet for a moment, but then Ellington spoke up. When he did, he spoke slowly, as if making sure every word was right—or that he actually meant what he was saying. “What’s the likelihood of them being here at the same time?” he said. “Really, think about that. The chances are incredibly slim. And if neither of us trusts one of them individually...”

“You mean you want them to tag-team babysitting?”

“It could work. You saw how they were getting along. And my God, Kevin looked like he was in grandma heaven.”

“Will your mom get offended?” she asked.

“I doubt it. Will yours?”

“No. Hell, she’ll be flattered that I’m asking her such a thing. Did you see the look on her face when I told her you and I had to head out for a quick meeting and were trusting them to watch over him?”

“Yeah, I did.” He considered it for a while as they came to the intersection where they would turn left to reach their apartment. “So...if the place isn’t burned down when we get back, do we want to ask both of them?”

Mackenzie panicked at the thought for only a moment. She recalled the brief visit she’d had with her mother months ago—how her mother had finally started getting back on her feet and acting responsibly. Maybe her visit out here and the desire to finally see her grandson was the turning point. And if Mackenzie could make sure her mother kept heading in the right direction, wasn’t it her responsibility as a daughter to make sure it happened? Certainly a few days with a thirteen-month-old grandson would help.

As they stepped onto the elevator in their building, Mackenzie reached out and took Ellington’s hand. “You okay with this? You sure?”

He made a confused expression while he nodded. “I am. I know it’s weird, but yeah. I think it will be okay. You?”

“Same.”

They entered the apartment, returning about eighty minutes after they had walked out. They found Frances wiping down the kitchen counters while Patricia sat on the floor playing with Kevin. They were currently playing with his Spin ’n’ Speak, one of his favorite toys. Seeing her mother down on the floor playing with him warmed her heart in a way that she had not expected. She gave Ellington a little nudge into the living room as they came through the door, indicating that he was going to have to be the one to do the speaking.

“So...Mom? Ms. White?”

“Oh, no, Patricia, please.”

“Okay... Mom and Patricia. So, Mackenzie and I have just been given an opportunity to work together on a case. We have before, of course, but ever since we got married, the bureau has been a little weird about pairing us up. But this time, it was requested.”

“Well, that’s wonderful,” Frances said.

“It is. Only, the case is in Utah. And we need to be on a plane around five o’clock in the morning.”

Patricia looked up at them for the first time since they had come in; her attention had been on Kevin the entire time. “Anything dangerous?” she asked.

“No more than usual,” Mackenzie said. “But we’re mentioning this to both of you because we understand just how unlikely it is that you’re both here. So, Mom...you had planned on staying in town for two days, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And you,” Ellington said, pointing to his mother, “showed up unannounced, which makes me think you have no plans anytime soon. Is that a safe assumption?”

“I had planned to go home tomorrow, but I have no concrete plans, no.”

“Any chance you can cancel your hotel room and get a refund, Mom?” Mackenzie asked.

Patricia seemed to understand where this was going. She looked to Kevin, smiled brightly, and then back to her daughter with a bit of apprehension. “Mackenzie...I don’t know. I want to, sure. Of course I do. But are *you* sure?”

“It would be both of you,” Mackenzie said. “If Frances is up for it. Two or three days at most, I would think. Are you both okay with that?”

The tears that leaked from her mother’s eyes was all the answer Mackenzie needed. Still, Patricia nodded and got to her feet. When she came over and hugged her daughter, Mackenzie barely knew what to do. She hugged her mother back, unsure what it meant that it felt a little forced and awkward. Had it really been *that* long since they had embraced out of emotion rather than social necessity?

“Count me in, too,” Frances said. “I only have enough clothes for a day or two, but I can do the wash.”

“Mackenzie, I don’t even know where to start,” Patricia said. “It’s been so long since I cared for a baby and...”

“It’s like riding a bike,” Frances assured her. “And little Kevin there is an angel. Not a problem at all.”

“And we’ll leave a schedule for you,” Mackenzie said.

“As well as the numbers for the doctor, fire department, and poison control,” Ellington quipped.

When no one laughed, he grimaced and slowly stepped out of the room. Kevin, sitting on the floor, provided the only response as he craned his neck to see where his daddy was going.

“Think you can handle it, kiddo?” Mackenzie asked, getting down on the floor with him.

His only response was his usual smile and his big bright eyes as he looked up at his mother and the two older women behind her.

CHAPTER FIVE

About halfway through their flight to Utah, Mackenzie was on her second cup of bitter airline coffee as her first signs of worry took root. She glanced out the window, the early morning light blooming over the horizon, and then to Ellington.

“Still feel good about it?” she asked him.

“I do. Why? You changing your mind?”

“No. I just know my mother. I mean, it’s obvious she’s changing her life for the better and I hope spending some time with Kevin only helps to super-charge those changes. But I know my mother. I know how stubborn she can be. I know how defensive she can be. I can’t help but wonder if our mothers together might turn into a WWE cage match.”

“As long as they keep Kevin alive, I’m fine with that. I’d put my money on your mom, by the way.”

She could tell that he was slightly worried, but was trying to be the strong husband that she could depend on. Throughout their marriage and the years of partnering together beforehand, he had learned when to take on that role and when to step back and let her be strong. He was getting very good at doing both and knowing which role to fill at the appropriate time. She sighed, looked back out the window, and held his hand.

“Hey, Mac? It really is okay. It’s going to be great. This is part of being a family, you know? In-laws, relatives, all of it.”

“I know. But today it’s my mom. Tomorrow, what if my sister wants to step up and be an aunt all of a sudden?”

“Then you have to let her. Or, at the very least, let her try.”

“Oh, but you haven’t met Stephanie...”

“And I hadn’t met your mother until yesterday. Yet here we are, in the sky while she and my mother are down below, taking care of our son. And if I can be honest...?”

“Please do.”

“I think you’re worried about it because you *aren’t* worried about it. You and I were both rocked by how natural it felt. Maybe we just need to go with it and focus on this case. Our mothers raised us and we turned out fine, after all.”

“Did we, though?” she asked with a smirk.

“Eh, good enough.”

Mackenzie continued to sip from her coffee and did exactly what Ellington had suggested, turning her thoughts away from the surprising result back home and toward the case.

They drove their rental car sixteen miles outside of Salt Lake City, on task to beat McGrath’s projection of a noon arrival by nearly an hour. The town where the woman without an identity had been murdered was a cute little place called Fellsburg. It was a slightly upscale town, likely the sort of town that thrived only because it was so close to Salt Lake City. Mackenzie imagined most of the population made that commute daily, working in the city and then coming back to their homes in one of the numerous neighborhoods in Fellsburg.

Following the file notes and instructions in the information McGrath had emailed to them, Ellington drove them to a subdivision called Plainsview. It looked like the two other subdivisions they had to pass to get there—two-story houses, cookie-cutouts of one another. Nice trimmed yards, security streetlights every one hundred feet or so.

But they didn't have to venture far into Plainsview. Four houses after the entrance, there was a cop car parked on the side of the street. This was the officer who had arranged to meet with them when Mackenzie had called from the airport to announce their arrival. He was already getting out of his patrol car when Ellington pulled in behind him.

The three of them met between the cars, going through a round of introductions. The badge and pin he wore on his chest indicated he was Sheriff Burke.

"Agents," Burke said. "Thanks for coming out. I'm Sheriff Declan Burke."

Mackenzie and Ellington gave their names, shaking hands with him. Mackenzie guessed Burke to be about fifty or so. He had a thick beard that could use a trim and a hardened face. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of aviator sunglasses even though the morning was not bright at all.

"This is where the body was discovered?" Mackenzie asked.

"It is. Right there." Burke pointed to a spot just slightly right of center.

"According to the report, there was nothing on her except a driver's license, correct?"

"That, and a pair of sandals. They were wet from the little bit of rain we had gotten that day. She wasn't wearing the sandals, though. At first, I thought the car knocked her out of them, but the MD pointed out that there were cuts and abrasions on her feet that indicated she took them off in the hopes of maybe running faster."

"Any idea how far she had been running?" Ellington asked.

"We're not really clear on that," Burke said. "There's a field about a mile and a half away from here that shows some signs of someone passing through that same night. But the growth of weeds and wild grass makes it impossible to tell for sure if it was this woman—or even a human being at all. Could have been a deer or something."

"And no one around here saw anything?" Mackenzie asked. She looked down the street, to the slightly sloping road and the nice homes. There were plenty of streetlights. It was hard to believe no one had seen anything.

"My men and I questioned every homeowner on this street. We have one night owl who claims to have seen an old town car driving through the neighborhood with its lights off. But they didn't get a plate number."

"And what about the girl?" Ellington said. "No known identity at all?"

"None that we can find. The driver's license was a fake. And a damned convincing one at that. We of course took her fingerprints and drew blood. None of them match to anyone in the system."

"That makes no sense," Ellington commented.

"And that's why we called you guys out here," Burke said. "You saw the pictures of the body at the scene, I assume?"

"Yes," Mackenzie said. "Black duct tape over her mouth. The ME believes it was placed there postmortem."

"That's right. Checked the tape for prints and got nothing."

Mackenzie had studied that strip of tape in the photographs for a while last night and on the plane this morning. She figured it could be symbolic, some way of the killer letting the woman know even in death that she needed to be quiet. But why? What did she have to say?

"With no identity, I guess it's been next to impossible to identify friends or family members," Ellington said.

"Yeah. We have *nothing*. So I will now gladly hand this over to you. Need anything from me?"

"Yes, actually," Mackenzie said. "No prints were found on the driver's license?"

"Just the girl's."

"What's the forensics lab like at your station?"

"Not state of the art by any means, but better than most in towns of this size."

“Get your forensics guys to take a closer look at that license. Check it under a microscope with ultraviolet light. Some forgers put a little signature or mark on their work. It’s always hidden well, but sometimes it’s *there*. Sort of a sneaky little middle-finger to people like us.”

“I’ll do that,” Burke said. “Anything else?”

Mackenzie was about to ask Ellington what he thought, but she was interrupted by the ringing of her phone. It was on silent, but they could all hear it buzzing from inside her coat pocket. She turned away and pulled the phone out of her pocket. She was irritated and a little alarmed to see it was her mother. She nearly ignored it but the thought of her and Frances keeping Kevin sat heavy on her mind.

She took a few steps away and answered the call, already dreading the news that may be waiting on the other end.

“Hey, Mom. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is good. Kevin is perfectly fine.”

“So then why the call? You know I’m right at the start of case, right?”

“I do. But I just need to know something. Is Frances always this overbearing?”

“How do you mean?”

“Just being bossy. I know she’s been around Kevin more than I have but she’s acting like she knows every single detail about him, and questioning everything I do.”

“That’s why you’re calling me?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Mackenzie, I just—”

“Both of you are big girls. You’ll find a way to work together. For now, I have to go. Please, Mom...don’t call me again unless it’s urgent.”

“Okay.” There was hurt and disappointment in her voice, but Mackenzie looked past it.

She killed the call and turned back to Ellington and Burke. Burke looked at her almost apologetically as he headed back to his patrol car. “I was just telling your partner here that we’ve got an office space set up for you guys back at the station. I’ve got a few other things I need to check on, so just make yourselves at home. And feel free to call me directly if anything pressing pops up.”

He seemed relieved to be leaving the scene as he got into his car. He gave them a little wave before he pulled off, leaving them to look at the section of road where the mystery woman had been killed.

“Important call?” Ellington asked.

“It was my mother.”

“Oh? Everything okay?”

“Yes. She was just calling to let me know the cage match is officially underway.”

CHAPTER SIX

The first thing Mackenzie did when they arrived at the station was to go through the physical records to get actual photos of the crime scene rather than the digital ones she and Ellington had been given. She spread them out on the large table that took up most of their designated office space and hunched over them for a moment. As she studied them, Ellington started taking down notes on his phone.

The girl was rather young. Mackenzie doubted she was older than twenty. She was blonde and had a face that most would consider pretty. But there was some quality to her, even in her emotionless dead face, that made Mackenzie think the girl may have been a runaway or a vagrant. That, or she'd been through some trauma recently. Her skin simply had a pallor to it that spoke of grime and hard living.

"No identity," she said, speaking to herself more than to Ellington. "I wonder if she was from WITSEC."

"Witness protection?" Ellington said. "That's a bit of a leap. Especially with a license you think might be a fake."

"Well, she has no real ID and she was running hard from someone. If she was with witness protection *and* on the run, that would give us at least somewhere to start looking. Maybe someone from her past found her."

"That's why I love you," Ellington said. "You'd rather look hard at a theory without legs than admit you have nowhere to start."

"There's always somewhere to start," Mackenzie said, still eyeing the photos. "It's just that sometimes the place you start is the hardest."

She pulled out her phone, her eyes bouncing back and forth between her contacts and the pictures of the dead girl on the table.

"Who you calling?" Ellington asked.

"I'm going to have DC patch me through to the US Marshals office to see if they'll get me a list."

Ellington, clearly surprised by the suggestion, nodded comically. "Yeah, good luck with that."

As the phone was answered and she was placed on hold and then finally patched through to the Marshals office, she continued to eye the pictures. The injuries sustained by the vehicle striking her weren't obvious in the pictures, but the harsh slit across her throat was glaring. The pavement in the pictures was slightly wet and glistening, making the dark red coming from her neck almost surreal.

"This is Assistant Chief Manning," a rough voice said through the other end of the phone. "Who is this?"

"This is Special Agent Mackenzie White, with the FBI. I'm working a case in Salt Lake City that I believe may involve a young woman out of WITSEC. We have absolutely no ID. Her prints aren't in any database and the driver's license found on her body is a fake. I'm taking a shot in the dark and hoping she might be in your system."

"Agent White, you know I can't give you the identities of people under our security. That would be breaking about a dozen different laws and regulations."

"I'm aware of that. But what if I sent you a picture? Using facial recognition, you could maybe come up with something and—"

"Pardon me, but even if you only *suspect* she might be with WITSEC, sending a picture back and forth breaks even more rules."

"Being that it's a crime scene photo, I think it's permissible," Mackenzie snapped. "She was hit by a vehicle and then had her throat slit. So I'm not sending you a glamour shot."

Manning gave a deep sigh that indicated Mackenzie was about to get her way. “Send the picture over and I’ll have someone run a facial recognition search. Of course, I can’t promise anything. But I’ll see what we can do.”

“Thanks.”

“We’ll get back to you as soon as we can.” He gave her the information of where to send the picture before hanging up.

Ellington had been looking over the coroner’s report while she spoke with Manning. “Got your way, huh?”

“Was there ever any doubt?”

He shook his head and handed the coroner’s report over to her. “This is the most recent, fresh off the presses about five hours ago. Sort of interesting, don’t you think?”

She scanned the report, looking over the obvious content until she came to the most recent updates. What she found did indeed seem interesting. According to the most recent updates from the coroner and the medical examiner, it appeared that the victim had suffered several broken bones in the past that had not healed correctly. Two ribs, the left wrist, and a buckle fracture along her right arm. According to the coroner’s notes, the bones of the left wrist looked as if they had never been properly set at all.

“You thinking domestic abuse?” Mackenzie asked.

“I think she was running away from someone and she had a history of broken bones that weren’t set. So yeah...domestic abuse and maybe even something darker. I wonder if she was maybe held captive. She doesn’t look the healthiest, you know. The report has her listed as weighing one hundred and fifteen pounds. And you can see it in her face in the pictures...she looks sort of...I don’t know...”

“Hardened,” Mackenzie finished for him.

“Yeah, that’s a good word for it.”

“So maybe she was a prisoner or captive and she managed to get away from her abuser. And when he caught up to her, he figured it was going to be easier to kill her rather than capture her again.”

“But for someone to be so carefree about that, it would mean the abuser must have known she had no identity.”

It was a good point, one that left them in silence to mull it over individually. Mackenzie thought of a girl, potentially running through a damp field and then down a rain-slicked road. She had been barefoot, apparently carrying her sandals. The scenario presented two questions, but she wasn’t sure which one was more important.

The first was where was she running away from?

The second, as she pondered it, started to seem more pressing. “Where was she going?” Mackenzie asked out loud. “It can’t be a coincidence that she chose that neighborhood. I know there is no evidence that it was her that ran through the field Sheriff Burke mentioned, but what if she did? She could have gone in any direction and chosen any neighborhood. So why that one?”

Ellington smiled as he nodded, catching on to her enthusiasm. “Why don’t we go find out?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

They were fortunate in that it was a Saturday and most of the cars within the neighborhood were parked in driveways or opened garages. They arrived back in the Plainsview neighborhood at 3:10, parking in the same spot they had met Sheriff Burke. It was a sunny March afternoon, not quite chilly but certainly not warm either. Regardless, Mackenzie did not expect to have much of a problem finding people to speak with.

“You take the right, I’ll take the left,” Ellington said as they got out of the car.

Mackenzie nodded, knowing that most partners opted not to take the split-up approach. But she and Ellington trusted one another on a level that allowed for this. It came not only in their strong work partnership, but from the bonds of marriage as well. They separated without any fanfare and took their respective sides of the street.

The first house on Mackenzie’s side was a no-brainer, as a mother and her daughter were in the front yard. The daughter was maybe six years old, pedaling a Little Tikes tricycle up and down the sidewalk. The mother was sitting on the porch, scrolling on her phone. When Mackenzie approached, she looked up and offered a smile.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Her tone indicated she did not want to help at all, especially if Mackenzie was selling something.

Mackenzie got a little farther away from the little girl before she pulled her badge and introduced herself. “I’m Agent Mackenzie White, with the FBI. My partner and I are scouring the neighborhood to see if we can find out any information on the hit-and-run from two nights ago.”

“Nope,” she said. “I told the cops the same thing. The way they tell it, they think it happened after midnight, and everyone in my home is asleep by eleven.”

“Do you happen to know who found the body?”

“Not for sure. There’s all sorts of rumors circulating and I don’t know which ones to believe. After a while, I just topped paying attention to them, you know?”

“Any of it coming from people you would trust with information like that?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Well, thanks for your time.”

She turned away and gave the little girl a wave as she made her way to the next house over. She knocked three times but got no answer. She received the same result at the third house. The fourth home was different. The door was answered right after she rang the doorbell.

Mackenzie found herself looking at an older lady, maybe just a little shy of sixty. She was carrying a bottle of Pledge and a duster. Some ’70s rock was playing behind her; Peter Frampton, if Mackenzie’s rather impressive musical knowledge was correct. She was clearly distracted by her cleaning, but greeted Mackenzie with a smile anyway.

“Sorry to bother you,” Mackenzie said. “I’m Agent White, FBI.” She flashed her badge and the woman looked at it as if Mackenzie had just performed a magic trick. “I’m canvassing the neighborhood to find any information I can on the hit-and-run that occurred on your street two nights ago.”

“Oh, of course,” the woman said. And just like that, her cleaning was forgotten. “Have you found who was responsible?”

“Not yet. That’s why we’re here, trying to find some leads. Did you happen to see or hear anything that night?”

“No. I don’t know that anyone did. And that’s the scariest thing of all.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, it’s a very peaceful neighborhood. But we’re also sort of out in the middle of nowhere. Sure, Salt Lake City is less than twenty miles away, but as you can see, we don’t really have that big-city feel out here.”

“What sort of gossip has been circling?” Mackenzie asked.

“None that I’m aware of. It’s too dark of a thing to talk about.” She took a step through the doorway, closer to Mackenzie so she could speak in a conspiratorial tone. “I get the feeling that most everyone in this neighborhood believes that by not talking about it, the whole thing will just go away—that everyone will forget about it.”

Mackenzie nodded. She’d worked cases in several towns like this. However, she also knew that it was in those small neighborhoods where gossip tended to plant its roots and really start to grow.

But as her trip down the street continued, she wasn’t so sure that was going to be the case in Plainsview. There were two basic attitudes among the residents: those who were irritated with the FBI visiting because they had already spoken to the police, and those who were genuinely afraid for the state of their neighborhood now that the bureau was involved.

The eighth house she came to was rather unremarkable. There were no flowers in the flowerbeds, just used up mulch that had long ago gone discolored. While there was furniture on the porch, it was also in a state of disrepair, one of the chairs festooned with cobwebs. Two houses shy of the first intersection in the neighborhood, it didn’t quite stick out but Mackenzie guessed that some of the older property owners might frown upon this home.

She knocked on the door and heard the slight shuffling of footsteps inside. Another ten seconds passed before anyone came to the door. And when they did, it was opened only a crack. A young woman peered out, her dark eyes taking in the sight of Mackenzie with the sort of scrutiny that suggested she was a suspicious woman.

“Yeah?” the young woman asked.

Mackenzie showed her badge and ID, instantly getting a strange vibe from this woman. Everyone else had opened their doors wide, yet this woman looked as if she was using her door as a shield. Perhaps she was one of the residents who had opted for a reaction of absolute fear in response to the murder.

“I’m Agent White, with the FBI. I was hoping to ask you some questions about the hit-and-run that occurred here two nights ago.”

“Me?” the woman asked, confused.

“No, not just you. My partner and I are going door to door to ask all residents. Please forgive me for asking, but you look a little young. Are your parents home?”

A quick flicker of irritation crossed the woman’s face. “I’m twenty years old,” she said. “I live here with my two roommates.”

“Oh, my apologies. So...do you recall anything interesting about that night?”

“No. I mean, from what I gather, it happened very late. I’m usually asleep by ten or eleven.”

“And you heard nothing?”

“No.”

The woman was still not opening the door all the way. She was also speaking quite fast. Mackenzie didn’t think the woman was hiding something, but she was behaving in a way that made Mackenzie start to wonder.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Amy Campbell.”

“Amy, are your roommates home?”

“One of them is. The other is out running errands.”

“Do you know if they saw or heard anything out of the ordinary on the night of the hit-and-run?”

“They didn’t. We all talked about it, trying to figure it out. But we were all asleep by ten thirty that night.”

Mackenzie nearly asked to come inside, but decided not to. Amy was clearly freaked out about the situation and there was no sense in making it any worse. As the tense moment passed between them, Mackenzie caught motion behind Amy. Another woman was walking down the hallway and taking a left into another room. She looked to be about Amy's age and had an angular face. Her hair, which appeared to be brown, was up in a messy bun. Mackenzie almost asked who this was but sensed that if she did, she might lose any traction she was building with Amy.

"How did you hear about the murder?" Mackenzie asked.

"From the police. They came by, doing exactly what you're doing, that morning."

"And you told them exactly what you're telling me?"

"Yes. Honestly, I saw nothing. Heard nothing. I wish I could help because it's just awful...but I was asleep."

It was in that comment that Mackenzie detected some emotion. Amy was either sad or in a state of despair about something—which made sense, given what had happened on her very street just two nights ago. Still, she was acting much stranger than anyone else she had spoken with. Mackenzie reached into her inner coat pocket and took out one of her business cards. When she handed it over to Amy, the young woman took it quickly.

"Please call me if you or your roommates happen to think of anything—or if you even hear some of your neighbors mention anything strange. Can you do that?"

"Yes. Good luck, Agent."

Amy Campbell quickly shut the door, leaving Mackenzie standing alone on the dirty porch. She walked back down the porch steps slowly, thinking a few things over.

A twenty-year-old renting a house in a neighborhood like this...that's sort of strange. But if she has roommates, there could be a chance they are college students at some college in Salt Lake City. Maybe it's cheaper and nicer than on-campus housing.

While the whole situation did seem a bit strange, she had to remind herself that a brutal murder had happened on this street. People were going to handle it differently—especially college-aged girls who knew the victim had been right around their age.

Mackenzie worked it all out in her head as she stepped back toward the street. As she did, she passed the two cars sitting on the little concrete slab that was Amy Campbell's driveway. They were both rather old, one being a 2005 Pontiac that looked like it might fall apart the next time it hit a pothole.

Before heading further down the street, Mackenzie took her phone out. She typed in Amy's name and the address for future reference. It was just a hunch but more often than not, Mackenzie's hunches paid off in the end.

She tucked her phone back into her pocket and headed further down the street to knock on more doors.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eight minutes and three houses later, Mackenzie's trek of the Plainsview subdivision was interrupted by a phone call. Sheriff Burke was on the other end, his voice somehow rougher through the phone. He had one of those expressionless voices that made it pretty much impossible to tell what sort of mood he was in.

"Just got a call from the forensics lab. They didn't find any sort of hidden signature under the UV light. But they did find a partial thumbprint that did not belong to the girl."

"Any results come up from it?"

"Yeah, I just ran it. The print belongs to a guy named Todd Thompson. I've got an officer running a check on him right now."

"So, no signature at all...which means there's a good chance the license is legitimately made."

"Still makes no sense. The name on the license matches nothing in our records. Neither do her fingerprints. If the picture on the license didn't look almost exactly like her, I'd say she stole it from somewhere."

"I suppose we could run a search for women who placed reports in regards to losing their purses or licenses in the last month or so."

"We already did that on the first day. Got a few nibbles, but nothing panned out. We also tried to...hold on, I've got an officer here with results on Todd Thompson. Gonna put you on speaker, Agent White."

There was some shuffling, a clicking noise, and then another voice. This was a female voice, just as stern as Burke's but with more emotion. There was excitement in her tone as she perhaps suspected what she was saying might very well lead them toward the end of this case.

"A basic state records search shows that Todd Thompson is a native of Salt Lake City. He's fifty-three years old and—get this—works at the DMV."

The DMV connection certainly shed new light on the bizarre driver's license. Mackenzie could nearly hear the clinking of gears in her head as it all came into place.

"Got a home address?"

"I do. I'll scan this report and send it to you as soon as we hang up."

"Perfect."

They ended the call and Mackenzie looked down the street, back the way she had come. The site of the hit-and-run was now out of sight, about six houses down and on a completely different block. She looked over and saw that Ellington was one house ahead of her. He was currently speaking to an older gentleman through an opened door. She was pretty sure he'd be more than happy to end this door-to-door task.

She hurried across the street to give him the latest update as a chilled afternoon breeze swept through the neighborhood.

According to the report Burke and his officer sent over, Todd Thompson had a few minor dings on his record. Two unpaid parking tickets (which Mackenzie found somewhat funny, considering his occupation), and a charge of aiding a breaking and entering from nearly thirty years ago. Other than that, Todd Thompson looked squeaky clean. Except for the fact that his thumbprint had been lightly placed on the presumably fake driver's license of a woman who appeared to have no identity.

Mackenzie shared all of this with Ellington as he drove them into the city. She also shared her peculiar encounter with Amy Campbell. As it turned out, it was the most interesting visit out of their

combined nineteen homes. Ellington agreed that Amy's mood could have simply been a reflection of a woman her own age being killed less than a thousand feet away from her front door.

By the time they entered the city and were headed for Todd Thompson's residence, they both felt that this could be the visit that sealed the case. Mackenzie did not say anything out loud about it, but she was anxious to get back home. The single call from her mother had upset her more than she was willing to admit and she suddenly felt foolish for thinking her mother would be able to keep a child without somehow making it all about her.

Night was just beginning to fall when Ellington parked the car in front of Thompson's apartment building. He lived in one of the nicer areas of the city, the apartment building located on a corner that looked out over a small park and a square where it looked as if farmer's markets and crafts fairs were set up on the weekend. As they entered, a few of the vendors were just finishing packing up for the day.

When Mackenzie knocked on the door of the second-floor apartment, she wondered how many doors she had knocked on today. Eleven? Twelve? She wasn't sure.

"One minute," a man's cheerful voice called from the other side. When the door was finally opened, they were greeted by not only a middle-aged African American man, but the smell of Thai food as well.

"Are you Mr. Todd Thompson?" Ellington asked.

"That's me," he said. He looked confused at first, but when he saw both agents reaching for their badges, a look of understanding fell across his face. Seeing that expression, Mackenzie realized that Mr. Thompson had been expecting this visit for quite some time.

"We're with the FBI," Mackenzie said. "We're looking into the murder of a young woman about twenty miles north of here. Given that your fingerprint showed up on her license, I'd appreciate it if we could come inside."

Thompson nodded, stepping aside and allowing them in. Now, more than ever, Mackenzie was sure he had known this day was coming. Oddly enough, he didn't seem all that scared. This was further proven when, after he closed the door behind them, he immediately went to the small table in the kitchen and sat down behind his Thai takeout.

"Forgive me for saying so," Mackenzie said, "but you don't seem all that upset to have the FBI showing up at your door."

"With proof that you handled a now-dead woman's driver's license at that," Ellington added.

"When was she killed?" Thompson asked. He did sound sad, and his eyes started to grow distant as he ate his dinner.

"You honestly don't know who we're talking about?"

"No. But I know about the licenses."

"Plural?" Mackenzie asked.

Thompson took one last bite, then dropped the plastic fork into the food and slid the plate away from him. He sighed deeply and looked at the agents with sad eyes. "Yeah," he said. "There's probably quite a few of them floating around."

"You're not making sense, Mr. Thompson," Mackenzie said. "Why don't you tell us why your thumbprint appeared on a dead woman's fake license?"

"Because I made it. Though I used a powder when making them that was supposed to keep my prints off of them. You use UV?"

"We did."

"Shit. Well, yeah...I made the license."

"At the DMV, I assume?" Mackenzie asked.

"Yes."

"Did the young woman pay you for it? The name on the license was Marjorie Hikkum."

"No. It's always the same woman that pays for them."

Mackenzie was starting to get irritated with the cavalier nature in which Thompson was explaining things. She could tell by the way Ellington's jaw was set that he was getting mad, too.

"Mr. Thompson, please explain what the hell you're talking about."

"I've been doing it for about three years now. This woman comes in, pretends to have some sort of issue, and slides me some money. Five hundred bucks per ID. A week later, I give her what she asked for."

"You understand how highly illegal that is, right?" Ellington asked.

"I do. But this woman...she's trying to do some good. She gets these IDs because she's trying to help those girls."

"What girls?" Ellington asked, almost barking the question.

Thompson looked at them, confused. It took him a moment to understand what was happening and then he gave them an apologetic look. "Damn. I'm sorry. If you were here asking about the IDs and a dead woman, I figured you probably already knew. The IDs I make are for women that manage to escape that crazy-farm on the other side of Fellsburg."

"What crazy-farm?" Mackenzie asked.

This question made Thompson look genuinely worried for the first time since they had knocked on his door. He made a slight grimace and shook his head softly. "I don't feel right talking about it. Too much power up there, you know?"

"No, we don't know." Though she did remember McGrath stating that there was some sort of religious community in the area, which was one of the reasons the local agents were jumping at the case.

"Well, Mr. Thompson, I hate to play it this way," Ellington said, "but you already fessed up to making fake IDs. If we wanted, we could arrest you for that and make sure you spend at least six months in a federal prison. Depending on who you sold them to, it could be worse than that. However, if you can let us know about the women these IDs are for and it helps us with this case, then we can sort of wave that away. We'd insist that you stop creating fake documents at a government facility like the DMV, but that would be it."

Thompson looked a little embarrassed that he had even fallen into such a trap. The pained look on his face dissolved into a defeated grin. "Any way you can keep my name out of it?"

"Unless there are extenuating circumstances, I don't see why not," Mackenzie said. "Are you afraid someone may seek some kind of revenge?"

"With these people, I just don't know." When he saw that the agents still had no clear idea of what he was talking about, he sighed again and went on. "This woman comes in and buys the IDs. She gets them for women that are trying to escape the Community. They use them to get back on their feet—just some small thing they can possess that helps them start a new life. A normal life."

"What's the Community?" Ellington asked.

"A religious commune about fifteen miles on the other side of Fellsburg—about forty minutes away from here. A lot of people know about it, but no one really talks about it. When they do, it's either in a joking way or in a spooky campfire sort of way."

"Any idea why women that join this Community would need to escape it?"

Thompson shrugged. "I don't know for sure. And that's the truth. Honestly, I don't know much more about the place than anyone else you'd pull off the street. I just make and sell those IDs."

"You know nothing about what they practice?"

"Rumor has it that it's some sort of polygamist cult. Some of the men are supposed to have like three or four wives. They're supposed to be very religious—very Old Testament wrath-type stuff."

"And what about this woman that buys the IDs from you? What do you know about her?"

"Not too much. When she came in and asked if I wanted the side gig, one of the things she said was that I couldn't ask questions. I thought it was bullshit but then she slid me five hundred bucks. And look...I'm damn near sixty and still in debt. I can't pass up that kind of money."

“You don’t even know her name?” Ellington asked.

“No. Sorry.”

“Can you describe her?”

“She’s on the younger side. Somewhere between twenty-five and thirty if I had to guess. Attractive. Brown hair, wears reading glasses.”

“Anything else you can think of?” Mackenzie asked. “Anything at all.”

“I caught a glimpse of her car one time. She’d only been in three times. The second time, I hurried out to the front lobby a few seconds behind her. I watched her leave through the front glass. She hurried across the parking lot and got in her car. An old red one, a sedan, I think.”

“Does she schedule her meetings with you?” Ellington asked.

“Nope.”

They continued talking, but Mackenzie only heard parts of it. She was still hung up on something Thompson had said. *An old red one, a sedan, I think.*

There had been an older-model red car in Amy Campbell’s driveway. A Pontiac. Typically, Mackenzie would call it nothing more than a coincidence. But Amy had been acting strange—scared and suspicious. It was certainly worth paying her another visit.

“Mr. Thompson, thank you very much for your time,” Mackenzie said. “We’ll let the IDs slide, but you have to stop making them.”

“You said a girl is dead, right? And she had one of my IDs?”

“It seems that way.”

“Then I’m done. There’s no amount of money worth getting involved in something like that.”

Mackenzie and Ellington made their way to his door. Ellington gave Thompson one of his business cards with instructions to contact them if he saw that woman again or if she tried to get in touch with him somehow. They left him looking slightly upset, perhaps mulling over the fact that the only item on the dead woman had been one of the fake IDs he’d made.

“So what did you realize?” Ellington said as they hurried back to their car. “You ended the conversation quickly and had that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“The one you have on your face right now—like a kid that has just spotted one more present hiding away under the Christmas tree.”

“His description of the car. An older red sedan. There was one parked in the driveway of one of the houses I visited. Amy Campbell...and she was nervous. Very suspicious and didn’t even hint at inviting me in.”

“Looks like we might have our first lead.”

“Maybe,” Mackenzie said.

It felt right, but given the nature of the case and the way Amy had been behaving, she thought they might need to take a few extra precautions to make sure it wasn’t just a coincidence. She hated to waste time in such a way, but in the back of her head she also reminded herself that there was a chance the Community could be involved.

Though she had never experienced it herself, she had read case studies and reports of other cases where the introduction of a religious group into the case made the entire thing a ticking time bomb. And if she could avoid that, Mackenzie was more than willing to take some extra time-consuming steps.

CHAPTER NINE

They headed back to the Fellsburg police station, where the small bullpen area was alive with officers swapping shifts. It was nearing eight o'clock on a Saturday night, a busy time for any police department, no matter where they were located. Burke was nowhere to be found, so they headed to their workspace near the back of the building. It was tempting to simply find a motel and call it a night, but they both knew they'd have faster access to records and other information while at the station.

The first thing they did was look on the police database for any information on Amy Campbell. Her record was stellar, with not even a single parking ticket. Seeing that there was clearly not going to be any help there, Ellington placed a call to the resource offices in DC, putting in a request for a background check on Amy Campbell of Fellsburg, Utah.

That done, they turned their attention to the mysterious religious commune known as the Community. It wasn't hard to find information on it, as a simple Google search turned up plenty of hits. The only problem was that the multiple hits were all redundant. All they could tell for sure was there was a religious community tucked away in the forests between Fellsburg and the smaller town of Hoyt.

It was believed that there were anywhere between 1,200 and 1,500 people living in the community. They occupied a small tract of land in the woods that consisted of small shack-like dwellings and little foot-path avenues that connected all of the homes, the church, and the other buildings.

"Check this out," Ellington said, tapping at his laptop.

He had gone into the police database and found two photos. One was an aerial view, taken from a low-flying plane. It showed the entire ground of the community. It reminded Mackenzie of what she had seen of Amish or Mennonite communities. There were a few cornfields on the far right side of the grounds, and a pasture of what she thought were goats (it was hard to tell from the distance) on the other side.

The second picture was black and white, and rather blurry. It had clearly been taken by someone in hiding, having snuck up on the grounds through the forest. The pictures showed two buildings Mackenzie assumed to be homes, and four people: two children and two women. The women were dressed quite plainly in basic dresses, their hair done up in ponytails.

Mackenzie went back to digging up more information on the place, but there wasn't much more to be found. The Community had existed since the late 1970s and had laid low, never showing up in the news outside of a few local headlines. Aside from some likely overzealous religious beliefs, they seemed to be a standard run-of-the mill isolated religious people. The fact that they practiced polygamy made it a little darker, but Mackenzie knew better than to assume it automatically opened them up to closer scrutiny. Agents far more skilled and experienced than her had fallen into that nasty trap.

As she looked for more information on the Community, her cell phone buzzed on the table beside her. She recognized the DC area code, but not the number. "This is Agent White," she answered.

"Agent White, this is Assistant Chief Manning at the Marshals office. We had that photo scanned and looked over. There was an angle from her left side that gave us a pretty good shot. We ran it through the WITSEC database but there was nothing. There's a ninety-nine percent chance your woman wasn't in witness protection."

The disappointment was strong but fleeting. She hadn't been exactly sure it would be a promising search, anyway. But if it had proven true, it would have made the case a lot easier.

"Thanks all the same," Mackenzie said and ended the call. She turned to Ellington and said: "Our mystery woman wasn't enrolled in WITSEC."

“That makes things a bit harder.”

Mackenzie nodded and closed the lid of her laptop. She’d read about twenty-five articles on the Community and the information was all starting to repeat. She glanced over at Ellington and said, “There hasn’t been a single arrest or public disturbance related to the Community?”

“Not on the police database going back twenty years.”

“I wonder if Burke has any stories or even rumors we could go by.”

Before they could continue this conversation, her phone buzzed again. This time it was a short little burst—a text rather than a call. She picked it back up and instantly fumed when she saw it was from her mother.

Wasn’t sure what was too late for you, the text read. Can you call?

“E...I’m going to kill my mother.”

“If anyone asks, I did try to talk you out of it. But...when?”

She rolled her eyes at him, letting him know now was not the time to joke around about it. She almost decided to ignore the text; she had enough to worry about as it was. But she knew that if she didn’t respond, her mother would keep texting until Mackenzie finally caved. Plus, there was the off chance that she might have a legitimate question about Kevin’s needs.

She called her mother, pushing herself away from the table. Even that little amount of distance between work and home made her feel somewhat like a mother herself.

She was not surprised that Patricia White answered the phone right away. When she did, her voice was hushed. Mackenzie could imagine her holed up in Ellington’s study or the guest bedroom so Frances would not hear her.

“Thanks for calling,” Patricia said.

“Is Kevin okay?”

“Yes.”

“Is the apartment still in one piece?”

“Of...of course. Mackenzie—”

“Then what is it now, Mom?”

There was a quiet moment from the other end that was quickly broken by the sound of her mother’s hurt. “I don’t understand. We had such a great afternoon yesterday. We got along, had a great meal, and I felt like you and I sort of reconnected.”

“I did, too. But this is the second time you’ve called me while I’m trying to work. And I swear, if it’s for no other reason than to bitch about something Frances has done...”

“Well, what am I supposed to do? She’s undermining every single thing I say or do. And it’s bad enough that Kevin prefers her...”

“He prefers her because he’s familiar with her. And Mom, are you sure she’s undermining you or is she just giving you pointers and suggestions on how to please a kid she knows better than you?”

“Maybe this was a mistake.”

“What? Coming to finally meet your grandson?”

“Partly. But not just that. It’s just...”

Mackenzie did not feel bad for her mother...not at all. But she also knew that if her mother fell back into the bad decisions and dark places that had defined the last decade or so of her life, there may be no return. So she found herself at odds: did she tell her mother what she needed to hear, or did she pacify her?

As much as Mackenzie hated it, she figured she had to pacify.

“Mom, I’m going to ask you this as a favor. I need you to suck it up and stay there. Hang in there until we get back. And you know what? Don’t even do it for me. Do it for Kevin. You want to be familiar to him? Then stick around. Give him a reason to remember you.”

There was a nervous chuckle from the other end of the phone. “You’re right,” she said. “It was stupid of me to fly out here just to give up over something like this and go back to the hotel.”

“You said it, not me.”

“Sorry I bothered you.”

“It’s okay... just make sure you try not to call or text unless there’s something wrong.”

“I will. Goodnight, Mackenzie.”

They ended the call and Mackenzie swallowed down several emotions that all seemed to fight for control. There was anger, sadness, and pity. She could not decide on one, so she settled for calm indifference.

“One of them dead yet?” Ellington asked.

“No, not yet.” She looked to the table—to the laptops and the police reports—and got to her feet. “Want to get out of here?”

“Sure.”

They tidied up the space, bagged up their laptops, and headed for the lobby. On their way out, they were once again interrupted by the buzzing sound of a phone. This time it was Ellington’s. He answered as they passed through the front doors and into the parking lot. Mackenzie listened to his half of the conversation, not quite clear on who it was or what was being talked about.

He did not hang up until they were in the car, Mackenzie slipping behind the wheel since Ellington was occupied. When he ended the call, there was a perplexed look on his face as he pocketed his phone.

“I think I know why there was no record on Amy Campbell,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because according to everything the bureau threw at the background check, she doesn’t seem to exist. There are, of course, numerous Amy Campbells, but none fitting my description. None at all. Just like our mystery lady, Marjorie Hikkum, Amy Campbell doesn’t seem to exist.”

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