



BLAKE PIERCE

BEFORE
HE
SEES

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 2

Blake Pierce
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Аннотация

In BEFORE HE SEES (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 2), FBI agent-in-training Mackenzie White struggles to make her mark in the FBI Academy in Quantico, trying to prove herself as a woman and as a transplant from Nebraska. Hoping she has what it takes to become an FBI agent and leave her life in the Midwest behind for good, Mackenzie just wants to keep a low profile and impress her superiors.

But all that changes when the body of a woman is found in a garbage dump. The murder bears shocking similarities to the Scarecrow Killer—the case that made Mackenzie famous in Nebraska—and in the frantic race against time to stop a new serial killer, the FBI decides to break protocol and give Mackenzie a chance on the case.

It is Mackenzie's big break, her chance to impress the FBI—but the stakes have never been higher. Not everyone wants her on the case, and everything she touches seems to go wrong. As the pressure mounts and the killer strikes again, Mackenzie finds herself as a lone voice in

a sea of experienced agents, and she soon realizes she is in way over heard. Her entire future with the FBI is in jeopardy.

As tough and determined as Mackenzie is, as brilliant as she is in hunting down killers, this new case proves an impossible riddle, something just beyond her reach. She may not even have time to crack it as her own life falls apart around her.

A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **BEFORE HE SEES** is book #2 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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BEFORE HE SEES

(A Mackenzie White

Mystery–Book 2)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which include the mystery suspense thrillers ONCE GONE (book #1), ONCE TAKEN (book #2), ONCE CRAVED (#3), and ONCE LURED (#4). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series and the AVERY BLACK 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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BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)

ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)

ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)

ONCE LURED (Book #4)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)

PROLOGUE

Susan Kellerman understood the need to dress nicely. She was representing her company and trying to win over new buyers, so her appearance went a long way. What she did not understand, though, was why in God's name she had to wear heels. She was wearing a pretty summer dress and had the perfect pair of flats to go with it. But no... corporate insisted on heels. Something about sophistication.

I doubt heels have anything to do with acquiring a sale, she thought. Especially not if the would-be client is a man. According to her sell – sheet, the person in the house she was currently approaching *was* a man. Given that, Susan checked the collar of her dress. She was showing *some* cleavage but nothing scandalous.

That, she thought, *shows sophistication.*

With her rather large and cumbersome display case in hand, she clomped up the steps in her heels and rang the doorbell. As she waited, she took a quick glance around the front of the house. It was a basic little house situated on the outskirts of a middle-class neighborhood. The grass had been recently cut, but the small flower beds bordering the tiny set of stairs to the front door were badly in need of weeding.

It was a quiet neighborhood, but not the kind Susan would live in. The houses were one-story little saltboxes splattered along

the streets. Most, she assumed, were owned by older couples or those struggling to pay their bills. This house in particular looked about one strong storm or financial crisis away from becoming the property of the bank.

She reached out to ring the bell again but the door was answered before she could touch it. The man that answered was of average size and build. She guessed him to be about forty or so. There was something feminine about him, something she could see from the way he simply answered the door and gave her a wide, bright smile.

“Good morning,” the man said.

“Good morning,” she said.

She knew his name but had been instructed by those that trained her to never use it until the lines of communication were wide open. When you greeted them by name right away, it made them feel like targets rather than customers – even when they had scheduled the appointment ahead of time.

Not wanting to allow him a moment to ask her questions and therefore take control of the conversation, she added: “I was wondering if you might have a moment to speak with me about your current diet.”

“Diet?” the man asked with a smirk. “I’m not on much of a diet. I sort of eat what I want.”

“Oh, that must be nice,” Susan said, putting on her best charming smile and chipper tone of voice. “As I’m sure you know, not many people over the age of thirty can say that and

maintain a healthy body type.”

For the first time, the man looked at the case in her left hand. He smiled again and this time it was a lazy one – the sort of smile someone might flash when they know they’ve been had.

“So what are you selling?”

It was a sarcastic comment, but at least it wasn’t a door closing in her face. She took that as the first victory toward getting inside. “Well, I’m here on behalf of A Better You University,” she said. “We offer adults over the age of thirty a very easy and methodical way to stay in shape without hitting the gym or altering their lifestyle too much.”

The man sighed and his hand went to the door. He looked bored, ready to send her packing. “And how do you do that?”

“Through a combination of protein shakes made with our very own protein powders and more than fifty healthy recipes to give your daily nutrition the boost it needs.”

“And that’s it?”

“That’s it,” she said.

The man considered it for a moment, looking to Susan and then to the large pack in her hands. He then looked at his watch and gave a shrug.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “I have to leave in ten minutes. If you can convince me in that amount of time, you’ve got a customer. Anything to keep me from going back to the gym.”

“Splendid,” Susan said, cringing internally at the fake cheer in her voice.

The man stepped aside and waved her into the house. “Come on in,” he said.

She stepped inside and entered a small living room. An ancient-looking television sat on a scarred entertainment center. A few dusty old chairs sat in the corners of the room along with a crumpled sofa. There were ceramic figurines and doilies everywhere. It looked more like some old woman’s house than a forty-something single man’s.

For reasons she did not know, she heard internal alarms going off. But then she tried to thwart her fear with shaky logic. *So he’s either incredibly off or this isn’t his house. Maybe he lives with his mother.*

“Is here okay?” she asked, pointing to the coffee table in front of the couch.

“Yes, right there is fine,” the man said. He smiled at her as he closed the door.

The moment the door was closed, Susan felt something stir in her gut. It felt like the room had grown cold and all of her senses were responding to it. Something was wrong. It was a bizarre feeling. She looked at the nearest ceramic figure – a little boy pulling a wagon – as if for some sort of answer.

She busied herself by opening up her case. She took out a few packs of the A Better You University Protein Powder and the complimentary mini-blender (a retail value of \$35 but yours absolutely free with your first purchase!) to distract herself.

“Now,” she said, trying to remain calm and ignore the chill she

still felt. “Are you more interested in weight loss, weight gain, or maintaining your current body type?”

“I’m not sure,” the man said, standing over the coffee table and looking at the goods. “What would you say?”

Susan found it hard to talk. She felt scared now and for no real reason.

She looked over at the door. Her heart thumped in her chest. Had he *locked* the door when he closed it? She couldn’t tell from where she sat.

She then realized that the man was still waiting for a response. She shook the cobwebs away and tried to slip back into presenter mode.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said.

She wanted to look to the door again. Suddenly the fake eyes of every porcelain figure in the room seemed to be staring at her – leering at her like a predator.

“I don’t eat *too* bad,” the man said. “But I do have a soft spot for key lime pie. Would I still be able to eat key lime pie on your program?”

“Possibly,” she said. She sifted through her materials, pulling the case closer to her. *Ten minutes*, she thought, getting more and more uneasy with the passing of each second. *He said he had ten minutes. I can make it that long.*

She found the small pamphlet that showed what the man would be able to eat on the program and looked up to him to hand it over. He took it and when he did, his hand brushed hers

for just a moment.

Again, alarms sounded in her head. She had to get out of there. She'd never had such a reaction from stepping into a potential client's house but this was so overpowering that it was all she could think about.

"I'm sorry," she said, gathering the case and her materials back up. "But I just now remembered that I have a meeting to attend in less than an hour, and it's all the way on the other side of town."

"Oh," he said, looking at the pamphlet she had just handed him. "Well, I understand. Sure. I hope you can make it on time."

"Thanks," she said quickly.

He offered her the pamphlet and she took it with a trembling hand. She put it into the case and started for the front door.

It *was* locked.

"Excuse me," the man said.

Susan turned, still reaching for the doorknob.

She barely saw the punch coming. All she saw was a blinding white fist as it slammed into her mouth. She felt blood flowing right away and tasted it on her tongue. She fell directly back onto the couch.

She opened her mouth to scream and felt like the right side of her jaw was locked up. As she tried getting to her feet, the man was there again, this time driving a knee into her stomach. The wind rushed out of her and she could do nothing but curl up, fighting for breath. As she did, she was dimly aware of the man picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder as if she was

some helpless cavewoman that he was dragging back to his cave.

She tried fighting against him, but she still could not draw any breath into her lungs. It was like being paralyzed, like drowning. Her whole body felt limp, including her head. She was dripping blood onto the back of the man's shirt and this was all she saw as he took her through the house.

At some point, she realized that he had taken her into another house – a house that was somehow attached to the one she had been in just moments ago. She was dropped to the floor like a sack of rocks, striking her head on a scarred linoleum floor. Bright dots of pain flared across her eyes as she was finally able to take in the smallest of breaths. She rolled over but when she managed to get to her feet, he was there again.

Her eyes were growing hazy but she could make out enough to see that he had opened some sort of small door in the side of a wall – hidden behind some sort of false paneling. It was dark in there, layered with dust and some sort of puffy insulation that hung down in torn tatters. Her heart slammed against her chest as if trying to break through her breastbone when she realized that he was taking her in there.

“You’ll be safe here,” the man told her as he hunched over and dragged her into the crawlspace.

She found herself in the dark, lying down on stiff boards that served as the floor. All she could smell was dust and her own blood, still trickling from her busted nose. The man...she knew his name but could not recall it. The word was blood and pain

and a tight pain in her chest as she still fought for breath.

She finally drew one in and wanted to use it to scream. But instead, she let it fill her lungs, relieving her body. In that moment of brief relief, she heard the crawlspace door close somewhere behind her and then she was stranded in the darkness.

The last thing she heard before her world went black was his laughter, just outside the door.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “This will all be over soon.”

CHAPTER ONE

The rain was coming down steadily, just hard enough so that Mackenzie White could not hear her own footfalls. This was good. It meant that the man she was chasing down would not be able to hear them, either.

Still, she had to advance with caution. Not only was it raining, but it was late at night. The suspect could easily use the darkness to his advantage just like she could. And the weak flickering streetlights were doing her no favors.

With her hair nearly soaked and her rain coat so wet that it was basically plastered to her, Mackenzie crossed the deserted street in a near march. Ahead of her, her partner was already at the targeted building. She could see his shape crouching low by the side of the old concrete structure. As she neared him, illuminated only by the moonlight and a single streetlight a block away, she tightened her slick grip on the Academy-issued Glock she carried in her hands.

She was starting to like the feel of a gun in her hands. It was more than a sense of security but something closer to a relationship. When she held a gun in her hands and knew that she was going to shoot it, she felt an intimate connection to it. She had never felt this while working as an underappreciated detective in Nebraska; it was something new that the FBI Academy had chiseled out of her.

She reached the building and huddled up along the side of it with her partner. Here, at least, the rain was no longer pelting her.

Her partner's name was Harry Dougan. He was twenty-two, well-built, and cocky in a subtle and almost respectable way. She was relieved to see that he looked a little unnerved, too.

“Did you get a visual?” Mackenzie asked him.

“No. But the front room is clear. You can see that much through the window,” he said, pointing ahead of them. There was a single window there, broken and jagged.

“How many rooms?” she asked.

“Three that I know of for sure.”

“Let me lead,” she said. She made sure it did not sound like a question. Even here in Quantico, women had to be assertive to be taken seriously.

He gestured for her to go ahead. As she dashed in front of him, she slid to the front of the building. She peered around and saw that the coast was clear. These streets were eerily empty and everything looked dead.

She gave a quick motion for Harry to come forward and he did without hesitation. He was holding his own Glock steady in his hands, holding it low to the ground in their pursuit, just like they had been trained to do. Together, they crept toward the front door of the building. It was an abandoned concrete slab of a place – maybe an old warehouse or storage place – and the door showed its age. It also made it obvious that it was open, a dark crack revealing a sliver of the building's interior.

Mackenzie looked at Harry and counted down with her fingers. *Three, two...one!*

She pressed her back tight against the concrete wall as Harry went low, pushed the door open, and strafed inside. She wheeled in behind him, the two of them operating like a well-oiled machine. However, once inside the building, there was almost no light. She quickly went for her flashlight at her side. Just as she was about to click it on, she stopped herself. A flashlight beam would be a dead giveaway for their location. The suspect would see them far in advance and could likely escape them...again.

She replaced the flashlight and reclaimed the lead again, creeping in front of Harry with the Glock now trained ahead to the door on her right. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see more details of the place. It was mostly barren. A few soggy cardboard boxes were pressed against a far wall. A sawhorse and several old cables lay discarded near the back corner of the room. Other than that, the central room was empty.

Mackenzie walked toward the door to her right. It was really just a doorway, the actual door having long been removed. Inside, shadows concealed nearly everything. Other than a broken glass bottle and what looked to be several rat droppings, the room was empty.

She stopped and started to turn around when she realized that Harry was following far too close behind her. She nearly stepped on his feet as she backed away from the room.

“Sorry,” he whispered in the dark. “I thought it – ”

He was cut off by the sound of a gunshot. This was instantly followed by an *oof* noise from Harry's mouth as he went to the ground.

Mackenzie pressed hard against the wall as another blast came. The shot pounded the wall from the other side; she could feel the impact of it against her back.

She knew that if she acted quickly, she could take the perp down right now rather than engaging in a shootout from around the wall. She looked at Harry, saw that he was still moving and coherent for the most part, and reached out to him. She hauled him through the doorway, out of the line of fire. When she did, another shot came. She felt it go just over her shoulder, the air whizzing around her raincoat.

When she had Harry to safety, she wasted no time and decided to act. She grabbed her flashlight, clicked it on, and tossed it out the door. It clattered on the ground seconds later, its white beam dancing wildly along the floor on the other side of the wall.

Following the clattering noise, Mackenzie whirled her body out of the doorway. She was crouched low, her hands skimming the floor as she curled herself into a quick, tight roll. As she rolled hard to the left, she saw the shape of the perp directly to her right, still focused on the flashlight.

Coming out of her roll, she extended her right leg with a vicious amount of force. It caught the perp on the backside of the leg, just below the knee. The suspect buckled a bit and that was all she needed. She sprang up and wrapped her right arm around

his neck as he sagged and brought him hard to the ground. With a knee to the solar plexus and a deft motion with her left arm, the perp was down, trapped, and quickly disarmed as his rifle went to the floor.

From somewhere else within the old building, a loud voice said, *“Halt!”*

A series of bright white bulbs popped on with audible clicks, flooding the building in light.

Mackenzie stood up and looked down to the suspect. He was smiling up at her. It was a familiar face – one she had seen in her training modules several times, usually barking orders and instructions at the agent trainees.

She held her hand out and he took it from his place on the floor. “Damn good work, White.”

“Thank you,” she said.

From behind her, Harry stumbled forward, holding his stomach. “Are we absolutely certain they’re just packing bean bags in those things?” he asked.

“Not only that, but these are low-grade,” the instructor said. “Next time we’ll use the riot bags.”

“Awesome,” Harry grunted.

A few people started filing into the room as the Hogan’s Alley run came to an end. It was Mackenzie’s third session in the Alley, a mock-up of a derelict street that was heavily used by the FBI in training agent trainees for real-world situations.

While two instructors stood by Harry, letting him know what

he had done wrong and how he could have prevented being shot, another instructor headed directly over to Mackenzie. His name was Simon Lee, an older man that looked like life had dealt him a crap hand and he had responded by beating the hell out of it.

“Amazing work, Agent White,” he said. “That roll was so damn fast that I barely saw it. Still...it was a little reckless. If there had been more than one suspect out here, it could have gone totally different.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

Lee smiled at her. “I know you do,” he said. “I tell you, at the halfway point of your training cycle, I’m already over the moon about your progress. You’re going to make an excellent agent. Good work.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

Lee took his leave and walked elsewhere into the building, speaking with another instructor. As they started to file out, Harry came over to her, still grimacing a bit.

“Well done,” he said. “It doesn’t hurt half as bad when the person that came out on top is exceptionally pretty.”

She rolled her eyes at him and holstered her Glock. “Flattery is useless,” she said. “Flattery, as they say, gets you nowhere.”

“I know,” Harry said. “But would it at least get me a drink?”

She grinned. “If you’re paying.”

“Yeah, I’ll pay,” he agreed. “I wouldn’t want you to kick my ass.”

They exited the building and walked back out into the rain.

Now that the drill was over, the rain was almost refreshing. And with several instructors and consultant agents skimming the grounds to end the night, she finally allowed herself to feel proud of herself.

Eleven weeks in, she had passed through the majority of the classroom-oriented part of her Academy training. She was almost there...about nine weeks away from wrapping up the course and potentially becoming a field agent for the FBI.

She suddenly wondered why she'd waited so long to leave Nebraska. When Ellington had recommended her for the Academy, it had essentially been her golden ticket, the push she needed to test herself, to break out of what had been comfortable and safe. She'd gotten rid of the job, the boyfriend, the apartment...and she'd picked up a new life.

She thought of the flat expanse of land, the cornfields, and the open blue skies that she had left behind. While they held their own specific beauty, it had, in a way, been a prison for her.

It was all behind her now.

Now that she was free, there was nothing left to hold her back.

*

The rest of her day proceeded with physical training: push-ups, sprints, crunches, more sprints, and selective weights. For her first few days at the Academy, she had hated this sort of training. But as her body and mind had gotten used to it, it

seemed to her that she actually *craved* it.

Everything was done with speed and precision. She ran through fifty push-ups so fast that she wasn't aware of the burning in her upper arms until she was done with them and headed for the mud-flecked obstacle course. With just about any sort of physical activity, she had gotten into the mindset of thinking that she wasn't really pushing herself until her arms and legs were trembling and her abs felt like slabs of serrated meat.

There were sixty trainees in her unit and she was one of only nine women. This did not bother her, probably because her time in Nebraska had hardened her to not really caring about the gender of the people she worked with. She simply kept her head down and worked to the best of her abilities, which, she wasn't too proud to say, was pretty exceptional.

When the instructor called time on her last circuit – a two-mile run through muddy trails and forest – the class broke apart and went their separate ways. Mackenzie, on the other hand, took a seat on one of the benches along the edge of the course and stretched her legs out. With nothing much else going on for the day and still pumped from her successful stint in Hogan's Alley, she figured she'd head out for one last run.

As much as she hated to admit it, she had become one of those people that liked to run. While she wouldn't be enlisting in any themed marathons anytime soon, she had come to appreciate the act. Outside of the required laps and courses in her training, she found time to run along the wooded trails of the campus that

sat six miles away from the FBI headquarters and, subsequently, about eight miles away from her new Quantico apartment.

With her workout tank top drenched in sweat and a flush in her face, she rounded out her day with a final sprint around the obstacle course, leaving the hills, fallen logs, and nets out of it. As she did, she noticed two different men watching her – not out of some sort of lustful daydreams, but in a sort of awe that, quite frankly, spurred her on.

Although, truth be told, she wouldn't mind a few lustful glances here and there. This new svelte body she had worked so hard for deserved to be appreciated. It was weird to feel so comfortable in her own skin, but she was growing to like it. She knew Harry Dougan liked it, too. But so far, he'd said nothing. Even if he *were* to say something, Mackenzie wasn't sure what she would say in return.

When her last run (just under two miles) was wrapped up, she showered in the training facilities and grabbed a pack of crackers from the vending machine on her way out. She had the rest of the day at her disposal; four hours to do whatever she wanted before hitting the treadmill at the gym – a little routine she'd managed to fall into just to stay one step ahead of everyone else.

What to do with the rest of her day? Maybe she could finally finish unpacking. There were still six boxes in her apartment that she had not cracked the packing tape to. That would be the smart thing to do. But she also wondered what Harry was up to this evening, if he would hold good for his drinks request. Did he

mean tonight or some other night?

And, beyond that, she wondered what Agent Ellington was doing.

She and Ellington had nearly met up a few times but it had never stuck – likely for the best, as far as Mackenzie was concerned. She could go the rest of her life without being reminded of the embarrassment that had occurred between them back in Nebraska.

As she tried to decide what to do with her afternoon, she headed for her car. As she slid the key into the door lock, she saw a familiar face go jogging by. The jogger, a fellow agent-in-training named Colby Stinson, saw her looking and smiled. She jogged over to Mackenzie's car with energy that made Mackenzie think that Colby was starting her run, not wrapping it up.

“Hey there,” Colby said. “Did the class leave you behind?”

“No. I snuck in an extra run.”

“Well, of course you did.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Mackenzie asked. She and Colby knew one another fairly well, although it might be a long shot to say that they were *friends*. She was never sure when Colby was being funny or trying to get a rise out of her.

“It means that you're super-driven and a bit of an overachiever,” Colby said.

“Guilty.”

“So what are you doing?” Colby asked. She then pointed to the pack of crackers in Mackenzie's hand. “Is that lunch?”

“It is,” she said. “Sad, huh?”

“A bit. Why don’t we go grab something? Pizza sounds awesome to me.”

Pizza sounded good to Mackenzie, too. But she really didn’t feel like suffering through small talk, especially not with a woman that tended to lean a little too close to the gossipy side of conversation. Yet, on the other hand, she also knew that she needed more in her life than training, extra training, and holing herself up in her apartment.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Mackenzie said.

It was a small victory – stepping out of her comfort zone and trying to make friends in this new place, in this new chapter of her life. But with each step, a new page was turned and she was, quite frankly, eager to start writing.

*

Donnie’s Pizza Place was only half full when Mackenzie and Colby arrived there in the afternoon, the lunch crowd thinning out. They grabbed a table in the back and ordered a pizza. Mackenzie allowed herself to relax, resting her sore legs and arms, but was not able to enjoy it for long.

Colby sat forward and sighed. “So, can we address the elephant in the room?”

“There’s an elephant?” Mackenzie asked.

“There is,” Colby said. “But it’s dressed in all black and sort

of blends in most of the time.”

“Okay,” Mackenzie said. “Explain this elephant to me. And tell me why you’re waiting until now to mention it.”

“Something I never told you is that the first day you showed up at the Academy, I knew who you were. Just about everybody did. There was a lot of whispering. And that’s why I’m waiting to tell you now. As we get to the end of this, I don’t know how it is going to affect things.”

“What whispering?” Mackenzie asked, pretty sure she already knew where this was going.

“Well, the important parts are about the Scarecrow Killer and the meek little lady that bagged him. A little lady that was so good being a detective in Nebraska that the FBI came calling.”

“That’s a rather glorified version of it, but yes...I recognize that elephant. You said *the important parts*, though. Are there other parts?”

Colby looked suddenly uncomfortable. She tucked a strand of her brown hair nervously behind her ear. “Well, there are rumors. I’ve heard some agent played a hand in getting you on board. And...well, we’re in a male-driven environment. You can imagine how the rumors go.”

Mackenzie rolled her eyes, finding herself embarrassed. She had never stopped to wonder what sorts of hushed rumors might have been circulating about her and Ellington, the agent that had indeed played a large part in getting her a shot at the Bureau.

“Sorry,” Colby said. “Should I not have said anything?”

Mackenzie shrugged. "It's okay. I guess we all have our stories."

Apparently sensing that she may have said too much, Colby looked at the table and sipped nervously from her soda. "Sorry," she said softly. "I just thought you should know. You're the first real friend I've made here and I wanted to be as blunt as possible."

"Ditto," Mackenzie said.

"We good?" Colby asked.

"Yeah. Now how about you throw out some other topic to talk about?"

"Oh, that's easy," Colby said. "Tell me about you and Harry."

"Harry Dougan?" Mackenzie asked.

"Yes. The would-be agent that seems to undress you with his eyes every time you're in the same room together."

"Nothing to tell," Mackenzie said.

Colby smiled and rolled her eyes. "If you say so."

"No, really. He's not my type."

"Maybe you're not *his* type," Colby pointed out. "Maybe he just wants to see you naked. I wonder... what type *are* you? Deep and psychological, I bet."

"Why do you say that?" Mackenzie asked.

"Because of your interests and tendency to excel in profiling courses and scenarios."

"I think that's a common misconception about anyone interested in profiling," Mackenzie said. "If you need proof, I can point you to at least three aging men on the Nebraska State

Police.”

Conversation dwindled down to the mundane after that – their classes, their instructors, and so forth. But all the while, Mackenzie seethed on the inside. The rumors Colby had mentioned were the exact reason she had decided to stay under everyone’s radar. She had not gone out of her way to make many friends – a decision that *should* have afforded her plenty of time to get her apartment set up.

And under it all was Ellington...the man that had come into Nebraska and changed her world. It sounded clichéd to think such a thing, but it’s essentially what happened. And the fact that she still couldn’t get him out of her head was slightly nauseating.

Even as she and Colby shared pleasantries as they finished their lunch, Mackenzie wondered what Ellington was up to. She also wondered what *she* would be doing right now if he had not come strolling through Nebraska during her attempt to bring down the Scarecrow Killer. It was not a pleasant image: she’d probably still be driving those agonizingly straight roads, bordered by either sky, fields, or corn. And she’d likely be partnered with some chauvinist prick that was just a younger and more stubborn version of Porter, her old partner.

She did not miss Nebraska. She did not miss the routines of the job she’d had there, and she certainly did not miss the mindset. What she *did* miss, though, was knowing that she fit in. More than that, she was in the top tier of people in her department. Here in Quantico, that wasn’t true. Here, she had

massive competition and she had to fight to stay at the top.

Fortunately, she was more than up for the challenge and was happily leaving the Scarecrow Killer and her life before his arrest behind.

Now, if she could only get the nightmares to stop.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning started bright and early with weapons training, something Mackenzie was finding that she was quite adept at. She'd always been a decent shot, but with the proper instruction and a class of twenty-two other hopefuls competing with her, she got eerily good. She still favored the Sig Sauer that she'd used in Nebraska and had been pleased to find that the Bureau's standard-issue sidearm was a Glock – not too dissimilar.

She stared down the paper target at the end of the firing corridor. A long sheet of paper hung stationary from the mechanized rack twenty yards away. She took aim, fired three times in rapid succession, and then put her gun down. The thrum of the shots rang out in her hands, a sensation she had come to enjoy.

When the green light at the back of the corridor gave her the go-ahead, she pushed a button on the small panel in front of her and brought the target up. It scaled forward and as it got closer, she could see where three holes had appeared in the paper target. It was the representation of a man's figure from the waist up. Two shots had landed high in the chest while the other had grazed the left shoulder. These were okay shots (not great) and while she was a little disappointed with the stray chest shots, she knew that she was doing much better than she had during her first shooting

range session.

Eleven weeks. She'd been here for eleven weeks and was still learning. She was upset with the stray chest shots because those could be fatal. She had been trained to shoot to only take a suspect down – to deliver the fatal shot to the chest or head under the direst of circumstances.

Her instinct was getting better. She smiled at the paper target and then looked at the small control box in front of her where a box of ammunition waited. She reloaded the Glock and then pressed a button to send out another target. She let this one go back twenty-five yards.

She waited for the red light on the panel to turn to green and then turned her back. She took a breath, wheeled around, and fired off three more shots.

A neat row of bullet holes formed just below the figure's shoulder.

Much better, Mackenzie thought.

Satisfied, she removed her ear and eye protectors. She then tidied up her station and pressed another button on the control panel that brought the target forward on the motorized pulley system that carried out the targets. She took the target down, folded it, and placed it in the small book bag she carried just about everywhere.

She'd been coming to the range during her free time to sharpen skills that she felt she was a bit behind on when it came to the others in her class. She was one of the oldest there

and rumors had circled through the grapevine already – rumors about how she had been headhunted from a miserable little PD in Nebraska right after wrapping up the Scarecrow Killer case. She was somewhere in the middle of the class average as far as firearms skill and was determined to be among the best by the time her Academy training came to an end.

She had to prove herself. And that was fine with her.

*

After the shooting range, Mackenzie wasted no time in heading to her final class-based course, a session on psychology that was taught by Samuel McClarren. McClarren was a sixty-six-year-old former agent and best-selling author, having penned six *New York Times* bestsellers about the psychological makeup of some of the most vicious serial killers of the past one hundred years. Mackenzie had read everything the man had written and could listen to him lecture for hours on end. It was by far her favorite course and although the assistant director had felt she didn't need the course based on her resume and work history, she had jumped at the chance to take it.

As usual, she was among the first in class, sitting near the front. She readied her notebook and pen while a few others trickled in and set up their MacBooks. As she waited, Samuel McClarren took to his podium. Behind Mackenzie, the class of forty-two students waited with anticipation; every single one of

them seemed to hang on his every word when he spoke.

“We wrapped up the psychological constructs that we believe were driving Ed Gein yesterday, much to the delight of some of you with weaker stomachs,” McClarren said. “And today, it’s not going to get much better, as we dip into the often underrated yet incredibly twisted mind of John Wayne Gacy. Twenty-six recorded victims, killed by either strangulation or asphyxiation by use of a tourniquet. From the boards beneath his house to the Des Plaines River, he scattered his victims in various spots after they were killed. And, of course, there’s what most people think of when they hear his name – the clown makeup. At its root, the Gacy case is a clinic on psychological breaks.”

And so the class went, McClarren speaking while students feverishly took notes. As usual, the hour and fifteen minutes sped by and Mackenzie found herself wanting to hear more. On a few occasions, McClarren’s class had brought up memories of her hunt for the Scarecrow Killer, particularly when she had revisited the murder sites in an attempt to get inside the mind of a killer. She had always known she’d had a knack for this sort of thing but had tried to keep it quiet. It scared her from time to time and was a bit morbid, so she kept it close to her chest.

When the session was over, Mackenzie packed up her things and headed for the door. She was still processing the lecture as she passed through into the hallway and didn’t see the man standing by the edge of the doorway. In fact, she didn’t notice him until he called out her name.

“Mackenzie! Hey, wait up.”

She stopped at the sound of her name, turning around and spotting a familiar face in the small crowd.

Agent Ellington was following behind her. Seeing him was such a surprise that she literally stood motionless for a moment, trying to figure out why he was here. As she remained frozen, he gave her a timid smile and approached her quickly. Another man was with him, trailing behind.

“Agent Ellington,” Mackenzie said. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” he said. “Yourself?”

“Pretty good. What are you doing here? A refresher course?” she asked, trying to inject some humor.

“No, not so much,” Ellington said. He gave her another smile and it reminded her all over again why she had taken the chance and made a fool of herself with him three months ago. He gestured to the man beside him and said, “Mackenzie White, I’d like you to meet Special Agent Bryers.”

Bryers stepped forward and extended his hand. Mackenzie shook it as she took a moment to study the man. He looked to be in his early fifties. He had a mostly gray moustache and friendly blue eyes. She could tell right away that he was likely mild-mannered and one of the true southern gentlemen she had heard so much about since moving to Virginia.

“Pleased to meet you,” Bryers said as they shook.

With that introduction out of the way, Ellington was back to business as usual. “Are you busy right now?” he asked

Mackenzie.

“Not at the moment,” she answered.

“Well, if you have a minute, Agent Bryers and I would like to speak with you about something.”

Mackenzie saw the flash of doubt in Bryers’s face as Ellington said this. Come to think of it, Bryers looked a little uncomfortable. Maybe *that* was why he seemed so timid.

“Sure,” she said.

“Come on,” Ellington said, waving her toward the small study area near the back of the building. “I’ll buy you a coffee.”

Mackenzie remembered the last time Ellington had showed such an interest in her; it had gotten her here, to nearly having her dream of being an FBI agent and living in the ebb and flow of it all. So to follow him now only made sense. She did so, casting a glance at Agent Bryers as they went and wondering why he looked so uneasy.

*

“So, you’re pretty close, aren’t you?” Ellington asked as the three of them sat down with their cups of coffee that Ellington had purchased from the tiny coffee bar.

“Eight weeks left,” she said.

“Counter-terrorism, fifteen simulation hours, and about twelve shooting range hours left, right?” Ellington asked.

“And you know this how?” Mackenzie asked, concerned.

Ellington shrugged and gave a smirk. “I’ve made it my hobby to sort of keep tabs on you since you arrived here. I recommended you, so my ass is sort of on the line. You’re impressing just about everyone that matters. Everything is really just a formality at this point. Unless you manage to crash and burn these last eight weeks, I’d say you’re as good as in.”

He took a deep breath and seemed to brace himself.

“Which brings us around to why I wanted to speak with you. Agent Bryers here is in a bit of a predicament and might need your help. But I’ll let him explain that to you.”

Bryers still looked unsure of the situation. It even showed as he set his coffee cup down and took a few seconds to start speaking.

“Well, as Agent Ellington says, you *have* been impressing the people that matter. In the last two days, I’ve had your name come up three times.”

“In what regard?” she asked, a bit nervous.

“I’m on a case right now that has my partner of thirteen years turning away from the Bureau,” Bryers explained. “He’s close to retirement age anyway, so it’s not much of a surprise. I love the guy like a brother, but he’s had enough. He’s seen enough during his twenty-eight years as an agent and did not want one more nightmare following him into retirement. So that, of course, leaves the gap open for a partner to step in and fill his shoes. It would not be a permanent partnership – just long enough to hopefully wrap up this current case.”

Mackenzie felt a flutter of excitement in her heart and knew

that she had to keep it in check before her need to please and impress took over. “That’s why my name has come up?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Bryers said.

“But there have to be several experienced agents that could fill the role better than me.”

“There probably *are* more appropriate agents,” Ellington said matter-of-factly. “But so far as we can tell, this case mirrors the Scarecrow Killer case in more than a few ways. That, plus the fact that your name is getting around, has a lot of higher-ups thinking that you’d be a perfect fit.”

“But I’m not an agent yet,” Mackenzie pointed out. “I mean, with something like this, can you really afford to wait eight weeks?”

“We wouldn’t be waiting,” Ellington said. “And at the risk of sounding pompous, this isn’t an offer the Bureau would hand out to just anyone. An opportunity like this – well, I’d bet anyone in that class you just stepped out of would kill to have it. It’s incredibly unorthodox and a few important people are sort of looking the other way.”

“It just seems...unethical,” Mackenzie said.

“It is,” Ellington said. “It’s *technically* illegal in a few ways. But we can’t look past the similarities between this case and what you wrapped up in Nebraska. It’s either slip you in under the radar right now or wait about three or four days and hope to line Agent Bryers up with a new partner. And time is of the essence.”

Of course she wanted the opportunity, but it felt too fast. It felt rushed.

“Do I have time to think it over?” she asked.

“No,” Ellington said. “In fact, after this meeting, I’m having the case files delivered to your apartment to go over. I’ll give you a few hours to look them over and then contact you at the end of the day for an answer. But, Mackenzie...I’d strongly suggest you take this.”

She knew she would, but didn’t want to seem too anxious or cocky. Plus, there *was* a degree of nervousness that was starting to set in. This was the big-time. And for an agent as seasoned as Bryers to want her help...well, that was simply amazing.

“Here’s the gist,” Bryers said, leaning in across the table and lowering his voice. “So far, we have two bodies that have shown up in the same landfill. Both have been young women – one was twenty-two, the other nineteen. They were found naked and with bruises all over them. The most recent showed signs of molestation but no trace of bodily fluids. The bodies appeared about two and a half months apart, but the fact that they showed up in the same dump with the same sort of bruising...”

“Not a coincidence,” Mackenzie said, thinking it over.

“No, probably not,” Bryers said. “So tell me...let’s say this was your case. It *just* got handed to you. What’s the first thing you’d do?”

It took her less than three seconds to come up with an answer. When she gave it, she felt herself slip into a sort of zone – a sense

that she *knew* she was right. If there had been any doubt that she was going to accept this opportunity, it was erased as she gave her answer.

“I’d start at the landfill,” she said. “I’d want to see the area for myself, through my own eyes. I’d then want to speak with family members. Were either of the women married?”

“The twenty-two-year-old,” Ellington said. “She’d been married for sixteen months.”

“Then yes,” Mackenzie said. “I’d start at the landfill and then speak to the husband.”

Ellington and Bryers gave one another a knowing look. Ellington nodded and drummed his hands on the table. “You in?” he asked.

“I’m in,” she said, unable to keep her excitement at bay much longer.

“Good,” Bryers said. He reached into his pocket and slid a set of keys across the table. “No sense in wasting time. Let’s get going.”

CHAPTER THREE

It was 1:35 when they reached the landfill. The eighty-five-degree weather enhanced the stink of the place, and the flies were so loud it was like some bizarre music. Mackenzie had driven while Bryers sat in the passenger seat, filling her in on the details of the case.

By the time they stepped out of the car and approached the dumps, Mackenzie thought she had Bryers pegged. He was, for the most part, a by-the-books sort of man. He would not come out and say as much, but he was extremely nervous about having her ride along with him, even if those in the know had approved it with blind eyes. It was evident in his posture and the fleeting glances he gave her.

Mackenzie walked slowly while Bryers approached the large green bins. He walked toward them as if he worked there. She had to remind herself that he'd been to the scene once before. He knew what to expect, making her feel very much like a novice – which she was, actually.

She took a moment to really study the place, having never taken the time to study landfills before. The area she and Bryers currently stood in – the portion of the landfill that allowed traffic – was really nothing more than a dump. Six economy-sized metal dumpsters lined the place, all set within a hollow space within the grounds. Behind the dumps, she could see the area below

where state trucks came to pick up the haul. To allow for these hollow areas that hid most of the dumpsters, the paved entryway and lot took on the shape of a well-maintained hill; the area she and Bryers currently stood on was the summit while the road through the landfill led further back, wound around, and spit cars out behind the dumpsters into a road that led back out to the highway.

Mackenzie scanned the ground. Where she stood was nothing more than packed dirt that gave way to gravel and then tar around the other side of the bins. She was standing on the dirt portion and looking down to the tire tracks that were embedded like ghost prints along the ground. The criss-crossing and jumbled passage of countless tire tracks was going to make it very hard to identify a reliable print. It had been dry and hot lately; the last rainfall had been about a week ago and that had only been a drizzle. Dry ground was going to make this significantly harder.

Feeling that getting suitable prints out of the mess was going to be next to impossible, she joined Bryers by the dump he was standing by.

“The body was found in this one,” Bryers said. “Forensics already lifted the blood samples and took the prints. The victim’s name was Susan Kellerman, twenty-two years old, a resident of Georgetown.”

Mackenzie nodded, still saying nothing. She shifted her priorities as she looked into the dump. She was working with people from the FBI now so she felt comfortable skipping ahead

a few steps. She wouldn't waste her time looking for the obvious. Those that had come before her – probably including Bryers – had already done the legwork. Therefore, Mackenzie tried to focus on the obscure...on the things that might have been overlooked.

After about a minute of looking around the immediate area, Mackenzie thought she knew everything there was to know. And so far, it wasn't much.

“So tell me,” Bryers said. “If you had to guess, what's the significance of the killer dumping his bodies here?”

“I don't think it's a matter of convenience,” Mackenzie said. “I think he's trying to play it safe. He's discarding the bodies here because he wants to get rid of them. I'd also guess he lives nearby...no more than twenty or thirty miles. I don't think he'd drive that far off just to dispose of a body...especially at night.”

“Why at night?” Bryers asked.

Mackenzie knew that he was testing her and didn't mind. Given the amazing opportunity she had been handed, she expected some ribbing.

“Because he'd almost *have* to come during the night to dump a body. Doing it in the light of day while there are workers here would be stupid.”

“So you think he's smart?”

“Not necessarily. He's cautious and careful. And that's not the same as *smart*.”

“I saw you scouring for tracks,” he said. “We tried and there

was nothing. There are just too many.”

“Yeah, it would be difficult,” she said. “Of course, like I said, I’d assume the body was dumped after hours. Is that the assumption you’re going on?”

“It is.”

“So there would be no prints here,” Mackenzie pointed out.

He smiled at her. “That’s right,” he said. “No tire tracks anyway. But *footprints* would. Not that it matters. There are too many of those, too.”

Mackenzie nodded, feeling stupid for having missed such an obvious fact. But right away, that sent her mind down a different path.

“Well, it’s not like he carried the body over his shoulders,” Mackenzie said. “His tire tracks *would* be somewhere. Not here, but maybe just outside of the gate. We could then try to compare and contrast between tracks we find stopped outside the gate and tracks here in this dirt. We could even look right around the edge of the fence for any indication of impact from where he almost certainly threw or dropped the body over.”

“That’s good thinking,” Bryers said, clearly amused. “That’s a detail the guys from the print lab got, but I managed to overlook. But yes, you’re right. He would have had to stop his car outside of the gate. So the thinking is that if we find tracks that come to the gate, stop, then turn around, that could be our guy.”

“*Could* be,” Mackenzie said.

“So you’re thinking along the right lines, but there’s nothing

new. What else you got?"

He wasn't being rude or dismissive; she knew this from his tone alone. He was simply trying to urge her on, to motivate her to keep going.

"Do we know how many vehicles come through here on any given day?"

"Approximately eleven hundred or so," Bryers said. "Still, if we can get prints that come close to the gate and then just *stop*..."

"It could be a start."

"That's the hope," Bryers said. "We've had a team working on that since yesterday afternoon and we still don't have any leads."

"I can take a look if you'd like," Mackenzie said.

"Knock yourself out," Bryers said. "But you're working with the Bureau now, Ms. White. Don't overwork yourself if there's another department that can handle it better than you can."

Mackenzie looked back into the dumpster, trying to make sense of the crushed shapes of trash inside. A young woman had been there recently, her body nude and slightly beaten. She'd been discarded in the same place people dumped their refuse, the things they no longer needed. Maybe the killer was trying to speculate that the women he had killed were no better than common household trash.

She almost wished she had been here when Bryers and his soon-to-be-retired friend had come out. Maybe then she'd have more to go on. Maybe then she could help lead Bryers closer to a suspect. But for now, at least she had proven herself rather

quickly with her perceptions regarding the tire tracks.

She turned back around to him and saw that he was standing idly, peering back toward the gate. It was clear that he was giving her some time to process. She appreciated it, but again, it made her very aware just how much of a rookie she was.

She ventured down to the chain-link fence that surrounded the dump. She started at the gate where vehicles came through and worked her way to the left. She looked around the bottom edge of the fence for a few seconds before another thought hit her.

He'd have to climb the fence, she thought.

She then started investigating the fence. She wasn't sure what she was looking for. Maybe stray dirt or fibers on the chain links. Anything she found would be a long shot, but it would be something.

It took less than two minutes before she came across something of interest. It was so infinitesimal that she almost ignored it completely. But as she stepped closer, she saw that it might be more helpful than she had originally thought.

About five feet off the ground and six feet to the left of the entry gate, a single strand of white fabric clung to one of the diamond shapes in the fence. The fabric itself might not yield any results but this at least gave them a great place to start dusting for fingerprints.

“Agent Bryers?” she said.

He came over slowly, as if he wasn't expecting much. As he got closer, she heard him make a *hmmm* sound as he looked at

the piece of fabric.

“Great work, Ms. White,” he said.

“Please, just Mackenzie,” she said. “Mac, if you’re feeling adventurous.”

“What do you think it is?” he asked.

“Maybe nothing. Buy maybe a strand of clothing from someone that recently scaled the fence. The fabric may be useless, but it gives us a concentrated area to focus on for fingerprints.”

“There’s a small evidence kit in the trunk of the car. Can you retrieve it while I call this in?”

“Sure,” she said, heading back to the car.

By the time she returned to him, he was already ending the call. Everything with Bryers seemed to be quick and efficient. It was one of the things she was quickly starting to like about him.

“Okay, Mac,” he said. “Now let’s continue down the trail you spelled out earlier today. The victim’s husband lives about twenty minutes away from here. You up for it?”

“I am,” Mackenzie said.

They got back into the car and pulled out of the still-closed-down landfill. Overhead, a series of scavenger birds performed their duty diligently, watching the drama unfold below with uncaring eyes.

Caleb Kellerman already had visitors in the form of two policemen when Mackenzie and Bryers arrived at his home. He lived just outside of Georgetown in a two-story house that made for a cute starter home. Thinking that the Kellermans had only been married for a little over a year before his bride had been killed made Mackenzie feel sorry for the man, but also angry about what had happened.

A starter home that never got a chance to see what else it could be, Mackenzie thought as they stepped into the house. How profoundly sad.

They entered through the front door, stepping into a thin foyer that looked directly into the living room. Mackenzie could feel the creeping sense of loneliness and quiet that accompanied most residences shortly after a death. She hoped she'd eventually get used to it, but found it hard to believe.

Bryers made introductions with the police outside of the foyer and the boys in uniform seemed relieved to be asked to step aside. When they made their exit, Bryers and Mackenzie stepped into the living room. Mackenzie saw that Caleb Kellerman looked incredibly young; he could easily pass for eighteen with his clean-shaven look, Five Finger Death Punch T-shirt, and baggy camo shorts. Mackenzie was able to quickly look past his appearance, focusing instead on the indescribable grief she saw in the young

man's face.

He looked up to them, waiting for either of them to speak. Mackenzie noticed Bryers giving her the go-ahead, nodding subtly in Caleb Kellerman's direction. She stepped forward, both terrified and flattered that she was being given such authority. Either Bryers thought a lot of her, or he was trying to make her uncomfortable.

"Mr. Kellerman, I'm Agent White, and this is Agent Bryers." She hesitated there for a moment. Had she really just called herself *Agent White*? It sort of had a nice ring to it. She skipped past this and continued on. "I know you're dealing with a loss that I won't even pretend to be able to understand," she said. She kept her tone soft, warm, but firm. "But if we want to find the person that did this, we really need to ask you some questions. Are you up for it?"

Caleb Kellerman nodded. "Anything I can do to make sure the man that did this is found," he said. "I'll do anything."

There was rage in his voice that made Mackenzie hope that someone would seek some sort of therapy for Caleb in the coming days. There was something in his eyes that looked nearly unhinged.

"Well, first of all, I need to know if Susan had any enemies... anyone that might be a rival of sorts."

"There were a few girls she went to high school with that would get pissy with her on Facebook," Caleb said. "It was usually over politics, though. And none of those girls would do it, anyway. It

was just nasty arguments and things like that.”

“And what about her job?” Mackenzie asked. “Did she enjoy it?”

Caleb shrugged. He sat back on the couch and tried to relax. His face, however, seemed resigned to a permanent frown. “She liked it about as much as any woman that went to college and lands a job that has nothing to do with her degree. It paid the bills and the bonuses were pretty good sometimes. The hours sucked, though.”

“Did you know any of the people she worked with?” Mackenzie asked.

“No. I heard about them in the stories she’d bring home, but that was it.”

Bryers chimed in next. His voice sounded very different in the still of the house as he used somber tones. “She was a saleswoman, correct? For A Better You University?”

“Yeah. I already gave the police her supervisor’s number.”

“We’ve had some people from the Bureau already speak with him,” Bryers said.

“It won’t matter,” Caleb said. “No one at work killed her. I can guarantee it. I know it sounds stupid, but it’s this feeling I have. Everyone at her work is nice...in the same boat we were in, trying to pay bills and make ends meet. Honest people, you know?”

For a moment, he teetered on the edge of weeping. He stifled it back, looked down to the floor to collect himself, and looked

back up. The tears that he had barely suppressed floated along the edges of his eyes.

“Okay, then what can you think of that might lead us down the right path?” Bryers asked.

“I can’t,” Caleb said. “She had a sell sheet of the clients she was visiting that day, but no one can find it. The cops said it’s probably because the killer took it and trashed it.”

“That’s probably the case,” Mackenzie said.

“I still don’t get it,” Caleb said. “It still doesn’t feel real. I’m waiting for her to come back through that door any minute now. The day she died...it started out just like any other day. She kissed me on the cheek as I was getting dressed for work and said goodbye. She left for the bus stop, and that was it. That was the last time I saw her.”

Mackenzie saw that Caleb was on the verge of losing it and, as much as it seemed wrong to do so, she got in one last question before he collapsed.

“Bus stop?” she asked.

“Yeah, she rode the bus to the office every day; she caught the eight twenty to get to work on time. The car crapped out on us two months ago.”

“Where’s that bus stop located?” Bryers asked.

“Two blocks down,” Caleb said. “It’s one of those small vestibule-type deals.” He then looked at Mackenzie and White, hope suddenly blooming in his eyes under the pain and hatred. “Why? Do you think it’s important?”

“There’s no way to know for sure,” Mackenzie said. “But we’ll keep you posted. Thank you for your time.”

“Sure,” Caleb said. “Hey...guys?”

“Yeah?” Mackenzie said.

“It’s been more than three days now, right? Three days since I last saw her and almost two whole days since they found her body.”

“That’s right,” Bryers said quietly.

“So is it too late? Is this bastard going to get away?”

“No,” Mackenzie said. It was out of her mouth before she could stop it and she knew right away that she had made her first mistake in front of Bryers.

“We’ll do the best we can,” Bryers said, placing a gentle but urging hand on Mackenzie’s shoulder. “Please call us if you think of anything that might help.”

With that, they made their exit. Mackenzie shuddered a bit when she heard Caleb break down in a sobbing fit before they were able to shut the door behind them.

That sound did something to her...something that reminded her of home. The last time she’d felt such a thing was the moment back in Nebraska when she had become absolutely consumed with the task of stopping the Scarecrow Killer. She felt that all-consuming need again as they stepped out onto Caleb Kellerman’s front steps, and she slowly realized that she would stop at nothing until she caught this killer.

CHAPTER FOUR

“You can’t do that,” Bryers said the moment they were back in the car, he taking the wheel.

“I can’t do what?”

He sighed and tried his best to seem sincere rather than disciplinary. “I know you’ve probably never been in this exact situation before, but you can’t tell the family of a victim that *no*, the killer isn’t going to get away. You can’t give them hope if there is none. Hell, even if there *is* hope, you can’t say something like that.”

“I know,” she said, disappointed. “I knew it the moment the word was out of my mouth. I’m sorry.”

“No need for apologies. Just try to keep your head on straight. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Because Bryers knew the city better than Mackenzie, he drove them to the Department of Public Transportation. He drove with some urgency and requested that Mackenzie call ahead to make sure they could speak to someone that knew what they were talking about and could get them in and out of there in a hurry. It was such a simple method, but Mackenzie was impressed with the efficiency of it. It was a far cry from what she’d experienced in Nebraska for sure.

During the half hour drive, Bryers filled the car with

conversation. He wanted to know all about her time on the force in Nebraska, most notably the Scarecrow Killer case. He asked about college and her interests. She was happy enough to give him the surface-level information but didn't go too deep – mainly because he wasn't going very deep himself.

In fact, Bryers seemed reserved. When Mackenzie asked him about his family, he kept it as general as he could without being rude. “A wife, two boys that are off to college, and a dog that's on its last legs.”

Well, Mackenzie thought. It's only our first day together and he doesn't know me at all – just what he read about me in the papers six months ago and from whatever is in my file with the Academy. I don't blame him for not opening up just yet.

When they arrived at the Department of Public Transportation, Mackenzie still held a favorable opinion of the elder agent but there was a tension between them that she couldn't quite grasp. Maybe he didn't feel it; maybe it was just her. The fact that he had basically waved off any questions she asked him about his work made her uncomfortable. It also made her quickly remember that this was not her job yet. She was simply riding along as a favor to Ellington, a way to test her wheels, so to speak.

She was also involved in all of this due to some shady dealings in back rooms where the higher-ups were taking a gamble on her. It added a whole new level of risk not only for her, but for the people she was working with – Bryers and Ellington included.

The Department of Transportation was located inside of a

building with about ten other departments housed within it. Mackenzie followed Agent Bryers through the hallways as best she could. He walked quickly, nodding to people here and there as if he were familiar with the place. A few people seemed to recognize him, giving him quick smiles and waves here and there. The day was coming to an end, so people seemed to be milling about quickly, waiting for five o'clock.

As they came to the section of the building they needed, Mackenzie started to allow herself to appreciate the moment. Four hours ago, she'd been coming out of McClarren's class and now she was somehow knee deep in a homicide case, working with an agent that seemed to be well conditioned and damn good at his job.

They approached a counter where Bryers leaned slightly over it and eyed the young woman sitting behind a desk immediately in front of them. "We called about speaking to someone about the bus schedules," he explained to the woman. "Agents White and Bryers."

"Oh yes," the receptionist said. "You'll be speaking to Mrs. Percell. She is out back in the bus garage. It's all the way down the hall, down the stairs, and out the back."

They followed the receptionist's directions, heading to the back of the building where Mackenzie could already hear the humming of engines and the rumbling of machinery. The building was constructed in such a way that the noise was not at all noticeable in the busier, nicer parts of the building but here

in the back, it sounded almost like an auto garage.

“When we meet this Mrs. Percell,” Bryers said, “I want you to take the lead.”

“Okay,” Mackenzie said, still feeling like she was taking some sort of weird exam.

They took the stairs down, following a sign labeled *Garage / Bus Lot*. Downstairs, a thin hallway led into a small open office. A man in mechanic’s scrubs stood behind an antiquated computer, typing something in. Through a large picture window, Mackenzie was able to look out into a large garage. Several city buses were parked there, undergoing maintenance. As she watched, a door in the back of the office opened and a cheerful-looking overweight woman entered from the garage.

“Are you the FBI folks?”

“That’s us,” Mackenzie said. Beside her, Bryers flashed his badge – probably because she didn’t have one to show. Percell seemed satisfied with the credentials and started talking right away.

“I understand you have questions about the bus schedules and the rotation of drivers,” she said.

“That’s correct,” Mackenzie replied. “We’re hoping to find out what stop a certain bus made three mornings ago and, if possible, to get a word with the driver.”

“Sure,” she said. She went over to the small desk where the mechanic was typing and nudged him playfully. “Doug, let me take the wheel, would you?”

“Gladly,” he said with a smile. He stepped away from the desk and headed out to the garage as Mrs. Percell sat down behind the computer. She hit a few keys and then looked up to them proudly, obviously glad to be of service.

“Where’s the stop in question?”

“At the corner of Carlton and Queen Street,” Mackenzie said.

“What time would the person have gotten on?”

“Eight twenty in the morning.”

Mrs. Percell typed the information in quickly and scanned the screen for a moment before giving her answer. “That was bus number 2021, driven by Michael Garmond. That bus makes three stops before reporting back to that same bus stop for a nine thirty-five pickup.”

“We need to speak with Mr. Garmond,” Mackenzie said.

“Could we have his information, please?”

“I can do better than that,” Mrs. Percell said. “Michael is out in the garage right now, signing out for the day. Let me see if I can grab him for you.”

“Thanks,” Mackenzie said.

Mrs. Percell dashed to the garage door with speed that defied her size. Mackenzie and Bryers watched her amble expertly through the garage in search of Michael Garmond.

“If only everyone was that enthusiastic about helping the feds,” Bryers said with a grin. “Trust me...don’t get used to this.”

In less than a minute, Mrs. Percell returned into the small office, followed by an elderly black man. He looked tired but,

like Mrs. Percell, more than happy to help.

“Hey, folks,” he said, giving a tired smile. “How can I help you?”

“We’re looking for details about a woman that we are fairly confident got on your bus at the eight twenty stop at the corner of Carlton and Queen three mornings ago,” Mackenzie said. “Do you think you could help us with that?”

“Probably,” Michael said. “There aren’t too many people at that stop in the mornings. I never get more than four or five.”

Bryers pulled out his cell phone and thumbed through it for a bit, pulling up a photograph of Susan Kellerman. “This is her,” he said. “Does she look familiar?”

“Hey, yeah, she does,” Michael said, a bit too excited in Mackenzie’s opinion. “Sweet girl. Always really nice.”

“Do you recall where she got off the bus three mornings ago?”

“I do,” Michael said. “And I thought it was weird because every other morning for about two weeks or so, she was getting off at another bus stop. I talked to her a bit one morning and found out she walked two blocks from her usual stop to work at some office. But three days ago, she got off at the station instead of a stop. I watched her hop on another bus. I kind of hoped she’d gotten some better job or something, so she was taking a different route.”

“Where was that?” Mackenzie asked.

“Dupont Circle.”

“What time would you say she got off the bus there?”

“Probably around eight forty-five or so,” Michael answered. “No later than nine o’clock for sure.”

“We can check that in our records,” Mrs. Percell said.

“That would be great,” Bryers said.

Mrs. Percell went back to work behind the grimy little desk as Michael looked at the agents forlornly. He looked back to the picture on Bryers’s phone and frowned. “Something bad happened to her?” he asked.

“In fact, yes,” Mackenzie said. “So if there’s anything you can tell us about her that morning, that would be great.”

“Well, she was carrying a case, like the kind salespeople carry around. Not like a briefcase, but a tacky case, you know? She sold stuff for a living – like health supplements and things like that. I was guessing she had a customer she was seeing.”

“Do you know which bus she got on after yours?” Mackenzie asked.

“Well, I don’t recall the number of the bus, but I remember seeing Black Mill Street up on the destination indicator in the windshield. I thought that was pretty sketchy...no reason for that pretty little thing to be going to that part of town.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, the neighborhood itself is okay, I guess. The houses aren’t too bad and I think most of the folks are decent people. But it’s one of those places where the not-so nice people hang around and do their business. When I was trained for this job six years ago, they filled the drivers in on places to keep an eye out

for danger. Black Mill Street was one of them.”

Mackenzie thought all of this over and realized that they had gotten all of the valuable information there was to get from Michael Garmond. She wanted to seem efficient in front of Bryers but she also didn't want to seem as if she wasted time on trivial details.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Garmond,” Mackenzie said.

From the desk, Mrs. Percell added: “The stop at Dupont Circle was at eight forty-eight, Agents.”

When they turned and made their exit, they were quiet until they made it back to the stairs. When they started climbing them, it was Bryers who broke the silence.

“How long have you been in Quantico?” he asked.

“Eleven weeks.”

“So you're probably not familiar with the outskirts of the city, huh?”

“No.”

“Never been up to Black Mill Street?”

“Can't say that I have,” Mackenzie said.

“You're not missing much. But hey, maybe we won't have to go that far. We'll start at Dupont Circle and have a look around. Maybe we can find something on the security cameras.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now,” Bryers said. There was an edge of annoyance to his voice, the first sign that he was beginning to tire of carting around the rookie no matter how promising she was. “When

there's a killer on the loose, we don't really punch a clock.”

Several retorts came to her tongue, but she kept them choked down. He was right, anyway. If she'd learned anything from her ordeal with the Scarecrow Killer, it was that when you were chasing down a killer that seemingly had no MO, every minute was precious.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dupont Circle Station was just starting to slow down from the busyness of the five o'clock afternoon rush when Mackenzie and Bryers arrived. The conversation along the way was once again surface-level and stale as Bryers remained quiet and reserved. As they stepped out of the car and walked toward the station, Mackenzie truly felt awkward for the first time. She didn't think he resented her yet, but he was likely having second thoughts about whatever scheme he and Ellington had cooked up.

Bryers finally cracked their silence as they entered the station. He stepped to the side of the doors and watched the crowd of people threading through the place.

"You familiar with this place?" he asked.

"No," Mackenzie said. "I've always gone through Union Station."

Bryers shrugged. "It doesn't matter which station you're at; there's always going to be a corner somewhere that's a little seedier than the rest of the place. The rough part is that it's usually well hidden."

"So you're thinking she was taken on her way back home? You think someone grabbed her here when she was in between buses?"

"It's a possibility. What do *you* think?"

"I think we should be checking Black Mill Street. You *and* the

bus driver said the place was bad news.”

“And we’ll probably end up there,” Bryers said. “But I’m playing a hunch here. You work this city long enough you start to accumulate a sort of hunch about certain things.”

His cryptic talk was annoying, but she figured she could actually learn something if she could just shut up and watch. After a minute or so of standing by the doors and watching the crowd, Bryers moved slowly forward, motioning for Mackenzie to follow him. She stayed close, but not so close that she was crowding him. He walked through the crowd nonchalantly, as if he had no real purpose for being there. He blended in quite well; only someone who really took the time to study him might suspect that he was some sort of law enforcement official.

They made their way through the main concourse and out toward where six buses were waiting. Passengers were stepping off of two of the buses while the others idled, waiting for passengers. As they headed toward the buses, Mackenzie looked at the destination indicators above the windshields. As far as she could tell, the next stops for these buses were all within the DC historic district or Georgetown.

“Over here,” Bryers said.

Mackenzie looked away from the buses and stayed behind Bryers as he walked further down the concourse. The buses were behind them now as the crowd thinned out a bit. Out of nowhere, the scene seemed to change simply by rounding a corner. There were fewer people in casual or business-casual attire. She saw a

homeless man sitting against the wall and three teenagers dressed in mostly black, adorned with large earrings, nose piercings, and tattoos everywhere.

Bryers slowed as they rounded this corner, again taking in the scene. Mackenzie did the same, trying to observe the layout of the place and the makeup of the people the same way he did. It only took a few seconds before she saw something that instantly put her on guard.

A young man with a short, nearly military buzz haircut and dressed in a plain T-shirt and jeans was speaking to a girl that was surely no older than sixteen. Mackenzie knew the look on her face because it was easy to read on most girls her age: she was liking the attention the guy was giving her, but was also uncomfortable in being approached. She saw that the guy had a hand in his pocket. She was pretty sure he wasn't packing, but there were numerous other things that he could be concealing.

Without looking over his shoulder to speak to her, Bryers asked: "You see him?"

"Twenty-something buzz-cut speaking to the minor?" she said.

"Bingo."

Still, they did not move. Mackenzie knew why even though she already didn't like the way the scene was playing out. Bryers was waiting for the creep to make a move – to do something that would warrant someone of Bryers's authority to step in and intervene.

They watched the scene unfold as they did what they could to blend in. Mackenzie felt herself wanting to surge forward as it played out predictably. The guy inched closer and closer. He was doing a lot of smiling and trying to look the girl in the eyes. She smiled back flirtatiously but looked at the ground more than she looked at him.

Slowly, he reached out and touched her shoulder. His hand rested there for a while before the girl stepped awkwardly away. The creep followed up by laughing and then stepping into her, placing his arm around her. He tried pulling her close but the girl stepped away. A look of frustration flashed across the guy's face before he stepped forward again, with a bit of anger this time. When he reached out to put his arm around her again, Bryers stepped forward. Mackenzie followed along, trying to make herself remain in the role of a student.

"Is there a problem here?" Bryers asked, stepping into the girl's path. "Is this guy harassing you?"

The girl looked up, surprised. She looked instantly relieved but then looked back to the ground, maybe a little embarrassed.

"I don't think so," the girl said. "Some guys just don't take *no* for an answer."

"Shut up, bitch," the crewcut guy said. He then looked directly at Bryers and said: "What business is it of yours, anyway?"

Bryers withdrew his ID so fast that it was like watching a gunslinger go for his irons. "It's my business in more ways than you want to imagine," he said.

“Oh,” crewcut said. “Well, I think I might – ”

And then he turned and ran.

“Ah, hell,” Bryers said. He started to take off after the young man but Mackenzie couldn’t stay still any longer.

“You stay with the girl,” she said. “I’ll get him.”

“Are you sure?” Bryers asked. “I don’t know if – ”

“I’m sure,” she said, already starting to sprint after the suspect.

Without looking back for confirmation from Bryers, Mackenzie dashed forward. There wasn’t much of a crowd assembled along the concourse, giving her few obstacles to contend with. Within two seconds, she knew she’d catch up to the creep easily. He was running on panic and fear while her own strides were balanced and controlled.

The idiot even stopped to look over his shoulder, further giving her the edge. When he saw that she was on his heels, he found another gear. But by then, Mackenzie already had him. She gave an extra push, finding her own next gear, and got within arms’ reach of him. The few people standing in her way saw what was occurring and had stepped out of the way, mainly for their own safety but also to watch what might happen.

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