

A woman with long, dark hair is seen from behind, standing in a vast field of golden wheat. She is wearing a white, long-sleeved, pleated dress with a black belt and hem. Her hair is blowing in the wind. The sky above is a deep, moody blue with scattered white clouds, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting. The overall mood is contemplative and mysterious.

BLAKE PIERCE

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK I

BEFORE
HE
KILLS

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Before he Kills

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Пирс Б.

Before he Kills / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (A Mackenzie White Mystery)

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In the cornfields of Nebraska a woman is found murdered, strung up on a pole, the victim of a deranged killer. It doesn't take long for the police to realize a serial killer is on the loose—and that his spree has just begun. Detective Mackenzie White, young, tough, smarter than the aging, chauvinistic men on her local force, finds herself called in grudgingly to help solve it. As much as the other officers hate to admit it, they need her young, brilliant mind, which has already helped crack cold cases that had left them stumped. Yet even for Mackenzie this new case proves an impossible riddle, something the likes of which she—and the local force—have ever seen. With the FBI called in, together, an intense manhunt ensues. Mackenzie, reeling from her own dark past, her failed relationships, and her undeniable attraction to the new FBI agent, finds herself battling her own demons as her hunt for the killer takes her to the darkest places of her mind. As she delves into the killer's mind, obsessing over his twisted psychology, she finds that evil truly does exist. She only hopes it will not be too late to extricate herself from it, as her entire life collapses around her. As more bodies turn up dead and a frantic race against time ensues, there is no way out but to find him before he kills again. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **BEFORE HE KILLS** marks the debut of a riveting new series—and a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Pierce Blake

BEFORE HE KILLS

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) and ONCE CRAVED (#3). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE 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 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)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)

PROLOGUE

Any other time, the dawn's first light on the tops of the cornstalks would look beautiful to her. She watched as the first light of day danced along the stalks, creating a muted gold color, and she tried with all she had to find the beauty in it.

She had to distract herself – or else the pain would be unbearable.

She was tied to a large wooden pole that ran up her back and stopped two feet above her head. Her hands were bound behind her, tied together behind the pole. She wore only black lace underwear and a bra that pushed her already generous breasts closer together and higher up. It was the bra that got her the most tips at the strip club, the bra that made her breasts look like they still belonged to a twenty-one-year-old rather than a thirty-four-year-old mother of two.

The pole grated against her bare back, rubbing it raw. But it was not nearly as bad as the pain that the man with the dark, creepy voice had been doling out.

She tensed as she heard him walking behind her, his footsteps falling softly in the clearing of the cornfield. There was another sound, too, fainter. He was dragging something. The whip, she realized, the one he'd been using to beat her. It must have been barbed with something, and had a fanned tail to it. She'd only caught sight of it once – and that had been more than enough.

Her back stung with dozens of lashes, and just hearing the thing being pulled across the ground gave her a rush of panic. She let out a scream – what felt like the hundredth one of the night – that seemed to fall dead and flat in the cornfield. At first, her screams had been cries for help, hoping someone might hear her. But over time, they had become garbled howls of anguish, cries uttered by someone who knew that no one was coming to help her.

“I will consider letting you go,” the man said.

He had the voice of someone that either smoked or screamed a lot. There was some sort of odd lisp to his words as well.

“But first, you must confess your crimes.”

He'd said this four times. She wracked her brains again, wondering. She had no crimes to confess. She had been a good person to everyone she knew, a good mother – not as good as she would have liked – but she had tried.

What did he want from her?

She screamed again and tried bending her back against the pole. When she did, she felt the briefest give to the ropes around her wrists. She also felt her sticky blood pooling around the rope.

“Confess your crimes,” he repeated.

“I don't know what you're talking about!” she moaned.

“You will remember,” he said.

He'd said that before, too. And he'd said it just before every —

There was a soft whispering noise as the whip arced through the air.

She screamed and writhed against the pole as the thing struck her.

New blood flowed from her new wound but she barely felt it. Instead, she focused on her wrists. The blood that had been collecting there over the last hour or so was mixing with her sweat. She could feel empty space between the rope and her wrists and she thought she might be able to get away. She felt her mind trying to drift away, to disconnect from the situation.

Crack!

This one hit her directly on the shoulder and she bellowed.

“Please,” she said. “I'll do anything you want! Just let me go!”

“Confess your — ”

She yanked as hard as she could, bringing her arms forward. Her shoulders screamed in agony, but she was instantly free. There was a slight burn as the rope caught the top of her hand, but that was nothing compared to the pain laced across her back.

She yanked forward so hard that she nearly fell to her knees, almost ruining her escape. But the primitive need to survive took control of her muscles and before she was even aware of what she was doing, she was running.

She sprinted, amazed that she was really free, amazed that her legs worked after being bound so long. She would not stop to question it.

She went crashing through the corn, the stalks slapping at her. The leaves and branches seemed to reach out for her, brushing her lacerated back like old withered fingers. She was gasping for breath and focusing on keeping one foot in front of the other. She knew the highway was somewhere nearby. All she had to do was keep running and ignoring the pain.

Behind her, the man started laughing. His voice made the laughter sound like it came from a monster who had been hiding in the cornfield for centuries.

She whimpered and ran on, her bare feet slapping against the dirt and her mostly bare body knocking cornstalks askew. Her breasts bobbed up and down in a ridiculous manner, her left one escaping the bra. She promised herself in that moment that if she made it out of here alive, she would never strip again. She'd find some better job, a better way to provide for her kids.

That lit a new spark in her, and she ran faster, crashing through the corn. She ran as hard as she could. She'd be free of him if she just kept running. The highway had to be right around the corner. Right?

Maybe. But even so, there was no guarantee that anyone would be on it. It wasn't even six AM yet and the Nebraska highways were often very lonesome this time of the day.

Ahead of her, there came a break in the stalks. Dawn's murky light spilled toward her, and her heart leapt to see the highway.

She burst through, and as she did, to her disbelief she heard the noise of an approaching engine. She soared with hope.

She saw the glow of approaching headlights and she ran even faster, so close that she could smell the heat-drenched blacktop.

She reached the edge of the cornfield just as a red pickup truck was passing by. She screamed and waved her arms frantically.

“PLEASE!” she cried.

But to her horror, the truck roared by.

She waved her arms, weeping. Maybe if the driver happened to look into his rearview mirror —
Crack!

A sharp and biting pain exploded along the back of her left knee, and she fell to the ground.

She screamed and tried to get to her feet, but she felt a strong hand grab her by the back of her hair, and soon he was dragging her back into the cornfield.

She tried to move, to break free, but this time, she could not.

There came one last crack of the whip when, finally, gratefully, she lost consciousness.

Soon, she knew, it would all come to an end: the noise, the whip, the pain – and her brief, pain-filled life.

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Mackenzie White braced herself for the worst as she walked through the cornfield that afternoon. The sound of the cornstalks unnerved her as she passed through them, a dead sound, grazing her jacket as she passed through row after row. The clearing she sought, it seemed, was miles away.

She finally reached it, and as she did, she stopped cold, wishing she were anywhere but here. There was a dead, mostly naked body of a thirty-something female tied to a pole, her face frozen in an expression of anguish. It was an expression that Mackenzie wished she'd never seen – and knew she would never forget.

Five policemen milled around the clearing, doing nothing in particular. They were trying to look busy but she knew they were simply trying to make sense of it. She felt certain that none of them had seen anything like this before. It took no more than five seconds of seeing the blonde woman tied to the wooden pole before Mackenzie knew there was something much deeper going on here. Something unlike anything she had ever encountered. This was not what happened in the cornfields of Nebraska.

Mackenzie approached the body and walked a slow circle around it. As she did, she sensed the other officers watching her. She knew that some of them felt she took her job far too seriously. She approached things a little too closely, looked for threads and connections that were almost abstract in nature. She was the young woman who had reached the position of detective far too fast in the eyes of a lot of the men at the precinct, she knew. She was the ambitious girl that everyone assumed had her eyes on bigger and better things than a detective with small-town Nebraska law enforcement.

Mackenzie ignored them. She focused solely on the body, waving away the flies that darted everywhere. They hovered spastically around the woman's body, creating a small black cloud, and the heat was doing the body no favors. It had been hot all summer and it felt as if all of that heat had been collected in this cornfield and placed here.

Mackenzie came close and studied her, trying to repress a feeling of nausea and a wave of sadness. The woman's back was covered in gashes. They looked uniform in nature, likely placed there by the same instrument. Her back was covered in blood, mostly dried and sticky. The back of her thong underwear was caked in it, too.

As Mackenzie finished her loop around the body, a short but stout policeman approached her. She knew him well, though she didn't care for him.

"Hello, Detective White," Chief Nelson said.

"Chief," she replied.

"Where's Porter?"

There was nothing condescending in his voice, but she felt it nonetheless. This hardened local fifty-something police chief did not want a twenty-five-year-old woman helping to make sense of this case. Walter Porter, her fifty-five-year-old partner, would be best for the job.

"Back at the highway," Mackenzie said. "He's speaking to the farmer that discovered the body. He'll be along shortly."

"Okay," Nelson said, clearly a little more at ease. "What do you make of this?"

Mackenzie wasn't sure how to answer that. She knew he was testing her. He did it from time to time, even on menial things at the precinct. He didn't do it to any of the other officers or detectives, and she was fairly certain he only did it to her because she was young and a woman.

Her gut told her this was more than some theatrical murder. Was it the countless lashes on her back? Was it the fact that the woman had a body that was pin-up worthy? Her breasts were clearly fake and if Mackenzie had to guess, her rear had seen some work as well. She was wearing a good deal of makeup, some of which had been smeared and smudged from tears.

“I think,” Mackenzie said, finally answering Nelson’s question, “that this was purely a violent crime. I think forensics will show no sexual abuse. Most men that kidnap a woman for sex rarely abuse their victim this much, even if they plan to kill them later. I also think the style of underwear she is wearing suggests that she was a woman of provocative nature. Quite honestly, judging by her makeup style and the ample size of her breasts, I’d start placing calls to strip clubs in Omaha to see if any dancers were MIA last night.”

“All of that has already been done,” Nelson replied smugly. “The deceased is Hailey Lizbrook, thirty-four years old, a mother of two boys and a mid-level dancer at The Runway in Omaha.”

He recited these facts as if he were reading an instruction manual. Mackenzie assumed he’d been in his position long enough where murder victims were no longer people, but simply a puzzle to be solved.

But Mackenzie, only a few years into her career, was not so hardened and heartless. She studied the woman with an eye toward figuring out what had happened, but also saw her as a woman who had left two boys behind – boys that would live the rest of their lives without a mother. For a mother of two to be a stripper, Mackenzie assumed that there were money troubles in her life and that she was willing to do damn near anything to provide for her kids. But now here she was, strapped to a pole and partially mauled by some faceless man that —

The rustling of cornstalks from behind her cut her off. She turned to see Walter Porter coming through the corn. He looked annoyed as he entered the clearing, wiping dirt and corn silk from his coat.

He looked around for a moment before his eyes settled on Hailey Lizbrook’s body on the pole. A surprised smirk came across his face, his grayed moustache tilting to the right at a harsh angle. He then looked to Mackenzie and Nelson and wasted no time coming over.

“Porter,” Chief Nelson said. “White’s solving this thing already. She’s pretty sharp.”

“She can be,” Porter said dismissively.

It was always like this. Nelson wasn’t genuinely paying her a compliment. He was, in fact, teasing Porter for being stuck with the pretty young girl who had come out of nowhere and yanked up the position of detective – the pretty young girl that few men in the precinct over the age of thirty took seriously. And God, did Porter hate it.

While she *did* enjoy watching Porter writhe under the teasing, it wasn’t worth feeling inadequate and underappreciated. Time and again she had solved cases the other men couldn’t and this, she knew, threatened them. She was only twenty-five, far too young to start feeling burnt out in a career that she once loved. But now, being stuck with Porter, and with this force, she was starting to hate it.

Porter made an effort to step between Nelson and Mackenzie, letting her know that this was his show now. Mackenzie felt herself starting to fume, but she choked it down. She’d been choking it down for the last three months, ever since she’d been assigned to work with him. From day one, Porter had made no secret about his dislike for her. After all, she had replaced Porter’s partner of twenty-eight years who had been released from the force, as far as Porter was concerned, to make room for a young female.

Mackenzie ignored his blatant disrespect; she refused to let it affect her work ethic. Without a word, she went back to the body. She studied it closely. It hurt to study it, and yet, as far as she was concerned, there was no dead body that would ever affect her as much as the first she had ever seen. She was almost reaching the point where she no longer saw her father’s body when she stepped onto a murder scene. But not yet. She’d been seven years old when she walked into the bedroom and saw him half-sprawled on the bed, in a pool of blood. And she had never stopped seeing it since.

Mackenzie searched for clues that this murder had not been about sex. She saw no signs of bruising or scratching on her breasts or buttocks, no external bleeding around the vagina. She then looked to the woman’s hands and feet, wondering if there might be a religious motive; signs of

puncture along the palms, ankles, and feet could denote a reference to crucifixion. But there were no signs of that, either.

In the brief report she and Porter had been given, she knew the victim's clothes had not been located. Mackenzie thought this likely meant that the killer had them, or had disposed of them. This indicated to her that he was either cautious, or borderline obsessive. Add that to the fact that his motives last night had almost certainly not been of a sexual nature, and it added up to a potentially elusive and calculated killer.

Mackenzie backed to the edge of the clearing and took in the entirety of the scene. Porter gave her a sideways glance and then ignored her completely, continuing to talk to Nelson. She noticed that the other policemen were watching her. Some of them, at least, were watching her work. She'd come into the role of detective with a reputation for being exceptionally bright and highly regarded by the majority of instructors at the police academy, and from time to time, younger cops – men and women alike – would ask her genuine questions or seek her opinion.

On the other hand, she knew that a few of the men sharing the clearing with her might also be leering, too. She wasn't sure which was worse: the men that checked out her ass when she walked by or the ones that laughed behind her back at the little girl trying to play the role of bad-ass detective.

As she studied the scene, she was once again assaulted by the nagging suspicion that something was terribly wrong here. She felt like she was opening up a book, reading page one of a story that she knew had some very difficult pages ahead.

This is just the beginning, she thought.

She looked to the dirt around the pole and saw a few scuffed boot marks, but not anything that would provide prints. There was also a series of shapes in the dirt that looked almost serpentine. She squatted down for a closer look and saw that several of the shapes trailed side by side, winding their way around the wooden pole in a broken fashion, as if whatever made them had circled the pole several times. She then looked to the woman's back and saw that the gashes in her flesh were roughly the same shape of the markings on the ground.

"Porter," she said.

"What is it?" he asked, clearly annoyed that he'd been interrupted.

"I think I've got weapon prints here."

Porter hesitated for a second and then walked over to where Mackenzie was hunkered down in the dirt. When he squatted down next to her, he groaned slightly and she could hear his belt creaking. He was about fifty pounds overweight and it was showing more and more as he closed in on fifty-five.

"A whip of some kind?" he asked.

"Looks like it."

She examined the ground, following the marks in the sand all the way up to the pole – and while doing so, she noticed something else. It was something minuscule, so small that she almost didn't catch it.

She walked over to the pole, careful not to touch the body before forensics could get to it. She again hunkered down and when she did, she felt the full weight of the afternoon's heat pressing down on her. Undaunted, she craned her head closer to the pole, so close that her forehead nearly touched it.

"What the hell are you doing?" Nelson asked.

"Something's carved here," she said. "Looks like numbers."

Porter came over to investigate but did everything he could not to bend down again. "White, that chunk of wood is easily twenty years old," he said. "That carving looks just as old."

"Maybe," Mackenzie said. But she didn't think so.

Already uninterested in the discovery, Porter went back to speaking with Nelson, comparing notes about information he'd gotten from the farmer who had discovered the body.

Mackenzie took out her phone and snapped a picture of the numbers. She enlarged the image and the numbers became a bit clearer. Seeing them in such detail once again made her feel as if this was all the start of something much bigger.

N511/J202

The numbers meant nothing to her. Maybe Porter was right; maybe they meant absolutely nothing. Maybe they'd been carved there by a logger when the post had been created. Maybe some bored kid had chiseled them there somewhere along the years.

But that didn't feel right.

Nothing about this felt right.

And she knew, in her heart, that this was only the beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

Mackenzie felt a knot in her stomach as she looked out of the car and saw the news vans piled up, reporters jockeying for the best position to assault her and Porter as they pulled up to the precinct. As Porter parked, she watched several news anchors approach, running across the precinct lawn with burdened cameramen keeping pace behind them.

Mackenzie saw Nelson already at the front doors, doing what he could to pacify them, looking uncomfortable and agitated. Even from here she could see the sweat glistening on his forehead.

As they got out, Porter ambled up beside her, making sure she was not the first detective the media saw. As he passed her, he said, “Don’t you tell these vampires anything.”

She felt a rush of indignation at his condescending comment.

“I know, Porter.”

The throng of reporters and cameras reached them. There were at least a dozen mics sticking out of the crowd and into their faces as they made their way past. The questions came at them like the buzzing of insects.

“Have the victim’s children been notified yet?”

“What was the farmer’s reaction when he found the body?”

“Is this a case of sexual abuse?”

“Is it wise for a woman to be assigned to such a case?”

That last one stung Mackenzie a bit. Sure, she knew they were simply trying to land a response, hoping for a juicy twenty-second spot for the afternoon newscast. It was only four o’clock; if they acted quickly, they might have a nugget for the six o’clock news.

As she made her way through the doors and inside, that last question echoed like thunder in her head.

Is it wise for a woman to be assigned to such a case?

She recalled how emotionlessly Nelson had read off Hailey Lizbrook’s information.

Of course it is, Mackenzie thought. In fact, it’s crucial.

Finally they entered the precinct and the doors slammed behind them. Mackenzie breathed with relief to be in the quiet.

“Fucking leeches,” Porter said.

He’d dropped the swagger from his step now that he was no longer in front of the cameras. He walked slowly past the receptionist’s desk and toward the hallway that led to the conference rooms and offices that made up their precinct. He looked tired, ready to go home, ready to be done with this case already.

Mackenzie entered the conference room first. There were several officers sitting at a large table, some in uniform and some in their street clothes. Given their presence and the sudden appearance of the news vans, Mackenzie guessed that the story had leaked in all sorts of directions in the two and a half hours between leaving her office, heading to the cornfield, and getting back. It was more than a random grisly murder; now, it had become a spectacle.

Mackenzie grabbed a cup of coffee and took a seat at the table. Someone had already set folders around the table with the little bit of information that had already been gathered about the case. As she looked through it, more people started filing into the room. Porter eventually entered, taking a seat at the opposite end.

Mackenzie took a moment to check her phone and found that she had eight missed calls, five voice messages, and a dozen e-mails. It was a stark reminder that she’d already had a full caseload before being sent out to the cornfield this morning. The sad irony was that while her older peers spent a lot of time demeaning her and throwing subtle insults her way, they also realized her talents. As a

result, she kept one of the larger caseloads on the force. To date, though, she had never fallen behind and had a stellar rate of closed cases.

She thought about answering some of the e-mails while she waited, but Chief Nelson came in before she could get the chance. He quickly closed the conference room door behind him.

“I don’t know how the media found out about this so quickly,” he growled, “but if I find out that someone in this room is responsible, there’s going to be hell to pay.”

The room fell quiet. A few officers and related staff started to look nervously at the contents of the folders in front of them. While Mackenzie didn’t care much for Nelson, there was no denying that the man’s presence and voice commanded a room without much effort.

“Here’s where we stand,” Nelson said. “The victim is Hailey Lizbrook, a stripper from Omaha. Thirty-four years old, two boys, ages nine and fifteen. From what we can gather, she was abducted before clocking in for work, as her employer says she never showed up the night before. Security footage from the Runway, her place of employment, shows nothing. So we’re working on the assumption that she was taken somewhere between her apartment and the Runway. That’s an area of seven and a half miles – an area that we currently have a few bodies investigating with the Omaha PD right now.”

He then looked to Porter as if he were a prized pupil and said:

“Porter, why don’t you describe the scene?”

Of course he’d choose Porter.

Porter stood up and looked around the room as if to make sure everyone was paying close attention.

“The victim was bound to a wooden pole with her hands tied behind her. The sight of her death was in a clearing in a cornfield, a little less than a mile off the highway. Her back was covered in what appeared to be lash marks, placed there by some sort of a whip. We noted prints in the dirt that were the same shape and size of the lashes. While we won’t know for absolutely certain until after the coroner’s report, we are fairly certain this was not a sexual attack, even though the victim had been stripped to her underwear and her clothes were nowhere to be found.”

“Thanks, Porter,” Nelson said. “Speaking of the coroner, I spoke with him on the phone about twenty minutes ago. He says that while he won’t know for sure until an autopsy is conducted, the cause of death is likely going to be blood loss or some sort trauma – likely to the head or heart.”

His eyes then went to Mackenzie and there was very little interest in them when he asked: “Anything to add, White?”

“The numbers,” she said.

Nelson rolled his eyes in front of the entire room. It was a clear sign of disrespect but she trudged past it, determined to get it out to everyone present before she could be cut off.

“I discovered what appeared to be two numbers, separated by a slash, carved into the bottom of the pole.”

“What were the numbers?” one of the younger officers at the table asked.

“Numbers and letters actually,” Mackenzie said. “N 511 and J 202. I have a picture on my phone.”

“Other pictures will be here shortly, just as soon as Nancy gets them printed out,” Nelson said. He spoke quickly and forcefully, letting the room know that the issue of these numbers was now closed.

Mackenzie listened to Nelson as he droned on about the tasks that needed to be carried out to cover the seven-and-a-half-mile area between Hailey Lizbrook’s home and the Runway. But she was only half-listening, really. Her mind kept going back to the way the woman’s body had been strung up. Something about the entire display of the body had seemed almost familiar to her right away, and it still stuck with her as she sat in the conference room.

She went through the brief notes in the folder, hoping some small detail might trigger something in her memory. She leafed through the four pages of information, hoping to uncover something. She already knew everything in the folder, but she scanned the details anyway.

Thirty-four-year-old female, presumed killed the previous night. Lashes, cuts, various abrasions on her back, tied to an old wooden post. Cause of death assumed to be blood loss or possible trauma to the heart. Method of binding suggests possible religious overtones while woman's body type hints at sexual motivations.

As she read through it, something clicked. She zoned out a bit, allowing her mind to go where it needed without interference from her surroundings.

As she put the dots together, coming up with a connection she *hoped* she was wrong about, Nelson started to wind down.

"...and since it's too late for roadblocks to be effective, we're going to have to rely mostly on witness testimony, even down to the most minute and seemingly useless detail. Now, does anyone have anything else to add?"

"One thing, sir," Mackenzie said.

She could tell that Nelson was containing a sigh. From the other end of the table, she heard Porter make a soft sort of chuckling noise. She ignored it all and waited to see how Nelson would address her.

"Yes, White?" he asked.

"I'm recalling a case in 1987 that was similar to this. I'm pretty sure it was right outside of Roseland. The binding was the same, the type of woman was the same. I'm fairly certain the method of beating was the same."

"1987?" Nelson asked. "White, were you even born yet?"

This was met with soft laughter from more than half of the room. Mackenzie let it slide right off. She'd find the time to be embarrassed later.

"I was not," she said, not afraid to tangle with him. "But I *did* read the report."

"You forget, sir," Porter said. "Mackenzie spends her free time reading cold case files. The girl is like a walking encyclopedia for this stuff."

Mackenzie noticed at once that Porter had referred to her by her first name *and* called her a girl rather than a woman. The sad thing was that she didn't think he was even aware of the disrespect.

Nelson rubbed at his head and finally let out the thunderous sigh that had been building up. "1987? You're sure?"

"Almost positive."

"Roseland?"

"Or the immediate surrounding area," she said.

"Okay," Nelson said, looking to the far end of the table where a middle-aged woman sat, listening diligently. There was a laptop in front of her, which she had been quietly typing on the whole time. "Nancy, can you run a search for that in the database?"

"Yes sir," she said. She started typing something into the precinct's internal server right away.

Nelson cast Mackenzie another disapproving look that essentially translated to: *You better be right. If not, you just wasted twenty seconds of my valuable time.*

"All right, boys and ladies," Nelson said. "Here's how we're going to break this out. The moment this meeting ends, I want Smith and Berryhill heading out to Omaha to help the local PD out there. From there, if needed, we'll rotate out in pairs. Porter and White, want you two to speak with the kids of the deceased and her employer. We're also working on getting the address of her sister."

"Excuse me, sir," Nancy said, looking up from her computer.

"Yes, Nancy?"

“It seems Detective White was right. October of 1987, a prostitute was found dead and bound to a wooden line pole just outside of the Roseland city limits. The file I’m looking at says she was stripped to her underwear and flogged severely. No signs of sexual abuse and no motive to speak of.”

The room went quiet again as many damning questions went unspoken. Finally, it was Porter that spoke up and although Mackenzie could tell he was trying to dismiss the case, she could hear a hint of worry in his voice.

“That’s almost thirty years ago,” he said. “I’d call that a flimsy connection.”

“But it’s a connection nonetheless,” Mackenzie said.

Nelson slammed a hefty hand down on the desk, his eyes burning into Mackenzie. “If there *is* a connection here, you know what it means, right?”

“It means we may be dealing with a serial killer,” she said. “And even the *idea* that we may be dealing with a serial killer means we need to consider calling in the FBI.”

“Ah, hell,” Nelson said. “You’re jumping the gun there. You’re jumping an entire arsenal, in fact.”

“With all due respect,” Mackenzie said, “it’s worth looking into.”

“And now that your hardwired brain has brought it to our attention, we *have* to,” Nelson said. “I’ll make some calls and get you involved in checking it out. For now, let’s get cracking on things that are relevant and timely. That’s it for now, everyone. Now get to work.”

The small group at the conference table started to disperse, taking their folders with them. As Mackenzie started out of the room, Nancy gave her a small smile of acknowledgment. It was the most encouragement Mackenzie had gotten at work in more than two weeks. Nancy was the receptionist and sometimes fact-checker around the precinct. As far as Mackenzie knew, she was one of the few older members on the force who had no real problem with her.

“Porter and White, hold on,” Nelson said.

She saw that Nelson was now showing some of the same worry she had seen and heard in Porter when he spoke up moments ago. He looked almost sick with it.

“Good recall on that 1987 case,” Nelson told Mackenzie. It looked like it physically hurt him to pay her the compliment. “It *is* a shot in the dark. But it does make you wonder...”

“Wonder what?” Porter asked.

Mackenzie, never one for beating around the bush, answered for Nelson.

“Why he’s decided to go active now,” she said.

Then she added:

“And when he’ll kill again.”

CHAPTER THREE

He sat in his car, enjoying the silence. Streetlights cast a ghostly glow on the street. There weren't many cars out at such a late hour, making it eerily tranquil. He knew that anyone out in this part of town at such an hour was likely preoccupied or doing their dealings in secret. It made it easier for him to focus on the work at hand – the Good Work.

The sidewalks were dark except for the occasional neon glow of seedy establishments. The crude figure of a well-endowed woman glowed in the window of the building he was studying. It flickered like a beacon on a stormy sea. But there was no refuge in those places – no respectable refuge, anyway.

As he sat in his car, as far away from the streetlights as he could get, he thought about his collection at home. He'd studied it closely before heading out tonight. There were remnants of his work on his small desk: a purse, an earring, a gold necklace, a chunk of blonde hair placed in a small Tupperware container. They were reminders, reminders that he had been assigned this work. And that he had more work to do.

A man emerged from the building on the opposite side of the street, breaking him from his thoughts. Watching, he sat there and waited patiently. He'd learned a great deal about patience over the years. Because of that, knowing that he must now work quickly made him anxious. What if he was not precise?

He had little choice. Already, Hailey Lizbrook's murder was on the news. People were searching for him – as if he were the one who had done something bad. They just didn't understand. What he had given that woman had been a gift.

An act of grace.

In the past, he'd let much time pass between his sacred acts. But now, an urgency was upon him. There was so much to do. There were always women out there – on street corners, in personal ads, on television.

In the end, they'd understand. They'd understand and they'd thank him. They would ask him how to be pure, and he would open their eyes.

Moments later, the neon image of the woman in the window went black. The glow behind the windows died out. The place had gone dark, the lights cut off as they closed for the night.

He knew this meant that the women would be coming out of the back at any moment, headed to their cars and then home.

He shifted into drive and drove slowly around the block. The streetlights seemed to chase him, but he knew that there were no prying eyes to see him. In this part of the city, no one cared.

At the back of the building, most of the cars were nice. There was good money in keeping your body on display. He parked at the far edge of the lot and waited some more.

After a long while, the employee door finally opened. Two women came out, accompanied by a man that looked like he worked security for the place. He eyed the security man, wondering if he might be a problem. He had a gun under the seat that he would use if he absolutely had to, but he'd rather not. He hadn't had to use it yet. He actually abhorred guns. There was something impure about them, something almost slothful.

Finally, they all split up, getting in their cars and heading off.

He watched others emerge, and then he sat upright. He could feel his heart pounding. That was her. That was the one.

She was short, with fake blonde hair that bobbed just over her shoulders. He watched her get into her car and he did not drive forward until her taillights were around the corner.

He drove around the other side of the building, so as not to draw attention to himself. He trailed behind her, his heart starting to race. Instinctively, he reached under his seat and felt the strand of rope. It eased his nerves.

It calmed him to know that, after the pursuit, there would come the sacrifice.

And come, it would.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mackenzie sat in the passenger seat, several files scattered in her lap, Porter behind the wheel, tapping his fingers to the beat of a Rolling Stones song. He kept the car tuned to the same classic rock station he always listened to while driving, and Mackenzie glanced up, annoyed, her concentration finally broken. She watched the car's headlights slice down the highway at eighty miles per hour, and turned to him.

"Can you please turn that down?" she snapped.

Usually, she didn't mind, but she was trying to slip into the right frame of mind, to understand the killer's MO.

With a sigh and shake of his head, Porter turned down the radio. He glanced over to her dismissively.

"What are you hoping to find, anyway?" he asked.

"I'm not trying to *find* anything," Mackenzie said. "I'm trying to put the pieces together to better understand the killer's personality type. If we can think like him, we have a much better chance of finding him."

"Or," Porter said, "you can just wait until we get to Omaha and speak to the victim's kids and sister like Nelson told us."

Without even looking at him, Mackenzie could tell that he was struggling to keep some wise-ass comment in. She had to give him a little credit, she supposed. When it was just the two of them on the road or at a crime scene, Porter kept the wisecracks and degrading behavior to a minimum.

She ignored Porter for the moment and looked to the notes in her lap. She was comparing the notes from the 1987 case and the Hailey Lizbrook murder. The more she read over them, the more she was convinced that they had been pulled off by the same guy. But the thing that kept frustrating her was that there was no clear motive.

She looked back and forth through the documents, flipping through pages and cycling through the information. She started to murmur to herself, asking questions and stating facts out loud. It was something she had done ever since high school, a quirk that she had never quite grown out of.

"No evidence of sexual abuse in either case," she said softly. "No obvious ties between the victims other than profession. No real chance of religious motivations. Why not go for the full-on crucifix rather than just basic poles if you're going for a religious theme? The numbers were present in both cases but the numbers don't show any clear significance to the killings."

"Don't take this the wrong way," Porter said, "but I'd really rather be listening to the Stones."

Mackenzie stopped talking to herself and then noticed that her notification light was blinking on her phone. After she and Porter had left, she'd e-mailed Nancy and asked her to do a few quick searches with the terms *pole*, *stripper*, *prostitute*, *waitress*, *corn*, *lashes*, and the sequence of numbers *N511/J202* from murder cases over the last thirty years. When Mackenzie checked her phone, she saw that Nancy, as usual, had acted quickly.

The mail Nancy had sent back read: *Not much, I'm afraid. I've attached the briefs on the few cases I did find, though. Good luck!*

There were only five attachments and Mackenzie was able to look through them pretty quickly. Three of them clearly had nothing to do with the Lizbrook murder or the case from '87. But the other two were interesting enough to at least consider.

One of them was a case from 1994 where a woman had been found dead behind an abandoned barn in a rural area about eighty miles outside of Omaha. She had been tied to a wooden pole and it was believed that her body had been there for at least six days before being discovered. Her body had gone stiff and a few woodland animals – believed to be bobcats – had started eating at her legs. The woman had a lengthy criminal record, including two arrests for soliciting sex. Again, there had been

no clear signs of sexual abuse and while there had been lashes on her back, they had not been nearly as extensive as what they had found on Hailey Lizbrook. The briefing on the murder said nothing about numbers being found on the pole, though.

The second maybe-related file concerned a nineteen-year-old girl that had been reported as kidnapped when she did not return home for Christmas break from her freshman year at the University of Nebraska in 2009. When her body was discovered in an empty field three months later, partially buried, there had been lashes on her back. Images were later leaked to the press, showing the young girl nude and engaged in some sort of lurid sex party at a fraternity house. The pictures had been taken one week before she had been reported missing.

The last case was a bit of a stretch, but Mackenzie thought they could both potentially be linked to the '87 murder and Hailey Lizbrook.

“What you got there?” Porter asked.

“Nancy sent me briefs from some other cases that might be linked.”

“Anything good?”

She hesitated but then filled him in on the two potential links. When she was done, Porter nodded his head as he stared out into the night. They passed a sign telling them that Omaha was twenty-two miles ahead.

“I think you try too hard sometimes,” Porter said. “You bust your ass and a lot of people have taken notice. But let’s be honest: no matter how hard you try, not every case has some huge link that is going to create some monster case for you.”

“So humor me,” Mackenzie said. “At this very moment, what does your gut tell you about this case? What are we dealing with?”

“It’s just some basic perp with mommy issues,” Porter said dismissively. “We talk to enough people, we find him. All this analysis is a waste of time. You don’t find people by getting into their head. You find them by asking questions. Street work. Door to door. Witness to witness.”

As they fell into silence, Mackenzie started to worry about just how simplistic his view of the world was, how black and white. It left no room for nuance, for anything outside of his predetermined beliefs. She thought the psycho they were dealing with was far too sophisticated for that.

“What’s *your* take on our killer?” he finally asked.

She could detect resentment in his voice, as if he really hadn’t wanted to ask her but the silence had got the best of him.

“I think he hates women for what they represent,” she said softly, working it out in her mind as she spoke. “Maybe he’s a fifty-year-old virgin who thinks sex is gross – and yet there’s also that *need* in him for sex. Killing women makes him feel like he’s conquering his own instincts, instincts he sees as gross and inhuman. If he can eliminate the source of where those sexual urges come from, he feels in control. The lashes on the back indicate that he’s almost punishing them, probably for their provocative nature. Then there’s the fact that there are no signs of sexual abuse. It makes me wonder if this is some sort of attempt at purity in the killer’s eyes.”

Porter shook his head, almost like some disappointed parent.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” he said. “A waste of time. You’ve got yourself so far into this you don’t even know what you think anymore – and none of that is gonna help us. You can’t see the forest for the trees.”

The awkward silence blanketed them again. Apparently done speaking, Porter turned the radio up.

It lasted only a few minutes, though. As they neared Omaha, Porter turned the radio back down without being prompted this time. Porter spoke up and when he did, he sounded nervous, but Mackenzie could also hear the effort he was putting forth to sound like he was the one in charge.

“You ever interviewed kids after they lost a parent?” Porter asked.

“Once,” she said. “After a drive-by. An eleven-year-old boy.”

“I’ve had a few, too. It’s not fun.”

“No, it’s not,” Mackenzie agreed.

“Well look, we’re about to ask two boys questions about their dead mom. The topic of where she works is bound to come up. We have to handle this thing with kid gloves – no pun intended.”

She fumed. He was doing that thing where he spoke down to her as if she were a child.

“Let me lead. You can be the comforting shoulder if they start crying. Nelson says the sister will also be there, but I can’t imagine she’d be any reliable source of comfort. She’s probably just as wrecked as the kids.”

Mackenzie actually didn’t think it was the best idea. But she also knew that when Porter and Nelson were involved, she needed to choose her battles wisely. So if Porter wanted to take charge of asking two grieving kids about their dead mom, she’d let him have that weird ego trip.

“As you want,” she said through clenched teeth.

The car fell into silence again. This time, Porter kept the radio turned down, the only sounds coming from the shifting of pages in Mackenzie’s lap. There was a larger story in those pages and the documents Nancy had sent; Mackenzie was sure of it.

Of course, for the story to be told, all of the characters needed to be revealed. And for now, the central character was still hiding in the shadows.

The car slowed and Mackenzie raised her head as they turned down a quiet block. She felt a familiar pit in her stomach, and she wished she were anywhere but here.

They were about to talk to a dead woman’s kids.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mackenzie was surprised as she entered Hailey Lizbrook's apartment; it was not what she had expected. It was neat and tidy, the furniture nicely centered and dusted. The décor was very much that of a domesticated woman, right down to the coffee mugs with cute sayings and the pot holders hanging from ornate hooks by the stove. It was evident that she had run a tight ship, right down to the haircuts and pajamas on her sons.

It was very much like the family and home she always dreamed of having herself.

Mackenzie recalled from the files that the boys were nine and fifteen; the oldest was Kevin and the youngest was Dalton. It was clear as she met him that Dalton had been crying a lot, his blue eyes rimmed with puffy red splotches.

Kevin, on the other hand, looked angry more than anything else. As they settled in and Porter took the lead, it showed perfectly clear when Porter tried speaking to them in a tone that was somewhere between condescending and a preschool teacher trying too hard. Mackenzie winced inside as Porter spoke.

"Now I need to know if your mother had any men friends," Porter said.

He stood in the center of the room while the boys sat on the living room couch. Hailey's sister, Jennifer, was standing in the adjoining kitchen, smoking a cigarette by the stove with the exhaust fan running.

"You mean like a boyfriend?" Dalton asked.

"Sure, that could be a male friend," Porter said. "But I don't even mean like that. Any man that she might have spoken to more than once. Even someone like a mailman or someone at the grocery store."

Both of the boys were looking at Porter as if they were expecting him to perform a magic trick or maybe even spontaneously combust. Mackenzie was doing the same. She had never heard him use such a soft tone. It was almost funny to hear such a soothing tone come out of his mouth.

"No, I don't think so," Dalton said.

"No," Kevin agreed. "And she didn't have a boyfriend, either. Not that I know of."

Mackenzie and Porter looked to Jennifer over by the stove for an answer. All they got in response was a shrug. Mackenzie was pretty sure Jennifer was in some sort of shock. It made her wonder if there might be another family member that could take care of these boys for a while, since Jennifer certainly didn't seem like a fit guardian at the moment.

"Well, how about people that you and your mom didn't get along with?" Porter asked. "Did you ever hear her arguing with anyone?"

Dalton only shook his head. Mackenzie was pretty sure the kid was on the brink of tears again. As for Kevin, he rolled his eyes while looking directly at Porter.

"No," he said. "We're not stupid. We know what you're trying to ask us. You want to know if we can think of anyone that might have killed our mom. Right?"

Porter looked as if he had been punched in the gut. He glanced nervously over to Mackenzie but managed to get his composure back fairly quickly.

"Well, yes," he said. "That's what I'm getting at. But it seems clear that you don't have any information."

"You think?" Kevin said.

There was a tense moment where Mackenzie was certain that Porter was going to get harsh with the kid. Kevin was looking at Porter with pain in his expression, almost daring Porter to keep at him.

"Well," Porter said, "I think I've bothered you boys enough. Thanks for your time."

"Hold on," Mackenzie said, the objection coming out of her mouth before she was able to think about stopping it.

Porter gave her a look that could have melted wax. It was clear that he felt they were wasting their time talking to these two grief-stricken sons – especially a fifteen-year-old that clearly had issues with authority. Mackenzie shrugged his expression off and knelt down to Dalton's eye level.

"Listen, do you think you could go hang out in the kitchen with your aunt for a second?"

"Yeah," Dalton said, his voice ragged and soft.

"Detective Porter, why don't you go with him?"

Again, Porter's gaze toward her was filled with hate. Mackenzie stared right back at him, unflinching. She set her face until it felt like stone and was determined to stand her ground on this one. If he wanted to argue, she'd take it outside. But it was clear that even in a situation with two kids and a nearly catatonic woman, he didn't want to be embarrassed.

"Of course," he finally said through gritted teeth.

Mackenzie waited a moment as Porter and Dalton walked into the kitchen.

Mackenzie stood back up. She knew that around the age of twelve or so, the tactic of getting down at eye level with kids stopped working.

She looked at Kevin and saw that the defiance he had showed Porter was still there. Mackenzie had nothing against teenagers, but she did know that they were often difficult to work with – especially in the midst of tragic circumstances. But she'd seen how Kevin had responded to Porter and thought she might know how to get through to him.

"Level with me, Kevin," she said. "Do you feel like we showed up too soon? Do you think we're being inconsiderate by asking questions so soon after you received the news about your mom?"

"Sort of," he said.

"Do you just not feel like talking right now?"

"No, I'm fine with talking," Kevin said. "But that guy is a dick."

Mackenzie knew this was her chance. She could take a professional, formal approach, as she normally would – or she could use this opportunity to establish a rapport with an angry teenage boy. Teenagers, she knew, above all, cherished honesty. They could see through anything when driven by emotion.

"You're right," she said. "He is a dick."

Kevin stared back at her, wide-eyed. She had stunned him; clearly, he had not expected that response.

"But that doesn't change the fact that I have to work with him," she added, her voice layered with sympathy and understanding. "It also doesn't change the fact that we're here to help you. We want to find whoever did this to your mother. Don't you?"

He was silent for a long time; then, finally, he nodded back.

"Do you think you could talk to me, then?" Mackenzie asked. "Just a few quick questions and then we'll get out of here."

"And who comes after that?" Kevin asked, guarded.

"Honestly?"

Kevin nodded and she saw that he was close to tears. She wondered if he'd been holding them back this entire time, trying to be strong for his brother and his aunt.

"Well, after we leave, we'll call in any information we can get and then social services will come to make sure your aunt Jennifer is suitable to care for you while final arrangements are made for your mom."

"She's cool most of the time," Kevin said, looking over to Jennifer. "But her and Mom were really tight. Like best friends."

"Sisters can be like that," Mackenzie said, having no idea if it was true or not. "But for now, I need to see if you can focus on my questions. Can you do that?"

"Yeah."

“Good. Now, I hate to ask you this, but it’s sort of necessary. Do you know what your mom did for work?”

Kevin nodded as his eyes dropped to the floor.

“Yeah,” he said. “And I don’t know how, but kids at school know about it, too. Someone’s horny dad probably went to the club and saw her and recognized her from a school function or something. It sucks. I got ribbed about it all the time.”

Mackenzie couldn’t imagine that kind of torment but it also made her respect Hailey Lizbrook a hell of a lot more. Sure, she stripped for money at night but during the day she was apparently a mother who was involved with her kids.

“Okay,” Mackenzie said. “So, knowing about her job, you can imagine the kind of men that go to those places, right?”

Kevin nodded, and Mackenzie saw the first tear slide down his left cheek. She almost reached out and took his hand as a sign of comfort but she didn’t want to antagonize him.

“I need you to think about whether or not your mom ever came home really upset or mad about something. I need you to also think about any men that might have...well, any men that might have come home with her.”

“No one ever came home with her,” he said. “And I hardly ever saw Mom angry or upset about anything. The only time I ever saw her mad was when she was dealing with the lawyers last year.”

“Lawyers?” Mackenzie asked. “Do you know why she was speaking with lawyers?”

“Sort of. I know that something happened at work one night and it made her end up talking to some lawyers. I heard bits and pieces of it when she was on the phone. I’m pretty sure she was talking to them about a restraining order.”

“And you think this was in regards to where she worked?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Kevin said. He seemed to have brightened a bit once it seemed that he had said something that might be of assistance. “But I think so.”

“That’s a huge help, Kevin,” Mackenzie said. “Is there anything else you can think of?”

He shook his head slowly and then looked into Mackenzie’s eyes. He was trying to remain strong but there was so much sadness in the boy’s eyes that Mackenzie had no idea how he hadn’t broken down yet.

“Mom was ashamed of it, you know?” Kevin said. “She worked from home some during the day. She was this sort of technical writer, doing websites and stuff. But I don’t think she was making much money. She did the other thing to make more money because our dad...well, he split a long time ago. He never sends money anymore. So Mom...she had to take this other job. She did it for me and Dalton and...”

“I know,” Mackenzie said, and this time she did reach out to him. She placed her hand on his shoulder and he seemed to be grateful. She could also tell that he wanted to cry quite badly but probably wasn’t going to allow himself to do it in front of strangers.

“Detective Porter,” Mackenzie said, and he emerged from the other room, glaring at her. “Did you have any further questions?” She shook her head subtly as she asked this, hoping he’d pick up on it.

“No, I think we’re good here,” Porter said.

“Okay,” Mackenzie said. “Again, guys, thank you so much for your time.”

“Yes, thanks,” Porter said, joining Mackenzie in the living room. “Jennifer, you have my number so if you can think of anything that might help us, don’t hesitate to call. Even the smallest detail could prove helpful.”

Jennifer nodded and let out a croaky, “Thanks.”

Mackenzie and Porter made their exit, walking down a set of wooden steps and into the apartment complex parking lot. When they were a safe distance away from the apartment, Mackenzie closed the distance between them. She could feel the immense anger coming off of him like heat but ignored it.

“I got a lead,” she said. “Kevin says that his mother was working toward filing a restraining order against someone at work last year. He said it was the only time he had ever seen her visibly mad or upset about something.”

“Good,” Porter said. “That means that something good came out of you undermining me.”

“I didn’t undermine you,” Mackenzie said. “I simply saw a situation falling apart between you and the oldest son, so I stepped in to resolve it.”

“Bullshit,” Porter said. “You made me look weak and inferior in front of those kids and their aunt.”

“That’s not true,” Mackenzie said. “And even if it *was* true, what does it matter? You were talking to those kids like they were idiots that could barely comprehend the English language.”

“Your actions were a clear sign of disrespect,” Porter said. “Let me remind you that I’ve been at this job for longer than you’ve been alive. If I need you to step in to help me, I’ll damn well tell you.”

“You ended it, Porter,” she replied. “It was over, remember? There was nothing left to undermine. You were out the door. That was your call. And it was the wrong call.”

They had reached the car now and as Porter unlocked it, he looked over the roof, his eyes blazing into Mackenzie.

“When we get back to the station, I’m going to Nelson and put in a request to be reassigned. I’m done with this disrespect.”

“Disrespect,” Mackenzie said, shaking her head. “You don’t even know what that word means. Why don’t you start by taking a close look at how you treat me.”

Porter let out a shaky sigh and got in the car, not saying anything else. Deciding not to let Porter’s tense mood get the best of her, Mackenzie also got in. She looked back to the apartment and wondered if Kevin had allowed himself to cry yet. In the grand scheme of things, the beef that existed between her and Porter really didn’t seem all that significant.

“You wanna call it in?” Porter asked, clearly pissed that he had been overstepped.

“Yeah,” she said, taking out her phone. As she pulled up Nelson’s number, she couldn’t deny the slow satisfaction that was building inside of her. A restraining order placed a year ago and now Hailey Lizbrook was dead.

We got the bastard, she thought.

But at the same time, she also couldn’t help but wonder if wrapping this thing up would really be this easy.

CHAPTER SIX

Mackenzie finally arrived home at 10:45, exhausted. The day had been long and draining but she knew that she would not be able to sleep for quite a while. Her mind was too focused on the lead that Kevin Lizbrook had supplied. She'd called the information in to Nelson and he assured her that he'd have someone call the strip club and whatever law firm Hailey Lizbrook had been working with to get her restraining order.

With her mind firing off in hundreds of directions, Mackenzie put on some music, grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, and ran herself a bath. She was typically not fond of baths, but tonight every muscle in her body was wound entirely too tight. As the tub filled with water, she walked through the house and tidied up from where Zack had apparently waited until the last minute to go to work again.

She and Zack had moved in together a little over a year ago, trying to take every possible step they could in their relationship that might prevent marriage for as long as possible. Mackenzie felt that she was ready to get married, but Zack seemed terrified of it. They'd been together for three years now and while the first two of those years had been great, the latter part of their relationship had been based on monotony and Zack's fear of being alone and getting married. If he could stay somewhere in between those, with Mackenzie as his buffer, he'd be happy.

Yet as she picked up two dirty plates from the coffee table and stepped over an Xbox disc on the floor, Mackenzie wondered if maybe she was done being a buffer. More than that, she wasn't even sure she'd marry Zack if he asked her tomorrow. She knew him too well; she had seen a picture of what being married to him would be like and, quite frankly, it wasn't too promising.

She was stuck in a dead-end relationship, with a partner who didn't appreciate her. In the same way, she realized, she was stuck in a job with colleagues who didn't appreciate her. Her entire life felt stuck. She knew changes needed to be made, but they felt too daunting to her. And given her level of exhaustion, she just didn't have the energy.

Mackenzie retired to the bathroom and cut off the water. Waves of steam rolled from the top of the water, as though inviting her in. She undressed, looking at herself in the mirror and becoming even more aware that she had wasted eight years of her life with a man who had no real desire to commit his life to her. She felt that she was attractive in a simple sort of way. Her face was pretty (maybe a bit more so when she wore her hair in a ponytail) and she had a solid figure, if a bit thin and muscular. Her stomach was flat and hard – so much so that Zack sometimes joked that her abs were a bit intimidating.

She slipped into the tub, the beer resting on the small towel table beside her. She let out a deep exhale and let the hot water do its work. She closed her eyes and relaxed as best as she could, but the image of Kevin Lizbrook's eyes returned to her on a constant loop. The amount of sadness in them had been almost unbearable, speaking of a pain that Mackenzie herself had once known but had managed to push far back into her heart.

She closed her eyes and dozed, the image haunting her the entire time. She felt a palpable presence, as if Hailey Lizbrook were in the room with her now, urging her to solve her murder.

*

Zack came home an hour later, fresh off a twelve-hour shift at a local textile plant. Every time Mackenzie smelled the scents of dirt, sweat, and grease on him, it reminded her of how little ambition Zack had. Mackenzie had no issue with the job in and of itself; it was a respectable job made for men that were built for hard work and dedication. But Zack had a bachelor's degree that he had intended

to use to land a spot in a master's program to become a teacher. That plan had ended five years ago and he had been stuck in the role of shift manager at the textile plant ever since.

Mackenzie was on her second beer by the time he came in, sitting in bed and reading a book. She figured she'd try to fall asleep around three or so, getting a solid five hours before heading in to work at nine the next morning. She'd never cared much for sleep and had discovered that on nights she got more than six hours, she found herself lethargic and out of sorts the next day.

Zack came into the room in his dingy work clothes. He kicked his shoes off by the side of the bed as he looked her over. She was wearing a tank top and a pair of high-riding bicycle shorts.

"Hey, babe," he said, his eyes taking her all in. "So, this is nice to come home to."

"How was your day?" she asked, barely looking up from her book.

"It was okay," he said. "Then I came home and saw you like *this* and it got a lot better." With that, he crawled onto the bed and directly toward her. His hand went to the side of her face as he angled in for a kiss.

She dropped her book and pulled away at once. "Zack, have you lost your mind?" she asked.

"What?" he said, clearly confused.

"You're absolutely filthy. And not only have I taken a bath, but you're getting dirt and grease and God only knows what else on the sheets."

"Ah, God," Zack said, annoyed. He rolled off of the bed, purposefully covering as much of the sheets as he could. "Why are you such a tight-ass?"

"I'm not a tight-ass," she said. "I just prefer to not live in a pig sty. By the way, thanks for cleaning up after yourself before you left for work."

"Oh, it's so nice to be home," Zack sneered, walking into the bathroom and shutting the door behind him.

Mackenzie sighed and chugged down the rest of her beer. She then looked across the room where Zack's dirty work boots were still on the floor – where they would stay until he put them on tomorrow. She also knew that when she got up in the morning and went into the bathroom to get ready, she'd find his dirty clothes in a pile in the floor.

To hell with it, she thought, returning to her book. She read only a few pages while she listened to the water from Zack's shower in the bathroom. She then set the book aside and walked back into the living room. She picked up her briefcase, carried it into the bedroom, and pulled out the most up-to-date files on the Lizbrook murder she had retrieved from the station before coming home. As much as she wanted to rest, even for a few hours, it would not let her.

She looked through the files, digging for any detail that they might have overlooked. When she was certain that everything had been covered, she once again saw Kevin's tear-filled eyes and it pushed her to look again.

Mackenzie was so enamored with the files that she didn't notice Zack coming into the room. He smelled much better now and, with only a towel around his waist, looked much better, too.

"Sorry about the sheets," Zack said almost absently as he dropped the towel and slid into a pair of boxers. "I'm...I don't know...I just can't remember the last time you actually paid any attention to me."

"You mean sex?" she asked. Surprisingly, she found that she was actually up for sex. It might be just what she needed to finally unwind and get to sleep.

"Not just sex," Zack said. "I mean *any* kind of attention. I get home and you're either already asleep or looking through casework."

"Well, that's *after* I've picked up your crap from the day," she said. "You live like a boy that's waiting for mommy to clean up after him. So yeah, sometimes I jump back into work to forget about how frustrating you can be."

"So it's back to this again?" he asked.

"Back to what?"

“Back to you using work as a way to ignore me.”

“I don’t use it as a way to ignore you, Zack. Right now I’m more concerned with finding out who brutally killed a mother of two boys than making sure you get the attention you need.”

“That right there,” Zack said, “is why I’m in no hurry to get married. You’re already married to your work.”

There were about a thousand remarks she could have spat back at him, but Mackenzie knew there was no point. She knew that he was, in a way, right. Most every night, she found the caseloads she brought home more interesting than Zack. She still loved him, without a doubt, but there was nothing new to him – nothing challenging.

“Good night,” he said bitterly as he crawled into bed.

She looked at his bare back and wondered if it was, in some way, her responsibility to give him attention. Would that make her a good girlfriend? Would that make her a better investment for a man that was terrified of marriage?

With the idea of sex now a forgotten impulse, Mackenzie simply shrugged and looked back to the case files.

If her personal life had to melt into the background, then so be it. This life, the life inside the case, felt more real to her anyway.

*

Mackenzie walked into her parents’ bedroom, and before she made it through the doorframe, she smelled something that made her seven-year-old stomach buckle. It was a tangy sort of smell, reminding her of the inside of her piggy bank – a smell like the copper of pennies.

She stepped into the room and saw the foot of the bed, a bed that her mother had not slept in for a year or so – a bed that looked far too big for just her father.

She saw him there, legs dangling over the side of the bed, arms splayed out as if he were trying to fly. There was blood everywhere: on the bed, on the wall, even some on the ceiling. His head was turned to the right, as if he were looking away from her.

She knew he was dead right away.

She stepped toward him, her bare feet padding down in a splatter of blood, not wanting to get closer but needing to.

“Daddy,” she whispered, already crying.

She reached out, terrified, but drawn in like a magnet.

Suddenly, he turned and stared at her, still dead.

Mackenzie screamed.

Mackenzie opened her eyes and looked around the room in a glare of confusion. The case files were in her lap, spread out. Zack was sleeping beside her, his back still to her. She took a deep breath, wiping the sweat from her brow. It was just a dream.

And then she heard the creak.

Mackenzie froze. She looked toward the bedroom door and slowly got out of bed. She’d heard the weak floorboard in the living room creaking, a sound that she had only ever heard when someone was walking in the living room. Sure, she had been asleep and in the midst of a nightmare, but she *had* heard it.

Hadn’t she?

She got out of bed and grabbed her service pistol from the top of her dresser where it sat by her badge and small purse. She quietly angled herself around the doorframe and walked out into the hallway. The ambient glow of streetlights filtered in through the living room blinds, revealing an empty room.

She stepped into the room, the gun held in an offensive position. Every gut instinct told her that there was no one there, but she still felt shaken. She *knew* she'd heard the floorboards creaking. She walked to that area of the living room, just in front of the coffee table, and heard it creak.

Out of nowhere, the image of Hailey Lizbrook crossed her mind. She saw the lashes on the woman's back and the prints in the dirt. She shuddered. She looked dumbly down to the gun in her hands and tried to remember the last time a case had ever gotten to her this badly. What the hell had she been thinking? That the killer had been here in her living room, sneaking up on her?

Irritated, Mackenzie headed back to the bedroom. She quietly placed the gun back on top of the dresser and went to her side of the bed.

Still feeling slightly spooked and with the remnants of her dream still floating in her head, Mackenzie lay back down. She closed her eyes and tried to find sleep again.

But she knew it would be a hard time coming. She was plagued, she knew, by the living and the dead.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mackenzie couldn't remember a time when the station had been so chaotic. The first thing she saw when she walked through the front doors was Nancy rushing down the hallway to someone's office. She'd *never* seen Nancy move so quickly. Beyond that, there were anxious looks on the faces of every officer she passed on her way to the conference room.

It looked like it was going to be an eventful morning. There was a tension in the air that reminded her of the thickness of the atmosphere just before a bad summer storm.

She'd felt some of that tension herself, even before she left her house. She'd gotten the first call at 7:30, informing her that they would be moving on the lead within hours. Apparently, while she'd been sleeping, the lead she had managed to pull out of Kevin had turned out to be a very promising one. A warrant was being acquired and a plan was being put into place. One thing had already been established, though: Nelson wanted her and Porter to bring the suspect in.

The ten minutes she spent in the station was a whirlwind. While she poured a cup of coffee, Nelson was barking orders at everyone while Porter sat solemnly in a chair at the conference table. Porter looked like a pouting child looking for any attention he could get. She knew it must be eating at him that this lead had come from a boy that Mackenzie had spoken with – a boy that he had been prepared to walk away from.

Mackenzie and Porter were given the lead, and two other cars were assigned to fall in behind them to assist as needed. It was the fourth time in her career that she had been tasked with such a takedown, and the rush of adrenaline never got old. Despite the surge of energy coursing through her, Mackenzie remained calm and collected. She walked out of the conference room with poise and confidence, starting to get the feeling that this was now *her* case, no matter how badly Porter wanted it.

On her way out, Nelson approached her and took her softly by the arm.

"White, let me talk to you for a second, will you?"

He led her to the side, guiding her into the copy room before she could answer. He looked around conspiratorially, making sure no one was within hearing distance. When he was sure they were safe, he looked at her in a way that made her wonder if she had done something wrong.

"Look," Nelson said, "Porter came to me last night and asked to be reassigned. I flat out told him no. I also told him he'd be stupid to drop out of this case right now. Do you know why he wanted to be reassigned?"

"He thinks I stepped on his toes last night," Mackenzie said. "But it was clear that the kids weren't responding to him and he wasn't going to try hard to get through to them."

"Oh, you don't have to explain it to me," Nelson said. "I think you did a damn good job with that oldest kid. The kid even told some of the other guys that showed up – including the social services guys – that he really liked you. I just wanted to let you know that Porter is up in arms today. If he gives you any shit, let me know. But I don't think he will. While he's not a big fan of yours, he all but told me that he respects the hell out of you. But that stays between you and me. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Mackenzie said, surprised at the sudden support and encouragement.

"All right then," Nelson said, clapping her lightly on the back. "Go get our guy."

With that, Mackenzie headed out to the parking lot where Porter was already sitting behind the wheel of their car. He gave her a *what the hell is taking so long* sort of look as she went hurrying to the car. The moment she was in, Porter pulled out of the parking spot before Mackenzie had even closed the door all the way.

"I take it you got the full report on our guy this morning?" Porter asked as he pulled out onto the highway. Two other cars pulled out behind them, carrying Nelson and four other officers as backup if needed.

“I did,” Mackenzie said. “Clive Traylor, a forty-one-year-old registered sex offender. Spent six months in prison for assault on a woman in 2006. He currently works at a local pharmacy but he also does some woodwork out of a small shed on his property.”

“Ah, you must have missed the last memo Nancy sent out,” Porter said.

“Did I?” she asked. “What did I miss?”

“The bastard has several wooden poles cut out behind his shed. Intel shows that they’re just about the same size as the one we found out in that cornfield.”

Mackenzie scrolled through her e-mails on her phone and saw that Nancy had sent the memo out less than ten minutes ago.

“Sounds like our guy, then,” she said.

“Damn right,” Porter said. He was speaking like a robot, like he had been programmed to say certain things. He did not look over at her a single time. It was clear that he was pissed, but that was okay with Mackenzie. As long as he put that anger and determination into bringing the suspect down, she couldn’t care less.

“I’ll go ahead and kick the elephant out of the car,” Porter said. “It pissed me off *bad* when you took over last night. But I’ll be damned if you didn’t work some kind of miracle on that kid. You’re sharper than I give you credit for. I’ll admit that. But the disrespect...”

He trailed off here, as if he wasn’t sure how to finish the statement. Mackenzie said nothing in response. She simply looked ahead and tried to digest the fact that she had just received what could almost be considered compliments from two very unlikely sources in the last fifteen minutes.

She suddenly felt that this could be a very good day. Hopefully, by the end of the day, they’d bring in the man responsible for the death of Hailey Lizbrook and several other unresolved murders over the last twenty years. If that was the reward, she could certainly tolerate Porter’s sour mood.

*

Mackenzie looked out and felt depressed as she watched the neighborhoods change before her eyes as Porter drove into the more derelict suburbs of Omaha. Well-to-do subdivisions gave way to low-rent apartment complexes which then faded away into seedier neighborhoods.

Soon enough they reached Clive Traylor’s neighborhood, consisting of lower-income houses sitting in mostly dead lawns, punctuated with crooked mailboxes along the street. The rows and rows of houses never seemed to end, each one looking less cared for than the next. She did not know what was more depressing to her: their neglected state, or the numbing monotony.

Clive’s block was quiet, and as they turned down it, Mackenzie felt the familiar rush of adrenaline. She sat up involuntarily, readying herself to confront a murderer.

According to the surveillance team who had been watching over the property since 3 AM, Traylor was still at home. He was not due to clock in at work until one o’clock.

Porter slowed their car as he drove further up the street and parked directly in front of Traylor’s house. He then looked to Mackenzie for the first time that morning. He looked a little on edge. She realized she must have looked the same. And yet, despite their differences, Mackenzie still felt safe walking into potential danger with him. Sexist hard-ass or not, the man had a seasoned record and knew what he was doing most of the time.

“You ready?” Porter asked her.

She nodded and pulled the mic from the dashboard radio unit.

“This is White,” she said into the mic. “We’re ready to head in on your word.”

“Go,” came Nelson’s simple reply.

Mackenzie and Porter got out of the car slowly, not wanting to give Traylor any cause for alarm if he happened to look out the window to see two strangers walking up his lawn. Porter took the lead as they walked up the rickety porch steps. The porch was covered in flaked white paint and the shells

of countless dead insects. Mackenzie felt herself tensing up, preparing. What would she do when she saw the face of the man who had murdered those women?

Porter pulled open the flimsy screen door and knocked on the front door.

Mackenzie stood beside him, waiting, heart pounding. She could feel her palms begin to sweat.

A few seconds passed before she heard approaching footsteps. There came the clicking of a lock being disengaged, the door opened a little more than a crack, and Clive Traylor looked out at them. He looked confused – and then very alarmed.

“Can I help you?” Traylor asked.

“Mr. Traylor,” Porter said, “I’m Detective Porter and this is Detective White. If you have a moment, we’d like to speak with you.”

“In regards to what?” Traylor asked, instantly defensive.

“About a crime that was committed two nights ago,” Porter said. “We just have a few questions and as long as you answer honestly, we’ll be out of your hair in five or ten minutes.”

Traylor seemed to consider this for a moment. Mackenzie was pretty sure she knew the train of logic that was chugging through his head. He was a registered sex offender, and any resistance to help the police when they asked for it would raise alarms and maybe even further investigation into Traylor’s current activities.

And that was the last thing a man like Clive Traylor wanted.

“Yeah, come on in,” Traylor finally said, clearly not pleased with the situation. Still, he opened the door and led them into a house that looked like a college dorm room.

There were books stacked everywhere, empty beer cans strewn here and there, and piles of clothes sporadically placed on any available surface. The place smelled like Traylor had recently burned something on the stove.

He led them into his small living room, and Mackenzie took it all in, analyzing everything at rapid speed to determine if this were the house of a killer. There were more clothes bundled up on the couch and the coffee table was littered with dirty dishes and a laptop. Seeing such disarray made Mackenzie realize that maybe Zack’s living habits weren’t as bad as she had thought. Traylor did not ask them to have a seat – which was good, because there was no way Mackenzie was going to sit anywhere in this house.

“Thanks for your time,” Porter said. “As I said, there was a crime committed two nights ago – a murder. We’re here because you have a rather shaky past with the victim.”

“Who was it?” Traylor asked.

Mackenzie watched him closely, studying his facial expressions and posture, hoping she’d find some clues there. So far, all she could tell was that he was very uncomfortable having police inside his house.

“A woman named Hailey Lizbrook.”

Traylor seemed to think about this for a second and then shook his head.

“I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Are you sure?” Porter asked. “We have proof that she placed a restraining order against you last year.”

Realization dawned over him and he rolled his eyes.

“Oh. *Her*. I never knew her name.”

“But you knew where she lived?” Mackenzie asked.

“I did,” Traylor said. “Yeah, I followed her home from the Runway a few times. I had policemen come to my house and talk to me about that. But I haven’t gone against that order. I swear it.”

“So you don’t deny that you stalked her at some point?” Porter asked.

Mackenzie saw the embarrassment flush over Traylor and her heart dropped. She was pretty certain this was not their man.

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