

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark floral-patterned dress, stands in a field of tall grass. She is looking out over a vast landscape towards a sunset or sunrise. The sky is filled with soft, golden light and scattered clouds. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

BLAKE PIERCE

BEFORE
HE
NEEDS

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 5

A Mackenzie White Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Before He Needs

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In *A TRACE OF VICE*, Keri Locke, Missing Persons Detective in the Homicide division of the LAPD, follows a fresh lead for her abducted daughter. It leads to a violent confrontation with The Collector—which, in turn, offers more clues that may, after all this time, reunite her with her daughter. Yet at the same time, Keri is assigned a new case, one with a frantic ticking clock. A teenage girl has gone missing in Los Angeles, a girl from a good family who was duped into drugs and abducted into a sex trafficking ring. Keri is hot on her trail—but the trail is moving fast, with the girl being constantly moved and with her abductors' single, nefarious goal: to cross her over the border with Mexico. In an epic, breathtaking, cat and mouse chase that takes them through the seedy underworld of trafficking, Keri and Ray will be pushed to their limits to save the girl—and her own daughter—before it is all too late.

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Blake Pierce
BEFORE HE NEEDS

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PROLOGUE

Joey Nestler knew that he'd make a good cop one day. His father had been a cop and so had his grandfather. Joey's grandfather had actually taken a bullet in the chest in 1968, sending him to early retirement. Being a cop was in Joey's blood and even though he was only twenty-eight years old and was being given crap assignments, he knew that one day he would rise to the top.

Today was not that day, though. They'd assigned him another stupid bait-and-chase task – grunt work. Joey knew he had at least another six months of these bullshit assignments. That was fine with him. Coasting through Miami in a cop car during late spring was a pretty sweet deal. The ladies were eager to try on their skimpy shorts and bathing suits as the weather got nicer, and such things were easier to pay attention to and enjoy when he was tasked with menial duties.

He'd get right back to scanning the streets for such beauties when he was done with his most recent chore. He parked in front of the ritzy townhouses, each new set of homes bordered by a pretentiously well-maintained set of palm trees. He got out of the patrol car in no great hurry, pretty sure he was about to walk into a simple domestic dispute case. Even so, he had to admit that the details of the assignment piqued his curiosity.

A woman had called the precinct earlier that morning, claiming that her sister was not answering phone calls or emails. Usually that would not draw much interest at all, but when they ran the address of the sister, it was directly beside a townhouse that had called with a noise complaint the night before. Apparently a dog had been barking furiously all night. Phone calls and knocks on the door to get the owners to shut up went unanswered. And when the police called the woman back to inquire about her sister, it was confirmed that her sister did indeed have a dog.

And now here I am, Joey thought as he walked up the stairs to the front door.

He'd already stopped by the landlord's office to retrieve a key, and that in and of itself made the task a *little* more interesting than his typical busy-body assignments. Still, he felt underused and a little silly as he knocked on the door. Given everything he knew about the case, he didn't even expect an answer.

He knocked again and again, his hair sweating beneath his cap in the sun.

After two minutes, still no answer. He was not surprised.

Joey took out the key and unlocked the door. He cracked it open a bit and shouted inside.

"Hello? This is Officer Nestler with the Miami PD. I'm entering the house and –"

The barking of a small dog interrupted him as it came rushing toward him. It was a Jack Russell terrier and while it tried its best to intimidate the strange man at the door, it also looked a little scared. Its back legs were trembling.

"Hey, buddy," Joey said as he stepped inside. "Where's your mommy and daddy?"

The little dog whined. Joey stepped further into the house. He had made two steps into the small foyer, heading for the living room, when he smelled the awful stench. He looked down to the dog and frowned.

"No one has let you out in a while, have they?"

The dog hung its head, as if it had perfectly understood the question and was ashamed of what it had done.

Joey walked into the living room, still calling out.

"Hello? I'm looking for Mr. or Mrs. Kurtz. Again, this is Officer Nestler of the Miami PD."

But he got no answer, and he was sure he wouldn't get one. He made his way through the living room, finding it spotless. He then entered the adjoining kitchen and placed his hand to his face to cover his mouth and nose. The kitchen was where the dog had decided to use the bathroom; puddles of urine were all over the floor and two piles of feces were in front of the fridge.

Empty food and water dishes were on the other side of the kitchen. Feeling bad for the dog, Nestler filled the water bowl with water from the kitchen sink. The dog started to lap at it greedily as Nestler left the kitchen. He then went to the flight of stairs just off of the living room and headed up.

As he came to the hallway at the top, Joey Nestler felt what his father had called *a cop's gut instinct* for the first time in his career. He knew right away that something was wrong up here. He knew that he was going to find something bad, something that he had not been expecting.

He drew his gun, feeling a little foolish as he made his way down the hallway. He passed a bathroom (where he found another puddle of the dog's urine) and a small office space. The office was a bit of a mess but there were no signs of distress or red flags.

At the end of the hall, a third and final door stood open, revealing the master bedroom.

Nestler stopped in the doorway, his blood running cold.

He stared for a full five seconds before stepping inside.

A man and a woman – presumably Mr. and Mrs. Kurtz – lay dead on the bed. He knew they were not sleeping due to the amount of blood on the sheets, walls, and carpet.

Joey took two steps inside but stopped. This was not for him. He needed to call this in before he went any further. Besides, he could see all he needed to from where he stood. Mr. Kurtz had been stabbed in the chest. Mrs. Kurtz had had her throat slit from ear to ear.

Joey had never seen so much blood in his life. It was almost dizzying to look at.

He backed out of the bedroom, not thinking of his father or grandfather, not thinking of the great cop he one day wanted to be.

He stormed outside, got to the bottom of the stairs, and fought against a heavy wave of nausea. As he fumbled for the shoulder mic on his uniform, he saw the Jack Russell come rushing out of the townhouse but didn't care.

He and the little dog stood in front of the house as Nestler called the scene in, the dog yapping at the sky as if somehow that could change the horrors that lay inside.

CHAPTER ONE

Mackenzie White sat at her cubicle and habitually ran her index finger along the edges of a business card. It was a business card that she had been fixated on for several months now, a card that was somehow linked to her past. Or, more specifically, to the murder of her father.

She came back to it whenever she closed a case, wondering when she would allow herself to take some time off from her actual job as an agent so she could return to Nebraska and view the scene of her father's death with reinvigorated eyes that were not regulated by an FBI mentality.

Work was burning her out lately and with each case she cracked, the lure of the mystery surrounding her father grew stronger. It was getting so strong that she was feeling less of a sense of accomplishment when she closed a case. The most recent had been bringing in two men that had been masterminding a plot to get cocaine into a Baltimore high school. The job had lasted three days and had gone so smoothly that it hadn't seemed like work at all.

She'd had more than her fair share of notable cases since coming to Quantico and being pushed through the ranks in a whirlwind of action, back-room dealings, and close calls. She'd lost a partner, managed to piss off just about every supervisor she'd ever had, and made a name for herself.

The one thing she didn't have was a friend. There was Ellington, sure, but there was some sort of tainted chemistry between them that made forming a friendship difficult. And she'd officially given up on him, anyway. He'd rejected her twice now – for different reasons each time – and she was not going to be made a fool of again. She was fine with their working relationship being the only thread holding them together.

Over the last few weeks, she had also gotten to know her new partner – a clumsy but eager rookie by the name of Lee Harrison. He was being handed an assortment of paperwork, busy duty, and research, but he was doing a splendid job. She knew that Director McGrath was just seeing how he'd handle being inundated with so much busywork. And so far, Harrison was winning everyone over.

She thought faintly of Harrison as she looked at the business card. She had asked him on a few occasions to research any businesses called Barker Antiques. And while he had come up with more results than anyone else in the last few months, all leads had still come to a dead end.

As she thought about this, she heard soft footsteps approaching her cubicle. Mackenzie slid the business card under a pile of papers beside her laptop and then pretended like she was checking her email.

"Hey, White," a familiar male voice said.

The guy is so good that he can practically hear me thinking about him, she thought. She swiveled around in her chair and looked at Lee Harrison peering into her cubicle.

"None of this *White*, stuff," she said. "It's Mackenzie. Mac, if you're feeling really brave."

He smiled awkwardly. It was clear that Harrison had not yet figured out how to speak to her or, for that matter, how to really even act around her. And that was fine with her. Sometimes she wondered if McGrath had assigned him as her sometimes-partner just to get him accustomed to never being sure where he stood with his coworkers. If so, she thought, it was a genius move.

"Okay then...Mackenzie," he said. "I just wanted you to know that they've just finished processing the dealers from this morning. They want to know if you need any more information from them."

"Nope. I'm good," she said.

Harrison nodded but before he left, he gave her a frown that she was starting to think was a trademark of his. "Can I ask you something?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Are you...well, are you feeling all right? You look really tired. Maybe a little flushed."

She could have easily ribbed him about such a comment and made him very awkward but she decided not to. He was a good agent and she didn't want to be the sort of agent (really not much more than a rookie herself) that hassled the new guy. So instead, she said: "Yeah, I'm good. Just not sleeping much lately."

Harrison nodded. "I get that," he said. "Well...good luck with resting." He then gave that trademark frown of his and took off, probably on to tackle whatever busybody work McGrath had lined up for him next.

Distracted from the business card and the countless unsolved mysteries it presented, Mackenzie allowed herself to leave it behind. She caught up on her emails and filed away some of the papers that had started collecting on her desk. She did not get many chances to experience these less-than-glamorous moments, and for that, she was thankful.

When her phone rang in the midst of it all, she grabbed for it anxiously. *Anything to get away from this desk.*

"This is Mackenzie White," she answered.

"White, it's McGrath."

She allowed the briefest of smiles to cross her face. While McGrath was far from her favorite person, she knew that whenever he called her up or even came by her cubicle, it was usually with an assignment of some sort.

It appeared that this was why he was calling. Mackenzie didn't even have time to say hello before he was speaking again, in his usual rapid-fire way of communicating.

"I need you in my office right away," he said. "And bring Harrison with you."

Again, Mackenzie was not given a chance to respond. The line was dead before a single word could bounce from her tongue.

But that was fine with her. Apparently, McGrath had a new case for her. Maybe it would sharpen her mind and give her that one last moment of clarity before she possibly stepped aside for a while to concentrate on matters with her father's old case.

With a bubbling sort of excitement pushing her, she got up and went off in search of Lee Harrison.

Watching the way Harrison behaved in McGrath's office was a great way for Mackenzie to ground herself. She watched him sitting rigidly at the edge of his seat as McGrath started speaking to them. The younger agent was clearly nervous and eager to please. Mackenzie knew that he was a perfectionist and that he had something very close to a photographic memory. She wondered what his memory was like – if he was perhaps soaking up each word that came out of McGrath's mouth like a sponge.

He reminds me a little bit of me, she thought as she also focused on McGrath.

"Here's what I've got for the two of you," McGrath said. "Yesterday morning, the Miami State Police called us up and filled us in on a series of murders down there. In both cases, the murders were of married couples. So that's four bodies. The murders have been fairly brutal and bloody and so far, there seems to be no obvious connection. The brutal style of the killings, as well as the fact that they were married couples, killed in bed, is making the state PD down there think it's a serial killer. I personally think it's too early to make such a claim."

"You think it could just be coincidence?" Mackenzie asked.

"I think it's a chance, yes," he said. "Anyway, they've asked for our help and I want to send both of you down. Harrison, this would be a great opportunity for you to get into the field and get your feet wet. White, I expect you to oversee him, but not boss him around. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Mackenzie said.

“I’ll have the details and flight arrangements sent your way within the hour. I don’t see this taking any more than a day or two. Any questions?”

Mackenzie shook her head. Harrison gave a brisk “No sir,” and Mackenzie could tell that he was doing his very best to rein in his excitement.

She couldn’t blame him. She felt it, too.

Despite what McGrath thought, she already sensed this case would be far from routine.

Couples.

This was a first for her.

And she could not help but feel that this “routine” little case was going to get far worse.

CHAPTER TWO

While Mackenzie was well aware that a stereotype of the government was that everything moved slowly, she also knew that this was not usually the case with the FBI getting their agents on the scene. Just fourteen hours after being called into McGrath's office, Mackenzie was pulling a rental car into a parking spot in front of a row of townhouses. She pulled in next to a police cruiser and took note of the officer sitting inside.

Beside her, in the passenger seat, Harrison was going over the notes on the case. He had been mostly quiet during the trip and Mackenzie had nearly started to try to open up the lines of conversation. She couldn't tell if he was nervous, intimidated, or a bit of both. But rather than force him to start speaking to her, she thought it might be best for his development to come out of his shell on his own – especially if McGrath planned on them working together as partners for the foreseeable future.

Mackenzie took a moment to process everything she knew about the case. She reclined her head back slightly, closed her eyes, and pulled it all forward. Her tendency toward obsessing over the details of case files made it rather easy for her to simply delve into her own mind and rifle through them as if there were a mental filing cabinet within her skull.

A dead couple, which brings a few questions to the surface right away. Why both of them? Why not just one?

Got to keep an eye out for anything that might seem even remotely out of place. If jealousy is driving these killings, it's likely from someone that envies their lives in some way.

No forced entry; the Kurtz family willingly let the killer inside.

She opened her eyes and then opened the door. She could speculate all she wanted based on what she had seen in the files. But none of that would be as effective as stepping foot into the crime scene and having a look around.

Harrison stepped out of the car alongside her and into the bright Miami sunshine. She could smell the ocean in the air, salty and with just the faintest traces of a fishlike smell that wasn't necessarily unpleasant.

As she and Harrison closed their doors, the officer in the police car next to them also stepped out. This, Mackenzie assumed, was the officer who had been tasked with meeting them. Forty or so, she looked pretty in a plain sort of way, her short dirty blonde hair catching the shine from the sun.

"Agents White and Harrison?" the officer asked.

"That's us," Mackenzie said.

The woman offered her hand as she introduced herself. "I'm Officer Dagney," she said. "Anything you need, just let me know. The place has, of course, been cleaned up but I've got a whole file filled with pictures taken when the scene was fresh."

"Thanks," Mackenzie said. "To start off, I think I'd like to take a look inside first."

"Of course," Dagney said, walking up the stairs and retrieving a key from her pocket. She unlocked the door and gestured for Mackenzie and Harrison to step inside ahead of her.

Mackenzie smelled bleach or some other sort of cleaner right away. She recalled the report stating that a dog had been trapped inside the house for at least two days and had used the bathroom several times.

"The bleach," Harrison said. "Is that from cleaning up the dog's mess?"

"Yes," Dagney said. "That was done last night. We tried to leave it as it was until you guys arrived but the stench was just – it was bad."

"That should be fine," Mackenzie said. "The bedroom is upstairs, correct?"

Dagney nodded and led them up the stairs. "The only thing that's been changed up here is that the bodies and the top sheet have been removed," she explained. "The sheet is still there, on the floor

and placed on a plastic sheet. It had to be moved, though, just to get the bodies off of the bed. The blood was...well, you'll see."

Mackenzie noticed that Harrison slowed his approach a bit, falling safely in behind her. Mackenzie followed Dagney to the bedroom door, noticing that she stayed at the doorway and did everything she could not to look inside.

Once she was inside the room, Mackenzie saw that Dagney had not exaggerated, nor had the reports she had read. There was a lot of blood – much more than she had ever seen at one site.

And for a horrifying moment, she was standing in a room in Nebraska – a room in a house she knew was now abandoned. She was looking at a blood-soaked bed that contained the body of her father.

She shook the image away at the sound of Harrison's footsteps slowly approaching behind her.

"You good?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he said, though his voice sounded a bit breathless.

Mackenzie noted that most of the blood was on the bed, as was expected. The sheet that had been removed from the bed and stretched out on the floor had once been an off-white. But now it was mostly covered in dried blood, going a rusty shade of maroon. She slowly approached the bed, pretty sure that there would be no evidence. Even if the killer had accidentally left behind a hair or anything with DNA, it would be buried in all of the blood.

She looked to the splatters on the wall and carpet. She eyed the carpet in particular, looking to see if any of the blood splatter could be the edge of a shoe.

There might be tracks of some kind, she thought. To kill someone in such a way – to have so much blood at the scene – the killer would have to have gotten some on him. So even if there are no tracks, maybe there's stray blood somewhere within the house, blood he might have accidentally left behind on his way out.

Also, how did the killer get them both while in bed? Killing one, the other would have likely woken up. Either the killer is that fast or he staged the scene with the bodies in bed after committing the murders.

"This is a mess, huh?" Harrison said.

"It is," Mackenzie said. "Tell me...do you see anything right off hand that you'd consider a lead, a clue, or anything to look deeper into?"

He shook his head, staring at the bed. She nodded in agreement, knowing that all of the blood would make it very hard to find any evidence. She even got down on her hands and knees, peering under the bed to see if there was anything under there. She saw nothing but a pair of slippers and an old photo album. She slid the album out and flipped through it. The first few pages showed a wedding, from the bride walking down the aisle of a large church to the happy couple cutting into their cake.

With a frown, she slid the album back where she had gotten it from. She then turned back to Dagney, still standing at the bedroom door with her back mostly turned. "You said you have files with photos, right?"

"I do. Give me a second and I can bring it all in." She answered quickly and with a bit of urgency, clearly anxious to get back downstairs.

When Dagney was gone, Harrison walked back out into the hallway. He looked back into the bedroom and sighed deeply. "Have you ever seen a crime scene like this?"

"Not with this much blood," she answered. "I've seen some grisly sites, but this one tops the list for amount of blood."

Harrison seemed to think hard about this as Mackenzie exited the room. They headed back downstairs together, stepping into the living room just as Dagney came back in the front door. They met at the bar area that separated the kitchen from the living room. Dagney placed the folder on the bar and Mackenzie opened it up. Right away, the first picture showed the same bed upstairs, coated in blood. Only in the picture, there were two bodies – a man and a woman. The Kurtzes.

Both of them were clothed in what Mackenzie assumed was what they wore to bed. Mr. Kurtz (Josh, according to the reports) was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of boxers. Mrs. Kurtz (Julie) was wearing a spaghetti-strapped tank top and a pair of skimpy gym shorts. There were a variety of photographs, some taken so close to the bodies that Mackenzie caught herself cringing a few times. The photo of Mrs. Kurtz's sliced neck was particularly gruesome.

"I didn't see any positive ID on the weapon used within the reports," Mackenzie said.

"That's because no one had figured it out. Everyone just assumed a knife."

A very big knife, at that, Mackenzie thought as she tore her eyes away from the body of Mrs. Kurtz.

She saw that apparently, even in death, Mrs. Kurtz had reached out for the comfort of her husband. Her right hand was draped almost lazily across his thigh. There was something very sweet about it but it also broke her heart a little.

"And what about the first couple that was killed?" Mackenzie asked.

"That was the Sterlings," Dagney said, pulling several pictures and sheets of paper from the back of the folder.

Mackenzie looked at the pictures and saw a scene similar to what she had seen in the previous photos, as well as upstairs. A couple, lying in bed, blood everywhere. The only difference was that the husband in the Sterling photos had either been sleeping in the nude or had had his clothes removed by the killer.

These scenes are far too similar, Mackenzie thought. *It's almost as if they were staged.* She looked over the similarities, looking back and forth between the Kurtz and Sterling photos.

The bravery and sheer will to kill two people at once – and in such a brutal way. This guy is incredibly driven. Very motivated. And apparently not opposed to extreme violence.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Mackenzie said, "but the Miami PD are working under the assumption that these were routine home invasions, correct?"

"Well, we were at first," Dagney said. "But from what we can tell, there are no signs of looting or theft. And since this is the second couple to be killed in the last week, it seems less and less likely they were simple home invasions."

"I'd agree with that," she said. "What about links between the two couples?" Mackenzie asked.

"So far nothing has come up, but we've got a team working on it."

"And with the Sterlings, were there any signs of a struggle?"

"No. Nothing."

Mackenzie again looked back down at the pictures and two similarities jumped out at her at once. One of them in particular made her skin crawl.

Mackenzie glanced back at the Kurtz photos. She saw the wife's hand resting dead on her husband's thigh.

And she knew right then: this was indeed the work of a serial killer.

CHAPTER THREE

Mackenzie followed behind Dagney as she led them to the station. On the way, she noticed that Harrison was jotting notes down in the folder he had practically obsessed over during most of the trip from DC to Miami. In the midst of writing, he paused and looked at her quizzically.

“You’ve already got a theory, don’t you?” he asked.

“No. I don’t have a theory, but I did notice a few things in the images that seemed a little odd to me.”

“Want to share?”

“Not just yet,” Mackenzie said. “If I have to go over it now and then again with the police, I’ll reanalyze myself. Give me some time to sort through it all.”

With a grin, Harrison returned to his notes. He did not complain that she was keeping things from him (which she wasn’t) and he didn’t press any further. He was doing his best to stay obedient and effective at the same time and she appreciated that.

On the ride to the precinct, she started to catch peeks of the ocean through some of the buildings they passed. She had never been enamored with the sea the way some people were but she could understand its draw. Even now, on the hunt for a killer, she could feel the sense of freedom it represented. Punctuated by the towering palm trees and flawless sun of a Miami afternoon made it even more beautiful.

Ten minutes later, Mackenzie followed Dagney into the parking lot of a large police building. Like just about everything else in the city, it had a beachy sort of feel. Several huge palm trees stood along the thin strip of lawn in front of the building. The simple architecture also managed to convey a relaxed yet refined feel. It was a welcoming place, a sensation that held up even after Mackenzie and Harrison were inside.

“There are only going to be three people, including myself, on this,” Dagney said as she led them down a spacious hallway. “Now that you guys are here, my supervisor is going to likely take a very hands-off approach.”

Good, Mackenzie thought. The least amount of rebuttals and arguments, the better.

Dagney led them into a small conference room at the end of the hallway. Inside, two men sat down at a table. One of them was hooking a projector up to a MacBook. The other was typing something furiously into a smart pad.

They both looked up when Dagney led them into the room. When they did, Mackenzie got the usual look...one she was getting tired of yet used to. It was a look that seemed to say: *Oh, a rather good-looking woman. I wasn’t expecting that.*

Dagney made a quick round of introduction as Mackenzie and Harrison sat down at the table. The man with the smart pad was Police Chief Rodriguez, a grizzled old man with deep lines in his tanned face. The other man was a fairly new guy, Joey Nestler. Nestler, as it turned out, was the officer who had discovered the bodies of the Kurtzes. As he was introduced, he finished successfully hooking the monitor to the laptop. The projector shone a bright white light on a small screen attached to the wall in front of the room.

“Thanks for coming out,” Rodriguez said, setting his pad aside. “Look, I’m not going to be that typical local police dick that gets in the way. You tell me what you need and if it’s within reason, you’ll get it. In return, I just ask that you help wrap it up quickly and not turn the city into a circus while you do it.”

“It sounds like we want the same things, then,” Mackenzie said.

“So, Joey here has all of the existing documents we have on this case,” he said. “The coroner’s reports just came in this morning and told us just what we expected. The Kurtzes were cut up and

bled out. No drugs in their system. Totally clean. So far we have no discernable links between the two crimes. So if you have any ideas, I'd like to hear them."

"Officer Nestler," Mackenzie said, "do you have all of the crime scene photos from both sites?"

"I do," he said. He reminded Mackenzie a lot of Harrison – anxious, a little nervous, and visibly seeking to please his superiors and coworkers.

"Could you pull up the full body shots side by side and put them on the screen, please?" Mackenzie asked.

He worked quickly and had the images up on the projector screen, side by side, within ten seconds. Seeing the images in such a bright light in a semi-darkened room was eerie. Not wanting to let those in the room dwell on the severity of the pictures and lose focus, Mackenzie got right to the point.

"I think it's safe to say that these murders were not the result of a typical break-in or home invasion. Nothing was stolen and, in fact, there is no clear indication of a break-in of any kind. There aren't even any signs of a struggle. That means that whoever killed them was likely invited in or, at the very least, had a key. And the murders had to have happened quickly. Also, the absence of blood anywhere else within the house makes it appear that the murders happened in the bedroom – that there was no foul play anywhere else within the house."

Speaking it out loud helped her understand how strange it seemed.

The guy was not only invited in, but apparently invited into the bedroom. That means that the likelihood that he was actually invited is a small one. He had a key. Or knew where a spare one was located.

She went on before she derailed herself with new thoughts and projections.

"I want to look at these pictures because there are two odd things that stand out to me. First... look at how all four of them are lying perfectly flat on their back. Their legs are relaxed and well-postured. It's almost as if they were staged to look that way. And then there's one other thing – and if we're dealing with a serial killer, I think this might be the most important thing to note. Look at Mrs. Kurtz's right hand."

She gave the other four people in the room the chance to look. She wondered if Harrison would notice what she was getting at and blurt it out. She gave them three seconds or so and when no one said anything, she carried on.

"Her right hand is resting on her husband's thigh. It's the one part of her body that is not perfectly laid out. So either this is a coincidence or the killer *did* place their bodies in this position, purposefully moving her hand."

"So what if he did?" Rodriguez asked. "What's the point?"

"Well, now look at the Sterlings. Look at the husband's left hand."

This time she did not make it three seconds. It was Dagny who saw what she was referencing. And when she answered, her voice was thin and on edge.

"He's reaching out and placing his hand on his wife's thigh," she said.

"Exactly," Mackenzie said. "If it were just one of the couples, I would not even mention it. But that same gesture is present with both of these couples, making it evident that the killer did it with some intention."

"But for what?" Rodriguez asked.

"Symbolism?" Harrison suggested.

"It could be," Mackenzie said.

"But that's not really much to go on, is it?" Nestler asked.

"Not at all," Mackenzie said. "But at least it's *something*. If it's symbolic to the killer, there's a reason for it. So here's where I'd like to start: I'd like to get a list of suspects that have been recently paroled for violent crimes that were linked to home invasions. I still don't think it was a home invasion per se, but it's the most plausible place to start."

“Okay, we can get that for you,” Rodriguez said. “Anything else?”

“Nothing just yet. Our next course of action is to speak with the family, friends, and neighbors of the couples.”

“Yeah, we spoke to the Kurtzes’ next of kin – a brother, sister, and a pair of parents. You’re more than welcome to go back to them, but they didn’t offer up much of anything. The brother of Josh Kurtz said that as far as he knew, they had a great marriage. The only time they fought was during football season when the Seminoles played the Hurricanes.”

“What about the neighbors?” Mackenzie asked.

“We spoke with them, too. But it was brief. Mostly about the noise complaint they filed about the yapping dog.”

“So that’s where we’ll start,” Mackenzie said, looking over to Harrison.

And without another word, they stood and were out the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mackenzie found it a little unsettling to revisit the townhouses. While standing in the beautiful weather as they approached the neighbors' house, the knowledge that there was a bed in the next townhouse over that was coated in blood seemed surreal. Mackenzie suppressed a shudder and looked away from the Kurtzes' townhouse.

As she and Harrison made their way up the stairs to the neighbors' front door, Mackenzie's phone dinged, letting her know that she had received a text message. She pulled out the phone and saw that the text was from Ellington. She rolled her eyes as she read it.

How's the rookie working out for you? Miss me yet?

She nearly responded but didn't want to encourage him. She also didn't want to seem aloof or distracted in front of Harrison. She knew it was a conceited thing to think, but she was pretty sure he was looking to her as an example of sorts. Given that, she tucked her phone back into her pocket and walked up to the front door. She allowed Harrison to knock and he even did that with great caution and care.

Several seconds later, a flustered-looking woman answered the door. She looked to be in her mid-forties. She was dressed in a loose-fitting tank top and a pair of shorts that may as well have been nothing more than panties. She looked like she was probably a regular at the beach, and had obviously been to a plastic surgeon for her nose and possibly her breasts.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Are you Demi Stiller?"

"I am. Why?"

Mackenzie flashed her badge with an expert swiftness that she was getting much better at. "We're agents White and Harrison with the FBI. We were hoping to speak with you about your neighbors."

"That's fine, I guess," Demi said. "But we already spoke to the police."

"I know," Mackenzie said. "I was hoping to go a bit deeper. As I understand it, there was some frustration over the dog next door when they spoke to you."

"Yeah, there was," Demi said, ushering them in and closing the door behind them. "Of course, I had no idea that they had been killed when I made that call."

"Of course," Mackenzie said. "We're not here about that, anyway. We were hoping you might be able to give us some insights into their lives. Did you know them at all?"

Demi had led them to the kitchen, where Mackenzie and Harrison took a seat at the bar. The place was laid out just like the Kurtz residence. Mackenzie saw Harrison looking skeptically toward the stairs off of the adjoined living room.

"We weren't friends, if that's what you're asking," Demi said. "We'd say hi if we saw one another, you know? We grilled out on the back patio with them a few times, but that's about it."

"How long were they your neighbors?" Harrison asked.

"A little more than four years, I guess."

"And would you consider them good neighbors?" Mackenzie followed up.

Demi gave a little shrug. "For the most part. They had some noisy get-togethers here and there during football season but it wasn't too bad. I honestly almost didn't even call in the complaint about the stupid dog. The only reason I did is because no one answered the door over there when I knocked."

"I don't suppose you know if they ever had any regular guests, do you?"

"I don't think so," Demi said. "The cops asked the same sort of thing. My husband and I thought it over and I don't ever remember seeing any cars parked over there regularly unless it was their own."

"Well, do you know if they were involved in anything that might get us some people to talk to? Any sort of clubs or weird interests?"

“Not that I know of,” Demi said. As she spoke, she was looking at the wall, as if trying to see through it and into the Kurtzes’ townhouse. She looked a little sad, either for the loss of the Kurtzes or simply to have been dragged into the middle of this.

“You’re certain?” Mackenzie pushed.

“Pretty certain, yeah. I think the husband played racquetball. I saw him going in a few times, just coming back from the gym. As for Julie, I don’t know. I know she liked to draw but that’s only because she showed me some of her stuff one time. But other than that...no. They pretty much stayed to themselves.”

“Is there anything else about them – anything *at all* —that stands out to you?”

“Well,” Demi said, still looking at the wall, “I know it’s sort of lewd, but it was quite evident to my husband and me that the Kurtzes had quite an active sex life. The walls here are apparently thin – or the Kurtzes were very loud. I can’t even tell you how many times we heard them. Sometimes it wasn’t even just like muffled noises; they would be going *at it*, you know?”

“Anything violent?” Mackenzie asked.

“No, it never sounded like it,” Demi said, now looking a little embarrassed. “They were just very enthusiastic. It was something we always wanted to complain to them about but never did. It’s sort of embarrassing to bring it up, you know?”

“Sure,” Mackenzie said. “You’ve mentioned your husband a few times. Where is he?”

“At work. He works a nine to five. I stay here and run a part-time editorial service, a work from home deal.”

“Would you please ask him the same things I’ve asked you just to make sure I get all the possible information?” Mackenzie asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Thank you very much for your time, Mrs. Stiller. I may call you a little later if any other questions arise.”

“That’s fine,” Demi said as she led them back toward the front door.

When they were outside and Demi Stiller had closed the door, Harrison looked back to the townhouse that Josh and Julie Kurtz had once called home. “So all we took away from that was the knowledge that they had a great sex life?” he asked.

“Seems like it,” she said. “But that tells us that they had a strong marriage, perhaps. Add that to the statements from the family about their picture-perfect marriage and it makes it more challenging to find a reason for their murders. Or, on the other hand, it could be easier now. If they had a good marriage and stayed out of trouble, finding someone with something against them could prove to be easier. Now...take a look at your notes. Where would you choose to look next?”

Harrison seemed a little surprised that she had asked the question but he dutifully looked down at the notebook he kept his notes and files in. “We need to check out the first crime scene – the Sterling residence. The parents of the husband live six miles from the house, so it may be worth checking in with them.”

“Sounds good to me,” she said. “You got the addresses?”

She tossed him the car keys and headed for the passenger door. She took a moment to admire the look of surprise and pride on his face at the simple gesture as he caught the keys.

“Then lead the way,” she said.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sterling residence was eleven miles away from the Kurtzes' townhouse. Mackenzie couldn't help but admire the place as Harrison pulled into the long concrete driveway. The house sat about fifty yards off of the main road, lined with a gorgeous flowerbed and tall thin trees. The house itself was very modern, mostly comprised of windows and distressed wooden beams. It looked like an idyllic yet expensive home for a well-to-do couple. The only thing that broke this illusion was the strip of yellow crime scene tape strung along the front door.

When they started walking toward the front door, Mackenzie noted just how quiet the place was. It was blocked off from the other high-priced neighboring houses by a thick grove of trees, a lush wall of green that looked just as well maintained and expensive as the houses along this stretch of the city. While the property was not on the beach, she could hear it murmuring somewhere in the distance.

Mackenzie ducked under the crime scene tape and dug out the spare key that Dagney had provided from the Miami PD's original investigation. They stepped into a large foyer and Mackenzie was again taken aback by the absolute silence of everything. She took a look around at the layout of the house. A hallway stretched out to their left and ended in a kitchen. The rest of the house was quite open; a living room and large sitting area connected to one another, leading further off and out of sight toward a glassed-in back porch.

"What do we know about what happened here?" Mackenzie asked Harrison. She, of course, already knew. But she wanted to let him display his own smarts and commitment, hoping he would quickly get comfortable before the case really took off.

"Deb and Gerald Sterling," Harrison said. "He was thirty-six and she was thirty-eight. Killed in their bedroom in the same manner as the Kurtzes, though these murders took place at least three days before the Kurtz murders. Their bodies were discovered by their maid just after eight o'clock in the morning. The coroner's reports indicate that they had been killed the night before. Initial investigation's turned up absolutely no evidence of any kind, although forensics is currently analyzing hair fibers found clinging to the front door frame."

Mackenzie nodded along as he recited the facts. She was studying the downstairs, trying to get a feel for the sort of people the Sterlings were before heading up to the room where they had been killed. She passed by a large built-in bookshelf between the living room and sitting area. Most of the books were fiction, mostly by King, Grisham, Child, and Patterson. There were also a few art-related books. In other words, basic filler books that gave no insights into the personal lives of the Sterlings.

A decorative roll-top desk sat against the wall in the sitting area. Mackenzie lifted the top and looked inside but there was nothing of interest – just pens, paper, a few pictures, and other household debris.

"Let's go on up," she said.

Harrison nodded and took a deep, shaky breath.

"It's okay," Mackenzie said. "The Kurtz house got to me, too. But trust me...these sorts of situations *do* get easier."

You know that might not necessarily be a good thing, right? she thought to herself. *How many terrible sights have you become desensitized to ever since coming across that first woman on a post in the cornfields of Nebraska?*

She shook the thought away as she and Harrison reached the top of the stairs. The upstairs consisted of a long hallway that housed only three rooms. A large office sat to the left. It was tidy to the point of being almost empty, looking out into the grove of trees along the back of the house. The huge bathroom boasted his and hers sinks, a large shower, a tub, and a linen closet that was as large as Mackenzie's kitchen.

Just like downstairs, there was nothing to paint an accurate picture of the Sterlings or why anyone would want to kill them. Wasting no more time, Mackenzie walked toward the end of the hallway where the bedroom door was standing open. Sunlight came pouring in through a large window on the left side of the room. The light swallowed up the end of the bed, turning the maroon there an alarming shade of red.

It was dizzying in a way, to step into the bedroom of a spotless house to see all of the blood on the bed. The floor was hardwood but Mackenzie could see splatters of blood here and there. There was not as much blood on the walls here as they had seen at the Kurtz residence, but there was some speckled in droplets like some morbid abstract painting.

There was a faint smell like copper in the air, the scent of spilled blood having dried. It was faint but seemed to fill the room. Mackenzie walked around the edge of the bed, looking at the light gray sheets that had been deeply stained in red. She saw a single mark in the top sheet that might have been a puncture wound from the knife. She observed it closer and found that was exactly what she was looking at.

With a single lap around the bed, Mackenzie was sure that there was nothing here that would push the case along any further. She looked elsewhere around the room – the bedside tables, the dresser drawers, and the small entertainment center – looking for even the smallest detail.

She saw a slight indentation in the wall, no larger than a quarter. But there was speck of blood around it. There was more blood beneath it, a slight dribble that had dried on the wall and the smallest little fleck of it on the carpet beneath the indentation.

She went to the indentation in the wall and looked at it closely. It was a peculiar shape, and the fact that there was blood centered around it made her think one was the result of the other. She stood up straight and checked the small hole's alignment with her body. She raised her arm slightly and bent it. In doing so, her elbow aligned with the hole almost perfectly.

“What have you got?” Harrison asked.

“Signs of a struggle, I believe,” she answered.

He joined her and took note of the indentation. “Not much to go on, is it?” he asked.

“No, not really. But the blood makes it notable. That and the fact that this house is in pristine condition. It makes me think the killer did everything he could do hide any signs of a struggle. He almost staged the house, in a way. But this sign of a struggle could not be hidden.”

She looked down at the small blood splotch on the carpet. It was faded and there were even very faint traces of red around it.

“See,” she said, pointing. “Right there, it looks like someone tried cleaning this up. But he was either hurried or this last little bit just would not come up.”

“Maybe we should double-check the Kurtz house then.”

“Maybe,” she agreed, although she felt confident that she had thoroughly looked the place over.

She stepped away from the wall and went to the enormous walk-in closet. She looked inside and saw more tidiness.

She did see the one single thing that could have been considered as messy within the entire house, though. A shirt and a pair of pants were crumpled up, pushed almost against the closet wall. She pulled the shirt away from the pants and saw that they were men's clothing – perhaps the last clothes that Gerald Sterling had ever worn.

Taking a chance, she reached into each of the front pockets. In one, she found seventeen cents in change. In the other, she found a crumpled receipt. She straightened it out and saw that it was from a grocery store five days ago...the last day of his life. She looked at the receipt and started to think.

How else can we discover what they did on their last days alive? Or the last week, or even month?

“Harrison, in those reports, didn't the Miami PD state that they had gone through the phones of the deceased to check for any red flags?”

“That’s correct,” Harrison said as he cautiously stepped around the bloody bed. “Contacts, incoming and outgoing calls, emails, downloads, everything.”

“But nothing like Internet search history or anything like that?”

“No, not that I recall.”

Placing the receipt back into the pair of jeans, Mackenzie exited the closet and then the bedroom. She headed back downstairs, aware that Harrison was following behind her.

“What is it?” Harrison asked.

“A hunch,” she said. “A *hope*, maybe.”

She walked back to the roll-top desk in the sitting area and opened it again. In the back, there was a small basket. A few pens stuck out, as did a basic single-sheet personal checkbook. *If they keep a house this tidy, I’d assume their checkbook is in the same condition.*

She took the checkbook out and found that she was correct. The figures were kept with meticulous care. Each transaction was written very legibly and with as much detail as possible. Even ATM withdrawals were accounted for. It took her about twenty seconds to realize that this checkbook was for some sort of secondary account and not for the Sterlings’ primary checking. At the time of their death, the account held a little over seven thousand dollars.

She looked through the check register for anything that might give her some sort of clues but nothing jumped out at her. She did, however, see a few abbreviations that she did not recognize. Most of the transactions for these entries were for amounts of around sixty to two hundred dollars. One of the entries she did not recognize had been written out for two thousand dollars.

While nothing in the register seemed immediately curious, she remained hung up on the abbreviations and initials that she was not familiar with. She snapped a few pictures of those entries with her phone and then returned the checkbook.

“You have an idea or something?” Harrison asked.

“Maybe,” she said. “Could you please get Dagney on the phone and ask her to task someone with pulling up the Sterlings’ financial records over the last year? Checking accounts, credit cards, even PayPal if they used it.”

“Absolutely,” Harrison said. He instantly pulled out his phone to complete the task.

I might not mind working with him so much after all, Mackenzie thought.

She listened to him speaking with Dagney while she closed the roll-top desk and looked back toward the stairs.

Someone walked up those stairs four nights ago and killed a married couple, she thought, trying to envision it. *But why? And again, why were there no signs of forced entry?*

The answer was simple: *Just like with the Kurtzes, the killer was invited in. And that means that they either knew who the killer was and let him in or the killer was playing a certain part...acting like someone they knew or someone in need.*

The theory felt flimsy but she knew there was something to it. If nothing else, it created a fragile link between the two couples.

And for now, that was enough of a connection to go on.

CHAPTER SIX

While she had been hoping to avoid speaking to the families of the recently deceased, Mackenzie found herself working her way down her to-do list faster than she had expected. After leaving the Sterlings' house behind, the next natural place to go for any answers was to the closest relatives of the families. In the case of the Sterlings, their closest family was a sister that lived less than ten miles from the Kurtzes' townhouse. The rest of the family lived in Alabama.

The Kurtzes, however, had plenty of family nearby. Josh Kurtz had not moved very far away from home, living within twenty miles of not only his parents, but his sister as well. And since the Miami PD had already spoken extensively with the Kurtzes earlier in the day, Mackenzie opted to check in with the sister of Julie Kurtz.

Sara Lewis seemed more than happy to meet with them, and although the news of her sister's death was less than two days old, she seemed to have accepted it as well as a twenty-two-year-old could.

Sara invited them into her house in Overtown, a quaint one-story house that was little more than a small apartment. It was decorated sparsely and held the sort of edgy silence that Mackenzie had felt in so many other houses where someone was dealing with recent loss. Sara sat on the edge of her couch, cupping a mug of tea in her hands. It was clear that she had done her fair share of crying recently; she also looked like she hadn't slept much.

"I assume that if the FBI is involved," she said, "that means there have been more murders?"

"Yes, there have," Harrison said from beside Mackenzie. She frowned briefly, wishing he had not so willingly divulged the information.

"But," Mackenzie said, interjecting before Harrison could continue, "we of course can't make any solid claims about a connection without a thorough investigation. And that's why we've been called in."

"I'll help however I can," Sara Lewis said. "But I already answered the police's questions."

"Yes, I understand, and I appreciate that," Mackenzie said. "I just want to cover a few things they might have missed. For instance, do you by any chance have any idea how your sister and brother-in-law were in terms of financial standing?"

It was clear that Sara thought it was a strange question but she did her best to answer nonetheless. "Okay, I suppose. Josh had a good job and they really didn't spend too much money. Julie would even scold me sometimes for spending too frivolously. I mean, they certainly weren't loaded...not from what I know. But they did okay."

"Now, their neighbor told us that Julie liked to draw. Was this just a hobby or was she making any money off of it?"

"More of a hobby," Julie said. "She was pretty good, but she knew it wasn't anything spectacular, you know?"

"How about ex-boyfriends? Or maybe ex-girlfriends Josh might have had?"

"Julie has a few exes, but none of them took it hard. Besides that, they all live halfway across the country. I know for a fact that two of them are married. As for Josh, I don't think there were any exes in the picture. I mean...hell, I don't know. They were just a really good couple. Really good together – disgustingly cute in public. That sort of couple."

The visit felt too brief to end but Mackenzie had only one other route to pursue and she wasn't quite sure how to refer to it without repeating herself. She thought back to those odd entries in the Sterlings' checkbook, still unable to figure them out.

Probably nothing, she thought. People keep their checkbooks differently, that's all. Still, worth looking into.

Thinking of the abbreviations she had seen in the Sterlings' checkbook, Mackenzie continued on. As she opened her mouth to speak, she heard Harrison's phone vibrating in his pocket. He quickly checked it and then ignored the call. "Sorry," he said.

Ignoring the disturbance, Mackenzie asked: "Would you happen to know if Julie or Josh were involved with any sort of organizations or maybe even clubs or gyms? The sort of place they'd routinely pay fees to?"

Julie thought about this for a moment but shook her head. "Not that I know of. Like I said... they didn't really spend a lot of money. The only monthly fee I know of that Julie had outside of bills was her Spotify account, and that's only ten bucks."

"And have you been contacted by anyone like an attorney about what happens with their finances?" Mackenzie asked. "I'm very sorry to ask, but it could be pressing."

"No, not yet," she said. "They were so young, I don't even know if they had drawn up a will. Shit... I guess I have all of that to look forward to, don't I?"

Mackenzie got to her feet, unable to answer the question. "Thanks again for speaking with us, Sara. Please, if you think of anything else in regards to the questions I've asked you, I'd appreciate a call."

With that, she handed Sara a business card. Sara took it and pocketed it as she led them to the door. She wasn't being rude but it was clear that she wanted them to leave as quickly as possible.

With the door closed behind them, Mackenzie found herself standing on Sara's porch with Harrison. She considered correcting him on so quickly letting Sara know that there had been more murders that could be related to the murder of her sister. But it had been an honest mistake, one that she had made once or twice when she had started off. So she let it go.

"Can I ask you something?" Harrison asked.

"Sure," Mackenzie said.

"Why were you so fixated on their finances? Did it have something to do with what you saw in the Sterlings' place?"

"Yeah. It's just a hunch for now, but some of the transactions were –"

Harrison's phone started vibrating again. He scooped it out of his pocket with an embarrassed look on his face. He checked the display, nearly ignored it, but then kept it out as they walked back toward the car.

"Sorry, I have to take this," he said. "It's my sister. She called while we were inside, too. Which is weird."

Mackenzie didn't pay him much attention as they got into the car. She was barely even listening to Harrison's end of the conversation as he started speaking. However, by the time she had pulled back out onto the street, she could tell by his tone that something was very wrong.

When he ended the call, there was a shocked expression on his face. His bottom lip had a sort of curl to it, somewhere between a grimace and a frown.

"Harrison?"

"My mom died this morning," he said.

"Oh my God," Mackenzie said.

"Heart attack... just like that. She's –"

Mackenzie could tell that he was struggling not to break down in tears. He turned his head away from her, looking out of the passenger side window, and started to let it out.

"I'm so sorry, Harrison," she said. "Let's get you back home. I'll set up the flight now. Anything else you need?"

He only gave a brief shake of the head, still looking away from her as he wept a bit more openly.

Mackenzie first made a call to Quantico. She was unable to get McGrath on the phone so she left a message with his receptionist, letting her know what had happened and that Harrison would be

on a flight back into DC as soon as possible. She then called the airline and grabbed the first available flight, which departed in three and a half hours.

The moment the flight was booked and she ended the call, her phone rang. Giving Harrison a sympathetic look, she answered it. It felt terrible to resort back to a work mentality after Harrison's news but she had a job to do – and there were still no solid leads.

“This is Agent White,” she said.

“Agent White, this is Officer Dagney. I thought you might want to know that we have a potential lead.”

“Potential?” she asked.

“Well, he certainly fits the profile. This is a guy that was booked on multiple home invasions, two of which included violence and sexual assault.”

“In the same areas as the Kurtzes and Sterlings?”

“That's where it gets promising,” Dagney said. “One of the instances that involved sexual assault happened in the same group of townhouses the Kurtzes lived in.”

“Do we have an address for the guy?”

“Yeah. He works at an auto garage. A small one. And we've got confirmation that he's there right now. Name of Mike Nell.”

“Send me the address and I'll go have a talk with him. And any word on the financial records Harrison requested?” Mackenzie asked.

“Not yet. We've got some guys working on it, though. Shouldn't take too long.”

Mackenzie killed the call and did her best to give Harrison his moment of grief. He was no longer weeping, but was clearly having to make an effort to keep it together.

“Thanks,” Harrison said, wiping a stray tear away from his face.

“For what?” Mackenzie asked.

He shrugged. “Calling McGrath and the airport. Sorry this is such a pain in the midst of the case.”

“It's not,” she said. “Harrison, I'm very sorry for your loss.”

After that, the car fell into silence and whether she liked it or not, Mackenzie's mind slipped back into work mode. There was a killer somewhere out there, apparently with some odd vengeance to enact upon happy couples. And he might be awaiting her this very second.

Mackenzie could barely wait to meet him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dropping Harrison off at the motel was bittersweet. She wished she could do more for him or, at the very least, offer some more comforting words. In the end, though, she only gave him a half-hearted wave as he went into his room to pack his things and call a cab to take him to the airport.

Once his door had closed behind him, Mackenzie pasted the address Dagney had sent her into her GPS. Lipton Auto Garage was exactly seventeen minutes from the motel, a distance she started to cover right away.

Being alone in the car felt strange but she again distracted herself with the Miami scenery. It was different from any other beach-oriented city she had ever been in. Where smaller towns situated by the beach seemed a little sandy and almost faded, everything in Miami seemed to shine and sparkle despite the nearby sand and salt spray from the ocean. Here and there she would see a building that seemed out of place, neglected and forlorn – a reminder that everything had its blemishes.

She arrived at the garage sooner than she expected, having been distracted by taking in the sights of the city. She parked in a lot that was overcrowded with broken down cars and trucks that were obviously being pillaged for spare parts. It looked like the sort of operation that was forever in a state of almost going bankrupt.

Before walking into the place, she did a quick once-over of the place. There was a run-down front office that was currently unattended. The attached garage held three bays, only one of which contained a car; it was up on risers but did not look to be having any work done on it. In the garage, one man was rummaging through a shelf-shaped toolbox. Another was in the very back of the garage, standing on a small ladder and rifling through a series of old cardboard boxes.

Mackenzie walked over to the man closest to her, the one looking through the toolbox. He looked to be nearing forty, with long greasy hair that hung down to his shoulders. The stubble on his face was not quite a beard. When he looked up at her as she approached, he smiled brightly.

“Hey, darlin’,” he said with a bit of a Southern accent. “What can I help you with today?”

Mackenzie flashed her badge. “You can stop calling me *darling* first of all. Then you can tell me if you happen to be Mike Nell.”

“Yeah, that’s me,” he said. He was staring at her ID with something like fear. He then looked back at her face, as if trying to decide if he was part of some prank.

“Mr. Nell, I’d like for you to – ”

He wheeled around quickly and shoved her. *Hard*. She stumbled backward and her feet struck a tire that was lying on the ground. As she lost her footing and went falling to her backside, she caught a glimpse of Nell running away. He was leaving the garage, running and looking over his shoulder.

That escalated quickly, she thought. *He’d sure as hell guilty of something*.

Her instincts wanted to go for her gun. But that would cause a scene. So she got up and gave chase. Yet, as she pushed herself up, her hand fell on something else that had been left on the floor. It was a lug wrench – possibly the one that had taken off the tire she had fallen over.

She picked it up and quickly got to her feet. She dashed to the front of the garage and saw Nell at the sidewalk, about to cross the street. Mackenzie quickly looked both ways, saw that there were no cars within a few feet, and drew her arm back.

She launched the lug wrench through the air with as much force as she could. It sailed over the fifteen feet or so that separated her and Nell, striking him squarely in the back. He let out a yelp of surprise and pain before staggering forward and falling to his knees, nearly face planting on the side of the street.

She ran after him, driving a knee into his back before he could even think about trying to get back to his feet.

She pinned his arms behind him and pushed down. He tried squirming but then realized that trying to get away only caused more pain as his shoulders were stretched back. With a quickness that she had been practicing for months now, she pulled the set of handcuffs from her belt and slapped them around Nell's wrist.

"That was stupid," Mackenzie said. "I only wanted to ask some questions...and you gave me the answer I was looking for."

Nell said nothing but he did finally accept that he could not get away from her. As cars passed by, the other man from the garage came rushing over.

"What the hell is this?" he asked.

"Mr. Nell just attacked an FBI agent," Mackenzie said. "I'm afraid he won't be able to finish out the day for you."

Mackenzie observed Mike Nell from behind the double-mirror of the observation room. He looked aggravated and embarrassed – a scowl that had remained on his face ever since Mackenzie had hauled him to his feet, handcuffed in front of his employer. He chewed nervously at his lip, an indication that he was probably itching for a cigarette or a drink.

Mackenzie looked away from him to study the file in her hands. It told the brief but troubled story of Mike Nell, a teenage runaway at the age of sixteen, busted for petty theft and aggravated assault for the first time at eighteen. The last twelve years of his life painted the portrait of a troubled loser – assault, theft, breaking and entering, a few stints in prison.

Beside Mackenzie, Dagney and Chief Rodriguez looked out at Nell with something like contempt.

"I take it you've seen a lot of him in the past?" Mackenzie asked.

"We have," Rodriguez said. "And somehow, the courts keep just slapping him on the wrist and that's it. The longest sentence he served was the one he just got paroled from, and that was for a sentence of one year. If it turns out this jackass is responsible for these murders, the courts are going to be tucking their tail between their legs."

Mackenzie handed the report to Dagney and stepped toward the door. "Well then, let's see what he has to say," she said.

She exited the room and stood in the hallway for a moment before heading in to interrogate Mike Nell. She took out her phone, looking to see if she had received a text from Harrison. She assumed he'd be at the airport by now, maybe having spoken to other family members to get a better idea of what was going on back home.. She genuinely felt sorry for him and even though she did not know him all that well, she wished there was something she could do for him.

Setting her emotions aside for the moment, she pocketed her phone and entered the interrogation room. Mike Nell looked up at her and didn't bother hiding the look of contempt. But now there was something else, too. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was checking her out, his eyes lingering especially longer than necessary on her hips.

"See something you like, Mr. Nell?" she asked as she took a seat.

Clearly perplexed by the question, Nell chuckled nervously and said, "I guess."

"I suppose you know that you're in trouble for putting your hands on an FBI agent, even if it *was* just a push."

"What about your little lug wrench stunt?" he asked.

"Would you have preferred my gun? A shot right through the calf or shoulder to slow you down?"

Nell had nothing to say to that.

“It’s clear we’re not going to be best friends anytime soon,” Mackenzie said, “so let’s skip the small talk. I’d like to know just about everywhere you’ve been over the course of the last week.”

“That’s a long list,” Nell said defiantly.

“Yes, I’m sure a man of your character gets all over the place. So let’s start with two nights ago. Where were you between six p.m. and six a.m.?”

“Two nights ago? I was out with a friend. Played some cards, had a few drinks. Nothing big.”

“Can anyone other than your friend vouch for that?”

Nell shrugged. “I don’t know. There were a few other guys playing cards with us. What the hell is all this about anyway?”

Mackenzie didn’t see the point in dragging it out any further than necessary. If she wasn’t so distracted by what was going on with Harrison, she might have grilled him further before getting straight to the point, hoping he’d trip himself up if he was indeed guilty.

“A couple was found murdered in their townhouse two nights ago. It just happens to be a townhouse located in the same complex of townhouses you were busted for attempted burglary and aggravated assault. Put the two together, plus the fact that you’ve been paroled for a little less than a month, and that puts you high on the list of people to question.”

“That’s bullshit,” Nell said.

“No, that’s logic. Something I’m assuming you’re not familiar with based on your criminal record.”

She could see that he wanted to toss a remark back out to her but he stopped himself, again chewing on his bottom lip. “I haven’t been back by that place since I got out,” he said. “What the hell sort of sense would that make?”

She eyed him skeptically for a moment and asked: “What about your friends? Are they guys you met while in prison?”

“One of them, yeah.”

“Any of your friends into burglary and assault, too?”

“No,” he spat. “One of the guys has a breaking and entering charge on him from when he was a teenager, but no...they wouldn’t kill anyone. Neither would I.”

“But breaking and entering and beating someone is A-OK?”

“I never killed anyone,” he said again. He was clearly frustrated and showing great restraint to not lash out at her. And that’s exactly what she had been looking for. If he were guilty of the murders, the chance of him growing instantly defensive and angry would be much higher. The fact that he was doing his best to stay out of trouble, even from lashing out verbally at an FBI agent, showed that he likely had no connection to the murders.

“Okay, so let’s say you’re *not* connected with these murders. What *are* you guilty of? I’m assuming you’re doing *something* you shouldn’t. Why else would you push me, an FBI agent, and try to run?”

“I’m not talking,” he said. “Not until I see a lawyer.”

“Ah, I forget you’re a pro at this game by now. So yeah, fine...we’ll get you your lawyer. But I assume you also know how the police work. We *know* you’re guilty of something. And we’re going to find out what it is. So tell me now and save everyone some trouble.”

His five straight seconds of silence indicated that he intended to do no such thing.

“I’m going to need the names and the numbers of the men you claim to have been with two nights ago. Give me those and if your alibi checks out, you’re free to go.”

“Fine,” Nell grunted.

His reaction to this was yet another sign that he was likely innocent of the murders. There was no instant relief on his face, just a sort of annoyed irritation that he had somehow once again found himself back in an interrogation room.

Mackenzie took the names of the men down and noted for Dagney or whoever was in charge of such things to scroll through Nell's cell phone for their numbers. She left the interrogation room and headed back into observation.

"Well?" Rodriguez said.

"He's not our guy," Mackenzie said. "But just for protocol, here's a list of his friends he says he was with on the night the Kurtzes were murdered."

"You're sure of that?"

She nodded.

"There was no real relief when I told him he could likely leave after his alibi checked out. And I tried to get a rise out of him, to trip him up. His behavior simply is not indicative of a guilty party. But like I said, we should check the accomplices just to be sure. Nell is sure as hell guilty of something. I've got a sore backside from falling down to prove it. Think your guys can figure out what it is?"

"You got it."

She left the station, confident that Mike Nell was not their man. Somewhere beyond that, though, she started to think of her father.

She supposed it was bound to happen. There were a few similarities between his case and the current case she was on. Someone had come into the couples' homes with no signs of forced entry, insinuating that the couples knew the killer and let him in willingly. She caught flashes of her father, sprawled bloody on the bed, as she recalled the images she'd seen of the Kurtzes and Sterlings in the case files.

Thinking of a deceased parent made her feel more strongly for Harrison's situation. She got to the motel as quickly as she could, yet when she knocked on his door, he did not answer. Mackenzie walked to the front desk and found a bored-looking receptionist thumbing through a *Star* magazine.

"Excuse me, but did my partner leave?"

"Yes, he left about five minutes ago. I called him a cab to take him to the airport."

"Thank you," Mackenzie said, deflated.

She left the front office feeling strangely alienated. Sure, she'd been on a few cases alone before, especially when working as a detective in Nebraska. But being in a strange city without a partner made her feel particularly alone. It made her feel slightly uneasy but there was no use in trying to ignore it.

With that sense of displacement growing by the second, Mackenzie figured she'd put a stop to it the only way she knew how: by drowning herself in work. She got back into her car and went directly back to the station, thinking that while pursuing the case alone might be a bit depressing, it could also be just the motivation she needed to find the killer before the day came to a close.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Her motivation to bring the killer in on her own was quickly muted by a lack of answers and several hours that felt absolutely wasted back at the station. She sat in a small spare office provided by Rodriguez as the few scant updates came in. The first update was that after less than three hours, every single one of Mike Nell's accomplices had panned out. There was now evidence from multiple sources that Nell had been nowhere near the Kurtz townhouse on the night of the murders.

However, those same three hours also had Miami PD locate two pounds of heroin hiding in a small secret compartment of his truck. A few calls also proved that he had meetings to sell it, one of which was to a customer who was only fifteen years of age.

The second update was a bit more useful but really provided very little to go on. Two of the initialed entries within the Sterlings' checkbook that Mackenzie had not recognized were accounted for. One was a local animal shelter, to which they had made contributions twice a year. Another had been a small grassroots political campaign, and the other was still a mystery.

With the other two eliminated, Mackenzie was able to focus on the remaining one. The initials in question were DCM. Joey Nestler was the officer who brought her the results of the first two, and before he could leave her tiny working space, Mackenzie stopped him.

"Officer Nestler, do you have any idea what these initials might mean? Are there any businesses, organizations, or even individuals in the city that these might apply to?"

"I've been wondering that myself ever since we got the results," he said. "But I'm coming up with nothing. We've got some guys working on it, though. We're also looking over the Kurtzes' financial records to see if there's any sort of connection."

"Great work," she said.

Nestler left her alone after that. She then turned her attention back to the crime scene photos. It was weird, but the vast amount of blood in both photos was not what unsettled her the most. There was something even more gruesome about the way the bodies had been arranged. As far as she was concerned, there was no question that the bodies had been moved and staged to be lying on their backs. With the evidence of a struggle of some sort having occurred at the Sterling residence, it was all but a given that the scenes had been purposefully set up.

But why?

She kept looking at the posturing of the hands. *What's he trying to tell us? That the couples are linked somehow? Is he highlighting the couples' need for one another?*

She was fairly certain that there was some sort of symbolism in the posing of the hands in both photos: in the Kurtz photo, Julie's hand was touching her husband's thigh, almost draped lovingly over it; in the Sterling photo, it was Gerald Sterling's hand draped over his wife's thigh.

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