

A MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY--BOOK 7

BEFORE

HE

SINS

BLAKE PIERCE

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Аннотация

From Blake Pierce, bestselling author of ONCE GONE (a #1 bestseller with over 900 five star reviews), comes book #7 in the heart-pounding Mackenzie White mystery series.

In BEFORE HE SINS (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 7), priests are turning up dead, their bodies found crucified against church doors throughout Washington, D.C. Could this be some sort of act of revenge? Could it be a member of their order? Or a serial killer, hunting priests with a far more diabolical motive?

The FBI turns to special agent Mackenzie White, as the case bears a resemblance to the religious overtones of her first case, The Scarecrow Killer. Plunged into the subculture of the priesthood, Mackenzie struggles to learn more about the rituals, about ancient scripture, to try enter the killer's mind. But Mackenzie is already preoccupied by her hunt for her father's own murderer, determined to find him this time.

And this new killer is more sinister than most, and will push her, in his deadly cat and mouse game, to the very brink of her own sanity.

A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **BEFORE HE SINS** is book #7 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Blake Pierce

BEFORE HE SINS

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Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes eleven books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising five books; and of the new KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

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

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)

ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)

ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)

ONCE LURED (Book #4)

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ONCE PINED (Book #6)

PROLOGUE

The sun had cracked the horizon but had not yet burned off the last chills of night – Christy’s favorite time of day. Seeing the sun come up over the city was a stark reminder for her that every night had its end, something she needed to know, as she had started to feel further and further away from God. Seeing the sun coming up over the buildings of Washington, DC, and pushing away the night reminded her of the lyrics to a worship song: *Although there’s pain in the night, the sun comes in the morning...*

She recited that line over and over as she walked up the street toward the church. She’d been trying to talk herself into doing this for weeks now. Her faith had been challenged, as she had given in to sin and temptation. The idea of confession had come to her right away but it was also hard. It was never easy to confess one’s sins. But she knew she had to. The longer a sin existed between her and God, the harder it would be to correct that imbalance. The sooner she could confess that sin, the better chance she had of regaining her footing and reestablishing her faith – a faith that had defined her life ever since the age of ten.

As she saw the edges of the church come into view, her heart sagged. *Can I really do this? Can I really confess this?*

The familiar edges and shape of Blessed Heart Catholic Church seemed to tell her that yes, she could.

Christy started to tremble. She wasn’t sure she’d call what she

had been doing an affair or not. She'd only kissed the man once and had called it out for what it was then. But she had continued to see him, had continued to let herself be lifted up by his words of praise and adoration – words her own husband had stopped uttering to her years ago.

She could almost feel that sin burned away from her as the sun rose higher in the sky, casting golds and soft oranges around the edges of Blessed Heart. If she needed any further sign that she was supposed to be confessing her sins to a priest on this particular morning, that was it.

She came to the steps of Blessed Heart with a heaviness on her shoulders. But she knew that within moments, it would be gone. She could return home, her sins confessed, her heart unburdened, and her mind —

When she reached the front doors, Christy screamed.

She backed away, still screaming. She nearly fell down the concrete stairs as she stumbled back. Her hands went to her mouth, doing very little to muffle the scream.

Father Costas was hanging from the doors. He had been stripped down to his underwear and there was a long horizontal cut on his brow. His head hung down, looking toward his bare feet, which were dangling two feet above the concrete stoop. Little tendrils of blood dripped from his toes, collecting in a dingy pool on the stoop.

Crucified, Christy thought. *Father Costas has been crucified.*

CHAPTER ONE

Following her last case, Mackenzie White had done something she had never once done before as a working woman: she had asked for a vacation.

She'd requested a two-week vacation for a number of reasons and within just a single day, she knew she had made the right decision. She'd wasted no time in bolstering her reputation when she had come to the FBI. By no design of her own, she had ended up handling high-profile cases that seemed to come looking for her. Not only that, but she had excelled at them and had impressed all of the right people in Quantico and DC. After successfully wrapping up numerous cases and putting her life on the line on a monthly basis, she thought two weeks of paid vacation wasn't too much to ask.

Her superiors had agreed – and even encouraged it. She was sure they'd get a kick out of knowing how she had been spending most of that time – in numerous gyms and workout facilities, getting her body into better shape, sharpening her instincts and skills. She had a solid base for all of the important things. She was adept at hand-to-hand combat. She was eerily good with a firearm. She was much stronger than most other women she had gone through the academy with.

But Mackenzie White was always wanting to improve upon herself.

That's why, eight days into her two-week vacation, she was working up a sweat and a multitude of sore muscles at a private gym. She was pushing herself away from the corner of one of several boxing rings, giving her sparring partner a nod of gratitude. She was stepping into a second practice round and was fully expecting to get defeated. And that was okay.

She'd only been practicing Muay Thai for a little over a month now. She had gotten good enough at it that she was comfortable introducing another, lesser known, fighting style with it. With the help of a private instructor and a hell of a lot of determination, Mackenzie had also started training in Yaw-Yan, a Filipino style of kickboxing. Mixing the two was rather unorthodox but she and her trainer had worked on a way to utilize them both. It pushed Mackenzie physically, to the point where her shoulders and calves felt like slabs of brick.

She felt those muscles responding now as she stepped to her partner. They touched gloves and resumed their session. She immediately dodged a jab and countered with a low jab of her own.

It was, in a way, like learning a new style of dance. Mackenzie had taken part in dance classes as a girl and had never forgotten the importance of footwork and focus. They were disciplines she carried with her into her first job as a street cop, then into her job as a detective out in Nebraska. Those basic disciplines had also helped her immensely as an FBI agent, saving her life on more than one occasion.

They also came rushing back to her as she sparred. She tried out her new moves and instruction, using a series of downward kicks and elbow attacks combined with more traditional kickboxing attacks. She used the surprised expression of her sparring partner as fuel, motivating her. Sure, it was just practice, but she felt the need to excel there as well.

It also helped to clear her mind. She always associated each punch, kick, or elbow strike with something from her past. A left jab was directed at years of neglect with the Nebraska PD. A back-handed attack with her right swatted away the fear the Scarecrow Killer case had instilled in her. A pivot and jab was a blow to the heart of the endless stream of mysteries coming out of her father's old case.

If she was being honest with herself, it was that case that had pushed her to learn these new fighting disciplines – to make sure she continued to evolve as a fighter. She had received a note from someone involved...someone in the shadows who apparently knew who she was.

She still saw that note in her mind's eye as she sparred.

Stop looking...

Naturally, she intended to do just the opposite. And that's why she was currently in the ring, her gaze focused and her muscles as taut as violin strings.

When she landed a blow to her opponent's solar plexus and then a padded-elbow strike to her sparring partner's ribs, the session was called from the side of the ring. The judge was

smiling and nodding as he softly applauded.

“Okay, Mac,” he said. “Give it a break for a while, huh? You’re at an hour and a half today.”

Mackenzie nodded, dropping her stance and again tapping gloves with her sparring partner – a twenty-five-year-old male who had the build of an MMA fighter. He gave her a quick grin over his mouthpiece and made a quick exit through the ropes.

Mackenzie thanked the judge and then headed for the locker rooms. Her muscles were sore to the point of trembling, but she enjoyed it. It meant she was pushing herself, stretching herself to new limits.

As she showered and slid into what Ellington referred to as her gym swag (an Under Armour tank top and a pair of black dry-fit leggings), she reminded herself that she had one more workout for the day. She hoped her arms were done trembling by then. Sure, Ellington would be there to help, but she had several rather heavy boxes to move around this afternoon.

While she had been technically living at Ellington’s apartment for the past few days, today would be the day she actually moved things in. It was yet another of the many reasons she had asked for a two-week vacation. The thought of trying to move over the course of a weekend had not appealed to her. Plus, she figured, this was yet another way she was growing and evolving. Trusting someone else enough to share a living space and, as cheesy as it seemed, her heart, was something she had been incapable of until a few months ago.

And as soon as she was changed into her gym swag, she found that she could barely wait to start moving things in. Sore or not, she put a little extra speed in her step on the way to the parking lot.

The upside to not being a materialistic person was that when it came time to move, there was very little to pack up. As such, a single trip in Ellington's pickup truck and a rented U-Haul did the job. The move itself took less than two hours thanks to the elevator in Ellington's building, and in the end, she really didn't have to lift that many boxes.

They celebrated the move with Chinese food and a bottle of wine. Mackenzie was tired, sore, but immensely happy. She'd been expecting to feel nervous and maybe even a bit of regret over the move, but as they started unpacking boxes over their dinner, she found that she was excited for this next stage of her life.

"Here's the deal," Ellington said as he placed a box cutter to a stream of packing tape along the top of one of the boxes. "You need to tell me now if I'm going to find any overly embarrassing movies or CDs in these boxes."

"I think the most embarrassing CD you'll find is the soundtrack to that awful nineties remake of *Romeo and Juliet*. But what can I say? I really liked that Radiohead song."

“Then you’re forgiven,” he said, cutting into the tape.

“How about you?” she asked. “Any embarrassing media lying around?”

“Well, I got rid of all of my CDs and DVDs. Everything’s digital. I needed to free up the space. It’s almost as if I had a sneaking suspicion that this sexy FBI lady was going to be moving in with me one of these days.”

“Good instincts,” she said. She walked over to him and took his hands in hers. “Now...this is your last chance. You can back out now before we start taking things out of the boxes.”

“Back out? Are you crazy?”

“You’ll have a girl living with you,” she said, pulling him close. “A girl that tends to like things neat. A girl that can get a little OCD.”

“Oh, I know,” he said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Even all the ladies’ clothes? You willing to share your closet?”

“I have very few clothes,” he said, leaning in close to her. Their noses were almost touching and a heat that they had gotten used to was starting to build between them. “You can have all of the closet space you want.”

“Makeup and tampons, sharing a bed, and another person dirtying up dishes. You sure you’re ready for that?”

“Yeah. One question, though.”

“What’s that?” she said. Her hands traveled from his hands to his arms. She knew where this was going and every sore muscle

in her body was ready.

“All of those ladies’ clothes,” he said. “You can’t be leaving them on the floor all the time.”

“Um, I don’t intend to,” she said.

“Oh, I know,” he said. He then reached down and lifted the tank top off of her. He wasted no time in doing the same to the sports bra underneath. “But I probably will,” he added, throwing both to the floor.

He kissed her then and although he tried leading her into the bedroom, their bodies did not have the patience. They ended up on the living room rug and although Mackenzie’s sore muscles protested the hard floor under her back, other parts of her body overruled them.

When her phone rang at 4:47 in the morning, a single thought went through Mackenzie’s sleepy mind as she reached for the bedside table.

A call at this hour...I guess my vacation is over.

“Yeah?” she asked, not bothering with formalities as she was technically on vacation.

“White?”

In an odd way, she had nearly missed McGrath over these last nine days. Still, hearing his voice was like a very quick and stark return to reality.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Sorry for the early call,” he said. And before he added anything else, Mackenzie heard Ellington’s phone ring from the other side of the bed.

Something big, she thought. *Something bad*.

“Look, I know I signed off on your two weeks,” McGrath said. “But we’ve got a mess on our hands here and I need you on it. You and Ellington. Meet me in my office as soon as you can.”

It wasn’t a question, but a direct order. And without anything resembling a *goodbye*, McGrath killed the call. Mackenzie let out a sigh and looked over at Ellington, who was finishing up his own call.

“Well, looks like your vacation is over,” he said with a thin smile.

“That’s fine,” she said. “It ended on quite a bang.”

And then, like some old married couple, they kissed and slid out of bed, heading in to work.

CHAPTER TWO

The J. Edgar Hoover building was empty as Mackenzie and Ellington entered. They'd both been in its hallways at all hours of the night, so it was nothing out of the ordinary. Still, to be called in to work at such an hour was never a good thing. It usually meant there was something truly awful waiting for them.

When they reached McGrath's office, they found his door open. He was sitting at a small conference table in the back of his office, looking over a variety of files. There was another agent there with him, a woman Mackenzie had seen before. Her name was Agent Yardley, a quiet, no-bullshit type of woman who had stepped in to help Agent Harrison from time to time. She gave a nod and a robotic sort of smile when they entered the room and stepped up to the conference room table. She looked back at her laptop, focused on whatever was on the screen.

When McGrath looked up at Mackenzie, she couldn't help but notice what looked like slight relief in his eyes. It was a nice way to be introduced back into work after having her vacation cut short.

"White, Ellington," McGrath said. "You know Agent Yardley?"

"Yes," Mackenzie said, giving the agent a nod of acknowledgment.

"She's just come back from a crime scene that is linked to

another we had five days ago. I originally had her on the case but when I thought we might have a serial on our hands, I asked her to provide everything she had so I could hand it off to you two. We've got a murder...the second of its kind in five days. White, I called you specifically because I want you on it based on your history – the Scarecrow Killer specifically.”

“What’s the case?” Mackenzie asked.

Yardley turned her laptop toward them. Mackenzie went to the chair closest to it and took a seat. She looked at the image on the screen with a deadened sort of quiet that she had come to know well – the ability to study a picture of something grotesque as part of her job but with a resigned sympathy most humans would feel at such a tragic death.

She saw an older man, his hair and beard mostly gray, hanging from the door of a church. His arms were extended and his head was bowed down in a show of mock crucifixion. There were slash marks on his chest and a large gash on his forehead. He had been stripped down to his underwear, which had caught a great deal of the blood that had drained down from his brow and chest. From what she could see in the pictures, she was pretty sure his hands had literally been nailed to the door. The feet, though, were simply tied together.

“This is the second victim,” Yardley said. “Reverend Ned Tuttle, fifty-five years of age. He was discovered by an old woman who had stopped by the church early to put flowers on her husband’s grave. Forensics is on the scene as we speak. It

seems the body was put there less than four hours ago. We've already had agents speak with the family to notify them."

A woman who likes to take charge and get things done, Mackenzie thought. Perhaps she and I would get along well together.

"What do we have on the first victim?" Mackenzie asked.

McGrath slid her a folder. As she opened it up and looked over the contents, McGrath filled her in. "Father Costas, of the Blessed Heart Catholic Church. He was found in the same state, nailed to the doors of his church five days ago. I'm honestly quite surprised you didn't see anything about it on the news."

"I made a point not to watch the news on my vacation," she said, cutting McGrath a look that was meant to be comical but, she felt, went totally unacknowledged.

"I remember hearing about it around the water cooler," Ellington said. "The woman who discovered the body was in a state of shock for a while, right?"

"Right," McGrath said.

"And based on what forensics came up with," Yardley added, "Father Costas had certainly not been nailed there for any longer than two hours."

Mackenzie looked through the files. The images inside showed Father Costas in the exact same position as Reverend Tuttle. Everything looked pretty much identical, right down to the elongated gash across the brow.

She closed the file and slid it back over to McGrath.

“Where is this church?” Mackenzie asked, pointing back to the laptop screen.

“Just outside of town. A decent-sized Presbyterian church.”

“Text me the directions,” Mackenzie said, already getting to her feet. “I’d like to go see it for myself.”

Apparently, she had missed working over the last eight days more than she had realized.

It was still dark when Mackenzie and Ellington arrived at the church. The forensics team was just finishing up their work. The body of Reverend Tuttle had been removed from the door but that was fine with Mackenzie. Based on the two images she had seen of Father Costas and Reverend Tuttle, she’d seen all she needed to see.

Two crucifixion-style murders, both on the front doors of churches. The men killed were the presumed leaders of those churches. It’s pretty clear someone has a pretty big grudge against the church. And whoever they are, it’s not specific to one particular denomination.

She and Ellington approached the front of the church as the forensics team wrapped things up. Off to the left, near the small plaque board with the church’s name on it, was a small group of people. A few of them were in prayer while they embraced. Others were openly weeping.

Members of the church, Mackenzie assumed with a resounding sadness.

They neared the church and the scene only got worse. There were smears of blood and two large holes where the nails had been driven in. She looked the area over for any further religious iconography but saw nothing. There was just blood and bits of dirt and sweat.

Such a bold move, she thought. *There's got to be some sort of symbolism to it. Why a church? Why the doors of a church? Once would be a coincidence. But two in a row, both nailed to the doors – that's purposeful.*

She found it almost offensive that someone would do such a thing in front of a church. And maybe that was the point of it. There was no way to know for sure. While Mackenzie was not a strong believer in religion or God or the effects of faith, she also fully respected the rights of people who *did* live by faith. Sometimes she wished she was that kind of person. Maybe that was why she found this act so deplorable; mocking the death of Christ at the very entryway to a place where people gathered to seek solace and refuge in his name was detestable.

“Even if this was the first murder,” Ellington said, “a sight like this would instantly make me think there were more coming. This is...revolting.”

“It is,” Mackenzie said. “But I can’t be quite sure why it makes me feel that way.”

“Because churches are safe places. You don’t expect to see

large nail holes and wet blood on their doors. That's some Old Testament shit right there."

Mackenzie wasn't anything close to a Biblical scholar but she did recall Bible stories from her childhood – something about the Angel of Death passing through a city and collecting the firstborns of every family if there was not a certain marking over their doors.

A chill crept through her. She repressed it by turning to the forensics team. With a slight wave, she got the attention of a member of their team. He came over, clearly a little distraught over what he and the rest of the team had seen. "Agent White," he said. "This your case now?"

"Seems like it. I was wondering if you guys still had the nails that were used to put him up there."

"Sure do," he said. He waved over another of his team members and then looked back to the door. "And the guy who did this...he was either strong as hell or had all the time in the world to do this."

"That's doubtful," Mackenzie said. She nodded back out toward the church parking lot and the street beyond. "Even if the killer did this around two or three in the morning, the chances of a vehicle not traveling down Browning Street and seeing him are slim to none."

"Unless the killer canvassed the area beforehand and knew the dead-times for traffic after midnight," Ellington offered.

"Any chance of video footage?" she asked.

“None. We checked. Agent Yardley even called some people – owners of the buildings closest by. But only one has security cameras and they are facing away from the church. So there’s no dice there.”

The other forensics member came over. He was carrying a medium-sized plastic bag that contained two large iron spikes and what looked like a thread of bailing wire. The spikes were coated in blood, which had also smeared itself along the clear interior of the bag.

“Are those railroad spikes?” Mackenzie asked.

“Probably,” the forensics guy said. “But if they are, they’re miniaturized ones. Maybe the kind people use to put up chicken coops or pasture fences.”

“How long before you’ll have any sort of results from these?” she asked.

The man shrugged. “Half a day, maybe? Let me know what you’re looking for specifically and I’ll try to get the results to you sooner.”

“See if you can find out what the killer used to drive the spikes in. Can you tell that sort of thing by the recent wear on the spike heads?”

“Yeah, we should be able to do that. Everything has pretty much been handled on our end. The body is still with us; it won’t get to the coroner until we say so. The doors and stoop have been dusted for prints. We’ll let you know if we find anything.”

“Thanks,” Mackenzie said.

“Sorry to have already moved the body. But the sun was coming up and we really didn’t want this in today’s papers. Or tomorrow’s for that matter.”

“No, that’s fine. I totally understand.”

With that, Mackenzie turned back to the double doors, nonverbally dismissing the forensics team. She tried to picture someone lugging a body across the small lawn and up the stairs in the dead of night. The positioning of security lights on the street would make the front of the church dark. There were no lights of any kind along the front of the church, so it would have been cast in almost absolute darkness.

Maybe it would have been more possible than I originally thought for the killer to take all the time he needed to get this done, she thought.

“That seemed like a weird request,” Ellington said. “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know yet. But I do know that it would take a hell of a lot of strength and determination to work by yourself in order to haul someone off of the ground just to nail their hands to these doors. If a sledgehammer was used to knock the nails in, it might denote more than one killer – one to hold the victim off the ground *and* extend the arm, and another to drive the nails in.”

“Paints a hell of a picture, doesn’t it?” Ellington said.

Mackenzie nodded as she started snapping pictures of the scene with her cell phone. As she did, the idea of crucifixion again crept up on her. It made her think of the first case she’d

ever worked where themes of crucifixion had been utilized – a case back in Nebraska that had eventually led her to rub elbows with the bureau.

The Scarecrow Killer, she thought. *God, am I ever going to be able to leave that in the dust of my memory?*

Behind her, the sun started to rise, casting the first rays of light on the day. As her shadow was slowly cast upon the church steps, she tried to ignore the fact that it looked almost like a cross.

Again, memories of the Scarecrow Killer fogged her mind.

Maybe this will be it, she thought hopefully. *Maybe when I close this case, memories of those people crucified in the cornfields will stop haunting my memory.*

But as she looked back at those bloodstained doors of Cornerstone Presbyterian, she was afraid this was nothing more than wishful thinking.

CHAPTER THREE

Mackenzie learned a great deal about Reverend Ned Tuttle in the next half an hour. For starters, he had left behind two sons and a sister. His wife had walked out on him eight years ago, moving to Austin, Texas, with a man she had been having an affair with for over a year before it had come to light. Both sons lived in the Georgetown area, leading Mackenzie and Ellington to their first stop of the day. It was just after 6:30 when Mackenzie parked her car along the curb outside of Brian Tuttle's apartment. According to the agent who had broken the news, both brothers were there, waiting to do what they could to answer questions about their father's death.

When Mackenzie stepped into Brian Tuttle's apartment, she was a little surprised. She had expected to see two sons deep in grief, torn apart by the loss of their devout father. Instead, she saw them sitting at a small dining room table in the kitchen. They were both drinking coffee. Brian Tuttle, twenty-two years of age, was eating a bowl of cereal while Eddie Tuttle, nineteen, was absently dabbing an Eggo waffle into a pool of syrup.

"I don't exactly know what you're thinking we can offer you," Brian said. "We weren't exactly on the best terms with Dad."

"Can I ask why?" Mackenzie asked.

"Because we stopped associating with him when he went full-tilt into the church."

“Are you not believers?” Ellington asked.

“I don’t know,” Brian said. “I guess I’m an agnostic.”

“I’m a believer,” Eddie said. “But Dad...he took it to a whole different level. Like, when he found out Mom was cheating on him, he didn’t do anything. After about two days of dealing with it, he forgave her *and* the guy she was cheating on him with. He said he forgave them because it was the Christian thing to do. And he refused to even talk about a divorce.”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “And Mom saw that as Dad not giving a shit about her – not caring that she had cheated. So she left. And he didn’t do much of anything to stop her.”

“Did your Dad ever try to reach out to the two of you since your mom left?”

“Oh yeah,” Brian said. “Just about every Saturday evening, begging us to come to church.”

“And besides that,” Eddie added, “he was too busy during the week even if we *did* want to see him. He was always at the church or out on charity drives or sick visits at hospitals.”

“When was the last time either of you spoke to him at length?” Mackenzie asked.

The brothers looked at each other for a moment, calculating. “Not sure,” Brian said. “Maybe a month. And it wasn’t much of anything. He was asking the same questions: how was work going, if I was dating anyone yet, stuff like that.”

“So it’s safe to say you both have an estranged relationship with your father?”

“Yeah,” Eddie said.

He looked down to the table for a moment as regret started to sink in. Mackenzie had seen this sort of reaction before; if she'd been forced to bet, she was pretty sure at least one of these boys would be a sobbing mess within an hour, realizing all that had been lost in terms of the father they'd never gotten to know.

“Do you know who *would* have known him well?” Mackenzie asked. “Did he have any close friends?”

“Just that priest or pastor or whatever at the church,” Eddie said. “The one that runs the place.”

“Your father wasn't the lead reverend?” Mackenzie asked.

“No. He was like an associate pastor or something,” Brian said. “There was another guy over him. Jerry Levins, I think.”

Mackenzie noticed the way the young men were getting their terminology mixed up. Pastor, reverend, priest...it was all confusing. Mackenzie didn't even know the difference actually, assuming it had something to do with differences in beliefs between denominations.

“And your father spent a lot of time with him?”

“Oh yeah,” Brian said, a bit angry. “All of his damn time, I think. If you need to know anything about Dad, he'd be the one to ask.”

Mackenzie nodded, well aware that she would not be getting any useful information out of these two young men. Still, she wished she had more time to speak with them. There was clearly unresolved tension and loss between them. Maybe if they broke

through whatever emotional walls were keeping them so tranquil, they'd have more to offer.

In the end, she turned away and gave them her thanks. She and Ellington left the apartment quietly. As they took the stairs down side by side, he took her hand.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, confused. "Why?"

"Two kids...their father just died and aren't sure how to handle it. With all of the speculation about your dad's old case as of late...just wondering."

She smiled at him, reveling in the uplifting way he made her heart feel in those moments. *God, he can be so sweet...*

As they walked out into the morning together, she also realized that he was right: the reason she had wanted to stay and keep talking was to help the Tuttle brothers resolve the issues they'd had with their father.

Apparently, the ghost of her father's recently reopened case was haunting her more than she realized.

Seeing Cornerstone Presbyterian Church in the light of morning was surreal. Mackenzie drove by it on the way to visit with Reverend Jerry Levins. Levins resided in a house that sat just half a block away from the church, something Mackenzie had seen a lot of during her time out in Nebraska where the heads

of smaller churches tended to live in very close proximity to their houses of worship.

When they arrived at Levins's house, there were numerous cars parked along the side of the street and in his driveway. She assumed these were likely members of Cornerstone, coming by to seek solace from or offer comfort to Reverend Levins.

When Mackenzie knocked on the front door of the modest little brick house, it was answered right away. The woman at the door had clearly been crying. She eyed Mackenzie and Ellington suspiciously until Mackenzie raised her badge.

"We're Agents White and Ellington, with the FBI," she said. "We'd like to speak with Reverend Levins, if he's in."

The woman opened the door for them and they stepped into a house that was filled with sniffing and sobbing. Somewhere else within the house, Mackenzie could hear the sound of murmured prayers.

"I'll get him for you," the woman said. "Please wait here."

Mackenzie watched the woman go back through the house, turning into a small living room where a few people stood by the entryway. After some whispering noises, a tall bald man came walking toward them. Like the woman who had answered the door, he had also been weeping.

"Agents," Levins said. "Can I help you?"

"Well, I know it's a very tense and sad time for you," Mackenzie said, "but we're hoping to get any information we can on Reverend Tuttle. The sooner we can get any leads, the quicker

we can catch who did this.”

“Do you think his death is related to that poor priest’s from earlier this week?” Levins asked.

“We can’t know for certain yet,” Mackenzie said, though she was already certain he was. “And that’s why we were hoping you could speak with us.”

“Of course,” Levins said. “Outside on the stoop, though. I don’t want to interrupt the prayer we have going here.”

He led them back out into the morning, where he took a seat on the concrete steps. “I must say, I’m not sure what you’re going to find on Ned,” Levins commented. “He was a stand-up believer. Other than some issues with his family, I don’t know that he had anything closely resembling an enemy.”

“Did he have friends within the church that you might question being moral or upstanding?” Ellington asked.

“Everyone was friends with Ned Tuttle,” Levins said, wiping a tear away from his eyes. “The man was as close to a saint as they come. He regularly tithed at least twenty-five percent of his pay back into the church. He was always downtown, helping to feed and clothe the poor. He mowed lawns for the elderly, did home repair for widows, took three missions trips to Kenya every year to help with a medical ministry.”

“Do you know anything about his past that might be shady?” Mackenzie asked.

“No. And that’s saying a lot because I know a great deal about his past. He and I, we shared a lot of stories about our struggles.

And I can tell you in confidence that among the few sinful things he experienced in his past, there was nothing that would suggest being treated in the way he was last night.”

“How about any people within the church?” Mackenzie asked. “Were there members of the church who might have been offended at something Reverend Tuttle said or did?”

Levins thought about it for only a moment before shaking his head. “No. If there was such an issue, Ned never told me and I never knew about it. But again...I can tell you with the utmost certainty that he had no enemies that I was aware of.”

“Do you know if – ” Ellington started.

But Levins held up his hand, as if shooing the comment away. “I’m very sorry,” he said. “But I’m quite sad about the loss of my good friend, and I have many grieving members of my church inside. I will happily answer any questions you have in the coming days, but I need to report to God and my congregation right now.”

“Of course,” Mackenzie said. “I understand. And I am truly sorry for your loss.”

Levins managed a smile as he got back to his feet. Fresh tears were streaming down his face. “I meant what I said,” he whispered, doing what he could to not break down in front of them. “Give me a day or so. If there is anything further you need to ask, let me know. I’d like to take part in bringing whoever did this to justice.”

With that, he headed back inside. Mackenzie and Ellington walked back to the car as the sun finally took its rightful place in

the sky. It was hard to believe it was only 8:11.

“What next?” Mackenzie asked. “Any ideas?”

“Well...I’ve been awake for nearly four hours now and I haven’t had coffee yet. That seems like a good place to start.”

Twenty minutes later, Mackenzie and Ellington were sitting face to face in a small coffee shop. As they drank their coffee, they looked over the files on Father Costas they had taken from McGrath’s office and the digital files on Reverend Tuttle that had been emailed to Mackenzie’s phone.

Aside from studying the photographs, there was not really much to study. Even in the case of Father Costas, where there was paperwork to go along with it, there wasn’t much to tell. He had been killed from either the puncture wound to his lung or a deep incision in the back of his neck that had gone deep enough to reveal white glimmers of his spine.

“So according to this report,” Mackenzie said, “the wounds to Father Costas’s body were likely what killed him. He was most likely dead before he was crucified.”

“And that means something?” Ellington asked.

“I think there’s a very good chance. It’s clear there’s some sort of religious angle here. The mere subject of crucifixion supports that. But there’s a huge difference between using the *act* of crucifixion as a message and using the *imagery* of crucifixion.”

“I think I follow,” Ellington said. “But you can keep explaining.”

“For Christians, the *image* of crucifixion would really just be a depiction of sorts. In our cases, death as a result of crucifixion doesn’t seem to be the goal. If that were the case, the bodies would likely be mostly free of injury. Think about it...the whole of Christianity would be quite different if Christ was already dead when he was nailed to the cross.”

“So you think the killer is crucifying these men just for show?”

“Too early to tell,” Mackenzie said. She paused long enough to take a blissful gulp of her coffee. “I’m leaning toward *no*, though. Both men were men of the cloth...leaders of a church in some form or another. Displaying them strung up like the Christian figure those churches revolve around is too much of a sign. There’s some sort of motive behind it all.”

“You just referred to Jesus Christ as a Christian figure. I thought you believed in God.”

“I do,” Mackenzie said. “But not with the strength and conviction someone like Ned Tuttle had. And when it gets into the Bible stories – the talking snake, the ark, the blow-by-blow of the crucifixion – I think faith has to take a back seat and rely on something closer to blind belief. And I’m not comfortable with that.”

“Whoa,” Ellington said with a smile. “That’s deep. Me...I just prefer to go with *I don’t know* answer. So...as for the motive you mentioned. How do we find it?” Ellington asked.

“Good question. I plan to start with the family of Father Costas. There’s not much to go on in the reports. Also, I think – ”

She was interrupted by the ringing of Ellington’s phone. He grabbed it quickly and frowned at what he saw on the display. “It’s McGrath,” he said before answering it.

Mackenzie listened to Ellington’s end of the conversation, unable to piece together what was being said. After less than a minute, Ellington ended the call and shoved his phone back into his pocket.

“Well,” he said. “It looks like you’ll be visiting the Costas family on your own. McGrath needs me back at his office. Some detail work on a case he’s being all secretive on.”

“Which probably means it’s grunt work,” Mackenzie said. “Lucky you.”

“Still...seems weird he’d yank me off of this so soon when we don’t have any leads. It must mean he has immense confidence in you all of a sudden.”

“And you don’t?”

“You know what I mean,” Ellington said, smiling.

Mackenzie took another gulp of her coffee, a little disgruntled to find that it was already empty. She tossed the cup in the trash and gathered up the files and her phone, ready to move in to her next stop. First, though, she headed for the counter to order another coffee.

It was looking like it was going to be a very long day. And without Ellington to keep her on her toes, she’d definitely need

coffee.

Then again, long days usually resulted in leads – in productivity. And if Mackenzie had her way, she'd find the killer before he had time to so much as plan another murder.

CHAPTER FOUR

After dropping Ellington off in the parking garage at the FBI offices (and a quick yet passionate kiss before she left), Mackenzie made her way out to Blessed Heart Catholic Church. She wasn't expecting to find much of anything, so she wasn't disappointed when that was exactly what was waiting for her.

The doors had been replaced, but looked like exact replicas of the ones she had seen in the photos from the crime scene. She climbed up the stairs, these much fancier and ornate than the ones at Cornerstone Presbyterian, and to the new doors. She then turned her back to the doors and looked back out to the street. She couldn't help but wonder if there was any further symbolism in nailing the men to the front doors.

Maybe they're supposed to be looking out toward something, Mackenzie thought. But all she was seeing were parked cars, a few pedestrians, and street signs.

She looked at her feet and along the edges of the door frame. There were small spackled shapes there that could be anything. But she had seen this color before – the color of blood once it dried into pale concrete.

She looked back down the steps and tried to imagine a man bringing a dead body up them. It would be a task, that was for sure. Of course, she didn't know for sure that Costas had been dead when he had been nailed to the door, though that seemed

to be the working assumption.

As she stood at the double doors and looked around, she went over the facts as she knew them from the files. *The same kind of nails were used here as were used at the Tuttle scene. The only common injury among the two bodies was a large gash that went the length of their foreheads – maybe an allusion to Christ’s crown of thorns.*

Imagining such a grisly sight on the stoop she was standing on was hard to imagine. People didn’t typically think of death and gore when they stood before the doors of a church.

And maybe that’s the point. Maybe that’s a tie-in to the killer’s motive.

Feeling like she might be on to something, Mackenzie took the stairs back down to the street. It felt odd to be moving at such a pace without Ellington by her side, but by the time she was in her car and moving forward, her mind was solely on the case.

For the second time that day, Mackenzie found herself walking into a crowded home. Father Costas had lived in a nice home, a two-story brick home just along the outskirts of the downtown region. She was met by a woman who introduced herself as a parishioner of Blessed Heart. She led Mackenzie into a den area, where she was asked to wait for a moment.

Within a matter of seconds, an older woman entered the room.

She looked exhausted and profoundly sad when she sat down in an armchair across from the seat Mackenzie had taken on an ornate sofa.

“I’m so sorry to bother you,” Mackenzie said. “I had no idea you’d have this much company.”

“Yes, I had no idea, either,” the woman said. “But the funeral is tonight and there are all of these people coming out of the woodwork. Family members, acquaintances, loved ones from the church.” She then grinned sleepily and added: “I’m Nancy Allensworth, the parish secretary. I’m told you’re with the FBI?”

“Yes ma’am. At the risk of upsetting you further, there was another body discovered this morning, treated the same way as Father Costas. This one was a reverend at a small Presbyterian church near Georgetown.”

Nancy Allensworth put her hand to her mouth in a dramatic *oh no* gesture. “My goodness,” she said. Then, through tears and gritted teeth, she hissed, “What has this wretched world come to?”

Doing her best to press on, Mackenzie continued. “Obviously, we have reason to believe it could happen again if it has happened twice. So time is of the essence. I was hoping you might be able to answer a few questions for me.”

“I can try,” she said, though it was clear that she was struggling to keep her emotions in check.

“Because Blessed Heart is a relatively large church, I was wondering if there might have been someone within the

congregation who might have recently approached Father Costas with a complaint or grievance.”

“Not that I’m aware of. Of course, keep in mind that many people came to him in confidence to confess sins or work out spiritual unrest within their lives.”

“Is there anything at all over the course of the last several years that you can think of that might have rubbed someone the wrong way? Anything that might upset someone who perhaps previously looked at Father Costas with reverence?”

Nancy looked down at her hands. She was wringing them nervously in her lap, trying to keep them from trembling. “I suppose there was, but it was before I started working here. There was a story maybe ten years back, a report that one of the local papers broke. One of the teenage boys that lead a youth group claimed that Father Costas had sexually abused him. It was very explicit. There was never any proof of it and, quite frankly, there’s just no way Father Costas would have done that. But once a news story like that hits and concerns someone within the Catholic Church, it’s taken as solid truth.”

“What was the aftermath of that story?”

“From what I was told, he got death threats. Attendance at the church decreased by about fifteen percent. He started to receive unsolicited emails filled with homosexual pornography.”

“Did he keep any of those mails?” Mackenzie asked.

“For a while,” Nancy said. “He had the cops called in on it but they were never able to make any connections. After it was clear

that nothing was going to be able to be done, he deleted them all. I've never seen them personally.”

“And what about the teen who made the accusations? If you could give us his name, we could pay him a visit.”

Nancy shook her head, fresh tears spilling. “He committed suicide later that year. There was a note near the body where he confessed to being gay. It was yet another strike against Father Costas. It made the story seem all that more plausible.”

Mackenzie nodded, trying to think of any other accessible avenues. She knew, naturally, that trying to get this sort of information out of a grieving widow would be difficult. And when you added in a past ordeal with a news story that may or may not have had any truth to it, the whole thing just became that much worse. She supposed she could push for more information about the young man who had filed the complaint and eventually killed himself. But she could also easily find that information on her own while leaving this poor woman to get ready for Father Costas's funeral.

“Well, Ms. Allensworth, thank you so much for your time,” Mackenzie said, getting to her feet. “My deepest sympathies for your loss.”

“Bless you, my dear,” Nancy said. She also got to her feet and led Mackenzie back through the house, to the front door.

At the door, Mackenzie gave Nancy a business card with her name and number on it. “I understand you are going through quite a lot,” Mackenzie said. “But if anything else should happen to

come to you in the next few days, please give me a call.”

Nancy took the card without a word and slipped it into her pocket. She then turned away, clearly fighting back a larger swarm of tears, and closed the door.

Mackenzie headed back to her car, pulling out her cell phone. She dialed up Agent Harrison, who answered right away.

“Everything going well?” he asked her.

“I don’t know yet,” she said. “Can you do me a favor and look back about ten years to see what you can find about Father Costas being accused of sexually abusing a male leader of a youth group? I’d like as many details on the case as I can get.”

“Sure. You think it might present a lead?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I think a kid who claims to have been sexually abused by a priest who was nailed to the door of his church would certainly be worth looking into.”

“Yeah, good point,” Harrison said.

She ended the call, again haunted by images of the Scarecrow Killer and Nebraska. She had obviously dealt with killers striking out of a religious context before. And one thing she knew about them was that they could be unpredictable and very driven. She wasn’t going to take any chances and, as such, would not leave any stone unturned.

Yet as she got back into her car, she realized that a sexually abused boy *did* feel like a solid lead. Besides, other than him, the only thing at her disposal was returning to the FBI offices and seeing what she could mine from the files while hoping Forensics

might be able to come up with something.

And she knew that if she sat idly, waiting for a break in the case, the killer could very well be out there plotting his next move.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was 3:08 by the car's dashboard when the pastor came out of the church.

He watched the pastor through the windshield from a distance. He knew the man was holy; his reputation was stellar and his church had been blessed. Still, it was rather disappointing. Sometimes he thought holy men should be set apart from the rest of the world, easier to identify. Maybe like those old religious paintings where Jesus had a large golden circle around his head.

He chuckled at the thought of this as he watched the pastor meet with another man in front of a car by the church. This other man was an assistant of some sort. He'd seen this assistant before but wasn't concerned with him. He was very low on the food chain within the church.

No, he was more interested in the head pastor.

He closed his eyes as the two men talked. In the silence of his car, he prayed. He knew he could pray anywhere and God would hear him. He had known for quite some time that God did not care where you were when you prayed or confessed your sins. You did not have to be in some huge and gaudily decorated building. In fact, the Bible indicated that such elaborate dwellings were an affront to God.

With his prayer over, he thought about that bit of scripture. He muttered it out loud, his voice slow and gritty.

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, so that they may be seen of men.”

He looked back to the pastor, currently walking away from the man and to another car.

“Hypocrite,” he said. His voice was a mixture of venom and sadness.

He also knew that the Bible warned of a plague of false prophets in the end times. That was, after all, why he had set himself to his current task. The false prophets, the men who spoke of glorifying God while eyeing the collection plates as they were passed around – the same ones who preached of sanctification and purity while staring at young boys with lustful eyes – they were the worst of them. They were worse than the drug dealers and murderers. They were worse than rapists and the most deplorable deviants on the streets.

Everyone knew it. But no one did anything about it.

Until now. Until he had heard God speaking into him, telling him to set it right.

It was his job to rid the world of these false prophets. It was bloody work, but it was God’s work. And that was all he needed to know.

He looked back to the pastor, getting into his car and leaving the church.

After a while, he also pulled out onto the street. He did not tail the pastor closely, but followed along at a safe distance.

When he came to a stoplight, he could just barely hear the musical noise from his trunk as several of his industrial nails clinked together in their box.

CHAPTER SIX

She walks up toward the church, the blood moon casting a shadow of her body on the sidewalk that looks like a stretched out bug – a praying mantis or a millipede perhaps. There is a bell ringing, a large bell above the cathedral, summoning everyone to come worship and sing and give praise.

But Mackenzie cannot get inside the church. There is a throng of people on the front stoop, congregating around the front door. She sees Ellington there, as well as McGrath, Harrison, her estranged mother and sister, even her old partner, Bryers, and some of the men she'd worked with while still a detective back in Nebraska.

“What’s everyone doing?” she asks.

Ellington turns to her. His eyes are closed. He is dressed in a nice suit, punctuated by a blood red tie. He smiles at her, his eyes still closed, and holds a hand to his lips. Beside him, her mother points to the front doors of the church.

Her father is there. Strung up, crucified. He wears a crown of thorns, and a wound in his side leaks something that looks like motor oil. He is looking directly at her, his eyes wide and maniacal. He is insane. She can see it in his eyes and in the leer of a grin.

“Has thee come to save thyself?” he asks her.

“No,” she says.

“Well, you certainly did not come to save me. Too late for that.

Now bow. Worship. Find your peace in me.”

And as if someone has broken her in half from inside, Mackenzie kneels. She kneels hard, scraping her knees on the concrete. All around her, the congregation starts to sing in tongues. She opens her mouth and formless words come out, joining in the song. She looks back up to her father and there is a halo of fire encircling his head. He is dead now, his eyes blank and expressionless, his mouth trailing a pool of blood.

There is the chiming of the bell, repeating over and again.

Ringin...

Ringin. Something ringin.

Her phone. With a jerk, Mackenzie came awake. She barely registered the clock on her bedside table, which read 2:10 a.m. She answered the phone, trying to shake the vestiges of the nightmare from her head

“This is White,” she said.

“Good morning,” came Harrison’s voice. She was secretly rather disappointed. She’d been expecting to hear from Ellington. He’d been sent off on some task by McGrath, the details of which were sketchy at best. He’d promised to call at some point but so far, she’d heard nothing from him.

Harrison, she thought groggily. What the hell does he want?

“It’s way too early for this, Harrison,” she said.

“I know,” Harrison said. “Sorry, but I’m calling for McGrath. There’s been another murder.”

Through a series of texts, Mackenzie pieced together all she needed to know. A rebellious couple had pulled off into the shadow of a well-known church's parking lot to have sex. Just as things had started heating up, the girl had seen something strange on the door. It had spooked her enough to put an end to the night's planned activities. Clearly pissed, the male who had been robbed of his exhibitionism stalked to the front door and found a naked body nailed to the doors.

The church in question was a fairly popular one: Living Word Community Church, one of the largest in the city. It often made the news, as the President frequently attended services there. Mackenzie had never been (she had not stepped into a church since a guilt-filled weekend in college) but the size and scope of the place sank in fully as she steered her car into the parking lot.

She was one of the first on the scene. The CSI team was there, approaching the main entrance of the church. A single agent was getting out of a car, apparently having been waiting for her. She was not at all surprised to see that it was Yardley, the agent who had handled the first case with Father Costas.

Yardley met her at the sidewalk that led to the main entrance. She looked tired but excited in a way that only other agents would likely identify and relate to.

"Agent White," Yardley said. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

“Sure. Were you the first one on the scene?”

“I was. I got sent out about fifteen minutes ago. Harrison called and sent me.”

Mackenzie almost commented on this but shut it down. *Strange that I wasn't called first*, she thought. *Maybe McGrath is letting her fill in where Ellington would be helping. Makes sense, as she was the first to handle the Costas scene.*

“Seen the body yet?” Mackenzie asked as they headed for the front door just behind the CSI team.

“Yeah. From a few feet away. It's identical to the others.”

Within a few steps, Mackenzie was able to see this for herself. She stayed back a bit, letting the CSI and Forensics guys do their job. Sensing that they had two agents behind them waiting, the teams worked quickly yet efficiently, making sure to leave the two agents some room to take in their own observations.

Yardley was right. The scene *was* the same, right down to the elongated mark across the brow. The only difference was that this man's underwear had apparently slipped down – or had been yanked down to his ankles on purpose.

One of the guys from the CSI team looked back at them. He looked a little out of sorts, maybe even a little sad.

“The deceased is Robert Woodall. He's the head pastor here.”

“You're sure?” Mackenzie asked.

“Positive. My family attends this church. I've heard this man preach at least fifty times.”

Mackenzie stepped closer to the body. The doors to Living

Word were not ornate and decorative like the ones at Cornerstone Presbyterian and Blessed Heart. These were more modern, made of a heavy-duty wood that was designed and distressed to look like something akin to a barn door.

Like the others, Pastor Woodall had been nailed through the hands and his ankles had been bound with bailing wire. She studied his exposed genitalia, wondering if his stark nakedness had been a decision made by the killer who had staged the body. She could see nothing out of the ordinary and decided that the underwear must have slid down by itself, perhaps due to the weight of the blood it had collected. The wounds that had shed that blood were numerous. There were a few scratches on his chest. And while his back could not be seen, the trails of blood that smeared along his waist and ventured down his legs indicated that there would be a few back there.

Mackenzie then saw another wound – a thin one that brought back the hellish imagery of her nightmare.

There was a slit in Woodall's right side. It was slight but clearly visible. There was something precise about it, almost pristine. She leaned in closer and pointed. "What's this look like to you?" she asked the CSI team.

"I noticed that, too," said the man who had recognized Pastor Woodall. "Looks like some sort of incision. Maybe made by some sort of crafting blade – an X-Acto knife or something."

"But these other cuts and stab wounds," Mackenzie said. "They're made with a standard blade, right? The angles and

edges...”

“Yeah. You a religious woman?” the man asked.

“That seems to be a recurring question over the last day or so,” she said. “Despite the answer, though, I understand the relevance of a cut to the side. It’s where Christ was speared while he was hanging on the cross.”

“Yeah,” Yardley said from behind her. “But there was no blood, right?”

“Right,” Mackenzie said. “According to scripture, water came out of this wound.”

So why did the killer decide to make this wound stand out? she wondered. And why was it not on the others?

She stood back and observed the scene while Yardley chatted with a few of the CSI and Forensics members. The case had already unnerved her a bit but this random wound in Woodall’s side made her worry that something deeper might be going on. There was symbolism but then there was *layered* symbolism.

The killer has obviously thought things out, she thought. He has a plan and he’s being methodical about it. More than that, the addition of this very precise cut in the side shows that he’s not just killing to kill – he’s trying to convey a message.

“But what message?” she asked herself quietly.

In the darkest hours of night, she stood in the entryway to Living Word Community Church and tried to find that message on the canvas of the dead pastor’s body.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the time it had taken Mackenzie to leave Living Word and drive to the J. Edgar Hoover building, the media had somehow found out about the newest murder. While the murder of Father Costas had made the news, the death of Ned Tuttle had not. But with the lead pastor of a church with the status of Living Word, the case was going to blow up the headlines. It was 4:10 when Mackenzie arrived at the FBI offices, headed up to see McGrath. She figured that the details of Pastor Woodall and the case as a whole would be the main point of interest on local morning news programs – and all over the nation by noon.

She could feel the mounting pressure of it all as she stepped into McGrath's office. He was sitting at his little conference table, on the phone with someone. Agent Harrison was there with him, reading something from a laptop. Yardley was also there, having arrived a scant few minutes before Mackenzie. She was sitting, listening to McGrath on the phone, apparently awaiting instruction.

Seeing the two of them hovering around McGrath made her wish Ellington was here. It reminded her that she was still in the dark about where McGrath had sent him. She wondered if it had something to do with this case – but if it did, why had she not been informed of his whereabouts?

When McGrath finally got off the phone, he looked to the

three gathered agents and let out a sigh. “That was Assistant Director Kirsch,” he said. “He’s assembling three more agents to spearhead this case on his end. The moment the media caught wind of this, we were fucked. This is going to go big and it’s going to go big quickly.”

“Any particular reason?” Harrison asked.

“Living Word is a hugely popular church. The President goes there. A few other politicians are regulars, too. Their podcast gets around five hundred thousand listens a week. Woodall wasn’t like a celebrity or anything, but he was well known. And if it’s a church the President attends...”

“Got it,” Harrison said.

McGrath looked at Mackenzie and Yardley. “Anything of note at the scene?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Mackenzie said. She then went into detail about the peculiar and precise incision in Woodall’s right side. She did not, however, go into what sort of symbolic gesture she was trying to decipher from its meaning. She had no real solid theories just yet and did not want to waste time with speculation.

McGrath, however, was in panic mode. He spread his hands out on the table and nodded to the chairs around the table. “Take a seat. Let’s go over what we have. I want to be able to give Kirsch the same information we have. Including you three, we now have six agents dedicated to this case. If we work together, armed with the same details, we might be able to nab this guy before he strikes again.”

“Well,” Yardley said, “he’s not sticking to one denomination. We know that for sure. If anything, it seems like he’s trying to *avoid* that. So far we’ve got a Catholic church, a Presbyterian church, and now a nondenominational community church.”

“And another thing to consider,” Mackenzie said, “is that we can’t know for certain if he’s using the position of crucifixion as his preferred use of punishment and symbolism, or if he’s doing it as a mockery.”

“What’s the difference, really?” Harrison asked.

“Until we know which reason is behind it, we can’t narrow down the motive,” Mackenzie said. “If he’s doing it as a mockery, then he’s likely not a believer – maybe even some sort of very angry atheist or former believer. But if he’s doing it as a preferred means of symbolism, then he could be a very devout believer, albeit with some pretty strange ways to profess his faith.”

“And this thin cut along Woodall’s side,” McGrath said. “It wasn’t on any of the other bodies?”

“No,” Mackenzie said. “It was new. Which makes me think it has some meaning to it. Like the killer might even be trying to communicate something to us. Or just going further off the rails.”

McGrath pushed himself away from the table and looked to the ceiling, as if searching for answers up there. “I’m not blind to all of this,” he said. “I know there are zero clues and no real avenues to pursue. But if I don’t have *something* resembling a lead by the time this shit is splashed all over national news programs

within a few hours, things are going to get bad around here. Kirsch says he's already gotten a call from a congresswoman who attends Living Word asking why we weren't able to crack this one as soon as Costas was killed. So I need the three of you to get me something. If I have nothing new to go on by this afternoon, I have to open it open wider...more resources, more manpower, And I really don't want to do that."

"I can check in with Forensics," Yardley offered.

"Work alongside them for all I care," McGrath said. "I'll make a call and okay it. I want you there the moment they discover anything from those bodies."

"It might be a needle-in-a-haystack scenario," Harrison said, "but I can start looking at local hardware stores to get records and receipts about anyone who has purchased the nails this guy is using in the last few months. From what I understand, they aren't particularly common."

McGrath nodded. It was an idea, sure, but the look on his face made it clear how much time that would take.

"And you, White?" he asked.

"I'll go the families and co-workers," she said. "In a church the size of Living Word, there's got to be *someone* with some insight as to why this happened to Woodall."

McGrath clapped his hands together loudly and sat forward. "Sounds good," he said. "So get to it. And check in with me every hour on the hour. Got it?"

Yardley and Harrison nodded. Harrison closed his laptop as he

stood up from the table. As they made their exit, Mackenzie hung back. When Yardley had closed the door behind them, leaving only Mackenzie and McGrath in the room, she turned back to him.

“Ah hell, what is it?” McGrath asked.

“I’m curious,” she said. “Agent Ellington would have been a valuable asset for this case. Where did you send him off to?”

McGrath shifted uncomfortably in his seat and briefly looked out the window of his office, to the early morning darkness outside.

“Well, before I tasked him with this other assignment, I obviously had no idea this case was going to be this bad. As for where he is currently working, with all due respect, that’s none of your business.”

“With the same respect,” she replied, doing her best not to sound too defensive, “you took away a partner I work well with, which leaves me on my own to work this case out.”

“You are not on your own,” McGrath said. “Harrison and Yardley are more than efficient. Now... please, Agent White. Get to work.”

She wanted to press the issue further but didn’t see the point. The last thing she needed was for McGrath to be pissed at her. The pressure was already on and it was *far* too early in the day to be dealing with a disgruntled boss.

She gave a curt little nod and took her leave. Still, as she walked toward the elevators, she pulled out her phone. It was too

early to call Ellington so she opted for a text.

Just checking in, she typed. **Call or text when you can.**

She sent the text as she stepped into the elevator. She rode down to the garage where her car was waiting. Outside, the morning was still dark – the kind of thick darkness that seemed capable of hiding any secrets it wanted.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After grabbing a cup of coffee, Mackenzie headed back out to Living Word. She knew that it was a large church, so singling out anyone with possible information from within its staff or congregation would take forever. She figured that if the news had gotten out and phone calls had started to make the rounds, there was a very good chance that those close to Pastor Woodall would be at the church – perhaps already setting up little memorials or just coming to the church to be closer to God as they grieved.

Her intuition paid off yet again. When she arrived at the scene, Woodall had been removed from the doors. And while there were still several local police and members of the bureau present, there were also other people scattered here and there, held back by yellow crime scene tape that bordered the edge of the concrete walkway that led to the front doors.

A few of them were openly crying. Several were wrapped in the embraces of other onlookers. She took note of one man standing by himself, his head turned away from the scene. His head was lowered and his mouth was moving just slightly as he offered up prayers. Mackenzie respectfully gave him some time to finish his prayer before she approached him. As she neared him, she saw what looked to be an expression of anger on his face.

Excuse me, sir,” she said. “Do you have a moment?” She

finished her question by showing her ID and introducing herself.

“Yes,” the man said. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes, as if trying to swipe away the last remnants of sleep or a bad dream. He then offered his hand and said, “I’m Dave Wylerman, by the way. I’m head of the music department here at Living Word.”

“There’s a music department?”

“Yeah. We have a rotating ensemble of about fourteen musicians that make up three worship bands.”

“So you’ve worked closely with Pastor Woodall in the past?”

“Oh, absolutely. I’m in meetings with him at least twice a week. Outside of that, he’s become a dear family friend to my wife, my kids, and I over the past decade or so.”

“Can you think of anyone who might have been capable of doing this? Anyone who might have some sort of a grudge or grievance against Pastor Woodall?”

“Well, it’s a big church. I don’t think there’s a single person that works here that knows *everyone* that attends. But as for me, no, I can’t think of anyone right off the top of my head who was angry enough with him to do *this*...”

The early morning darkness had hidden Dave Wylerman’s tears to this point, but when he looked up into her eyes they were quite clear. He looked troubled, as if he were struggling to figure out how to say something.

“Do you have a moment to talk in private?” Mackenzie asked.

“Yeah.”

She waved him forward to follow her. She stepped away from

the concrete entryway to the church and headed back to her car. She opened the passenger's side door for him, figuring it might do him some good to get off his feet and feel relaxed. She got in the driver's side and when she closed her door, she could tell that Wylerman was struggling to keep himself together.

"Has the rest of the church body been informed?" Mackenzie asked.

"No, just the elders, myself, and a few of those close to Pastor Woodall. But calls are being made. Everyone will know within an hour or so, I'd imagine."

Good, Mackenzie thought. They'll personally receive the news from someone they know rather than hearing about it for the first time on the news.

"So, correct me if I'm wrong," she said, "but it looked like you were struggling with something back there by the church. Is there something you can tell me that you didn't want to share in front of everyone else?"

"Well, as you know, it's a big church. On any given Sunday, if you count both services we hold, there's anywhere between five thousand and seven thousand people that attend. And with such a large group, we require several elders to handle the business and concerns of the church. Here at Living Word, we have six – well, we *had* six. One of them had started to sort of raise some concerns among the others before he left. I don't think he would have it in him to do something like this but...I don't know. Some things he had been insinuating...it sort of caught everyone else

off guard. Other elders...employees..."

"What's his name?"

"Eric Crouse."

"And what sort of things?" Mackenzie asked.

"He kept spouting off about how things left in the dark will come to the light and how that light could be blinding. That maybe being burned by the light is exactly what Living Word needed."

"And how long had he been behaving this way?"

"About a month or so, I'd say. From what I understand, he left of his own accord about two weeks ago but there was talk before that among the other elders and Pastor Woodall about releasing him. But the thing of it is that everything Eric was saying was scripturally accurate. Things Jesus said, things that most people that attend Living Word believe. But...and I know this is going to sound dumb...it was the *way* he said the things. You know? Like, he had some hidden context to them. More than that, he never spoke like that before. He was an elder, sure, but never one to just spout off scripture or starting giving these hellfire-and-brimstone-type talks."

"So if you don't think he was capable of murder, why are you mentioning him? Was it just the sudden personality change that alarmed everyone?"

Wylerman shrugged. "No. Some people started to notice that Eric was doing everything he could to avoid meetings or small groups where Pastor Woodall would be in attendance. They've

never been best friends, but always got along. Then all of a sudden, when he started talking about all of this light shining in the darkness stuff, he also seemed to distance himself from Pastor Woodall.”

“And you say he left the church two weeks ago?”

“Yeah, give or take a few days. I don’t know if he’s attending somewhere else now or what. And what’s strange is that it’s almost as if Eric knew Pastor Woodall’s schedule. He had just gotten back from a retreat a few days ago.”

“A retreat?”

“Yeah, it’s this little getaway he takes twice a year. It’s a really quiet little island off the coast of Florida.”

“And how long had he been back?” Mackenzie asked.

“He and his wife got back home five days ago.”

Mackenzie thought about this for a moment, cataloguing it in her mind. She then turned matters back to the man Wylerman had mentioned – the former elder, Eric Crouse.

“Would you happen to know where Crouse lives?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’ve been in his house a few times for small groups and prayer.”

Mackenzie wasn’t sure why, but something about this crept her out. The timing of Eric Crouse leaving Living Word was nearly perfect for the type of suspect she was looking for. To imagine this grieving man clasping praying hands together with a man who might have been responsible for three deaths over the last few days was unsettling.

“Can you tell me where?”

“I will,” Wylerman said, “but I’d really rather you not tell him that you got the information from me...or anyone else at Living Word, for that matter.”

“Of course not,” she said.

A bit reluctantly, Wylerman gave her directions to Eric Crouse’s house. Mackenzie typed them in on her phone, noticing that while Wylerman might have been interacting with her, his mind was very much still with his grieving friends out by the church. He was looking in that direction now, wiping tears from his eyes as he looked at them through the passenger window.

“Thanks for your time, Mr. Wylerman,” Mackenzie said.

Wylerman nodded without saying anything else. He then got out of the car. He hung his head low before he even reached the small crowd of people. She could see him trembling. She had never understood how people could have deep faith in an invisible God, but she did respect the sense of community that was evident among those who shared a common belief. She felt very bad for Dave Wylerman in that moment, as well as those who attended Living Word and the void they would feel on Sunday morning.

With that sense of sympathy pushing her, Mackenzie pulled out of the Living Word lot and headed west, to what looked to be the first solid lead this case had churned up.

CHAPTER NINE

It was 6:40 when she arrived in front of Eric Crouse's home. It was located in a well-to-do neighborhood where the houses were more important than yards, each house pressed in tightly against the other. The garage was closed, making it impossible to know if anyone was home – though given the early hour, she assumed there would be someone there to answer the door.

As she made her way to his door, Mackenzie wished she'd picked up another coffee from somewhere. It was hard to believe that it was not yet seven o'clock. She did her best to shake the vestiges of sleep from her face as she rang the doorbell of the Crouse residence. Right away she could hear footfalls behind the door. Seconds later, the door opened just a crack and a woman peered out.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked, clearly suspicious.

"Yes," Mackenzie said. "And I do apologize for the early hour, but this is pressing. I'm Agent Mackenzie White with the FBI. I'm looking for Eric Crouse."

The woman slowly opened the door. "That's my husband. He's...well, he's received some terrible news this morning. I assume that's why you're here? About the murder this morning?"

"It is," she said. "So if I could speak with him..."

"Of course," the woman said. "Come in, come in."

Mackenzie was ushered inside to the smell of cooking bacon

and freshly brewed coffee. The Crouse home was beautiful not overly so. There were high ceilings, crown molding, hardwood floors, and granite counters and a bar space in the kitchen. In the kitchen, the woman led her to a large dining room table; this was the type of kitchen that served as a dining room as well. A man and a boy of about ten sat at the table. The boy was eating a bowl of cereal while the man sipped at a cup of coffee and read something from a laptop.

“This lady is here from the FBI,” Crouse’s wife said.

Crouse looked up, blinking in a *what’s going on* kind of way. He then got up and walked to Mackenzie. He smiled tiredly at her and she could see from his face that he, just like Dave Wylerman, had been doing his fair share of crying this morning.

Crouse extended his hand for a shake and Mackenzie obliged. She watched his face the entire time, looking for some flaw in what was either a great disguise of emotion or a front to fool her. She could not see either and, therefore, could not decide if he was hiding any guilt.

“I assume this is about Pastor Woodall?” Eric asked.

“Yes,” Mackenzie said. “Is there somewhere we could talk?”

“Um, yeah,” Eric said. He looked at his son and patted him on the shoulder. “Can you and Mommy run to the bathroom and finish getting ready for school? Get those teeth good, okay?”

The boy looked at his cereal, clearly not finished, but obeyed his father. So did the wife, as she escorted their son out of the kitchen and toward a hallway that sat off to the right. When they

were out of sight, Eric looked at the coffee pot on the counter and asked: “Coffee?”

“Yes, please. That would be fantastic, actually.”

Eric walked into the kitchen and Mackenzie followed. Eric grabbed a cup from a cupboard and filled it with coffee from the pot on the counter. “Cream? Sugar?”

“Black is fine,” she said. She was pretty sure he was stalling, but at the same time, also trying his best to seem pleasant and hospitable.

When he handed her the coffee, she gave her thanks and sipped. It was good and strong – just what she needed.

“So, how did you find out about Pastor Woodall?” she asked.

“I got a call from one of the elders. I suppose if you’re here to speak with me, you already know that I was an elder there until very recently.”

“Yes. I was aware. And I understand there was a bit of hostility and disagreement just before you left.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Would you care to elaborate on what you meant by the comments you made about the dark and the light? About Living Word being burned by the light?”

Eric hesitated, taking a drink from his coffee. “You see, the difficult thing here is that had you asked me that very same question yesterday, I would have gladly answered you. But things are different now.”

“Well, Mr. Crouse, I had no reason to ask you that yesterday.

But right now, I have a dead pastor that you were disagreeing with rather harshly... a pastor you worked closely with for several years and suddenly started to apparently not care for very much.”

“That’s fair,” he said. He leaned to the right a bit, peering down the hallway as if to make sure his wife and son were still out of earshot. When he was confident that they were still gone, he stepped closer to Mackenzie. “Look... I discovered something about Pastor Woodall three months ago. At first, I refused to believe it but then I saw proof. And I couldn’t deny it anymore. I... well, I guess I didn’t know quite how to handle it.”

“And what did you discover?”

“Agent White... he’s dead. *Recently* dead. What kind of man would I be to speak ill of him? The last thing I want is to smear his name after he’s dead.”

“I’ll keep it discreet then,” she said. “No one other than my supervisor and two or three additional agents will know.”

“I have your word on that?”

“Yes,” she said. “Although, from what I understand, you wouldn’t have cared much about dragging his name through the mud a few weeks ago.”

Eric actually sneered at this. “You expect this shit from small-town churches... rumors and gossip. Yes... I probably did not do the best job at staying quiet. I said some not-so-subtle things that might have raised eyebrows. But believe me... with what I know, I could have gone public. I could have smeared his name right away. But I didn’t.”

“And why not?”

“Because it’s not my job to judge. He’s dead now and God will judge him.”

“Judge him for what?” Mackenzie asked. “What’s the big secret?”

His eyes were welling with tears as he spoke and it was that one simple indicator that told Mackenzie that Eric Crouse was not only not the killer, but that despite his recent behavior, he *had* once cared for Pastor Woodall.

“I had a young man come to me in confidence about three months ago. From time to time, I’d help with the teen classes at Living Word. This was a kid I’d talked to off and on when he was younger...sort of helped him with his spiritual journey, answered the tough God questions, things like that. So he comes to me and it’s been...I don’t know...maybe a year since I’ve had a real conversation with him. He asks if we can talk in private, so I took him to my office. He tells me that for the last year or so, he’s been having a homosexual relationship. So I’m prepared to talk it out with him, to see where he’s at mentally and everything. But then he finishes the comment...the relationship was with Pastor Woodall.”

“And you believed him, just like that?” Mackenzie asked.

“Hell no. It actually made me mad that the guy would even insinuate such a thing. But then he showed me his cell phone. There were texts and pictures. And I hated him for showing it to me. I hated *him*

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