

Chapter One

Saturday, June 17

12:03 p.m.

“Someone just reported a body being found out at the Kootenai Lakes campground.”

Startled, Maggie Gaines jumped to her feet and snatched the radio from the desk. She knew that voice. David Downey was one of their new seasonal rangers who had been brought on for the summer, and she’d last seen him this morning when he left the Goat Haunt ranger station with a group of tourists. The kid was young, but in the couple of weeks she’d worked with him, he’d remained calm and unruffled even when dealing with the most difficult of tourists.

To have him sounding this panicked made her skin crawl.

She held the radio up, trying to think—to keep the past from creeping in. *A body*. “Are we going to need a team to retrieve it?”

This wouldn’t be the first time a body had been found in Glacier National Park, and it wouldn’t be the last, but they still maintained one of the lowest death counts of the national parks. Maggie wasn’t too keen on seeing that change.

She also wasn’t thrilled by the fact that *she* was going to have to deal with this one.

“Maggie, it’s not a fall.”

Right. She should have realized that. Kootenai Lakes didn’t offer a lot of places to fall from, even if that was the leading cause of death in this park—historically, at least.

“They said they found her *strung up*.”

Her stomach dropped. Maggie braced her hands on the desk as the world took a slow turn around her. *Protocol. Stick with protocol.* She took a deep breath that did nothing to calm her racing thoughts. “You haven’t seen the body?”

“No. The couple who found her are freaking out, and freaking the rest of the group out. The husband is having chest pains, so I’m sticking here to monitor the situation.”

“Good.” At least David was keeping his head. But then, he’d worked in the Grand Canyon last season, so he’d likely seen worse than a potential heart attack. “I’m coming.”

A previously healthy heart didn’t mean a damn thing when it came to hiking, especially with the elevation changes that came from hiking south out of Goat Haunt. The 220-foot vertical gain wasn’t as severe as many of the other hikes in the park, but it was a lot for someone not used to it.

She looked up to find Ava Boyle already handing her one of the packs they kept stocked. “You sure you don’t want me to call in someone else?” Ava had grown up just outside the park on the Blackfeet Reservation. A few inches taller than Maggie, she kept her long black hair back in a serviceable braid, as usual. She’d been hired the year before Maggie, and as two of the only women park rangers, they’d ended up rooming together. It was hard to live day in and day out with someone without ending up fast friends or bitter enemies.

Luckily, they fell into the former category.

“No, I’ll do it. I’ve been cooped up here for days.” She tried really hard to sound in control, but her voice wavered.

“Maggie, with your history—”

“I’m fine.” She managed to fake a smile, even though she suspected Ava saw right through it. “You know as well as I do that my history has nothing to do with this body. I’ve been a ranger longer than I was with the Feds, so I’d like to think I’m more than capable of hiking out there and figuring out what’s going on.” She thought she did a good job of sounding reasonable. Better than good.

Ava gave her a long look. She didn’t have to say anything—it was all there in her ink-dark eyes for Maggie to see. *You don’t sound okay.* But she just nodded. “Then let’s go. The sooner we get up there, the sooner we get this over with.”

They grabbed the equipment necessary to retrieve a body—something Maggie had been naive enough to hope she’d never have to do in this job capacity—and headed for Kootenai Lakes campground. It was just under three miles, and Maggie almost welcomed the struggle of having to keep up with Ava’s longer legs and legendary stamina. As rangers, they had to be in pretty good shape, and as women, they had to work twice as hard as the men to prove to themselves and their coworkers that they weren’t getting special treatment. But Ava was in another realm entirely.

Even the faint, burning protest of her legs and the harsh inhales of cool air into her lungs did nothing to distract her from David’s words. *Strung up.*

There were a lot of ways a person could die in Glacier, at least in theory. Fall, grizzly attack, exposure. *Strung up* did not fit in with any of those possibilities.

Strung up sounded a whole lot like murder.

Stop it.

She hitched her pack higher onto her back. There was another option besides murder, and it was far more likely. Suicide. Kootenai Lakes got a lot of tourist traffic, even this early in the

season, and there were quite a few studies out about how national parks had more than their fair share of suicides. But, again, Glacier's number was minuscule compared to the others. They didn't even hit the top five in deaths and rescue-mission numbers on an annual basis.

That doesn't mean anything, and you know it.

All the numbers in the world didn't change the fact that they were hiking up to retrieve a body. Projecting all sorts of wild theories was something she knew better than to indulge in.

She would have remembered issuing a permit to a lone hiker. It was possible that whoever the woman was had hiked up from the Many Glacier ranger station. Or even from a different entry point. People did all sorts of crazy stuff when it came to parks, though it seemed weird that a suicide would travel that far and then hang herself.

Stop guessing. You won't know until you see the body.

They made good time, reaching the campground far faster than she was prepared for. Ava made a beeline for David's distinctive park-ranger uniform. They were ungodly ugly—green pants and a khaki shirt—but it made them easy to pick out of a crowd.

The relief on his face relit the flicker of unease that she'd been doing a damn good job of ignoring on the trip up there. David straightened. "I'm glad you guys are here."

Ava didn't smile, but she managed to radiate calm all the same as she sank onto her heels next to the man sitting on the ground. "I'm Ranger Ava Boyle. Can you tell me how you're feeling, sir?" Ava shot her a look, and they'd worked together long enough that Maggie understood the silent command.

Figure out what the hell is going on while I deal with the tourists.

Maggie drew David aside, watching the people milling about as she did. The group had ten adults and a kid, and they were gathered in small groups, talking in hushed voices. She spoke low so her voice wouldn't carry. "How many people saw the body?"

"Just the couple Ava is talking to."

"Do you have a good bead on the location?" She really, really didn't want to be the one to cut down the body, but Ava's skills lay in dealing with scared people.

Maggie didn't do people. Not well. She could fake it for the tours that her job required because she loved the park, but her patience was always too limited, her temper too close to the surface. It had been a relief for everyone when she started being scheduled for more backcountry work.

"Yeah. It's the southernmost lake on the northwest edge."

It wouldn't take them long to get there and assess the situation. She took a fortifying breath. They were wasting daylight, and she didn't relish the thought of hauling a body back to the ranger station in the dark. "Let's get to it, then."

She could do this. It wasn't a usual part of her job, but it *was* part of her job. Park rangers were a strange kind of catchall. If it happened in the park, it was their jurisdiction. Because of the nature of Glacier, they didn't see as much of the drug trafficking or other crazy stuff that some of the parks did, but weird shit still went on in these woods.

The hair along the nape of her neck rose as they skirted first one lake and then the other. She kept an eye out for moose, because while they might look like big cows with awesome antlers, they had nasty tempers and were too fast to evade if they got it into their heads that they wanted to trample a person. Behind her, David huffed and puffed a little. Maggie shot a glance over her shoulder. "Problems keeping up?"

“Nope.” He set his jaw and picked up his pace until he was nearly on her heels. She liked the man’s stubbornness, but he had to learn to ask for help if he needed it.

Not something she needed to worry about now.

“What do you know about the body? You said it was strung up.” The more information she had going into this, the better it would be. Maggie hadn’t been in the BAU—Behavioral Analysis Unit—for going on seven years, but apparently some habits died hard. It didn’t make a bit of sense. She’d been a Fed for less than a year. She’d been a park ranger for almost six.

But she still found herself falling back into the old mind-set.

David dodged a rock and hurried up until he was even with her. “They weren’t super clear. They said they thought it was a woman, but there was a lot of blood, and she was hanging from a tree.”

Maggie’s mind worked on the possibilities the same way she worked on her puzzles during her downtime. Hanging from a tree likely meant suicide. Blood, though? “Could be one of the cougars got to her.” The big cats sometimes hauled their kills into trees, so it wouldn’t necessarily be deterred by a hanging body if the woman had been there long enough.

“It’d have to be that. Bears aren’t going to manage it—or even want to bother.”

No, they wouldn’t. They moved through the trees on a little path that was barely a path. Most people were content to stick around the campsite at Kootenai Lakes, but there would always be those who wanted a little more privacy, and there were enough hikers these days to beat down a regular path. Her feet tried to slow, but she forced herself to keep her pace quick. *Losing daylight, Gaines.*

“Could be a gunshot.”

She frowned. “You think someone went to the trouble to shoot themselves before they hung themselves?”

“Stranger things, right?”

It was something of a motto when it came to Maggie. A person saw enough weird shit and they stopped doubting that people would find a variety of ways to get themselves into trouble, despite all warnings to the contrary. It was like some tourists left their common sense at home when they went on vacation. “Yeah.”

She pushed through the break in the trees that led to the last lake. Maggie stopped short, wrinkling her nose as a breeze kicked a very distinct stench into her face. It smelled like a slaughterhouse.

That should have warned her.

She caught sight of a dark red against the greens and browns she was expecting to see. *What the—?* She moved forward, frowning. It didn’t make sense . . . until it did. “Shit.”

David gagged, but she didn’t spare him a glance. “Hold it together, kid.”

“I’m twenty-fucking-five, Maggie. You’re not that much older than me.”

Thank God poking his pride worked. I can’t have him losing it right now. “You’re younger and less experienced. That makes you a kid, where I’m concerned.” She kept her tone bland even though her heartbeat sounded like a herd of stampeding horses in her head. *This is so, so bad.*

Forcing herself to walk closer, she stopped just outside the circle of carnage. Thanks to her grandfather, Maggie had hunted on and off since she was a kid. It was one of the many ways her parents felt that she’d failed them—hunting wasn’t highbrow enough for their tastes. As a result, she knew what field dressing looked like, though her experience started and ended with animals.

Not humans.

This was no suicide, unless the woman had somehow managed to hang herself from her ankles and then split herself open from groin to chest. Maggie took a careful breath, but there was no decay, just shit and blood. She couldn't know without getting closer, but this kill looked recent—within the last day or two.

Probably more recent, since the innards hadn't been scavenged by animals. “Fuck,” she breathed.

“I think I'm—”

“You puke, you do it somewhere else. You hear me, David?” She rubbed a hand over her face, feeling a full decade older than her twenty-nine years. “*Fuck*. We need to call in . . .” Her mind blanked. National parks were on federal land, which meant the state cops might get some say, but this wasn't a drunk and disorderly or any of the normal reasons she'd stick someone in a cell to cool their heels.

This was murder.

Saturday, June 17
9:30 p.m.

Vic Sutherland stared out the windshield as he drove into Kalispell. The sky wasn't completely dark despite the hour, and he barely noticed the majesty of the mountains and the sprawling green forests that surrounded the city. If it could be called a city. With a population resting just over twenty-two thousand, it was really more of a big small town. That didn't change the fact that it was one of the largest settlements on the west side of Montana.

None of which really mattered.

What mattered was the body waiting in the morgue, found by park rangers. He should be focusing on the victim, contemplating what he knew about the crime scene and what little evidence had been found. That was the way he liked to operate—familiarizing himself with the case before he ever set foot in the place he was headed.

The case was different, though.

Not because of the location of the body found. Not because of the method of murder—a murder that matched two others he'd been investigating. The unfortunate truth was that he'd seen worse than what was done to those victims—at least as far as the preliminary report went.

No, the main reason the case was different was because he knew one of the park rangers who had found and transported the body back to civilization.

Maggie Gaines.

He hadn't seen her in something like seven years—not since their first and last case as partners. There had been a whole hell of a lot of changes in his life since then. Promotions, a new partner, divorce, a few notorious cases—though he did his damndest to stay out of the spotlight—and another new partner. When Maggie had left, he'd respected her need to put as much distance between herself and the FBI as possible, and he'd even managed not to take it personally most days.

He hadn't expected to ever see her again.

He pulled into the parking lot and stopped in a spot next to the only other car there—a serviceable truck that looked like it never got stuck, no matter how vicious the winters became. Everything about this damn state was harsh. He liked it well enough in the fall and now in the spring, but a winter holed up here sounded like the worst kind of hell.

He'd never seen the appeal of the national parks. Oh, they were beautiful, but he'd spent enough of his time in the Navy living out of a pack that he had no desire to do it recreationally. Sleeping on the ground and potentially no longer being at the top of the food chain made his skin crawl.

And there was more than wildlife to worry about out here.

He climbed out of his rented 4Runner—the only rental-car choice that would fit his six-foot-four-inch frame comfortably—and headed for the building. Despite the fact that it was well into June now, the wind snapping at his face held a hint of winter's cold. The park kept quite a few glaciers year-round, though the exact number escaped him, which meant that even in the height of summer, there was snow and freezing water to deal with even on the well-traveled trails. The victim had been found close to one of the main campgrounds, but that didn't mean that was where she had initially been attacked.

Part of him tried to wonder how Maggie was dealing with it, but he shut it down. He was here to work, and letting himself get distracted—even by Maggie—was inexcusable.

The dead woman needed justice. She had to come first.

After? Well, he had no reason to think Maggie would be happy to see him, and every reason to assume she'd be ready to slam the nearest door in his face once this case reached a satisfactory resolution.

You're doing it again. Stop. Focus.

The morgue was like many others he'd visited over the years—never enough windows, everything made of easy-to-hose-down materials, and a lingering scent of decay. Mixed with the sterile smell of bleach, it created an aroma he would never mistake for anything else.

He knocked on the door as he pushed it open, startling the woman standing over the body. She jumped, cursed, and then cursed again. Vic stopped, not wanting to spook her further. He was used to it, to some extent—he was tall enough that he loomed when he wasn't paying attention. He tried to pay attention—especially around women. “Sorry. I'm Agent Sutherland. We spoke briefly on the phone earlier.”

“I was expecting you.” She managed a smile and took off her glasses to clean them. Dr. Katherine Huxley was a nice-looking woman somewhere in her midthirties, her dark hair pulled back from her face and her smile easy despite the unease that lingered in her brown eyes. “It's fine. Working a case like this makes me a bit jumpy, is all.” She motioned to the body on the table in front of her.

He took that as an invitation and moved closer. He'd seen this before, twice now, in different parks. It didn't make it any easier to see the third time around. “She's been—”

“Field dressed. Yes.”

He'd grown up in Philly and had bolted to join the Navy the first chance he got. It had been his only ticket out of the city, and he'd signed up because of the lure of free college, not realizing what he was getting himself into until it was too late. Even with what he'd done and seen while in the service—and since—these recent killings set his teeth on edge. People were not animals, no matter how monstrous they acted from time to time. Most of the victims he'd seen over the years had been hunted, but that word meant something different than what had happened to this woman.

“Was that the cause of death?” He tried to imagine the fear she must have felt to be strung up by her ankles, and had to shut it down. *Just get the facts. Deal with the profile later.*

“No.” Dr. Huxley exhaled carefully like she wanted to curse again. She pointed to the chest, just above the heart. “See this?”

He recognized the wound only because he'd seen it before. "Arrow."

"How did you know? Never mind, forget I asked." Dr. Huxley ran her gloved finger along the edge of the wound. "Judging from the damage and the trajectory, I can give you my best guess that this wasn't a crossbow—it was a compound bow. The wound runs at a slight inversion, so whoever shot her was higher than she was."

"Taller or on high ground—or both." He straightened, his suspicions confirmed. This woman was just like the other two. The only difference was the location. The unknown subject—the unsub—was park hopping. If his past was anything to go by, he wouldn't hit Glacier again, but Vic still had to collect every bit of evidence he could while it was still relatively fresh.

That started with the body itself. "So she was shot with an arrow, strung up, and then field dressed." Like someone would do with wild game during hunting season.

"That about sums it up. I'm still working on getting through the autopsy, though. I'll forward you any further findings."

"Thank you. My partner will be checking in tomorrow." He checked his watch. It was too late to drive into Glacier, though his muscles had twisted enough that he knew sleep wasn't in his future. It would be better to stay overnight in Kalispell and then head in to the main station tomorrow. From what he understood, Maggie was north at the Goat Haunt ranger station, along with the other rangers who'd found the body. He had to talk to them, to figure out what they knew about the victim and if they could identify her.

Maggie was one of the rangers who'd hauled the body back to the ranger station. There would be no avoiding talking to her. In all honesty, it gave him the perfect excuse to see her again.

Even if it took a serial killer to make it happen.

The rate of escalation was happening too fast. Some unsubs took years between kills, and this marked three in less than nine months. The cooling-off period was shrinking rapidly as he worked himself into a frenzy. In the evolution of a killer, that meant a higher chance of being caught as he unraveled—but it also meant more victims in the process.

Vic headed for his rental, his skin crawling with the knowledge that this woman wouldn't be the unsub's last victim. And the next victim would be coming sooner rather than later.