

BLAKE PIERCE



w a i t i n g

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE--BOOK TWO

The Making of Riley Paige

Блейк Пирс

Waiting

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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Пирс Б.

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“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery! The author did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side that is so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. The plot is very intelligent and will keep you entertained throughout the book. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone) WAITING (The Making of Riley Paige—Book Two) is book #2 in a new psychological thriller series by #1 bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose free bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. Brilliant 22 year old FBI intern Riley Paige struggles to decode the riddles of the sadistic serial killer dubbed by media as the “clown killer”—but finds it all becomes too personal when she herself, targeted, is in a battle for her life. Recent college graduate Riley Paige is accepted into the prestigious FBI summer internship program, and is determined to make a name for herself. Exposed to many departments of the FBI, she thinks it will be a quiet summer—until a serial killer holds Washington by suspense. Dubbed the “clown killer,” he dresses and paints his victims as clowns, and mocks the FBI with tantalizing riddles in the media. He leaves everyone to wonder: is he a clown himself? It seems that only Riley has the mind brilliant enough to decode the answers. And yet the journey into this killer’s mind is too dark—and the battle too personal—for Riley to come out unscathed. Can she win this deadly game of cat and mouse? An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, WAITING is book #2 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. It takes readers back 20 plus years—to how Riley’s career began—and is the perfect complement to the ONCE GONE series (A Riley Paige Mystery), which includes 13 books and counting. Book #3 in THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

Waiting (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 2)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes thirteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising two 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.

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PROLOGUE

At first, Janet Davis was aware of nothing except the terrible pain that rattled through her skull like a thousand castanets playing out of time.

Her eyes were closed. When she tried to open them, she was blinded by glaring white light, and she had to shut them again.

The light felt hot on her face.

Where am I? she wondered.

Where was I before ... before this happened?

Then it began to come back to her ...

She'd been out taking pictures in the marshes near Lady Bird Johnson Park. It was too late in the summer for the millions of daffodils there to be blooming, but the dogwood leaves were a beautiful deep green, especially around sunset.

She'd been standing in the marina photographing the shadowy boats and the beautiful play of the sunset on the water when she'd heard footsteps swiftly approaching her from behind. Before she could even turn to look, she'd felt a sharp crack on the back of her head, and the camera had flown out of her hands, and ...

I lost consciousness, I guess.

But where was she now?

She was too dazed to feel really afraid yet. But she knew that fear would kick in soon.

Slowly she became aware that she was lying flat on her back on some hard surface.

She couldn't move her arms or legs. Her hands and feet felt numb from tight restraints around her wrists and ankles.

But the weirdest sensation was of fingers all over her face, smearing something soft and moist on her hot skin.

She managed to croak out a few words.

"Where am I? What are you doing?"

When no reply came, she twisted her head, trying to escape the annoying movement of the gooey fingertips.

She heard a male voice whisper ...

"Hold still."

She had no intention of holding still. She kept twisting until the fingers moved away.

She heard a noisy, disapproving sigh. Then the light shifted so it wasn't shining directly on her face anymore.

"Open your eyes," the voice said.

She did so.

Gleaming in front of her was the sharp blade of a butcher knife. The tip of the knife came nearer and nearer to her face, making her eyes cross so that she saw the blade double.

Janet gasped, and the voice whispered again ...

"Hold still."

She froze, facing directly upward, but a spasm of terror surged through her body.

The voice hissed a command again.

"Still, I said."

She willed her body to be still. Her eyes were open, but the light was painfully bright and hot, and she couldn't see anything clearly.

The knife went away, and the fingers resumed smearing, this time around her lips. She gritted her teeth, and she could actually hear them grinding together with terrible pressure.

"Almost through," the voice said.

Despite the heat, Janet was starting to shiver all over from fear.

The fingers began pressing around her eyes now, and she had to shut them again to keep whatever the man was smearing from getting into them.

Then the fingers moved away from her face, and she could open her eyes again. Now she could make out the silhouette of a grotesquely shaped head moving around in the blazing light.

She felt a terrified sob burst out of her throat.

“Let me go,” she said. “Please let me go.”

The man said nothing. She felt him fumbling around her left arm right now, strapping something elastic around her bicep, then tightening it painfully.

Janet’s panic rose, and she tried not to imagine what was about to happen.

“No,” she said. “Don’t.”

She felt a finger probing around the crook of her arm, then the piercing pain of a needle entering an artery.

Janet let out a shriek of horror and despair.

Then, as she felt the needle leave, a strange transformation came over her.

Her scream suddenly turned into ...

Laughter!

She was laughing riotously, uncontrollably, filled with a crazed euphoria she’d never experienced before.

She felt positively invincible now, and infinitely strong and powerful.

But when she tried again to free herself from the bonds around her wrists and ankles, they wouldn’t budge.

Her laughter turned into a surge of wild fury.

“Let me go,” she hissed. “Let me go, or I swear to God, I’ll kill you!”

The man let out a whispering chuckle.

Then he tilted the metal shade of the lamp so that its light blazed on his face.

It was the face of a clown, painted white with huge, bizarre eyes and lips drawn with black and red.

Janet’s breath froze in her lungs.

The man smiled, his teeth a dull yellow in contrast to the rest of his brightly colored face.

He said to her ...

“They’re going to leave you behind.”

Janet wanted to ask ...

Who?

Who are you talking about?

And who are you?

Why are you doing this to me?

But she couldn’t even breathe now.

The knife flashed in front of her face again. Then the man teased its sharp tip lightly across her cheek, down the side of her face, and then across her throat. Just the slightest bit of pressure, and Janet knew that the knife would draw blood.

Her breath started to come again, first in shallow gasps, then in huge gulps of air.

She knew she was starting to hyperventilate, but she couldn’t bring her breathing under control. She could feel her heart pounding inside her chest, could feel and hear its violent pulse between her ears growing faster and louder.

She wondered ...

What was in that needle?

Whatever it was, its effects were coming on stronger by the second. She couldn’t escape what was going on in her own body.

As he kept stroking her face with the knife tip, he murmured ...

“They’re going to leave you behind.”

She managed to gasp out ...

“Who? Who’s going to leave me behind?”

“You know who,” he said.

Janet realized she was losing control of her thoughts. She was flooded with mindless anxiety and panic, mad feelings of persecution and victimhood.

Who does he mean?

Images of friends and family members and coworkers passed through her head.

But their familiar, friendly smiles turned to sneers of contempt and hatred.

Everybody, she thought.

Everybody is doing this to me.

Every person I’ve ever known.

Again, she felt a burst of anger.

I should have known better than to ever trust a single soul.

Worse, she felt as if her skin was literally starting to move.

No, something was crawling *all over* her skin.

Insects! she thought.

Thousands of them!

She struggled against her restraints.

“Swat them off me!” she begged the man. “Kill them!”

The man chuckled as he kept staring down at her through his grotesque makeup.

He made no offer to help.

He knows something, Janet thought.

He knows something I don’t know.

Then as the crawling continued, it dawned on her ...

The insects ...

They’re not crawling on my skin.

They’re crawling under it!

Her breathing came harder and faster, and her lungs burned as if she’d been running for a long distance. Her heart pounded even more painfully.

Her head was exploding with a host of violent emotions—fury, fear, disgust, panic, and sheer bafflement.

Had the man injected thousands, perhaps millions, of insects into her bloodstream?

How was that even possible?

In a voice that shook with both anger and self-pity, she asked ...

“Why do you hate me?”

The man chuckled louder this time.

He said, “*Everybody* hates you.”

Janet was having trouble seeing now. Her vision wasn’t getting blurry. Instead, the scene in front of her seemed to be twitching and bouncing and jumping. She imagined she could *hear* her eyeballs rattling around in their sockets.

So when she saw another clown’s face, she thought she was seeing double.

But she quickly realized ...

This face is different.

It was painted with the same colors, but with somewhat different shapes.

It isn’t him.

Under the paint lay familiar features.

Then it dawned her ...

Me. That's me.

The man was holding a mirror up to her face. The hideously garish face she saw was her own. The sight of that twisted, tearful, yet mocking countenance filled her with a loathing she'd never known before.

He's right, she thought.

Everybody hates me.

And I'm my own worst enemy.

As if sharing her disgust, the creatures under her skin scurried all about like cockroaches suddenly exposed to sunlight but with nowhere to run and hide.

The man set the mirror aside and began to stroke her face with the knife point again.

He said yet again ...

“They're going to leave you behind.”

As the knife passed over her throat, it occurred to her ...

If he cuts me the insects can escape.

Of course the blade would also kill her. But that seemed a small price to pay to be free of the insects and this terror.

She hissed ...

“Do it. Do it now.”

Suddenly, the air was filled with ugly and distorted laughter, as if a thousand clowns were noisily gloating in her plight.

The laughter propelled her heart to pound still harder and faster. Janet knew her heart couldn't possibly take much more of this.

And she didn't want it to.

She wanted it to stop as soon as possible.

She found herself trying to count the beats ...

One, two ... three, four, five ... six ...

But the beats were coming both faster and less regularly.

She wondered—which was going to explode first, her heart or her brain?

Then finally she heard her very last heartbeat, and the world dissolved.

CHAPTER ONE

Riley laughed when Ryan snatched the box of books away from her.

She said, “Just let me carry something, OK?”

“It’s too heavy,” Ryan said, carrying the box over to the empty bookshelf. “You shouldn’t be lifting it.”

“Come on, Ryan. I’m pregnant, not sick.”

Ryan put the box down in front of the bookshelf and brushed off his hands.

“You can take out the books and put them on the shelf,” he said.

Riley laughed again.

She said, “You mean you’re giving me *permission* to help move into *our* apartment?”

Ryan looked embarrassed now.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said. “It’s just that—well, I worry.”

“And I keep telling you, there’s nothing to worry about,” Riley said. “I’m only six weeks along, and I feel great.”

She didn’t want to mention her occasional bout of morning sickness. So far it hadn’t been very severe.

Ryan shook his head. “Just try not to overdo it, OK?”

“I won’t,” Riley said. “I promise.”

Ryan nodded and went back over to the pile of boxes yet to be unpacked.

Riley pried open the cardboard box in front of her and started putting books on the shelves. She was actually happy to be sitting still and doing a simple job. She realized her mind needed the rest more than her body did.

The last few days had been a whirlwind.

In fact, so had the last couple of weeks.

Her graduation with a psychology degree from Lanton University had been a crazy, life-changing day. Right after the ceremony, an FBI agent had recruited her for the bureau’s ten-week Honors Internship Summer Program. Right after that, Ryan had asked her to move in with him when he started his new job.

The amazing thing was that both her internship program and Ryan’s new job were in Washington, DC. So she hadn’t had to make a choice.

At least he wasn’t freaked out when I told him I was already pregnant, she thought.

In fact, he’d seemed delighted at the time. He’d gotten a bit more nervous about the idea of a baby in the days since graduation—but then, Riley felt plenty nervous about it herself.

The very thought of it boggled her mind. They were just getting started in their lives together, and they’d soon be sharing the greatest responsibility Riley could imagine—raising their own child.

We’d better be ready, Riley thought.

Meanwhile, she felt strange putting her old psychology textbooks onto the shelves. Ryan had tried to talk her into selling them, and she knew that she probably should ...

God knows, we need every cent we can get.

Still, she had a feeling she’d be needing them in the future. She wasn’t sure just why or what for.

Anyway, the box also contained a lot of Ryan’s law books, and he hadn’t even considered selling any of them. Of course, he probably would be using them in his new job as an entry-level attorney in the DC law firm of Parsons and Rittenhouse.

When the box was empty and the books all on the shelves, Riley sat on the floor watching Ryan, who kept restlessly pushing and repositioning pieces of furniture as if trying to find the perfect place for everything.

Riley suppressed a sigh ...

Poor Ryan.

She knew he really wasn't happy with this basement apartment. He'd had a nicer apartment back in Lanton, with the same furniture they'd brought here—a pleasantly bohemian collection of secondhand items.

As far as she was concerned, Ryan's stuff still looked quite nice here. And the little apartment didn't bother her at all. She'd gotten used to a dorm room back at Lanton, so this place seemed positively luxurious, despite the covered pipes hanging over the bedroom and the kitchen.

True, the apartments on the floors upstairs were much nicer, but this one had been the only one available. When Ryan had first seen it, he'd almost refused to rent it. But the truth was, this was the best they could afford. They were already seriously overextended financially. Ryan had maxed out his credit card with moving expenses, the deposit on the apartment, and everything else they had needed for this momentous change in their lives.

Ryan finally looked over at Riley and said, "What do you say we take a break?"

"Sure," Riley said.

Riley got up from the floor and sat down at the kitchen table. Ryan grabbed a couple of soft drinks from the refrigerator and sat down with her. The two of them fell silent, and Riley sensed right away that Ryan had something on his mind.

Finally Ryan drummed his fingers on the table and said ...

"Uh, Riley, we've got to talk about something."

This really does sound serious, she thought.

Ryan fell silent again, and he had a faraway look in his eyes.

"You're not breaking up with me, are you?" she asked.

She was joking, of course.

But Ryan didn't laugh. He seemed to have barely noticed the question.

"Huh? No, it's nothing like that, it's ..."

His voice trailed away, and Riley felt really uneasy now.

What's going on? she wondered. Had Ryan's job fallen through or something?

Ryan looked into Riley's eyes and said ...

"Don't laugh at me, OK?"

"Why would I laugh?" Riley asked.

A bit shakily, Ryan got up from his chair and knelt beside her.

And then Riley realized ...

Oh, my God! He's going to propose!

And sure enough, she laughed. It was nervous laughter, of course.

Ryan blushed deeply.

"I told you not to laugh," he said.

"I'm not laughing *at* you," Riley said. "Go ahead, say what you want to say. I'm pretty sure ... well, just go ahead."

Ryan fumbled around in his pants pocket and took out a little black jewelry box. He opened it to reveal a modest but lovely diamond ring. Riley couldn't help but gasp.

Ryan stammered ...

"Uh, Riley Sweeney, would—will you marry me?"

Trying unsuccessfully to hold back her nervous giggles, Riley managed to say ...

"Oh, yes. Absolutely."

Ryan plucked the ring out of the box, and Riley held out her left hand and let him put it on her finger.

"It's beautiful," Riley said. "Now get up and sit down with me."

Ryan smiled sheepishly as he sat down at the table next to her.

"Was the kneeling too much?" he asked.

“The kneeling was perfect,” Riley said. “Everything is just ... perfect.”

She stared at the little diamond on her ring finger raptly for a moment. Her spell of nervous laughter had passed, and now she felt a knot of emotion form in her throat.

She really hadn’t seen this coming. She hadn’t even dared to hope for it—at least not this soon.

But here she and Ryan were, taking yet another enormous step in their lives.

As she watched the light play on the diamond, Ryan said ...

“I’ll get you a nicer ring someday.”

Riley gasped a little.

“Don’t you dare!” she said. “This is always going to be my only engagement ring!”

But as she kept staring at the ring, she couldn’t help but worry ...

How much did this cost?

As if reading her thoughts, Ryan said ...

“Don’t worry about the ring.”

Ryan’s reassuring smile made her worry dissolve in an instant. She knew he was no fool when it came to money. He’d probably gotten a good bargain on this ring—although she’d never ask him about it.

Riley then noticed how Ryan’s expression saddened as he looked around the apartment.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

Ryan let out a sigh and said, “I’ll make a better life for you. I promise.”

Riley felt strangely jolted.

She asked, “What’s wrong with the life we’ve got now? We’re young and we’re in love and we’re going to have a baby and—”

“You know what I mean,” Ryan said, interrupting her.

“No, I’m not sure I do,” Riley said.

A silence fell between them.

Ryan sighed again and said, “Look, I’m starting work tomorrow on an entry level salary. I’m not exactly feeling like a huge success in the world. But it’s a good firm, and if I stay with it, I’ll be moving up and I might even become a partner someday.”

Riley gazed at him steadily.

“Someday, sure,” she said. “But you’re off to a great start already. And I like what we’ve got right now.”

Ryan shrugged. “We don’t have much. For one thing, we’ve only got the one car, and I’ll be needing that to go to work, which means ...”

Riley interrupted, “Which means I’ll be taking the metro to the training program every morning. What’s wrong with that?”

Ryan reached across the table and took her hand.

“It’s a two-block walk to and from the nearest metro stop,” he said. “And this isn’t the safest neighborhood in the world. The car got broken into once already. I don’t like it that you have to go out there on your own. I’m worried.”

A strange, unpleasant feeling was starting to come over Riley. She wasn’t yet sure just what that feeling was.

She said, “Hasn’t it occurred to you that I actually like this neighborhood? I’ve spent my whole life in rural Virginia. This is an exciting change, an adventure. Besides, you know I’m tough. My dad was a Marine captain. He taught me how to take care of myself.”

She almost added ...

And I survived an attack by a serial killer a couple of months ago, remember?

Not only had she survived that attack, she’d helped the FBI track the killer down and bring him to justice. That was why she’d been offered the chance to join the training program.

But she knew that Ryan didn't want to hear about any of that right now. His masculine pride was feeling delicate at the moment.

And Riley realized something ...

I really resent that.

Riley chose her words carefully, trying not to say the wrong thing ...

"Ryan, you know, making a better life for us isn't just up to you. It's up to both of us. I'm going to have something to do with it. I'm going to have a career of my own."

Ryan looked away with a frown.

Riley fought down a sigh as she realized ...

I said the wrong thing after all.

She'd almost forgotten that Ryan didn't really approve of her summer internship. She'd reminded him that it was only ten weeks and it wasn't physical training. She was just going to be watching agents at work, mostly indoors. Besides, she thought it might even lead to an office job right there in the FBI headquarters.

He'd become more agreeable about it, but he certainly wasn't enthusiastic.

But then, Riley really didn't know what he might prefer for her.

Did he maybe want her to be a stay-at-home mother? If so, he was going to be disappointed sooner or later.

But now was no time to get into all this.

Don't spoil this moment, Riley told herself.

She looked at her ring again and then at Ryan.

"This is beautiful," she said. "I'm really happy. Thank you."

Ryan smiled and squeezed her hand.

Then Riley said, "So who are we going to share the news with?"

Ryan shrugged. "I don't know. We don't really have any friends yet here in DC. I guess I could get in touch with some of my old friends from law school. Maybe you could call your dad."

Riley frowned at the idea. Her last visit to her father hadn't been pleasant. Their relationship had always been deeply troubled.

And besides ...

"He doesn't have a phone, remember?" Riley said. "He lives all alone up in the mountains."

"Oh, yeah," Ryan said.

"What about *your* parents?" Riley asked.

Ryan's smile faded a little.

"I'll write to them about it," he said.

Riley had to stop herself from asking ...

Why not give them a call?

Maybe then I could actually talk to them.

She'd never met Ryan's parents, who lived in the small town of Munny, Virginia.

Riley knew that Ryan had grown up among working-class people, and he was very anxious to put that kind of life behind him.

She wondered if he was embarrassed by them or ...

Is he embarrassed by me?

Do they even know we're living together?

Would they approve?

But before Riley could think of how to broach the subject to him, the phone rang.

"Maybe we could just let the machine take that," Ryan said.

Riley thought about it for a moment as the phone kept ringing.

"It might be something important," she said. She went to the phone and took the call.

A cheerful, professional-sounding male voice said, "May I speak with Riley Sweeney?"

“This is she,” Riley said.

“This is Hoke Gilmer, your supervisor for the FBI training program. I just wanted to remind you—”

Riley said excitedly, “Yes, I know! I’ll be there bright and early at seven o’clock tomorrow morning!”

“Great!” Hoke replied. “I look forward to meeting you.”

Riley hung up the phone and looked at Ryan. He had a wistful look in his eye.

“Wow,” he said. “Everything’s getting real, isn’t it?”

Riley understood how he felt. Ever since the move from Lanton, they’d seldom been away from one another.

And now, tomorrow, they were both off to their new jobs.

Riley said, “Maybe we need to do something special together.”

“Good idea,” Ryan said. “Maybe go to a movie and find a nice restaurant and ...”

Riley laughed as she grabbed him by the hand and pulled him to his feet.

“I’ve got a better idea,” she said.

She pulled him into the bedroom, where they both fell laughing onto the bed.

CHAPTER TWO

Riley felt her breath and heartbeat quicken as she walked from the metro stop toward the massive white J. Edgar Hoover Building.

Why am I so nervous? she asked herself. After all, she had managed her first solo trip on a metro through a larger city than she had even visited before moving here.

She tried to convince herself that this wasn't such a big change—that she was just going to school again, the same as she'd done in Lanton.

But she couldn't help feeling awed and daunted. For one thing, the building was on Pennsylvania Avenue, right between the White House and the Capitol. She and Ryan had driven past the building earlier this week, but the reality was only now hitting her that she was going to be coming here to learn and work for the next ten weeks.

It seemed almost like a dream.

She walked through the front entrance and passed on through the lobby to the security gate. The guard on duty found her name on a list of visitors and gave her a clip-on identification card. He told her to take an elevator three floors down to a small auditorium.

When Riley found the auditorium and went inside, she was handed a packet of rules, regulations, and information that she was supposed to read later. She sat down among about twenty other interns who appeared to be in her general age range. She knew that some, like her, were recent college graduates; others were undergraduates who would be returning to college in the fall.

Most of the other interns were male, and all of them were well dressed. She felt a little insecure about her own pantsuit, which she'd bought at a thrift shop in Lanton. It was the best business-type outfit she had, and she hoped she looked sufficiently respectable.

Soon a clean-cut, middle-aged man stepped in front of the seated interns.

He said, "I'm Assistant Director Marion Connor, and I'm in charge of the FBI Honors Internship Summer Program. You should all be very proud to be here today. You are a very select and exceptional group, chosen from thousands of applicants ..."

Riley gulped hard as he continued congratulating the group.

Thousands of applicants!

How strange it seemed. The truth was, she hadn't put in an application at all. She'd simply been chosen for the program straight out of college.

Do I really belong here? she wondered.

Assistant Director Connor introduced the group to a younger agent—Hoke Gilmer, the training supervisor who had called Riley yesterday. Gilmer instructed the interns to stand and raise their right hands to take the FBI oath of office.

Riley felt herself choke up as she began to speak the words ...

"I, Riley Sweeney, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic ..."

She had to blink back a tear as she continued.

This is real, she told herself. This is really happening.

She had no idea what awaited her from this moment on.

But she felt sure that her life would never be the same.

*

After the ceremony, Hoke Gilmer took the students on a long tour of the J. Edgar Hoover Building. Riley grew more and more amazed at the size and complexity of the building, and at all

the different activities that took place here. There were various exercise rooms, a basketball court, a medical clinic, a printing shop, many kinds of labs and computer rooms, a firing range, and even a morgue and a car repair shop.

It all boggled her mind.

When the tour was over, the group was taken to the cafeteria on the eighth floor. Riley felt exhausted as she put food on her tray—not so much from the miles of walking she’d done, but at everything she’d seen and tried to absorb.

How much of this wonderful facility could she hope to experience in the ten weeks she was to spend here? She wanted to learn everything she could, as fast as she possibly could.

And she wanted to get started right this very minute.

As she carried her tray looking for a place to eat, she felt strangely out of place. The other interns already seemed to be forming friendships and sitting in groups, chattering away excitedly about the day they were having. She told herself she ought to sit down among some of her young colleagues, introduce herself and get to know a few of them.

But she knew it wasn’t going to be easy.

Riley had always felt like something of an outsider, and making friends and fitting in had never come naturally for her.

And right now, she felt shyer than she could remember ever feeling.

And was it just her imagination, or were some of the interns glancing at her and whispering about her?

She had just decided to sit alone when she heard a voice next to her.

“You’re Riley Sweeney, aren’t you?”

She turned to see a young man who had caught her eye back in the auditorium and during the tour. She hadn’t been able to help noticing that he was remarkably good-looking—a bit taller than she was, rugged and athletic, with short curly hair and a pleasant smile. His suit looked expensive.

“Um, yes,” Riley said, suddenly feeling even more shy than before. “And you ... ?”

“John Welch. I’m pleased to meet you. I’d offer to shake hands, but ...”

He nodded at the trays they were both carrying and laughed a little.

“Would you care to sit with me?” he asked.

Riley hoped she wasn’t blushing.

“Sure,” she said.

They sat down across a table from each other and started eating.

Riley asked, “How did you know my name?”

John smiled impishly and said, “You’re kidding right?”

Riley was startled. She managed to stop herself from saying ...

No, I’m not kidding.

John shrugged and said, “Pretty much everybody here knows who you are. I guess you could say that your reputation precedes you.”

Riley looked over at some of the other students. Sure enough, a few of them were still glancing at her and exchanging whispers.

Riley began to realize ...

They must know about what happened back at Lanton.

But how much did they know?

And was this a good thing or a bad thing?

She certainly hadn’t counted on having a “reputation” among the interns. The idea made her feel extremely self-conscious.

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“Right here in DC,” John said. “I graduated with a BA in criminology this spring.”

“What school?” Riley asked.

John blushed a little.

“Um—George Washington University,” he said.

Riley felt her eyes widen at the mention of such an expensive college.

He must be rich, she thought.

She also sensed that he felt a little awkward about that.

“Wow, a criminology degree,” she said. “I’ve just got a psych degree. You’ve really got a head start on me.”

John laughed.

“On *you*? I don’t think so. I mean, you’re probably the only intern in the program with actual field experience.”

Riley felt truly taken aback now.

Field experience?

She hadn’t thought of what had happened back at Lanton as “field experience.”

John continued, “I mean, you actually helped track down and apprehend an actual serial killer. I can’t imagine what that must have been like. I really envy you.”

Riley frowned and fell silent. She didn’t want to say so, but envy seemed like a terribly inappropriate emotion to feel about what she’d been through.

What did John think had gone on during those terrible weeks in Lanton? Did he have any idea what it was like to find the bodies of two of her best friends, their throats brutally slashed?

Did he know how horrified and grief-stricken she’d felt—and also how guilty?

She was still haunted by the thought that her roommate, Trudy, would still be alive if Riley had just done a better job of watching out for her.

And did he have any idea how terrified she’d been when she’d fallen into the killer’s clutches herself?

Riley took a sip of her soft drink and poked at her food with her fork.

Then she said, “It was ... well, it wasn’t like you must think. It’s just something that happened.”

John looked at her with real concern now.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I guess you don’t want to talk about it.”

“Maybe some other time,” Riley said.

An awkward silence fell. Not wanting to be rude, Riley started asking John questions about himself. He seemed reluctant to talk about his life and family, but Riley was able to draw him out a little.

John’s parents were both prominent lawyers who were heavily involved in DC politics. Riley was impressed—not so much by John’s affluent background, but by how he’d chosen a different path from anyone else in his family. Instead of pursuing a prestigious career in law and politics, John had dedicated himself to a humbler life of service in law enforcement.

A real idealist, Riley thought.

She found herself contrasting him to Ryan, who was trying to put his humble background behind him by becoming a successful lawyer.

Of course, she admired Ryan’s ambition. It was one of the things she loved about him. But she couldn’t help also admiring John for the choices he was making.

As they continued talking, Riley sensed that John was putting on the charm for her.

He’s flirting with me, she realized.

She was a bit taken aback by that. Her left hand was in full view right there on the table, so surely he could see her new engagement ring.

Should she mention that she was engaged?

She felt as though that would be awkward somehow—especially if she was wrong.

Maybe he’s not flirting with me at all.

Soon John started asking questions about Riley, carefully staying away from the topic of the murders at Lanton. As usual, Riley avoided certain issues—her troubled relationship with her father, her rebellious teenage years, and especially how she'd watched her own mother get shot to death when she was a little girl.

Also, it occurred to Riley that, unlike Ryan or John, she really didn't have much to say about her hopes for the future.

What does that say about me? she wondered.

She finally did talk about her budding relationship with Ryan, and how they'd gotten engaged just yesterday—although she didn't mention that she was pregnant. She didn't notice any particular change in John's behavior.

I guess he's just naturally charming that way, she thought.

She found herself relieved at the thought that she'd jumped to conclusions, and he'd never been flirting with her after all.

He was a nice guy, and she looked forward to getting to know him better. In fact, she felt pretty sure that John and Ryan would like each other. Maybe they could all get together sometime soon.

When the interns finished their meals, Hoke Gilmer rounded them up and took them down a few floors to a large locker room that was to be their headquarters for the ten-week term. A younger agent who was assisting Gilmer assigned each of the interns a locker. Then all the interns sat down at the tables and chairs in the middle of the room, and the younger agent started handing out cell phones.

Gilmer explained, "It'll soon be the twenty-first century, and the FBI doesn't like to be behind the latest technology. We won't be passing out pagers this year. Some of you may have cell phones already, but we want you to have a separate one for FBI use. You'll find instructions in your orientation packet."

Then Gilmer laughed as he added, "I hope you'll have an easier time learning to use these than I did."

Some of the interns laughed as well as they claimed their new toys.

Riley's phone felt oddly small in her hand. She was used to larger house phones and had never used a cell phone before. Although she'd used computers at Lanton, and some of her friends there had cell phones, she still didn't own one. Ryan already had both a computer and a cell phone, and he sometimes teased Riley about her old-fashioned ways.

She hadn't liked that very much. The truth was, the only reason she didn't already have a computer or a cell phone yet was because she couldn't afford it.

This one looked almost exactly like Ryan's—very simple, with a small screen for text messages, a number pad, and just three or four other buttons. Still, it felt strange to realize she didn't yet know how to even make an ordinary phone call with it. She knew that it was also going to feel strange to be reachable by phone all the time, no matter where she happened to be.

She reminded herself ...

I'm starting a whole new life.

Riley noticed that a group of official-looking people, most of them men, had just filed into the locker room.

Gilmer said, "Each of you will be shadowing an experienced special agent during your weeks here. They'll start off by teaching you their own specialties—analyzing crime data, forensics work, computer lab work, and what have you. We'll introduce you to them now, and they'll take things from here."

As the younger agent matched up each of the interns with their supervising agent, Riley soon realized ...

There's one less agent than interns.

Sure enough, after the interns went away with their mentors, Riley found herself without a mentor of her own. She looked at Gilmer with perplexity.

Gilmer smiled slightly and said, “You’ll find the agent you’ll be shadowing down the hall in room nineteen.”

Feeling a little unsettled, Riley left the locker room and walked down the hall until she found the right room. She opened the door and saw that a short, barrel-chested, middle-aged man was sitting on a table.

Riley gasped aloud as she recognized him.

It was Special Agent Jake Crivaro—the agent she’d worked with back in Lanton, and who had saved her life.

CHAPTER THREE

Riley smiled when she recognized Special Agent Jake Crivaro. She had spent her morning among strangers and she was especially glad to see this familiar face.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, she thought.

After all, she remembered what he'd told her back in Lanton, when he'd handed her papers for the Honors Program ...

"I'm eligible for retirement, but I might stay on for a while to help someone like you get started."

He must have specifically requested to be Riley's mentor for her internship.

But Riley's smile quickly faded when she realized ...

He isn't smiling back.

In fact, Agent Crivaro didn't look the least bit happy to see her.

Still sitting on the table, he crossed his arms and nodded toward a nondescript but amiable-looking man in his twenties who was standing nearby. Crivaro said ...

"Riley Sweeney, I want you to meet Special Agent Mark McCune, from right here in DC. He's my partner on a case I'm working on today."

"Pleased to meet you," Agent McCune said with a smile.

"Likewise," Riley said.

McCune seemed markedly more friendly than Crivaro did.

Crivaro stood up from the table. "Consider yourself lucky, Sweeney. While the other interns are stuck indoors learning how to use filing cabinets and paper clips, you'll be heading right out into the field. I just came up here from Quantico to work on a drug case. You'll be joining Agent McCune and me—we're headed to the scene right now."

Agent Crivaro strode out of the room.

As Riley and Agent McCune followed him, Riley thought ...

He called me "Sweeney."

Back in Lanton, she'd gotten used to him calling her "Riley."

Riley whispered to McCune, "Is Agent Crivaro upset about something?"

McCune shrugged and whispered back, "I was hoping you could tell me. This is my first day working with him, but I hear you already got to work on a case with him. They say he was pretty impressed by you. He's got a reputation for being kind of brusque. His last partner got fired, you know."

Riley almost said ...

Actually, I didn't know.

She'd never heard Crivaro mention a partner back in Lanton.

Although Crivaro had been tough, she'd never thought of him as "brusque." In fact, she'd come to think of him as a kindly father figure—quite unlike her actual father.

Riley and McCune followed Crivaro to a car in the FBI building's parking level. Nobody spoke as Crivaro drove them out of the building and continued north through the streets of DC.

Riley began to wonder whether Crivaro was ever going to explain what they were supposed to do whenever they got wherever they were going.

They eventually reached a seedy-looking neighborhood. The streets were lined with row houses that looked to Riley like they must have once been pleasant homes but had become awfully rundown.

Still driving, Agent Crivaro finally spoke to her.

"A couple of brothers, Jaden and Malik Madison, have been running a drug operation in this neighborhood for a couple of years now. They and their gang have been brazen about it—selling right on the street, like it was some kind of outdoor market. The local cops couldn't do anything to stop them."

“Why not?” Riley asked.

Crivaro said, “The gang kept careful watch for cops. Also, they had the whole neighborhood scared stiff—drive-by shootings, that kind of thing. A couple of kids got shot for just standing around where they weren’t supposed to be. Nobody dared talk to the cops about what was going on.”

Looking along the rows of houses, Crivaro continued.

“The FBI got called in to help a few days ago. Just this morning, one of our undercover guys managed to arrest Jaden. His brother, Malik, is still at large, and the gang has scattered. They won’t be easy to catch. But because of the arrest, we were able to get a warrant to search the house they’ve been working out of.”

Riley asked, “If the gang is still out there, won’t they just start all over again?”

McCune said, “That’s where the local cops can really get something done. They’ll set up a ‘mini station’ right out on the sidewalk—just a picnic table and chairs manned by a couple of uniformed officers. They’ll work with the locals to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen here again.”

Riley almost asked ...

Won’t they just start up in another neighborhood?

But she knew it was a stupid question. Of course the gang would start up somewhere else—at least if they weren’t caught. And then the cops and the FBI would have to get to work all over again wherever that happened. That was just the nature of this kind of work.

Crivaro stopped the car and pointed to the nearest house.

“The search is already underway in that one,” he said. “And we’re here to help.”

As they got out of the car, Crivaro wagged his finger at Riley sternly.

“By ‘we,’ I mean Agent McCune and myself. You’re here to watch and learn. So stay the hell out of the way. And don’t touch anything.”

Riley felt a chill at his words. But she nodded obediently.

A uniformed cop standing in the open doorway led them inside. Riley immediately saw that a big operation was already in progress. The narrow hallway was bustling with local cops and agents wearing FBI jackets. They were piling up weapons and bags of drugs in the middle of the floor.

Crivaro looked pleased. He said to one of the FBI men, “Looks like you folks have hit a real gold mine here.”

The FBI man laughed and said, “We’re pretty sure this is only the start of it. There’s got to be a lot of cash around here someplace, but we haven’t found it yet. There are plenty of places to hide stuff in a house like this. Our guys are going over every square inch.”

Riley followed Crivaro and McCune up a flight of stairs to the second floor.

She could now see that the house, and apparently the others surrounding it, was larger than it looked outside. Although it was narrow, it was also deep, with a good many rooms along the hallways. In addition to the two floors in ready view, Riley guessed that the house also had an attic and a basement.

At the top of the stairs, four agents almost collided with Crivaro as they came out of one of the rooms.

“Nothing in there,” one of the agents said.

“Are you sure?” Crivaro asked.

“We searched it top to bottom,” the other agent said.

Then a voice called out from inside the room directly across the hall ...

“Hey, I think we’ve really got something here!”

Riley trailed Crivaro and McCune across the hall. Before she could follow them into the room, Crivaro held out his hand and stopped her.

“Huh-uh,” he told her. “You can watch from right here in the hallway.”

Riley stood just outside the door and saw five men searching the room. The one who had called out to Jake was standing beside a rectangular shape on the wall.

He said, “This looks like it used to be a dumbwaiter. What do you want to bet we’ll find something inside?”

“Bust it open,” Crivaro said.

Riley took a step forward to see what they were doing.

Jake looked up at her and yelled ...

“Hey, Sweeney. What did I just tell you?”

Riley was about to explain that she didn’t actually intend to come inside when Jake ordered a cop ...

“Shut that goddamn door.”

The door slammed shut in Riley’s face. Riley stood in the hallway feeling shocked and embarrassed.

Why is Agent Crivaro so angry with me? she wondered.

A lot of noise was coming from inside the room now. It sounded like somebody was taking a crowbar to the place in the wall where the dumbwaiter had once been. Riley wished she could see what was going on, but opening the door again was out of the question.

She walked across the hallway and into the room on the other side, the one the agents had said was already searched. Chairs and furniture were overturned, and a rug was crumpled from having been pulled up and thrown back down again.

Alone there, Riley walked over to the window that overlooked the street.

Outside she saw a few scattered people moving briskly as if in a hurry to get wherever they were going.

They don’t feel safe outside, she realized. It struck her as incredibly sad.

She wondered how long it had been since this neighborhood had been a pleasant place to live.

She also wondered ...

Are we really making a difference?

Riley tried to imagine what life might be like here after the “mini station” Agent McCune mentioned was in place. Would neighbors really feel safer because of a couple of cops posted at a picnic table?

Riley sighed as the handful of people on the street continued hurrying to their separate destinations.

She realized she was asking herself the wrong question.

There’s no “we”—at least not yet.

She wasn’t involved in this operation at all. And Agent Crivaro certainly wasn’t showing any confidence in her.

She turned away from the window and headed back toward the door. As she crossed the crumpled rug, she noticed an odd sound under her feet. She stopped in her tracks and stood there for a moment. Then she tapped her heel against the floor.

It sounded oddly hollow where she was standing.

She walked over to the edge of the rug and pulled it off that patch of the floor.

She didn’t see anything unusual, just an ordinary hardwood floor.

I guess I was just imagining things, she thought.

She remembered what one of the agents had said coming out of this room.

“We searched it top to bottom.”

Surely she wasn’t going to find something that four FBI agents had missed.

And yet, she was sure she had heard something odd. She wouldn’t have noticed it if anybody else had been moving around the room. She’d only noticed it because it was quiet in here.

She took a couple of steps to the side and tapped her heel against the floor. The floor sound solid again. Then she stooped down and rapped on the spot she’d noticed before with her knuckles.

Sure enough, it *did* sound hollow there. She still didn’t see any sign of an opening but ...

I wonder.

She could see that one length of board was shorter than the others. It had a dark spot on one end that looked like an ordinary knot.

Riley pressed the knot with her finger.

She almost jumped out of her skin as the board sprang up a little at that end.

I've found something! she thought.

I've really found something!

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley tugged at the end of the board that had popped up a little.

The whole board came loose. She set it to one side.

And sure enough, there was an opening to a space under the floor.

Riley peered closer. Tucked under the floorboards just out of ready sight were bundles of paper money.

She yelled loudly, “Agent Crivaro! I’ve found something!”

As she waited for a reply, Riley glimpsed something else alongside those bundles. It was the edge of a plastic object.

Riley reached for the object and picked it up.

It was a cell phone—a simpler model than the one she’d been given a little while ago. She realized that this must be one of those prepaid types that couldn’t be traced to an owner.

A burner phone, she thought. That must be very useful for a drug operation.

Suddenly she heard a voice shout from the doorway ...

“Sweeney! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Riley turned and saw Agent Crivaro, his face red with rage. Agent McCune had entered right behind him.

She held the phone out and said, “I found something, Agent Crivaro.”

“I see that,” Crivaro said. “And your fingers are all over it. Give me that thing.”

Riley handed the phone to Crivaro, who took it gingerly with a thumb and forefinger and dropped it into an evidence bag. She saw that both he and Agent McCune were wearing gloves.

She felt her face flush with shame and embarrassment.

I really screwed up.

McCune knelt down and looked into the space under the floor.

He said, “Hey, Agent Crivaro! Get a look at this!”

Crivaro knelt down beside McCune, who said, “It’s the cash we’ve been looking all over the house for.”

“So it is,” Crivaro said.

Turning toward Riley again, Crivaro snapped ...

“Did you touch any of this money?”

Riley shook her head.

“Are you sure?” Crivaro said.

“I’m sure,” Riley said timidly.

“How did you find this?” Crivaro said, pointing to the opening.

Riley shrugged and said, “I was just walking through here and I heard a hollow sound under the floor, so I pulled back the rug and—”

Crivaro interrupted, “And you yanked this board loose.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly *yank* anything. It just sort of popped up when I touched it in a certain spot.”

Crivaro growled, “You touched it. And the phone too. I can’t believe it. You got your prints all over everything.”

Riley stammered, “I—I’m sorry, sir.”

“You damn well should be,” Crivaro said. “I’m getting you out of here before you screw anything else up.”

He got up from the floor and brushed off his hands.

He said, “McCune, keep the search team working. When you finish the rooms on this floor, keep searching up in the attic. I don’t guess we’re likely to find much of anything else, but we’ve got to be thorough.”

“I’ll do that, sir,” McCune said.

Crivaro led Riley back downstairs and out to his car.

As they drove away, Riley asked, “Are we going back to headquarters?”

“Not today,” Crivaro said. “Maybe not ever. Where do you live? I’m taking you home.”

Her voice choked with emotion, Riley told him her address.

As they drove on in silence, Riley found herself remembering how impressed by her Crivaro had been back in Lanton, and how he’d told her ...

“The FBI needs young people like you—especially women. You’d make a very fine BAU agent.”

How things had changed!

And she knew it wasn’t just because of the mistake she’d made. Crivaro had been cold to her from the start today.

Right now, Riley just wished he’d say something—anything.

She shyly asked, “Did you find anything in that other room across the hall? I mean, where the dumbwaiter used to be?”

“Not a thing,” Crivaro said.

Another silence fell. Riley was starting to feel confused now.

She knew she’d made a terrible mistake, but ...

What was I supposed to do?

She’d had a gut feeling back in that room that there was something under the floor.

Was she just supposed to have ignored that feeling?

She summoned up her courage and said ...

“Sir, I know I screwed up, but didn’t I find something important back there? Four agents searched that room and missed that space. You were looking for the cash, and I found it. Would anybody else have found it if I didn’t?”

“That’s not the point,” Crivaro said.

Riley fought down the urge to ask ...

Then what is the point?

Crivaro drove on in sullen silence for several minutes. Then he said in a quiet, bitter voice, “I pulled a lot of strings to get you into this program.”

Another silence fell. But Riley detected a world of meaning in those words. She began to realize that Crivaro had really gone out on a limb on her behalf, not only to get her into the program but also to serve as her mentor. And he’d probably made some of his colleagues angry, perhaps by excluding intern candidates they might have deemed to be more promising than Riley.

Now that she thought of things that way, Crivaro’s cold behavior started to make sense. He hadn’t wanted to show even the slightest bit of preferential treatment toward her. In fact, he’d gone to the opposite extreme. He’d been counting on her to prove herself worthy without any encouragement from himself, and despite his colleagues’ doubts and resentments.

And judging from the looks and whispers she’d noticed among other interns during the day, Crivaro’s colleagues weren’t the only people who harbored those resentments. She’d faced an uphill climb just to achieve even modest success.

And she’d blown it all in a single afternoon, with one stupid mistake. Crivaro had good reason to be disappointed and angry.

She took a long, slow breath and said ...

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Crivaro didn’t reply for a few moments.

Finally he said, “I guess you want a second chance. Well, let me tell you, the FBI isn’t big on second chances. My last partner got fired for making the same kind of mistake—and he definitely deserved it. A mistake like that has consequences. Sometimes it just means spoiling a case so that a bad guy gets off free. Sometimes it costs someone their life. It can cost your *own* life.”

Crivaro glanced over at her with a scowl.

“So what do you think I should do?” he said.

“I don’t know,” Riley said.

Crivaro shook his head. “I sure don’t know either. I guess maybe both of us should sleep on it. I’ve got to decide whether I misjudged your abilities. You’ve got to decide whether you’ve really got what it takes to stay in this program.”

Riley felt a lump in her throat, and her eyes stung and she blinked hard.

Don’t cry, she told herself.

Crying was the only thing she could think of that would make things worse than they were already.

CHAPTER FIVE

Still stinging from Crivaro's rebuke, Riley arrived at home a full two hours before Ryan did. When Ryan got there, he seemed surprised to see that she'd gotten back so early, but he was too excited about his own day to notice how upset she was.

Ryan sat down at the kitchen table with a beer while Riley heated up macaroni and cheese TV dinners. She could tell that he was really buzzed about everything he was doing at the law firm and eager to tell her all about it. She tried to pay close attention.

He'd been given more duties than he'd expected—a lot of complex research and analysis, writing briefs, preparing for litigation, and other tasks that Riley barely understood. He was even going to appear in a courtroom tomorrow for the very first time. He was only going to be assisting the lead attorneys, of course, but it was a real milestone for him.

Ryan appeared nervous, daunted, maybe a little scared, but above all else exhilarated.

Riley tried to keep smiling as they sat down and ate dinner. She wanted to be happy for him.

Finally Ryan asked ...

"Wow, listen to me talk. What about you? How was your day?"

Riley gulped hard.

"It could have been better," she said. "Actually, it was pretty bad."

Ryan reached across the table and took her hand with an expression of sincere concern.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Riley wondered whether talking about it would make her feel better.

No, I'll only start crying.

Besides, Ryan might not be happy that she'd actually gone out into the field today. They'd both been sure that she'd be doing her training safely indoors. Not that she'd been in any actual danger ...

"I'd rather not get into any details," Riley said. "But do you remember Special Agent Crivaro, the FBI man who saved my life back in Lanton?"

Ryan nodded.

Riley continued, "Well, he's supposed to be mentoring me. But he's got doubts now as to whether I belong in the program. And ... I guess I've got doubts too. Maybe this whole thing was a mistake."

Ryan squeezed her hand and didn't speak.

Riley wished he'd say something. But what did she want him to say?

What did she *expect* him to say?

After all, Ryan hadn't been enthusiastic about Riley being in the program from the very start. He'd probably be just as happy if she dropped out—or even got kicked out.

Finally Ryan said, "Look, maybe it's just not the right time for you to do this. I mean, you're pregnant, we're just getting moved into this new place, and I'm just getting started Parsons and Rittenhouse. Maybe you should just wait until—"

"Wait until when?" Riley said. "Until I'm a mom raising a kid? How is that going to work?"

Ryan's eyes widened at Riley's bitter tone. Even Riley was startled at the sound of her own voice.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it to come out like that."

Ryan said quietly, "Riley, you *are* going to be a mom raising a kid. We're going to be parents. It's a reality we both have to deal with, whether you keep training this summer or not."

Riley was really struggling not to cry now. The future seemed so murky and mysterious.

She asked, "What am I going to do if I'm not in the program? I can't just sit around this apartment all day."

Ryan shrugged slightly.

“Well, you can always find a job, help with the expenses. Maybe some kind of temp work—something you can just walk away from whenever you get tired of doing it. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. There’s plenty of time to figure out what you really want to do. But before long, I could be successful enough that you wouldn’t have to work at all if you don’t want to.”

They both fell quiet for a moment.

Then Riley said, “So do you think I should quit?”

“What I think doesn’t matter,” Ryan said. “It’s your decision. And whatever you decide, I’ll do my best to back you up.”

They didn’t say much for the rest of the meal. After they finished eating, they watched TV for a while. Riley couldn’t really focus on what they were watching. She kept thinking about what Agent Crivaro had said ...

“You’ve got to decide whether you’ve really got what it takes to stay in this program.”

The more Riley thought about it, the more doubt and uncertainty she felt.

After all, she had more than just herself to think about. There was Ryan, the baby, and even Agent Crivaro.

She remembered something else her would-be mentor had said ...

“I pulled a lot of strings to get you into this program.”

And keeping her in the program wasn’t going to make Crivaro’s life any easier. He was likely to keep catching flak from colleagues who didn’t think Riley belonged there, especially if she didn’t live up to his expectations.

And she sure hadn’t lived up to his expectations today.

Ryan eventually took a shower and went to bed. Riley sat on the couch, continuing to mull over her choices.

Finally, she picked up a legal pad and started to draft a letter of resignation to Hoke Gilmer, the training supervisor. She was surprised at how much better she felt as she kept writing the letter. When she came to the end, she felt as if a load had been lifted from her mind.

This is the right choice, she thought.

She figured she would get up early tomorrow morning, tell Ryan about her decision, type her letter into his computer, then print it and send it out with the morning mail. She’d also make a phone call to Agent Crivaro, who would surely be relieved.

Finally, she went to bed, feeling much better about things. She found it easy to go to sleep.

Riley found herself walking into the J. Edgar Hoover Building.

What am I doing here? she wondered.

Then she noticed the legal pad in her hand, with her letter written on it.

Oh, yes, she realized.

I came to deliver this to Agent Gilmer personally.

She took the elevator down three floors, then went into the auditorium where the interns had met yesterday.

To her alarm, all the interns were seated in the auditorium watching her every move. Agent Gilmer was standing at the front of the auditorium, looking at her with his arms crossed.

“What do you want, Sweeney?” Gilmer asked, sounding a lot more stern than he had yesterday when he’d addressed the group.

Riley glanced at the interns, who gazed at her silently with accusing expressions.

Then she said to Gilmer, “I won’t take any of your time. I just need to give you this.”

She handed him the yellow legal pad.

Gilmer raised his reading glasses to look at the pad.

“What’s this?” he asked.

Riley opened her mouth to say ...

*"It's my letter of resignation from the program."
But instead, different words came out of her mouth ...
"I, Riley Sweeney, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States ..."
To her alarm, she realized ...
I'm reciting the FBI oath of office.
And she couldn't seem to stop herself.
"...that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same ..."
Gilmer pointed to the legal pad and asked again ...
"What's this?"
Riley still wanted to explain what it really was, but the words of the oath continued to pour out ...
"... I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion ..."
Gilmer's face was morphing into another face.
It was Jake Crivaro, and he was looking angry. He waved the pad in front of her face.
"What's this?" he snarled.
Riley was surprised to see that nothing was written there at all.
She heard all the other interns murmuring aloud, speaking the same oath but in a confused jumble of voices.
Meanwhile, she was nearing the end of the oath ...
"... I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter.
So help me God."
Crivaro seemed to be seething now.
"What the hell's this?" he said, pointing to the blank yellow paper.
Riley tried to tell him, but no words came out.*

Riley's eyes snapped open when she heard an unfamiliar buzzing sound.
She was lying in bed next to Ryan.
It was a dream, she realized.
But the dream definitely meant something. In fact, it meant everything. She'd taken an oath, and she couldn't take it back. Which meant she couldn't resign from the program. It wasn't a legal problem. It was personal. It was a matter of principle.
*But what if I get kicked out?
What do I do then?*
Meanwhile, she wondered—what was that buzzing sound that kept repeating over and over again?
Still half-asleep, Ryan groaned and muttered ...
"Answer your damn phone, Riley."
Then Riley remembered the cell phone she'd been given yesterday at the FBI building. She fumbled around on the side table until she found it, then scrambled out of bed and carried it out of the room and shut the door behind her.
It took her a moment to figure out which button to push to take the call. When she finally succeeded, she heard a familiar voice.
"Sweeney? Did I wake you?"
It was Agent Crivaro, sounding none too friendly.
"No, of course not," Riley said.
"Liar. It's five o'clock in the morning."
Riley sighed deeply. She realized she felt sick to her stomach.
Crivaro said, "How long will it take you to get awake and dressed?"
Riley thought for a moment, then said, "Um, fifteen minutes, I guess."

“I’ll be there in ten. Meet me outside your building.”

Crivaro ended the call without another word.

What does he want? Riley wondered.

Is he coming here to personally fire me?

Suddenly she felt a rising wave of nausea. She knew it was morning sickness—the worst she’d experienced so far during her pregnancy.

She let out a groan and thought ...

Just what I need right now.

Then she rushed to the bathroom.

CHAPTER SIX

When Jake Crivaro pulled up to the apartment building, Riley Sweeney was already waiting outside. Jake noticed that she looked more than a little pale as she got into the car.

“Not feeling well?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Riley said.

She doesn’t look fine, Jake thought. She doesn’t sound fine, either.

Jake wondered if maybe she’d partied too hard last night. These young interns did that sometimes. Or maybe she’d just had too much to drink right at home. She’d certainly seemed discouraged when he’d dropped her off yesterday—and small wonder, after the chewing out he’d given her. Maybe she’d tried to drown her sorrows.

Jake hoped his protégé wasn’t too hung over to function.

As he pulled away from the building, Riley asked ...

“Where are we going?”

Jake hesitated for a moment.

Then he said, “Look, we’re going to start from scratch today.”

Riley looked at him with a vaguely surprised expression.

He continued, “The truth is, what you did yesterday—well, it wasn’t entirely a screw-up. You found the Madison brothers’ drug money. And that burner phone turned out to be plenty useful. It had some important phone numbers in it, which made it possible for the cops to round up a few gang members—including Malik Madison, the brother who was still at large. It was stupid of them to buy a prepaid phone and not dump it after using it. But I guess they just didn’t think anybody was going to find it.”

He glanced her way and added, “They were wrong.”

Riley just kept staring back at him, as if she was having trouble understanding what he was saying.

Jake resisted the impulse to say ...

“I’m really sorry I gave you such a hard time.”

Instead he said, “But you’ve got to follow instructions. And you’ve got to respect procedure.”

“I understand,” Riley said tiredly. “Thanks for giving me another chance.”

Jake growled under his breath. He reminded himself that he didn’t want to give the kid too much encouragement.

But he did feel bad about how he’d treated her yesterday.

I’m overreacting to things, he thought.

He’d pissed off some colleagues at Quantico by pushing for Riley to get into the program. One agent in particular, Toby Wolsky, had wanted his nephew Jordan to be an intern this summer, but Jake had gotten Riley in instead of him. He’d thrown his considerable credentials into that effort and called in a couple of favors owed him.

Jake didn’t think much of Wolsky as an agent, and he had no reason to think his nephew had any potential to speak of. But Wolsky had friends in Quantico who were now unhappy with Jake.

In a way, Jake could understand why.

For all they knew, Riley was just some ordinary college psych graduate who’d never even thought about getting into law enforcement.

And the truth was, Jake didn’t know much more about her either—except that he’d seen her instincts at work, up close and personal. He remembered vividly how readily she’d understood the killer’s thoughts back in Lanton, with just a little coaching from him. Aside from himself, Jake had seldom met anyone with those kinds of instincts—gut-level insights that very few other agents could even understand.

Of course, he couldn't discount the possibility that what she'd done in Lanton had been little more than a fluke.

Maybe today he'd get a better idea of what she could do.

Riley asked again ...

"Where are we going?"

"To a murder scene," Jake said.

He didn't want to tell her anything more until they got there.

He wanted to observe how she reacted to a really bizarre situation.

And from what he'd heard, this murder scene was about as bizarre as a murder scene could get. He'd gotten called about it just a little while ago himself, and he was still having trouble believing what he'd been told.

We'll see what we see, I guess.

*

Riley thought maybe she was feeling a bit better as she rode along with Agent Crivaro.

Still, she wished he'd tell her what this was all about.

A murder scene, he said.

That was more than she'd bargained for in the summer program—let alone on her second day. Yesterday had been unexpected enough.

She wasn't sure how she felt about it.

But she *was* pretty sure that Ryan wouldn't like the idea at all.

She realized she hadn't yet told Ryan that she was shadowing Jake Crivaro. Ryan wouldn't approve of that either. Ryan had mistrusted Crivaro from the start, especially for the way he had helped Riley get a glimpse into a killer's mind.

She remembered what Ryan had said about one of those episodes ...

"Are you telling me that FBI guy—Crivaro—played mind games with you? Why? Just for fun?"

Of course Riley knew that Crivaro hadn't put her through all that "just for fun."

He'd been dead serious about it. Those experiences had been absolutely necessary.

They had helped make it possible to eventually catch the killer.

But what am I in for now? Riley wondered.

Crivaro seemed to be being deliberately cryptic.

When he parked the car along a street with houses on one side and an open field on the other, she saw that a couple of police cars and an official van were pulled up nearby.

Before they left the car, Crivaro wagged his finger and said to her ...

"Now remember the goddamn rules. Don't *touch anything*. And don't speak unless you're spoken to. You're only here to observe the rest of us at work."

Riley nodded. But something in Crivaro's voice made her suspect that he expected something a little more from her than just watching quietly.

She wished she knew what that something might be.

Riley and Crivaro got out of the car and walked into the field. It was scattered with lots of debris, as if some kind of big public event had taken place here recently.

Other people, some wearing police uniforms, were standing near a stand of trees and bushes. A wide area around them was cordoned off with yellow police tape.

As Riley and Crivaro approached the group, she realized that the bushes had concealed something on the ground.

Riley gasped at what she saw.

Nausea swelled up in her throat again.

Lying on the ground was a dead circus clown.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Riley felt so dizzy that she thought she might faint.

She managed to stay on her feet, but then she worried that she was going to throw up, like she had back at the apartment.

This can't be real, she thought.

This has to be a nightmare.

The cops and other people were standing around a body that was in a full clown outfit. The suit was puffy and brightly colored with huge pompoms as buttons. A pair of outsized shoes completed the attire.

The stark white face had a bizarre painted smile, a bright red nose, and exaggerated eyes and eyebrows. A huge red wig framed the face. A canvas tarp was bunched up next to the body.

It dawned on Riley that the body was actually a woman.

Now that her head was clearing, she noticed a distinct and unpleasant odor in the air. As she looked around the area, she doubted that the smell was from the body—or at least not much of it. Trash was strewn everywhere. The morning sun was bringing out the odor of various kinds of human residue.

A man wearing a white jacket was kneeling beside the body, studying it carefully. Crivaro introduced him as Victor Dahl, the DC medical examiner.

Crivaro shook his head and said to Dahl, “This is even weirder than I’d expected.”

Rising to his feet, Dahl said, “Yeah, weird. And it’s just like the last victim.”

Riley thought ...

The last victim?

Had another clown been killed before this one?

“I just got briefed a little while ago,” Crivaro said to Dahl and the cops. “Maybe you folks can fill in my trainee here on what this is all about. I’m maybe not fully up to speed on this case myself.”

Dahl looked at Riley and hesitated for a moment. Riley wondered if she looked as sick as she felt. But then the medical examiner began to explain.

“Saturday morning, a body was found in the alley behind a movie theater. The victim was a young woman named Margo Birch—and she was dressed and made up pretty much like this victim. The cops figured it was a weird murder, but one of a kind. Then this corpse turned up last night. Another young woman all painted up and dressed this way.”

It hit Riley then. This wasn’t an actual clown. This was an ordinary young woman dressed up as a clown. Two such women had been bizarrely dressed and made up and murdered.

Crivaro added, “And that’s when it became an FBI case, and we got called in.”

“That’s right,” Dahl said, looking around the debris-strewn field. “There was a carnival here for a few days. It moved out on Saturday. That’s where all this junk came from—the field hasn’t been cleaned up yet. Late last night some neighborhood guy came out here with a metal detector, looking for coins that might have gotten dropped during the carnival. He found the body, which was covered by that tarp at the time.”

Riley turned to see that Crivaro was watching her closely.

Was he just making sure she was minding her own business?

Or was he monitoring her reactions?

She asked, “Has this woman been identified?”

One of the cops said, “Not yet.”

Crivaro added, “We’re focused on one particular missing person’s report. Yesterday morning a professional photographer named Janet Davis was reported missing. She’d been taking pictures at

Lady Bird Johnson Park the night before. The cops are wondering if this might be her. Agent McCune is paying her husband a visit right now. Maybe he can help us make an ID.”

Riley heard sounds of vehicles stopping nearby in the street. She looked and saw that a couple of TV news vans had pulled up.

“Damn,” one of the cops said. “We’d managed to keep the clown angle about the other murder quiet until now. Should we cover her back up?”

Crivaro let out a growl of annoyance as a news crew poured out of one of the vans with a camera and a boom mic. The crew hurried out onto the field.

“It’s too late for that,” he said. “They’ve already seen the victim.”

As other media vehicles approached, Crivaro and the ME mobilized the cops to try to keep the reporters as far back from the police tape as they could.

Meanwhile, Riley looked at the victim and wondered . . .

How did she die?

There was no one to ask at the moment. Everybody was busy dealing with the reporters, who were noisily asking questions.

Riley carefully stooped over the body, telling herself . . .

Don’t touch anything.

Riley saw that the victim’s eyes and mouth were open. She’d seen that same terrified expression before.

She remembered all too well how her two friends had looked after their throats were cut back in Lanton. Most of all, she remembered the staggering amounts of blood on the dorm room floors when she’d found their bodies.

But there was no blood here.

She saw what appeared to be some small cuts on the woman’s face and neck showing through the white makeup.

What did those cuts mean? They surely weren’t large enough to have been fatal.

She also noticed that the makeup was painted on clumsily and awkwardly.

She didn’t put it on herself, she thought.

No, someone else had done that, perhaps against the victim’s will.

Then Riley felt a strange shift in her consciousness—something she hadn’t felt since those terrible days in Lanton.

Her skin crawled as she realized what that feeling was.

She was getting a sense of the mind of the killer.

He dressed her like this, she thought.

He’d probably put on the costume after she was dead, but she had still been conscious when he smeared her face with makeup. Judging from her dead, open eyes, she’d been all too aware of what was happening to her.

And he enjoyed it, she thought. *He enjoyed her terror as he painted her.*

Riley also understood the small cuts now.

He teased her with a knife.

He taunted her—made her wonder how he was going to kill her.

Riley gasped and rose to her feet. She felt another wave of nausea and dizziness and almost fell down again, but someone caught her by the arm.

She turned and saw that Jake Crivaro had stopped her from falling.

He was looking straight into her eyes. Riley knew that he understood exactly what she’d just experienced.

In a hoarse, horrified voice she told him . . .

“He frightened her to death. She died of fear.”

Riley heard Dahl let out a yelp of surprise.

“Who told you that?” Dahl said, walking toward Riley.

Crivaro said to him, “Nobody told her. Is it true?”

Dahl shrugged a little.

“Maybe. Or something like it, anyway, if she’s like the other victim. Margo Birch’s bloodstream was pumped full of amphetamines, a fatal dose that made her heart stop beating. That poor woman must have felt scared out of her mind right until the moment she died. We’ll have to do toxicology on this new victim, but ...”

His voice trailed off, and then he asked Riley, “How did you know?”

Riley had no idea what to say.

Crivaro said, “It’s what she does. It’s why she’s here.”

Riley shivered deeply at those words.

Is this something I really want to be good at? she asked herself.

She wondered if maybe she should have submitted that resignation letter after all.

Maybe she shouldn’t be here.

Maybe she should have no part in this.

She was sure of one thing—Ryan would be horrified if he knew where she was right now and what she was doing.

Crivaro asked Dahl, “How hard would it be for the killer to get hold of this particular amphetamine?”

“Unfortunately,” the medical examiner replied, “it would be easy to buy on the street.”

Crivaro’s phone buzzed. He looked at it. “It’s Agent McCune. I’ve got to take this.”

Crivaro stepped away and talked on his cell phone. Dahl continued to stare at Riley as if she were some kind of freak.

Maybe he’s right, she thought.

Meanwhile, she could hear some of the questions the reporters were asking.

“Is it true Margo Birch’s murder was just like this?”

“Was Margo Birch dressed and made up the same way?”

“Why is this killer dressing his victims up like clowns?”

“Is this the work of a serial killer?”

“Are there going to be more clown murders?”

Riley remembered what one of the cops had just said ...

“We’d managed to keep the clown angle about the other murder quiet until now.”

Obviously, rumors had already been circulating even so. And now there was no keeping the truth quiet.

The cops were trying to say as little as possible in reply to the questions. But Riley remembered how aggressive reporters had been back in Lanton. She understood all too well why Jake and the cops weren’t happy that these reporters had shown up. The publicity wasn’t going to make their work any easier.

Crivaro walked back toward Riley and Dahl, tucking his phone in his pocket.

“McCune just talked to the missing woman’s husband. The poor guy’s worried sick, but he told McCune something that might be helpful. He said she has a mole just behind her right ear.”

Dahl stooped down and peeked behind the victim’s ear.

“It’s her,” he said. “What did you say her name was again?”

“Janet Davis,” Crivaro said.

Dahl shook his head. “Well, at least we’ve ID’d the victim. We might as well get her out of here. I wish we didn’t have to deal with rigor mortis, though.”

Riley watched as Dahl’s team loaded the corpse onto a gurney. It was a clumsy effort. The body was stiff like a statue, and the puffily clad limbs extended in all directions, protruding from underneath the white sheet that covered it.

Finally dumbstruck themselves, the reporters gawked and stared as the gurney rattled across the field toward the ME's van carrying its grotesque burden.

As the body vanished into the van, Riley and Crivaro pushed past the reporters and headed back to their own vehicle.

As Crivaro drove them away, Riley asked where they were going next.

"To headquarters," Crivaro said. "McCune told me that some cops have been searching around Lady Bird Johnson Park where Janet Davis went missing. They found her camera. She must have dropped it when she was abducted. The camera is now at FBI headquarters. Let's go see what the tech people can find out about it. Maybe we'll get lucky and it'll give us some evidence."

That word jarred Riley ...

"Lucky."

It seemed like a strange word to use when talking about something so singularly unlucky as a woman's murder.

But Crivaro had obviously meant what he said. She wondered at how hardened he must have become, doing this work for as many years as he had.

Was he completely immune to horror?

She couldn't tell from his tone of voice as he continued ...

"Also, Janet Davis's husband let McCune look through photos she'd taken during the last few months. McCune found a few photos that she had taken in a costume store."

Riley felt a tingle of interest.

She asked, "You mean the kind of store that might sell clown costumes?"

Crivaro nodded. "Sounds interesting, doesn't it?"

"But what does it mean?" Riley said.

Crivaro said, "It's hard to say just yet—except Janet Davis was interested enough in costumes to want to take pictures of them. Her husband remembers her talking about doing that, but she didn't happen to tell him where. McCune is now trying to figure out what store the pictures were taken in. He'll call me then. It shouldn't take him very long."

Crivaro fell silent for a moment.

Then he glanced over at Riley and asked, "How are you holding up?"

"Fine," Riley said.

"Are you sure?" Crivaro asked. "You look kind of pale, like you're not feeling well."

It was true, of course. A combination of morning sickness and the shock of what she'd just seen had definitely gotten to her. But the last thing in the world she wanted to tell Crivaro was that she was pregnant.

"I'm fine," Riley insisted.

Crivaro said, "I take it you got some gut feelings about the killer back there."

Riley nodded silently.

"Anything more I should know—aside from the possibility that he'd scared the victim to death?"

"Not much," Riley said. "Except that he's ..."

She hesitated, then found the word she was looking for. "Sadistic."

As they drove on in silence, Riley found herself remembering the spectacle of the body splayed atop the gurney. She felt a resurgence of horror that the victim had to suffer such humiliation and indignity even in death.

She wondered what kind of monster would wish this on anybody.

As close as she'd momentarily felt to the killer, she knew that she couldn't begin to understand the sick workings of his mind.

And she was sure she didn't want to.

But was that what was in store for her before this case was over?

And what about afterward?

Is this what my life is going to be like?

CHAPTER EIGHT

As Riley and Crivaro walked into the clean, air-conditioned J. Edgar Hoover Building, she still felt the ugliness of the murder scene clinging to her. It was as if the horror had gotten into her very pores. How was she ever going to shake it off—especially the smell?

During the drive here, Crivaro had assured Riley that the smell she'd noticed in the field hadn't been from the body. As Riley had guessed, it was just from the trash left scattered from the carnival. Janet Davis's body hadn't been dead long enough to produce much of a smell—and neither had the bodies of Riley's murdered friends when she'd found them back in Lanton.

Riley still hadn't experienced the stench of a decomposing corpse.

Crivaro had said as they drove ...

"You'll know it when you smell it."

It wasn't something Riley looked forward to.

Again, she wondered ...

What do I think I'm doing here?

She and Crivaro took an elevator to a floor occupied by dozens of forensic labs. She followed Crivaro down a hall until they came to a room with a sign that said "DARKROOM." A lanky, longhaired young man stood leaning next to the door.

Crivaro introduced himself and Riley to the man, who nodded and said, "I'm Charlie Barrett, forensic tech. You got here just in time. I'm taking a break after processing the negatives out of that camera they found at Lady Bird Johnson Park. I was just going back in to make some prints. Come on in."

Charlie led Riley and Crivaro into a short hallway bathed in amber-colored light. Then they passed through a second door into a room awash with the same weird light.

The first thing that really struck Riley was the pungent, acrid smell of chemicals.

Curiously, she didn't find the smell to be at all unpleasant.

Instead, it seemed almost ...

Cleansing, Riley realized.

For the first time since she'd left the field where they'd found the body, that clinging, sour stench of trash was gone.

Even the horror lifted somewhat, and Riley's nausea disappeared.

It was a true relief.

Riley peered around through the dim, alien light, fascinated by all the elaborate equipment.

Charlie held up a sheet of paper with rows of images and examined it in the dim light.

"Here are the proofs," he said. "It looks like she was one hell of a photographer. A shame what happened to her."

As Charlie laid out strips of film on a table, Riley realized that she'd never been in a darkroom before. She'd always taken her own rolls of exposed film to a drugstore to be processed. Ryan and some of her friends had recently bought digital cameras, which didn't use film at all.

Janet Davis's husband had told McCune that his photographer wife had used both kinds of cameras. She tended to use a digital camera for her professional work. But she considered the shots she was taking in the park artwork, and she preferred the film cameras for that.

Riley thought that Charlie also seemed to be an artist, a true master at what he was doing. That made her wonder ...

Is this a dying art?

Would all this skilled work with film, paper, instruments, thermometers, timers, valves, and chemicals someday go the way of blacksmithing?

If so, it seemed rather sad.

Charlie began to make the prints one by one—first enlarging the negative onto a piece of photographic paper, then slowly soaking the paper in a basin of developing liquid, followed by further soakings in what Charlie called a “stop bath” and a “fix bath.” Then came a long rinse over a steel sink under tap water. Finally Charlie hung the pictures by clips to a rotating stand.

It was a slow process, and a quiet one. The silence was only broken by the trickling sounds of liquid, the shuffling of feet, and a few words spoken from time to time in what seemed almost like reverential whispers. It just didn’t feel right to talk loudly here.

Riley found the stillness and the slowness to be almost eerily soothing after the noisy disorder at the murder scene, when cops had been struggling to keep reporters at bay.

Riley watched raptly as the images revealed themselves over several long minutes—ghostly and indistinct at first, then finally with sharp clarity and contrast when they hung dripping from the stand.

The black and white photographs captured a quiet, peaceful evening at the park. One showed a wooden footbridge extending over a narrow passage of water. Another seemed at first to be of a flock of seagulls taking flight, but when the image came into clearer focus Riley realized that the birds were part of a large statue.

Another photo showed a rough-hewn stone obelisk with the Washington Monument towering far in the distance. Other images were of paths for biking and walking that passed through wooded areas.

The pictures had clearly been taken as sunset approached, creating soft gray shadows, glowing halos, and silhouettes. Riley could see that Charlie had been correct in his opinion that Janet Davis had been “one hell of a photographer.”

Riley also sensed that Janet knew the park well and had chosen her locations long in advance—and also the time of day, when visitors were few. Riley didn’t see a single person in any of the photos. It was as if Janet had had the park all to herself.

Finally came some shots of a marina, its docks and boats and water fairly shimmering as the sun finally set. The gentle calmness of the scene was truly tangible. Riley could almost hear the gentle lapping of water and the cries of birds, could almost feel the caress of cool air on her cheek.

Then finally came a much more jarring image.

It, too, was of the marina—or at least Riley thought she could make out the shapes of boats and docks. But everything was blurred and chaotic and jumbled.

Riley realized what must have happened at the very moment she’d snapped that picture ...

The camera got knocked out of her hands.

Riley’s heart jumped in her throat.

She knew the image had captured the very instant when Janet Davis’s world had changed forever.

In a fraction of a second, tranquility and beauty had turned into ugliness and terror.

CHAPTER NINE

As Riley stared at the blurred image, she wondered ...

What happened next?

After the camera was knocked from the woman's hands, what happened to her?

What did she experience?

Did she struggle against her assailant until he somehow subdued and bound her?

Did she remain conscious throughout her ordeal? Or was she knocked unconscious right there and then, when the picture was taken?

Did she then awaken to the horror of her final moments?

Maybe it doesn't matter, Riley thought.

She remembered what the ME had said about the likelihood that Janet had died from an overdose of amphetamines.

If that was true, she had actually been frightened to death.

And now Riley was looking at the frozen moment when that fatal terror had really begun.

She shuddered deeply at the thought.

Crivaro pointed to the photo and said to Charlie, "Magnify everything. Not just this one, all the photographs, every square centimeter."

Charlie scratched his head and asked, "Looking for what?"

"People," Crivaro said. "Any people you can find. Janet Davis seems to have thought she was alone, but she was wrong. Someone was lying in wait for her. Maybe—just maybe—she caught him on film without realizing it. If you find anybody at all, get as clear a blow-up as you can."

Although she didn't say so aloud, Riley felt skeptical.

Will Charlie find anybody?

She had a feeling about the killer—that he was far too stealthy to let himself be accidentally photographed. She doubted that even a microscopic search of the photos would reveal any trace of him.

At that moment, Crivaro's phone buzzed in his pocket. He said, "That's got to be McCune."

Riley and Crivaro left the darkroom, and Crivaro stepped away to take the call. He seemed to be excited by whatever McCune was saying to him. When he ended the call, he said to Riley ...

"McCune has located the costume store where Janet Davis took some pictures. He's on his way there, and says he'll meet us there. Let's get going."

*

When Crivaro pulled up to the store called Costume Romp, Agent McCune was already there waiting in his own vehicle. He got out and joined Riley and Crivaro as they approached the store. It looked to Riley at first like a modest storefront establishment. The front windows were filled with costumes, of course—ranging from a vampire and a mummy to fancy dress outfits suggestive of earlier centuries. There was also an Uncle Sam costume for the upcoming Fourth of July.

When she followed Crivaro and McCune inside, Riley was startled by the vastness of the long brick interior, filled with racks loaded with what appeared to be hundreds of costumes, masks, and wigs.

The sight of so much make-believe took Riley's breath away. The costumes included pirates, monsters, soldiers, princes and princesses, wild and domestic animals, space aliens, and every other kind of character she could imagine.

It boggled Riley's mind. After all, Halloween only came once a year. Was there really a year-round market for all these costumes? If so, what did people want with them?

A lot of costume parties, I guess.

It occurred to her that she shouldn't be surprised, considering the horrors she was starting to learn about. In a world where such awful things happened, it was small wonder that people wanted to escape into fantasy worlds.

It also wasn't surprising that a talented photographer like Janet Davis would enjoy taking photographs here, in the midst of such a rich array of images. No doubt she used real film here, not a digital camera.

The monster masks and costumes reminded Riley of a TV show she'd enjoyed during the last couple of years—the story of a teenage girl who fought and slew vampires and other kinds of demons.

Lately, though, Riley had found that show less appealing.

After learning about her own ability to enter a killer's mind, the saga of a girl with superpowers and super-obligations now seemed to cut a little too close to home for comfort.

Riley, Crivaro, and McCune looked all around but didn't see anybody.

McCune called out, "Hello—is anybody here?"

A man stepped out from behind one of the costume racks.

"May I help you?" he asked.

The man cut a startling figure. He was tall and extremely thin, wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt that was printed to resemble a tuxedo. He was also wearing familiar "Groucho" glasses—the kind with an enormous white nose, black-rimmed glasses, and bushy eyebrows and a mustache.

Obviously taken somewhat aback, Crivaro and McCune took out their badges and told the man who they and Riley were.

Seeming utterly unsurprised to be visited by the FBI, the man introduced himself as Danny Casal, the owner of the business.

"Just call me Danny," he said.

Riley found herself waiting for him to take off the nose glasses. But as she looked at him more closely, she realized ...

Those are prescription glasses.

They also had remarkably thick lenses. Danny Casal apparently wore these glasses all the time, and he surely would be quite myopic without them.

McCune opened a manila folder.

"We have photos of two women," he said. "We need to know if you've ever seen either of them."

The eyebrows and fake nose and mustache all bobbed up and down as Danny nodded. He struck Riley as a peculiarly serious and dour man to be wearing such a getup.

McCune pulled out one photo and held it for the shop owner to see.

Danny peered at the photo through his glasses.

He said, "She's not one of our regular customers. I can't guarantee that she's never been in the shop, but I don't recognize her."

"You're sure?" McCune asked.

"Quite positive."

"Does the name Margo Birch mean anything to you?"

"Uh, maybe something in the news. I'm not sure."

McCune pulled out another photo. "What about this woman? We believe she came to your establishment to take pictures."

Riley, too, looked closely at the photograph. This must be Janet Davis. It was the first time she'd seen her living, unpainted face—smiling and happy and unaware of the terrible fate that awaited her.

"Oh, yes," Casal said. "She was in here not long ago. Janet something."

"Davis," Crivaro said.

“That’s right,” Casal said with a nod. “A nice lady. A nice camera too—I’m something of a photography buff myself. She offered to pay me to let her take pictures here, but I wouldn’t accept. I was flattered that she found my establishment worthy of her efforts.”

Casal tilted his head and looked at his visitors.

“But I don’t suppose you’re here with good news about her,” he said. “Is she in some kind of trouble?”

Crivaro said, “I’m afraid she was murdered. Both of these women were.”

“Really?” Casal said. “When?”

“Margo Birch was found dead five days ago. Janet Davis was murdered the night before last.”

“Oh,” Casal said. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Riley barely noticed any change in his tone of voice or facial expression.

McCune changed tactics. He asked, “Do you sell clown costumes here?”

“Of course,” Casal said. “Why do you ask?”

McCune abruptly took another photo out of his folder. Riley almost gasped when she got a look at it.

It showed another dead woman dressed in a clown costume. She was splayed on concrete next to an alley dumpster. The costume was similar to the one that Janet Davis, the victim found in the park this morning, had worn—puffy fabric with huge pompom buttons. But the colors and patterns were somewhat different, and so was the makeup.

Margo Birch, Riley realized. The way she was found.

McCune asked Casal, “Do you sell costumes like this one?”

Riley noticed that Crivaro was scowling at McCune. McCune was obviously testing Casal’s response to the photo, but Crivaro seemed to disapprove of his blunt approach.

But like McCune, Riley was curious as to how the man was going to react.

Casal turned to look at Riley. She simply couldn’t read his expression. In addition to the bushy eyebrows and mustache, she could now see how really thick the lenses were. Although he was surely making eye contact with her, it didn’t look like it. Refracted through the lenses, his eyes appeared to be directed slightly elsewhere.

It’s like he’s wearing a mask, Riley thought.

“Is this Ms. Davis?” Casal asked Riley.

Riley shook her head and said, “No. But Janet Davis’s body was found in a similar condition this morning.”

Still with no change in his tone of voice, Casal said to McCune ...

“In answer to your question—yes, we do sell this sort of costume.”

He led his visitors over to a long rack full of clown costumes. Riley was startled at how varied they were.

As Casal browsed among some tattered jackets and baggy, patched up pants, he said, “As you can see, there are several different types of clowns. For example, there’s the ‘tramp’ here, often personified as a hobo or a vagabond, with a worn-out hat and shoes, sooty sunburned makeup, a sad frown, and a painted stubble of beard. The female equivalent is often a bag lady.”

He moved on to group of more motley costumes.

“Somewhat related to the tramp is the ‘Auguste,’ a traditional European type, more of a trickster than a vagabond, an underling and a flunky. He wears a red nose and mismatched clothes and alternates between inept clumsiness and agile cunning.”

Then he shuffled through some costumes that seemed to be mostly white, some of them spangled and with colored trim.

He said, “And here we have the traditional European whiteface, the ‘Pierrot’—composed, poised, graceful, intelligent, always in control. His makeup is simple—completely white, with regular features painted in red or black, like a mime, and he often wears a conical hat. He’s an authority figure,

often Auguste's boss—and not a very nice boss. Small wonder, though, since many of Auguste's jokes are at his expense.”

He moved through dozens of wildly different costumes, saying ...

“Now here we've got lots of different ‘character’ clowns, based on types familiar from everyday life—cops, maids, butlers, doctors, firemen, that kind of thing. But here's the type you're looking for.”

He showed his visitors a row of brightly colored costumes that definitely reminded Riley of the victims in the picture and the field.

“This is the ‘grotesque whiteface,’” he said.

That word caught Riley's attention.

Grotesque.

Yes, that certainly described what had been done to Janet Davis's body.

Fingering one of the outfits, Casal continued, “This is the most common type of clown, I suppose, at least here in America. It doesn't reflect any particular type or profession or status. The grotesque whiteface is just generally clownish-looking, ridiculous and silly. Think Bozo the Clown, or Ronald McDonald—or Stephen King's ‘It,’ to cite a scarier example. The grotesque typically wears a baggy colorful costume, outsized shoes, and white makeup with exaggerated features, including a huge wig and a bright red nose.”

Crivaro seemed to be genuinely interested in what Casal was now saying.

He asked, “Have you sold any of these grotesque-type costumes lately?”

Casal thought for a moment.

“Not that I remember—not at least during the last few months,” he said. “I could look through our receipts, but that might take a while.”

Crivaro handed him his FBI card and said, “I'd appreciate if you'd do that and get back to me.”

“I'll do that,” Casal said. “But remember, the grotesque costume is extremely common. It might have been bought at any costume shop anywhere in the city.”

McCune smirked a little and said, “Yeah, but this isn't just *any* costume store. One of the victims was here pretty recently taking pictures.”

His expression still inscrutable, Casal put his hands in his pockets and said, “Yes, I can understand why that might concern you.”

Casal looked off into space for a moment, as if deep in thought.

Then his whole body seemed to jerk to attention.

“Oh, my,” he said, finally sounding unsettled. “I just thought of something I think you'd better know.”

CHAPTER TEN

Riley felt a surge of excitement as she and the two FBI agents followed Casal away from the costume rack.

Are we about to get a break? she wondered.

Without revealing what he'd just remembered, the store manager had whirled around and headed back to the front of the store.

When he reached the front desk, Casal stopped and began to explain.

"Janet Davis came back here a second day to take more pictures. But she left rather abruptly—and she wasn't at all happy."

Riley, Crivaro, and McCune exchanged interested glances.

"Why not?" Crivaro asked.

Casal opened a filing cabinet and thumbed through its contents.

"Well, she complained about a young man who was working here at the time—Gregory Wertz is his name. Apparently he'd said something improper to her. She wasn't specific, but she was quite upset about it, and it wasn't the first time a female customer complained about him. I'd also suspected him of stealing for some time, so I fired him on the spot."

Crivaro asked, "Can you give us his address?"

"Certainly," Casal said, taking a sheet of paper out of the drawer and handing it to Crivaro. "Here you go—his name, Social Security number, phone number, and address. Also, the last day he worked here—exactly two weeks ago today."

Crivaro thanked him for his cooperation, and Riley followed the two agents out of the store.

She was startled when, as soon as they were outside, Crivaro grabbed McCune by the shoulder.

"What do you think you were doing back there?" he asked angrily.

McCune looked surprised.

"You mean showing him that photo? I wanted to see his reaction, of course."

"It was a stunt," Crivaro said. "I don't like stunts."

McCune's face reddened with anger.

"A stunt, huh?" he said. "Are you telling me you trust that Casal guy? He seemed as suspicious as hell to me. Actually, he gave me the creeps, the way he talked and all. He didn't even give us a good look at his face."

That's true, Riley thought.

But it really hadn't occurred to her to suspect Casal of anything.

Crivaro paced back and forth, barking at McCune.

"So you just thought you'd put the screws to him, huh? You decided to go for some kind of instant confession. Figured you'd get a lot of glory if you succeeded. Well, let me put your mind at ease about something. Casal's not our killer."

"How do you know?" McCune asked.

Crivaro rolled his eyes and said, "Didn't you get a good look at him? He's blind as a bat without those glasses, and he's as skinny as a rail. Our killer abducted two women—at least one of them probably forcibly. Then he managed to subdue them. Can you imagine Casal pulling that off?"

Looking as embarrassed as angry now, McCune began, "Maybe with an accomplice—"

Crivaro interrupted, "There wasn't any accomplice. My every instinct tells me our killer acts alone. And he's sure as hell not Danny Casal. Casal's maybe an important witness, though. We're all just lucky you didn't spook him into not cooperating."

McCune hung his head and shuffled his feet.

Crivaro jabbed his finger at him.

“Now listen to me. No more stunts, not when you’re working with me. If you get any ideas, talk to me about them first. This is not the Boy Scouts. Initiative is *not* a virtue right now. Either I call all the shots, or you can get off the case.”

In a whisper, McCune said, “I hear you. It won’t happen again.”

“It sure as hell had better not,” Crivaro growled.

A silence fell among the three of them.

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