

BLAKE PIERCE



luring

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE--BOOK THREE

The Making of Riley Paige

Блейк Пирс

Luring

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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) LURING (The Making of Riley Paige —Book Three) is book #3 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. A serial killer is using barbed wire to kill a series of women, and the FBI, at a loss, must break protocol and turn to its brilliant 22 year old academy recruit, Riley Paige, to solve the case. Riley Paige is accepted into the grueling FBI academy, and is determined to finally keep a low profile and work hard with her peers. But that is not meant to be, as she is hand-picked to help her mentors to profile and hunt down a serial killer that has terrified the nation. What sort of diabolical killer, Riley wonders, would use barbed wire to kill his victims? There is no time for Riley to make a mistake in this deadly game of cat and mouse, with her own future on the line, and with a killer out there that may just be smarter than her. An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, LURING is book #3 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 14 books and counting. Book #4 in THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

Luring (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 3)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fourteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising eleven 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 four books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising four books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising four 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

Hope Nelson took a last look around the store as she got ready to close up for the night. She was tired, and it had been a long, slow business day. It was after midnight, and she'd been here since early that morning.

She was alone now, because she'd sent the last of her grumbling employees home a little early. None of them liked to work late on Saturday nights. On weekdays, the store always closed at 5:00, which was more to everybody's liking.

Not that she had much sympathy with the help.

Owning this place with her husband, Mason, meant putting in longer hours than anybody else—getting here first and leaving here last on most days. It was no secret to Hope that local people resented her and Mason for being the richest folks in the dinky little town of Dighton.

And she resented them right back.

Her personal motto was ...

Money is responsibility.

She took her many duties seriously, and so did Mason, who served as the town mayor. They weren't ones for vacationing or even taking the occasional day off. Sometimes Hope felt as though she and Mason were the only people around who gave much of a damn about anything.

As she looked at the well-ordered merchandise—the hardware and power equipment, the feeds, seeds, and fertilizers—she thought as she often did ...

Dighton wouldn't last a day without us.

In fact, she figured the same might be true of the whole county.

Sometimes she dreamed of the two of them packing up and leaving, just to prove it.

It would serve everybody right.

She turned off the lights with a dismayed sigh. Then, as she reached to activate the alarm system before leaving, she saw a figure through the glass door. It was a man standing on the sidewalk under the streetlight, some 30 feet away.

He seemed to be staring right at her.

She was shocked to see that his face was badly scarred and pitted—whether from birth or from some terrible accident, she had no idea. He was wearing a t-shirt, so she could see that he was similarly disfigured on his hands and arms.

It must be hard for him, going through life like that, she thought.

But what was he doing standing out there so late on a Saturday night? Had he come into the store earlier? If so, one of her employees must have helped him. She certainly didn't expect to see him or anyone else out here after closing.

But there he was, staring at her and smiling.

What did he want?

Whatever it was, it meant that Hope was going to have to talk to him personally. That bothered her. It was going to be a strain to pretend not to notice his face.

Feeling distinctly uneasy, Hope punched in the alarm code, stepped outside, and locked the front door. The warm night air felt good after being shut up in the store all day long with unsavory smells, most notably of fertilizer.

As she started to walk toward the man, she forced a smile and called out ...

“Sorry, we're closed.”

He shrugged and kept smiling and murmured something inaudible.

Hope stifled a sigh. She wanted to ask him to speak louder. But she found it to say anything to him that resembled a command or even a polite request. She was irrationally afraid of hurting his feelings.

His smile broadened as she walked toward him. Again, he said something she couldn't hear. She stopped just a couple of feet in front of him.

"Excuse me, but we're closed for the night," she said.

He mumbled something inaudible. She shook her head to indicate that she couldn't hear him.

He spoke just a little louder, and this time she could make out the words ...

"I've got a little problem with something."

Hope asked, "What is it?"

He murmured something else that was inaudible.

Maybe he wants to return something he bought today, she thought.

The last thing she wanted right now was to unlock the door and deactivate the alarm system just so she could take back the merchandise and return his money.

Hope said, "If you want to return anything, I'm afraid you'll have to come back tomorrow."

The disfigured man mumbled ...

"No, but ..."

Then he shrugged at her silently, still smiling. Hope found it hard to maintain eye contact with him. Looking directly at his face was difficult. And somehow, she sensed that he knew that.

Judging from his smile, maybe he even enjoyed it.

She suppressed a shudder at the thought that he might take pleasure in the discomfort he provoked in people.

Then he said a bit more loudly and clearly ...

"Come look."

He pointed toward his old pickup truck, which was parked next to the curb just a short distance away. Then he turned and started to walk toward the truck. Hope just stood there for a moment. She didn't want to follow him, and she wasn't sure why she should bother ...

Whatever it is, surely it can wait to tomorrow.

But she couldn't bring herself to turn around and walk away.

Again, she was afraid of seeming rude to him.

She walked behind him to the back of the truck. He pulled open the cover on the truck bed and she saw a mass of barbed wire, unbundled and loose and in tangles all over the bed of the pickup truck.

Suddenly he seized her from behind and slapped a wet rag over her mouth and nose.

Hope kicked and tried to pull herself away, but he was taller and stronger than she was.

She couldn't even get free of the rag to scream. It was soaked through with a thick liquid that smelled and tasted sickeningly sweet.

Then a strange sensation began to come over her.

It was giddiness and elation, as if she had taken some kind of drug.

For a few seconds, that euphoria made it hard for Hope to grasp that she was in terrible danger. Then she tried to struggle again, but found that her limbs were weaker and seemed almost rubbery.

Whatever it was the man was trying to do to her, she couldn't fight against it.

Feeling almost outside of her own body, she was aware of him picking her up and dumping her in the back of his truck amid the tangle of barbed wire. All the while he held the rag tight to her face, and she couldn't help but breathe the thick fumes.

Hope Nelson was just vaguely aware of little stabbing pains all over her body as she fell limp and slowly lost consciousness.

CHAPTER ONE

As she prepared two ribeye steaks for broiling, Riley Sweeney thought again ...

I want tonight to be special.

She and her fiancé, Ryan Paige, had been too busy to enjoy much of anything lately. Riley's grueling schedule in the FBI Honors Internship Program and Ryan's new job as an entry-level attorney had absorbed all their time and energy. Ryan even had to work long hours today—a Saturday.

Riley's 22nd birthday had passed almost two weeks ago, and there simply hadn't been time to celebrate. Ryan had bought her a pretty necklace, and that was about all there had been to it—no party, no dinner, no cake. She hoped that tonight's special dinner might help make up for that.

Besides, it was pretty much now or never as far as a nice dinner together was concerned. Just yesterday Riley had successfully completed her internship, and tomorrow she'd be heading off to the FBI Academy at Quantico, Va. Ryan would be staying here in Washington D.C. Although the distance between them was only about an hour by car or train, they were both going to be working very hard. She wasn't sure when she and Ryan would have any time together again.

Following a detailed recipe, Riley finished flavoring the steaks with salt, pepper, onion powder, ground mustard, and dried oregano and thyme. Then she stood looking around the kitchen at her handiwork. She'd made a lovely tossed salad, she had sliced mushrooms ready to broil with the steak, and two potatoes were already baking in the oven. In the refrigerator, a store-bought cheesecake was ready for dessert.

The small kitchen table was neatly set, including a vase full of flowers she'd picked up when she'd bought groceries. A bottle of inexpensive but very pleasant red wine was waiting there to be opened.

Riley looked at her watch. Ryan had said he should be home about now, and she hoped he wouldn't be much later. She didn't want to sear and broil the steaks before he arrived.

Meanwhile, she could think of nothing else that needed to be done right now. She'd spent whole day washing laundry, cleaning their tiny apartment, shopping, and preparing the food—domestic tasks that she'd seldom had time for since she and Ryan had moved in together at the beginning of the summer. She'd found it to be a nice change from her studies.

Even so, she couldn't help but wonder ...

Is this what married life is going to be like?

If she achieved her goal of becoming an FBI agent, would she really spend long days making everything perfect for when Ryan came from work? It didn't seem likely.

But right now Riley had a hard time visualizing that future—or any specific future.

She plopped herself down on the couch.

She closed her eyes and realized she was very tired.

What we both need is a vacation, she thought.

But a vacation wasn't in the cards for the near future.

She felt a little drowsy and had almost dozed off when a memory forced its way into her mind ...

She was bound hand and foot by a madman wearing a clown costume and makeup.

He held a mirror to her face and said ...

"All done now. Have a look!"

She saw that he had smeared makeup all over her face so that she, too, looked like a clown.

Then he held a syringe in front of her. She knew that if he injected her with its deadly contents, she'd die from sheer terror ...

Riley's eyes snapped open and she shivered all over.

It had only been a couple of months since she'd barely escaped death at the hands of the notorious so-called "Clown Killer." She was still having painful flashbacks of her ordeal.

As she tried to shake off her memory, she heard someone coming down the apartment building steps to the basement hallway.

Ryan! He's home!

She jumped up from the couch and checked the oven to make sure it was at its highest temperature. Then she turned off the apartment lights and lit the candles she'd set on the table. Finally she dashed toward the door and met Ryan just as he came inside.

She threw her arms around him and gave him a kiss. But he didn't kiss her back, and she felt his body sag from exhaustion. He looked into the candlelit apartment and blurted ...

"Riley—what the hell's going on?"

Riley's heart sank.

She said, "I'm fixing something nice for dinner."

Ryan came inside and set down his briefcase and collapsed onto the couch.

"You shouldn't bother," he said. "It's been a hell of a day. And I'm not very hungry."

Riley sat down beside him and rubbed his shoulders.

She said, "But everything's practically ready. Aren't you hungry enough for ribeye steaks?"

"Ribeyes?" Ryan said with surprise. "Can we afford it?"

Fighting down a surge of irritation, Riley didn't reply. She handled the household finances, and she felt like she knew pretty well what they could afford and not afford.

Apparently sensing Riley's dismay, Ryan said ...

"Ribeyes sound nice. Give me a few minutes to wash up."

Ryan got up and headed for the bathroom. Riley hurried back into the kitchen, took the potatoes out of the oven, and seared the steaks and broiled them so that they'd both be medium rare.

Ryan was seated at the table by the time she put their meals on the table. He'd poured glasses of wine for both of them.

"Thanks," Ryan said, smiling weakly. "This is nice."

As he cut into his steak he added, "I'm afraid I've brought some work home. I'll have to get to it after we eat."

Riley suppressed a sigh of deep disappointment. She'd hoped their dinner would end more romantically.

She and Ryan ate in silence for a few moments. Then Ryan started to complain about his day ...

"This entry level work—it's practically slave labor. We've got to do all the heavy lifting for the partners—research, writing briefs, making sure everything's ready for the courtroom. And we put in longer hours than the partners by far. It feels like some kind of fraternity hazing, it except never stops."

"It'll get better," Riley said.

Then she forced a laugh and added ...

"Someday you'll be a partner yourself. And you'll have a team of entry level guys who'll go home and complain about you."

Ryan didn't laugh, and Riley couldn't blame him. It seemed like a lame joke now that she'd said it.

Ryan kept grumbling during dinner, and Riley didn't know whether she felt more hurt or angry. Didn't he appreciate the effort she'd gone to make everything as perfect as she could tonight?

And didn't he understand how much their lives were about to change?

When Ryan fell quiet for a few moments, Riley said ...

"You know, we're having a get-together tomorrow at the FBI building to celebrate the end of the internship. You'll be able to come, won't you?"

"I'm afraid not, Riley. This is going to be a seven-day week."

Riley almost gasped.

“But tomorrow’s Sunday,” she said.

Ryan shrugged and said, “Yeah, well, it’s like I said—slave labor.”

Riley said, “Look, it’s not going to take all day. There’ll be a couple of speeches—the assistant director and our training supervisor will want to say a few words. And then there will be some snacks and—”

Ryan interrupted, “Riley, I’m sorry.”

“But I’m leaving for Quantico tomorrow, right afterwards. I’m taking my suitcase with me. I thought you’d be driving me to the bus station.”

“I can’t,” Ryan said a bit sharply. “You’ll have to get there some other way.”

They ate in silence for a few moments.

Riley struggled to understand what was happening. Why couldn’t Ryan come with her tomorrow? It would only take a couple of hours out of his day. Then something began to dawn on her.

She said, “You still don’t want me to go to Quantico.”

Ryan let out a groan of annoyance.

“Riley, let’s not get started on this,” he said.

Riley felt her face redden with anger.

She said, “Well, it’s now or never, isn’t it?”

Ryan said, “You’ve made your decision. I took it to be final.”

Riley’s eyes widened.

“My decision?” she said. “I thought it was *our* decision.”

Ryan sighed. “We’re not going to have this conversation,” he said. “Let’s just finish eating, OK?”

Riley sat there and stared at him as he continued to pick at his meal.

She found herself wondering ...

Is Ryan right?

Did I just railroad us both into this?

She thought back to their conversations, trying to remember, trying to sort it out. She remembered how proud Ryan had been of her when she’d stopped the Clown Killer ...

“You saved at least one woman’s life. By solving the case, you may have saved other lives as well. It’s crazy. I think maybe you’re crazy. But you’re also a hero.”

At the time, she’d thought that was what he wanted—for her to pursue a career with the FBI, to keep right on being a hero.

But now that she thought about it, Riley couldn’t remember him saying those precise words. Ryan had never told her ...

“I want you to go to the academy. I want you to follow your dream.”

Riley took some long, slow breaths.

We need to discuss this calmly, she thought.

Finally she said ...

“Ryan, what do *you* want? For us, I mean?”

Ryan tilted his head as he looked at her.

“Do you really want to know?” he asked.

Riley’s throat tightened sharply.

“I want to know,” she said. “Tell me what you want.”

A pained look crossed Ryan’s face. Riley found herself dreading what he was going to say next.

Finally he said, “I just want a family.”

Then he shrugged and ate another bite of steak.

Feeling a glimmer of relief, Riley said, “I want that too.”

“Do you?” Ryan asked.

“Of course I do. You know I do.”

Ryan shook his head and said, “I’m not sure even *you* know what you really want.”

Riley felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach. For a moment she simply didn't know what to say.

Then she said, "Don't you think I can have a career *and* a family?"

"Sure I do," Ryan said. "Women do it all the time these days. It's called 'having it all,' I hear. It's tough and it takes planning and sacrifices, but it can be done. And I'd love to help you do all that. But ..."

His voice faded.

"But what?" Riley asked.

He breathed deeply, then said, "Maybe it would be different if you wanted to become a lawyer, like me. Or a doctor or a shrink. Or go into real estate. Or start your own business. Or become a college professor. I could relate to any of those things. I could deal with them. But this whole thing with going to the Academy—you're going to be in Quantico for 18 weeks! How much are we going to see each other during that whole time? Do you thin any relationship can survive so much time apart? And besides ..."

He held Riley's gaze for a moment.

Then he said, "Riley, you've almost been killed twice since I've known you."

Riley gulped hard.

He was right, of course. Her most recent brush with death had been at the hands of the Clown Killer. Before that, during their last semester in college, she'd almost been killed by a sociopathic psychology professor who still awaited trial for murdering two other coeds. Riley had known both of those girls. One had been her best friend and roommate.

Riley's help in solving that awful murder case was how she'd gotten into the summer intern program, and it was one of the main reasons she was thinking about becoming an FBI agent.

In a choked voice, Riley said, "Do you want me to quit? Do you want me to not go to Quantico tomorrow?"

Ryan said, "It doesn't matter what I want."

Riley was struggling not to cry now.

"Yes, it does, Ryan," she said. "It matters a lot."

Ryan locked gazes with her for what seemed like a long time.

Then he said, "I guess I do. Want you to quit, I mean. I know you've found it exciting. It's been a great adventure for you. But it's time for us both to settle down. It's time for us to get on with our *real* lives."

Riley suddenly felt as though this had to be a bad dream, but she couldn't wake up.

Our real lives! she thought.

What did that mean?

And what did it say about her that she didn't know what it meant?

She only knew one thing for certain ...

He doesn't want me to go to Quantico.

Then Ryan said, "Look, you can work at all kinds of jobs right here in DC. And you've got lots of time to think about what you want to do in the long run. Meanwhile, it doesn't matter if you make a lot of money. We're not rich on what I'm making at the firm, but we're getting by, and I'll eventually be doing really well."

Ryan started eating again, looking oddly relieved, as if they'd just settled everything.

But had they settled anything at all? Riley had spent all summer dreaming about the FBI Academy. She couldn't imagine giving it up right here and now.

No, she thought. *I just can't do that.*

Now she felt anger swelling up inside her.

In a tense voice she said, "I'm sorry you feel that way. I'm not changing my mind. I'm going to Quantico tomorrow."

Ryan stared at her like he couldn't believe his ears.

Riley got up from the table and said, "Enjoy the rest of your meal. There's some cheesecake in the refrigerator. I'm tired. I'm going to take a shower and go to bed."

Before Ryan could reply, Riley hurried into the bathroom. She cried for a few minutes, then took a long, hot shower. When she put on her slippers and bathrobe and came back out of the bathroom, she saw Ryan sitting in the kitchen. He'd cleared the table and was working at his computer. He didn't look up.

Riley went into the bedroom and climbed into bed and started crying again.

As she wiped her eyes and blew her nose, she wondered ...

Why am so angry?

Is Ryan wrong?

Is any of this his fault?

Her thoughts were such a jumble, she couldn't think things through. And a terrible memory started to creep up on her—of waking up in this bed with a sharp pain, then seeing that she was soaked in blood ...

My miscarriage.

She found herself wondering—was that one of the reasons Ryan didn't want her to go into the FBI? She'd been badly stressed by the Clown Killer case when it had happened. But the doctor in the hospital had assured her that stress had nothing to do with her miscarriage.

Instead, she'd said that it had been caused by "chromosomal abnormalities."

Now that Riley thought about it again, that word disturbed her ...

Abnormalities.

She wondered—was she somehow abnormal, deep down inside where it really mattered?

Was she incapable of having a lasting relationship, let alone a family?

As she drifted off to sleep, she felt as though she knew only one thing for sure ...

I'm going to Quantico tomorrow.

She was asleep before she could think about what might happen after that.

CHAPTER TWO

The man was pleased to hear the woman's soft moan. He knew she must be regaining consciousness. Yes, he could see that her eyes had opened a little.

She was lying on her side on a rough-hewn wooden table in the small room that had a dirt floor, cinderblock walls, and low timbered ceiling. She was bound up tightly in a curled up position, taped fast with duct tape. Her legs were sharply bent and tightly bound to her chest, and her hands were wrapped around her shins. Her head lay sideways on top of her knees.

She reminded him of pictures he'd seen of human fetuses—and also of embryos he sometimes found when he cracked a fresh egg from one of the chickens he kept. She looked so mild and innocent, it was somehow a rather touching sight.

Mostly, of course, she reminded him of the other woman—Alice had been her name, he believed. He'd once thought that Alice would be the only one he'd treat this way, but then he'd enjoyed it ... and there were so few pleasures in his life ... how could he stop?

"It hurts," the woman murmured, as if out of a dream. "Why does it hurt?"

He knew that it was because she lay in a thick tangled bed of barbed wire. Blood was already trickling onto the table top, and it was going add to the stains in the unfinished wood. Not that it mattered. The table was older than he was, and he was the only person who ever saw it anyway.

He was hurting and bleeding some as well. He'd cut himself while getting her into the truck with the barbed wire. It was harder to do than he'd expected because she'd fought back more forcefully than the other one.

She had writhed and twisted while the homemade chloroform was starting to kick in. But her struggles had weakened and he'd finally subdued her completely.

Even so, he wasn't much bothered to be hurt by the sharp barbs. He knew from hard experience that such cuts healed up pretty quickly, even if they did leave ghastly scars.

He stooped down and looked closely into her face.

Her eyes were opened almost impossibly wide now. Her irises twitched around as she looked back at him.

Still trying to avoid looking at me, he realized.

Everybody acted that way toward him, wherever he went. He didn't blame people for trying to pretend he was invisible, or that he didn't exist at all. Sometimes he'd look in the mirror and pretend that he could make himself disappear.

Then the woman murmured again ...

"It hurts."

In addition to the cuts, he was sure that her head ached badly from the heavy dose of homemade chloroform. When he'd first mixed up the stuff right here, he'd almost passed out himself, and he'd suffered from a splitting headache for days afterward. But the preparation worked very well, so he would continue using it.

Now he was well prepared for what he was about to do next. He was wearing thick work gloves now and a thickly padded jacket. He wasn't going to hurt himself any more while getting the thing done.

He went to work on the mass of barbed wire with a pair of wire cutters. Then he pulled a length of it tightly around the woman's body and twisted the ends into makeshift knots to hold the wire in place.

The woman let out a sharp whimper and tried to twist loose from the duct tape as the barbs tore through her skin and clothing.

As he kept working, he said ...

"You don't have to be quiet. You can scream if you want—if it helps."

He certainly wasn't worried about anybody hearing her.

She whimpered louder, and she seemed to try to scream, but her voice was weak.

He chuckled quietly. He knew that she couldn't get enough air in her lungs to properly scream—not with her legs bound up against her chest like that.

He pulled another length of barbed wire around her and stretched it tight, watching as blood dripped from where each barb pierced her flesh beneath her clothes, soaking through the fabric, spreading and making spots much wider than the wound itself.

He kept right on pulling strand after strand around her until she was all bound up like some kind of enormous wire cocoon, not looking human at all. The bundle was making all kinds strange low sounds—sighs, gasps, whimpers, and groans. Blood trickled here and spurted a little there until the whole tabletop was bathed in red.

Then he stepped back and admired his handiwork.

He turned off the overhead light and walked out into the night, closing the heavy wooden door behind him.

The sky was clear and starry, and he couldn't hear anything now except the dense rumble of crickets.

He took a long, slow breath of the clean, fresh air.

The night seemed especially sweet just now.

CHAPTER THREE

As Riley lined up with the rest of the interns for their final formal photograph, she heard the door to the reception room open.

Her heart leapt, and she turned around expectantly to see who had arrived.

But it was only Hoke Gilmer, the program's training supervisor, returning after having stepped out for a few minutes.

Riley suppressed a sigh. She already knew that Agent Crivaro wouldn't be here today. Yesterday he'd congratulated her on completing the course and said he wanted to get back to Quantico. It was obvious that he simply had no taste for ceremonies or receptions.

Her secret hope was that Ryan might show up out of the blue to help her celebrate the completion of the summer program.

Of course she knew better than to seriously expect that to happen.

Even so, she couldn't help but fantasize that somehow he'd change his mind and he'd arrive at the last minute and apologize for his cold behavior last night and finally say those words she longed for him to say ...

"I want you to go to the academy. I want you to follow your dream."

But of course, that wasn't going to happen ...

And the sooner I get that through my head, the better.

The 20 interns formed three rows for the photograph—one row seated at a long table, with two rows standing behind them. Since the interns were arranged in alphabetical order, Riley found herself in the back row between other two other students whose last names began with S—Naomi Strong and Rhys Seely.

She hadn't gotten to know Naomi or Rhys very well.

But then, that was true for almost all the other interns. She'd felt out of place among them ever since the first day of the program 10 weeks ago. The only student she'd gotten close to during that whole time was John Welch, who was standing a few students to her left.

On that first day, John had explained why the others were giving her odd looks and whispering to each other about her ...

"Pretty much everybody here knows who you are. I guess you could say that your reputation precedes you."

She was, after all, the only intern who already had what everybody called "field experience" under her belt.

Riley fought down another sigh at the thought of those words ...

"Field experience."

She found it weird to think of what had happened back at Lanton University as "field experience." A nightmare seemed more like it. She'd never be able to shake off those memories of finding her two close friends with their throats cut in their blood-drenched dorm rooms.

Back then, the last thing she'd had in mind was training with the FBI. She'd gotten caught up in the case through no choice of her own—and she'd helped solve it, which was why pretty much everybody here had known who she was from the very first day.

And then when the program got underway, and all the other students had started learning about computers and forensics and other less thrilling matters, Riley had tracked down the deadly Clown Killer. Both of those cases had been traumatic and life-threatening.

Getting a "head start" on "field experience" had hardly made her popular with the other interns. In fact, their unspoken resentment had been palpable all along.

And now at least some of them envied her for moving on to the Academy.

If only they knew what I've been through, she thought.

She doubted that they'd envy her then.

She felt horror and guilt at the memory of her two friends being murdered at Lanton, and she wished she could turn back time and stop it from happening. Not only would her friends still be alive, but her own life would be completely different right now. She'd have a psychology degree and some kind of run-of-the-mill job and a whole lot of uncertainty about what she was going to do with the rest of her life ...

And Ryan would be perfectly happy with me.

But she doubted that she would be happy. She hadn't felt passionate about pursuing any career until the possibility of being an FBI agent came up—even if she did feel like this career had chosen her, not the other way around.

When the three rows of interns were properly posed, Hoke Gilmer told a joke to make everybody laugh while the photographer snapped their picture. Riley didn't feel in a humorous mood, so the joke didn't strike her as funny. She was sure that her own smile looked forced and insincere.

She also felt insecure about her own pantsuit, which she'd bought months ago at a thrift shop. Most of the other interns were better off financially than she was, and markedly better dressed. She didn't look forward to seeing the photo that was being taken.

Then the group broke up to enjoy the snacks and refreshments arranged on another table in the middle of the room. Everybody clustered into groups of friends, and as usual, Riley felt isolated.

She noticed that Natalie Embry was clinging to Rollin Sloan, an intern who was headed straight for a high-paying job as a data analyst in a big Midwestern field office.

Riley heard a voice at her side ...

"Well, Natalie sure got what she came here for, didn't she?"

Riley turned and saw John Welch standing beside her.

She smiled and said, "Come on, John. Aren't you being a bit cynical?"

John shrugged and said, "Are you telling me I'm wrong?"

Riley looked again at Natalie, who was flashing her new engagement ring at someone.

"No, I guess not," Riley said to John.

Natalie had been showing off that ring to everybody ever since Rollin had put it on her finger a couple of days ago. It had been a real whirlwind romance—she and Rollin hadn't even met before entering the summer program.

John let out a sigh of mock sympathy.

"Poor Rollin," he said. "There but for the grace of God go I."

Riley laughed aloud. She knew exactly what John meant. Starting on the very first day of the program, Natalie had been on the lookout for a prospective fiancée. She'd even targeted John until he'd made it clear that he really didn't like her.

Riley wondered—had Natalie ever been interested in the program at all? After all, she'd been smart enough and accomplished enough to be accepted into the honors internship.

Probably not, she figured.

Natalie seemed to have joined the program for the same reason that some of Riley's friends had gone to college—to catch herself a successful husband.

Riley tried to imagine how it would feel to go through life with Natalie's priorities. Things would surely seem simpler, at least, when decisions could be so clear-cut...

Finding a man, moving into a nice house, having a few babies ...

Riley couldn't help envy Natalie's security, at least.

Even so, Riley felt sure she'd be bored to death by such a life—which was exactly why things were bad between her and Ryan right now.

Then John said, "I assume you're heading straight to Quantico when this is over."

Riley replied, "Yeah. I guess you are too, right?"

John nodded. Riley found it exciting to think that she and John were among the small handful of interns who were continuing on to the FBI Academy.

Most of the rest of them looked forward to other possibilities. Some would be going to graduate school in fields that had caught their interest this summer. Others would be starting new jobs in labs or offices right here in the Hoover Building or at Agency headquarters in other cities. They could begin FBI careers as computer scientists, data analysts, technicians—jobs that offered regular hours and didn't lead to life-threatening situations.

Jobs that Ryan would approve of, Riley thought wistfully.

Riley almost asked John how he was going to get to Quantico today. But of course she knew—he was going to drive there in his expensive car. Riley briefly considered asking him for a ride. After all, it would save her money for both a taxi and a train ticket.

But she couldn't bring herself to do that. She didn't want to admit to him that Ryan wasn't even going to drive her to the train station. John was a sharp guy, and he'd surely sense that things weren't right between her and Ryan. She'd rather he not know about that—at least not right now.

As she and John continued chatting, Riley couldn't help notice yet again how attractive he was—rugged and athletic, with short curly hair and pleasant smile.

He was well-off and wore an expensive suit, but Riley didn't hold his wealth and privilege against him. His parents were both prominent DC lawyers who were heavily involved in politics, and Riley admired John's choice of a humbler life of dedicated service to law enforcement.

He was a good guy, a true idealist, and she liked him very much. They'd actually worked together to crack the Clown Killer case, covertly communicating with the riddling killer to draw him out of hiding.

Standing close to him and enjoying his smile and their conversation, Riley found herself wondering how their friendship might grow at the Academy.

They were definitely going to be spending a lot of time together ...

And I'm going to be far away from Ryan ...

She cautioned herself not to let her imagination run away with her. For one thing, the problems she was having with Ryan were probably only temporary. Maybe all they needed was some time apart to remind them of why they'd fallen in love in the first place.

Finally the interns finished eating and started to leave. John waved to Riley on his way out, and she smiled and waved back. Still clinging to Rollin, Natalie kept flashing her ring around all the way through the door.

Riley said goodbye to Hoke Gilmer, the training supervisor, and Assistant Director Marion Connor, both of whom had given short congratulatory speeches to the whole group a little while ago. Then she left the reception room and went to the locker room to get her suitcase.

She found herself alone in the big, empty locker room. She looked around wistfully. The room was where all the interns had gathered for meetings during the summer. She doubted that she'd ever be here again.

Would she miss the program? She wasn't sure. She'd learned a lot here, and she'd enjoyed much of her intern experience. But she knew it was definitely time for her to move on.

So why do I feel sad? she wondered.

She quickly realized it was because of how she'd left things with Ryan. She remembered her own sharp words to him last night before she'd gone to bed ...

"Enjoy the rest of your meal. There's some cheesecake in the refrigerator. I'm tired. I'm going to take a shower and go to bed."

They hadn't spoken since that moment. Ryan had gotten up and left for work before Riley had even awoken this morning.

She wished she hadn't spoken to him like that. But what choice had he given her? He hadn't shown a lot of sensitivity to her feelings—to her hopes and dreams.

The weight of her engagement ring felt strange on her finger. She held her hand in front of her face and looked at it. As the modest but lovely gem sparkled under the fluorescent ceiling light, she remembered the sweet moment when Ryan had knelt shyly to propose to her.

That seemed like a long time ago now.

And after their ugly parting, Riley wondered—were they even really engaged anymore? Was their relationship over? Had they broken up without actually saying so? Was it time for her to move on from Ryan, just like she was moving on from everything else? And was Ryan ready to move on from her?

For a moment, she toyed with the idea of not catching that cab and that train to Quantico—at least not right now. Maybe it wouldn't hurt for her to be a day late for classes. Maybe she could talk to Ryan again when he got home from work. Maybe they could put things right.

But she quickly realized ...

If I go back to the apartment now, maybe I'll never go to Quantico.

She shuddered at the idea.

Somehow, she knew that her destiny awaited her in Quantico, and she didn't dare miss it.

It's now or never, she thought.

She got her suitcase and headed on out of the building, then caught a cab to the train station.

CHAPTER FOUR

Guy Dafoe didn't particularly like getting up so early in the morning. But at least these days he was working hard to take care of his own cattle rather than the herds he'd handled for other owners. Early morning chores seemed well worth the effort now.

The sun was rising, and he knew it was going to be a beautiful day. He loved the smell of the fields and the sounds of the cattle.

He'd spent years working bigger ranches and bigger herds. But this was his own land, his own animals. And he was feeding these animals right, not raising them artificially on grain and hormones. That was a waste of resources, and production-line cattle lived miserable lives. He felt good about what he was doing.

He'd plunged all his savings into buying this farm and a few cattle to start out with. He knew it was a big risk, but he had faith that there was a real future in sales of grass-fed beef. It was a growing market.

The yearling calves were clustered up around the barn, where he'd penned them up last night in order to check on their health and development. They watched him and mooed softly, as if waiting for him.

He was proud of his small herd of Black Angus, and sometimes he had to resist the temptation to become fond of them, as if they were pets. These were food animals, after all. It would be a bad idea to get very attached to any of them individually.

Today he wanted to turn the yearling calves into the roadside pasture. The field they were in now was eaten down short, and the good legume and grass pasture down by the road was ready for grazing.

Just as he swung wide gate open, he noticed something odd on the far side of the pasture. It looked like some kind of tangle or bundle over near the road.

He grumbled aloud ...

"Whatever it is, it probably isn't good."

He slipped through the opening and pushed the gate shut again, leaving the yearlings where they were. He didn't want to turn his stock into this field until he found out what that strange object was.

As he strode across the field, he grew more puzzled. It looked like a huge wad of barbed wire hanging from a fence post. Had a roll of the stuff bounced off of someone's truck and wound up there somehow?

But as he walked closer to it, he saw that it wasn't a new roll. It was a tangle of old wire, wrapped in all directions.

It didn't make any sense.

When he reached the bundle and stared into it, he realized that something was inside.

He leaned toward it, peered closely, and felt a sudden cold chill of terror.

"Holy hell!" he yelled, jumping backward.

But maybe he was only imagining things. He forced himself to look again.

There it was—a woman's face, pale and wounded, contorted in agony.

He grabbed the wire to pull it off her, but quickly stopped himself.

It's no use, he realized. She's dead.

He staggered over to next fencepost, leaned on it, and retched violently.

Pull yourself together, he told himself.

He had to call the police—right now.

He staggered away and broke into a run toward his house.

CHAPTER FIVE

Special Agent Jake Crivaro sat bolt upright when his office phone rang. Things had been too quiet at Quantico since he got back yesterday. Now his gut told him instantly ...

It's a new case.

Sure enough, as soon as he picked up the phone, he heard the sonorous voice of Special Agent in Charge Erik Lehl ...

“Crivaro, I need you in my office right now.”

“Right away, sir,” Crivaro said.

He hung up the phone and grabbed his go bag, which he always kept at the ready. Agent Lehl was being even more laconic than usual, which surely meant urgent business. Crivaro was sure that he would be traveling somewhere soon—probably within the hour.

He felt his heart pumping just a little faster as he hurried down the hall. It was a good feeling. After a 10-week stint serving as a mentor for the FBI's Honors Internship Program, this was a welcome return to normality.

During the first few days of the summer program he'd been pulled away by a murder case—the notorious “Clown Killer.” After that he'd settled in to the more mundane work of mentoring just one of the interns—a talented but exasperating kid named Riley Sweeney, who had shown startling brilliance helping him on the case.

Even so, the program had passed too slowly for his taste. He wasn't used to spending such a long period out of the field.

When Jake walked into Lehl's office, the lanky man rose up from his chair to greet him. Erik Lehl was so tall that he barely seemed to fit into any space he occupied. Other agents said that he looked like he was wearing stilts. He looked more to Jake as though he were *made* out of stilts—an awkwardly assembled assortment of lengths of lumber that somehow never seemed to be perfectly coordinated in their movements. But the man had been a crack agent and had earned his position at the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit.

“Don't make yourself comfortable, Crivaro,” Lehl said. “You're leaving right away.”

Jake obediently stayed on his feet.

Lehl looked at a manila folder that he was holding and heaved a grim sigh. Jake had long since observed Lehl's tendency to take every case extremely seriously—even personally, as if he felt directly insulted by any sort of monstrous criminality.

Not surprisingly, Jake couldn't remember ever finding Lehl in a cheerful mood.

After all ...

Monsters are our business.

And Jake knew that Lehl wouldn't be assigning him to this particular case if it weren't unusually heinous. Jake was something of a specialist in cases that defied human imagination.

Lehl handed the manila folder to Jake and said, “We've got a really ugly situation in West Virginia. Have a look.”

Jake opened the folder and saw a black-and-white photo of a weird bundle held together by duct tape and barbed wire. The bundle was dangling against a fence post. It took a moment for Jake to realize that the bundle had a face and hands—that it was in fact a human being and obviously dead.

Jake inhaled sharply.

Even for him, this was a uniquely grisly sight.

Lehl explained, “The photo was taken about a month ago. The body of a beauty parlor worker named Alice Gibson was found bound up with barbed wire and hanging from a fence post on a rural road near Hyland, West Virginia.”

“Pretty nasty stuff,” Jake said. “How are the local cops handling it?”

“They have a suspect in custody,” Lehl said.

Jake’s eyes widened with surprise.

He asked, “So what makes this an FBI case?”

Lehl said, “We just got a call from the chief of police in Dighton, a town near Hyland. Another bundled-up body like this was found just this morning, hanging from a fence post on a road outside of town.”

Jake was starting to understand. Being in a jail cell at the time of the second murder gave the suspect a pretty good alibi. And now things looked like a serial killer was just getting started.

Lehl continued, “I’ve given orders that the current crime scene not be disturbed. So you need to get there ASAP. It would be a four-hour drive across the mountains, so I’ve got a helicopter waiting for you on the airstrip.”

Jake was just turning to leave the office when Lehl added ...

“Do you want me to assign you a partner?”

Jake turned and looked at Lehl. Somehow, he hadn’t expected the question.

“I don’t need a partner,” Jake said. “But I’ll need a forensics team. The cops in rural West Virginia aren’t going to know how to get a good reading on the scene.”

Lehl nodded and said, “I’ll get the team together right now. They’ll fly out with you.”

Just as Jake was stepping out the door, Lehl said ...

“Agent Crivaro, sooner or later you’re going to need another regular partner.”

Jake shrugged awkwardly and said, “If you say so, sir.”

With a hint of a growl in his voice, Lehl said. “I do say so. It’s about time for you to learn to play nice with others.”

Jake stared at him with surprise. It was rare for the taciturn Erik Lehl to say anything the least bit snide.

I guess he really means it, Jake realized.

Without another word, Jake left the office and headed through the building. As he walked briskly along, he thought about what Lehl had said about him getting a new partner. Jake was well-known for being tough to work with in the field. But he really didn’t think he gave anybody a hard time unless they deserved it.

His last regular partner, Gus Bollinger, had certainly deserved it. He’d gotten fired for smearing the fingerprints on a piece of vital evidence in the so-called “Matchbook Killer” case. As a consequence, the case had gone cold—and there was little that Jake hated more than cold cases.

On the Clown Killer case, Jake had worked with a DC agent named Mark McCune. McCune hadn’t been as bad as Bollinger, but he’d made stupid mistakes and thought too highly of himself for Jake’s taste. Jake was glad that their partnership had been only for that one case and that McCune remained in DC.

As he stepped onto the tarmac where the helicopter waited, he thought about someone else he’d worked with recently ...

Riley Sweeney.

He’d been impressed with her ever since she’d been a psych student who had helped him solve a serial case at Lanton University. When she’d graduated, he’d pulled strings and stirred up the ire of some his colleagues to get her into the Honors Internship Program. Perhaps against his own better judgment, he’d enlisted her help on the Clown Killer case.

She’d done some really brilliant work. She’d also made some really outrageous mistakes. And she was a long way from learning how to obey orders, but he’d only known a handful of even seasoned agents with such powerful intuitions.

One of those was himself.

As Jake stooped below the spinning propeller blades and climbed up into the helicopter, he saw the four-man forensic team trotting across the tarmac. Then the forensics guys climbed into the chopper, which took to the air.

It seemed silly to be thinking of Riley Sweeney right now. Quantico was a huge base, and even though she was at the FBI Academy, their paths weren't likely to cross again.

Jake opened the folder to read over the police report.

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After the helicopter cleared the Appalachian mountain ranges, it passed over rolling meadows dotted with Black Angus cattle. As the chopper descended, Jake could see where police vehicles had blocked off a stretch of gravel road to keep onlookers away from the crime scene.

The helicopter set down in grassy pasture. Jake and the forensics team climbed out of the vehicle and headed over toward a small group of uniformed people and several official vehicles.

The cops and the medical examiner's team were standing on both sides of a barbed wire fence that ran along the road at the edge of the pasture. Jake could see what looked like a snarled bundle of wire hanging from a fencepost.

A short, sturdy-looking man of about Jake's height and build stepped forward to greet him.

"I'm Graham Messenger, the chief of police here in Dighton," he said, shaking hands with Jake. "We've had ourselves a couple of pretty awful incidents, at least for these parts. Let me show you."

The chief led the way to a fence post and, sure enough, a weird bundle was hanging from the post, all held together with duct tape and barbed wire. Again Jake was able spot a face and hands indicating that the bundle was actually a human being.

Messenger said, "I guess you already know about Alice Gibson, the earlier victim over near Hyland. This looks like the same damn thing all over again. The victim this time is Hope Nelson."

Crivaro said, "Was she reported missing before the body was found?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so," Messenger said, pointing toward a stunned-looking middle-aged man standing near one of the vehicles. "Hope was married to Mason Nelson over there—the town mayor. She was working in their local farm supply store last night, but she didn't come home when Mason expected. He called me in the middle of the night about it, sounding pretty alarmed."

The police chief shrugged guiltily.

"Well, I'm kind of used to folks going missing for a spell, then turning up again. I told Mason I'd look into it today if she didn't turn up. I had no idea ..."

Messenger's voice trailed off. Then he sighed and shook his head and added ...

"The Nelsons own a lot of property in Dighton. They've always been good, respectable folks. Poor Hope didn't deserve this. But then, I don't reckon anybody does."

Another man stepped toward them. He had a long, aged face, white hair, and a bushy old-fashioned mustache. Chief Messenger introduced him as Hamish Cross, the county's chief medical examiner. Chewing on a weed, Cross seemed relaxed and mildly curious about what was going on.

He asked Jake, "Ever seen anything like this before?"

Jake didn't reply. The answer, of course, was no.

Jake stooped down beside the bundle and examined it closely.

He said to Cross, "I assume you worked on the earlier murder."

Cross nodded and stooped down beside Jake and twirled the weed in his mouth.

"That I did," Cross said. "And this one's pretty near identical. She didn't die here, that much is certain. She was abducted, bound up first with duct tape and then with barbed wire, and bled slowly to death. Either that or she suffocated first. Bound up tight like that, she'd hardly have been able to breathe at all. All that happened somewhere else—there's no sign of bleeding here."

Jake could see that the face and hands were almost as white as paper, and they glistened in the late morning sunlight like pieces of china. The woman simply didn't look real to Jake, but more like some kind of sick, grotesque sculpture.

A few flies had gathered around the body. They kept landing, roaming around, then flying away again. They looked like they didn't know what to do with this mysterious object.

Jake rose to his feet and asked Chief Messenger, "Who found the body?"

As if in reply, Jake heard a man's voice calling out ...

"What the hell's going on here? How much longer is this going to take?"

Jake turned and saw a longhaired man with a scraggly beard coming toward them. He looked wild-eyed with anger, and his voice was shaking and shrill.

He yelled, "When the hell are you taking this—this thing away? This is a huge inconvenience. I've had to keep my cattle in an overgrazed pasture because of all this. I've got lots of work to do today. How much longer is this going to take?"

Jake turned to Hamish Cross and said quietly ...

"You can take the body away any time now."

Cross nodded and gave orders to his team. Then he led the angry man away and spoke to him quietly, apparently calming him down.

Chief Messenger explained to Jake ...

"That's Guy Dafoe, who owns this property. He's an organic farmer—our local hippie, I guess you might say. He hasn't been around for very long. It turns out this area is good for raising grass-fed organic beef. Organic farming's been a real boost to the local economy."

The chief's cellphone rang and he took the call. He listened for a moment, then said to Jake ...

"This is Dave Tallhamer, the sheriff over in Hyland. You may have heard there's a suspect in custody for the first murder—Philip Cardin. He's the victim's ex-husband, and a bad sort who didn't have an alibi at the time. Tallhamer thought he had him dead to rights. But I guess this new murder changes things, doesn't it? Dave wants to know if he should let the guy go."

Jake thought for a moment, then said ...

"Not until I've had a chance to talk to him."

Chief Messenger squinted curiously and said, "Uh, doesn't being locked in a jail cell when this woman was killed pretty much let him off the hook?"

Jake suppressed a sigh of impatience.

He repeated simply, "I'll want to talk to him."

Messenger nodded and got back on the phone with the sheriff.

Jake didn't want to go into any kind of explanation right now. The truth was, he knew nothing at all about the suspect currently in custody, or even why he was a suspect. For all Jake knew, Philip Cardin might have a partner who committed this new murder, or else ...

God knows what might be going on.

At this point in an investigation, there were always thousands of questions and no answers. Jake hoped that would change before too long.

While Messenger kept talking on the phone, Jake walked over to the victim's husband, who was leaning against a police car staring off into space.

Jake said, "Mr. Nelson, I'm very sorry for your loss. I'm Special Agent Jake Crivaro, and I'm here to help bring your wife's killer to justice."

Nelson nodded only slightly, as if he were barely aware that he'd been spoken to.

Jake said in a firm voice, "Mr. Nelson, do you have any idea who might have done this? Or why?"

Nelson looked at him with a dazed expression.

"What?" he said. Then he repeated, "No, no, no."

Jake knew that there was no point in asking the man any more questions, at least not right now. He was clearly in a deep state of shock. That was hardly surprising. Not only was his wife dead, but the way she had died was especially grotesque.

Jake headed back over toward the crime scene, where his forensics team was already hard at work.

He looked all around, noting how isolated the place seemed to be. At least there wasn't a crowd of gawkers hanging around ...

And so far no sign of the media.

But right then he heard the sound of another helicopter. He looked around and saw that a TV news helicopter was descending toward the meadow.

Jake sighed deeply and thought ...

This case is going to be tough.

CHAPTER SIX

Riley felt a sharp tingle of expectation when the speaker stepped in front of the 200 or so recruits. The man looked like he belonged to a different era, with his thin lapels and his skinny black tie and his buzz haircut. He reminded Riley of photos she'd seen of 1960s astronauts. As he shuffled through a few notecards, then looked out over his audience, she waited for his words of welcome and praise.

Academy Director Lane Swanson began much as she had expected ...

"I know that you've all been working hard to prepare for this day."

He added with a half-smile ...

"Well, let me tell you right now—you're *not* prepared. None of you."

An audible sigh passed through the auditorium and Swanson paused to let his words sink in.

Then he continued, "That's what this 20-week program is about—getting you as prepared as you can get for life in the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And part of that preparedness is learning the limits of preparedness, how to deal with the unexpected, learning to think on your feet. Always remember—the FBI Academy is called the 'West Point for Law Enforcement' with good reason. Our standards are high. Not all of you are going to get through this. But those of you who do will be as prepared as you can hope to be for the tasks that await you."

Riley hung on his every word as Swanson spoke about the Academy's standards of fostering safety, esprit de corps, uniformity, accountability, and discipline. Then he went on to talk about the rigorous curriculum—courses in everything from law and ethics to interrogation and evidence collection.

Riley felt more and more anxious at every word as the truth sank in ...

I'm not a summer intern anymore.

The summer program seemed like some kind of teenage day camp in comparison to what she was now facing.

Was she hopelessly out of her depth?

Was this a bad idea?

For one thing, she felt like a kid as she looked around at all the other seated recruits. Scarcely anyone here was her age. She sensed by the faces around her that almost everybody here already had at least that much experience under their belts, and some of them considerably more. Most were over the age of 23, and some looked like they were verging on the maximum recruitment age of 37.

She knew that they came from all kinds of backgrounds and work fields. Many had been police officers, and many others had served in the military. Others had worked as teachers, lawyers, scientists, business people, and at many other occupations at one time or another. But they all had one thing in common—a powerful commitment to spend the rest of their lives serving in law enforcement.

Only a few were here fresh out of the intern program. John Welch, who was sitting a couple of rows ahead of her, was one of them. Like Riley, he had been given a waiver to the rule that all recruits had to have at least three years of full-time law enforcement experience to enter the Academy.

Swanson finished his speech ...

"I look forward to shaking the hands of those of you who make the grade here at Quantico. On that day, you'll be sworn into service by FBI Director Bill Cormack himself. Good luck to all of you."

Then he added with a stern chuckle, "And now—get to work!"

An instructor took Swanson's place at the podium and began to call out the names of recruits—"NATs," they were called, meaning "New Agents in Training." As the NATs answered to their names, the instructor assigned them smaller groups that would be taking their classes together.

As she waited breathlessly for her name to be called, Riley remembered how tedious things had been when she'd gotten here yesterday. After she'd checked in, she'd stood in line after line, filled out forms, bought a uniform, and gotten her dorm room assignment.

Today was already turning out to be a lot different.

She felt a pang as she heard John Welch's name called out for a group that she wasn't chosen for. It might help, she thought, to have a friend close at hand to lean on and commiserate with during the tough weeks to come. On the other hand, she thought ...

Maybe it's just as well.

Given her somewhat confusing feelings about John, his presence might prove to be a distraction.

Riley was finally relieved, though, to find herself in the same group as Francine Dow, the roommate she'd been assigned yesterday. Frankie, as she preferred to be called, was older than Riley, perhaps almost 30—a high-spirited redhead whose ruddy features hinted that she'd already experienced a lot in life.

Riley and Frankie hadn't gotten to know each other at all to speak of. They'd had time yesterday for little except getting unpacked and settled in their little dorm room together, and they'd gone their separate ways for breakfast.

Finally, Riley's group of NATs was summoned together in the hallway by Agent Marty Glick, the group instructor. Glick looked like he was in his thirties. He was tall and had the muscular build of a football player, and he wore a serious, no-nonsense expression.

He said to the group ...

"You've got a big day ahead. But before we get started, there's something I want to show you."

Glick led them into the main entrance lobby, an enormous room with an FBI seal in the middle of its marble floor an enormous bronze badge on one wall with a black band across it. Riley had passed through here when she'd arrived, and she knew that it was called the Hall of Honor. It was a solemn place where martyred FBI Agents were memorialized.

Glick led them to a wall with two displays of portraits and names. Between the displays was a framed plaque that read ...

National Academy Graduates who were killed in the line of duty

as the direct result of an adversarial action

Small gasps passed through the group as they viewed the shrine. Glick didn't say anything for a moment, just allowed the emotional impact of the display sink in.

Finally he said, almost in a whisper ...

"Don't let them down."

As he led the group of NATs away to start their day's activities, Riley glanced back over her shoulder at the portraits on the wall. She couldn't help but wonder ...

Will my picture be there someday?

Of course there was no way to know. All she knew for sure was that the coming days would bring challenges she'd never faced before in her life. She felt staggered by a new sense of responsibility toward those martyred agents.

I can't let them down, she thought.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jake steered the hastily-borrowed vehicle along a web of gravel roads from Dighton toward the town of Hyland. Chief Messenger had loaned him the car so Jake could get on his way before the media helicopter landed.

He had no idea what to expect at Hyland, but he was grateful to have escaped the invaders. He hated being besieged by reporters pummeling him with questions he couldn't answer. There was little the media relished more than sensational murders in bucolic, out-of-the-way places. The fact that the victim was a mayor's wife surely made the story all the more irresistible to them.

He drove with his window open, enjoying the fresh country air. Messenger had marked up a map for him, and Jake was enjoying the slow tour of country roads. The man he was on his way to interview wasn't going anywhere before he got there.

Of course the suspect in the Hyland jail might have nothing to do with either of the two murders. He'd been incarcerated at the time of the second victim's death.

Not that that proves his innocence, Jake thought.

There was always a possibility that a team of two or more killers was at work. Hope Nelson could have been taken by a copycat imitating Alice Gibson's murder.

Nothing like that would surprise Jake. He'd worked on stranger cases in his long career.

As Jake pulled into Hyland, the first thing he noticed was how little and sleepy the town looked—much smaller than Dighton, with its population of about a thousand. The sign he'd just passed indicated that only a couple of hundred people lived here.

Barely big enough to be incorporated, Jake thought.

The police station was just another storefront on the short business street. As he parked along the curb, Jake saw an obese uniformed man leaning against in the doorjamb, looking like he had nothing else to do.

Jake got out of the car. As he walked toward the station, he noticed that the big cop was staring at someone directly across the street. It was a man wearing a white medical jacket, standing there with his arms crossed. Jake got the odd impression that the two had been standing there staring at each other silently for quite a long time.

What's this all about? he wondered.

He walked up to the uniformed man in the doorway and showed him his badge. The man introduced himself as Sheriff David Tallhamer. He was chewing on a wad of tobacco.

He said to Jake in a bored tone, "Come on in, let me introduce you to our house guest—Phil Cardin's his name."

As Tallhamer led the way inside, Jake glanced back and saw that the white-coated man wasn't budging from his spot.

Once in the station, Tallhamer introduced Jake to a deputy who was sitting with his feet up on a desk reading a newspaper. The deputy nodded at Jake and kept right on reading his paper.

The little office seemed saturated with a weird feeling of ennui. If Jake hadn't known it already, he wouldn't have guessed that these two jaded cops had been dealing with a grisly murder case.

Tallhamer led Jake through a door in the back of the office that led into the jail. The jail was comprised of just two cells facing each other across a narrow corridor. Both cells were occupied at the moment.

In one cell, a man in a rather threadbare business suit lay on his cot snoring loudly. In the opposite, a sullen-looking man wearing jeans and a t-shirt was sitting on his bunk.

Tallhamer took out his keys and unlocked the seated prisoner's cell and said ...

"You've got a visitor, Phil. A bona-fide FBI Agent, he says."

Jake stepped inside the cell while Tallhamer stood just outside, keeping the cell door open.

Phil Cardin squinted hard at Jake and said, “FBI, huh? Well, maybe you can teach Deputy Dawg here how to do his goddamn job. I didn’t kill nobody, let alone my ex-wife. If I did, I’d be the first to brag about it. So let me out of here.”

Jake wondered ...

Has anybody told him about the other murder?

Jake got the feeling that Cardin knew nothing about it. He figured it was best to keep things that way, at least for the time being.

Jake said to him, “I’ve got some questions, Mr. Cardin. Do you want a lawyer present?”

Cardin chuckled and pointed at the sleeping man in the opposite cell.

“He already *is* present—in a manner of speaking,” Cardin said.

Then he yelled at the man ...

“Hey, Ozzie. Sober up, why don’t you? I need legal representation. Make sure my rights don’t get violated. Although I guess that train’s left the station already, you drunken incompetent bastard.”

The man in the rumpled suit sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“What the hell are you yelling about?” he grumbled. “Can’t you see I’m trying to get some sleep? Jesus, I’ve got a son-of-a-bitch of a headache.”

Jake’s mouth dropped open. The fat sheriff laughed heartily at his obvious surprise.

Tallhamer said, “Agent Crivaro, I’d like you to meet Oswald Hines, the town’s only lawyer. He gets drafted into public defense duties from time to time. Conveniently enough, he got arrested a while ago for drunk and disorderly behavior, so he’s right here at hand. Not that that’s an unusual occurrence.”

Oswald Hines coughed and grunted.

“Yeah, I guess that’s the truth,” he said. “This is sort of my home away from home—or more like a second office, you might say. At times like now, it’s a handy location. I’d hate to have to walk anywhere else, the way I’m feeling at the moment.”

Hines took a long, slow breath, staring blearily at the others.

Then he said to Jake, “Listen up, Agent Whatever-Your-Name is. As this man’s defense attorney, I must insist that you leave him alone. He’s been asked too damn many questions for about a week now. In fact, he’s being held without cause.”

The lawyer yawned and added, “Actually, I’d hoped he’d be gone by now. He’d better be out of here before I wake up again.”

The lawyer started to lie back down when the sheriff said ...

“Stay awake, Ozzie. You’ve got work to do. I’ll go get you a cup of coffee. Do you want me to let you out of your cell so you can be closer to your client?”

“Naw, I’m good right here,” Ozzie said. “Just hurry up with that coffee. You know how I like it.”

Laughing, Sheriff Tallhamer said, “How is that again?”

“In a cup of some sort,” Ozzie growled. “Go. Now.”

Tallhamer went back into the office. Jake stood staring down at the prisoner for a moment.

Finally Jake said, “Mr. Cardin, I understand you don’t have an alibi for the time of your ex-wife’s murder.”

Cardin shrugged and said, “I don’t know where anybody got that idea. I was at home. I ate a frozen dinner, watched TV all evening, then slept the rest of the night through. I wasn’t anywhere near where it happened—wherever that was.”

“Can anybody corroborate that?” Jake said.

Cardin grinned and said, “No, but nobody can *corroborate* otherwise either, can they?”

Observing Cardin’s snide expression, Jake wondered ...

Is he guilty and taunting me?

Or does he just not understand the seriousness of his situation?

Jake asked, “How was your relationship with your ex-wife at the time of the murder?”

The lawyer called out sharply ...

“Phil, don’t answer that question.”

Cardin looked across to the other cell and said, “Aw, shut up, Ozzie. I’m not going to tell him anything I haven’t told the sheriff a hundred times already. It won’t make no difference anyhow.”

Then looking at Jake, Cardin said in a sarcastic tone ...

“Things were just peachy between me and Alice. Our divorce was perfectly amicable. I wouldn’t have hurt a hair on her pretty little head.”

The sheriff had just returned and handed a cup of coffee to the lawyer.

“Amicable, shit,” the sheriff said to Cardin. “The day of her murder, you went roaring into the beauty parlor where she worked, yelling right in front of her clientele that she’d ruined your life and you hated her guts and you wanted her dead. That’s why you’re here.”

Jake put his hands in his pockets and said, “Would you care to tell me what that was all about?”

Cardin’s lips twisted in an expression of savage anger.

“It was the truth, that’s all—about her ruining my life, I mean. I’ve been down on my luck ever since the bitch threw me out and married that damned doctor. Just that day I got fired from my job as a short-order cook in Mick’s Diner.”

“And that was her fault somehow?” Jake said.

Cardin stared Jake straight in the eye and said through clenched teeth ...

“*Everything* was her fault.”

Jake felt a chill at the sound of hatred in his voice.

He’s a real blamer, he thought.

Jake had dealt with more than his share of killers who couldn’t accept responsibility for anything that went wrong in their lives. Jake knew that Cardin’s fiery resentment was hardly proof of his guilt. But he could definitely understand why Cardin had been arrested in the first place.

Still, Jake knew that keeping him in custody was another issue, now that there had been another murder. From what Chief Messenger had told Jake back in Dighton, there was no hard physical evidence linking Cardin with the crime. The only evidence was a history of threatening behavior, especially the recent outburst at the beauty parlor where Alice had worked. It was all circumstantial ...

Unless he says something incriminating right here and now.

Jake said to Cardin, “I take it you’re not exactly a grieving ex-husband.”

Cardin grunted and said, “Maybe I would be if Alice hadn’t done me so bad. Spent our whole marriage telling me what a loser I was—as if that toad she took up with was some kind of improvement. Well, I wasn’t no loser until she divorced me. It was only when I was on my own that things started going bad. It’s not fair ...”

Jake listened as Cardin kept griping on about his ex. His bitterness was palpable—and so was his heartbreak. Jake suspected that Cardin never stopped loving Alice, or at least wanting her. Part of him had always held out some vain hope that they’d wind up together again.

However, his love for her was obviously sick, twisted, and obsessive—not love at all, in any healthy sense. Jake had known plenty of murderers who were driven by exactly that kind of thing they called love.

Cardin paused from ranting for a moment, then said ...

“Tell me—is it true they found her wrapped up in barbed wire?”

Shaking his head with a smile he added ...

“Man, that’s—that’s *creative*.”

Jake felt a slight jolt at those words.

What did Cardin mean, exactly?

Was he admiring someone else’s handiwork?

Or was he slyly gloating over his own resourcefulness?

Jake figured the time had come to try to draw him out about the other murder. If Cardin had an accomplice who had killed Hope Nelson, maybe Jake could get him to admit it. But he knew he had to tread carefully.

He said, “Mr. Cardin, did you know a woman named Hope Nelson over in Dighton?”

Cardin scratched his head and said ...

“Nelson ... the name’s familiar. Ain’t she the mayor’s wife or something?”

Leaning against the bars outside the cell, Sheriff Tallhamer grunted and said ...

“She’s *dead*, that’s what she is.”

Jake fought down a groan of discouragement. He hadn’t planned to spring the truth on Cardin in so blunt a manner. He’d hoped to take his time about it, try to find out if he already knew what had happened to Hope Nelson.

The lawyer in the other cell jumped to his feet.

“Dead?” he yelled. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Tallhamer spit out some tobacco on the concrete floor and said, “She was murdered just last night—in exactly the same way Alice was killed. Strung up from a fence post, bundled up in barbed wire.”

Suddenly seeming perfectly sober, Ozzie barked, “So what the hell are you holding my client for? Don’t tell me you think he murdered another woman last night while he was locked up right here.”

Jake’s spirits sank. His tactic was spoiled, and he knew that any further questions were likely to be pointless.

Nevertheless, he asked Cardin again, “Did you know Hope Nelson?”

“Didn’t I just tell you no?” Cardin said with a note of surprise.

But Jake couldn’t tell whether his surprise was unfeigned or he was just faking it.

Ozzie grabbed the bars of his own cell and yelled, “You’d damn well better let my client loose right now, or you’ll be facing one hell of a lawsuit!”

Jake stifled a sigh.

Ozzie was right, of course, but ...

He picked a fine time to get competent all of a sudden.

Jake turned to Tallhamer and said, “Let Cardin go. But keep a close eye on him.”

Tallhamer called for his deputy to bring Cardin’s belongings. As the sheriff opened the cell for Cardin to leave, he turned toward Ozzie and said ...

“Do you want to go too?”

Ozzie yawned and lay back down on his bunk.

“Naw, I’ve done a pretty good day’s work. I’d just as soon go back to sleep—as long as you don’t need the cell for anybody else.”

Tallhamer smirked and said, “Be my guest.”

As Jake walked out of the station with Tallhamer and Cardin, he noticed that the white-coated man was still standing on the other side of the street in exactly the same spot as before.

Suddenly, the man went into motion, striding across the street toward them.

Tallhamer grumbled quietly to Jake ...

“Here comes trouble.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jake scrutinized the man who was rushing toward them just outside the police station. He saw outrage in the man's face and bearing, but didn't sense that it was aimed at him. And he was aware that Tallhamer wasn't bracing for action.

Meanwhile, Cardin had turned and hurried rapidly away along the sidewalk.

The angry man stormed up to Tallhamer. Waving an arm in the departing Cardin's direction, he shouted ...

"I *demand* that you take that bastard back into custody!"

Seemingly impervious to the man's anger, Sheriff Tallhamer calmly introduced Jake to Earl Gibson, the town's only doctor and Alice Gibson's husband.

Jake started to shake hands and to offer his condolences, but the doctor's arms were still waving in circles as he ranted on at Tallhamer. He noted that Dr. Gibson was a remarkably homely man with a heavily pockmarked face that wasn't improved by the flush of fury. He remembered Cardin describing him as "*that toad she took up with.*"

Indeed, Cardin was positively handsome by comparison.

Jake figured that Earl Gibson must have virtues that had attracted the dead woman despite his looks. After all, Gibson was a doctor, and Alice's ex was nothing more than a failed short-order cook ...

Probably a pretty easy choice in a town with few options.

Gibson's anger only increased when he found out who Jake was.

"The FBI! What business does the FBI have even being here? You already caught my wife's killer. You had him locked away. There's not a jury in the world that wouldn't find him guilty. And now you just let him go!"

Sheriff Tallhamer shuffled his feet and spoke in a patient, almost condescending tone ...

"Now, Earl, we talked about this just a little while ago, didn't we?"

Dr. Gibson said, "Yeah, we did. And that's why I stayed right here, waiting. I had to see this for myself. I wanted to stop it."

"We've got to let him go, and you know it," Tallhamer said, "Another woman was murdered last night over in Dighton, the same way as Alice was. I can vouch for Phil Cardin's whereabouts last night, and he sure wasn't anywhere near Dighton. He didn't kill that woman, and now we've got no reason to think he killed Alice, either."

"No reason!" Gibson said, sputtering with rage. "He threatened her life that very day. And don't insult me with all this nonsense about the victim in Dighton, and how Phil Cardin couldn't have killed her. We both know there's a perfectly viable suspect for the other murder."

Jake's interest was suddenly piqued.

"A viable suspect?" he asked.

Gibson scoffed at Sheriff Tallhamer and said, "So you didn't tell him, eh?"

"Tell me about what?" Jake asked.

"About Phil Cardin's brother, Harvey," Gibson said to Jake. "He takes Phil's side in everything. He threatened Alice too. He'd get her on the phone and tell her that he and Phil were going to get revenge. He called her the same day she was killed. And wherever he was last night, he wasn't in any jail cell. He's the one who killed that woman in Dighton. I'd bet my life on it."

Jake was truly startled now.

He asked Gibson, "Why do you think he'd kill someone in another town?"

Gibson said, "His motive you mean? Maybe he had something personal against that woman. He wanders around the state a lot so maybe he got involved with her, then followed his brother's example. But I think he most likely did it to protect his brother—to make people think he didn't kill Alice."

Tallhamer sighed and said, “Earl, we talked about this too a little while ago, didn’t we? We’ve both known Harvey Cardin all our lives. He travels around because he’s an itinerant plumber. He talks tough from time to time, but he’s not like his brother. He’d never hurt a fly, let alone kill anyone in such an awful way.”

Jake’s brain clicked away, trying to process what he was hearing.

He wished Tallhamer had told him about Harvey Cardin from the start.

Small town cops, he thought. Some of them are so sure they know everything about everybody in their district that they can miss what’s important.

Jake said to Sheriff Tallhamer, “I want to talk to Harvey Cardin.”

The sheriff shrugged as if he considered it a waste of time.

He said, “Well, if that’s what you want. Harvey lives only a couple of blocks away from here. I’ll take you there.”

As Jake started walking with the sheriff, he saw that Gibson was following along. The last thing Jake needed right now was a grieving and irate widower inserting himself into the interview of a possible suspect.

As delicately as he could, he said, “Dr. Gibson, the sheriff and I need to do this on our own.”

When Gibson opened his mouth to protest, Jake added ...

“I’ll want to interview you in a little while. Where can I find you?”

Gibson fell silent for a moment.

“I’ll be in my office,” Gibson said. “The sheriff can tell you where it is.”

Gibson turned and stormed angrily away.

Jake and Tallhamer walked the short distance to a tiny white house where Harvey Cardin lived. It was a ramshackle cottage with an overgrown lawn.

Tallhamer knocked on the front door. When no one answered, he knocked again, and there was still no answer.

Tallhamer said, “He’s probably away, maybe working in some other town. We’ll have to catch him some other time.”

Jake didn’t want to wait for “some other time.” He peered through one of the glass panes in the front door. He could see some stark, simple furniture, but little else inside—certainly no personal touches to the decor. It looked like a the kind of place that was rented furnished, but there was no sign that anybody lived there.

Jake guessed that Harvey Cardin was out of town, all right ...

But is he ever coming back?

His musings were interrupted by a man’s voice from next door ...

“Can I help you with anything, sheriff?”

Jake turned and saw a man standing in the yard.

Tallhamer said to him, “This FBI fellow and I are looking for Harvey Cardin.”

The man shook his head and said, “You won’t have much luck, I don’t reckon. I saw him loading up his truck a week ago—just after his brother got arrested for killing Alice Gibson. It looked like he was taking everything he had, not that there was much of it to begin with. I asked him where he was going, and he said, ‘Anywhere that’s not Hyland. I’ve had it with this goddamn town.’”

Jake felt a jolt of alarm.

This possible suspect had already disappeared.

“Come on,” Jake said to Tallhamer. “Let’s go talk to some people.”

*

Jake and Sheriff Tallhamer spent the rest of the day conducting fruitless interviews, starting in the neighborhood where Harvey Cardin had lived. All that Harvey's other neighbors knew was that they hadn't seen him since he'd driven away weeks ago.

They had no better luck with Alice's friends and acquaintances. Alice's female coworkers at the beauty parlor agreed that Phil Cardin had made a terrible, frightening scene there on the day before Alice was killed.

When Jake and Tallhamer stopped by Mick's Diner, the owner said that Phil Cardin had gotten himself fired from his job as a short-order cook for a whole cluster of reasons—skipping work, showing up drunk, and getting into fistfights with other employees.

None of them knew anything about where Phil's brother Harvey might be.

Finally Jake and the sheriff stopped by Earl Gibson's physician's office. The doctor was still seething about Phil Cardin's release, and was further angered to hear that Harvey had disappeared. Jake managed to calm him down enough to ask him some questions, but Gibson wasn't able to shed any light on who else might have wanted to kill his wife.

Their inquiries only deepened the mystery as far as Jake was concerned. He was looking for any indication that the two Cardin brothers had committed the two murders by turns, or even that the missing Harvey Cardin had committed both murders ...

But if not?

Jake didn't have any alternative scenarios just yet. He'd gotten no gut instinct about anybody else in Hyland committing either of the two murders. Alice seemed well-liked by everyone they talked to that day, and nobody in Hyland seemed to know Hope Nelson except by name. Neither, apparently, had Alice Gibson. The two women were from the same part of the state, but had spent their lives in different towns and different social circles.

When they found themselves back at the police station after a fruitless day, Jake told Tallhamer's deputy to keep a close eye on Harvey Cardin, especially to make sure he didn't try to leave town.

"One more stop," he told Tallhamer, "and then I'll give up for the day."

The sheriff drove Jake out to the first murder scene.

Dusk was falling by the time they got there. The fence post where Alice Gibson's body had been found dangling was marked by an X that Sheriff Tallhamer's deputy had painted on it. Like the spot where Alice Gibson's body had been found, the fence bordered on a gently rolling pasture.

Jake suppressed a sigh as he imagined the hideous bundle hanging there ...

This'd be nice place to visit under different circumstances.

He figured it must have taken a remarkably sick man to leave such a grisly object in such a lovely location.

Was Phil Cardin such a man?

Might his brother be such a man?

Jake crouched down by the fence post and breathed long and slowly, hoping to catch some feeling about what had happened here. Jake was known for making intuitive leaps at murder scenes, oftentimes getting an uncanny sense of the mind of a criminal. Jake knew of nobody else who could do that—except for young Riley Sweeney, and her instincts were still erratic and undisciplined.

This morning at the other crime scene, Jake hadn't been able even try to make such a connection—not with all the hubbub going on around him and the arrival of a TV news helicopter.

Can I do it now? he wondered.

Jake closed his eyes and focused, trying to get some sort of gut feeling.

Nothing came.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that three black and white Black Angus cows had wandered over and were eyeing him curiously. He wondered—had they seen what had gone on that night? If so, had the horror of what they'd witnessed had any impact on them?

“If only you could talk,” Jake said to the cows under his breath.

He rose to his feet, feeling thoroughly discouraged.

It was time to head back over to Dighton and check in with his forensics team. He'd go over the day's notes and get some sleep in the town's only motel, then get a fresh start early tomorrow. Jake had left some unfinished business in Dighton, including a serious interview with Hope Nelson's husband, the mayor. Mason Nelson had been too incapacitated with shock for Jake to talk to him when they'd met at the other murder scene.

As for trying to track down Harvey Cardin's whereabouts, Jake knew that it wasn't a job for either the local cops or the forensics crew he'd brought along. He'd have to call for technical support from Quantico.

He said to Sheriff Tallhamer, “Take me back to my car, I'm leaving.”

But before they could get into the sheriff's car, Jake saw a van approaching with a TV station's logo on it. The van pulled to a stop nearby, and a crew poured out with lights, camera, and a microphone.

Jake let out a groan of despair.

There was no way of getting away from the media this time.

CHAPTER NINE

Riley was disappointed when she went to the computer room after a day of tours, classes, and her first dinner in the Academy cafeteria. There was still no email from Ryan. For the moment she ignored the others in her box.

Last night she had emailed Ryan to let him know that she'd arrived at Quantico and was settling in. She hadn't heard anything from him in reply. She asked herself—should she send him another note, telling him about her day? Or should she give him a phone call?

Riley sighed deeply as she tried to come to terms with the truth ...

He's still angry.

She wondered if maybe she'd made a mistake by catching the first train she could to Quantico. Maybe she should have returned home before she'd left to talk things out with him, find out where things stood between them. She couldn't imagine how they were ever going to do that as long as they were separated like this.

But she couldn't help thinking ...

If I'd gone back home yesterday, I'd probably still be there.

She decided it was best not to try to do anything about it now. Maybe tomorrow morning she'd send Ryan another note.

One other email in the box was junk, which she deleted. But when she opened the remaining message, Riley was unsettled and alarmed.

“Brant Hayman,” she whispered, with a shudder.

Hayman was the professor who had killed Riley's two college friends in Lanton. He had tried to kill Riley.

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