

BLAKE PIERCE



A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #15

ONCE
SHUNNED

Blake Pierce
Once Shunned

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Аннотация

“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*)

ONCE SHUNNED is book #15 in the bestselling Riley Paige mystery series, which begins with the #1 bestseller ONCE GONE (Book #1)—a free download with over 1,000 five star reviews!

When a serial killer strikes across a series of towns and the only potential witness is unable to speak, it is up to FBI Special Agent Riley Paige to enter the mind of this complex man, and to learn what, if anything, he knows.

What do these victims have in common? What exactly did this man witness?

In this dark psychological suspense thriller, Riley Paige must battle her own demons as she is summoned to solve a crime that leaves all others stumped, one that will force her to enter, too deep, into the mind of a psychopath...

An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **ONCE SHUNNED** is book #15 in a riveting new series—with a beloved character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #16 in the Riley Paige series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

Once Shunned (A Riley Paige Mystery—Book 15)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fifteen 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 four books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising three books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three 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

Robin's eyes snapped open.

She found herself lying wide awake in her bed. She thought at first she'd been awakened by a noise coming from somewhere in her little house.

Breaking glass?

But as she lay there listening for a moment, she heard nothing except the comforting rumble of the furnace in the basement.

Surely she'd just imagined the sound.

Nothing to worry about, she thought.

But as she turned on her side to try to get back to sleep, she felt a sudden sharp pain in her left leg.

This again, Robin thought with a sigh.

She switched on the lamp on the nightstand and pulled away the covers.

She no longer felt surprised to see that she had no left leg. She'd gotten used to that months ago. The leg had been amputated above the knee after her bones were crushed to a pulp in a terrible car accident last year.

But the pain was plenty real—a cluster of throbbing, cramping, and burning sensations.

She sat up in bed and stared at the stump under her nightgown. She'd suffered from phantom limb pain like this ever since the amputation, mostly at night when she was trying to sleep.

She looked at the clock on the nightstand and saw that it was four o'clock in the morning. She let out a groan of discouragement. She was often awakened by the pain at this hour or earlier, and she knew there was no chance of going back to sleep while this sensation was tormenting her.

She considered reaching under the bed for her mirror box, a therapy device that often helped her through episodes like this. It involved slipping the stump into the end of a long, prism-shaped box with a mirror on one side, so that her remaining leg cast a reflection. The mirror box created the illusion that she still had both of her legs. It was a weird but effective technique for diminishing or even getting rid of the phantom pain.

She'd watch the reflection while manipulating her remaining leg, clenching and unclenching the muscles in her feet, toes, and calves, as she tricked her brain into believing that she still had both legs. By imagining that she was controlling the missing leg, she could often work out the pain and cramping she felt there.

But it didn't always work. It required a level of meditative concentration that she couldn't always attain. And she knew from experience she had little chance of success just after waking up in the early morning hours.

I might as well get up and get some work done, she thought.

She briefly considered putting on the prosthetic leg that she kept beside her bed. That would mean stretching a nylon gel liner over her stump, pulling a couple of socks over the liner to compensate for the shrinkage of her stump, then fastening the

prosthesis into place, putting her weight on it until she felt it pop fully into place.

It hardly seemed worth the trouble right now—especially if she got lucky and the pain faded on its own and she could go back to bed and get some more sleep.

Instead, she pulled on her bathrobe, reached for her elbow crutches, slipped her wrists through the cuffs and gripped the handgrips, then hobbled out of the bedroom into her kitchen.

A pile of papers awaited her there on the Formica-topped table.

She'd brought home a huge bundle of poems and short stories to read—submissions for *Sea Surge*, the literary magazine where she worked as the assistant editor. She'd read more than half of the pieces last night before she'd gone to bed, selecting just a few that might be worthy of publication while setting the many others aside for rejection.

Now she skimmed through a batch of five especially bad poems by a remarkably untalented writer, the sort of greeting-card verses that the magazine too often received. She laughed a little as she plopped the poems onto the rejection pile.

The next batch was altogether different, but also typical of the sort of thing she often had to wade through while sorting through submissions. These poems immediately struck her as dry, bloodless, obscure, and pretentious. As she tried to make some sense of them, her mind started wandering, and she found herself thinking about how she'd wound up living alone in this

cheap but comfortable little rented house.

It was sad to remember how her marriage had broken up early this year. Shortly after the accident and the amputation, her husband, Duane, had been attentive, caring, and supportive. But as time went on, he'd become more and more distant until he'd pretty much stopped showing her any intimacy or affection.

Although Duane wouldn't admit it, Robin had realized that he simply didn't find her physically attractive anymore.

She sighed as she remembered how wildly in love they'd been during the first four years of their marriage.

Her throat tightened as she wondered whether she'd ever experience that kind of happiness again. But she knew she was still an attractive, charming, intelligent woman. Surely there was a wonderful man out there who could see her as a whole person, not merely as an amputee.

Still, the shallowness of Duane's love for her had been a blow to her self-confidence and to her faith in men in general. It was hard not to feel bitter toward her ex-husband. She reminded herself as she often did ...

He did the best he could.

At least their divorce had been amicable and they still remained friends.

Her ears perked up at a familiar sound outside—the approaching garbage truck. She smiled as she looked forward to a little ritual she'd developed on such sleepless mornings.

She got up from the table, put on the crutches, hobbled over

to the living room window, and opened the curtains.

The truck was pulling up in front of her own house now, and the huge robotic arm clamped onto her bin and lifted it and dumped its contents into the truck. And sure enough, walking alongside the truck was an odd young man.

As always, Robin found something endearingly earnest about him as he followed the truck on its way, gazing attentively in all directions as if keeping some sort of lookout.

She figured he must work for the town's sanitation department, although she wasn't sure just what his job could be. He didn't seem to have anything to do except walk along and make sure the big machine did its job and didn't drop any stray pieces of garbage.

As she always did when she saw him out there on the lighted street, she smiled, took an arm out of a cuff, and waved at him. He looked straight back at her, as he always did. She found it odd that he never waved back, just stood there with his arms at his sides returning her gaze.

But this time he did something he'd never done before.

He lifted his arm and pointed in her direction.

What's he pointing at? she wondered.

Then she felt a chill as she remembered the moment when she'd woken up ...

I thought I heard a sound.

She'd thought it might be breaking glass.

And now she realized ...

He's pointing at something behind me.

Before she could turn around and look, she felt a powerful hand seize her right shoulder.

Robin froze with fear.

She felt a sudden deep pain as something sharp plunged into her ear, and the world around her quickly dissolved.

In another moment she felt nothing at all.

CHAPTER ONE

The moment Riley plopped down on the sofa in the family room and kicked off her shoes, the doorbell rang. She groaned softly. She figured it was someone promoting a cause, wanting her to sign a petition or write a check or something like that.

Not what I need right now.

She'd just dropped off her daughters, April and Jilly, for their first day of school. She'd been looking forward to relaxing for a while.

Just then she heard Gabriela, her Guatemalan housekeeper, call out to her from the kitchen ...

“No te muevas, señora. I'll get the door.”

As she listened to Gabriela's footsteps heading for the front door, Riley leaned back and propped her feet up on the coffee table.

Then she heard Gabriela chattering cheerfully with the person at the door.

A visitor? Riley wondered.

Riley scrambled to put her shoes back on as she heard approaching footsteps.

When Gabriela escorted the visitor into the room, Riley was surprised and pleased to see who it was.

It was Blaine Hildreth, her handsome boyfriend.

Or is he my fiancé?

These days she didn't know for sure, and apparently neither did Blaine. A couple of weeks ago he had more or less proposed to her, then just last week he had said he wanted to take things slowly. She hadn't seen him for a few days now, and she hadn't expected him to show up this morning.

As Riley started to rise from the sofa, Blaine said, "Please, don't get up. I'll join you."

Blaine sat down beside her and relaxed against the elderly family room sofa. Riley grinned and kicked her shoes off again.

With a slight laugh, Blaine kicked his own shoes off, and they both propped their feet up on the coffee table.

Being so comfortable with him felt really nice to Riley, even if she wasn't quite sure where things stood in their relationship.

"How's your morning been?" Blaine asked.

"OK," Riley said. "I just dropped the girls off at school."

"Yeah, I just dropped off Crystal too."

As always, Riley could hear a note of affection whenever Blaine mentioned his sixteen-year-old daughter's name. She liked that about him.

Then with a laugh Blaine added, "She seemed pretty anxious for me to drive away once we got there. I guess she wanted me to get out of sight of her friends."

Riley laughed as well.

"It's the same with April," she said. "Kids seem to be embarrassed to have their parents around at that age. Well, starting tomorrow, mine will be taking a bus."

“Mine too.”

Blaine put his hands behind his head and leaned back and heaved a deep sigh.

“Crystal will be driving soon,” he said.

“So will April,” Riley said. “I guess she can apply for her license in November. I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Me neither. Especially since teaching Crystal to drive has made me a nervous wreck.”

Riley felt a pang of guilt.

She said, “I’m afraid I haven’t spent much time teaching April. Hardly any time, really. She’s mostly had to make do with driver’s training at school.”

Blaine shrugged and said, “Do you want me to spend some time teaching her?”

Riley winced a little. She knew that Blaine managed to be more of a hands-on parent than she seemed capable of being. Her work with the BAU kept tugging her away from the usual mother-daughter routines, and she felt bad about that.

Still, it was kind of Blaine to offer to help out, and she knew she mustn’t feel jealous if he spent more time with April than she could. After all, he might wind up being April’s father before too long. It would be great for April and Jilly to have a dad who gave them real attention. That would be more than Riley’s ex-husband, Ryan, had ever done.

“That would be nice,” she said. “Thanks.”

Gabriela came into the living room carrying a tray. The

stout woman deftly steered her steps as Jilly's small, big-eared dog, Darby, and April's rapidly growing black-and-white kitten, Marbles, scampered around her feet. Then Gabriela set the tray down on the coffee table in front of them.

"I hope you both are in the mood for coffee and *champurradas*."

"*Champurradas!*" Blaine said with pleasure. "What a treat!"

As Gabriela poured two cups of coffee, Riley reached for one of the crisp, buttery cookies rolled in sesame seeds. The *champurradas* were freshly baked—and, of course, absolutely delicious.

Just as Gabriela turned to head back to the kitchen, Blaine said, "Gabriela, won't you join us?"

Gabriela smiled. "*Por supuesto. Gracias.*"

She went to the kitchen to fetch another cup, then came back, poured herself some coffee, and sat in a chair near Riley and Blaine.

Blaine started chattering away with Gabriela, half in English and half in Spanish, asking her about her *champurrada* recipe. As a master chef and the owner of an upscale restaurant, Blaine was always interested in hearing Gabriela's culinary secrets. As usual, Gabriela coyly resisted saying much at first, but she finally gave him all the details about how to make the exquisite Guatemalan cookies.

Riley smiled and listened as Blaine and Gabriela went on to discuss other recipes. She enjoyed hearing them talk like this.

She thought it was remarkable how at home the three of them were together.

Riley searched in her mind for the word to describe how things felt right here and now. Then it came to her.

Cozy.

Yes, that was it. Here she and Blaine were, lounging shoeless on the couch, feeling thoroughly cozy together.

Then Riley felt a bit wistful as she realized something.

One thing the situation was *not* was romantic.

At the moment, Blaine hardly seemed like the passionate lover she'd sometimes known him to be. Of course, those romantic moments had been few and far between. Even when they had spent two weeks in a nice beach house this summer, they'd slept in separate rooms on account of their children.

Riley wondered ...

Is this how things will stay between us if we get married?

Riley stifled a sigh at the thought that they were already acting like an old married couple. Then she smiled as she considered ...

Maybe there's nothing wrong with this.

After all, she was forty-one years old. Maybe it was time to put passionate romance behind her. Maybe it was time to settle down to coziness and comfort. And at the moment, that possibility really seemed OK.

Still, she wondered ...

Is marriage really in the cards for Blaine and me?

She wished they could make a decision one way or the other.

Riley's thoughts were interrupted by her ringing cell phone.

Her heart sank a little as she saw that the call was from her longtime BAU partner, Bill Jeffreys. As fond as she was of Bill, she felt sure that this wasn't just a friendly call.

When she took the call, Bill said, "Riley, I just got a call from Chief Meredith. He wants to see you and me and Jenn Roston in his office immediately."

"What's going on?" Riley asked.

"There have been a couple of murders up in Connecticut. Meredith says it looks like a serial. I don't know any details myself just yet."

"I'll be right there," Riley said, ending the call.

She saw that both Blaine and Gabriela were looking at her with concern.

Blaine asked, "Is it a new murder case?"

"It looks like it," Riley said, putting her shoes back on. "I'll probably head up to Connecticut right away. I might be gone for a while."

Gabriela said, "*Ten cuidado*, Señora Riley."

Blaine nodded in agreement and said, "Yes, please be careful."

Riley kissed Blaine lightly and headed on out of the house. Her go-bag was already packed and ready in the car, so she didn't need to make any further preparations.

She felt a surge of anticipation. She knew that she was about to step out of a world of coziness and comfort into a much-too-familiar realm of darkness and evil. A world inhabited by

monsters.

The story of my life, she thought with a bitter sigh.

CHAPTER TWO

Riley felt a sharp tingle of urgency in the air when she walked into Special Agent in Charge Brent Meredith's office in the BAU building. The daunting, broad-framed Meredith was sitting at his desk. In front of him, Bill Jeffreys and Jenn Roston stood holding their go-bags.

Looks like this is going to be a short meeting, Riley thought.

She figured that she and her two partners would probably be flying out of Quantico within minutes, and she was glad to see that they'd all be working together again. During their most recent case in Mississippi, the three of them had broken even more rules than usual, and Meredith had made no secret of his displeasure with all of them. After that, she'd been afraid that Meredith might split them up.

"I'm glad all of you could get here so quickly," Meredith said in his gruff voice, swiveling slightly in his desk chair. "I just got a call from Rowan Sturman, Special Agent in Charge at the New Haven, Connecticut, FBI office. He wants our help. I take it all of you've heard about the recent death of Vincent Cranston."

Riley nodded, and so did her colleagues. She'd read in the newspapers that Vince Cranston, a youthful heir in the multibillionaire Cranston family, had died just last week under mysterious circumstances in New Haven.

Meredith continued, "Cranston had just started his first year

at Yale, and his body was found early one morning on the Friendship Woods jogging trail. He'd just been out for a morning jog, and at first his death seemed to be from natural causes—a cerebral hemorrhage, it looked like.”

Bill said, “I take it the medical examiner came to a different conclusion.”

Meredith nodded. “Yeah, the authorities have kept it quiet so far. The ME found a small wound that ran through the victim’s ear straight into his brain. He’d apparently been stabbed there with something sharp, straight, and narrow.”

Jenn squinted at Meredith with surprise.

“An ice pick?” she asked.

“That’s what it looked like,” Meredith said.

Riley asked, “What was the motive?”

“Nobody has any idea,” Meredith said. “Of course, you can’t grow up in a wealthy family like the Cranstons and not acquire more than your share of enemies. It’s part of your inheritance. It seemed like a good guess that the poor kid was the victim of a professional hit. Narrowing down a list of suspects looked like it was going to be a formidable task. But then ...”

Meredith paused, drumming his fingers on his desk.

Then he said, “Just yesterday morning, another body was found. This time the victim was Robin Scoville, a young woman who worked for a literary magazine in Wilburton, Connecticut. She was found dead in her own living room—and at first, the cause of her death also looked like maybe a cerebral hemorrhage.

But again, the ME's autopsy revealed a sharp wound through the ear and into the brain."

Riley's mind clicked away as she processed what she was hearing.

Two ice pick victims in one little state, over the course of just one week.

It hardly sounded coincidental.

Meredith continued, "Vincent Cranston and Robin Scoville were about as different as two people can get—one a wealthy heir in his freshman year in an Ivy League school, the other a young divorcée of markedly modest means."

Jenn asked, "So what's the connection?"

"Why would anyone want them both dead?" Bill added.

Meredith said, "That's just what Agent Sturman wants to know. It's already a nasty case—and it's liable to get a lot nastier if more people get killed this way. No connection of any kind has turned up, and it's hard to make sense out of this killer's behavior. Sturman feels like he and his New Haven FBI team are way out of their depth. So he called me and asked for help from the BAU. That's why I called you three."

Meredith stood up from his chair and growled ...

"Meanwhile, you've got no time to lose. A company plane is ready and waiting for you on the landing strip. You'll fly to the Tweed–New Haven Regional Airport, and Sturman will meet you there. You'll get right to work. Needless to say, I want this solved quickly."

Meredith paused and leveled his intimidating stare at each of the agents.

“And this time, I want you to do everything by the book,” he said. “No more shenanigans. I mean it.”

Riley and her colleagues all sheepishly muttered, “No, sir.”

Riley certainly meant it. She didn’t want to face Meredith’s anger again, and she was sure Bill and Jenn didn’t either.

Meredith escorted them out of his office, and a few moments later they were walking across the tarmac toward the waiting plane.

As they walked, Jenn remarked, “Two ice pick murders, two apparently unrelated victims—maybe even random. Does that sound weird or what?”

“We ought to be used to weird by now,” Riley said.

Jenn scoffed. “Yeah, *ought* to be. I don’t know about you two, but I’m not there yet.”

With a chuckle, Bill said, “Look at it this way. I hear the weather in Connecticut’s lovely this time of year.”

Jenn laughed as well and said, “It sure ought to be nicer than Mississippi.”

Riley grimaced as she remembered the heavy, suffocating heat in the disagreeable coastal town of Rushville, Mississippi.

She felt sure that late summer weather in New England couldn’t help but be an improvement.

Too bad we’re probably not going to get much of a chance to enjoy it.

*

When the plane landed at the Tweed–New Haven Regional Airport, Special Agent in Charge Rowan Sturman greeted Riley and her colleagues on the tarmac. Riley had never met Sturman, but she knew him by reputation.

Sturman was in his early forties, about the same age as Riley and Bill. In his younger years he'd been considered a promising, up-and-coming agent who was expected to climb high in the ranks of the FBI. Instead, he'd contented himself with running the New Haven FBI office. Rumor had it that he simply hadn't wanted to move to D.C. headquarters or Quantico or anywhere else. His roots and family were planted firmly right here in Connecticut.

Of course, Riley figured, he might not have had an appetite for the political maneuvering that could play a role in those power centers.

She could relate to that possibility.

Riley liked being at the Behavioral Analysis Unit because investigating strange personalities drew on her unique abilities. But she hated the way the power plays of higher-ups sometimes interfered with investigations. She wondered how soon that sort of thing would kick in over the death of an heir to great wealth.

Riley immediately found Sturman to be warm and likeable. As he walked them to a waiting van, he spoke in a pleasant New

England twang.

“I’m taking you straight to Wilburton, so you can get a look at where Robin Scoville’s body was found. That’s the fresher crime scene, and I’ve called the local police chief to meet us there. Later I’ll show you where Vincent Cranston was killed. I sure hope you folks can figure out what’s going on, because my team and I can’t make any sense of it.”

Riley, Bill, and Jenn sat together in the van as Sturman drove north. Jenn opened her laptop computer and started searching for information.

Sturman said to Riley and her colleagues, “I’m glad you’re here. My team and I can only do so much with the skills and resources we’ve got on hand. We’re trying everything we can think of, though. For one thing, we’re contacting hardware stores throughout the region to get whatever information we can on recent ice pick purchases.”

“That’s a good idea,” Riley said. “Any luck so far?”

“No, and I’m afraid it’s kind of a long shot,” Sturman said. “At this point we’re not getting a lot of names, mostly only people who bought their ice picks with credit cards, or the storekeepers had some other record. Out of those names we’re not sure what we might be looking for. We’ll just have to keep at it and see.”

Riley remarked, “Using an ice pick as a murder weapon seems kind of quaint to me.”

She thought for a moment, then added, “On the other hand, what else is an ice pick useful for anymore?”

Jenn scowled as she scanned the information that was appearing on her screen.

She said, “Not much—at least not for a century or so. Back in the days before refrigerators, people kept their perishables in old-fashioned iceboxes.”

Bill nodded and said, “Yeah, my great-grandmother told me about those. Every so often, the iceman would come to your house to deliver a block of ice to keep your icebox cool. You’d need an ice pick to break chips off the block of ice.”

“That’s right,” Jenn said. “After iceboxes got replaced by refrigerators, ice picks got to be a popular weapon for Murder Incorporated. Bodies of murder victims sometimes had twenty or so ice pick wounds.”

Bill scoffed and said, “Sounds like kind of a sloppy weapon for professional hit jobs.”

“Yeah, but it was scary,” Jenn said, still poring over the screen. “Nobody wanted to die that way, that was for sure. The threat of getting killed by an ice pick helped keep mobsters in line.”

Jenn turned the screen around to share her information with Bill and Riley.

She said, “Besides, look here. Not all ice pick murders were messy and bloody. A mobster named Abe Reles was the most feared hit man of his time, and the ice pick was his weapon of choice. He’d stab his victims neatly through the ear—just like our murderer. He got so good at it that sometimes his hits didn’t even look like murders.”

“Don’t tell me,” Riley said. “They looked like the victims died from a cerebral hemorrhage.”

“That’s right,” Jenn said.

Bill scratched his chin. “Do you think our killer got the idea from reading about Abe Reles? Like maybe his murders are some kind of homage to an old master?”

Jenn said, “Maybe, but maybe not. Ice picks are coming back in style with gangs. Lots of young thugs are doing each other in with ice picks these days. They’re even used in muggings. Victims are threatened with an ice pick instead of a gun or a knife.”

Bill chuckled grimly and said ...

“Just the other day I went into a hardware store to buy some duct tape. I noticed a rack with brand new ice picks for sale—‘professional quality,’ the labels said, and ‘high carbon steel.’ I wondered at the time, just what does anybody use something like that for? And I still don’t know. Surely not everybody who buys an ice pick has murder in mind.”

“Women might carry them for self-defense, I guess,” Riley said. “Although pepper spray is probably a better choice, if you ask me.”

Jenn turned the screen toward herself again and said, “As you can imagine, there hasn’t been much success passing laws to restrict ice pick sales or possession. But some hardware stores voluntarily ID ice pick buyers to make sure they’re over twenty-one. And in Oakland, California, it’s illegal to carry ice picks—

the same as it's illegal to carry switchblades or similar stabbing weapons.”

Riley's mind boggled at the thought of trying to regulate ice picks.

She wondered ...

How many ice picks are there out there?

At the moment, she and her colleagues knew of at least one.

And it was being put to the worst possible use.

Agent Sturman soon drove the van into the little town of Wilburton. Riley was struck by the sheer quaintness of the residential district where Robin Scoville had lived—the lines of handsome clapboard houses with shuttered windows, fronted by row after row of picket fences. The neighborhood was old, possibly even historical. Even so, everything gleamed with paint so white that one might think it was still wet.

Riley realized that the people who lived here took great pride in their surroundings, preserving its past as if the neighborhood were a large outdoor museum. There weren't many cars on the streets, so it was easy for Riley to imagine the town in a bygone era, with horse-drawn buggies and carriages passing by.

Then it occurred to her ...

An iceman used to make his regular rounds here.

She imagined the bulky cart carrying loads of ice, and the strong man who hauled the blocks to front doors with iron tongs. In those days, every housewife who had lived here owned an ice pick that she put to perfectly innocent use.

But the town had experienced a bitter loss of innocence the night before last.

Times have changed, Riley thought. And not for the better.

CHAPTER THREE

Riley's nerves quickened as Agent Sturman parked the van in front of a little house in a well-kept neighborhood. This was where Robin Scoville had lived, and where she had died at the hands of a killer. Riley always felt this heightened alertness when she was about to visit a crime scene. Sometimes her unique ability to get into a twisted mind would kick in where the murder had taken place.

Would that happen here?

If so, she wasn't looking forward to it.

It was an ugly, unsettling part of her job, but she had to use it whenever she could.

As they got out of the van, she noticed that the house was the smallest in the neighborhood—a modest one-story bungalow with a compact yard. But like all the other properties on the block, this one was immaculately painted and maintained. It was a picturesque setting, marred only by the yellow police tape that barred the public from entering.

When Riley, Jenn, Bill, and Agent Sturman entered through the front gate, a tall, uniformed man stepped out of the house. Agent Sturman introduced him to Riley and her colleagues as Clark Brennan, Wilburton's police chief.

“Come on inside,” Brennan said in an agreeable accent similar to Sturman's. “I'll show you where it happened.”

They walked up a long wooden ramp that led to the porch.

Riley asked Brennan, “Was the victim able to move around independently?”

Brennan nodded and said, “Her neighbors say she didn’t much need the ramp anymore. After the car accident last year, her left leg was amputated above the knee, but she was getting around really well on a prosthetic limb.”

Brennan opened the front door, and they all entered the cozy, comfortable house. Riley noticed no further signs that anybody disabled had lived here—no special furniture or handholds, just a wheelchair tucked away in a corner. It seemed obvious that Robin Scoville had prided herself on living as normal a life as she possibly could.

A survivor, Riley thought with bitter irony.

The woman must have thought she’d endured the worst hardships life could throw at her. She’d surely had no idea of the grim fate that awaited her.

The small, tidy living room was furnished with inexpensive furniture that looked rather new. Riley doubted that Robin had lived in this house for very long. The place felt transitional somehow, and Riley thought she might know why.

Riley asked the police chief, “Was the victim divorced?”

Brennan looked a little surprised at the question.

“Why, yes,” he said. “She and her husband broke up earlier this year.”

It was just as Riley had suspected. This place seemed much

like the little house where she and April had lived after her marriage to Ryan ended.

But Robin Scoville's challenge had been much greater than Riley's. She'd had to put both a divorce and a crippling accident behind her as she'd tried to start life anew.

A taped outline on the hardwood floor showed the position of the body. Brennan pointed to a small, dark stain on the floor.

"She'd bled from the ear just a little. Perfectly consistent with a cerebral hemorrhage. But because of the recent Cranston murder, the ME got suspicious right away. And sure enough, his autopsy showed that Robin was murdered in the same way as Cranston."

Riley thought ...

The same method, but such different circumstances.

And she knew that any differences were likely to prove as important as similarities.

She asked Brennan, "Were there any signs of a struggle?"

"None at all," Brennan said.

Sturman added, "It looked like she was taken by surprise, attacked swiftly from behind."

Bill asked, "Was she wearing her leg prosthesis at the time of her death?"

"No," Brennan said. "She was using her elbow crutches to get around."

Riley knelt down and examined the position marked by the body tape. She had fallen right in front of the window. Robin had

most likely been struck while she was looking out the window.

She asked Brennan, "What was the estimated time of death?"

Brennan said, "Around four in the morning."

Riley stood and looked through the window at the calm, pleasant street and wondered . . .

What was she looking at?

What had been going on in the neighborhood at such an hour that might have caught Robin's attention? And did it matter one way or the other? Did it have anything to do with her actual killing?

Riley asked, "How was her body found?"

Brenan said, "She didn't show up the next morning for her job as an editor at a local literary magazine. And she wouldn't answer her boss's phone calls. He found that to be strange and worrisome, not like her at all. He was worried that maybe she'd had some kind of an accident on account of her disability. So he sent an employee to her house to check on her. When she didn't answer the door, the employee went around behind the house and found that the back door had been broken into. He came on inside the house and found the body and called nine-one-one."

Riley stood there for a moment, still wondering what Robin might have been looking at outside.

Had something happened out there that awakened her and brought her to this spot?

Riley had no idea.

Anyway, what the victim had experienced just before her

death was of markedly less interest to Riley than what had been going on in the mind of the killer. She hoped maybe she could get a hint of that while she was here.

“Show us where the killer broke in,” Riley said.

Brennan and Sturman led Riley and her colleagues through the little house to a door that opened onto stairs to the basement. Near the top of the stairs was a landing from which another door opened onto the backyard.

Riley saw right away that the pane of glass nearest the dead bolt and the doorknob had been broken. The killer had obviously broken the glass and reached through the frame and unlocked and opened the door.

But Riley noticed something else that struck her as important.

Pieces of contact paper were stuck to the shards that remained in the frame.

Riley carefully touched a shard with some paper on it.

The killer had carefully placed the contact paper on the pane, hoping not to make too much noise, but also ...

Maybe he didn't want to make too much of a mess.

Riley shivered at a sudden near-certainty.

He's fastidious.

He's a perfectionist.

It was the sort of sharp flash of intuitive insight she'd been hoping for.

How much more could she learn about the killer right here and now?

I've got to try, she thought.

CHAPTER FOUR

As Riley mentally prepared to reach into a killer's mind, her eyes met with Bill's for a moment. He was standing with their other colleagues, watching her. She saw Bill nod, obviously understanding that she wanted to be alone to do her work. Jenn smiled a little as she, too, seemed to pick up on Riley's intention.

Bill and Jenn turned and led Sturman and Brennan back into the house, shutting the basement door behind them.

Alone on the little landing, Riley looked again at the broken window. Then she walked outside, pushed the door shut, and stood in the well-kept little backyard. There was an alley just beyond the picket fence at the edge of the yard.

Riley wondered—had he approached from the alley?

Or had he slipped around from the front, between Robin's house and one of her neighbors' homes?

The alley, probably.

He might have parked a vehicle on a nearby side street, walked down the alley, and slipped quietly through the back gate. Then he'd crept through the narrow yard straight to the back door and

...

And then?

Riley took a few long, slow breaths to ready herself. She carefully visualized how the backyard must have looked at that hour of morning. She could imagine the sound of crickets and

could almost feel the pleasant, cool air of a September night. There would have been some glow from the streetlights but probably little light from the houses themselves.

How had the killer felt as he'd readied himself for his task?

Well prepared, Riley thought.

After all, he'd obviously picked out his victim in advance, and he would have known a few crucial things about her, including the fact that she was an amputee.

Riley looked again at the broken pane of glass. Now she could see that the contact paper had been cut almost exactly to the shape of the windowpane. That surely meant he'd stood right here and cut the paper to fit even in the dim light, probably with a pair of scissors.

Again that word flashed through Riley's mind ...

Fastidious.

But more than that, he'd been calm and patient. Riley sensed that the killer had been utterly dispassionate—not the least bit angry or vengeful. Whether he'd known the victim personally or not, he'd harbored no feelings of animosity toward her. The killing had been cold-blooded in the fullest possible sense.

Almost clinical.

She made a fist and imitated the gentle but firm blow he must have used to break the glass. Before she reached through the broken pane, she suddenly sensed a spasm of discomfort.

Did he make more noise than he'd expected?

She remembered seeing a shard of glass lying on the floor

inside the door. A piece had fallen despite the care he'd taken, causing a tinkling sound.

Had he hesitated?

Had he considered giving up on his plan and quietly slipping away the way he'd come?

If so, he'd quickly regained his resolve.

Riley gingerly reached through the pane and reopened the door and stepped onto the landing, slipping her shoes off as he surely had in order to move about quietly.

And then ...

He'd heard a noise upstairs.

Sure enough, the woman had awakened at the sound, and he could hear clattering and thumping as she put on her elbow crutches and started moving through the house.

Riley thought maybe his hopes had sunk for a few moments.

Maybe he'd hoped to creep up on Robin as she lay in bed fast asleep, then drive the ice pick into her ear without her ever knowing he'd been there.

It wouldn't be like the earlier killing, when he'd murdered young Vincent Cranston while he'd been jogging outdoors. But Riley sensed that the killer had no interest in a consistent MO. All he wanted was to get the killings done as cleanly and efficiency as possible.

But now ...

With the woman on the move upstairs, did he dare continue? Or should he run away before she came back here and found

him?

Riley sensed that he froze here on the landing for a moment, struggling with his indecision.

But then ...

The woman didn't come to the back door. She moved on elsewhere in the little house. Maybe she hadn't heard the glass breaking after all. The killer might have breathed a little easier at the realization, but he still wavered. Did he dare attack the woman while she was up and around?

Why not? he may have wondered.

Disabled as she was, he'd surely be able to overpower her much more easily than he had his earlier victim.

Still, he didn't want to be sloppy or careless. A struggle might spoil everything.

But he reminded himself that this was urgent business. He was driven by some deep imperative that only he could understand.

He couldn't back out—not now. When would he get another chance like this?

He summoned up his will and decided to get on with it.

Following in what she imagined to be the killer's footsteps in her stocking feet, Riley climbed the steps up to the door that led to the kitchen. She turned the doorknob and tugged the door open ...

Perfect!

The doorknob didn't squeak, and neither did the door hinges. Feeling more and more connected to the killer by the moment,

Riley crept on into the kitchen. Ignoring the fact that Bill, Jenn, Sturman, and Brennan were all standing nearby watching her, she looked all around. She knew that the scene had been untouched since the murder. So the same as right now, the kitchen table had been piled with stacks of paper that the woman had been reading.

But where was the woman?

Riley imagined looking through the killer's eyes, peering through the kitchen archway into the living room. Sure enough, she was standing right there, looking out the window, her attention entirely directed toward whatever she saw outside.

Riley imagined taking the ice pick in hand. Then she walked on across the hardwood floor, her shoeless feet stirring not so much as a whispering shuffle, until she stood right behind where Robin Scoville had been standing.

And then ...

One swift, sharp, flawlessly aimed move was all it took.

The long point of the ice pick plunged effortlessly through the boneless passage through her ear into her brain, and the killer pulled the pick just as effortlessly out again, then watched his victim collapse to the floor.

And finally ...

Riley felt sure that he was satisfied with his deed.

He was proud of himself for overcoming his uncertainties and going through with it.

But did he pause for a moment to admire his own handiwork? Or had he slipped away immediately?

Riley's sense of the killer's mind dimmed now as she stood looking again at the taped outline on the floor.

There was a lot—too much—that she still didn't know.

But she felt sure of one thing.

She said aloud to her colleagues, who were now gathered around her ...

“He's one cold son of a bitch.”

Bill said, “Tell us more.”

Riley thought for a moment, then said, “I can't be sure of anything yet. But I think it's personal for him—and yet it's *not* personal at the same time. I don't think he hated this woman. He may not have even known her name. But he had reasons for wanting her dead—important reasons, almost like killing her was some kind of ...”

Riley paused, trying to think of the right word.

Then Jenn suggested, “Duty?”

Riley looked at her younger colleague and nodded.

“Yeah, that's exactly the feeling I get. A sense of obligation, almost.”

Riley noticed now that Chief Brennan was staring at her with his mouth hanging open. She'd long since gotten used to people's surprise when they watched her going through this strange process of hers. And she knew she'd just looked pretty strange, walking trancelike through the house in her socks, pantomiming the moves of the killer.

Agent Sturman, by contrast, didn't look surprised at all. Of

course, as a seasoned FBI agent, Sturman had surely at least heard of Riley's unique propensities, which were well-known throughout the Bureau.

Sure enough, Sturman nudged Brennan with his elbow and said, "I'll explain it later."

Bill had gone to the landing in back of the house. He now came back with Riley's shoes and handed them to her. As Riley sat down on a footstool and put them back on, doubts started to creep into her mind.

Did I get everything wrong?

She often felt swept with such uncertainties after these exercises.

After all, she wasn't a mind reader, and there wasn't anything magic or paranormal about the process she used. It was pure intuition, nothing more or less. She'd been wrong sometimes in the past, and she might be wrong now.

She got up from the footstool and wondered ...

Did I miss something?

She looked toward the window and imagined the young woman standing there staring outside, oblivious to the danger that was creeping up behind her.

What was she looking at?

Riley had no idea.

But she knew she'd better find out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Riley stood looking out the window, trying to imagine what the street had looked like in the early morning hours, at the exact moment when someone had driven an ice pick into Robin Scoville's skull.

What was out there? she wondered.

What did Robin see just then?

The question nagged harder at Riley by the moment.

She said to Chief Brennan, "I didn't notice that this house has any security cameras. Does it?"

"No," Brennan said. "The owner didn't bother to install them in a small rental like this. Too bad, because maybe we'd have a video recording of what happened. Or better yet, cameras might have deterred the killer."

Followed by her colleagues, Riley walked out through the front door. She stood on the sidewalk looking up and down the street. Again she noticed that Robin's house was the smallest house in an upscale neighborhood.

She said to Brennan, "I assume you've interviewed all the neighbors."

"As many of them as we could," Brennan said. "Nobody was awake when it happened, so nobody noticed anything unusual."

She could see cameras on some of the front porches. In several yards, signs warned that these houses were protected by one or

another security company.

“I see that some neighbors have security cameras for their own houses,” Riley commented.

“Most of them do, I’m sure,” Brennan said with a shrug. “But it doesn’t look like any of them are going to do us any good.”

Riley could see what Brennan meant. None of the cameras appeared to be directed toward Robin’s house, so they couldn’t have picked up anything concerning the break-in or the murder. And yet a Nest camera fastened to a porch post of the nearest house caught her interest.

Riley pointed to the house and said, “Have you talked to the people who live there?”

Brennan shook his head. “No, a retired couple named Copeland live there, but they haven’t been at home for a week or so. The neighbors say they’re vacationing in Europe. They’re supposed to come back in a couple of weeks. So they definitely couldn’t have seen what happened. And their camera isn’t aimed at Robin’s house either.”

Not at the house, Riley thought. But definitely at the street in front of the house.

And what had happened on the street was exactly what Riley was curious about right now. Because the couple was gone for an extended time, maybe they’d left the surveillance system programmed to keep a continuous record of all that happened in their absence.

Riley said, “I want to see what, if anything, that camera picked

up.”

Agent Sturman replied, “We’ll have to track down the Copelands and get their permission. To see the recording we’ll need their password. Or we’ll have to get a warrant and go after it through the company.”

“Do it,” Riley said. “Whatever we need. As quickly as you can.”

Sturman nodded and stepped aside, taking out his cell phone to make a call.

Meanwhile, before Riley could decide what she and her colleagues should do next, Jenn spoke to Chief Brennan.

“You said Robin was divorced. What can you tell us about her ex?”

Brennan said, “His name’s Duane Scoville, and he plays in a local rock band called the Epithets.” The chief laughed a little and added, “I’ve heard them play. They’re not bad, but it seems to me they’d better keep their day jobs.”

Jenn asked, “Where does Duane live?”

Brennan pointed. “Just over on the east side of town.”

Jenn said, “I take it you’ve interviewed him.”

“Yeah, we don’t think he’s a viable suspect,” Brennan said.

“Why not?” Jenn asked.

“Duane says he and the Epithets were playing a gig over in Crestone, Rhode Island, the night of Robin’s murder. He says he and the band stayed the night, and he showed us a motel receipt. We don’t have any reason not to believe him.”

Riley saw that Jenn looked doubtful.

And with good reason, Riley thought.

It didn't sound like the local police had done a very thorough job of interviewing Duane Scoville, let alone eliminating him as a suspect. And even if Duane wasn't the murderer, he still might have important information to offer.

Jenn said, "I'd like to talk to him some more."

"OK, I'll give him a call," Brennan said, reaching for his cell phone.

"No, I'd rather not give him advance notice," Jenn said.

Riley knew that Jenn was right. If there was even the slightest chance that Duane was their killer, it was best to try to catch him off guard.

Riley said to Brennan, "Could you drive us to where he lives, see if we can find him at home?"

"Certainly," Brennan said.

Agent Sturman ended his phone call and rejoined them. "I've got an agent tracking down the Copelands," he said. "But I've got another case in progress, and I need to get back to headquarters."

"You'll let us know as soon as you get anything?" Bill asked.

"Absolutely," Sturman promised, and strode off toward his van.

Chief Brennan said, "My vehicle is over here. I can take you to Duane Scoville's place."

As Riley and her colleagues climbed into Brennan's police car, Riley noticed the determined expression on Jenn Roston's face. It

felt good for Riley to see her young protégé looking so engaged. Riley glanced at Bill and could tell that he felt the same way.

She's really turning out to be a hell of an agent, Riley thought.

And the three of them together were becoming a remarkable team.

She decided she and Bill should let Jenn take the lead in interviewing Duane Scoville. It might give her a chance to shine, Riley figured.

And she definitely deserves that.

*

During the short drive across town, Jenn Roston found herself remembering Riley's actions back at Robin Scoville's house, and the conclusion she'd drawn about the killer ...

"He's one cold son of a bitch."

Jenn didn't doubt that Riley was right. She'd seen Riley get into a killer's mind a number of times now, but it never ceased to amaze her.

How does she do it?

No one in the BAU seemed to know, except maybe for Riley's one-time mentor, a retired agent named Jake Crivaro who now lived in Florida. Riley herself didn't seem to be able to explain the process or even what it felt like.

It seemed to be nothing more or less than pure gut instinct.

Jenn couldn't help but envy Riley for that.

Of course, Jenn had her own share of strengths. She was smart, resourceful, tough, ambitious . . .

And nothing if not self-confident, she thought with a smile.

Right now she was pleased that Riley had agreed with her about the need to interview Duane Scoville. Jenn felt anxious to make meaningful contributions to solving this case. She regretted some of her own behavior during the previous case she'd worked on with Riley and Bill—the case of the so-called “Carpenter,” who'd killed his victims with a swift hammer blow to the head.

A bitter remark Jenn had made in response to Riley's criticism kept echoing through her mind . . .

“I suppose this is where you accuse me of not being objective.”

It had been a cheap shot—especially since Jenn knew perfectly well that Riley had had good reason to doubt her objectivity. As an African-American agent, Jenn had been on the receiving end of some pretty overt racism while they'd been working in Mississippi. She hadn't taken it well, and she had to admit it had affected her judgment.

She hoped she could make up for all that now.

She hoped she could make up for a lot of things.

She looked forward to a day when, at long last, she could put her troubled past behind her.

As Chief Brennan drove, darker memories began to crowd into Jenn's mind—the dysfunctional parents who'd abandoned her when she'd been a child, then her years under the care of a brilliant but sinister foster parent who called herself “Aunt

Cora.” Aunt Cora had trained Jenn and her other foster children to become master criminals in her own criminal network.

Jenn had been alone among Aunt Cora’s pupils in escaping from her clutches, hoping to make a different and better life for herself. She’d become a decorated cop in Los Angeles, then had made phenomenal scores at the FBI Academy before becoming a full-fledged BAU agent.

Even so, she hadn’t been able shake off Aunt Cora completely. The woman had been in touch with her earlier this year, trying to pull her back into her sphere of influence, even trying to make Jenn beholden to her by helping out on an FBI case.

Jenn hadn’t heard anything from Aunt Cora for a few weeks now. Had her one-time mentor given up on her for good?

Jenn could only dare to hope.

Meanwhile, Jenn’s gratitude toward Riley knew no bounds. Riley was the only person who knew the truth about Jenn’s past. More than that, Riley sympathized. After all, Riley herself had once been entangled with a criminal mastermind, the brilliant escaped convict Shane Hatcher.

Jenn knew more than anybody else did about Riley’s secret, just as Riley knew all about hers. It was one of the reasons Jenn felt such a close bond with her new mentor—a bond based on mutual understanding and respect. Because of that bond, Jenn wanted to live up to Riley’s high expectations of her.

Jenn’s thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Brennan’s voice as he turned a corner.

“We’re almost there.”

Jenn was surprised to see a huge change in the surrounding community. Gone were all the dignified, gleaming white houses with their flawlessly straight picket fences. They passed down a street littered with modest-sized businesses that included vegan restaurants, organic food stores, and a thrift store.

Then they continued into a neighborhood filled with smaller houses, somewhat shabby but nevertheless rather charming. Pedestrians were a varied lot, from young bohemian types of diverse races to old hippie types who looked like they’d lived here since the sixties.

Jenn felt immediately more comfortable here than she had in the homogenized, ultra-white, upper-class area they’d just left. Still, this was a small neighborhood, and Jenn guessed that it was getting rapidly smaller.

Gentrification is closing in, she thought a bit sadly.

Brennan parked in front an old brick apartment building. He led Jenn and her colleagues up to the front door. There, Riley gave Jenn a look that told her she was to take the lead now.

Jenn glanced at Bill, who nodded at her to go ahead.

She gulped with anticipation, then rang the buzzer for Duane Scoville’s apartment.

No one answered at first. Jenn wondered if maybe he wasn’t home. Then she rang again and heard a grumbling voice over the speaker.

“Who is it?”

The voice crackled for only a couple of seconds. But Jenn thought she heard music in the background.

Jenn called back, “We’re from the FBI. We’d like to talk to you.”

“What about?”

Jenn felt a bit taken aback by the question. And this time she was sure she heard music.

She said, “Um ... about your ex-wife’s murder.”

“I talked to the cops about that already. I was out of town when it happened.”

There was another snippet of music, and this time it sounded familiar to Jenn—almost eerily so.

Brennan interjected, “This is Police Chief Brennan. I talked with you earlier. The agents would still like to ask a few more questions.”

A silence fell, then the buzzer rang and the door clicked. Jenn opened the door and she and her colleagues walked inside.

She thought ...

It doesn’t sound like we’re exactly welcome.

Jenn wondered why not.

She decided she was going to find out.

CHAPTER SIX

Jenn followed Chief Brennan into the building and up the stairwell to the second floor. Riley and Bill followed behind as they walked down the hall toward Duane Scoville's apartment.

Jenn's ears perked up as she heard the sound wafting from some nearby room.

That music again.

This time she was sure she'd heard it before, but it had been a long time ago, and she wasn't sure where or when. It was a classical piece—something slow, soft, and incredibly sad.

They arrived at Scoville's apartment, and Chief Brennan rapped on the door.

A voice called out, "Come in."

As she and her colleagues walked inside, Jenn was startled by the appearance of the apartment. The place was a mess, all scattered with beer cans and food wrappers.

About ten guitars were in view, some of them on stands, others in open cases, still others lying about in the open. Some were acoustic, some electric. There were also amplifiers, speakers, and miscellaneous electronic equipment scattered about.

Duane Scoville himself sat in a battered beanbag chair. He had long hair and a beard and wore jeans, a tie-dye shirt, a peace symbol on a cord around his neck, and round-framed "granny glasses."

Jenn had to suppress a giggle. Scoville looked like he was in his twenties, but he was trying his best to look like a sixties-style hippie. The room's decor included beads, cheap tapestries, faux-Persian throw rugs, lighted candles, and general disorderliness. Some of the posters on the wall were psychedelic images, others promoting rock music groups and performers that had been popular long before Jenn's time.

There was a strong odor in the air—of incense and ...

Something else, Jenn realized.

Duane Scoville sat staring blearily into space as if no one had arrived. He was obviously quite stoned, although Jenn saw no signs of drugs anywhere.

Chief Brennan said to him, "Duane, these are FBI Agents Paige, Jeffreys, and Roston. Like I just said, they've got a few more questions for you."

Duane said nothing, and he didn't offer his visitors a place to sit in the crowded little room.

Jenn felt perplexed as she remembered how immaculately neat the victim's little home had been. She could hardly believe Robin Scoville had ever known this man, much less been married to him.

And then there was the music ...

Instead of the Doors or Jefferson Airplane or Jimi Hendrix or something else more appropriate to these surroundings, Duane was listening to soft Baroque chamber music with a haunting woodwind solo like a high-pitched, mournful birdsong.

Suddenly recognizing the piece, Jenn said to Duane, “That’s Vivaldi, isn’t it? The slow movement of a piccolo concerto.”

Still without looking at Jenn or her companions, Duane asked, “How did you know?”

Jenn felt jolted by the question. She remembered vividly where she’d heard the music before.

It had been back in Aunt Cora’s foster home, where she’d grown up.

Aunt Cora had always kept classical music playing in the background when she’d been teaching her kids how to be master criminals.

Jenn shivered a little. She found it eerie and unsettling to hear this melancholy melody again after so many years. It brought back strange, disturbing memories of days Jenn had tried hard to put behind her.

But she knew she mustn’t let it distract her.

Keep your head in the game, Jenn told herself sternly.

Instead of answering Duane’s question, she said ...

“You don’t strike me as a Vivaldi kind of guy, Duane.”

Duane finally looked at her and met her gaze.

He said in a dull voice, “Why not?”

Jenn didn’t reply. From studying at the academy and her experiences working with Riley and Bill, she knew she’d accomplished a little something just by getting him to look at her. Now they had at least a tentative connection. Jenn decided to wait and let Duane speak next.

But he said nothing right away.

The slow, sad movement came to an end and a sparkling fast movement started.

Duane clicked his player so the same slow movement began to play again.

Finally he said, “Robin really liked this piece. It was her favorite movement. She couldn’t get enough of it.”

Then with a trace of a sneer he added ...

“I hope they play it at her funeral.”

Jenn was chilled by a telltale note of anger and bitterness in his voice. She wondered—what was behind those dark emotions?

She glanced at Bill and Riley. They gave her slight nods, silently encouraging her to keep following her instincts.

She took a step closer to Duane and asked, “Are you going to Robin’s funeral?”

Duane said, “No, I don’t even know when or where it’s going to be. Over in Missouri, I guess. That’s where Robin grew up, where her family still lives. St. Louis, Missouri. I don’t guess I’ll be invited.”

Then with a barely audible chuckle he added, “And I don’t guess I’d be welcome if I did go.”

“Why not?” Jenn asked.

Duane shrugged. “Why do you think? Her folks don’t like me very much.”

“Why don’t they like you?”

Duane abruptly switched off the music. His face twisted a little

with what appeared to be disgust.

Then he said spoke directly to the three agents. “Look, let’s get right to the point, OK? You folks want to know if I killed her. I didn’t. I went through all this earlier with Chief Brennan here. It’s like I told him, I was over in Rhode Island, playing a gig with my band. We stayed the night.”

He reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a piece of paper and offered it to Jenn.

“Do I need to show this again?” he said. “It’s our motel bill.”

Jenn crossed her arms and let him hold the paper in his hand.

Whatever was written there, she doubted she’d find it convincing. It might only mean that some members of the band had stayed there that night.

She said, “Can your bandmates vouch that you were with them all night?”

He didn’t reply. But he did look uncomfortable with the question. Jenn’s suspicions were thoroughly piqued now.

She said to him, “Could you tell us how to get in touch with them?”

“I guess,” Duane said. “But I’d rather not.”

“Why not?”

“We weren’t on the best of terms. They’d just kicked me out of the group. They might not exactly cooperate.”

Jenn began to pace a little.

“It might be a good idea for *you* to cooperate,” she said.

Duane said, “Yeah? Is that what a lawyer would tell me? Do

I need a lawyer?"

Jenn didn't reply right away. But as she walked past a closed living room closet, she noticed that Duane sat up uneasily. She looked at the door and walked closer to it, then turned and noticed that Duane's anxiety seemed to be mounting.

She said, "I don't know, Duane. *Do* you need a lawyer?"

Duane settled back down and tried to appear relaxed again.

He said, "Look, I'd really like for you guys to leave now. This is kind of a tough time for me, you know? You're not making it any easier. And I've got rights. I'm pretty sure I don't have to answer your questions."

Jenn stood there looking back and forth between Duane and the closet. She felt really close to finding out whatever it was Duane didn't want her to know.

She reached over and touched the closet doorknob, and Duane winced sharply.

Jenn saw Riley shaking her head sharply, silently warning her not to open the closet.

Of course, Jenn didn't need a warning. She knew better than to open the closet without a warrant. Her move was only a bluff, an attempt to get more of a reaction out of the man who lived here.

And she was definitely succeeding.

Duane lifted a hand toward the closet and said in a shaky voice

...
"Don't do that. I've got rights."

Jenn smiled at him, but she didn't move away from the closet door.

She was about to ask the retrograde musician to come to the police station to answer more questions when Riley said, "Thanks for your time, Mr. Scoville. We'll leave now."

Jenn's smile disappeared.

She felt dumfounded. But she saw that Riley, Bill, and the police chief were all headed for the door.

Obediently, Jenn followed them out of the room.

As they headed back down the hallway and down the stairs, Riley said to Jenn ...

"What did you think you were doing back there? You can't go poking around like that without a warrant."

Jenn said, "I know that, Riley. I wasn't going to *open* the closet."

Riley said, "Well, I'm glad to hear that."

"Aren't we going to take him in for questioning?" Jenn asked.

"No," Riley said.

"Why not?"

Riley sighed and said, "I'm hungry. Let's go get something to eat. We can talk about it then."

The discussion went on hold as Chief Brennan drove them to a nearby fast food place. Jenn and her colleagues ordered their generic burgers and sat down at a table together.

Then Riley said to Jenn, "Now tell me your thoughts about Duane Scoville."

Jenn sensed that Riley was about to give her a little question-and-answer lesson in police work.

Don't get defensive, Jenn told herself sternly. After all, she was probably going to learn something, whether she liked it or not.

She thought about Riley's question.

What are my thoughts about Duane Scoville?

She thought back to the interview and replayed bits of it in her mind.

She remembered his sneer when he'd mentioned that the Vivaldi piece had been Robin's favorite ...

"I hope they play it at her funeral."

Why would a rocker like him even be listening to Vivaldi, apparently the same movement over and over again?

Except maybe to gloat.

Then she remembered his look of disgust when he'd switched the music off.

Self-disgust.

Jenn could think of one good reason for him to feel that way.

"I think he's guilty," Jenn said.

Riley smiled a little and said, "I think so too."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Riley could see the shock in Jenn's face at what she'd just said. The younger agent's mouth hung open for a moment.

Jenn took a quick glance at Bill and Captain Brennan, who were listening attentively, then stared back at Riley.

Riley suppressed a smile and waited for Jenn to say something. Finally Jenn asked, "You think he's guilty too? Guilty of murder?"

"I didn't say that," Riley said.

"Then what do you mean?"

Riley saw that Bill was now grinning broadly and Brennan just looked mystified. But she didn't want to say exactly what she meant, at least not outright. She wanted to draw her young protégé out with questions. After all, Jenn still had some things to learn about thinking like a BAU agent. And maybe Riley could coax Jenn into seeing things Riley's way regarding Duane Scoville.

Riley asked, "What were your first impressions when you walked into the apartment?"

Jenn squinted in thought. "Well, it was weird. I mean, the music was weird enough, for a rock musician. But the way the place looked ... Robin's little house wasn't anything like that. Everything there was so neat. And conservative."

"Hard to believe they were ever married, huh?" Riley said.

Jenn shrugged a little and said, “Not happily, anyway.”

Riley smiled a little.

“It’s not so hard for *me* to believe,” Riley said. “I’ve got some idea what it’s like to get married when you’re young and stupid. It’s pretty much the story of my life. Robin and Duane were probably crazy in love and happy for a while. Their marriage might not have even lasted long enough for them to realize how little they really had in common.”

Jenn sputtered, “But—but he acted so ...”

Riley said, “Guilty. Yes, I know. He had his reasons. Why do you think their marriage broke up? Aside from those differences that would probably have broken them up eventually anyhow?”

Jenn stared down at her untouched hamburger, obviously trying to think of an answer.

Riley said, “Well, it’s not too hard to figure out. What do you know about Robin’s recent past?”

Jenn said, “She was in a car accident last year, and she lost a leg and ...”

Riley could see a light coming on in Jenn’s eyes.

“Oh my God,” Jenn said. “Duane couldn’t deal with it. He’d married a gorgeous young woman, married her *because* she was beautiful, but suddenly she was ... well, mutilated. He just didn’t find her attractive anymore.”

Riley nodded. “In short, he was a shallow little prick.”

Jenn nodded slowly and said, “And he knows it, too. That he was a prick, I mean. He felt guilty about it as soon as he dumped

her. But now that she's dead ...”

Jenn paused for a moment, then continued.

“He keeps thinking, if only he'd been a better husband, a better *human being*, Robin would still be alive today. And he might well be right. So his guilt is eating him up right now.”

Jenn shook her head and added, “Small wonder he acted the way he did. But ... what about the closet? Why did he get so nervous when I acted like I was going to open it?”

Riley chuckled and said, “You'd be nervous, too, if you had two FBI agents and a police chief in your room, and you had a bong hidden in your closet.”

Jenn rolled her eyes. “Of course. I should have known.”

Riley didn't say anything. The truth was ...

We don't really know anything.

For all Riley really knew, Duane Scoville might have killed his wife after all. Maybe killing her was a desperate attempt to put his shame at abandoning her behind him—an attempt that had failed miserably.

Riley didn't think that was likely to be the case, but she couldn't be sure. They really had nothing to go on so far and she was just keeping Jenn from jumping to rash conclusions. And she was glad that Jenn wasn't getting angry and defensive like she had when they'd been in Mississippi.

At that moment, Chief Brennan's cell phone rang. He took the call, then quickly cupped the phone with his hand to tell Riley and her colleagues ...

“This is Agent Sturman on the phone. He says his people got in touch with the Copelands in Europe. They said their camera was set up to record continuously, and to save everything it recorded during their absence. Sturman says they understand the urgency of the situation, and they’ve given us a permission to look at their security feed. They’ve also turned over all the information we need to view it.”

Riley saw Bill’s face light up.

“That means we won’t have to go scrambling after a warrant, then deal with the security company,” he said.

Riley, too, was excited. She asked, “How do we access the feed?”

Jenn suggested, “From what I know about these systems, we ought to be able to connect online, from any computer or even cell phone.”

“I’ll find out,” Chief Brennan said.

He spoke again with Sturman on the phone and jotted down some notes. Then he ended the call and showed the group his notes.

He said, “Sturman gave me a link, a sign-in name, and a password. We should be able to check it out right here and now.”

Riley looked at Jenn, who obviously understood these systems better than she or Bill. She said to Jenn, “Go ahead, see what you can do.”

Chief Brennan handed his notes to Jenn, who took her laptop out of her bag and opened it up on the table. It took just a few

seconds for her to make the connection. Everybody at the table crowded around the laptop so they could see the image on the screen.

The picture wasn't at all sharp or clear. But it was exactly what Riley had expected, based on the position of the camera.

She pointed and said, "Look, this is the street right in front of the Copeland house. Although you can't see it, Robin Scoville's house is out of frame, right across the street."

"So what are we looking for?" Chief Brennan asked.

Riley stifled a sigh.

That's a good question, she thought.

She thought back to her attempt to connect with the killer's mind back at Robin Scoville's house. She remembered imagining how the killer found Robin staring out her front window, then creeping up behind her and taking her by surprise.

Robin had been looking at something outside. Riley was sure of it.

She said to the others, "We're looking for anything going on in the very early hours of that morning. We're not likely to see the actual killer out on the street, but we could get lucky. It seemed that Robin was looking out her front window when she was attacked. Maybe we can get a clue what she saw out there. I don't know what it might be. I hope we know it if we see it ourselves."

Then she said to Chief Brennan, "You said the time of Robin's death was around four a.m., right?"

Brennan shrugged. “That’s the approximation the medical examiner gave us,” he replied.

“It’s something we can work with,” Riley said. “Jenn, start the footage at, say, three thirty. Run it fast until we see something interesting.”

Jenn fast-forwarded through the footage. At first, the street was empty. Then a car drove by without stopping. A few minutes later, another car went by and the street was empty again.

Then Jenn stopped the feed.

“What’s that?” she exclaimed, pointing at something large and bulky that had come into view.

Looking at the still frame, Chief Brennan said, “It’s just a garbage truck. Nothing sinister about that.”

Maybe not, Riley thought.

Even so, she said to Jenn, “Back it up and run it slowly.”

Jennifer backed up the feed to just before the garbage truck appeared. Then she ran it frame by frame. The truck was the kind with mechanical arms that automatically picked up garbage bins. Although the camera did not show Robin’s house, it did show the machine picking up the bin on her curb and dumping it into the truck.

But Riley saw something much more important than that.

She pointed at the screen and said, “There’s a man right there.”

Riley’s companions peered more closely at the screen as Jenn continued to run through the footage frame by frame. Sure enough, a man was walking alongside the truck. The low-

resolution image didn't show him at all clearly. He appeared as little more than a fuzzy silhouette.

When the truck finished dumping Robin's bin, it began to drive on to the next house. But the man just stood there.

Riley realized with a tingle ...

He's staring at Robin's house.

Then Riley gasped and said to Jenn ...

"Stop on that frame!"

Jenn stopped the feed, stared at the image, and asked ...

"What's he doing now?"

The shadowy figure seemed to have raised one arm.

"Almost looks like he's aiming a gun," Brennan said. "But the victim wasn't shot."

"It looks to me like he's pointing at something," Bill said.

"Pointing at the victim?" Jenn asked. "Threatening her?"

Riley said, "Keep running it slowly."

Jenn ran the footage frame by frame by frame. Riley and her colleagues could see the man standing there for a moment, arm raised, staring in the direction of the victim's house. Then he lowered his arm and hurried out of the frame.

Riley said to Jenn, "Run the whole thing again."

Jenn backed up the footage to where the truck was coming into view, then ran it slowly. Again, Riley and her colleagues saw the truck stop to pick up Robin's garbage bin. Again, they saw a man walking alongside the truck. They saw the truck start to pull out of view, then the man standing, gesturing, and finally

leaving the scene.

“Who was that guy?” Chief Brennan asked in an amazed voice.

“What was he doing?” Jenn added.

And where did he go? Riley wondered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Riley sighed in discouragement. There simply was nothing more to see.

She and her colleagues had been staring hard at the screen as Jenn ran the security camera footage several times. But the camera wasn't well focused for that distance from the house it was set up to protect. The man walking alongside the truck remained an indistinct blur.

They'd found no clue to suggest why he'd suddenly walked out of the frame, or where he'd gone. He had never come back into view.

Riley said, "We've got to find out who that man is. He and the truck driver seem to be the only signs of life on that street at that time."

"This guy was on the move at the approximate time of the murder," Jenn added. "We could be sitting here watching the killer."

"The truck appears to have continued on its way without him," Bill said. "We can't be sure they were even supposed to be together."

"I think I know how to find some answers," Chief Brennan said. He pulled out his cell phone. "I've got a direct number for Roger Link, the director of Public Works here in Wilburton."

Brennan punched in a number, then put the call on

speakerphone so Riley and her colleagues could hear.

When Brennan got the director on the line, he said, “Roger, this is Clark Brennan.”

The voice replied cheerfully, “Hey, how’re you doing, Clark?”

Brennan scratched his chin and said, “Well, I’m hoping you can help me with a problem. I’m sure you know about the murder that happened the night before last.”

“Yeah. Awful thing.”

Brennan said, “Some FBI agents and I have been looking at a security feed, and we see that a waste collection truck went by the victim’s house at about the time of the murder. There was a guy on foot alongside that truck, and he acted a little oddly.”

Riley could hear the director gasp.

He said, “Surely you don’t suspect any of our sanitation guys.”

Brennan said, “Honestly, Roger, we don’t know what the hell to think. But we need to know who was working that particular route that night.”

“Our guys usually work alone,” the director replied. “Now that we’re using these robotic arm pickup vehicles, they don’t even interact with people on their routes anymore. Generally speaking, things are better this way.”

Brennan told him Robin Scoville’s address.

“OK, I’ll see what I can find out,” the director said.

Riley and her colleagues heard clattering on a keyboard. Then the director spoke again.

“I may have found out something for you. This is a little

unusual. The driver on that route's name is Dick Abbott. That night he did have someone kind of working with him, a young guy named Wesley Mannis. It seems that Wesley lives at Wilburton House, an IDD facility."

Jenn asked, "IDD?"

"Intellectual and developmental disabilities," the director said.

Chief Brennan squinted and asked, "So does that mean he's retarded or physically handicapped or ...?"

"I wouldn't know," the director said. "But the facility and the city run a program together for live-in IDD residents. The city hires the residents for jobs outside the facility, helping them transition into regular lives. This Wesley Mannis was part of that program, and his job was sort of a made-up one, something that wouldn't be too demanding. Really, he just walked alongside the truck and made sure no garbage got dropped. Not much of a job, but it gave him something to do until ..."

The director paused. Riley had to bite her tongue to keep from asking ...

"Until what?"

After another clatter of keys, the director said, "Two days ago the driver filed a report that Wesley disappeared sometime during that morning's shift. We're required to do that when these workers don't show up or wander off."

"That was the morning Robin Scoville was murdered," Jenn said.

"Can you pinpoint the time?" Brennan asked.

“No,” the director replied. “This doesn’t say exactly when, where, or why Wesley skipped out. Apparently Wesley just walked away somewhere along the route and the driver didn’t miss him right away. The Public Works Department alerted Wilburton House that one of their residents had walked off on a job and ... well, that’s all the report says.”

Riley asked, “Nothing about whether Wesley eventually turned up at Wilburton House?”

“No, I guess you’ll have to find that out from the staff there.”

“We’ll do that, thanks,” Chief Brennan said.

He ended the call and looked back and forth at Riley and her two colleagues.

“What do you think?” he asked the three agents. “Maybe this Wesley Mannis is our killer?”

Riley had no idea, and judging from their silence, she was sure neither Jenn nor Bill did either.

“If he is,” Jenn finally said tentatively, “we’ve got him.”

“Now wouldn’t that be nice and easy?” Bill muttered.

But the possibility didn’t quite add up to Riley. Had the same resident from the same facility gone to New Haven a week ago and killed Vincent Cranston during his morning jog on the Friendship Woods trail? Riley found that hard to believe.

She said to Brennan, “We need to check in with Wilburton House.”

Brennan nodded and punched another number on his cell phone.

When he got the facility's female receptionist on the line, he said, "Police Chief Clark Brennan here. I've got three FBI agents listening in on this call. We need to know—do you have a live-in resident there named Wesley Mannis?"

"Yes."

"Is he in the facility right now?"

"I'll check." After a brief pause, the receptionist said, "Yes, he's in his room."

Apparently unsure what to ask next, Brennan looked appealingly at Riley and her colleagues.

Riley said to the receptionist, "We need to know about Wesley Mannis's activities two days ago, during the very early morning hours."

A short silence fell.

Then the receptionist said, "I'm sorry, and I hope you understand, but I'm not very comfortable sharing information about a patient over the phone like this. Could you come and talk to someone on the staff in person?"

"We'll be right there," Chief Brennan said.

Brennan drove Riley and her colleagues across town to Wilburton House. As Brennan parked his car, Riley was impressed by the size of the facility, which looked like a tastefully designed small mansion.

As they all went inside, they were immediately greeted by a tall, willowy, smiling woman dressed in cheerful pastel colors.

She stepped toward the police chief and shook his hand and

said, “You must be Clark Brennan. I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Dr. Amy Rhind, and I’m the director of the facility.”

Riley, Bill, and Jenn produced their badges and introduced themselves to her. Dr. Rhind invited them to sit down in the comfortable lobby.

She said, “I understand that you’re here about one of our residents, Wesley Mannis.”

Her brow knitted with worry and she added, “I’m glad you’re here. Perhaps you can help us understand what has happened to him. I’m afraid it’s something of a mystery.”

That word jolted Riley a little.

A mystery.

She’d been hoping for answers, not questions.

She heard Bill groan softly.

A mystery?

This might not be so nice and easy after all.

CHAPTER NINE

Riley was beginning to feel worried. They had come here looking for a solution, not for another mystery. She couldn't imagine what Dr. Rhind had meant just now when she'd said ...

"Perhaps you can help us understand what has happened to him."

Hadn't the receptionist just told Riley and her colleagues on the phone that Wesley Mannis was in his room?

Riley asked, "Are you saying that Wesley is missing?"

Dr. Rhind shook her head. "No, he's here, but ..." She fell silent for a moment and said, "Could you please explain why you're here?"

Chief Brennan said, "Dr. Rhind, we understand that Wesley is part of a program your facility has worked out with the city. He's been working with a sanitation driver during an early morning shift. Is that right?"

"That's right," Dr. Rhind said.

Brennan continued, "Well, we caught him on a security video. He was right outside the home of a woman who was murdered that night. Then he disappeared from view."

Dr. Rhind's eyes widened.

She said, "Oh, no. Surely you don't suspect that Wesley ..."

Her voice trailed off and she glanced about uneasily.

Trying to sound reassuring, Riley said, "We don't know what

to think, Dr. Rhind. We just need to talk with Wesley.”

Dr. Rhind said, “I’m not sure whether it *is* possible. You see, Wesley is severely autistic. And like many autistic people, he has serious problems with social and language skills. He was making great progress for a while, and the work program seemed to be doing him a world of good, really drawing him out of his shell.”

With a sigh, Dr. Rhind added, “Then the night before last, the Public Works Department called to report that he’d gone missing. We were terribly worried, but he did show up here a couple of hours later. He apparently walked all the way back from wherever he’d been. But ...”

She squeezed her hands together worriedly and continued. “He’s had some kind of terrible setback. He was getting along so well, but now he’s returned to being completely uncommunicative. We had no idea why, although we seldom do know why with our autistic residents. Their progress is often touch and go, and we have to deal with our share of disappointments. But from what you’re saying, maybe his setback had something to do with ...”

Dr. Rhind looked deeply troubled now.

She added, “I really can’t believe that Wesley would ever hurt anybody. He’s not at all prone to violence.”

Jenn said, “We have no reason to think otherwise, Dr. Rhind.”

Bill added, “But we do need to talk with him if it’s at all possible.”

Dr. Rhind thought quietly for a moment.

Then she said, “His mother is with him in his room. She’s been trying to help him through this setback. Let’s go see how she’s doing.”

As Dr. Rhind led Riley and her four companions into the facility, Riley was surprised by her surroundings. She remembered all too well the last time she’d been to any kind of a care facility. It had been back in Mississippi when she, Bill, and Jenn had interviewed a man suffering from dementia.

That had been a home for the elderly, and the place had made Riley distinctly uneasy. It had all felt fake somehow, and more like a funeral home than someplace where living people were actually cared for.

But this place was entirely different.

For one thing, the people in the hallways were of all different ages, ranging from children to the elderly. And many of faces the were happy faces. Several residents waved and smiled at Riley and her companions.

Wait—are they residents or staff? Riley wondered.

No one seemed to be wearing uniforms of any kind, so Riley couldn’t be sure she could tell residents from staff members.

They passed by a comfortable sitting room where people sat around talking and playing board games and eating snacks, and a classroom where a small group of students took notes and listened attentively to their instructor.

As they continued on past spacious apartment-style rooms, Riley said to Dr. Rhind ...

“I’m impressed. This seems more like a combination school and dormitory than a ...”

Riley stopped herself from finishing her sentence, but Dr. Rhind smiled broadly.

“Don’t be afraid to say it,” she said to Riley. “You mean a mental institution.”

Riley nodded, blushing a little.

Dr. Rhind said, “We try not to treat our residents like ... well, patients. Instead, we treat them as individuals, with their own problems, hopes, changes, challenges, abilities, limitations, and needs. We try to foster a feeling of family for residents and staff alike. This leads to positive networking and relationships that might last a lifetime, even after some of them leave here to live in the outside world. Our ‘alumni’ often come back to help others, to teach them valuable life skills and other lessons that they’ve learned. Above all else, we try to foster independence.”

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