

BLAKE PIERCE



t a k i n g

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE--BOOK FOUR

The Making of Riley Paige

Blake Pierce

Taking

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Taking / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (The Making of Riley Paige)

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) TAKING (The Making of Riley Paige – Book Four) is book #4 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, suspected to be using an RV camper, lures and kills women across the country – and the FBI turns to its youngest and most brilliant agent: 22 year old Riley Paige. Riley has managed to graduate the FBI academy, determined to make it as an FBI agent. But when she is assigned her first official case with her new partner – Jake – she wonders if she is cut out for the task. Riley and Jake, immersed in the RV subculture – and into the depths of the killer's mind – soon realize that nothing is what it seems. There is a psychopath at large, stumping them at every turn, and willing to stop at nothing until he has killed as many victims as he can find. With her own future on the line, Riley has no choice but to find out: is her brilliant mind any match for the killer's? An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, TAKING is book #4 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 #5 in THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE series will be available soon.

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TAKING

(THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE—BOOK 4)

BLAKE PIERCE

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 thirteen 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 five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery--Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), and [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1) are each available as a free download on B&N!

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

When Brett Parma returned from her hike through the rough and barren Arizona hills, she didn't get back into her little camping van right away. She leaned against the vehicle, gazing back the way she'd walked, and took a long breath of the dry, clean air. She was loving this place more and more by the minute.

And even in December! she thought.

Nothing could be more unlike the grim, windy winter cold back in North Platte, Nebraska. Of course, she knew that this whole area would be blazingly hot in the summer, even at this late time of day. Hiking would be out of the question then.

She'd made the perfect choice for a three-week vacation—both the location and the time of year. The campgrounds weren't at all crowded, like they would be during the tourist season. And it had been smart of her to modify her van into a simple camping vehicle.

She'd desperately needed this vacation. Her job as a receptionist for the Hanson Family Medical Group had become more and more thankless every day. Almost everybody she dealt with, either on the phone or in person, seemed to be angry about something or other—insurance coverage, appointment times, the unavailability of certain doctors ...

Any problem that I'm in no position to solve.

All those troubles seemed blessedly far away right now. Brett found herself thinking ...

What if I just don't go back?

Wouldn't it be cool to retire in her early thirties? Or maybe she could do something even crazier. What if she just kept right on driving on and on, hopping from campground to campground, perhaps finding her own sequestered places to stop for the night, maybe heading on down into Mexico, never to return?

She laughed at herself.

No, she wasn't that kind of free spirit—not someone who could blithely ignore dangers and responsibilities in order to ...

What was the phrase?

Oh, yes. Follow my bliss.

She knew such an adventure just wasn't in the cards for her. For one thing, her savings would give out before long, and where would she be then? What would she do for a living?

Meanwhile, she'd just have to grab up as much bliss as she could during the coming days.

And really, that didn't seem like a bad thing at all.

As she watched the sun starting to set over the rocky, rust-colored hills, she heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. She turned and saw a good-sized camper approaching.

She was mildly surprised. She'd chosen this scenic back road because she guessed she'd have it pretty much to herself, especially at this time of year.

She was even more surprised when the driver pulled the vehicle off the road and parked alongside her van. The much bigger camper dwarfed her own little makeshift vehicle, but then so did most of the others she saw in camping areas.

It must be nice—all that luxury on wheels.

The driver climbed down out of the vehicle. He was a nondescript but pleasant-looking man.

He looked at Brett and said ...

“Hey, didn't I see you back at the Wren's Nest Campground?”

Now that Brett thought about it, both the man and his vehicle looked somewhat familiar from where she'd been camping the night before. He looked like a lot of the guys she'd seen in the campgrounds, older than she was and obviously better off financially. Usually, a whole family was traveling along with them.

“Maybe so,” she said.

“I’m Pete,” the man said.

“I’m Brett.”

“Nice to meet you, Brett.”

“Likewise,” Brett said. “Where are you headed?”

“The Beavertail Campground,” Pete said.

“Me too,” Brett said. “It looks to be about a ten-minute drive from here.”

Pete nodded and smiled. “Yeah, that’s what I figure.”

He walked over to the sign that said HIKING TRAIL and stood staring out into the hills for a moment.

Then he looked at Brett and said, “You look like you just came in from hiking.”

Brett knew it was a good guess, since she was still wearing her backpack.

“That’s right,” she said.

Pete squinted at her. “I might try the trail myself. Do you recommend it?”

Brett was a little startled at the question.

She said, “Um, it’s a really nice trail, but ... it’s pretty late in the day, don’t you think? It’ll be getting dark soon.”

Pete sighed with disappointment.

“I guess that’s true,” he said. “Maybe I’ll come back this way tomorrow.”

He stared at the hills again for a few moments, then walked back toward his camper.

Then he turned and said to Brett, “Would you like to come inside for a beer?”

Brett was both surprised and pleased by the offer. She’d brought nothing to drink on this trip except bottled water and a few soft drinks, and a nice cold beer sounded refreshing. Besides, she’d just love to get a look at the inside of that camper.

“That would be nice,” she said.

When he escorted her inside, the camper actually looked more spacious than it had from the outside. It had a good-sized kitchen area complete with a stove, and enough bedding for more than one person—a couple with a child or two, maybe.

Nevertheless, this guy did seem to be traveling alone. Brett figured she’d get awfully spoiled, traveling alone in a camper like this. Her own vehicle wasn’t equipped with much of anything except a mattress.

Pete pointed to a door and said, “You’ve been on the road for a while. Maybe you’d like to use my bathroom.”

Brett stifled a little gasp.

A real bathroom!

Of course, it couldn’t be much bigger than a closet. But in comparison with restrooms in restaurants and gas stations and communal facilities at campgrounds, it would be a true luxury.

“Thanks!” she said.

She opened the door and stepped inside the cubicle. The door swung shut behind her, and she found herself in total darkness.

Strange, she thought.

Didn’t the bathroom at least have a window?

She fumbled around the wall next to the door, feeling for a light switch, but couldn’t find any. Anyway, should she expect there to be any electricity as long as the camper wasn’t properly hooked up to a line?

She turned to leave again, but now the door latch wouldn’t budge.

It must be broken.

She shyly called out ...

“Hey, I seem to be kind of stuck.”

She got no reply.

Starting to get worried now, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone and switched on its flashlight.

As she flashed its beam around, she began to feel a touch of fear.

This wasn't a bathroom.

Maybe it once had been, but now it was stripped of all the usual fixtures.

She was standing in a plain rectangular space, its walls and ceiling lined with small square tiles with tiny pinholes.

Acoustical tiles, she realized.

Was the room soundproofed?

Her fear grew stronger.

As her eyes adjusted, she could see that the tiles were gouged and scratched.

The walls were smeared and splattered with something red.

Blood!

When she heard the door latch start to rattle, she started screaming.

But she knew it wouldn't do any good.

As the door began to open, Brett Parma knew she was going to die.

CHAPTER ONE

The enormous, ox-like man stepped up to the microphone and began to speak.

“I am honored to address ...”

But his booming voice broke up into a shriek of feedback that rattled through the large auditorium.

Riley Sweeney almost jumped out of her skin at the racket.

The noise quickly faded, and a couple of seconds later she was chuckling nervously along with the rest of the FBI Academy graduates. FBI Director Bill Cormack was known to have a deep, booming, resonant voice that wreaked havoc on sound systems.

He’d be better off turning off the microphone, Riley thought.

With that gigantic voice of his, surely he could project to everyone in the audience without a lot of trouble.

But with a self-deprecating grin, Director Cormack began to speak into the microphone again, much more softly this time.

“I am honored to address this year’s graduates from the FBI Academy here in Quantico. Congratulations to all of you for rising to all the challenges of the last eighteen weeks.”

Riley was struck by those words.

Eighteen weeks!

If only I’d had a full eighteen weeks!

She’d missed nearly two weeks, chasing down a brutal killer rather than participating in classes and training exercises here on base.

Her mentor, Special Agent Jake Crivaro, had rather unceremoniously yanked her out of the Academy to work on a case in West Virginia—a truly grisly case of a killer who’d murdered his victims by wrapping them up in barbed wire.

Catching up with her studies afterward had been hard. She had envied the other students for having more time than she did for such rigorous work. But Riley knew that not all of the original 200 or so students were graduating today. Some had failed and others had dropped out.

She was proud of herself for succeeding in spite of everything.

Riley turned her attention to what Director Cormack was saying.

“I look back in awe over the journey that I and so many other agents have taken before you, and that you are about to embark upon today. I can tell you from personal experience that it’s a deeply rewarding journey—but sometimes less than a thankful one. Your selfless deeds won’t always be greeted with public gratitude.”

He paused for a moment, as if reflecting on personal experience.

Then he said, “Remember that few people outside the Bureau have much of an idea of your momentous responsibilities. You’ll be criticized for your work, your every mistake subjected to the utmost scrutiny, often in the glare of public media. When you fail to solve a crime, you’ll feel as though the whole world knows about it. When you succeed, you’ll often feel neglected and unappreciated.”

He leaned forward a little and said almost in a whisper ...

“But always remember—you won’t be alone. You’re part of a family now—the proudest and most loyal and nurturing family anyone can imagine. There will always be someone here to comfort you in defeat and celebrate with you in triumph.”

Riley felt a lump form in her throat at the mention of that word ...

Family.

She’d scarcely ever had a family, not since her mother had been murdered right before her eyes when she’d been just a little girl. Her father was alive—an embittered and reclusive ex-Marine who lived in the Appalachian Mountains. But she hadn’t seen him since ...

When?

Not since before she'd graduated from college last fall, she realized. And that meeting had been anything but pleasant. As far as Riley knew, her father had little if any idea of everything she'd done during the months since then. She wondered if she'd ever tell him about it. For that matter, she wondered whether she'd ever see him again.

And now Director Cormack was holding out the promise of something Riley had dreamed of but never had.

Family!

Was it really possible?

Was she going to feel like part of such a large family in the days to come?

She looked around at the faces of her fellow graduates. Many were smiling at each other, and some were whispering to each other as Director Cormack kept talking. Riley knew many of them had made lasting friendships here at the Academy.

She stifled a sigh at the thought that she hadn't really found a "family" here. As behind as she'd gotten during the murder case, she hadn't had much time to socialize and hang out with friends. She'd formed exactly two really close friendships during her time here—one with her roommate Frankie Dow, and one with John Welch, an idealistic and handsome young man she'd gotten to know back during the summer when they'd both been in the FBI's ten-week Honors Internship Program.

John and Frankie were also here today. Because the graduating class was seated according to names, Riley and her two pals hadn't been able to sit together, and she didn't really know the classmates who were beside her.

Riley reminded herself that she and her fiancé, Ryan Paige, were already—or almost—a family. She would move back in with him in their DC apartment, and they planned to marry soon. Riley had lost one pregnancy to an early miscarriage, but they would surely have children in the coming years.

She wondered if Ryan was there in the audience. It was Saturday, which could be a workday for an entry-level attorney like Ryan. Besides that, Riley knew he had mixed feelings about the career she had chosen.

Director Cormack finished his speech, and the time had come to swear in all the new agents. One by one, he would call out their names. Each of them would go up to the stage, take the FBI oath of office, receive their badge, and return to their seat.

They were being called in alphabetical order, and as Cormack worked his way through the list, Riley found herself wishing her last name didn't begin with the nineteenth letter of the alphabet. It was a long wait. Frankie, of course, went up onto the stage before her, then waved and grinned at Riley as she returned to her seat.

When the director finally called out Riley's name, her knees felt weak as she stood up and pushed her way past other seated graduates until she got to the aisle. By the time she stepped up onto the stage, she felt as though she was no longer inside her own body.

Finally she stood on the stage, raised her hand, and repeated after Director Cormack ...

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

She had to blink back a tear as she continued.

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

It was a short oath, but Riley felt as though her voice would give out before it was over. Finally she said the closing words ...

"... and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God."

Riley held out her hand, expecting Director Cormack to hand the badge to her. Instead, the big man grinned at her somewhat impishly and set the badge on the podium.

"Now hold on, young lady. We've got a little business to take care of."

Riley gasped. Had she failed to graduate after all?

The director took a small black box out of his jacket pocket and said ...

“Riley Sweeney, it is my distinct honor to bestow upon you the Director’s Leadership Award for Excellence.”

Riley was stunned.

The director opened the little box and took out a ribbon with a medal attached. A burst of applause broke out as Cormack hung the medal around her neck. Cormack praised Riley for her initiative and leadership during her weeks at the Academy.

Riley tried to listen carefully to his words, but she felt lightheaded.

Don’t faint, she ordered herself. Stay on your feet.

She hoped somebody was recording whatever the director was saying because it was all blurring together for her.

Cormack handed her something.

My FBI badge, she realized as she accepted it.

Then he held out his hand. She shook it and turned to leave.

As Riley Sweeney, brand new FBI agent, stepped down from the stage, she saw that not all the graduates looked happy for her. In fact, there was a palpable resentment in some of their faces. She could hardly blame them. When she’d gotten back from working on the murder case, she’d been designated team leader over and over again for Academy activities. It was no secret that some students felt that Riley’s recent fieldwork had given her an unfair advantage over them. She was sure that some who came from law-enforcement backgrounds must be especially annoyed.

Riley went back to her seat, feeling flushed with emotion at having been chosen for the award. She couldn’t remember anything like that ever happening to her before.

Meanwhile, the rest of the recruits filed one by one onto the stage, swearing the oath and accepting their badges. When John went up, Riley smiled and waved at him, and he shyly waved back at her.

After the last students took their oaths, Director Cormack again congratulated the recruits on their achievement and brought the ceremony to an end. The students got up from their seats and eagerly sought out their friends.

Riley quickly located John and Frankie, who were glowing with pride as they clutched their new badges.

“We did it!” John said, hugging Riley.

“We’re FBI agents for real!” Frankie said, hugging Riley in turn.

“We sure are,” Riley said.

Frankie added, “And best of all, we’ll all be working at the DC Headquarters. We can stick together!”

“Won’t that be great!” Riley agreed.

She took a deep breath. After that rough summer, everything was working out just fine. Better even than she had imagined.

She glanced around for Ryan and saw him moving through the crowd toward her.

He’d made it here after all, and he had a pleasant smile on his face.

“Congratulations, sweetie,” he said, kissing her on the cheek.

“Thanks,” Riley said, kissing him back.

Taking Riley’s hand, Ryan said, “And now we can go home.”

Riley smiled and nodded. Yes, that was one really great thing about today. During all her weeks in the Academy, she’d had to live in the dorm while Ryan had stayed in their DC apartment. They hadn’t spent nearly as much time together as either of them had wanted.

Her assignment to the DC FBI Headquarters meant that she'd be working just a short subway ride from their apartment. They could settle down to life together, and maybe decide soon just when they planned to get married.

But before Ryan and Riley could walk away, John called out to her.

"Wait a minute, Riley. We've got one more bit of business to take care of."

Riley's eyes widened as she remembered ...

Yes, there's one more thing to do.

She and her friends went outside into the cold winter air, where the new agents were all lining up and heading across the quad toward the FBI gun vault. Riley and her two friends hurried to join the line, while Ryan followed along with them.

Riley noticed that Ryan looked rather perplexed.

He doesn't realize what's going on here, she thought.

There was no time to discuss this right now. Riley and her friends were approaching the quartermaster.

As they reached him, the man handed each of them a service weapon—a 22-caliber Glock pistol.

Ryan's mouth gaped with surprise—and also some alarm, Riley felt pretty sure.

He'll just have to get used to my having a firearm, she thought.

Riley smiled at him and said, "OK, we can go home now."

She was relieved that he made no comment about the lethal weapon she was carrying as they said goodbye to her friends and headed back across the quad.

Everything is going to be all right, she thought.

That was when a young man approached her holding an envelope.

"Are you Riley Sweeney?" the young man asked.

"Yes," Riley said.

The young man handed her the envelope and said, "I'm supposed to give you this. You've got to sign for it."

Riley signed for the envelope, then hastily pulled it open.

She staggered back a few steps at what she read.

"What is it?" Ryan asked.

She gulped hard and told him, "It's a change of assignment."

"What does that mean?" he demanded.

"I won't be working at DC Bureau Headquarters after all. I'm assigned to the Behavioral Analysis Unit right here in Quantico."

Ryan stammered, "But—but you said ... we're supposed to be living together."

"We will be," Riley hastened to assure him. "After all, it's not that long a commute."

Even so, she knew that the change was definitely going to complicate their lives. This wasn't going to make it impossible for them to be together, but it wasn't going to be easy.

Ryan snapped, "Well, you can't do that. They'll have to change it."

"I can't make them change anything," Riley replied. "I'm just an underling here, like you are in the law office."

Ryan was silent for a long moment, then he grumbled, "Whose idea was this, anyway?"

Riley thought about that. She'd had hadn't even listed Quantico among her three assignment choices. Who would have intervened to place her here?

Then she realized with a sigh ...

I've got a pretty good idea.

CHAPTER TWO

Special Agent Jake Crivaro stared discontentedly at his scrambled eggs.

I should have gone to that graduation, he thought.

He was sitting in the commissary of the BAU building in Quantico, thinking about Riley Sweeney, his young protégé. Her graduation from the FBI Academy had been two days ago, and he was feeling bad about having skipped it.

Of course, he'd made an excuse for himself—too much paperwork piled up on his desk. But the truth was, he hated those kinds of ceremonies, and he just hadn't been able to muster up the will to go and sit there in the crowd and listen to speeches he'd heard in so many variations before.

If he had gone, he could have taken the opportunity to tell her face-to-face that he'd personally arranged for her transfer from DC to the Behavioral Analysis Unit here in Quantico.

Instead, he'd let a messenger do that job.

But surely she'd taken the BAU transfer to be good news. After all, her unique talents would be put to much better use here than they would have been in DC.

Then it occurred to Jake that Riley might not even know yet that he'd had her assigned to be his own partner.

He hoped she'd find it a nice surprise to learn that they'd be working together. They'd already made a good team on three pretty tough cases. The youngster could be erratic at times, but she always managed to surprise him with the unusual power of her insight.

I should have at least called her, he reprimanded himself.

Jake looked at his watch and realized that Riley must be on her way here right now, to report for her first day at work.

As he took a sip of coffee, his cell phone rang.

When he took the call, a voice said, "Hey, Jake. Harry Carnes here. Am I catching you at an OK time?"

Jake grinned at the sound of his old friend's voice. Harry was a retired police detective from Los Angeles. Several years ago, they'd worked together on a celebrity kidnapping case. They'd hit it off well and had stayed in touch.

"Sure, Harry," Jake said. "It's great to hear from you. What's up?"

He heard Harry sigh, then say, "I've got something bothering me. I was hoping you might be able to help me out."

Jake felt a surge of concern.

"I'd be glad to, buddy," he said. "What's the problem?"

"Do you remember that Colorado murder case last year? The woman who got killed in Dyson Park?"

Jake was surprised to hear Harry bring it up. When Harry had retired from the LA police force, he and his wife, Jillian, had moved to Gladwin, a tiny town in the Rocky Mountains right next to Dyson Park. A young woman's body had been found on a hiking trail. Despite his civilian status, Harry had tried to help the police solve the case, but without success.

"Sure, I remember," Jake said. "Why do you ask?"

A short silence fell.

Then Harry said, "Well ... I think it's happened again."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked.

"I think the killer has struck again. Another woman has been murdered."

Jake felt a jolt of surprise.

He asked, "You mean right there in Dyson Park?"

“No, this time it’s in Arizona. Lemme explain. You know how Jillian and I like to travel south during the winter? Well, we’re in Arizona right now, at a campground not far from Phoenix. This morning on the local news, they said that a young woman’s body had been found on a hiking trail somewhere north of here. I called the local cops, and they were willing to give me a few details.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Jake, the girl’s wrists were all cut up. She must have bled to death somewhere, but not where her body was found. It’s just like the victim in Dyson Park. I’ll bet anything it’s the same killer.”

Jake felt a twinge of skepticism.

“Harry, I don’t know,” he said. “A lot of time has passed since the Colorado killing. There’s a pretty good chance that any resemblance between the two murders is just a coincidence.”

Harry’s voice took on a more urgent tone.

“Yeah, but what if it’s not a coincidence? What if the guy who did the Colorado crime did this one too? What if it turns into some kind of spree?”

Jake suppressed a sigh. He could understand his friend’s reaction. Harry had told him how bitterly disappointed he’d been about not being able to help the Gladwin cops and the Colorado State Patrol catch the local killer. It wasn’t surprising that a new murder with some similar details pushed Harry’s buttons.

But people hiking in a wilderness alone did get killed sometimes. And some people persisted in going out there by themselves in spite of all warnings.

Jake didn’t want to tell Harry flat-out that he thought he was wrong.

But what can I tell him?

Jake didn’t know.

Harry continued, “Jake, I was wondering ... do you think you could take this on as a BAU case? I mean, now that there have been two murders in two different states?”

Jake was feeling more and more uneasy.

He said, “Harry, that’s not how things usually work. It’s up to the police out there in Arizona to ask for the FBI’s help. And as far as I know, they haven’t done that. Until they do, it’s none of our business. Now maybe if you could get them to call the FBI ...”

Harry interrupted. “I’ve already tried that. I can’t convince these cops that the murders are connected. And you know how local cops can be about the FBI stepping onto their turf. They’re not crazy about the idea.”

Jake thought, No, I don’t guess they are.

He found it easy to imagine how the police in Arizona might react to some retired cop trying to convince them they were missing something important. But Harry was actually right about one thing. If a killer committed murders in more than one state, the FBI didn’t need an invitation to get on the case. If Harry was right about it being the same killer, the FBI could open an investigation.

If Harry was right.

Jake took a long, slow breath. “Harry, I really don’t know if I can do anything about this on my end. It would be a hard sell, trying to get the people in charge here to make this an official FBI thing. For one thing, you know perfectly well the FBI won’t take a case if the local cops think it’s just a single murder. But ...”

“But what?”

Jake hesitated, then said, “Let me think about it. I’ll get back to you.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Harry said.

They ended the call.

Jake winced a little, wondering why on earth he’d promised to get back to Harry.

He knew perfectly well that he could never convince Special Agent in Charge Erik Lehl that this ought to be an FBI case. Not on such a slim connection.

Hell, I don’t really believe it myself.

But he'd said what he'd said, Harry was out in Arizona waiting for Jake to call back at pretty much any minute. And the only thing Jake was going to be able to tell him was what he should have told him before they'd ended that call—that there was no way for him to get the FBI involved.

Jake stared at his cell phone for a moment, trying to get up the nerve to make that return phone call. But he couldn't bring himself to do it—at least not yet.

Instead he hunkered down and began eating his breakfast in earnest. He figured maybe more coffee might help him think better about how to handle this situation.

Or maybe not.

Jake knew he hadn't been especially sharp lately. In fact, he'd already been feeling low when Harry called him, and it wasn't just because he'd blown off Riley Sweeney's graduation.

That case he and Riley had solved some weeks ago—the nasty case of the barbed wire killer—had left him feeling exhausted and burnt out. That seemed to be happening more and more as he grew older. His energy just didn't bounce back like it used to. And he suspected that his colleagues here at the BAU knew that. In fact, he guessed that was why Erik Lehl hadn't assigned him to anything out in the field since that last one.

And maybe it was just as well.

Maybe he wasn't up to it just yet.

Or maybe he wasn't up to it at all anymore—ever again.

He sighed into his coffee cup as he thought ...

Maybe it really is time to retire.

That thought had been bugging him a lot lately. It was one reason why he'd gone to the trouble of transferring Riley Sweeney to the BAU. It was why he'd made such a green agent his partner. In all his years as a profiler, he'd never met anyone else with a talent like his own—the ability to climb into a killer's mind.

Whenever he did retire, he wanted to leave someone like that behind to continue his work—a bright young agent who could fill his own shoes. But he worried that getting Riley ready for all that might be no easy task. He often described her as “a diamond in the rough.”

And she was a rough diamond indeed. Even now that she had graduated from the Academy, Jake was sure it going to take a lot of work to get rid of those rough edges—her impetuosity, her tendency to bend and even break the rules and not follow orders, and her lack of discipline when it came to using her own gift.

She's got a lot to learn, Jake thought.

And he had to wonder if he was actually up to the task of teaching her all that she had to know, especially now that he seemed to be past his own peak.

One thing seemed certain—he mustn't go easy on her. Not that he'd exactly pampered her so far. In fact, he often found it hard to hold onto his temper when she did crazy, rookie things. But he liked her a lot, even though he tried not to show it too much. She reminded him of himself when he was much younger.

So he sometimes felt tempted to spoil her.

But he mustn't do that.

He had to work her hard. He had to shape her up fast.

As Jake finished his breakfast, he found himself thinking again about Harry Carnes, who was probably waiting for his return call right now.

Jake wondered ...

Isn't there anything I can do for the guy?

He had to admit, he could feel his spirit lift a little at the idea of getting out of this place.

And why not?

Erik Lehl didn't seem eager to put him on any cases right now.

The alternative was to sit in his office and do boring paperwork, unless ...

An idea took shape in Jake's head.

He had lots of vacation time piled up. He could ask Lehl for two or three days off, go out to Arizona, and see if there was anything he could do for Harry.

Of course, Riley Sweeney was on her way here right now to report for duty.

But there wouldn't be much point in her starting to work here at the BAU if her senior partner was going to be on vacation, so ...

Why can't she come with me?

This could provide some simple, safe training opportunities for the rookie agent.

He smiled at the idea.

As Jake left the commissary and headed for Erik Lehl's office, he thought ...

Who knows? This might actually be fun.

CHAPTER THREE

By the time she neared the BAU Headquarters in Quantico, Riley was in a terrible mood. The drive from her apartment in DC had been worse than she'd expected. The morning traffic had been so thick and heavy that she almost missed her exit.

It would be worse if I were commuting the other way, she told herself.

Still, it wasn't going to be any fun to face this traffic every morning. And then returning after a day of work—would that be any easier?

Now, as she finally reached the BAU parking lot, she saw two entrances—one for visitors and one for staff.

Which entrance should she use?

Nobody had told her. In fact, she hadn't heard from anybody since she'd received that note after her graduation the day before yesterday—the message telling her she should report for duty at Quantico, not in DC.

When she'd gotten the note, she'd been certain the transfer must have been Agent Crivaro's idea. But now she wasn't so sure. After all, they'd already worked together on some demanding investigations. Wouldn't Agent Crivaro have made an effort to get in touch with her to talk about the change?

Meanwhile, she really had no idea what the day might have in store for her—or, for that matter, what her foreseeable future might have in store.

Then Riley realized that whatever that future might be, everything she had done over the past year had brought her to this place. When she had inserted herself into an investigation of murders in her college dorm, when she had worked with Jake on cases while she was still in training, this was what it had all led to.

She wasn't a visitor.

She was an FBI agent.

She drove up to the staff gate, where a security guard was posted in a booth.

Riley took out her badge and showed it to the guard.

The guard nodded and said, "You're expected."

He then handed her a parking permit tag and waved her on in.

Riley felt a rush of excitement. It was the first time she'd shown her FBI badge to identify herself, and it had made a difference.

I've actually got a place to park!

The thrill quickly passed, though, as Riley drove around looking for an empty slot. Memories of yesterday came creeping into her mind.

After all those weeks of dormitory living, she'd finally gotten to spend two nights and all of Sunday with Ryan. Their first night had been plenty exciting because they'd been apart for so long, but the next day things hadn't been especially pleasant. Ryan wasn't at all happy about Riley's new assignment and the inconvenience it was going to cause.

Inconvenience!

Riley scoffed aloud.

The main inconvenience to Ryan was that Riley was going to need the car for her daily commute, leaving him to use the subway to get to and from work. That had been a blow to his pride. His Ford Mustang was one of the few luxuries of his life, and he loved driving it to work every day. She knew it made him feel more like the big-time lawyer he someday hoped to be.

Ryan hadn't complained openly about the transportation thing, but he hadn't hidden his feelings either. He'd made way too much of a show of magnanimity and self-sacrifice, trying to make it seem like he was going to great lengths and taking great pains to support her in her new career.

And all on account of this stupid car, she thought, pulling into an empty parking spot and turning off the engine.

She got out of the vehicle and stood looking at it for a moment. She remembered the first time she'd seen the Mustang. She and Ryan had both been college students going out on their first date. She'd been quite impressed when he'd arrived at her dormitory in this car, and also by his gallantry in getting out and opening the passenger door for her.

Gazing at the vehicle now, she sighed.

Those giddy days when she and Ryan were just starting to get to know each other seemed awfully long ago now. The Mustang didn't impress her anymore, and she wished it didn't still seem like such a big deal to Ryan.

And what's wrong with having to take the subway, anyway?

She'd taken the subway every day during the summer, when she'd been in the FBI's Honors Internship Program. It was very efficient, and she'd actually gotten to enjoy riding with the mix of other passengers.

But then, she wasn't afflicted with Ryan's masculine pride.

She walked on inside the building and presented her credentials at the security gate. The guard looked up her name and told her she was supposed to report straight to Agent Crivaro's office.

As Riley took the elevator, she was sure this proved her original hunch—that it had been Agent Crivaro's idea for her to transfer to Quantico. She couldn't help but feel proud that he wanted her there. Crivaro wasn't just a good senior agent, he was nearly legendary in the FBI.

But what would he want a beginner like her to do on her first day on the job?

Paperwork, probably, she guessed.

It seemed like a boring prospect, but she knew her work in the FBI wasn't going to be all adventure. Although she'd had more than the usual field experience for a rookie, she was still just that—a rookie. Taking things slow seemed like a pretty good idea. It wouldn't be all adventure, but it wouldn't be all hazardous either.

And it might be nice to be working regular hours, at least for a while. A dependable schedule might help ease things between her and Ryan, give them a chance to get used to each other again.

She exited the elevator and headed down the hall to Crivaro's office, then knocked on his door. She heard a familiar gruff voice telling her to come on in.

When she opened the door, Crivaro was standing beside his desk. He was wearing a hat and jacket.

A go-bag was by his feet.

He glanced at his watch and said, "It's about time you got here."

Riley looked at her own watch and saw that she wasn't late at all. In fact, she was somewhat early. But she was too startled to say so.

"Where's your go-bag?" Crivaro asked.

"Um, out in my car," Riley said.

Although she didn't know much about working as a BAU agent, she knew that it was always important to be packed up and ready to go on a moment's notice. Not that she'd been expecting to use her bag so soon.

Crivaro asked, "Are you parked in the staff lot?"

Riley nodded.

"OK, then," Crivaro said, slinging his own go-bag over his shoulder. "We'll pick it up on the way to my car."

Crivaro strode right past Riley out the office door. Riley trotted along to keep up with him.

She stammered, "B-but where are we going?"

"We've got a case in Arizona," Crivaro said. "We're taking a commercial flight to Phoenix, so I'll drive us to the airport."

Riley felt dizzy from this sudden development.

“How long are we going to be in Arizona?” she asked.

“As long as it takes,” Crivaro said. “I never speculate about such matters.”

Riley stifled a gasp. This was about the last thing she’d expected to happen today.

And it certainly threw a wrench into her hopes of settling back down with Ryan.

“Could you give me just a few minutes before we go?” Riley asked Crivaro. “I’ve got to call my fiancé and let him know.”

Still walking, Crivaro asked, “Have you got your cell phone?”

“Yeah,” Riley said, still keeping up with him.

“Well, you can walk and talk at the same time, can’t you?”

As Riley and Crivaro continued on down the hall, Riley took out her cell phone and called Ryan.

When she got him on the line she said, “Ryan, something’s come up. I’m, uh, flying out to Phoenix today. Right now, actually.”

She could hear Ryan gasp. “You’re what?”

“Yeah, it’s a surprise to me too,” Riley said as she and Crivaro got into the elevator.

Ryan was sputtering now.

“Riley, this is crazy. This is your first day on the job.”

“I know,” Riley said. “I’m sorry.”

“How long are you going to be gone?”

Riley gulped and said, “I, uh—I’ve got no idea.”

“What do you mean, you’ve got no idea? What are you going to be doing out in Arizona, anyway? Are you even going to be back home in time for Christmas? It’s just a few days off, you know.”

That’s a good question, Riley thought.

Instead of trying to answer it, Riley said, “Look, as soon as I find out when I’m coming back, I’ll let you know.”

“Are you driving out there, or what?” Ryan said.

“Of course not. We’re taking a commercial flight.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Me and Agent Crivaro.”

Riley and Crivaro got out of the elevator and headed out of the building.

Ryan said, “If you’re flying out there, what about my car?”

Riley was startled. She hadn’t had time to think about the car.

She said, “It’s in the BAU parking lot here in Quantico. Don’t worry, it’ll be safe.”

“How long am I going to have to do without it?”

Riley felt a twinge of anger.

“You’ll manage somehow, Ryan,” she said.

“Yeah, but for how long?”

“Like I said—I’ll call you when I know myself.”

As Riley and Crivaro were heading outside the building, Ryan kept jabbering over the phone.

Mostly about his car, Riley couldn’t help but notice.

The more he went on, the more it irritated her.

She and Crivaro were walking through the parking lot when Riley finally said ...

“Look, Ryan—I really can’t talk now. I promise to get back to you as soon as I can. I love you.”

She could hear Ryan’s voice still complaining as she ended the call.

Opening the car door for Riley, Agent Crivaro said, “Everything OK at home?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Riley grumbled, climbing into the passenger seat.

Her anger was fading, and now she felt embarrassed that Crivaro couldn’t have helped overhearing her words to Ryan.

Crivaro got into the car and started the engine.

Then he smiled at Riley ever so slightly and said, “Hey, in case I didn’t mention it—we’re partners now.”

Yeah, I kind of figured that, Riley thought as Crivaro drove out of the parking lot.

So a few things were clear.

She was an FBI agent.

She was Jake Crivaro’s partner.

And they were going to Arizona.

She wished she had some idea of what else to expect today.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley couldn't help wondering ...

Is he mad at me or something?

Agent Crivaro had barely spoken to her as he drove them from Quantico to the Reagan Airport.

But why ...?

She knew Crivaro could be gruff, impatient, and even angry whenever she made mistakes or disobeyed orders—which unfortunately had been all too often. But what could she possibly have done wrong during the short time they'd been together this morning?

He'd just rushed her out of the BAU offices without much explanation, not even giving time to stop and make a private call to Ryan. Of course, now Ryan was mad at her, and she realized he had some reason to be annoyed.

But what could be the problem with Agent Crivaro?

Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with me, she thought hopefully.

Maybe something personal was bothering him.

In any case, Riley didn't feel like it was a good idea to ask.

She just sat quietly in the car, trying to focus on the most amazing things about today—she was an FBI agent, she was on a case, and she was partnered with one of the most respected agents in the BAU.

When they got to the airport, Crivaro rushed them through the check-in. She had to hurry to keep up as they practically ran all the way to the gate.

Breathless from their dash through the concourse, they got there just in time for the last call for passengers on their flight. Riley remembered how Crivaro had looked at his watch when she'd arrived at his office and grumbled ...

"It's about time you got here."

Now Riley understood why Crivaro had been so agitated about the time,

If they'd gotten to the gate a couple of minutes later, they would have missed the flight completely. She wished he had explained things to her instead of just expecting her to follow along without question.

He'd told her he had trouble working with partners. So, now that she was a partner and not just a trainee, what did that mean she'd be in for?

Riley reminded herself that Crivaro must have had to plan this trip hastily. He probably hadn't known about it himself until the last minute.

This must be about something really urgent, she thought with a slight thrill of excitement.

After they boarded, Crivaro sat in a window seat and stared outside as the plane took off. Sitting next to him, Riley was still wondering what was on his mind and why they'd been in such a rush. When the plane reached cruising altitude, Crivaro tilted back his seat and kept staring out the window. The light on his face revealed lines etched by years of difficult cases.

Riley felt sure that whatever this one might be, she was going to learn a lot about tracking criminal behavior. When she'd worked with him before, she had been yanked out of whatever was supposed to be her normal routine—college, internship, Academy training. Now that she was actually assigned to the job, she'd have more time to understand what was going on.

But when would she find out what that was? Surely she also had more right to information now.

Finally she summoned up the courage to ask him ...

"Uh, are you going to tell me anything about the case we'll be working on?"

Crivaro's lips twisted a little. He looked as though he wasn't sure how to answer that question.

Then he said, "Possibly—just possibly—we've got a serial killer to catch."

Riley thought she detected more than a little skepticism in his voice, as if he didn't believe any such thing.

Crivaro paused, then continued, "About a year ago, a young woman's body was found on a hiking trail in Dyson Park in Colorado. Yesterday another woman's body was found on another hiking trail in Arizona. She died under ... well, similar circumstances. We're going to Arizona to check and see if there's really any connection."

Crivaro looked out the window again, as if there were nothing more to say.

"Is there anything else?" Riley asked.

"Not really," Crivaro said, still looking out the window.

Riley felt thoroughly confused now. This might be her first day on the job, but she knew perfectly well that Crivaro ought to know more than he was telling her. In fact, he ought to have had a folder full of materials to show her to bring her up to date. They should be poring over that stuff right now.

She asked, "What were the victims' names?"

Crivaro shrugged slightly. "I don't remember the name of the victim in Colorado. Nobody's told me the name of the one in Arizona."

Riley couldn't believe her ears.

What does he mean, nobody's told him?

What does he mean, he doesn't remember?

Was he being secretive, or ...?

Her eyes widened as she got a strong hunch about what was going on with him.

She said to Crivaro ...

"This isn't an official BAU case, is it?"

Crivaro said with a slight growl, "It doesn't matter."

Riley felt a flash of anger.

She said, "I kind of think it does matter, Agent Crivaro. This is my first day as a BAU agent. What am I even doing here? I think I have a right to know more than you're telling me."

Crivaro shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Riley Sweeney, one of these days those instincts of yours are going to get you in serious trouble."

Then he turned toward her in his seat. Keeping his voice low, he started to explain.

"Look, early this morning I got a call from an old friend. Harry Carnes is his name. He used to be a cop in LA, and we worked on a case together there. He retired and moved to Colorado. A year ago a woman got murdered near where he lived—the first of the two women I just mentioned. He tried to help out the local cops, but they never solved the case."

"And?" Riley asked.

"And—Harry and his wife are traveling through the Southwest this winter, and he heard about this new murder in Arizona, and he thought there might be a connection with what happened in Colorado. So he called me to come out and check things out."

Riley felt more baffled by the second.

"Identical murders," she said. "So why isn't this an FBI case?"

Crivaro shook his head and said, "I didn't go through official channels. It doesn't sound to me like something the FBI would get mixed up in. I don't even know how identical they are, and some of the details just aren't all that unusual anyhow. In fact, I suspect there's probably no connection between the two murders at all."

Riley squinted hard at Crivaro and said ...

"So what you're telling me is, you're flying out to Arizona just as a favor to this old friend of yours."

"You got it," Crivaro said.

Riley struggled to make sense of what she was hearing.

She asked, “Why are you dragging me along?”

“You’re my partner,” Crivaro said.

“But this isn’t even a real case!”

Crivaro shrugged. “We don’t know that. Maybe we’ll find out that Harry’s right and the two murders are connected, and we have a real serial killer to hunt down. If so, it will wind up being a BAU case. You wouldn’t want to miss out on that, would you? Anyway, I thought ... well, I thought maybe this would be a good chance for the two of us to, you know, get used to working with each other.”

Riley almost blurted aloud ...

We’ve already worked three murder cases together!

But she quickly reminded herself that there had been plenty of friction between them during those early cases. And she hadn’t been an agent then.

Maybe Agent Crivaro was right.

Maybe they did need a little time to get used to working together in their new roles. But was this non-official and possibly even nonexistent case really the way to do it?

She asked, “Who’s paying for this trip, anyway?”

“I am, OK?” Crivaro grunted. “Of course I might get reimbursed if it turns out to be a real case.”

Riley said, “So you’re telling me—what? That we’re sort of on vacation together?”

Crivaro chuckled awkwardly. “Hey, the weather in Arizona this time of year is sure a lot nicer than it is in Virginia. Don’t bother to thank me for a change of scenery.”

“I don’t think this is funny,” Riley said, trying not to sound as irritated as she felt. “You could have at least told me from the start what this was all about.”

Crivaro said defensively, “Well, I was in kind of a rush. And it’s not like you were going to have any work to do in Quantico while I was gone. You might as well be with me, at least trying to get something done. We will be doing some investigating while we’re there. It might even be a good learning experience for you. So what’s the problem?”

“I’ll tell you what the problem is,” Riley said. “I’ve got a fiancé back home who’s pissed off that I’m taking off like this all of a sudden. Do you think he’s going to be less angry to hear I’m not even on a real case?”

Crivaro sighed guiltily. “And you’re going to tell him that?”

Riley was startled. She hadn’t even considered not telling Ryan all about her activities while she was away from him.

“Of course,” she snapped.

“Sorry about that,” Crivaro said. “I guess you’re right, I should have asked you first.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Crivaro looked at her more sympathetically and said, “Look, if you want out of this whole thing, I’ll understand. When we get to Phoenix, you can catch the first flight back if you want. I’ll even pay for the ticket. Is that what you want to do?”

Riley felt startled anew by his offer, and she didn’t know what to say.

Shouldn’t I take him up on it? she wondered.

For a moment the choice seemed obvious. Crivaro had no business dragging her across the country on this possibly pointless errand. And heading straight back home might be a good way to patch things up with Ryan—especially if she wound up with another day or two before she really had to start work at Quantico. It might be just what she and Ryan needed.

Then she quickly remembered the anger in Ryan’s voice when he’d asked her over the phone ...

“What about my car? How long am I going to have to do without it?”

Riley stifled a growl of irritation.

That damned car, she thought.

Not having that car around mattered more to Ryan than Riley not being there.

It really pissed her off.

Suddenly Riley didn't feel in the mood to patch things up with Ryan. And as far as Crivaro was concerned ...

Well, at least he's showing some interest in me.

Besides, Crivaro was right about one thing. They'd surely be doing a little investigating, even if it was only to find out there was nothing to investigate. It might turn out to be a good experience after all. She might actually learn something.

Finally Riley said, "It's OK. I'll stay with you."

Crivaro's eyes brightened.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Riley smirked a little and said, "I'll let you know if I change my mind."

Crivaro grinned. "Well, the offer still stands, if you want to get the hell away from me. At least as far as this trip is concerned. When we start working cases together officially, you'll be stuck with me."

"I'll keep that in mind," Riley said.

Crivaro leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, apparently about to take a nap.

Riley took a flight magazine out of the seat pocket in front of her and started to browse through it.

She found herself mulling over what she'd just done.

I chose work over Ryan.

And to her surprise, she felt good about it.

What does that say about me? she wondered. And our future?

Then her mind turned to speculation about the present.

Arizona.

She really knew nothing about it.

She'd spent most of her life in the green hills of Virginia. What might such a different part of the country have in store for her?

CHAPTER FIVE

When the flight landed in Phoenix, Riley and Crivaro got their go-bags out of the overhead bin and made their way through the boarding bridge into the terminal. About twenty people were waiting for the passengers from their flight, but there was no question about who was there to meet them.

A hearty-looking guy with a ruddy expression was waving vigorously at Crivaro. Riley knew that had to be Harry Carnes. The equally sturdy woman standing beside him with crossed arms and a frown on her face must be Harry's wife, and she was not looking happy at the moment.

The man welcomed Crivaro with a big hug, and Crivaro introduced Riley to the couple. The wife's name was Jillian. Riley guessed them to be about Agent Crivaro's age or maybe just a little bit older.

For a moment, she was startled to see that both of them were wearing T-shirts, jean short, and sandals. She and Crivaro still had on their jackets and clothes suitable for colder weather.

"Luggage?" Harry asked, eyeing their outfits.

"No, just these," Jake replied, holding up his go-bag.

Harry laughed and said, "Well, that's something you can take care of soon enough."

She remembered what Crivaro had said during the flight.

"The weather in Arizona this year is sure a lot nicer than it is in Virginia."

She definitely wasn't prepared for the weather here. They'd been in so much of a hurry to leave, she'd given no thought to packing a different wardrobe. She wondered if she was going to have to buy some new things for herself. Her budget sure wouldn't cover much.

Maybe it won't matter, she thought. If they headed back to Quantico soon, she could probably make do with what she had.

Harry led the way to the nearest food court, where they sat at a table and ordered sandwiches for lunch.

Crivaro said to Harry, "So here I am. Now tell me everything you know."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know much except what I told you over the phone. A woman was found dead yesterday on a hiking trail near Tunsboro, a town north of here. Her name was Brett Parma. When I heard about it on the news, I got curious and called the Tunsboro police chief. I had trouble getting him to open up, but I managed to pry a little out of him. He did mention the slashes on the woman's arms—and also that she'd bled to death somewhere before her body had been left on that trail. Then he basically told me to keep out of the way of his investigation."

"Which is what we're going to do," Jillian commented.

Harry leaned across the table toward Crivaro. "Jake, it all just gave me the weirdest feeling. It was like Erin Gibney's murder a year ago all over again. I started flashing back to how I'd tried to help the cops in Gladwin solve the case, and how we'd failed."

Harry lowered his eyes and muttered, "We never even came close to finding out who did that one."

Jillian sighed unhappily and said to Crivaro, "Harry's feeling all guilty about this whole thing. He says if he'd solved that case back in Colorado, maybe this new murder wouldn't have happened. Of course that's ridiculous. Jake, can you talk some sense into him? Tell him he's got no reason to feel that way."

Crivaro gazed at Harry sympathetically.

He said, "Jillian's right. You can't beat yourself up about that. Even if there is a connection between the two murders—"

Harry interrupted, "Jake, there is a connection. I feel it in my bones."

Riley could see a world of skepticism in Crivaro's face.

“Harry, I’ve worked a lot more homicide cases than you have,” Crivaro said. “I know what it’s like to feel responsible for those deaths, for not being able to catch a killer. But you can’t let it get the best of you.”

He reached out and put a hand on his friend’s arm.

“You didn’t kill anybody, Harry. You’re not responsible for that. It’s not your fault. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

Harry heaved a long, bitter sigh, then said to Jake and Riley, “Well, I was a cop long enough to know that. We never solve them all. But I was also out there long enough to recognize when my cop’s instinct is likely to be right. This thing, this latest murder, is really ringing some alarms for me.”

He put his unfinished sandwich back on the plate and pushed it away.

“I’m glad you two came out here to check things out,” he continued. “That makes me feel a whole lot better. Finish your sandwiches and I’ll drive you to Tunsboro.”

Jillian poked him in the arm and said almost in a whisper, “Wait a minute, Harry. You’re not driving anyone anywhere. We’ve got to get back to the campground.”

Harry gave his wife a pleading look.

“Come on, honey,” he whispered back. “We’re not in that much of a hurry. And Tunsboro’s just a short drive.”

“They can rent a car,” Jillian said. “Remember, we’ve got a deal.”

Harry looked embarrassed. Riley wondered what was going on between them. She saw that Crivaro seemed uncertain about what to say next.

Finally Jillian looked sternly at Jake and said . . .

“Harry’s not getting mixed up in this—this—whatever it is. He’s retired. We’re on vacation. I don’t want him getting all worked up about the Erin Gibney killing again. He was a guilty wreck about that for months. I thought we’d put all that behind us.”

Harry nodded reluctantly and said to Riley and Crivaro with a weak smile. “Well, you heard what the missus said. She’s got me on a tight leash. I wish I could work with you, but there it is. We’ve got an itinerary. We’re headed south to the Coronado National Forest today. We’ve got a reservation at the Riggs Flat campground.”

“And we’re not canceling,” Jillian added sharply. “No matter what.”

Harry squeezed her hand and said, “Of course not, honey. But we’ve got enough time to drive these two to the police station in Tunsboro. Then we can get back to the campground and check out there. It’s the least we can do for them, after they went to all this time and trouble.”

Jillian stared hard at Harry. “OK—as long as you promise not to change your mind along the way.”

Harry awkwardly raised his right hand.

“I promise,” he said and gave her a quick kiss.

Jillian smiled and looked reassured. She wagged her finger at Crivaro and said . . .

“And don’t you go trying to persuade him otherwise!”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” Crivaro said with a chuckle.

The couple seemed a lot more relaxed now. Harry even picked up his sandwich again and as they all kept eating, he regaled Riley and Crivaro with small talk. Now and then, Jillian added details or corrected him.

Harry and Jillian had recently become first-time grandparents, and their youngest daughter was getting married. As usual at this time of year, the weather in Colorado was too cold for their liking. So as they almost always did during the winter, the couple had packed up their camper and driven into the warmer Southwest, where they were hopping from one campground to another.

Harry proudly showed Riley and Crivaro a picture of their camping rig—a fair-sized trailer towed by a white truck. Harry called the getup “our home away from home.”

As the small talk continued, Riley noticed a wistful expression on Crivaro’s face.

She wondered ...

Does Crivaro envy them?

Again she noticed that Crivaro and Harry looked close to the same age. She hadn't given any thought to Crivaro retiring. Did he ever think about that?

Would he see any point in it?

Although there was a lot Riley didn't know about her mentor, she did know that he was divorced and had an estranged son.

Crivaro's life wasn't anything like Harry and Jillian's, with their close and happy family. If he had grandchildren, he'd never mentioned them to Riley. He'd told her that his ex-wife was happily remarried, and his son had gone into real estate, and ...

"They're perfectly normal, just like regular folks."

With a self-deprecating laugh, he'd added ...

"Maybe I just can't do normal."

Not for the first time, it occurred to Riley that Crivaro must be a very lonely man.

If his work was the only thing that gave his life meaning, if he felt that he'd missed out on something, then naturally this perfectly normal, happily retired couple could stir up melancholy feelings in him.

Was loneliness one reason he'd brought her along on this peculiar trip?

There had been moments when Riley had felt that Crivaro was more like a real father to her than that bitter ex-Marine who lived alone in the mountains. At least he sometimes praised her for doing something well, which was more than her actual father ever did.

She wondered ...

Does he ever think of me as a daughter?

The group finished eating and headed on out to the parking lot. Riley was relieved that the weather was actually very pleasant. Warm, but not hot or humid. Maybe the clothes she had with her would serve after all.

She'd expected to see the whole camping rig from the photos, but they were just headed toward a truck.

"Where's the camper?" Crivaro asked.

"That's the beauty of our rig," Jillian replied. "We can disconnect the house and leave it in the campground while we drive around in our ... um ... extended car. Not as fancy as some, but it's very practical."

Crivaro and Harry climbed into the front seats, and Riley and Jillian got into the wide back seat.

As Harry drove out of the airport, he started to regale Crivaro with more small talk—what routes they had taken coming south from Colorado, where they intended to go next, what places they visited every winter, even where they'd found good restaurants along the way. It seemed to Riley that he had an endless supply of trivial things to talk about, but Crivaro appeared to be listening contentedly, apparently not bored at all.

Riley tuned that conversation out. She was grateful that Jillian, sitting beside her, didn't seem inclined to indulge in similar meaningless chatter.

But then, Riley wondered, should she be saying something like that to Jillian, if only to be polite?

As Harry pulled onto the freeway and headed north, Jillian spoke up. "I see that you're engaged."

Riley was startled by the remark, but quickly realized that Jillian was looking at her engagement ring.

She smiled and said, "Yes, I am."

Jillian half-smiled as she asked, "Have you set a date for the wedding?"

Riley gulped at the question.

"Uh, no, not yet," she said.

The truth was, she and Ryan had no idea just when the date would be. Sometimes it seemed like the whole idea was little more than a fantasy.

“Well,” Jillian said, “I wish you every happiness.”

Jillian then turned her head and gazed out the window.

Riley felt a lot of meaning in those words.

“I wish you every happiness.”

Jillian and her husband certainly seemed to have found happiness. But Riley sensed that their happiness had been hard won, and that Harry’s work in law enforcement hadn’t made things easy for them.

Riley found herself thinking about her own future.

What was in store for her?

She and Ryan had sometimes been wonderful together. But she was afraid that any lasting happiness might be hard won for them, too.

Would she eventually have a happy retirement with someone she loved?

Or was she going to wind up alone like Agent Crivaro?

Riley looked out the window on her side of the truck. The landscape outside was unlike anything she’d ever seen, except in pictures. Apart from areas where people had built structures and cultivated greenery, this land looked lifeless to her.

Somewhere in a desert setting like this, a young woman had been brutally robbed of her life. Had the same monster killed before?

If so, Riley and Crivaro had to put a stop to his murders once and for all.

CHAPTER SIX

As the truck neared the town of Tunsboro, Riley noticed that Jillian was getting uneasy again. And maybe with good reason, Riley thought.

The two men in the front seats weren't talking about road trips and other trivia now. Harry had turned off his steady flow of inane chatter and gotten back to the topic that was most on his mind.

"You know, I'm starting to come up with a theory about those two murders," he said. "Want to hear it?"

Riley heard Jillian let out a gasp. She knew the woman must be worried that her husband would renege on his promise not to get mixed up in the case at the last possible minute.

Looking irritated, Crivaro just grumbled inaudibly.

Riley got the distinct feeling that his intended answer was "no." But Harry was clearly determined to talk about his theory anyway.

"I think—no, I'm almost sure—the killer is a camper, someone who hops from campground to campground."

"Someone like you?" Crivaro asked wryly.

Harry chuckled and said, "Yeah, like me except for the years spent catching slime like that. But in a way, yeah, you're kind of right. The killer has to be someone who blends right in with the whole campground culture. Campgrounds have got to be where he stalks his victims."

Crivaro shook his head. "I don't know, Harry ..."

Harry ignored him and babbled on about his theory. Riley felt as though she could understand Crivaro's skepticism. Even if Harry was right and the two murders were connected, that certainly didn't mean the killer had "stalked" anybody. She knew that some murders were spontaneous acts that resulted from chance encounters. Besides, wouldn't most campers travel in groups, or at least in pairs? The idea of a psychotic camper prowling the nation's campgrounds seemed a bit farfetched.

Finally Harry said, "Now, Jake, I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but ..."

Riley could see Crivaro wince at those words. He grumbled again, "It's not actually my job."

That didn't even slow Harry down. He continued, "I think you and your partner should start going to campgrounds, ask the people there a lot of questions. Sooner or later you'll get just the clue you need."

Crivaro rolled his eyes, and Riley couldn't help but sympathize.

Still not noticing Crivaro's dismay, Harry kept right on.

"Mind you, you and your partner can't just march into a campground looking like you do right now. Hell, you've got 'FBI' written all over you. I know campers, and most of them are perfectly friendly, and they'll talk to you no matter who you are. But we do get all kinds of people out there. Some of them are more—what's the word?"

"Reserved," Jillian grumbled. "Some of them are just shy."

"Yeah, that's it, shy," Harry said. "Some of them really like to keep to themselves. And if any of those shy ones know anything, they'll skitter off the second they catch sight of you. I guess what I'm saying is, the two of you have got to go undercover, pretend to be campers yourselves. You can say you're the girl's uncle or something like that. Sure, you know how to do that, but for here it might be harder than it sounds. First of all, you've got to get new clothes, dress more like Jillian and me. And you'll need your own trailer or RV ..."

At that point Crivaro interrupted loudly. "Harry, I can't go buying a camper."

"Yeah, I know, but you can rent one," Harry informed him. "They've got to be available around here. Just make sure it looks halfway decent, not some piece of junk. Some of the better motor home campgrounds won't even let an old or beat-up camper in. I'm sure the Tunsboro police chief can tell you someplace where you can find just what you need."

Riley couldn't help but smile a little. The idea of going camping with Crivaro and pretending to be his niece seemed silly to her.

We'd never fool anybody, she thought.

She realized that Harry's nonstop advice just showed how excited he was about this case. Jillian's grim silence told her that Harry's wife was well aware of his state of mind.

As Harry kept rattling on and on about how Riley and Crivaro should go about investigating the case, he was driving past golf resorts and dude ranches just outside the town of Tunsboro.

When they pulled into Tunsboro itself, it looked to Riley like an old-time Western town that someone had unsuccessfully tried to dress up for modern times. Buildings with square false fronts lined the main street. A row of rickety tin porch roofs held up by heavy wooden poles stretched in front of the buildings. In spite of some fresh paint here and there, none of it looked ready for the soon-to-come year 2000.

In fact, it was the concrete sidewalk, paved street, stoplights, and especially the cars that seemed weirdly out of place.

Harry parked outside the police station, which was just another old-fashioned business front.

He turned to look at Riley and Crivaro.

"I don't suppose Chief Webster will be expecting you. I didn't say anything about contacting the BAU. At least he knows me from talking with me on the phone. Maybe I should come on inside with you and—"

Jillian interrupted sharply. "Don't even think of it, Harry."

Harry looked at his wife with a pleading expression.

"I'll just be a minute, honey," he said.

"You won't be just a minute, and you know it. We're letting your friends off right here, and then we're going straight back to get our camper and driving on to the Coronado Forest. That's all there is to it."

"But honey—"

"No 'buts,' Harry. If you go into that police station, I'm going to take this truck and drive right on without you."

Harry sighed and forced a laugh.

He said to Crivaro and Riley, "Well, you heard the missus. Like I said, a tight leash. We'll be going now. Good hunting, you two. And thanks again for looking into this."

As Riley and Crivaro climbed down out of the truck, she heard Harry mutter, "I wouldn't mind if you'd let me know how things go."

"Don't!" Jillian remarked sharply.

Riley and Jake stood there and watched Harry and his wife drive out of town.

It felt very strange to Riley to be here, suddenly stranded in the middle of this odd little town.

Crivaro was apparently feeling the same way. He looked at the ground and shuffled his feet and shook his head.

"This is crazy," he said. "We've got no business being mixed up in this."

Riley laughed and said, "Well, it wasn't exactly my idea."

Then she felt a possibility taking shape in her mind.

"Besides," she added, "for all we really know, Harry's right about everything."

Crivaro glared at her and growled, "Well, he's not right about you and me going camping. That's just too damned ridiculous. We've got to draw the line somewhere."

"I agree," Riley said.

Crivaro turned and headed toward the building.

"Come on, let's introduce ourselves to the chief," he said.

They walked on into the little police station, where a receptionist sent them on into the Chief Everett Webster's office. They found him sitting on the edge of his desk talking to another cop. The conversation seemed serious.

Riley was sure that they were talking about the recent murder.

When Riley and Crivaro produced their badges and introduced themselves, Webster's mouth dropped open.

"Good Lord," he said. "What the hell are you federal folks doing here?"

Crivaro said, "We understand you found a murdered woman on a hiking trail near here."

Webster said, "Yeah, but there's no call for the FBI to come out here about that. It's a local thing and we can handle it."

Then he squinted at Riley and Crivaro and said, "Wait just a minute. You're not here on account of that nut job from Colorado, are you? The guy who called trying to convince me there was some connection between this murder and another one a year ago?"

Crivaro shrugged. "We're just here to check things out."

Webster shook his head, then said to the other cop, "Wally, could you give us the room for a few minutes?"

Wally nodded and left the office.

Webster began to pace in front of his desk. He struck Riley as a rather unsightly man, with a huge jutting chin and a sloping forehead that made him look like some sort of caveman. But his eyes seemed alert and fairly intelligent.

He said to Riley and Crivaro, "Look, I don't know how that guy talked the FBI into sending you two out here, but it really is a wasted trip, and I'm sorry you got put to the trouble. My boys and I can handle this."

"I don't doubt it," Crivaro said in a pleasant voice. "Still, as long as we're here, maybe you can tell us whatever you know about the murder. We're in the Behavioral Analysis Unit, and it sounded like this killer is kind of unusual. We just thought we might be able to help out here."

Webster shrugged and said, "BAU? Well, it's an odd case, I have to admit. Brett Parma was the victim's name. I just got off the phone trying to find out more about her."

Webster picked up some notes that were lying on his desk and peered at them through his reading glasses.

He said, "It seems she worked as a receptionist in a doctor's office up in North Platte, Nebraska. She came down here for a three-week vacation. She'd stayed at the Wren's Nest Campground near here for a couple of nights, then checked out of there on Saturday. That was the last anybody saw of her—at least until a hiker ran across her body yesterday evening on a hiking trail. Apparently she had a reservation at the Beavertail Campground, also pretty close by. But she never got there."

Webster set the notes back down again and said, "The weird thing is, she wasn't killed right there on the hiking trail. It seems she was slashed up elsewhere and bled to death. Then her body was dumped on the trail."

Webster crossed his arms and added, "Look, I don't mind telling you, I take it kind of personal when somebody gets murdered in my jurisdiction. It's bad for tourism, and tourism's pretty much Tunsboro's whole economy—at least since the mines shut down ages ago. My boys and I sure as hell plan to crack this case soon. No offense, but I'd just as soon not have any interference from Quantico."

Crivaro nodded. "I understand, and I respect that. But as long as we're here, do you mind if my partner and I have a look at the crime scene? We'll be able to tell pretty much at a glance whether we've got any business here or not—and we probably don't. Then we can get right out of your hair."

Webster visibly relaxed a little. "Sounds like a plan," he said. "As it happens, I was just getting ready to drive back out there myself. You two can come along for the ride."

Riley and Jake followed Webster out of the building, then got into his car with him.

As Webster drove them out of town, Riley thought about how he'd said Brett Parma had died.

“She was slashed up elsewhere and bled to death.”

Riley shivered as she remembered the last grim case she and Crivaro had worked on together—the case of the barbed wire killer. His victims, too, had bled slowly to death, and that similarity unsettled her.

She also thought about what Crivaro had said just now.

“We can get right out of your hair.”

She wondered—had he really meant it?

Riley had no idea whether Harry might be right and the two murders might be connected. But one thing was absolutely certain—a woman had recently been brutally murdered right near here.

Could they just walk away from that?

Were they really going to fly back to Quantico without even trying to solve it?

She was beginning to find that hard to imagine.

But what if Crivaro insists?

She’d have to go along with whatever he decided, and he hadn’t shown any real interest in this case.

Maybe that was because Special Agent Jake Crivaro had seen so many deaths in his long years with the BAU.

Well, she thought, Special Agent Riley Sweeney has seen more murders than most people her age.

And she wasn’t ready to give up on this one.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Chief Webster drove the police car out of Tunsboro, Riley felt her expectations rising. But she had to wonder ...

Is it just me?

She'd seen no hint of interest in Agent Crivaro's face. Now, sitting up front next to the chief, he actually looked bored.

Doesn't Crivaro care about this case at all? Not even after dragging both of us this far across the whole country?

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