

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #1

ONCE GONE



BLAKE PIERCE

A Riley Paige Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Once Gone

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Women are turning up dead in the rural outskirts of Virginia, killed in grotesque ways, and when the FBI is called in, they are stumped. A serial killer is out there, his frequency increasing, and they know there is only one agent good enough to crack this case: Special Agent Riley Paige. Riley is on paid leave herself, recovering from her encounter with her last serial killer, and, fragile as she is, the FBI is reluctant to tap her brilliant mind. Yet Riley, needing to battle her own demons, comes on board, and her hunt leads her through the disturbing subculture of doll collectors, into the homes of broken families, and into the darkest canals of the killer's mind. As Riley peels back the layers, she realizes she is up against a killer more twisted than she could have imagined. In a frantic race against time, she finds herself pushed to her limit, her job on the line, her own family in danger, and her fragile psyche collapsing. Yet once Riley Paige takes on a case, she will not quit. It obsesses her, leading her to the darkest corners of her own mind, blurring the lines between hunter and hunted. After a series of unexpected twists, her instincts lead her to a shocking climax that even Riley could not have imagined. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, "Once Gone" marks the debut of a riveting new series – and a beloved new character – that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Blake Pierce

Once Gone

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Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is an avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres. ONCE GONE is Blake's debut novel. Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

Prologue

A new spasm of pain jolted Reba's head upright. She yanked against the ropes that bound her body, tied around her stomach to a vertical length of pipe that had been bolted to the floor and ceiling in the middle of the small room. Her wrists were tied in front, and her ankles were bound.

She realized she'd been dozing, and she was immediately awash in fear. She knew by now that the man was going to kill her. Little by little, wound by wound. It wasn't her death he was after, and it wasn't sex either. He only wanted her pain.

I've got to stay awake, she thought. I've got to get out of here. If I fall asleep again, I will die.

Despite the heat in the room, her naked body felt chilled with sweat. She looked down, writhing, and saw her feet were bare against the hardwood floor. The floor around them was caked with patches of dry blood, sure signs that she wasn't the first person to have been tied here. Her panic deepened.

He had gone somewhere. The room's single door was shut tight, but he would come back. He always did. And then he'd do whatever he could think of to make her scream. The windows were boarded, and she had no idea if it was day or night, the only light from the glare of a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. Wherever this place was, it seemed that no one else could hear her screams.

She wondered if this room had once been a little girl's bedroom; it was, grotesquely, pink, with curly-cues and fairytale motifs everywhere. Someone – she guessed her captor – had long since trashed the place, breaking and overturning stools and chairs and end tables. The floor was scattered with the dismembered limbs and torsos of children's dolls. Little wigs – doll's wigs, Reba guessed – were nailed like scalps on the walls, most of them elaborately braided, all of them in unnatural, toy-like colors. A battered pink vanity table stood upright next to a wall, its heart-shaped mirror shattered into little pieces. The only other piece of furniture intact was a narrow, single bed with a torn, pink canopy. Her captor sometimes rested there.

The man watched her with dark beady eyes, through his black ski mask. At first she had taken heart in the fact that he always wore that mask. If he didn't want her to see his face, didn't that mean that he didn't plan to kill her, that he might let her go?

But she soon caught on that the mask served a different purpose. She could tell that the face behind it had a receded chin and a sloped forehead, and she was sure the man's features were weak and homely. Although he was strong, he was shorter than she, and probably insecure about it. He wore the mask, she guessed, to seem more terrifying.

She'd given up trying to talk him out of hurting her. At first she had thought she could. She knew, after all, that she was pretty. *Or at least I used to be*, she thought sadly.

Sweat and tears mixed on her bruised face, and she could feel the blood matted into her long blond hair. Her eyes stung: he had made her put in contact lenses, and they made it harder to see.

God knows what I look like now.

She let her head drop.

Die now, she begged herself.

It ought to be easy enough to do. She was certain that others had died here before.

But she couldn't. Just thinking about it made her heart pound harder, her breath heave, straining the rope around her belly. Slowly, as she knew she was facing an imminent death, a new feeling began to arise within her. It wasn't panic or fear this time. It wasn't despair. It was something else.

What do I feel?

Then she realized. It was *rage*. Not against her captor. She'd long since exhausted her rage toward him.

It's me, she thought. *I am doing what he wants. When I scream and cry and sob and plead, I'm doing what he wants.*

Whenever she sipped that cold bland broth he'd feed her through a straw, she was doing what he wanted. Whenever she blubbered pathetically that she was a mother with two children who needed her, she was delighting him to no end.

Her mind cleared with new resolve as she finally stopped writhing. Maybe she needed to try a different tack. She had been struggling so hard against the ropes all these days. Maybe that was the wrong approach. They were like those little bamboo toys – the Chinese finger traps, where you'd put your fingers in each end of the tube, and the harder you pulled, the more stuck your fingers became. Maybe the trick was to relax, deliberately and completely. Maybe that was the way out.

Muscle by muscle, she let her body go slack, feeling every sore, every bruise where her flesh touched the ropes. And slowly, she became aware of where the rope's tension lay.

At last, she found what she needed. There was just a little looseness around her right ankle. But it wouldn't do to tug, at least not yet. No, she had to keep her muscles limber. She wiggled her ankle gently, gently, then more aggressively as the rope loosened.

Finally, to her joy and surprise, her heel popped loose, and she withdrew the whole right foot.

She immediately scanned the floor. Only a foot away, amid the scattered doll parts, lay his hunting knife. He always laughed as he left it there, tantalizingly nearby. The blade, encrusted with blood, twinkled tauntingly in the light.

She swung her free foot toward the knife. It swung high and missed.

She let her body slacken again. She slid downward along the post just a few inches and strained with her foot until the knife was within reach. She clutched the filthy blade between her toes, scraped it across the floor, and lifted it carefully with her foot until its handle rested in the palm of her hand. She clutched the handle tight with numb fingers and twisted it around, slowly sawing at the rope that held her wrists. Time seemed to stop, as she held her breath, hoping, praying she didn't drop it. That he didn't come in.

Finally she heard a snap, and to her shock, her hands were loose. Immediately, heart pounding, she cut the rope around her waist.

Free. She could hardly believe it.

For a moment all she could do was crouch there, hands and feet tingling with the return of full circulation. She poked at the lenses over her eyes, resisting the urge to claw them out. She carefully slid them to one side, pinched them, and pulled them out. Her eyes hurt terribly, and it was a relief to have them gone. As she looked at the two plastic disks lying in the palm of her hand, their color sickened her. The lenses were bright blue, unnatural. She threw them aside.

Heart slamming, Reba pulled herself up and quickly limped to the door. She took hold of the knob but didn't turn it.

What if he's out there?

She had no choice.

Reba turned the knob and tugged at the door, which opened noiselessly. She looked down a long empty hallway, lit only by an arched opening on the right. She crept along, naked, barefoot, and silent, and saw that the arch opened into a dimly lit room. She stopped and stared. It was a simple dining room, with a table and chairs, all completely ordinary, as if a family might soon come home to dinner. Old lace curtains hung over the windows.

A new horror rose up in her throat. The very ordinariness of the place was disturbing in a way that a dungeon wouldn't have been. Through the curtains she could see that it was dark outside. Her spirits lifted at the thought that darkness would make it easier to slip away.

She turned back to the hallway. It ended in a door – a door that simply had to lead outdoors. She limped and squeezed the cold brass latch. The door swung heavily toward her to reveal the night outside.

She saw a small porch, a yard beyond it. The nighttime sky was moonless and starlit. There was no other light anywhere – no sign of nearby houses. She stepped slowly out onto the porch and down into the yard, which was dry and bare of grass. Cool fresh air flooded her aching lungs.

Mixed with her panic, she felt elated. The joy of freedom.

Reba took her first step, preparing to run – when suddenly she felt the hard grip of a hand on her wrist.

Then came the familiar, ugly laugh.

The last thing she felt was a hard object – maybe metal – impacting her head, and then she was spinning into the very depths of blackness.

Chapter 1

At least the stench hasn't kicked in, Special Agent Bill Jeffreys thought.

Still leaning over the body, he couldn't help but detect the first traces of it. It mingled with the fresh scent of pine and the clean mist rising from the creek – a body smell that he ought to have been long since used to. But he never was.

The woman's naked body had been carefully arranged on a large boulder at the edge of the creek. She was sitting up, leaning against another boulder, legs straight and splayed, hands at her sides. An odd crook in the right arm, he could see, suggested a broken bone. The wavy hair was obviously a wig, mangy, with clashing hues of blond. A pink smile was lipsticked over her mouth.

The murder weapon was still tight around her neck; she'd been strangled with a pink ribbon. An artificial red rose lay on the rock in front of her, at her feet.

Bill gently tried to lift the left hand. It didn't budge.

"She's still in rigor mortis," Bill told Agent Spelbren, crouching on the other side of the body. "Hasn't been dead more than twenty-four hours."

"What's with her eyes?" Spelbren asked.

"Stitched wide open with black thread," he answered, without bothering to look closely.

Spelbren stared at him in disbelief.

"Check for yourself," Bill said.

Spelbren peered at the eyes.

"Jesus," he murmured quietly. Bill noticed that he didn't recoil with disgust. Bill appreciated that. He'd worked with other field agents – some of them even seasoned veterans like Spelbren – who would be puking their guts up by now.

Bill had never worked with him before. Spelbren had been called in for this case from a Virginia field office. It had been Spelbren's idea to bring in somebody from the Behavioral Analysis Unit in Quantico. That was why Bill was here.

Smart move, Bill thought.

Bill could see that Spelbren was younger than him by a few years, but even so, he had a weathered, lived-in look that he rather liked.

"She's wearing contacts," Spelbren noted.

Bill took a closer look. He was right. An eerie, artificial blue that made him look away. It was cool here down by the creek late in the morning, but even so, the eyes were flattening in their sockets. It was going to be tough to nail down the exact time of death. All Bill felt certain of was that the body had been brought here sometime during the night and carefully posed.

He heard a nearby voice.

"Fucking Feds."

Bill glanced up at the three local cops, standing a few yards away. They were whispering inaudibly now, so Bill knew that he was supposed to hear those two choice words. They were from nearby Yarnell, and they clearly weren't happy to have the FBI show up. They thought they could handle this on their own.

The head ranger of Mosby State Park had thought differently. He wasn't used to anything worse than vandalism, litter, and illegal fishing and hunting, and he knew the locals from Yarnell weren't capable of dealing with this.

Bill had made the hundred-plus-mile trip by helicopter, so he could get here before the body was moved. The pilot had followed the coordinates to a patch of meadow on a nearby hilltop, where the ranger and Spelbren had met him. The ranger had driven them a few miles down a dirt road, and when they'd pulled over, Bill could glimpse the murder scene from the road. It was just a short way downhill from the creek.

The cops standing impatiently nearby had already gone over the scene. Bill knew exactly what they were thinking. They wanted to crack this case on their own; a pair of FBI agents was the last thing they wanted to see.

Sorry, you rednecks, Bill thought, *but you're out of your depth here.*

"The sheriff thinks this is trafficking," Spelbren said. "He's wrong."

"Why do you say that?" Bill asked. He knew the answer himself, but he wanted to get an idea of how Spelbren's mind worked.

"She's in her thirties, not all that young," Spelbren said. "Stretch marks, so she's had at least one child. Not the type that usually gets trafficked."

"You're right," Bill said.

"But what about the wig?"

Bill shook his head.

"Her head's been shaved," he replied, "so whatever the wig was for, it wasn't to change her hair color."

"And the rose?" Spelbren asked. "A message?"

Bill examined it.

"Cheap fabric flower," he replied. "The kind you'd find in any low-price store. We'll trace it, but we won't find out anything."

Spelbren looked him over, clearly impressed.

Bill doubted that anything they'd found would do much good. The murderer was too purposeful, too methodical. This whole scene had been laid out with a certain sick style that set him on edge.

He saw the local cops itching to come closer, to wrap this. Photos had been taken, and the body would be removed any time now.

Bill stood and sighed, feeling the stiffness in his legs. His forty years were starting to slow him down, at least a little.

"She's been tortured," he observed, exhaling sadly. "Look at all the cuts. Some are starting to close up." He shook his head grimly. "Someone worked her over for days before doing her in with that ribbon."

Spelbren sighed.

"The perp was pissed off about something," Spelbren said.

"Hey, when are we gonna wrap up here?" one of the cops called out.

Bill looked in their direction and saw them shuffling their feet. Two of them were grumbling quietly. Bill knew the work was already done here, but he didn't say so. He preferred keeping those bozos waiting and wondering.

He turned around slowly and took in the scene. It was a thick wooded area, all pines and cedars and lots of undergrowth, with the creek burbling along its serene and bucolic way toward the nearest river. Even now, in midsummer, it wasn't going to get very hot here today, so the body wasn't going to putrefy badly right away. Even so, it would be best to get it out of here and ship it off to Quantico. Examiners there would want to pick it apart while it was still reasonably fresh. The coroner's wagon was pulled up on the dirt road behind the cop car, waiting.

The road was nothing more than parallel tire tracks through the woods. The killer had almost certainly driven here along it. He had carried the body the short distance along a narrow path to this spot, arranged it, and left. He wouldn't have stayed long. Even though the area looked out of the way, rangers patrolled through here regularly and private cars weren't supposed to be on this road. He had wanted the body to be found. He was proud of his work.

And it *had* been found by a couple of early-morning horseback riders. Tourists on rented horses, the ranger had told Bill. They were vacationers from Arlington, staying at a fake Western ranch just outside of Yarnell. The ranger had said that they were a little hysterical now. They'd been told not to leave town, and Bill planned to talk to them later.

There seemed to be absolutely nothing out of place in the area around the body. The guy had been very careful. He'd dragged something behind him when he'd returned from the creek – a shovel, maybe – to obscure his own footprints. No scraps of anything left intentionally or accidentally. Any tire prints on the road had likely been obliterated by the cop car and coroner's wagon.

Bill sighed to himself.

Damn it, he thought. Where's Riley when I need her?

His longtime partner and best friend was on involuntary leave, recovering from the trauma of their last case. Yes, that had been a nasty one. She needed the time off, and the truth be told, she might not ever come back.

But he really needed her now. She was a lot smarter than Bill, and he didn't mind admitting it. He loved watching her mind at work. He pictured her picking away at this scene, detail by minuscule detail. By now she'd be teasing him for all the painfully glaring clues that had been staring him in the face.

What would Riley see here that Bill didn't?

He felt stumped, and he didn't like the feeling. But there wasn't anything more he could do about it now.

"Okay, guys," Bill called out to the cops. "Take the body away."

The cops laughed and gave each other high-fives.

"Do you think he'll do it again?" Spelbren asked.

"I'm sure of it," Bill said.

"How do you know?"

Bill took a long deep breath.

"Because I've seen his work before."

Chapter 2

“It got worse for her every day,” Sam Flores said, bringing up another horrific image on the huge multimedia display looming above the conference table. “Right up to when he finished her off.”

Bill had guessed as much, but he hated to be right.

The Bureau had flown the body to the BAU in Quantico, forensics technicians had taken photos, and the lab had started all the tests. Flores, a lab technician with black-rimmed glasses, ran the grisly slide show, and the gigantic screens were a forbidding presence in the BAU conference room.

“How long was she dead before the body was found?” Bill asked.

“Not long,” he replied. “Maybe early evening before.”

Beside Bill sat Spelbren, who had flown into Quantico with him after they’d left Yarnell. At the head of the table sat Special Agent Brent Meredith, the team chief. Meredith cut a daunting presence with his broad frame, his black, angular features, and his no-nonsense face. Not that Bill was intimidated by him – far from it. He liked to think that they had a lot in common. They were both seasoned veterans, and had both seen it all.

Flores flashed a series of close-ups of the victim’s wounds.

“The wounds on the left were inflicted early on,” he said. “Those on the right are more recent, some inflicted hours or even minutes before he strangled her with the ribbon. He seems to have gotten progressively more violent during the week or so that he held her captive. Breaking her arm might have been the last thing he did while she was still alive.”

“The wounds look like the work of one perpetrator to me,” Meredith observed. “Judging from the mounting level of aggression, probably male. What else have you got?”

“From the light stubble on her scalp, we’re guessing her head was shaved two days before she was killed,” Flores continued. “The wig was stitched together with pieces of other wigs, all cheap. The contact lenses were probably mail order. And one more thing,” he said, looking around at the faces, hesitant. “He covered her with Vaseline.”

Bill could feel the tension in the room thicken.

“Vaseline?” he asked.

Flores nodded.

“Why?” Spelbren asked.

Flores shrugged.

“That’s your job,” he replied.

Bill thought about the two tourists he’d interviewed yesterday. They had been no help at all, torn between morbid curiosity and the edge of panic at what they had seen. They were eager to get back home to Arlington and there hadn’t been any reason to detain them. They had been interviewed by every officer on hand. And they’d been duly cautioned to say nothing about what they’d seen.

Meredith exhaled and laid both palms on the table.

“Good work, Flores,” Meredith said.

Flores looked grateful for the praise – and maybe a bit surprised. Brent Meredith wasn’t given to making compliments.

“Now Agent Jeffreys,” Meredith turned to him, “brief us on how this relates to your old case.”

Bill took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair.

“A little over six months ago,” he began, “on December sixteenth, actually – the body of Eileen Rogers was found on a farm near Daggett. I got called in to investigate, along with my partner, Riley Paige. The weather was extremely cold, and the body was frozen solid. It was hard to tell how long it had been left there, and the time of death was never exactly determined. Flores, show them.”

Flores turned back to the slide show. The screen split and alongside the images on the screen, a new series of images appeared. The two victims were displayed side by side. Bill gasped. It was

amazing. Aside from the frozen flesh of the one body, the corpses were in almost the same condition, the wounds nearly identical. Both women had their eyes stitched open in the same, hideous manner.

Bill sighed, the images bringing it all back. No matter how many years he was on the force, seeing each victim pained him.

“Rogers’s body was found seated upright against a tree,” Bill continued, his voice more grim. “Not quite as carefully posed as the one at Mosby Park. No contact lenses or Vaseline, but most of the other details are the same. Rogers’s hair was chopped short, not shaved, but there was a similar patched-together wig. She was also strangled with a pink ribbon, and a fake rose was found in front of her.”

Bill paused for a moment. He hated what he had to say next.

“Paige and I couldn’t crack the case.”

Spelbren turned to him.

“What was the problem?” he asked.

“What *wasn’t* the problem?” Bill countered, unnecessarily defensive. “We couldn’t get a single break. We had no witnesses; the victim’s family couldn’t give us any useful information; Rogers had no enemies, no ex-husband, no angry boyfriend. There wasn’t a single good reason for her to be targeted and killed. The case went cold immediately.”

Bill fell silent. Dark thoughts flooded his brain.

“Don’t,” Meredith said in an uncharacteristically gentle tone. “It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have stopped the new killing.”

Bill appreciated the kindness, but he felt guilty as hell. Why couldn’t he have cracked it before? Why couldn’t Riley? There were very few times in his career he had been so stumped.

At that moment, Meredith’s phone buzzed, and the chief took the call.

Almost the first thing he said was, “Shit.”

He repeated it several times. Then he said, “You’re positive it’s her?” He paused. “Was there any contact for ransom?”

He stood from his chair and stepped outside the conference room, leaving the other three men sitting in perplexed silence. After a few minutes, he came back. He looked older.

“Gentlemen, we’re now in crisis mode,” he announced. “We just got a positive ID on yesterday’s victim. Her name was Reba Frye.”

Bill gasped as if he’d been punched in the stomach; he could see Spelbren’s shock, too. But Flores looked confused.

“Should I know who that is?” Flores asked.

“Maiden name’s Newbrough,” Meredith explained. “The daughter of State Senator Mitch Newbrough – probably Virginia’s next governor.”

Flores exhaled.

“I hadn’t heard that she’d gone missing,” Spelbren said.

“It wasn’t officially reported,” Meredith said. “Her father’s already been contacted. And *of course* he thinks it’s political, or personal, or both. Never mind that the same thing happened to another victim six months ago.”

Meredith shook his head.

“The Senator’s leaning hard on this,” he added. “An avalanche of press is about to hit. He’ll make sure of it, to keep our feet to the fire.”

Bill’s heart sank. He hated feeling as though he were over his head. But that’s exactly how he felt right now.

A somber silence fell over the room.

Finally, Bill cleared his throat.

“We’re going to need help,” he said.

Meredith turned to him, and Bill met his hardened gaze. Suddenly, Meredith's face knotted up with worry and disapproval. He clearly knew what Bill was thinking.

"She's not ready," Meredith answered, clearly knowing that Bill meant to bring her in.

Bill sighed.

"Sir," he replied, "she knows the case better than anyone. And there's no one smarter."

After another pause, Bill came out and said what he was really thinking.

"I don't think we can do it without her."

Meredith thumped his pencil against a pad of paper a few times, clearly wishing he was anywhere but here.

"It's a mistake," he said. "But if she falls apart, it's *your* mistake." He exhaled again. "Call her."

Chapter 3

The teenage girl who opened the door looked as though she might slam it in Bill's face. Instead, she whirled around and walked away without a word, leaving the door open.

Bill stepped inside.

"Hi, April," he said automatically.

Riley's daughter, a sullen, gangly fourteen-year-old, with her mother's dark hair and hazel eyes, didn't reply. Dressed only in an oversized T-shirt, her hair a mess, April turned a corner and plopped herself down on the couch, dead to everything except her earphones and cell phone.

Bill stood there awkwardly, unsure what to do. When he had called Riley, she had agreed to his visiting, albeit reluctantly. Had she changed her mind?

Bill glanced around as he proceeded into the dim house. He walked through the living room and saw everything was neat and in its place, which was characteristic of Riley. Yet he also noticed the blinds drawn, a film of dust on the furniture – and that wasn't like her at all. On a bookshelf he spotted a row of shiny new paperback thrillers he'd bought for her during her leave, hoping they'd get her mind off her problems. Not a single binding looked cracked.

Bill's sense of apprehension deepened. This was not the Riley he knew. Was Meredith right? Did she need more time on leave? Was he doing the wrong thing by reaching out to her before she was ready?

Bill braced himself and proceeded deeper into the dark house, and as he turned a corner, he found Riley, alone in the kitchen, sitting at the Formica table in her housecoat and slippers, a cup of coffee in front of her. She looked up and he saw a flash of embarrassment, as if she had forgotten he was coming. But she quickly covered it up with a weak smile, and stood.

He stepped forward and hugged her, and she hugged him, weakly, back. In her slippers, she was a little shorter than he was. She had become very thin, too thin, and his concern deepened.

He sat down across the table from her and studied her. Her hair was clean, but it wasn't combed, either, and it looked as if she had been wearing those slippers for days. Her face looked gaunt, too pale, and much, much older since he'd last seen her five weeks ago. She looked as if she had been through hell. She had. He tried not to think about what the last killer had done to her.

She averted her gaze, and they both sat there in the thick silence. Bill had been so sure he'd know just what to say to cheer her up, to rouse her; yet as he sat there, he felt consumed by her sadness, and he lost all his words. He wanted to see her look sturdier, like her old self.

He quickly hid the envelope with the files about the new murder case on the floor beside his chair. He wasn't sure now if he should even show her. He was beginning to feel more certain he'd made a mistake coming here. Clearly, she needed more time. In fact, seeing her here like this, he was, for the first time, unsure if his longtime partner would ever come back.

"Coffee?" she asked. He could sense her unease.

He shook his head. She was clearly fragile. When he'd visited her in the hospital and even after she'd come home, he'd been frightened for her. He had wondered if she would ever make her way back from the pain and terror she'd endured, from the depths of her longtime darkness. It was so unlike her; she'd seemed invincible with every other case. Something about this last case, this last killer, was different. Bill could understand: the man had been the most twisted psychopath he had ever encountered – and that was saying a lot.

As he studied her, something else occurred to him. She actually looked her age. She was forty years old, the same age he was, but back when she was working, animated and engaged, she'd always seemed several years younger. Gray was starting to show in her dark hair. Well, his own hair was turning too.

Riley called out to her daughter, "April!"

No reply. Riley called her name several times, louder each time, until she finally answered.

“What?” April answered from the living room, sounding thoroughly annoyed.

“What time’s your class today?”

“You know that.”

“Just tell me, okay?”

“Eight-thirty.”

Riley frowned and looked upset herself. She looked up at Bill.

“She flunked English. Cut too many classes. I’m trying to help dig her out of it.”

Bill shook his head, understanding all too well. The agency life took too much of a toll on all of them, and their families were the biggest casualty.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Riley shrugged.

“She’s fourteen. She hates me.”

“That’s not good.”

“I hated everybody when I was fourteen,” she replied. “Didn’t you?”

Bill didn’t reply. It was hard to imagine Riley ever hating everybody.

“Wait’ll your boys get that age,” Riley said. “How old are they now? I forget.”

“Eight and ten,” Bill replied, then smiled. “The way things are going with Maggie, I don’t know if I’ll even be in their lives when they get to be April’s age.”

Riley tilted her head and looked at him with concern. He’d missed that caring look.

“That bad, huh?” she said.

He looked away, not wanting to think about it.

The two of them fell silent for a moment.

“What’s that you’re hiding on the floor?” she asked.

Bill glanced down then back up and smiled; even in her state, she never missed a thing.

“I’m not hiding anything,” Bill said, picking up the envelope and setting it on the table. “Just something I’d like to talk over with you.”

Riley smiled broadly. It was obvious that she knew perfectly well what he was really here for.

“Show me,” she said, then added, glancing nervously over at April, “Come on, let’s go out back. I don’t want her to see it.”

Riley took off her slippers and walked into the backyard barefoot ahead of Bill. They sat at a weathered wooden picnic table that had been there since well before Riley moved here, and Bill gazed around the small yard with its single tree. There were woods on all sides. It made him forget he was even near a city.

Too isolated, he thought.

He’d never felt that this place was right for Riley. The little ranch-style house was fifteen miles out of town, rundown, and very ordinary. It was just off a secondary road, with nothing else but forests and pastures in sight. Not that he’d ever thought suburban life was right for her either. He had a hard time picturing her doing the cocktail party circuit. She could still, at least, drive into Fredericksburg and take the Amtrak to Quantico when she came back to work. When she still *could* work.

“Show me what you’ve got,” she said.

He spread the reports and photographs across the table.

“Remember the Daggett case?” he asked. “You were right. The killer wasn’t through.”

He saw her eyes widen as she pored over the pictures. A long silence fell as she studied the files intensely, and he wondered if this might be what she needed to come back – or if it would set her back.

“So what do you think?” he finally asked.

Another silence. She still did not look up from the file.

Finally, she looked up, and when she did, he was shocked to see tears well up in her eyes. He had never seen her cry before, not even on the worst cases, up close to a corpse. This was definitely not the Riley he knew. That killer had done something to her, more than he knew.

She choked back a sob.

“I’m scared, Bill,” she said. “I’m so scared. All the time. Of everything.”

Bill felt his heart drop seeing her like this. He wondered where the old Riley had gone, the one person he could always rely on to be tougher than him, the rock he could always turn to in times of trouble. He missed her more than he could say.

“He’s *dead*, Riley,” he said, in the most confident tone he could muster. “He can’t hurt you anymore.”

She shook her head.

“You don’t know that.”

“Sure I do,” he answered. “They found his body after the explosion.”

“They couldn’t identify it,” she said.

“You know it was him.”

Her face fell forward and she covered it with one hand as she wept. He held her other hand across the table.

“This is a new case,” he said. “It’s got nothing to do with what happened to you.”

She shook her head.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Slowly, as she wept, she reached up and handed him the file, looking away.

“I’m sorry,” she said, looking down, holding it out with a trembling hand. “I think you should go,” she added.

Bill, shocked, saddened, reached out and took the file back. Never in a million years would he have expected this outcome.

Bill sat there for a moment, struggling against his own tears. Finally, he gently patted her hand, got up from the table, and made his way back through the house. April was still sitting in the living room, her eyes closed, nodding her head to her music.

* * *

Riley sat crying alone at the picnic table after Bill left.

I thought I was okay, she thought.

She’d really wanted to be okay, for Bill. And she’d thought she could actually carry it off. Sitting in the kitchen talking about trivialities had been all right. Then they had gone outside and when she had seen the file, she’d thought she’d be okay, too. Better than okay, really. She was getting caught up in it. Her old lust for the job was rekindled, she wanted to get back in the field. She was compartmentalizing, of course, thinking of those nearly identical murders as a puzzle to solve, almost in the abstract, an intellectual game. That too was fine. Her therapist had told her she would have to do that if she ever hoped to go back to work.

But then for some reason, the intellectual puzzle became what it really and truly was – a monstrous human tragedy in which two innocent women had died in the throes of immeasurable pain and terror. And she’d suddenly wondered: *Was it as bad for them as it was for me?*

Her body was now flooded with panic and fear. And embarrassment, shame. Bill was her partner and her best friend. She owed him so much. He’d stood by her during the last weeks when nobody else would. She couldn’t have survived her time in the hospital without him. The last thing she wanted was for him to see her reduced to a state of helplessness.

She heard April yell from the back screen door.

“Mom, we gotta eat now or I’ll be late.”

She felt an urge to yell back, *“Fix your own breakfast!”*

But she didn't. She was long since exhausted from her battles with April. She'd given up fighting.

She got up from the table and walked back to the kitchen. She pulled a paper towel off the roll and used it to wipe her tears and blow her nose, then braced herself to cook. She tried to recall her therapist's words: *Even routine tasks will take a lot of conscious effort, at least for a while.* She had to settle for doing things one baby step at a time.

First came taking things out of the refrigerator – the carton of eggs, the package of bacon, the butter dish, the jar of jam, because April liked jam even if she didn't. And so it went until she laid six strips of bacon in a pan on the stovetop, and she turned on the gas range under the pan.

She staggered backward at the sight of the yellow-blue flame. She shut her eyes, and it all came flooding back to her.

Riley lay in a tight crawlspace, under a house, in a little makeshift cage. The propane torch was the only light she ever saw. The rest of the time was spent in complete darkness. The floor of the crawlspace was dirt. The floorboards above her were so low that she could barely even crouch.

The darkness was total, even when he opened a small door and crept into the crawlspace with her. She couldn't see him, but she could hear him breathing and grunting. He'd unlock the cage and snap it open and climb inside.

And then he'd light that torch. She could see his cruel and ugly face by its light. He'd taunt her with a plate of wretched food. If she reached for it, he'd thrust the flame at her. She couldn't eat without getting burned...

She opened her eyes. The images were less vivid with her eyes open, but she couldn't shake the stream of memories. She continued to make breakfast robotically, her whole body surging with adrenaline. She was just setting the table when her daughter's voice yelled out again.

“Mom, how long's it going to be?”

She jumped, and her plate slipped out of her hand and fell to the floor and shattered.

“What happened?” April yelled, appearing beside her.

“Nothing,” Riley said.

She cleaned up the mess, and as she and April sat eating together, the silent hostility was palpable as usual. Riley wanted to end the cycle, to break through to April, to say, *April, it's me, your mom, and I love you.* But she had tried so many times, and it only made it worse. Her daughter hated her, and she couldn't understand why – or how to end it.

“What are you going to do today?” she asked April.

“What do you think?” April snapped. “Go to class.”

“I mean after that,” Riley said, keeping her voice calm, compassionate. “I'm your mother. I want to know. It's normal.”

“Nothing about our lives is normal.”

They ate silently for a few moments.

“You never tell me anything,” Riley said.

“Neither do you.”

That stopped any hope for conversation once and for all.

That's fair, Riley thought bitterly. It was truer than April even knew. Riley had never told her about her job, her cases; she had never told her about her captivity, or her time in the hospital, or why she was “on vacation” now. All April knew was that she'd had to live with her father during much of that time, and she hated him even more than she hated Riley. But as much as she wanted to tell her, Riley thought it best that April have no idea what her mother had been through.

Riley got dressed and drove April to school, and they didn't say a word to each other during the drive. When she let April out of the car, she called after her, “I'll see you at ten.”

April gave her a careless wave as she walked away.

Riley drove to a nearby coffee shop. It had become a routine for her. It was hard for her to spend any time in a public place, and she knew that was exactly why she had to do it. The coffee shop was small and never busy, even in the mornings like this, so she found it relatively unthreatening.

As she sat there, sipping on a cappuccino, she remembered again Bill's entreaty. It had been six weeks, damn it. This had to change. *She* had to change. She didn't know how she was going to do that.

But an idea was forming. She knew exactly what she needed to do first.

Chapter 4

The white flame of the propane torch waved in front of Riley. She had to dodge back and forth to escape being burned. The brightness blinded her to everything else and she couldn't even see her captor's face anymore. As the torch swirled about, it seemed to leave lingering traces hanging in the air.

"Stop it!" she yelled. "Stop it!"

Her voice was raw and hoarse from shouting. She wondered why she was wasting her breath. She knew he wouldn't stop tormenting her until she was dead.

Just then, he raised an air horn and blew it in her ear.

A car horn blared. Riley snapped back to the present, and looked out to see the light at the intersection had just turned green. A line of drivers waited behind her vehicle, and she stepped on the gas.

Riley, palms sweating, forced the memory away and reminded herself of where she was. She was going to visit Marie Sayles, the only other survivor of her near-killer's unspeakable sadism. She berated herself for letting the flashback overwhelm her. She had managed to keep her mind on her driving for an hour and a half now, and she had thought she was doing fine.

Riley drove into Georgetown, passing upscale Victorian homes, and parked at the address Marie had given her over the phone – a red brick townhouse with a handsome bay window. She sat in the car for a moment, debating whether to go in, and trying to summon the courage.

Finally, she exited. As she climbed the steps, she was pleased to see Marie meet her at the door. Somberly but elegantly dressed, Marie smiled somewhat wanly. Her face looked tired and drawn. From the circles under her eyes, Riley was pretty sure that she'd been crying. That came as no surprise. She and Marie had seen each other a lot during their weeks of video chats, and there was little they could hide from one another.

When they hugged, Riley was immediately aware that Marie was not as tall and robust as she'd expected her to be. Even in heels Marie was shorter than Riley, her frame small and delicate. That surprised Riley. She and Marie had talked a lot, but this was the first time they had met in person. Marie's slightness made her seem all the more courageous to have survived what she'd been through.

Riley took in her surroundings as she and Marie walked for the dining room. The place was immaculately clean and tastefully furnished. It would normally be a cheery home for a successful single woman. But Marie kept all the curtains closed and the lights low. The atmosphere was strangely oppressive. Riley didn't want to admit it, but it made her think of her own home.

Marie had a light lunch ready on the dining room table, and she and Riley sat down to eat. They sat there in an awkward silence, Riley sweating but unsure why. Seeing Marie was brining it all back.

"So... how did it feel?" Marie asked tentatively. "Coming out into the world?"

Riley smiled. Marie knew better than anyone what today's drive took.

"Pretty well," Riley said. "Actually, *quite* well. I only had one bad moment, really."

Marie nodded, clearly understanding.

"Well, you did it," Marie said. "And that was brave."

Brave, Riley thought. That was not how she would have described herself. Once, maybe, when she was an active agent. Would she ever describe herself that way again?

"How about you?" Riley asked. "How much do you get out?"

Marie fell silent.

"You don't leave the house at all, do you?" Riley asked.

Marie shook her head.

Riley reached forward and held her wrist in a grip of compassion.

“Marie, you’ve got to try,” she urged. “If you let yourself stay stuck inside like this, it’s like he’s still holding you prisoner.”

A choked sob forced its way out of Marie’s throat.

“I’m sorry,” Riley said.

“That’s all right. You’re right.”

Riley watched Marie as they both ate for a moment and a long silence descended. She wanted to think that Marie was doing well, but she had to admit that she seemed alarmingly frail to her. It made her fear for herself, too. Did she look that bad, too?

Riley wondered silently whether it was good for Marie to be living alone. Might she be better with a husband or boyfriend? she wondered. Then she wondered the same thing about herself. Yet she knew the answer for both of them was probably not. Neither of them was in any emotional frame of mind for a sustained relationship. It would just be a crutch.

“Did I ever thank you?” Marie asked after a while, breaking the silence.

Riley smiled. She knew perfectly well that Marie meant for having rescued her.

“Lots of times,” Riley said. “And you don’t need to. Really.”

Marie poked at her food with a fork.

“Did I ever say I’m sorry?”

Riley was surprised. “Sorry? What for?”

Marie spoke with difficulty.

“If you hadn’t gotten me out of there, you wouldn’t have gotten caught.”

Riley squeezed Marie’s hand gently.

“Marie, I was just doing my job. You can’t go feeling guilty about something that wasn’t your fault. You’ve got too much to deal with as it is.”

Marie nodded, acknowledging her.

“Just getting out of bed every day is a challenge,” she admitted. “I guess you noticed how dark I keep everything. Any bright light reminds me of that torch of his. I can’t even watch television, or listen to music. I’m scared that someone might sneak up on me and I’ll not hear it. Any noise at all puts me in a panic.”

Marie began to weep quietly.

I’ll never look at the world in the same way. Never. There’s evil out there, all around us. I had no idea. People are capable of such horrible things. I don’t know how I’ll ever trust people again.”

As Marie cried, Riley wanted to reassure her, to tell her she was wrong. But a part of Riley was not so sure she was.

Finally, Marie looked at her.

“Why did you come here today?” she asked, point-blank.

Riley was caught off guard by Marie’s directness – and by the fact that she didn’t really know herself.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just wanted to visit you. See how you are doing.”

“There’s something else,” Marie said, narrowing her eyes with an uncanny perception.

Maybe she was right, Riley thought. Riley thought of Bill’s visit, and she realized she had, indeed, come here because of the new case. What was it she wanted from Marie? Advice? Permission? Encouragement? Reassurance? A part of her wanted Marie to tell her she was crazy, so she could rest easy and forget about Bill. But maybe another part wanted Marie to urge her to do it.

Finally, Riley sighed.

“There’s a new case,” she said. “Well, not a *new* case. But an old case that never went away.”

Marie’s expression grew taut and severe.

Riley gulped.

“And you’ve come to ask if you should do it?” Marie asked.

Riley shrugged. But she also looked up and searched Marie's eyes for reassurance, encouragement. And in that moment she realized that was exactly what she had come here hoping to find.

But to her disappointment, Marie lowered her eyes and slowly shook her head. Riley kept waiting for an answer, but instead there followed an endless silence. Riley sensed that some special fear was working its way inside Marie.

In the silence, Riley looked around the apartment, and her eyes fell upon Marie's landline phone. She was surprised to see it was disconnected from the wall.

"What's the matter with your phone?" Riley asked.

Marie looked positively stricken, and Riley realized she had hit a real nerve.

"He keeps calling me," Marie said, in an almost inaudible whisper.

"Who?"

"Peterson."

Riley's heart jumped up into her throat.

"Peterson is dead," Riley replied, her voice shaky. "I torched the place. They found his body."

Marie shook her head.

"It could have been anyone they found. It wasn't him."

Riley felt a flush of panic. Her own worst fears were being brought back.

"Everybody says it was," Riley said.

"And you really believe that?"

Riley didn't know what to say. Now was no time to confide her own fears. After all, Marie was probably being delusional. But how could Riley convince her of something that she didn't altogether believe herself?

"He keeps calling," Marie said again. "He calls and breathes and hangs up. I know it's him. He's alive. He's still stalking me."

Riley felt a cold, creeping dread.

"It's probably just an obscene phone caller," she said, pretending to be calm. "But I can get the Bureau to check it out anyway. I can get them to send out a surveillance car if you're scared. They'll trace the calls."

"No!" Marie said sharply. "No!"

Riley stared back, puzzled.

"Why not?" she asked.

"I don't want to make him angry," Marie said in a pathetic whimper.

Riley, overwhelmed, feeling a panic attack coming on, suddenly realized it had been a terrible idea to come here. If anything, she felt worse. She knew she could not sit in this oppressive dining room a moment longer.

"I've got to go," Riley said, talking. "I'm so sorry. My daughter's waiting."

Marie suddenly grabbed Riley's wrist with surprising strength, digging her nails into her skin.

She stared back, her icy blue eyes holding such intensity that it terrified Riley. That haunting look seared into her soul.

"Take the case," Marie urged.

Riley could see in her eyes that Marie was confusing the new case and Peterson, blurring them together into one.

"Find that son of a bitch," she added. "And kill him for me."

Chapter 5

The man kept a short but discreet distance from the woman, glancing her way only fleetingly. He placed a few token items into his handbasket so that he'd look like just another shopper. He congratulated himself on how inconspicuous he was able to make himself. No one would guess his true power.

But then again, he'd never been the kind of man who attracted much attention. As a child, he'd felt practically invisible. Now, at long last, he was able to turn his own innocuousness to his advantage.

Just a few moments ago, he had stood right next to her, scarcely more than two feet away. Rapt in choosing her shampoo, she hadn't noticed him at all.

He knew plenty about her, though. He knew her name was Cindy; that her husband owned an art gallery; that she worked in a free medical clinic. Today was one of her days off. Right now she was on her cell phone talking with somebody – her sister, it sounded like. She was laughing at something the person was saying to her. He burned red with anger, wondering if she were laughing at him, just as all the girls used to. His fury increased.

Cindy wore shorts, a tank top, and expensive-looking running shoes. He'd watched her from his car, jogging, and waited until she'd finished her run and came into the grocery store. He knew her routine for a non-working day like this. She'd take the items home and put them away, take a shower, then drive to meet her husband for lunch.

Her good figure owed a lot to physical exercise. She was no more than thirty years old, but the skin around her thighs wasn't tight anymore. She'd probably lost a lot of weight at one time or another, perhaps pretty recently. She was undoubtedly proud of that.

Suddenly, the woman headed toward the nearest cash register. The man was taken by surprise. She had finished shopping earlier than usual. He rushed to get in line behind her, almost pushing another customer aside to do so. He silently berated himself for that.

As the cashier rang up the woman's items, he inched up and stood extremely close to her – close enough to smell her body, now sweaty and pungent after her vigorous jog. It was a smell that he expected to become much, much better acquainted with very soon. But the smell would then be mixed with yet another odor – one that fascinated him because of its strangeness and mystery.

The smell of pain and terror.

For a moment, the lurker felt exhilarated, even pleasantly light-headed, with eager anticipation.

After paying for her groceries, she pushed her cart out through the automatic glass doors and out into the parking lot.

He felt no hurry now about paying for his own handful of items. He didn't need to follow her home. He'd been there already – had even been inside her house. He had even handled her clothing. He'd take up his vigil again when she got off work.

It won't be long now, he thought. Not long at all.

* * *

After Cindy MacKinnon got into her car, she sat there for a moment, feeling shaken and not knowing why. She remembered the weird feeling she'd just had back in the supermarket. It was an uncanny, irrational feeling of being watched. But it was more than that. It took her a few moments to put her finger on it.

Finally, she realized it was a feeling that someone had meant her harm.

She shivered deeply. During the last few days, that feeling had been coming and going. She chided herself, sure that it was completely groundless.

She shook her head, ridding herself of any vestiges of that feeling. As she started her car, she forced herself to think of something else, and she smiled at her cell phone conversation with her sister, Becky. Later this afternoon, Cindy would help her throw a big birthday party her three-year-old daughter, complete with cake and balloons.

It would be a beautiful day, she thought.

Chapter 6

Riley sat in the SUV beside Bill as he shifted gears, pushing the Bureau's four-wheel-drive vehicle higher into the hills, and she wiped her palms on her pants legs. She didn't know what to make of the sweatiness, and she didn't know what to make of being here. After six weeks off the job, she felt out of touch with what her body was telling her. Being back felt surreal.

Riley was disturbed by the awkward tension. She and Bill had barely spoken during their hour-plus drive. Their old camaraderie, their playfulness, their uncanny rapport – none of that was there now. Riley felt pretty sure she knew why Bill was being so aloof. It wasn't out of rudeness – it was out of worry. He, too, seemed to have doubts about whether she should be back on the job.

They drove toward Mosby State Park, where Bill had told her he had seen the most recent murder victim. As they went, Riley took in the geography all around her and slowly, her old sense of professionalism kicked in. She knew she had to snap out of it.

Find that son of a bitch and kill him for me.

Marie's words haunted her, drove her on, made her choice simple.

But nothing seemed that simple now. For one thing, she couldn't help worrying about April. Sending her to stay at her father's house wasn't ideal for anybody involved. But today was Saturday and Riley didn't want to wait until Monday to see the crime scene.

The deep silence began to add to her anxiety, and she desperately felt the need to talk. Wracking her brain for something to say, finally, she said:

"So are you going to tell me what's going on between you and Maggie?"

Bill turned to her, a surprised look on his face, and she couldn't tell if it was due to her breaking the silence, or her blunt question. Whichever it was, she immediately regretted it. Her bluntness, many people told her, could be off-putting. She never meant to be blunt – she just had no time to waste.

Bill exhaled.

"She thinks I'm having an affair."

Riley felt a jolt of surprise.

"What?"

"With my job," Bill said, laughing a bit sourly. "She thinks I'm having an affair with my job. She thinks I love *all this* more than I love her. I keep telling her she's being silly. Anyway, I can't exactly end it – not my job, anyway."

Riley shook her head.

"Sounds just like Ryan. He used to get jealous as hell when we were still together."

She stopped short of telling Bill the whole truth. Her ex-husband hadn't been jealous of Riley's job. He'd been jealous of Bill. She'd often wondered if Ryan might have had some reason. Despite today's awkwardness, she felt awfully good just being close to Bill. Was that feeling solely professional?

"I hope this isn't a wasted trip," Bill said. "The crime scene's been all cleaned up, you know."

"I know. I just want to see the place for myself. Pictures and reports don't cut it for me."

Riley was starting to feel a bit woozy now. She was pretty sure it was from the altitude, as they climbed still higher. Anticipation had something to do with it, too. Her palms were still sweating.

"How much farther?" she asked, as she watched the woods get thicker, the terrain more remote.

"Not far."

A couple of minutes later, Bill turned off the paved road onto a pair of rough tire tracks. The vehicle bounced along jarringly, then came to a stop about a quarter of a mile into the dense woods. He switched off the ignition, then turned toward Riley and looked at her with concern.

"You sure you want to do this?" he asked.

She knew exactly what was worrying him. He was afraid she'd flash back to her traumatic captivity. Never mind that this was a different case altogether, and a different killer.

She nodded.

"I'm sure," she said, not at all convinced that she was telling the truth.

She got out of the car and followed Bill off the road onto a brushy, narrow path through the woods. She heard the gurgling of a nearby stream. As the vegetation grew thicker, she had to push her way past low-hanging branches, and sticky little burrs started bunching up on her pants legs. She was annoyed at the thought of having to pick them off.

At last she and Bill emerged onto the creek bank. Riley was immediately struck by what a lovely spot it was. The afternoon sunlight poured in through the leaves, mottling the rippling water with kaleidoscopic light. The steady gurgling of the stream was soothing. It was strange to think of this as a gruesome crime scene.

"She was found right here," Bill said, leading her to a broad, level boulder.

When they got there, Riley stood and looked all around and breathed deeply. Yes, she had been right to come here. She was starting to feel that.

"The pictures?" Riley asked.

She crouched beside Bill on the boulder, and they started leafing through a folder full of photographs taken shortly after Reba Frye's body had been found. Another folder was stuffed with reports and photos of the murder she and Bill had investigated six months ago – the one that they had failed to solve.

Those pictures brought back vivid memories of the first killing. It transported her right back to that farm country near Daggett. She remembered how Rogers had been staged in a similar manner against a tree.

"A lot like our older case," Riley observed. "Both women in their thirties, both with little kids. That seems to be part of his MO. He's got it in for mothers. We need to check with parenting groups, find out if there were any connections between the two women, or between their kids."

"I'll get somebody on it," Bill said. He was taking notes now.

Riley continued poring through the reports and photos, comparing them to the actual scene.

"Same method of strangulation, with a pink ribbon," she observed. "Another wig, and the same type of artificial rose in front of the body."

Riley held up two photographs side by side.

"Eyes stitched open, too," she said. "If I remember right, the technicians found that Rogers's eyes had been stitched postmortem. Was it the same with Frye?"

"Yeah. I guess he wanted them to watch him even after they were dead."

Riley felt a sudden tingle up her spine. She'd almost forgotten that feeling. She got it whenever something about a case was just about to click and make sense. She didn't know whether to feel encouraged or terrified.

"No," she said. "That's not it. He didn't care whether the women saw him."

"Then why did he do it?"

Riley didn't reply. Ideas were starting to rush into her brain. She was exhilarated. But she wasn't yet ready to put any of it into words – not even to herself.

She laid out pairs of photographs on the boulder, pointing out details to Bill.

"They're *not* exactly the same," she said. "The body wasn't as carefully staged back in Daggett. He'd tried to move that corpse when it was already stiff. My guess is this time he brought her here before rigor mortis set in. Otherwise he couldn't have posed her so..."

She suppressed the urge to finish the sentence with "nicely." Then she realized, that was exactly the kind of word she'd have used when she was on the job before her capture and torture. Yes, she was getting back into the spirit of things, and she felt the same old dark obsession growing inside her. Pretty soon there'd be no turning back.

But was that a good thing or a bad thing?

“What’s with Frye’s eyes?” she asked, pointing to a photo. “That blue doesn’t look real.”

“Contacts,” Bill answered.

The tingle in Riley’s spine grew stronger. Eileen Rogers’s corpse hadn’t had contact lenses. It was an important difference.

“And the shine on her skin?” she asked.

“Vaseline,” Bill said.

Another important difference. She felt her ideas snapping into place with breathtaking speed.

“What has forensics found out about the wig?” she asked Bill.

“Nothing yet, except that it was pieced together out of pieces of cheap wigs.”

Riley’s excitement grew. For the last murder, the killer had used a simple, whole wig, not something patched together. Like the rose, it had been so cheap that forensics couldn’t trace it. Riley felt parts of the puzzle coming together – not the whole puzzle, but a big chunk of it.

“What does forensics plan to do about this wig?” she asked.

“The same as last time – run a search of its fibers, try to track it down through hairpiece outlets.”

Startled by the fierce certainty in her own voice, Riley said: “They’re wasting their time.”

Bill looked at her, clearly caught off guard.

“Why?”

She felt a familiar impatience with Bill, one she felt when she always found herself thinking a step or two ahead of him.

“Look at the picture he’s trying to show us. Blue contacts to make the eyes look like they’re not real. Eyelids stitched so the eyes stay wide open. The body propped up, legs splayed out freakishly. Vaseline to make the skin look like plastic. A wig pieced together out of pieces of little wigs – not human wigs, *doll’s* wigs. He wanted both victims to look like *dolls* – like naked *dolls* on display.”

“Jesus,” Bill said, feverishly taking notes. “Why didn’t we see this last time, back in Daggett?”

The answer seemed so obvious to Riley that she stifled an impatient groan.

“He wasn’t good enough at it yet,” she said. “He was still figuring out how to send the message. He’s learning as he goes.”

Bill looked up from his notepad and shook his head admiringly.

“Damn, I’ve missed you.”

As much as she appreciated the compliment, Riley knew that an even bigger realization was on its way. And she knew from years of experience that there was no forcing it. She simply had to relax and let it come to her unbidden. She crouched on the boulder silently, waiting for it happen. As she waited, she picked idly at the burrs on her pants legs.

What a damned nuisance, she thought.

Suddenly her eyes fell on the stone surface under her feet. Other little burrs, some of them whole, others broken into fragments, were lying amid the burrs she was plucking off now.

“Bill,” she said, her voice quavering with excitement, “were these little burrs here when you found the body?”

Bill shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Her hands shaking and sweating more than ever, she grabbed a bunch of pictures and rifled through them until she found a front view of the corpse. There, between her splayed legs right around the rose, was a group of little smudges. Those were the burrs – the very burrs she had just found. But nobody had thought they were important. Nobody had bothered to take a sharper, closer picture of them. And nobody had even bothered to sweep them away when the crime scene was cleaned up.

Riley closed her eyes, bringing her imagination fully into play. She felt lightheaded, even dizzy. It was a sensation that she knew all too well – a feeling of falling into an abyss, into a terrible black void, into the killer’s evil mind. She was stepping into his shoes, into his experience. It was a dangerous and terrifying place to be. But it was where she belonged, at least right now. She embraced it.

She felt the killer's confidence as he lugged the body down the path to the stream, perfectly sure that he wasn't going to get caught, in no hurry at all. He might well have been humming or whistling. She felt his patience, his craft and skill, as he posed the corpse on the boulder.

And she could see the grisly tableau through his eyes. She felt his deep satisfaction at a job well done – the same warm feeling of fulfillment that she always felt when she'd solved a case. He had crouched on this rock, pausing for a moment – or for as long as he liked – to admire his own handiwork.

And as he did, he had plucked the burrs off his pants legs. He took his time about it. He didn't bother to wait until he'd gotten away free and clear. And she could almost hear him saying aloud her own exact words.

“What a damn nuisance.”

Yes, he'd even taken the time to pluck off the burrs.

Riley gasped, and her eyes snapped open. Fingering the burr in her own hand, she noted how sticky it was, and that its prickles were sharp enough to draw blood.

“Gather these burrs,” she ordered. “We might just get a bit of DNA.”

Bill's eyes widened, and he immediately extracted a ziplock bag and tweezers. As he worked, her mind ran in overdrive, not done yet.

“We've been wrong all along,” she said. “This isn't his second murder. It's his third.”

Bill stopped and looked up, clearly stunned.

“How do you know?” Bill asked.

Riley's whole body tightened as she tried to bring her trembling under control.

“He's gotten too good. His apprenticeship is over. He's a pro now. And he's just hitting his stride. He *loves* his work. No, this is his third time, at least.”

Riley's throat tightened and she swallowed hard.

“And there won't be much time now until the next one.”

Chapter 7

Bill found himself in a sea of blue eyes, none of them real. He didn't usually have nightmares about his cases, and he wasn't having one now – but it sure felt like one. Here in the middle of the doll store, little blue eyes were simply everywhere, all of them wide open and sparkling and alert.

The dolls' little ruby-red lips, most of them smiling, were troubling also. So was all the painstakingly combed artificial hair, so stiff and immobile. Taking in all these details, Bill wondered now how he could have possibly missed the killer's intention – to make his victims look as doll-like as possible. It had taken Riley to make that connection.

Thank God she's back, he thought.

Still, Bill couldn't help but worry about her. He had been dazzled by her brilliant work back at Mosby Park. But afterward, when he drove her home, she'd seemed exhausted and demoralized. She'd barely said a word to him during the whole drive. Maybe it had been too much for her.

Even so, Bill wished that Riley was here right now. She'd decided it would be best for them to split up, to cover more ground more quickly. He couldn't disagree with that. She'd asked him to cover the doll stores in the area, while she would revisit the scene of the crime they'd covered six months ago.

Bill looked around and, feeling in way over his head, wondered what Riley would make of this doll store. It was the most elegant of the ones he'd visited today. Here on the edge of the Capital Beltway, the store probably got a lot of classy shoppers from wealthy Northern Virginia counties.

He walked around and browsed. A little girl doll caught his eye. With its upturned smile and pale skin, it especially reminded him of the latest victim. Although it was fully clothed in a pink dress with lots of lace on the collar, cuffs, and hem, it was also sitting in a disturbingly similar position.

Suddenly, Bill heard a voice to his right.

"I think you're looking in the wrong section."

Bill turned and found himself facing a stout little woman with a warm smile. Something about her immediately told him that she was in charge here.

"Why do you say that?" Bill asked.

The woman chuckled.

"Because you don't have daughters. I can tell a man who doesn't have a daughter from a mile off. Don't ask me how, it's just some kind of instinct, I guess."

Bill was stunned by her insight, and deeply impressed.

She offered Bill her hand.

"Ruth Behnke," she said.

Bill shook her hand.

"Bill Jeffreys. I take it you own this store."

She chuckled again.

"I see you've got some kind of instinct, too," she said. "I'm pleased to meet you. But you *do* have sons, don't you? Three of them, I'd guess."

Bill smiled. Her instincts were pretty sharp, all right. Bill figured that she and Riley would enjoy each other's company.

"Two," he replied. "But pretty damn close."

She chuckled.

"How old?" she asked.

"Eight and ten."

She looked around the place.

“I don’t know that I’ve got much for them here. Oh, actually, I’ve got a few rather quaint toy soldiers in the next aisle. But that’s not the kind of things boys like anymore, is it? It’s all video games these days. And violent ones at that.”

“I’m afraid so.”

She squinted at him appraisingly.

“You’re not here to buy a doll, are you?” she asked.

Bill smiled and shook his head.

“You’re good,” he replied.

“Are you a cop, maybe?” she asked.

Bill laughed quietly and took out his badge.

“Not quite, but a good guess.”

“Oh, my!” she said, with concern. “What does the FBI want with my little place? Am I on some kind of list?”

“In a way,” Bill said. “But it’s nothing to worry about. Your shop came up on our search of stores in this area that sell antique and collectible dolls.”

In fact, Bill didn’t know exactly *what* he was looking for. Riley had suggested that he check out a handful of these places, assuming the killer might have frequented them – or at least had visited them on some occasion. What she was expecting, he didn’t know. Was she expecting the killer himself to be there? Or that one of the employees had met the killer?

Doubtful that they had. Even if they had, it was doubtful that they would have recognized him as a killer. Probably all the men that came in here, if any, were creepy.

More likely Riley was trying to get him to gain more insights into the killer’s mind, his way of looking at the world. If so, Bill figured she’d wind up disappointed. He simply did not have the mind that she did, or the talent to easily walk into killers’ minds.

It seemed to him as if she were really fishing. There were dozens of doll stores within the radius they had been searching. Better, he thought, to let forensics just continue to track down the doll makers. Though, thus far, that had turned up nothing.

“I’d ask what kind of case this is,” Ruth said, “but I probably shouldn’t.”

“No,” Bill said, “you probably shouldn’t.”

Not that the case was a secret anymore – not after Senator Newbrough’s people had put out a press release about it. The media was now saturated with the news. As usual, the Bureau was reeling under an assault of erroneous phone tips, and the internet was abuzz with bizarre theories. The whole thing had become a pain.

But why tell the woman about it? She seemed so nice, and her store so wholesome and innocent, that Bill didn’t want to upset her with something so grim and shocking as a serial murderer obsessed with dolls.

Still, there was one thing he wanted to know.

“Tell me something,” Bill said. “How many sales do you make to adults – I mean grown-ups without kids?”

“Oh, those are most of my sales, by far. To collectors.”

Bill was intrigued. He’d never have guessed that.

“Why do you think that is?” he asked.

The woman smiled an odd, distant smile, and spoke in a gentle tone.

“Because people die, Bill Jeffreys.”

Now Bill was truly startled.

“Pardon?” he said.

“As we get older, we *lose* people. Our friends and loved ones die. We grieve. Dolls stop time for us. They make us forget our grief. They comfort and console us. Look around you. I’ve got dolls that

are most of a century old, and some that are almost new. With some of them, at least, you probably can't tell the difference. They're ageless."

Bill looked around, feeling creeped out at all the century-old eyes staring back at him, wondering how many people these dolls had outlived. He wondered what they had witnessed – the love, the anger, the hate, the sadness, the violence. And yet still they stared back with that same blank expression. They didn't make sense to him.

People *should* age, he thought. They should get old and lined and gray, as he had, given all the darkness and horror there was in the world. Given all that he had seen, it would be a sin, he thought, if he still looked the same. The murder scenes had sunk into him like a living thing, had made him not want to stay young anymore.

"They're also – not alive," Bill finally said.

Her smile turned bittersweet, almost pitying.

"Is that really true, Bill? Most of my customers don't think so. I'm not sure I think so, either."

An odd silence fell. The woman broke it with a chuckle. She offered Bill a colorful little brochure with pictures of dolls all over it.

"As it happens, I'm heading to an upcoming convention in D.C. You might want to go, too. Maybe it will give you some ideas for whatever it is you're searching for."

Bill thanked her and left the store, grateful for the tip about the convention. He hoped that Riley would go with him. Bill remembered that she was supposed to interview Senator Newbrough and his wife this afternoon. It was an important appointment – not just because the senator might have good information, but for diplomatic reasons. Newbrough really was making things hot for the Bureau. Riley was just the agent to convince him that they were doing all that they could.

But will she really show up? Bill wondered.

It seemed truly bizarre that he couldn't be sure. Until six months ago, Riley was the one dependable thing in his life. He had always trusted her with his life. But her obvious distress worried him.

More than that, he missed her. Daunted as he sometimes was by her quicksilver mind, he needed her on a job like this. During the last six weeks, he'd also come to realize that he needed her friendship.

Or, deep down, was it more than that?

Chapter 8

Riley drove down the two-lane highway, sipping on her energy drink. It was a sunny, warm morning, the car windows were down, and the warm smell of freshly baled hay filled the air. The surrounding modest-sized pastures were dotted with cattle, and mountains edged both sides of the valley. She liked it out here.

But she reminded herself she hadn't come here to feel good. She had some hard work to do.

Riley turned off onto a well-worn gravel road, and after a minute or two, she reached a crossroads. She turned into the national park, drove a short distance, and stopped her car on the sloping shoulder of the road.

She got out and walked across an open area to a tall, sturdy oak that stood on the northeast corner.

This was the place. This was where Eileen Rogers's body had been found – posed rather clumsily against this tree. She and Bill had been here together six months ago. Riley started to recreate the scene in her mind.

The biggest difference was the weather. Back then it had been mid-December, and bitterly cold. A thin blanket of snow covered the ground.

Go back, she told herself. Go back and feel it.

She breathed deeply, in and out, until she imagined she could feel a searing coldness passing through her windpipe. She could almost see thick clouds of frost forming with her every breath.

The naked corpse had been frozen solid. It wasn't easy to tell which of the many bodily lesions were knife wounds, and which were cracks and fissures caused by the icy cold.

Riley summoned back the scene, down to every last detail. The wig. The painted smile. The eyes stitched open. The artificial rose lying in the snow between the corpse's splayed legs.

The picture in her mind was now sufficiently vivid. Now she had to do what she'd done yesterday – get a sense of the killer's experience.

Once again, she closed her eyes, relaxed, and stepped off into the abyss. She welcomed that lightheaded, giddy feeling as she slipped into the killer's mind. Pretty soon, she was with him, inside him, seeing exactly what he saw, feeling what he felt.

He was driving here at night, anything but confident. He watched the road anxiously, worried about the ice under his wheels. What if he lost control, skidded into a ditch? He had a corpse on board. He'd be caught for sure. He had to drive carefully. He'd hoped his second murder would be easier than the first, but he was still a nervous wreck.

He stopped the vehicle right here. He hauled the woman's body – already naked, Riley guessed – out into the open. But it was already stiffened from rigor mortis. He hadn't reckoned on that. It frustrated him, shook his confidence. To make matters worse, he couldn't see what he was doing at all well, not even in the glare of the headlights which he directed at the tree. The night was much too dark. He made a mental note to do this in daylight next time if he possibly could.

He dragged the body to the tree and tried to put it into the pose that he'd envisioned. It didn't go at all well. The woman's head was tilted to the left, frozen there by rigor mortis. He yanked and twisted it. Even after breaking its neck, he still couldn't set it staring straight forward.

And how was he to splay the legs properly? One of the legs was hopelessly crooked. He had no choice but to get a tire iron out of his trunk and break the thigh and kneecap. Then he twisted the leg as well as he could, but not to his satisfaction.

Finally, he dutifully left the ribbon around her neck, the wig on her head, and the rose in the snow. Then he got into his car and drove away. He was disappointed and disheartened. He was also scared. In all his clumsiness, had he left any fatal clues behind? He obsessively replayed his every action in his mind, but he couldn't be sure.

He knew that he had to do better next time. He promised himself to do better.

Riley opened her eyes. She let the killer's presence fade away. She was pleased with herself now. She hadn't let herself be shaken and overwhelmed. And she'd gotten some valuable perspective. She'd gotten a sense of how the killer was learning his craft.

She only wished she knew something – anything – about his first murder. She was more certain than ever that he had killed one earlier time. This had been the work of an apprentice, but not a rank beginner.

Just as Riley was about to turn and walk back toward her car, something in the tree caught her eye. It was a tiny dash of yellow peeking out from where the trunk divided in half a little above her head.

She walked around to the far side of the tree and looked up.

“He's been back here!” Riley gasped aloud. Chills surged through her body and she glanced around nervously. Nobody seemed to be nearby now.

Nestled up in the branch of a tree staring down at Riley was a naked female doll with blond hair, posed precisely the way the killer had intended the victim to be.

It couldn't have been there long – three or four days at most. It hadn't been shifted by the wind or tarnished by rain. The murderer had returned here when he'd been preparing himself for the Reba Frye murder. Much as Riley had done, he had come back here to reflect on his work, to examine his mistakes critically.

She took pictures with her cell phone. She'd send those to the Bureau right away.

Riley knew why he'd left the doll.

It's an apology for past sloppiness, she realized.

It was also a promise of better work to come.

Chapter 9

Riley drove toward Senator Mitch Newbrough's manor house, and her heart filled with dread as it came into view. Situated at the end of a long, tree-lined drive, it was huge, formal, and daunting. She always found the rich and powerful harder to deal with than folks further down the social ladder.

She pulled up and parked in a well-manicured circle in front of the stone mansion. Yes, this family was very rich indeed.

She got out of the car and walked up to the enormous front doors. After ringing the doorbell, she was greeted by a clean-cut man of about thirty.

"I'm Robert," he said. "The Senator's son. And you must be Special Agent Riley. Come on in. Mother and Father are expecting you."

Robert Newbrough led Riley on into the house, which immediately reminded her how much she disliked ostentatious homes. The Newbrough house was especially cavernous, and the walk to wherever the Senator and his wife were waiting was disagreeably long. Riley was sure that making guests walk such an inconvenient distance was a sort of intimidation tactic, a way of communicating that the inhabitants of this house were far too powerful to tangle with. Riley also found the ubiquitous Colonial furniture and decor to be really quite ugly.

More than anything else, she dreaded what was coming next. To her, talking to victims' families was simply awful – much worse than dealing with murder scenes or even corpses. She found it all too easy to get caught up in people's grief, anger, and confusion. Such intense emotions wrecked her concentration and distracted her from her work.

As they walked, Robert Newbrough said, "Father's been home from Richmond ever since..."

He choked a little in mid-sentence. Riley could feel the intensity of his loss.

"Since we heard about Reba," he continued. "It's been terrible. Mother's especially shaken up. Try not to upset her too much."

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Riley said.

Robert ignored her, and led Riley into a spacious living room. Senator Mitch Newbrough and his wife were sitting together on a huge couch holding each other's hands.

"Agent Paige," Robert said, introducing her. "Agent Paige, let me introduce my parents, the Senator and his wife, Annabeth."

Robert offered Reba a seat, then sat down himself.

"First of all," Riley said quietly, "my deepest condolences for your loss."

Annabeth Newbrough replied with a silent nod of acknowledgment. The Senator just sat staring forward.

In the brief silence that followed, Riley made a quick assessment of their faces. She'd seen Newbrough on television many times, always wearing a politician's ingratiating smile. He wasn't smiling now. Riley hadn't seen so much of Mrs. Newbrough, who seemed to possess the typical docility of a politician's wife.

Both of them were in their early sixties. Riley detected that they'd both gone to painful and expensive lengths to look younger – hair implants, hair dye, facelifts, makeup. As far as Riley was concerned, their efforts had left them looking vaguely artificial.

Like dolls, Riley thought.

"I've got to ask you a few questions about your daughter," Riley said, taking out her notebook. "Were you in close touch with Reba recently?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Newbrough said. "We are a very close family."

Riley noted a slight stiffness in the woman's voice. It sounded like something she said a little too often, a little too routinely. Riley felt pretty sure that family life in the Newbrough home had been far from ideal.

“Did Reba say anything recently about being threatened?” Riley asked.

“No,” Mrs. Newbrough said. “Not a word.”

Riley observed that the Senator hadn’t said a word so far. She wondered why he was being so quiet. She needed to draw him out, but how?

Now Robert spoke up.

“She’d been through a messy divorce recently. Things got ugly between her and Paul over custody of their two kids.”

“Oh, I never liked him,” Mrs. Newbrough said. “He had such a temper. Do you think that possibly—?” Her words trailed off.

Riley shook her head.

“Her ex-husband’s not a likely suspect,” she said.

“Why on earth not?” Mrs. Newbrough asked.

Riley weighed in her mind what she should and should not tell them.

“You may have read that the killer struck before,” she said. “There was a similar victim near Daggett.”

Mrs. Newbrough was becoming more agitated.

“What’s any of this supposed to mean to us?”

“We’re dealing with a serial killer,” Riley said. “There was nothing domestic about it. Your daughter may not have known the killer at all. There’s every likelihood that it wasn’t personal.”

Mrs. Newbrough was sobbing now. Riley immediately regretted her choice of words.

“Not *personal*?” Mrs. Newbrough almost shouted. “How could it be anything *but* personal?”

Senator Newbrough spoke to his son.

“Robert, please take your mother elsewhere and calm her down. I need to talk with Agent Paige alone.”

Robert Newbrough obediently led his mother away. Senator Newbrough said nothing for a moment. He looked Riley steadily in the eyes. She was sure that he was accustomed to intimidating people with that stare of his. But it didn’t work especially well on her. She simply returned his gaze.

At last, the Senator reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a letter-sized envelope. He walked over to her chair and handed it to her.

“Here,” he said. Then he walked back to the couch and sat down again.

“What’s this?” Riley asked.

The Senator turned his gaze on her again.

“Everything you need to know,” he said.

Riley was now completely baffled.

“May I open it?” she asked.

“By all means.”

Riley opened the envelope. It contained a single sheet of paper with two columns of names on it. She recognized some of them. Three or four were well-known reporters on the local TV news. Several others were prominent Virginia politicians. Riley was even more perplexed than before.

“Who are these people?” she asked.

“My enemies,” Senator Newbrough said in an even voice. “Probably not a comprehensive list. But those are the ones who matter. Somebody there is guilty.”

Riley was completely dumbfounded now. She sat there and said nothing.

“I’m not saying that anybody on that list killed my daughter directly, face to face,” he said. “But they sure as hell paid somebody to do it.”

Riley spoke slowly and cautiously.

“Senator, with all due respect, I believe I just said that your daughter’s killing probably wasn’t personal. There has already been one murder nearly identical to it.”

“Are you saying that my daughter was targeted purely by coincidence?” the Senator asked.

Yes, probably, Riley thought.

But she knew better than to say so aloud.

Before she could reply, he added, “Agent Paige, I’ve learned through hard experience not to believe in coincidences. I don’t know why or how, but my daughter’s death was political. And in politics, *everything* is personal. So don’t try to tell me it’s anything else but personal. It’s your job and the Bureau’s to find whoever is responsible and bring him to justice.”

Riley took a long, deep breath. She studied the man’s face in minute detail. She could see it now. Senator Newbrough was a thorough narcissist.

Not that I should be surprised, she thought.

Riley understood something else. The Senator found it inconceivable that anything in his life wasn’t specifically about him, and him alone. Even his daughter’s murder was about him. Reba had simply gotten caught between him and somebody who hated him. He probably really believed that.

“Sir,” Riley began, “with all due respect, I don’t think – ”

“I don’t want you to think,” Newbrough said. “You’ve got all the information you need right in front of you.”

They held each other’s gaze for several seconds.

“Agent Paige,” the Senator finally said, “I get the feeling we’re not on the same wavelength. That’s a shame. You may not know it, but I’ve got good friends in the upper echelons of the agency. Some of them owe me favors. I’m going to get in touch with them right away. I need somebody on this case who will get the job done.”

Riley sat there, shocked, not knowing what to say. Was this man really that delusional?

The Senator stood.

“I’ll send somebody to see you out, Agent Paige,” he said. “I’m sorry we didn’t see eye to eye.”

Senator Newbrough walked out of the room, leaving Riley sitting there alone. Her mouth hung open with shock. The man was narcissistic, all right. But she knew there was more to it than that.

There was something the Senator was hiding.

And no matter what it took, she would find out what it was.

Chapter 10

The first thing that caught Riley's eye was the doll – the same naked doll she had found earlier that day in that tree near Daggett, in exactly the same pose. For a moment, she was startled to see it sitting there in the FBI forensics lab surrounded by an array of high-tech equipment. It looked weirdly out of place to Riley – like some kind of sick little shrine to a bygone non-digital age.

Now the doll was just another item of evidence, protected by a plastic bag. She knew that a team had been sent to retrieve it as soon as she'd called it in from the scene. Even so, it was a jarring sight.

Special Agent Meredith stepped forward to greet her.

"It's been a long time, Agent Paige," he said warmly. "Welcome back."

"It's good to be back, sir," Riley said.

She walked over to the table to sit with Bill and the lab tech Flores. Whatever qualms and uncertainties she might be feeling, it really did feel good to see Meredith again. She liked his gruff, no-nonsense style, and he'd always treated her with respect and consideration.

"How did things go with the Senator?" Meredith asked.

"Not good, sir," she replied.

Riley noticed a twitch of annoyance in her boss's face.

"Do you think he's going to give us any trouble?"

"I'm almost sure of it. I'm sorry, sir."

Meredith nodded sympathetically.

"I'm sure it's not your fault," he said.

Riley guessed that he had a pretty good idea of what had happened. Senator Newbrough's behavior was undoubtedly typical of narcissistic politicians. Meredith was probably all too used to it.

Flores typed rapidly, and as he did, images of grisly photographs, official reports, and news stories came up on large monitors around the room.

"We did some digging, and it turns out you were right, Agent Paige," Flores said. "The same killer did strike earlier, way before the Daggett murder."

Riley heard Bill's grunt of satisfaction, and for a second, Riley felt vindicated, felt her belief in herself returning.

But then her spirits sank. Another woman had died a terrible death. That was no cause for celebration. She had wished, actually, that she had not been right.

Why can't I enjoy being right once in a while? she wondered.

A gigantic map of Virginia spread out over the main flat-screen monitor, then narrowed to the northern half of the state. Flores tagged a spot high up on the map, near the Maryland border.

"The first victim was Margaret Geraty, thirty-six years old," Flores said. "Her body was found dumped in farmland, about thirteen miles outside of Belding. She was killed on June twenty-fifth, nearly two years ago. The FBI wasn't called in for that one. The locals let the case go cold."

Riley peered at the crime scene photos Flores brought up on another monitor. The killer obviously hadn't tried to pose the body. He'd just dumped her in a hurry and left.

"Two years ago," she said, thinking, taking it all in. A part of her was surprised he had been at this for so long. Yet another part of her knew that these sick killers could operate for years. They could have an uncanny patience.

She examined the photos.

"I see that he hadn't developed his style," she observed.

"Right," Flores said. "There's a wig there, and the hair was cropped short, but he didn't leave a rose. However, she was choked to death with a pink ribbon."

“He rushed through the set-up,” Riley said. “His nerves got the best of him. It was his first time, and he lacked self-confidence. He did a little better with Eileen Rogers, but it wasn’t until the Reba Frye killing that he really hit his stride.”

She remembered something that she’d wanted to ask.

“Did you find any connections between the victims? Or between the kids of the two mothers?”

“Not a thing,” Flores said. “The check of parenting groups came up empty. None of them seemed to know each other.”

That discouraged Riley, but didn’t altogether surprise her.

“What about the first woman?” Riley asked. “She was a mother, I take it.”

“Nope,” Flores said quickly, as though he’d been waiting for that question. “She was married, but childless.”

Riley was startled. She was *sure* that the killer was singling out mothers. How could she have gotten that wrong?

She could feel her rising self-confidence suddenly deflate.

As Riley hesitated, Bill asked, “Then how close are we to identifying a suspect? Were you able to get anything off of those burrs from Mosby Park?”

“No such luck,” Flores said. “We found traces of leather instead of blood. The killer wore gloves. He seems to be fastidious. Even at the first scene, he didn’t leave any prints or DNA.”

Riley sighed. She had been so hopeful that she’d found something that others had overlooked. But now she felt she was striking out. They were back to the drawing board.

“Obsessive about details,” she commented.

“Even so, I think we’re closing in on him,” Flores added.

He used an electronic pointer to indicate locations, drawing lines between them.

“Now that we know about this earlier killing, we’ve got the order and a better idea of his territory,” Flores said. “We’ve got number one, Margaret Geraty, at Belding to the north here, number two, Eileen Rogers, over to the west at Mosby Park, and number three, Reba Frye, near Daggett, farther south.”

As Riley looked, she saw that the three locations formed a triangle on the map.

“We’re looking at an area of about a thousand square miles,” Flores said. “But that’s not as bad as it sounds. We’re talking mostly rural areas with a few small towns. In the north you get into some big estates like the Senator’s. Lots of open country.”

Riley saw a look of professional satisfaction on Flores’s face. He obviously loved his work.

“What I’m going to do is bring up all the registered sex offenders who live in this area,” Flores said. He typed in a command, and the triangle was dotted with about two dozen little red tags.

“Now let’s eliminate the pederasts,” he said. “We can be sure that our killer’s not one of them.”

Flores typed another command, and about half of the dots disappeared.

“Now let’s narrow it down to just the hardcore cases – guys who’ve been in prison for rape or murder or both.”

“No,” Riley said abruptly. “That’s wrong.”

All three men stared at her with surprise.

“We’re not looking for a violent criminal,” she said.

Flores grunted.

“Like hell we’re not!” he protested.

A silence fell. Riley felt an insight forming, but it hadn’t quite taken shape in her mind. She stared at the doll, which was still sitting grotesquely on the table, looking as out of place as ever.

If only you could talk, she thought.

Then she slowly began to state her thoughts.

“I mean, not *obviously* violent. Margaret Geraty wasn’t raped. We already knew that Rogers and Frye weren’t either.”

“They were all tortured and killed,” Flores grumbled.

A tension filled the room, as Brent Meredith looked worried, while Bill was staring fixedly at one of the monitors.

Riley pointed to close-up pictures of Margaret Geraty’s hideously mutilated corpse.

“His first killing was his most violent,” she said. “These wounds are deep and ugly – worse even than his next two victims. I’ll bet your technicians have already determined that he inflicted these wounds really rapidly, one right after another.”

Flores nodded with admiration.

“You’re right.”

Meredith looked at Riley with curiosity.

“What does that tell you?” Meredith asked.

Riley took a deep breath. She found herself slipping into the killer’s mind again.

“I’m pretty sure of something,” she said. “He’s never had sex with another human being in his life. He’s probably never even been on a date. He’s homely and unattractive. Women have always rejected him.”

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