



BLAKE PIERCE

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #6

ONCE
PINED

A Riley Paige Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Once Pined

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Пирс Б.

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— (A Riley Paige Mystery)

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Men and women are turning up dead in the outskirts of Seattle, poisoned by a mysterious chemical. When a pattern is discovered and it becomes clear that a twisted serial killer is on the hunt, the FBI calls in their best asset: Special Agent Riley Paige. Riley is urged to return to the line of duty—but Riley, still reeling from the attacks on her family, is loath to return. Yet as bodies mount, and the murders become more inexplicable, Riley knows she has no choice. The case takes Riley deep into the unsettling world of nursing homes, of hospitals, of drifting caretakers and psychotic patients. As Riley delves deeper into the mind of the murderer, she realizes she is hunting the most terrifying killer of all: one whose madness knows no depths—and yet who may just appear shockingly ordinary. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, ONCE PINED is book #6 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Pierce Blake

Once Pined

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes six books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); and of the new KERI LOCKE mystery series.

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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PROLOGUE

The physical therapist smiled kindly at her patient, Cody Woods, as she turned off the machine. “I think that’s enough CPM for the day,” she told him as his leg gradually stopped moving.

The machine had been slowly and passively moving his leg for a couple of hours now, helping him recover from his knee replacement surgery.

“I’d almost forgotten it was on, Hallie,” Cody said with a slight chuckle.

She felt a bittersweet pang. She liked that name – Hallie. It was the name she’d used whenever she’d worked here at the Signet Rehabilitation Center as a freelance physical therapist.

It seemed to her rather a shame that Hallie Stillians was going to disappear tomorrow, as if she’d never existed.

Still, that was the way things had to be.

And besides, she had other names that she liked just as well.

Hallie took the continuous passive motion machine off the bed and set it on the floor. She gently straightened Cody’s leg and arranged the covers around him.

Finally she stroked Cody’s hair – an intimate gesture that she knew most therapists would avoid. But she often did little things like that, and she’d never had a patient who minded. She knew that she projected a certain warmth and empathy – and most of all, complete sincerity. A little innocent touching was perfectly appropriate, coming from her. No one ever misunderstood.

“How’s the pain?” she asked.

Cody had been having some unusual swelling and inflammation after the operation. That was why he’d stayed here an extra three days and hadn’t gone home yet. That was also why Hallie had been brought in to work her special healing magic. The staff here at the center knew Hallie’s work well. The staff liked her, and patients liked her, so she often got called in for situations like this.

“The pain?” Cody said. “I’d almost forgotten about it. Your voice made it go away.”

Hallie felt flattered but not surprised. She’d been reading a book to him while he’d been on the CPM machine – an espionage thriller. She knew her voice had a calming effect – almost like an anesthetic. It didn’t matter whether she was reading Dickens or some pulp novel or the newspaper. Patients didn’t need much pain medication when they were under her care; the sound of her voice was often enough.

“So is it true that I can go home tomorrow?” Cody asked.

Hallie hesitated just a split second. She couldn’t be entirely truthful. She wasn’t sure how her patient would be feeling by tomorrow.

“That’s what they tell me,” she said. “How does it feel to know that?”

A sad expression crossed Cody’s face.

“I don’t know,” he said. “In just three weeks, they’re doing my other knee. But you won’t be here to help me through it.”

Hallie took hold of his hand and held it gently. She was sorry that he felt this way. Since he’d been under her care, she’d told him a long story about her supposed life – a rather boring story, she’d thought, but he’d seemed enchanted by it.

Finally, she’d explained to him that her husband, Rupert, was about to retire from his career as a CPA. Her younger son, James, was down in Hollywood trying to make it as a screenwriter. Her older son, Wendell, was right here in Seattle teaching linguistics at the University of Washington. Now that the kids were grown and out of the house, she and Rupert were moving to a lovely colonial village in Mexico, where they planned to spend the rest of their lives. They were leaving tomorrow.

It was a beautiful story, she thought.

And yet none of it was true.

She lived at home, alone.

Utterly alone.

“Oh look, your tea has gotten cold,” she said. “I’ll just heat it up for you.”

Cody smiled and said, “Yes, please. That would be nice. And have some yourself. The teapot is right there on the counter.”

Hallie smiled and said, “Of course,” just as she did every time they repeated this routine. She got up from her chair, picked up Cody’s mug of lukewarm tea, and took it to the counter.

But this time, she reached into her purse beside the microwave. She took out a small plastic medicine container and emptied the contents of the container into Cody’s tea. She did it quickly, stealthily, a practiced move she had down, and she felt certain he had not seen her. Even so, her heart beat just a little bit faster.

She then poured her own tea and put both mugs into the microwave.

I’ve got to keep these straight, she reminded herself. *The yellow mug for Cody, blue for me.*

While the microwave hummed, she sat down beside Cody again and looked at him without saying anything.

He had a nice face, she thought. But he’d told her about his own life, and she knew that he was sad. He had been sad for a long time. He’d been a prize-winning athlete when he was in high school. But he’d injured his knees playing football, ending his hopes for an athletic career. Those same injuries at long last led to his need for knee replacements.

His life ever since had been marked by tragedy. His first wife had died of a car wreck, and his second wife left him for another man. He had two grown children, but they didn’t speak to him anymore. He’d also had a heart attack just a few years ago.

She admired the fact that he didn’t seem the least bit bitter. In fact, he seemed full of hope and optimism about the future.

She thought he was sweet, but naive.

She knew that his life wasn’t going to take a turn for the better.

It was too late for that.

The bell from the microwave snapped her out of her little reverie. Cody was looking up at her with kindly, expectant eyes.

She patted his hand, got up, and walked over to the microwave. She took out the mugs, which were now hot to the touch.

She reminded herself yet again.

Yellow for Cody, blue for me.

It was important not to mix them up.

They both sipped their tea without saying much. Hallie liked to think of these moments as times of quiet companionship. It made her a little sad to realize that there would be no more of them. After just a few days, this patient would no longer need her.

Soon Cody was nodding off to sleep. She had mixed the powder with just enough sleeping medicine to make sure he did.

Hallie got up and gathered her belongings to leave.

And then she began to sing softly, a song she’d known for as long as she could remember:

Far from home,
So far from home —
This little baby’s far from home.
You pine away
From day to day
Too sad to laugh, too sad to play.
No need to weep,
Dream long and deep.

Give yourself to slumber's sweep.
No more sighs,
Just close your eyes
And you will go home in your sleep.

His eyes closed, she stroked his hair from his face lovingly.
Then, with a gentle kiss on the forehead, she stood and walked away.

CHAPTER ONE

FBI Agent Riley Paige worried as she walked through the jetway at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. She'd been anxious all during the flight from Reagan Washington International. She'd come here in a hurry because she'd heard that a teenage girl was missing – Jilly – a girl Riley felt especially protective toward. She was determined to help the girl and was even thinking about trying to adopt her.

As Riley stepped through the exit gate, walking hurriedly, she looked up and was shocked to see the very girl herself standing there, FBI agent Garrett Holbrook from the Phoenix field office beside her.

Thirteen-year-old Jilly Scarlatti stood next to Garrett, blinking back, clearly waiting for her.

Riley was confused. It was Garrett who had called to tell her that Jilly had run away and was nowhere to be found.

Before Riley could ask any questions, though, Jilly rushed forward and threw herself into her arms, sobbing.

“Oh, Riley, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I'll never do it again.”

Riley hugged Jilly comfortingly, looking at Garrett for an explanation. Garrett's sister, Bonnie Flaxman, had tried to take Jilly in as a foster child. But Jilly had rebelled and run away.

Garrett smiled a little – an unusual expression from a normally taciturn man.

“She called Bonnie shortly after you left Fredericksburg,” he said. “She said she just wanted to say goodbye once and for all. But then Bonnie told her that you were on your way here to take her home with you. She got really excited and told us where to pick her up.”

He looked at Riley.

“Your flying all the way here saved her,” he concluded.

Riley just stood there for a moment, Jilly sobbing in her arms, feeling oddly clumsy and helpless.

Jilly whispered something that Riley couldn't hear.

“What?” Riley asked.

Jilly drew her face back and looked into Riley's eyes, her own earnest brown eyes filled with tears.

“Mom?” she said in a choked, shy voice. “Can I call you Mom?”

Riley hugged her close again, overwhelmed by a confusing onslaught of emotions.

“Of course,” Riley said.

Then she turned to Garrett. “Thank you so much for everything you've done.”

“I'm glad I could help, at least a little,” he replied. “Do you need a place to stay while you're here?”

“No. Now that she's been found, there's no point. We'll catch the next flight back.”

Garrett shook her hand. “I hope this works out for both of you.”

Then he left.

Riley looked down at the teenager who was still clinging to her. She was struck with an odd mix of elation to have found her and concern for what the future might hold for them both.

“Let's go grab a burger,” she said to Jilly.

*

It was snowing lightly during the drive home from Reagan Washington International Airport. Jilly sat staring silently out the window as Riley drove. Her silence was a big change after the more

than four-hour flight from Phoenix. Then, Jilly hadn't been able to stop talking. She'd never been on a plane before and was curious about absolutely everything.

Why is she so quiet now? Riley wondered.

It occurred to her that snow must be an unusual sight for a girl who had lived all her life in Arizona.

"Have you ever seen snow before?" Riley asked.

"Only on TV."

"Do you like it?" Riley said.

Jilly didn't reply, which made Riley feel uneasy. She remembered the first time she had seen Jilly. The girl had run away from an abusive father. In sheer desperation, she had decided to become a prostitute. She'd gone to a truck stop that was notorious as a pickup place for prostitutes – "lot lizards," they were called, because they were especially down-and-out.

Riley had gone there investigating a series of murders of prostitutes. She'd happened to find Jilly hidden away in the cab of a truck, waiting to sell herself to the driver whenever he came back.

Riley had gotten Jilly into Child Protective Services and had stayed in touch with her. Garrett's sister had taken Jilly in as a foster child, but eventually Jilly had run away again.

It was then that Riley had decided to take Jilly home herself.

But now she was starting to wonder if she'd made a mistake. She already had her own fifteen-year-old daughter, April, to take care of. April alone could be a handful. They had been through some traumatic experiences together since Riley's marriage had broken up.

And what did she really know about Jilly? Did Riley have any idea how deeply scarred the girl might be? Was she the least bit prepared to deal with the challenges Jilly might present? And although April had approved of her bringing Jilly home, how would the two teenagers get along?

Suddenly, Jilly spoke.

"Where am I going to sleep?"

Riley felt relieved to hear Jilly's voice.

"You'll have your own room," she said. "It's small, but I think it's just right for you."

Jilly fell silent for another moment.

Then she said, "Was it somebody else's room?"

Jilly sounded worried now.

"Not since I've lived there," Riley said. "I tried using it as an office, but it was too big. So I moved my office into my bedroom. April and I bought you a bed and a dresser, but when we have time, you can pick out some posters and a bedspread that you like."

"My own room," Jilly said.

Riley thought she sounded more apprehensive than happy.

"Where does April sleep?" Jilly asked.

Riley more than half wanted to tell Jilly to just wait until they got home, and then she'd see everything for herself. But the girl sounded like she needed reassurance right this minute.

"April has her own room," Riley said. "You and April will share a bathroom, though. I've got my own bathroom."

"Who cleans? Who cooks?" Jilly asked. Then she added anxiously, "I'm not a good enough cook."

"Our housekeeper, Gabriela, takes care of all that. She's from Guatemala. She lives with us, in her own apartment downstairs. You'll meet her soon. She'll take care of you when I have to be away."

Another silence fell.

Then Jilly asked, "Will Gabriela beat me?"

Riley was stunned by the question.

"No. Of course not. Why would you think that?"

Jilly didn't reply. Riley tried to comprehend what she meant.

She tried to tell herself that she shouldn't be surprised. She remembered what Jilly had said when she'd found her in the truck cab and told her that she needed to go home.

"I'm not going home. My dad will beat me up if I go back."

Social services in Phoenix had already removed Jilly from her father's custody. Riley knew that Jilly's mother had gone missing long ago. Jilly had a brother somewhere, but nobody had heard from him in a while.

It broke Riley's heart to realize that Jilly might be expecting similar treatment in her new home. It seemed that the poor girl could barely imagine anything better in life.

"Nobody's going to beat you, Jilly," Riley said, her voice shaking a little with emotion. "Never again. We're going to take good care of you. Do you understand?"

Again, Jilly didn't reply. Riley wished she would just say that she *did* understand, and that she believed what Riley was saying. Instead, Jilly changed the subject.

"I like your car," she said. "Can I learn to drive?"

"When you're older, sure," Riley said. "Right now let's get you settled into your new life."

*

A little snow was still falling when Riley parked in front of her townhouse and she and Jilly got out of the car. Jilly's face twitched a little as snowflakes struck her skin. She didn't seem to like this new sensation. And she shivered all over from the cold.

We've got to get her some warmer clothes right away, Riley thought.

Halfway between the car and the front door, Jilly froze in her tracks. She stared at the house.

"I can't do this," Jilly said.

"Why not?"

Jilly said nothing for a moment. She looked like a frightened animal. Riley suspected that the thought of living in such a nice place overwhelmed her.

"I'll be getting in April's way, won't I?" Jilly said. "I mean it's her bathroom."

She seemed to be looking for excuses, grasping for reasons why this whole thing wouldn't work.

"You won't get in April's way," Riley said. "Now come on in."

Riley opened the door. Waiting inside were April and Riley's ex-husband, Ryan. Their faces were smiling and welcoming.

April rushed toward Jilly right away and gave her a big hug.

"I'm April," she said. "I'm so glad you came. You'll really like it here."

Riley was startled by the difference between the two girls. She'd always considered April to be rather thin and gangly. But she appeared positively robust next to Jilly, who looked skinny by comparison. Riley guessed that Jilly had gone hungry from time to time during her life.

So many things I still don't know, Riley thought.

Jilly smiled nervously as Ryan introduced himself and hugged her.

Suddenly Gabriela came rushing in from downstairs, introducing herself with a huge smile.

"Welcome to the family!" Gabriela exclaimed, giving Jilly a hug.

Riley noticed that the stout Guatemalan woman's skin was only slightly darker than Jilly's olive complexion.

"*Vente!*" Gabriela said, taking Jilly by the hand. "Let's go upstairs. I will show you your room!"

But Jilly pulled her hand away and stood there trembling. Tears began to stream down her face. She sat down on the stairs and cried. April sat down beside her and put her arm around her shoulders.

"Jilly, what's wrong?" April asked.

Jilly shook her head miserably.

"I don't know," she sobbed. "It's just ... I don't know. It's all so much."

April smiled sweetly and patted her gently on the back.

“I know, I know,” she said. “Come on upstairs. You’ll feel at home in no time.”

Jilly obediently got up and followed April upstairs. Riley was pleased by how graciously her daughter was handling the situation. Of course, April had always said that she wanted a younger sister. But April had been through some difficult years herself, and had been severely traumatized by criminals eager to get even with Riley.

Maybe, Riley thought hopefully, April will be able to understand Jilly better than I can.

Gabriela gazed sympathetically after the two girls.

“¡Pobrecita!” she said. “I hope she will be all right.”

Gabriela went back downstairs, leaving Riley and Ryan alone. Ryan stood staring up the stairs, looking somewhat dazed.

I hope he’s not having second thoughts, Riley thought. I’m going to need his support.

A lot had gone on between her and Ryan. During the last years of their marriage he’d been an unfaithful husband and an absent father. They’d been separated and divorced. But Ryan had seemed like a changed man lately and they were cautiously spending more time together.

They’d talked about the challenge of bringing Jilly into their lives. Ryan had seemed enthusiastic about the idea.

“Are you still OK with this?” Riley asked him.

Ryan looked at her and said, “Yeah. I can see that it’s going to be tough, though.”

Riley nodded. Then came an awkward pause.

“I think maybe I’d better go,” Ryan said.

Riley felt relieved. She kissed him lightly, and he put on his coat and left. Riley fixed a drink for herself and sat down alone in the living room.

What have I gotten us all into? she wondered.

She hoped that her good intentions weren’t going to tear her family apart all over again.

CHAPTER TWO

Riley woke up the next morning with a heart full of apprehension. This was going to be the first day of Jilly's life in her home. They had a lot to do today and Riley hoped that no trouble was in store.

Last night she had realized that Jilly's transition to her new life would mean hard work for all of them. But April had pitched in and helped Jilly get settled. They had picked out clothes for Jilly to wear today – not from the meager possessions she'd brought along in a grocery bag but from new things that Riley and April had bought for her.

Jilly and April had finally gone to bed.

Riley had too, but her sleep had been troubled and restless.

Now she got up and dressed, and headed straight to the kitchen, where April was helping Gabriela get breakfast ready.

"Where's Jilly?" Riley asked.

"She hasn't gotten up yet," April said.

Riley's worry mounted.

She went to the base of the stairs and called out, "Jilly, it's time to get up."

She heard no reply. She was seized by a wave of panic. Had Jilly run off during the night?

"Jilly, did you hear me?" she called out. "We've got to register you at school this morning."

"I'm coming," Jilly yelled back.

Riley breathed a sigh of relief. Jilly's tone was sullen, but at least she was here and being cooperative.

In recent years, Riley had often heard that sullen tone from April. Now April seemed to have gotten past it, but she still had lapses from time to time. Riley wondered if she was really up to the job of raising another teenager.

Just then there was a knock at the front door. When Riley answered it, her townhouse neighbor, Blaine Hildreth, was standing outside.

Riley was surprised to see him, but hardly displeased. He was a couple of years younger than she was, a charming and attractive man who owned an upscale restaurant in town. In fact, she had felt an unmistakable mutual attraction with him that definitely confused the issue of possibly reconnecting with Ryan. Most importantly, Blaine was a wonderful neighbor and their daughters were best friends.

"Hi, Riley," he said. "I hope it's not too early."

"Not at all," Riley said. "What's up?"

Blaine shrugged with a rather sad smile.

"I just thought I'd stop by to say goodbye," he said.

Riley gaped with surprise.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He hesitated, and before he could answer, Riley saw a huge truck parked in front of his townhouse. Movers were carrying furniture from Blaine's home into the truck.

Riley gasped.

"You're moving?" she asked.

"It seemed like a good idea," Blaine said.

Riley almost blurted out, "*Why?*"

But it was easy to guess why. Living next door to Riley had proved to be dangerous and terrifying, both to Blaine and his daughter, Crystal. The bandage that was still on his face was a harsh reminder. Blaine had been badly injured when he'd tried to protect April from a killer's attack.

"It's not what you probably think," Blaine said.

But Riley could tell by his expression – it was exactly what she thought.

He continued, “It has turned out that this place just isn’t convenient. It’s too far away from the restaurant. I’ve found a nice place that’s much closer. I’m sure you understand.”

Riley felt too confused and upset to reply. Memories of the whole terrible incident came flooding back to her.

She’d been in Upstate New York working on a case when she’d learned that a brutal killer was at large. His name was Orin Rhodes. Sixteen years earlier, Riley had killed his girlfriend in a gunfight and sent him to prison. When Rhodes was finally released from Sing Sing, he was bent on revenge against Riley and everyone she loved.

Before Riley could get home, Rhodes had invaded her home and attacked both April and Gabriela. Next door, Blaine had heard the struggle, so he came over to help. He’d probably saved April’s life. But he’d gotten badly hurt in the attempt.

Riley had seen him twice in the hospital. The first time had been devastating. He’d been unconscious from his injuries, with an IV in each arm and an oxygen mask. Riley had blamed herself bitterly for what had happened to him.

But the next time she’d seen him had been more heartening. He’d been alert and cheerful, and had joked a bit proudly about his foolhardiness.

Most of all, she remembered what he’d said to her then ...

“There isn’t much I wouldn’t do for you and April.”

Clearly he’d had second thoughts. The danger of living next door to Riley had proven too much for him and now he was going away. She didn’t know whether to feel hurt or guilty. She definitely felt disappointed.

Riley’s thoughts were interrupted by April’s voice behind her.

“Oh my God! Blaine, are you and Crystal moving? Is Crystal still there?”

Blaine nodded.

“I’ve got to go over and say goodbye,” April said.

April dashed out the door and headed next door.

Riley was still grappling with her emotions.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Sorry for what?” Blaine asked.

“You know.”

Blaine nodded. “It wasn’t your fault, Riley,” he said in a gentle voice.

Riley and Blaine stood gazing at each other for a moment. Finally, Blaine forced a smile.

“Hey, it’s not like we’re leaving town,” he said. “We can get together whenever we like. So can the girls. And they’ll still be in the same high school. It’ll be like nothing has changed.”

A bitter taste rose up in Riley’s mouth.

That’s not true, she thought. Everything has changed.

Disappointment was starting to give way to anger. Riley knew that it was wrong to feel angry. She had no right. She didn’t even know why she felt that way. All she knew was that she couldn’t help it.

And what were they supposed to do right now?

Hug? Shake hands?

She sensed that Blaine felt the same awkwardness and indecision.

They managed to exchange terse goodbyes. Blaine went back home, and Riley went back inside. She found Jilly eating breakfast in the kitchen. Gabriela had put Riley’s own breakfast on the table, so she sat down to eat with Jilly.

“So are you excited about today?”

Riley’s question was out before she could realize how lame and clumsy it sounded.

“I guess,” Jilly said, poking her pancakes with a fork. She didn’t even look up at Riley.

*

A while later, Riley and Jilly walked through the entrance to Brody Middle School. The building was attractive, with brightly colored locker doors lining the hallway and student artwork hanging everywhere.

A pleasant and polite student offered her help and directed them toward the main office. Riley thanked her and continued down the hall, clutching Jilly's registration papers in one hand and holding Jilly's hand with the other.

Earlier, they had gone through registration at the central school office. They'd taken along the materials that Phoenix Social Services had put together – records of vaccination, school transcripts, Jilly's birth certificate, and a statement that Riley was Jilly's appointed guardian. Jilly had been removed from her father's custody, although he had threatened to challenge that decision. Riley knew that the path to finalizing and legalizing an adoption wouldn't be quick or easy.

Jilly squeezed Riley's hand tightly. Riley sensed that the girl felt extremely ill at ease. It wasn't hard to imagine why. As rough as life in Phoenix had been, it was the only place that Jilly had ever lived.

"Why can't I go to school with April?" Jilly asked.

"Next year you'll be in the same high school," Riley said. "First you've got to finish eighth grade."

They found the main office and Riley showed the papers to the receptionist.

"We'd like to see someone about enrolling Jilly in school," Riley said.

"You need to see a guidance counselor," the receptionist said with a smile. "Come right this way."

Both of us could use some guidance, Riley thought.

The counselor was a woman in her thirties with a mop of curly brown hair. Her name was Wanda Lewis, and her smile was as warm as a smile could be. Riley found herself thinking that she could be a real help. Surely a woman in a job like this had dealt with other students from rough backgrounds.

Ms. Lewis took them on a tour of the school. The library was neat, orderly, and well stocked with both computers and books. In the gym, girls were happily playing basketball. The cafeteria was clean and sparkling. Everything looked absolutely lovely to Riley.

All the while, Ms. Lewis cheerfully asked Jilly lots of questions about where she'd gone to school before, and about her interests. But Jilly said almost nothing in reply to Ms. Lewis's questions and asked none of her own. Her curiosity seemed to perk up a little when she got a look at the art room. But as soon as they moved on, she became quiet and withdrawn all over again.

Riley wondered what might be going on in the girl's head. She knew that her recent grades had been poor, but they had been surprisingly good in earlier years. But the truth was, Riley knew almost nothing about Jilly's past school experience.

Maybe she even hated school.

This new one must be daunting, where Jilly knew absolutely nobody. And of course, it wasn't going to be easy to get caught up in her studies, with only a couple of weeks left before end of the term.

At the end of the tour, Riley managed to coax Jilly into thanking Ms. Lewis for showing her around. They agreed that Jilly would start classes tomorrow. Then Riley and Jilly walked out into the bite of the cold January air. A thin layer of yesterday's snow lay all around the parking lot.

"So what do you think of your new school?" Riley asked.

"It's OK," Jilly said.

Riley couldn't tell if Jilly was being sullen or was simply dazed by all the changes she was facing. As they approached the car, she noticed that Jilly was shivering deeply and her teeth were chattering. She was wearing a heavy jacket of April's, but the cold was really bothering her.

They got into the car, and Riley switched on the ignition and the heater. Even as the car got warmer, Jilly was still shivering.

Riley kept the car parked. It was time to find out what was bothering this child in her care.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Is there something about school that upsets you?"

"It's not the school," Jilly said, her voice shaking now. "It's the cold."

"I guess it doesn't get cold in Phoenix," Riley said. "This must be strange to you."

Jilly's eyes filled up with tears.

"It does get cold sometimes," she said. "Especially at night."

"Please tell me what's wrong," Riley said.

Tears started to pour down Jilly's cheeks. She spoke in a small, choked voice.

"The cold makes me remember ..."

Jilly fell silent. Riley waited patiently for her to go on.

"My dad always blamed me for everything," Jilly said. "He blamed me for my mom going away, and my brother too, and he even blamed me because he kept getting fired from whatever jobs he could get. Anything that was wrong was always my fault."

Jilly was sobbing quietly now.

"Go on," Riley said.

"One night he told me he wanted me gone," Jilly said. "He said I was a dead weight, that I was keeping him down, and he'd had enough of me and he was through with me. He kicked me out of the house. He locked the doors and I couldn't get back in."

Jilly gulped hard at the memory.

"I've never felt so cold in my life," she said. "Not even now, in this weather. I found a big drainpipe in a ditch, and it was big enough for me to crawl into, so that was where I spent that night. It was so scary. Sometimes people were walking around near me, but I didn't want them to find me. They didn't sound like anybody who would help me."

Riley closed her eyes, picturing the girl hiding in the dark drainpipe. She whispered, "And what happened then?"

Jilly continued, "I just scrunched down and stayed there all night. I didn't really sleep. The next morning I went back home and knocked on the door and called for Dad and begged him to let me in. He ignored me, like I wasn't even there. That's when I went to the truck stop. It was warm there, and there was food. Some of the women were nice to me and I figured I'd do whatever I had to do to stay there. And that night is when you found me."

Jilly had grown calmer as she'd told her story. She seemed relieved to let it out. But now Riley was crying. She could hardly believe what this poor girl had gone through. She put her arm around Jilly and hugged her tight.

"Never again," Riley said through her sobs. "Jilly, I promise you, you'll never feel like that ever again."

It was a huge promise, and Riley was feeling small, weak, and fragile herself right now. She hoped that she could keep it.

CHAPTER THREE

The woman kept thinking about poor Cody Woods. She was sure that he was dead by now. She'd find out for sure from the morning newspaper.

As much as she was enjoying her hot tea and granola, waiting for the news was making her grumpy.

When is that paper going to get here? she wondered, looking at the kitchen clock.

The delivery seemed to be getting later and later these days. Of course, she wouldn't have this trouble with a digital subscription. But she didn't like to read the news on her computer. She liked to settle down in a comfortable chair and enjoy the old-fashioned feel of a newspaper in her hands. She even liked the way the newsprint sometimes stuck to her fingers.

But the paper was already a quarter of an hour late. If things got much worse, she'd have to call in and complain. She hated to do that. It always left a bad taste in her mouth.

Anyway, the newspaper was really the only way she had of finding out about Cody. She couldn't very well call the Signet Rehabilitation Center to ask about him. That would cause too much suspicion. Besides, as far as the staff there was concerned, she was already in Mexico with her husband, with no plans ever to return.

Or rather, Hallie Stillians was in Mexico. It felt a bit sad that she'd never get to be Hallie Stillians ever again. She'd gotten rather attached to that particular alias. It had been sweet of the staff at Signet Rehab to surprise her with a cake on her last day there.

She smiled as she remembered. The cake had been colorfully decorated with sombreros and a message:

Buen Viaje, Hallie and Rupert!

Rupert had been the name of her imaginary husband. She was going to miss talking so fondly about him.

She finished her granola and kept sipping her delicious homemade tea, made from an old family recipe – a different recipe from the one she'd shared with Cody, and of course minus the special ingredients she'd added for him.

She idly began to sing ...

Far from home,
So far from home —
This little baby's far from home.
You pine away
From day to day
Too sad to laugh, too sad to play.

How Cody had loved that song! So had all the other patients. And many more patients in the future were sure to love it just as much. That thought warmed her heart.

Just then she heard a thump at the front door. She hurried to open it and look outside. Lying on the cold stoop was the morning newspaper. Trembling with excitement, she picked up the paper, rushed back to the kitchen, and opened it to the death notices.

Sure enough, there it was:

SEATTLE – Cody Woods, 49, of Seattle ...

She stopped for a moment right there. That was odd. She could have sworn that he'd told her he was fifty. Then she read the rest ...

... at the South Hills Hospital, Seattle, Wash.; Sutton-Brinks Funeral Home and Cremation Services, Seattle.

That was all. It was terse, even for a simple death notice.

She hoped that there would be a nice obituary in the next few days. But she was worried that maybe there wouldn't be. Who was going to write it, after all?

He'd been all alone in the world, at least as far as she knew. One wife was dead, another had left him, and his two children wouldn't speak to him. He'd said barely a word to her about anybody else – friends, relatives, business colleagues.

Who cares? she wondered.

She felt a familiar bitter rage rising in her throat.

Rage against all the people in Cody Woods' life who didn't care whether he lived or died.

Rage against the smiling staff at Signet Rehab, pretending that they liked and would miss Hallie Stillians.

Rage against people everywhere, with their lies and secrets and meanness.

As she often did, she imagined herself soaring over the world upon black wings, wreaking death and destruction upon the wicked.

And everybody was wicked.

Everybody deserved to die.

Even Cody Woods himself had been wicked and deserved to die.

Because what kind of man had he been, really, to leave the world with no one to love him?

A terrible man, surely.

Terrible and hateful.

“Serves him right,” she growled.

Then she snapped out of her anger. She felt ashamed to have said such a thing aloud. She didn't mean it, after all. She reminded herself that she felt nothing but love and goodwill toward absolutely everybody.

Besides, it was almost time to go to work. Today she was going to be Judy Brubaker.

Looking in the mirror, she carefully made sure that the auburn wig was properly aligned and that the soft bangs hung naturally over her forehead. It was an expensive wig and no one had ever caught on that it wasn't her own hair. Beneath the wig, Hallie Stillians' short blond hair had been dyed dark brown and trimmed into a different style.

No sign of Hallie remained, not in her wardrobe and not in her mannerisms.

She picked up a pair of stylish reading glasses and hung them on a sparkly cord around her neck.

She smiled with satisfaction. It was smart to invest in the proper accessories, and Judy Brubaker deserved the best.

Everybody loved Judy Brubaker.

And everybody loved that song that Judy Brubaker often sang – a song she sang aloud as she dressed for work ...

No need to weep,
Dream long and deep.
Give yourself to slumber's sweep.
No more sighs,
Just close your eyes
And you will go home in your sleep.

She was overflowing with peace, enough peace to share with all the world. She'd given peace to Cody Woods.

And soon she'd give peace to someone else who needed it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley's heart pounded and her lungs burned from breathing hard and fast. A familiar tune was stuck in her head.

"Follow the yellow brick road ..."

As tired and winded as she was, Riley couldn't help but be amused. It was a cold early morning, and she was running the six-mile outdoor obstacle course at Quantico. The course was nicknamed, of all things, the Yellow Brick Road.

It had been called that by the US Marines who had built it. The Marines had placed yellow bricks to mark every mile. FBI trainees who survived the course were given a yellow brick as their reward.

Riley had won her yellow brick years ago. But every now and then, she ran the course again, just to make sure that she was still up to it. After the emotional stress of the last couple of days, Riley needed some full-on physical exertion to clear her head.

So far, she had overcome a series of daunting obstacles and had passed three yellow bricks along the way. She had climbed over makeshift walls, pulled herself over hurdles, and leaped through simulated windows. Just a moment ago she had pulled herself up a sheer rock face by a rope, and now she was lowering herself back down again.

When she hit the ground, she looked up and saw Lucy Vargas, a bright young agent she enjoyed working and training with. Lucy had been glad to be Riley's workout partner this morning. She stood panting at the top of the rock face, looking down at Riley.

Riley called up to her, "Can't keep up with an old fart like me?"

Lucy laughed. "I'm taking it slow. I don't want you to overdo it – not at your age."

"Hey, don't hold back on my account," Riley yelled back. "Give it all you've got."

Riley was forty, but she had never let her physical training lapse. Being able to move fast and strike hard could be crucial when battling human monsters. Sheer physical force had saved lives, including her own, more than once.

Even so, she wasn't happy when she looked ahead and saw the next obstacle – a shallow pool of freezing cold, muddy water with barbed wire hanging over it.

Things were about to get tough.

She was well bundled for winter weather and was wearing a waterproof parka. But even so, the crawl through the mud was going to leave her soaked and freezing.

Here goes nothing, she thought.

She threw herself forward into the mud. The icy water sent a severe shock through her whole body. Still, she forced herself to start crawling, and she flattened herself as she felt the barbed wire scrape her back slightly.

A gnawing numbness kicked in, triggering an unwanted memory.

Riley was in a pitch-dark crawlspace under a house. She had just escaped a cage where she had been held and tormented by a psychopath with a propane torch. In the darkness, she'd lost track of how long she'd been in captivity.

But she'd managed to force the cage door open, and now she was crawling blindly in search of a way out. It had rained recently, and the mud underneath her was sticky, cold, and deep.

As her body grew ever more numb from the cold, a deep despair crept through her. She was weak from sleeplessness and hunger.

I can't make it, she thought.

She had to force such ideas out of her mind. She had to keep crawling and searching. If she didn't get out, he'd eventually kill her – just as he'd killed his other victims.

"Riley, are you OK?"

Lucy's voice snapped Riley out of her memory of one of her most harrowing cases. It was an ordeal that she would never forget, especially because her daughter later became a captive to the same psychopath. She wondered if she would ever be entirely free of the flashbacks.

And would April ever be free of those devastating memories?

Riley was back in the present again, and she realized that she'd crawled to a halt under the barbed wire. Lucy was right behind her, waiting for her to finish this obstacle.

"I'm OK," Riley called back. "Sorry to hold you up."

She forced herself to start crawling again. At the water's edge, she scrambled to her feet and gathered her wits and her energy. Then she took off down the wooded trail, certain that Lucy wasn't far behind her. She knew that her next task would be to climb across a rough hanging cargo net. After that, she still had almost two miles to go, and more than a few really tough obstacles to overcome.

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At the end of the six-mile course, Riley and Lucy stumbled along arm-in-arm, panting and laughing and congratulating each other over their triumph. Riley was surprised to find her longtime partner waiting for her where the trail ended. Bill Jeffreys was a strong, sturdy man of about Riley's age.

"Bill!" Riley said, still gasping for breath. "What are you doing here?"

"I came looking for you," he said. "They told me I could find you here. I hardly believed you wanted to do this – and in the dead of winter, too! What are you, some kind of masochist?"

Riley and Lucy both laughed.

Lucy said, "Maybe *I'm* the masochist. I hope I can run the Yellow Brick Road like Riley can when I'm her ripe old age."

Teasingly, Riley said to Bill, "Hey, I'm ready for another go at it. Want to join me?"

Bill shook his head and chuckled.

"Huh-uh," he said. "I've still got my old Yellow Brick at home, and I use it as a doorstep. One's enough for me. I'm thinking about going for a Green Brick, though. Want to join me for that?"

Riley laughed again. The so-called "Green Brick" was a joke around the FBI – an award given to anyone who could smoke thirty-five cigars on thirty-five successive nights.

"I'll pass," she said.

Bill's expression suddenly turned serious.

"I'm on a new case, Riley," he said. "And I need you to work with me on it. I hope you're OK with this. I know it's really soon after our last case."

Bill was right. To Riley, it seemed like only yesterday when they'd apprehended Orin Rhodes.

"You know I've just brought Jilly home. I'm trying to get her settled into her new life. New school ... new everything."

"How is she doing?" Bill asked.

"She's erratic, but she's really trying. She's so happy to be part of a family. I think she's going to need a lot of help."

"And April?"

"She's absolutely great. I'm still blown away by how fighting with Rhodes made her feel stronger. And she's already very fond of Jilly."

After a pause, she asked, "What kind of case have you got, Bill?"

Bill was silent for a moment.

"I'm on my way to meet with the chief about it," he said. "I really do need your help, Riley."

Riley looked directly at her friend and partner. His expression was one of deep distress. When he'd said he needed her help, he'd really meant it. Riley wondered why.

“Let me take a shower and get into some dry clothes,” she said. “I’ll meet you at headquarters right away.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Team Chief Brent Meredith wasn't a man to waste time with niceties. Riley knew that from experience. So when she walked into his office after her run, she didn't expect small talk – no polite questions about health and home and family. He could be kindly and warm, but those moments were rare. Today, he was going to get right down to business, and his business was always urgent.

Bill had already arrived. He still looked extremely anxious. She hoped she would soon understand why.

As soon as Riley sat down, Meredith leaned over his desk toward her, his broad, angular African-American face as daunting as ever.

"First things first, Agent Paige," he said.

Riley waited for him to say something else – to ask a question or give an order. Instead, he simply stared at her.

It only took Riley a moment to understand what Meredith was getting at.

Meredith was taking care not to ask his question aloud. Riley appreciated his discretion. A killer was still on the loose, and his name was Shane Hatcher. He'd escaped from Sing Sing, and Riley's most recent assignment had been to bring Hatcher in.

She'd failed. Actually, she hadn't really tried, and now other FBI agents were assigned to apprehend Hatcher. So far they'd had no success.

Shane Hatcher was a criminal genius who had become a respected expert in criminology during his long years in prison. So Riley had sometimes visited him in prison to get advice on her cases. She knew him well enough to feel sure that he wasn't a danger to society right now. Hatcher had a weird but strict moral code. He'd killed one man since his escape – an old enemy who was himself a dangerous criminal. Riley felt certain that he wouldn't kill anybody else.

Right now, Riley understood that Meredith needed to know whether she'd heard from Hatcher. It was a high-profile case, and it seemed that Hatcher was quickly becoming something of an urban legend – a famed criminal mastermind capable of just about anything.

She appreciated Meredith's discretion in not asking his question out loud. But the simple truth was, Riley knew nothing about Hatcher's current activities or his whereabouts.

"There's nothing new, sir," she said in reply to Meredith's unspoken question.

Meredith nodded and seemed to relax a little.

"All right, then," Meredith said. "I'll get right to the point. I'm sending Agent Jeffreys to Seattle on a case. He wants you as a partner. I need to know whether you're available to go with him."

Riley needed to say no. She had so much to deal with in her life right now that taking on an assignment in a distant city seemed out of the question. She still had occasional returns of the PTSD she had suffered since being held captive by a sadistic criminal. Her daughter, April, had suffered at the same man's hands, and now April had her own demons to deal with. And now Riley had a new daughter who had been through her own terrible traumas.

If she could just stay put for a while and teach a few classes at the Academy, maybe she could get her life stabilized.

"I can't do it," Riley said. "Not right now."

She turned toward Bill.

"You know what I'm dealing with," she said.

"I know, I was just hoping ..." he said, with an imploring expression in his eyes.

It was time to find out what was the matter.

"What's the case?" Riley asked.

"There have been at least two poisonings in Seattle," Meredith said. "It appears to be a serial case."

At that moment, Riley understood why Bill was feeling shaken. When he was still a boy, his mother had been poisoned to death. Riley didn't know any of the details, but she did know that her murder had been one of the reasons he had become an FBI agent. It had haunted him for years. This case opened up old wounds for him.

So when he'd told her he needed her on the case, he'd really meant it.

Meredith continued, "So far, we know of two victims – a man and a woman. There may have been others, and there may be others still to come."

"Why are we being called in?" Riley asked. "There's an FBI field office right there in Seattle. Can't they handle it?"

Meredith shook his head.

"The situation there is pretty dysfunctional. It seems that the local FBI and the local police can't agree on anything about this case. That's why you're needed, whether you're wanted or not. Can I count on you, Agent Paige?"

Suddenly, Riley's decision seemed perfectly clear. In spite of her personal problems, she was really needed on this job.

"Count me in," she finally said.

Bill nodded and breathed an audible sigh of relief and gratitude.

"Good," Meredith said. "You'll both fly out to Seattle tomorrow morning."

Meredith drummed his fingers on the table for a moment.

"But don't expect a cozy welcome," he added. "Neither the cops nor the Feds will be happy to see you."

CHAPTER SIX

Riley dreaded taking Jilly to her first day at her new school almost as much as she'd dreaded some cases. The teenager was looking rather grim, and Riley wondered if she might even make a scene at the last moment.

Is she ready for this? Riley kept asking herself. *Am I ready for this?*

Also, the timing seemed unfortunate. It worried Riley that she had to fly off to Seattle this morning. But Bill needed her help, and that decided the matter as far as she was concerned. Jilly had seemed all right when they had discussed the matter at home, but Riley really didn't know what to expect now.

Fortunately, she didn't have to take Jilly to school alone. Ryan had offered to drive, and Gabriela and April also came along to offer moral support.

When they all got out of the car in the school parking lot, April took Jilly by the hand and trotted along with her straight toward the building. The two slender girls were both wearing jeans and boots and warm jackets. Yesterday Riley had taken them shopping and let Jilly choose a new jacket, along with a bedspread, posters, and some pillows to personalize her bedroom.

Riley, Ryan, and Gabriela followed behind the girls, and Riley's heart warmed as she watched them. After years of sullenness and rebellion, April suddenly seemed incredibly mature. Riley wondered if maybe this was what April had needed all along – someone else to take care of.

“Look at them,” Riley said to Ryan. “They're bonding.”

“Wonderful, isn't it?” Ryan said. “They actually look kind of like sisters. Is that what drew you to her?”

It was an interesting question. When she'd first brought Jilly home, Riley had mostly been struck by how different the two girls were. But now she was becoming more and more aware of resemblances. True, April was the paler of the two, with hazel eyes like her mom, while Jilly had brown eyes and an olive complexion.

But right now, as the two heads of dark hair bounced along together, they did seem very much alike.

“Maybe so,” she said, answering Ryan's question. “I didn't stop to think about it. All I knew was that she was in serious trouble, and maybe I could help.”

“You may very well have saved her life,” Ryan said.

Riley felt a lump in her throat. That possibility hadn't occurred to her and it was a humbling thought. She was both exhilarated and terrified by this feeling of newfound responsibility.

The whole family went straight to the guidance counselor's office. Warm and smiling as always, Wanda Lewis greeted Jilly with a map of the school.

“I'll take you straight to your homeroom,” Ms. Lewis said.

“I can see this is a good place,” Gabriela told Jilly. “You'll be fine here.”

Now Jilly looked nervous but happy. She hugged them all, then followed Ms. Lewis down the hall.

“I like this school,” Gabriela told Ryan, Riley, and April on the way back to the car.

“I'm glad you approve,” Riley said.

She meant it sincerely. Gabriela was much more than a housekeeper. She was a true member of the family. It was important that she feel good about family decisions.

They all got into the car, and Ryan started the engine.

“Where to next?” Ryan asked cheerfully.

“I've got to get to school,” April said.

“Then home right after that,” Riley said. “I've got a plane to catch in Quantico.”

“Got it,” Ryan said, pulling out of the parking lot.

Riley watched Ryan's face as he drove. He looked really happy – happy to be a part of things, and happy to have a new member of the family. He hadn't been like this through most of their marriage. He really did seem like a changed man. And at moments like now, she felt grateful to him.

She turned and looked at her daughter, who was in the back seat.

"You're handling all of this really well," Riley said.

April looked surprised.

"I'm putting a lot into it," she said. "Glad you noticed."

For a moment Riley was taken aback. Had she been ignoring her daughter out of concern for getting their new family member settled in?

April was quiet for a moment, then said, "Mom, I'm still glad you brought her home. I guess it's all more complicated than I thought it would be, having a new sister. She's had an awful time and sometimes she isn't easy to talk to."

"I don't want to make this hard on you," Riley said.

April smiled weakly. "I was hard on you," she said. "I'm tough enough to deal with Jilly's problems. And the truth is, I'm beginning to enjoy helping her. We'll be fine. Please don't worry about us."

It eased Riley's mind that she was leaving Jilly in the care of three people she felt sure she could trust – April, Gabriela, and Ryan. All the same, it bothered her that she had to be away right now. She hoped it wouldn't be for long.

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The ground dropped away as Riley looked out the window of the small BAU jet. The jet climbed above the clouds for the flight to the Pacific Northwest – nearly six hours. In just a few minutes, Riley was watching the landscape rolling beneath them.

Bill was sitting next to her.

He said, "Flying across the country like this always makes me think of long ago, when people had to walk or ride horses or wagons."

Riley nodded and smiled. It was as if Bill had read her thoughts. She often had that feeling about him.

"The country must have seemed huge to people back then," she said. "It took settlers months to get across."

A familiar and comfortable silence settled between them. Over the years, she and Bill had had their share of disagreements and even quarrels, and at times their partnership had seemed to be over. But now she felt all the closer to him because of those hard times. She trusted him with her life, and she knew he trusted her with his.

At times like now, she was glad that she and Bill hadn't given in to their attraction to one another. They'd come perilously close at times.

It would have ruined everything, Riley thought.

They'd been smart to steer clear of it. The loss of their friendship would have been too hard for her to imagine. He was her best friend in the world.

After a few moments, Bill said, "Thanks for coming, Riley. I really need your help this time out. I don't think I could handle this case with any other partner. Not even Lucy."

Riley looked at him and said nothing. She didn't have to ask him what was on his mind. She knew he was finally going to tell her the truth about what had happened to his mother. Then she'd understand just how important and troubling this case really was to him.

He stared straight ahead, remembering.

“You already know about my family,” he said. “I’ve told you that Dad was a high school math teacher, and my mom worked as a bank teller. With three kids, we were all comfortable without being especially well off. It was a pretty happy life for all of us. Until ...”

Bill paused for a moment.

“It happened when I was nine years old,” he continued. “Just before Christmas, the staff at Mom’s bank threw their annual Christmas party, exchanging gifts and eating cake and all the usual office stuff. When Mom came home that afternoon, she sounded like she’d had fun and everything was fine. But as the evening wore on, she started behaving strangely.”

Bill’s face tightened at the grim memory.

“She got dizzy and confused, and her speech was slurred. It was almost like she was drunk. But Mom never drank much, and besides, no alcohol had been served at the party. None of us had any idea what was going on. Things rapidly got worse. She suffered from nausea and vomiting. Dad rushed her to the emergency room. We kids went along with them.”

Bill fell quiet again. Riley could tell that it was becoming harder by the moment to tell her what had happened.

“By the time we got to the hospital, her heart was racing, and she was hyperventilating, and her blood pressure had gone through the roof. Then she slipped into a coma. Her kidneys started to fail, and she had congestive heart failure.”

Bill’s eyes were shut tight and his face was knotted with pain. Riley wondered if maybe it would be best for him not to tell the rest of his story. But she sensed that it would be wrong to tell him to stop.

Bill said, “By the next morning, the doctors figured out what was wrong. She was suffering from severe ethylene glycol poisoning.”

Riley shook her head. That sounded familiar but she couldn’t quite place it.

Bill quickly explained, “Her punch at the party had been spiked with antifreeze.”

Riley gasped.

“My God!” she said. “How is that even possible? I mean, wouldn’t the taste alone – ?”

“The thing is, most antifreeze has a sweet taste,” Bill explained. “It’s easy to mix with sugary beverages without being noticed. It’s awfully easy to use as a poison.”

Riley was struggling to grasp what had she was hearing.

“But if the punch was spiked, weren’t other people affected?” she said.

“That’s just it,” Bill said. “Nobody else was poisoned. It wasn’t in the punch bowl. It was only in Mom’s drinks. Somebody specifically targeted her.”

He fell quiet again for a moment.

“By then, it was too late for anything,” he said. “She stayed in a coma and died on New Year’s Eve. We were all right there at her bedside.”

Somehow, Bill managed not to break down in tears. Riley guessed that he’d done plenty of crying about it over the years.

“It didn’t make sense,” Bill said. “Everybody liked Mom. She didn’t have an enemy in the world that anybody knew of. The police investigated, and it became clear that nobody who worked at the bank was responsible. But several co-workers remembered a strange man who came and went during the party. He’d seemed friendly, and everybody assumed that he was somebody’s guest, a friend or a relative. He was gone before the party was over.”

Bill shook his head bitterly.

“The case went cold. It’s still cold. I guess it always will be. After so many years, it’ll never be solved. It was terrible never to find out who did it, never bring him to justice. But the worst thing was never finding out *why*. It just seemed so pointlessly cruel. Why Mom? What did she do to make anybody want to do something so horrible? Or maybe she didn’t do anything. Maybe it was just some sort of vicious joke. Not knowing was torture. It still is. And of course, that’s one of the reasons I decided to – ”

He didn't finish the thought. He didn't need to. Riley had long known that the unsolved mystery of his mother's death was why Bill had gone into a career in law enforcement.

"I'm so sorry," Riley said.

Bill shrugged feebly, as if a huge weight lay on his shoulders.

"It was a long time ago," he said. "Besides, you must know how it felt as well as anybody."

Bill's quiet words shook Riley. She knew exactly what he meant. And he was right. She'd told him all about it long ago, so there was no need to repeat it now. He knew already. But that didn't make the memory any less searing.

Riley was six years old, and Mommy had taken her to a candy store. Riley was excited and asking for all the candy she could see. Sometimes Mommy would scold her for acting like that. But today Mommy was being sweet and spoiling her, buying her all the candy she wanted.

Just when they were in line at the cash register, a strange man walked toward them. He wore something on his face that flattened his nose and lips and cheeks and made him look funny and scary at the same time, sort of like a circus clown. It took little Riley a moment to realize that he was wearing a nylon stocking over his head, just like Mommy wore on her legs.

He was holding a gun. The gun looked huge. He was pointing it at Mommy.

"Give me your purse," he said.

But Mommy didn't do it. Riley didn't know why. All she knew was that Mommy was scared, maybe too scared to do what the man told her to do, and probably Riley should be scared too, and so she was.

He said some bad words to Mommy, but she still didn't give him her purse. She was shaking all over.

Then came a bang and a flash, and Mommy fell to the floor. The man said more bad words and ran away. Mommy's chest was bleeding, and she gasped and twisted for a moment before she fell completely still.

Little Riley started screaming. She didn't stop screaming for a long time.

The gentle touch of Bill's hand on hers brought Riley back to the present.

"I'm sorry," Bill said. "I didn't mean to bring it all back."

He'd obviously seen the tear trickling down her cheek. She squeezed his hand. She was grateful for his understanding and concern. But the truth was, Riley had never told Bill about a memory that troubled her even more.

Her father had been a colonel in the Marines – a stern, cruel, unfeeling, unloving, and unforgiving man. During all the years that followed, he'd blamed Riley for her mother's death. It didn't matter that she'd only been six years old.

"You might as well have shot her yourself, for all the good you did her," he'd said.

He'd died last year without ever forgiving her.

Riley wiped her cheek and looked out the window at the slowly crawling landscape miles below.

As she so often did, she realized how much she and Bill had in common, and how haunted they both were by past tragedy and injustice. During all the years that they'd been partners, they'd both been driven by similar demons, haunted by similar ghosts.

For all her worry about Jilly and life at home, Riley now knew that she'd been right to agree to join Bill on this case. Every time they worked together, their bond grew stronger and deeper. This time was going to be no exception.

They'd solve these murders, Riley was sure of it. But what would she and Bill gain or lose by it? *Maybe we'll both heal a little, Riley thought. Or maybe our wounds will open and hurt more.*

She told herself it didn't really matter. They always worked together to get the job done, no matter how tough it was.

Now they could be facing a particularly ugly crime.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When the BAU plane landed at Sea-Tac, the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, a heavy rain was streaking across the windows. Riley looked at her watch. It was about two in the afternoon at home now, but it was eleven in the morning here. That would give them time to get something done on this case today.

As she and Bill moved toward the exit, the pilot came out of his cabin and handed each of them an umbrella.

“You’ll need these,” he said with a grin. “Winter is the worse time to be in this corner of the country.”

When they stood at the top of the stairs, Riley had to agree. She was glad they had umbrellas, but she wished she had dressed warmer. It was cold as well as rainy.

An SUV pulled up at the edge of the tarmac. Two men in raincoats hurried out of the vehicle toward their plane. They introduced themselves as Agents Havens and Trafford of the FBI field office in Seattle.

“We’re taking you to the medical examiner’s office,” Agent Havens said. “The team leader on this investigation is waiting for you there.”

Bill and Riley got into the car, and Agent Trafford started to drive through the drenching rain. Riley could make barely out the usual airport hotels along the way, and that was all. She knew there was a vital city out there, but it was practically invisible.

She wondered if she was ever going to see Seattle while she was here.

*

The minute Riley and Bill sat down in the conference room in Seattle’s medical examiner’s building, she sensed that trouble was brewing. She exchanged glances with Bill, and she could tell that he was feeling the tension too.

Team Leader Maynard Sanderson was a big-chested, big-jawed man with a presence that struck Riley as falling somewhere between a military officer and an evangelical preacher.

Sanderson was glowering at a portly man whose thick walrus mustache gave his face what seemed to be a permanent scowl. He had been introduced as Perry McCade, Seattle’s Chief of Police.

The body language of the two men and the places they had taken at the table spoke volumes to Riley. For whatever reason, the last thing they wanted was to be in the same room together. And she also felt sure that both men especially hated having Riley and Bill here.

She remembered what Brent Meredith had said before they left Quantico.

“Don’t expect a cozy welcome. Neither the cops nor the Feds will be happy to see you.”

Riley wondered what kind of minefield she and Bill had walked into.

A complex power struggle was going on, without a word being spoken. And in just a few minutes, she knew it was going to start getting verbal.

By contrast, Chief Medical Examiner Prisha Shankar looked comfortable and unconcerned. The dark-skinned, black-haired woman was about Riley’s age and appeared to be stoic and imperturbable.

She’s on her own turf, after all, Riley figured.

Agent Sanderson took the liberty of getting the meeting underway.

“Agents Paige and Jeffreys,” he said to Riley and Bill, “I’m pleased that you could make it all the way from Quantico.”

His icy voice told Riley that the opposite was true.

“Glad to be of service,” Bill said, not sounding very sure of himself.

Riley just smiled and nodded.

“Gentlemen,” Sanderson said, ignoring the presence of two women, “we’re all here to investigate two murders. A serial killer might be getting started here in the Seattle area. It’s up to us to stop him before he kills again.”

Police Chief McCade growled audibly.

“Would you like to comment, McCade?” Sanderson asked dryly.

“It’s not a serial,” McCade grumbled. “And it’s not an FBI case. My cops have got this under control.”

Riley was starting to get the picture. She remembered how Meredith had said that the local authorities were floundering with this case. And now she could see why. Nobody was on the same page, and nobody agreed on anything.

Police Chief McCade was angry that the FBI was muscling in on a local murder case. And Sanderson was fuming that the FBI had sent Bill and Riley from Quantico to straighten everybody out.

The perfect storm, Riley thought.

Sanderson turned toward the chief medical examiner and said, “Dr. Shankar, perhaps you’d like to summarize what we currently know.”

Seemingly aloof from the underlying tensions, Dr. Shankar clicked a remote to bring up an image on the wall screen. It was a driver’s license photo of a rather plain-looking woman with straight hair of a dullish brown color.

Shankar said, “A month and a half ago, a woman named Margaret Jewell died at home in her sleep of what appeared to be a heart attack. She’d been complaining the day before of joint pains, but according to her spouse, that wasn’t unusual. She suffered from fibromyalgia.”

Shankar clicked the remote again and brought up another driver’s license photo. It showed a middle-aged man with a kindly but melancholy face.

She said, “A couple of days ago, Cody Woods admitted himself to the South Hill Hospital, complaining of chest pains. He also complained of joint pain, but again that wasn’t surprising. He’d had some arthritis, and he’d had knee replacement surgery a week before. Within hours of being admitted to the hospital, he, too, died of what appeared to be a heart attack.”

“Totally unconnected deaths,” McCade muttered.

“So now are you saying that neither one of these deaths was murder?” Sanderson said.

“Margaret Jewell, probably,” McCade said. “Cody Woods, certainly not. We’re letting him be a distraction. We’re muddying the waters. If you’d just leave it to my boys and me, we’d solve this case in no time.”

“You’ve had a month and a half on the Jewell case,” Sanderson said.

Dr. Shankar smiled rather mysteriously as McCade and Sanderson continued to bicker. Then she clicked the remote again. Two more photos came up.

The room fell quiet, and Riley felt a jolt of surprise.

The men in both photos looked Middle Eastern. Riley didn’t recognize one of them. But she sure did recognize the other.

It was Saddam Hussein.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Riley stared at the image on the wall screen. Where could the chief medical examiner possibly be going with a photo of Saddam Hussein? The deposed leader of Iraq had been executed in 2006 for crimes against humanity. What was his connection with a possible serial killer in Seattle?

After letting the effect of the photos settle in, Dr. Shankar spoke again.

“I’m sure we all recognize the man on the left. The man on the right was Majidi Jihad, a Shia dissident against Saddam’s regime. In May 1980, Jihad was granted permission to travel to London. When he stopped at a Baghdad police station to pick up his passport, he was treated to a glass of orange juice. He left Iraq, apparently safe and sound. He died soon after he got to London.”

Dr. Shankar brought up pictures of many more Middle Eastern faces.

“All of these men met similar fates. Saddam liquidated hundreds of dissidents in much the same way. When some of them were released from prison, they were offered congratulatory drinks to toast their freedom. None of them lived very long.”

Chief McCade nodded with understanding.

“Thallium poisoning,” he said.

“That’s right,” Dr. Shankar said. “Thallium is a chemical element that can be turned into a colorless, odorless, and tasteless soluble powder. It was Saddam Hussein’s poison of choice. But he hardly invented the idea of assassinating his enemies with it. It is sometimes called the ‘poisoner’s poison’ because it acts slowly and produces symptoms that can result in mistaken causes of death.”

She clicked the remote, and a few more faces appeared, including that of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro.

She said, “In 1960, the French secret service used thallium to kill the Cameroon rebel leader Félix-Roland Moumié. And it is widely believed that the CIA tried to use thallium in one of its many failed attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro. The plan was to put thallium powder in Castro’s shoes. If the CIA had succeeded in that particular method, Castro’s death would have been humiliating as well as slow and painful. That iconic beard of his would have fallen out before he died.”

She clicked the remote, and the faces of Margaret Jewell and Cody Woods appeared again.

“I’m telling you all this so that you’ll understand that we’re dealing with a very sophisticated murderer,” Dr. Shankar said. “I found traces of thallium in the bodies of both Margaret Jewell and Cody Woods. There’s no doubt in my mind that they were both poisoned to death by the same killer.”

Dr. Shankar looked around at everybody in the room.

“Any comments so far?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Chief McCade said. “I still don’t think the deaths are connected.”

Riley was startled by the comment. But Dr. Shankar didn’t look surprised.

“Why not, Chief McCade?” she asked.

“Cody Woods was a plumber,” McCade said. “Wouldn’t it have been possible for him to have been exposed to thallium as an occupational hazard?”

“It’s possible,” Dr. Shankar said. “Plumbers have to be careful to avoid lots of hazardous substances, including asbestos and heavy metals such as arsenic and thallium. But I don’t think this was what happened in Cody Woods’ case.”

Riley was becoming more and more intrigued.

“Why not?” she asked.

Dr. Shankar clicked the remote, and toxicology reports appeared.

“These killings seem to be thallium poisoning with a difference,” she said. “Neither victim showed certain classic symptoms – hair loss, fever, vomiting, abdominal pain. As I said before, there was some joint pain, but little else. Death came quite suddenly, looking much like an ordinary heart

attack. There was no lingering at all. If my staff hadn't been on their toes, they might not have even noticed that these were cases of thallium poisoning."

Bill seemed to be sharing Riley's fascination.

"So we're dealing with what – designer thallium?" he asked.

"Something like that," Dr. Shankar said. "My staff is still untangling the chemical makeup of the cocktail. But one of the ingredients is definitely potassium ferrocyanide – a chemical that you might be familiar with as the dye Prussian blue. That's strange, because Prussian blue happens to be the only known antidote to thallium poisoning."

Chief McCade's large mustache was twitching.

"That doesn't make sense," he growled. "Why would a poisoner administer an antidote along with the poison?"

Riley hazarded a guess.

"Might it have been to disguise the symptoms of thallium poisoning?"

Dr. Shankar nodded in agreement.

"That's my working theory. The other chemicals we found would have interacted with thallium in a complex way that we don't yet understand. But they probably helped control the nature of the symptoms. Whoever concocted the mixture knew what they were doing. They had a pretty keen knowledge of both pharmacology and chemistry."

Chief McCade was drumming his fingers on the table.

"I don't buy it," he said. "Your results for the second victim must have been skewed by your results for the first. You found what you were looking for."

For the first time, Dr. Shankar's face showed a trace of surprise. Riley, too, was taken aback by the police chief's audacity in questioning Shankar's expertise.

"What makes you say that?" Dr. Shankar asked.

"Because we have a surefire suspect for Margaret Jewell's killing," he said. "She was married to another woman, name of Barbara Bradley – calls herself Barb. The couple's friends and neighbors say the two were having problems, loud fights that woke up the neighbors. Bradley actually has a past record for criminal assault. Folks say she has a hair-trigger temper. She did it. We're all but sure of it."

"Why haven't you brought her in?" Agent Sanderson demanded.

Chief McCade's eyes darted about defensively.

"We've questioned her, at home," he said. "But she's a sly character, and we still haven't got enough evidence to bring her in. We're building a case. It's taking some time."

Agent Sanderson smirked and grunted.

He said, "Well, while you've been building your case, it seems that your 'surefire' suspect has gone right ahead and killed somebody else. You'd better pick up the pace. She might be getting ready to do it again right now."

Chief McCade's face was getting red with anger.

"You're dead wrong," he said. "I'm telling you, Margaret Jewell's killing was an isolated incident. Barb Bradley didn't have any motive to kill Cody Woods, or anybody else as far as we know."

"As far as you know," Sanderson added in a scoffing tone.

Riley could feel the underlying tensions coming to the surface. She hoped the meeting would end without a knockdown, drag-out fight.

Meanwhile, her brain was clicking away, trying to make sense of what little she knew so far.

She asked Chief McCade, "How financially well off were Jewell and Bradley?"

"Not well off at all," he said. "Lower middle-class. In fact, we're thinking that financial strain might have been part of the motive."

"What does Barb Bradley do for a living?"

"She makes deliveries for a linen service," McCade said.

Riley felt a hunch forming in her mind. She thought that a killer who used poison was likely to be a woman. And as a delivery person, this one could have had access to various health facilities. This was definitely someone she'd like to talk to.

"I'd like to have Barb Bradley's home address," she said. "Agent Jeffreys and I should go and interview her."

Chief McCade looked at her as if she were out of her mind.

"I just told you, we've done that already," he said.

Not well enough, apparently, Riley thought.

But she stifled the urge to say so aloud.

Bill put in, "I agree with Agent Paige. We should go check Barb Bradley out for ourselves."

Chief McCade obviously felt insulted.

"I won't allow it," he said.

Riley knew that the FBI team leader, Agent Sanderson, could overrule McCade if he chose to. But when she looked to Sanderson for support, he was staring daggers at her.

Her heart sank. She instantly understood the situation. Although Sanderson and McCade hated each other, they were allies in their resentment of Riley and Bill. As far as both of them were concerned, agents from Quantico had no business being here on their turf. Whether they realized it or not, their egos were more important than the case itself.

How are Bill and I going to get anything done? she wondered.

By contrast, Dr. Shankar seemed as cool and collected as ever.

She said, "I'd like to know why it's such a bad idea for Jeffreys and Paige to interview Barb Bradley."

Riley was surprised at Dr. Shankar's audacity in speaking up. After all, even as the chief medical examiner, she was brazenly overstepping her bounds.

"Because I've got my own investigation going!" McCade said, almost shouting now. "They're liable to make a mess of it!"

Dr. Shankar smiled that inscrutable smile of hers.

"Chief McCade, are you actually questioning the competence of two agents from Quantico?"

Then, turning toward the FBI team leader, she added, "Agent Sanderson, what do you have to say about this?"

McCade and Sanderson both stared at Dr. Shankar in open-mouthed silence.

Riley noticed that Dr. Shankar was smiling at her. Riley couldn't help smiling back at her in admiration. Here in her own building, Shankar knew how to project an authoritative presence. It didn't matter who else thought they were in charge. She was one tough customer.

Chief McCade shook his head with resignation.

"OK," he said. "If you want the address, you've got it."

Agent Sanderson quickly added, "But I want some of my people to go with you."

"That sounds fair," Riley said.

McCade scribbled down the address and handed it to Bill.

Sanderson called the meeting to a close.

"Jesus, did you ever see such a pair of arrogant jerks in your life?" Bill asked as Riley walked with him to their car. "How the hell are we going to get anything done?"

Riley didn't reply. The truth was, she didn't know. She sensed that this case was going to be tough enough without having to deal with local power politics. She and Bill had to get their job done quickly before anyone else died.

CHAPTER NINE

Today her name was Judy Brubaker.

She enjoyed being Judy Brubaker.

People liked Judy Brubaker.

She was moving briskly around the empty bed, straightening sheets and plumping the pillows. As she did so, she smiled at the woman who was sitting in the comfortable armchair.

Judy hadn't decided whether to kill her or not.

Time's running out, Judy thought. *I've got to make up my mind.*

The woman's name was Amanda Somers. Judy found her to be an odd, shy, and mousy little creature. She'd been under Judy's care since yesterday.

Continuing to make up the bed, Judy began to sing.

Far from home,
So far from home —
This little baby's far from home.

Amanda joined in with that small, reedy little voice of hers.

You pine away
From day to day
Too sad to laugh, too sad to play.

Judy was a bit surprised. Amanda Somers hadn't shown any real interest in the lullaby until just now.

"You like that song?" Judy Brubaker asked.

"I suppose so," Amanda said. "It's sad, and I guess it fits my mood."

"Why are you sad? Your treatment's over and you're going home. Most patients are happy to go home."

Amanda sighed and said nothing. She put her hands together in a prayer position. Keeping her fingers together, she moved her palms away from each other. She repeated the movement a couple of times. It was an exercise Judy had taught her to help the healing process after Amanda's carpal tunnel surgery.

"Am I doing this right?" Amanda asked.

"Almost," Judy said, crouching beside her and touching her hands to correct her movements. "You need to keep the fingers elongated, so they bow outward. Remember, your hands are supposed to look like a spider doing pushups on a mirror."

Amanda was doing it correctly now. She smiled, looking rather proud of herself.

"I can really feel it helping," she said. "Thanks."

Judy watched Amanda continue to do the exercise. Judy really hated the short, ugly scar that extended along the lower part of Amanda's right hand.

Unnecessary surgery, Judy thought.

The doctors had taken advantage of Amanda's trust and credulity. She was sure that less drastic treatments would have worked as well or better. A splint maybe, or some corticosteroid injections. Judy had seen too many doctors insist on surgery, whether it was needed or not. It always made her angry.

But today, Judy wasn't upset just with the doctors. She felt impatient with the patient as well. She wasn't sure just why.

Hard to draw out, this one, Judy thought as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

During their whole time together, Amanda had let Judy do all the talking.

Judy Brubaker had plenty of interesting things to talk about, of course. Judy wasn't much like the now-vanished Hallie Stillians, who'd had the homey personality of a doting aunt.

Judy Brubaker was at once plainer and more flamboyant, and she usually wore a jogging suit instead of more conventional clothes. She loved to tell stories about her adventures – hang gliding, skydiving, scuba diving, mountain climbing, and the like. She'd hitchhiked across Europe and much of Asia.

Of course, none of those adventures had really happened. But they made for wonderful stories.

Most people liked Judy Brubaker. People who might find Hallie a bit cloying and sugary enjoyed Judy's more plainspoken personality.

Maybe Amanda just doesn't take to Judy, she thought.

For whatever reason, Amanda had told her almost nothing about herself. She was in her forties, but she never said anything about her past. Judy still didn't know what Amanda did for a living, or if she did anything at all. She didn't know whether Amanda had ever been married – although the absence of a wedding band indicated that she wasn't married now.

Judy was dismayed by how things were going. And time really was running out. Amanda could get up and leave at any moment. And here Judy was, still trying to decide whether to poison her or not.

Part of her indecision was simple prudence. Things had changed a lot during the last few days. Her last two killings were now in the papers. It seemed that some smart medical examiner had detected thallium in the corpses. It was a worrisome development.

She had a teabag ready with an altered recipe that used a little more arsenic and a little less thallium. But detection was still a danger. She had no idea whether the deaths of Margaret Jewell and Cody Woods had been traced back to their rehab stays or to their caregivers. This method of killing was becoming riskier.

But the real problem was that the whole thing just didn't feel right.

She had no rapport with Amanda Somers.

She didn't feel like she even knew her.

Offering to "toast" Amanda's departure with a cup of tea would feel forced, even vulgar.

Anyway, the woman was still here, exercising her hands, showing no inclination to go away just yet.

"Don't you want to go home?" Judy asked.

The woman sighed.

"Well, you know, I've got other physical problems. There's my back, for instance. It's getting worse as I get older. My doctor says I need an operation for it. But I don't know. I keep thinking that maybe therapy is all I need to get better. And you're such a good therapist."

"Thank you," Judy said. "But you know, I don't work here full time. I'm a freelancer, and today's my last day here for the time being. If you stay here any longer, it won't be under my care."

Judy was startled by Amanda's wistful gaze. Amanda had seldom made eye contact like this with her before.

"You don't know what it's like," Amanda said.

"What what's like?" Judy asked.

Amanda shrugged a little, still looking into Judy's eyes.

"Being surrounded by people you can't fully trust. People who seem to care about you, and maybe they do, but then again, maybe they don't. Maybe they just want something from you. Users. Takers. A lot of people in my life are like that. I don't have any family, and I don't know who my friends are. I don't know who I can trust and who I can't."

With a slight smile, Amanda added, "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Judy wasn't sure. Amanda was still speaking in riddles.

Does she have a crush on me? Judy wondered.

It wasn't impossible. Judy was aware that people often thought she was gay. That always amused her, because she'd never really given any thought to whether Judy was gay or not.

But maybe it wasn't that.

Maybe Amanda was simply lonely, and she'd come to like and trust Judy without her even realizing it.

One thing seemed certain. Amanda was emotionally very insecure, probably neurotic, certainly depressive. She must be taking quite an array of prescription medicines. If Judy could get a look at them, she might be able to come up with a cocktail especially for Amanda. She'd done that before, and it had its advantages, especially at a time like now. It would be good to skip the thallium recipe this once.

"Where do you live?" Judy asked.

An odd look crossed Amanda's face, as if she were trying to decide what to tell Judy.

"On a houseboat," Amanda said.

"A houseboat? Really?"

Amanda nodded. Judy's interest was piqued. But why did she have the feeling that Amanda wasn't telling her the truth – or at least not the whole truth?

"Funny," Judy said. "I've lived in Seattle off and on for years, and there are so many houseboats in the waterways in these parts, but I've never actually been on one. One of the few adventures I haven't had."

Amanda's smile brightened and she didn't say anything. That inscrutable smile was starting to make Judy nervous. Was Amanda going to invite her to visit her on her houseboat? Did she even really *have* a houseboat?

"Do you do at-home visits for your clients?" Amanda asked.

"I do sometimes, but ..."

"But what?"

"Well, I'm not supposed to in situations like this. This rehab center would consider it poaching. I signed an agreement not to."

Amanda's smile turned a little bit mischievous.

"Well, what would be wrong with your paying me a simple *social* visit? Just stop by. See my place. We could chat. Spend some time together. See where things go. And then, if I decided to hire you ... well, that would be different, wouldn't it? Not poaching at all."

Judy smiled. She was starting to appreciate Amanda's cleverness. What she was suggesting would still be bending the rules, if not breaking them outright. But who would ever know? And it certainly suited Judy's purposes. She'd have all the time she needed.

And the truth was, Amanda was starting to fascinate her.

It would be exciting to get to know her before she killed her.

"That sounds marvelous," Judy said.

"Good," Amanda chirped, not sounding the least bit sad anymore.

She reached into her purse, took out a pencil and notepad, jotted down her address and phone number.

Judy took the note and asked, "Do you want to make an appointment?"

"Oh, let's not get all regimented about it. Sometime soon would be fine. During the next day or two. But don't stop by unexpected. Call me first. That's important."

Judy wondered why that was so important.

She's certainly got a secret or two, Judy thought.

Amanda got up and put on her coat.

"I'll check myself out now. But remember. *Call me.*"

"I'll do that," Judy said.

Amanda walked out of the room into the hall, singing some more of the lullaby, her voice sounding happier and surer now.

No need to weep,
Dream long and deep.
Give yourself to slumber's sweep.

As Amanda's voice vanished down the hall, Amanda sang the rest of it quietly to herself.

No more sighs,
Just close your eyes
And you will go home in your sleep.

Things were going Judy's way after all.
And this killing was going to be special.

CHAPTER TEN

Riley tried to ignore the tensions inside the FBI vehicle as she and Bill headed out to interview the wife of a poison victim. She thought that Barb Bradley could be a viable suspect. The fact that she delivered linens struck her as possibly significant. If the woman made medical deliveries, maybe she'd also had access to Cody Woods, who had admitted himself to a hospital and died there.

It was obvious that nobody in Seattle law enforcement was happy with the presence of two agents from Quantico. But then, none of those working on this case seemed happy with each other either.

Maybe the local animosity is catching, Riley thought. She had already found herself annoyed with both of the agents that Sanderson assigned to work with them. She told herself it was an irrational feeling, but her dislike persisted.

In spite of all that, it was good that she and Bill were going to interview Barb Bradley right away. *Are we going to really get lucky and solve this thing today?* she wondered.

She knew better than to get her hopes up. Breaks like that were few and far between. It was more likely that progress was going to be slow and tough, especially due to all the infighting and power plays in the air.

The rain had ended and the air was starting to clear.

At least, Riley thought, *that could help make the trip more pleasant.*

Agent Jay Wingert was driving, and Riley and Bill were sitting in the back seat.

Wingert had the physique and good looks of a male fashion model – and the same complete lack of personality. Riley couldn't imagine that there was a single thought in that well-formed head with its perfectly groomed hair.

Agent Lloyd Havens was sitting in the passenger seat. Lean and wiry, he sported a pretentious pseudo-military posture and spoke in short, abrupt sentences. A chronic sneer didn't add to his charm as far as Riley was concerned.

Havens turned toward Bill and Riley.

"I thought you guys were here in an advisory capacity," he said. "To help develop a profile. Not to actually investigate the case. Agent Wingert and I are the team on this."

Riley heard Bill grumble and hurried to get in a reply first.

"Interviewing a suspect can help us develop a profile," she said. "We need as much information as we can pull together."

"Seems like overkill, the four of us interviewing Bradley," he said. "Might spook the suspect."

Riley was surprised to hear him say so. After all, Sanderson had insisted upon sending all four of them. But she couldn't disagree. Four was definitely going to be a crowd.

"Agent Paige, Agent Jeffreys," Havens added in that clipped, official-sounding manner of his. "No need to trouble yourselves. Agent Wingert and I will do the interview. You can wait in the car."

Riley exchanged shocked glances with Bill. Neither one of them knew what to say.

Is this brat really giving us orders? Riley thought.

Then it occurred to her that this was Sanderson's idea, and Havens was acting on his instructions. Maybe it was Sanderson's way of making his guests from Quantico feel thoroughly unwelcome.

Havens continued in his brazenly self-assured tone.

"Unusual case for a serial. Poisoning's not at all typical. A lesser-used method. Strangulation is much more common. After that, attack-type weapons – knives, guns, blunt objects, and the like. Up close and personal, that's the usual serial killer for you. This doesn't fit the usual parameters."

He was directing his comments to Riley, as if giving her a lecture on criminology.

A mansplainer if ever there was one, she thought with rising distaste.

And of course, he wasn't saying anything that she and Bill didn't know already.

“Oh, but there are always outliers,” Riley said, fully aware of her own condescending tone. “Agent Jeffreys and I have seen all sorts. Our last serial killer shot people completely at random, purely for the love of killing.”

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