

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #9

ONCE

STALKED

BLAKE PIERCE

A Riley Paige Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Once Stalked

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When two soldiers are found dead on a huge military base in California, apparently killed by gunshot, military investigators are stumped. Who is killing its soldiers, inside the secure confines of its own base? And why? The FBI is called in, and Riley Paige is summoned to take the lead. As Riley finds herself immersed in the military culture, she is amazed to realize that serial killers can strike even here, in the midst of the most secure location on earth. She finds herself in a frantic cat and mouse chase, racing to decode the killer's psychology. Yet she soon discovers she is up against a highly-trained killer, one that may, even for her, be too deadly an opponent.

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Blake Pierce

ONCE STALKED

Blake Pierce

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

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

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PROLOGUE

Colonel Dutch Adams looked at his watch as he strode through Fort Nash Mowat, and saw that the time was 0500 hours on the dot. It was a brisk, dusky April morning in Southern California, and all appeared as it should.

He heard a woman's voice yell out sharply ...

"The garrison commander is present!"

He turned in time to see a training platoon snap to attention at the female drill sergeant's command. Col. Adams paused to return their salute and continued on his way. He walked a little faster than before, hoping not to attract the attention of other drill sergeants. He didn't want to interrupt more training platoons as they gathered in their formation areas.

His face twitched a little. After all these years, he still wasn't quite used to hearing female voices snapping out commands. Even the sight of mixed-gender platoons sometimes startled him a little. The Army had definitely changed since his own days as a teenaged recruit. He didn't like many of those changes.

As he continued on his way, he heard the barking voices of other drill sergeants, both male and female, calling their platoons into formation.

They don't have much punch anymore, he thought.

He could never forget the abuse spewed by his own drill sergeant so many years ago – the savage invectives against family and ancestry, the insults and obscenities.

He smiled a little. That bastard Sergeant Driscoll!

Driscoll died many years ago, Col. Adams recalled – not in combat as he'd surely have preferred, but of a stroke brought on by hypertension. In those days, sky high blood pressure had been an occupational hazard of drill sergeants.

Col. Adams would never forget Driscoll, and as far as Adams was concerned, that was how things should be. A drill sergeant ought to make an indelible imprint on a soldier's mind for the rest of his life. He ought to present a living example of the worst kind of hell a soldier's life had to offer. Sergeant Driscoll had definitely had that kind of lifelong impact on Col. Adams. Were the trainers under his command here at Fort Nash Mowat likely to leave that kind of impression on their recruits?

Col. Adams doubted it.

Too damn much political correctness, he thought.

Softness was now even written into the Army's training manual ...

"Stress created by physical or verbal abuse is non-productive and prohibited."

He scoffed as he thought of the words.

"What a load of crap," he murmured under his breath.

But the Army had been moving in this direction since the 1990s. He knew he ought to be used to it by now. But he never would be.

Anyway, he wouldn't have to deal with it much longer. He was a year away from retirement, and his final ambition was to make brigadier general before then.

Suddenly, Adams was distracted from his musings by a puzzling sight.

The recruits of Platoon #6 were milling around aimlessly in their formation area, some doing calisthenics, others just idly talking among themselves.

Col. Adams stopped in his tracks and yelled.

"Soldiers! Where the hell's your sergeant?"

Flustered, the recruits jumped to attention and saluted.

"At ease," Adams said. "Is somebody going to answer my goddamn question?"

A female recruit spoke up.

"We don't know Sergeant Worthing's whereabouts, *sir*."

Adams could hardly believe his ears.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” he demanded.

“He never showed up for formation, *sir*.”

Adams growled under his breath.

This didn’t sound like Sergeant Clifford Worthing at all. In fact, Worthing was one of the few drill sergeants that Adams had any real use for. He was a real hard-ass of the old school – or at least he wanted to be. He often came to Adams’s office to complain about how the rules reined him in.

Even so, Adams knew that Worthing bent the rules as much as he could. Sometimes the recruits complained about his rigorous demands and verbal abuse. Those complaints pleased Adams.

But where was Worthing right now?

Adams waded among the recruits into the barracks, passing between the rows of beds until he got to Worthing’s office.

He knocked sharply on the door.

“Worthing, are you in there?”

No one replied.

“Worthing, this is your CO, and if you’re in there, you’d damn sure better answer me.”

Again no one replied.

Adams turned the doorknob and pushed the door open.

The office was immaculately neat – and no one was there.

Where the hell did he go? Adams wondered.

Did Worthing even show up on the base at all this morning?

Then Adams noticed the NO SMOKING sign on the office wall.

He remembered that Sergeant Worthing was a smoker.

Had the drill instructor just stepped out for a smoke?

“Naw, it can’t be,” Adams grumbled aloud.

It didn’t make sense.

Even so, Adams stepped out of the office and headed for the back door of the barracks.

He opened the door and stood staring into the early morning light.

He didn’t have to look long or hard.

Sergeant Worthing was crouched with his back against the barracks wall, a burned-out cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“Worthing, what the hell ...?” Adams snarled.

Then he recoiled at what he saw.

At Adams’s eye level was a large dark wet blotch on the wall.

From that blotch, a continuous smear trailed down to where Worthing was crouched.

Then Adams saw the dark hole in the middle of Worthing’s head.

It was a bullet wound.

The entry wound was tiny, but the exit wound had taken off much of the back of Worthing’s skull. The man had been shot dead, standing there smoking an early morning cigarette. The shot had been so clean that the drill sergeant had died instantly. Even the cigarette had remained in his mouth undisturbed.

“Jesus Christ,” Adams murmured. “Not again.”

He looked all around. A large empty field stretched out behind the barracks. The shot had been fired from some great distance. That meant it had been fired by a skilled marksman.

Adams shook his head with disbelief.

His life, he knew, was about to become complicated – and extremely aggravating.

CHAPTER ONE

Riley Paige stood looking out an open window of her townhouse. It was a lovely spring day, one of those storybook days with birds singing and flowers blooming. The air smelled fresh and clean. And yet a lurking darkness kept tugging at her.

She had the strange feeling that all this beauty was somehow terribly fragile.

That's why she kept her hands hanging at her sides, as if she were in a shop full of delicate china, and a single wrong move might break something lovely and expensive. Or maybe it was as if this perfect afternoon were just a paper-thin illusion that would fall away at the touch of a hand only to reveal ...

What? Riley wondered.

The darkness of a world full of pain and terror and evil?

Or the darkness that lurked inside her own mind – the darkness of too many ugly thoughts and secrets?

A girlish voice interrupted Riley's musings.

"What are you thinking about, Mom?"

Riley turned around. She realized that she'd momentarily forgotten the other people in her living room.

The girl who had spoken was Jilly, the skinny thirteen-year-old Riley was in the process of trying to adopt.

"Nothing," Riley said in reply.

Her handsome former neighbor Blaine Hildreth smiled at her.

"You certainly seemed to be far away," he said.

Blaine had just arrived at Riley's home with his teenaged daughter, Crystal.

Riley said, "I guess I was just wondering where April is."

It was a matter of some concern. Riley's fifteen-year-old daughter hadn't come home from school yet. Didn't April know that they had plans to go to Blaine's restaurant for dinner shortly?

Crystal and Jilly grinned at each other mischievously.

"Oh, she'll be here soon," Jilly said.

"Any minute now, I'll bet," Crystal added.

Riley wondered what the girls knew that she didn't know. She hoped April wasn't in some sort of trouble. April had gone through a rebellious phase and had endured a lot of trauma a few months ago. But she seemed to be doing much better now.

Then Riley looked at the others and realized something.

"Blaine, Crystal – I haven't asked if you wanted something to drink. I have some ginger ale. And bourbon if you'd like that, Blaine."

"Ginger ale would be nice, thank you," Blaine said.

"For me too, please," Crystal said.

Jilly started to get up from her chair.

"I'll go get some," Jilly said.

"Oh, no, you don't need to," Riley said. "I'll get it."

Riley headed straight to the kitchen, rather pleased to have something like this to do. Serving refreshments would normally be the job of Gabriela, Riley's live-in Guatemalan housekeeper. But Gabriela had the day off and was visiting friends. Gabriela sometimes made Riley feel spoiled, and it was nice to be able to fetch drinks for a change. It also kept Riley's mind focused on the pleasant present.

She poured glasses of ginger ale for Crystal and Blaine, and also for herself and Jilly.

As she carried the tray with the drinks back into the living room, Riley heard the front door open. Then she heard April's voice talking to someone she'd brought in with her.

Riley was handing out the drinks when April came in, followed by a boy about April's age. She looked surprised to see Blaine and Crystal.

"Oh!" April said with a gasp. "I didn't expect –"

Then April reddened with embarrassment.

"Omgod, I completely forgot! We were going out tonight! I'm so sorry!"

Jilly and Crystal were giggling. Now Riley understood the reason for their amusement. They knew already that April had a new boyfriend, and that she'd probably forgotten all about dinner because she was so preoccupied with him.

I remember what that was like, Riley thought, wistfully remembering her own adolescent crushes.

Pleased that April had brought him over to introduce him, Riley eyed the boy quickly. She immediately liked what she saw. Like April, he was tall, gangly, and rather awkward looking. He had bright red hair, freckles, sparkling blue eyes, and a goofy, amiable smile.

April said, "Mom, this is Liam Schweppe. Liam, this is my mom."

Liam offered Riley his hand to shake.

"Very pleased to meet you, Ms. Paige," he said.

His voice had an amusing teenaged-boy squawk to it that made Riley smile.

"You can call me Riley," she said.

April said, "Mom, Liam's –"

April stopped short, apparently not ready to say "my new boyfriend."

Instead she said, "He's captain of the high school chess team."

Riley's amusement was growing by the minute.

"So you're teaching April to play chess, I take it," she said.

"I'm trying," Liam said.

Riley couldn't help but chuckle a little. She was a pretty good chess player herself, and for years she'd been trying to get April interested in the game. But April had always rolled her eyes at the idea and considered chess to be perfectly uncool – a "mom thing" that couldn't possibly interest her.

Her attitude seemed to have changed now that a cute boy was involved.

Riley invited Liam to come and sit down with the others.

She told him, "I'd offer you something to drink, but we're all just getting ready to head out to dinner."

"The dinner that April forgot about," Liam said, his grin widening a little.

"That's right," Riley said. "Why don't you come too?"

April's blush deepened.

"Oh, Mom ..." she began.

"Oh, Mom' what?" Riley said.

"I'm sure Liam's got other plans," April said.

Riley laughed. She was obviously getting into "uncool mom" territory again. It seemed that April was ready to introduce Liam to her, but a family dinner was rushing things as far as she was concerned.

"What do you think, Liam?" Riley asked.

"Sounds great, thanks," Liam said. "Where are we going?"

"Blaine's Grill," Riley said.

Liam's eyes lit up with excitement.

"Oh, wow! I've heard great things about that place!"

It was Blaine Hildreth's turn to grin.

"Thanks," he said to Liam. "I'm Blaine. I own the restaurant."

Liam laughed.

"Cooler and cooler!" he said.

“Come on, let’s all get going,” Riley said.

*

A little while later, Riley was enjoying a delicious dinner with April, Jilly, Blaine, Crystal, and Liam. They were all sitting on the patio at Blaine’s Grill, enjoying the lovely weather as well as the wonderful food.

Riley was talking about chess with Liam, discussing middle-game planning tactics. She was impressed by his knowledge of the game. She wondered how well she’d do in a game against him. She guessed that she’d probably lose. She was a good player, but he was already the captain of a high school chess team and he was still a sophomore. Besides, she’d had few opportunities to play the game lately.

He must be really good, she figured.

The thought pleased her a lot. Riley knew that April was brighter than she realized, and it was good that she had a boyfriend who challenged her.

As she and Liam talked, Riley found herself wondering just where this thing between him and April was going. There were just two months left of the school year. Would they part ways and lose interest in each other? Riley hoped not.

“What are you doing this summer, Liam?” Riley asked.

“Going to chess camp,” Liam said. “Actually, I’m going to be a junior coach. I’ve been trying to talk April into coming too.”

Riley glanced over at April.

“Why don’t you go, April?” she asked.

April blushed again.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I was thinking about soccer camp. That might be more my speed. I’d probably be in way over my head at chess camp.”

“Oh, no, you won’t be!” Liam said. “There will be players from all levels – including some who are just starting to learn the game, like you. And it’s right here in Fredericksburg, so you wouldn’t have to leave home.”

“I’ll think about it,” April said. “Right now I just want to focus on my grades.”

Riley was glad Liam didn’t seem to be distracting April from school. Still, Riley wished she’d consider going to the chess camp. But she knew she’d better not push it. That might turn it into another “uncool mom thing.” It was best to leave it up to Liam to persuade her if he could.

Anyway, Riley was pleased to see April look so happy. Dark-haired with hazel eyes like Riley’s own, sometimes April looked astonishingly grown up. Riley remembered that she’d chosen April’s name because it was her own favorite month. And it was her favorite month because of days just like this.

Blaine looked up from his meal at Riley.

He said, “So tell us about this award you’re going to get tomorrow, Riley.”

It was Riley’s turn to blush a little.

“It’s no big deal,” she said.

Jilly let out a squeal of protest.

“It is so a big deal!” Jilly said. “It’s called the Award of Perseverance, and she’s getting it because of that cold case she just solved. The boss of the whole FBI is going to give it to her.”

Blaine’s eyes widened.

“You mean Director Milner himself?” he said.

Riley was feeling truly awkward and self-conscious now.

She laughed nervously.

“That’s not as impressive as it sounds,” she said. “It’s not a big trip for him to come to Quantico. He works right over in DC, you know.”

Blaine’s mouth dropped open with amazement.

Jilly said, “Blaine, April and I are getting out of school to see her get it. You and Crystal ought to come too.”

Blaine and Crystal both said they’d love to come.

“OK, then,” Riley said, still feeling embarrassed. “I hope it doesn’t bore you. Anyway, that’s not the biggest event tomorrow. Jilly’s the star of the school play tomorrow night. That’s a much bigger deal.”

Now Jilly was blushing.

“I’m not the *star*, Mom,” she said.

Riley laughed at Jilly’s sudden coyness.

“Well, you’re playing one of the title roles. You’re Persephone in a play called *Demeter and Persephone*. Why don’t you tell us the story?”

Jilly started telling the story of the Greek myth – shyly at first, but getting more enthusiastic about it as she continued. Riley felt more and more pleased. One of her girls was learning to play chess; the other was excited about Greek mythology.

Maybe things are looking up, she thought.

Her efforts at marriage and family had been troubled at best. Recently she’d made a bad mistake, trying to let her ex-husband, Ryan, back into the girls’ lives and her own. Ryan had proved to be as incapable of commitment as ever.

But now?

Riley looked over at Blaine, and realized that he was already looking at her. He was smiling, and she smiled back. There was definitely a spark between them. They’d even danced and kissed during a date last month – their only one-on-one date so far. But Riley cringed a little inside as she remembered how awkwardly it had ended – with her running off to work on a case.

Blaine seemed to have forgiven her.

But where were things going between them?

Again, that lurking darkness welled up inside Riley.

Sooner or later, this happy illusion of family and friendship could give way to the reality of evil – to murder and cruelty and human monsters.

And she had a feeling, deep inside, that it was going to happen very soon.

CHAPTER TWO

Sitting in the front row of the auditorium at Quantico, Riley felt terribly ill at ease. She'd faced down countless vicious killers without losing her composure. But right now, she felt on the verge of outright panic.

FBI Director Gavin Milner stood at the podium at the front of the big room. He was speaking of Riley's long career – especially the case that she was being honored for, the cold case of the so-called “Matchbook Killer.”

Riley was struck by the distinguished baritone purr of his voice. She'd rarely spoken with Director Milner, but she liked him. He was a slight, dapper little man with a flawlessly neat mustache. Riley thought he looked and sounded more like a dean of some fine arts school than the head of the nation's most elite law enforcement organization.

Riley hadn't been listening to his actual words very well. She was much too nervous and self-conscious as it was. But now that he seemed to be nearing the end of his speech, Riley paid more attention.

Milner said, “We all know of Special Agent Riley Paige's courage, intelligence, and grace under pressure. She's been honored for all these qualities in the past. But we are here today to honor her for something different – her long-term tenacity, her determination not to leave justice undone. Because of her efforts, a killer who claimed three victims twenty-five years ago faces justice at last. We all owe her a debt of gratitude for her service – and for her example.”

He smiled, looking straight at her. He picked up the box with the award in it.

That's my cue, Riley thought.

Her legs felt wobbly as she got up from her chair and made her way up onto the stage.

She stepped to the side of the podium and Milner hung the Medal of Perseverance by a ribbon around her neck.

It felt surprisingly heavy.

Strange, Riley thought. *The others didn't feel like this.*

She'd received three other such awards over the years – the Shield of Bravery, and Medals of Valor and Meritorious Achievement.

But this one felt heavier – and different.

It felt almost wrong somehow.

Riley wasn't sure just why.

FBI Director Gavin Milner patted Riley on the shoulder and chuckled a little.

He said to Riley in a near-whisper ...

“Something to add to your collection, eh?”

Riley laughed nervously and shook the director's hand.

The people in the auditorium burst into a round of applause.

Again with a chuckle and in a near-whisper, Director Milner said, “It's time to face your public.”

Riley turned around and was rather overcome by what she saw.

There were more people in the auditorium than she'd realized. And every face was familiar – a friend, a family member, a colleague, or someone she'd helped or saved in the line of duty.

They were all on their feet, smiling and clapping.

Riley's throat caught, and tears formed in her eyes.

They all believe in me so much.

She felt grateful and humble – but she also felt a spasm of guilt.

What would these same people think of her if they knew all of her darkest secrets?

They knew nothing about her current relationship with a savage but brilliant killer who had escaped from Sing Sing. They certainly didn't suspect that the criminal had helped her solve several

cases. And they couldn't possibly know how hopelessly entwined Riley's own life was with Shane Hatcher's.

Riley almost shuddered at the thought.

No wonder this medal felt heavier than the others.

No, I don't deserve this, Riley thought.

But what was she going to do – turn around and give it back to Director Milner?

Instead, she managed to smile and utter a few words of appreciation. Then she stepped carefully down off the stage.

*

A few moments later, Riley was in a large, crowded room that had been set up with refreshments. It looked like most of the people who had been in the auditorium were here. She was the center of a swirl of activity as everyone took turns congratulating her. She was grateful for the stabilizing presence of Director Milner, who stood right beside her.

In the first wave of well-wishers were colleagues – fellow field agents, specialists, administrators, and office workers.

Most of them were visibly happy for her. For example, Sam Flores, the nerdish head of the Quantico technical analysis team, gave her a silent thumbs-up and a thoroughly sincere smile and moved on.

But Riley also had her share of enemies, and they were here as well. The youngest was Emily Creighton, a fairly inexperienced agent who fancied herself to be Riley's rival. Riley had called her out on a rookie mistake a few months back, and Creighton had resented her ever since.

When it came Creighton's turn to congratulate Riley, the younger agent forced a smile through her clenched teeth, shook her hand, mumbled "Congratulations," and wandered away.

A few more colleagues came and went before Special Agent in Charge Carl Walder stepped toward Riley. Babyish both in appearance and behavior, Walder was Riley's idea of the ultimate bureaucrat. She was always at odds with him, and he with her. In fact, he'd suspended and even fired her on a few occasions.

But right now Riley was amused by his expression of cringing goodwill toward her. With Director Milner standing beside her, Walder didn't dare show anything but feigned respect.

His hand was damp and cold as he shook hers, and she noticed beads of sweat on his forehead.

"A well-deserved honor, Agent Paige," he said in a shaky voice. "We are honored to have you on the force."

Then Walder shook hands with the FBI director.

"So good of you to join us, Director Milner," Walder said.

"My pleasure," Director Milner said.

Riley watched the director's face. Did she notice a slight smirk as he nodded at Walder? She couldn't be sure. But she knew that Walder didn't command a whole lot of respect in the Bureau, neither by his subordinates nor by his superiors.

After the last of her Quantico colleagues congratulated her, the next wave of well-wishers stirred up powerful emotions for Riley. They were people she'd met in the line of duty – family members of murder victims, or people she'd saved from becoming victims. Riley hadn't expected them to be here, especially not so many of them.

The first was a frail, elderly man that she'd rescued from an insane poisoner last January. He took hold of Riley's hand with both of his and tearfully said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," over and over again.

Riley couldn't help but cry herself.

Then came Lester and Eunice Pennington and their teenaged daughter, Tiffany. In February, Tiffany's older sister, Lois, had been murdered by a sick young man. Riley hadn't seen the Penningtons since she'd solved their case. Riley could hardly believe they were here. She remembered them as distraught and grief-stricken. But they were smiling through their tears, happy for Riley and grateful for the justice she had given them.

As Riley exchanged emotional handclasps with them, she wondered how much more of this she could take without fleeing the room in tears.

Finally came Paula Steen, the elderly mother of a girl who had been killed twenty-five years ago in the case that Riley was being honored for today.

Riley felt truly overwhelmed now.

She and Paula had been in touch for many years now, talking by phone on every anniversary of her daughter's death.

Paula's presence here today took Riley completely off guard.

She clasped Paula's hands, trying not to break down uncontrollably.

"Paula, thank you for coming," she managed to stammer through her tears. "I hope we can still stay in touch."

Paula's smile was radiant, and she wasn't crying at all.

"Oh, I'll keep calling once a year as always, I promise," Paula said. "As long as I'm still in this world, anyway. Now that you've caught Tilda's killer, I feel ready to move on – to join her and my husband. They've been waiting for me for a long time. Thank you so much."

Riley felt a sudden pain deep inside.

Paula was thanking her for the peace she now felt – thanking her for allowing her to die at long last.

It was too much for Riley to process.

She simply couldn't speak.

Instead, she clumsily kissed Paula on the cheek, and the elderly woman walked away.

People were leaving now, and the room was markedly less crowded.

But the ones who most mattered to her were still here. Blaine, Crystal, Jilly, April, and Gabriela had stood nearby watching her this whole time. Riley felt especially good about the look of pride on Gabriela's face.

She also saw that the girls were smiling, while Blaine's expression was one of awed admiration. Riley hoped that this whole ceremony didn't intimidate him or scare him off.

Coming toward her were three people whose faces she was especially happy to see. One was her longtime partner, Bill Jeffreys. Standing right beside him was Lucy Vargas, an eager and promising young agent who looked up to Riley as a mentor. Next to her was Jake Crivaro.

Riley was surprised to see Jake. He'd been her partner years ago and had long since retired. He'd come out of retirement just to help her on the Matchbook Killer case, which had haunted him for years.

"Jake!" Riley said. "What are you doing here?"

The short, barrel-chested man let out a raspy laugh.

"Hey, what kind of welcome is that?"

Riley laughed a little too and hugged him.

"You know what I meant," she said.

After all, Jake had headed back to his apartment in Florida as soon as the case was over. She was glad he was back, even if it was a lot sooner than she'd expected.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," Jake said.

Riley felt a renewed wave of guilt as she hugged Bill.

"Bill, Jake – this isn't fair."

"What isn't fair?" Bill asked.

“My getting this award. You two did as much work as I did.”

Lucy took her turn to hug Riley.

“Sure, it’s fair,” Lucy said. “Director Milner mentioned them. He gave them credit too.”

Bill nodded and said, “And we wouldn’t have done anything at all if you weren’t so damned stubborn about reopening the case.”

Riley smiled. It was true, of course. She’d reopened the case when nobody else had thought it was possible to solve.

Suddenly she felt a new wave of confusion over what had just happened.

She looked around and said to Bill, Jake, and Lucy, “All these people – how did they know about this?”

Lucy said, “Well, it was in the news, of course.”

That was true, but it didn’t explain things as far as Riley was concerned. Her award had been announced in tiny news items that scarcely anyone would have noticed unless they were looking for it already.

Then Riley noticed a sly grin on Bill’s face.

He contacted people! Riley realized.

He may not have reached out to every single person from her past, but he’d put the wheels in motion.

She was startled by the contradictory emotions she felt.

Of course she was grateful to Bill for making sure that this day was nothing short of extraordinary.

But to her surprise, she was angry too.

Without seeming to realize it, Bill had set an emotional ambush for her.

Worst of all, he had made her cry.

But she reminded herself that he’d done it out of friendship and respect.

She said to him, “You and I are going to have a little talk about this later.”

Bill smiled and nodded.

“I’m sure we will,” he said.

Riley turned toward her waiting family and friends, but she was stopped in her tracks by her boss, Team Chief Brent Meredith. The big man with black, angular features didn’t appear to be in a celebratory mood.

He said, “Paige, Jeffreys, Vargas – I need to see you in my office right away.”

Without another word, Meredith walked out of the room.

Riley’s heart sank as she headed over to Blaine, Gabriela, and the girls to tell them to wait a little while for her.

She remembered that lurking sense of darkness she had felt over dinner yesterday.

It’s here, she thought.

Some new evil was about to enter her life.

CHAPTER THREE

As Riley followed Bill and Lucy down the hallway toward Chief Meredith's office, she tried to figure out why she felt so unsettled. She couldn't put her finger on just what was troubling her.

She realized that it was partly a sensation she was long since used to – that familiar heightened apprehension she got whenever she was about to get new orders.

But something else was mixed in with that feeling. It didn't feel like fear or foreboding. She'd been on too many jobs in her career to be unduly worried about what was ahead.

It was something she barely recognized.

Is it relief? Riley wondered.

Yes, maybe that was it.

The ceremony and the reception had felt so bizarre and unreal, stirring up conflicting thoughts and waves of emotions.

Heading to Meredith's office was familiar, comfortable ... and it felt like an escape of sorts.

But an escape into what?

Doubtless into a well-known world of cruelty and evil.

Riley felt a shiver go up her spine.

What did it say about her that she was more comfortable with cruelty and evil than she was with celebration and praise?

She didn't want to dwell on that question, and she tried to shake off that anxious feeling as she walked. But she couldn't quite do it.

It seemed that she was feeling less and less comfortable in her own skin these days.

When Riley, Bill, and Lucy reached Meredith's large office, the chief was standing beside his desk.

Someone else was already there – a young African-American woman with short straight hair and large, intense eyes. She stood up at the sight of Riley and her companions.

Meredith said, "Agents Paige, Jeffreys, and Vargas, I'd like you to meet Special Agent Jennifer Roston."

Riley eyed the woman she'd spoken to on the phone right after solving the Matchbook Killer case. Jennifer Roston wasn't tall, but she looked athletic and completely competent. The expression on her face was that of a woman who was secure in her own abilities.

Roston shook hands with each of them.

"I've heard great things about you," Lucy told her.

"You've reset some records at the Academy," Bill said.

Riley had also heard great things about Agent Roston. She already had an amazing reputation and had received some excellent commendations.

"I'm so honored to meet all of you," Roston said with a sincere smile. Then, looking Riley straight in the eye, she added, "Especially you, Agent Paige. It's great to meet you face to face."

Riley felt flattered. She also felt a slight, nagging concern.

As they all made their way to chairs and sat down, Riley wondered what Roston was doing here today. Was Meredith going to put her on an assignment with Riley and her two colleagues?

The thought made Riley a little uneasy. She, Bill, and Lucy had built an excellent rapport, a seamless working relationship. Wouldn't a new addition to their little team disrupt that, at least temporarily?

Meredith answered her question. "I wanted the three of you to meet Agent Roston because I've got her working on the Shane Hatcher case. The bastard has been at large for way too long. Headquarters has decided to make him a priority. It's time to bring him in, and we need fresh eyes assigned to that specific case."

Riley squirmed a little on the inside.

She already knew that Roston was working on the Hatcher case. In fact, that was what they had discussed over the phone. Roston had asked for access to Quantico's computer files about Shane Hatcher, and Riley had given her that access.

But what was going on right now?

Surely Meredith hadn't brought them all together to work on the Hatcher case. She wasn't sure how much Meredith actually knew about her own connections with Hatcher. She would have been arrested if her boss was fully aware that she had let the escaped killer go because he'd helped her out.

She knew perfectly well Hatcher was probably up in the mountains hiding in the cabin she had inherited from her father – staying there with Riley's full knowledge and approval.

How could she possibly even pretend to be trying to bring him to justice?

Bill asked Roston, "How is it going so far?"

Roston smiled.

"Oh, I'm just getting started – I'm only doing research at this point."

Then looking at Riley again, Roston said, "I appreciate the access you gave me to all those files."

"I'm glad to help out," Riley said.

Roston squinted a little at Riley, her expression turning vaguely curious.

"Oh, it's been a great help," she said. "You've put a lot of information together. Even so – I thought there'd be more about Hatcher's financial dealings."

Riley suppressed a shudder as she remembered doing something rash right after that phone call.

Before giving Roston access to the Hatcher files, she'd deleted one called "THOUGHTS" – a file that not only contained Riley's personal thoughts and observations about Hatcher, but also financial information that would likely lead to his capture. Or at least make it possible to cut off his resources.

What a crazy thing to do, Riley thought.

But it was done, and it couldn't be undone even if she wanted to change that.

Riley now felt distinctly uneasy under Roston's inquisitive gaze.

"He's an elusive character," Riley said to Roston.

"Yes, so I take it," Roston said.

Roston's eyes stayed locked on Riley's.

Riley's discomfort grew.

Does she already know something? Riley wondered.

Then Meredith said, "That will be all for now, Agent Roston. I've got another matter to discuss with Paige, Jeffreys, and Vargas."

Roston got up and politely took her leave.

As soon as she was gone, Meredith said, "It looks like we've got a new serial case in Southern California. Someone has murdered three drill sergeants at Fort Nash Mowat. They were shot at long range by a skilled marksman. The most recent victim was killed early this morning."

Riley was intrigued, but also a little surprised.

"Isn't this more of a case for the Army Criminal Investigation Command?" she asked, noting the other name for the Army's Criminal Investigation Division. She knew the CID typically investigated felony crimes that were committed within the US Army.

Meredith nodded.

"The CID is already working on it," he said. "There's a CID office in Fort Mowat, so they're up and running. But as you know, Provost Marshal General Boyle is in charge of the CID. He called me a little while ago to ask the FBI to pitch in. This is looking to be an especially nasty case, with all kinds of negative PR repercussions. There's going to be a lot of bad press and political pressure. The sooner it gets solved, the better for everybody."

Riley wondered if this was a good idea. She'd never heard of the FBI and CID working together on a case. She worried that they might wind up stepping on each other's toes, doing more harm than good.

But she didn't raise any objection. It wasn't up to her.

"So when do we head out?" Bill asked.

"ASAP," Meredith said. "Do you have your go-bags here?"

"No," Riley said. "I'm afraid I wasn't expecting this so soon."

"Then as soon as you can pack your things."

Riley felt a sudden burst of alarm.

Jilly's play is tonight! she thought.

If Riley left right now, she'd miss it.

"Chief Meredith –" she began.

"Yes, Agent Paige?"

Riley stopped short. After all, the FBI had just given her an award and a raise. How could she back out of this now?

Orders are orders, she told herself firmly.

There was nothing she could do.

"Nothing," she said.

"OK, then," Meredith said, rising to his feet. "The three of you get moving. And solve this thing fast. Other cases are waiting."

CHAPTER FOUR

Colonel Dutch Adams stood staring out his office window. He had a good view of Fort Nash Mowat from here. He could even see the field where Sergeant Worthing had been killed only this morning.

“Damn it to hell,” he muttered under his breath.

Less than two weeks ago Sergeant Rolsky had been killed in exactly the same way.

Then a week ago it was Sergeant Fraser.

And now it was Worthing.

Three good drill sergeants.

Such a stupid waste, he thought.

And so far, the agents from the Criminal Investigation Command hadn't been able to crack the case.

Adams stood wondering ...

How the hell did I wind up in charge of this place?

He'd had a good career overall. He wore his medals proudly – the Legion of Merit, three Bronze Stars, Meritorious Service Medals, a Meritorious Unit Commendation, and a hefty batch of others.

He looked back over his life as he stared out the window.

What were his best memories?

Surely his wartime service in Iraq, both in Operation Desert Storm and Operation Enduring Freedom.

What were his worst memories?

Possibly the academic grind of piling up enough degrees to get a commission.

Or maybe standing in front of classrooms giving lectures.

But even those weren't as bad as running this place.

Driving a desk and filing reports and presiding over meetings – all that was the worst of it as far as he was concerned.

Still, at least he'd had the good times.

His career had come at a personal cost, though – three divorces and seven grown children who scarcely spoke to him anymore. He wasn't even sure how many grandchildren he might have.

That was just how it had to be.

The Army had always been his true family.

But now, after all those years, he was feeling estranged even from the Army.

So how was his parting from military service going to feel in the end – like a happy retirement, or just another ugly divorce?

He breathed a bitter sigh.

If he achieved his final ambition, he'd retire as a brigadier general. Even so, he'd be all alone after he retired. But maybe it was just as well.

Maybe he could just quietly disappear – “fade away” like one of Douglas MacArthur's proverbial “old soldiers.”

Or like some wild animal, he thought.

He'd been a hunter all his life, but couldn't remember ever having run across the carcass of a bear or a deer or any other wild animal that had died of natural causes. Other hunters had told him the same thing.

What a mystery that had always been! Where did those wild creatures go to die and rot away?

He wished he knew, so he could go where they did when his time came.

Meanwhile, he had a hankering for a cigarette. It was a hell of a thing, not being able to smoke in his own office.

Just then his desk phone buzzed. It was his secretary in the outer office.

The woman said, “Colonel, I’ve got the provost marshal general on the line. He wants to talk to you.”

Colonel Adams felt a jolt of surprise.

He knew that the provost marshal general was Brigadier General Malcolm Boyle. Adams had never talked to him as far as he could remember.

“What’s it about?” Adams asked.

“The murders, I believe,” the secretary said.

Adams growled under his breath.

Of course, he thought.

The provost marshal general in Washington was in charge of all Army criminal investigations. Doubtless he’d gotten word that the investigation here was lagging.

“OK, I’ll talk to him,” Adams said.

He took the call.

Adams immediately disliked the sound of the man’s voice. It was too soft for his taste, didn’t have the proper bark for a high-ranking officer. Nevertheless, the man vastly outranked Adams. He had to at least feign respect.

Boyle said, “Colonel Adams, I just wanted to give you a heads-up. Three FBI agents from Quantico will be arriving there soon to help with the murder investigation.”

Adams felt a surge of irritation. As far as he was concerned, he already had too many agents working on it. But he managed to keep his voice calm.

“Sir, I’m not sure I understand why. We’ve got our own Criminal Investigation Command office right here at Fort Mowat. They’re on the case.”

Boyle’s voice sounded a little tougher now.

“Adams, you’ve had three murders in less than three weeks. It sure sounds to me like you folks could use a little help.”

Adams’s frustration was growing by the second. But he knew he mustn’t show it.

He said, “Respectfully, sir, I don’t know why you’re calling me with this news. Colonel Dana Larson is the CID commander here at Fort Mowat. Why aren’t you calling her first?”

Boyle’s reply took Adams completely aback.

“Colonel Larson contacted me. She asked for me to call in the BAU to help. So I put in a call and arranged it.”

Adams was aghast.

That bitch, he thought.

Colonel Dana Larson seemed to do everything she could to annoy him at every opportunity.

And what was a woman doing in charge of a CID office anyway?

Adams did his best to swallow down his disgust.

“I understand, sir,” he said.

Then he ended the call.

Colonel Adams was seething now. He banged his fist against his desk. Didn’t he have any say in what went on in this place?

Still, orders were orders, and he had to comply.

But he didn’t have to like it – and he didn’t have to make anybody comfortable.

He growled aloud.

Never mind people getting killed.

Things were going to get very ugly.

CHAPTER FIVE

As she drove Jilly, April, and Gabriela home, Riley couldn't bring herself to tell them she was heading out right away. She was going to miss Jilly's very first major event, a starring role in a play. Would the girls be able to understand that she was under orders?

Even after they all got home, Riley couldn't tell them.

She burned inside with shame.

Today she'd earned a medal for perseverance, and in the past she'd been honored for valor and bravery. And of course, her daughters had been in the audience watching her receive her medal.

But she sure didn't feel like much of a hero.

The girls headed outside to play in the backyard, and Riley went up to her bedroom and started packing her things. It was a familiar routine. The trick was to pack a small bag with enough necessities to last for a couple of days or a month.

While she was laying things out on her bed, she heard Gabriela's voice.

"Señora Riley – what are you doing?"

Riley turned and saw Gabriela standing in the doorway. The housekeeper was holding a stack of clean linen that she was about to put in the hall closet.

Riley stammered, "Gabriela, I've – I've got to go."

Gabriela's mouth dropped open.

"Go? Where?"

"I've been assigned to a new case. In California."

"Can't you go tomorrow?" Gabriela asked.

Riley swallowed hard.

"Gabriela, the FBI plane is waiting right now. I've got to go."

Gabriela shook her head.

She said, "It is good to fight evil, Señora Riley. But sometimes I think you lose sight of what's good."

Gabriela disappeared into the hallway.

Riley sighed. Since when did Riley pay Gabriela to be her conscience?

But she couldn't complain. It was a job that Gabriela was getting to be all too good at.

Riley stood staring at her unfinished packing.

She shook her head and whispered to herself ...

"I can't do this to Jilly. I just can't."

All of her life she had sacrificed her kids for work things. Every time. Not once had she put her kids first.

And that, she realized, was what was wrong with her life. That was a part of her darkness.

She was brave enough to face down a serial killer. But was she brave enough to put work on the back burner and make her kids' lives her number one priority?

At this very moment, Bill and Lucy were getting ready to fly out to California.

They were expecting to meet her at the Quantico airstrip.

Riley sighed miserably.

There was only one way to solve this problem – if she could solve it at all.

She had to try.

She took out her cell phone and dialed Meredith's private number.

At the sound of his gruff voice, she said, "Sir, this is Agent Paige."

"What's the matter?" Meredith asked.

There was a note of concern in his voice. Riley understood why. She had never used this number except in dire circumstances.

She gathered up her nerve and came right to the point.

“Sir, I would like to delay my trip to California. Just for tonight. Agents Jeffreys and Vargas can go ahead of me.”

After a pause, Meredith asked, “What’s your emergency?”

Riley gulped. Meredith wasn’t going to make this easy.

But she was determined not to lie.

In a shaky voice she stammered, “My younger daughter, Jilly – she’s in a school play tonight. She’s – she’s playing the lead.”

The silence that fell was deafening.

Did he just hang up on me? Riley wondered.

Then with a growl Meredith said, “Would you repeat that, please? I’m not sure I heard you correctly.”

Riley stifled a sigh. She was sure that he’d heard her perfectly well.

“Sir, this play is important to her,” she said, growing more nervous by the second. “Jilly’s – well, you know I’m trying to adopt her. She’s had a hard life, and she’s coming out of a very difficult time and her feelings are very delicate and...”

Riley’s voice faded off.

“And what?” Meredith asked.

Riley swallowed hard.

“I can’t disappoint her, sir. Not this once. Not today.”

Another grim silence fell.

Riley was starting to feel more determined.

“Sir, it won’t make any difference in the case,” she said. “Agents Jeffreys and Vargas will go ahead of me, and you know how capable they are. They can get me up to speed when I do get out there.”

“And when would that be?” Meredith asked.

“Tomorrow morning. Early. I’ll head for the airport as soon as the play’s over. I’ll take the first flight I can get.”

After another pause, Riley added, “I’ll go on my own dime.”

She heard Meredith grunt a little.

“You certainly will, Agent Paige,” he said.

Riley gasped and caught her breath.

He’s giving me permission!

She suddenly realized that she’d barely been breathing during the conversation.

It took a lot of effort not to burst out into uncontrolled gales of gratitude.

She knew Meredith wouldn’t like that at all. And the last thing she wanted was for him to change his mind.

So she simply said, “Thank you.”

She heard another grunt.

Then Meredith said, “Tell your daughter to break a leg.”

He ended the call.

Riley breathed a sigh of relief, then glanced up and saw that Gabriela was standing in the doorway again, smiling.

She’d obviously been listening to the whole call.

“I think you are growing up, Señora Riley,” Gabriela said.

*

Sitting in the audience with April and Gabriela, Riley was thoroughly enjoying the school play. She'd forgotten how charming events like this could be.

The middle-school kids were all dressed in makeshift costumes. They had painted flat scenery to look like scenes from the story of Demeter and Persephone – fields full of flowers, a volcano in Sicily, the dank caverns of the Underworld, and other mythical places.

And Jilly's acting was simply wonderful!

She played Persephone, the young daughter of grain goddess Demeter. Riley found herself remembering the familiar story as it unfolded.

Persephone was outside picking flowers one day when Hades, the god of the Underworld, rode by in his chariot and snatched her away. He took her down into the Underworld to be his queen. When Demeter realized what had happened to her daughter, she wailed with sorrow.

Riley felt chills at how convincingly the girl playing Demeter expressed her grief.

At that point, the story started getting to Riley in a way she hadn't expected.

Persephone's story seemed eerily like Jilly's own. After all, it was the story of a girl who lost part of her childhood to forces much greater than herself.

Riley felt herself tearing up.

She knew the rest of the story very well. Persephone would regain her freedom, but only for half of every year. Whenever Persephone was gone, Demeter let the earth grow cold and dead. Whenever she came back, she brought the earth back to life, and springtime came again.

And that was how seasons had come into the world.

Riley squeezed April's hand and whispered, "Here comes the sad part."

Riley was surprised to hear April giggle.

"Not so sad," April whispered back. "Jilly told me they changed the story a little. Just watch."

Riley sat and paid close attention.

Fully in character as Persephone, Jilly cracked Hades over the head with a Grecian urn – actually a pillow in disguise. Then she stormed out of the Underworld and back to her overjoyed mother.

The boy playing Hades threw an enormous tantrum and brought winter to the world. He and Demeter then fought a tug-of-war, changing the seasons from winter to spring and back again, and so on again and again for the rest of time.

Riley was delighted.

When the play ended, Riley led the way backstage to congratulate Jilly. On their way, she ran into the teacher who had directed the play.

"I love what you did with the story!" Riley told the teacher. "It was so refreshing to see Persephone turned from a helpless victim to an independent heroine."

The teacher smiled broadly.

"Don't thank me," she said. "It was Jilly's idea."

Riley rushed over to Jilly and gave her a big hug.

"I'm so proud of you!" Riley said.

"Thanks, Mom," Jilly said, smiling happily.

Mom.

The word echoed through Riley. It meant more to her than she could say.

*

Later that night when they were all at home, Riley finally had to tell the girls she was leaving. She poked her head in Jilly's door.

Jilly was fast asleep, exhausted from her great success. Riley loved the look of contentment on her face.

Then Riley went to April's bedroom and looked in on her. April was sitting up in bed reading a book.

April looked up at her mother.

"Hey, Mom," she said. "What's up?"

Riley stepped quietly into the room.

She said, "This is going to seem weird but ... I've got to leave right now. I've been assigned to a case in California."

April smiled.

She said, "Jilly and I both pretty much guessed that was what your meeting back in Quantico was all about. And then we saw that go-bag on your bed. We actually thought you were going to leave before her play. You usually don't pack it unless you're out the door."

She stared at Riley, her smile widening.

"But then you stayed," she added. "I know you delayed the trip, at least for the play. Do you know how much that meant to us?"

Riley felt herself tear up. She leaned forward and the two of them embraced.

"So it's OK if I go, then?" Riley asked.

"Sure, it's OK. Jilly told me she hoped you'd catch some bad guys. She's really proud of what you do, Mom. So am I."

Riley felt moved beyond words. Both of her daughters were growing up so fast. And they were becoming really amazing young women.

She kissed April on the forehead.

"I love you, dear," she said.

"I love you too," April said.

Riley wagged her finger at April.

"Now what are you doing up?" she said. "Turn off that light and go to sleep. It's a school night."

April giggled and turned off the light. Riley went to her own bedroom to get her bag.

It was after midnight and she had to drive to DC in time for a commercial flight.

It was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER SIX

The wolf lay on his stomach on the rough desert soil.

That's how the man thought of himself – a beast stalking his next kill.

He had an excellent view of Fort Nash Mowat from this high place, and the night air was pleasant and cool. He peered at tonight's prey through the night-vision scope on his rifle.

He thought back to his hated victims.

Three weeks ago it had been Rolsky.

Then came Fraser.

Then came Worthing.

He'd taken them out with great finesse, with shots to the head so clean they surely hadn't even known a bullet had hit them.

Tonight, it would be Barton.

The wolf watched Barton walking along an unlit path. Although the image through the night scope was grainy and monotone, the target was sufficiently visible for his purposes.

But he wouldn't shoot tonight's prey – not yet.

He wasn't far enough away. Someone nearby might be able to figure out his location, even though he had attached a flash hider to his M110 sniper rifle. He wasn't going to make the amateurish mistake of underestimating the soldiers on this base.

Following Barton through his scope, the wolf enjoyed the feel of the M110 in his hands. These days the Army was transitioning toward using the Heckler & Koch G28 as a standard sniper rifle. While the wolf knew the G28 was lighter and more compact, he still preferred the M110. It was more accurate, even if it was longer and harder to conceal.

He had twenty rounds in the magazine, but he only intended to use one when the time came to fire.

He was going to take out Barton with one shot, or not at all.

He could feel the energy of the pack, as though they were watching him, giving him their support.

He watched as Barton finally arrived at his destination – one of the base's outdoor tennis courts. Several other players greeted him as he stepped onto the court and unpacked his tennis gear.

Now that Barton was in the brightly lit area, the wolf had no further need of the night scope. He detached it to use the day optical sight. Then he took aim directly at Barton's head. The image was no longer grainy, but crystal clear and in full, vivid color.

Barton was about three hundred feet away now.

At that range, the wolf could depend upon the rifle's precision down to an inch.

It was up to him to stay within that inch.

And he knew that he would.

Just a slight squeeze of the trigger, he thought.

That was all that was needed now.

The wolf basked in that mysterious, suspended moment.

There was something almost religious about those seconds before pulling the trigger, when he *waited* for himself to will the shot, waited for himself to *decide* to squeeze with his finger. During that moment, life and death seemed strangely out of his hands. The irrevocable move would happen in the fullness of an instant.

It would be his decision – and yet not his decision at all.

Whose decision was it, then?

He fancied that there was an animal, a true wolf, lurking inside him, a remorseless creature that took actual command over that fatal moment and movement.

That animal was both his friend and his enemy. And he loved it with a strange love that he could only feel toward a mortal enemy. That inner animal was what called out the best in him, kept him truly up to the mark.

The wolf lay waiting for that animal to strike.

But the animal didn't.

The wolf didn't pull the trigger.

He wondered why.

Something seems wrong, he thought.

It quickly occurred to him what it was.

The view of the target in the glaring tennis court floodlights through the regular scope was simply too clear.

It would take too little effort.

There was no challenge.

It wouldn't be worthy of a true wolf.

Also, it was too soon after the last killing. The others had been spaced out to stir up anxiety and uncertainty among the men he loathed. Shooting Barton now would disrupt the psychological rhythmic impact of his work.

He smiled a little at the realization. He got to his feet with his gun and started to walk back the way he'd come.

He felt right about leaving his prey undisturbed for now.

No one knew when he'd strike next.

Not even he himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was still dark when Riley's commercial flight took off. But even with the time change, she knew it would be daylight in San Diego when she got there. She was going to be in the air for more than five hours and she was already feeling quite tired. She had to be fully functional tomorrow morning when she joined Bill and Lucy for the investigation. There would be serious work to do, and she needed to be ready for it.

I'd better get some sleep, Riley thought. The woman seated next to her already seemed to be dozing.

Riley tilted her chair back and closed her eyes. But instead of falling asleep, she found herself remembering Jilly's play.

She smiled as she recalled how Jilly's Persephone had bonked Hades over the head and escaped the Underworld to live life on her own terms.

Remembering how she had first found Jilly made Riley's heart ache. It had been night in a truck stop parking lot in Phoenix. Jilly had run away from a miserable home life with an abusive father and climbed into the cab of a parked truck. She had fully intended to sell her body to its driver whenever he came back.

Riley shuddered.

What would have become of Jilly if she hadn't stumbled across her that night?

Friends and colleagues had often told Riley what a good thing she'd done by bringing Jilly into her life.

So why didn't she feel better about it? Instead, she felt pangs of despair.

After all, there were countless Jillys in the world, and very few of them were ever rescued from terrible lives.

Riley couldn't help all of them, any more than she could rid the world of all vicious killers.

It's all so futile, she thought. *Everything I do.*

She opened her eyes and looked out the window. The jet had left the lights of DC behind, and outside there was nothing but impenetrable darkness.

As she peered into the black night, she thought about her meeting that day with Bill, Lucy, and Meredith, and what little she knew about the upcoming case. Meredith had said that the three victims were shot from a long distance by a skilled marksman.

What did that tell her about the killer?

That killing was a sport to him?

Or that he was on some kind of sinister mission?

One thing seemed certain – the killer knew what he was doing, and he was good at it.

The case was definitely going to be a challenge.

Meanwhile, Riley's eyelids were feeling heavy.

Maybe I can get some sleep, she thought. Again she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

*

Riley was staring at what looked like thousands of Rileys, all of them standing at odd angles toward each other, becoming smaller and finally vanishing into the distance.

She turned a little, and so did all the other Rileys.

She lifted her arm, and the others did as well.

Then she reached out, and her hand came in contact with a glass surface.

I'm in a hall of mirrors, Riley realized.

But how had she gotten here? And how was she going to get out?

She heard a voice call out ...

“Riley!”

It was a woman’s voice, and somehow familiar to her.

“I’m here!” Riley called back. “Where are you?”

“I’m here too.”

Suddenly, Riley saw her.

She was standing directly in front of her, in the midst of the multitude of reflections.

She was a slight, attractive young woman, wearing a dress that looked many decades out of style.

Riley immediately knew who it was.

“Mommy!” she said in a stunned whisper.

She was surprised to hear that her own voice was now that of a little girl.

“What are you doing here?” Riley asked.

“I just came to say goodbye,” Mommy said with a smile.

Riley struggled to understand what was happening.

Then she remembered ...

Mommy had been shot to death right before Riley’s eyes in a candy store when Riley was only six years old.

But here Mommy was, looking exactly the same as when Riley had last seen her alive.

“Where are you going, Mommy?” Riley asked. “Why do you have to go?”

Mommy smiled and touched the glass that stood between them.

“I’m at peace now, thanks to you. I can move on now.”

Little by little, Riley started to understand.

Not long ago, she had tracked down her mother’s killer.

He was now a pathetic old vagrant living under a bridge.

Riley had left him there, realizing that his life had been punishment enough for his terrible crime.

Riley reached out and touched the glass that separated her from Mommy’s hand.

“But you can’t go, Mommy,” she said. “I’m just a little girl.”

“Oh, no, you’re not,” Mommy said, her face radiant and blissful. “Just look at yourself.”

Riley looked at her own reflection in the mirror next to Mommy.

It was true.

Riley was a grown woman now.

It seemed strange to realize that she was now much older than her mother had lived to be.

But Riley also looked tired and sad in comparison with her youthful mother.

She’ll never grow any older, Riley thought.

The same was not true for Riley.

And she knew that her world was full of trials and challenges still to be endured.

Was she ever going to get any rest from it? Would she ever be at peace for the rest of her life?

She found herself envying her mother’s timeless, eternally peaceful joy.

Then her mother turned and walked away, disappearing into the infinite tangle of reflections of Riley.

Suddenly there came a terrible crash, and all the mirrors shattered.

Riley was standing in near-total darkness, up to her ankles in broken glass.

She gently pulled her feet out one by one, then tried to make her way through the wreckage.

“Watch your step,” said another familiar voice.

Riley turned and saw a rugged old man with a lined, hard, and weathered face.

Riley gasped.

“Daddy!” she said.

Her father smirked at her surprise.

“You hoped I was dead, didn’t you?” he said. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Riley opened her mouth to contradict him.

But then she realized he was right. She hadn’t grieved when he had died last October.

And she certainly didn’t want him back in her life.

After all, he’d scarcely ever said a kind word to her in all his days.

“Where have you been?” Riley asked.

“Where I’ve been all along,” her father said.

The scene began to change from a vast expanse of broken glass to become the outside of her father’s cabin in the woods.

He was now standing on the front stoop.

“You might need my help on this case,” he said. “It sounds like your killer’s a soldier. I know a lot about soldiers. And I know a lot about killing.”

It was true. Her father had been a captain in Vietnam. She had no idea how many men he’d killed in the line of duty.

But the last thing she wanted was his help.

“It’s time for you to go,” Riley said.

Her father’s smirk twisted into a sneer.

“Oh, no,” he said. “I’m just settling in.”

His face and body changed shape. In a matter of moments, he was younger, stronger, dark-skinned, even more menacing than before.

He was now Shane Hatcher.

The transformation struck Riley with terror.

Her father had always been a cruel presence in her life.

But she was coming to dread Hatcher even more.

Much more than her father ever did, Hatcher had some kind of manipulative power over her.

He could make her do things that she’d never imagined she’d do.

“Go away,” Riley said.

“Oh, no,” Hatcher said. “We’ve got a deal.”

Riley shuddered.

We’ve got a deal, all right, she thought.

Hatcher had helped her find her mother’s killer. In return, she allowed him to live in her father’s old cabin.

Besides, she knew she owed him. He’d helped her solve cases – but he’d done much more.

He’d even saved her daughter’s life along with that of her ex-husband.

Riley opened her mouth to speak, to protest.

But no words came out.

Instead, it was Hatcher who spoke.

“We’re joined at the brain, Riley Paige.”

Riley was awakened by a sharp jolt.

The plane had landed in the San Diego International Airport.

The morning sun was rising beyond the runway.

The pilot spoke over the intercom, announcing their arrival and apologizing for the bumpy landing.

The other passengers were gathering their belongings and preparing to leave.

As Riley groggily got up and pulled down her bag from the overhead luggage compartment, she remembered her disturbing dream.

Riley was hardly superstitious – but even so she couldn’t help but wonder ...

Were the dream and the rough landing somehow portents of things to come?

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was a bright, clear morning by the time Riley got into her rental car and drove out of the airport. The weather really was wonderful, with a temperature in the comfortable sixties. She realized that it would make most people think of enjoying the beach or at least lying beside a pool somewhere.

But Riley felt a lurking apprehension.

She wondered wistfully if she could ever come to California just to enjoy the weather – or go to any other place to relax.

It seemed that evil awaited her wherever she went.

The story of my life, she thought.

She knew she owed it to herself and her family to break out of this pattern – to take some time off and take the girls somewhere just for the sheer joy of it.

But when was that ever going to happen?

She let out a sad, tired sigh.

Maybe never, she thought.

She hadn't gotten much sleep on the plane, and she was feeling the jet lag from the three-hour time difference between here and Virginia.

Nevertheless, she was eager to get started on this new case.

As she headed north on the San Diego Freeway, she passed modern buildings punctuated by palm trees and other greenery. Soon she was out of the city, but the traffic on the multi-laned freeway didn't diminish. The fast-moving procession of closely crowded vehicles wound among rough hills where the early sunlight accentuated a steep, brush landscape.

The scenery notwithstanding, Southern California struck her as less easygoing than she had expected. Like her, everyone in the crush of cars seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere important.

She took an exit marked "Fort Nash Mowat." After a few minutes, she pulled up to the camp gate, showed her badge, and was allowed to enter.

She had messaged ahead to let Bill and Lucy know she was on her way, so they were waiting by a car. Bill introduced the uniformed woman standing with them as Colonel Dana Larson, the commander of the Fort Mowat CID office.

Riley was instantly impressed by Larson. She was a strong, sturdy woman with intense dark eyes. Her handshake immediately conveyed to Riley a feeling of confidence and professionalism.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Agent Paige," Col. Larson said in a crisp, vigorous voice. "Your reputation precedes you."

Riley's eyes widened.

"I'm surprised," she said.

Larson chuckled a little.

"Don't be," she said. "I'm in law enforcement too, and I keep up with everything the BAU does. We're honored to have you here at Fort Mowat."

Riley felt herself blush a little as she thanked Col. Larson.

Larson called to a nearby soldier, who stepped briskly toward her and saluted.

She said, "Corporal Salerno, I want you to drive Agent Paige's car back to the rental station at the airport. She won't be needing it here."

"Yes ma'am," the corporal said, "right away." He got into Riley's car and drove out of the base.

Riley, Bill, and Lucy got into the other car.

As Col. Larson drove, Riley asked, "What have I missed so far?"

"Not much," Bill said. "Col. Larson met us here last night and showed us to our quarters."

"We still haven't met the CO of the base," Lucy added.

Col. Larson told them, "We're on our way to meet Col. Dutch Adams right now."

Then with a chuckle, she added, “Don’t expect a warm welcome. Agents Paige and Vargas, that means you especially.”

Riley wasn’t sure what Larson meant. Was Col. Adams going to be unhappy that the BAU was sending two women? Riley couldn’t imagine why. Everywhere Riley looked, she saw men and women in uniform mixing freely together. And with Col. Larson on the base, surely Adams was used to dealing with a woman in authority.

Col. Larson parked in front of a clean, modern administrative building and led the agents inside. As they approached, three young men jumped to attention and saluted Col. Larson. Riley saw that their CID jackets were similar to the ones worn by FBI field agents.

Col. Larson introduced the three men as Sergeant Matthews and his team members, Special Agents Goodwin and Shores. Then they all entered a conference room, where they were awaited by Col. Dutch Adams himself.

Matthews and his agents saluted Adams, but Col. Larson did not. Riley realized that it was because she was Adams’s equal in rank. She soon found the tension between the two colonels to be palpable, almost painful.

And as predicted, Adams did look distinctly displeased to see Riley and Lucy.

Now Riley was getting the picture.

Col. Dutch Adams was an old-school career officer who wasn’t at all used to having men and women serve together. And judging from his age, Riley felt pretty sure that he wasn’t ever going to get used to it. He would probably retire with his prejudices intact.

She was sure that Adams must especially resent the presence of Col. Larson on his base – a female officer over whom he had no authority.

As the group sat down, Riley felt an eerie chill of familiarity as she studied Adams’s face. It was broad and long, severely sculpted like the faces of many other military officers she’d known during her life – including her father.

In fact, Riley found Col. Adams’s resemblance to her father to be downright disturbing.

He spoke to Riley and her colleagues in an excessively official tone.

“Welcome to Fort Nash Mowat. This base has been in operation since 1942. It extends for seventy-five thousand acres, has fifteen hundred buildings, and three hundred fifty miles of roads. You’ll find about sixty thousand people here on any given day. I’m proud to call it the finest Army training base in the country.”

At that point, Col. Adams seemed to be trying to suppress a sneer. He wasn’t quite succeeding.

He added, “And for that reason, I ask that you not make nuisances of yourselves as long as you’re here. This place runs like a finely tuned machine. Outsiders have an unfortunate tendency to gum up the works. If you do so, I promise that there will be hell to pay. Do I make myself clear?”

He was making eye contact with Riley, obviously trying to intimidate her.

She heard Bill and Lucy say, “Yes, sir.”

But she said nothing.

He’s not my CO, she thought.

She simply held his gaze and nodded.

He then shifted his eyes to the others in the room. He spoke again with cold anger in his voice.

“Three good men are dead. The situation at Fort Mowat is unacceptable. Fix it. Immediately. Preferably sooner.”

He paused for a moment. Then he said, “There will be a funeral for Sergeant Clifford Worthing at eleven hundred hours. I expect all of you to be in attendance.”

Without another word, he got up from his chair. The CID agents stood and saluted, and Col. Adams left the room.

Riley was dumbfounded. Hadn’t they all come here to discuss the case and what to do next?

Obviously noticing Riley’s surprise, Col. Larson grinned at her.

“He’s not normally so talkative,” she said. “Maybe he likes you.”
Everybody laughed at her bit of sarcasm.
Riley knew that a little humor was a good thing right now.
Things were going to get plenty grim soon enough.

CHAPTER NINE

The laughter subsided, and Larson was still looking at Riley, Bill, and Lucy. Her expression was penetrating and powerful, as if she were assessing them somehow. Riley wondered if the CID commander was about to make some dire announcement.

Instead, Larson asked, “Have any of you had breakfast?”

They all said no.

“Well, that situation is unacceptable,” Larson said with a chuckle. “Let’s fix it before you waste away. Come with me, and I’ll show you some Fort Mowat hospitality.”

Larson then left her team behind and proceeded to guide the three FBI agents into the officers’ club. Riley could see right away that the colonel wasn’t kidding about hospitality. The dining facility was like an upscale restaurant, and Larson wouldn’t let them pay for their own meals.

Over a delicious breakfast, they discussed the case. Riley realized that she had definitely needed coffee. The meal was welcome too.

Col. Larson gave them her take on the case. “The most salient features of these murders are the method of killing and the ranks of the victims. Rolsky, Fraser, and Worthing were all drill sergeants. They were all shot from a long distance with a high-powered rifle. And the victims were all shot at night.”

Bill asked, “What else did they have in common?”

“Not much. Two were white and one was black, so it isn’t a racial issue. They were in command of separate units, so they had no recruits in common.”

Riley added, “You’ve probably already pulled the files of soldiers reprimanded for disciplinary or psychological issues. AWOLs? Dishonorable discharges?”

“We have,” Larson replied. “It’s a very long list and we have been through it. But I’ll send it to you and you can see what you think.”

“I’d like to talk to the men in each unit.”

Larson nodded. “Of course. You can catch some of them after the funeral today, and I’ll set up any additional meetings that you want.”

Riley noticed that Lucy was taking notes. She nodded to the young agent to ask her own questions.

Lucy asked, “What caliber were the bullets?”

“NATO-caliber,” Col. Larson said. “7.62 millimeter.”

Lucy looked at Col. Larson with interest. She said, “It sounds like the weapon might be an M110 sniper rifle. Or possibly a Heckler and Koch G28.”

Col. Larson smiled a little, obviously impressed by Lucy’s knowledge.

“Due to the range, we’re guessing the M110,” Larson said. “The bullets all seem to have been from the same weapon.”

Riley was pleased to see that Lucy was so fully engaged. Riley liked to think of Lucy as her protégé, and she knew that Lucy thought of her as a mentor.

She’s learning fast, Riley thought proudly.

Riley glanced at Bill. She could tell by his expression that he was pleased with Lucy as well.

Riley had questions of her own, but she decided not to interrupt.

Lucy said to Larson, “You’re guessing someone with military training, I assume. A soldier on the base?”

“Possibly,” Larson said. “Or an ex-soldier. Someone with excellent training, at any rate. Not just an average shooter.”

Lucy drummed her pencil eraser against the table.

She suggested, “Someone who has it in for authority figures? Drill sergeants especially?”

Larson scratched her chin thoughtfully.

“I’ve been considering it,” she said.

Lucy said, “I’m sure you’re also considering Islamic terrorism.”

Larson nodded.

“These days, that simply has to be our default theory.”

“A lone wolf?” Lucy asked.

“Maybe,” Larson said. “But it could be that he’s acting on behalf of some group – either a small cell near here, or something international, like ISIS or Al-Qaeda.”

Lucy thought for a moment.

“How many Muslim recruits have you currently got at Fort Mowat?” Lucy asked.

“Right now, three hundred forty-three. That’s obviously a very small percentage of our recruits. But we’ve got to be careful about profiling. In general, our Muslim recruits have been exceptionally dedicated. We’ve never had any problems with extremism – if that’s what this is.”

Larson looked at Riley and Bill and smiled.

“But you two are being very quiet. How would you like to proceed?”

Riley glanced at Bill. As usual, she could tell that he was thinking the same thing as she was.

“Let’s go have a look at the murder scenes,” Bill said.

*

A few minutes later, Col. Larson was driving Riley, Bill, and Lucy through Fort Mowat.

“Which of the locations do you want to see first?” Larson asked.

“Let’s see them in the order they happened,” Riley said.

As Larson drove, Riley noticed soldiers drilling, running obstacle courses, and practicing marksmanship with various weapons. She could see that it was rigorous, demanding work.

Riley asked Larson, “How far along in their training is this round of recruits?”

“The second phase – the White Phase,” Larson said. “We’ve got three phases – red, white, and blue. The first two, red and white, are three weeks each, and these recruits are in their fifth week overall. Their last four weeks will be the Blue Phase. That’s about as tough as tough can get. That’s when the recruits find out if they’ve got what it takes to be an Army soldier.”

Riley heard a note of pride in Larson’s voice – the same pride she’d often heard in her father’s voice when he talked about his military service.

She loves what she does, Riley thought.

She also had no doubt that Col. Larson was excellent at what she did.

Larson parked near a footpath that led through the camp. They got out of the car, and Larson led them to a spot on the path. It was in an open area, free of trees that might block a view.

“Sergeant Rolsky was killed right here,” Larson said. “Nobody saw or heard it happen. We couldn’t tell from the wound or the position of his body where the shot came from – except that it must have been a considerable distance.”

Riley looked all around her, studying the scene.

“What time was Rolsky killed?” she asked.

“At about twenty-two hundred hours,” Larson said.

Riley mentally converted that to civilian time – 10:00 p.m.

She imagined what this place would look like at that time of night. There were a couple of lamps standing within thirty feet of the spot. Even so, the light here would have been pretty dim. The shooter must have used a night scope.

She turned slowly around, trying to guess where the shot came from.

There were buildings to the south and north. It was unlikely a sniper would have the opportunity to fire from within any of those places.

To the west, she could see across camp to the Pacific Ocean, faint in a hazy distance.

There were rough hills to the east.

Riley pointed to the hills and said, “My guess is that the shooter positioned himself somewhere up there.”

“That’s a good guess,” Larson said, pointing to another spot on the ground. “We found the bullet right here, so that indicates the shot must have come from somewhere up in those hills. Judging from the wound, the shot was fired from between two hundred fifty and three hundred feet. We’ve scoured the area, but he didn’t leave any evidence behind.”

Riley thought for a moment.

Then she asked Larson, “Is hunting allowed on Fort Mowat grounds?”

“In season, with permits,” Larson replied. “Right now it’s wild turkey season. Shooting crows by day is also allowed.”

Of course, Riley knew that these deaths were anything but hunting accidents. As the daughter of a man who had been both a Marine and a hunter, she knew that no one would use a sniper rifle to kill crows and turkeys and such. A shotgun was the more likely hunting weapon of choice around Fort Mowat at this time of year.

She asked Larson to take them to the next location. The colonel drove them up into some low hills at the edge of a hiking trail. When they all got out of their vehicle again, Larson pointed to the spot on a trail that wound its way uphill.

“Sergeant Fraser was killed right here,” she said. “He was taking an after-hours hike. The shot seems to have been about the same distance as before. Again, no one heard or saw it happen. But our best guess is that he was killed at about twenty-three hundred hours.”

Eleven o’clock at night, Riley thought.

Pointing to another spot, Larson added, “We found the bullet over here.”

Riley then looked in the opposite direction, toward where the shooter must have been. She saw more scrubby hills – and countless places where a shooter might have hidden. She was sure that Larson and her team had combed the area thoroughly.

Finally they drove down to the area where the recruits’ living quarters were. Larson took them behind one of the barracks. The first thing Riley saw was an enormous dark splotch on the wall near the back door.

Larson said, “This is where Sergeant Worthing was killed. He seems to have come out here for a cigarette before his platoon’s morning formation. The shot was so clean that the cigarette never fell from his lips.”

Riley’s interest quickened. This scene was different from the others – and much more informative. She examined the blotch and the smear that spread down below it.

She said, “It looks like he was leaning against the wall when the bullet hit him. You must have been able to get a much better idea of the bullet’s trajectory than you could for the others.”

“Much better,” Larson agreed. “But not the precise location.”

Larson pointed across the field behind the barracks to where hills began to rise.

“The shooter must have positioned himself somewhere between those two valley oaks,” she said. “But he cleaned up very carefully afterward. We couldn’t find a trace of him in any likely location.”

Riley saw that the distance between the small trees was about twenty feet. Larson and her team had done good work narrowing the area down that much.

“What kind of weather was it?” Riley asked.

“Very clear,” Larson said. “There was a three-quarter moon out almost until dawn.”

Riley felt a tingle down her back. It was a familiar feeling that she got when she was about to really connect with a crime scene.

“I’d like to go out and have a look for myself,” she said.

“Certainly,” Larson said. “I’ll take you there.”

Riley didn’t know how to tell her that she wanted to go by herself.

Fortunately, Bill spoke up for her.

“Let’s let Agent Paige go alone. It’s kind of her thing.”

Larson nodded appreciatively

Riley strode out across the field. With every step, that tingling grew stronger.

Finally, she found herself between the two trees. She could see why Larson’s team hadn’t been able to find the exact spot. The ground was highly irregular with lots of smaller bushes. Just in that area, there were at least a half dozen excellent places to squat or lie and fire a clean shot toward the barracks.

Riley began to walk back and forth between the trees. She knew that she wasn’t looking for anything that the shooter might have left behind – not even footprints. Larson and her team wouldn’t have missed anything like that.

She took some slow breaths and imagined herself here in the very early hours in the morning. The stars were just starting to disappear, and the moon still cast shadows all around.

The feeling grew stronger by the second – a sense of the killer’s presence.

Riley took a few more deep breaths and prepared to enter the killer’s mind.

CHAPTER TEN

Riley began to imagine the killer. What had he felt, thought, and observed when he came here looking for the perfect spot to shoot from? She wanted to become the killer, as nearly as she could, in order to track him down. And she could do that. It was her gift.

First, she knew, he had to find that spot.

She searched about, just as he must have searched.

As she moved around, she felt a mysterious, almost magnetic pull.

She was drawn to a red willow bush. To one side of the bush, there was a space between its branches and the ground. There was a slightly hollow place in the ground at that very spot.

Riley stooped down and looked carefully at the ground.

The soil in that hollow place was neat and smooth.

Too neat, Riley thought. Too smooth.

The rest of the soil in this area was rougher, more irregular.

Riley smiled.

The killer had gone to such lengths to tidy up after himself that he'd betrayed his exact position.

Imagining the scene by moonlight, Riley gazed down the slope and across the field toward the back of the barracks.

She pictured what the killer saw from this place – the distant figure of Sergeant Worthing stepping out of the back door.

Riley felt a smile form on the killer's face.

She could hear him think ...

"Right on schedule!"

And just as the killer had expected, the sergeant lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall.

It was time to act – and it had to be quick.

The sky was starting to brighten where the sun would soon rise.

As the killer must have done, Riley stretched out prone in the hollow place on the ground. Yes, it was the perfect place, the perfect shape for wielding a high-powered weapon.

But how did the weapon feel in the killer's hands?

Riley had never actually handled an M110 sniper rifle. But some years ago she had trained a little with the weapon's predecessor, the M24. Fully loaded and assembled, the M24 had weighed about sixteen pounds, and Riley had read that the M110 was scarcely any lighter.

But the night scope added to that weight, making it a little top heavy.

Riley imagined the view through the night scope. The image of Sergeant Worthing was mottled and grainy.

That wasn't a problem for true marksmanship. For a skilled sniper, the shot would be easy. Even so, Riley sensed that the killer felt vaguely unsatisfied.

What was it that bothered him?

What was he thinking?

Then his thought came to her ...

"I wish I could see the look on his face."

Riley felt a jolt of understanding.

This killing was deeply personal – an act of hatred, or at the very least contempt.

But he wasn't going to put it off on account of his dissatisfaction. He could do this just fine without seeing his prey's expression.

She felt the resistance from the trigger as she pulled it, then the sharp recoil from the rifle as the bullet was fired.

The noise of the shot wasn't very loud. The sound suppressor and the flash hider had muffled the noise and the burst of flame.

Even so, did the killer worry that someone had heard it?

Only for a moment, Riley felt sure. He had shot two other men from much the same distance, and no one seemed to have heard the shots. Or if they had heard them, no one had thought them extraordinary.

But what did the killer do now that he'd fired the shot?

He kept looking through the scope, Riley realized.

He followed the body in its slouch against the wall toward an awkward squat.

And again the killer thought ...

"I wish I could see the look on his face."

As the killer must have done, Riley got to her feet. She imagined the killer taking a wide brush to the soil to smooth it over, then leaving the way he'd come.

Riley breathed a sigh of satisfaction. Her attempt to link with the killer's mind had revealed more than she'd hoped for.

Or at least she had a hunch that it had.

She remembered something that Col. Larson had said earlier about whether the killings were acts of Islamic terrorism ...

"These days, that simply has to be our default theory."

Riley's gut told her that that theory was probably wrong. But she wasn't ready to say so to her colleagues. Under the circumstances, she knew that Larson was right to pursue the possibility of terrorism. It was simply good procedure. Meanwhile, it was best for Riley to keep her hunch to herself – at least until she could back it up with evidence.

Riley looked at her watch. She realized that she and the others were due at a funeral.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As Riley watched the six uniformed men carry Sergeant Worthing's flag-draped casket to the gravesite, she admired the solemn cadence and precision of their actions.

She was also struck by an eerie contrast between this ceremony and his actual death. The murder of Sergeant Worthing had been abrupt and brutal.

His funeral was elegance itself.

The military cemetery was in a lovely place, high on a hill in a remote part of Fort Nash Mowat. Riley could see the Pacific Ocean in the distance.

Riley, Lucy, and Bill were standing off to one side of the ceremony. She could see Sergeant Worthing's widow and family seated on folding chairs beside the grave. She could watch the fifty uniformed young men and women in Worthing's training platoon standing stiffly at attention.

She also spotted civilians of an unwelcome sort nearby – a small group of reporters and photographers crowded behind a rope barrier.

She stifled a groan of discouragement.

After three murders, there was no longer any way to keep the press away from Fort Mowat. The publicity was certainly going to add to the pressure of solving the case. Riley just hoped that the journalists wouldn't make too much of a nuisance of themselves.

Probably too much to hope for, she thought.

Once the coffin was in place over the grave, the chaplain began to speak.

"We commend to the almighty God our brother, Sergeant Clifford Jay Worthing, and we commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust ..."

Riley was surprised to feel herself choke up at the chaplain's words.

What was it about this funeral that was getting to her?

Then she realized ...

Daddy.

As a Marine captain, her father had been eligible for a funeral with honors like this one.

Had he gotten this kind of funeral? Riley didn't even know. Not only had she refused to go to his funeral, she'd taken no part in its planning. She'd left all that to her estranged sister, Wendy.

She'd never grieved over her father's death. Nevertheless, she felt sad at the thought that he might not have been buried with full military honors. But who would have gone to the funeral, aside from Wendy? Riley's father had died with no real friends as far as she knew. And Riley and Wendy were all he had left of family.

Riley remembered something that one of her father's former buddies recently told her.

"Riley, your daddy was a good man. But he was a hard man too. He couldn't help it, 'Nam made him that way."

Tears welled up in Riley's eyes.

He'd been a terrible father. But he'd been a good soldier. He'd given everything he had to the Marines – including his humanity, his capacity to love.

As the honor guard lifted the flag and held it taut above the casket, Riley thought ...

He deserved this.

Riley thought she should have made sure her father had his full honors funeral, even if no one had been there to witness it except Wendy.

She was jolted out of her sad reverie by the firing of guns. A seven-person squad fired three volleys into the still air. Then the quiet was broken again by the mournful sound of a bugler playing taps.

The honor guard ceremoniously folded the flag, and an officer presented it to Sergeant Worthing's widow. The officer whispered something to her – doubtless some word of support or solace.

Then the officer gave the family a slow-motion salute, and the service was over.

*

Before Sergeant Worthing's platoon could leave the cemetery, Col. Dana Larson called them together. She introduced them to Riley, Bill, and Lucy and told them that they were here to investigate the three recent murders.

Riley scanned their faces, looking for some telltale sign of emotion. She detected nothing – certainly not grief.

She guessed that many of the recruits had hated Sergeant Worthing's guts and weren't sorry that he was gone.

Riley stepped forward and spoke to the gathered recruits.

"My colleagues and I are very sorry for your loss. We don't want to disturb you right now, just after the ceremony. But if any of you has any information that might help us, we hope that you'll talk to us."

Then the platoon was allowed to disperse. Riley, Bill, and Lucy broke up and wandered among them, hoping to draw somebody out. Pretty soon two recruits, a young man and a young woman, approached Riley. They introduced themselves as Privates Elena Ludekens and Maxwell Wilber.

They seemed to be uneasy and reluctant. Riley thought she understood why. Informing on a fellow recruit couldn't be easy.

Riley said, "Look, I get the feeling that Worthing wasn't the most popular drill sergeant at Fort Mowat."

The two recruits nodded and mumbled in agreement.

Riley continued, "But we're looking for someone whose animosity was out of the ordinary. If you know anyone like that, please tell me."

Ludekens and Wilber looked at each other.

The young woman said, "The sarge really rode one of us especially hard."

"His name's Stanley Pope," the young man added.

"Tell me about him," Riley said.

The young man said, "He's got a real mouth and a bad attitude. The sarge busted him for it."

Riley felt a surge of interest.

"Busted him?" she said. "Explain that to me."

The young woman said, "Almost all of us in the platoon are PV1 – private E-1. Just 'fuzzies,' they call us, because of this."

She pointed to a blank Velcro patch on her shoulder.

The young man said, "When we get through basic training, we'll get our 'mosquito wings' – chevrons – to show that we've become second-class privates. But Pope had his mosquito wings already when he came to Fort Mowat."

"How?" Riley asked.

The young man shrugged.

"You can come in as a second-class private if you have an associate's degree. Or if you've got a Boy Scout Eagle badge. That's how Pope got his."

"But he talked back to the sarge once too often," the young woman said. "So the sarge busted him, took away his chevron, demoted him to PV1 – a fuzzy just like the rest of us. He didn't take it too well."

Riley's curiosity was rising by the second.

“Where can I find him?” she asked.

Private Wilber pointed to the gravesite.

“He’s right over there,” he said.

A young man was standing alone beside the grave, looking down at the casket with his arms on his hips.

Riley thanked Privates Ludekens and Wilber, who wandered off. Riley saw that Bill and Lucy had each found some recruits to talk to.

Riley walked toward the private who was standing beside the grave. He was a lanky young man with an intense, brooding expression on his face.

What’s on his mind? she wondered.

She planned to find out.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Riley approached Private Pope, she decided not to let on that that she knew anything about him – certainly not that he'd been demoted by Sergeant Worthing. She thought it would be best to see what the young soldier would be willing to reveal.

She stepped right beside him, but he didn't seem to notice her presence. His bitter expression remained unchanged and his eyes stayed fixed on the grave.

Finally, she asked, "Taking the sarge's death kind of hard?"

He turned his head and looked at her and then his expression shifted for a moment. He regarded her with obvious distaste, but he didn't reply to her question. Then he turned and stared down into the grave again, brooding as before.

"Not everyone seemed to like him," Riley said. "Did you?"

Private Pope still said nothing.

Riley said, "It's probably a hard thing to talk about. But I think maybe I understand. I lost my dad recently – and he was a Marine, a captain who served in Vietnam. Folks didn't like him much either."

Then she added with a lie ...

"Still, I miss him."

Pope didn't look up from the grave.

"You don't know anything about it," Pope said. "How could you? You're not one of us."

His resentment of Riley was practically radiating off of him.

"I might surprise you," Riley said. "I know a thing or two about comradeship. There's a deep bond among FBI agents. And I've lost colleagues in the line of work. I know it's hard."

He didn't reply at all.

"Come on," Riley said. "Let's take a little walk."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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