

BLAKE PIERCE

ONCE
BOUND

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #12

A Riley Paige Mystery

Блейк Пирс

Once Bound

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Пирс Б.

Once Bound / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (A Riley Paige Mystery)

ISBN 978-1-64-029284-0

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery! The author did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side that is so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. The plot is very intelligent and will keep you entertained throughout the book. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone) ONCE BOUND is book #12 in the bestselling Riley Paige mystery series, which begins with the #1 bestseller ONCE GONE (Book #1)—a free download with over 1,000 five star reviews! In this heart-pounding thriller, women are being found dead on train tracks across the country, forcing the FBI into a mad race against time to catch the serial killer. FBI Special Agent Riley Paige may have finally met her match: a sadistic killer, binding victims to the tracks to be killed by incoming trains. A killer smart enough to evade capture across many states—and charming enough to go unseen. She soon learns it will require all of her faculties to enter into his sick mind—a mind which she unsure she wants to enter. And all with a final twist that is so shocking, even Riley could not expect it. A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, ONCE BOUND is book #12 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #13 in the Riley Paige series will be available soon.

ISBN 978-1-64-029284-0

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Blake Pierce

ONCE BOUND

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE SERIES

WATCHING (Book #1)

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

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ONCE LOST (Book #10)

ONCE BURIED (Book #11)

ONCE BOUND (Book #12)

PROLOGUE

As consciousness slowly returned, Reese Fisher realized that she was in pain all over. The back of her neck ached and her skull felt as though it would burst from throbbing.

She opened her eyes only to be blinded by glaring sunlight. She squeezed her eyelids tight again.

Where am I? she wondered. *How did I get here?*

Mingled with the pain was a tingling numbness, especially in her extremities.

She tried to shake her arms and legs to get rid of the tingling, but found that she couldn't. Her arms, hands, and legs were somehow immobilized.

She wondered ...

Was I in some kind of accident?

Maybe she'd been hit by a car.

Or maybe she'd been thrown from her own car and was now lying on hard pavement.

Her mind couldn't get a hold on anything.

Why couldn't she remember?

And why couldn't she move? Was her neck broken or something?

No, she could *feel* the rest of her body, she just couldn't move anything.

She could also feel the hot sun on her face, and she didn't want to open her eyes again.

She tried hard to think – where had she been and what had she been doing just before this ... whatever this was?

She remembered – or thought she remembered – getting on the train in Chicago, finding a good seat, and then she'd been on her way home to Millikan.

But had she gotten to Millikan?

Had she gotten off the train?

Yes, she thought she had. It had been a bright, sunny morning at the train station, and she was looking forward to the mile-long walk to her house.

But then ...

What?

The rest was all fragmented, even dreamlike.

It was like one of those nightmares of being in terrible danger but unable to run, unable to move at all. She'd wanted to struggle, to free herself from some threat, but she couldn't.

She also remembered a malignant presence – a man whose face she now couldn't bring to mind at all.

What did he do to me? she wondered.

And where am I?

She realized she could at least turn her head. She turned away from the glaring sunlight and finally managed to open her eyes and keep them open. At first, she was aware of curving lines stretching away from her. But at the moment they seemed abstract and incomprehensible.

Then she could see why the back of her neck was in such pain.

It was lying against a long curving stretch of reddish steel, hot under the bright sunlight.

She wriggled slightly and felt a sharp roughness against her back. It felt like crushed rock.

Little by little, the abstract lines came into focus and she could see what they were.

In spite of the hot sun, her body felt cold as she understood.

She was on a railroad track.

But how had she gotten here?

And why couldn't she move?

As she struggled, she realized that she *could* move, at least somewhat.

She could writhe, twisting her torso, and also her legs, although she couldn't separate them for some reason.

The tingling numbness she hadn't been able to shake off was now turning into surges of fear. She was tied here somehow – tied to railroad tracks, with her neck fastened to the rail.

No, she told herself. This is impossible.

It had to be one of those dreams – a dream of being immobilized and helpless and in terrible danger.

She closed her eyes again, hoping the nightmare would go away.

But then she felt a sharp vibration against her neck, and a rumbling reached her ears.

The rumbling was getting louder. The vibration became piercingly strong, and her eyes snapped back open.

She couldn't see very far along the curve of the tracks, but she knew what the source of that vibration was, that crescendo of noise.

It was an oncoming train.

Her pulse pounded, and terror erupted through her whole body. Her writhing became frantic, but completely futile.

She couldn't tear her arms and legs free, and she couldn't pull her neck away from the rail.

The rumbling was now a deafening roar, and suddenly it came into view ...

... the reddish-orange front of a massive diesel engine.

She let out a scream – a scream that sounded supernaturally loud to her own ears.

But then she realized – it wasn't her own scream she'd heard.

It was the piercing noise of the train whistle.

Now she felt a weird rush of anger.

The engineer had sounded his whistle ...

Why the hell doesn't he just stop?

But of course, he couldn't – not nearly fast enough, not hurtling along at his current speed.

She could hear a screeching sound as he tried to bring the mountain of metal to a stop.

The engine filled her whole field of vision now – and peering out through the windshield was a pair of eyes ...

... eyes that looked as terrified as she felt.

It was like looking in a mirror – and she didn't want to see what she was seeing.

Reese Fisher closed her eyes, knowing it was for the last time ever.

CHAPTER ONE

When Riley heard the car pull up in front of her townhouse, she asked herself ...

Am I really going to be able to go through with this?

She studied her face in her bathroom mirror, hoping it didn't look too obvious that she'd been crying. Then she went downstairs, where her family was already gathered in the living room – her housekeeper, Gabriela; her fifteen-year-old daughter, April; and Jilly, the thirteen-year-old girl Riley was in the process of adopting.

And standing among them, flanked by a couple of large packed suitcases, was fifteen-year-old Liam, smiling rather sadly at Riley.

It's really happening, she thought. Right now.

She reminded herself that this was all for the best.

Even so, she couldn't help but feel sad.

Then came the sound of the doorbell, and Jilly rushed to open the front door.

A man and woman in their late fifties came inside, all smiles. The woman hurried over to Liam, but the man approached Riley.

"You must be Ms. Paige," he said.

"Riley, please," Riley said, her voice choking just a little.

"I'm Scott Schweppe, Liam's uncle," he said. He turned toward his wife, who was giving Liam a big hug. "And this is my wife, Melinda."

With a slightly awkward chuckle he added, "But I guess you already know that. Anyway, I'm so glad to meet you."

Riley shook his offered hand. She noticed that his handshake was warm and strong.

Unlike Riley, Melinda didn't bother to hold back her tears. Looking up at her nephew, she told him, "Oh, Liam! It's been such a long time! You were so little when we last saw you. Such a handsome young man you've become!"

Riley took several long, slow breaths.

This really is for the best, she told herself again.

But until a couple of days ago, it was about the last thing she'd expected to happen.

It seemed like only yesterday when Liam had come to live with Riley and her family. In fact, he'd been here less than two months, but Liam had fit in perfectly and everyone in the household was already very attached to him.

But now it had turned out that the boy had relatives who wanted him to come live with them.

Riley said to the couple, "Please, sit down. Make yourselves comfortable."

Melinda dabbed her eyes with a tissue, and she and Scott sat down on the couch. Everybody else found places to sit except Gabriela, who hurried away to the kitchen for refreshments.

Riley was a bit relieved when April and Jilly started making small talk with Scott and Melinda – all about their two-day drive from Omaha, where they had stopped for the night, and how the weather had been along the way. Jilly seemed in good spirits, but Riley detected sadness behind April's cheerful demeanor. After all, she had been closer to Liam than any of them.

As Riley listened, she observed the couple closely.

Scott and his nephew looked a lot alike – the same lanky build, bright red hair, and freckled complexion. Melinda was on the stout side and looked like a perfectly conventional, good-natured housewife.

Gabriela quickly returned carrying a tray with coffee, sugar and cream, and some delicious home-baked Guatemalan cookies called champurradas. She served everybody as they talked.

Riley noticed that Liam's aunt was looking at her.

With a warm smile, Melinda said, "Riley, Scott and I can't thank you enough."

“Oh – it was my pleasure,” Riley said. “He’s a delight to have around.”

Scott shook his head and said, “I’d had no idea how bad things had gotten with my brother, Clarence. We’d been estranged for such a long time. The last I’d heard from him was years ago, when Liam’s mother left him. We should have stayed in better touch, if only for Liam’s sake.”

Riley wasn’t sure what to say. How much had Liam told his aunt and uncle about what had happened?

She remembered it all too vividly.

April had just started dating Liam, and Riley had taken a liking to him right away. But after a frantic call from April, Riley had rushed to Liam’s house and found him being beaten savagely by his drunken father. Riley had subdued the man, but leaving Liam in his care had been unthinkable. Riley had brought Liam home and set up a place for him to sleep in her family room.

This living situation had been precarious, of course.

Liam’s father kept calling and texting his son, promising to change and not to drink anymore – emotional blackmail, pure and simple. And it had been awfully hard for Liam.

Scott continued, “You could have knocked me over with a feather when Clarence called out of the blue last week. He sounded like he was out of his mind. He wanted my help getting Liam back. He said ... well, he said some stuff, let me tell you.”

Riley could imagine some of the “stuff” Liam’s father had said – probably including what a vile, horrible person Riley was for taking Liam away from him.

“Clarence said he’d stopped drinking,” Scott said. “But I was sure he was drunk even when he called. Sending Liam back to him was a crazy idea. So there seemed to be only one thing to do.”

Riley felt an emotional jolt those words ...

“... only one thing to do.”

Of course, that one thing wasn’t to let Liam stay and live with Riley’s family.

It was simple common sense.

He should go and live with his nearest relatives.

Melinda squeezed Scott’s hand and said to Riley, “Scott and I are empty nesters, you know. We raised three kids, two sons and a daughter. Our girl is finishing her last year of college, and the boys are married and successful and ready to start families of their own. So we’re alone in our big house and we miss hearing young voices. For us, this is the perfect time.”

Again, Riley felt a sharp twinge.

“... the perfect time ...”

Of course it was the perfect time. What was more, these were obviously perfect people – or as nearly perfect as parents could be.

Probably a lot better at it than me, Riley thought.

She was a long, long way from balancing everything in her own complicated life – the duties of being a parent and the often conflicting, sometimes dangerous duties of being an FBI field agent.

In fact, she sometimes found it to be almost impossible, and having Liam here hadn’t made her life any easier.

She’d often felt as though she wasn’t giving nearly enough attention to her kids – including Liam. She had stretched herself much too thin when she took him in.

Besides, how could he keep living in that family room until he went to college?

Just how was Riley going to send him to college, anyway?

No, this really was for the best.

Jilly and April kept the conversation going, asking all about the couple’s children.

Meanwhile, Riley’s head was filling with worries.

She felt as though she’d gotten to know Liam well in just a short time. After years of estrangement from him and his father, what did these people know about him? She knew that Scott was the owner of a thriving bicycle store. He also seemed to be in remarkably good shape for his age.

Would he understand that Liam was by nature clumsy and nonathletic?

Anything but a jock, Liam loved to read and study, and he was the captain of his school chess team.

Would Scott and Linda know how to relate to him? Would they enjoy talking with him as much as Riley did? Would they share any of his interests?

Or would he wind up feeling lonely and out of place?

But Riley reminded herself that she had no business worrying about these things.

This really is for the best, she told herself again.

Soon – much too soon, as far as Riley was concerned – Scott and Melinda finished their cookies and coffee and thanked Gabriela for the delicious refreshments. The time had come for them to go. After all, it was going to be a long drive back to Omaha.

Scott picked up Liam's suitcases and headed out to the car.

Melinda took Riley's hand warmly.

She said, "Again, we simply can't thank you enough for being there when Liam needed it."

Riley simply nodded, and Melinda followed her husband outside.

Then Riley found herself face to face with Liam.

His eyes were wide, and he looked to Riley as if he'd just now realized that he was going away.

"Riley," he said, his voice squeaking in that charming adolescent way of his, "we never got a chance to play a game of chess."

Riley felt a stab of regret. Liam had been teaching April the game, but somehow Riley had never gotten around to playing with him.

Now she felt that she'd never gotten around to too many things.

"Don't worry," she said. "We can play online. I mean, you *are* going to stay in touch, aren't you? We all expect to hear from you. A lot. If we don't, I'll come out to Omaha. I don't think you'll want the FBI knocking on your door."

Liam laughed.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll stay in touch. And we'll play chess for sure."

Then he added with an impish smile, "I'm really gonna kick your ass, you know."

Riley laughed and hugged him.

"In your dreams," she said.

But of course, she knew he was right. She was a pretty good chess player, but not nearly good enough to win against a brilliant kid like Liam.

Looking like he was on the verge of tears, Liam dashed out the door. He got into the car with Scott and Melinda, and they pulled out of the driveway and drove away.

As Riley stood watching, she heard Jilly and Gabriela cleaning up in the kitchen.

Then she felt someone squeeze her hand. She turned and saw that it was April, looking at her with concern.

"Are you OK, Mom?"

Riley could hardly believe that April was the one to show sympathy right now. After all, Liam had been her boyfriend when he'd moved it. But their romance had been put on hold since then. They'd had to be *hermanos solamente*, as Gabriela had put it – brother and sister only.

April had handled the change with grace and maturity.

"I'm OK," Riley said. "How about you?"

April blinked a little, but she seemed remarkably in control of her emotions.

"I'm fine," she said.

Riley remembered something April had planned to do with Liam when school was out.

She said, "Are you still planning to go to chess camp this summer?"

April shook her head.

"Without Liam, it just wouldn't be the same."

“I understand,” Riley said.

April squeezed Riley’s hand a little harder and said, “We did a really good thing, didn’t we? Helping Liam, I mean.”

“We sure did,” Riley said, squeezing April’s hand back.

Then she stood gazing at her daughter for a moment. She seemed so incredibly grown up right now, and Riley felt deeply proud of her.

Of course, like all mothers, she worried about April’s future.

She’d become especially concerned recently, when April announced to her that she wanted to be an FBI agent.

Was that the kind of life Riley wanted for her daughter?

She reminded herself yet again ...

What I want doesn’t matter.

Her job as a parent was to do all she could to make her daughter’s dreams possible.

April was starting to look just a little restless under Riley’s intense, loving gaze.

“Um, is something wrong, Mom?” April asked.

Riley simply smiled. She’d been waiting for the right moment to bring up something special with April. And if this wasn’t the right moment, she couldn’t imagine when it would be.

“Come on upstairs,” Riley said to April. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

CHAPTER TWO

As Riley led April up the stairs, she found herself wondering if she had really made the right decision. But she could feel that April was excited about what the “surprise” would be.

She thought that April also seemed a little nervous.

No more nervous than I am, Riley realized. But she didn't figure she could change her mind now. They both went into Riley's bedroom.

A glance at the expression on her daughter's face convinced Riley not to make any advance explanations. She went to her closet, where a new little black safe was on the shelf. She punched numbers into the keypad, then took something out and laid it on the bed.

April's eyes opened wide at what she saw.

“A gun!” she said. “Is it ...?”

“Yours?” Riley replied. “Well, legally it's still mine. Virginia law says you can't own a handgun until you're eighteen. But you can learn with this one until then. We're going to work our way into this slowly, but if you've learned to handle it well, it'll be yours.”

April's mouth was hanging open.

“Do you want it?” Riley asked.

April didn't seem to know what to say.

Was this a mistake? Riley wondered. Maybe April actually didn't feel ready for this.

Riley said, “You said you wanted to become an FBI agent.”

April nodded eagerly.

Riley said, “So – I thought it might be a good idea to start you on some weapons training. Don't you?”

“Yes – oh, yes,” April said. “This is wonderful. Really, really amazing. Thanks, Mom. I'm just kind of overwhelmed. I really hadn't expected this.”

“I hadn't either,” Riley said. “I mean, I hadn't expected to do anything like this at this point. Owning a gun is a huge responsibility and one that a lot of adults can't handle.”

Riley took the gun out of the case and showed it to April.

She said, “This is a Ruger SR22 – a .22 caliber semiautomatic handgun.”

“A .22?” April asked.

“Believe me, this is not a toy. I don't want you training with a larger caliber yet. A .22 can be just as dangerous as any other gun – maybe more so. More people are killed by this caliber than any other. Treat it with care and respect. You'll only be handling it for training purposes. I'll keep it in my closet the rest of the time. It will be in a gun safe that can only be opened with a combination. For now, I'll be the only one with that.”

“Of course,” April said. “I wouldn't want to have it just lying around.”

Riley added, “And I'd rather you didn't mention this to Jilly.”

“What about Gabriela?”

Riley knew it was a good question. As far as Jilly was concerned, it was simply a matter of maturity. She might get jealous and want a gun of her own, which was out of the question. As for Gabriela, Riley suspected that she might be alarmed at the idea of April learning to use a weapon.

“I might tell her,” Riley said. “Not just yet.”

Riley clicked out the empty cartridge and said, “Always know whether your weapon is loaded or not.”

She handed the unloaded gun to April, whose hands were shaking a little.

Riley almost joked ...

“I'm sorry I couldn't get one in pink.”

But she thought better of it. This was not a thing to joke about.

April said, "But what do I do with it? Where? When?"

"Right now," Riley said. "Come on, let's go."

Riley put the gun back in its case and carried it with her as they went back down the stairs. Fortunately, Gabriela was working in the kitchen and Jilly was in the family room, so they didn't have to discuss what was in the case.

April went to the kitchen and told Gabriela that she and Riley were going out for a while, then went to the family room and told Jilly the same. The younger girl seemed to be fascinated by something playing on the TV, and she just nodded.

Riley and April both went out the front door and got into the car. Riley drove them to a gun store called Smith Firearms, where she'd bought the gun a couple of days ago. When she and April went inside, they were surrounded by firearms of every type and size, hanging on the walls or in glass cases.

They were greeted by Brick Smith, the store owner. He was a large, bearded man wearing a plaid shirt and a wide, hearty smile.

"Hello there, Ms. Paige," he said. "It's good to see you again. What brings you around today?"

Riley said, "This is my daughter, April. We came by to try out the Ruger I bought here the other day."

Brick Smith seemed slightly amused. Riley remembered when she'd brought her own boyfriend, Blaine, here to buy him a gun for self-defense. Back then, Brick had seemed a little nonplussed to see a woman buying a gun for a man. His surprise had waned when he'd found out that Riley was an FBI agent.

He didn't look the least bit surprised now.

He's getting used to me, Riley thought. Good. Not everybody does.

"Well, well, well," he said, looking at April. "You didn't tell me you were buying the gun for your little girl."

Those words jarred Riley a little ...

"... your little girl."

She wondered – had April taken offense?

Riley glanced at April and saw that she was still looking a bit overwhelmed.

I guess she kind of feels like a little girl at the moment, Riley thought.

Brick Smith led Riley and April through a door into the surprisingly large shooting range behind the store, then left them alone.

"First things first," Riley said, pointing to a long list on the wall. "Read these rules. Ask me if you've got any questions."

Riley stood watching as April read over the rules, which of course covered all the safety essentials, including *never* pointing a gun in any direction except downrange. As April read with an earnest expression, Riley felt an odd sense of déjà vu. She remembered when she had brought Blaine here to buy and try out his new weapon.

It was a somewhat bitter memory.

Over breakfast at his house after their first night of lovemaking, Blaine had hesitantly told her ...

"I think I need to buy a gun. For home protection."

Of course, Riley had understood why. His own life had been in danger since he'd come to know her. And as things turned out, he'd needed that gun only days later to defend not only himself but also Riley's whole family from a dangerous escaped convict, Shane Hatcher. Blaine had almost killed the man.

Riley now felt again the pang of guilt over that terrible incident.

Is no one safe with me in their lives? she wondered. Will everyone I know need guns because of me?

April finished reading the rules, and she and Riley went to one of the empty booths, where April put on ear and eye protection gear. Riley took the gun out of the box and put it in front of April.

April looked at it with a daunted expression.

Good, Riley thought. She ought to feel intimidated.

April said, “This is different from the gun you bought for Blaine.”

“That’s right,” Riley said. “I got him a Smith and Wesson 686, a .38 caliber revolver – a much more powerful weapon. But his needs were different. He only wanted to be able to defend himself. He wasn’t thinking about going into law enforcement like you.”

Riley picked up the gun and showed it to April.

“There are some big differences between a revolver and a semiautomatic. A semiautomatic has a lot of advantages, but a few disadvantages as well – occasional misfires, double feed, failure to eject, stovepipe jams. I didn’t want Blaine to have to deal with any of that, not in a case of emergency. But as for you – well, you might as well start learning about them right away, in a safe setting where your life isn’t in danger.”

Riley began to show April what she needed to know next – how to put rounds into the cartridge, how to put the cartridge into the weapon, and how to unload it again.

Demonstrating, Riley said, “Now this weapon can be used in either single-action or double-action mode. Single-action is when you pull back the hammer before pulling the trigger. Then the gun takes over and automatically cocks the gun again and again. You can fire off rapid shots until your cartridge is empty. That’s the great advantage of a semiautomatic.”

Fingering the trigger, Riley continued, “Double-action is when you do all the work with the trigger. As you begin to pull, the hammer cocks, and when you finish, the gun fires. If you want to fire another shot, you have to start all over again. That takes more work – your finger is pulling against eight to eleven pounds of pressure – and the firing is slower. And it’s what I want you to do to get started.”

She pushed a button to bring the paper target to seven yards away from the booth, then showed April the proper stance and hand positions for firing, and also how to aim.

Riley said, “OK, your gun isn’t loaded. Let’s try some dry firing.”

As she had done with Blaine, Riley explained to April how to breathe – to inhale slowly while aiming, then exhale slowly as she pulled the trigger so that her body would be most still when the weapon fired.

April aimed carefully at the vaguely human shape on the target, then pulled the trigger several times. Then, at Riley’s instruction, she put the loaded cartridge into the gun, resumed her position, and fired a single shot.

April let out a startled squeal.

“Did I hit anything?” she asked.

Riley pointed to the target.

“Well, you hit the target, anyway. And for your first try, that’s not bad. How did it feel?”

April let out a nervous giggle.

“Kind of surprising. I expected more of a ...”

“Recoil?”

“Yeah. And it wasn’t as loud as I’d expected.”

Riley nodded and said, “That’s one of the nice things about a .22. You won’t develop a flinch or other bad habits. As you work your way up to larger weapons, you’ll be ready to deal with their power. Go ahead, empty the cartridge.”

As April slowly fired the nine remaining rounds, Riley noticed a change in her face. It was a determined, fierce expression that Riley realized she had seen in April sometime before. Riley tried to remember ...

When was that? Only once, she thought.

Then the memory hit her like a thunderbolt ...

Riley had pursued the monster named Peterson down to a riverbank. He was holding April hostage, bound hand and foot with a gun to her head. When Peterson's gun misfired, Riley lunged at him and stabbed him, and they struggled in the river until he pushed her head underwater and was about to drown her.

Her face surfaced for a moment, and she saw a sight she would never forget ...

Her wrists and feet still bound, April was on her feet holding the shotgun that Peterson had dropped.

April slammed its butt against Peterson's head ...

The fight had ended a few moments later, when Riley smashed Peterson's face in with a rock.

But she'd never forgiven herself for allowing April to be in such danger.

And now, here April was, firing away at the target with the same fierce expression on her face.

She's so much like me, Riley thought.

And if April really put her heart and soul into it, Riley was sure that she'd become as good an FBI agent as she'd ever been – perhaps better.

But was that a good thing or a bad thing?

Riley didn't know whether to feel guilty or proud.

But during the half-hour training session, April fired with ever increasing confidence and accuracy at the target. By the time they left the gun store and drove home, Riley was definitely feeling proud.

April was exhilarated and chatty, asking all kinds of questions about the training she had to look forward to. Riley gave the best answers she could, trying not to show her ambivalence about the future April seemed to want so much.

As they neared home, April said, "Look who's here."

Riley's heart sank when she saw the expensive BMW pulled up in front of the townhouse. She knew it belonged to the last person in the world she wanted to see right now.

CHAPTER THREE

As Riley parked her own modest vehicle behind the BMW, she realized that things were likely to get very unpleasant in her house. When she turned off the engine, April picked up the box with the gun in it and started to get out of the car.

“Better leave that here for now,” Riley said.

She certainly didn’t want to explain the weapon to the unwelcome visitor.

“I guess you’re right,” April replied, shoving the box under the front seat.

“And don’t forget – don’t tell Jilly about this,” Riley said.

“I won’t,” April said. “But she’s probably figured out already that you got something for me, and she’ll wonder all about it. Oh, well, on Sunday you’ll be giving her a present of her own and she’ll forget all about this.”

Present of her own? Riley wondered.

Then she remembered – Sunday was Jilly’s birthday.

Riley felt her face flush with alarm.

She’d almost forgotten that Gabriela had planned a family party for Sunday evening.

And she still hadn’t bought Jilly a present.

Don’t forget! she told herself sternly.

Riley and April locked up the car and walked on into the house. Sure enough, the owner of the luxury car – Riley’s ex-husband – was sitting there in the living room.

Jilly was in a chair across from him, her stony expression showing that she wasn’t the least bit happy to have him there.

“Ryan, what are you doing here?” Riley asked.

Ryan turned toward her with that charming smile that had too many times weakened her resolve to shut him out completely.

He’s still handsome, damn it, she thought.

She knew that he went to a lot of trouble to look that way and spent many hours at the gym.

Ryan said, “Hey, is that any way to greet family? I *am* still family, aren’t I?”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

The tension was palpable and Ryan’s expression turned to one of disappointment.

Riley wondered – what kind of greeting had he expected?

He hadn’t even been to see them in about three months. Before that, they had made an attempt at reconciling. He’d spent a couple of months more or less living here, but he’d never completely moved in. He’d kept the comfortable house he had once shared with Riley and April before the separation and divorce.

The girls had been happy to have him around – until he lost interest and wandered off again.

The girls had been crushed by that.

And now, here he was again, out of the blue and without warning.

The silence continued to hang in the air. Then Jilly crossed her arms and scowled.

Turning to Riley and April, she asked, “Where did the two of you take off to, anyway?”

Riley gulped.

She hated to lie to Jilly, but this would surely be a bad time to tell her about April’s gun.

Fortunately, April said, “We just had an errand to run.”

Ryan looked up at April.

“Hey, sweetie,” he said. “Don’t I get a hug or something?”

April didn’t make eye contact with him. She just stood there shuffling her feet for a moment.

Finally she said in a sullen voice, “Hi, Daddy.”

Looking like she was about to burst into tears, April turned around and trotted up the stairs to her room.

Ryan's mouth dropped open.

"What was *that* all about?" he said.

Riley sat down alone on the couch, trying to figure out how best to handle the situation.

She asked again, "What are you doing here, Ryan?"

Ryan shrugged.

"Jilly and I are talking about her schoolwork – or at least I'm trying to get her to talk about her schoolwork. Have her grades been slipping? Is that what she doesn't want to tell me?"

"My grades are fine," Jilly said.

"So tell me all about school, why don't you?" Ryan asked.

"School's fine – Mr. Paige," Jilly said.

Riley cringed, and Ryan looked wounded.

Jilly had started calling Ryan "Dad" just before he had left.

Before that, she had called him "Ryan." Riley was sure that Jilly had never called him Mr. Paige before. The girl was expressing her attitude very clearly.

Jilly got up from her chair and said, "If it's OK with everybody, I've got some homework to do."

"Do you want any help?" Ryan asked.

Jilly ignored the question and trotted up the stairs.

Ryan looked at Riley with a stricken expression.

"What's going on here?" he said. "Why are the girls so mad at me?"

Riley sighed bitterly. Sometimes her ex was just as immature as they'd both been when they married so young.

"Ryan, what on earth did you expect?" she asked, as patiently as she could manage. "When you moved in, the girls were just thrilled to have you around. Especially Jilly. Ryan, that poor girl's father was an abusive drunk. She almost became a prostitute to get away from him – and she's just thirteen years old! It meant so much to her to have a father figure like you in her life. Don't you understand how crushed she was when you took off?"

Ryan just stared at her with a puzzled expression, as if he had no idea what she was talking about.

But Riley remembered all too well what Ryan had told her on the phone.

"I need some space. This whole family thing – I thought I was ready for it, but I wasn't."

And he hadn't shown a lot of concern about Jilly at the time.

"Riley, Jilly was your decision. I admire you for it. But I never signed up for it. Somebody else's troubled teenager is too much for me. It's not fair."

And now here he was, acting hurt because Jilly didn't want to call him "Dad" anymore.

It really was infuriating.

Riley found it small wonder that the two girls had stormed off just now. She more than half wanted to do the same thing. Unfortunately, somebody had to be an adult in this situation. And since Ryan seemed to be incapable of that, Riley was stuck with the job.

Before she could think of what to say next, Ryan got up from his chair and sat down beside her. He reached toward her.

Riley pushed him away.

"Ryan, what are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

Ryan's voice sounded amorous now.

Riley's fury was mounting by the second.

"Don't even think about it," she said. "How many girlfriends have you been through since you've been gone?"

“Girlfriends?” Ryan asked, obviously trying to sound baffled by the very question.

“You heard me. Or did you forget? One of them mistakenly called here while you were still around. She sounded drunk. You said her name was Lina. But I don’t guess Lina was the last. How many more have there been? Do you even know? Do you even remember all their names?”

Ryan didn’t reply. He looked guilty now.

Everything was starting to make sense to Riley. This whole thing had happened before, and she felt stupid for not having expected it.

Ryan was between girlfriends, and he figured Riley would do under the circumstances.

He didn’t really care about the girls at all – not even his own daughter. They were just a pretext for getting together with Riley.

Riley clenched her teeth and said, “I think you’d better leave.”

“Why? What’s the matter? You’re not seeing anyone, are you?”

“As a matter of fact, I am.”

Now Ryan looked genuinely perplexed, as if he couldn’t imagine why Riley would take an interest in any other man.

Then he said, “Oh my God. It’s not that cook again, is it?”

Riley let out a growl of anger.

She said, “You know very well that Blaine is a master chef. You also know that he owns a nice restaurant, and April and his daughter are best friends. He’s terrific with the girls – everything you’re not. And yes, I am seeing him, and it’s getting pretty serious. So I really, really want you to get out of here.”

Ryan stared at her for a moment.

Finally he said in a bitter voice, “We were good together.”

She didn’t reply.

Ryan got up from the couch and headed for the door.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” he said as he left the house.

Riley was tempted to say ...

“Don’t hold your breath.”

... but she managed to not say it. She just sat still until she heard the sound of Ryan’s car pulling away. Then she breathed a little easier.

Riley sat there in silence for a little while, thinking about what had happened.

Jilly called him “Mr. Paige.”

That had been cruel, but she couldn’t deny that Ryan had deserved it.

Even so, she worried – what should she say to Jilly about that kind of cruelty?

This motherhood thing is tough, she thought.

She was about to call Jilly down from her room to talk about it when her phone buzzed. The call was from Jenn Roston, a young agent she’d worked with on recent cases.

When Riley took the call, she could hear the stress in Jenn’s voice.

“Hey, Riley. I just thought I’d call and ...”

A silence fell. Riley wondered what was on Jenn’s mind.

Then Jenn said, “Listen, I just want to thank you and Bill for ... you know ... when I ...”

Riley was on the verge of telling her ...

“Don’t say it. Not over the phone.”

Fortunately, Jenn’s voice faded without finishing her thought.

Even so, Riley knew what Jenn was thanking her for.

During the case they’d just finished, Jenn had gone AWOL for most of a day. Riley had persuaded Bill that they should cover for her. After all, Jenn had covered for Riley in a somewhat similar situation.

But Jenn's delinquency from her job had been due to the demands of a woman who had once been her foster mother, but who was also a master criminal. Jenn had stepped outside of legal boundaries to take care of a problem for "Aunt Cora."

Riley didn't know exactly what it had been. She hadn't asked.

She heard Jenn make a slight choking sound.

"Riley, I've been thinking. Maybe I should just turn in my badge. What happened before might happen again. And it might be worse next time. Anyway, I don't think it's over."

Riley sensed that Jenn wasn't telling her the real truth.

Aunt Cora is pressuring her again, Riley thought.

It was hardly surprising. If Aunt Cora's hold was strong enough, Jenn could serve as a real resource from inside the FBI.

Riley briefly wondered ...

Should Jenn resign?

But she quickly told herself ...

No.

After all, Riley had had a similar relationship with a master criminal – the brilliant escaped convict Shane Hatcher. It had ended after Blaine had shot Hatcher, almost fatally, and Riley had captured him. Hatcher was back in Sing Sing now, and he hadn't spoken a word to anybody ever since.

Jenn knew more about Riley's relationship with Hatcher than anybody except Hatcher himself. Jenn could have destroyed Riley's career with the knowledge she had. But she had kept quiet out of loyalty to Riley. Now it was time for Riley to show the same loyalty to Jenn.

Riley said, "Jenn, remember what I said to you when you first talked to me about this?"

Jenn was silent.

Riley said, "I told you we'd deal with this. You and me, together. You can't quit. You've got too much talent. Do you hear me?"

Jenn still said nothing.

Instead, Riley heard the beep of her call-waiting service telling her that she had another caller.

Ignore it, she told herself.

But the beep came again. Riley's gut told her that the other call was something important. She sighed.

She said to Jenn, "Look, I've got to take another call. Stay on the line, OK? I'll try to make it quick."

"OK," Jenn said.

Riley switched to the incoming call and heard the gruff voice of her team chief at the BAU, Brent Meredith.

"Agent Paige, we've got a case. It's a serial killer in the Midwest. I need to see you in my office."

"When?" Riley asked.

"Already," Meredith grumbled. "Sooner if possible."

Riley could tell by his tone that this really was an urgent matter.

"I'll leave right now," Riley said. "Who else are you putting on the team?"

"That's up to you," Meredith said. "You and Agents Jeffreys and Roston did good work together on the Sandman case. Take both of them if it suits you. And all of you get your asses right over here."

Without another word, Meredith ended the call.

Riley got back on the line with Jenn.

She said, "Jenn, turning in your badge isn't an option. Not right now. I need you on a case. Meet me at Brent Meredith's office. And hurry."

Without waiting for an answer, Riley ended the call. As she dialed the number of her partner, Bill Jeffreys, she thought ...

Maybe another case is just what Jenn needs right now.

Riley hoped so.

Meanwhile, she felt a familiar heightening of her own alertness as she hurried to find out what the new case might be.

CHAPTER FOUR

About a half hour later, Riley pulled into the parking lot at Quantico. When she'd asked Meredith how soon he wanted her there, she'd heard real urgency in his voice ...

"Already. Sooner if possible."

Of course, when Meredith called her at home, time was almost always running out – sometimes literally, as in her last case. The so-called Sandman had used sand timers to mark the hours that would elapse before his next brutal murder.

But today, something in Meredith's tone told her that this situation was pressing in some unique way.

As she parked, she saw that Bill and Jenn were also just arriving in their own vehicles. She got out of her car and stood waiting for them.

Without exchanging many words, the three walked toward the building. Riley saw that, like her, Bill and Jenn had brought their go-bags along. None of them had needed to be told that they'd likely be flying out of Quantico in short order.

They checked into the building and headed toward Chief Meredith's office. As soon as they got to his door, the burly, imposing African-American man burst out into the hallway. He'd obviously been notified of their arrival.

"No time for a conference," he growled at the three agents. "We'll talk and walk."

As they hurried along with Meredith, Riley realized that they were headed straight to Quantico's airstrip.

We really are in a hurry, Riley thought. It was unusual not to have at least a brief meeting to bring them up to speed on a new case.

Striding along beside Meredith, Bill asked, "What's this all about, Chief?"

Meredith said, "Right now there's a decapitated dead body on a train track near Barnwell, Illinois. It's a line out of Chicago. A woman was bound to the tracks and run over by a freight train, just a few hours ago. It's the second such killing in four days and there are apparently striking similarities. It looks like we're dealing with a serial."

Meredith began to walk a little faster, and the three agents scurried to keep up.

Riley asked, "Who called for the FBI?"

Meredith said, "I got the call from Jude Cullen, the Chicago area Deputy Chief of Railroad Police. He says he wants profilers there right away. I told him to leave the body where it was until my agents got a look at it."

Meredith grunted a little.

"That's a pretty tall order. Three more freight trains are scheduled along that track today, and a passenger train as well. Right now, they're all on hold, and it's already getting to be a mess. You need to get out there ASAP and get a look at the crime scene so the body can be moved and the trains can start running again. And then ..."

Meredith grunted again.

"Well, you've got a killer to stop. And I'm pretty sure we all agree on one thing – he *will* kill again. Aside from that, you now know as much about the case as I do. Cullen will have to fill you in on anything else."

The group stepped out onto the tarmac of the airstrip where the small jet was waiting, its engines already rumbling.

Over the sound, Meredith called out, "You'll be met at O'Hare by some railroad cops. They'll drive you straight to the crime scene."

Meredith turned around and headed back into the building, and Riley and her colleagues mounted the steps and boarded the plane. The hastiness of their departure almost made Riley dizzy. She couldn't remember Meredith ever rushing them out like that.

But it was hardly any surprise, considering that railroad traffic was stalled. Riley couldn't imagine that enormous difficulties that might be causing right now.

Once the plane was airborne, the three agents opened their computers and got online to look for what little information they might find at this point.

Riley quickly saw that news of the most recent killing was already spreading, although the current victim's name wasn't yet available. But she saw that the previous victim's name was Fern Bruder, a twenty-five-year-old woman whose decapitated body had been found on a train track near Allardt, Indiana.

Riley couldn't find much else online about the murders. If the railroad police had any suspects or knew of any motive, that information hadn't leaked to the public yet – which was a good thing as far as Riley was concerned.

Still, it was frustrating not to be able to learn more right now.

With so little to think about regarding the case, Riley found herself mulling over what had happened so far today. She still felt a pang about losing Liam – although she also realized ...

“Losing” isn't exactly the right word.

No, she and her family had done their very best for the boy. And now things had turned out for the best, and Liam was in the care of people who would love him and take good care of him.

Even so, Riley wondered ...

Why does it feel like a loss?

Riley also had mixed feelings about buying April a gun and taking her to the shooting range. April's show of maturity had certainly made Riley proud, and so had her budding marksmanship. Riley was also deeply touched that her daughter wanted to follow in her footsteps.

And yet ... Riley couldn't help but remind herself ...

I'm on my way to view a decapitated body.

Her whole career was one long string of horrors. Was this really a life she wanted for April?

It's not up to me, Riley reminded herself. It's up to her.

Riley also felt strange about that awkward phone conversation she'd had with Jenn a little while ago. So much had been left unspoken, and Riley had no idea what might be going on right now between Jenn and Aunt Cora. And of course, now was no time to talk it out – not with Bill sitting right here with them.

Riley couldn't help but wonder ...

Was Jenn right? Should she turn in her badge?

Was Riley doing the young agent any favors by encouraging her to stay with the FBI?

And was Jenn in the right frame of mind to take on a new case right now?

Riley looked over at Jenn, who was sitting in her seat staring raptly at her computer.

Jenn certainly seemed fully focused at the moment – more so than Riley was, anyway.

Riley's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Bill's voice.

“Tied to railroad tracks. It almost sounds like ...”

Riley saw that Bill was also looking at his computer screen.

He paused, but Jenn finished his thought.

“Like one of those old-time silent movies, huh? Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”

Bill shook his head.

“I sure don't mean to make light of it ... but I keep thinking of some mustachioed villain in a top hat tying a young damsel to the train tracks until some dashing hero comes along to rescue her. Isn't that what always happened in silent movies?”

Jenn pointed at her computer screen.

She said, “Actually, not really. I’ve been doing some research on that. It’s a trope, all right, a cliché. And everybody seems to think they’ve seen it at one time or another, like some sort of urban legend. But it never seemed to show up in actual silent movies, at least not seriously.”

Jenn turned her computer screen around so that Bill and Riley could see it.

She said, “The first fictional example of a villain tying someone to railroad tracks seems to have appeared long before movies even existed, in an 1867 play called *Under the Gaslight*. Only – get this! – the villain tied a *man* to the tracks, and the leading lady had to rescue him. The same sort of thing happened in a short story and a few other plays around that time.”

Riley could see that Jenn was quite caught up in what she’d found.

Jenn continued, “As far as old-time movies are concerned, there were maybe two silent comedies in which this exact thing happened – a screaming, helpless damsel got tied to the tracks by a dastardly villain and got rescued by a handsome hero. But they were played for laughs, just like in Saturday morning cartoons.”

Bill’s eyes widened with interest.

“Parodies of something that was never real to begin with,” he said.

“Exactly,” Jenn said.

Bill shook his head.

He said, “But steam locomotives were a part of everyday life back in those days – the first few decades of the twentieth century, I mean. Weren’t there any silent movies portraying someone in danger of getting run over by a train?”

“Sure,” Jenn said. “Sometimes a character would get pushed or fall onto tracks and maybe get knocked unconscious when a train was coming. But that’s not the same scenario, is it? Besides, just like in that old play, the movie character in danger was usually a man who had to get rescued by the heroine!”

Riley’s interest was thoroughly piqued now. She knew that Jenn wasn’t wasting her time looking into this sort of thing. They needed to know about anything that could be driving a killer. Part of that could be understanding all the cultural precedents of whatever scenarios they happened to be dealing with – even those that might be fictional.

Or in this case, nonexistent, Riley thought.

Anything that might have influenced the killer was of interest.

She thought for a moment, then asked Jenn, “Does this mean that there have never been any real-life cases of people being murdered by getting tied to train tracks?”

“Actually, it has happened in real life,” Jenn said, pointing to some more information on her computer screen. “Between 1874 and 1910, at least six people were killed that way. I can’t find many examples since, except for one very recently. In France, a man bound his estranged wife to train tracks on her birthday. Then he got in front of the oncoming high-speed train, so he died along with her – a murder-suicide. Otherwise, it seems to be a rare way to murder anyone. And none of those were serial killings.”

Jenn turned her computer screen back toward her and fell quiet again.

Riley mulled over what Jenn had just said ...

“... a rare way to murder anyone.”

Riley thought ...

Rare, but not unheard of.

She found herself wondering – had that string of murders between 1874 and 1910 been inspired by those old stage plays in which characters had been tied to train tracks? Riley knew of more recent instances of life imitating art in some horrible way – in which murderers were inspired by novels or movies or video games.

Maybe things hadn’t changed all that much.

Maybe *people* hadn’t changed all that much.

And what about the killer they were about to look for?

It seemed ridiculous to imagine that they were hunting some psychopath who was emulating a dastardly, melodramatic, mustache-twirling villain who had never really existed, not even in the movies.

But what *could be* driving this killer?

The situation was all too clear and all too familiar. Riley and her colleagues were going to have to answer that question, or more people would be killed.

Riley sat watching as Jenn continued to work on her computer. It was an encouraging sight. For the time being, Jenn seemed to have shaken off her anxieties about the mysterious “Aunt Cora.”

But how long will it last? Riley wondered.

Anyway, the sight of Jenn so focused on research reminded Riley that she ought to be doing the same. She'd never worked a case involving trains before, and she had a lot to learn. She turned her attention back to her computer.

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Just as Meredith had said, Riley and her colleagues were greeted on the tarmac at O'Hare by a pair of uniformed railroad cops. They all introduced themselves, and Riley and her colleagues got into their vehicle.

“We'd better hurry,” the cop in the passenger seat said. “The railroad bigwigs are really breathing down the chief's neck to get that body off the tracks.”

Bill asked, “How long will it take us to get there?”

The cop who was driving said, “Usually an hour, but it won't take us that long.”

He turned on the lights and siren, and the car started wending its way through the heavy late afternoon traffic. It was a tense, chaotic, high-speed drive that eventually took them through the small town of Barnwell, Illinois. After that, they passed through a railroad crossing.

The passenger cop pointed.

“It looks like the killer turned off the road right next to the tracks in some kind of off-road vehicle. He drove alongside the tracks until he reached the place where he did the killing.”

Soon they pulled over and parked next to a wooded area. Another police vehicle was parked there, and also a coroner's van.

The trees weren't very dense. The cops led Riley and her colleagues straight through them to the railroad tracks, which were only some fifty feet away.

Just then, the crime scene came into full view.

Riley gulped hard at what she saw.

Suddenly gone were any corny images of mustachioed villains and damsels in distress.

This was all too real – and all too horrible.

CHAPTER FIVE

For a long moment, Riley stood staring at the body on the tracks. She'd seen corpses mangled in all kinds of horrifying ways. Even so, this victim presented a uniquely shocking spectacle. The woman had been beheaded cleanly by the wheels of the train, almost as if by a guillotine's blade.

Riley was surprised that the woman's headless body seemed unscathed by the train that had passed over it. The victim was bound tightly with duct tape, her hands and arms taped to her sides, and her ankles taped together. Clothed in what had been an attractive outfit, the body was twisted in a desperate, writhing position. Where her neck was severed, blood was spattered on the crushed stones, the wooden ties, and the rail. The head had been thrown some six or seven feet down the embankment along the tracks. The woman's eyes and mouth gaped up at the sky in an expression of frozen horror.

Riley saw several people standing around the body, some of them wearing uniforms, some not. Riley figured they were a mix of local police and railroad cops. A man in a uniform came toward Riley and her colleagues.

He said, "You're the FBI folks, I take it. I'm Jude Cullen, Deputy Chief of Railroad Police for the Chicago region – 'Bull' Cullen, folks call me."

He sounded proud of the nickname. Riley knew from her research that "Bull" was general slang for a police officer on the railroad. Actually, in the railroad police organization they held the titles of Agent and Special Agent, much like the FBI. This one apparently preferred the sound of the more generic term.

"It was my idea to get you guys here," Cullen continued. "I hope the trip proves to be worth it. The sooner we can get the body away from here, the better."

As Riley and her colleagues introduced themselves, she looked Cullen over. He seemed remarkably young and had an exceptionally muscular physique, his arms bulging below the uniform's short sleeves and the shirt stretched tight across his chest.

The nickname "Bull" suited him pretty well, she thought. But Riley always found herself put off rather than attracted by men who obviously spent many hours in a gym to look this way.

She wondered how a muscle-bound guy like Bull Cullen actually found time for much of anything else. Then she noticed that he wasn't wearing a wedding ring. She figured that his life must be about his job and working out, and not much else.

He appeared to be good-natured and not especially shocked by the unusually grisly nature of the crime scene. Of course, he'd been here for a few hours now – long enough to get somewhat numbed to it. Even so, the man immediately struck Riley as rather vain and shallow.

She asked him, "Have you identified the victim?"

Bull Cullen nodded.

"Yeah, her name was Reese Fisher, thirty-five years old. She lived right near here in Barnwell, where she worked as the local librarian. She was married to a chiropractor."

Riley looked up and down the tracks. This stretch was curved so that she couldn't see very far in either direction.

"Where is the train that ran over her?" she asked Cullen.

Cullen pointed and said, "About a half mile down there, exactly where it stopped."

Riley noticed an obese, black-uniformed man who was crouching next to the body.

"Is that the medical examiner?" she asked Cullen.

"Yeah, let me introduce you to him. This is the Barnwell coroner, Corey Hammond."

Riley crouched down beside the man. She sensed that, in contrast to Cullen, Hammond was still struggling to contain his shock. His breathing was coming in gasps – partly due to his weight, but also, she suspected, from revulsion and horror. He'd surely never seen anything like this in his jurisdiction.

"What can you tell us so far?" Riley asked the coroner.

“No sign of sexual assault that I can see,” Hammond said. “That’s consistent with the other coroner’s autopsy of the victim four days ago, over near Allardt.”

Hammond pointed to mangled pieces of wide silvery tape around the woman’s neck and shoulders.

“The killer bound her hand and foot, then taped her neck onto the rail and immobilized her shoulders. She must have struggled like mad trying to get loose. But she didn’t stand a chance.”

Riley turned toward Cullen and asked, “Her mouth wasn’t gagged. Would anybody have heard her screaming?”

“We don’t think so,” Cullen said, pointing toward some trees. “There are some houses through those woods, but they’re out of earshot. A couple of my guys went from door to door asking if anybody had heard anything or had any idea what had been happening at the time of the murder. No one did. They found out all about it on TV or on the Internet. They’ve been instructed to stay away from here. So far, we haven’t had any trouble with gawkers.”

Bill asked, “Did it look like anything was stolen from her?”

Cullen shrugged.

“We don’t think so. We found her purse right here beside her, and she still had identification and money and credit cards. Oh, and a cell phone.”

Riley studied the body, trying to imagine how the killer had managed to get the victim into this position. Sometimes she could get a powerful, even uncanny, feeling of the killer just by tuning in to her surroundings at a crime scene. Sometimes it almost seemed that she could get into his thoughts, know what was on his mind as he committed the murder.

But not right now.

Things were too jangled here, with all these people milling about.

She said, “He must have subdued her somehow before he bound her up like this. What about the other corpse, the victim that was killed earlier? Did the local coroner find any drugs in her system?”

“There was flunitrazepam in her bloodstream,” Coroner Hammond said.

Riley glanced at her colleagues. She knew what flunitrazepam was, and she knew that Jenn and Bill did as well. Its trade name was Rohypnol, and it was commonly known as the date rape drug or as “roofies.” It was illegal, but all too easy to buy on the streets.

And it certainly would have subdued the victim, rendering her helpless although possibly not fully unconscious. Riley knew that flunitrazepam had an amnesiac effect once it wore off. She shuddered to realize ...

It might well have worn off right here – just before she died.

If so, the poor woman would have had no idea how or why such a terrible thing had happened to her.

Bill scratched his chin as he looked down at the body.

He said, “So maybe this started off date-rape style, with the killer slipping the drug into her drink at a bar or a party or something.”

The coroner shook his head.

“Apparently not,” he said. “There wasn’t a trace of the drug in the other victim’s stomach. It must have been given to her as an injection.”

Jenn said, “That’s odd.”

Deputy Chief Bull Cullen looked at Jenn with interest.

“Why so?” he asked.

Jenn shrugged slightly.

She said, “It’s a little hard to imagine, that’s all. Flunitrazepam doesn’t take effect right away, no matter how it’s delivered. In a date-rape situation, that typically doesn’t matter. The unsuspecting victim maybe has drinks with her soon-to-be assailant for a little while, starts feeling woozy without knowing quite why, and pretty soon she becomes helpless. But if our killer stabbed her with a needle,

she'd immediately know she was in trouble, and she'd have had a few minutes to resist before the drug took effect. It just doesn't sound ... very efficient."

Cullen smiled at Jenn – a little flirtatiously, Riley thought.

"It makes sense to me," he said. "Let me show you."

He walked behind Jenn, who was markedly shorter than he was. He started reaching around her neck from behind her. Jenn stepped away.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Jenn said.

"Just demonstrating. Don't worry, I'm not really going to hurt you."

Jenn scoffed and kept her distance from him.

"Damn right, you're not," she said. "And I'm pretty sure I know what you've got in mind. You're thinking the killer used some kind of choke hold."

"That's right," Cullen said, still smiling. "Specifically, a so-called blood choke."

He twisted his arm to illustrate his point.

"The killer approached her unexpectedly from behind, then crooked his arm like this around the front of her neck. The victim could still breathe, but her carotid arteries were shut off completely, cutting off the blood flow to the brain. The victim lost consciousness within seconds. Then it was easy for the killer to administer an injection that rendered her helpless for a longer period."

Riley easily sensed the friction between Cullen and Jenn. Cullen was obviously a classic "mansplainer" whose attitude toward Jenn was condescending as well as flirtatious.

Jenn clearly didn't like him one bit, and Riley felt the same. The man was shallow, all right, with a poor sense of appropriate behavior when it came to dealing with a female colleague – and an even worse sense of how to behave at a murder scene.

Still, Riley had to admit that Cullen's theory was sound.

He might be obnoxious, but he wasn't stupid.

In fact, he might be genuinely helpful to work with.

That is, if we can stand to be around him, Riley thought.

Cullen stepped off the tracks and down the slope and pointed at a space where the ground had been taped off.

He said, "We've got some tire tracks, from where he drove down here after turning off the main road back at the railroad crossing. They're big tracks – obviously some kind of off-road vehicle. Here are some footprints too."

Riley said, "Have your people take pictures of these. We'll send them to Quantico and have our technicians run them through our database."

Cullen stood with his arms akimbo for a moment, taking in the scene with what seemed to Riley almost like a sense of satisfaction.

He said, "I've got to say, this is a new experience for me and my guys. We're used to investigating cargo theft, vandalism, collisions, and the like. Murders are few and far between. And something like this – well, we've never seen anything like it before. Of course, I guess it's nothing really special for you FBI folks. You're used to it."

Cullen got no reply and he fell silent for a moment. Then he looked at Riley and her colleagues and said, "Well, I don't want to take too much of your precious time. Just give us a profile, and my team will take it from here. You can fly back home today, unless you really want to spend the night."

Riley, Bill, and Jenn looked at each other with surprise.

Did he seriously think they could wrap up their work here that quickly?

"I'm not sure what you mean," Riley said.

Cullen shrugged and said, "I'm sure you've figured out something in the way of a profile by now. That's what you're here for, after all. What can you tell me?"

Riley hesitated for a moment.

Then she said, “We can give you a few generalizations. Statistically, most murderers who leave the body at the scene have a prior criminal record. Over half of them are between the ages of fifteen and thirty-seven – and over half are African-American, employed at least part time, and have at least a high school education. Some such killers have had prior psychiatric problems, and some have been in the military. But ...”

Riley hesitated.

“But what?” Cullen asked.

“Try to understand – none of this is really useful information, at least not at this point. There are always outliers. And our killer is starting to look like one already. For example, the kind of killer we’re talking about usually has some kind of sexual motivation. But that doesn’t seem to be the case here. My guess is that he’s not typical in a lot of ways. Maybe he’s not typical at all. We’ve still got a lot of work cut out for us.”

For the first time since she’d arrived, Cullen’s expression darkened a little.

Riley added, “And I want her cell phone rushed to Quantico. And the other victim’s cell phone as well. Our technicians need to see if they can get any information out of them.”

Before Cullen could reply, his own cell phone buzzed and he scowled.

He said, “I already know who that is. It’s the railroad administrator, wanting to know if he can get the trains moving again. The line has got three freight trains piled up and a passenger train running late. There’s a fresh crew ready to drive away the train that’s still sitting on the tracks. Can we move the body yet?”

Riley nodded and said to the coroner, “Go ahead, get her into your van.”

Cullen turned away and took the call, while the coroner called his people together and got to work with the body.

When Cullen got off the phone, he seemed to be in a genuinely sour mood.

He said to Riley and her colleagues, “So I guess you folks are going to make yourselves at home for a while.”

Riley thought she was starting to understand what was bothering him. Cullen was positively looking forward to solving a sensational case, and he hadn’t expected the FBI to rob him of his thunder.

Riley said, “Look, we’re here at your request. But I think you’ll be needing us – for a while longer anyway.”

Cullen shook his head and shuffled his feet.

Then he said, “Well, we’d all better head on into the Barnwell police station. We’ve got something pretty unpleasant to deal with there.”

Without another word, he turned and headed away.

Riley glanced at the body, which was now being loaded onto a gurney.

She wondered ...

More unpleasant than this?

Her mind boggled as she and her colleagues followed Cullen back the way they’d come.

CHAPTER SIX

Jenn Roston was seething as she turned to follow her colleagues away from the crime scene. She trudged through the trees behind Riley and Agent Jeffreys as Deputy Chief Jude Cullen led the way toward the parked vehicles.

“Bull” Cullen, he calls himself, she remembered with contempt.

She was glad to have two people between her and that man.

She kept thinking ...

He tried to demonstrate a blood choke on me!

She doubted that he'd been looking for an excuse to grope her – not exactly, anyway. But he sure was looking for a chance to show physical control over her. It was bad enough that he felt the need to mansplain the blood choke hold and its effects to her – as if she didn't know all about it already.

She thought they were both lucky that Cullen hadn't actually gotten his arm around her neck. She might not have been able to control herself. Although the man was ridiculously muscular, she would most likely have made short work of him. Of course, that would have been pretty unseemly at a murder scene and would have done nothing to promote good relations among investigators. So Jenn knew it was just as well things hadn't gotten out of hand.

On top of everything else, now Cullen seemed to be pissed off that Jenn and her colleagues weren't going away just yet, and that he wasn't going to hog all the glory of solving the case.

Tough luck, asshole, Jenn thought.

The group emerged from the trees and got into the police van with Cullen. The man said nothing as he drove to the police station and her FBI companions were quiet too. She figured that they, like her, were thinking about the grisly crime scene and Cullen's comment about having “something pretty unpleasant to deal with” at the station.

Jenn hated riddles, maybe because Aunt Cora was so often cryptic and threatening in her attempts at manipulation. And she also hated living with the sense that something in her past could destroy her present dream-come-true of being an FBI agent.

When Cullen parked the van in front of the police station, Jenn and her colleagues got out and followed him inside. There, Cullen introduced them to Barnwell's Chief of Police, Lucas Powell, a middle-aged man with a sagging chin.

“Come with me,” Powell said. “I've got the guys right in here. My people and I just don't know how to deal with this kind of thing.”

Guys? Jenn wondered.

And what kind of “thing” did he mean?

Chief Lucas Powell led Jenn, her colleagues, and Cullen straight to the station's interview room. Inside, they found two men seated at the table, both wearing neon yellow vests. One was lean and tall, an older but vigorous-looking man. The other was about Jenn's own shorter height, and probably not much older than she was.

They were drinking cups of coffee and just staring at the table.

Powell introduced the older man first, the younger man second.

“This is Arlo Stine, the freight conductor. And this is Everett Boynton, his assistant conductor. When the train stopped, they're the ones who had to walk back and find the body.”

The two men barely looked up at the group.

Jenn gulped. Surely they must be terribly traumatized.

There definitely was “something pretty unpleasant” to deal with here.

Interviewing these men wasn't going to be easy. To make matters worse, they weren't likely to know anything that would help lead to the killer.

Jenn stood back as Riley sat down at the table with the men and spoke in a soft voice.

“I’m awfully sorry you’ve had to deal with this. How are you guys holding up?”

The older man, the conductor, shrugged slightly.

“I’ll be all right,” he said. “Believe it or not, I’ve seen this kind of thing before. People killed on the tracks, I mean. I’ve seen bodies mangled up a lot worse. Not that anyone ever gets used to it, but ...”

Stine nodded toward his assistant and added, “But Everett here has never been through this before.”

The younger man looked up from the table at the people in the room.

“I’ll be OK,” he said with a shaky nod, obviously trying to sound like he meant it.

Riley said, “I’m sorry to ask this – but did you see the victim just before ...?”

Boynton winced sharply and said nothing.

Stine said, “Just a glimpse, that’s all. We were both in the cab. But I was on the radio making a routine call to the next station, and Everett was making calculations for the curve we were taking just then. When the engineer started braking and sounded the whistle, we looked up and saw ... something, we weren’t sure what it was really.”

Stine paused, then added, “But we sure knew what happened when we walked back to the spot for a look.”

Jenn was mentally reviewing some of the research she’d done on the plane flight. She knew that freight train crews were small. Even so, there seemed to be one person missing.

“Where’s the engineer?” she asked.

“The hogger?” Bull Cullen said. “He’s in the custody suite.”

Jenn’s mouth dropped slightly.

She knew that “hogger” was railroad slang for an engineer.

But what the hell was going on here?

“You put him in a jail cell?” she asked.

Powell said, “We didn’t have much choice.”

The older conductor added, “The poor guy – he won’t talk to anybody. The only words he’s said since it happened are, ‘Lock me up.’ He just kept saying that again and again.”

The local police chief said, “So that’s what we wound up doing. It seemed the best thing for now.”

Jenn felt a flash of anger.

She asked, “Haven’t you brought in a therapist to talk to him?”

The railroad deputy chief said, “We’ve asked for a company psychologist to come in from Chicago. It’s union rules. We don’t know when he’s going to show up.”

Riley looked truly startled now.

“Surely the engineer doesn’t blame himself for what happened,” she said.

The older conductor looked surprised at the question.

“Of course he does,” he said. “It wasn’t his fault, but he can’t help it. He was the man at the controls. He’s the one who felt the most helpless. It’s eating him up inside. I hate it that he’s shut himself off like this. I really tried to talk to him, but he won’t even look me in the eye. We shouldn’t be waiting around for some damned railroad shrink to show up. Rules or not, somebody ought to do something right now. A good hogger like him deserves better.”

Jenn’s anger sharpened.

She said to Cullen, “Well, you can’t just leave him in that cell by himself. I don’t care if he insists on being alone. It can’t be good for him. Somebody needs to reach out to him.”

Everyone in the room looked at her.

Jenn hesitated, then said, “Take me to the custody suite. I want to see him.”

Riley looked up at her and said, “Jenn, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.”

But Jenn ignored her.

“What’s his name?” Jenn asked the conductors.

Boynton said, “Brock Putnam.”

“Take me to him,” Jenn insisted. “Right now.”

Chief Powell led Jenn out of the interview room and down the hall. As they walked along, Jenn wondered whether Riley might be right.

Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.

After all, she knew that empathy was hardly her strong suit as an agent. She tended to be blunt and outspoken, even when a softer touch was needed. She certainly didn’t have Riley’s ability to turn on the compassion at appropriate moments. And if Riley herself didn’t feel up to this task, why did Jenn feel like she ought to take it on?

But she couldn’t help thinking ...

Somebody’s got to talk to him.

Powell led her into the row of cells, all with solid doors and tiny windows.

He asked, “Do you want me to come in with you?”

“No,” Jenn said. “I’d better do this one-on-one.”

Powell opened a door to one of the cells, and Jenn stepped inside. Powell left the door open but stepped away.

A man in his early thirties sat on the end of the cot, staring directly at the wall. He was wearing an ordinary T-shirt and backward baseball cap.

Standing just inside the doorway, Jenn said in a soft voice ...

“Mr. Putnam? Brock? My name is Jenn Roston, and with the FBI. I’m so terribly sorry about what happened. I just wondered if you wanted to ... talk.”

Putnam showed no indication of even hearing her.

He seemed especially determined not to make eye contact with her – or with anybody else, Jenn felt sure.

And from her research flying out here, Jenn knew exactly why he felt that way.

She swallowed hard as a knot of anxiety filled her throat.

This was going to be a lot harder than she’d even imagined.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Riley uneasily kept her eye on the door after Jenn left the room. As Bill kept asking the conductor and his assistant questions, she worried about how Jenn was going to deal with the engineer.

She was sure that the engineer was probably having a terrible time of it. She didn't like the idea of waiting a lot longer for a railroad psychologist – possibly some official flunky who might be more concerned about the company's well-being than the engineer's. But what else were they supposed to do?

And might the young agent only make things worse for the man? Riley had never seen any sign that Jenn was especially skillful at dealing with people.

If Jenn did just upset the man further, how might that affect her own morale? She had already been contemplating leaving the FBI because of pressures from a criminal former foster mother.

Despite her concerns, Riley managed to listen to what was being said in the room.

Bill said to Stine, "You said you've seen this kind of thing before. Do you mean murders on railroad tracks?"

"Oh, no," Stine said. "Actual murders like that are really rare. But people getting killed on the tracks – that's a lot more common than you might think. There are several hundred victims a year, some of them just stupid thrill-seekers, but a lot of them suicides. In the business, we call them 'trespassers.'"

The younger man twisted in his chair uncomfortably and said, "I sure don't want to see anything like that again. But from what Arlo tells me ... well, I guess it's part of the job."

Bill said to the conductor, "Are you sure there wasn't anything the engineer could have done?"

Arlo Stine shook his head.

"Damned sure. He'd already slowed the train down to thirty-five miles per hour for the curve we were on. Even so, there was no way to stop a diesel locomotive with ten freight cars behind it anywhere near fast enough to save that woman. You can't break the laws of physics and stop several thousand tons of moving steel on a dime. Let me explain it to you ..."

The conductor started talking about the mechanics of braking. It was highly technical talk, and of no real interest or use to Riley or Bill. But Riley knew that it was best to let Stine just keep talking – for his own sake, if for no one else's.

Meanwhile, Riley still found herself looking toward the door, wondering how Jenn was doing with the engineer.

*

Jenn stood next to the bed looking anxiously at Brock Putnam's back as he stared silently at the wall.

Now that she was actually with the man, she found that she had no idea what to do or say next.

But from her research on the plane, she understood why he was incapable of looking at her or anyone else right now. He was traumatized by a single detail that often haunted "hoggers" who'd been through what he had just been through.

A few moments ago, the conductor had said that he and his assistant had only gotten a glimpse of the victim before she died.

But this man had gotten much more than a glimpse.

He'd seen something uniquely horrifying from his window in that cab – something that no innocent human being deserved to see.

Would it help for him to say it aloud?

I'm not a shrink, she reminded herself.

Even so, she felt more and more anxious to reach out to him.

Slowly and cautiously, Jenn said ...

"I think I know what you saw," she said. "You can talk to me about it if you like."

After a pause, she added ...

"But not if you don't want to."

A silence fell.

I guess he doesn't want to, Jenn thought.

She almost got up to leave, but then the man said in a nearly inaudible whisper ...

"I died back there."

The words chilled Jenn to the bone.

Again, she wondered whether she had any business trying to do this.

She said nothing. She figured it was best to wait and see if he wanted to say more. She waited for many seconds, more than half-hoping the man would stay silent and she could leave quietly.

Then he said ...

"I saw it happen. I was looking ... in a mirror."

He paused for a moment, then added ...

"I saw myself die. So why ... why am I here?"

Jenn gulped hard.

Yes, what had happened to him was exactly the sort of thing she'd read about on the plane. Hundreds of people died on railroad tracks every year. And all too often, the engineers endured an unimaginably horrifying moment.

They made eye contact with the person who was about to die.

The exact same thing had happened to Brock Putman. The reason he couldn't make eye contact with anyone else was that it made him relive that moment all over again. And his identification with the poor woman was eating him up inside. He was trying to cope by denying that anyone else had been killed. Guiltily, he was trying to convince himself that he – and only he – was dead.

Jenn spoke even more cautiously than before.

"You didn't die. You weren't looking in a mirror. Someone else died. And it wasn't your fault. There was no way on earth you could stop it from happening. You know that – even if you have trouble accepting it. It wasn't your fault."

The man still faced away from her. But a sob escaped from his throat.

Jenn was momentarily alarmed. Had she just pushed him over some kind of edge?

No, she thought.

She had a gut feeling that this was good, that it was necessary.

The man's shoulders shook slightly as his quiet sobbing continued.

Jenn touched him on the shoulder.

She said, "Brock, could you do something for me? I just want you to look at me."

His shoulders stopped shaking, and his sobbing ebbed away.

Then, very slowly, he turned around on his bed and looked at Jenn.

His bright blue eyes were wide and pleading and brimming with tears – and they were gazing straight into Jenn's own eyes.

Jenn had to fight back her own tears.

As blunt, brusque, and sometimes even tactless as she normally was, it dawned on her that she'd never had this kind of interaction with anybody before, at least not professionally.

She swallowed hard, then said, "You're not looking into a mirror right now. You're looking at me. You're looking into my eyes. And you're alive. You've got every right to be alive."

Brock Putnam opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

Instead, he nodded.

Jenn almost gasped with relief.

I did it, she thought. I drew him out.

Then she said, “But you deserve something more. You deserve to find out who did this terrible thing – not just to that poor woman, but to you. And you deserve justice. You deserve to know that he’ll never do anything like this again. I promise – you’ll get justice. I’ll make sure of it.”

He nodded again, with just a trace of a smile.

She smiled and said, “Now let’s get out of here. You’ve got two pals out there who are worried about you. Let’s go see them.”

She got up from the cot, and so did Brock. They walked outside the cell, where Chief Powell was still waiting. Powell looked astonished at the change in Putnam’s demeanor and behavior. They all walked back to the interview room and headed on inside. Riley, Bill, and Cullen were still there, and so were the two conductors.

Stine and Boynton sat gaping for a moment, then got up and exchanged emotional hugs with Brock Putnam. They all sat down at the table together and started talking quietly.

Jenn looked at the railroad deputy chief sternly and said, “Light a fire under somebody’s ass and get that railroad psychologist down here ASAP.”

Then, turning to the local police chief, she said, “Go get this man a cup of coffee.”

Powell nodded mutely and left the room.

Riley took Jenn aside and asked quietly, “Do you think he’ll ever be able to get back to work?”

Jenn thought for a moment and said, “I doubt it.”

Riley nodded and said, “He’ll probably be struggling for the rest of his life. It’s a horrible thing to have to live with.”

Riley smiled and added, “But you did some good work just now.”

Jenn felt flooded with warmth at Riley’s praise.

She remembered back to how her day had started – how her communication with Aunt Cora had left her feeling inadequate and unworthy.

Maybe I’m of some use after all, she thought.

After all, she’d always known that empathy was a quality she lacked and needed to cultivate. And now at last, she seemed to have taken at least a few steps toward being a more empathetic agent.

She also felt energized by the promise she’d just made to Brock Putnam:

“I promise – you’ll get justice. I’ll make sure of it.”

She was glad she’d said it. Now she was committed to it.

I won’t let him down, she thought.

Meanwhile, the two conductors and the engineer continued to talk quietly, commiserating about the awful experience they had all endured, but which had been especially awful for Putnam.

Suddenly, the door to the room opened and Chief Powell looked inside.

He said to Cullen and the FBI agents, “You’d better come with me. A witness just showed up.”

Jenn felt a jolt of excitement as she and the others followed Cullen down the hall.

Were they about to get the break they needed?

CHAPTER EIGHT

As Riley followed Powell down the hall along with the other FBI agents and Bull Cullen, she wondered ...

A witness? Are we really going to get a break this fast?

Years of experience told her that it wasn't likely.

Even so, she couldn't help hoping that this time might be different. It would be wonderful to wrap this case up before anyone else was killed.

When the group arrived at a small meeting room, a stout woman in her fifties was pacing inside. She wore heavy makeup and her hair was an unnatural shade of blond.

She hurried toward them. "Oh, this is awful," she said. "I saw her picture on the news a little while ago, and I recognized her right away. Such a horrible death. But I had a feeling about her – a bad feeling. A premonition, you might even call it."

Riley's hopes sank a little.

It usually wasn't a good sign when witnesses started talking about "premonitions."

Bill guided the woman to a chair.

"Sit down, ma'am," he said. "Take it easy and let's start from the beginning. What's your name?"

The woman sat down, but she just fidgeted in her chair.

Bill sat in a nearby chair, turning it a little to talk with her. Riley, Jenn, and the others also took chairs around the meeting room table.

"Your name?" Bill asked again.

"Sarah Dillon," she said, giving him a wide smile. "I live right here in Barnwell."

Bill asked, "And how did you know the victim?"

The woman looked at him as if surprised at the question.

"Well, I didn't actually *know* her. We exchanged words on occasion."

Bill asked, "Did you see her this morning – before she was killed?"

Sarah Dillon seemed more surprised than before.

"No. It's been a couple of weeks or more since I last saw her. Why does that matter?"

Riley exchanged glances with Bill and Jenn. She knew they were all thinking the same thing.

A couple of weeks or more?

Of course it mattered a great deal.

When Powell had said a witness had shown up, Riley had imagined someone who either knew the victim personally or had seen something truly material to the case – the actual abduction, perhaps. Still, she knew that they needed to follow up on every possible lead. So far, they had nothing else to go on.

Riley said, "Tell us about your interactions with the victim."

Sarah Dillon scratched her chin.

"Well, I've seen her around town. Occasionally, I mean. In stores, on the streets. Also at the train stations, both here and in Chicago. I take the train to Chicago every week or so, to see my sister and her family there. I've seen her getting on or off the train, either here or in Chicago. Sometimes we've been in the same car together."

Sarah Dillon's eyes darted about for a moment.

Then she asked in a near-whisper, "Do you think I'm in any danger right now?"

The woman was striking Riley as less coherent by the moment. She didn't know how to answer her question. Why did the woman imagine she might be in danger? Did she have any good reason to worry at all?

Offhand, Riley doubted it. For one thing, she'd gotten a good look at the corpse at the crime scene, and she'd seen a photo online of the other victim. Both women were slight of build and dark-

haired. Their faces were somewhat similar. If the killer was obsessed with a particular type of victim, this much more robust woman certainly didn't fit it.

Riley asked, "What information do you have?"

Sarah Dillon squinted.

"Information? Well, maybe not information exactly. But a strong feeling – really, really strong. Something was very wrong about that woman. I've known it for a while now."

"How so?" Jenn asked.

"Once, on the train up to Chicago, I tried to strike up a conversation with her. Just small talk, the weather, the kind of day I'd had, my sister in Chicago and her family. She seemed friendly enough at first. But she started getting standoffish when I asked her about herself. I asked her, 'What do you do in Chicago?' She said she went there to visit her mother, who was in a nursing home."

Sarah Dillon fingered her purse nervously.

"Then I started asking questions about her mother – what her health was like, how long she'd been in a home, that kind of thing. She started getting defensive, and in a few minutes she didn't want to talk to me at all. She got out a book and pretended to read it, like I wasn't even there. Whenever I've seen her on the train since then, she does the same thing – acts like she's never met me. I just thought she was rude, standoffish. But now ... well, I'm sure it was something else."

"Like what?" Jenn asked.

The woman let out a grunt of disapproval.

"Well, you're the people in law enforcement. You tell me. But she was hiding something. I'll bet she was mixed up in something illegal. Something that got her killed. And now ..."

She shivered all over.

"Do you think I'm in any danger?" she asked again, peering nervously around the room.

"Why would you think that?" Bill asked.

Sarah Dillon looked like she could hardly believe the question.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? There were other people on that train. Lots of people. None of them are exactly friendly these days. And ever since I talked to her, I've noticed some of them looking at me strangely. Any one of them might have been the killer. She didn't tell me what she was mixed up in, I don't know anything about it. But the killer doesn't know that. He might think she actually told me something – something he doesn't want me to know."

Riley suppressed a sigh of impatience.

She said, "I really doubt that you're in any danger, Ms. Dillon."

The fact was, Riley was quite sure of it. The woman was paranoid, pure and simple.

"But you don't *know* that," the woman said, her voice growing more shrill. "You can't know for sure. And I've got such a terrible feeling. You've got to do something. You've got to protect me."

Chief Powell got up and patted her gently on the shoulder.

"You wait here for just a moment, ma'am," he said. "I'll be right back."

The woman nodded, then sat silently. She looked as if she were on the verge of tears.

The police chief quickly returned with a uniformed policeman.

He said to the woman, "This is Officer Ring. He'll watch after you for a while. Right now, you should just go home. Officer Ring will make sure you get there safely."

The woman let out a gasp of relief. She got up from her chair and left the room with the policeman, gazing happily up at him as he held the door for her.

Bill shook his head and said to Chief Powell, "What are you going to do? Give her round-the-clock protection? Because that's just going to be a waste of time and resources."

Powell chuckled slightly.

"Don't worry," he said. "Landry Ring has got a calming effect on people. He's almost uncanny that way. That's why I picked him to take her home. By the time they get there, I'll bet Landry will have her convinced that she's in no danger at all."

Jenn was frowning.

“That sure was a waste of time,” she said.

Maybe, Riley thought.

But she had a nagging gut feeling about what the “witness” had just said ...

“Something was very wrong about that woman.”

... and ...

“She was hiding something.”

Riley sensed that Sarah Dillon might not be altogether wrong.

She asked Powell and Cullen, “Did Reese Fisher have any family members living here in Barnwell?”

Powell said, “Just her husband, Chase. A local chiropractor.”

“And has he been interviewed?”

“Of course,” Bull Cullen said. “Chief Powell here and I both talked to him. He’s got a clean alibi – he was in his office this morning when it happened.”

“I want to talk to him again,” Riley said.

Cullen and Powell glanced at each other with surprise.

Powell said, “I’m not sure what good that will do. He’s pretty shaken up about all this.”

Riley wasn’t sure what she expected to find out. But if Reese Fisher was harboring some sort of secret, her husband might be able to tell them what it was.

“I want to see him,” Riley insisted. “Right now.”

CHAPTER NINE

The railroad's deputy police chief looked thoroughly annoyed by Riley's request to re-interview Reese Fisher's husband. But Riley was in no mood to back down.

Bull Cullen said, "When I asked you FBI guys to come out here, I didn't expect you to waste my time."

Feeling her temper escalate, Riley pressed her lips together to prevent snapping back at the man. She heard Bill let out a low grumble beside her.

Before Riley could think of a civil response, Jenn spoke up. The young agent sounded just as condescending and patronizing as Cullen had been toward her back at the crime scene.

"Oh, we won't interfere with your excellent work, *sir*. Just give us a car and we'll go see Mr. Fisher on our own. We'll get out of your way for a while. You and your team can keep right on doing the really important stuff. You might start by booking a comfortable place for those three men back in the interview room to stay the night."

Cullen grimaced at Jenn's obvious contempt for him.

"I'll do that," he said, puffing up his considerable physique in an attempt to exert male authority. "And I'll book a place for the three of you as well. Meanwhile, Chief Powell here will show you to a vehicle."

Powell's heavy, bloodhound-like jowls hung in an expression of bewilderment as he watched Cullen stalk away. Riley knew what Powell must be thinking. Surely he was worried that an FBI team and the railroad police were starting to look like a bad mix, and he was going to get caught in the middle of an ugly situation.

Finally Powell shook his head and led Riley and her team outside to a parked vehicle. He gave them the keys and directions to the Fisher home.

As Riley drove, she said, "Jenn, I don't blame you for not liking Deputy Chief Cullen, but –"

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