

The background of the entire cover is a monochromatic, grayscale image. It depicts a multitude of human hands, palms facing upwards, as if they are trapped and reaching for freedom. The hands are scattered across the frame, with some in sharp focus and others blurred, creating a sense of depth and movement. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the individual fingers.

BLAKE PIERCE

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #13

ONCE  
TRAPPED

# Блейк Пирс

## Once Trapped

Серия «A Riley Paige Mystery», книга 13

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*ONCE TRAPPED:*

*ISBN 9781640293670*

### Аннотация

“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 TRAPPED* is book #13 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 dark psychological thriller, a wealthy husband turns up dead, and his abused wife is charged with the crime. She calls Riley for help—and yet it seems clear she is guilty.

But when another wealthy, abusive husband turns up dead, the FBI is called in, and FBI special agent Riley Paige wonders: is this all a coincidence? Or could this be the work of a serial killer?

What ensues is a game of cat and mouse, as Riley Paige realizes she is up against a brilliant and unpredictable killer, one without a clear motive—and one determined to keep on killing until he is caught.

An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **ONCE TRAPPED** is book #13 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #14 in the Riley Paige series will be available soon.

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# **Blake Pierce**

# **ONCE TRAPPED**

**Blake Pierce**

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fourteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising eight books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; and of the new MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, which begins with WATCHING.

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

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# PROLOGUE

Morgan Farrell had no idea where she was or where she had just come from. She felt as if she were stepping out of a deep, thick fog. Something or someone was right there in front of her.

She leaned forward, staring, and saw a woman's face staring back at her. The woman looked just as lost and confused as Morgan felt.

"Who are you?" she asked the woman.

The face mouthed the words in unison with her, and then Morgan realized ...

*My reflection.*

She was looking at her own face in a mirror.

She felt stupid not to have recognized herself right away, but not completely surprised.

*My reflection.*

She knew she was looking at her own face in a mirror, but it felt like looking at a stranger. This was the face she'd always had, the face that people called elegant and beautiful. Now it looked artificial to her.

The face in the mirror didn't look quite ... alive.

For a few moments, Morgan wondered if she had died. But she could feel her slightly ragged breathing. She felt her heart beating a little fast.

No, she wasn't dead. But she seemed to be lost.

She tried to pull her thoughts together.

*Where am I?*

*What was I doing before I got here?*

Weird as she felt about not knowing, it was a familiar problem. This wasn't the first time she'd found herself in some part of the huge house without knowing how she'd gotten there. Her sleepwalking spells were caused by the multiple tranquilizers the doctor had prescribed, plus too much scotch.

Morgan only knew one thing—Andrew had better not see her looking like she looked right now. She had no makeup on, and her hair was a mess. She lifted a hand to push a strand of hair off her forehead, then saw ...

*My hand.*

*It's red.*

*It's covered with blood.*

She watched as the mouth on the reflected face dropped open with shock.

Then she lifted her other hand.

It was also red with blood.

With a shudder of revulsion, she impulsively wiped her hands on the front of her clothing.

Then her horror mounted. She had just smeared blood on her extremely expensive silk nightgown.

Andrew would be furious if he found out.

But how was she going to clean herself up?

She glanced around, then hastily reached for a hand towel

hanging next to the mirror. As she tried to clean her hands with it, she saw the monogram ...

*AF*

This was her husband's towel.

She forced herself to focus on her surroundings ... the plush monogrammed towels ... the shimmering gold-colored walls.

She was in her husband's bathroom.

Morgan sighed with despair.

Her nighttime wanderings had taken her into her husband's bedroom a few times before. If she woke him up, he was always furious at her for violating his privacy.

And now she had wandered all the way through his bedroom into his adjoining bathroom.

She shivered. Her husband's punishments were always cruel.

*What's he going to do to me this time?* she thought.

Morgan shook her head, trying to pull herself out of her mental fog. Her head was splitting and she felt nauseous. Obviously she'd had a lot to drink on top of too many tranquilizers. And now, not only had she gotten blood all over one of Andrew's precious towels, she saw that she had made prints all over the white bathroom counter. There was even blood on the marble floor.

*Where did all this blood come from?* she asked herself.

A strange possibility occurred to her ...

*Did I try to kill myself?*

She couldn't remember doing that, but it certainly seemed possible. She'd contemplated suicide more than once since she'd been married to Andrew. And if she ever did die by her own hand, she wouldn't be the first to do so in this house.

Mimi, Andrew's wife before Morgan, had committed suicide. So had his son Kirk, just last November.

She almost smiled with bitter irony ...

*Did I just try to continue the family tradition?*

She stepped back to get a better look at herself.

*All this blood ...*

But she didn't seem to be wounded anywhere.

So where had the blood come from?

She turned and saw that the door leading into Andrew's bedroom was wide open.

*Is he in there?* she wondered.

Had he slept through whatever had happened?

She breathed a little easier at the possibility. If he was sleeping that soundly, maybe she could get away without him noticing that she'd been here.

But then she stifled a groan as she realized it wasn't going to be that easy. There was still all this blood to deal with.

If Andrew came into his bathroom and found this terrible mess, of course he'd know that she was somehow to blame.

She was always to blame for everything as far as he was concerned.

Her panic rising, she began to wipe the counter with the towel. But that was no good. All she was doing was smearing the blood all over the place. She needed water to clean things up.

She almost turned on the faucet in the sink when she realized the sound of running water would surely wake Andrew up. She thought maybe she could softly close the bathroom door and run the water as quietly as she could.

She crept on tiptoe across the enormous bathroom toward the door. When she got there, she cautiously peeked out into the bedroom.

She gasped aloud at what she saw.

The lights were turned low, but there was no mistaking Andrew lying there in bed.

He was covered with blood. The sheets were covered in blood. There was even blood on the carpeted floor.

Morgan rushed over to the bed.

Her husband's eyes were wide open in an expression of frozen terror.

*He's dead*, she realized. She hadn't died, but Andrew had.

Had *he* committed suicide?

No, that was impossible. Andrew had nothing but contempt for people who took their own lives—including his wife and son.

*"Not serious people,"* he'd often said about them.

And Andrew had always prided himself on being a serious person.

And he'd always raised that issue with Morgan ...

*“Are you a serious person?”*

As she looked more carefully, she could see that Andrew had bled from many different wounds all over his body. And nestled among the blood-soaked sheets beside his body she saw a large kitchen knife.

*Who could have done this?* Morgan wondered.

Then a weird, euphoric calm fell over her as she realized ...

*I finally did it.*

*I killed him.*

She'd done it in her dreams many times.

And now, at long last, she'd done it for real.

She smiled and said aloud to the corpse ...

*“Who’s a serious person now?”*

But she knew better than to bask in this warm and pleasant feeling. Murder was murder, and she knew that she had to accept the consequences.

But instead of fear or guilt, she felt a deep sense of contentment.

He was a horrible man. And he was dead. Whatever happened now, this was well worth it.

She picked up the phone next to his bed with her sticky hand and almost dialed 911 before she thought ...

*No.*

*There’s someone else I want to tell first.*

It was a kindly woman who had shown concern about her welfare some time ago.

Before she did anything else, she needed to call that woman and tell her that she needn't worry about Morgan anymore.

Everything was just fine at last.

# CHAPTER ONE

Riley noticed that Jilly was twitching a little in her sleep. The fourteen-year-old was in the adjoining seat, with her head resting on Riley's shoulder. Their plane had been in the air for about three hours now, and it would be another couple of hours before they would land in Phoenix.

*Is she dreaming?* Riley wondered.

If so, Riley hoped that the dreams weren't bad.

Jilly had lived through horrific experiences during her short life, and she still had lots of nightmares. She'd seemed especially anxious since that letter from social services in Phoenix had arrived, informing them that Jilly's father wanted his daughter back. Now they were flying to Phoenix for a court date that would settle the matter once and for all.

Riley couldn't help but worry as well. What would become of Jilly if the judge didn't allow her to stay with Riley?

The social worker had said she didn't expect that to happen.

*But what if she was wrong?* Riley wondered.

Jilly's whole body started twitching more sharply. She began moaning quietly.

Riley shook her gently and said, "Wake up, sweetheart. You're having a bad dream."

Jilly sat bolt upright and stared straight ahead for a moment. Then she burst into tears.

Riley put her arm around Jilly and reached into her purse for a tissue.

She asked, “What is it? What were you dreaming about?”

Jilly sobbed wordlessly for a few moments. Then she said, “It was nothing. Don’t worry.”

Riley sighed. She knew that Jilly harbored secrets that she didn’t like to talk about.

She stroked the girl’s dark hair and said, “You can tell me anything, Jilly. You know that.”

Jilly wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

Finally she said, “I was dreaming about something that really happened. A few years ago. My dad was on one of his serious drunks and he was blaming me as usual—for my mother leaving, for his not being able to keep a job. For everything. He told me he wanted me out of his life. He dragged me by the arm to a closet and threw me inside and locked the door and ...”

Jilly fell silent and closed her eyes.

“Please tell me,” Riley said.

Jilly shook herself a little and said, “I was afraid to scream at first, because I thought he’d drag me back out and beat me. He just left me in there, like he’d forgotten all about me. And then ...”

Jilly choked back a sob.

“I don’t know how many hours passed, but everything got real quiet. I thought maybe he’d just passed out or gone to bed or something. But it was like that for a long, long time, and

everything stayed so quiet. Finally I realized that he must have left the house. He did that sometimes. He'd go away for days and I'd never know when he was coming back, or *if* he was coming back."

Riley shuddered as she tried to imagine the poor girl's horror.

Jilly continued, "Finally I started screaming and banging on the door, but of course nobody could hear me, and I couldn't get out. I was alone in that closet for ... I still don't know how long. Several days, probably. I had nothing to eat, and I sure couldn't sleep, and I was so hungry and afraid. I even had to go to the bathroom in there and I had to clean that up later. I started seeing and hearing weird things in the dark—I guess they must have been hallucinations. I guess I kind of lost my mind."

*Small wonder*, Riley thought with horror.

Jilly said, "When I heard noises in the house again, I thought maybe I was just hearing things. I yelled out, and Dad came to the closet and unlocked it. He was stone cold sober now, and he looked surprised to see me. 'How'd you get in there?' he said. He acted all upset that I'd gotten myself into such a mess and treated me OK for a little while after that."

Jilly's voice had faded to a near whisper, and she added, "Do you think he's going to get custody of me?"

Riley gulped down a knot of anxiety. Should she share her own fears with the girl she still hoped to adopt as her own daughter? She couldn't bring herself to do that.

Instead she said ...

“I’m sure he won’t.”

“He’d better not,” Jilly said. “Because if he does, I’ll run away for good. Nobody will ever find me.”

Riley felt a deep chill as she realized ...

*She really means it.*

Jilly had a history of running away from places she didn’t like. Riley remembered all too well how she’d found Jilly in the first place. Riley had been working on a case involving dead prostitutes in Phoenix, and she’d found Jilly in the cab of a truck in a parking lot where prostitutes worked. Jilly had decided to become a prostitute and sell her body to the owner of the truck.

*Would she do anything that desperate again?* Riley wondered.

Riley was horrified by the idea.

Meanwhile, Jilly had calmed down and was drifting back to sleep. Riley nestled the girl’s head against her shoulder again. She tried to stop worrying about the upcoming court date. But she couldn’t shake off her fear of losing Jilly.

Would Jilly even survive if that happened?

And if she did survive, what kind of life would she have?

\*

When the plane landed, four people were waiting to greet Riley and Jilly. One was a familiar face—Brenda Fitch, the social worker who had put Jilly into Riley’s care in the first place. Brenda was a slender, nervous woman with a warm and caring

smile.

Riley didn't recognize the three other people. Brenda hugged Riley and Jilly and made introductions, starting with a middle-aged married couple, both of them stout and smiling.

Brenda said, "Riley, I don't believe you've met Bonnie and Arnold Flaxman. They were Jilly's foster parents for a short while after you rescued her."

Riley nodded, remembering how Jilly had soon run away from the well-meaning couple. Jilly had been determined to live with no one except Riley. Riley hoped that the Flaxmans didn't harbor any hard feelings about that. But they seemed kind and welcoming.

Brenda then introduced Riley to a tall man with a long, oddly shaped head and a somewhat vacuous smile.

Brenda said, "This is Delbert Kaul, who is serving as our attorney. Come on, let's go somewhere to sit down and talk things over."

The group hurried through the concourse to the nearest coffee shop. The adults ordered coffee and Jilly got a soft drink. As they all sat down, Riley remembered that Bonnie Flaxman's brother was Garrett Holbrook, an FBI agent stationed here in Phoenix.

Riley asked, "How's Garrett these days?"

Bonnie shrugged and smiled. "Oh, you know. Garrett is Garrett."

Riley nodded. She remembered the agent as a rather taciturn man with a cold demeanor. But then, she'd been investigating the

murder of Garrett's estranged half-sister. He had been grateful when she solved the murder, and had helped put Jilly into foster care with the Flaxmans. Riley knew that he was a good man beneath his frosty exterior.

Brenda said to Riley, "I'm glad you and Jilly could get here on such short notice. I'd really hoped we'd be finalizing the adoption by now, but as I wrote to you in my letter, we've run into a snag. Jilly's father claims he made the decision to give up Jilly under duress. Not only is he contesting the adoption, he's threatening to charge you with kidnapping—and me as an accomplice."

Looking through some legal papers, Delbert Kaul added, "His case is pretty flimsy, but he is making a nuisance of himself. But don't worry about it. I'm sure we can fix all this tomorrow."

Somehow, Kaul's smile didn't strike Riley as very reassuring. There was something weak and uncertain about him. She found herself wondering just how he'd gotten assigned the case.

Riley noticed that Brenda and Kaul seemed to have an easy rapport. They didn't appear to be a romantic couple, but they did seem to be good friends. Maybe that was why Brenda had hired him.

*Not necessarily a good reason,* Riley thought.

"Who is the judge?" Riley asked him.

Kaul's smile faded a little as he said, "Owen Heller. Not exactly my first choice, but the best we could get under the circumstances."

Riley suppressed a sigh. She was feeling less and less assured.

She hoped Jilly wasn't getting the same feeling.

Kaul then discussed what the group should expect at the hearing. Bonnie and Arnold Flaxman were going to testify about their own experience with Jilly. They would emphasize the girl's need for a stable home environment, which she emphatically could not have with her father.

Kaul said he wished he could get Jilly's older brother to testify, but he had long since disappeared and Kaul hadn't been able to track him down.

Riley was supposed to testify about the kind of life she was able to give Jilly. She had come to Phoenix armed with all sorts of documentation to back up her claims, including financial information.

Kaul tapped his pencil against the table and added, "Now Jilly, you don't *have* to testify—"

Jilly interrupted. "I want to. I'm going to."

Kaul looked a little surprised by the note of determination in Jilly's voice. Riley wished the lawyer seemed as determined as Jilly did.

"Well," Kaul said, "let's consider that settled."

When the meeting ended, Brenda, Kaul, and the Flaxmans left together. Riley and Jilly went to rent a car, and then they drove to a nearby hotel and checked in.

\*

Once they got settled into their hotel room, Riley and Jilly ordered a pizza. The TV played a movie they'd both seen before and didn't pay much attention to. To Riley's relief, Jilly didn't seem the least bit anxious now. They chatted pleasantly about little things, like Jilly's upcoming school year, clothes and shoes, and celebrities in the news.

Riley found it hard to believe that Jilly had been in her life for such a short time. Things seemed so natural and easy between them.

*Like she's always been my daughter,* Riley thought. She realized that was exactly how she felt, but it brought on a renewed burst of anxiety.

Was it all going to end tomorrow?

Riley couldn't bring herself to consider how that would feel.

They were almost finished with their pizza when they were interrupted by a loud signal from Riley's laptop computer.

"Oh, that must be April!" Jilly said. "She promised we'd do a video chat."

Riley smiled and let Jilly take the call from her older daughter. Riley listened idly from across the room as the two girls chattered away like the sisters they'd truly become.

When the girls finished talking, Riley spoke to April while Jilly plopped down on the bed to watch TV. April's face looked

serious and concerned.

She asked, “How are things looking for tomorrow, Mom?”

Glancing across the room, Riley saw that Jilly had gotten interested in the movie again. Riley didn’t think she was really listening to what she and April were saying, but she still wanted to be careful.

“We’ll see,” Riley said.

April spoke in a low voice so Jilly couldn’t hear.

“You look worried, Mom.”

“I guess so,” Riley said, speaking quietly herself.

“You can do this, Mom. I know you can.”

Riley gulped hard.

“I hope so,” she said.

Still speaking softly, April’s voice shook with emotion.

“We can’t lose her, Mom. She can’t go back to that kind of life.”

“I know,” Riley said. “Don’t worry.”

Riley and April stared at each other in silence for a few moments. Riley suddenly felt deeply moved by how mature her fifteen-year-old seemed right now.

*She’s really growing up,* Riley thought proudly.

April finally said, “Well, I’ll let you go. Call me as soon as you know anything.”

“I’ll do that,” Riley said.

She ended the video call and went back to sit on the bed with Jilly. They were just getting to the end of the movie when the

phone rang. Riley felt another wave of worry.

Phone calls hadn't brought good news lately.

She picked up the phone and heard a woman's voice.

"Agent Paige, I'm calling from the Quantico switchboard. We just got a call from a woman in Atlanta and . . . well, I'm not sure how to handle this, but she wants to talk directly to you."

"Atlanta?" Riley asked. "Who is it?"

"Her name is Morgan Farrell."

Riley felt a chill of alarm.

She remembered the woman from a case she'd worked on back in February. Morgan's wealthy husband, Andrew, had briefly been a suspect in a murder case. Riley and her partner, Bill Jeffreys, had interviewed Andrew Farrell at home and had determined that he wasn't the killer she was looking for. Nevertheless, Riley had seen the signs that the man was abusing his wife.

She had silently slipped Morgan an FBI card, but had never heard from her.

*I guess she finally wants help*, Riley thought, picturing the thin, elegant, but timid woman she'd seen in Andrew Farrell's mansion.

But Riley wondered—what was she going to be able to do for anybody under her present circumstances?

In fact, the last thing in the world Riley needed right now was another problem to solve.

The waiting operator asked, "Do you want me to put the call

through?”

Riley hesitated for a second, then said, “Yes, please.”

In a moment, she heard the sound of a woman’s voice.

“Hello, is this Special Agent Riley Paige?”

Now it occurred to her—she couldn’t remember Morgan having said a single word while she’d been there. She’d seemed too terrified of her husband to even speak.

But she didn’t sound terrified right now.

In fact, she sounded rather happy.

*Is this just a social call?* Riley wondered.

“Yes, this is Riley Paige,” she said.

“Well, I just thought I owed you a call. You were very kind to me that day when you visited our home, and you left me your card, and you seemed to be anxious about me. I just wanted to let you know, you don’t need to worry about me anymore. Everything is going to be fine now.”

Riley breathed a little easier.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said. “Did you leave him? Are you getting a divorce?”

“No,” Morgan said cheerfully. “I killed the bastard.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Riley sat down in the nearest chair, her mind reeling as the woman's words echoed in her mind.

*"I killed the bastard."*

Had Morgan really just said that?

Then Morgan asked, "Agent Paige, are you still there?"

"I'm still here," Riley said. "Tell me what happened."

Morgan still sounded eerily calm.

"The thing is, I'm not sure exactly. I've been rather doped up lately, and I tend not to remember things I do. But I killed him, all right. I'm looking right down at his body lying in bed, and he's got knife wounds all over him, and he bled a lot. It looks like I did it with a sharp kitchen knife. The knife is lying right next to him."

Riley struggled to make sense of what she was hearing.

She remembered how unhealthily thin Morgan had looked. Riley had been sure that she was anorexic. Riley knew better than most people how hard it was to stab a person to death. Was Morgan even physically capable of doing such a thing?

She heard Morgan sigh.

"I hate to impose, but I honestly don't know what to do next. I wonder if you could help me."

"Have you told anybody else? Have you called the police?"

"No."

Riley stammered, "I'll ... I'll get right on it."

“Oh, thank you so much.”

Riley was about to tell Morgan to stay on the line while she made a separate call on her own cell phone. But Morgan hung up.

Riley sat there staring into space for a moment. She heard Jilly ask, “Mom, is something wrong?”

Riley looked and saw that Jilly seemed deeply concerned.

She said, “Nothing to concern yourself about, honey.”

Then she grabbed her cell phone and called the police in Atlanta.

\*

Officer Jared Ruhl felt bored and restless as he rode in the passenger seat next to Sergeant Dylan Petrie. It was night, and they were patrolling one of the richest neighborhoods in Atlanta—an area where there was seldom any criminal activity. Ruhl was new to the force, and he was hungry for a taste of action.

Ruhl had all the respect in the world for his African-American partner and mentor. Sergeant Petrie had been on the force for twenty years or more, and he was one of the most seasoned and experienced cops around.

*So why are they wasting us on this beat?* Ruhl wondered.

As if in reply to his unspoken question, a female voice sputtered over the scanner ...

“Four-Frank-thirteen, do you copy?”

Ruhl’s senses sharpened to hear their own vehicle’s

identification.

Petrie answered, "Copy, go ahead."

The dispatcher hesitated, as if she didn't quite believe what she was about to say.

Then she said, "We have a possible one-eighty-seven in the Farrell home. Go to the scene."

Ruhl's mouth dropped open, and he saw Petrie's eyes widen with surprise. Ruhl knew that 187 was the code for a homicide.

*At Andrew Farrell's place?* Ruhl wondered.

He couldn't believe his ears, and Petrie looked as though he couldn't either.

"Say again," Petrie said.

"A possible 187 in the Farrell home. Can you get there?"

Ruhl saw Petrie squint with perplexity.

"Yeah," Petrie said. "Who is the suspect?"

The dispatcher hesitated again, then said, "Mrs. Farrell."

Petrie gasped aloud and shook his head.

"Uh ... is this a joke?" he said.

"No joke."

"Who's my RP?" Petrie asked.

*What does that mean?* Ruhl asked himself.

*Oh, yeah ...*

It meant, "Who reported the crime?"

The dispatcher replied, "A BAU agent called it in from Phoenix, Arizona. I know how strange that sounds, but ..."

The dispatcher fell silent.

Petrie said, “Code Three response?”

Ruhl knew that Petrie was asking whether to use flashing lights and a siren.

The dispatcher asked, “How close are you to the location?”

“Less than a minute,” Petrie said.

“Better keep quiet then. This whole thing is ...”

Her voice faded away again. Ruhl guessed she was concerned that they not draw too much attention to themselves. Whatever was really going on in this luxurious and privileged neighborhood, it was surely best to keep the media out of the loop for as long as they could.

Finally the dispatcher said, “Look, just check it out, OK?”

“Copy,” Petrie said. “We’re on our way.”

Petrie pushed the accelerator and they sped along the quiet street.

Ruhl stared in astonishment as they approached the Farrell mansion. This was the closest he’d ever been to it. The house sprawled in all directions, and it looked to him more like a country club than anybody’s home. The exterior was carefully lit—for protection, no doubt, but also probably to show off its arches and columns and great windows.

Petrie parked the car in the circular drive and stopped the engine. He and Ruhl got out and strode up to the huge front entrance. Petrie rang the doorbell.

After a few moments, a tall, lean man opened the door. Ruhl guessed from his fancy tuxedo-like outfit and his stern, officious

expression that he was the family butler.

He looked surprised to see the two police officers—and not at all pleased.

“May I ask what this is all about?” he asked.

The butler didn’t seem to have any idea that there might be trouble inside that mansion.

Petrie glanced at Ruhl, who sensed what his mentor was thinking ...

*Just a false alarm.*

*Probably a prank call.*

Petrie said to the butler, “Could we speak with Mr. Farrell, please?”

The butler smiled in a supercilious manner.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” he said. “The master is fast asleep, and I have very strict orders—”

Petrie interrupted, “We have reason to be worried about his safety.”

The butler’s eyebrows rose.

“Really?” he said. “I’ll look in on him, if you insist. I’ll try not to waken him. I assure you, he would complain quite vociferously.”

Petrie didn’t ask permission for him and Ruhl to follow the butler into the house. The place was vast inside, with rows of marble columns that eventually led to a red-carpeted staircase with curved, fancy banisters. Ruhl found it harder and harder to believe that anybody could actually live here. It seemed more like

a movie set.

Ruhl and Petrie followed the butler on up the stairs and through a wide hallway to a pair of double doors.

“The master suite,” the butler said. “Wait right here for a moment.”

The butler passed on through the doors.

Then they heard him let out a yelp of horror inside.

Ruhl and Petrie rushed through the doors into a sitting room, and from there into an enormous bedroom.

The butler had already switched on the lights. Ruhl’s eyes almost hurt for a moment from the brightness of the enormous room. Then his eyes fell upon a canopied bed. Like everything else in the house, it too was huge, like something out of a movie. But as big as it was, it was dwarfed by the sheer size of the rest of the room.

Everything in the master bedroom was gold and white—except for the blood all over the bed.

## CHAPTER THREE

The butler was slumped against the wall, staring with a glazed expression. Ruhl himself felt as though the wind had been knocked out of his lungs.

There the man was, lying on the bed—the rich and famous Andrew Farrell, dead and extremely bloody. Ruhl recognized him from seeing him on TV many times.

Ruhl had never seen a murdered corpse before. He'd never expected the sight to seem so weird and unreal.

What made the scene especially bizarre was the woman sitting in an ornate upholstered chair right next to the bed. Ruhl recognized her, too. She was Morgan Farrell—formerly Morgan Chartier, a now-retired famous model. The dead man had turned their marriage into a media event, and he liked to parade her around in public.

She was wearing a flimsy, expensive-looking gown that was streaked with blood. She sat there unmoving, holding a large carving knife. Its blade was bloody, and so was her hand.

“Shit,” murmured Petrie in a stunned voice.

Then Petrie spoke into his microphone.

“Dispatch, this is four-Frank-thirteen calling from the Farrell house. We've got a one-eighty-seven here for real. Send three units, including a homicide unit. Also contact the medical examiner. Better tell Chief Stiles to get over here as well.”

Petrie listened to the dispatcher on his earpiece, then seemed to think for a moment.

“No, don’t make this a Code Three. We need to keep this as quiet as we can for as long as we can.”

During this exchange, Ruhl couldn’t take his eyes off the woman. He’d thought she was beautiful when he’d seen her on TV. Weirdly enough, she seemed just as beautiful to him even now. Even holding a bloody knife in her hand, she looked as delicate and fragile as a china figurine.

She was also as still as if she were made of china—as motionless as the corpse, and apparently unaware that anyone had entered the room. Even her eyes didn’t move as she kept staring at the knife in her hand.

As Ruhl followed Petrie toward the woman, it occurred to him that the scene no longer reminded him of a movie set.

*It’s more like an exhibit in a wax museum,* he thought.

Petrie gently touched the woman on the shoulder and said, “Mrs. Farrell ...”

The woman didn’t seem the least bit startled as she looked up at him.

She smiled and said, “Oh, hello, Officer. I wondered when the police were going to get here.”

Petrie put on a pair of plastic gloves. Ruhl didn’t need to be told to do the same. Then Petrie delicately took the knife out of the woman’s hand and handed it to Ruhl, who carefully bagged the weapon.

As they were doing this, Petrie said to the woman, "Please tell me what happened here."

The woman let out a rather musical chuckle.

"Well, that's a silly question. I killed Andrew. Isn't that obvious?"

Petrie turned to look at Ruhl, as if to ask ...

*Is it obvious?*

On one hand, there didn't seem to be any other explanation for this bizarre scene. On the other hand ...

*She looks so weak and helpless,* Ruhl thought.

He couldn't begin to imagine her doing such a thing.

Petrie said to Ruhl, "Go talk to the butler. Find out what he knows."

While Petrie examined the body, Ruhl went over to the butler, who was still crouched against the wall.

Ruhl said to him, "Sir, could you tell me what happened here?"

The butler opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"Sir," Ruhl repeated.

The butler squinted as if in deep confusion. He said, "I don't know. You arrived and ..."

He fell silent again.

Ruhl wondered ...

*Does he really not know anything at all?*

Maybe the butler was faking his shock and perplexity.

Maybe he was actually the killer.

The possibility reminded Ruhl of the old cliché ...

*"The butler did it."*

The idea might even be funny under different circumstances. But certainly not right now.

Ruhl thought fast, trying to decide what questions to ask the man.

He said, "Is there anybody else in the house?"

The butler replied in a dull voice, "Just the live-in help. Six servants in all aside from myself, three men and three women. Certainly you don't think ...?"

Ruhl had no idea what to think, at least not yet.

He asked the butler, "Is it possible that anyone else is in the house somewhere? An intruder, maybe?"

The butler shook his head.

"I don't see how," he said. "Our security system is of the very best."

*That's not a no,* Ruhl thought. Suddenly he felt quite alarmed.

If the killer was an intruder, might he still be in the house somewhere?

Or might he be slipping away at this very moment?

Then Ruhl heard Petrie talking into his microphone, giving someone instructions on how to find the bedroom in the huge mansion.

It seemed like only seconds until the room was swarming with cops. Among them was Chief Elmo Stiles, a bulky and imposing man. Ruhl was also surprised to see the county District Attorney,

Seth Musil.

The normally smooth and polished DA looked disheveled and disoriented, as if he had just been roused out of bed. Ruhl guessed that the chief had contacted the DA as soon as he'd heard the news, then picked him up and brought him here.

The DA gasped with horror at what he saw and rushed toward the woman.

“Morgan!” he said.

“Hello, Seth,” the woman said, as if pleasantly surprised by his arrival. Ruhl wasn't especially surprised that Morgan Farrell and a high-ranking politician like the DA knew each other. The woman still didn't seem to be aware of much of anything else that was going on around her.

Smiling, the woman said to Musil, “Well, I suppose it's obvious what happened. And I'm sure you're not surprised that —”

Musil hastily interrupted.

“No, Morgan. Don't say anything. Not just yet. Not until we get you a lawyer.”

Sergeant Petrie was already organizing the people in the room.

He said to the butler, “Tell them the layout of the house, every nook and cranny.”

Then he said to the cops, “I want the whole place searched for any intruders or any sign of a break-in. And check in with the live-in staff, make sure they can account for their actions during the last few hours.”

The cops gathered around the butler, who was on his feet now. The butler gave them directions, and the cops left the room. Not knowing what else to do, Ruhl stood next to Sergeant Petrie, looking over the grisly scene. The DA was now standing protectively over the smiling, blood-spattered woman.

Ruhl was still struggling to come to terms with what he was seeing. He reminded himself that this was his first homicide. He wondered ...

*Will I ever be involved in one weirder than this?*

He also hoped that the cops searching the house wouldn't return empty-handed. Maybe they'd come back with the real culprit. Ruhl hated the thought that this delicate, lovely woman was really capable of murder.

Long minutes passed before the cops and the butler returned.

They said they hadn't found any intruders or any sign that anyone had broken into the house. They'd found the live-in staff asleep in their beds and had no reason to think that any of them were responsible.

The medical examiner and his team arrived and began to attend to the body. The huge room was really quite crowded now. At long last, the bloodstained woman of the house seemed to be aware of the bustle of activity.

She got up from her chair and said to the butler, "Maurice, where are your manners? Ask these good people if they'd like anything to eat or drink."

Petrie walked toward her, taking out his handcuffs.

He said to her, “That’s very kind of you, ma’am, but it won’t be necessary.”

Then, in an extremely polite and considerate tone, he began to read Morgan Farrell her rights.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Riley couldn't help but worry as the court session unfolded.

So far, everything seemed to be going smoothly. Riley herself had testified about the kind of home she was trying to make for Jilly, and Bonnie and Arnold Flaxman had testified to Jilly's desperate need for a stable family.

Even so, Riley felt uneasy about Jilly's father, Albert Scarlatti.

She'd never actually seen the man before today. Judging from what Jilly had told her about him, she had pictured a grotesque ogre of a man.

But his actual appearance surprised her.

His once-black hair was heavily streaked with gray, and his dark features were, as she'd expected, ravaged from years of alcoholism. Even so, he seemed perfectly sober right now. He was dressed well but not expensively, and he was kindly and charming with everyone he talked to.

Riley also wondered about the woman sitting at Scarlatti's side and holding his hand. She, too, looked as though she'd lived a hard life. Otherwise, her expression was difficult for Riley to read.

*Who is she?* Riley wondered.

All Riley knew about Scarlatti's wife and Jilly's mother was that she had disappeared many years ago. Scarlatti had often told Jilly that she'd probably died.

This couldn't be her after all these years. Jilly had shown no sign of even knowing this woman. So who was she?

Now it was time for Jilly to speak.

Riley squeezed Jilly's hand reassuringly, and the young teenager took the stand.

Jilly looked small in the big witness chair. Her eyes darted around the courtroom nervously, glancing at the judge, then making eye contact with her father.

The man smiled with what appeared to be sincere affection, but Jilly hastily averted her gaze.

Riley's attorney, Delbert Kaul, asked Jilly how she felt about the adoption.

Riley could see Jilly's whole body shake with emotion.

"I want it more than anything I've ever wanted in my life," Jilly said in an unsteady voice. "I've been so, so happy living with my mom—"

"You mean Ms. Paige," Kaul said, gently interrupting.

"Well, she's my mom now as far as I'm concerned, and that's what I call her. And her daughter, April, is my big sister. Until I started living with them, I had no idea what it would be like—having a real family to love me and care for me."

Jilly seemed to be bravely fighting back her tears.

Riley wasn't sure that she was going to be able to do the same.

Then Kaul asked, "Can you tell the judge a little about what it was like living with your father?"

Jilly looked at her father.

Then she looked at the judge and said, “It was awful.”

She went on to tell the court what she had told Riley yesterday—how her father had locked her in a closet for days. Riley shuddered as she listened to the story all over again. Most of the people in the courtroom seemed to be deeply affected by it. Even her father hung his head.

When she was finished, Jilly was truly in tears.

“Until my new mom came into my life, everyone I loved ended up leaving sooner or later. They couldn’t stand living with Dad because he was so awful to them. My mother, my older brother—even my little puppy, Darby, ran away.”

Riley’s throat tightened. She remembered Jilly crying when she spoke of the puppy she’d lost so many months ago. Jilly still worried about what had become of Darby.

“Please,” she said to the judge. “Please don’t send me back to that. I’m so happy with my new family. Don’t take me away from them.”

Jilly then came back and sat next to Riley again.

Riley squeezed her hand and whispered to her, “You did really well. I’m proud of you.”

Jilly nodded and wiped away her tears.

Then Riley’s attorney, Delbert Kaul, presented the judge with all the necessary papers to finalize the adoption. He was especially emphasizing the consent form signed by Jilly’s father.

As far as Riley could tell, Kaul was doing a reasonably thorough job with the presentation. But his voice and manner

were hardly inspiring, and the judge, a beefy, scowling man with small, beady eyes, didn't seem to be at all impressed.

For a moment, Riley's mind drifted back to the bizarre phone call she'd gotten yesterday from Morgan Farrell. Of course Riley had contacted the police in Atlanta right away. If what the woman had said was true, then surely she was in custody by now. Riley couldn't help wondering what had really happened.

Was it really possible that the fragile woman she'd met in Atlanta had committed murder?

*This is no time to think about all that,* she reminded herself.

When Kaul finished his presentation, Scarlatti's lawyer stood up.

Jolene Paget was a keen-eyed woman in her thirties whose lips seemed to be shaped in a slight but perpetual smirk.

She said to the lawyer, "My client wishes to contest this adoption."

The judge nodded and growled, "I know he does, Ms. Paget. Your client had better have a good reason for wanting change his own decision."

Riley immediately noticed that, unlike her own lawyer, Paget wasn't referring to any notes. Also unlike Kaul, her voice and demeanor exuded self-confidence.

She said, "Mr. Scarlatti has very good reason, your honor. He gave his consent under duress. He was going through an especially hard time and didn't have a job. And yes, he was drinking back then. And he was depressed."

Paget nodded toward Brenda Fitch, who was also sitting in the courtroom, and added, “He was easy prey to pressure from social services personnel, especially this woman. Brenda Fitch threatened to bring him up on charges for entirely made-up crimes and offenses.”

Brenda let out a sharp gasp of outrage. She said to Paget, “That’s not true and you know it.”

Paget’s smirk broadened as she said, “Your honor, would you kindly tell Ms. Fitch not to interrupt?”

“Please keep quiet, Ms. Fitch,” the judge said.

Paget added, “My client also wishes to bring charges of kidnapping against Ms. Paige—with Ms. Fitch as an accessory.”

Brenda let out an audible groan of disgust, but Riley forced herself to keep quiet. She’d known all along that Paget was going to pursue this issue.

The judge said, “Ms. Paget, you’ve presented no evidence of kidnapping by anybody. As for the duress and threats you mentioned, you’ve offered no proof or evidence. You’ve said nothing to persuade me that your client’s initial consent shouldn’t still stand.”

Albert Scarlatti then got to his feet.

“May I say a few words on my own behalf, your honor?” he begged.

When the judge nodded his approval, Riley felt a new jolt of concern.

Scarlatti hung his head and spoke in a low, quiet voice.

“What Jilly told you just now about what I did to her—I know it sounds awful. And Jilly, I’m awfully sorry. But the truth is, that’s not exactly how it happened.”

Riley had to stop herself from interrupting him. She was sure that Jilly hadn’t lied about this.

Albert Scarlatti chuckled a bit sadly. A warm smile spread across his worn features.

“Jilly, surely you’ll admit that you’ve been a handful to raise. You can be a challenge, little daughter. You’ve got a temper, and you’d get completely out of control sometimes, and I just didn’t know what to do that day. The way I remember it, I was just plain desperate when I put you in that closet.”

He shrugged a little and continued, “But it wasn’t like you said. I’d never have put you through something like that for days. Not even for a few hours. I’m not saying you’re not telling the truth, just that your imagination sometimes runs away with you. And I understand that.”

Then Scarlatti turned his attention to the others in the courtroom.

He said, “A lot has happened since I lost my little Jilly. I’ve cleaned myself up. I’ve been in rehab and I go to AA regularly, and I haven’t had a drink in months. I hope never to have a drink again for the rest of my life. And I’ve got a steady job—nothing really impressive, just janitorial work, but it’s a good job, and I can give you a reference from my employer that I’m doing just fine.”

Then he touched the mysterious woman he'd been sitting next to on the shoulder.

“But there's been another big change in my life. I met Barbara Long here, the most wonderful woman in the world, and she's the best thing that ever happened to me. We're engaged to be married later this month.”

The woman smiled at him with glistening eyes.

Scarlatti spoke directly to Jilly now.

“That's right, Jilly. No more single-parent family. You're going to have a father and a mother—a real mother after all these years.”

Riley felt like a knife had been plunged in her chest.

*Jilly just said that I'm her real mom*, she thought. But what could she say about that single-parent crack? Her divorce from Ryan had been final even before she found Jilly.

Scarlatti then directed his attention to Brenda Fitch.

He said, “Ms. Fitch, my lawyer just said some pretty tough things about you just now. I just want you to know that I don't have any hard feelings. You've been doing your job, and I know that. I just want you to know how much I've changed.”

Then he looked Riley straight in the eye.

“Ms. Paige, I've got no hard feelings toward you either. In fact, I'm grateful for everything you did to take care of Jilly while I was trying to get myself together. I know it couldn't have been easy for you, being single and all. And with a teenager of your own to take care of.”

Riley opened her mouth to protest, but Albert went on speaking warmly. “I know you care about her, and you needn’t worry. I’ll be a good father to Jilly from now on. And I’ll want you to keep on being a part of Jilly’s life.”

Riley was stunned. She now realized why his lawyer had threatened to bring charges of kidnapping in the first place.

*It’s classic good cop, bad cop.*

Jolene Paget had presented herself as a cutthroat attorney prepared to go to any lengths to win her case. She’d cleared the way for Scarlatti to come across as the nicest guy in the world.

And he was very convincing. Riley couldn’t help but wonder

...

*Is he really a nice guy after all?*

*Was he really just going through a bad stretch?*

Worst of all—might she be wrong in trying to take Jilly away from him? Was she doing nothing except adding unnecessary trauma to Jilly’s life?

Finally Scarlatti looked pleadingly at the judge.

“Your honor, I beg you, please let me have my daughter back. She is my flesh and blood. You won’t regret your decision. I promise.”

A tear trickled down his cheek as he sat back down.

His lawyer stood up, looking more smug and confident than ever.

She spoke to Jilly with a tone of oily, fake sincerity.

“Jilly, I hope you understand that your father wants only what’s

best for you. I know you've had troubles with him in the past, but tell me the truth now—isn't that a pattern with you?"

Jilly looked puzzled.

Paget continued, "I'm sure you won't deny that you ran away from your father, and that's how Riley Paige found you in the first place."

Jilly said, "I know, but that was because—"

Paget interrupted, pointing to the Flaxmans.

"And didn't you also run away from this nice couple when they took you in?"

Jilly's eyes widened and she nodded silently.

Riley swallowed hard. She knew what Paget was going to say next.

"And didn't you once even run away from Ms. Paige and her family?"

Jilly nodded and hung her head miserably.

And of course it was true. Riley remembered all too well how hard it had been for Jilly to adjust to life in her home—and especially how she'd struggled with feelings of unworthiness. In an especially weak moment, Jilly had run off to another truck stop, thinking that selling her body was all she was good for.

"*I'm nobody*," Jilly had told Riley when the police brought her back.

The lawyer had done her research well, but Jilly had changed so much since then. Riley was sure that those days of insecurity were over.

Still maintaining a tone of deep concern, Paget said to Jilly ...

“Sooner or later, dear, you’ve got to accept the help of people who care about you. And right now, your father wants more than anything else to give you a good life. I think you owe it to him to give him a chance to do that.”

Turning to the judge, Paget added, “Your honor, I leave the matter to you.”

For the first time, the judge seemed to be genuinely moved.

He said, “Mr. Scarlatti, your eloquent comments have forced me to reconsider my decision.

Riley gasped aloud.

*Is this really happening?*

The judge continued, “Arizona statute is very clear on the matter of severance. The first consideration is the fitness of the parents. The second consideration is the best interests of the child. Only if the parent is deemed unfit can the second consideration be brought into question.”

He paused to think for a moment.

“Mr. Scarlatti’s unfitness has not been established here today. I think rather to the contrary, he seems to be doing everything he can to become an excellent father.”

Looking alarmed, Kaul stood up and spoke sharply.

“Your honor, I object. Mr. Scarlatti gave up his rights voluntarily, and this is completely unexpected. The agency had no reason to bring evidence to establish his unfitness.”

The judge spoke with a note of finality and rapped his gavel.

“Then I have no reason to consider anything further. Custody is granted to the father, effective immediately.”

Riley couldn't help letting out a cry of despair.

*This is real*, she thought.

*I'm losing Jilly.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

Riley was almost hyperventilating as she tried to grasp what was happening.

*Surely I can contest this decision*, she thought.

The agency and the lawyer could easily put together some solid evidence of Scarlatti's abusive behavior.

But what would happen in the meantime?

Jilly would never stay with her father. She would run away again—and this time she might really disappear.

Riley might never see her youngest daughter again.

Still sitting at the bench, the judge said to Jilly, "Young lady, I think you should go to your father now."

To Riley's surprise, Jilly looked utterly calm.

She squeezed Riley's hand and whispered . . .

"Don't worry, Mom. This is going to be all right."

She walked over to where Scarlatti and his fiancée were now standing. Albert Scarlatti's smile seemed warm and welcoming.

Just as her father held out his arms to hug her, Jilly said, "I've got something to say to you."

A curious expression crossed Scarlatti's face.

Jilly said, "You killed my brother."

"Wh-what?" Scarlatti stammered. "No, that's not true, and you know it. Your brother Norbert ran away. I've told you lots of times—"

Jilly interrupted him.

“No, I’m not talking about my big brother. I don’t even remember him. I’m talking about my little brother.”

“But you never had a—”

“No, I never had a little brother. Because you killed him.”

Scarlatti’s mouth dropped open and his face reddened.

Her voice shaking with anger, Jilly continued, “I guess you think I don’t remember my mother, because I was so little when she left. But I do remember. I remember she was pregnant. I remember you yelling at her. You hit her in the stomach. I saw you do it, again and again. Then she was sick. And then she wasn’t pregnant anymore. She told me it was a boy, and he would have been my little brother, but you killed him.”

Riley was staggered by what Jilly was saying. She had no doubt that every word of it was true.

*I wish she could have told me,* she thought.

But of course, Jilly must have found it too painful to talk about—until this very moment.

Jilly was sobbing now. She said, “Mommy cried a lot when she told me. She said she had to go away, or you’d kill her sooner or later. And she did go away. And I never saw her again.”

Scarlatti’s face was knotting up in an ugly expression. Riley could see that he was struggling with his rage.

He growled, “Girl, you don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re imagining the whole thing.”

Jilly said, “She was wearing her pretty blue dress that day. The

one she really liked. See, I do remember. I saw the whole thing.”

Jilly’s words were pouring out in a desperate torrent.

“You kill everything and everybody sooner or later. You can’t help it. I’ll bet you even lied when you told me my puppy ran away. You probably killed Darby too.”

Scarlatti was shaking all over now.

Jilly’s words kept flowing out, “My mother did the right thing by running away, and I hope she’s happy, wherever she is. And if she’s dead—well, she’s still better off than she would be with you.”

Scarlatti let out a roar of fury. “Shut up, you little bitch!”

He grabbed Jilly by the shoulder with one hand and slapped her across the face with the other.

Jilly cried out and tried to pull away from him.

Riley was on her feet, rushing toward Scarlatti. Before she got there, two security officers had grabbed the man by the arms.

Jilly broke free and ran to Riley.

The judge pounded his gavel and everything got quiet. He looked around the courtroom as if he couldn’t believe what had just happened.

For a moment, he just sat there, breathing heavily.

Then he looked at Riley and said, “Ms. Paige, I think I owe you an apology. I made the wrong decision just now, and I rescind it.”

He glared at Scarlatti and added, “Another sound from you and I’ll put you under arrest.”

Looking at the others in the room, the judge said firmly,

“There will be no further hearings. This is my final determination on this adoption. Custody is awarded to the adoptive mother.”

He rapped his gavel again and got up and left the courtroom without another word.

Riley turned and looked at Scarlatti. His dark eyes were furious, but the two security officers were still standing beside him. He glanced at his fiancée, who was looking on in horror. Then Scarlatti hung his head and just stood there quietly.

Jilly threw herself into Riley’s arms, sobbing.

Riley held her close and said, “You’re a brave girl, Jilly. I’m never going to let you go, no matter what happens. You can count on it.”

\*

Jilly’s cheek was still stinging as Riley wrapped up a few details with Brenda and the lawyer. But it seemed like a good kind of hurting and she knew it would soon go away. She’d told the truth about something she’d kept to herself for much too long. As a result, she was free from her father forever.

Riley—her new mom—drove her back to their hotel room, where they packed up quickly and drove to the airport. They arrived in plenty of time for their flight home and checked their bags so they wouldn’t have to lug them around. Then they went together to a restroom.

Jilly stood looking in a mirror while her mom was in a nearby

stall.

A slight bruise was forming on the side of her face where her father had hit her. But it was going to be OK now.

Her father could never hurt her again. And all because she'd come out and told the truth about her little lost brother at last. That was all it had taken to turn everything around.

She smiled a little as she remembered Mom saying to her ...

*"You're a brave girl, Jilly."*

*Yes, Jilly thought. I guess I am pretty brave.*

## CHAPTER SIX

When Riley came out of the restroom, she didn't see Jilly anywhere.

The first thing she felt was a flash of anger.

She remembered telling Jilly clearly ...

*"Wait right outside the door. Don't go anywhere."*

And now she was nowhere in sight.

*That girl*, Riley thought.

She wasn't worried about missing their flight. They had plenty of time before boarding. But she had hoped to take things slow and easy after such a hard day. She'd planned for them to go on through security, find their gate, and then find a nice place to eat.

Riley sighed with discouragement.

Even after Jilly's courageous actions in the courtroom, Riley couldn't help but be disappointed by this new display of immaturity.

She knew that if she went searching for Jilly in the big terminal, they'd probably go on missing each other time and time again. She looked for a place to sit and wait for Jilly to come back, which she surely would do sooner or later.

But as Riley gazed around the big, open terminal building, she caught a glimpse of Jilly going through one of the glass doors that led outside.

Or at least she *thought* it was Jilly—it was hard to be sure from

where Riley was standing.

And who was that woman that the girl seemed to be with?

It looked like Barbara Long, Albert Scarlatti's fiancée.

But the two people disappeared quickly among the travelers milling about outside.

Riley felt a tingle of apprehension. Had her eyes been playing tricks on her?

No, she was now pretty sure of what she'd seen.

But what was going on? Why would Jilly be going anywhere with that woman?

Riley got moving. She knew there was no time to make sense of this. Breaking into a trot, she instinctively reached under her lightweight jacket and patted the gun she wore in her shoulder holster.

She was stopped by a uniformed security guard who stepped in front of her.

He spoke in a calm, professional voice. "Are you drawing a weapon, ma'am?"

Riley let out a groan of frustration.

She said, "Sir, I don't have time for this."

She could tell by the guard's expression that she'd only confirmed his suspicion.

He drew his own weapon and moved toward her. Out of the corner of her eye, Riley saw that another guard had spotted the activity and was also approaching.

"Let me by," Riley snapped, showing both of her hands. "I'm

an FBI agent.”

The guard with the gun didn't reply. Riley guessed that he didn't believe her. And she knew he was trained not to believe her. He was just doing his job.

The second guard looked like he was now about to frisk her.

Riley was losing precious time. Given her superior training, she calculated that she could probably disarm the guard with the gun before he could fire. But the last thing she needed right now was to get into a needless hassle with a pair of well-meaning security guards.

Forcing herself to stand still, she said, “Look, just let me show you my ID.”

The two guards glanced at each other warily.

“OK,” the guard with the gun said. “But slowly.”

Riley carefully pulled out her badge and showed it to them.

Their mouths dropped open.

“I'm in a hurry,” Riley said.

The guard standing in front of her nodded and holstered his gun.

Gratefully, she broke into a run across the terminal and dashed through the glass doors to the outside.

Riley looked all around. Neither Jilly nor the woman were anywhere in sight.

But then she spotted her daughter's face in the back window of an SUV. Jilly looked alarmed, and her hands were pressing against the glass.

Even worse, the vehicle was starting to pull away.

Riley broke into a desperate run.

Luckily, the SUV bounced to a halt. A vehicle ahead of it had stopped for pedestrians and the SUV was trapped behind it.

Riley reached the driver's side before the SUV could pull away again.

And there was Albert Scarlatti in the driver's seat.

She pulled out her gun and pointed it through the window, directly at his head.

"It's over, Scarlatti," she yelled at the top of her lungs.

But before she knew it, Scarlatti swung his door open, slamming it into her. The gun fell out of her hand and clattered to the pavement.

Riley was furious now—not just at Scarlatti, but at herself for misjudging the distance between herself and the door. For once she'd let her panic get the best of her.

But she recovered her wits in a split-second.

This man was not going to get away with Jilly.

Before Scarlatti could slam the door shut again, Riley jammed her arm inside to block it. Although the door hit her arm painfully, it couldn't close.

Riley yanked the door wide open and saw that Scarlatti hadn't bothered to fasten his seat belt.

She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him, cursing and struggling, out of the car.

He was a big man, and stronger than she'd expected. He pulled

loose from her and raised his fist to punch her in the face. But Riley was faster. She hit him hard in the solar plexus and heard the wind burst out of his lungs as he buckled forward. Then she hit him in the back of the head.

He fell flat on his face on the pavement.

Riley retrieved her gun from where it had fallen and put it back into her holster.

By then, several security guards were scurrying around her. Fortunately, one of them was the man she'd faced inside the terminal.

"It's OK," the man yelled to the other guards. "She's FBI."

The worried guards obediently kept their distance.

Now Riley heard Jilly yell from inside the car ...

"Mom! Open the back!"

When Riley stepped over to the vehicle, she saw that the woman, Barbara Long, was sitting in the front passenger seat, looking terrified.

Without a word, Riley touched the unlock switch that controlled all the doors.

Jilly threw the hatch open and climbed out of the car.

Barbara Long opened the door on her side, looking as if she hoped to slip away. But one of the guards stopped her before she could take two steps.

Looking utterly defeated, Scarlatti was trying to crawl back to his feet.

Riley wondered ...

*What should I do with this guy? Arrest him? And her?*

It seemed like a waste of time and energy. Besides, she and Jilly might be stuck here in Phoenix for days pressing charges against him.

While she was trying to make up her mind, she heard Jilly's voice behind her ...

"Mom, look!"

Riley turned around and saw Jilly holding a small, big-eared dog in her arms.

"You could just let that old ex-dad go," Jilly said, with a mischievous grin. "After all, he *did* bring my dog back. Wasn't that nice of him?"

"That's ..." Riley sputtered in astonishment, trying to remember the name of the puppy Jilly had talked about.

"This is Darby," Jilly said proudly. "Now she can go home with us."

Riley hesitated for a long moment, then felt her face break out into a smile.

She looked around at the guards and said, "Deal with this guy however you like. And his girlfriend too. My daughter and I have got a plane to catch."

Riley led Jilly and the dog away from the perplexed-looking guards.

"Come on," she said to Jilly. "We've got to find ourselves a pet carrier. And explain this to the airline."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

As their plane descended into DC, Riley sat with Jilly snuggled against her shoulder, napping. Even the little dog, nervous and whiny at the beginning of the flight, had settled down quickly. Darby was curled up and sleeping quietly in the carrier they'd hastily bought from the airline. Jilly had explained to Riley that Barbara Long had approached her outside the restroom and convinced her to go with her to get Darby, claiming she hated dogs and wanted Jilly to have her. When she got to the car, Barbara shoved her inside and locked the doors, and they took off.

Now that the whole ordeal was over, Riley found herself thinking again about that weird phone call from Morgan Farrell last night ...

*"I killed the bastard,"* Morgan had said.

Riley had called the Atlanta police right away, but she hadn't heard any news since from them, and she hadn't had time to check back and find out what had happened.

She wondered—had Morgan been telling the truth, or had Riley sent the cops on a false alarm?

Was Morgan now in custody?

The whole idea of the fragile-looking woman killing anybody at all still struck Riley as very hard to believe.

But Morgan had been most insistent.

Riley remembered her saying ...

*"I'm looking right down at his body lying in bed, and he's got knife wounds all over him, and he bled a lot."*

Riley knew all too well that even the mildest and unlikeliest people could be driven to violent extremes. It usually happened because of some twist in their own makeup, something repressed and hidden that burst forth under extreme circumstances, causing them to commit seemingly inhuman acts.

Morgan had also told her, *"I've been rather doped up lately."*

Maybe Morgan had just fantasized or hallucinated the whole thing.

Riley reminded herself ...

*Whatever happened, it's none of my concern.*

It was time for her to focus on her own family, which now included two daughters—and to Riley's own surprise, a dog.

And wasn't it also time for her to get back to work?

But Riley couldn't help thinking that after today's courtroom and airport dramas, maybe she deserved a good rest break. Shouldn't she take another day of leave before returning to Quantico?

Riley sighed as she realized ...

*Probably not.*

Her work was important to her. She thought it might be important to the world at large. But then, thinking that way worried her. What kind of parent worked day in and day out pursuing the most vicious monsters alive, sometimes finding

more than a little of a monster in herself in the process?

She knew that she sometimes couldn't help bringing her grim work home with her, at times even in the direst possible way. Her cases had sometimes put the lives of people she loved in danger.

*But it's what I do*, she thought.

And deep down, she knew that it was good work that had to be done. Somehow, she owed it even to her daughters to keep doing it—not only to protect them from monsters, but to show them how monsters could be defeated.

She needed to keep on being an example to them.

*It's best this way*, she thought.

As the plane came to a stop at the concourse, Riley gave Jilly a little shake.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” she said. “We're here.”

Jilly grumbled and groaned a little, and then her face broke into a grin as she saw the dog in its case. Darby had just woken up herself and was looking at Jilly and wagging her tail happily.

Then Jilly looked at Riley with joy in her eyes.

“We really did it, didn't we, Mom?” she said. “We won.”

Riley hugged Jilly tightly and said, “We sure did, dear. You're really and truly my daughter now, and I'm your mom. And nothing's ever going to change that.”

\*

When Riley, Jilly, and the dog arrived at their townhouse,

April was waiting for them right at the door. Just inside were Blaine, Riley's divorced boyfriend, and his fifteen-year-old daughter, Crystal, who was also April's best friend. The family's Guatemalan housekeeper, Gabriela, stood watching nearby.

Riley and Jilly had reported their good news from Phoenix and they had called again when they had landed and were on the way home, but she hadn't mentioned the puppy. The whole crowd was there to welcome Jilly, but after a moment April leaned over to look at the carrier that Riley had put on the floor.

"What's that?" she asked.

Jilly just giggled.

"It's something alive," Crystal said.

Jilly opened the top of the carrier and there was Darby, looking wide-eyed and a little worried at all the faces surrounding her.

"Omigod, omigod, omigod!" Crystal yelled.

"We've got a dog!" April squealed. "We've got a dog!"

Riley laughed as she remembered how calm and collected April had seemed when they'd talked just the night before. Now all that adult maturity had suddenly vanished, and April was acting like a little girl again. It was wonderful to see.

Jilly lifted Darby out of the carrier. It didn't take the little dog very long to begin enjoying all the attention.

As the girls continued fussing noisily over the dog, Blaine asked Riley, "How did things go? Is everything really all settled?"

"Yes," Riley told him, smiling. "It's really over. Jilly is legally

mine.”

Everybody else was too excited about the dog to talk about the adoption at the moment.

“What’s her name?” April said, holding up the dog.

“Darby,” Jilly told April.

“Where did you get her?” Crystal asked.

Riley chuckled and said, “Well, that’s quite a story. Give us a few minutes to settle in before we tell it.”

“What breed is she?” April asked.

“Part Chihuahua, I think,” Jilly said.

Gabriela took the dog out of April’s hands and examined it carefully.

“Yes, some Chihuahua, and she’s got some other kinds of dog in her,” the stout woman said. “What is the word in English for a mix of dogs?”

“A mutt,” Blaine said.

Gabriela nodded sagely and said, “Yes, you’ve got a real mutt here—*auténtico*, the real thing. A mutt is the best kind of dog. This one still has a little growing to do, but she will stay pretty small. *¡Bienvenidos! Darby. ¡Nuestra casa es tuya también!* This is your home too!”

She handed the puppy to Jilly and said, “She’ll need some water now, and food after everything calms down. I have some leftover chicken we can give her later, but we’ll have to buy some real dog food soon.”

Following Gabriela’s instructions on how to set up a place for

Darby, the girls hurried upstairs to Jilly's room to make a bed and put down old newspapers in case she had to go to the bathroom during the night.

Meanwhile, Gabriela put food on the table—a delicious Guatemalan dish called *pollo encebollado*, chicken in onion sauce. Soon everybody sat down to eat.

Himself a chef and restaurant owner, Blaine praised the meal and asked Gabriela all kinds of questions about it. Then the conversation turned to all that had happened in Phoenix. Jilly insisted on telling the whole story herself. Blaine, Crystal, April, and Gabriela all sat with their mouths agape as they heard about the wild scene in the courtroom, and then the still wilder adventure at the airport.

And of course, everybody was delighted to hear about the new dog that had come into their lives.

*We're a family now, Riley thought. And it's great to be home.*

It was also going to be great to get back to work tomorrow.

After dessert, Blaine and Crystal went home, and April and Jilly went to the kitchen to feed Darby. Riley poured herself a drink and sat down in the living room.

She felt herself relaxing more and more. It really had been a crazy day, but now it was over.

Her phone rang, and she saw that the call was from Atlanta.

Riley felt a jolt. Could this be Morgan again? Who else would be calling from Atlanta?

She picked up the phone and heard a man's voice. "Agent

Paige? My name is Jared Ruhl, and I'm a police officer here in Atlanta. I got your number from the Quantico switchboard."

"What can I do for you, Officer Ruhl?" Riley said.

In a tentative voice, Ruhl said, "Well, I'm not just sure, but ... I guess you know that we arrested a woman for the murder of Andrew Farrell last night. It was his wife, Morgan. In fact, weren't you the person who called in about it?"

Riley was feeling edgy now.

"I was," she said.

"I also heard that Morgan Farrell called you right after the killing, before she called anybody else."

"That's right."

A silence fell. Riley sensed that Ruhl was struggling with what he wanted to say.

Finally he said, "Agent Paige, what do you know about Morgan Farrell?"

Riley squinted with concern. She said, "Officer Ruhl, I'm not sure it's proper for me to comment. I really don't know anything about what happened, and it's not an FBI case."

"I understand that. I'm sorry, I guess I shouldn't have called ..."

His voice trailed off.

Then he added, "But Agent Paige, I don't think Morgan Farrell did it. Murdered her husband, I mean. I'm kind of new to this job, and I know I've got a lot to learn ... but I just don't think she's the type who could do that."

Riley was startled at those words.

She certainly didn't *remember* Morgan Farrell as being the "type" who might commit murder. But she had to be careful what she said to Ruhl. She wasn't at all sure she ought to be having this conversation at all.

She asked Ruhl, "Has she confessed?"

"They tell me she has. And everybody believes her confession. My partner, the police chief, the DA—absolutely everybody. Except me. And I can't help but wonder, do you ...?"

He didn't finish his question, but Riley knew what it was.

He wanted to know whether Riley believed Morgan to be capable of murder.

Slowly and cautiously, she said, "Officer Ruhl, I appreciate your concern. But it's really not appropriate for me to speculate on any of this. I assume that it's a local case, and unless the FBI is called in to help in the investigation, well ... frankly, it's none of my business."

"Of course, my apologies," said Ruhl politely. "I should have known better. Anyway, thanks for taking my call. I won't bother you again."

He ended the call, and Riley sat staring at the telephone, sipping from her drink.

The girls clattered past her, closely followed by the little dog. They were all on the way to the family room to play, and Darby was looking quite happy now.

Riley watched them go by, with a deep feeling of satisfaction.

But then memories of Morgan Farrell began to intrude on her mind.

She and her partner, Bill Jeffreys, had gone to the Farrells' mansion to interview Morgan's husband regarding the death of his own son.

She remembered how Morgan had seemed almost too weak to stand, clinging to the banister of the huge staircase for support while her husband presided over her as if she were some sort of trophy.

She remembered the look of vacant terror in the woman's eyes.

She also remembered what Andrew Farrell had said about her as soon as she was out of earshot . . .

*"A rather famous model when I married her—perhaps you've seen her on magazine covers."*

And regarding how much younger Morgan had been than himself, he'd added . . .

*"A stepmother should never be older than her husband's oldest children. I've made sure of that with all my wives."*

Riley now felt the same chill she'd felt back then.

Morgan had obviously been nothing more than a costly trinket for Andrew Farrell to show off in public—not a human being at all.

Finally Riley remembered what had happened to Andrew Farrell's wife before Morgan.

She had committed suicide.

When Riley had given Morgan her FBI card, she'd been worried that the woman might meet the same fate—or die under other sinister circumstances. The last thing she had imagined was that Morgan would kill her husband—or anybody else for that matter.

Riley began to feel a familiar tingle—the kind of tingle she got whenever her instincts told her that things were not what they seemed.

Normally, that tingle was a signal for her to probe the matter more deeply.

But now?

*No, it's really none of my business,* she told herself.

Or was it?

While she was puzzling things over, her phone rang again. This time she saw that the call was from Bill. She'd texted him that everything was all right and she'd be home tonight.

“Hi, Riley,” he said when she answered. “Just checking in. So everything went all right in Phoenix?”

“Thanks for calling, Bill,” she replied. “Yes, the adoption is final now.”

“Everything was thoroughly uneventful, I hope,” Bill asked.

Riley couldn't help but laugh.

“Not exactly,” she said. “In fact, far from it. There was, uh, some violence involved. And a dog.”

She heard Bill chuckle as well.

“Violence and a dog? I'm intrigued! Tell me more!”

“I will when we see each other,” Riley said. “It’ll be a better story if I can tell you face to face.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow in Quantico, then.”

Riley fell silent for a moment as she felt on the brink of a strange decision.

She said to Bill, “I don’t think so. I think maybe I’ll take a couple more days off.”

“Well, you certainly deserve it. Congratulations again.”

They ended the call, and Riley headed upstairs to her room. She turned on her computer.

Then she booked a flight to Atlanta for tomorrow morning.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

By early afternoon the next day, Riley was sitting in the office of Atlanta's police chief, Elmo Stiles. The large, gruff man didn't seem at all happy with what Riley had been telling him.

He finally growled, "Let me get this straight, Agent Paige. You've come here all the way from Quantico to privately interview Morgan Farrell, who we're holding in custody for the murder of her husband. But we didn't ask for the FBI's help. In fact, the case is now open and shut. We've got a confession and everything. Morgan is guilty, and that's pretty much that. So what's your business here?"

Riley tried to project an air of confidence.

"I told you before," she said. "I need to talk to her about a completely separate matter—a different case altogether."

Stiles squinted skeptically and said, "A different case that you can't tell me anything about."

"That's right," Riley said.

It was a lie, of course. For the thousandth time since she'd flown out of DC this morning, she wondered just what the hell she thought she was doing. She was used to bending the rules, but she was seriously crossing a line by pretending to be here on official FBI business.

Just why had she ever thought this might be a good idea?

"What if I say no?" Stiles said.

Riley knew perfectly well that this was the chief's prerogative, and if he did say no, she'd have to comply. But she didn't want to say so. She had to gear herself up for some serious bluffing.

She said, "Chief Stiles, believe me, I wouldn't be here if it weren't a matter of utmost importance and urgency. I'm just not at liberty to say what it is."

Chief Stiles drummed his fingers on his desk for a few moments.

Then he said, "Your reputation precedes you, Agent Paige."

Riley cringed a little inside.

*That could be a good thing or a bad thing,* she thought.

She was well-known and respected throughout the law enforcement profession for her keen instincts, her ability to get into a killer's mind, and her knack for solving seemingly unsolvable cases.

She was also known for sometimes being a nuisance and a loose cannon, and local authorities who had to work with her often took a dislike to her.

She didn't know which of those reputations Chief Stiles might be referring to.

She wished she could read his expression better, but he had one of those faces that probably never looked pleased about much of anything.

What Riley really dreaded at this moment was the possibility that Stiles might do the most logical thing—pick up the phone and call Quantico to confirm that she was here on FBI business.

If he did, nobody there would cover for her. In fact, she'd wind up in a good bit of trouble.

*Well, it wouldn't be the first time,* she thought.

Finally Chief Stiles stopped drumming his fingers and got up from his desk.

He grumbled, "Well, far be it from me to stand in the way of FBI business. Come on, I'll take you to Morgan Farrell's jail cell."

Suppressing a sigh of relief, Riley got up and followed Stiles out of his office. As he led her through the bustling police station, Riley wondered whether any of the cops around her might happen to be Jared Ruhl, the officer who had called her last night. She wouldn't recognize him if she saw him. But might he know who she was?

Riley hoped not, for his sake as much as for her own. She remembered telling him over the phone about Morgan Farrell's death ...

*"Frankly, it's none of my business."*

It had been exactly the right thing for her to say, and it would be best for Ruhl if he thought Riley was sticking by her decision. It could be a big problem for him if Chief Stiles found out that he'd been making queries outside the department.

As Stiles led her into the women's part of the jail, Riley was nearly deafened by the noise. Prisoners were pounding on bars and loudly arguing with one another, and now they started yelling at Riley as she walked past their cells.

Finally Stiles ordered a guard to open the cell occupied by

Morgan Farrell, and Riley walked inside. The woman was sitting on the bed staring at the floor, seemingly unaware that anyone had arrived.

Riley was shocked by her appearance. Morgan was, as Riley remembered, extremely thin and fragile-looking. She looked even more so now, clad in an orange jumpsuit that looked way too big for her.

She also appeared to be deeply exhausted. The last time Riley had seen her, she'd been fully made up and looking like the model she had been before marrying Andrew Farrell. Without makeup, she looked shockingly waiflike. Riley thought that somebody who didn't know anything about her might take her for a homeless woman.

In a rather polite tone, Chief Stiles said to Morgan, "Ma'am, there's a visitor here to see you. Special Agent Riley Paige of the FBI."

Morgan looked up at Riley and stared at her, as if she wasn't sure whether she might be dreaming.

Chief Stiles then turned to Riley and said, "Check in with me when you're through."

Stiles left the cell and told the guard to shut the door behind him. Riley glanced around to see what kind of surveillance the cell might have. She wasn't surprised to see a camera. She hoped that there weren't any audio devices as well. The last thing she wanted right now was for Stiles or anyone else to eavesdrop on her conversation with Morgan Farrell. But now that she was here,

she had to take that chance.

As Riley sat down on the bed next to her, Morgan continued to squint at her in near disbelief.

In a tired voice, she said, “Agent Paige. I hadn’t expected you. It’s kind of you to come see me, but really, it wasn’t at all necessary.”

Riley said, “I just wanted to ...”

Her voice trailed off as she found herself wondering ...

*What do I want exactly?*

Did she really have any clear idea of just what she was doing here?

Finally Riley said, “Could you tell me what happened?”

Morgan sighed deeply.

“There’s not much to tell, is there? I killed my husband. I’m not sorry I did, believe me. But now that it’s done ... well, I’d really like to go home now.”

Riley was shocked by her words. Didn’t the woman understand what a terrible situation she was in?

Didn’t she know that Georgia was a death penalty state?

Morgan seemed to be having trouble holding her head up. She shuddered at the sound of a woman’s shrill shouting in a nearby cell.

She said, “I thought I’d be able to get some sleep here in jail. But listen to all that racket! It goes on all the time, twenty-four hours a day.”

Riley studied the woman’s weary face.

She asked, “You’ve not gotten much sleep, have you? Maybe not for a long time?”

Morgan shook her head.

“It’s been two or three weeks now—even before I got here. Andrew got into one of his sadistic moods and decided not to leave me alone or let me sleep, night or day. It’s easy for him to do ...”

She paused, apparently noticing her mistake, then said, “It *was* easy for him to do. He had some kind of trick metabolism that some high-powered men have. He could get by on three or four hours of sleep every day. And lately he’d been home a lot of the time. So he hounded me everywhere in the house, never giving me any privacy, coming into my bedroom at all hours, making me do ... all kinds of things ...”

Riley felt a little ill at the thought of what those unspoken “things” might be. She was sure that Andrew had sexually tormented Morgan.

Morgan shrugged her shoulders.

“I finally snapped, I guess,” she said. “And I killed him. From what I hear, I stabbed him a good twelve or thirteen times.”

“From what you hear?” asked Riley. “Don’t you remember?”

Morgan let out a quiet groan of despair.

“Do we have to get into what I remember and don’t remember? I’d been drinking and taking pills before it happened and it’s all a fog. The police asked me questions until I didn’t know which end was up. If you want to know the details, I’m sure

they'll let you read my confession.”

Riley felt an odd tingle at those words. She wasn't yet sure just why.

“I really wish you'd tell me,” Riley said.

Morgan wrinkled her brow in thought for a moment.

Then she said, “I guess I made up my mind ... that I had to do *something*. I waited until he went to his room that night. Even then, I wasn't sure whether he was asleep. I knocked on his door lightly, and he didn't answer. I opened the door and looked inside, and there he was in his bed, fast asleep.”

She seemed to be thinking harder.

“I guess I must have looked around for something to do it with—kill him, I mean. I guess I didn't see anything. So I guess I went down the kitchen and I got that knife. Then I came back up and—well, I guess I went a little crazy stabbing him, because I wound up with blood everywhere, including all over me.”

Riley took note of how often she was saying those words ...

*“I guess.”*

Then Morgan let out a sigh of annoyance.

“What a mess that was! I do hope the live-in help has cleaned it all up by now. I tried to do it myself, but of course I'm no good at that kind of thing under the best of circumstances.”

Then Morgan took a long, slow breath.

“And then I called you. And you called the police. Thanks for taking care of that for me.”

Then she smiled curiously at Riley and added, “And thanks

again for coming by to see me. It was very sweet of you. I still don't understand what this is all about, though."

Riley was feeling more and more troubled by Morgan's description of her own actions.

*Something's not right here*, she thought.

Riley paused to think for a moment and then asked ...

"Morgan, what kind of knife was it?"

Morgan wrinkled her brow.

"Just a knife, I guess," she said. "I don't know much about kitchen utensils. I think the police said it was a carving knife. It was long and sharp."

Riley was feeling more and more uneasy about all the things that Morgan didn't know or wasn't sure of.

As for herself, Riley didn't do much of her family's cooking anymore, but she certainly knew everything that was in her kitchen and exactly where everything was. Everything was kept in its special place, especially since Gabriela had been in charge. Her own carving knife was kept in a wooden stand with other sharp knives.

Riley asked, "Where exactly did you find the knife?"

Morgan let out an uneasy laugh.

"Didn't I just tell you? In the kitchen."

"No, I mean *where* in the kitchen?"

Morgan's eyes clouded over.

"Why are you asking me that?" she said in a soft, pleading voice.

“Can’t you tell me?” Riley asked with gentle insistence.

Morgan was starting to look distressed now.

“Why are you asking me these questions? Like I told you, it’s all in my confession. You can read it if you haven’t already. Really, Agent Paige, this isn’t kind of you. And I’d really like to know what you’re doing here. Somehow I don’t think it’s just out of kindness.”

Morgan’s voice shook with quiet anger. “I’ve already had to answer all kinds of questions—more than I can count. I don’t deserve any more of this, and I can’t say I like it.”

She drew herself upright and added, “I did what had to be done. Mimi, his wife before me, committed suicide, you know. It was all over the media. So did his son. All the rest of his wives—I’m not even sure how many they were—just waited around suffering until they got a few wrinkles and he decided they weren’t any good for showing off anymore, and then he got rid of them. What kind of a woman puts up with that? What kind of woman thinks she deserves it?”

Then with a low snarl she added . . .

“I’m not that kind of woman. And I think Andrew knows that now.”

Then her face clouded with confusion again.

“I don’t like this,” she whispered. “I think you’d better leave.”

“Morgan—”

“I said I want you to leave right now.”

“Who is your lawyer? Have you been examined by a

psychiatrist?”

Morgan almost shouted, “I mean it. Go.”

Riley wished she could ask a lot more questions. But she could see there was no use in trying. She called for a guard, who let her out of the cell. Then she made her way back to Chief Stiles’s office and looked inside the open door.

Stiles looked up at her from his paperwork with a suspicious expression.

“Did you find out what you needed to know?” he asked Riley.

For a moment, Riley didn’t know what to say.

She wanted to keep open the possibility of talking to Morgan again.

She was tempted to say ...

*“No, and I’ll need to come back and talk to her some more.”*

But that might trigger Stiles skepticism to a breaking point, and he might end up calling Quantico after all.

Instead she said ...

“Thanks for your cooperation, sir. I’ll show myself out.”

As she headed out of the station, she recalled the strange conversation she’d just had with Morgan about the knife, and how defensive the woman had gotten about it ...

*“Why are you asking me these questions?”*

Riley was sure of one thing. Morgan had no idea where the knife had been kept in the kitchen. And if she’d had to go to the trouble of finding it, she’d have been able to tell Riley where she’d found it.

She also remembered what Morgan had told her on the phone

...

*“The knife is lying right next to him.”*

At that moment, Morgan surely hadn't known where it had come from.

*She's not guilty*, Riley realized as she climbed into her rented car.

She knew it in her gut, even if Morgan herself didn't believe it.

And no one else was going to question her guilt. They were all happy to have the matter settled.

It was up to Riley to set things right.

## CHAPTER NINE

As she took a sip of coffee, Riley wondered ...

*What do I do now?*

Her head buzzing with questions, she'd driven to a fast food restaurant and ordered a hamburger and coffee. She had found a place to sit away from the other customers so she could think about her next move.

Riley was used to bending rules and working in strange circumstances. But this situation was new even to her. She was in uncharted territory.

She wished she could call Bill, her longtime partner. Or that she could talk things over with Jenn Roston, the young agent who'd also partnered with her on recent cases. But that would mean getting them involved in a situation that even she wasn't supposed to be working on.

Was there anyone she could talk to locally?

*I can't very well ask Chief Stiles anything,* Riley thought.

Of course there were a few people in other places that she sometimes turned to in unconventional situations. One was Mike Nevins, a forensic psychologist in DC who worked as an independent consultant on some FBI cases. Riley had asked Mike for help on many cases, including a few that she hadn't exactly handled by the book. He'd also helped both her and Bill through bouts with PTSD. Mike had always been discreet, and he was

also a good friend.

She flipped open her laptop, put in her earpieces, opened her video chat program, and called Mike's office. Right away he appeared on her screen—a dapper, rather fussy-looking man wearing an expensive shirt with a vest.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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