

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #2

ONCE TAKEN



BLAKE PIERCE

Blake Pierce

Once Taken

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Аннотация

Women are being murdered in upstate New York, their bodies found mysteriously hanging in chains. With the FBI called in, given the bizarre nature of the murders—and the lack of any clues—there is only one agent they can turn to: Special Agent Riley Paige.

Riley, reeling from her last case, is reluctant to take on a new one, since she is still convinced a former serial killer is out there, stalking her. She knows, though, that her ability to enter a serial killer's mind and her obsessive nature is what will be needed to crack this case, and she just can't refuse—even if it will push her over the edge.

Riley's search takes her deep into a killer's deluded mind as it leads her to orphanages, mental hospitals, prisons, all in an effort to understand the depth of his psychosis. Realizing she is up against a true psychopath, she knows time is short before he strikes again. But with her own job on the line and her own family a target, and with her fragile psyche collapsing, it may all be too much for her—and too late.

A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **ONCE TAKEN** is book #2 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Once Taken (A Riley Paige Mystery – Book 2)

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Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which include the mystery suspense thrillers ONCE GONE (book #1), ONCE TAKEN (book #2) and ONCE CRAVED (#3).

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

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BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)

ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)

ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)

Prologue

Captain Jimmy Cole had just finished telling his passengers an old Hudson River ghost story. It was a good one, about an ax murderer in a long, dark coat, perfect for a foggy night like this. He sat back in his chair and rested his knees for a moment, too creaky from too many surgeries, and pondered, for the millionth time, his retirement. He'd seen nearly every hamlet the Hudson had to offer, and one of these days, even a small fishing boat like his, the *Suzy*, would get the best of him.

Done for the night, he steered his ship for shore, and as it chugged steadily for the dock at Reedsport, one of his passengers called out, jarring him from his reverie.

“Hey, Cap'n – isn't that your ghost right over there?”

Jimmy didn't bother to look. All four of his passengers – two young vacationing couples – were pretty drunk. Doubtless one of the guys was just trying to scare the girls.

But then one of the women added: “I see it too. Isn't it weird?”

Jimmy turned toward his passengers. Goddamn drunks. Last time he'd charter his boat this late at night.

The second man pointed.

“It's over there,” he said.

His wife covered her eyes.

“Oh, I can't look!” she said with a nervous and embarrassed laugh.

Jimmy, exasperated, realizing he wasn't going to get any rest, finally turned and looked where the man was pointing.

In a gap between the shoreline trees, something did catch his eye. It glistened, he thought, and it had a vaguely human shape. Whatever it was, it seemed to float above the ground. But it was too far away to see clearly.

Before Jimmy could reach for his binoculars, the object disappeared behind the trees along the bank.

The truth was, Jimmy had had a few beers himself. That wasn't a problem as far as he was concerned. He knew this river well. And he liked his job. He especially enjoyed being out on the Hudson at this time of night, when the water was so still and peaceful. Few things out here could shatter his sense of calm.

He slowed and steered the *Suzy* carefully against the bumpers as he hit the dock. Proud of himself for a gentle landing, he stopped the engine and lashed the boat to the cleats.

The passengers tumbled off the boat giggling and laughing. They staggered down the dock to shore and headed toward their B&B. Jimmy was glad they'd paid in advance.

But he couldn't stop thinking about that strange object he'd spotted. It was far back down the shoreline and impossible to see from here. Who or what might it be?

Annoyed by it, he knew he wouldn't get any rest until he figured it out. That was just the way he was.

Jimmy sighed loudly, twice as annoyed, and set off on foot, trudging back along the riverbank, following the train tracks that

bordered the water. Those tracks had been in use a hundred years ago when Reedsport was mostly bordellos and gambling houses. Now, they were just another relic to a bygone time.

Jimmy finally rounded a curve and approached an old warehouse near the tracks. A few security lamps on the building cast a dim light, and he saw it: a glistening human shape that seemed to be floating in mid-air. The shape was suspended from one of the crossbeams of a power pole.

As he neared and got a good look, a chill ran up his spine. The shape was truly human – yet it didn't show any signs of life. The body faced away from him, bound in some kind of fabric and wrapped around and around with heavy chains that crisscrossed and connected far beyond any need to hold a prisoner. The chains glittered in the light.

Oh, God, not again.

Jimmy could not help but remember a gruesome murder that had rocked the whole area several years ago.

His knees weakening, Jimmy walked around to the other side of the body. He stepped close enough to see its face – and he almost fell to the tracks in shock. He recognized her. It was a local woman, a nurse, and a friend of many years. Her throat was slashed, and her dead mouth was gagged open with a chain that wrapped around her head.

Jimmy gasped in grief and horror.

The murderer was back.

Chapter 1

Special Agent Riley Paige froze in place, staring in shock. The handful of pebbles on her bed shouldn't have been there. Someone had broken into her home and placed them – someone who meant her harm.

She knew immediately the pebbles were a message, and that the message was from an old enemy. He was telling her that she had not killed him after all.

Peterson is alive.

She felt her body tremble at the thought.

She'd long suspected it, and now she was absolutely sure. Worse, he'd been inside her house. The thought made her want to throw up. Was he still here now?

Her breathing became short with fear. Riley knew that her physical resources were limited. Just that day she had survived a deadly encounter with a sadistic killer, and her head was still bandaged and her body bruised all over. Would she be ready to face him if he were inside her house?

Riley immediately drew her gun from its holster. Hands trembling, she went to her closet and opened it. Nobody was in there. She checked under her bed. Nobody there either.

Riley stood there and forced herself to think clearly. Had she been in the bedroom since she had gotten home? Yes, she had, because she had put her gun holster on top of the dresser next

to the door. But she hadn't turned on the light and hadn't even looked into the room. She had simply stepped into the doorway and deposited her weapon on the dresser top, then left. She'd changed into her nightgown in the bathroom.

Could her nemesis have been in the house this whole time? After she and April got home, the two of them had talked and watched TV late into the night. Then April had gone to bed. In a tiny house like hers, staying hidden would require amazing stealth. But she couldn't discount the possibility.

Then she was seized by a new fear.

April!

Riley snatched the flashlight that she kept on the side table. With her gun in her right hand and the flashlight in her left, she stepped out of her bedroom and switched on the hall light. When she heard nothing awry, she quickly made her way to April's bedroom and threw open the door. The room was pitch dark. Riley turned on the overhead light.

Her daughter was already in bed.

"What is it, Mom?" April asked, squinting with surprise.

Riley stepped into the bedroom.

"Don't get out of bed," she said. "Stay right where you are."

"Mom, you're scaring me," April said, her voice trembling.

That was just fine as far as Riley was concerned. She was plenty scared herself, and her daughter had every reason to be as scared as she was. She went to April's closet, shined her flashlight around inside, and saw that no one was there. No one was under

April's bed either.

What should she do next? She had to check every nook and corner in the rest of the house.

Riley knew what her one-time partner Bill Jeffreys would say.

Damn it, Riley, call for help.

Her longstanding tendency to go things alone had always infuriated Bill. But this time, she was going to heed his advice. With April in the house, Riley wasn't going to take any chances.

"Put on a bathrobe and some shoes," she said to her daughter. "But don't leave this room – not yet."

Riley went back into her bedroom and picked up her phone from the side table. She punched autodial for the Behavioral Analysis Unit. As soon as she heard a voice on the line, she hissed, "This is Special Agent Riley Paige. There's been an intruder in my home. He might still be here. I need someone here fast." She thought for a second, then added, "And send an evidence team."

"We'll get right on it," came the reply.

Riley ended the phone call and stepped out into the hall again. Except for the two bedrooms and the hallway, the house was still dark. He could be anywhere, lurking, waiting to attack. This man had caught her off guard once before, and she had nearly died at his hands.

Switching lights on as she went and keeping her gun at the ready, Riley moved efficiently through the house. She aimed her flashlight into every closet and unlit corner.

Finally, she glanced up at the hallway ceiling. The door above her led to the attic, with a pull-down ladder tucked away inside. Did she dare climb up there for a look?

At that moment Riley heard police sirens. She breathed a huge sigh of relief at the sound. She realized that the agency had called in the local police, because BAU headquarters was more than half an hour away.

She went to her bedroom and pulled on a pair of shoes and her bathrobe, then returned to April's room.

"Come with me," she said. "Stay close."

Still holding her gun, Riley wrapped her left arm around April's shoulders. The poor girl was trembling with fear. Riley led April to the front door and opened it just as several uniformed police officers came dashing up the sidewalk.

The male officer in charge came into the house, his gun drawn.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"Someone was in the house," Riley said. "He might still be here."

The officer eyed the gun in her hand uneasily.

"I'm FBI," Riley said. "BAU agents will be here soon. I've already searched the house, except the attic." She pointed. "There's a door in the ceiling over in the hall."

The officer called out, "Bowers, Wright, get in here and check the attic. The rest of you search outside, back and front."

Bowers and Wright went straight to the hallway and pulled

down the ladder. Both drew their weapons. One waited at the bottom of the ladder while the other climbed upward and flashed a light around. In a few moments, the man disappeared into the attic.

Soon a voice called out, “No one here.”

Riley wanted to feel relieved. But the truth was, she more than half wished that Peterson had been up there. He could be arrested right here and now – or better yet, shot. She was all but sure that he wasn’t going to turn up in the front yard or the back.

“Have you got a basement?” the lead officer asked.

“No, just a crawl space,” Riley said.

The officer called outside, “Benson, Pratt, check under the house.”

April was still holding onto her mother for dear life.

“What’s going on, Mom?” she asked.

Riley hesitated. For years she’d avoided telling April much of the ugly truth about her work. But she had recently realized that she’d been overly protective. So she’d told April about her traumatic captivity at Peterson’s hands – or at least as much as she thought she could handle. She’d also confided her doubts that the man was really dead.

But what should she tell April now? She wasn’t sure.

Before Riley could make up her mind, April said, “It’s Peterson, isn’t it?”

Riley hugged her daughter tightly. She nodded back, trying to hide the shiver that ran through her whole body.

“He’s still alive.”

Chapter 2

An hour later, Riley's house was swarming with people wearing uniforms or FBI labels. Heavily armed Federal agents and an evidence team were working with the police.

"Bag those pebbles on the bed," Craig Huang called out. "They'll need to be examined for prints or DNA."

At first, Riley hadn't been pleased to see that Huang was in charge. He was very young, and her previous experience working with him hadn't gone well. But now she saw that he was giving solid orders and organizing the scene effectively. Huang was growing into his job.

The evidence team was already at work combing every inch of the house and dusting for fingerprints. Other agents had disappeared into the darkness behind the house, trying to find vehicle tracks or some hint of a trail through the woods. Now that things seemed to be running smoothly, Huang led Riley away from the others into the kitchen. He and Riley sat down at the table. April joined them there, still badly shaken.

"So what do you think?" Huang asked Riley. "Is there any chance that we'll still find him?"

Riley sighed with discouragement.

"No, I'm afraid he's long gone. He must have been here earlier this evening, before my daughter and I got home."

Just then a Kevlar-clad female agent came in from the back of

the house. She had dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark complexion, and she looked even younger than Huang.

“Agent Huang, I found something,” the woman said. “Scratches on the back door lock. It looks like someone picked it open.”

“Good work, Vargas,” Huang said. “Now we know how he got in. Could you stay with Riley and her daughter for a little while?”

The young woman’s face lit up with delight.

“I’ll be glad to,” she said.

She sat at the table, and Huang left the kitchen to rejoin the others.

“Agent Paige, I’m Agent María de la Luz Vargas Ramírez.” Then she grinned. “I know, it’s a mouthful. It’s a Mexican thing. People call me Lucy Vargas.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Agent Vargas,” Riley said.

“Just Lucy, please.”

The young woman fell silent for a moment and just kept gazing at Riley. Finally she said, “Agent Paige, I hope I’m not out of line in saying this, but ... it’s a real honor to meet you. I’ve been following your work ever since I went into training. Your whole record is just so amazing.”

“Thank you,” Riley said.

Lucy smiled with admiration. “I mean, the way you wrapped up the Peterson case – the whole story just amazes me.”

Riley shook her head.

“I wish things were that simple,” she said. “He’s not dead. He

was the intruder here today.”

Lucy stared back, stunned.

“But everybody says – ” Lucy began.

Riley interrupted.

“Someone else thought he was alive. Marie, the woman I rescued. She was sure he was still out there taunting her. She ...”

Riley paused, painfully remembering the sight of Marie’s body hanging in her own bedroom.

“She committed suicide,” Riley said.

Lucy looked both horrified and surprised. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Just then, Riley heard a familiar voice call out to her.

“Riley? You okay?”

She turned and saw Bill Jeffreys standing in the kitchen archway, looking anxious. The BAU must have alerted him about the trouble, so he’d driven here on his own.

“I’m okay, Bill,” she said. “So is April. Sit down.”

Bill sat down at the table with Riley, April, and Lucy. Lucy stared at him, apparently in awe to meet Riley’s former partner, yet another FBI legend.

Huang stepped back into the kitchen.

“Nobody’s in the house, or outside either,” he told Riley. “My people have gathered up whatever evidence they can find. They say it won’t be much to go on. It’ll be up to the lab technicians to see what they can make of it.”

“I was afraid of that,” Riley said.

“Looks like it’s time for us to wrap things up for tonight,” Huang said. Then he left the kitchen to give his final orders to the agents.

Riley turned toward her daughter.

“April, you’re going to stay at your father’s house tonight.”

April’s eyes widened.

“I’m not leaving you here,” April said. “And I sure don’t want to stay with Dad.”

“You’ve got to,” Riley said. “You might not be safe here.”

“But Mom – ”

Riley interrupted. “April, there are still things I haven’t told you about this man. Terrible things. You’ll be safe with your father. I’ll pick you up tomorrow after your class.”

Before April could protest further, Lucy spoke.

“Your mother’s right, April. Take it from me. In fact, consider it an order from me. I’ll handpick a couple of agents who can drive you there. Agent Paige, with your permission, I’ll call your ex-husband and tell him what’s going on.”

Riley was surprised by Lucy’s offer. She was also pleased. Almost uncannily, Lucy seemed to understand that this would be an awkward call for her to make. Ryan would undoubtedly take this news more seriously from any agent other than Riley. Lucy had also handled April well.

Not only had Lucy had spotted the picked lock, she also demonstrated empathy. Empathy was an excellent quality in a BAU agent, and it was all too often worn away by the stress of

the job.

This woman is good, Riley thought.

“Come on,” Lucy said to April. “Let’s go call your dad.”

April stared daggers at Riley. Even so, she got up from the table and followed Lucy into the living room, where they started making the call.

Riley and Bill were left sitting at the kitchen table alone. Even though there seemed to be nothing left to do, it seemed right to Riley that Bill was there. They had worked together for years and she had always thought of them as something like a matched pair – both were forty with touches of gray showing in dark hair. They were both dedicated to their jobs and troubled in their marriages. Bill was solid in build and temperament.

“It was Peterson,” Riley said. “He was here.”

Bill said nothing. He looked unconvinced.

“You don’t believe me?” Riley said. “There were pebbles in my bed. He must have put them there. They couldn’t have gotten there any other way.”

Bill shook his head.

“Riley, I’m sure there really was an intruder,” he said. “You weren’t imagining that part. But Peterson? I doubt that very much.”

Riley’s anger was rising now.

“Bill, listen to me. I heard rattling against the door one night, and I looked outside, and I found pebbles there. Marie heard someone throw pebbles at her bedroom window. Who else could

it be?”

Bill sighed and shook his head.

“Riley, you’re tired,” he said. “And when you’re tired and you get an idea fixed in your head, it’s easy to believe just about anything. It can happen to anybody.”

Riley found herself fighting back tears. In better days, Bill would have trusted her instincts without question. But those days were over. And she knew why. A few nights ago she’d called him drunk and suggested that they act on their mutual attraction and begin an affair. It had been an awful thing to do, and she knew it, and she’d not had a drink since then. Even so, things hadn’t been right between her and Bill after that.

“I know what this is about, Bill,” she said. “It’s because of that stupid phone call. You don’t trust me anymore.”

Now Bill’s voice crackled with anger.

“Damn it, Riley, I’m just trying to be realistic.”

Riley was seething. “Just go, Bill.”

“But Riley – ”

“Believe me or don’t believe me. Take your pick. But right now I want you to go.”

With an air of resignation, Bill got up from the table and left.

Through the kitchen doorway, Riley could see that almost everybody had left the house, including April. Lucy came back into the kitchen.

“Agent Huang is leaving a couple of agents here,” she said. “They’ll watch the house from a car for the rest of the night. I’m

not sure it's a good idea for you to be alone inside. I'll be glad to stay."

Riley sat and thought for a moment. What she wanted – what she *needed* right now – was for somebody to believe that Peterson wasn't dead. She doubted that she could convince even Lucy of that. The whole thing seemed hopeless.

"I'll be all right, Lucy," Riley said.

Lucy nodded and left the kitchen. Riley heard the sound of the last agents leaving the house and shutting the door behind them. Riley got up and checked both the front door and back door to make sure they were locked. She moved two chairs up against the back door. They would make noise enough if anybody picked the lock again.

Then she stood in the living room and looked all around. The house looked weirdly bright, with every single light burning.

I ought to turn some of them off, she thought.

But as she reached for the living room light switch, her fingers froze. She just couldn't do it. She was paralyzed with terror.

Peterson, she knew, was coming for her again.

Chapter 3

Riley hesitated for a moment as she entered the BAU building, wondering if she was really ready to face anyone today. She hadn't slept all night, and was bone-tired. The sensation of terror that had kept her awake all night had run her adrenaline until there was nothing left. Now, she just felt hollowed out.

Riley took a deep breath.

The only way out is through.

She gathered her resolve and walked into the busy maze of FBI agents, specialists, and support staff. As she wound her way through the open bay area, familiar faces looked up from their computers. Most smiled to see her and several gave her a thumbs-up. Riley slowly felt glad she had decided to come in. She'd needed something to lift to her spirits.

“Way to go with the Dolly Killer,” one young agent said.

It took Riley a couple of seconds to understand what he meant. Then she realized that “Dolly Killer” must be the new nickname for Dirk Monroe, the psychopath she had just taken down. The name made sense.

Riley also noticed that some of the faces looked at her more warily. Doubtless they had heard about the incident at her house last night when a whole team had raced to her frantic call for backup. *They probably wonder if I'm in my right mind*, she thought. As far as she knew, absolutely no one else in the Bureau

believed that Peterson was still alive.

Riley stopped by the desk of Sam Flores, a lab technician with black-rimmed glasses, hard at work at his computer.

“What news have you got for me, Sam?” Riley said.

Sam looked up from the screen at her.

“You mean about your break-in, right? I’m just now looking at some preliminary reports. I’m afraid there won’t be much. The lab guys didn’t get anything off the pebbles – no DNA or fibers. No fingerprints, either.”

Riley sighed with discouragement.

“Let me know if anything changes,” she said, patting Flores on the back.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Flores said.

Riley continued on to the area shared by senior agents. As she passed by the small glass-walled offices, she saw that Bill wasn’t in. That was actually a relief, but she knew that sooner or later she would have to clear up the recent awkwardness between them.

When she set foot in her own neat, well-organized office, Riley immediately noticed that she had a phone message. It was from Mike Nevins, the D.C. forensic psychiatrist who sometimes consulted on BAU cases. Over the years, she had found him a source remarkable insight, and not only into cases. Mike had helped Riley through her own bout of PTSD after Peterson had captured and tortured her. She knew he was calling to check up on her, as he often did.

She was about to call him back, when the broad frame of

Special Agent Brent Meredith appeared in her doorway. The unit commander's black, angular features hinted at his tough, no-nonsense personality. Riley felt relieved at the sight of him, always reassured by his presence.

"Welcome back, Agent Paige," he said.

Riley got up to shake his hand. "Thanks, Agent Meredith."

"I hear you had another little adventure last night. I hope you're all right."

"I'm fine, thanks."

Meredith looked at her with warm concern, and Riley knew that he was trying to assess her readiness for work.

"Would you like to join me in the break area for some coffee?" he asked.

"Thanks, but there are some files I really need to review. Some other time."

Meredith nodded and said nothing. Riley knew he was waiting for her to speak. Doubtless he had also heard about her belief that Peterson had been the intruder. He was giving her a chance to voice her opinion. But she was sure that Meredith wouldn't be any more inclined than anybody else to agree with her about Peterson.

"Well, I'd better be going," he said. "Let me know whenever you're up for coffee or lunch."

"I'll do that."

Meredith paused and turned back toward Riley.

Slowly and carefully, he said, "Do be careful, Agent Paige."

Riley detected a world of meaning in those words. Not long ago, another higher-up in the agency had suspended her for subordination. She'd been reinstated, but her position could be still tenuous. Riley sensed that Meredith was giving her a friendly warning. He didn't want her to do anything to jeopardize herself. And raising a lot of fuss about Peterson might cause trouble with those who had declared the case closed.

As soon as she was alone, Riley went to her filing cabinet and pulled out the thick file on the Peterson case. She opened it up on her desk and browsed through it, refreshing her memory about her nemesis. She didn't find much that was helpful.

The truth was that the man remained an enigma. There hadn't even been any records of his existence until Bill and Riley finally tracked him down. Peterson might not even be his real name, and they'd turned up several different first names supposedly connected with him.

As Riley looked through the file, she came across photographs of his victims – women who had been found in shallow graves. They had all borne burn scars, and the cause of death had been manual strangulation. Riley shuddered with the memory of the large, powerful hands that had caught her and caged her like an animal.

Nobody knew just how many women he had killed. There might be many more corpses yet to be found. And until Marie and Riley had been captured and lived to tell about it, nobody knew about how he liked to torment women in the dark with

a propane torch. And nobody else was willing to believe that Peterson was still alive.

The whole thing was really getting her down. Riley was known for her ability to get into the minds of killers – an ability that sometimes scared her. Even so, she'd never been able to get into Peterson's mind. And as of right now, she felt that she understood him even less.

He had never struck Riley as an organized psychopath. The fact that he left his victims in shallow graves suggested quite the opposite. He was no perfectionist. Even so, he was meticulous enough not to leave clues behind. The man was truly paradoxical.

She remembered something that Marie had said to her shortly before her suicide ...

"Maybe he's like a ghost, Riley. Maybe that's what happened when you blew him up. You killed his body but you didn't kill his evil."

He wasn't a ghost, and Riley knew it. She was sure – more sure than ever – that he was out there, and that she was his next target. Even so, he might as well be a ghost as far as she was concerned. Aside from herself, nobody else even believed that he existed.

"Where are you, you bastard?" she whispered aloud.

She didn't know, and she had no way to find out. She was completely stymied. She had no choice but to let the whole thing go for now. She closed the folder and put it back in its place in her filing cabinet.

Then her office phone rang. She saw that the call was coming

through on a line shared by all the special agents. It was the line that the BAU phone bank used to forward appropriate call-ins to agents. As a rule of thumb, whichever agent picked up such a call first would take the case.

Riley glanced around at the other offices. Nobody else seemed to be in at the moment. The other agents were all either taking a break or out working other cases. Riley answered the phone.

“Special Agent Riley Paige. What can I do to help you?”

The voice on the line sounded harried.

“Agent Paige, this is Raymond Alford, Chief of Police in Reedsport, New York. We’ve got a real problem here. Would it be okay for us to do this by video chat? I think maybe I could explain it better. And I’ve got some images that you’d better see for yourself.”

Riley’s curiosity was piqued. “Certainly,” she said. She gave Alford her contact information. A few moments later she was talking to him face to face. He was a slender, balding man who appeared to be well along in years. At the moment, his expression was anxious and tired.

“We had a murder here last night,” Alford told her. “A real ugly one. Let me show you.”

A photograph came up on Riley’s computer screen. It showed what appeared to be a woman’s body hanging from a chain over railroad tracks. The body was wrapped in a multitude of chains, and it seemed to be oddly dressed.

“What’s the victim wearing?” Riley asked.

“A straitjacket,” Alford said.

Riley was startled. Looking closer at the photograph, she could see that it was true. Then the picture disappeared, and Riley found herself face to face with Alford again.

“Chief Alford, I appreciate your alarm. But what makes you think this is a case for the Behavioral Analysis Unit?”

“Because this exact same thing happened very near here five years ago,” Alford said.

An image appeared of another woman’s corpse. She, too, was chained all over and bound in a straitjacket.

“Back then it was a part-time prison worker, Marla Blainey. The MO was identical – except that she was just dumped on the riverbank, not hung up.”

Alford’s face reappeared.

“This time it was Rosemary Pickens, a local nurse,” he said. “Nobody can imagine a motive, not for either of the women. They were both well-liked.”

Alford slumped wearily and shook his head.

“Agent Paige, my people and I are really out of our depth here. This new killing must be a serial or copycat. The trouble is, neither of those makes any sense. We don’t get that kind of problem in Reedsport. This is just a little Hudson River tourist town with a population of about seven thousand. Sometimes we have to break up a fight or fish a tourist out of the river. That’s about as bad as things usually get here.”

Riley thought about it. This actually did look like a case for

the BAU. She really ought to refer Alford directly to Meredith.

But Riley glanced toward Meredith's office and saw that he hadn't returned yet. She'd have to alert him about this later. In the meantime, maybe she could help a little.

"What were the causes of death?" she asked.

"Throats slashed, both of them."

Riley tried not to show her surprise. Strangulation and blunt force strike were far more common than slashing.

This seemed to be a highly unusual killer. Even so, it was the kind of psychopath that Riley knew well. She specialized in just such cases. It seemed a shame that she wasn't going to be able to bring her skills to this one. In the wake of her recent trauma, she wouldn't get the assignment.

"Have you taken the body down?" Riley asked.

"Not yet," Alford said. "She's still hanging there."

"Then don't. Leave it there for now. Wait till our agents get there."

Alford didn't look pleased.

"Agent Paige, that's going to be a tall order. It's right next to the train tracks and it can be seen from the river. And the town doesn't need this kind of publicity. I'm under a lot of pressure to take it down."

"Leave it," Riley said. "I know it's not easy, but it's important. It won't be long. We'll get agents there this afternoon."

Alford nodded in mute compliance.

"Have you got any more photos of the latest victim?" Riley

asked. “Any close-ups?”

“Sure, I’ll bring them up.”

Riley found herself looking at a series of detail shots of the corpse. The local cops had done a good job. The photos showed how tightly and elaborately the chains were wrapped around the corpse.

Finally came a close-up of the victim’s face.

Riley felt as though her heart jumped up into her throat. The victim’s eyes bulged, and her mouth was gagged by a chain. But that wasn’t what shocked Riley.

The woman looked a lot like Marie. She was older and heavier, but even so, Marie might have looked a lot like this if she’d only lived another decade or so. The image hit Riley like an emotional blow to the gut. It was as if Marie was calling out for her, demanding that she get this killer.

She knew that she had to take this case.

Chapter 4

Peterson coasted his car along, not too fast, not too slow, feeling good as he finally had the girl back in his sights. Finally, he had found her. There she was, Riley's daughter, alone, walking toward her high school, with no clue at all that he was stalking her. That he was about to end her life.

As he watched, she suddenly stopped in her tracks and turned around, as if suspicious she were being watched. She stood there, as if undecided. A few other students passed her and filtered into the building.

He coasted the car along, waiting to see what she would do next.

Not that the girl mattered to him especially. Her mother was the true target of his revenge. Her mother had thwarted him badly, and she had to pay. She already had, in a way – after all, he'd driven Marie Sayles to suicide. But now he had to take from her the girl who mattered to her most.

The girl, to his delight, began to turn around and walk away from school. Apparently she had decided not to go to class today. His heart pounded – he wanted to pounce. But he could not. Not yet. He had to tell himself to be patient. Other people were still in sight.

Peterson drove ahead and circled a block, forcing himself to be patient. He suppressed a smile at the joy to come. With what

he had in mind for her daughter, Riley would suffer in ways she didn't think possible. Although she was still gangly and awkward, the girl looked a lot like her mother. That would make it extra satisfying.

As he circled around, he saw that the girl was walking briskly along the street. He pulled over to the curb and watched her for a few minutes, until he realized that she was taking a road that led out of town. If she was going to walk home alone, then this might be the perfect moment to take control of her.

His heart pounding, wanting to savor the delightful anticipation, Peterson circled another block with his car.

People needed to learn to put off certain pleasures, Peterson knew, to wait until just the right time. Delayed gratification made everything more pleasurable. He had learned that from years of delicious, lingering cruelty.

There's just so much to look forward to, he thought contentedly.

When he came back around and saw her again, Peterson laughed aloud. She was hitchhiking! God was smiling down upon him on this day. Taking her life was clearly meant to be.

He pulled the car up beside her and gave her his most pleasant smile.

“Give you a lift?”

The girl smiled back broadly. “Thanks. That would be great.”

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

“I live just a little way out of town.”

The girl told him the address.

He said, "I'm going right past there. Hop in."

The girl got into the front seat. With increasing satisfaction, he observed that she even had her mother's hazel eyes.

Peterson pressed the buttons to lock the doors and windows. Over the quiet rumble of the air conditioner, the girl didn't even notice.

*

April felt a pleasant rush of adrenaline as she fastened the safety harness. She'd never hitchhiked before. Her mother would have a fit if she found out.

Of course, it served Mom right, April figured. It was really rotten to make her stay at Dad's last night – and all because of some crazy idea of hers that Peterson had been in their home. It wasn't true, and April knew it. The two agents who had driven her to Dad's house had said so. From what they'd said to each other, it sounded kind of like the whole agency thought Mom was a bit bonkers.

The man said, "So what brings you into Fredericksburg?"

April turned and looked at him. He was an agreeable-looking, big-jawed guy with shaggy hair and a stubble of beard. He was smiling.

"School," April said.

"A summer class?" the man asked.

“Yeah,” April said. She certainly wasn’t going to tell him that she’d decided to skip the class. Not that he looked like the kind of guy who wouldn’t understand. He seemed pretty cool. Maybe he’d even get a kick out of helping her defy parental authority. Still, it was best not to take any chances.

The man’s smile turned a bit mischievous.

“So what does your mother think about hitchhiking?” he asked.

April flushed with embarrassment.

“Oh, she’s fine with it,” she said.

The man chuckled. It wasn’t a very pleasant sound. And something occurred to April. He’d asked what her *mother* thought, not what her *parents* thought. What made him say it that way?

The traffic was fairly heavy this close to the school at this time of morning. It was going to take a while to get home. April hoped that the man wasn’t going to make a whole lot of conversation. That could get really awkward.

But after a couple of blocks of silence, April felt even more uncomfortable. The man had stopped smiling, and his expression seemed rather grim to her. She noticed that all the doors were locked. She surreptitiously fingered the button of the passenger-side window. It didn’t budge.

The car came to a stop behind a line of cars waiting for a light to change. The man clicked on the left turn signal. April was seized by a sudden burst of anxiety.

“Um ... we have to go straight here,” she said.

The man said nothing. Had he simply not heard her? Somehow, she couldn't get up the nerve to say it again. Besides, maybe he planned to go by a different route. But no, she couldn't think of how he could drive her home from that direction.

April wondered what to do. Should she scream for help? Would anybody hear her? And what if the man hadn't heard what she said? Didn't mean any harm after all? The whole thing would be horribly embarrassing.

Then she saw someone familiar slouching along the sidewalk, his backpack slung over his shoulder. It was Brian, her sort-of-boyfriend these days. She rapped sharply on the window.

She gasped with relief when Brian looked around and saw her.

“Do you want a ride?” she mouthed to Brian.

Brian grinned and nodded.

“Oh, that's my boyfriend,” April said. “Could we stop and pick him up, please? He's on his way to my house anyway.”

It was a lie. April really had no idea where Brian was headed. The man scowled and grunted. He wasn't at all happy with this. Was he going to stop? April's heart beat wildly.

Brian was talking on his cell phone as he stood on the sidewalk and waited. But he was looking straight at the car and April was sure that he could see the driver pretty clearly. She was glad to have a potential witness just in case the man had something ugly in mind.

The man studied Brian, and he clearly saw him talking on his

cell, and saw him looking back right at him.

Without saying a word, the man unlocked the doors. April signaled for Brian to get in the back seat, so he opened the door and jumped in. He shut the door just as the light changed and the line of cars started to move again.

“Thanks for the ride, mister,” Brian said brightly.

The man didn’t say anything at all. He kept on scowling.

“He’s taking us to my house, Brian,” April said.

“Awesome,” Brian replied.

April felt safe now. If the man really had bad intentions, he surely wasn’t going to snatch both her and Brian. He’d surely drive them straight to Mom’s house.

Thinking ahead, April wondered whether she should tell her mother about the man and her suspicions about him. But no, that would mean admitting to skipping her class and hitchhiking. Mom would ground her for good.

Besides, she thought, the driver couldn’t be Peterson.

Peterson was a psychotic killer, not a regular man driving a car.

And Peterson, after all, was dead.

Chapter 5

Brent Meredith's tight, grim expression told Riley that he didn't like her request at all.

"It's an obvious case for me to take," she said. "I have more experience than anybody else with this kind of kinky serial killer."

She had just described the call from Reedsport, Meredith's jaw set the entire time.

After a long silence, Meredith finally sighed.

"I'll allow it," he said reluctantly.

Riley breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"Don't thank me," he growled. "I'm doing this against my better judgment. I'm only going along with it because you've got the special skills to deal with this case. Your experience with this kind of killer is unique. I'll assign you a partner."

Riley felt a jolt of discouragement. She knew that working with Bill wasn't an option right now, but she wondered if Meredith knew why there was tension between the long-time partners. She thought it more likely that Bill had simply told Meredith that he wanted to stay close to home for now.

"But sir –" she began.

"No buts," Meredith said. "And no more of your lone wolf shenanigans. It's not smart, and it's against policy. You've nearly

gotten yourself killed more than once. Rules are rules. And I'm breaking enough of them right now as it is, not putting you on leave after your recent incidents."

"Yes, sir," Riley said quietly.

Meredith rubbed his chin, obviously considering all the options. He said, "Agent Vargas will go with you."

"Lucy Vargas?" Riley asked.

Meredith just nodded. Riley didn't much like the idea.

"She was on the team that showed up at my house last night," Riley said. "She seems very impressive, and I liked her – but she's a rookie. I'm used to working with someone more experienced."

Meredith smiled broadly. "Her marks at the academy were off the charts. And she's young, all right. It's rare that students right out of the academy get accepted to BAU. But she really is that good. She's ready for experience in the field."

Riley knew she had no choice.

Meredith continued, "How soon can you be ready to go?"

Riley ran the necessary preparations through her mind. Talking to her daughter was at the top of her list. And what else? Her travel kit wasn't here in her office. She'd have to drive to Fredericksburg, stop at home, then make sure that April would stay at her father's and drive back to Quantico.

"Give me three hours," she said.

"I'll call for a plane," Meredith said. "I'll notify the police chief in Reedsport that we have a team on the way. Be at the airstrip in exactly three hours. If you're late, there'll be hell to pay."

Riley rose nervously from her chair.

“I understand, sir,” she said. She almost thanked him again, but hastily remembered his command not to. She left his office without another word.

*

Riley made it to her house in half an hour, parked outside, and made a beeline for the front door. She had to grab her travel kit, a small suitcase she always kept packed with toiletries, a robe, and a change of clothes. She had to get them super fast and then go into town, where she'd explain things to April and Ryan. She wasn't looking forward to that part at all, but she needed to be sure that April was safe.

When she turned the key in the front door, she found that it was already unlocked. She knew she had locked it when she left. She always did, without fail. All of Riley's senses snapped into alertness. She pulled out her gun and stepped inside.

As she moved stealthily into the house, peering around at every nook and corner, she became aware of a long, continuous noise. It seemed to be coming from outside the house, in back. It was music – very loud music.

What the hell?

Still on the lookout for any intruder, she went through the kitchen. The back door was partly open and a pop song was blaring outside. She smelled a familiar aroma.

“Oh, Jesus, not this again,” she said to herself.

She put her gun back into its holster and walked outside. Sure enough, there was April, sitting at the picnic table with a skinny boy about her age. The music was coming from a pair of little speakers sitting on the picnic table.

Upon seeing her mother, April’s eyes lit up with panic. She reached under the picnic table to extinguish the joint in her hand, obviously hoping to make it disappear.

“Don’t bother to hide it,” Riley said, striding toward the table. “I know what you’re doing.”

She could barely make herself heard over the music. She reached over to the player and turned it off.

“This isn’t what it looks like, Mom,” April said.

“This is *exactly* what it looks like,” Riley said. “Give me the rest of it.”

Rolling her eyes, April handed over a plastic bag with a small amount of pot in it.

“I thought you were working,” April said, as if that explained everything.

Riley didn’t know whether to feel more angry or disappointed. She’d caught April smoking pot just once before. But things had gotten better between them, and she’d thought those days were behind them.

Riley stared at the boy.

“Mom, this is Brian,” April said. “He’s a friend from school.”

With a vacant grin and glassy eyes, the boy reached out to

shake hands with Riley.

“Pleased to meet you, Ms. Paige,” he said.

Riley kept her own hands at her sides.

“What are you even doing here?” Riley asked April.

“This is where I live,” April said with a shrug.

“You know what I mean. You’re supposed to be at your dad’s house.”

April didn’t reply. Riley looked at her watch. Time was running short. She had to resolve this situation quickly.

“Tell me what happened,” Riley said.

April was starting to look somewhat embarrassed. She really wasn’t prepared for this situation.

“I walked to school from Dad’s house this morning,” she said. “I ran into Brian in front of the school. We decided to skip today. It’s okay if I miss it once in a while. I’m acing it already. The final exam isn’t till Friday.”

Brian let out a nervous, inane laugh.

“Yeah, April really is doing great in that class, Ms. Paige,” he said. “She’s awesome.”

“How did you get here?” Riley asked.

April looked away. Riley easily guessed why she was reluctant to tell her the truth.

“Oh, God, you kids hitchhiked here, didn’t you?” Riley said.

“The driver was a really nice guy, very quiet,” April said. “Brian was with me the whole time. We were safe.”

Riley struggled to keep her nerves and her voice steady.

“How do you *know* you were safe? April, you’re *never* supposed to accept rides from strangers. And why would you come here after the scare we got last night? That was incredibly foolish. Suppose Peterson was still around?”

April smiled as if she knew better.

“C’mon, Mom. You worry too much. The other agents say so. I heard two of them talking about it – the guys who drove me to Dad’s house last night. They said Peterson was definitely dead, and you just couldn’t accept it. They said whoever left those stones probably did it as a prank.”

Riley was steaming. She wished she could get her hands on those agents. They had a lot of nerve, contradicting Riley within earshot of her daughter. She thought about asking April for their names, but she decided to let that go.

“Listen to me, April,” Riley said. “I’ve got to go out of town on a job for a few days. I have to leave right now. I’m taking you to your Dad’s house. I need for you to stay there.”

“Why can’t I go with you?” April asked.

Riley wondered how on earth teenage kids could be so stupid about some things.

“Because you’ve got to finish this class,” she said. “You’ve got to pass it or you’ll be behind in school. English is a requirement, and you blew it for no good reason. And besides, I’m working. Being around while I’m on the job isn’t always safe. You ought to know that by now.”

April said nothing.

“Come on inside,” Riley said. “We’ve only got a few minutes. I’ve got to get some things together, and so do you. Then I’m taking you to your father’s house.”

Turning to Brian, Riley added, “And I’m driving you home.”

“I can hitch,” Brian said.

Riley simply glared at him.

“Okay,” Brian said, looking rather cowed. He and April got up from the table and followed Riley into the house.

“Go on and get in the car, both of you,” she said. The kids obediently left the house.

She latched the new slide bolt that she’d added to the back door and went from room to room making sure that all the windows were fastened.

In her own bedroom, she picked up her travel bag and made sure that everything she needed was still inside. As she left, she glanced nervously at her bed as though the pebbles might have returned. For a moment, she wondered why she was headed off to another state instead of staying here and trying to track the killer who had put them there to taunt her.

Besides, this stunt of April’s had her scared. Could she trust her daughter to stay safe in Fredericksburg? She’d thought so before, but now she had her doubts.

Still, there wasn’t anything she could do to change things. She was committed to the new case and had to leave. As she walked outside to the car, she glanced into the thick, dark woods, scanning them for any sign of Peterson.

But there was none.

Chapter 6

Riley glanced at her car clock as she drove the kids into an upscale part of Fredericksburg and shuddered to see how little time she had left. Meredith's words came rushing back.

If you're late, there'll be hell to pay.

Maybe – just maybe – she'd get to the airstrip on time. She had planned to just stop at home and grab a bag, and now things were getting a lot more complicated. She wondered if she should she call Meredith and warn him that family problems might hold her up. No, she decided; her boss had been reluctant enough as it was. She couldn't expect him to cut her any slack.

Luckily, Brian's address was on the route to Ryan's house. When Riley pulled up to a big front yard and stopped the car, she said, "I ought to come in and tell your parents what happened."

"They're not at home," Brian said with a shrug. "Dad's gone for good, and Mom isn't there much."

He got out of the car, then turned and said, "Thanks for the ride." As he walked toward his house Riley wondered what kind of parents would leave a kid like that on his own. Didn't they know what kind of trouble a teenager could get into?

But maybe his mother doesn't have much choice in that matter, Riley thought miserably. Who am I to judge?

As soon as Brian went inside his house, Riley drove away. April had said nothing during the whole drive so far, and she

didn't seem to be in any mood to talk now. Riley couldn't tell whether that silence was due to sullenness or shame. She realized that there seemed to be a lot she didn't know about her own daughter.

Riley was upset with both herself and April. Just yesterday they'd seemed to be getting along better. She'd thought that April was beginning to understand the pressures on an FBI agent. But then Riley had insisted that April go to her father's house last night, and today April was rebelling against being forced to do that.

Riley reminded herself that she ought to be a whole lot more sympathetic. She'd always been something of a rebel herself. And Riley knew what it was like to lose a mother and to have a distant father. April was bound to be afraid that the same thing would happen to her.

She's terrified for my safety, Riley realized. During recent months, April had seen her mother endure both physical and emotional injuries. After last night's intruder scare, April was surely worried sick. Riley reminded herself that she needed to pay closer attention to how her daughter might be feeling. Anyone of any age might have a hard time coping with the complications of Riley's life.

Riley pulled in front of the house she had once shared with Ryan. It was a large, handsome house with a portico at the side door, or *porte-cochère* as Ryan called it. These days, Riley chose to park on the street instead of pulling into the driveway and

under the shelter.

She had never felt at home here. Somehow, living in a respectable suburban neighborhood had never suited her. Her marriage, the house, the neighborhood, all had represented so many expectations that she'd never felt able to fulfill.

Over the years Riley had realized that she was better at her job than she would ever be at living a normal life. Finally she had left the marriage, house, and neighborhood, and that made her all the more determined to live up to the expectations of being a mother to a teenage daughter.

As April started to open the car door, Riley said, "Wait."

April turned and looked at her expectantly.

Without so much as stopping to think, Riley said, "I get it. I understand."

April stared at her with a stunned expression. For a moment, she seemed on the verge of tears. Riley felt almost as surprised as her daughter. She didn't know quite what had come over her. She only knew that now was no time for parental lectures, even if she had time to deliver one, which she didn't. She also felt in her gut that she'd said exactly the right thing.

Riley and April got out of the car and walked together to the house. She didn't know whether to hope Ryan would be at home or not. She didn't want to get into an argument with him, and she'd already decided not to tell him about the marijuana incident. She knew she ought to, but there simply wasn't time to deal with his reactions. Still, she really did have to explain to him

that she was going to be gone for a few days.

Gabriela, the stout, middle-aged Guatemalan woman who had worked as the family's housekeeper for years, greeted Riley and April at the door. Gabriela's eyes were wide with worry.

"*Hija*, where have you been?" she asked in her heavy accent.

"I'm sorry, Gabriela," April said meekly.

Gabriela looked closely at April's face. Riley saw by her expression that she detected that April had been smoking pot.

"*Tonta!*" Gabriela said sharply.

"*Lo siento mucho*," April said, sounding genuinely repentant.

"*Vente conmigo*," Gabriela said. As she led April away, she turned and gave Riley a look of bitter disapproval.

Riley withered under that look. Gabriela was one of the few people in the world who truly daunted her. The woman also had a wonderful way with April, and at the moment, she seemed to be doing a better job of parenting than Riley was.

Riley called after Gabriela, "Is Ryan here?"

As she walked away, Gabriela replied, "*Sí*." Then she called into the house, "Señor Paige, your daughter is back."

Ryan appeared in the hallway, dressed and coiffed to leave. He looked surprised to see Riley.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Where was April?"

"She was at my house."

"What? After everything that happened last night, you took her home?"

Riley's jaw clenched with exasperation.

“I didn’t take her anywhere,” she said. “Ask her, if you want to know how she got there. I can’t help it if she doesn’t want to live with you. You’re the only one who can fix that.”

“This is all your fault, Riley. You’ve let her get completely out of control.”

For a split second, Riley was furious. But her fury gave way to a sinking feeling that he might be right. It wasn’t fair, but he really did know how to push her buttons that way.

Riley took a long, deep breath and said, “Look, I’m leaving town for a few days. I’ve got a case in Upstate New York. April has got to stay here, and she’s got to stay put. Please explain the situation to Gabriela.”

“*You* explain the situation to Gabriela,” Ryan snapped. “I’ve got a client to meet. Right now.”

“And I’ve got a plane to catch. Right now.”

They stood staring at each other for a moment. Their argument had reached a stalemate. As she looked into his eyes, Riley reminded herself that she’d once loved him. And he’d seemed to love her just as much. That had been back when both of them were young and poor, before he had become a successful lawyer and she had become an FBI agent.

She couldn’t help noting that he was still a very good-looking man. He went to a lot of trouble to look that way and spent many hours at the gym. Riley also knew perfectly well that he had lots of women in his life. That was part of the problem – he was enjoying his freedom as a bachelor too much to worry

about parenting.

Not that I'm doing all that much better, she thought.

Then Ryan said, "It's always about your job."

Riley choked back her anger. They'd gone around and around about this. Her job was somehow both too dangerous and too trivial. His job was all that mattered, because he was making a lot more money, and because he claimed to be making a real difference in the world. As if handling lawsuits for wealthy clients amounted to more than Riley's never-ending war against evil.

But she couldn't let herself get dragged into this tired old argument right now. Neither of them ever won it anyway.

"We'll talk when I get back," she said.

She turned and walked out of the house. She heard Ryan shut the door behind her.

Riley got into her car and drove. She had less than an hour to get back to Quantico. Her head was reeling. So much was happening so fast. Just a little while ago she had decided to take a new case. Now she wondered if it was the right thing to do. Not only was April having trouble coping, but she was sure that Peterson was back in her life.

But in a way, it made good sense. As long as April stayed with her father, she'd be safe from Peterson's clutches. And Peterson wasn't going to take any other victims during Riley's absence. As puzzled as she was by him, Riley knew one thing for certain. She alone was his target for revenge. She, and no one else, was his intended next victim. And it would feel good to be far away from

him for a while.

She also reminded herself of a hard lesson she had learned during her last case – not to take on all the evil in the world, all at the same time. It boiled down to a simple motto: *One monster at a time.*

And right now, she was going after an especially vicious brute. A man she just knew would strike again soon.

Chapter 7

The man began to spread lengths of chains out on the long worktable in his basement. It was dark outside, but all those links of stainless steel were bright and shiny under the glare of a bare light bulb.

He pulled one of the chains out to its full length. The rattling sound stirred terrible memories of being shackled, caged, and tormented with chains like these. But it was like he kept telling himself: *I've got to face my fears.*

And to do that he had to prove his mastery over the chains themselves. Too often in the past, chains had held mastery over him.

It was a shame that anyone had to suffer on account of this. For five years, he'd thought he'd put the whole matter behind him. It had helped so much when the church hired him to be a night watchman. He'd liked that job, proud of the authority that came with it. He'd liked feeling strong and useful.

But last month, they'd taken that job away from him. They needed someone with security skills, they'd said, and better credentials – someone bigger and stronger. They promised to keep him working in the garden. He'd still be making enough money to pay the rent on this tiny little house.

Even so, the loss of that job, the loss of the authority it gave him, had shaken him, made him feel helpless. That urge broke

loose again – that desperation not to be helpless, that frantic need to assert mastery over the chains so they couldn't take him again. He'd tried before to outrun the urge, as if he could leave his inner darkness right here in his basement. This last time, he'd driven all the way down to Reedsport, hoping to escape it. But he couldn't.

He didn't know why he couldn't. He was a good man, with a good heart, and he liked to do favors. But sooner or later, his kindness always turned against him. When he'd helped that woman, that nurse, carry groceries to her car in Reedsport, she'd smiled and said, "What a good boy!"

He winced at the memory of the smile and those words.

"What a good boy!"

His mother had smiled and said such things, even while she kept the chain on his leg too short for him to reach any food or even see outside. And the nuns, too, had smiled and said things like that when they peered at him through the little square opening in the door to his small prison.

"What a good boy!"

Not everyone was cruel, he knew that. Most people really meant well toward him, especially in this little town where he'd long since settled. They even liked him. But why did everyone seem to think of him as a child – and a handicapped child at that? He was twenty-seven years old, and he knew that he was exceptionally bright. His mind was full of brilliant thoughts, and he scarcely ever encountered a problem he couldn't solve.

But of course he knew why people saw him the way they

did. It was because he could barely speak at all. He'd stammered hopelessly all his life, and he hardly ever tried to talk, although he understood everything that other people said.

And he was small, and weak, and his features were stubby and childish, like those of someone who had been born with some congenital defect. Caged in that slightly misshapen skull was a remarkable mind, thwarted in its desire to do brilliant things in the world. But nobody knew that. Nobody at all. Not even the doctors at the psychiatric hospital had known it.

It was *ironic*.

People didn't think he knew words like *ironic*. But he did.

Now he found himself nervously fingering a button in his hand. He'd plucked it off the nurse's blouse when he hung her up. Reminded of her, he looked around at the cot where he'd kept her chained up for more than a week. He'd wished he could talk to her, explain that he didn't mean to be cruel, and it was just that she was so much like his mother and the nuns, especially in that nurse's uniform of hers.

The sight of her in that uniform had confused him. It was the same with the woman five years ago, the prison guard. Somehow both women had merged in his mind with his mother and the nuns and the hospital workers. He'd fought a losing battle simply to tell them apart.

It was a relief to be through with her. It was a terrible responsibility, keeping her bound like that, giving her water, listening to her moaning through the chain he'd used to gag her.

He only undid the gag to put a straw in her mouth for water now and again. Then she'd try to scream.

If only he could have explained to her that she *mustn't* scream, that there were neighbors across the street who *mustn't* hear. If he could only have told her, maybe she'd have understood. But he couldn't explain, not with his hopeless stammer. Instead, he'd mutely threatened her with a straight-edged razor. In the long run, even the threat hadn't worked. That was when he'd had to slit her throat.

Then he'd taken her back to Reedsport and hung her up like that, for everyone to see. He wasn't sure just why. Perhaps it was a warning. If only people could understand. If they did, he wouldn't have to be so cruel.

Perhaps it was also his way of telling the world how sorry he was.

Because he *was* sorry. He'd go to the florist tomorrow and buy flowers – a cheap little bouquet – for the family. He couldn't talk to the florist, but he could write out simple instructions. The gift would be anonymous. And if he could find a good place to hide, he'd stand near the grave when they buried her, bowing his head like any other mourner.

He pulled another chain taut on his workbench, clenching its ends as tightly as he could, applying all his strength to it, silencing its rattle. But deep down, he knew that this wasn't enough to make him master of the chains. For that, he'd have to put the chains to use again. And he'd use one of the straitjackets still in his

possession. Someone must be bound, as he'd been bound.
Someone else would have to suffer and die.

Chapter 8

As soon as Riley and Lucy stepped off the FBI plane, a young uniformed cop came dashing toward them across the tarmac.

“Boy, am I glad to see you guys,” he said. “Chief Alford’s fit to be tied. If somebody doesn’t take Rosemary’s body down directly, he’s liable to have a stroke. Reporters are already all over this. I’m Tim Boyden.”

Riley’s heart sank as she and Lucy introduced themselves. Media on the scene so quickly was a sure sign of trouble. The case was off to a rocky start.

“Can I help you carry anything?” Officer Boyden asked.

“We’re good,” Riley said. She and Lucy had only a couple of small bags.

Officer Boyden pointed across the tarmac.

“The car’s right over there,” he said.

The three of them walked briskly to the car. Riley got in on the front passenger side, while Lucy took the back seat.

“We’re just a couple of minutes from town,” Boyden said as he started to drive. “Man, I can’t believe this is happening. Poor Rosemary. Everybody liked her so much. She was always helping people. When she disappeared a couple of weeks ago, we were all scared for the worst. But we couldn’t have imagined ...”

His voice trailed off and he shook his head in horrified disbelief.

Lucy leaned forward from the back seat.

“I understand that you had a murder like this before,” she said.

“Yeah, back when I was still in high school,” Boyden said.

“Not right here in Reedsport, though. It was near Eubanks, farther south along the river. A body in chains, just like Rosemary. Wearing a straitjacket too. Is the chief right? Do we have a serial on our hands?”

“We’re not ready to say,” Riley said.

The truth was, she thought that the chief must be right. But the young officer seemed upset enough already. There seemed no point in alarming him further.

“I can’t believe it,” Boyden said, shaking his head again. “A nice little town like ours. A nice lady like Rosemary. I can’t believe it.”

As they drove into town, Riley saw a couple of vans with TV news crews on its little main street. A helicopter with a TV station logo was circling above the town.

Boyden drove to a barricade where a small cluster of reporters had gathered. An officer waved the car on through. Just a few seconds later, Boyden pulled the car alongside a stretch of railroad track. There was the body, hanging from a power pole. Several uniformed policemen were standing a few yards away from it.

As Riley stepped out of the car, she recognized Chief Raymond Alford as he trotted toward her. He looked none too happy.

“I sure as hell hope you had a good reason for us keeping the body hanging here like this,” he said. “We’ve had a nightmare on our hands. The mayor’s threatening to take my badge.”

Riley and Lucy followed him toward the body. In the late afternoon sunlight, it looked even weirder than it had in the photos Riley had viewed on her computer. The stainless steel chains sparkled in the light.

“I take it you’ve cordoned off the scene,” Riley said to Alford.

“We’ve done it as best we could,” Alford said. “We’ve got the area barricaded far enough away that nobody can see the body except from the river. We’ve rerouted the trains to go around the town. It’s slowing them down and playing havoc with their schedule. That must be how the Albany news channels found out that something was going on. They sure didn’t hear about it from my people.”

As Alford spoke, his voice was drowned out by the TV helicopter as it hovered directly overhead. He gave up trying to say what he meant to say. Riley could read the profanities on his lips as he looked up at the aircraft. Without rising, the helicopter swung away in a circle. The pilot obviously intended to circle back this way.

Alford took out his cell phone. When he got someone on the line, he yelled, “I *told* you to keep your damned chopper away from the site. Now tell your pilot to take that thing up above five hundred feet. It’s the law.”

From Alford’s expression, Riley suspected that the person on

the other end was giving him some resistance.

Finally Alford said, “If you don’t get that bird out of here right now, your reporters are going to be barred from the news conference I’ll be giving this afternoon.”

His face relaxed a little. He looked up and waited. Sure enough, after a few moments the helicopter rose to a more reasonable height. The noise from its engine still filled the air with a loud and steady drone.

“God, I hope we don’t get a lot more of this,” Alford growled. “Maybe when we cut the body down, there’ll be less here to attract them. Still, in the short run, I guess there’s an upside. The hotels and B&Bs are getting some extra business. Restaurants too – reporters have got to eat. But in the long run? It’s bad if tourists get scared off from Reedsport.”

“You’ve done a good job keeping them away from the scene,” Riley said.

“I guess that’s something,” Alford said. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

Alford led Riley and Lucy nearer to the suspended body. The body was held in a makeshift chain harness that wrapped around and around it. The harness was tied to a heavy rope that looped through a steel pulley attached to a high crossbeam. The rest of the rope descended to the ground at a sharp angle.

Riley could see the woman’s face now. Once again, her resemblance to Marie shot through her like an electric shock – the same silent pain and anguish that her friend’s face had

displayed after she'd hanged herself. The bulging eyes and the chain that gagged the mouth made the sight all the more disturbing.

Riley looked at her new partner to see how she was reacting. Somewhat to her surprise, she saw that Lucy was already taking notes.

"Is this your first murder scene?" Riley asked her.

Lucy simply nodded while she wrote and observed. Riley thought she was taking the sight of the corpse awfully well. A lot of rookies would be off vomiting in the bushes at this point.

By contrast, Alford looked decidedly queasy. Even after all these hours, he hadn't gotten used to it. For his sake, Riley hoped that he'd never need to.

"Not much of a smell yet," Alford said.

"Not yet," Riley said. "She's still in a state of autolysis, mostly just internal cell breakdown. It's not hot enough to speed the putrefaction process along. The body hasn't started melting down from the inside. That's when the smell would get really bad."

Alford looked more and more pale at this kind of talk.

"What about rigor mortis?" Lucy asked.

"She's in full rigor, I'm sure," Riley said. "She probably will be for another twelve hours."

Lucy still didn't look the least bit fazed. She just kept jotting down more notes.

"Have you figured out how the killer got her up there?" Lucy asked Alford.

“We’ve got a pretty good idea,” Alford said. “He climbed up and tied the pulley in place. Then he hauled the body up. You can see how it’s anchored.”

Alford pointed to a bundle of iron weights lying next to the tracks. The rope was tied through holes in the weights, knotted carefully so that it wouldn’t come loose. The weights were the kind that might be found in weight machines at a gym.

Lucy bent down and looked at the weights more closely.

“There’s almost enough weight here to completely counterbalance the body,” Lucy said. “Odd that he dragged all this heavy stuff with him. You’d think he’d have just tied the rope directly to the pole.”

“What does that tell you?” Riley asked.

Lucy thought for a moment.

“He’s small and not very strong,” Lucy said. “The pulley didn’t give him enough leverage by itself. He needed the weights to help him.”

“Very good,” Riley said. Then she pointed to the opposite side of the train tracks. For a brief stretch, a partial tire track veered off the nearby pavement onto to the dirt. “And you can see that he pulled his vehicle up very close. He had to. He couldn’t drag the body very far on his own.”

Riley examined the ground near the power pole and found sharp indentations in the earth.

“It looks like he used a ladder,” she said.

“Yeah, and we found the ladder,” Alford said. “Come on, I’ll

show you.”

Alford led Riley and Lucy across the tracks to a weather-beaten warehouse made of corrugated steel. There was a broken lock hanging from the hasp of the door.

“You can see how he broke in here,” Alford said. “It was easy enough to do. A pair of bolt cutters would have done the trick. This warehouse isn’t used for much, just long-term storage, so it’s not very secure.”

Alford opened the door and switched on the fluorescent overhead lights. The place was, indeed, mostly empty, except for a few shipping crates swarming with cobwebs. Alford pointed to a tall ladder leaning against the wall next to the door.

“There’s the ladder,” he said. “We found fresh dirt on its feet. It probably belongs here, and the killer knew about it. He broke in, dragged it out, and climbed it to tie the pulley in place. Once he got the body where he wanted it, he dragged the ladder back here. Then he drove off.”

“Maybe he got the pulley from inside the warehouse too,” Lucy suggested.

“The front of this warehouse is lit up at night,” Alford said. “So he’s bold, and I’ll bet he’s pretty fast, even if he isn’t very strong.”

At that moment there came a sharp, loud crack outside.

“What the hell?” Alford yelled.

Riley knew immediately that it was a gunshot.

Chapter 9

Alford drew his gun and charged out of the warehouse. Riley and Lucy followed with their hands on their own weapons. Outside, something was hovering in circles around the pole where the body was hanging. It made a steady buzzing sound.

Young Officer Boyden had his pistol drawn. He had just taken a shot at the small drone that was circling the body and was getting ready to take another.

“Boyden, put that damned gun away!” Alford shouted. He holstered his own weapon.

Boyden turned toward Alford with surprise. Just as he was putting away his weapon, the drone rose higher and flew away.

The chief was fuming.

“What the hell did you think you were doing, firing your weapon like that?” he snarled at Boyden.

“Protecting the scene,” Boyden said. “It’s probably some blogger taking pictures.”

“Probably,” Alford said. “And I don’t like that any more than you do. But it’s illegal to shoot those things down. Besides, this is a populated area. You ought to know better.”

Boyden hung his head sheepishly.

“Sorry, sir,” he said.

Alford turned toward Riley.

“Drones, hell!” he said. “I sure do hate the twenty-first

century. Agent Paige, please tell me we can take that body down now.”

“Have you got more pictures than the ones I saw?” Riley asked.

“Lots of them, showing every little detail,” Alford said. “You can look at them in my office.”

Riley nodded. “I’ve seen what I needed to see here. And you’ve done a good job keeping the scene under control. Go ahead and cut her down.”

Alford said to Boyden, “Call the county coroner. Tell him he can stop waiting around twiddling his thumbs.”

“Got it, Chief,” Boyden said, taking out his cell phone.

“Come on,” Alford said to Riley and Lucy. He led them to his police car. When they got in and were on their way, a cop waved the car past the barricade onto the main street.

Riley took careful note of the route. The killer would have brought his vehicle in and out along this same route that both Boyden and Alford used. There was no other way into the area between the warehouse and the train tracks. It seemed likely that someone would have seen the killer’s vehicle, although they might not have thought it unusual.

The Reedsport Police Department was nothing more than a little brick storefront right on the town’s main street. Alford, Riley, and Lucy went inside and sat down in the chief’s office.

Alford placed a stack of folders on his desk.

“Here’s everything we’ve got,” he said. “The complete file on

the old case from five years ago, and everything so far on last night's murder.”

Riley and Lucy each took a folder and began to browse through it. Riley's attention was drawn to the photos of the first case.

The two women were similar in age. The first one worked in a prison, which put her at some degree of risk for possible victimization. But the second one would be considered a lower risk victim. And there was no indication that either of them frequented bars or other places that would make them especially vulnerable. In both cases, those who knew the women had described them as friendly, helpful, and conventional. And yet, there had to be some factor that drew the killer to these particular women.

“Did you make any headway on Marla Blainey's murder?” Riley asked Alford.

“It was under the jurisdiction of the Eubanks police. Captain Lawson. But I worked with him on it. We found out nothing useful. The chains were perfectly ordinary. The killer could have picked them up at any hardware store.”

Lucy leaned toward Riley to look at the same pictures.

“Still, he did buy a lot of them,” Lucy said. “You'd think some clerk would have noticed someone buying so many chains.”

Alford nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, that's what we thought at the time. But we contacted hardware stores all around these parts. None of the clerks picked

up on any unusual sales like that. He must have bought a few at a time, here and there, without attracting a lot of attention. By the time he got around to the murder, he had big pile of them handy. Maybe he still does.”

Riley peered closely at the straitjacket the woman was wearing. It looked identical to the one used to bind last night’s victim.

“What about the straitjacket?” Riley asked.

Alford shrugged. “You’d think something like that would be easy to track. But we got nothing. It’s standard issue in psychiatric hospitals. We checked all the hospitals throughout the state, including one real close by. Nobody noticed any straitjackets missing or stolen.”

A silence fell as Riley and Lucy continued looking at reports and photos. The bodies had been left within ten miles of each other. That indicated that the killer probably didn’t live too far away. But the first woman’s corpse had been dumped unceremoniously on a riverbank. Over the five years between murders, the killer’s attitude had changed in some way.

“So what do you make of this guy?” Alford asked. “Why the straitjacket and all the chains? Doesn’t that seem like overkill?”

Riley thought for a moment.

“Not in his mind,” she said. “It’s about power. He wants to restrict his victims not just physically but symbolically. It goes way beyond the practical. It’s about taking away the victim’s power. The killer wants to make a real point of that.”

“But why women?” Lucy asked. “If he wants to disempower his victims, wouldn’t it be more dramatic with men?”

“It’s a good question,” Riley replied. She thought back to the crime scene – how the body had been so carefully counterbalanced.

“But remember, he’s not very strong,” Riley said. “It might be partly a matter of choosing easier targets. Middle-aged women like these would probably put up less of a fight. But they also probably stand for something in his mind. They weren’t selected as individuals, but as *women*– and whatever it is that women represent to him.”

Alford let out a cynical growl.

“So you’re saying it was nothing personal,” he said. “It’s not like these women *did* anything to get captured and killed. It’s not like the killer even thought they especially deserved it.”

“That’s often how it goes,” Riley said. “In my last case, the killer targeted women who bought dolls. He didn’t care who they were. All that mattered is that he saw them buy a doll.”

Another silence fell. Alford looked at his watch.

“I’ve got a press conference in about a half hour,” he said. “Is there anything else we need to discuss before then?”

Riley said, “Well, the sooner Agent Vargas and I can interview the victim’s immediate family, the better. This evening, if that’s possible.”

Alford knitted his brow with concern.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “Her husband died young, maybe

fifteen years ago. All she's got is a couple of grown-up kids, a son and a daughter, both with families of their own. They live right in town. My people have been interviewing them all day. They're really worn out and distraught. Let's give them till tomorrow before we put them through any more of that."

Riley saw that Lucy was about to object, so she stopped her with a silent gesture. It was smart of Lucy to want to interview the family immediately. But Riley also knew better than to make waves with the local force, especially if they seemed to be as competent as Alford and his team.

"I understand," Riley said. "Let's try for tomorrow morning. What about the family of the first victim?"

"I think there might still be some relatives down in Eubanks," Alford said. "I'll check into it. Let's just not rush anything. The killer's in no hurry, after all. His last murder was five years ago, and he's not liable to act again soon. Let's take time to do things right."

Alford got up from his chair.

"I'd better get ready for the press conference," he said. "Do you two want to be part of it? Have you got any kind of statement to make?"

Riley mulled it over.

"No, I don't think so," she said. "It's best if the FBI keeps a low profile for the time being. We don't want the killer to feel like he's getting a lot of publicity. He might be more likely to show himself if he doesn't think he's getting the attention he deserves.

Right now, it's better for you to be the face people see."

"Well then, you can get settled in," Alford said. "I've got a couple of rooms at a local B&B reserved for you. There's also a car out front you can use."

He slid the room reservation form and a set of car keys across his desk to Riley. She and Lucy left the station.

*

Later that evening, Riley sat on a bay window seat looking out over Reedsport's main street. Dusk had fallen, and streetlights were coming on. The night air was warm and pleasant and all was quiet, with no reporters in sight.

Alford had reserved two lovely second-story rooms in the B&B for Riley and Lucy. The woman who owned the place had served a delicious supper. Then Riley and Lucy had spent an hour or so in the main room downstairs making plans for tomorrow.

Reedsport truly was a quaint and lovely town. Under different circumstances, it would be nice place for a vacation. But now that Riley was away from all talk of yesterday's murder, her mind turned toward more familiar concerns.

She hadn't thought about Peterson all day until now. He was out there, and she knew it, but nobody else believed it. Had she been wise to leave things like that? Should she have tried harder to convince somebody?

It gave her a chill to think that two murderers – Peterson

and whoever had killed two women here – were at this very moment going about their lives however they pleased. How many more were out there, somewhere in the state, somewhere in the country? Why was our culture plagued with these warped human beings?

What might they be doing? Were they plotting somewhere in isolation, or were they comfortably passing their time with friends and family – unsuspecting, innocent people who had no idea of the evil in their midst?

At the moment, Riley had no way to know. But it was her job to find out.

She also found herself thinking anxiously about April. It hadn't felt right to simply leave her with her father. But what else was she to do? Riley knew that even if she had not taken this case, another one would come along soon. She was simply too involved in her work to deal with an unruly teenager. She wasn't home enough.

On an impulse, Riley took out her cell phone and sent a text message.

Hey April. How are U?

After a few seconds, the reply came.

I'm fine Mom. How are U? Have U solved it yet?

It took Riley a moment to realize that April meant the new case.

Not yet, she typed.

April replied, *U'll solve it soon.*

Riley smiled at what sounded almost like a vote of confidence. She typed, *Do U want to talk? I could call U now.* She waited a few moments for April's reply.

Not right now. I'm good.

Riley didn't know exactly what that meant. Her heart sank a little.

OK, she typed. Goodnight. Love U.

She ended the chat and sat there, looking out into the deepening night. She smiled wistfully as she remembered April's question ...

"Have U solved it yet?"

"It" could mean any of a huge number of things in Riley's life. And she felt a long, long way from solving any of them.

Riley stared out into the night again. Looking down at the main street, she pictured the killer driving straight through town on the way to the railroad tracks. It had been a bold move. But not nearly as bold as taking the time to hang the body from a power pole where it would be visible in the light from the warehouse.

That part of his MO had changed drastically over the last five years, from sloppily dumping a body by the river to hanging this one up for the world to see. He didn't strike Riley as particularly organized, but he was becoming more obsessive. Something in his life must have changed. What was it?

Riley knew that this kind of boldness often represented an escalating desire for publicity, for fame. That was certainly true of the last killer she had tracked down. But it felt wrong for this

case. Something told Riley that this killer was not only small and rather weak, but also self-effacing, even humble.

He didn't like to kill; Riley felt pretty sure of it. And it wasn't fame that spurred him to this new level of boldness. It was sheer despair. Perhaps even remorse, a half-conscious desire to get caught.

Riley knew from personal experience that killers were never more dangerous than when they started turning against themselves.

Riley thought about something Chief Alford had said earlier. *"The killer's in no hurry, after all."*

Riley felt sure that the chief was wrong.

Chapter 10

Riley felt sorry for the county coroner, a middle-aged and overweight man, as he spread out the photos on Chief Alford's desk. They displayed every gruesome detail of Rosemary Pickens's autopsy. The coroner, Ben Tooley, looked slightly ill. He was undoubtedly more accustomed to examining corpses of people who had died from strokes and heart attacks. He looked as if he hadn't slept, and she realized he'd surely been up late last night. And Riley guessed that he hadn't slept soundly whenever he had gotten to bed.

It was morning, and Riley felt remarkably rested herself. Her bed had been soft and comfortable, and neither nightmares nor real intruders had disturbed her sleep. She had badly needed a night like that. Lucy and Chief Alford also looked alert – but the coroner was another story.

“This is as bad as Marla Blainey's murder five years ago,” Tooley said. “Worse, maybe. Lord, after that one, I'd hoped we'd put this kind of awful thing behind us. No such luck.”

Tooley showed the group a close-up of the back of the woman's head. A large, deep wound was visible, and the surrounding hair was matted with blood.

“She sustained a sharp blow to the left parietal bone,” he said. “It was hard enough to crack the skull slightly. Probably caused concussion, maybe even a short interval of unconsciousness.”

“What kind of object was used?” Riley asked.

“Judging from the pulled hair and scraping, I’d say it was a blow from a heavy chain. Marla Blainey had the same kind of wound in about the same place.”

Alford shook his head. “This guy is all about chains,” he said. “Reporters are already calling him the ‘chain killer.’”

Lucy pointed to some tight close-ups of the woman’s abdomen.

“Do you think she was beaten generally, over time?” she asked. “Those bruises look bad.”

“They’re bad, all right, but they’re not from being beaten,” Tooley said. “She’s got contusions like that all over from being chained so tightly. Between the chains and how tight the straitjacket was, she spent a lot of time in severe pain. Same with Marla Blainey.”

The group fell silent for a moment, mulling over the significance of this information.

Finally Lucy said, “We know that he’s small and not very strong – and we’re assuming that it really is a ‘he.’ So it looks like he must’ve subdued each of the women with a single sharp blow to the head. When they were dazed or unconscious, he lugged them into a nearby vehicle.”

Riley nodded with approval. It struck her as a good guess.

“So how was she treated during her captivity?” Alford asked.

Tooley shuffled the photos to reveal images of the dissected body.

“Pretty badly,” he said. “I found almost no stomach contents. Not much in her intestines either. He must have kept her alive on water alone. But he probably wasn’t trying to starve her to death. That would have taken much longer. Maybe he was just trying to weaken her. Again, it was the same with Marla Blainey. The slashed throats were the decisive and fatal blows.”

Another silence fell. There was little left for anyone to say, but much to think about. Riley’s head was abuzz with too many questions to ask. Why did the killer hold these women captive? The usual motives didn’t apply here. He didn’t torture or rape them. If he’d always intended to kill them, why had he taken his time about it? Did it take time for him to build up the will to do that?

Obviously, she thought, the killer was obsessed with rendering his victims helpless. That gave him some kind of satisfaction. He’d probably suffered similar helplessness himself, maybe in childhood. She also suspected that he’d starved the victims for other reasons than simply to weaken them. Had the killer been starved himself at one time or another?

Riley stifled a sigh. There were so many questions. There always were this early in a case. Meanwhile, there was a lot of work to do.

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