

A photograph of a person lying on a floor, covered by a white sheet. Only one hand is visible, resting on the floor. The scene is dimly lit with a blueish tint, suggesting a crime scene or a mysterious setting.

BLAKE PIERCE

ONCE
HUNTED

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #5

Blake Pierce
Once Hunted

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ONCE HUNTED (A Riley Paige Mystery – Book 5):

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Аннотация

A prison break from a maximum security prison. Frantic calls from the FBI. Special Agent Riley Paige's worst nightmare has come true: a serial killer she put away years ago is loose.

And his main target is her.

Riley is used to being the one hunting, but for the first time, she finds herself—and her family—to be the ones being hunted. As the killer stalks her, he also begins a new rampage of kills, and Riley must stop him before it is too late—for the other victims, and for herself.

But this is no ordinary killer. He is too smart, and their game of cat-and-mouse too twisted, and he somehow manages to elude her and always stay one step ahead. Desperate to stop him, Riley realizes there is only one way: she must delve back into the past, into this killer's twisted mind, his old cases, and re-learn what drives him. The only way to stop him, she realizes, is to face the darkness she thought she had left behind.

A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **ONCE HUNTED** is book #5 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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Pierce Blake

ONCE HUNTED (A Riley Paige Mystery – Book 5)

Blake Pierce

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), ONCE CRAVED (#3) and ONCE LURED (#4). ONCE HUNTED (#5), and ONCE PINED (#6). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series and AVERY BLACK mystery series.

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

ONCE LURED (Book #4)

ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)

ONCE PINED (Book #6)

PROLOGUE

Special Agent Riley Paige's speeding car shattered the silence of Fredericksburg's dark streets. Her fifteen-year-old daughter was missing, but Riley was more furious than frightened. She had a good idea where April was – with her new boyfriend, seventeen-year-old high school dropout Joel Lambert. Riley had tried her best to put a stop to the relationship, but she hadn't been successful.

Tonight that's going to change, she thought with determination.

She parked in front of Joel's home, a rundown little house in an unsavory neighborhood. She'd been here once before and had given Joel an ultimatum to stay away from her daughter. He'd obviously ignored it.

There wasn't a single light on in the house. Maybe nobody was even inside. Or maybe what Riley would find in there would be more than she could handle. She didn't care. She banged on the door.

"Joel Lambert! Open up!" she yelled.

There were a few moments of silence. Riley banged on the door again. This time she heard muttered curses inside. The porch light came on. Still chained, the door opened a few inches. In the light from the porch, Riley could make out an unfamiliar face. It was a bearded, strung-out-looking man of about nineteen or twenty.

“What do you want?” the man asked groggily.

“I’m here for my daughter,” Riley said.

The man looked puzzled.

“You’ve got the wrong place, lady,” he said.

He tried to shut the door, but Riley kicked it so hard that the safety chain broke loose and the door flew open.

“Hey!” the man yelled.

Riley stormed inside. The house looked much as it had the last time she’d been here – a horrible mess filled with suspicious odors. The young man was tall and wiry. Riley detected a family resemblance between him and Joel. But he wasn’t old enough to be Joel’s father.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Guy Lambert,” he replied.

“Joel’s brother?” Riley guessed.

“Yeah. Who the hell are you?”

Riley whipped out her badge.

“Special Agent Riley Paige, FBI,” she said.

The man’s eyes got wide with alarm.

“FBI? Hey, there’s got to be some kind of mistake here.”

“Are your parents here?” Riley said.

Guy Lambert shrugged.

“Parents? What parents? Joel and I are on our own here.”

Riley was hardly surprised. The last time she’d been here, she’d suspected that Joel’s parents were out of the picture. What had become of them she couldn’t possibly guess.

“Where’s my daughter?” Riley said.

“Lady, I don’t even know your daughter.”

Riley took a step toward the nearest doorway. Guy Lambert tried to block her way.

“Hey, aren’t you supposed to have a search warrant?” he asked.

Riley thrust him aside.

“I’m making the rules right now,” she snarled.

Riley went through the door into a disheveled bedroom. No one was there. She continued through another door into a filthy bathroom, and another door that connected to a second bedroom. Still no one.

She heard a voice call out from the living room.

“Hold it right there!”

She hurried back into the living room.

Now she saw that her partner, Agent Bill Jeffreys, was standing in the front doorway. She had called for his help before she’d left home. Guy Lambert was slumped on the sofa, looking despondent.

“This guy seemed to be heading out,” Bill said. “I just made it clear that he should wait here for you.”

“Where are they?” Riley demanded of Lambert. “Where are your brother and my daughter?”

“I’ve got no idea.”

Riley seized him by the T-shirt and hauled him to his feet.

“Where are your brother and my daughter?” she repeated.

When he said, “I don’t know,” she slammed him against the wall. She heard Bill let out a groan of disapproval. Doubtless he was worried that Riley might get out of control. She didn’t care.

Completely panicked now, Guy Lambert spit out an answer.

“They’re just down on the next block on this street. Thirteen thirty-four.”

Riley released him. Without another word, she stormed out the front door as Bill followed after her.

Riley had her flashlight out and was checking the house numbers. “It’s this way,” she said.

“We’ve got to call for some help,” Bill said.

“We don’t need backup,” Riley called as she ran along the sidewalk.

“That’s not what worries me.” Bill followed her.

In a few moments, Riley stood in the yard of a two-story house. It was broken-down and obviously condemned, with empty lots on either side – a typical “shooting gallery” for heroin users. It reminded her of the house where a sadistic psychopath named Peterson had held her captive. He’d kept her in a cage and tormented her with a propane torch until she’d escaped and blown the place up with his own supply of propane.

For a second, she hesitated, shaken by the memory. But then she reminded herself:

April’s in there.

“Get ready,” she told Bill.

Bill took out his own flashlight and his gun, and they moved

together toward the house.

When Riley arrived at the porch, she saw that the windows were boarded up. She had no intention of knocking this time. She didn't want to give Joel or anyone else who was in there any warning.

She tried the doorknob. It turned. But the door was locked by a deadbolt. She pulled out her gun and fired, blasting the deadbolt away. She turned the knob again and the door fell open.

Even after the darkness outside, her eyes had to adjust as she and Bill stepped into the living room. The only light came from scattered candles. They illuminated a ghastly scene of trash and debris that included empty heroin bags, hypodermics, and other drug paraphernalia. About seven people were visible – two or three of them getting sluggishly to their feet after the racket Riley had made, the rest still lying on the floor or curled up in chairs in a drug-induced stupor. They all looked wasted and ill, and their clothes were filthy and tattered.

Riley holstered her weapon. She clearly didn't need it – not yet.

“Where's April?” she yelled. “Where's Joel Lambert?”

A man who had just stood up said in a foggy voice, “Upstairs.”

With Bill behind her, Riley made her way up the dark stairway, shining the flashlight ahead of her. She could feel the rotting steps giving under her weight. She and Bill stepped into the hallway at the top of the stairs. Three doorways, one of them leading into a vile-smelling bathroom, had been stripped of their

doors and were visibly empty. The fourth doorway still had a door, and it was shut.

Riley stepped toward the door. Bill held out his hand to stop her.

“Let me go in first,” he said.

Ignoring him, Riley pushed past him, opened the door, and stepped inside.

Riley’s legs almost gave out from under her at what she saw. April was lying on a bare mattress, murmuring “No, no, no” over and over again. She writhed feebly as Joel Lambert struggled to pull off her clothes. An overweight, homely man stood nearby, waiting for Joel to finish his task. A needle and a spoon lay on the candlelit bed stand.

Riley understood in an instant. Joel had drugged April almost into unconsciousness and was offering her as a sexual favor to this repulsive man – whether for money or some other purpose, Riley didn’t know.

She drew her weapon again and pointed it at Joel. It was all she could do to restrain herself from shooting him right away.

“Back away from her,” she said.

Joel clearly understood her state of mind. He raised his hands and stepped away from the bed.

Indicating the other man, Riley said to Bill, “Cuff this bastard. Take him back to your car. Now you can call for help.”

“Riley, listen to me ...” Bill’s voice trailed off.

Riley knew what Bill was leaving unsaid. He understood

perfectly well that all Riley wanted was a few minutes alone with Joel. He was understandably reluctant to allow that.

Still keeping her gun pointed at Joel, Riley looked at Bill with an imploring expression. Bill slowly nodded, then went over to the man, read him his rights, cuffed him, and led him outside.

Riley shut the door behind them. Then she stood silently facing Joel Lambert, her gun still raised. This was the boy that April had fallen in love with. But this was no ordinary teenager. He was deeply involved with the drug trade. He had used those drugs on her own daughter and had obviously intended to sell April's body. This was not a person capable of loving anyone.

"What do you think you're going to do, cop lady?" he said. "I've got rights, you know." He flashed her the same slightly smirking smile he'd displayed the last time she'd seen him.

The gun trembled slightly in Riley's hand. She was itching to pull the trigger and blow this lowlife away. But she couldn't let herself do that.

She noticed that Joel was edging toward the end table. He was sturdily built, and he was a bit taller than Riley. He was moving toward a baseball bat, obviously kept for self-defense purposes, that was leaning against the table. Riley suppressed a grim smile. It looked like he was going to do exactly what she wanted him to do.

"You're under arrest," she said.

She holstered her weapon and reached for the cuffs on the back of her belt. Exactly as she'd hoped, Joel lunged for the

baseball bat, picked it up, and swung it wildly at Riley. She deftly avoided the blow and braced herself for the next swing.

This time Joel raised the bat high, meaning to smash her head with it. But as his arm came down, Riley ducked and reached for the small end of the bat. She grabbed it, then yanked it away from him. She enjoyed the surprised look on his face as he lost his balance.

Joel reached for the end table to stop himself from falling. When his hand was fast against the table, Riley brought the bat crashing down on it. She could hear the bones breaking.

Joel let out a pathetic scream and fell to the floor.

“You crazy bitch!” he yelled. “You broke my hand.”

Panting for breath, Riley cuffed him to a bedpost.

“Couldn’t help it,” she said. “You resisted, and I accidentally slammed your hand in the door. Sorry about that.”

Riley cuffed his undamaged hand to the bottom of a bedpost. Then she stepped on his broken hand and shifted her weight onto it.

Joel screamed and writhed. His feet thrashed around helplessly.

“No, no, no!” he shouted.

Still keeping her foot in place, Riley crouched down close to his face.

Mockingly, she said, “No, no, no! Where did I hear those words before? Just in the last few minutes?”

Joel was blubbering with pain and terror.

Riley pushed down with her foot.

“Who said it?” she demanded.

“Your daughter ... she said it.”

“Said what?”

“No, no, no ...”

Riley let up on the pressure a little.

“And why did my daughter say that?” she asked.

Joel could barely speak through his violent sobs.

“Because ... she was helpless ... and hurting. I get it. I understand.”

Riley removed her foot. She figured he got the message – at least for now, although probably not for good. But this was the best – or worst – she could do for now. He deserved death, or far worse. But she couldn’t bring herself to give it to him. At least he would never use that hand properly again.

Riley left Joel, cuffed and cringing, and rushed to her daughter’s side. April’s eyes were dilated, and Riley knew that she was having trouble seeing her.

“Mom?” April said in a low whimper.

The sound of that word unleashed a world of anguish in Riley. She burst into tears as she started to help April get back into her clothes.

“I’m getting you out of here,” she said through her sobs. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

Yet even as she spoke the words, Riley prayed that they were true.

CHAPTER ONE

Riley was crawling through the dirt in a damp crawlspace under a house. Total darkness surrounded her. She wondered why she hadn't brought a flashlight. After all, she had been in this awful place before.

Again, she heard April's voice call out in the darkness.

"Mom, where are you?"

Despair tugged at Riley's heart. She knew that April was caged somewhere in this evil darkness. She was being tortured by a heartless monster.

"I'm here," Riley called out in reply. "I'm coming. Keep talking so I can find you."

"I'm over here," April called.

Riley crept in that direction, but a moment later she heard her daughter's voice speak from another direction.

"I'm over here."

Then the voice echoed through the darkness.

"I'm over here ... I'm over here ... I'm over here ..."

It wasn't just one voice, and it wasn't just one girl. Many girls were calling for her help. And she had no idea how to reach any of them.

Riley was awakened from her nightmare by a squeeze of her hand. She had fallen asleep holding onto April's hand, and now April was starting to wake up. Riley sat up straighter and looked

at her daughter lying in the bed.

April's face was still somewhat pasty and pale, but her hand was stronger and not cold anymore. She looked much better than she had yesterday. Her night in the clinic had done her a lot of good.

April managed to focus her eyes on Riley. Then the tears came, just as Riley knew they would.

"Mom, what if you hadn't come?" April said in a choked voice.

Riley felt her own eyes sting. April had asked the same question countless times now. Riley couldn't bear to even imagine the answer, much less say it aloud.

Riley's cell phone rang. She saw that it was Mike Nevins, a forensic psychiatrist who was also her good friend. He had gotten Riley through a lot of personal crises, and had been glad to help with this one.

"Just checking in," Mike said. "I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

Riley was happy to hear Mike's friendly voice.

"Not at all, Mike. Thanks for calling."

"How's she doing?"

"Better, I think."

Riley didn't know what she would have done without Mike's help. After Riley had gotten April away from Joel, yesterday had been a bedlam of emergency services, medical treatments, and police reports. Yesterday evening Mike had arranged for April to

be admitted here to the Corcoran Hill Health and Rehab Center.

It was much nicer than the hospital. Even with all the necessary equipment, the room was attractive and comfortable. Through the window Riley could see trees on well-manicured grounds.

Just then, April's doctor came into the room. They ended the call as Dr. Ellis Spears entered, a kindly-looking man with a youthful face but a few telltale gray hairs.

He touched April's hand and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Not great," she said.

"Well, give yourself some time," he said. "You're going to be fine. Ms. Paige, could I have a word with you?"

Riley nodded and followed him out into the hall. Dr. Spears looked over some information on his clipboard.

"The heroin is almost cleared out of her system now," he said. "The boy gave her a dangerous dose. Fortunately, it leaves the bloodstream quickly. She's not likely to have any more physical withdrawal symptoms. The distress she's going through right now is more emotional than physical."

"Is she going to ...?" Riley couldn't bring herself to finish the question.

Fortunately, the doctor understood what she wanted to know.

"Relapse or have cravings? It's hard to say. First-time heroin use can feel wonderful – like nothing else in the world. She's not an addict at this point, but she's not likely to forget that feeling. There's always a danger that she'll be drawn back to the glow it

gave her.”

Riley grasped what the doctor was getting at. From now on, it was going to be vitally important to keep April away from any possibility of drug use. It was a terrifying prospect. April now admitted to smoking pot and taking pills – some were apparently prescription painkillers, very dangerous opioids.

“Dr. Spears, I – ”

For a moment, Riley had trouble forming the question that was on her mind.

“I don’t understand what happened,” she said. “Why would she do something like this?”

The doctor smiled at her sympathetically. Riley guessed that he heard this question quite often.

“Escape,” he said. “But I’m not talking about a complete escape from life. She’s not that kind of user. In fact, I don’t think she’s really a user by nature at all. Like all teenagers, she runs really short on impulse control. That’s simply a matter of an immature brain. She really liked the short-term high those drugs gave her. Fortunately, she hasn’t used enough to do herself any lasting harm.”

Dr. Spears thought silently for a moment.

“Her experience was unusually traumatic,” he said. “I’m talking about how that boy was trying to exploit her sexually. That memory alone might be enough to keep her away from drugs for good. But it’s also possible that emotional distress could be a dangerous trigger.”

Riley's heart sank. Emotional distress seemed an unavoidable fact of family life these days.

“We need to watch her for a few days,” Dr. Spears said. “After that, she'll need lots of care, rest, and help with self-analysis.”

The doctor excused himself and continued on his rounds. Riley stood in the hall, feeling alone and troubled.

Is this what happened to Jilly? she wondered. Could April have ended up like that desperate child?

Two months ago in Phoenix, Arizona, Riley had rescued a girl even younger than April from prostitution. An odd emotional bond had formed between them, and Riley had tried to stay in touch with her after placing her in a shelter for teenagers. But a couple of days ago, Riley had been notified that Jilly had run away. Unable to return to Phoenix, Riley called an FBI agent there for help. She knew the man felt indebted to her, and she expected to hear from him today.

Meanwhile, at least Riley was where she needed to be for April.

She was headed back toward her daughter's room when she heard a voice call her name from down the hallway. She turned and saw the worried face of her ex-husband, Ryan, coming toward her. When she'd called him yesterday to tell him what had happened, he'd been in Minneapolis working on a court case.

Riley was surprised to see him. Ryan's daughter tended to be low on his list of priorities – lower than his job as a lawyer, and much lower than the freedom he was now enjoying as a bachelor.

She'd doubted that he would even show up.

But now he rushed toward Riley and hugged her, his face full of concern.

"How is she? How is she?"

Ryan kept repeating the question, making it difficult for Riley to reply.

"She's going to be all right," Riley finally managed to say.

Ryan pulled out of the embrace and looked at Riley with an anguished expression.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so, so sorry. You told me that April was having problems, but I didn't listen. I should have been here for both of you."

Riley didn't know what to say. Apologies weren't Ryan's style. In fact, she'd expected him to heap all sorts of blame on her for what had happened. That had always been his normal way of dealing with family crises. Apparently, what had just happened to April was terrible enough to affect him. He had surely already talked with the doctor and learned the whole awful story.

He nodded toward the door.

"Can I see her?" he asked.

"Of course," Riley said.

Riley stood in the doorway and watched as Ryan rushed to April's bed and took her in his arms. He held his daughter tight for a few moments. Riley thought she saw his back heave with a single sob. Then he sat down beside April and held her hand.

April was crying again.

“Oh, Daddy, I messed up so bad,” she said. “You see, I was going through this thing with this guy – ”

Ryan touched her on the lips to quiet her.

“Shh. You don’t need to tell me. It’s all right.”

Riley felt a lump form in her throat. Suddenly, for the first time in a very long time, she felt as if the three of them were a family. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Was it a sign of better times to come, or yet another build-up to disappointment and heartbreak? She had no idea.

Riley watched from the doorway as Ryan gently stroked his daughter’s hair, and April closed her eyes and relaxed. It was a touching sight.

When did things go so wrong? she wondered.

She found herself wishing she could turn back time to some crucial moment when she’d made some terrible mistake, and do everything differently so that all this would never have happened. She felt pretty sure that Ryan was thinking much the same thing.

It was an ironic thought, and she knew it. The killer she had taken down the day before yesterday had been obsessed with clocks, posing and arranging his victims like hands on a clock face. And now here she was, with her own yearnings about time.

If only I could have kept Peterson away from her, she thought with a shudder.

Like Riley, April had been caged and tormented by that sadistic monster and his propane torch. The poor girl had been struggling with PTSD ever since.

But the truth was, Riley knew that the problem went back further than that.

Maybe if Ryan and I had never gotten divorced, she mused.

But how could that have been avoided? Ryan had been distant and disengaged both as a husband and a father, aside from being a philanderer. Not that she held him solely to blame. She'd made her own share of mistakes. She'd never struck the right balance between her FBI work and being a mother. And she'd not seen a lot of the warning signs that April was headed for trouble.

Her sadness deepened. No, she couldn't think of one particular moment when she could have changed everything. Her life had been too full of mistakes and missed opportunities. Besides, she knew perfectly well that she couldn't turn back time. There was no point in yearning for the impossible.

Her phone rang, and she stepped out into the hallway again. Her heart beat faster when she saw that the call was from Garrett Holbrook, the FBI agent who had taken on the search for Jilly.

"Garrett!" she said, taking the call. "What's going on?"

Garrett answered in his characteristic monotone.

"I've got good news."

Riley immediately started to breathe easier.

"The cops picked her up," Garrett said. "She'd been on the street all night without money or anywhere to go. She got caught shoplifting at a convenience store. I'm with her at the police station right now. I'll post bail, but ..."

Garrett stopped. Riley didn't like the sound of that word,

“but.”

“Maybe I should let her talk to you,” he said.

A few seconds later, Riley heard the familiar sound of Jilly’s voice.

“Hey, Riley.”

Now that Riley’s panic was ebbing away, she was starting to get mad.

“Don’t ‘hey’ me. What did you think you were doing, running off like that?”

“I’m not going back there,” Jilly said.

“Yes, you are.”

“Please don’t make me go back there.”

Riley didn’t reply for a moment. She didn’t know what to say. She knew that the shelter where Jilly had been staying was a good, nurturing place. Riley had gotten to know some of the staff, who had been very helpful.

But Riley also understood how Jilly felt. The last time they’d talked together, Jilly had complained that nobody wanted her, that foster parents kept passing her over.

“They don’t like my past,” Jilly had said.

That conversation had ended badly, with Jilly in tears begging for Riley to adopt her. Riley had been unable to explain the thousand reasons why that was impossible. She hoped this conversation wasn’t going to end the same way.

Before Riley could think of what to say, Jilly said, “Your friend wants to talk to you.”

Riley heard Garrett Holbrook's voice again.

"She keeps saying that – she won't go back to the shelter. But I've got an idea. One of my sisters, Bonnie, is thinking of adopting. I'm sure that she and her husband would love to have Jilly. That is, if Jilly –"

He was interrupted by squeals of delight from Jilly, who kept yelling, "Yes, yes, yes!" over and over again.

Riley smiled. It was just the kind of moment she needed right now.

"Sounds like a plan, Garrett," she said. "Let me know how it works out. Thanks so much for all your help."

"Any time," Garrett said.

They ended the phone call. Riley stepped back into the doorway and saw that Ryan and April were now carrying on what seemed to be a carefree conversation. Things suddenly seemed so much better. For all of her failings, and Ryan's too, they'd given April a much better life than many other kids had.

Just then she felt a hand on her shoulder and heard a voice.

"Riley."

She turned and saw Bill's friendly face. As she stepped away from the doorway to talk with him, Riley couldn't help glancing back and forth from her longtime partner to her ex-husband. Even in his current state of distress, Ryan looked like the successful lawyer that he was. His blond good looks and smooth manners opened doors for him everywhere. Bill, as she had often realized, looked more like she did. His dark hair showed touches

of gray and he was more solid and much more rumped than Ryan. But Bill was competent in his own areas of expertise and he had been much more dependable in her life.

“How’s she doing?” Bill asked.

“Better. What’s going on with Joel Lambert?”

Bill shook his head.

“That little thug really is a piece of work,” he said. “He’s talking, anyway. He says he knows some guys who made a lot of money off of young girls, and he thought he’d give it a try himself. No signs of remorse, he’s a sociopath to the bone. Anyway, he’ll definitely be convicted and get jail time. He’ll probably do a plea deal, though.”

Riley frowned. She hated plea deals. And this one was especially upsetting.

“I know how you feel about that,” Bill said. “But my guess is he’ll talk up a storm, and we’ll be able to put a lot of bastards away. That’s a good thing.”

Riley nodded. It helped to know that some good was going to come out of this terrible ordeal. But there was something she needed to talk about with Bill, and she wasn’t sure how to say it.

“Bill, about my coming back to work ...”

Bill patted her on the shoulder.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he said. “You can’t work cases for a while. You need to take some time off. Don’t worry, I understand. So will everybody at Quantico. Take as much time as you need.”

He looked at his watch.

“I’m sorry to rush off, but – ”

“Go,” Riley said. “And thanks for everything.”

She hugged Bill, and he left. Riley stood in the hallway, thinking about the near future.

“Take as much time as you need,” Bill had said.

That might not be easy. What had just happened to April was a reminder of all the evil that was out there. It was her job to stop as much of it as she could. And if she’d learned one thing in life, it was that the evil never rested.

CHAPTER TWO

Seven weeks later

When Riley arrived at the psychologist's office, she found Ryan sitting alone in the waiting room.

"Where's April?" she asked.

Ryan nodded toward a closed door.

"She's with Dr. Sloat," he said, sounding uneasy. "They had something they needed to talk about alone. Then we're supposed to go in and join them."

Riley sighed and sat down in a nearby chair. She, Ryan, and April had spent many emotionally demanding hours here during recent weeks. This would be their last session with the psychologist before they all took a break for the Christmas holidays.

Dr. Sloat had insisted that the whole family participate in April's recovery. It had been hard work for all of them. But to Riley's relief, Ryan had taken part wholeheartedly in the process. He'd come to all the sessions that he could fit into his schedule, and he'd even scaled back his work to make more time for this. Today he'd driven April here from her school.

Riley studied her ex-husband's face as he stared at the office door. In many ways, he seemed like a changed man. Not long ago, he'd been inattentive to the point of serious delinquency as a parent. He'd always insisted that all of April's problems were

Riley's fault.

But April's drug use and her much-too-close brush with forced prostitution had changed something in Ryan. After her stay in the rehab clinic, April had been home with Riley for six weeks now. Ryan had visited often and had joined them for Thanksgiving. At times, they seemed almost like a functional family.

But Riley kept reminding herself that they had never really been a functional family.

Could that change now? she wondered. *Do I want it to change?*

Riley felt torn, even a little guilty. She'd long tried to accept that her own future probably didn't have Ryan in it. Perhaps there might even be another man in her life.

There had always been some kind of attraction between her and Bill. But they'd also fought and quarreled from time to time. Besides, their professional relationship was demanding enough without throwing romance into the mix.

Her kind and attractive next door neighbor, Blaine, seemed a better prospect, especially since his daughter, Crystal, was April's best friend.

Still, at times like now, Ryan almost seemed to be the same man she'd fallen in love with so many years ago. Where were things headed? She really didn't know.

The office door opened and Dr. Lesley Sloat stepped out.

"We'd like to see you now," she said with a smile.

Riley had long since taken a liking to the short, stocky, good-natured psychologist, and April was clearly fond of her too.

Riley and Ryan both went into the office and sat down in a couple of comfortable upholstered chairs. They were facing April, who sat on a couch beside Dr. Sloat. April was smiling weakly. Dr. Sloat nodded for her to start talking.

“Something happened this week,” April said. “It’s kind of hard to talk about ...”

Riley’s breathing quickened and she felt her heart beating faster.

“It’s got to do with Gabriela,” April said. “Maybe she should be here today to talk about this too, but she’s not, so ...”

April’s voice trailed off.

Riley was surprised. Gabriela was a stout, middle-aged Guatemalan woman who had been the family’s housekeeper for years. She had moved in with Riley and April and was like a member of the family.

April took a deep breath and continued, “A couple of days ago, she told me something I didn’t tell you. But I think you should know. Gabriela said that she had to leave.”

“Why?” Riley gasped.

Ryan looked confused. “Aren’t you paying her enough?” he asked.

“It was because of me,” April said. “She said she couldn’t do it anymore. She said it was too much responsibility for her to have to stop me from harming myself or getting myself killed.”

April paused. A tear came to her eye.

“She said it was too easy for me to sneak out without her

knowing. She couldn't sleep at night wondering if I was putting myself in danger. She said that now that I was healthy again, she was moving out right away."

Riley was jolted with alarm. She'd had no idea that Gabriela had been thinking any such thing.

"I begged her not to go," April said. "I was crying and she was crying, too. But I couldn't change her mind, and I was terrified."

April choked back a sob and wiped her eyes with a tissue.

"Mom," April said, "I actually got down on my knees. I promised never, ever to make her feel that way again. Finally ... *finally* she hugged me and said she wouldn't leave as long as I kept my promise. And I will. I really will. Mom, Dad, I'll never make you or Gabriela or anybody worry about me like that ever again."

Dr. Sloat patted April's hand and smiled at Riley and Ryan.

She said, "I guess what April's trying to say is that she's turned a corner."

Riley saw Ryan take out a handkerchief and dab his eyes. She'd very rarely ever seen him cry. But she understood how he felt. She felt her own throat catch. It was Gabriela – not Riley or Ryan – who had made April see the light.

Even so, Riley felt incredibly grateful that her family would be together and in good health for Christmas. She ignored the dread that lurked deep down inside, the awful feeling that the monsters in her life were going to take away her holiday.

CHAPTER THREE

When Shane Hatcher walked into the prison library on Christmas Day, the wall clock showed that it was exactly two minutes before the hour.

Perfect timing, he thought.

In a few minutes, he was going to break free.

He was amused to see Christmas decorations hung here and there – all made of colored Styrofoam, of course, nothing hard or with edges or useful as rope. Hatcher had spent a lot of Christmas holidays in Sing Sing, and the idea of trying to evoke the holiday spirit here always struck him as absurd. He almost laughed aloud when he saw Freddy, the taciturn prison librarian, wearing a red Santa hat.

Sitting at his desk, Freddy turned toward him and smiled a cadaverous smile. That smile told Hatcher that everything was set to go as planned. Hatcher silently nodded and smiled back at him. Then Hatcher walked between two shelves and waited.

Just as the clock ticked the hour, Hatcher heard the sound of the loading dock door opening at the far end of the library. In just a few moments, a truck driver came in pushing a large plastic bin on wheels. The dock door closed noisily behind him.

“Whatcha got for me this week, Bader?” Freddy asked.

“What do you think I’ve got?” the driver said. “Books, books, books.”

The driver took a quick peek in Hatcher's direction, then turned away. The driver, of course, was in on the plan. From that moment on, both the driver and Freddy treated Hatcher as if he weren't there at all.

Excellent, Hatcher thought.

Together, Bader and Freddy unloaded the books onto a wheeled steel table.

"How's about a cup of coffee over in the commissary?" Freddy said to the driver. "Or maybe some hot eggnog? They're serving it for the holiday."

"Sounds great."

The two men chatted casually as they disappeared through the swinging double doors out of the library.

Hatcher stood quietly for a moment, studying the exact position of the bin. He'd paid off a guard to nudge a surveillance camera little by little over a period of days until there was a blind spot in the library – one that the guards who watched the monitors hadn't yet noticed. It looked like the driver had hit the mark perfectly.

Hatcher silently stepped out from between the shelves and climbed inside the bin. The driver had left a coarse, heavy packing blanket at the bottom. Hatcher pulled the blanket over himself.

Now was the only phase of Hatcher's plan when he thought that anything could possibly go wrong. But even if somebody came into the library, he doubted that they would bother to look

inside the bin. Others who might ordinarily have checked the book truck closely as it left had been paid off too.

Not that he was worried or nervous. He hadn't felt such emotions for some three decades now. A man who had nothing to lose in life had no cause for anxiety or unease. The only thing that could arouse his interest was the promise of the unknown.

He lay underneath the blanket, listening closely. He heard the wall clock tick the minute.

Five more minutes, he thought.

That was the plan. Those five minutes would give Freddy deniability. He could honestly say that he hadn't seen Hatcher climb into the bin. He could say he'd thought Hatcher had actually left the library earlier. When five minutes were up, Freddy and the driver would return, and Hatcher would be carted out of the library and then driven out of the prison.

Meanwhile, Hatcher allowed his thoughts to stray to what he was going to do with his freedom. He had recently heard some news that made the risk worthwhile – even interesting.

Hatcher smiled when he thought about another person who would take keen interest in his escape. He wished he could see Riley Paige's face when she found out he was at large.

He chuckled ever so softly.

It was going to be nice to see her again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley watched as April opened the box containing the Christmas present that Ryan had bought for her. She wondered just how in tune Ryan was with his daughter's taste these days.

April smiled as she took out a bangle bracelet.

"It's beautiful, Daddy!" she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"I hear it's quite the style these days," Ryan said.

"It is!" April said. "Thanks!"

Then she gave Riley a barely noticeable wink. Riley suppressed a chuckle. Just a few days ago, April had told Riley how much she hated these silly bracelets that all the girls were wearing. In spite of that, April was doing a great job of acting enthusiastic.

Of course, Riley knew that it wasn't entirely an act. She could see that April was pleased that her father had at least made an effort to buy a Christmas present that she would like.

Riley felt much the same way about the expensive handbag Ryan had bought for her. It wasn't her style at all, and she'd never use it – except when she knew Ryan would be around. And for all she knew, Ryan felt exactly the same way about the wallet she and April had bought for him.

We're trying to be a family again, Riley thought.

And for the moment, they seemed to be succeeding.

It was Christmas morning, and Ryan had just come over to spend the day with them. Riley, April, Ryan, and Gabriela were all sitting near the roaring fireplace sipping on hot chocolate. The delicious smell of Gabriela's grand Christmas dinner wafted in from the kitchen.

Riley, April, and Ryan were all wearing the scarves that Gabriela had made for them, and Gabriela was wearing fluffy slippers that April and Riley had bought for her.

The doorbell rang, and Riley went over to answer it. Her neighbor, Blaine, and his teenage daughter, Crystal, were standing outside.

Riley was at once delighted and uneasy to see them. In the past, Ryan had shown more than a little jealousy toward Blaine – and not without reason, Riley had to admit. The truth was, she found him quite attractive.

Riley couldn't help mentally comparing him to both Bill and Ryan. Blaine was a couple of years younger than she was, lean and fit, and she liked the fact that he wasn't vain enough to disguise his receding hairline.

"Come on in!" Riley said.

"Sorry, I can't," Blaine said. "I've got to get over to the restaurant. I brought Crystal by, though."

Blaine owned a popular restaurant downtown. Riley realized that she shouldn't be surprised that it was open on Christmas day. Today's holiday dinner at Blaine's Grill must be delicious.

Crystal hurried inside and joined the group at the fireplace.

Giggling, she and April immediately tore into presents they had bought for each other.

Riley and Blaine discreetly exchanged their Christmas cards, then Blaine left. When Riley rejoined the group, Ryan was looking rather sour. Riley tucked the card away without opening it. She'd wait until after Ryan was gone.

My life certainly is complicated, she thought. But it was beginning to feel like an almost normal life, a version of life that she could enjoy.

*

Riley's footsteps echoed through a large dark room. Suddenly, there came the noisy crack of breaker switches. Lights came on, blinding her for a few seconds.

Riley found herself in the corridor of what seemed to be a wax museum filled with grisly exhibits. To her right was a naked woman's corpse, splayed doll-like against a tree. To her left was a dead woman wrapped in chains and hanging from a lamppost. An exhibit farther on displayed several women's corpses with their arms bound behind their backs. Beyond that were starved dead bodies with their limbs grotesquely arranged.

Riley recognized every scene. They were all cases she had worked on in the past. She had entered her own personal chamber of horrors.

But what was she doing here?

Suddenly she heard a young voice call out with terror.

“Riley, help me!”

She looked straight ahead and saw the silhouette of a young girl holding out her arms in desperate appeal.

It looked like Jilly. She was in trouble again.

Riley broke into a run toward her. But then another light came on and showed that the silhouette wasn't Jilly at all.

It was a grizzled old man wearing the full dress uniform of a Marine colonel.

It was Riley's own father. And he was laughing at Riley's mistake.

“You didn't expect to find anybody alive, did you?” he said. “You're no good to anybody unless they're dead. How many times do I have to tell you?”

Riley was puzzled. Her father had died months ago. She didn't miss him. She did her best never to think about him. He'd always been a hard man who had never given her anything but pain.

“What are you doing here?” Riley asked.

“Just passing through.” He chuckled. “Checking in to see how you're botching your life. Same as always, I see.”

Riley wanted to lunge at him. She wanted hit him as hard as she could. But she found herself frozen where she stood.

Then came a loud buzzing sound.

“Wish we could chat,” he said. “But you've got other business.”

The buzzing became louder and louder. Her father turned and walked away.

“You never did anybody a lick of good,” he said. “Not even yourself.”

Riley’s eyes snapped open. She realized that her phone was ringing. The clock showed that it was 6:00 a.m.

She saw that the call was from Quantico. A call at this hour had to mean something dire.

She answered the phone and heard the stern voice of her team chief, Special Agent in Charge Brent Meredith.

“Agent Paige, I need you in my office right now,” he said. “That’s an order.”

Riley rubbed her eyes.

“What’s it about?” she asked.

There was a short pause.

“We’ll have to discuss it in person,” he said.

He ended the call. For a groggy moment, Riley wondered if she might be in for a reprimand for her behavior. But no, she’d been off duty for months now. A call from Meredith could only mean one thing.

It’s a case, Riley thought.

He wouldn’t call her on a holiday for any other reason.

And from Meredith’s tone of voice, she felt sure it was going to be big – maybe even life-changing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Riley's apprehension mounted as she entered the BAU building. When she walked into Brent Meredith's office, the chief was at his desk waiting for her. A big man with angular, African-American features, Meredith was always an imposing presence. Right now he also looked worried.

Bill was there as well. Riley could see by his expression that he didn't yet know what the meeting was about.

"Have a seat, Agent Paige," Meredith said.

Riley sat down in a free chair.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your holidays," Meredith said to Riley. "It's been a while since we've talked. How are you doing?"

Riley was taken aback. It wasn't Meredith's style to start a meeting this way – with an apology and a query about her well-being. He normally got right to the point. Of course, he knew that she'd been on leave because of the crisis with April. Riley understood that Meredith was genuinely concerned. Even so, this struck her as odd.

"I'm doing better, thanks," she said.

"And your daughter?" Meredith asked.

"She's recovering well, thank you," Riley said.

Meredith fixed his gaze on her in silence for a moment.

"I hope you're ready to come back to work," Meredith said. "Because if we've ever needed you on a case, it's this one."

Riley's imagination boggled as she waited for him to explain.

Finally, Meredith said, "Shane Hatcher has escaped from the Sing Sing Correctional Facility."

His words hit her like a ton of bricks. Riley was glad she was sitting down.

"My God," Bill said, looking equally stunned.

Riley knew Shane Hatcher well – too well for her own liking. He had been serving life without possibility of parole for decades now. During his time in prison, he'd become an expert in criminology. He'd published articles in scholarly magazines and had actually taught classes in the prison's academic programs. Several times now, Riley had visited him in Sing Sing, seeking advice on current cases.

The visits had always been disturbing. Hatcher seemed to feel a special affinity for her. And Riley knew that, deep down, she was more fascinated with him than she ought to be. She thought that he was probably the most intelligent man that she had ever met – and also probably the most dangerous.

She'd sworn after every visit never to see him again. Now she remembered all too well the last time she'd left the Sing Sing visiting room.

"I won't come back here to see you again," she'd told him.

"You might not have to come back here to see me," he'd replied.

Now those words seemed disturbingly prescient.

"How did he escape?" Riley asked Meredith.

"I don't have many details," Meredith said. "But as you

probably know, he spent a lot of time in the prison library, and he often worked there as an assistant. Yesterday he was there when a book delivery came in. He must have slipped away on the truck that brought the books. Late last night, about the time guards noticed that he was missing, the truck was found abandoned a few miles outside of Ossining. There was no sign of the driver.”

Meredith fell silent again. Riley could easily believe that Hatcher had staged such a daring escape. As for the driver, Riley hated to think of what might have become of him.

Meredith leaned across his desk toward Riley.

“Agent Paige, you know Hatcher better than maybe anybody else. What can you tell us about him?”

Still reeling from the news, Riley took a deep breath.

She said, “In his youth, Hatcher was a gangbanger in Syracuse. He was unusually vicious even for a hardened criminal. People called him ‘Shane the Chain’ because he liked to beat gang rivals to death with chains.”

Riley paused, remembering what Shane had told her.

“A certain beat cop made it his personal mission to bring Hatcher down. Hatcher retaliated by pulverizing him to an unrecognizable pulp with tire chains. He left his mangled body on his front porch for his family to find. That’s when Hatcher got caught. He’s been in prison now for thirty years. He was never supposed to get out.”

Another silence fell.

“He’s fifty-five years old now,” Meredith said. “I’d think that

after thirty years in prison, he wouldn't be as dangerous as he was when he was young."

Riley shook her head.

"You'd be thinking wrong," she said. "Back then, he was just an ignorant punk. He had no idea of his own potential. But over the years he's acquired a vast store of knowledge. He knows he's a genius. And he's never shown any real remorse. Oh, he's developed a polished persona over the years. And he's behaved himself in prison – it gets him privileges even if it won't shorten his sentence. But I'm sure he's more vicious and dangerous than ever."

Riley thought for a moment. Something was bothering her. She couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Does anybody know why?" she asked.

"Why what?" Bill said.

"Why he escaped."

Bill and Meredith exchanged puzzled looks.

"Why does anybody escape from prison?" Bill asked.

Riley understood how strange her question sounded. She remembered one time when Bill went with her to talk with Hatcher.

"Bill, you met him," she said. "Did he strike you as – well, dissatisfied? Restless?"

Bill knitted his brow in thought.

"No, actually he seemed ..."

His voice trailed off.

“Almost contented, maybe?” Riley said, finishing his thought. “Prison seems to suit him. I’ve never gotten the feeling that he even wants freedom. There’s something almost Zen-like about him, his non-attachment to anything in life. He’s got no desires that I know of. Freedom has nothing to offer him that he wants. And now he’s on the run, a wanted man. So why did he decide to escape? And why now?”

Meredith drummed his fingers on his desk.

“How did you leave things the last time you saw him?” he asked. “Did you part on good terms?”

Riley barely suppressed a wry smile.

“We never part on good terms,” she said.

Then after a pause, she added, “I understand what you’re getting at. You’re wondering if I’m his target.”

“Is it possible?” Bill asked.

Riley didn’t reply. Again, she remembered what Hatcher had said to her.

“You might not have to come back here to see me.”

Had it been a threat? Riley didn’t know.

Meredith said, “Agent Paige, I don’t need to tell you that this is going to be a high-pressure, high-profile case. Even as we speak, news is getting out to the media. Prison escapes are always big news. They can even cause public panic. Whatever it is he’s up to, we’ve got to stop him fast. I wish you didn’t have to come back to a case this dangerous and hard. Do you feel ready? Do you feel up to it?”

Riley felt a strange tingling as she thought about the question. It was a feeling that she'd seldom if ever felt before taking on a case. It took her a moment to realize that the feeling was fear, pure and simple.

But it wasn't fear for her own safety. It was something else. It was something unnamable and irrational. Perhaps it was the fact that Hatcher knew her so well. In her experience, all prisoners wanted something in return for information. But Hatcher hadn't been interested in the usual little offerings of whiskey or cigarettes. His own *quid pro quo* had been both simple and deeply unsettling.

He'd wanted her to tell him things about her.

"Something that you don't want people to know," he'd said. *"Something you wouldn't want anybody to know."*

Riley had complied, maybe too readily. Now Hatcher knew all sorts of things about her – that she was a flawed mother, that she hated her father and didn't go to his funeral, that there was sexual tension between her and Bill, and that sometimes – like Hatcher himself – she took great pleasure in violence and killing.

She remembered what he'd said during their last visit.

"I know you. In some ways, I know you better than you know yourself."

Could she really match wits with such a man? Meredith was sitting there, patiently awaiting an answer to his question.

"I'm as ready as I can be," she said, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

“Good,” Meredith said. “How do you think we should proceed?”

Riley thought for a moment.

“Bill and I need to look at all the information on Shane Hatcher that the Agency has on hand,” she said.

Meredith nodded and said, “I’ve already got Sam Flores setting things up.”

*

A few minutes later, Riley, Bill, and Meredith were in the BAU conference room looking at the huge multimedia display that Sam Flores had put together. Flores was a lab technician with black-rimmed glasses.

“I think I’ve got everything you could possibly want to see,” Flores said. “Birth certificate, arrest records, court transcripts, the works.”

Riley saw that it was an impressive display. And it certainly didn’t leave much to the imagination. There were several gruesome photos of Shane Hatcher’s murdered victims, including the mangled cop lying on his own front porch.

“What information do we have about the cop Hatcher killed?” Bill asked.

Flores brought up a batch of photos of a hearty-looking police officer.

“We’re talking about Officer Lucien Wayles, forty-six years

old when he died in 1986,” Flores said. “He was married with three kids, awarded a Medal of Valor, well-liked and respected. The FBI teamed up with local cops and nailed Hatcher within days after Wayles was killed. What’s amazing is that they didn’t beat Hatcher to a pulp right then and there.”

Scanning the display, Riley was most struck by the photos of Hatcher himself. She barely recognized him. Although the man she knew could be intimidating, he managed to project a respectable, even bookish demeanor, with a pair of reading glasses always perched on his nose. The young African American in the 1986 mugshots had a lean, hard face and a cruel, empty stare. Riley had a hard time believing that it was the same person.

As detailed and complete as the display was, Riley felt dissatisfied. She had thought that she knew Shane Hatcher as well as anybody alive. But she didn’t know *this* Shane Hatcher – the vicious young gangbanger called “Shane the Chain.”

I’ve got to get to know him, she thought.

Otherwise, she doubted that she could possibly catch him.

Somehow, she felt that the cold, digital feeling of the display was working against her. She needed something more tangible – actual glossy photographs with folds and frayed edges, yellowed and brittle reports and documents.

She asked Flores, “Could I get a look at the originals of these materials?”

Flores let out a slight snort of disbelief.

“Sorry, Agent Paige – but not a chance. The FBI shredded all

its paper files in 2014. Now all of it is scanned and digitized. What you see is all we've got."

Riley let out a sigh of disappointment. Yes, she remembered all that shredding of millions of paper files. Other agents had complained, but back then it hadn't seemed like a problem to her. Now she fairly itched for some old-fashioned palpability.

But right now, the important thing was to figure out Hatcher's next move. An idea occurred to her.

"Who was the cop who brought Hatcher in?" she asked. "If he's still alive, Hatcher's liable to target him first."

"It wasn't a local cop," Flores said. "And it wasn't a 'he.'"

He brought up an old photo of a woman agent.

"Her name was Kelsey Sprigge. She was an FBI agent at the Syracuse office – was thirty-five years old at the time. She's seventy now, retired and living in Searcy, a town near Syracuse."

Riley was surprised that Sprigge was a woman.

"She must have joined the bureau – " Riley began.

Flores continued her thought.

"She signed up in 1972, when J. Edgar's corpse was barely cold. That was when women were finally allowed to apply to be agents. She'd been a local cop before then."

Riley was impressed. Kelsey Sprigge had lived a lot of history.

"What can you tell me about her?" Riley asked Flores.

"Well, she's a widow with three children and three grandchildren."

"Call the Syracuse FBI field office and tell them to do

whatever they can to keep Sprigge safe,” Riley said. “She’s in serious danger.”

Flores nodded.

Then she turned to Meredith.

“Sir, I’m going to need a plane.”

“Why?” he asked, confused.

She took a deep breath.

“Shane may be on his way to kill Sprigge,” she said. “And I want to see her first.”

CHAPTER SIX

As the FBI jet hit the runway at Syracuse Hancock International Airport, Riley remembered something her father had told her in last night's dream.

"You're no good to anybody unless they're dead."

Riley was struck by the irony. This was perhaps the first case she'd ever been assigned where somebody hadn't been murdered already.

But that's likely to change soon, she thought.

She was especially worried about Kelsey Sprigge. She wanted to meet the woman face to face and see that she was all right. Then it would be up to Riley and Bill to keep her that way, and that would mean tracking down Shane Hatcher and putting him back in prison.

As the plane taxied toward the terminal, Riley saw that they had traveled into a true winter world. Although the landing strip was clear, huge mountains of snow showed how much work the plows had put in recently.

It was a change of scenery from Virginia – and a welcome one. Now Riley realized how much she needed a new challenge. She had called Gabriela from Quantico to explain that she was on her way to work on a case. Gabriela had been happy for her and assured her that she'd take care of April.

When the plane came to a stop, Riley and Bill grabbed their

gear and climbed down the stairs onto the icy tarmac. When she felt the shock of deep cold on her face, she was glad that she'd been issued a heavy hooded jacket at Quantico.

Two men scurried toward them and introduced themselves as Agents McGill and Newton of the FBI field office in Syracuse.

"We're here to help any way we can," McGill told Bill and Riley as they all hurried into the terminal.

Riley asked the first question that came to her mind.

"Have you got people watching Kelsey Sprigge? Are you sure she's safe?"

"Some local cops are posted outside her house in Searcy," Newton said. "We're sure she's fine."

Riley wished she felt as certain.

Bill said, "Okay then. Right now we just need something to drive to Searcy."

McGill said, "Searcy's not far from Syracuse, and the roads are all clear. We've brought an SUV you can use, but ... uh, are you used to driving in northern winters?"

"You know, Syracuse always wins the Golden Snowball Award," Newton added with impish pride.

"Golden Snowball?" Riley asked.

"That's New York state's prize for the most snow," McGill said. "We're the champs. Got a trophy to prove it."

"Maybe one of us should drive you," Newton said.

Bill chuckled. "Thanks, but I think we can handle it. I had a winter assignment in North Dakota a few years ago. I got a good

dose of winter driving there.”

Although she didn't say so, Riley also felt seasoned for this kind of driving. She'd learned to drive in the Virginia mountains. The snow there was never as deep as it was here, but the back roads were never cleared very quickly. She'd probably put in as much time on icy roads as anybody here.

But she was happy to have Bill drive. Right now she was preoccupied with Kelsey Sprigge's safety. Bill took the keys and they were on their way.

“I've got to say, it feels good to be working together again,” Bill said as he drove. “It's selfish of me, I guess. I like working with Lucy, but it's not the same.”

Riley smiled. She also felt good to be working with Bill again. “Still, part of me wishes you weren't coming back to this case,” Bill added.

“Why not?” Riley asked with surprise.

Bill shook his head.

“I've just got a bad feeling,” he said. “Remember, I met Hatcher too. It takes a lot to scare me, but ... well, he's in a class by himself.”

Riley didn't reply, but she couldn't disagree. She knew that Hatcher had pushed Bill's buttons during that visit. With uncanny instinct, the longtime prisoner had made shrewd observations about Bill's personal life.

Riley remembered how Hatcher had pointed to Bill's wedding band and said:

“Forget about trying to fix things with your wife. It can’t be done.”

Hatcher had been right, and Bill was now in the middle of an ugly divorce.

At the end of the same visit, he’d said something to Riley that still haunted her.

“Stop fighting it.”

To this day, she didn’t know what Hatcher had meant she should stop fighting. But she felt an inexplicable dread that one day she was going to find out.

*

A little while later, Bill parked alongside a huge pile of plowed snow outside Kelsey Sprigge’s house in Searcy. Riley saw a police car parked nearby with a couple of uniformed cops inside. But two cops in a car didn’t inspire her with a whole lot of confidence. The vicious and brilliant criminal who had broken out of Sing Sing could make short work of them if he put his mind to it.

Bill and Riley got out of the car and flashed their badges at the cops. Then they walked up the shoveled sidewalk toward the house. It was a traditional two-story home with a practical pitched roof and enclosed front porch, and it was covered with Christmas lights. Riley rang the doorbell.

A woman answered the door with a charming smile. She was lean and fit and wearing a jogging suit. Her expression was bright

and cheerful.

“Why, you must be Agents Jeffreys and Paige,” she said. “I’m Kelsey Sprigge. Come on in. Get out of this awful cold.”

Kelsey Sprigge led Riley and Bill to a cozy living room with a roaring fire.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asked. “Of course, you’re on duty. I’ll get some coffee.”

She went into the kitchen, and Bill and Riley sat down. Riley looked around at the Christmas decorations and at the dozens of framed photographs hanging from the walls and resting on the furniture. They were taken of Kelsey Sprigge at various times of her adult life, with children and grandchildren all around her. In many of the pictures, a smiling man stood at her side.

Riley remembered that Flores had said she was a widow. From the photos Riley guessed that it had been a long, happy marriage. Somehow, Kelsey Sprigge had managed to accomplish something that had always defeated Riley. She had lived a full, loving family life while working as an FBI agent.

Riley more than half wanted to ask her how she’d managed that. But of course, now was not the time.

The woman quickly returned carrying a tray with two cups of coffee, cream and sugar, and – to Riley’s surprise – a scotch on the rocks for herself.

Riley was in awe of Kelsey. For a woman of seventy, she was extremely spry and full of life, and tougher than most women she’d met. In some ways, Riley felt it was like looking at a sneak

preview of the woman she might become.

“Well, now,” Kelsey said, sitting down and smiling. “I wish our weather was more welcoming.”

Riley was startled by her easy hospitality. Under the circumstances, she thought that the woman should be truly alarmed.

“Ms. Sprigge – ” Bill began.

“Kelsey, please,” the woman interrupted. “And I know why you’re here. You’re worried that Shane Hatcher might be coming after me, that I might be his first target. You think he wants to murder me.”

Riley and Bill looked at each other, not sure what to say.

“And of course, that’s why those police are outside,” Kelsey said, still smiling sweetly. “I asked them to come in and warm up, but they wouldn’t do it. They wouldn’t even let me go out for my afternoon jog! Such a shame, I just love getting out for a run in this brisk weather. Well, I’m not worried about being murdered, and I don’t think you should worry either. I really don’t think that Shane Hatcher intends to do any such thing.”

Riley almost blurted, “*Why not?*”

Instead, she said cautiously, “Kelsey, you captured him. You brought him to justice. He was spending his life in prison because of you. You might be the whole reason he got out.”

Kelsey didn’t say anything for a moment. She was eyeing the pistol in Riley’s holster.

“What weapon do you carry, dear?” she asked.

“A forty-caliber Glock,” Riley said.

“Nice!” Kelsey said. “May I have a look at it?”

Riley handed Kelsey her weapon. Kelsey took out the magazine and examined the gun. She handled it with the appreciation of a connoisseur.

“Glocks came along a little too late for me to use in the field,” she said. “I like them, though. The polymer frame has a good feel to it – very light, excellent balance. I love the sighting arrangement.”

She put the magazine back in and handed the gun back to Riley. Then she walked over to a desk. She took out a semiautomatic pistol of her own.

“I took Shane Hatcher down with this baby,” she said, smiling. She handed the gun to Riley, then sat back down. “Smith and Wesson Model 459. I wounded and disarmed him. My partner wanted to kill him on the spot – revenge for the cop he’d killed. Well, I wouldn’t have it. I told him if he did kill Hatcher, there’d be more than one corpse to bury.”

Kelsey blushed a little.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “I’d rather that story didn’t get around. Please don’t tell anybody.”

Riley handed the weapon back to her.

“Anyway, I could tell that I met with Hatcher’s approval,” Kelsey said. “You know, he had a strict code, even as a gangbanger. He knew that I was just doing my job. I think he respected that. And he was grateful, too. Anyway, he’s never

shown any interest in me. I even wrote him a few letters, but he never wrote back. He probably doesn't even remember my name. No, I'm all but positive he doesn't want to kill me."

Kelsey peered at Riley with interest.

"But Riley – is it OK for me to call you Riley? – you told me on the phone that you'd actually visited him, that you'd gotten to know him. He must be quite fascinating."

Riley thought she actually detected a note of envy in the woman's voice.

Kelsey rose from her chair.

"But listen to me babble, while you've got a bad guy to catch! And who knows what he might be up to, even as we speak. I've got some information that might help. Come on, I'll show you everything I've got."

She led Riley and Bill through a hallway to a basement door. Riley's nerves quickened.

Why does it have to be in a basement? she thought.

Riley had harbored a slight but irrational phobia about basements for some time now – vestiges of PTSD from having been held captive in Peterson's damp crawlspace, and even more recently from having taken out a different killer in a pitch-dark basement.

But as they followed Kelsey down the stairs, Riley saw nothing sinister. The basement was finished as a comfortable rec room. In one corner was a well-lighted office area with a desk covered with manila folders, a bulletin board with old photographs and

newspaper clippings, and a couple of filing drawers.

“Here it is – everything you could want to know about ‘Shane the Chain’ and his career and downfall,” Kelsey said. “Help yourself. Ask if you need help making sense out of it all.”

Riley and Bill started looking through folders. Riley was surprised and thrilled. It was a fascinating, even daunting body of information and a lot of it had never been scanned for the FBI database. The folder she was looking through was crammed with seemingly unimportant items, including restaurant napkins with handwritten notes and sketches pertaining to the case.

She opened another folder that held photocopied reports and other documents. Riley was a bit amused to realize that Kelsey surely wasn’t supposed to have copied or kept them. The originals had surely long since been shredded after being scanned.

As Bill and Riley pored over the material, Kelsey remarked, “I guess you’re wondering why I just won’t let this case go. Sometimes I wonder myself.”

She thought for a moment.

“Shane Hatcher was my one brush with real evil,” she said. “During my first fourteen years with the Bureau, I was pretty much window dressing here in the Syracuse office – the token woman. But I worked this case from the ground up, talking to gangbangers in the street, taking charge of the team. Nobody thought I could bring Hatcher down. In fact, nobody was sure that anybody could bring him down. But I did.”

Now Riley was looking through a folder of poor-quality

photos that the Bureau probably hadn't bothered to scan. Kelsey had obviously known better than to throw them away.

One showed a cop sitting in a café talking to a gangbanger. Riley immediately recognized the young man as Shane Hatcher. It took her a moment to recognize the cop.

"That's the officer that Hatcher killed, isn't it?" Riley said.

Kelsey nodded.

"Officer Lucien Wayles," she said. "I took that photograph myself."

"What's he doing talking with Hatcher?"

Kelsey smiled knowingly.

"Well, now, that's rather interesting," she said. "I suppose you've heard that Officer Wayles was an upstanding, decorated policeman. That's what the local cops still want everybody to think. Actually, he was corrupt to the very bone. In this picture, he was meeting with Hatcher hoping to make a deal with him – a cut of the drug profits for not interfering with Hatcher's territory. Hatcher said no. That's when Wayles decided to do Hatcher in."

Kelsey pulled out a photograph of Wayles's mangled body.

"As you probably know, that didn't work out too well for Officer Wayles," she said.

Riley felt a tingle of understanding. This was exactly the treasure trove of material she'd yearned for. It brought her much, much closer to the mind of the youthful Shane Hatcher.

As she looked at the photo of Hatcher and the cop, Riley probed the young man's mind. She imagined Hatcher's thoughts

and feelings at the moment the picture was taken. She also remembered something that Kelsey had just said.

“You know, he had a strict code, even as a gangbanger.”

From her own conversations with Hatcher, Riley knew that it was still true today. And now, looking at the photo, Riley could feel Hatcher’s visceral disgust at Wayles’s proposal.

It offended him, Riley thought. It felt like an insult.

Small wonder that Hatcher had made such a gruesome example of Wayles. According to Hatcher’s twisted code, it was the moral thing to do.

Thumbing through more photos, Riley found a mugshot of another gangbanger.

“Who’s this?” Riley asked.

“Smokey Moran,” Kelsey said. “Shane the Chain’s most trusted lieutenant – until I busted him for selling drugs. He faced a long prison sentence, so I had no trouble getting him to turn state’s evidence against Hatcher in return for some leniency. That’s how I finally nailed Hatcher.”

Riley’s skin prickled as she handled the picture.

“What became of Moran?” she asked.

Kelsey shook her head with disapproval.

“He’s still out there,” she said. “I often wish I hadn’t made that deal. For years and years now, he’s been quietly running all kinds of gang activities. The younger gangbangers look up to him and admire him. He’s smart and elusive. The local cops and the Bureau have never been able to bring him to justice.”

That prickling feeling grew. Riley found herself in Hatcher's mind, brooding in prison for decades over Moran's betrayal. In Hatcher's moral universe, such a man didn't deserve to live. And justice was long overdue.

"Do you have his current address?" Riley asked Kelsey.

"No, but I'm sure the field office does. Why?"

Riley took a deep breath.

"Because Shane is going there to kill him."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Riley knew that Smokey Moran was in great danger. But the truth was, Riley's heart didn't exactly go out to the vicious career thug.

Shane Hatcher was what really mattered.

Her assignment was to put Hatcher back in prison. If they caught him before he killed Moran for the old betrayal, fine. She and Bill would drive to Moran's address without giving him any advance warning. They would call the local field office to have backup meet them there.

It was about a half hour drive from Kelsey Sprigge's home in middle-class Searcy to the much more sinister gang neighborhoods of Syracuse. The sky was overcast, but no snow was falling, and traffic moved normally along the well-cleared roads.

As Bill drove, Riley accessed the FBI database and did some quick research on her cell phone. She saw that the local gang situation was dire. Gangs had grouped and regrouped in this area since the early 1980s. Back in the era of Shane the Chain, they had been mostly locals. Since then national gangs had moved in, bringing with them heightened levels of violence.

The drugs that fueled this violence with their profits had gotten weirder and much more dangerous. They now included cigarettes soaked in embalming fluid and paranoia-inducing

crystals called “bath salts.” Who knew what even deadlier substances would turn up next?

As Bill parked in front of the rundown apartment building where Moran lived, Riley saw two men wearing FBI jackets get out of another car – Agents McGill and Newton, who had met them at the airport. She could tell from their bulkiness that they were wearing Kevlar vests under the jackets. Both were carrying Remington sniper rifles.

“Moran’s place is on the third floor,” Riley said.

When the group of agents moved in through the building’s front door, they encountered several gangbanger types standing around in the cold and shabby foyer. They just stood there with their hands shoved into their hoodie pockets and appeared to pay little attention to the armed squad.

Moran’s bodyguards?

She didn’t think they were likely to try to stop her little army of agents, although they might signal Moran that someone was on the way up.

McGill and Newton appeared to know the young guys. The agents patted them down quickly.

“We’re here to see Smokey Moran,” Riley said.

None of the young men said a word. They just stared at the agents with strange, empty expressions. It struck Riley as odd behavior.

“Out,” said Newton, and the guys nodded in compliance and filed out the front door.

With Riley in the lead, the agents stormed up three flights of stairs. The local agents led the way, checking each hallway carefully. On the third floor, they stopped outside Moran's apartment.

Riley knocked sharply on the door. When no one answered, she called out.

"Smokey Moran, this is FBI Agent Riley Paige. My colleagues and I need to have a word with you. We don't mean you any harm. We're not here to arrest you."

Again came no answer.

"We have reason to believe that your life is in danger," Riley shouted.

Still no answer.

Riley turned the doorknob. To her surprise, it wasn't locked, and the door swung open.

The agents stepped into a neatly kept, nondescript apartment with virtually no decor. There was also no TV, no electronic devices, certainly no sign of a computer. Riley realized that Moran managed to wield tremendous influence in the criminal underworld solely by giving face-to-face orders. By never going online or even using a phone, he stayed under law enforcement's radar.

Definitely a shrewd customer, Riley thought. Sometimes the old-fashioned way works best.

But he was nowhere in sight. The two local agents quickly checked all the rooms and closets. Nobody was in the apartment.

They all made their way back down the stairs. When they reached the foyer, McGill and Newton lifted their rifles, ready for action. The young gangbangers awaited them at the base of the stairs.

Riley looked them over. She realized they'd obviously been under orders to let Riley and her colleagues search the empty apartment. Now it seemed that they had something to say.

"Smokey said he thought you'd come," one of the gangbangers said.

"He told us to give you a message," another said.

"He said to look for him over at the old Bushnell Warehouse on Dolliver Street," a third said.

Then, without another word, the young men stepped aside, leaving the agents plenty of room to leave.

"Was he alone?" Riley asked.

"Was when he left here," one of the young men replied.

A sort of solemn foreboding hung in the air. Riley didn't know what to make of it.

McGill and Newton kept their eyes on the young guys as the agents exited. When they got outside, Newton said, "I know where that warehouse is."

"I do too," McGill said. "It's just a few blocks from here. It's abandoned and up for sale, and there's been talk of turning it into classy apartments. But I don't like the sound of this. That place is perfect for an ambush."

He got on his phone and requested more backup to meet them

there.

“We’ll have to be careful,” Riley said. “Lead the way.”

Bill drove, following the local SUV. Both cars parked in front of a decrepit four-story brick building with a crumbling facade and broken windows. As they did, another FBI vehicle pulled up.

Looking over the building, Riley could see what McGill had meant and why he had wanted more backup. The place was huge and decrepit with three floors of dark and broken windows. Any of those windows could easily hide a shooter with a rifle.

All of the local team was armed with long guns, but she and Bill had only pistols. They might be sitting ducks in a firefight.

Still, an ambush didn’t make sense to her. After shrewdly evading arrest for some three decades, why would a guy as bright as Smokey Moran do something reckless like gun down FBI agents?

Riley called the other agents on her radio.

“You guys still wearing Kevlar?” she asked.

“Yeah,” came the reply.

“Good. Stay put in your car until I tell you to come out.”

Bill had already reached into the back of their well-stocked SUV, where he had found two Kevlar vests. He and Riley quickly slipped into them. Then Riley found a megaphone.

She rolled down the window and called out to the building.

“Smokey Moran, we’re FBI. We got your message. We came to see you. We don’t mean you any harm. Come out of the building with your hands up and let’s talk.”

She waited for a full minute. Nothing happened.

Riley got on the radio again to Newton and McGill.

“Agent Jeffreys and I are getting out of our vehicle. When we’re out, you get out too – with your weapons drawn. We’ll all meet at the front door. Keep your eyes high. If you see any movement anywhere in the building, take immediate cover.”

Riley and Bill got out of the SUV, and Newton and McGill got out of their car. Three more heavily armed FBI agents got out of the newly arrived vehicle and joined them.

The agents moved cautiously toward the building, eyeing the windows with their guns ready. Finally they reached the relative safety of the enormous front doorway.

“What’s the plan?” McGill asked, sounding distinctly nervous.

“To arrest Shane Harris, if he’s in there,” Riley said. “To kill him if necessary. And to find Smokey Moran.”

Bill added, “We’ll have to search the whole building.”

Riley could tell that the local agents didn’t much like this plan. She couldn’t blame them.

“McGill,” she said, “start on the ground floor, working your way up. Jeffreys and I will head to the top floor and work our way down. We’ll meet in the middle.”

McGill nodded. Riley could see a flash of relief on his face. They clearly knew that danger was much less likely in the lower part of the building. Bill and Riley would be putting themselves at considerably greater risk.

Newton said, “I’m going up with you.”

She saw that his expression was firm and made no objection.

Bill pushed the doors open, and all five agents went inside. Icy wind whistled through the windows of the bottom floor, which was mostly an empty space with posts and doors to several adjoining rooms. Leaving McGill and three others to start down here, Riley and Bill headed for the more threatening stairwell. Newton followed closely behind them.

Despite the cold, she could feel sweat in her gloves and on her forehead. She felt her heart pounding and worked hard to keep her breathing under control. No matter how many times she'd do this, she'd never get used to it. Nobody could.

At last they entered the vast, loft-like upper story.

The dead body was the first thing that caught Riley's eye.

It was duct-taped upright to a post, so mangled that it hardly seemed human anymore. Tire chains were wrapped around its neck.

Hatcher's weapon of choice, Riley remembered.

"That's got to be Moran," Newton said.

Riley and Bill exchanged glances. They knew not to holster their weapons – not yet. The body might well be Hatcher's ruse to lure them into the open.

As they approached the dead man, Newton hung back, rifle ready.

Freezing pools of blood stuck to the soles of Riley's shoes as she approached the body. The face was beaten beyond all possibility of recognition, and DNA or dental records would have

to be used to identify it. But Riley had no doubt that Newton was right; it must be Smokey Moran. Grotesquely, his eyes were still wide open, and the head was taped to the post so that he seemed to be staring directly at Riley.

Riley looked around again.

“Hatcher’s not here,” she said, holstering her weapon.

Bill did the same and walked up to the body beside Riley. Newton remained watchful, holding his rifle ready and turning to keep check on all directions.

“What’s this?” Bill said, pointing to a folded piece of paper poking out of the victim’s jacket pocket.

Riley took out the piece of paper. Upon it was written:

“A horse is on a 24 foot chain and eats an apple that is 26 feet away. How did the horse get to the apple?”

Riley tensed. It came as no surprise at all that Shane Hatcher had left behind a riddle. She handed the paper to Bill. Bill read it, then looked at Riley with a puzzled expression.

“The chain isn’t attached to anything,” Riley said.

Bill nodded. Riley knew that he understood the riddle’s meaning:

Shane the Chain was now unbound.

And he was just starting to enjoy his freedom.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sitting with Bill in the hotel bar that night, Riley couldn't get the image of the mangled man out of her head. Neither she nor Bill had been able to make sense of what had happened. She couldn't believe that Shane Hatcher had broken out of Sing Sing just to kill Smokey Moran. But there was no doubt that he had killed the man.

The bar's holiday lights seemed garish rather than a sign of celebration.

She held her empty glass out to a passing bartender. "I'll have another," she told her, handing over the glass.

Riley saw that Bill was looking at her uneasily. She understood why. This was Riley's second bourbon on the rocks. Bill knew that Riley's history with booze wasn't altogether pretty.

"Don't worry," she told him. "I'll make this my last for tonight."

She had no desire to get drunk tonight. All she wanted was to relax a little. The first glass hadn't helped, and she doubted that the second would either.

Riley and Bill had spent the rest of that day dealing with the aftermath of Smokey Moran's murder. While she and Bill had worked with local cops and the medical examiner's team at the crime scene, they'd sent Agents McGill and Newton back to the apartment building where Moran had lived. They were supposed

to talk to the young gangbangers who had been standing guard in the foyer. But those young men were nowhere to be found. Moran's apartment remained unlocked and unprotected.

As the bartender set the fresh drink down in front of Riley, Riley remembered what the gangbangers had said in the foyer:

"Smokey said he thought you'd come."

"He told us to give you a message."

Then they'd told them where to find Smokey Moran.

Riley shook her head as she mentally replayed the moment.

"We should have talked to those punks when we had a chance," she told Bill. "We should have asked questions."

Bill shrugged.

"About what?" he asked. "What could they have told us?"

Riley didn't reply. The truth was, she didn't know. But the whole thing seemed strange. She remembered the gangbangers' expressions – stern, somber, even sad. It was almost as if they understood that their leader had gone to his death, and they were mourning already. The fact that they had now left their posts, apparently for good, seemed to confirm that.

So what had Moran told them before he'd left? That he wouldn't be coming back? Riley was puzzled by that possibility. Why wouldn't a smart, hardened career thug like Moran have steered clear of danger? Why did he go to that warehouse at all, if he had any idea of what awaited him there?

Interrupting Riley's thoughts, Bill asked, "What do you think will be Hatcher's next move?"

“I don’t know,” Riley said.

It was hard to admit, but it was true. Seasoned FBI agents were now guarding Kelsey Sprigge’s house in case she was Hatcher’s next target. But Riley didn’t think she would be. Kelsey was right. Hatcher wouldn’t kill the woman for just having done her job all those years ago, especially since she’d actually saved his life.

“Do you think he might come for you next?” Bill said.

“I wish he would,” Riley said.

Bill looked a little shocked.

“You don’t mean that,” he said.

“I do mean that,” Riley said. “If he’d only show himself, maybe I could do something. This is like playing a chess game blindfolded. How can I make my own move if I don’t know his moves?”

Bill and Riley sipped on their drinks in silence for a few moments.

“You met him too, Bill,” Riley said. “What’s your take on him?”

Bill let out a long sigh.

“Well, he certainly seemed to figure *me* out in a hurry,” he said. “He told me to forget about fixing things up with Maggie. I had no idea how right he was.”

“How are things with Maggie these days?” Riley asked.

Bill rattled the ice around in his glass.

“Nowhere,” he said. “I’m feeling stranded. Six months of separation, no chance of getting back together, but six months

to go before the divorce becomes final. It feels like my life is standing still. At least she's easing up on custody of the boys. She's letting them spend time with me."

"That's good," Riley said.

She noticed that Bill was now gazing at her wistfully.

That's not good, she thought.

She and Bill had spent years struggling with their mutual attraction, sometimes very clumsily. Riley still winced as she remembered once drunkenly calling him and proposing that they have an affair. Their friendship and professional relationship had barely survived that miserable episode.

She didn't want to start down that road again, especially now that things were so confusing with both Ryan and Blaine. She gulped down the rest of her drink.

"It's time for me to turn in," she said.

"Yeah, me too," Bill said with a note of reluctance in his voice.

They paid the bill and left the bar. Bill headed straight toward his hotel room. In all the day's hectic confusion, Riley hadn't yet brought in her own travel bag and personal items from the car. She walked down a stairwell and through a door that led directly into the hotel's basement parking garage.

A cold blast of air hit her hard when she stepped into the concrete space. No one was in sight.

She headed straight toward the borrowed FBI SUV on the opposite side of the garage. The moment she got there and reached for the door handle, her peripheral vision caught a flash

of movement somewhere to her left.

She turned her head to look. She saw nothing except parked cars, although she thought her ears detected an echo of movement. She was sure her eyes weren't playing tricks on her. Someone else was in the garage.

"Hello," she called out.

Her voice resonated loudly through the garage, followed by the moaning sound of cold wind.

A rush of adrenaline shot through her. She was sure someone was here and avoiding her sight. Who could it possibly be except Shane Hatcher?

She drew her weapon, wondering whether he had a gun as well. If so, would he use it? No, simply shooting somebody hardly seemed Hatcher's style. She wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't even armed – but he'd be no less dangerous even so.

She walked cautiously toward where she thought she'd heard the sound. Now her own footsteps sounded positively deafening as they rang through the garage. Before she'd walked more than a few feet, she heard a noisy crack behind her, followed by a rattling sound.

She whirled around, her gun raised and ready. But at that very second, she heard a clatter of running footsteps from the opposite direction. She whirled again, but saw and heard nothing.

She instantly understood what had just happened. He'd thrown something – a pebble, maybe – across the way to distract her. Now he was moving among the parked cars somewhere. But

where?

Turning around and around as she walked, she threaded her way among the parked cars, looking everywhere she possibly could.

Finally she reached the garage exit. Snow was falling outside. And there he was – unmistakably silhouetted in the open space against the glaring outdoor lights.

“Hatcher!” Riley yelled, pointing her gun. “Freeze!”

She heard a familiar, grim chuckle. Then he disappeared into the night.

Riley broke into a run and rushed through the wide exit. The wind and cold were much sharper outside the garage, and Riley wasn’t warmly dressed. She shivered deeply and almost choked on the cold air. Snowflakes stuck to her face and stung her skin.

The driveway outside the garage wound a short way to the well-lighted street. Turning and turning, looking everywhere, Riley called out.

“Hatcher! Show yourself!”

Now the air was filled with the low rumble of nearby traffic. Looking around at the snow-covered shapes of trees and bushes, Riley found it hard to imagine that he was hidden among them.

“Hatcher!” she yelled again.

Finally she reached the street and looked up and down the cleared sidewalks along the street. She saw no sign of anyone.

He’s gone, she decided.

Still watching all sides, Riley made her way back to the garage.

Just as she stepped into the broad opening, she heard a flutter of movement.

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