



BLAKE PIERCE

ONCE
CRAVED

A RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY--BOOK #3

Blake Pierce
Once Craved

Серия «A Riley Paige Mystery», книга 3

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23300283

ONCE CRAVED:

ISBN 9781632915597

Аннотация

When prostitutes turn up dead in Phoenix, not much attention is paid. But when a pattern of disturbing murders is discovered, the local police soon realize a serial killer is on a rampage and they are in way over their heads. Given the unique nature of the crimes, the FBI, called in, knows they will need their most brilliant mind to crack the case: Special Agent Riley Paige.

Riley, recovering from her last case and trying to pick up the pieces of her life, is at first reluctant. But when she learns of the grievous nature of the crimes and realizes the killer will soon strike again, she is compelled. She begins her hunt for the elusive killer and her obsessive nature takes her too far—perhaps too far, this time, to pull herself back from the brink.

Riley's search leads her into the unsettling world of prostitutes, of broken homes, and shattered dreams. She learns that, even amongst these women, there are glimpses of hope, hope being robbed by a violent psychopath. When a teenage girl is abducted, Riley, in a frantic

race against time, struggles to probe the depths of the killer's mind. But what she discovers leads her to a twist that is too shocking for even her to imagine.

A dark psychological thriller with heart-pounding suspense, **ONCE CRAVED** is book #3 in a riveting new series—with a beloved new character—that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Содержание

Prologue	8
Chapter One	13
Chapter Two	18
Chapter Three	29
Chapter Four	32
Chapter Five	39
Chapter Six	51
Chapter Seven	61
Chapter Eight	70
Chapter Nine	77
Chapter Ten	82
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	89

Pierce Blake

ONCE CRAVED

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) and ONCE CRAVED (#3). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE 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.

Copyright © 2016 by Blake Pierce. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only,

then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Jacket image Copyright GongTo, used under license from Shutterstock.com.

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)

ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)

ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)

CONTENTS

Prologue

Janine thought she saw something dark in the water down near the shoreline. It was big and black, and it seemed to move a little in the gently lapping water.

She took a hit off the marijuana pipe and handed it back to her boyfriend. Could that be a really big fish? Or some other kind of creature?

Janine shook herself a little, telling herself not to let her imagination run away with her. Getting scared would ruin her high. Nimbo Lake was a huge artificial reservoir stocked for fishing just like lots of other Arizona lakes. There'd never been tales of Nessie monsters around here.

She heard Colby say, "Wow, the lake's on fire!"

Janine turned to look at her boyfriend. His freckled face and red hair glowed in the late afternoon sunlight. He had just taken a hit off the pipe and was staring across the water with an expression of idiotic awe.

Janine giggled. "You're just lit, dude," she said. "In every way."

"Yeah, so is the lake," Colby said.

Janine turned and looked out over Nimbo Lake. Even though her own high hadn't quite kicked in yet, the sight was stunning. The late afternoon sun set the canyon wall ablaze in reds and golds. The water reflected the colors like a big smooth mirror.

She remembered that *nimbo* was Spanish for halo. The name totally fit.

She took back the pipe and inhaled deeply, feeling the welcome burn down her throat. She'd be good and high any minute now. It was going to be fun.

Still, what *was* that black shape down in the water?

Just a trick of the light, Janine told herself.

Whatever it was, it was best to ignore it, not get creeped out by it, or scared. Everything else was so perfect. This was their favorite spot, hers and Colby's – so beautiful, tucked into one of the coves on the lake, away from the campgrounds, away from everything, everybody.

She and Colby usually came here on weekends, but today they had cut school and just taken off. The late summer weather was too good to pass up. It was way cooler and nicer up here than back in Phoenix. Colby's old car was parked off the dirt road behind them.

As she looked out over the lake, the buzz came on – the feeling of a really great impending high. The lake seemed almost too intensely gorgeous to look at. So she looked at Colby. He looked intensely gorgeous too. She grabbed hold of him and kissed him. He kissed her back. He tasted fabulous. Everything about him looked and felt fabulous.

She pulled her lips away from his and looked into his eyes and said breathlessly, "Nimbo means halo, did you know that?"

"Wow," he said. "Wow."

He sounded like that was the most amazing thing he'd ever heard in his life. He looked and sounded so funny, saying that, like it was religious or something. Janine started to laugh, and Colby laughed too. In another couple of seconds, they were completely tangled up in each other's arms, groping and pawing.

Janine managed to disentangle herself.

"What's the matter?" Colby asked.

"Nothing," Janine said.

In a flash, she pulled off her halter top. Colby's eyes widened.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What do you think I'm doing?"

She began to struggle with his T-shirt, trying to pull it off of him.

"Wait a minute," Colby said. "Right here?"

"Why not right here? It's better than the back seat of your car. Nobody's looking."

"But maybe a boat ..."

Janine laughed. "If there's a boat, so what? Who cares?"

Colby was cooperating now, helping her get him out of his T-shirt. They were both clumsy with excitement, which only added to the thrill. Janine couldn't imagine why they hadn't done this here before. It wasn't like this was the first time they'd smoked pot here.

But Janine kept picturing that shape down in the water. It was *something*, and until she knew what it was, it would keep nagging at her and ruin everything.

Panting, she rose to her feet.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go check something.”

“What?” Colby asked.

“I dunno. Just come on.”

She took Colby’s hand and they stumbled down the rough slope toward the shore. Janine’s buzz was starting to turn sour now. She hated when that happened. The sooner she found out that this whole thing was harmless, the sooner she could get back to feeling good.

Still, she was starting to wish her high hadn’t come on so fast and so strong.

With every step, the object came into clearer view. It was made out of black plastic, and here and there bubbles of it broke through the water’s surface. And there was something small and white right alongside of it.

Just a yard away from the water, Janine could see that it was a big black garbage bag. It was open at the end, and out of the opening poked the shape of a hand, unnaturally pale.

A mannequin, maybe, Janine thought.

She bent down toward the water to get a closer look. The fingernails were painted garishly red in contrast to the paleness. A terrible realization ripped through Janine’s body like an electrical current.

The hand was real. It was a woman’s hand. The bag contained a dead body.

Janine started screaming. She heard Colby scream too.

And she knew that they wouldn't be able to stop screaming for a long time.

Chapter One

Riley knew that the slides she was about to show would shock her FBI Academy students. Some of them probably weren't going to be able to take it. She scanned the eager young faces watching her from the half-circle of tiered desks.

Let's see how they react, she thought. This could be important for them.

Of course, Riley knew that in the whole range of criminal offenses, serial murder was rare. Still, these young people had to learn everything there was to learn. They aspired to be FBI field agents and they'd soon find that most local law officers had no experience with serial cases. And Special Agent Riley Paige was an authority on serial murder.

She clicked the remote. The first images to appear on the large flat-screen were anything but violent. They were five charcoal portraits of women, ranging in age from young to middle age. All the women were attractive and smiling, and the portraits had been done with skill and loving artistry.

As Riley clicked, she said, "These five drawings were made eight years ago by an artist named Derrick Caldwell. Every summer, he made lots of money drawing portraits of tourists on the Dunes Beach Boardwalk here in Virginia. These women were among his very last clients."

After the last of the five portraits, Riley clicked again. The

next photograph was a hideous image of an open chest freezer filled with dismembered female body parts. She heard her students gasp.

“This is what became of those women,” Riley said. “While he was drawing them, Derrick Caldwell became convinced, to use his own words, that they ‘were too beautiful to live.’ So he stalked them one by one, killed them, dismembered them, and kept them in his freezer.”

Riley clicked again, and the images that came up next were more shocking still. They were photographs taken by the medical examiner’s team after they’d reassembled the bodies.

Riley said, “Caldwell actually ‘shuffled’ the body parts, so that the women were dehumanized beyond recognition.”

Riley turned toward the classroom. One male student was rushing toward the exit, clutching his stomach. Others looked on the verge of throwing up. A few were in tears. Only a handful appeared to be unperturbed.

Paradoxically, Riley felt pretty sure that the unruffled students would be the ones who wouldn’t survive academy training. To them, these were just pictures, not real at all. They wouldn’t be able to handle true horror whenever they had to face it firsthand. They wouldn’t be able to handle the personal aftershocks, the post-traumatic stress that they could suffer. Visions of a flaming torch still slipped into her consciousness from time to time, but her PTSD was decreasing. She was healing. But she was sure that anybody first had to feel something before they could recover

from it.

“And now,” Riley said, “I’m going to make a couple of statements, and you’re going to tell me if they’re myth or fact. Here’s the first. ‘Most serial murderers kill for sexual reasons.’ Myth or fact?”

Hands shot up among the students. Riley pointed to an especially eager-looking student in the first row.

“Fact?” the student asked.

“Yes, fact,” Riley said. “Although there can be other reasons, a sexual component is the most frequent. This can take various forms, sometimes rather bizarre. Derrick Caldwell is a classic example. The medical examiner determined that he committed acts of necrophilia on the victims before he dismembered them.”

Riley saw that most of her students were typing notes into their laptops. She continued, “Now here’s another statement. ‘Serial killers inflict increasing violence on their victims as they continue to kill.’”

Hands went up again. This time Riley pointed to a student a few rows back.

“Fact?” the student said.

“Myth,” Riley said. “Although I’ve certainly seen some exceptions, most cases show no such change over time. Derrick Caldwell’s level of violence stayed consistent while he was killing. But he was reckless, hardly an evil mastermind. He got greedy. He took his victims within a period of a month and a half. By drawing that kind of attention, he made his capture all

but inevitable.”

She glanced at the clock and saw that her hour was up.

“That’s all for today,” she said. “But there are many mistaken assumptions about serial killers and a lot of myths still circulate. The Behavioral Analysis Unit has collected and analyzed the data, and I have worked serial cases in locations all over the country. We still have a lot of information to cover.”

The class broke up, and Riley started packing up her materials to go home. Three or four students clustered around her desk to ask questions.

A male student asked, “Agent Paige, weren’t you involved in the Derrick Caldwell case?”

“Yes, I was,” Riley said. “That’s a story for another time.”

It was also a story that she wasn’t eager to tell, but she didn’t say so.

A young woman asked, “Was Caldwell ever executed for his crimes?”

“Not yet,” Riley said.

Trying not to be rude, Riley brushed past the students toward the exit. Caldwell’s impending execution wasn’t something she felt comfortable discussing. The truth was, she expected it to be scheduled for any day now. As his principal captor, she had a standing invitation to witness his death. She hadn’t decided yet whether or not she’d go.

Riley felt good as she walked out of the building into a pleasant September afternoon. She was, after all, still on leave.

She'd suffered from PTSD ever since a maniacal killer had held her captive. She'd escaped and eventually taken down her tormentor. But she hadn't gone on leave even then. She'd continued straight on to finish another case. It was a grisly business in Upstate New York that had ended with the killer committing suicide right in front of her by slashing his own throat.

That moment still haunted her. When her supervisor, Brent Meredith, approached her with another case, she'd declined to accept it. At Meredith's suggestion, she'd agreed to teach a class at the Quantico FBI Academy instead.

As she got into her car and started to drive home, Riley thought about what a wise choice it had been. Finally, her life had a sense of peace, of calm.

And yet, as she drove, a creeping, familiar feeling began to set in, one that made her heart begin to pound in the middle of a clear blue day. It was a heightened sense of anticipation, she realized, of something ominous to come.

And try as she might to envision herself in this calm forever, she knew, she just knew, it wouldn't last.

Chapter Two

Riley felt a twinge of dread as she felt the buzzing in her handbag. She stopped outside the front door of her new townhouse and pulled out her phone. Her heart skipped a beat.

It was a message from Brent Meredith.

Call me.

Riley worried. Her boss might merely be checking in to see how she was doing. He did that a lot these days. On the other hand, he might want her to return to work. What would she do then?

I'll say no, of course, Riley told herself.

That might not be easy, though. She liked her boss, and she knew he could be very persuasive. It was a decision she didn't want to have to make, so she put the phone away.

When she opened her front door and stepped into the bright, clean space of her new home, Riley's momentary anxiety vanished. Everything seemed so right since she'd moved here.

A pleasant voice called out.

“¿Quién es?”

“Soy yo,” Riley called back. *“I'm home, Gabriela.”*

The stout, middle-aged Guatemalan woman stepped out of the kitchen, drying her hands with a towel. It was good to see Gabriela's smiling face. She'd been the family housekeeper for years, long before Riley had gotten divorced from Ryan. Riley

was grateful that Gabriela had agreed to move in with her and her daughter.

“How was your day?” Gabriela asked.

“It was great,” Riley said.

“¡*Qué bueno!*”

Gabriela disappeared back into the kitchen. The smell of a wonderful dinner wafted through the house. She heard Gabriela start to sing in Spanish.

Riley stood in her living room, relishing her surroundings. She and her daughter had moved here only recently. The little ranch-style house they had lived in when her marriage dissolved had been too isolated for safety. Besides, Riley had felt an urgent need for a change, both for herself and April. Now that her divorce was final and Ryan was being generous with child support, it was time to make a whole new life.

There were still a few finishing touches to take care of. Some of the furniture was rather old and out of place in such a pristine environment. She'd have to find replacements. One of the walls looked rather empty, and Riley had run out of pictures to hang there. She made a mental note to go shopping with April this coming weekend. That idea made Riley feel comfortably normal, a woman with a nice family life rather than an agent tracking down some deviant murderer.

Now she wondered – where *was* April?

She stopped to listen. No music was emanating from April's room upstairs. Then she heard her daughter scream.

April's voice was coming from the backyard. Riley gasped and rushed through her dining area and out onto the large back deck. When she saw April's face and torso pop into view above the fence between yards, it took Riley a moment to realize what was happening. Then she relaxed and laughed at herself. Her automatic panic had been an overreaction. But it had been instinctive. All too recently, Riley had rescued April from the clutches of a madman who had targeted her for revenge on her mother.

April disappeared from view and then popped up again squealing with pleasure. She was jumping on the neighbor's trampoline. She'd made friends with the girl who lived there, a teenager who was about April's age and even went to the same high school.

"Be careful!" Riley called out to April.

"I'm fine, Mom!" April called back breathlessly.

Riley laughed again. It was an unfamiliar sound, springing from feelings she had almost forgotten. She wanted to get used to laughing again.

She also wanted to get used to the joyful expression on her daughter's face. It seemed like only yesterday when April had been terribly rebellious and sullen, even for a teenager. Riley could hardly blame April. Riley knew that she had left a lot to be desired as a mother. She was doing everything she could to change that.

That was one thing she especially liked about being on leave

from field work, with its long, unpredictable hours often in faraway locations. Now her schedule meshed with April's, and Riley dreaded the likelihood that this would someday have to change.

Best to enjoy it while I can, she thought.

Riley went back into the house just in time to hear the front doorbell ring.

She called out, "I'll get it, Gabriela."

She opened the door and was surprised to find herself facing a smiling man she hadn't seen before.

"Hi," he said, a bit shyly. "I'm Blaine Hildreth, from next door. Your daughter is over there now with my daughter, Crystal." He held out a box to Riley and added, "Welcome to the neighborhood. I've brought you a small housewarming gift."

"Oh," Riley said. She was startled at the unaccustomed cordiality. It took her a moment to say, "Please, come on in."

She accepted the box awkwardly and offered him a seat in a living room chair. Riley sat down on the sofa, holding the gift box in her lap. Blaine Hildreth was looking at her expectantly.

"This is so kind of you," she said, opening up the package. It held a mixed set of colorful coffee mugs, two of them decorated with butterflies and the other two with flowers.

"They're lovely," Riley said. "Would you like some coffee?"

"I'd love some," Blaine said.

Riley called out to Gabriela, who came in from the kitchen.

"Gabriela, could you bring us some coffee in these?" she said,

handing her two of the mugs. “Blaine, how do you like yours?”

“Black will be fine.”

Gabriela took the mugs into the kitchen.

“My name is Riley Paige,” she said to Blaine. “Thanks for stopping by. And thank you for the gift.”

“You’re welcome,” Blaine said.

Gabriela returned with two mugs of delicious hot coffee, then went back to work in the kitchen. Somewhat to her embarrassment, Riley found herself sizing up her male neighbor. Now that she was single, she couldn’t resist. She hoped he didn’t notice.

Oh, well, she thought. Maybe he’s doing the same with me.

First, she observed that he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. Widowed or divorced, she figured.

Second, she estimated that he was about her age, maybe a little younger, perhaps in his late thirties.

Finally, he was good-looking – or at least reasonably so. His hairline was receding, which wasn’t a strike against him. And he seemed to be lean and fit.

“So, what do you do?” Riley asked.

Blaine shrugged. “I own a restaurant. Do you know Blaine’s Grill downtown?”

Riley was pleasantly impressed. Blaine’s Grill was one of the nicest casual lunch places here in Fredericksburg. She’d heard that it was terrific for dinner, but hadn’t had a chance to try it.

“I’ve been there,” she said.

“Well, that’s mine,” Blaine said. “And you?”

Riley took a long breath. It was never easy to tell a total stranger what she did for a living. Men especially were sometimes intimidated.

“I’m with the FBI,” she said. “I’m – a field agent.”

Blaine’s eyes widened.

“Really?” he said.

“Well, on leave at the moment. I’m teaching at the academy.”

Blaine leaned toward her with growing interest.

“Wow. I’m sure you’ve got some real stories. I’d love to hear one.”

Riley laughed a bit nervously. She wondered if she’d ever be able to tell anybody outside of the Bureau about some of the things she had seen. It would be even harder to talk about some of things she had done.

“I don’t think so,” she said a bit sharply. Riley could see Blaine stiffen, and she realized that her tone was rather rude.

He ducked his head and said, “I apologize. I certainly didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.”

They chatted for a few moments after that, but Riley was aware that her new neighbor was being more reserved. After he politely said goodbye and left, Riley closed the door behind him and sighed. She was not making herself approachable, she realized. The woman starting a new life was still the same old Riley.

But she told herself that it hardly mattered at the moment.

A rebound relationship was the very last thing she needed right now. Her life required some serious sorting out, and she was just beginning to make progress in that direction.

Still, it had been nice to spend a few minutes talking to an attractive man, and a relief to finally have neighbors – and pleasant ones at that.

*

When Riley and April sat down at the table for dinner, April couldn't keep her hands off her smartphone.

“Please stop texting,” Riley said. “It's supper time.”

“In a minute, Mom,” April said. She kept right on texting.

Riley was only mildly irritated by April's display of teen behavior. The truth was, it definitely had an upside. Riley was doing great at school this year and making new friends. As far as Riley was concerned, they were a much better bunch of kids than April had hung out with before. Riley guessed that April was now texting with a boy she was interested in. So far, though, April hadn't mentioned him.

April did stop texting when Gabriela came in from the kitchen with a tray of chiles rellenos. As she set the steaming, lusciously stuffed bell peppers on the kitchen table, April giggled mischievously.

“Picante enough, Gabriela?” she asked.

“Sí,” Gabriela said, also giggling.

It was a running joke among the three of them. Ryan had disliked foods that were too spicy. Actually, he couldn't eat them at all. As far as April and Riley were concerned, hotter was better. Gabriela no longer had to hold back – or at least not as much as she used to. Riley doubted whether even she or April could handle Gabriela's original Guatemalan recipes.

When Gabriela finished setting out the food for all three of them, she said to Riley, “The gentleman is *guapo*, no?”

Riley felt herself blush. “Handsome? I hadn't noticed, Gabriela.”

Gabriela let out a burst of laughter. She sat down to eat with them and started to hum a little tune. Riley guessed that it was a Guatemalan love song. April stared at her mother.

“What gentleman, Mom?” she asked.

“Oh, our neighbor came by a little while ago – ”

April interrupted excitedly. “Omigod! Was it Crystal's dad? It was, wasn't it! Isn't he gorgeous?”

“And I think he is single.” Gabriela said.

“OK, back off,” Riley said with a laugh. “Give me some room to live. I don't need the two of you trying to fix me up with the guy next door.”

They all dug into the stuffed peppers, and dinner was almost finished when Riley felt her phone buzz in her pocket.

Damn it, she thought. I shouldn't have brought it to the table.

The buzzing continued. She couldn't very well not answer it. Since she'd gotten home, Brent Meredith had left two more text

messages, and she'd kept telling herself that she'd call him later. She couldn't put it off anymore. She excused herself from the table and answered the phone.

"Riley, I'm sorry to bother you like this," her boss said. "But I really need your help."

Riley was startled to hear Meredith call her by her first name. That was rare. Although she felt quite close to him, he usually addressed her as Agent Paige. He was normally businesslike, sometimes to the point of being brusque.

"What is it, sir?" Riley asked.

Meredith fell silent for a moment. Riley wondered why he was being reticent. Her spirits sank. She felt sure that this was precisely the news she'd been dreading.

"Riley, I'm asking a personal favor," he said, sounding much less commanding than usual. "I've been asked to look into a murder in Phoenix."

Riley was surprised. "A single murder?" she asked. "Why would that require the FBI?"

"I've got an old friend at the field office in Phoenix," Meredith said. "Garrett Holbrook. We went to the academy together. His sister Nancy was the victim."

"I'm so sorry," Riley said. "But the local police ..."

There was a rare note of entreaty in Meredith's voice.

"Garrett really wants our help. She was a prostitute. She just disappeared and then her body turned up in a lake. He wants us to look into it as the work of a serial killer."

The request seemed odd to Riley. Prostitutes often did disappear without getting killed. Sometimes they decided to do their work somewhere else. Or just quit.

“Does he have any reason to think so?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Meredith said. “Maybe he wants to think that in order to get us involved. But it’s true, as you know, that prostitutes are frequent targets of serials.”

Riley knew that this was true. Prostitutes’ lifestyles made them high-risk. They were visible and accessible, alone with strangers, often drug dependent.

Meredith continued, “He called me personally. I promised him I’d send my very best people to Phoenix. And of course – that includes you.”

Riley was touched. Meredith wasn’t making it easy to say no.

“Please try to understand, sir,” she said. “I just can’t take on anything new.”

Riley felt vaguely dishonest. *Can’t or won’t?* she asked herself. After she had been captured and tortured by a serial killer, everyone had insisted she take a leave from work. She’d tried to do that, but found herself desperately needing to be back on the job. Now she wondered what that desperation had really been all about. She had been reckless and self-destructive and had a hell of a time getting her life under control. When she had finally killed Peterson, her tormentor, she had thought everything would be fine. But he still haunted her, and she was having new problems over the resolution of her last case.

After a pause, she added, “I need more time off the field. I’m still technically on leave and I’m really trying to put my life together.”

A long silence followed. It didn’t sound as though Meredith was going to argue, much less pull rank on her. But he wasn’t going to say he was OK with it, either. He wouldn’t let up the pressure.

She heard Meredith heave a long, sad sigh. “Garrett had been estranged from Nancy for years. Now what happened to her is eating him up inside. I guess there’s a lesson there, isn’t there? Don’t take anyone in your life for granted. Always reach out.”

Riley almost dropped the phone. Meredith’s words hit a nerve that hadn’t been touched for a long time. Riley had lost contact with her own older sister years ago. They were estranged and she hadn’t even wondered about Wendy for a long time. She had no idea what her own sister was doing now.

After another pause, Meredith said, “Promise me you’ll think it over.”

“I will,” Riley said.

They ended the call.

She felt terrible. Meredith had seen her through some awful times and he’d never shown such vulnerability toward her before. She hated to let him down. And she’d just promised him to think it over.

And no matter how desperately she wanted to, Riley wasn’t sure she could say no.

Chapter Three

The man sat in his car in the parking lot, watching the whore as she approached along the street. “Chiffon,” she called herself. Obviously not her real name. And he was sure there was a lot more about her that he didn’t know.

I could make her tell me, he thought. But not here. Not today.

He wouldn’t kill her here today either. No, not right here so near her regular workplace – the so-called “Kinetic Custom Gym.” From where he sat, he could see the decrepit exercise machinery through the storefront windows – three treadmills, a rowing machine, and a couple of weight machines, none of them working. As far as he knew, nobody ever came here to actually exercise.

Not in a socially acceptable manner anyway, he thought with a smirk.

He didn’t come around to this place much – not since he’d taken that brunette who had worked here years ago. Of course, he hadn’t killed her here. He’d lured her off to a motel room for “extra services” and with the promise of a lot more money.

It hadn’t been premeditated murder even then. The plastic bag over her head was only meant to add a fantasy element of danger. But once it was done, he’d been surprised at how deeply satisfied he’d felt. It had been an epicurean pleasure, distinctive even in his lifetime of pleasures.

Still, in his trysts since then, he'd exercised more care and restraint. Or at least he had until last week, when the same game went deadly again with that escort – what was her name?

Oh, yes, he remembered. Nanette.

He'd suspected at the time that Nanette might not be her real name. Now he'd never find out. In his heart, he knew that her death was not an accident. Not really. He'd meant to do it. And his conscience was unsullied. He was ready to do it again.

The one who called herself Chiffon was approaching about a half a block away, clad in a yellow tube top and a barely existent skirt, tottering toward the gym on impossibly high heels while talking on her cell phone.

He really wanted to know if Chiffon was her real name. Their one previous professional encounter had been a failure – her fault, he was sure, not his. Something about her had put him off.

He'd known perfectly well that she was older than she claimed to be. It was more than just her body – even teenage whores had stretch marks from childbirth. And it wasn't the lines in her face. Whores aged faster than any kind of women he knew.

He couldn't put his finger on it. But there was plenty about her that perplexed him. She displayed a certain kind of faux-girlish enthusiasm that wasn't the mark of a true professional – not even a novice.

She giggled too much, like a child playing a game. She was too eager. And most oddly, he suspected that she actually liked her job.

A whore who really enjoys sex, he thought, watching her come nearer. *Who ever heard of such a thing?*

Frankly, it turned him off.

Well, at least he was sure that she wasn't an undercover cop. He would have picked up on that in a split second.

When she got close enough to see him, he honked his car horn. She stopped talking on the phone for a moment and looked his way, shielding her eyes from the morning sunlight. When she saw who it was she waved and smiled – a smile that looked, for all the world, completely sincere.

Then she walked around back of the gym toward the “service” entrance. He realized that she probably had an appointment to keep inside the brothel. No matter, he would hire her some other day when he was in the mood for a specific kind of pleasure. Meanwhile, there were plenty of other hookers around.

He remembered how they'd left things last time. She'd been cheerful and good-natured and apologetic.

“Come back anytime,” she'd told him. *“It will go better next time. We'll hit it off together. Things will get really exciting.”*

“Oh, Chiffon,” he murmured aloud to himself. “You've got no idea.”

Chapter Four

Gunfire rang out around Riley. To her left, she heard the noisy cracks of pistols. To her right, she heard heavier weaponry – blasts from assault rifles and staccato sprays from submachine guns.

In the midst of the clamor, she drew her Glock handgun from her hip holster, dropped to a prone position, and fired off six rounds. She rose into a kneeling position and fired three rounds. She deftly and quickly reloaded, then stood and fired six rounds, and finally knelt and fired three more rounds with her left hand.

She stood up and holstered her weapon, then stepped back from the firing line and pulled off her earmuffs and eye protectors. The target with the bottle-shaped outline was twenty-five yards away. Even from this distance, she could see that she had clustered all her shots nicely together. In neighboring lanes, the FBI Academy trainees kept up their practice under the guidance of their instructor.

It had been a while since Riley had fired a weapon, even though she was always armed on the job. She'd reserved this lane at the FBI Academy firing range for a little target practice and, as always, there was something satisfying about the gun's powerful recoil, the raw force of it.

She heard a voice behind her.

“Kind of old-school, aren't you?”

She turned and saw Special Agent Bill Jeffreys standing nearby, grinning. She smiled back. Riley knew exactly what he meant by “old-school.” A few years ago, the FBI had changed the live-fire rules for pistol qualification. Firing from a prone position had been part of the old drill, but it was no longer required. Now more emphasis was put on firing at targets from up close, between three and seven yards. That was supplemented by the virtual reality installation where agents were immersed in scenarios involving armed confrontations in close quarters. And trainees also went through the notorious Hogan’s Alley, a ten-acre mocked-up town where they fought off imitation terrorists with paintball guns.

“Sometimes I like to go old-school,” she said. “I figure that someday I might actually have to use deadly force at a distance.”

From her own experience, Riley knew that the real thing was almost always up close and personal, and often unexpected. In fact, she’d actually had to fight hand to hand in two recent cases. She’d killed one attacker with his own knife and another with a random rock.

“Do you think anything prepares these kids for the real thing?” Bill asked, nodding toward the trainees who were now finished and leaving the firing range.

“Not really,” Riley said. “In VR your brain does accept the scenario as real, but there’s no imminent danger, no pain, no rage to control. Something inside always knows there’s no chance of being killed.”

“Right,” Bill said. “They’ll have to find out what it’s really like just like we did a lot of years ago.”

Riley glanced sideways at him as they moved farther away from the firing line.

Like her, he was forty years old with touches of gray in his dark hair. She wondered what it meant that she found herself mentally comparing him to her leaner, slighter male neighbor.

What was his name? she asked herself. *Oh, yeah – Blaine.*

Blaine was good-looking, but she wasn’t sure whether he gave Bill a run for his money. Bill was big, solid, and quite attractive.

“What brings you here?” she asked.

“I heard you’d be here,” he said.

Riley squinted at him uneasily. This probably wasn’t just a friendly visit. From his expression, she detected that he wasn’t ready to tell her what he wanted just yet.

Bill said, “If you want to do the whole drill, I’ll keep time for you.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Riley said.

They moved off to a separate section of the shooting range, where she wouldn’t be at risk of being hit by stray bullets from the trainees.

While Bill operated a timer, Riley breezed through all the stages of the FBI pistol qualification course, firing at the target from three yards, then five, then seven, then fifteen. The fifth and last stage was the only part that she found the least bit challenging – firing from behind a barricade at twenty-five yards.

When she was through, Riley took off her headgear. She and Bill walked up to the target and checked her work. All the impact marks were clustered nicely together.

“A hundred percent – a perfect score,” Bill said.

“It had better be,” Riley said. She’d hate it if she were getting rusty.

Bill pointed toward the earthen backstop beyond the target.

“Kind of surreal, huh?” he said.

Several white-tailed deer were contentedly grazing on top of the hill. They’d actually gathered there while she’d been shooting. They were within easy range, even with her pistol. But they weren’t the least bit bothered by all the thousands of bullets slamming into targets just below the high ridge they walked on.

“Yes,” she said, “and beautiful.”

Around this time of year, the deer were a common sight here at the range. It was hunting season, and somehow they knew that they would be safe here. In fact, the grounds of the FBI Academy had become a sort of wildlife haven for lots of animals, including foxes, wild turkeys, and groundhogs.

“A couple of days ago, one of my students saw a bear in the parking lot,” Riley said.

Riley took a few steps toward the backstop. The deer raised their heads, stared at her, and trotted away. They weren’t afraid of gunfire, but they didn’t want people getting too close.

“How do you suppose they know?” Bill asked. “That it’s safe here, I mean. Don’t all gunshots sound alike?”

Riley simply shook her head. It was a mystery to her. Her father had taken her hunting when she was little. To him, deer were simply resources – food and hide. It hadn't bothered her to kill them all those years ago. But that had changed.

It seemed odd, now that she thought about it. She had no trouble using deadly force against a human being when it was necessary. She could kill a man in a heartbeat. But to kill one of these trusting creatures now seemed unthinkable.

Riley and Bill walked off to a nearby rest area and sat down together on a bench. Whatever it was he came to talk about here, he still seemed reticent.

“How are you doing on your own?” she asked in a gentle voice.

She knew it was a delicate question and she saw him wince. His wife had recently left him after years of tension between his job and home life. Bill had been worried about the prospect of losing touch with his young sons. Now he was living in an apartment in the town of Quantico and spending time with his boys on weekends.

“I don't know, Riley,” he said. “I don't know if I'll ever get used to it.”

He was clearly lonely and depressed. She had been through enough of that herself during her own recent separation and then divorce. She also knew that the time after a separation was particularly fragile. Even if the relationship hadn't been very good, you found yourself out in a world of strangers, missing years of familiarity, never knowing quite what to do with

yourself.

Bill touched her arm. His voice a bit thick with emotion, he said, “Sometimes I think that all I’ve got left to depend on in life is ... you.”

For a moment Riley felt like hugging him. When they had worked as partners, Bill had come to her rescue plenty of times, both physically and emotionally. But she knew she had to be careful. And she knew that people could be pretty crazy at times like this. She had actually phoned Bill one drunken night and proposed that they begin an affair. Now the situations were reversed. She could sense his impending dependence on her, now that she was just beginning to feel free and strong enough to be on her own.

“We were good partners,” she said. It was lame, but she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Bill took a long, deep breath.

“That’s what I came out here to talk to you about,” he said. “Meredith told me he’d called you about the Phoenix case. I’m working on it. I need a partner.”

Riley felt just a trace of irritation. Bill’s visit was starting to seem like a bit of an ambush.

“I told Meredith I’d think about it,” she said.

“And now *I’m* asking you,” Bill said.

A silence fell between them.

“What about Lucy Vargas?” Riley asked.

Agent Vargas was a rookie who had worked closely with Bill

and Riley on their most recent case. They both were impressed with her work.

“Her ankle hasn’t healed,” Bill said. “She won’t be back in the field for another month at least.”

Riley felt foolish for asking. When she, Bill, and Lucy had closed in on Eugene Fisk, the so-called “chain killer,” Lucy had taken a fall and broken her ankle and almost gotten killed. Of course she couldn’t go back to work so soon.

“I don’t know, Bill,” Riley said. “This break away from work is doing me a lot of good. I’ve been thinking about just teaching from now on. All I can tell you is what I told Meredith.”

“That you’ll think about it.”

“Right.”

Bill let out a grunt of discontentment.

“Could we at least get together and talk it over?” he asked. “Maybe tomorrow?”

Riley fell silent again for a moment.

“Not tomorrow,” she said. “Tomorrow I have to watch a man die.”

Chapter Five

Riley looked through the window into the room where Derrick Caldwell would soon die. She was sitting beside Gail Bassett, the mother of Kelly Sue Bassett, Caldwell's final victim. The man had killed five women before Riley had stopped him.

Riley had wavered about accepting Gail's invitation to the execution. She'd only seen one other, that time as a volunteer witness sitting among reporters, lawyers, law enforcement officers, spiritual advisors, and the jury foreman. Now she and Gail were among nine relatives of women that Caldwell had murdered, all of them crowded together in a tight space, sitting on plastic chairs.

Gail, a small sixty-year-old woman with a delicate, birdlike face, had kept up contact with Riley over the years. By the time of the execution her husband had died, and she had written Riley that she had no one to see her through the momentous event. So Riley had agreed to join her.

The death chamber was right there on the other side of the window. The only furniture in the room was the execution gurney, a cross-shaped table. A blue plastic curtain hung at the head of the gurney. Riley knew that the IV lines and lethal chemicals were behind that curtain.

A red telephone on the wall connected with the governor's office. It would only ring in case of a last-minute decision for

clemency. No one expected that to happen this time. A clock over the door to the room was the only other visible decor.

In Virginia, convicted offenders could choose between the electric chair and lethal injection, but the chemicals were far more often chosen. If the prisoner made no choice, injection was assigned.

Riley was almost surprised that Caldwell hadn't opted for the electric chair. He was an unrepentant monster who seemed to welcome his own death.

The clock read 8:55 when the door opened. Riley heard a wordless murmur in the room as several members of the execution team ushered Caldwell into the chamber. Two guards flanked him, gripping each arm, and another followed right behind him. A well-dressed man came in after all the rest – the prison warden.

Caldwell was wearing blue pants, a blue work shirt, and sandals with no socks. He was handcuffed and shackled. Riley hadn't seen him for years. During his brief stint as a serial killer he'd had unruly long hair and a shaggy beard, a bohemian look befitting a sidewalk artist. Now he was clean-shaven and ordinary looking.

Although he didn't put up a struggle, he looked frightened.
Good, Riley thought.

He looked at the gurney, then glanced quickly away. He seemed to be trying not to look at the blue plastic curtain at the head of the gurney. For a moment, he stared into the viewing

room window. He suddenly seemed calmer and more collected.

“I wish he could see us,” Gail murmured.

They were shielded from his view behind one-way glass and Riley didn't share Gail's wish. Caldwell had already looked at her much too closely for her liking. To capture him, she'd gone undercover. She'd pretended to be a tourist on the Dunes Beach Boardwalk and hired him to draw her portrait. As he worked, he'd showered her with flowery flattery, telling her that she was the most beautiful woman he'd drawn in a long time.

She knew right then that she was his next intended victim. That night she'd served as bait to draw him out, letting him stalk her along the beach. When he had tried to attack her, backup agents had no trouble catching him.

His capture had been pretty nondescript. The discovery of how he had carved up his victims and kept them in his freezer had been another matter. Standing there when the freezer was opened was one of the most harrowing moments of Riley's career. She still felt pity for the victims' families – Gail among them – for having to identify their dismembered wives, daughters, sisters ...

“Too beautiful to live,” he had called them.

It chilled Riley deeply that she had been one of the women he had seen that way. She'd never thought of herself as beautiful, and men – even her ex-husband, Ryan – seldom told her that she was. Caldwell was a stark and horrible exception.

What did it mean, she wondered, that a pathological monster had found her so perfectly lovely? Had he recognized something

inside her that was as monstrous as he? For a couple of years after his trial and conviction, she'd had nightmares about his admiring eyes, his honeyed words, and his freezer full of body parts.

The execution team got Caldwell up onto the execution gurney, removed the cuffs and shackles, took off his sandals, and strapped him into place. They fastened him down with leather bands – two across his chest, two to hold his legs, two around his ankles, and two around his wrists. His bare feet were turned toward the window. It was hard to see his face.

Suddenly, the curtains closed over the viewing room windows. Riley understood that this was to conceal the phase of the execution where something was most likely to go wrong – say, the team might have trouble finding a suitable vein. Still, she found it peculiar. The people in both viewing rooms were about to watch Caldwell die, but they were not allowed to witness the mundane insertion of the needles. The curtains swayed a little, apparently brushed by one of the team members moving around on the other side.

When the curtains opened again, the IV lines were in place, running from the prisoner's arms through holes in the blue plastic curtains. Some members of the execution team had retreated behind those curtains, where they would administer the lethal drugs.

One man held the red telephone receiver, ready to receive a call that would surely never come. Another spoke to Caldwell, his words a barely audible crackle over the poor sound system.

He was asking Caldwell whether he had any last words.

By contrast, Caldwell's response came through with startling clarity.

"Is Agent Paige here?" he asked.

His words gave Riley a jolt.

The official didn't reply. It wasn't a question that Caldwell had any right to have answered.

After a tense silence, Caldwell spoke again.

"Tell Agent Paige that I wish my art could have done justice to her."

Although Riley couldn't see his face clearly, she thought she heard him chuckle.

"That's all," he said. "I'm ready."

Riley was flooded by rage, horror, and confusion. This was the last thing she had expected. Derrick Caldwell had chosen to make his last living moments all about *her*. And sitting here behind this unbreakable shield of glass, she was helpless to do anything about it.

She had brought him to justice, but in the end, he had achieved a weird, sick kind of revenge.

She felt Gail's small hand gripping her own.

Good God, Riley thought. *She's comforting me.*

Riley fought down a wave of nausea.

Caldwell said one more thing.

"Will I feel it when it begins?"

Again, he received no reply. Riley could see fluid moving

through the transparent IV tubes. Caldwell took several deep breaths and appeared to fall asleep. His left foot twitched a couple of times, then fell still.

After a moment, one of the guards pinched both feet and got no reaction. It seemed a peculiar sort of gesture. But Riley realized that the guard was checking to make sure the sedative was working and that Caldwell was fully unconscious.

The guard called out something inaudible to the people behind the curtain. Riley saw a renewed flow of fluid through the IV tubes. She knew that a second drug was in the process of stopping his lungs. In a little while, a third drug would stop his heart.

As Caldwell's breathing slowed, Riley found herself thinking about what she was watching. How was this different from the times she had used lethal force herself? In the line of duty, she had killed several killers.

But this was not like any of those other deaths. By comparison, it was bizarrely controlled, clean, clinical, immaculate. It seemed inexplicably wrong. Irrationally, Riley found herself thinking ...

I shouldn't have let it come to this.

She knew she was wrong, that she had carried out Caldwell's apprehension professionally and by the book. But even so she thought ...

I should have killed him myself.

Gail held Riley's hand steadily for ten long minutes. Finally, the official beside Caldwell said something that Riley couldn't hear.

The warden stepped out from behind the curtain and spoke in a clear enough voice to be understood by all the witnesses.

“The sentence was successfully carried out at 9:07 a.m.”

Then the curtains closed across the window again. The witnesses had seen all that they were meant to see. Guards came into the room and urged everybody to leave as quickly as possible.

As the group spilled out into the hallway, Gail took hold of Riley’s hand again.

“I’m sorry he said what he said,” Gail told her.

Riley was startled. How could Gail be worried about Riley’s feelings at a time like this, when justice had finally been done to her own daughter’s killer?

“How are you, Gail?” she asked as they walked briskly toward the exit.

Gail walked along in silence for a moment. Her expression seemed completely blank.

“It’s done,” she finally said, her voice numb and cold. “It’s done.”

In an instant they stepped out into the morning daylight. Riley could see two crowds of people across the street, each roped away from the other and tightly controlled by police. On one side were people who had gathered to cheer on the execution, wielding hateful signs, some of them profane and obscene. They were understandably jubilant. On the other side were anti–death penalty protesters with their own signs. They’d been out here all

night holding a candlelight vigil. They were much more subdued.

Riley found that she couldn't muster sympathy for either group. These people were here for themselves, to make a public show of their outrage and righteousness, acting out of sheer self-indulgence. As far as she was concerned, they had no business being here – not among people whose pain and grief were all too real.

Between the entrance and the crowds was a swarm of reporters, with media trucks nearby. As Riley waded among them, one woman rushed up to her with a microphone and a cameraman behind her.

“Agent Paige? Are you Agent Paige?” she said.

Riley didn't reply. She tried to go past the reporter.

The reporter stayed with her doggedly. “We've heard that Caldwell mentioned you in his last words. Do you care to comment?”

Other reporters closed in on her, asking the same question. Riley gritted her teeth and pushed on through the throng. At last she broke free from them.

As she hurried toward her car, she found herself thinking about Meredith and Bill. Both of them had implored her to take on a new case. And she was avoiding giving either of them any kind of an answer.

Why? she wondered.

She had just run away from reporters. Was she running away from Bill and Meredith as well? Was she running away from who

she really was? From all that she had to do?

*

Riley was grateful to be home. The death she had witnessed that morning still left her with an empty feeling, and the drive back to Fredericksburg had been tiring. But when she opened the door of her townhouse, something didn't seem right.

It was unnaturally silent. April should be home from school by now. Where was Gabriela? Riley went into the kitchen and found it empty. A note was on the kitchen table.

Me voy a la tienda, it read. Gabriela had gone to the store.

Riley gripped the back of a chair as a wave of panic swept over her. Another time that Gabriela had gone to the store, April had been kidnapped from her father's house.

Darkness, a glimpse of flame.

Riley turned and ran to the foot of the stairs.

"April," she screamed.

There was no answer.

Riley raced up the staircase. Nobody was in either of the bedrooms. Nobody was in her small office.

Riley's heart was pounding, even though her mind was telling her that she was being foolish. Her body wasn't listening to her mind.

She raced back downstairs and out onto the back deck.

"April," she screamed.

But no one was playing in the yard next door and no kids were in sight.

She stopped herself from letting out another scream. She didn't want these neighbors convinced that she was truly crazy. Not so soon.

She fumbled at her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. She texted a message to April.

She received no reply.

Riley went back inside and sat down on the couch. She held her head in her hands.

She was back in the crawlspace, lying on the dirt in the darkness.

But the small light was moving toward her. She could see his cruel face in the glow of the flames. But she didn't know whether the killer was coming for her or for April.

Riley forced herself to separate the vision from her present reality.

Peterson is dead, she told herself emphatically. He will never torture either of us again.

She sat up on the sofa and tried to focus on here and now. Today she was here in her new home, in her new life. Gabriela had gone to the store. April was surely somewhere nearby.

Her breathing slowed, but she couldn't make herself get up. She was afraid she'd go outside and yell again.

After what seemed like a long time, Riley heard the front door opening.

April walked through the door, singing.

Now Riley could get to her feet. “Where the hell have you been?”

April looked shocked.

“What’s your problem, Mom?”

“Where were you? Why didn’t you answer my text?”

“Sorry, I had my phone on mute. Mom, I was just over at Cece’s house. Just across the street. When we got off the school bus, her mom offered us ice cream.”

“How was I supposed to know where you were?”

“I didn’t think you’d be home yet.”

Riley heard herself yelling, but couldn’t make herself stop. “I don’t care what you thought. You weren’t thinking. You have to always let me know ...”

The tears running down April’s face finally stopped her.

Riley caught her breath, rushed forward, and hugged her daughter. At first April’s body was stiff with anger, but Riley could feel her relax slowly. She realized that tears were running down her own face too.

“I’m sorry,” Riley said. “I’m sorry. It’s just that we went through so much ... so much awfulness.”

“But it’s all over now,” April said. “Mom, it’s all over.”

They both sat down on the couch. It was a new couch, bought when they had moved here. She had bought it for her new life.

“I know that it’s all over,” Riley said. “I know that Peterson is dead. I’m trying to get used to that.”

“Mom, everything is so much better now. You don’t have to worry about me every minute. And I’m not some stupid little kid. I’m fifteen.”

“And you’re very smart,” Riley said. “I know. I’ll just have to keep reminding myself. I love you, April,” she said. “That’s why I get so crazy sometimes.”

“I love you too, Mom,” April said. “Just don’t worry so much.”

Riley was delighted to see her daughter smile again. April had been kidnapped, held captive, and threatened with that flame. She seemed to be back to being a perfectly normal teenager even if her mother hadn’t yet regained her stability.

Still, Riley couldn’t help but wonder whether dark memories still lurked somewhere in her daughter’s mind, waiting to erupt.

As for herself, she knew that she needed to talk to somebody about her own fears and recurring nightmares. It would have to be soon.

Chapter Six

Riley fidgeted in her chair as she tried to think of what she wanted to tell Mike Nevins. She felt unsettled and edgy.

“Take your time,” the forensic psychiatrist said, craning forward in his office chair and gazing at her with concern.

Riley chuckled ruefully. “That’s the trouble,” she said. “I don’t have time. I’ve been dragging my feet. I’ve got a decision to make. I’ve put it off too long already. Have you ever known me to be this indecisive?”

Mike didn’t reply. He just smiled and pressed his fingertips together.

Riley was used to this kind of silence from Mike. The dapper, rather fussy man had been many things to her over the years – a friend, a therapist, even at times a sort of mentor. These days she usually called on him to get his insight into the dark mind of a criminal. But this visit was different. She had called him last night after getting home from the execution, and had driven to his DC office this morning.

“So what are your choices, exactly?” he finally asked.

“Well, I guess I’ve got to decide what I’m going to do with the rest of my life – teach or be a field agent. Or figure out something else entirely.”

Mike laughed a little. “Hold on a minute. Let’s not try to plan your whole future today. Let’s stick to right now. Meredith and

Jeffreys want you to take a case. Just one case. It's not either/or. Nobody says you've got to give up teaching. And all you've got to do is say yes or no this once. So what's the problem?"

It was Riley's turn to fall silent. She didn't know what the problem was. That was why she was here.

"I take it you're scared of something," Mike said.

Riley gulped hard. That was it. She was scared. She'd been refusing to admit it, even to herself. But now Mike was going to make her talk about it.

"So what are you scared of?" Mike asked. "You said you were having some nightmares."

Riley still said nothing.

"This has to be part of your PTSD problem," Mike said. "Do you still have the flashbacks?"

Riley had been expecting the question. After all, Mike had done more than anybody to get her through the trauma of an especially horrible experience.

She leaned her head back on the chair and closed her eyes. For a moment she was in Peterson's dark cage again, and he was threatening her with a propane flame. For months after Peterson had held her captive, that memory had constantly forced its way into her mind.

But then she had tracked down Peterson and killed him herself. In fact, she had beaten him to a lifeless pulp.

If that's not closure, I don't know what is, she thought.

Now the memories seemed impersonal, as though she was

watching someone else's story unfold.

"I'm better," Riley said. "They're shorter and much less often."

"How about your daughter?"

The question cut Riley like a knife. She felt an echo of the horror she'd experienced when Peterson had taken April captive. She could still hear April's cries for help ringing through her brain.

"I guess I'm not over that," she said. "I wake up afraid that she's been taken again. I have to go to her bedroom and make sure that she's there and she's all right and sleeping."

"Is that why you don't want to take another case?"

Riley shuddered deeply. "I don't want to put her through anything like that again."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"No, I don't suppose it does," Riley said.

Another silence fell.

"I've got a feeling there's something more," Mike said. "What else gives you nightmares? What else wakes you up at night?"

With a jolt, a lurking terror surfaced in her mind.

Yes, there *was* something more.

Even with her eyes wide open, she could see his face – Eugene Fisk's babyish, grotesquely innocent-looking face with its small, beady eyes. Riley had looked deeply into those eyes during their fatal confrontation.

The killer had held Lucy Vargas with a razor at her throat. At that moment, Riley probed her most terrible fears. She'd talked

about the chains – those chains that he believed were talking to him, forcing him to commit murder after murder, chaining up women and slitting their throats.

“The chains don’t want you to take this woman,” Riley had told him. *“She isn’t what they need. You know what the chains want you to do instead.”*

His eyes glistening with tears, he’d nodded in agreement. Then he’d inflicted the same death upon himself that he had inflicted upon his victims.

He slit his own throat right before Riley’s eyes.

And now, sitting here in Mike Nevins’s office, Riley almost choked on her own horror.

“I killed Eugene,” she said with a gasp.

“The chain killer, you mean. Well, he wasn’t the first man you killed.”

It was true – she’d used deadly force a number of times. But with Eugene, it had been very different. She’d thought about his death quite often, but she’d never talked to anybody about it before now.

“I didn’t use a gun, or a rock, or my fists,” she said. “I killed him with understanding, with empathy. My own mind is a deadly weapon. I’d never known that before. It terrifies me, Mike.”

Mike nodded sympathetically. “You know what Nietzsche said about looking too long into an abyss,” he said.

“The abyss also looks into you,” Riley said, finishing the familiar saying. “But I’ve done a lot more than look into an abyss.

I've practically lived there. I've almost gotten comfortable there. It's like a second home. It scares me to death, Mike. One of these days I might go into that abyss and never come back out. And who knows who I might hurt – or kill.”

“Well, then,” Mike said, leaning back in his chair. “Maybe we're getting somewhere.”

Riley wasn't so sure. And she didn't feel any closer to making a decision.

*

When Riley walked through her front door a while later, April came galloping down the stairs to meet her.

“Oh, Mom, you've got to help me! Come on!”

Riley followed April up the stairs to her bedroom. An open suitcase was open on her bed and clothes were scattered all around it.

“I don't know what to pack!” April said. “I've never had to do this before!”

Smiling at her daughter's mixed panic and exhilaration, Riley set right to work helping her get her things together. April was leaving tomorrow morning on a school field trip – a week in nearby Washington, DC. She'd be going with a group of advanced American History students and their teachers.

When Riley had signed the forms and paid the extra fees for the trip, she'd had some qualms about it. Peterson had held April

captive in Washington, and although that had been far off on the edge of the city, Riley worried that the trip might dredge up the trauma. But April seemed to be doing extremely well both academically and emotionally. And the trip was a wonderful opportunity.

As she and April teased each other lightheartedly about what to pack, Riley realized that she was having fun. That abyss that she and Mike had talked about a little while ago seemed far away. She still had a life outside of that abyss. It was a good life, and whatever she decided to do, she was determined to keep it.

While they were sorting things, Gabriela stepped into the room.

“Señora Riley, my cab will be here *pronto*, any minute,” she said, smiling. “I’m packed and ready. My things are at the door.”

Riley had almost forgotten that Gabriela was leaving. Since April was going to be away, Gabriela had asked for time off to visit relatives in Tennessee. Riley had cheerfully agreed.

Riley hugged Gabriela and said, “*Buen viaje.*”

Gabriela’s smile fading a little, she added, “*Me preocupo.*”

“You’re worried?” Riley asked in surprise. “What are you worried about, Gabriela?”

“You,” Gabriela said. “You will be all alone in this new house.”

Riley laughed a little. “Don’t worry, I can take care of myself.”

“But you have not been *sola* since so many bad things have happened,” Gabriela said. “I worry.”

Gabriela’s words gave Riley a slight turn. What she was saying

was true. Ever since the ordeal with Peterson, at least April had always been around. Could a dark and frightening void open up in her new home? Was the abyss yawning even now?

"I'll be fine," Riley said. "Go have a good time with your family."

Gabriela grinned and handed Riley an envelope. "This was in the mailbox," she said.

Gabriela hugged April, then hugged Riley again, and went downstairs to wait for her cab.

"What is it, Mom?" April asked.

"I don't know," Riley said. "It wasn't mailed."

She tore the envelope open and found a plastic card inside. Decorative letters on the card proclaimed "Blaine's Grill." Below that she read aloud, "Dinner for two."

"I guess it's a gift card from our neighbor," Riley said. "That's nice of him. You and I can go there for dinner when we get back."

"Mom!" April snorted. "He doesn't mean you and me."

"Why not?"

"He's inviting you out to dinner."

"Oh! Do you really think so? It doesn't say that here."

April shook her head. "Don't be stupid. The man wants to date you. Crystal told me her dad likes you. And he's really cute."

Riley could feel her face flushing red. She couldn't remember the last time someone had asked her on a date. She had been married to Ryan for so many years. Since their divorce she had been focused on getting settled in her new home and decisions

to be made about her job.

“You’re blushing, Mom,” April said.

“Let’s get your stuff packed,” Riley grumbled. “I’ll have to think about all this later.”

They both went back to sorting through clothes. After a few minutes of silence, April said, “I’m kind of worried about you, Mom. Like Gabriela said ...”

“I’ll be fine,” Riley said.

“Will you?”

Folding a blouse, Riley wasn’t sure what to answer. Surely she’d recently faced worse nightmares than an empty house – murderous psychopaths obsessed with chains, dolls, and blowtorches among them. But might a host of inner demons break loose when she was alone? Suddenly, a week began to feel like a long time. And the prospect of deciding whether or not to date the man who lived next door seemed scary in its own way.

I’ll handle it, Riley thought.

Besides, she still had another option. And it was about time to make a decision once and for all.

“I’ve been asked to work on a case,” Riley told April. “I’d have to go to Arizona right away.”

April stopped folding her clothes and looked at Riley.

“So you’re going to go, aren’t you?” she asked.

“I don’t know, April,” Riley said.

“What’s there to know? It’s your job, right?”

Riley looked into her daughter’s eyes. The hard times between

them really did seem to be over. Ever since they'd both survived the horrors inflicted by Peterson, they'd been linked by a new bond.

"I've been thinking about not going back to field work," Riley said.

April's eyes widened with surprise.

"What? Mom, taking down bad guys is what you do best."

"I'm good at teaching, too," Riley said. "I'm *very* good at it. And I love it. I really do."

April shrugged with incomprehension. "Well, go ahead and teach. Nobody's stopping you. But don't stop kicking ass. That's just as important."

Riley shook her head. "I don't know, April. After all I put you through –"

April looked and sounded incredulous. "After all *you* put me through? What are you talking about? *You* didn't put me through anything. I got caught by a psychopath named Peterson. If he hadn't taken me, he'd have taken someone else. Don't you start blaming yourself."

After a pause, April said, "Sit down, Mom. We've got to talk."

Riley smiled and sat down on the bed. April was sounding just like a mother herself.

Maybe a little parental lecture is just what I need, Riley thought.

April sat down next to Riley.

"Did I ever tell you about my friend Angie Fletcher?" April said.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, we used to be tight for a while but she changed schools. She was really smart, just one year ahead of me, fifteen years old. I heard that she started buying drugs from this guy everybody called Trip. She got really, really into heroin. And when she ran out of money, Trip put her to work as a hooker. Trained her personally, made her move in with him. Her mom’s so screwed up, she barely noticed Angie was gone. Trip even advertised her on his website, made her get a tattoo swearing she was his forever.”

Riley was shocked. “What happened to her?”

“Well, Trip eventually got busted, and Angie wound up in a drug rehab center. That was just this summer while we were in Upstate New York. I don’t know what happened to her after that. All I know is that she’s just sixteen now and her life is ruined.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Riley said.

April groaned with impatience.

“You really don’t get it, do you, Mom? *You’ve* got nothing to be sorry for. You’ve spent your whole life stopping this kind of thing. And you’ve put away all kinds of guys like Trip – some of them forever. But if you stop doing what you do best, who’s going to take over for you? Somebody as good at it as you? I doubt it, Mom. I really doubt it.”

Riley fell silent for a moment. Then with a smile, she squeezed April’s hand tightly.

“I think I’ve got a phone call to make,” she said.

Chapter Seven

As the FBI jet lifted off from Quantico, Riley felt sure that she was on her way to face yet another monster. She was deeply uneasy at the thought. She had been hoping to stay away from killers for a while, but taking this job had finally seemed like the right thing to do. Meredith had been clearly relieved when she'd said she would go.

That morning, April had left on her field trip, and now Riley and Bill were on their way to Phoenix. Outside the airplane window the afternoon had turned dark, and rain streaked across the glass. Riley stayed strapped into her seat until the plane had made its way through rough-and-tumble gray clouds and into clearer air above. Then a cushiony surface spread out beneath them, hiding the earth where people were probably scurrying about to stay dry. And, Riley thought, going about their everyday pleasures or horrors or whatever lay in between.

As soon as the ride smoothed out, Riley turned to Bill and asked, "What have you got to show me?"

Bill flipped open his laptop on the table in front of them. He brought up a photo of a large black garbage bag barely submerged in shallow water. A dead white hand could be seen poking out of the bag's opening.

Bill explained, "The body of Nancy Holbrook was found in an artificial lake in the reservoir system outside of Phoenix. She

was a thirty-year-old escort with an expensive service. In other words, a pricey prostitute.”

“Did she drown?” Riley asked.

“No. Asphyxiation seems to have been the cause of death. Then she was stuffed into a heavy-duty garbage bag and dumped into the lake. The garbage bag was weighted with large rocks.”

Riley studied the photo closely. A lot of questions were already forming in her mind.

“Did the killer leave any physical evidence?” she asked. “Prints, fibers, DNA?”

“Not a thing.”

Riley shook her head. “I don’t get it. The disposal of the body, I mean. Why didn’t the killer go to just a little more trouble? A freshwater lake is perfect for getting rid of a body. Corpses sink and decompose fast in fresh water. Sure, they might resurface later on because of bloating and gases. But enough rocks in the bag would solve that problem. Why leave her in shallow water?”

“I guess it’s up to us to figure that out,” Bill said.

Bill brought up several other photos of the crime scene, but they didn’t tell Riley much.

“So what do you think?” she said. “Are we dealing with a serial or aren’t we?”

Bill’s knitted his brow in thought.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Really, we’re just looking at a single murdered prostitute. Sure, other prostitutes have disappeared in Phoenix. But that’s nothing new. That happens routinely in every

major city in the country.”

The word “routinely” struck an uncomfortable chord with Riley. How could the ongoing disappearance of a certain class of women be considered “routine”? Still, she knew that what Bill was saying was true.

“When Meredith phoned, he made it sound urgent,” she said. “And now he’s even giving us the VIP treatment, flying us directly there on a BAU jet.” She thought back for a moment. “His exact words were that his friend *wanted us to look into it as the work of a serial killer*. But you sound like nobody’s sure it is a serial.”

Bill shrugged. “It might not be. But Meredith seems to be really close to Nancy Holbrook’s brother, Garrett Holbrook.”

“Yeah,” Riley said. “He told me they went to the academy together. But this whole thing is unusual.”

Bill didn’t argue. Riley leaned back in her seat and considered the situation. It seemed pretty obvious that Meredith was bending FBI rules as a favor to a friend. That wasn’t typical of Meredith at all.

But this didn’t make her think any less of her boss. Actually, she really admired his devotion to his friend. She wondered ...

Is there anybody I’d bend the rules for? Bill, maybe?

He’d been more than a partner over the years, and more than even a friend. Even so, Riley wasn’t sure. And that made her wonder – just how close did she feel to any of her coworkers these days, including Bill?

But there didn't seem much point in thinking about it now. Riley closed her eyes and went to sleep.

*

It was a bright sunny day when they landed in Phoenix.

As they got off the jet, Bill nudged her and said, "Wow, great weather. Maybe at least we'll get a little vacation out of this trip."

Somehow, Riley doubted that it was going to be a lot of fun. It had been a long time since she'd taken a real vacation. Her last attempt at an outing in New York with April had been cut short by the usual murder and mayhem that was such a big part of her life.

One of these days, I need to get some real rest, she thought.

A young local agent met them at the plane and drove them to the Phoenix FBI field office, a striking new modern building. As he pulled the car into the Bureau parking lot, he commented, "Cool design, isn't it? Even won some kind of award. Can you guess what it's supposed to look like?"

Riley looked over the facade. It was all straight, long rectangles and narrow vertical windows. Everything was carefully placed and the pattern seemed familiar. She stopped and stared at it for a moment.

"DNA sequencing?" she asked.

"Yep," the agent said. "But I'll bet you can't guess what the rock maze over there looks like from above."

But they walked into the building before Riley or Bill could hazard a guess. Inside, Riley saw the DNA motif repeated in the sharply patterned floor tiles. The agent led them among severe-looking horizontal walls and partitions until they reached the office of Special Agent in Charge Elgin Morley, then left them there.

Riley and Bill introduced themselves to Morley, a small, bookish man in his fifties with a thick black mustache and round glasses. Another man was awaiting them in the office. He was in his forties, tall, gaunt, and slightly hunched. Riley thought he looked tired and depressed.

Morley said, “Agents Paige and Jeffreys, I’d like you to meet Agent Garrett Holbrook. His sister was the victim who was found in Nimbo Lake.”

Hands were shaken all around, and the four agents sat down to talk.

“Thank you for coming,” Holbrook said. “This whole thing has been pretty overwhelming.”

“Tell us about your sister,” Riley said.

“I can’t tell you much,” Holbrook said. “I can’t say I knew her very well. She was my half-sister. My dad was a philandering jerk, left my mom and had children with three different women. Nancy was fifteen years younger than me. We barely had contact over the years.”

He stared blankly at the floor for a moment, his fingers picking absent-mindedly at the arm of his chair. Then without

looking up he said, “The last I heard from her, she was doing office work and taking classes at a community college. That was a few years ago. I was shocked to find out what had become of her. I had no idea.”

Then he fell silent. Riley thought he looked like he was leaving something unsaid, but she told herself that maybe that was really all the man knew. After all, what could Riley say about her own older sister if anyone asked her? She and Wendy had been out of contact for so long that they might as well not be sisters at all.

Even so, she sensed something more than grief in Holbrook’s demeanor. It struck her as odd.

Morley suggested that Riley and Bill go with him to Forensic Pathology, where they could take a look at the body. Holbrook nodded and said that he’d be in his office.

As they followed the Agent in Charge down the hall, Bill asked, “Agent Morley, what reason is there for thinking we’re dealing with a serial killer?”

Morley shook his head. “I’m not sure we’ve got much of a reason,” he said. “But when Garrett found out about Nancy’s death, he refused to leave it alone. He’s one of our best agents, and I’ve tried to accommodate him. He tried to get his own investigation underway, but didn’t get anywhere. The truth is, he hasn’t been himself this whole while.”

Riley had certainly noticed that Garrett seemed to be terribly unsettled. Perhaps a little more so than a seasoned agent would usually be, even over a relative’s death. He’d made it clear that

they weren't close.

Morley led Riley and Bill into the building's Forensic Pathology area, where he introduced them to its team chief, Dr. Rachel Fowler. The pathologist pulled open the refrigerated unit where Nancy Holbrook's body was being kept.

Riley winced a little at the familiar odor of decomposition, even though the smell hadn't gotten very strong yet. She saw that the woman had been short of stature and very thin.

"She hadn't been in the water long," Fowler said. "The skin was just beginning to wrinkle when she was found."

Dr. Fowler pointed to her wrists.

"You can see rope burns. It looks like she was bound when she was killed."

Riley noticed raised marks on the crook of the corpse's arm.

"These look like track marks," Riley said.

"Right. She was using heroin. My guess was that she was slipping into serious addiction."

It looked to Riley like the woman had been anorexic, and that seemed consistent with Fowler's addiction theory.

"That kind of addiction seems out of place for a high-class escort," Bill said. "How do we know that's what she was?"

Fowler produced a laminated business card in a plastic evidence bag. It had a provocative photo of the dead woman on it. The name on the card was simply "Nanette," and the business was called "Ishtar Escorts."

"This card was on her when she was found," Fowler explained.

“The police got in touch with Ishtar Escorts and found out her real name, and that soon led to identifying her as Agent Holbrook’s half-sister.”

“Any idea how she was asphyxiated?” Riley asked.

“There’s some bruising around her neck,” Fowler said. “The killer might have held a plastic bag over her head.”

Riley looked closely at the marks. Was this some kind of a sex game gone wrong, or a deliberate act of murder? She couldn’t yet tell.

“What did she have on when she was found?” Riley asked.

Fowler opened up a box that contained the victim’s clothing. She had been wearing a pink dress with a low neckline – barely respectable, Riley observed, but definitely a notch above a streetwalker’s typical trashy attire. It was the dress of a woman who wanted to look both very sexy and suitably attired for nightclubs.

Nestled on top of the dress was a clear plastic bag of jewelry.

“May I have a look?” Riley asked Fowler.

“Go right ahead.”

Riley took out the bag and looked at the contents. Most of it was fairly tasteful costume jewelry – a beaded necklace and bracelets and simple earrings. But one item stood out among the rest. It was a slender gold ring with a diamond setting. She picked it up and showed it to Bill.

“Real?” Bill asked.

“Yes,” Fowler replied. “Real gold and a real diamond.”

“The killer didn’t bother to steal it,” Bill commented. “So this wasn’t about money.”

Riley turned to Morley. “I’d like to see where the body was found,” she said. “Right now, while it’s still light.”

Morley looked a bit puzzled.

“We can get you there by helicopter,” he said. “But I don’t know what you expect to find. Cops and agents have been all over the site.”

“Trust her,” Bill said knowingly. “She’ll find out something.”

Chapter Eight

The broad surface of Nimbo Lake looked still and tranquil as the helicopter approached it.

But looks can fool you, Riley reminded herself. She knew well that calm surfaces could guard dark secrets.

The helicopter descended, then wobbled as it hovered in search of a place to land. Riley felt a little queasy from the unsteady movement. She didn't much like helicopters. She looked at Bill, who was sitting next to her. She thought he looked equally uneasy.

But when she glanced over at Agent Holbrook, his face seemed blank to her. He had barely said a word during the half-hour flight from Phoenix. Riley didn't yet know what to make of him. She was used to reading people easily – sometimes too easily for her own comfort. But Holbrook still struck her as an enigma.

The helicopter finally touched down, and all three FBI agents stepped out onto solid ground, ducking through the churning air under the still-spinning blades. The road where the chopper had landed was nothing more than parallel tire tracks through the desert weeds.

Riley observed that the road didn't look heavily used. Even so, it appeared that enough vehicles had passed over it during the past week to conceal any tracks left by whatever the killer had

been driving.

The noisy helicopter engine died down, making it easier to talk as Riley and Bill followed Holbrook on foot.

“Tell us what you can about this lake,” Riley said to Holbrook.

“It’s one of a series of reservoirs created by dams along the Acacia River,” Holbrook said. “This is the smallest of the artificial lakes. It’s stocked with fish, and it’s a popular recreation spot, but the public areas are on the other side of the lake. The body was discovered by a couple of teenagers stoned on pot. I’ll show you where.”

Holbrook led them off the road to a stone ridge overlooking the lake.

“The kids were right where we’re standing,” he said. He pointed down to the edge of the lake. “They looked down there and saw it. They said that it just looked like a dark shape in the water.”

“What time of day were the kids here?” Riley asked.

“A little earlier than it is right now,” Holbrook said. “They had cut school and gotten stoned.”

Riley took in the whole scene. The sun was low, and the tops of the red rock cliffs across the lake were ablaze with light. There were a couple of boats out on the water. The sheer drop from the ridge down to the water wasn’t far – a mere ten feet, maybe.

Holbrook pointed to a place nearby where the slope wasn’t as steep.

“The kids climbed down over there to get a closer look,” he

said. “That’s when they found out what it really was.”

Poor kids, Riley thought. It had been some two decades since she’d tried marijuana back in college. Even so, she could well imagine the heightened horror of making such a discovery while under the influence.

“Do you want to climb down there for a closer look?” Bill asked Riley.

“No, it’s a good view from here,” Riley said.

Her gut told her that she was right where she needed to be. After all, the killer surely hadn’t lugged the body down the same slope where the kids had gone down.

No, she thought. *He stood right here.*

It even looked like the sparse vegetation was still broken down a little where she was standing.

She took a few breaths, trying to slip into his point of view. He’d undoubtedly come here at night. But was it a clear night or a cloudy one? Well, in Arizona at this time of year, the chances were that the night was clear. And she recalled that the moon would have been bright about a week ago. In the starlight and moonlight, he could have seen what he was doing pretty well – possibly even without a flashlight.

She imagined him putting the body down right here. But then what had he done next? Obviously he had rolled the body off the ledge. It had fallen straight down into the shallow water.

But something about this scenario struck Riley as wrong. She wondered again, as she had on the plane, how he could have been

so careless.

True, from up here on the ledge, he probably couldn't have seen that the body hadn't sunk very far. The kids had described the bag as "*a dark shape in the water.*" From this height, the submerged bag had likely been invisible even on a bright night. He'd assumed that the body had sunk, as newly dead bodies do in fresh water, especially when weighted down with stones.

But why did he suppose that the water was deep right here?

She peered down into the clear water. In the late afternoon light, she could easily see the submerged ledge where the body had landed. It was a small horizontal area, nothing more than the top of a boulder. Around it, the water was black and deep.

She looked around the lake. Sheer cliffs jutted up everywhere out of the water. She could see that Nimbo Lake had been a deep canyon before the dam had filled it with water. She saw only a few places where one could walk along the shoreline. The cliff sides dropped straight down into the depths.

To her right and left, Riley saw ridges that were similar to the one where they were standing, rising to about the same height. The water beneath those cliffs was dark, showing no signs of the kind of ledge that lay below right here.

She felt a tingle of comprehension.

"He's done this before," she told Bill and Holbrook. "There's another body in this lake."



On the helicopter ride back to the FBI Phoenix Division headquarters, Holbrook said, "So you think this is a serial case after all?"

"Yes, I do," Riley said.

Holbrook said, "I wasn't positive. Mostly I was eager to get someone good on the case. But what did you see that made up your mind?"

"There are other ledges that look just like the one he pushed this body over," she explained. "He used one of those other drop-offs before, and that body sank just like it was supposed to. But maybe he couldn't find the same spot this time. Or maybe he thought this *was* the same spot. Anyway, he expected the same result this time. He was wrong."

Bill said, "I told you she'd find something there."

"Divers will need to search this lake," Riley added.

"That will take some doing," Holbrook said.

"It's got to be done anyway. There's another body down there somewhere. You can count on it. I don't know how long it's been there, but it's there."

She paused, mentally assessing what all this said about the killer's personality. He was competent and capable. This wasn't a pathetic loser, like Eugene Fisk. He was more like Peterson, the killer who had captured and tormented both her and April.

He was shrewd and poised, and he thoroughly enjoyed killing – a sociopath rather than a psychopath. Above all else, he was confident.

Maybe too confident for his own good, Riley thought.

It might well prove to be his downfall.

She said, “The guy we’re looking for isn’t some criminal lowlife. My guess is he’s an ordinary citizen, reasonably well-educated, maybe with a wife and family. Nobody who knows him thinks he’s a killer.”

Riley watched Holbrook’s face as they talked. Although she now knew something about the case she hadn’t known before, Holbrook still struck her as utterly impenetrable.

The helicopter circled over the FBI building. Twilight had fallen and the area below was well lighted.

“Look there,” Bill said, pointing out the window.

Riley looked down where he pointed. She was surprised to see that from here the rock garden looked like a gigantic fingerprint. It spread out beneath them like a welcome sign. Some offbeat landscaper had decided that this image arranged out of stone was better suited for the new FBI building than a planted garden would have been. Hundreds of substantial stones had been carefully placed in curving rows to create the ridged illusion.

“Wow,” Riley said to Bill. “Whose fingerprint do you suppose they used? Someone legendary, I guess. Dillinger, maybe?”

“Or maybe John Wayne Gacy. Or Jeffrey Dahmer.”

Riley thought it a strange spectacle. On the ground, no one would ever guess that the arrangement of stones was anything more than a meaningless maze.

It struck her almost as a sign and a warning. This case was going to demand that she view things from a new and unsettling perspective. She was about to probe regions of darkness that not even she had imagined.

Chapter Nine

The man enjoyed watching streetwalkers. He liked how they grouped on the corner and pranced up and down the sidewalks, mostly in pairs. He found them to be much feistier than call girls and escorts, prone to easily losing their temper.

For example, right now, he saw one cursing a bunch of uncouth young guys in a slow-moving vehicle for taking her picture. The man didn't blame her one bit. After all, she was here to do business, not to serve as scenery.

Where's their respect? he thought with a smirk. *Kids these days.*

Now the guys were laughing at her and yelling obscenities. But they couldn't match her colorful retorts, some of them in Spanish. He liked her style.

He was slumming tonight, parked along a row of cheap motels where streetwalkers gathered. The other girls were less vivacious than the one who had done the cursing. Their attempts at sexiness looked awkward by comparison, and their come-ons were crude. As he watched, one hiked up her skirt to show her skimpy underpants to the driver of a slowly passing car. The driver didn't stop.

He kept his eye on the girl who had first drawn his attention. She was stomping around indignantly, complaining to the other girls.

The man knew he could have her if he wanted her. She could

be his next victim. All he had to do to get her attention was to drive along the curb toward her.

But no, he wouldn't do that. He never did that. He'd never approach a hooker on the street. It was up to her to approach him. It was the same even with whores he met through a service or a brothel. He'd get them to meet him alone somewhere separately without ever asking directly. It would seem like their idea.

With some luck, the feisty girl would notice his expensive car and trot right on over. His car was wonderful bait. So was the fact that he dressed well.

But however the night ended, he had to be more careful than last time. He'd been sloppy, dropping her body over that ledge and expecting her to sink.

And such a stir she had created! An FBI agent's sister! And they'd called in big guns from Quantico. He didn't like it. He wasn't out for publicity or fame. All he wanted to do was indulge his cravings.

And didn't he have every right? What healthy adult man didn't have his cravings?

Now they were going to send divers down in the lake to look for bodies. He knew what they might find there, even after some three years. He didn't like that at all.

It wasn't just out of concern for himself. Oddly, he felt bad for the lake. Having divers probe and poke into its every submerged nook and cranny struck him as rather obscene and invasive, an inexcusable violation. After all, the lake hadn't done anything

wrong. Why should it be harassed?

Anyway, he wasn't worried. There was no way they were going to trace either victim back to him. It simply wasn't going to happen. He was through with that lake, though. He hadn't yet decided where to deposit his next victim, but he was sure he would come to a decision before the night was over.

Now the vivacious girl was looking at his car. She started walking toward him, with lots of sass in her step.

He rolled down the passenger window and she poked her head in. She was a dark-skinned Latina, heavily made-up with thick lip liner, colorful eye shadow, and fierce arched eyebrows that seemed to be tattoos. Her earrings were big gold-painted crucifixes.

"Nice car," she said.

He smiled.

"What's a nice girl like you doing out so late?" he asked. "Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"Maybe you'd like to tuck me in," she said, smiling.

Her teeth struck him as remarkably clean and straight. Indeed, she looked remarkably healthy. That was pretty rare out here on the streets, where most of the girls were "tweakers," in various stages of meth addiction.

"I like your style," he said. "Very *chola*."

Her smile broadened. He could see that she took being called a Latina gangbanger as a compliment.

"What's your name?" he asked.

“Socorro.”

Ah, “*socorro*,” he thought. *Spanish for “help.”*

“I’ll bet you give great *socorro*,” he said in a leering tone.

Her deep brown eyes leered right back. “You look like maybe you could use some *socorro* right now.”

“Maybe I could,” he said.

But before they could start settling terms, a car pulled into the space right behind him. He heard a man call out from the driver window.

“¡*Socorro!*” he yelled. “¡*Vente!*”

The girl drew herself up with a rather lame show of indignation.

“¡*Porqué?*” she yelled back.

“*Vente aquí, ¡puta!*”

The man detected a trace of fear in the girl’s eyes. It couldn’t be because the man in the car had called her a whore. He guessed that the man was her pimp, checking on her to see how much cash she had brought in so far tonight.

“¡*Pinche Pablo!*” She muttered the all-purpose insult under her breath. Then she walked toward the car.

The man sat there, wondering if she was going to come back, still wanting to do business with him. Either way, he didn’t like it. Waiting around was not his style.

His interest in the girl suddenly vanished. No, he wouldn’t bother with her. She had no idea how lucky she was.

Besides, what was he doing slumming like this? His next

victim ought to be classier.

Chiffon, he thought. He'd almost forgotten about Chiffon. *But maybe I've just been saving her for a special occasion.*

He could wait. It didn't have to be tonight. He drove away, gloating over his show of self-restraint, despite his enormous cravings. He considered that one of his best personal qualities.

He was, after all, a very civilized man.

Chapter Ten

The three young women in the interview room didn't look at all like Riley had expected. For a few moments she just watched them through the one-way window. They were tastefully dressed, almost like well-paid secretaries. She'd been told their names were Mitzi, Koreen, and Tantra. Of course Riley was sure that those weren't their real names.

Riley also doubted that they dressed so acceptably when they were on the job. Working for about 250 dollars per hour, they'd surely invested in elaborate wardrobes to cater to all sorts of clients' fantasies. They had been colleagues of Nancy "Nanette" Holbrook at Ishtar Escorts. The clothes Nancy Holbrook had been wearing when she was killed had been markedly less proper. But, Riley figured, when not actually on the job, the women wanted to look respectable.

Although prostitutes had played a role in some of the cases Riley had investigated in the past, this was the first time she'd been called on to work so directly with any of them. These women were potential victims themselves. They might even be potential suspects, although virtually all murders of this type were carried out by men. Riley felt sure that these women weren't the kind of monsters she hunted in her job.

It was late Sunday afternoon. Last night Riley and Bill had settled into their separate and comfortable hotel rooms not far

from the FBI building. Riley had phoned April, who was in a Washington, DC, hotel with the history field trip. April had been giggly and happy, and had warned her mother that she didn't really have time for phone calls. "I'll text you tomorrow," April had said, shouting over the teenage clamor in the background.

Riley felt that too much of today had already been wasted. It had taken most of the day to round up the prostitutes and bring them in. Riley had told Special Agent in Charge Elgin Morley that she wanted to talk to the women without any men present. Perhaps they'd be more open with another woman. Now she thought she'd observe and listen to them unseen for a few minutes before actually questioning them. Through the speaker, she could hear their conversation.

Their styles and personalities were distinctive. Short, blonde, buxom Mitzi displayed a certain small-town, girl-next-door image.

"So has Kip popped the question?" Mitzi asked Koreen.

"Not yet," Koreen said with a conspiratorial smile. She was a slender brunette with something of the grace of a ballerina. "I've got a feeling he's bought a ring, though."

"Does he still want to have four kids?" Mitzi asked.

Koreen let out a high, lilting laugh. "I've talked him down to three. But between you and me, he's only going to get two."

Mitzi joined in Koreen's laughter.

Tantra gave Koreen a nudge. She was a tall African-American with a tawny complexion. She seemed to have adopted the

glamorous poise of a supermodel.

“Better make sure he doesn’t find out what you do for a living, girl,” Tantra said.

All three women laughed heartily. Riley was taken by surprise. These three prostitutes were talking about having families, just like any ordinary women in a beauty parlor. Was that kind of normality really in the cards for any of them? She couldn’t imagine that such a thing was possible.

Riley decided that she’d kept the women waiting long enough. When she walked into the interview room, she could feel the relaxed atmosphere suddenly pop like a bubble. Now the women were visibly on edge.

“I’m Agent Riley Paige,” she said. “I’d like to ask you all a few questions.”

All three women let out groans of dismay.

“Oh, God, not more questions!” Mitzi said. “We’ve talked to the cops already.”

“I’d like to ask a few questions of my own, if you don’t mind,” Riley said.

Mitzi shook her head. “This is starting to feel like harassment,” she said.

“What we do is perfectly legal,” Koreen said.

“I don’t care about what you do,” Riley said. “I’m an FBI investigator, not a judge.”

Koreen murmured under her breath, “Like hell.”

Mitzi looked at her wristwatch. “Can we make this quick?”

she said. "I've got three classes today."

"How many credits are you taking this semester?" Koreen asked.

"Twenty," Mitzi said.

Koreen gasped. "That's a pretty big load."

"Yeah, well, I want to get my degree as soon as I can."

Riley was taken aback again.

Mitzi is going to college, she thought.

She had heard that sometimes women pursuing an education chose prostitution as a way of paying tuition. With the money she was making, she might not have to go too deeply in debt. Still, it struck Riley as strangely unsettling.

"I'll try to keep this short," Riley said. "I just want to know more about Nanette."

Koreen's expression suddenly turned pensive. "Poor Nanette," she said.

But Mitzi seemed unperturbed. "What happened to Nanette's got nothing to do with us," she said.

"I'm afraid it does," Riley said. "We have good reason to believe that her murderer is a serial killer. And I can tell you from years of experience, serial killers are relentless. He'll kill again. And one of you might be his next victim."

Mitzi frowned disdainfully.

"Not a chance," she said. "We're not like Nanette."

Now Riley was shocked. Could these women possibly be naive enough to think that what they did for a living was safe?

“But you work for the same business, doing the same kind of work,” Riley said.

Mitzi was starting to get defensive.

“Hey, I thought you weren’t here to judge,” she said. “You can look down your nose at us if you like. But what we do is as respectable as this kind of thing can be. And as safe. We can turn down any clients we don’t like. We keep the sex safe, and we get regular check-ups, so we don’t have diseases. If a guy gets too kinky or violent, we can walk away. But it usually doesn’t come to that.”

Riley wondered about that word “usually.” Surely their business sometimes took them into pretty dark territory. And how “safe” could hired sex possibly be? How long could they continue without falling prey to AIDS?

“As far as Nanette goes,” Mitzi continued, “she was on her way down. She’d lost all her class. She was meeting clients outside of the service, shooting smack, losing her health and her looks. She wouldn’t have lasted at Ishtar’s a lot longer. She’d have been fired for sure.”

As Riley took notes, she eyed the women, trying to understand them better. Little by little, she sensed something behind their placid expressions. She was pretty sure it was denial. They refused to accept that theirs was a losing way of life, and that they’d all fall into the same decline as Nanette sooner or later. Their dreams of family, education, and success were ultimately doomed. And deep down, they knew it.

Riley noticed that Tantra had gotten quiet and was looking off into space. She had something to say, but hadn't yet said it.

Riley said, "We believe that Nanette was killed about a week ago, probably on Saturday. Do you know who her client was that night?"

Koreen shrugged. "I've got no idea."

"Me, neither," Mitzi said. "Actually, that's none of our business, you'd have to ask Ishtar about that."

Riley knew that the local agents were already looking for the escort service owner and would bring her in for questioning.

"What about other places of work?" Riley asked.

"We're contracted to Ishtar," Mitzi said firmly. "We're not allowed to follow our line of work through any other agency or on our own."

The other two women were looking downward, avoiding Riley's eyes. She asked the question more directly.

"Did Nanette ever do extra work anywhere else? Did she ever go out on her own without having a date made through Ishtar?"

The room was silent. Finally, in a barely audible voice, Tantra said, "She told me she'd just started working at Hank's Derby."

"What?" Mitzi said, sounding surprised.

"She didn't want me to tell anybody," Tantra told the other women.

"Jesus," Mitzi said. "So she was turning into a lot lizard. She was in worse shape than I'd thought."

Riley's mind was buzzing with questions.

“What’s a ‘lot lizard’?” she asked.

“It’s the lowest class kind of whore,” Koreen said. “They work truck stops, like Hank’s Derby. It’s really a rock bottom life.”

“She was just so strung out,” Tantra said. “She wasn’t getting the clients she used to at Ishtar’s. She told me she wasn’t making enough to feed her habit. She said she was just doing it on the side. I told her how dangerous it was. I mean, hookers just disappear from truck stops without a trace, it happens all the time. But she wouldn’t listen.”

A cloud of gloom had settled over the women. Riley didn’t guess that they had a lot more information to give. They’d given her one important lead already.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.