

BLAKE PIERCE



t a k i n g

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE--BOOK FOUR

TAKING

(THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE—BOOK 4)

BLAKE PIERCE

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fifteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery--Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), and [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

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 © 2019 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 Korionov, used under license from Shutterstock.com.

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

A JESSIE HUNT PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

THE PERFECT WIFE (Book #1)
THE PERFECT BLOCK (Book #2)
THE PERFECT HOUSE (Book #3)
THE PERFECT SMILE (Book #4)
THE PERFECT LIE (Book #5)

CHLOE FINE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

NEXT DOOR (Book #1)
A NEIGHBOR'S LIE (Book #2)
CUL DE SAC (Book #3)
SILENT NEIGHBOR (Book #4)
HOMECOMING (Book #5)
TINTED WINDOWS (Book #6)

KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES

IF SHE KNEW (Book #1)
IF SHE SAW (Book #2)
IF SHE RAN (Book #3)
IF SHE HID (Book #4)
IF SHE FLED (Book #5)
IF SHE FEARED (Book #6)

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE SERIES

WATCHING (Book #1)
WAITING (Book #2)
LURING (Book #3)
TAKING (Book #4)
STALKING (Book #5)

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)
ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)
ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)
ONCE LURED (Book #4)
ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)
ONCE PINED (Book #6)

ONCE FORSAKEN (Book #7)
ONCE COLD (Book #8)
ONCE STALKED (Book #9)
ONCE LOST (Book #10)
ONCE BURIED (Book #11)
ONCE BOUND (Book #12)
ONCE TRAPPED (Book #13)
ONCE DORMANT (Book #14)
ONCE SHUNNED (Book #15)
ONCE MISSED (Book #16)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)
BEFORE HE SEES (Book #2)
BEFORE HE COVETS (Book #3)
BEFORE HE TAKES (Book #4)
BEFORE HE NEEDS (Book #5)
BEFORE HE FEELS (Book #6)
BEFORE HE SINS (Book #7)
BEFORE HE HUNTS (Book #8)
BEFORE HE PREYS (Book #9)
BEFORE HE LONGS (Book #10)
BEFORE HE LAPSES (Book #11)
BEFORE HE ENVIES (Book #12)
BEFORE HE STALKS (Book #13)

AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES

CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)
CAUSE TO RUN (Book #2)
CAUSE TO HIDE (Book #3)
CAUSE TO FEAR (Book #4)
CAUSE TO SAVE (Book #5)
CAUSE TO DREAD (Book #6)

KERI LOCKE MYSTERY SERIES

A TRACE OF DEATH (Book #1)
A TRACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
A TRACE OF VICE (Book #3)
A TRACE OF CRIME (Book #4)
A TRACE OF HOPE (Book #5)

CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE](#)
[CHAPTER ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWO](#)
[CHAPTER THREE](#)
[CHAPTER FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER SIX](#)
[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER NINE](#)
[CHAPTER TEN](#)
[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)
[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY ONE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY TWO](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY THREE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY SIX](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT](#)
[CHAPTER TWENTY NINE](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)
[CHAPTER THIRTY ONE](#)

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

PROLOGUE

When Brett Parma returned from her hike through the rough and barren Arizona hills, she didn't get back into her little camping van right away. She leaned against the vehicle, gazing back the way she'd walked, and took a long breath of the dry, clean air. She was loving this place more and more by the minute.

And even in December! she thought.

Nothing could be more unlike the grim, windy winter cold back in North Platte, Nebraska. Of course, she knew that this whole area would be blazingly hot in the summer, even at this late time of day. Hiking would be out of the question then.

She'd made the perfect choice for a three-week vacation—both the location and the time of year. The campgrounds weren't at all crowded, like they would be during the tourist season. And it had been smart of her to modify her van into a simple camping vehicle.

She'd desperately needed this vacation. Her job as a receptionist for the Hanson Family Medical Group had become more and more thankless every day. Almost everybody she dealt with, either on the phone or in person, seemed to be angry about something or other—insurance coverage, appointment times, the unavailability of certain doctors ...

Any problem that I'm in no position to solve.

All those troubles seemed blessedly far away right now. Brett found herself thinking ...

What if I just don't go back?

Wouldn't it be cool to retire in her early thirties? Or maybe she could do something even crazier. What if she just kept right on driving on and on, hopping from campground to campground, perhaps finding her own sequestered places to stop for the night, maybe heading on down into Mexico, never to return?

She laughed at herself.

No, she wasn't that kind of free spirit—not someone who could blithely ignore dangers and responsibilities in order to ...

What was the phrase?

Oh, yes. Follow my bliss.

She knew such an adventure just wasn't in the cards for her. For one thing, her savings would give out before long, and where would she be then? What would she do for a living?

Meanwhile, she'd just have to grab up as much bliss as she could during the coming days.

And really, that didn't seem like a bad thing at all.

As she watched the sun starting to set over the rocky, rust-colored hills, she heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. She turned and saw a good-sized camper approaching.

She was mildly surprised. She'd chosen this scenic back road because she guessed she'd have it pretty much to herself, especially at this time of year.

She was even more surprised when the driver pulled the vehicle off the road and parked alongside her van. The much bigger camper dwarfed her own little makeshift vehicle, but then so did most of the others she saw in camping areas.

It must be nice—all that luxury on wheels.

The driver climbed down out of the vehicle. He was a nondescript but pleasant-looking man.

He looked at Brett and said ...

"Hey, didn't I see you back at the Wren's Nest Campground?"

Now that Brett thought about it, both the man and his vehicle looked somewhat familiar from where she'd been camping the night before. He looked like a lot of the guys she'd seen in the campgrounds, older than she was and obviously better off financially. Usually, a whole family was traveling along with them.

"Maybe so," she said.

"I'm Pete," the man said.

"I'm Brett."

"Nice to meet you, Brett."

"Likewise," Brett said. "Where are you headed?"

"The Beavertail Campground," Pete said.

"Me too," Brett said. "It looks to be about a ten-minute drive from here."

Pete nodded and smiled. "Yeah, that's what I figure."

He walked over to the sign that said HIKING TRAIL and stood staring out into the hills for a moment.

Then he looked at Brett and said, "You look like you just came in from

hiking.”

Brett knew it was a good guess, since she was still wearing her backpack.

“That’s right,” she said.

Pete squinted at her. “I might try the trail myself. Do you recommend it?”

Brett was a little startled at the question.

She said, “Um, it’s a really nice trail, but ... it’s pretty late in the day, don’t you think? It’ll be getting dark soon.”

Pete sighed with disappointment.

“I guess that’s true,” he said. “Maybe I’ll come back this way tomorrow.”

He stared at the hills again for a few moments, then walked back toward his camper.

Then he turned and said to Brett, “Would you like to come inside for a beer?”

Brett was both surprised and pleased by the offer. She’d brought nothing to drink on this trip except bottled water and a few soft drinks, and a nice cold beer sounded refreshing. Besides, she’d just love to get a look at the inside of that camper.

“That would be nice,” she said.

When he escorted her inside, the camper actually looked more spacious than it had from the outside. It had a good-sized kitchen area complete with a stove, and enough bedding for more than one person—a couple with a child or two, maybe.

Nevertheless, this guy did seem to be traveling alone. Brett figured she’d get awfully spoiled, traveling alone in a camper like this. Her own vehicle wasn’t equipped with much of anything except a mattress.

Pete pointed to a door and said, “You’ve been on the road for a while. Maybe you’d like to use my bathroom.”

Brett stifled a little gasp.

A real bathroom!

Of course, it couldn’t be much bigger than a closet. But in comparison with restrooms in restaurants and gas stations and communal facilities at campgrounds, it would be a true luxury.

“Thanks!” she said.

She opened the door and stepped inside the cubicle. The door swung shut behind her, and she found herself in total darkness.

Strange, she thought.

Didn't the bathroom at least have a window?

She fumbled around the wall next to the door, feeling for a light switch, but couldn't find any. Anyway, should she expect there to be any electricity as long as the camper wasn't properly hooked up to a line?

She turned to leave again, but now the door latch wouldn't budge.

It must be broken.

She shyly called out ...

"Hey, I seem to be kind of stuck."

She got no reply.

Starting to get worried now, she reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone and switched on its flashlight.

As she flashed its beam around, she began to feel a touch of fear.

This wasn't a bathroom.

Maybe it once had been, but now it was stripped of all the usual fixtures.

She was standing in a plain rectangular space, its walls and ceiling lined with small square tiles with tiny pinholes.

Acoustical tiles, she realized.

Was the room soundproofed?

Her fear grew stronger.

As her eyes adjusted, she could see that the tiles were gouged and scratched.

The walls were smeared and splattered with something red.

Blood!

When she heard the door latch start to rattle, she started screaming.

But she knew it wouldn't do any good.

As the door began to open, Brett Parma knew she was going to die.

CHAPTER ONE

The enormous, ox-like man stepped up to the microphone and began to speak.

“I am honored to address ...”

But his booming voice broke up into a shriek of feedback that rattled through the large auditorium.

Riley Sweeney almost jumped out of her skin at the racket.

The noise quickly faded, and a couple of seconds later she was chuckling nervously along with the rest of the FBI Academy graduates. FBI Director Bill Cormack was known to have a deep, booming, resonant voice that wreaked havoc on sound systems.

He'd be better off turning off the microphone, Riley thought.

With that gigantic voice of his, surely he could project to everyone in the audience without a lot of trouble.

But with a self-deprecating grin, Director Cormack began to speak into the microphone again, much more softly this time.

“I am honored to address this year’s graduates from the FBI Academy here in Quantico. Congratulations to all of you for rising to all the challenges of the last eighteen weeks.”

Riley was struck by those words.

Eighteen weeks!

If only I'd had a full eighteen weeks!

She'd missed nearly two weeks, chasing down a brutal killer rather than participating in classes and training exercises here on base.

Her mentor, Special Agent Jake Crivaro, had rather unceremoniously yanked her out of the Academy to work on a case in West Virginia—a truly grisly case of a killer who'd murdered his victims by wrapping them up in barbed wire.

Catching up with her studies afterward had been hard. She had envied the other students for having more time than she did for such rigorous work. But Riley knew that not all of the original 200 or so students were graduating today. Some had failed and others had dropped out.

She was proud of herself for succeeding in spite of everything.

Riley turned her attention to what Director Cormack was saying.

“I look back in awe over the journey that I and so many other agents have taken before you, and that you are about to embark upon today. I can tell you from personal experience that it’s a deeply rewarding journey—but sometimes less than a thankful one. Your selfless deeds won’t always be greeted with public gratitude.”

He paused for a moment, as if reflecting on personal experience.

Then he said, “Remember that few people outside the Bureau have much of an idea of your momentous responsibilities. You’ll be criticized for your work, your every mistake subjected to the utmost scrutiny, often in the glare of public media. When you fail to solve a crime, you’ll feel as though the whole world knows about it. When you succeed, you’ll often feel neglected and unappreciated.”

He leaned forward a little and said almost in a whisper ...

“But always remember—you won’t be alone. You’re part of a family now—the proudest and most loyal and nurturing family anyone can imagine. There will always be someone here to comfort you in defeat and celebrate with you in triumph.”

Riley felt a lump form in her throat at the mention of that word ...

Family.

She’d scarcely ever had a family, not since her mother had been murdered right before her eyes when she’d been just a little girl. Her father was alive—an embittered and reclusive ex-Marine who lived in the Appalachian Mountains. But she hadn’t seen him since ...

When?

Not since before she’d graduated from college last fall, she realized. And that meeting had been anything but pleasant. As far as Riley knew, her father had little if any idea of everything she’d done during the months since then. She wondered if she’d ever tell him about it. For that matter, she wondered whether she’d ever see him again.

And now Director Cormack was holding out the promise of something Riley had dreamed of but never had.

Family!

Was it really possible?

Was she going to feel like part of such a large family in the days to come?

She looked around at the faces of her fellow graduates. Many were smiling at each other, and some were whispering to each other as Director

Cormack kept talking. Riley knew many of them had made lasting friendships here at the Academy.

She stifled a sigh at the thought that she hadn't really found a "family" here. As behind as she'd gotten during the murder case, she hadn't had much time to socialize and hang out with friends. She'd formed exactly two really close friendships during her time here—one with her roommate Frankie Dow, and one with John Welch, an idealistic and handsome young man she'd gotten to know back during the summer when they'd both been in the FBI's ten-week Honors Internship Program.

John and Frankie were also here today. Because the graduating class was seated according to names, Riley and her two pals hadn't been able to sit together, and she didn't really know the classmates who were beside her.

Riley reminded herself that she and her fiancé, Ryan Paige, were already—or almost—a family. She would move back in with him in their DC apartment, and they planned to marry soon. Riley had lost one pregnancy to an early miscarriage, but they would surely have children in the coming years.

She wondered if Ryan was there in the audience. It was Saturday, which could be a workday for an entry-level attorney like Ryan. Besides that, Riley knew he had mixed feelings about the career she had chosen.

Director Cormack finished his speech, and the time had come to swear in all the new agents. One by one, he would call out their names. Each of them would go up to the stage, take the FBI oath of office, receive their badge, and return to their seat.

They were being called in alphabetical order, and as Cormack worked his way through the list, Riley found herself wishing her last name didn't begin with the nineteenth letter of the alphabet. It was a long wait. Frankie, of course, went up onto the stage before her, then waved and grinned at Riley as she returned to her seat.

When the director finally called out Riley's name, her knees felt weak as she stood up and pushed her way past other seated graduates until she got to the aisle. By the time she stepped up onto the stage, she felt as though she was no longer inside her own body.

Finally she stood on the stage, raised her hand, and repeated after Director Cormack ...

"I, Riley Sweeney, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the

Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic ...”

She had to blink back a tear as she continued.

This is real, she told herself. This is really happening.

It was a short oath, but Riley felt as though her voice would give out before it was over. Finally she said the closing words ...

“... and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.”

Riley held out her hand, expecting Director Cormack to hand the badge to her. Instead, the big man grinned at her somewhat impishly and set the badge on the podium.

“Now hold on, young lady. We’ve got a little business to take care of.”

Riley gasped. Had she failed to graduate after all?

The director took a small black box out of his jacket pocket and said ...

“Riley Sweeney, it is my distinct honor to bestow upon you the Director’s Leadership Award for Excellence.”

Riley was stunned.

The director opened the little box and took out a ribbon with a medal attached. A burst of applause broke out as Cormack hung the medal around her neck. Cormack praised Riley for her initiative and leadership during her weeks at the Academy.

Riley tried to listen carefully to his words, but she felt lightheaded.

Don’t faint, she ordered herself. Stay on your feet.

She hoped somebody was recording whatever the director was saying because it was all blurring together for her.

Cormack handed her something.

My FBI badge, she realized as she accepted it.

Then he held out his hand. She shook it and turned to leave.

As Riley Sweeney, brand new FBI agent, stepped down from the stage, she saw that not all the graduates looked happy for her. In fact, there was a palpable resentment in some of their faces. She could hardly blame them. When she’d gotten back from working on the murder case, she’d been designated team leader over and over again for Academy activities. It was no secret that some students felt that Riley’s recent fieldwork had given her an unfair advantage over them. She was sure that some who came from law-enforcement backgrounds must be especially annoyed.

Riley went back to her seat, feeling flushed with emotion at having been chosen for the award. She couldn't remember anything like that ever happening to her before.

Meanwhile, the rest of the recruits filed one by one onto the stage, swearing the oath and accepting their badges. When John went up, Riley smiled and waved at him, and he shyly waved back at her.

After the last students took their oaths, Director Cormack again congratulated the recruits on their achievement and brought the ceremony to an end. The students got up from their seats and eagerly sought out their friends.

Riley quickly located John and Frankie, who were glowing with pride as they clutched their new badges.

"We did it!" John said, hugging Riley.

"We're FBI agents for real!" Frankie said, hugging Riley in turn.

"We sure are," Riley said.

Frankie added, "And best of all, we'll all be working at the DC Headquarters. We can stick together!"

"Won't that be great!" Riley agreed.

She took a deep breath. After that rough summer, everything was working out just fine. Better even than she had imagined.

She glanced around for Ryan and saw him moving through the crowd toward her.

He'd made it here after all, and he had a pleasant smile on his face.

"Congratulations, sweetie," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

"Thanks," Riley said, kissing him back.

Taking Riley's hand, Ryan said, "And now we can go home."

Riley smiled and nodded. Yes, that was one really great thing about today. During all her weeks in the Academy, she'd had to live in the dorm while Ryan had stayed in their DC apartment. They hadn't spent nearly as much time together as either of them had wanted.

Her assignment to the DC FBI Headquarters meant that she'd be working just a short subway ride from their apartment. They could settle down to life together, and maybe decide soon just when they planned to get married.

But before Ryan and Riley could walk away, John called out to her.

"Wait a minute, Riley. We've got one more bit of business to take care of."

Riley's eyes widened as she remembered ...

Yes, there's one more thing to do.

She and her friends went outside into the cold winter air, where the new agents were all lining up and heading across the quad toward the FBI gun vault. Riley and her two friends hurried to join the line, while Ryan followed along with them.

Riley noticed that Ryan looked rather perplexed.

He doesn't realize what's going on here, she thought.

There was no time to discuss this right now. Riley and her friends were approaching the quartermaster.

As they reached him, the man handed each of them a service weapon—a 22-caliber Glock pistol.

Ryan's mouth gaped with surprise—and also some alarm, Riley felt pretty sure.

He'll just have to get used to my having a firearm, she thought.

Riley smiled at him and said, "OK, we can go home now."

She was relieved that he made no comment about the lethal weapon she was carrying as they said goodbye to her friends and headed back across the quad.

Everything is going to be all right, she thought.

That was when a young man approached her holding an envelope.

"Are you Riley Sweeney?" the young man asked.

"Yes," Riley said.

The young man handed her the envelope and said, "I'm supposed to give you this. You've got to sign for it."

Riley signed for the envelope, then hastily pulled it open.

She staggered back a few steps at what she read.

"What is it?" Ryan asked.

She gulped hard and told him, "It's a change of assignment."

"What does that mean?" he demanded.

"I won't be working at DC Bureau Headquarters after all. I'm assigned to the Behavioral Analysis Unit right here in Quantico."

Ryan stammered, "But—but you said ... we're supposed to be living together."

"We will be," Riley hastened to assure him. "After all, it's not that long a commute."

Even so, she knew that the change was definitely going to complicate their lives. This wasn't going to make it impossible for them to be together, but it wasn't going to be easy.

Ryan snapped, "Well, you can't do that. They'll have to change it."

"I can't make them change anything," Riley replied. "I'm just an underling here, like you are in the law office."

Ryan was silent for a long moment, then he grumbled, "Whose idea was this, anyway?"

Riley thought about that. She'd had hadn't even listed Quantico among her three assignment choices. Who would have intervened to place her here?

Then she realized with a sigh ...

I've got a pretty good idea.

CHAPTER TWO

Special Agent Jake Crivaro stared discontentedly at his scrambled eggs.

I should have gone to that graduation, he thought.

He was sitting in the commissary of the BAU building in Quantico, thinking about Riley Sweeney, his young protégé. Her graduation from the FBI Academy had been two days ago, and he was feeling bad about having skipped it.

Of course, he'd made an excuse for himself—too much paperwork piled up on his desk. But the truth was, he hated those kinds of ceremonies, and he just hadn't been able to muster up the will to go and sit there in the crowd and listen to speeches he'd heard in so many variations before.

If he had gone, he could have taken the opportunity to tell her face-to-face that he'd personally arranged for her transfer from DC to the Behavioral Analysis Unit here in Quantico.

Instead, he'd let a messenger do that job.

But surely she'd taken the BAU transfer to be good news. After all, her unique talents would be put to much better use here than they would have been in DC.

Then it occurred to Jake that Riley might not even know yet that he'd had her assigned to be his own partner.

He hoped she'd find it a nice surprise to learn that they'd be working together. They'd already made a good team on three pretty tough cases. The youngster could be erratic at times, but she always managed to surprise him with the unusual power of her insight.

I should have at least called her, he reprimanded himself.

Jake looked at his watch and realized that Riley must be on her way here right now, to report for her first day at work.

As he took a sip of coffee, his cell phone rang.

When he took the call, a voice said, "Hey, Jake. Harry Carnes here. Am I catching you at an OK time?"

Jake grinned at the sound of his old friend's voice. Harry was a retired police detective from Los Angeles. Several years ago, they'd worked together on a celebrity kidnapping case. They'd hit it off well and had stayed in touch.

"Sure, Harry," Jake said. "It's great to hear from you. What's up?"

He heard Harry sigh, then say, "I've got something bothering me. I was hoping you might be able to help me out."

Jake felt a surge of concern.

"I'd be glad to, buddy," he said. "What's the problem?"

"Do you remember that Colorado murder case last year? The woman who got killed in Dyson Park?"

Jake was surprised to hear Harry bring it up. When Harry had retired from the LA police force, he and his wife, Jillian, had moved to Gladwin, a tiny town in the Rocky Mountains right next to Dyson Park. A young woman's body had been found on a hiking trail. Despite his civilian status, Harry had tried to help the police solve the case, but without success.

"Sure, I remember," Jake said. "Why do you ask?"

A short silence fell.

Then Harry said, "Well ... I think it's happened again."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked.

"I think the killer has struck again. Another woman has been murdered."

Jake felt a jolt of surprise.

He asked, "You mean right there in Dyson Park?"

"No, this time it's in Arizona. Lemme explain. You know how Jillian and I like to travel south during the winter? Well, we're in Arizona right now, at a campground not far from Phoenix. This morning on the local news, they said that a young woman's body had been found on a hiking trail somewhere north of here. I called the local cops, and they were willing to give me a few details."

Harry cleared his throat. "Jake, the girl's wrists were all cut up. She must have bled to death somewhere, but not where her body was found. It's just like the victim in Dyson Park. I'll bet anything it's the same killer."

Jake felt a twinge of skepticism.

"Harry, I don't know," he said. "A lot of time has passed since the Colorado killing. There's a pretty good chance that any resemblance between the two murders is just a coincidence."

Harry's voice took on a more urgent tone.

"Yeah, but what if it's not a coincidence? What if the guy who did the Colorado crime did this one too? What if it turns into some kind of spree?"

Jake suppressed a sigh. He could understand his friend's reaction. Harry had told him how bitterly disappointed he'd been about not being able to help

the Gladwin cops and the Colorado State Patrol catch the local killer. It wasn't surprising that a new murder with some similar details pushed Harry's buttons.

But people hiking in a wilderness alone did get killed sometimes. And some people persisted in going out there by themselves in spite of all warnings.

Jake didn't want to tell Harry flat-out that he thought he was wrong.

But what can I tell him?

Jake didn't know.

Harry continued, "Jake, I was wondering ... do you think you could take this on as a BAU case? I mean, now that there have been two murders in two different states?"

Jake was feeling more and more uneasy.

He said, "Harry, that's not how things usually work. It's up to the police out there in Arizona to ask for the FBI's help. And as far as I know, they haven't done that. Until they do, it's none of our business. Now maybe if you could get them to call the FBI ..."

Harry interrupted. "I've already tried that. I can't convince these cops that the murders are connected. And you know how local cops can be about the FBI stepping onto their turf. They're not crazy about the idea."

Jake thought, *No, I don't guess they are.*

He found it easy to imagine how the police in Arizona might react to some retired cop trying to convince them they were missing something important. But Harry was actually right about one thing. If a killer committed murders in more than one state, the FBI didn't need an invitation to get on the case. If Harry was right about it being the same killer, the FBI could open an investigation.

If Harry was right.

Jake took a long, slow breath. "Harry, I really don't know if I can do anything about this on my end. It would be a hard sell, trying to get the people in charge here to make this an official FBI thing. For one thing, you know perfectly well the FBI won't take a case if the local cops think it's just a single murder. But ..."

"But what?"

Jake hesitated, then said, "Let me think about it. I'll get back to you."

"Thanks, buddy," Harry said.

They ended the call.

Jake winced a little, wondering why on earth he'd promised to get back to Harry.

He knew perfectly well that he could never convince Special Agent in Charge Erik Lehl that this ought to be an FBI case. Not on such a slim connection.

Hell, I don't really believe it myself.

But he'd said what he'd said, Harry was out in Arizona waiting for Jake to call back at pretty much any minute. And the only thing Jake was going to be able to tell him was what he should have told him before they'd ended that call—that there was no way for him to get the FBI involved.

Jake stared at his cell phone for a moment, trying to get up the nerve to make that return phone call. But he couldn't bring himself to do it—at least not yet.

Instead he hunkered down and began eating his breakfast in earnest. He figured maybe more coffee might help him think better about how to handle this situation.

Or maybe not.

Jake knew he hadn't been especially sharp lately. In fact, he'd already been feeling low when Harry called him, and it wasn't just because he'd blown off Riley Sweeney's graduation.

That case he and Riley had solved some weeks ago—the nasty case of the barbed wire killer—had left him feeling exhausted and burnt out. That seemed to be happening more and more as he grew older. His energy just didn't bounce back like it used to. And he suspected that his colleagues here at the BAU knew that. In fact, he guessed that was why Erik Lehl hadn't assigned him to anything out in the field since that last one.

And maybe it was just as well.

Maybe he wasn't up to it just yet.

Or maybe he wasn't up to it at all anymore—ever again.

He sighed into his coffee cup as he thought ...

Maybe it really is time to retire.

That thought had been bugging him a lot lately. It was one reason why he'd gone to the trouble of transferring Riley Sweeney to the BAU. It was why he'd made such a green agent his partner. In all his years as a profiler, he'd never met anyone else with a talent like his own—the ability to climb into a killer's mind.

Whenever he did retire, he wanted to leave someone like that behind to continue his work—a bright young agent who could fill his own shoes. But he worried that getting Riley ready for all that might be no easy task. He often described her as “a diamond in the rough.”

And she was a rough diamond indeed. Even now that she had graduated from the Academy, Jake was sure it going to take a lot of work to get rid of those rough edges—her impetuosity, her tendency to bend and even break the rules and not follow orders, and her lack of discipline when it came to using her own gift.

She’s got a lot to learn, Jake thought.

And he had to wonder if he was actually up to the task of teaching her all that she had to know, especially now that he seemed to be past his own peak.

One thing seemed certain—he mustn’t go easy on her. Not that he’d exactly pampered her so far. In fact, he often found it hard to hold onto his temper when she did crazy, rookie things. But he liked her a lot, even though he tried not to show it too much. She reminded him of himself when he was much younger.

So he sometimes felt tempted to spoil her.

But he mustn’t do that.

He had to work her hard. He had to shape her up fast.

As Jake finished his breakfast, he found himself thinking again about Harry Carnes, who was probably waiting for his return call right now.

Jake wondered ...

Isn’t there anything I can do for the guy?

He had to admit, he could feel his spirit lift a little at the idea of getting out of this place.

And why not?

Erik Lehl didn’t seem eager to put him on any cases right now.

The alternative was to sit in his office and do boring paperwork, unless ...

An idea took shape in Jake’s head.

He had lots of vacation time piled up. He could ask Lehl for two or three days off, go out to Arizona, and see if there was anything he could do for Harry.

Of course, Riley Sweeney was on her way here right now to report for duty.

But there wouldn’t be much point in her starting to work here at the BAU

if her senior partner was going to be on vacation, so ...

Why can't she come with me?

This could provide some simple, safe training opportunities for the rookie agent.

He smiled at the idea.

As Jake left the commissary and headed for Erik Lehl's office, he thought

...

Who knows? This might actually be fun.

CHAPTER THREE

By the time she neared the BAU Headquarters in Quantico, Riley was in a terrible mood. The drive from her apartment in DC had been worse than she'd expected. The morning traffic had been so thick and heavy that she almost missed her exit.

It would be worse if I were commuting the other way, she told herself.

Still, it wasn't going to be any fun to face this traffic every morning. And then returning after a day of work—would that be any easier?

Now, as she finally reached the BAU parking lot, she saw two entrances—one for visitors and one for staff.

Which entrance should she use?

Nobody had told her. In fact, she hadn't heard from anybody since she'd received that note after her graduation the day before yesterday—the message telling her she should report for duty at Quantico, not in DC.

When she'd gotten the note, she'd been certain the transfer must have been Agent Crivaro's idea. But now she wasn't so sure. After all, they'd already worked together on some demanding investigations. Wouldn't Agent Crivaro have made an effort to get in touch with her to talk about the change?

Meanwhile, she really had no idea what the day might have in store for her—or, for that matter, what her foreseeable future might have in store.

Then Riley realized that whatever that future might be, everything she had done over the past year had brought her to this place. When she had inserted herself into an investigation of murders in her college dorm, when she had worked with Jake on cases while she was still in training, this was what it had all led to.

She wasn't a visitor.

She was an FBI agent.

She drove up to the staff gate, where a security guard was posted in a booth.

Riley took out her badge and showed it to the guard.

The guard nodded and said, "You're expected."

He then handed her a parking permit tag and waved her on in.

Riley felt a rush of excitement. It was the first time she'd shown her FBI badge to identify herself, and it had made a difference.

I've actually got a place to park!

The thrill quickly passed, though, as Riley drove around looking for an empty slot. Memories of yesterday came creeping into her mind.

After all those weeks of dormitory living, she'd finally gotten to spend two nights and all of Sunday with Ryan. Their first night had been plenty exciting because they'd been apart for so long, but the next day things hadn't been especially pleasant. Ryan wasn't at all happy about Riley's new assignment and the inconvenience it was going to cause.

Inconvenience!

Riley scoffed aloud.

The main inconvenience to Ryan was that Riley was going to need the car for her daily commute, leaving him to use the subway to get to and from work. That had been a blow to his pride. His Ford Mustang was one of the few luxuries of his life, and he loved driving it to work every day. She knew it made him feel more like the big-time lawyer he someday hoped to be.

Ryan hadn't complained openly about the transportation thing, but he hadn't hidden his feelings either. He'd made way too much of a show of magnanimity and self-sacrifice, trying to make it seem like he was going to great lengths and taking great pains to support her in her new career.

And all on account of this stupid car, she thought, pulling into an empty parking spot and turning off the engine.

She got out of the vehicle and stood looking at it for a moment. She remembered the first time she'd seen the Mustang. She and Ryan had both been college students going out on their first date. She'd been quite impressed when he'd arrived at her dormitory in this car, and also by his gallantry in getting out and opening the passenger door for her.

Gazing at the vehicle now, she sighed.

Those giddy days when she and Ryan were just starting to get to know each other seemed awfully long ago now. The Mustang didn't impress her anymore, and she wished it didn't still seem like such a big deal to Ryan.

And what's wrong with having to take the subway, anyway?

She'd taken the subway every day during the summer, when she'd been in the FBI's Honors Internship Program. It was very efficient, and she'd actually gotten to enjoy riding with the mix of other passengers.

But then, she wasn't afflicted with Ryan's masculine pride.

She walked on inside the building and presented her credentials at the

security gate. The guard looked up her name and told her she was supposed to report straight to Agent Crivaro's office.

As Riley took the elevator, she was sure this proved her original hunch—that it had been Agent Crivaro's idea for her to transfer to Quantico. She couldn't help but feel proud that he wanted her there. Crivaro wasn't just a good senior agent, he was nearly legendary in the FBI.

But what would he want a beginner like her to do on her first day on the job?

Paperwork, probably, she guessed.

It seemed like a boring prospect, but she knew her work in the FBI wasn't going to be all adventure. Although she'd had more than the usual field experience for a rookie, she was still just that—a rookie. Taking things slow seemed like a pretty good idea. It wouldn't be all adventure, but it wouldn't be all hazardous either.

And it might be nice to be working regular hours, at least for a while. A dependable schedule might help ease things between her and Ryan, give them a chance to get used to each other again.

She exited the elevator and headed down the hall to Crivaro's office, then knocked on his door. She heard a familiar gruff voice telling her to come on in.

When she opened the door, Crivaro was standing beside his desk. He was wearing a hat and jacket.

A go-bag was by his feet.

He glanced at his watch and said, "It's about time you got here."

Riley looked at her own watch and saw that she wasn't late at all. In fact, she was somewhat early. But she was too startled to say so.

"Where's your go-bag?" Crivaro asked.

"Um, out in my car," Riley said.

Although she didn't know much about working as a BAU agent, she knew that it was always important to be packed up and ready to go on a moment's notice. Not that she'd been expecting to use her bag so soon.

Crivaro asked, "Are you parked in the staff lot?"

Riley nodded.

"OK, then," Crivaro said, slinging his own go-bag over his shoulder. "We'll pick it up on the way to my car."

Crivaro strode right past Riley out the office door. Riley trotted along to

keep up with him.

She stammered, “B-but where are we going?”

“We’ve got a case in Arizona,” Crivaro said. “We’re taking a commercial flight to Phoenix, so I’ll drive us to the airport.”

Riley felt dizzy from this sudden development.

“How long are we going to be in Arizona?” she asked.

“As long as it takes,” Crivaro said. “I never speculate about such matters.”

Riley stifled a gasp. This was about the last thing she’d expected to happen today.

And it certainly threw a wrench into her hopes of settling back down with Ryan.

“Could you give me just a few minutes before we go?” Riley asked Crivaro. “I’ve got to call my fiancé and let him know.”

Still walking, Crivaro asked, “Have you got your cell phone?”

“Yeah,” Riley said, still keeping up with him.

“Well, you can walk and talk at the same time, can’t you?”

As Riley and Crivaro continued on down the hall, Riley took out her cell phone and called Ryan.

When she got him on the line she said, “Ryan, something’s come up. I’m, uh, flying out to Phoenix today. Right now, actually.”

She could hear Ryan gasp. “You’re *what*?”

“Yeah, it’s a surprise to me too,” Riley said as she and Crivaro got into the elevator.

Ryan was sputtering now.

“Riley, this is crazy. This is your first day on the job.”

“I know,” Riley said. “I’m sorry.”

“How long are you going to be gone?”

Riley gulped and said, “I, uh—I’ve got no idea.”

“What do you mean, you’ve got no idea? What are you going to be doing out in Arizona, anyway? Are you even going to be back home in time for Christmas? It’s just a few days off, you know.”

That’s a good question, Riley thought.

Instead of trying to answer it, Riley said, “Look, as soon as I find out when I’m coming back, I’ll let you know.”

“Are you driving out there, or what?” Ryan said.

“Of course not. We’re taking a commercial flight.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Me and Agent Crivaro.”

Riley and Crivaro got out of the elevator and headed out of the building.

Ryan said, “If you’re flying out there, what about my car?”

Riley was startled. She hadn’t had time to think about the car.

She said, “It’s in the BAU parking lot here in Quantico. Don’t worry, it’ll be safe.”

“How long am I going to have to do without it?”

Riley felt a twinge of anger.

“You’ll manage somehow, Ryan,” she said.

“Yeah, but for how long?”

“Like I said—I’ll call you when I know myself.”

As Riley and Crivaro were heading outside the building, Ryan kept jabbering over the phone.

Mostly about his car, Riley couldn’t help but notice.

The more he went on, the more it irritated her.

She and Crivaro were walking through the parking lot when Riley finally said ...

“Look, Ryan—I really can’t talk now. I promise to get back to you as soon as I can. I love you.”

She could hear Ryan’s voice still complaining as she ended the call.

Opening the car door for Riley, Agent Crivaro said, “Everything OK at home?”

“Couldn’t be better,” Riley grumbled, climbing into the passenger seat.

Her anger was fading, and now she felt embarrassed that Crivaro couldn’t have helped overhearing her words to Ryan.

Crivaro got into the car and started the engine.

Then he smiled at Riley ever so slightly and said, “Hey, in case I didn’t mention it—we’re partners now.”

Yeah, I kind of figured that, Riley thought as Crivaro drove out of the parking lot.

So a few things were clear.

She was an FBI agent.

She was Jake Crivaro’s partner.

And they were going to Arizona.

She wished she had some idea of what else to expect today.

CHAPTER FOUR

Riley couldn't help wondering ...

Is he mad at me or something?

Agent Crivaro had barely spoken to her as he drove them from Quantico to the Reagan Airport.

But why ...?

She knew Crivaro could be gruff, impatient, and even angry whenever she made mistakes or disobeyed orders—which unfortunately had been all too often. But what could she possibly have done wrong during the short time they'd been together this morning?

He'd just rushed her out of the BAU offices without much explanation, not even giving time to stop and make a private call to Ryan. Of course, now Ryan was mad at her, and she realized he had some reason to be annoyed.

But what could be the problem with Agent Crivaro?

Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with me, she thought hopefully.

Maybe something personal was bothering him.

In any case, Riley didn't feel like it was a good idea to ask.

She just sat quietly in the car, trying to focus on the most amazing things about today—she was an FBI agent, she was on a case, and she was partnered with one of the most respected agents in the BAU.

When they got to the airport, Crivaro rushed them through the check-in. She had to hurry to keep up as they practically ran all the way to the gate.

Breathless from their dash through the concourse, they got there just in time for the last call for passengers on their flight. Riley remembered how Crivaro had looked at his watch when she'd arrived at his office and grumbled ...

"It's about time you got here."

Now Riley understood why Crivaro had been so agitated about the time,

If they'd gotten to the gate a couple of minutes later, they would have missed the flight completely. She wished he had explained things to her instead of just expecting her to follow along without question.

He'd told her he had trouble working with partners. So, now that she was a partner and not just a trainee, what did that mean she'd be in for?

Riley reminded herself that Crivaro must have had to plan this trip hastily.

He probably hadn't known about it himself until the last minute.

This must be about something really urgent, she thought with a slight thrill of excitement.

After they boarded, Crivaro sat in a window seat and stared outside as the plane took off. Sitting next to him, Riley was still wondering what was on his mind and why they'd been in such a rush. When the plane reached cruising altitude, Crivaro tilted back his seat and kept staring out the window. The light on his face revealed lines etched by years of difficult cases.

Riley felt sure that whatever this one might be, she was going to learn a lot about tracking criminal behavior. When she'd worked with him before, she had been yanked out of whatever was supposed to be her normal routine—college, internship, Academy training. Now that she was actually assigned to the job, she'd have more time to understand what was going on.

But when would she find out what that was? Surely she also had more right to information now.

Finally she summoned up the courage to ask him ...

"Uh, are you going to tell me anything about the case we'll be working on?"

Crivaro's lips twisted a little. He looked as though he wasn't sure how to answer that question.

Then he said, "Possibly—just possibly—we've got a serial killer to catch."

Riley thought she detected more than a little skepticism in his voice, as if he didn't believe any such thing.

Crivaro paused, then continued, "About a year ago, a young woman's body was found on a hiking trail in Dyson Park in Colorado. Yesterday another woman's body was found on another hiking trail in Arizona. She died under ... well, similar circumstances. We're going to Arizona to check and see if there's really any connection."

Crivaro looked out the window again, as if there were nothing more to say.

"Is there anything else?" Riley asked.

"Not really," Crivaro said, still looking out the window.

Riley felt thoroughly confused now. This might be her first day on the job, but she knew perfectly well that Crivaro ought to know more than he was telling her. In fact, he ought to have had a folder full of materials to show her to bring her up to date. They should be poring over that stuff right now.

She asked, “What were the victims’ names?”

Crivaro shrugged slightly. “I don’t remember the name of the victim in Colorado. Nobody’s told me the name of the one in Arizona.”

Riley couldn’t believe her ears.

What does he mean, nobody’s told him?

What does he mean, he doesn’t remember?

Was he being secretive, or ...?

Her eyes widened as she got a strong hunch about what was going on with him.

She said to Crivaro ...

“This isn’t an official BAU case, is it?”

Crivaro said with a slight growl, “It doesn’t matter.”

Riley felt a flash of anger.

She said, “I kind of think it *does* matter, Agent Crivaro. This is my first day as a BAU agent. What am I even doing here? I think I have a right to know more than you’re telling me.”

Crivaro shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Riley Sweeney, one of these days those instincts of yours are going to get you in serious trouble.”

Then he turned toward her in his seat. Keeping his voice low, he started to explain.

“Look, early this morning I got a call from an old friend. Harry Carnes is his name. He used to be a cop in LA, and we worked on a case together there. He retired and moved to Colorado. A year ago a woman got murdered near where he lived—the first of the two women I just mentioned. He tried to help out the local cops, but they never solved the case.”

“And?” Riley asked.

“And—Harry and his wife are traveling through the Southwest this winter, and he heard about this new murder in Arizona, and he thought there might be a connection with what happened in Colorado. So he called me to come out and check things out.”

Riley felt more baffled by the second.

“Identical murders,” she said. “So why isn’t this an FBI case?”

Crivaro shook his head and said, “I didn’t go through official channels. It doesn’t sound to me like something the FBI would get mixed up in. I don’t even know how identical they are, and some of the details just aren’t all that

unusual anyhow. In fact, I suspect there's probably no connection between the two murders at all."

Riley squinted hard at Crivaro and said ...

"So what you're telling me is, you're flying out to Arizona just as a favor to this old friend of yours."

"You got it," Crivaro said.

Riley struggled to make sense of what she was hearing.

She asked, "Why are you dragging me along?"

"You're my partner," Crivaro said.

"But this isn't even a real case!"

Crivaro shrugged. "We don't *know* that. Maybe we'll find out that Harry's right and the two murders are connected, and we have a real serial killer to hunt down. If so, it *will* wind up being a BAU case. You wouldn't want to miss out on that, would you? Anyway, I thought ... well, I thought maybe this would be a good chance for the two of us to, you know, get used to working with each other."

Riley almost blurted aloud ...

We've already worked three murder cases together!

But she quickly reminded herself that there had been plenty of friction between them during those early cases. And she hadn't been an agent then.

Maybe Agent Crivaro was right.

Maybe they did need a little time to get used to working together in their new roles. But was this non-official and possibly even nonexistent case really the way to do it?

She asked, "Who's paying for this trip, anyway?"

"I am, OK?" Crivaro grunted. "Of course I might get reimbursed if it turns out to be a real case."

Riley said, "So you're telling me—what? That we're sort of on vacation together?"

Crivaro chuckled awkwardly. "Hey, the weather in Arizona this time of year is sure a lot nicer than it is in Virginia. Don't bother to thank me for a change of scenery."

"I don't think this is funny," Riley said, trying not to sound as irritated as she felt. "You could have at least told me from the start what this was all about."

Crivaro said defensively, "Well, I was in kind of a rush. And it's not like

you were going to have any work to do in Quantico while I was gone. You might as well be with me, at least trying to get something done. We *will* be doing some investigating while we're there. It might even be a good learning experience for you. So what's the problem?"

"I'll tell you what the problem is," Riley said. "I've got a fiancé back home who's pissed off that I'm taking off like this all of a sudden. Do you think he's going to be less angry to hear I'm not even on a real case?"

Crivaro sighed guiltily. "And you're going to tell him that?"

Riley was startled. She hadn't even considered not telling Ryan all about her activities while she was away from him.

"Of course," she snapped.

"Sorry about that," Crivaro said. "I guess you're right, I should have asked you first."

"Yeah, I think so."

Crivaro looked at her more sympathetically and said, "Look, if you want out of this whole thing, I'll understand. When we get to Phoenix, you can catch the first flight back if you want. I'll even pay for the ticket. Is that what you want to do?"

Riley felt startled anew by his offer, and she didn't know what to say.

Shouldn't I take him up on it? she wondered.

For a moment the choice seemed obvious. Crivaro had no business dragging her across the country on this possibly pointless errand. And heading straight back home might be a good way to patch things up with Ryan—especially if she wound up with another day or two before she really had to start work at Quantico. It might be just what she and Ryan needed.

Then she quickly remembered the anger in Ryan's voice when he'd asked her over the phone ...

"What about my car? How long am I going to have to do without it?"

Riley stifled a growl of irritation.

That damned car, she thought.

Not having that car around mattered more to Ryan than Riley not being there.

It really pissed her off.

Suddenly Riley didn't feel in the mood to patch things up with Ryan. And as far as Crivaro was concerned ...

Well, at least he's showing some interest in me.

Besides, Crivaro was right about one thing. They'd surely be doing a little investigating, even if it was only to find out there was nothing to investigate. It might turn out to be a good experience after all. She might actually learn something.

Finally Riley said, "It's OK. I'll stay with you."

Crivaro's eyes brightened.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Riley smirked a little and said, "I'll let you know if I change my mind."

Crivaro grinned. "Well, the offer still stands, if you want to get the hell away from me. At least as far as *this* trip is concerned. When we start working cases together officially, you'll be stuck with me."

"I'll keep that in mind," Riley said.

Crivaro leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, apparently about to take a nap.

Riley took a flight magazine out of the seat pocket in front of her and started to browse through it.

She found herself mulling over what she'd just done.

I chose work over Ryan.

And to her surprise, she felt good about it.

What does that say about me? she wondered. *And our future?*

Then her mind turned to speculation about the present.

Arizona.

She really knew nothing about it.

She'd spent most of her life in the green hills of Virginia. What might such a different part of the country have in store for her?

CHAPTER FIVE

When the flight landed in Phoenix, Riley and Crivaro got their go-bags out of the overhead bin and made their way through the boarding bridge into the terminal. About twenty people were waiting for the passengers from their flight, but there was no question about who was there to meet them.

A hearty-looking guy with a ruddy expression was waving vigorously at Crivaro. Riley knew that had to be Harry Carnes. The equally sturdy woman standing beside him with crossed arms and a frown on her face must be Harry's wife, and she was not looking happy at the moment.

The man welcomed Crivaro with a big hug, and Crivaro introduced Riley to the couple. The wife's name was Jillian. Riley guessed them to be about Agent Crivaro's age or maybe just a little bit older.

For a moment, she was startled to see that both of them were wearing T-shirts, jean short, and sandals. She and Crivaro still had on their jackets and clothes suitable for colder weather.

"Luggage?" Harry asked, eyeing their outfits.

"No, just these," Jake replied, holding up his go-bag.

Harry laughed and said, "Well, that's something you can take care of soon enough."

She remembered what Crivaro had said during the flight.

"The weather in Arizona this year is sure a lot nicer than it is in Virginia."

She definitely wasn't prepared for the weather here. They'd been in so much of a hurry to leave, she'd given no thought to packing a different wardrobe. She wondered if she was going to have to buy some new things for herself. Her budget sure wouldn't cover much.

Maybe it won't matter, she thought. If they headed back to Quantico soon, she could probably make do with what she had.

Harry led the way to the nearest food court, where they sat at a table and ordered sandwiches for lunch.

Crivaro said to Harry, "So here I am. Now tell me everything you know."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know much except what I told you over the phone. A woman was found dead yesterday on a hiking trail near Tunsboro, a town north of here. Her name was Brett Parma. When I heard about it on the

news, I got curious and called the Tunsboro police chief. I had trouble getting him to open up, but I managed to pry a little out of him. He did mention the slashes on the woman's arms—and also that she'd bled to death somewhere before her body had been left on that trail. Then he basically told me to keep out of the way of his investigation."

"Which is what we're going to do," Jillian commented.

Harry leaned across the table toward Crivaro. "Jake, it all just gave me the weirdest feeling. It was like Erin Gibney's murder a year ago all over again. I started flashing back to how I'd tried to help the cops in Gladwin solve the case, and how we'd failed."

Harry lowered his eyes and muttered, "We never even came close to finding out who did that one."

Jillian sighed unhappily and said to Crivaro, "Harry's feeling all guilty about this whole thing. He says if he'd solved that case back in Colorado, maybe this new murder wouldn't have happened. Of course that's ridiculous. Jake, can you talk some sense into him? Tell him he's got no reason to feel that way."

Crivaro gazed at Harry sympathetically.

He said, "Jillian's right. You can't beat yourself up about that. Even if there *is* a connection between the two murders—"

Harry interrupted, "Jake, there *is* a connection. I feel it in my bones."

Riley could see a world of skepticism in Crivaro's face.

"Harry, I've worked a lot more homicide cases than you have," Crivaro said. "I know what it's like to feel responsible for those deaths, for not being able to catch a killer. But you can't let it get the best of you."

He reached out and put a hand on his friend's arm.

"*You* didn't kill *anybody*, Harry. You're not responsible for that. It's not your fault. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

Harry heaved a long, bitter sigh, then said to Jake and Riley, "Well, I was a cop long enough to know that. We never solve them all. But I was also out there long enough to recognize when my cop's instinct is likely to be right. This thing, this latest murder, is really ringing some alarms for me."

He put his unfinished sandwich back on the plate and pushed it away.

"I'm glad you two came out here to check things out," he continued. "That makes me feel a whole lot better. Finish your sandwiches and I'll drive you to Tunsboro."

Jillian poked him in the arm and said almost in a whisper, “Wait a minute, Harry. You’re not driving anyone anywhere. We’ve got to get back to the campground.”

Harry gave his wife a pleading look.

“Come on, honey,” he whispered back. “We’re not in that much of a hurry. And Tunsboro’s just a short drive.”

“They can rent a car,” Jillian said. “Remember, we’ve got a deal.”

Harry looked embarrassed. Riley wondered what was going on between them. She saw that Crivaro seemed uncertain about what to say next.

Finally Jillian looked sternly at Jake and said ...

“Harry’s not getting mixed up in this—this—whatever it is. He’s retired. We’re on vacation. I don’t want him getting all worked up about the Erin Gibney killing again. He was a guilty wreck about that for months. I thought we’d put all that behind us.”

Harry nodded reluctantly and said to Riley and Crivaro with a weak smile. “Well, you heard what the missus said. She’s got me on a tight leash. I wish I could work with you, but there it is. We’ve got an itinerary. We’re headed south to the Coronado National Forest today. We’ve got a reservation at the Riggs Flat campground.”

“And we’re not canceling,” Jillian added sharply. “No matter what.”

Harry squeezed her hand and said, “Of course not, honey. But we’ve got enough time to drive these two to the police station in Tunsboro. Then we can get back to the campground and check out there. It’s the least we can do for them, after they went to all this time and trouble.”

Jillian stared hard at Harry. “OK—as long as you promise not to change your mind along the way.”

Harry awkwardly raised his right hand.

“I promise,” he said and gave her a quick kiss.

Jillian smiled and looked reassured. She wagged her finger at Crivaro and said ...

“And don’t you go trying to persuade him otherwise!”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” Crivaro said with a chuckle.

The couple seemed a lot more relaxed now. Harry even picked up his sandwich again and as they all kept eating, he regaled Riley and Crivaro with small talk. Now and then, Jillian added details or corrected him.

Harry and Jillian had recently become first-time grandparents, and their

youngest daughter was getting married. As usual at this time of year, the weather in Colorado was too cold for their liking. So as they almost always did during the winter, the couple had packed up their camper and driven into the warmer Southwest, where they were hopping from one campground to another.

Harry proudly showed Riley and Crivaro a picture of their camping rig—a fair-sized trailer towed by a white truck. Harry called the getup “our home away from home.”

As the small talk continued, Riley noticed a wistful expression on Crivaro’s face.

She wondered ...

Does Crivaro envy them?

Again she noticed that Crivaro and Harry looked close to the same age. She hadn’t given any thought to Crivaro retiring. Did he ever think about that?

Would he see any point in it?

Although there was a lot Riley didn’t know about her mentor, she did know that he was divorced and had an estranged son.

Crivaro’s life wasn’t anything like Harry and Jillian’s, with their close and happy family. If he had grandchildren, he’d never mentioned them to Riley. He’d told her that his ex-wife was happily remarried, and his son had gone into real estate, and ...

“They’re perfectly normal, just like regular folks.”

With a self-deprecating laugh, he’d added ...

“Maybe I just can’t do normal.”

Not for the first time, it occurred to Riley that Crivaro must be a very lonely man.

If his work was the only thing that gave his life meaning, if he felt that he’d missed out on something, then naturally this perfectly normal, happily retired couple could stir up melancholy feelings in him.

Was loneliness one reason he’d brought her along on this peculiar trip?

There had been moments when Riley had felt that Crivaro was more like a real father to her than that bitter ex-Marine who lived alone in the mountains. At least he sometimes praised her for doing something well, which was more than her actual father ever did.

She wondered ...

Does he ever think of me as a daughter?

The group finished eating and headed on out to the parking lot. Riley was relieved that the weather was actually very pleasant. Warm, but not hot or humid. Maybe the clothes she had with her would serve after all.

She'd expected to see the whole camping rig from the photos, but they were just headed toward a truck.

"Where's the camper?" Crivaro asked.

"That's the beauty of our rig," Jillian replied. "We can disconnect the house and leave it in the campground while we drive around in our ... um ... extended car. Not as fancy as some, but it's very practical."

Crivaro and Harry climbed into the front seats, and Riley and Jillian got into the wide back seat.

As Harry drove out of the airport, he started to regale Crivaro with more small talk—what routes they had taken coming south from Colorado, where they intended to go next, what places they visited every winter, even where they'd found good restaurants along the way. It seemed to Riley that he had an endless supply of trivial things to talk about, but Crivaro appeared to be listening contentedly, apparently not bored at all.

Riley tuned that conversation out. She was grateful that Jillian, sitting beside her, didn't seem inclined to indulge in similar meaningless chatter.

But then, Riley wondered, should she be saying something like that to Jillian, if only to be polite?

As Harry pulled onto the freeway and headed north, Jillian spoke up. "I see that you're engaged."

Riley was startled by the remark, but quickly realized that Jillian was looking at her engagement ring.

She smiled and said, "Yes, I am."

Jillian half-smiled as she asked, "Have you set a date for the wedding?"

Riley gulped at the question.

"Uh, no, not yet," she said.

The truth was, she and Ryan had no idea just when the date would be. Sometimes it seemed like the whole idea was little more than a fantasy.

"Well," Jillian said, "I wish you every happiness."

Jillian then turned her head and gazed out the window.

Riley felt a lot of meaning in those words.

"I wish you every happiness."

Jillian and her husband certainly seemed to have found happiness. But Riley sensed that their happiness had been hard won, and that Harry's work in law enforcement hadn't made things easy for them.

Riley found herself thinking about her own future.

What was in store for her?

She and Ryan had sometimes been wonderful together. But she was afraid that any lasting happiness might be hard won for them, too.

Would she eventually have a happy retirement with someone she loved?

Or was she going to wind up alone like Agent Crivaro?

Riley looked out the window on her side of the truck. The landscape outside was unlike anything she'd ever seen, except in pictures. Apart from areas where people had built structures and cultivated greenery, this land looked lifeless to her.

Somewhere in a desert setting like this, a young woman had been brutally robbed of her life. Had the same monster killed before?

If so, Riley and Crivaro had to put a stop to his murders once and for all.

CHAPTER SIX

As the truck neared the town of Tunsboro, Riley noticed that Jillian was getting uneasy again.

And maybe with good reason, Riley thought.

The two men in the front seats weren't talking about road trips and other trivia now. Harry had turned off his steady flow of inane chatter and gotten back to the topic that was most on his mind.

"You know, I'm starting to come up with a theory about those two murders," he said. "Want to hear it?"

Riley heard Jillian let out a gasp. She knew the woman must be worried that her husband would renege on his promise not to get mixed up in the case at the last possible minute.

Looking irritated, Crivaro just grumbled inaudibly.

Riley got the distinct feeling that his intended answer was "no." But Harry was clearly determined to talk about his theory anyway.

"I think—no, I'm almost sure—the killer is a camper, someone who hops from campground to campground."

"Someone like you?" Crivaro asked wryly.

Harry chuckled and said, "Yeah, like me except for the years spent catching slime like that. But in a way, yeah, you're kind of right. The killer has to be someone who blends right in with the whole campground culture. Campgrounds have got to be where he stalks his victims."

Crivaro shook his head. "I don't know, Harry ..."

Harry ignored him and babbled on about his theory. Riley felt as though she could understand Crivaro's skepticism. Even if Harry was right and the two murders were connected, that certainly didn't mean the killer had "stalked" anybody. She knew that some murders were spontaneous acts that resulted from chance encounters. Besides, wouldn't most campers travel in groups, or at least in pairs? The idea of a psychotic camper prowling the nation's campgrounds seemed a bit farfetched.

Finally Harry said, "Now, Jake, I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but ..."

Riley could see Crivaro wince at those words. He grumbled again, "It's not actually my job."

That didn't even slow Harry down. He continued, "I think you and your partner should start going to campgrounds, ask the people there a lot of questions. Sooner or later you'll get just the clue you need."

Crivaro rolled his eyes, and Riley couldn't help but sympathize.

Still not noticing Crivaro's dismay, Harry kept right on.

"Mind you, you and your partner can't just march into a campground looking like you do right now. Hell, you've got 'FBI' written all over you. I know campers, and most of them are perfectly friendly, and they'll talk to you no matter who you are. But we do get all kinds of people out there. Some of them are more—what's the word?"

"Reserved," Jillian grumbled. "Some of them are just shy."

"Yeah, that's it, shy," Harry said. "Some of them really like to keep to themselves. And if any of those shy ones know anything, they'll skitter off the second they catch sight of you. I guess what I'm saying is, the two of you have got to go undercover, pretend to be campers yourselves. You can say you're the girl's uncle or something like that. Sure, you know how to do that, but for here it might be harder than it sounds. First of all, you've got to get new clothes, dress more like Jillian and me. And you'll need your own trailer or RV ..."

At that point Crivaro interrupted loudly. "Harry, I can't go buying a camper."

"Yeah, I know, but you can *rent* one," Harry informed him. "They've got to be available around here. Just make sure it looks halfway decent, not some piece of junk. Some of the better motor home campgrounds won't even let an old or beat-up camper in. I'm sure the Tunsboro police chief can tell you someplace where you can find just what you need."

Riley couldn't help but smile a little. The idea of going camping with Crivaro and pretending to be his niece seemed silly to her.

We'd never fool anybody, she thought.

She realized that Harry's nonstop advice just showed how excited he was about this case. Jillian's grim silence told her that Harry's wife was well aware of his state of mind.

As Harry kept rattling on and on about how Riley and Crivaro should go about investigating the case, he was driving past golf resorts and dude ranches just outside the town of Tunsboro.

When they pulled into Tunsboro itself, it looked to Riley like an old-time

Western town that someone had unsuccessfully tried to dress up for modern times. Buildings with square false fronts lined the main street. A row of rickety tin porch roofs held up by heavy wooden poles stretched in front of the buildings. In spite of some fresh paint here and there, none of it looked ready for the soon-to-come year 2000.

In fact, it was the concrete sidewalk, paved street, stoplights, and especially the cars that seemed weirdly out of place.

Harry parked outside the police station, which was just another old-fashioned business front.

He turned to look at Riley and Crivaro.

"I don't suppose Chief Webster will be expecting you. I didn't say anything about contacting the BAU. At least he knows me from talking with me on the phone. Maybe I should come on inside with you and—"

Jillian interrupted sharply. "Don't even think of it, Harry."

Harry looked at his wife with a pleading expression.

"I'll just be a minute, honey," he said.

"You *won't* be just a minute, and you know it. We're letting your friends off right here, and then we're going straight back to get our camper and driving on to the Coronado Forest. That's all there is to it."

"But honey—"

"No 'buts,' Harry. If you go into that police station, I'm going to take this truck and drive right on without you."

Harry sighed and forced a laugh.

He said to Crivaro and Riley, "Well, you heard the missus. Like I said, a tight leash. We'll be going now. Good hunting, you two. And thanks again for looking into this."

As Riley and Crivaro climbed down out of the truck, she heard Harry mutter, "I wouldn't mind if you'd let me know how things go."

"Don't!" Jillian remarked sharply.

Riley and Jake stood there and watched Harry and his wife drive out of town.

It felt very strange to Riley to be here, suddenly stranded in the middle of this odd little town.

Crivaro was apparently feeling the same way. He looked at the ground and shuffled his feet and shook his head.

"This is crazy," he said. "We've got no business being mixed up in this."

Riley laughed and said, "Well, it wasn't exactly my idea."

Then she felt a possibility taking shape in her mind.

"Besides," she added, "for all we really know, Harry's right about everything."

Crivaro glared at her and growled, "Well, he's not right about you and me going camping. That's just too damned ridiculous. We've got to draw the line somewhere."

"I agree," Riley said.

Crivaro turned and headed toward the building.

"Come on, let's introduce ourselves to the chief," he said.

They walked on into the little police station, where a receptionist sent them on into the Chief Everett Webster's office. They found him sitting on the edge of his desk talking to another cop. The conversation seemed serious.

Riley was sure that they were talking about the recent murder.

When Riley and Crivaro produced their badges and introduced themselves, Webster's mouth dropped open.

"Good Lord," he said. "What the hell are you federal folks doing here?"

Crivaro said, "We understand you found a murdered woman on a hiking trail near here."

Webster said, "Yeah, but there's no call for the FBI to come out here about that. It's a local thing and we can handle it."

Then he squinted at Riley and Crivaro and said, "Wait just a minute. You're not here on account of that nut job from Colorado, are you? The guy who called trying to convince me there was some connection between this murder and another one a year ago?"

Crivaro shrugged. "We're just here to check things out."

Webster shook his head, then said to the other cop, "Wally, could you give us the room for a few minutes?"

Wally nodded and left the office.

Webster began to pace in front of his desk. He struck Riley as a rather unsightly man, with a huge jutting chin and a sloping forehead that made him look like some sort of caveman. But his eyes seemed alert and fairly intelligent.

He said to Riley and Crivaro, "Look, I don't know how that guy talked the FBI into sending you two out here, but it really is a wasted trip, and I'm sorry you got put to the trouble. My boys and I can handle this."

“I don’t doubt it,” Crivaro said in a pleasant voice. “Still, as long as we’re here, maybe you can tell us whatever you know about the murder. We’re in the Behavioral Analysis Unit, and it sounded like this killer is kind of unusual. We just thought we might be able to help out here.”

Webster shrugged and said, “BAU? Well, it’s an odd case, I have to admit. Brett Parma was the victim’s name. I just got off the phone trying to find out more about her.”

Webster picked up some notes that were lying on his desk and peered at them through his reading glasses.

He said, “It seems she worked as a receptionist in a doctor’s office up in North Platte, Nebraska. She came down here for a three-week vacation. She’d stayed at the Wren’s Nest Campground near here for a couple of nights, then checked out of there on Saturday. That was the last anybody saw of her—at least until a hiker ran across her body yesterday evening on a hiking trail. Apparently she had a reservation at the Beavertail Campground, also pretty close by. But she never got there.”

Webster set the notes back down again and said, “The weird thing is, she wasn’t killed right there on the hiking trail. It seems she was slashed up elsewhere and bled to death. Then her body was dumped on the trail.”

Webster crossed his arms and added, “Look, I don’t mind telling you, I take it kind of personal when somebody gets murdered in my jurisdiction. It’s bad for tourism, and tourism’s pretty much Tunsboro’s whole economy—at least since the mines shut down ages ago. My boys and I sure as hell plan to crack this case soon. No offense, but I’d just as soon not have any interference from Quantico.”

Crivaro nodded. “I understand, and I respect that. But as long as we’re here, do you mind if my partner and I have a look at the crime scene? We’ll be able to tell pretty much at a glance whether we’ve got any business here or not—and we probably don’t. Then we can get right out of your hair.”

Webster visibly relaxed a little. “Sounds like a plan,” he said. “As it happens, I was just getting ready to drive back out there myself. You two can come along for the ride.”

Riley and Jake followed Webster out of the building, then got into his car with him.

As Webster drove them out of town, Riley thought about how he’d said Brett Parma had died.

“She was slashed up elsewhere and bled to death.”

Riley shivered as she remembered the last grim case she and Crivaro had worked on together—the case of the barbed wire killer. His victims, too, had bled slowly to death, and that similarity unsettled her.

She also thought about what Crivaro had said just now.

“We can get right out of your hair.”

She wondered—had he really meant it?

Riley had no idea whether Harry might be right and the two murders might be connected. But one thing was absolutely certain—a woman had recently been brutally murdered right near here.

Could they just walk away from that?

Were they really going to fly back to Quantico without even trying to solve it?

She was beginning to find that hard to imagine.

But what if Crivaro insists?

She’d have to go along with whatever he decided, and he hadn’t shown any real interest in this case.

Maybe that was because Special Agent Jake Crivaro had seen so many deaths in his long years with the BAU.

Well, she thought, Special Agent Riley Sweeney has seen more murders than most people her age.

And she wasn’t ready to give up on this one.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Chief Webster drove the police car out of Tunsboro, Riley felt her expectations rising. But she had to wonder ...

Is it just me?

She'd seen no hint of interest in Agent Crivaro's face. Now, sitting up front next to the chief, he actually looked bored.

Doesn't Crivaro care about this case at all? Not even after dragging both of us this far across the whole country?

With a sigh, Riley settled into the back seat. She hoped her partner would perk up once they reached the crime scene.

Webster asked Crivaro, "That Harry Carnes fellow—the guy who called me—do you happen to know him?"

"A little," Crivaro replied.

Riley realized that Crivaro didn't want to admit that he and Riley had come out here as a personal favor for an old friend of his. It was probably just as well to let Webster think they'd actually been officially sent here by the BAU.

"Well, he's sure got himself a motor mouth," Webster said. "I barely got a word in the whole time I talked to him."

Riley noticed a slight grin flicker across Crivaro's face. It was easy to guess what he was thinking ...

"Motor mouth" is right.

Harry had talked almost nonstop during the whole time they'd spent with him.

Webster added, "He sounded like some kind of conspiracy freak, the way he went on and on about that woman who got killed in Colorado. That's quite some theory he's got—that the same killer has struck again, some eight hundred miles away and a whole year later. You don't really believe that, do you?"

Crivaro let out a noncommittal grunt.

Webster laughed. "If I didn't know better, I'd guess Harry Carnes to be a Tunsboro native. We've got old-timers who spin tall tales like that. You know, there's a legend about our little town that's been told since our mining days. They say that anybody who takes a sip of water from Saguaro Creek

never speaks a word of truth for the rest of his days. He just keeps telling crazy stories forever.”

Webster wagged his finger at Crivaro. “Don’t get me wrong, that legend’s got nothing to do with me. I’m a transplant, born and raised in Texas. And I drink bottled water, so I’m pretty truthful mostly. To a fault, some might say.”

Webster’s tone darkened as he said ...

“And the truth is, I don’t like folks getting murdered around here. I don’t like it one little bit.”

Riley remembered what he’d said back at the station.

“I take it kind of personal when somebody gets murdered in my jurisdiction.”

He’d also told them ...

“No offense, but I’d just as soon not have any interference from Quantico.”

Webster seemed like a stubborn, single-minded man, and that worried Riley a little. She could understand his determination to solve the case without outside help. But from her own experiences, she knew how a murder case could turn into a personal vendetta. Crivaro had been trying to teach her not to let such feelings get the best of her. Little by little, she was coming to appreciate the importance of teamwork.

She wondered—how well did Webster understand that?

Did he grasp how helpful she and Crivaro could be to him right now?

Most of all, she wondered ...

Does this man know he might be seriously out of his depth?

If this killer was anything like the ones she and Crivaro had dealt with before, a small-town police department didn’t have the expertise, resources, or experience needed to catch him.

Riley had to stop her racing thoughts. So far, she had no reason to believe they were investigating a deadly serial killer. Crivaro certainly didn’t seem to think so.

She forced herself to turn her attention away and gaze out the car window.

The landscape had changed.

During the drive from Phoenix to Tunsboro, they’d passed mainly through developed areas—resorts and golf courses and the like. Now Webster had taken a road that wasn’t heavily traveled, and she was getting her first real

look at the Southwestern desert.

She didn't much like it.

The vast stretches of rocky, tan soil and dull green brush were punctuated only by tall, featureless cactuses. Even the intense blue sky seemed somehow harsh and unforgiving.

Growing up as Riley had in rural Virginia, she was accustomed to green vegetation, rolling hills, and especially trees.

There wasn't a tree anywhere in sight.

Just why tourists like Harry and Jillian came here to enjoy this scenery was a mystery to her.

She reminded herself that at least the weather was pleasant. Chief Webster had the car windows rolled down, and the air was fresh, dry, and surprisingly cool for midday—not at all humid, like it often was in Virginia.

Soon Riley saw a couple of vehicles parked on the side of the road up ahead. Webster pulled over and stopped behind them,

One of the vehicles was another police car, and the other was a beat-up van. A couple of cops were leaning against the police car, smoking cigarettes.

A weathered sign nearby read “Wren's Nest Hiking Trail.”

Webster explained to Riley and Crivaro as they got out of the car, “I left a couple of my guys here to watch over things. We've already checked out what we could from here. Didn't find anything useful. I was just about to get a tow truck to take the van in. Then you guys showed up, so I figured I could leave it all in place a little longer.”

Riley and Crivaro followed Webster over to the van. Its back doors were wide open, and Riley could see a mattress on the floor littered with some camping gear. As they looked inside, Webster said ...

“You can see that the poor kid wasn't a seasoned camper. It looks like she bought some second- or third-hand old van, took out the back seats, and didn't do much more to convert the vehicle than throw a mattress on the floor. A pretty Spartan get-up. She depended a lot on campground facilities.”

Webster turned and called out to the two cops.

“You can call for the tow truck now, fellas. No point in leaving her van sitting around here anymore.”

As one of the cops nodded and began to make the call, Riley could see Crivaro grimace a little. She guessed he didn't much like not being consulted about what to do with the van, even if he agreed with the decision. He was

used to local cops depending on his guidance and following his instructions. But since they weren't here in an official capacity, he wasn't exactly in a position to give orders.

Scanning the area, Crivaro asked Webster, "What were you able to find in the way of tracks?"

"Tracks?" Webster asked.

"I mean tire tracks," Crivaro said. "Whoever killed this woman must have come out here in a vehicle of his own. Tread marks could help identify the vehicle. I take it you photographed those tracks when you first came out here."

Webster looked embarrassed.

"Damn, I hadn't thought of that," Webster said. "Anyhow, the ground's dry. Wouldn't be much to find."

Crivaro shook his head.

"Well, it's too late now. What tracks are here are all a jumble. It looks like a half dozen or so vehicles have come and gone since the body was found. We'll never get any tread marks now."

Webster shrugged defensively, then said, "Well, you know, the guys that found her, our cop cars, the medical examiner ..."

His voice trailed off, then he added briskly, "Come on, let me show you where the body was found."

As Webster led Riley and Crivaro toward a rough path that led up a scrubby hill, he said, "The girl wasn't a very experienced hiker, either. Going it alone in the desert wasn't smart of her, especially on a trail like this one that doesn't get a lot of use. If you lose the trail, you can lose your way as surely as you can in a forest, and that can get you killed. This is rough country, and it's a good idea to have company when you go out exploring. She might have gotten herself into serious trouble, even if things hadn't turned out ... well, like they did."

Webster shook his head and added, "I guess it was kind of lucky her body got found as soon as it did. Those hikers who came across her were sure shaken up, though. My cops were too. They're not used to that kind of thing. For that matter, neither am I. And I'd just as soon never get used to it. One case like this is enough for my lifetime."

As they walked past towering cactuses, Riley was startled by the sheer height of the plants. They hadn't looked nearly so tall from the car. She

thought some of them looked like fairytale giants, with their arms raised to the sky.

Apparently noticing her amazement, Webster said, “These saguaro cactuses aren’t all that big. I’ve seen some get to be over forty feet tall. They’re pretty amazing plants, and they can live to be a hundred fifty years old.”

Stopping to point to one of them, Webster added, “You ought to see these things when they bloom in the spring. Bunches of flowers pop right out of the ends of those arms. The desert really comes to life then. You see flowers all over the place.”

As they started to walk again, Webster said, “Of course, you wouldn’t want to be out here at this time of day during the summer. Even the flowers prefer to bloom in the evening. It gets to be well over a hundred degrees then.”

With a chuckle, he added, “I almost said, ‘a hundred degrees in the shade,’ but that wouldn’t be right. There isn’t any shade!”

They made their way over the top of a small hill and continued along the trail down the other side. Then Chief Webster abruptly stopped and pointed at the ground between a pair of bushes.

“That’s where she was found,” he said.

Riley looked down at the ground. At first, the spot seemed no different than the rest of the surrounding soil. But then she noticed some dark stains in the soil.

She said to Webster, “Those look like bloodstains. Didn’t you say she bled to death before she was brought here?”

Webster grunted with disgust.

“Yeah, but scavengers picked the body apart a lot during the day and a half or so that it got left out here. When we got here, we had to scare off a bunch of buzzards just to get a look at the body. Coyotes also got to her, and God knows what other kinds of animals. Those stains are more from entrails than blood. The medical examiner had a hell of a mess to piece together.”

Crivaro glanced back and forth along the path.

He said, “So you don’t know *where* she was killed, right?”

“No idea,” Chief Webster said. “We don’t even really know whether she got a chance to hike out here. She might have gotten snatched up back there near her van.”

Crivaro crouched down and pointed to where the soil was scuffed and scraped.

“Too damn many footprints,” he growled.

Crivaro didn’t elaborate, but Riley understood what he meant. Just as they had done with the tire tracks back at the roadside, Chief Webster’s cops and the medical examiner’s team had made a mess of the crime scene. The same was true of the path they’d used to walk here. They wouldn’t find any useful footprints anywhere around here.

Crivaro stood up and asked Webster, “Was the victim noticeably tall or short, fat or skinny?”

Webster seemed a little surprised at the question.

“Well, it was kind of hard to tell from what was left of her. But it didn’t look like she’d been a very big woman. She might have been pretty slight, in fact. Why do you ask?”

Crivaro said, “It would help to have some idea of how strong the killer had to be to carry her all the way out here—his size and build and so forth.”

Webster said, “Well, maybe the medical examiner could tell you that.”

Crivaro grunted and scowled.

Riley realized that he wasn’t much interested in talking to the medical examiner. Crivaro apparently still didn’t think this was a BAU case, just a local matter that Webster and his team were handling pretty badly. He seemed to want nothing to do with it.

All he wants is to get out of here, Riley thought.

Riley stared down at the ground as Crivaro and Webster kept talking. An eerie sensation came over her, and the two men’s voices seemed to fade away. With a deep chill, Riley realized ...

I’m getting a sense of the killer.

It was an alarming feeling, but a familiar one. She’d experienced it before at other crime scenes. And just as she had those other times, she felt a sudden urge to shut out that feeling of palpable evil, but ...

Stay with it.

Let it happen.

After all, her ability to slip into a killer’s mind was the main reason she was in the BAU.

It’s my job.

The feeling came on strong and fast. She found it easy to imagine that she

was the killer himself, standing right here where she was standing, looking down at the newly lifeless body that he'd deposited here.

But how did he feel? she asked herself.

As she tried to grasp the killer's thoughts and emotions, her lips twisted into an involuntarily smile, and she almost said aloud ...

"I've missed this.

"It's been too long."

Riley staggered at the force of her intuition. It was almost more than she could stand.

Keep going, she told herself.

Don't lose this.

But at that moment, a sharp outcry yanked her out of her grim reverie.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Riley spun around.

What could have made that ugly, piercing noise?

She didn't see anything different in the bleak Arizona desert.

She heard Chief Webster ask ...

"What's the matter? You look like you saw a ghost."

For a second Riley thought ...

I didn't see one. But maybe I heard one.

Then she realized that Crivaro and Webster were both staring at her.

"What was that sound?" she asked them.

"What sound do you mean?" Webster asked.

Then it came again—a strange rattling noise, like a car engine trying unsuccessfully to start, only higher pitched. It wasn't as loud as it had seemed to Riley when it interrupted her experience of the killer's mind, but she still found it jarring.

Webster chuckled as he, too, noticed it.

He said, "Why, girl, you just let yourself get scared out of your wits by a bird. What kind of fearless BAU agent are you, anyway?"

"A bird?" Riley gasped.

Smiling slightly, Crivaro shrugged and then nodded in the direction of a big saguaro cactus.

Riley looked and saw a small brown bird perched there. With its black and white spots and darting white eyebrows, the thing was actually kind of cute.

"Sure, there's the culprit," Webster said. "Arizona's state bird, the cactus wren. Noisy little critter, isn't he?"

The bird raised its head and let out another cry. Riley could hardly believe such a small creature could make such an unsettling noise. She was still too shaken by her interrupted connection with the killer to be embarrassed by her own reaction.

Putting his hands in his pockets and looking up at the wren, Webster said

...

"This one sounds pretty pissed off with us. That's understandable. Cactus wrens are pretty territorial, especially later on, during nesting season. He probably thinks we're here to take his cactus away from him."

Riley said, “You mean things *live* in the cactus?”

“Sure, lots of things,” Webster said. “It’s just like a tree back where you come from. Lots of critters call a cactus home.”

Just then, Riley caught a glimpse of something skittering across the scrubby landscape and disappearing among some rocks.

A lizard, probably.

Then she glanced at the bushes that had flanked the dead body and noticed bugs crawling and flying among the leaves. And once again came the abrasive cry of the cactus wren. Until just now, Riley had thought of the desert as a lifeless place—as dead as the body that had been left on the trail.

And of course, the chief had mentioned the scavengers that had partially devoured the body—buzzards, coyotes, and God only knew what else.

A new, uncanny feeling came over Riley—a sense that this desert was as populous and dense with life as any city. Various kinds of insects and reptiles and birds and even small mammals must be watching them right now, most of them staying silent, waiting for the intruders to leave.

A word came into Riley’s mind ...

Witnesses.

When the woman’s body was dumped here, such creatures had surely been lurking all around.

They had witnessed what the killer had done, but they were never going to tell anybody what they’d seen.

Now it seemed to Riley that the whole desert was mocking these human visitors for even thinking about solving the crime.

She felt a burst of irrational anger at the irony of it all.

A young woman was dead, and the witnesses who’d seen the killer didn’t care. If they had the ability to think about it at all, they would consider it just part of a normal process.

Life and death.

But this death had come far too soon, too violently, too unfairly.

She couldn’t let it go unnoticed.

She couldn’t let it happen again.

Riley calmed herself and tried to recollect that feeling of connection she’d just had with the killer. She clearly remembered sensing his eerie contentment at resuming his awful work.

Crivaro and Webster were talking together again. Riley almost interrupted

them to say what she was thinking. But she quickly realized it would better to tell Crivaro privately. She knew from experience that ordinary cops like Chief Webster would only be baffled to hear about her experience.

She touched Crivaro on the shoulder. “Could I have a word with you for a moment?”

Crivaro looked surprised, but he nodded. He followed Riley along the path, just far enough for Chief Webster not to hear them whispering.

She took a deep breath and said quietly ...

“Agent Crivaro, Harry was right. Whoever killed Brett Parma also killed the woman in Colorado.”

Crivaro squinted hard at her.

“Did you get some feeling about that just now?” he asked.

Riley nodded and said, “He’s happy with himself now that he’s claimed a second victim. He’d forgotten how good it felt. Now he’s eager to kill again. If we don’t stop him, it won’t be long before he does.”

Crivaro stared at the place where the body had been found for a moment. Then he shook his head. “Look, Riley. I’ve got the same kind of odd ability you’ve got—that knack for getting a glimpse into a killer’s mind. That’s why I picked you out for this kind of work in the first place. But here, I’m getting nothing. I don’t get that feeling at all.”

“But Agent Crivaro—”

He interrupted her. “Let me remind you about this little extra ability of ours, Riley. It comes with a lot of responsibility. You’ve got to learn how to distinguish insight from imagination. This isn’t magic, and it isn’t mind-reading or anything psychic. You get intuitive hits, but they only really matter if they fit the evidence at hand. They can be way off if the imagination part gets out of hand.”

He pointed to the ground and added, “Do you see anything here to back up this hunch of yours—anything concrete or solid?”

Riley looked hard at the place on the ground where the body had been found. To her frustration, she couldn’t see anything that supported what she’d just felt. So far, nothing in this case seemed to support any connection between the two murders.

Crivaro said, “I think the desert air is getting to you. This is a strange place, and neither one of us is used to it. Now as for me, I think it’s highly unlikely that the two killings are related. And that means we’ve got no

business here. I think we should call it a day, go back to Phoenix, and catch the next plane back to DC.”

Riley felt a rush of desperation. Her sense of the killer had been strong. *I’ve just got to persuade him*, she thought.

She said, “Agent Crivaro, please, let’s not give up just yet. Isn’t there anything else we can do? Even if it’s only to prove I’m wrong?”

Crivaro tilted his head and said, “Well, I guess we could pay the medical examiner a visit, see what he thinks, even get a look at the body. I’ve got to warn you, it’s not going to be a pretty sight.”

“I’ve seen dead bodies before,” Riley said.

Crivaro smirked a little, as if he knew something she didn’t know.

He said, “If we do, and it doesn’t change my mind, do you promise to stop nagging me?”

Riley gulped hard. Did she really want to make that promise?

He’s not giving me much of a choice, she realized.

“I promise,” she said.

She and Crivaro walked together back to where Chief Webster was still standing. He was watching them with a slight frown on his face.

Crivaro asked him, “Where’s the medical examiner’s office?”

Webster pointed and said, “About ten miles north of here, in Stover. Why?”

“Could you give us a ride up there?” Crivaro said.

Webster grunted with irritation. Riley could tell he still wasn’t pleased at having two BAU agents around who didn’t know how to mind their own business, and who definitely didn’t know when to leave.

“I’ve kind of got my hands full here,” Webster replied. “But I guess Wally could give you a ride. And I’ll call the ME to let him know you’re on your way. Don’t get me wrong, but I hope this is the last I see of you.”

Crivaro chuckled and said, “Yeah, well, the feeling’s mutual. I expect we’ll be on a flight to DC pretty soon.”

“That would be good,” Webster agreed.

Crivaro and Riley followed the chief back along the trail and waited while he spoke with the cop named Wally. Soon Wally was dispatched to drive them to the ME’s office in Stover, so Riley and Crivaro climbed into the police car.

As Wally started driving, Riley looked back toward the crime scene.

The dead woman's van was still parked on the side of the road. It would be removed now, and the police would leave the area. There would be no sign that anything so ugly had happened here, and the only witnesses would still not be talking.

She shivered a little as she relived the feeling she'd gotten out on the trail—that this was the killer's second murder, and that he was eager to kill again.

What if their visit to the ME's office failed to convince Crivaro that her instincts were right?

Who would even try to stop this killer from fulfilling his vile desires?

I've got to convince Crivaro, she thought.

We can't leave now.

CHAPTER NINE

Jake Crivaro was aware of an uncomfortable silence in the police car. Not that he hoped the young cop driving them to Stover would start talking. It was just as well that he seemed intent on minding his own business. But Jake and Riley had barely exchanged a word since they'd gotten into the car.

Jake was sitting in the front seat and she was in the back, so he swiveled around to see her.

She flicked a glance at him, then looked away and went back to gazing out the side window. A slight frown was on her face.

Jake found it easy to guess what Riley was worrying about.

She thinks I just don't give a damn.

He knew it must seem to his junior partner as though he didn't think Brett Parma's death mattered enough for them to investigate. That was hardly the case, though. Whenever Jake got wind of a murder, even on the TV news, he almost always felt an overwhelming urge to pitch in and solve it.

That had gotten him into trouble more than once.

Over the years, he'd learned to resist that urge, at least most of the time.

Right now, he kept reminding himself he and Riley weren't here in any official capacity at all. Their unsanctioned involvement in a local murder case would be a serious breach of FBI rules.

He admitted to himself that he hadn't always been such a stickler for rules. There had been times in the past when he'd risked his career on a hunch.

But he didn't have any such hunch right now.

And besides ...

Poking into this case would set a bad example, and that wouldn't be good for Riley..

The kid tended to be too much a rule-breaker as it was. She'd made Jake furious more than once by defying his orders. Worse, she'd made Jake's own boss furious, almost wrecking her career before it had even started—and nearly wrecking Jake's career as well.

While Riley had still been a student at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Jake had yanked her out of her classes to help him on a murder case. He hadn't had a partner at the time, and he'd thought her raw instincts would be useful.

And her instincts had been very useful indeed.

If it hadn't been for Riley, they might never have stopped the killer.

But along the way, Riley had taken a truly outrageous detour. She'd gotten suspicious of a very important man, no less than a US senator. Pretending to be a reporter, she'd confronted Senator Gardner during a press conference and badgered him with questions about a murder victim.

Her instincts had been right, as usual—although not in the way she'd thought.

Gardner hadn't been guilty of murder, but he hadn't been an innocent man either. Riley's stunt had brought to light personal indiscretions that had ended his political career.

Jake's boss had been beyond furious—and not just with Riley. Special Agent in Charge Erik Lehl had lambasted Jake for getting her involved to begin with.

Riley had borne the blunt of his fury, though. Lehl personally had her expelled her from the Academy.

Then the young agent-in-training had pulled off some brilliant work with Jake on the barbed wire killer case.

Lehl had relented and put her back in the program, but he still had lingering reservations about her. Jake had overcome a lot of official doubts to get her into the BAU after her graduation from the Academy.

One more reckless stunt might finish her for good, he thought.

The last thing Jake wanted was for his decision to bring her along on this one to jeopardize her future. He would retire some day before too long, and the BAU would be in need of her unusual skills. Except for himself back when he'd been at his best, he'd never run across another investigator who could see into a killer's mind the way she could.

When they reached the county medical examiner's office in Stover, the cop named Wally parked in front of the building. As the three of them got out of the car, Jake watched Riley closely. He could tell by her determined expression that she felt strongly about this case.

She really believed that Brett Parma wasn't the killer's first victim.

Is she right? he wondered.

He'd told her the truth when he'd said he hadn't gotten the same feeling from the crime scene. And normally, he would have felt confident about his instincts. But it was also true that he'd felt nothing at all when he viewed the place where the woman's body had been tossed down. He had no insight to

offer on this one.

Jake felt tired and burnt out, and wasn't sure he could trust his own judgment.

He hoped the visit to the ME would settle things one way or the other.

But if, as he thought, they found no actual evidence connecting the two killings, would Riley keep her promise and let the whole thing go?

They might have a serious argument on their hands.

She's a stubborn kid, Jake thought with a smile.

And that made her a lot like him. That was one reason Jake couldn't help liking her, sometimes in spite of himself.

When they went inside the building, a receptionist greeted them and said that the medical examiner was expecting their visit. The woman led them to an office with a sign that read "Dr. Francisco Arau, County Medical Examiner."

Jake and Riley went into the office while Wally waited outside. They introduced themselves to ME, a short, dark-skinned man with a thick mane of black hair. Unlike Chief Webster, Dr. Arau didn't seem at all displeased to meet them.

He said, "Everett Webster told me you were coming. He said you had some questions about that woman who was killed near Wren's Nest Campground. He said you had some idea that we might have a serial killer on our hands."

Jake shrugged slightly and said, "It's just a hypothesis at this point, Dr. Arau."

"Please, call me Paco," the ME said with a smile. "Everybody else does."

Then he shook his head and added ...

"I've got to say, this particular victim really unsettles me. I've seen dead bodies in all kinds of awful conditions, usually people who got lost or injured out in the desert and wound up half-eaten by scavengers. That's pretty routine in this part of the country. I've also seen my share of murder victims. But this one ..."

He sighed and said, "I just can't make sense of it, I guess. Someone took this girl and bled her to death in an unknown location. Then he went to a certain amount of trouble to lug her body out onto that trail and left her there for anybody to find. That involved some risk to himself. Even though that particular trail isn't heavily used, he could easily have been seen coming or

going.”

Jake replied. “The guy who takes that kind of risk is usually eager to put some time and distance between himself and the victim.”

“But he didn’t bury the body. He didn’t even try to hide it.”

Jake looked at Riley. “What do you think that means?”

He could see her mentally turning his question over in her mind.

“I’m not sure,” Riley said. Finally she added, “He wasn’t announcing his deed to the public the way some serial killers do.”

Jake knew Riley was thinking of a killer who painted his victims up like clowns and another who left the dead hanging from fence posts, still wrapped in the barbed wire that had killed them.

“Right,” he said. “This one didn’t display the body in any way. But why didn’t he even try to hide it?”

“He obviously wasn’t trying to hide the fact that a murder had taken place,” she replied slowly. “And no matter why he killed her, after she was dead, the victim meant nothing to him.”

Dr. Arau had been listening intently. Now he chimed in. “He had to figure that it didn’t matter if the body was found. So he must have been confident that no one would see any connection between him and the victim.”

“Right,” Jake said. “Now, perhaps you’d let us have a look at the body.”

“I’d be glad to,” Paco said.

He led Jake and Riley to the morgue, where he pulled open a stainless steel drawer to reveal a woman’s naked, mangled body.

Riley let out a gasp and turned away.

Jake could understand her horror.

Most of the woman’s abdomen was gone, revealing fragments of internal organs and exposed ribs. Even some of her vertebrae were visible through the tangle of viscera. And of course, the stench was terrible.

Most noticeable of all, though, was the sheer, bloodless pallor of the victim’s skin.

Riley was still turned away, leaning against an empty table. Jake could hear her gasping and swallowing hard to keep from vomiting.

At first, Jake wasn’t especially shaken by what he saw. He’d seen bodies in far worse condition than this one during his years with the BAU. He walked slowly around the corpse, examining it from different angles.

He saw that there was little left of the woman’s right arm, which had been

gnawed mostly down to sinew and bones. But when he got a look at her other arm, he stifled a gasp at what he saw.

Relatively intact, the wrist was wildly carved in all directions.

Whoever had cut her had been serious about making her bleed to death.

And more than that ...

The cuts looked bold, confident, and assured.

Suddenly, Jake himself felt a surge of pure gut certainty.

Riley was right—and so was Harry, he thought.

Whoever did this has killed before.

CHAPTER TEN

Riley braced herself against the empty morgue table, trying to choke back her horror. She wondered—why was her whole body reacting so violently?

She remembered what she'd said to Agent Crivaro a little while ago.

"I've seen dead bodies before."

It was true—she'd seen more corpses than most young people her age. She'd seen dead women bound up with barbed wire, bodies with faces grotesquely smeared with clown makeup, and her own college friends lying on dorm room floors with their throats cut open. Worst of all, she'd seen her mother lying dead with a bullet wound to her chest when she'd been a small child.

She shouldn't be shocked, even by something this grisly.

Was this different somehow?

No, Riley thought. *It's too much the same.*

This time, the horror was more visible, but all of those deliberate deaths had been ugly.

She was finding the sheer bulk of atrocity she'd seen in her short life hard to take.

But she knew she couldn't let herself react this way—not if she wanted to be a successful BAU agent.

Riley forced herself to turn around and look again at the body.

To her surprise, she saw that Crivaro also looked stunned.

His face had gone pale and his mouth was hanging open. He stood staring at the victim's left forearm, which was slashed in wild, violent knife strokes.

Standing beside him, Dr. Paco Arau looked more complacent.

Finally, Jake gave a sharp nod and Paco closed the drawer, removing the body from view.

Crivaro's voice was hoarse when he asked, "Paco, do you have a fax machine?"

"Sure," the medical examiner said. "In my office."

Relieved that the body was out of sight, Riley finally drew a normal breath. As she followed Crivaro and Paco back to the office, she wondered what her senior partner had in mind now.

The first thing Crivaro did was to make a couple of phone calls to get the

name and number of the medical examiner who had worked on the earlier murder case in Colorado. Then Crivaro dialed that number and put the call on a speakerphone for Riley and Paco to listen in. A moment later, a voice crackled over the speaker.

“Dr. Robert Licht, Upshur County Coroner, speaking.”

Crivaro said, “Dr. Licht, this is Special Agent Jake Crivaro of the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI. I’m a friend of Harry Carnes. Do you happen to know him?”

The voice on the phone sounded pleased.

“Sure, Harry and I are pals. We go hunting together from time to time. What can I do for you?”

“I’m calling about a murder you had in your parts a about a year ago,” Crivaro said. “The victim’s name was Erin Gibney.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Dr. Licht said in a more somber tone. “That was an ugly business. She was found dead over in Dyson Park. Bled to death. I guess you know the police never caught the killer.”

“I know,” Crivaro said.

Then Crivaro took a long breath and said, “I’m calling from the medical examiner’s office in Stover, Arizona. I’ve got a couple of other people on the line, my partner and the ME. I’ll let them introduce themselves.”

Riley’s heart quickened at that word.

Partner.

She wondered ...

When is it going to seem real to me?

Paco identified himself over the phone and so did Riley.

“This sounds pretty serious,” Dr. Licht said. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve had a similar murder down here in Arizona,” Crivaro said.

Riley heard a gasp over the phone.

“Jesus,” Dr. Licht said. “Do you think it’s a serial killer?”

Crivaro paused for a moment. From the expression on his face, Riley sensed that he was on the verge of saying “yes.”

He’s becoming convinced, she thought hopefully.

Instead, Crivaro said, “I wonder if you could do me a favor. Could you fax me some autopsy photos of the victim’s body? I’m especially interested in seeing close-ups of the knife wounds on her forearms.”

Riley heard a hesitant grunt on the phone.

"I don't know," Dr. Licht said. "I normally keep that kind of documentation pretty close to my vest. Is this an official FBI case?"

Crivaro heaved a sigh and said, "I guess that depends on what's in the photos you'd be sending me."

A short silence fell. Then Dr. Licht said, "Well, for a friend of Harry's, I guess I can make an exception. How do I send it?"

Paco Arau told Dr. Licht his office fax number.

"Give me just a couple of minutes," Dr. Licht said. "I'll get back on the line as soon as the photos go through."

Riley saw that Paco's eyes had widened with concern.

Paco murmured to Crivaro ...

"I've never dealt with a serial case before. Do you really think ...?"

His voice faded, and Crivaro made no reply.

A silence fell for two or three minutes. Then came a click and the whirring of the fax machine. Sheets of paper came rolling out. Crivaro grabbed the faxes and looked at them. Then he groaned aloud and spread the images on the desk for both Riley and Paco to see.

Riley immediately noticed that the body was much less damaged than the one she'd just seen in the morgue. Apparently Erin Gibney's body had been discovered before it could fall prey to so many scavengers.

But most of all, Riley noticed the pattern of knife wounds on the victim's wrist.

The similarity to the wounds on Brett Parma's body were impossible to ignore. The older cuts might have been somewhat sloppier and reckless than the more recent victim's, but they were obviously the work of the same killer. It was like looking at two examples of one person's handwriting.

Riley and her two colleagues sat staring at the photos for a moment.

Then they were startled by the sound of Dr. Licht's voice crackling over the speaker.

"Did you get them?"

"Yeah, we got them," Crivaro said.

"So how do things look?" Dr. Licht asked.

Crivaro shook his head. "They look bad. Real bad."

With a glance at Riley, he added, "We've definitely got a serial on our hands."

Riley felt a jolt at those words.

I was right all along, she thought.

Only now did she realize ... she wished she'd been wrong.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dr. Licht said.

"Yeah, so am I," Crivaro said. "Listen, I need for you to fax us everything you've got on Erin Gibney's autopsy, the whole written report, all the photos. Especially the fingers. This victim's knuckles are bruised and her fingernails are broken, like there was some kind of struggle."

"I'll get right on it," Dr. Licht said.

The call came to an end, and Riley, Crivaro, and Paco sat in startled silence for a moment.

Finally Paco said, "Listen, I'm afraid I'm out of my depth all of a sudden. Like I said before, I've never dealt with a serial case. Mostly ordinary deaths, just a few open-and-shut murders. What do you need me to do next?"

Crivaro tilted his head and said, "Just do your job. Don't worry too much about it, Paco. An ME's job is pretty much the same, no matter how somebody dies. Dr. Licht will be faxing you a pile of information shortly. Just sift through it, then call Dr. Licht to compare notes, especially regarding the knuckles and fingernails. Neither one of you will probably find anything helpful that we haven't already noticed. But if you do, contact me right away."

"I understand," Paco said. "I guess the hard part is now up to you guys. What do *you* do next?"

Crivaro let out a grunt that seemed to say, *That's a good question.*

Then he said, "We've got to find out everything we can about what Brett Parma was doing for a day or two before she was murdered, especially anyone she might have talked to during that time. Also, we need to find out if anybody saw anything suspicious, like someone who might have been stalking her."

Drumming his fingers on his knee, he added, "That means going to the campground where she was staying. And of course the local police have already done that. Apparently they came up with nothing."

Crivaro looked unhappy, and Riley suspected she understood why.

She remembered something Harry had said to them.

"You and your partner can't just march into a campground looking like you do right now. Hell, you've got 'FBI' written all over you."

She also remembered what Crivaro had said about the idea of the two of

them camping together.

“That’s just too damned ridiculous.”

But now Riley wondered ...

What choice do we have?

Riley said to Crivaro in a cautious voice, “Agent Crivaro, it seems to me that we’ve got to—”

Crivaro interrupted with a growl, “Yeah, I know. We’ve got to go undercover as campers. We’ll do it just like Harry said except I’ll be your dad, you’ll be my daughter. We’re going to need a whole new look—especially our own camper. Paco, do you have any idea where we might rent one locally?”

Paco nodded and wrote down an address. Crivaro and Riley thanked him for his help and left his office.

When they stepped outside the building they heard loud music playing. They were relieved to see that the cop named Wally was sitting in the police car, listening to the radio as he waited for them.

Crivaro said to Riley, “You go ask Wally there if he’ll give us a ride to the RV rental place. I’ll be right with you. First I’ve got a phone call to make.”

Riley heard a note of dread in Crivaro’s voice, and his posture slumped as he walked away. Riley had a pretty good idea of who he was about to call—and why he wasn’t looking forward to it.

And I don’t envy him, she thought.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jake hesitated before he punched in the phone number.

This isn't going to be pleasant, he thought.

As he braced himself to make the call, Jake watched Riley walk over to the police car, where music still blared through the open window. He saw her speak to Wally, who nodded to her. Then Riley climbed into the car, so apparently the cop was willing to give them a ride to their next stop. At least that was taken care of.

Jake turned his attention back to the phone and entered the private number for Special Agent in Charge Erik Lehl at Quantico.

The last time he'd seen Lehl had been to ask for a few days of vacation time. Jake had given no hint that he'd be checking into a murder case.

He wondered how his boss was going to react to the truth.

For all Jake knew, Lehl might simply get furious and demand that Jake and Riley come back to Quantico on the next available flight.

Or it might even be worse.

When Lehl came on the line, he said, "I hadn't expected to hear from you, Agent Crivaro. Are you enjoying your vacation?"

Jake wondered—did he hear a note of sarcasm in Lehl's voice?

Had his boss already figured out that Jake wasn't on vacation at all?

Jake knew it wasn't impossible. Lehl had an uncanny way of keeping track of all his agents. If Jake really *were* on vacation, Lehl might well know exactly where he'd gone to enjoy himself.

Jake gulped hard, then said, "Uh, Chief, something's come up. I think I've stumbled across a serial killer case."

Jake heard the chief grunt and say ...

"Do tell."

Jake stifled a sigh at Lehl's wry reply.

That's sarcasm, all right.

Jake figured he'd better come clean about everything.

He said, "Agent Lehl, I'm actually out in Arizona. An old friend of mine asked me to come out and look into a recent murder here ..."

Jake went on to tell the whole story—how Harry had seen similarities in two widely separated murders and called Jake for help, how he'd recruited

Riley Sweeney to fly out here with him, and how he and Riley had visited the local ME and compared the two cases. He filled Lehl in on the details that had led them to believe that the recent murder in Arizona was the work of a killer who had taken another victim a year ago in Colorado.

When he finished, Lehl said, "Let me see if I've got this straight. You lied to me this morning—"

Jake wanted to interrupt and say he hadn't exactly lied.

But what else could I call it?

Lehl continued ...

"And you took a rookie agent with you on an unsanctioned investigation—an agent with her own history of insubordination. Am I right so far?"

A silence fell.

Yeah, that's pretty much right, Jake thought miserably.

Finally Lehl grumbled ...

"Well, from the information you've given me it does sound like you've run across something serious. Why hasn't the local police chief contacted the FBI about these killings?"

Jake tried to imagine going back to Chief Webster to talk him into calling in a formal request for FBI help. He'd already given the local chief the impression that he and Riley were here in an official capacity.

Jake really wanted to skip that conversation if he possibly could.

"I suspect you're not going to hear from the Tunsboro police chief at all," Jake said. "He's still pretty skeptical about this whole thing. Look, when I came out here, I was more than skeptical myself. But now there's not a question in my mind that this is a legitimate case—and an urgent one. This killer is still at large and nobody is hunting him very seriously. I just need you to make FBI participation official."

A tense silence fell.

"I'll do it," Lehl finally said. "Agent Crivaro, I trust your instincts, if nothing else. Send me all the data you have at this point and I'll set up a file on the case."

Jake felt a surge of relief.

"Thanks, Agent Lehl," he replied. "I'll fax you everything later today."

Before Jake could end the call, Lehl added ...

"But you'd better remember—I don't like how you went about this. You're on thin ice right now. So is that partner of yours. Keep your nose

clean. Hers too. You've got to keep that rookie out of trouble this time."

"I'll do that," Jake said, sounding more confident than he felt.

They ended the call, and Jake headed over to the car to tell the rookie in question that they had a case.

Jake wondered if he would be able to keep either of them out of trouble. He and Riley Sweeney were an erratic team, but they had proved to be effective together. The young woman had a rare talent, and he was determined to see it developed properly, both for her sake and for the good of the Bureau.

All the same, he reminded himself ...

Don't go to easy on her.

He felt skeptical about the way they had decided to go about the investigation. Could they really make a father-daughter act work?

Still, Jake realized that he also felt a renewed enthusiasm. He and Riley were here officially now. A BAU team was on the trail of a man who found some kind of twisted pleasure in draining young women of their lives.

He just hoped they weren't too far behind him to prevent another murder.

*

Riley sat in the passenger seat of the police car, watching Crivaro walk toward her. She couldn't tell from his expression whether the call had gone well or badly.

She knew it mattered a lot. She was sure he'd called their boss at Quantico, and if that had gone badly, they'd be headed right back there ...

Or we might both get fired.

As Crivaro got into the back seat, Riley asked him, "Did you talk to Lehl?"

"Yeah, and he's willing to make this an official case."

Riley felt a wave of relief.

"Did he say anything else?" she asked.

Crivaro smiled slightly and said, "He told me to keep your nose clean."

"My nose?" Riley asked with surprise.

"Yeah, and my nose too." He added with a chuckle, "He's very concerned about our nasal hygiene—speaking figuratively, of course."

Riley laughed. She understood what Crivaro meant—that both of them

had better stay on their best behavior. Otherwise, they could wind up in a lot of trouble.

The cop named Wally was obviously trying not to show too much curiosity about their conversation as he pulled out of the parking lot and drove them across town. When they reached the RV rental business called Arizona Outdoors, Crivaro told him ...

“We won’t need you to chauffeur us around anymore. But we do need you to make an official report to Chief Webster. Tell him we’re now sure this is a serial killer and the FBI is staying on the case.”

Wally snapped out a brisk “Yessir.”

Crivaro thought for a moment, then added, “Also tell Webster to fax all his reports and paperwork on this case to two numbers. One is the ME here in Stover. Agent Sweeney and I will pick it up later. The second is the BAU headquarters at Quantico.”

Jake took out a card and handed it to Wally.

“This is the number.”

“Anything else, sir?” Wally asked.

“That’s it. But those faxes are important. I’m counting on you to see that they get done.”

For a moment, Wally looked as though he might salute, but then he just nodded, tucked the card in a pocket, and drove away with a determined expression on his face.

Riley felt a bit amused that Crivaro hadn’t called Webster to personally tell him to send the faxes. Her partner clearly wasn’t eager to deal with the grumpy local police chief more than he had to. And judging from their earlier experiences with him, she was sure that Webster felt the same way about Crivaro and Riley.

There was a fast food place just across the street from Arizona Outdoors. Riley and Crivaro decided to go there first to have a coffee and a quick snack. When they sat down to eat, Riley thought about the tasks they were about to undertake.

Her mind began to reel.

This would be something she’d never tried to carry off before ...

We’re going undercover!

CHAPTER TWELVE

Riley told herself to curb her excitement about going undercover. After all, she and Crivaro would just be pretending to be campers so that other campers would be willing to talk to them. This would be nothing like the harrowing stories her Academy roommate, Frankie, had told her.

Frankie had gone undercover to bust drug dealers, but the experience had become a nightmare when she was forced to inject herself with heroin in order to save her own life.

Riley shuddered at the thought.

But surely she and Crivaro couldn't get into such a dire situation while staying at the fancy RV resort they planned to check out. It was where the recent victim had last been seen alive, and it seemed possible that the killer had stayed there too. Or at least, maybe someone there knew something about him. They had no other clues that might help pick up his trail.

Riley asked Crivaro, "Have you ever gone undercover before?"

Crivaro chuckled and said, "Yeah, but nothing like this. I've got to admit, I feel a little out of my depth."

Riley looked at him in surprise, and finally he continued.

"Trying to pass myself as some regular old retired camper is going to be tough enough. As you know, I've been a city type all my life. But trying to convince people that I'm your dad ... well, that's *really* going to be a challenge."

Riley looked at Crivaro and considered how well they might pass as family members. They both had dark hair and strong features. He was rugged-looking in a different way from her real father, muscular but not so lean and wiry.

And like many fathers, he could be tough on her—sometimes too tough for her liking. She didn't expect to find it all that hard to pretend that Crivaro was her dad. She knew she'd already thought of him as a father figure, at least a few times.

Then she grinned and told him, "I think the toughest part for me will be remembering to call you 'Dad.'"

"You'll have to make it sound natural," he replied.

Riley was curious about something, but the memory of Frankie's awful

story made her hesitate to ask.

She nibbled at her fries, then asked cautiously, “What were your other undercover jobs like?”

Crivaro squinted as he took a sip of coffee.

He said, “Way back during my early years with the Bureau, I posed as a hit man on a couple of cases.”

Riley’s eyes widened.

“That sounds dangerous,” she said.

Crivaro grunted and said, “Not as much as you might expect. But it sure took a toll on my faith in human nature.”

As Crivaro bit into his burger, Riley wondered whether he was going to tell her anything else about it.

Better not push him, she thought.

Finally he said, “The first time I went undercover, I helped bust a bank manager. One of his employees had caught him embezzling, and he wanted to bump the guy off. It took a whole team to set it up so that he’d seek me out for the job. I put on a wire, and the bank manager and I held the meeting right in his office. He didn’t mince words about what he wanted, and our team burst right in the minute he gave me an envelope full of money.”

Crivaro scratched his chin and added, “That first case didn’t really shake me up too much. I’ve never thought highly of bankers, so it didn’t come as a surprise that my target would think of murder as just another business deal. Call me cynical, but I figure that’s the way business is done in this country, at least by the people who can afford it.”

Then Crivaro’s expression darkened a little. “But the other case ... that one still nags at me.”

Riley sensed that he was truly troubled by the memory.

She was about to say ...

“You don’t have to tell me about it.”

But then Crivaro said, “There was this housewife whose husband cheated on her, and she decided she wanted to kill his girlfriend, and she tried to hire me to do it. We arranged a clandestine meeting in her car, and I was wearing a wire, and it was ... one of the strangest damn things I’ve ever experienced.”

Crivaro leaned across the table toward Riley and said ...

“She acted like it wasn’t anything serious. She acted like it was some kind of silly game. I kept trying to get her to say aloud what she wanted me to do,

and she kept giggling and nudging me and all but *winking*, saying, ‘Oh, you know. I don’t have to say it. You know what I want you to do. You must have done this lots of times.’”

Riley was imagining the scene now. She was starting to understand just why it must have seemed so weird to Crivaro.

He continued, “Then she kind of wagged her finger at me and said that the woman had a really sweet dog, and whatever else I did, I mustn’t hurt that dog. The dog hadn’t done anything bad to her. She said now that she thought about it, she wanted to adopt the dog.”

Crivaro shook his head and said, “And finally she just blurted out, ‘I want you to kill that woman, but after you do, I want you to bring me the dog. I’ll keep the dog. I’ll be very nice to him.’ And she handed me the money, and the team swarmed right in and arrested her.”

Riley’s mouth hung open with shock.

The idea of a woman wanting to kill somebody but fretting about the life of the victim’s dog seemed downright bizarre.

And really twisted.

Crivaro said, “Even then, I was used to tracking down a different kind of killer. Some of them have been bona fide monsters who wore their evil on their sleeves. Others have just been rotten people. But if you met this woman on the street or in a grocery store, she’d seem like just another normal housewife.”

He shook his head and added, “And that’s what scared me. Maybe she *was* just a normal housewife. Doing the kind of work I do, how am *I* supposed to know what ‘normal’ even means? Ever since then, I’ve wondered about people I see around me everywhere, on the streets and in public places—polite people who smile even at strangers. I wonder whether *most* people are capable of murder, given the opportunity and as long as someone else does the dirty work.”

He shrugged and added, “Like I said, who am I to even know?”

Crivaro and Riley continued eating in silence. After they finished their snack, Crivaro said, “Come on, we’d better get to work.”

They walked across the street to Arizona Outdoors, where dozens of vehicles and trailers were parked neatly for display in a lot outside the main building.

Crivaro put his hands in his pockets and shuffled his feet and shook his

head.

He asked Riley, “Have you ever been camping?”

“Some,” Riley said. “I used to go out with my dad from time to time into the Appalachian Mountains. It was when he was hunting or fishing.”

Crivaro grumbled, “Well, I haven’t been camping since I was a Boy Scout. And even then I wasn’t any good at it. I’ll be damned if I’ve got any idea what we’re looking for.”

Crivaro pointed to a nearby storefront. “That looks like a camping goods store. Remember what Harry said—we can’t go into a campground dressed like a couple of FBI agents. I’m gonna go over there and find myself some appropriate clothes. Your assignment is to pick out an RV, something suitable for a father-daughter holiday. What do I know about that anyhow?”

Riley was about to protest that she didn’t know anything more about campers than he did. She and her father had always roughed it whenever they’d gone out into the woods for a few nights, taking little with them but a tent and some necessary supplies.

But Crivaro patted her on the arm and said, “Money’s no object. This is an official case, so we’re doing everything on the Bureau’s dime now.”

Without giving her a chance to protest, he strode away toward the store.

Riley looked around at the conglomeration of vehicles, wondering ...

Now what do I do?

As if in reply to her unspoken question, she heard a voice behind her.

“May I help you?”

She turned around and saw a young woman wearing a nametag that said “EMILY.” She was dressed in blue shorts and a blue T-shirt, obviously the company’s employee uniform. Emily had a flawless smile and an equally flawless complexion. She looked like she’d walked straight out of a TV commercial. Riley doubted she’d ever been camping in her life.

Riley suddenly realized that she had no idea what to say to her.

Think fast, she told herself.

She said, “Um, my dad and I want to rent a nice trailer or an RV or something to camp in.”

Emily squinted at Riley and said, “I wonder if you could be more specific.”

Riley felt thoroughly stymied now, but quickly figured ...

Maybe the truth is best.

She forced a chuckle and said, “To be honest, I’ve got no idea what I’m looking for. We’d just like to spend a vacation together and thought it would be fun to stay at some of the really nice RV resorts. He’s left the choice of camper up to me. I’m hoping you can help me make a decision.”

“Well, that’s what I’m here for,” Emily said with a chuckle.

Then she eyed Riley from head to foot and asked, “Where are you from?”

For a moment Riley wondered why Emily had asked that question. But then she remembered how she was dressed—in a suit jacket with full-length slacks, hardly the sort of wardrobe anybody would normally wear on a warm Arizona day.

She remembered Harry’s words.

“Hell, you’ve got ‘FBI’ written all over you.”

Riley wondered if maybe Emily had already figured out exactly who she was. Maybe she’d even noticed the bulge under Riley jacket where her Glock was holstered. The thought was discouraging. She’d been undercover for only a minute or so, and she was already having trouble keeping her cover, even with an ordinary rental employee. Was she really ready to take on this task in earnest?

Again, she figured maybe it wouldn’t hurt to be at least partially truthful.

She said, “My dad and I just flew in from Virginia. We’re from the, uh, DC area.”

Emily’s smile widened, as if that explained a lot.

She said, “Maybe a simple camping trailer would suit you.”

Riley looked where Emily was pointing and saw some camping trailers of various shapes and sizes. The larger ones looked like the pictures that Harry’s wife, Jillian, had shown her of their camper.

But towing something like that could be a problem.

She remembered how she and Ryan had hauled their belongings in a trailer when they’d moved to DC. Putting the hitch on Ryan’s car had been a lot of trouble, and she hadn’t enjoyed her share of the driving. Making turns and backing up had been difficult. Besides, she and Crivaro would have to rent a car or truck in addition to the trailer.

She said to Emily, “I don’t think a trailer’s quite what I’m looking for.”

Emily asked, “May I ask what kind of price range you’ve got in mind?”

Riley remembered what Crivaro had just said.

“Money’s no object.”

Riley wasn't sure how she felt about running up a huge bill for the FBI to pay. But at least they could afford more than these trailers.

Feigning embarrassment, Riley said, "Well, the truth is, my dad's pretty well off."

Emily nodded and said, "Let's look at some motor homes, then."

Emily led Riley through the lot and explained to her the categories of the vehicles. The biggest and most luxurious were the Class A motor homes. These box-shaped vehicles were built on what looked like truck chassis, and they were as big as buses. Riley figured their interiors must be furnished like expensive hotel rooms, but she didn't ask Emily to let her look inside any of them. She couldn't imagine driving around in such a ridiculously large vehicle.

"Well," Emily chirped, "maybe a Class B would work better for you."

These were the smallest vehicles—more like good-sized vans, with raised roofs and tiny kitchen facilities and bathrooms. Riley could picture herself getting pretty comfortable in the one Emily showed her. But what about Agent Crivaro? What about the two of them living in that tight space together? Riley wished he'd stuck around to help her decide.

Riley shook her head no, and Emily took her over to see the Class C RV motor homes. These were mid-sized vans, smaller than Class A but bigger than Class B.

Emily showed Riley a brand new midsized motor home. A single camping unit was perched on a truck chassis, with an extension jutting out over the cab. Riley figured that even though it was longer, it wouldn't be much harder to drive than an ordinary pickup truck or a big van. The strategy for turns and backing up would be more familiar.

Emily showed her the interior, which looked like it had everything she and Crivaro would need—a table and seats where they could eat and work, plenty of kitchen equipment, a bathroom, and two beds, one in the back of the camper and the other over the truck cab.

Riley smiled. The RV reminded her of the old fairytale about Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

Not too big, not too little, but just right.

Riley was about to tell Emily that this was the one she wanted when she saw Crivaro emerge from the camping store. He was carrying a couple of bags of merchandise and his go-bag, which must be stuffed with the outfit

he'd arrived in.

Crivaro was dressed like Harry had been, in a T-shirt, denim shorts, and sandals.

Riley couldn't help but break out in a fit of giggles.

She'd had never seen her partner in short pants before, and his bulky, hairy legs took her completely by surprise. Silliest of all, though, was the floppy fishing hat he was now wearing.

"Go ahead and laugh," Crivaro growled. "I'll bet you come out of there looking pretty ridiculous yourself. Have you chosen an RV yet?"

"I think so," Riley said.

"Good, I'll sign for it. We've got to get going. Paco just called my cell phone and said he'd gotten the faxed information from Chief Webster. We've got to go over there and pick it up, then head to the RV resort and make like happy campers."

He handed her a credit card and added, "You go on over to the store and pick out some duds for yourself, and anything else you think we might need. I told them my daughter would be coming in to get her stuff. Don't forget a swimsuit. You'll probably need it."

Riley headed toward the store as Crivaro began to wrap things up with Emily. Before she went inside, Riley turned and saw that Emily was glancing back and forth between her and Crivaro with a perplexed expression.

She doesn't believe we're father and daughter, Riley thought.

God knows what she thinks we're up to.

Riley sure hoped they could do a better job of fooling other people they'd meet.

Meanwhile, she had some shopping to do.

For a few moments, she couldn't shake off her giggles at Crivaro's attempt to "make like a happy camper." But then she flashed back to the sight of Brett Parma's corpse in the morgue, her flesh a ghastly white where it hadn't been eaten away by scavengers.

Riley shuddered as she realized ...

Sooner or later we'll find whoever did that.

When they did, what would that be like?

Terrifying, she was sure.

And extremely dangerous.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Riley was seized by an unexpected and uncanny flash of fear.

For a moment she wondered why she felt that way. She wasn't in any danger. She was just sitting in a lounge chair beside a swimming pool. And a woman in a bathing suit was walking toward her, smiling at her.

That was all she was doing—smiling.

Why does that scare me? Riley wondered.

Then she realized ...

Her partner's stories had gotten under her skin, especially one about a giggling housewife who'd tried to hire him to murder her husband's lover.

Crivaro had said that case had taken a toll on his faith in human nature. It had made him wary of *“polite people who smile even at strangers.”*

Shaking off that feeling, Riley applied the towel to her wet hair and tried to look relaxed.

Can't think every single person who smiles at me might be a killer.

She'd just had a brief swim in the Wren's Nest Campground's pool and she was actually hoping to make some contact with other campers. She wanted to find out what they knew about Brett Parma. Crivaro was over in the clubhouse bar making the same kind of effort.

The woman was still smiling when she reached Riley.

“Honey,” she said, “you're new to all this, aren't you?”

Riley forced herself to smile back. She wondered ...

Is it that obvious?

The woman sat down in the lounge chair next to hers and said, “You're going to get burned to a crisp if you don't watch out. You've got to be careful out here, even this time of year. Here, put on some of my sunscreen.”

The woman handed her a plastic bottle.

Riley obediently began to spread the cream on her skin, feeling silly because it was late afternoon, and the sun was getting low in the sky. She thought that her new acquaintance seemed a little tipsy, probably from enjoying cocktails beside the pool.

The woman said, “My name's Holly Crim. What's yours?”

“Riley.”

Remembering the cover story she and Crivaro had agreed upon, she added

...

"Riley Crivaro. And you're right, I'm not used to camping. I'm not sure what I think of it so far. It was my dad's idea. You see, he retired from the insurance business a few months ago, so he decided to get out and do some traveling. He's a widower, so he thought he'd make it a father/daughter kind of thing, so ..."

Riley shrugged and added, "Here I am."

"Where's your dad?" Holly asked.

"Over in the clubhouse bar," Riley said. "I'll introduce you to him later."

"Oh, I do look forward to meeting him," Holly said. She leaned forward and added in a reassuring tone, "You'll get used to RV living. I wasn't sure how I'd feel about it when Rick dragged me along on our first trip. But I guess I'm getting to like it. It gives us something to do with ourselves now that the kids are gone."

Riley studied the woman, trying to guess a few things about her. She seemed to be in her early forties. Her jaded tone of voice suggested that she was quite well off. Her husband was surely retired. Riley wondered—was he a good bit older than Holly? Or had he made a lot of money and retired fairly young?

By that time, a couple of Holly's friends had joined them. They sat together on a nearby lounge chair and politely introduced themselves as Bella and Doris. Doris looked about Holly's age, while Doris appeared to be in her sixties.

Riley was curious about all of them, but she knew she'd better start probing for the answers she was really here to find.

In a worried voice, she told the women, "Dad insisted on this campground. I was worried. I wasn't sure we should come here."

The women let out a murmur of surprise.

"What's wrong with it?" the woman named Bella asked.

Riley looked around and said in a low voice ...

"Well, I guess what I want to know is—do you feel *safe* here? I heard on the news about a woman getting killed near here just the other day. They say she got killed just after leaving this campground."

The woman named Doris sighed and said, "Oh, yes. Poor Brett."

Riley's ears perked up.

"You knew her?" Riley asked.

Doris shrugged and said, “Just enough so we knew each other’s names. She hadn’t been here long before she decided to leave.”

The other women also murmured that they hadn’t gotten to know Brett at all.

Riley considered how to pose the questions she wanted to ask without blowing her cover.

“It does sound a little odd,” she said. “Do you think she met someone here and, um, struck up a relationship?”

“Not that I ever saw,” Bella replied. “I thought a girl like that might be here to pick up a man. Not that I’m narrow-minded about that sort of thing. But I never saw Brett hanging out with anybody. Apparently she just came here to use the general facilities. You know, showers and bathrooms, restaurants. Living in that little van couldn’t have been very comfortable.”

“She didn’t even have a real RV,” Doris added.

Holly shook her head. “Foolish girl. She ought to have known better than to travel alone like that.”

A deeper voice chimed in, “I hear that the ‘Hook Man’ probably killed her.”

Riley looked around and saw that a man had walked up behind her lounge chair. He looked like he was in his forties and had worked out in a gym quite a lot. Judging from his physique, he was going to a lot of trouble to appear young and sexy.

The women obviously knew him.

Holly rolled her eyes said, “Oh, Rodney, you’re so full of crap.” Then she told Riley, “Don’t listen to him. He keeps trying to scare us with stories about the ‘Hook Man.’”

Doris said, “The Hook Man isn’t even real. Rodney got the idea from a movie. *Campfire Tales*, I think it was called.”

Bella shuddered and said, “I saw that movie. It gave me the creeps.”

Riley remembered going to that movie with Ryan. It hadn’t scared her at all, and she really couldn’t remember much about it. She did remember thinking at the time that Ryan had been too embarrassed to admit that the movie had gotten to him.

The man named Rodney smirked and said, “But that part about the man with a hook for a hand was based on fact. I know that much for sure. My cousin told me about a pair of teenagers he knew who’d been making out in a

parked car at night somewhere all alone. They'd gotten scared of some sounds they heard, and they drove away in a hurry. When the guy drove his girlfriend home, they found a huge deep gouge in the side of the car. The Hook Man had clawed at the car just when they'd driven away."

Doris laughed raucously. Holly and Bella giggled a little as well, but their reaction sounded more forced, as if the story actually had scared them—at least a little.

Rodney sneered and said, "Hey, laugh if you like. The way I hear it, that girl who got killed the other day had her guts ripped right out of her stomach. Whoever killed her sure as hell didn't do that with his bare hands."

The women all laughed again, this time at Rodney. He turned and skulked away.

Holly said, "Ignore Rodney. He's just a horny middle-aged guy, on the make with every woman he meets. Doesn't even care if we're married. He thinks scary stories will get us to jump into his strong, protective arms. So far he's had no luck."

As the conversation turned to pointless campground gossip, Riley thought about the story Rodney had just told. She knew perfectly well what to make of this "Hook Man" business ...

A classic urban legend.

It was the sort of story heard so often that people came to believe it. The person telling an urban legend like that almost always claimed some personal connection to the story—a friend or a relative who knew someone else who had witnessed or experienced it.

And yet ...

Riley couldn't help but be struck by what Rodney had said about Brett's body.

"She had her guts ripped right out of her stomach."

It evoked an awful image.

In her mind she saw again the woman's disemboweled body lying in the morgue.

Of course, that corpse had been mutilated by scavengers, not by the killer himself. But had Rodney somehow found out about the condition of the body?

Did he know more about this case than he should?

She knew she shouldn't be surprised if he did. Such details often leaked

out to the public. Someone on the ME's staff had probably mouthed off to friends about it, and news about the corpse's condition was now circulating via word of mouth.

Riley began to realize that she and Crivaro had a tough job on their hands. This whole campground seemed to be abuzz with gossip and rumors. It wasn't going to be easy to tell fact from fiction.

On the other hand, she was beginning to understand the appeal of this way of life. There was a real sense of community here. These women seemed like old friends who had been neighbors for years—and in fact, they possibly were.

Bella and Doris had told Riley that that they lived in their RVs full time. They'd sold their houses. Bella's husband still worked in Phoenix, and he commuted there every day. All three of the women seemed to have settled down to live in the Wren's Nest Campground for good.

Everything here struck Riley as laid back and even a bit old-fashioned. It reminded her of her teenage years when she'd lived with her Uncle Deke and Aunt Ruth in the little town of Larned, Virginia.

Riley had been a rebellious teenager who'd had little patience for small-town life. But now that she was older, she missed that unhurried world with its close ties of friendship and family. She'd worried that maybe that kind of life was dying out due to the pace and overload of the digital age. These days people held their conversations in chat rooms, and not over backyard fences.

Riley had wondered—would she ever discover that sense of community again? It certainly didn't seem possible in the city neighborhood where she and Ryan now lived.

And now she couldn't help thinking ...

Wouldn't it be weird if I found it right here?

And what if she wound up not wanting to go home?

She smiled at the unlikelihood of that happening. These women seemed pleasant enough, but she couldn't imagine getting to be close friends with any of them.

Of course, one big difference here was the elegance of the surroundings. This campground was called an "RV motor home resort." It had more than one restaurant, a clubhouse with a bar, a big swimming pool, several Jacuzzis, showers, game rooms, and other facilities for people who didn't want to spend all their time inside their motor homes. The gardens were

beautiful and carefully tended by workers who probably went home to less glamorous surroundings.

Riley suspected she might feel more at home with those workers than with these women passing time beside the pool.

Holly said to her, "Rick and I are having a barbecue this evening. Everyone's invited. Would you and your dad like to come?"

"It's nice of you to ask," Riley said. "I'm tired from traveling and getting set up here, and I'm sure that Dad is too. We'll probably turn in early. Maybe some other time."

Holly was about to protest when Bella interrupted ...

"Let the girl get some rest. There will be plenty of other barbecues."

Doris chuckled and said to Riley, "There's pretty much a party going on somewhere in the grounds every night. I hope we don't keep you awake. We get to be like a bunch of rowdy teenagers sometimes."

Holly said, "That's right. If your neighbors get too loud, just go over and tell them to quiet down. That's what we all do. Everybody's cool with it."

Riley thanked the women and excused herself to head back to her RV.

As she walked around the edge of the pool she thought about the conversation. She hadn't succeeded in learning anything useful. Maybe Crivaro had fared better in the bar.

The guy named Rodney stepped right in front of her.

"Hey," he said, "where are you off to all of a sudden? It seems like you just got here."

Riley remembered Holly saying ...

"He's just a horny middle-aged guy, on the make with every woman he meets."

And now the guy was actually leering at her. She was suddenly aware that she was pretty bare in her new bathing suit.

"I've got someplace to be," she said, trying to push past him.

But Rodney stepped right in front of her again.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I didn't even get a chance to learn your name. I guess you already know, I'm Rodney."

Riley wanted to say ...

"Pleased to meet you, Rodney. Now kindly get lost."

She kept trying to move around him, but he kept maneuvering himself in front of her like a basketball player trying to block a shot. Riley would have

found him funny if he weren't such a pain in the ass.

"Did you come here alone?" he asked. "You know, a good-looking girl like you has got to be careful. This campground seems safe, but ... hey, you heard what happened to poor Brett. My conscience is bugging me about her. I should've watched out for her, shown some interest in her. If I had, maybe such a terrible thing wouldn't have happened to her."

Riley was determined not to waste a word on this guy. She knew he'd take anything she said as encouragement. She just wished she could get past him somehow.

He said, "I get it, you want to go change out of that swimsuit. How about I come along with you?"

When she just glared at him, he shifted his approach a little. "Or we could meet up later, have drinks and dinner. What do you think?"

He reached an arm across Riley's back and plopped his hand on her shoulder.

At the touch of his flesh against hers, Riley reacted purely on reflex.

She grabbed his hand, twisted his arm around, and sent him flying into the pool.

Rodney splashed around frantically for a moment until he seemed to realize he was in the shallow end. Then he stood up and gawked at Riley.

Riley heard applause and laughter from the women still sitting by the pool.

Holly called out, "Hey, you got some moves in you, girl!"

Bella said, "Where'd you learn how to do that?"

Riley sighed. As flustered as she was, she still had the presence of mind not to tell the truth—that she'd learned it at the FBI Academy.

Instead she smiled stiffly, waved, and said, "I'll see you ladies later."

As she walked through the grounds toward the RV, she berated herself for what she'd just done.

Surely she could have gotten free of Rodney without making such a scene out of it.

Throwing him into the pool had attracted a lot of attention.

I'll blow my cover if I don't watch out, she thought.

She wondered if maybe she'd blown her cover already. Everyone there was surely talking about her by now, perhaps wondering who she really was. How hard would it be to guess that she was some sort of cop investigating Brett Parma's murder?

She was tired from a long day, which didn't help her mood. She guessed that she'd feel better after a shower and getting into some dry clothes.

And after that ...

She had something to take care of, something she'd been putting off all day long.

It wasn't a pleasant task, and she wasn't looking forward to it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The man sitting at a table close to the bar was doing his best to eavesdrop on a conversation between the bartender and one of his female customers.

It wasn't difficult. Her cheerful voice penetrated most of the chatter around her. He'd only listened for a few minutes when he felt a surge of satisfaction.

She'll do, he thought.

He took another sip from his drink.

In fact, she'll be perfect.

If all went well, she'd definitely be his next.

He'd left his luxurious motor home at a nearby RV park and had walked back along the highway toward this bar, hoping to scout for victims here. Just as he'd approached the place, he'd seen the woman pulling into the parking lot in a nice but very small Class B RV. When she'd gotten out of her parked vehicle, he'd discreetly followed her inside.

So far, he felt confident that she hadn't noticed him at all.

It was important that things stay that way. If she so much as really looked at him, let alone exchanged words with him, he wouldn't be able to kill her. Fortunately, the bar was pretty crowded, and he'd gone to some trouble to look as innocuous as possible.

He wasn't sporting his Rolex watch, and he wasn't wearing designer clothes. Even his sneakers were an ordinary brand. Of course, he planned to look more like his normal wealthy self when he went in for the kill, when he wanted her to notice him and trust him.

Although she was seated on a bar stool facing away from the man, he could see her face in the mirror that was behind all the bottles and glasses. She was obviously no athlete. Her body was slender but not wiry or muscular. Her nails were nicely shaped and polished.

Roughing it is not her style, he observed with approval.

But what pleased him most was her smooth, peaches-and-cream complexion, which revealed that she hadn't spent a lot of time outdoors. Looking at that face in the mirror now, he felt a thrill of anticipation at the thought of her pink features turning ashen from loss of blood ...

Don't get ahead of yourself.

Right now, he had to determine exactly how, when, and where he could approach her. He'd been listening closely to her conversation with the bartender, hoping to catch a clue.

So far, he'd found her chatter to be quite amusing.

A typical Sedona tourist, he thought.

It seemed that she'd come here after a nasty divorce looking for peace and enlightenment and perhaps a UFO sighting or two. In an effort to remake herself, she'd changed her first name from "Shelby" to "Bliss." From what Bliss was telling the bartender, she hadn't seen any UFOs yet, but her spiritual quest was coming along quite nicely.

During the last few days, Bliss had been visiting Sedona's "vortexes," power centers where the very atmosphere supposedly vibrated with spiritual energy. So far she'd hiked to all four of the vortexes on the New Age maps—Cathedral Rock, Bell Rock, Boynton Canyon, and Airport Mesa.

But there seemed to be one last place she wanted to visit.

She said to the bartender, "You've got to stop holding out on me, Bruce. You said if I went to all those places first, you'd tell me about a vortex most people don't even know about. Don't you think I'm ready by now?"

Bruce the bartender was a dark-skinned man who had convinced the woman that he was a Yavapai Indian. The eavesdropping man suspected that he was actually of Mediterranean descent.

Greek, maybe.

The man thought Bruce seemed to enjoy playing the role of spiritual guru.

A thoroughgoing charlatan, he was sure.

But of course, charlatanry was just part of doing business here in Sedona.

Drying a glass, Bruce said, "I think you've evolved beautifully, Bliss. Yeah, I think you're ready. But believe me, I don't share this information with just anybody. I hope you'll keep it to yourself."

Bliss said in a breathless voice, "I will, Bruce. I promise."

Bruce leaned toward her across the bar and said, "A short distance out on Transept Trail, there's a place where the path cuts over a small ridge, forming a sort of cross shape if you could see it from above. Find that spot and meditate there."

"What kind of vortex is it?" Bliss asked.

"An electrical vortex, bursting with yang energy. It's too powerful for some people. But I think you can handle it."

“When’s the best time to go?” Bliss asked.

“Well, that gets kind of tricky,” Bruce said. “You see, it’s one of the easier hiking trails, and there’s no charge for using it, so it can get pretty crowded during the day. Whole families with kids walk right over that spot without bothering to notice its power. It’s tough to get into a meditative state there with all those people stopping to stare at you, wondering what you’re doing.”

Bruce scratched his chin and added, “The best times to go are before and after all the regular tourist traffic—after sunset or right around dawn. It’s a beautiful spot on a clear, moonlit night. It’s also pretty safe, if you watch your step. Like I said, it’s an easy trail, not too challenging and not too far from the road.”

Bliss gasped with delight.

“There’s a full moon tonight! I’ll go!”

The eavesdropping man listened eagerly as the bartender gave her directions on how to get there. The trail was easily accessible and it sounded like he could park his RV right where the trail began.

Perfect!

He’d meet her right in the very spot she was looking for, playing the part of a fellow seeker. She’d be astonished to find anyone else there, surprised that he even knew about this vortex. The encounter would seem like destiny to her, as if she’d found her true soul mate.

And once I’ve gained her trust ...

The man felt a flush of pleasure at the thought of what he would do then. He remembered the sheer intoxication of killing his first victim. But after that murder he’d succumbed to worry and fear. Were the police ever going to come after him? It had taken him a full year to get up the courage to kill again.

Now, after his second murder a couple of days ago, he felt much more confident. Only the local cops appeared to be looking into the death of Brett Parma. Nobody had seemed to connect it with the murder in Colorado.

Of course, after this new killing, he knew the whole world would realize that a serial killer was on the prowl.

But that prospect didn’t worry or frighten him—not now, not anymore.

In fact, he felt excited at the thought of lesser minds trying to track him down.

He knew he could outwit them every step of the way.

He felt much the same exhilaration as Bliss seemed to feel right now—a readiness and resolve to take on an audacious new challenge.

It actually seemed as if this new victim was being offered him as some sort of gift.

He thought with a smile ...

Maybe it really is destiny.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Riley stared at her cell phone with dread. She had showered in the RV's tiny bathroom and changed into dry clothes. Now she was sitting at a picnic table in the gardens outside the camper, checking her voicemails.

There were several listed, all of them from Ryan, and all of them unopened.

Did she dare listen to them?

Were they angry, resentful, pleading, desperate ...

Or all of those things?

She decided there was no point in listening to them right now. After all, she'd have to deal directly with whatever her fiancé was feeling. She needed to talk to him before Agent Crivaro got back from the clubhouse.

That meant right now, while she still had some time to herself.

Go ahead, get it over with, she told herself.

Her fingers shook as she punched in Ryan's number.

His voice sounded frantic when he answered. "Riley! Where the hell are you? Are you back in Virginia?"

Riley stifled a sigh and said, "No, I'm still in Arizona."

"You told me you'd call when you found out when you'd be coming back. When is that going to be?"

"I don't know, Ryan."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

Riley took a long, slow breath to calm her nerves.

Then she said, "Agent Crivaro and I are working on a murder case. It's serious, Ryan. If we don't find the killer, he's going to strike again."

She heard Ryan gasp.

"You mean you're hunting another *killer*?"

Riley was startled by the question. She wondered ...

Why should he be surprised?

She said, "It's my new job, Ryan. You know that."

She was about to go into more detail, at least so he'd understand what she was doing and why it was so urgent.

She quickly decided it was better not to. For one thing, she wasn't sure she could trust him to keep those details to himself. She was starting to

understand just how fast and far a rumor could fly. It was bad enough that a joker like Rodney already had some idea of the condition of Brett Parma's corpse. If Ryan so much as hinted about the case around his law office, it might actually cause further trouble.

Sounding like he was trying to calm himself down, Ryan said, "I know this is your job, Riley. I've tried to accept that. I guess I thought maybe I *had* accepted it. But right now ..."

Ryan hesitated, then said ...

"Riley, I'm scared for you. How many times have you almost gotten killed, just during the time we've known each other? Is that going to happen again? Is your life going to be in danger again? Is that what life ... our life ... is going to be like from now on?"

Riley was taken aback now. Somehow, she hadn't been prepared for the possibility that Ryan might be genuinely worried about her. This morning he'd been mad about not having his car for a while. She'd been braced for more of the same.

How on earth could she answer his question honestly?

She said slowly and carefully, "I'm working with Agent Crivaro. He's my full-time partner now. He's the best agent there is. He really knows what he's doing. He'll keep me safe."

"Safe?" Ryan almost yelled. "Riley, how safe has Crivaro kept you in the cases you've worked on with him so far? I don't trust that man, Riley. I've told you before, I think he exploits your abilities. He doesn't care about you or your safety. And you sure as hell didn't tell me he was going to be your full-time partner."

Riley fought down the urge to say ...

"I didn't know it myself until this morning."

It certainly wouldn't make Ryan feel any better.

Instead she said, "Ryan, I'm really sorry you feel this way. But I'm here, and I've got to stay here until we solve this case. I couldn't come back home right now even if I wanted to."

She heard Ryan gasp again. "So you're telling me you *don't* want to come back home?"

Riley cringed at having let those words slip out.

"That's not what I meant, Ryan," she said. "I've got a job to do, that's all."

A silence fell between them. Riley felt her throat catch with emotion when

she finally said ...

"I guess we've got a lot to talk about when I get home."

"I guess," Ryan said in a broken voice.

"But we can't deal with it right now," Riley added.

"I know. Just try to be home in time for Christmas, OK?"

Another silence fell, and then Ryan said ...

"Stay safe. I love you."

He ended the call before Riley could say she loved him too.

She sat there staring at her cell phone. As much as she'd dreaded this call, it had been worse than she'd expected. She'd been bracing herself for more shallow selfishness from him. It would have made her mad, just like he was, but that would be better than what she was feeling now.

She remembered what he'd just said.

"Riley, I'm scared for you."

She knew he'd really meant it. He was thinking of her now, not himself. And that really came as a shock to her.

She also remembered that awful slip of her tongue ...

"I couldn't come back home right now even if I wanted to."

She knew Ryan had every right to be upset by that.

And now she couldn't help wondering—had she *meant* it in some way that she wasn't willing to admit to herself? Did part of her prefer to be out here chasing killers to spending time with the man she loved?

She hoped not. That would be truly terrible.

She looked around and noticed that dusk was starting to fall. Crivaro would surely be back from the clubhouse soon. She reminded herself of the role she was supposed to be playing and asked herself—what would a dutiful daughter be doing while waiting for her dad?

They hadn't had a lot to eat today, but they'd stocked up on groceries on their way to the campground. Riley went into the RV and started making sandwiches. She was just finishing up when she glanced out the window and glimpsed Crivaro approaching the RV.

She went to the door and called out to him in a cheery voice ...

"Sit down, Dad. Make yourself comfortable. I'm bringing out something to eat."

Crivaro didn't reply, but he sat down at the picnic table.

Riley came out carrying a tray with sandwiches and a beer for each of

them. As she sat on the other bench, she could see right away that he wasn't in a good mood.

She asked him in a quieter voice, "How did things go at the clubhouse?"

Crivaro shook his head and said, "I turned up nothing. The guys there were all shook up about Brett Parma, but none of them had gotten to know her personally. How did things go for you at the pool?"

"Pretty much the same," Riley said. "The rumor mill's grinding away, though. I heard some talk about a 'Hook Man'—"

Crivaro interrupted with a scoff.

"Oh, God, not the damned Hook Man. I can't tell you how many times people have tried to tell me about him when I've been on cases. It happens all over the country. He's like the bogeyman, people have been talking about him for years, since before I even became an agent. He doesn't exist, of course."

"I figured that," Riley said. "But the guy who told me also seemed to have a pretty good idea of the condition of Brett Parma's body when it was found."

Crivaro took a sip of beer and said, "Yeah, I talked to a couple of guys who'd heard that she'd been mutilated. Somebody at the ME's office obviously couldn't keep his mouth shut. I'll call Paco tomorrow, tell him he's got to find out whoever it was and fire his ass. We really don't need this kind of crap right now."

Crivaro bit into his sandwich.

Then he said, "I hear you threw a guy into the pool."

Riley couldn't help but giggle nervously.

She said, "I guess word really gets around this place."

Crivaro glared at her. "It's not funny, Riley. We just got here this afternoon, and you've already drawn attention to us. The guys at the bar were asking each other questions, wondering who you might be. I played dumb, although it was pretty easy to guess it was you who dunked the guy. What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Riley winced at the anger in his voice.

She said, "He made a pass at me. I just reacted."

Crivaro growled, "Well, the next time a guy makes a pass at you, don't react like a superhero. Just say no. Isn't that what young women normally do? Is that too much to ask?"

Riley swallowed hard. "No. I'm sorry."

“Don’t let it happen again.”

“I won’t.”

Crivaro sipped his beer again and stared at his sandwich. He didn’t seem very interested in eating it.

Riley suggested, “Maybe we should have dinner at one of the restaurants. We could try to talk to some more people.”

“Not tonight,” Crivaro said. “We ought to lay low until tomorrow. In the morning we can talk to the Wren’s Nest management, see if we can get more details about Brett Parma—like where she’d come from, maybe where she was headed. Anyway, it’s been a long day. I’m worn out, and I’m sure you are too.”

He pushed the paper plate with the sandwich away and got up from the table.

“I’m going to take a shower and turn in for the night,” he said.

He walked on into the RV without saying another word.

Riley sat alone at the picnic table in the deepening dusk, feeling slightly stunned. It seemed like she simply couldn’t anticipate Crivaro’s mood from moment to moment. Riley knew it was her own fault that he was mad at her right now, but ...

Why does he have to talk to me that way?

Sometimes she wondered whether Agent Crivaro cared about her feelings at all.

She remembered something Ryan had said to her over the phone a while ago.

“I think he exploits your abilities. He doesn’t care about you or your safety.”

Was it possible Ryan was right? At least a little bit?

Did Crivaro think of Riley as some sort of freakish prodigy he could shape into his own image, and nothing more than that?

She took a sip of her own beer and thought ...

No, Ryan’s wrong.

She could think of plenty of times when Crivaro had shown concern for her. If it weren’t for him, she probably wouldn’t be alive today. He really was like a father to her, even at times like now. It was just that sometimes he was sometimes so sharply critical ...

Almost like my real father.

She sighed deeply and stared at her sandwich.

She didn't feel much like eating either, and she felt very tired. She put the sandwiches and beers back on the tray and carried them inside the RV, where she could hear the shower running in the little bathroom. She wrapped up the sandwiches and put them in the refrigerator so she and Crivaro could eat them tomorrow.

After that she climbed up into her bed above the RV's cab and pulled the curtains shut, closing herself into a small but reasonably comfortable sleeping space. She stared out the little window into the growing darkness.

It was strange to think that the killer was out there somewhere, living his life, feeling unthreatened, planning his next murder.

"Don't get too comfortable," she murmured aloud to him. "We're coming after you."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Riley was stumbling along a dark trail. The dim light revealed tufts of rough brush encroaching on both sides of the narrow path. Huge figures with raised arms were silhouetted in the harsh moonlight.

Saguaro cactuses, she realized.

That meant she was somewhere in the desert.

She was worried because she'd never been out in the desert at night before, and she didn't know her way ...

Or even what I'm doing here.

With her next step, her foot struck something large and soft lying on the trail in front of her. She looked down and saw a woman's dead body with terrified wide-open eyes, her flesh so pale that it seemed almost phosphorescent.

Riley's heart sank with despair.

Crivaro and I are too late, she thought.

There's been another murder.

She reached for a pocket flashlight to get a better look at the body. The beam fastened on the victim's forearms, which were slashed wildly like some abstract painting, but no longer bleeding ...

Because there's no blood left in her.

Or was that true? A dark pool on the ground near the corpse seemed to be growing wider.

As Riley stooped down to look closely at the pool, she felt a stickiness under the soles of her shoes.

Her flashlight beam revealed that there was more blood on the ground and that she was standing in it and ...

I'm bleeding! I'm bleeding badly!

She shone the flashlight on her left wrist and saw that she'd been slashed there over and over again. Her blood was flowing freely from the wounds, pouring out into the growing blotch in the desert soil.

When she rose to her feet, she almost fainted dead away. The flashlight fell from her hands, and the world suddenly got much, much darker.

She staggered wildly and flailed her arms.

Her hands struck against a hard surface.

She was surrounded by pitch blackness now, and couldn't see anything at all. But as she turned about and reached in all directions, she discovered ...

I'm shut in.

She'd been suddenly locked in some small space, a tiny room.

I've got to get out, she thought.

I've got to get out before I bleed to death.

She started pounding on the walls, screaming for help ...

Riley eyes snapped open as her knuckles slammed against a hard surface. She quickly realized she was lying in her little sleeping compartment above the cab of the RV.

She was striking her fist against the ceiling directly above her.

She remembered her dream, and she remembered screaming.

Did I scream out loud?

If so, had Crivaro heard her? Had she woken him up? It was an embarrassing possibility. But Riley didn't hear him grumbling or moving about.

She looked at her watch and saw that she'd slept later than she'd expected. She pulled the curtain open and climbed down from her perch.

A sheet of paper was on the camper's table.

It was a note that began ...

Riley—

I headed out early to start checking around the grounds. I'll talk to the management as soon as the office opens, see if I can get any more information out of them. Meanwhile, here's some stuff I want you to do ...

The to-do list only had a couple of items on it. First, Crivaro wanted Riley to reread the small stack of faxed reports they'd gotten from Chief Webster yesterday to see if anything jumped out at her that they hadn't noticed yesterday. That seemed like an innocuous enough a task.

The second item, though, filled Riley with dread.

Crivaro wanted her to call Brett Parma's mother, who lived in North Platte, Nebraska.

But why? Riley wondered.

She knew the Tunsboro police had already gotten in touch with the

woman. What could Riley ask her that they hadn't asked her already? Now that she and Crivaro knew that Brett Parma had been murdered by the same killer who had struck a year ago in Colorado, did her partner really think the mother would have any firsthand knowledge of who he might be?

It seemed extremely unlikely.

Riley took another look at her watch. She knew it was two hours later in Nebraska than here in Arizona, but even so it seemed just a little early to call the murder victim's mother.

She went into the little bathroom and got into fresh clothes, shorts, and a top she thought suitable for the RV life.

Crivaro had already made a pot of hot coffee. Riley poured herself a bowl of cereal and sat at the table.

As she began to eat, Riley worried about Crivaro. Why had he gotten up and left without waking her to come along with him? Was he still pissed off with her on account of her dunking that guy in the pool yesterday?

Had he decided that making her his partner had been a mistake all along?

Was she going to wind up on the next available flight back to Virginia?

She wished she had some idea.

As she ate, she thumbed through the police report again. She didn't see anything she hadn't noticed yesterday. Aside from how Webster's team had bungled the crime scene, it seemed to Riley that they had done a pretty good job of investigating what had initially seemed to be a one-off murder case.

Chief Webster himself had interviewed the owner of the Wren's Nest Campground, who had supplied him with some of the information that Riley was looking at right now. This included registrations of campers who had come and gone during recent days. Riley said their names aloud as she read them, hoping she'd maybe remember them if they turned up again. But for the time being, there was no reason to suspect any of them in particular.

The Tunsboro cops had also tracked down Brett Parma's movements during the days before she'd come to the Wren's Nest Campground. She'd left North Platte about a week and a half ago and had camped out at the Petrified Forest and the Mogollon Rim for a few days each before arriving here. No one knew where she might have been headed after she'd checked out of the Wren's Nest Campground.

The cops had also run a search to see if any campers who'd been at the Wren's Nest during Brett Parma's stay had also been at either of the other

two campgrounds she'd visited earlier. They hadn't found any matches.

Riley sighed as she turned the last page of the material and finished her cup of coffee. She realized she mustn't put off calling Brett Parma's mother any longer. It wouldn't do to have Crivaro come back and find that she hadn't done it yet.

She took out her cell phone and punched in the number for Dale Parma in North Platte.

When the woman answered the phone, Riley said, "Mrs. Parma, I'm sorry to trouble you, but this is Agent Riley Sweeney with the FBI and—"

Interrupting, Dale Parma said, "Oh! I hadn't known the FBI was involved. I thought it was just the local police down there. I can't tell you how hard this has been for me. Please tell me you've got some news."

Riley gulped hard.

She supposed that she *did* have some news—and that was that Dale Parma's daughter had been murdered by a serial killer. But should Riley tell her that? In his note, Crivaro hadn't given her any instructions one way or the other.

Riley quickly decided it might be best to be evasive.

"Our investigation is underway, Mrs. Parma. I'm afraid I don't have anything new to tell you."

She heard Mrs. Parma groan with despair.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the woman said. "So why are you calling me?"

Riley gulped and thought ...

That's a good question.

She said, "I just wanted to ask you ... a few things."

Mrs. Parma gasped slightly.

"Good Lord, what could you possibly want me to tell you? I've answered so many questions already. I'm exhausted from trying to think of answers."

Riley wanted to admit that this call had been a mistake, to apologize and say goodbye ...

But Crivaro told me to talk to her.

Riley summoned up her courage and said, "Mrs. Parma, I know you've already been asked lots of questions, so please forgive me. The FBI just got started on this case, and we need to be thorough and get a fresh start. Can you think of anyone who might have wished your daughter harm?"

"Absolutely not," Mrs. Parma said. "And yes, I *did* answer that question

already.”

Riley struggled to think of anything more to ask. Nothing that came to mind seemed the least bit relevant, now that they knew that Brett Parma had been murdered by a serial killer, and quite possibly a stranger. What could this woman possibly know that would be the least bit helpful?

Even so, Riley asked ...

“Was Brett engaged, or did she have a relationship, a boyfriend, anything like that?”

“I don’t think so,” Mrs. Parma said with a sigh. “You’d think I’d know, living in the same town with my only daughter. But she just ... drifted away from me during the last few years. Emotionally, I mean.”

The woman was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, “My husband, her father, died three years ago, and I guess she was always a little closer to him than she was to me, and after he was gone I’d go for months at a time without hearing from her at all.”

Riley listened closely as the woman kept talking. Mrs. Parma said she thought that Brett had been restless and lonely, and she sometimes said she hated her receptionist job at the Hanson Family Medical Group ...

Riley listened as Mrs. Parma rattled on about how Brett had been so different as a little girl, so cheerful and outgoing, but how she’d changed during her teen years, becoming sullen and sad, and how things were never the same after that.

Finally the woman blurted out a question ...

“Agent Sweeney—could you tell me *why*?”

Riley winced sharply and wondered ...

What on earth can I possibly say?

Slowly and carefully, Riley began ...

“Mrs. Parma, a killer’s mind can be a terrible mystery, even to investigators like—”

Mrs. Parma interrupted, “No, I don’t mean that. I mean, can you tell me *why* she went away like that? She went on this trip without even telling me. I’m not sure she told anybody. If she had, somebody could have told her it was dangerous for a young woman to go traveling alone, especially camping. It seems like such a crazy thing to do. Do you know *why* she did it?”

Riley swallowed hard at a sudden awful realization.

Yes, I know why she did it.

After listening to the woman talk, Riley felt sure the victim's mother also knew the truth deep in her gut.

She was sick of North Platte.

She was sick of her life there.

Brett Parma had been desperate to get away from everything she'd ever known—including her own mother.

But Riley didn't dare say all that aloud.

What would be the point in it?

Instead she said, "I'm sorry, I don't know."

Riley thought she heard the woman choke back a sob.

"Of course you don't," she said. "I don't know why I asked. I'm being foolish."

Riley clumsily told Mrs. Parma that she was sorry for her loss, then thanked her for her time and ended the call.

She sat at the kitchen table staring at the phone.

She remembered Mrs. Parma saying ...

"I'm being foolish."

Now that the call was over, Riley herself felt foolish. It took a few moments for her to realize why. The call had been absolutely pointless, and Riley should never have made it. What was worse, Agent Crivaro surely *knew* it would be pointless, and yet he'd told Riley to do it anyway.

But why?

An unpleasant possibility dawned on her.

Maybe he just wanted me to do something pointless and painful.

Maybe he was trying to drive her away by giving her unpleasant and useless tasks. If so, Riley wished he'd just tell her to go away and get it done with. It seemed cruel of him to drag out the inevitable end of their partnership.

At that moment, the motor home door slammed open.

Crivaro came charging in, red-faced and panting.

He almost yelled, "Come out here and give me a hand. We've got to disconnect all the utilities. We're getting out of here right now!"

"Why?" Riley asked.

"There's been another murder," Crivaro said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Riley gripped the dashboard fearfully as the RV tires squealed and a truck behind them honked furiously. Agent Crivaro had veered their motor home sharply into the left lane, cutting off an eighteen-wheeler. As the truck bore down on them, Crivaro swerved back to the right without even taking the trouble to signal.

More angry honking ensued from a driver in that lane.

“Don’t forget you’re driving a small house,” Riley told him nervously.

“What I need is a light and a siren,” Jake snapped.

The idea of a camper barreling along with turret light flashing and siren wailing actually made Riley laugh.

“I know, I know,” Crivaro growled. “Don’t worry, this damned tub won’t go fast enough to get us killed, but at least most traffic will stay out of our way.”

“Some of them are bigger than we are,” Riley commented, as the eighteen-wheeler breezed past them on a downhill slope.

Crivaro didn’t reply.

The traffic on the interstate taking them north was moderately heavy but moving along at a steady clip. But Crivaro seemed determined to pass every vehicle he fell behind. Whenever he swung over into the left lane, he caused the ire of faster drivers. In his frustration, he was switching lanes recklessly, and Riley didn’t think he was making much better time than he would by just staying in the right lane.

Pounding his fist on the steering wheel, Crivaro complained, “Why is everybody being such a pain in the ass? What’s the matter with these drivers?”

Riley wanted to say ...

“They value their own lives.”

But Agent Crivaro was in a bad enough mood already. They’d been in such a hurry to get on the road that he hadn’t had time to rent or borrow a regular car. Back at the campground when they’d been frantically disconnecting the utilities, he’d told her that a new body had been found this morning on a hiking trail at Sedona. The police chief there had heard that the FBI was in Arizona investigating a serial killer, so he’d called the FBI’s

district office right away, and they in turn had called Crivaro.

And now here they were, driving madly toward Sedona.

Riley could only hope they'd get there in one piece.

The traffic soon thinned out a little, and Crivaro's lane changes became less frequent and less crazed. No longer so alarmed by his driving, Riley found herself wondering again about another question—whether he might be planning to dump her as a partner. What else was she to think, after he'd given her such meaningless tasks to do this morning?

She finally decided ...

Maybe it's time to clear the air.

She took a deep breath and said ...

"Agent Crivaro, I don't understand why you wanted me to make that phone call to Brett's mother."

"You don't?" Crivaro replied.

"No. There was nothing to learn from her. And it was a really tough call to make—emotionally, I mean. Both she and I felt lousy by the end of it."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Crivaro said.

Riley felt sure she heard a note of sarcasm in his voice.

She swallowed hard and said ...

"I can't help wondering ..."

But she stopped without finishing her thought.

"Wondering what?" Crivaro said, glancing at her. "Wondering if it was maybe some kind of punishment for how you'd screwed up yesterday?"

Riley was startled.

She said, "Yeah, that's exactly what I was wondering. That, and whether you're through with me, and you're just trying to get me to quit and go home. If that's what you've got in mind, I wish you'd just fire me and get it over with. Because until you do, I'm just going to hang around and be a pain in the ass."

Crivaro shook his head and said, "So you didn't find out anything new from the mother."

"No. And I think you knew perfectly well that I wouldn't."

Crivaro chuckled a little and said, "Are you *sure* you didn't find out anything?"

"What was there to find out?" Riley asked.

"That's what I'm asking *you*," Crivaro said. "Are you absolutely sure you

ended that call without knowing anything you didn't know before?"

Riley replayed some of the painful conversation in her mind.

She remembered Mrs. Parma asking Riley about her daughter.

"Can you tell me why she went away like that?"

It had struck Riley as such a strange, sad, and desperate question. And yet somehow she felt as though she had known the answer.

She gathered her thoughts and said to Crivaro ...

"I guess I learned ... that Brett Parma was unhappy with her life. She was very nearly estranged from her mother, and she was bored with North Platte. She'd lived there all her life, but she felt like a stranger. She felt like she was all alone, even with people she'd always known. She didn't feel close to anybody anymore. She wondered if she ever would again."

Crivaro chuckled again and said, "Well, *that* sounds like something. I find it pretty interesting."

"Why?" Riley said. "Brett was murdered by a serial killer, someone who murdered his first victim in Colorado. Brett barely knew him, if she knew him at all. Her life back in North Platte and everybody she knew and grew up with there—all that stuff is pretty irrelevant. It's got nothing to do with how she died."

Crivaro shrugged and said, "If you say so."

"Well, don't you think so too?" Riley asked.

"How should I know?" Crivaro said. "You're the one who can figure it out—or can't."

Riley stared at him with her mouth hanging open. The way he was speaking in riddles was frustrating her to no end. She wondered—had he figured out something she ought to have figured out herself by now?

Crivaro said in a stern voice, "Just remember—a murder case is like a living organism. It's all of a piece, and everything about it is connected to everything else. It's up to you to find out how. Sometimes even what seem to be blind alleys can lead you somewhere important. Then again, sometimes they don't. Either way, you've got to follow wherever they lead you."

Riley sat staring out the window, trying to make sense of what he was telling her. Whatever it was, maybe it would dawn on her later on. Meanwhile, she felt some relief that he was going to the trouble of teasing her along this way. He was acting like a mentor again ...

Not like someone who wants to get rid of me.

She wondered how long it would last.

*

After a couple of hours of driving, Riley and Crivaro pulled off the freeway. Following the directions Crivaro had gotten from the Phoenix office, they wound their way up a smaller road. Riley knew they'd arrived at their destination when they came to a roadblock with a cluster of vehicles parked just beyond it.

A small camper was also parked there—the victim's camper, Riley guessed. It was a good bit smaller than the one Riley and Crivaro had rented, but it looked shiny and new.

Riley and Crivaro got out of their car, walked past the roadblock, and ducked under a line of yellow police tape. That attracted the attention of a uniformed cop who emerged from between the parked vehicles.

He yelled at them, "Hey, can't you see the tape? No tourists allowed through here right now!"

Crivaro pulled out his badge and introduced himself, and so did Riley.

The cop looked skeptical. He reached for Jake's badge and said, "Lemme see that."

Crivaro yanked the badge away from him, looking incredulous that anyone would doubt its authenticity.

Riley smiled a little.

Crivaro seemed to have forgotten that they were both still dressed like vacationers, in T-shirts, shorts, and sandals.

I guess our cover's pretty convincing after all, she thought.

The cop who'd stopped them didn't move aside, but another uniformed officer appeared behind him and yelled, "Hey, Arlo, what's the matter with you? If they say they're FBI, they're really FBI. The chief is expecting them."

Still looking annoyed, Arlo finally stepped out of their way. The friendlier cop led Riley and Crivaro past the police cars and the medical examiner's van. Riley noticed a terrified-looking man and woman sitting in the back of one of the police cars. Riley guessed they were the couple who'd found the body.

She and Crivaro followed the cop past a sign that read TRANSEPT

TRAIL. As they walked onto the trail, the cop pointed out a few boot prints that went both ways along the trail—the killer’s own footprints, Riley assumed.

“We got lucky,” the cop said. “Rained a little last night. Maybe we can get something from these.”

As the three of them stepped carefully around the prints, Riley looked at the prints closely. She figured the man must have left these when he’d brought the body out here after the rain. Just like at Phoenix, he’d committed the actual murder elsewhere. Any other footprints seem to have been washed away.

The boot prints looked perfectly ordinary, so Riley didn’t think they’d get much useful information from them. She guessed the man to be of average height. Although the trail wasn’t the least bit challenging, he must have been fairly strong to carry the body along here without stumbling.

The cop led them a short way along the trail and up a slight rise. On the flat area at the top, several people were standing under a tarp that had been set up to protect the crime scene.

A uniformed man wearing an outback hat stepped forward to meet them, and Riley and Crivaro produced their badges again.

The man nodded and introduced himself as Trevor Wilson, Sedona’s chief of police. He introduced Riley and Crivaro to Jay Faulkner, the county medical examiner.

Chief Wilson said, “I take it we’re dealing with a serial killer.”

“Yeah, that’s why we’re here,” Crivaro replied.

Wilson shook his head and said, “Not to sound callous, but that’s the last thing we need in a tourist town like this. I hope we can put a stop to it soon.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Crivaro said. “What do you know so far?”

“She was Shelby Eden from Phoenix,” Wilson told him. “She’d been staying at the Spring View Campground right here in Sedona. Not much more than that. Cards in her wallet identified her with a thing called Eden Financial Services in Phoenix. When we called there, we were told she was no longer connected with that company. Seems her ex-husband is in charge. We haven’t reached him yet.”

As Crivaro and Wilson discussed the possibility of the ex-husband being implicated, Riley gazed down at the body. The victim lay sprawled carelessly, untouched by scavengers this time, and for a moment Riley found

it hard to believe she was really dead. It looked more as though an actor had been hired to lie here and play the part of a corpse—an actor who had put on some kind of pale body paint that made her skin look almost like white porcelain. Riley wondered ...

Was Shelby Eden unhappy with her life? Was she as eager to get away as Brett Parma had been? Is that what tied the two victims together?

It didn't feel right somehow. There must be something else.

An eerie feeling came over Riley as she looked away from the porcelain body and up at their surroundings. The whole setup seemed unreal. In the distance impressive buttes and reddish sandstone boulders stood out against an intense blue sky. In the area where the woman lay dead the trail widened out to form a sort of stone platform, almost like a big altar with the body at its center.

Remembering the name of the trail, Riley asked Wilson ...

"Why is this called Transept Trail?"

Wilson pointed and explained ...

"It's because of the way the path here intersects with the ridge to form a kind of cross shape, like the transept of a church."

Looking intrigued, Crivaro asked, "Is there anything special or significant about this spot?"

Wilson shrugged and said, "Not that I know of. But I wouldn't take my word for it. New Agers are always finding supposed power spots and mini-vortexes and such around Sedona, places where they go to meditate—places with shamanic qualities, they'll try to tell you. For all I know, this might be one of those spots. But if that's what it is, not many people know about it, or I'd have heard of it."

Riley got an eerie tingling feeling as she realized ...

Yes, this is one of those spots.

And suddenly she felt a strong sense of the killer's presence.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A powerful sense of connection with the killer swept over Riley, so strong it made her take a few steps back. She wondered if this could really be some kind of “power spot.”

Then she reminded herself sternly...

There’s nothing mystical about this.

It was like Crivaro had told her yesterday.

“This isn’t magic, and it isn’t mind-reading or anything psychic.”

What she was good at was telling herself a story—a story that had a good chance of bearing a strong resemblance to what had really happened.

That’s what I’ve got to do now, she thought.

Tell a story.

She heard Crivaro chattering with the chief and the ME. She was glad nobody seemed to be paying much attention to her right now. She could slip into a reverie without anybody noticing.

She took a deep breath and pictured what this place must have looked like last night, possibly not long after sunset.

It wouldn’t have been completely dark.

Back at the Wren’s Nest Campground last night, she’d noticed a bright full moon in the sky. But the cop had just said it had rained here some, which meant there must have been clouds as well.

Riley retraced her steps back down the trail a bit, then started walking toward the altar-like spot again, taking in the view just as the killer must have done. She felt sure that he’d known he’d find the woman here. Somehow, he’d been stalking her and knew she was going to be taking this hike alone ...

He feels a deep satisfaction as he spots her, sitting there meditating silently in the moonlight. All he has to do now was take care not to alarm her—and to thoroughly win her trust.

He knows it will be easy to do.

He walks beside her and says in a gentle voice ...

“Do you mind if I join you?”

The woman opens her eyes and looks at him—startled at first, but then

pleased.

She says, "I didn't expect anybody else to be here."

He chuckles a little and says, "Neither did I. Strange, isn't it?"

She looks at him silently for a moment with an expression of keen interest.

She shyly asks, "Are you ... another seeker?"

He nods and flashes his most charming smile.

"Of course," he says. "Why else would I be here?"

Her eyes are glittering in the moonlight. He senses that he is working a rarer spell on her than he'd expected. She obviously knows that their meeting here can't be coincidence. Of course she has no idea of what had really brought him here. Instead, she seems to think that more spiritual forces are involved, that they might even be ...

Soul mates.

The idea amuses him.

Yes, everything is going perfectly.

She pats the ground next to her and says ...

"Please, do sit down, let's meditate together."

He sits down next to her cross-legged and closes his eyes. After a few moments, he opens his eyes again and looks at her sitting there.

Her eyes are still closed and she has a rapt and tranquil expression on her face.

He, too, feels joyfully calm, although for very different reasons.

He is imagining her fear and agony as the blood pours out of her wrists.

He is imagining how exquisitely pale she'll look when she is dead.

Just then he feels a few sprinkles of water.

It's starting to rain, he realizes.

The woman's eyes snap open.

"Oh!" she says with a gasp. "I guess we'd better get out of the rain!"

They both laugh as they jump to their feet and hurry back along the path the way they'd come. He puts his arm around her as they go—which doesn't keep off the rain, of course, but she seems to enjoy the gesture. She trusts him completely.

Yes, he knows that's the secret of his success ...

Trust.

Riley yanked herself out of her reverie as that word echoed through her

head ...

Trust.

Something was starting to come together in her mind now. She remembered what Crivaro had said when he'd nagged her about her phone call to Brett Parma's mother.

"Are you sure you didn't find out anything?"

Indeed, she had found out something, although it hadn't occurred to her that it was important at the time. She'd found out that Brett was unhappy and bored and felt alienated from people she'd known since she was a child. She was going through a bitter time in her life, and she probably wasn't inclined to trust people.

And yet ...

She'd apparently trusted the killer enough for him to abduct her and kill her, perhaps without a lot of effort.

And so had the woman who was lying here right now.

She thought about saying so to Crivaro, but he was still busy talking with the Sedona police chief and the county ME. Instead, Riley walked over to the body and crouched down for a better look at it.

Again, she was struck by how different this body looked from the one she'd seen in the morgue back in Stover. Brett Parma's body had been so horribly mangled after her death that Riley had felt distracted from the wounds that had actually killed her.

But that wasn't the case with this woman. The cause of death was easy to see. Her clothes were stained with the blood that had spurted from her forearms, which bore the same wild wounds as the other two victims. The ground underneath her was startlingly pristine, showing no sign that she'd done any serious bleeding here.

Now Riley found herself staring at the woman's hands. The nails were torn and the knuckles cut and bruised. She knew that the other corpses had similar wounds, but Riley hadn't given them much thought before.

But now ...

Riley shuddered as she flashed back to last night's nightmare. She remembered her horror when she realized she was bleeding from her own wrists. Then she'd found herself in a dark, tight space, clawing away at four walls ...

She gasped aloud as she realized ...

That's exactly what happened to this victim.

She walked over to Crivaro and interrupted his conversation by touching him on the arm.

“Agent Crivaro, I think I know something about how the victim died.”

Crivaro turned and looked at her with interest.

She said, “She bled to death in a small room—a really, really small room. An extremely tight space.”

Crivaro squinted at her curiously. For a moment, Riley worried that he considered this to be a trivial detail.

Then Crivaro said to the medical examiner, “Do you know Paco Arau, the ME down in Stover?”

Faulkner nodded and said, “Yeah, Paco and I are good pals.”

Crivaro scratched his chin and said, “Well, Paco will be examining whatever he finds under Brett Parma’s fingernails—hairs, fibers, any other kind of materials. I want you to do the same with this corpse and then get in touch with Paco and compare notes. And also compare whatever the two of you find with the information we’ve got about the victim in Colorado. If you need any help, let me know, and I’ll get some FBI forensics experts to work with you.”

“I’ll do that,” Faulkner said, then glanced at the corpse and added, “If it’s OK with you, I’d like my team to take the body to the morgue now. It’s been outdoors long enough.”

“Go ahead and do that,” Crivaro said.

Crivaro fell silent for a moment. Riley could tell he was mulling over an idea.

Then he said to Riley and the police chief, “Come on, let’s go back to the road.”

The three of them walked back to where the vehicles were parked. Riley noticed the distraught-looking couple was still sitting in the police car. Crivaro pointed down to some tire tracks and said to Chief Wilson ...

“I take it you found these tracks when you got here.”

Wilson nodded. “Yeah, I’ve been careful to keep them from being disturbed. My bet is they’re from the perpetrator’s vehicle. It looks like it pulled out of here after the rain stopped. I don’t think you’ll get a lot of information from these tracks, though. The treads are pretty pristine, no distinguishing marks or flaws that I can see.”

Crivaro looked at Riley and said, "What kind of vehicle do you think made these tracks?"

Riley knew he was quizzing her again.

She thought for a moment, then said, "It might have been an RV."

"What kind of RV?" Crivaro asked.

Riley remembered their visit to the RV rental place.

She said, "With tires like these, it was as big as a bus. That means it would have been a Class A RV."

Crivaro nodded silently, waiting for her to say something else.

But what? Riley wondered.

Then it occurred to her.

"A bathroom in a big RV would be just the size of the kind of small room I'm talking about."

Crivaro nodded again and said, "That's what I'm thinking too. The blood might have gone down a shower drain and collected with his wastewater. He could have disposed of the blood along with everything else."

Riley felt a tingle of excitement.

She said, "So now we know—the killer's in a Class A RV, one of the biggest motor homes."

"It's a pretty good guess, anyway," Crivaro said.

Riley said, "That means we've got to go to the campground she'd been staying at while she was here in Sedona, see what we can find out there."

Crivaro groaned and said, "Does that mean going undercover again?"

Riley smiled. "I don't see any way around it. Anyway, we're already dressed for it, and we've got the right sort of vehicle."

Crivaro shook his head. "I don't know, Riley. Last night didn't go so well."

Riley felt a renewed pang of guilt about dunking that man in the pool.

She said, "I won't screw up again, I promise. We can do this. *I* can do this."

"If you say so," Crivaro said. "I found it easier pretending to be a hit man. Anyway, we've got a couple more things to do before we get going."

Riley and Crivaro went over to the victim's RV and took a look inside. The camper was actually elegant inside, probably quite expensive for its size. Everything was perfectly neat and immaculate, with no sign of a struggle. That seemed consistent with Riley's intuition that the killer abducted his

victims by getting them to trust him, not by force. He probably just lured them into his own motor home.

Nodding toward the couple in the police car, Crivaro asked Chief Wilson

...

“What about those two?”

Wilson shrugged a little and said ...

“They’ve already told us pretty much everything they could, I guess. Still, we’ll take them to the station and get a formal statement. Their names are Simon and Paula Haas. They’re tourists from L.A.”

Crivaro said to Riley, “Go over there and touch base with them. Find out what they’ve got to say. I’ve got a few more things to go over with the chief before you and I head on to the campground.”

Riley hesitated. Again, she got the feeling that Crivaro was just trying to get her out of the way, if only briefly. Surely the couple wouldn’t be able to tell her anything they hadn’t already told the police.

Riley quickly told herself ...

Don’t be so hypersensitive.

Crivaro was just making certain they didn’t overlook any possible details.

Riley walked over to the police car and looked at the couple sitting in the back seat. They appeared to be almost catatonic with shock, and they were holding hands as if for dear life.

Riley crouched by the open door and produced her badge. She gently introduced herself, and said, “I’m terribly sorry that you’re going through all this. Could I ask you just a couple of questions?”

Paula Haas stared off into space as if she hadn’t heard what Riley had said. Simon looked up and nodded.

Riley asked, “Could you tell me just how you found the victim?”

Simon Haas wrinkled his brow, as if he were trying to remember something that had happened a long time ago.

Finally, he said, “Paula and I came here just before dawn. We wanted to get on the trail before a lot of people got here. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful morning.”

He nodded toward a nearby car and said, “We parked right over there, put on our backpacks, and started out onto the trail. We only got as far as the spot that people call the Transept ...”

He gulped down a sob of horror and said ...

“And there she was. Just lying there.”

Riley shuddered at those words, as if she herself were seeing the corpse again—only this time with no warning, with no expectation that there could possibly be anything evil afoot. It was all too easy to imagine how the couple had felt. On top of the sheer horror of seeing the body, they must surely have been terrified for their own lives, at least for a few moments.

Riley took a slow breath and asked ...

“Did you notice anybody else in the area? Any vehicles nearby? A large RV, for example?”

Simon Haas shook his head and said, “No. Like I said, we got here really early. I don’t think there was anybody at all near here.”

Finally Paula Haas looked at Riley. “Could you tell us ... why?”

Riley felt an eerie sense of déjà vu as she remembered Brett Parma’s mother saying the same thing to her yesterday ...

“Why?”

Riley opened her mouth, but no words came out. She had no idea what to say—or even exactly what Paula was trying to ask her.

Simon put his arm around his wife and said ...

“I guess what Paula wants to know is ... how could something so awful happen in a beautiful place like this? We came here ... hoping to experience something wonderful. We’d heard that Transept Trail was a really special place that few other people knew about. So how could ...?”

His voice trailed away, but he kept gazing at Riley imploringly.

Riley managed to gasp out the words ...

“I’m so sorry that you’ve had to go through this. Thank you for your help.”

As she got unsteadily to her feet and started to walk away, she saw Crivaro coming toward her.

“We’re through here,” he said to Riley. “Let’s hit the road again.”

As Riley followed him to the RV, she was overcome by a deep sense of pity—even deeper, in a way, than she’d felt for Mrs. Parma.

Simon’s words echoed through her head.

“We came here ... hoping to experience something wonderful.”

Riley realized that these two people had arrived in Sedona full of New Age ideas, full of naïve faith that the universe itself was a loving, benevolent place.

But suddenly they knew what Riley had faced during her whole lifetime

...

The universe isn't such a friendly place at all.

And she knew that the evil she was tracking now wasn't going to just disappear.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Crivaro drove the RV away from the crime scene, Riley tried to shake off a lingering discomfort over her conversation with Simon and Paula Haas. She simply hadn't known how to respond to the couple's shock at encountering such evil in what they had considered a holy place.

Her mood wasn't helped by the vehicle she saw coming from the opposite direction.

A TV news truck hurtled past them, headed toward the murder scene.

Crivaro grumbled, "Damn reporters. They found out pretty fast about this one. I guess they must monitor the police radio. Pretty soon the crime scene will be crawling with them."

Riley replied, "I'm glad they didn't get there before we did."

As new as she was to investigative work, she'd had her own troubles dealing with the media. She knew what a nuisance they could be.

Then Crivaro asked her, "Did you find out anything new from the couple?"

Riley hesitated. She wished she could tell him how shaken she felt after that brief interview. But ...

He wouldn't understand.

"No," she said. "Nothing they didn't already tell the cops, I'm sure."

Crivaro grunted and said, "I figured that. Still, we can't leave any stone unturned."

He drove on for a few moments, then added, "Chief Wilson and his team seem to know what they're doing. Better than the guys back in Tunsboro, anyway. They've handled that crime scene really well. And Webster's calling in the Arizona Highway Patrol to set up a circle of roadblocks around the whole area. They'll check out RVs, especially the bigger ones. Maybe that will keep the killer from getting out of the area."

Riley looked at Crivaro with surprise.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" she asked.

Crivaro shrugged and said, "Well, it's one of the basics. What I'd do if I were Webster, I guess."

Then with a hint of sarcasm in his voice, he added, "Have you got a better idea?"

Riley thought it over for a moment, then answered slowly ...

“I’m just worried that he’s long gone from the area. What if he is, and he hears that there have been roadblocks all around Sedona checking on big RVs? Won’t that put him on the alert, wherever he winds up? He’ll know what kind of RV we’re looking for, and that will make it easier for him to stay hidden. Maybe even get rid of the motor home.”

Crivaro scoffed. “Yeah, that possibility occurred to me. But kid, it’s time you learned that every strategy has its risks. What if he’s still in the area, and we miss our chance to nab him before he gets very far? He’s committed two murders just a couple of days apart. He didn’t travel very far between the two. We know he’s got a taste for blood, and he’s likely to kill again soon, if he hasn’t already. Roadblocks aren’t a bad idea, believe me.”

Riley still had her doubts, but now was no time to get into an argument. They were just then pulling into the entrance to the Spring View Campground, where Shelby Eden had been staying before she’d been killed.

Crivaro parked their vehicle in front of the main office.

“I’ll go on in,” he said, “and tell the management what we’re doing here, see if they can tell me anything useful.”

As he climbed out of the cab he added with a growl ...

“Then we can set up the camper and do our undercover bit. I’ll sure be glad when we stop having to do this.”

As he headed on into the office, Riley’s eyes drifted over to the campground itself. It was surprisingly lush with trees and vegetation. It looked as though somebody had created a sort of oasis in the middle of the rocky desert.

Riley climbed down out of the vehicle and wandered onto the grounds. To her surprise, the whole place looked like some kind of fantasy Hollywood movie set.

She saw Asian varieties of pine, willow, and cherry trees so carefully trimmed they hardly looked real. Flowering plants were everywhere—magnolias, azaleas, camellias, and the like. White boulders were precisely placed amid patches of gravel or moss.

She passed a statue of a woman wearing an acorn-shaped crown and flowing clothes—some sort of Buddhist figure, Riley guessed. Even the camping lots were so meticulously arranged that the expensive RVs seemed to blend naturally into their surroundings.

Or maybe “naturally” isn’t the right word.

The whole place struck Riley as positively weird, plunked into the Arizona desert like this. She couldn’t imagine how expensive it must have been to maintain in this dry climate.

Riley crossed a rainbow-shaped wooden bridge over a crystal clear stream filled with large, shiny fish. The stream was fed by a small artificial waterfall. At the far end of the bridge was a little shopping area, with storefronts advertising astrology and tarot readings and Tai Chi classes and such. New Age music droned quietly over speakers.

She spotted three women sitting at a table outside a little outdoor tea shop, sipping from delicate cups, talking and laughing. Riley thought this might be good place to start gathering information.

As she strolled across the white gravel patio toward the women, they looked up at her with curious expressions. She realized that all three of them were dressed in flowing, loose-fitting outfits, some probably made from silk.

Oh, no, she thought.

It was hardly any wonder she’d attracted their attention—and not in a good way. She wasn’t going to fit in at all, wearing the inexpensive shorts, T-shirt, and sandals she’d bought yesterday. And of course, Agent Crivaro was really going to look sorely out of place here.

For a second, Riley wondered if she should hurry back out to the campground office and warn Crivaro away, tell him that going undercover here wasn’t going to work out at all.

But one of the women patted an empty chair and asked her with a stiff smile ...

“Would you like to sit down?”

It didn’t sound like a very sincere invitation, just something the woman was likely saying to be polite. But Riley figured it would be impolite on her part to refuse, and this was, after all, the kind of opportunity she was looking for.

She pulled up another bamboo chair and sat down at the table with the group.

When one of the women asked who she was, Riley wished she’d prepared a different story. Instead, she said exactly what she had at the campground yesterday—that she was traveling with her dad, a recently retired insurance man and a widower.

Then she added ...

“Dad insisted on camping in this part of Arizona. I was worried. I wasn’t sure it was a good idea.”

The women’s eyes widened.

“Why on earth not?” one of them asked.

Riley wondered for a moment whether she should mention both murders or just one. Had these women heard about last night’s victim?

Probably not, she thought.

After all, the media had just been arriving at the scene when she and Crivaro left. These women seemed rather sequestered from the outside world and probably hadn’t heard the news yet.

Riley shrugged a little and said ...

“Well, we’d heard that there was a murder not far from here just the other day.”

A knowing murmur passed among the women.

“Oh, yes,” one of them said. “It happened down near Tunsboro, I believe.”

Another patted Riley on the knee and said ...

“Don’t worry, dear. You’ll be as safe as safe can be here at Spring View. Nothing like that could *possibly* happen here.”

The other women voiced their agreement.

They sound so positive, Riley thought. It was as if they thought this place was under some kind of protective spell.

If so, Riley didn’t feel inclined to share their belief. That was the way the Haas couple had felt about the most recent murder scene.

The women introduced themselves as Amanda, Donna, and Janine. For a few moments, Riley felt oddly unsure about their ages. On the one hand, they seemed to be fairly young. But on the other hand, Riley noticed something strained and stiff about their faces.

Then she realized ...

Facelifts.

They were all middle-aged, and their youthful looks were no more natural than anything else about this peculiar place.

They chattered away for a few moments, and Riley began to feel rather invisible to them. They talked about their recent meditations and classes until the one named Amanda said ...

“Has anybody seen Bliss today?”

Riley was startled by the question. Was “bliss” something they expected to physically encounter here from time to time?

But then the one named Donna said, “No, I haven’t seen her since yesterday. And her RV wasn’t in its spot.”

Then Riley understood that “Bliss” was a woman’s name.

Janine said, “I saw her when she was pulling out last evening. She said she was hoping to find a wonderful vortex.”

Donna shrugged and said, “Well, maybe she found one and decided not to come back.”

Riley felt a chill at that word ...

Vortex.

Chief Wilson had said something about vortexes back at the crime scene.

Riley now realized the woman they called “Bliss” was probably Shelby Eden. Maybe she had adopted a more New Age-sounding name since she’d started traveling. If Riley was right, these women clearly had no idea what had happened to the woman they knew as Bliss.

And I’d better not tell them.

Riley said to the women, “Tell me about vortexes.”

The women looked a little surprised that Riley didn’t know about all this already.

Janine said, “They’re power spots, places with tremendous spiritual energy.”

Donna added, “There are three different kinds of vortexes—electrical, magnetic, and balanced. Electrical vortexes are ‘yang’—masculine and very energizing. Magnetic vortexes are ‘yin’—feminine, soft, and nurturing. Balanced vortexes are a mixture of electrical and magnetic, great for achieving clarity and perspective.”

Riley was struck by the women’s matter-of-fact tone, as if they were talking about perfectly ordinary proven scientific facts. Even so, she doubted there was a lot of real science behind their ideas.

Riley asked, “Where are these vortexes?”

Amanda said, “There are four really well-known vortexes around Sedona—Cathedral Rock, Bell Rock, Boynton Canyon, and Airport Mesa.”

“I’ve tried them all,” Donna said with a shrug. “They’re plenty powerful. Even so, I find all the transformational energy I need right here in Spring View—and especially at the Delphi RV Resort, up in Utah.”

Amanda nodded in agreement and said, “Oh, yes. I love Delphi as well. A very blessed place, like this one. Exclusive, though. I’m so glad Harold and I were able to get a membership.”

Donna said in a haughty tone, “Sometimes exclusive is a good thing. That’s why I like Delphi. The very best people show up there—successful people, *evolved* people, people with the highest self-esteem, people who know their true self-worth.”

Amanda nodded and said, “That’s right. You meet all the most worthwhile people there. Nobody who is anybody would ever miss out on going to Delphi.”

Then Janine said, “Yesterday Bliss told me she was heading out to find another vortex that most people don’t even know about. If she did find something wonderful, I wish she’d come back and tell us about it. I’d like to check it out.”

Riley swallowed hard and thought ...

Bliss found it, all right.

But it wasn’t wonderful.

Riley asked, “Are you saying that your friend Bliss went out all alone to find this vortex?”

“Probably,” Amanda said. “After all, this entire area is on a very spiritual plane.”

“But she hasn’t come back at all,” Janine pouted.

Donna sighed and said, “Oh, dear. I hope Bliss hasn’t gone out boondocking again.”

Amanda shook her head and said, “I warned her against that.”

Janine looked dismayed at what her two friends were saying.

“I don’t see anything wrong with boondocking,” she said.

Riley squinted and asked, “What’s boondocking?”

Again, the women looked surprised that Riley didn’t know this already.

Donna laughed and said, “Well, you’d never catch *me* doing it.”

Amanda said, “It means parking your RV somewhere offsite, without any hookups for utilities. You know, like in a shopping center parking lot, not a real campground. It’s such a waste, not enjoying all the benefits of a motor home. Why go to the expense of buying a wonderful house on wheels and not get full use of it?”

Donna said, “I think boondocking is tacky, and I told Bliss so.”

Janine protested, “I think you’re both being very judgmental.”

Riley sensed that an argument was about to break out, and she certainly didn’t want to get caught in the middle of it. She was relieved to see Agent Crivaro trotting toward them across the Japanese bridge. She figured she could introduce Crivaro to the women as her dad, and that might settle things down a bit.

But Crivaro didn’t come to their table. Instead, he stood just at the edge of the patio and waved one arm, silently signaling to Riley that he wanted her to join him.

Riley excused herself and walked over to where Crivaro was standing.

He whispered, “Where have you been? I thought I’d find you back in the camper.”

Riley stammered, “I—I’m sorry. I just got kind of curious. I mean, this is such an odd place, and—”

Crivaro interrupted, “Well, don’t go wandering off like that. We’re driving out of here right now.”

Riley trotted along to keep up with him.

She said, “What’s going on?”

Crivaro growled, “We’ve got a suspect’s name, that’s what’s going on. And we know where he’s headed. With a little luck, we’re about to catch our killer.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

The man felt a familiar rising panic.

Stupid, he thought.

Why do I let things like this get to me?

It was only traffic, after all—nothing that truly threatened him.

But the cars ahead were definitely slowing down. The same thing was happening in the lane to his left.

He checked his mirrors. Traffic was already piling up behind him.

His expensive RV was closed in. He had no choice but to stay in line.

He told himself it meant nothing. But just being stuck among these slow-moving vehicles stirred up a primal feeling of claustrophobic helplessness. It was a fear that he'd always found difficult to control.

He could hear Aunt Florence's voice as clearly as if she were sitting right here beside him ...

"Out of sight, out of mind."

She'd always said that to him when he was a little boy.

She'd say it with a tolerant smile whenever she thought he'd done something wrong.

Then she'd gently take him by the hand and lead him to the closet, where she'd shut him in and lock him up in total darkness for many hours at a time.

He remembered the gnawing, lonely fear he'd felt in that darkness—that weird and hideous feeling that very his life was ebbing out of his body onto the closet floor, seeping down between the floorboards never to return.

His aunt seemed to have a way of releasing him at exactly the moment when he imagined he was down to his last ounce of life, that he couldn't survive for another moment.

Now, as he navigated the sluggish traffic, he tried to tell himself ...

It was a long time ago.

Aunt Florence had died of cancer many years back, before he'd even reached his teenage years. She couldn't threaten him anymore. Besides, he'd learned to come to terms with that trauma in his own really quite brilliant way.

He smiled as he remembered the woman he'd met while camping about a year ago in Colorado. She'd walked toward his RV with a trusting smile,

calling out with a cheerful wave ...

“Hi, neighbor. My name’s Erin. What’s yours?”

And he remembered her face—how uncannily she had resembled Aunt Florence. He’d sensed his opportunity immediately, invited Erin into his RV to have a drink, and then ...

He now felt a warm, delicious sensation as he remembered the killing, especially the way he’d heard the woman clawing and screaming in the tight space where he’d forced her to bleed to death. It was the fulfillment of a fantasy he’d had as a little boy—that he would somehow make Aunt Florence feel the same horror, the same feeling of ebbing of life, that she’d inflicted upon him.

That fantasy had been cut short by Aunt Florence’s early death.

For many years, he’d never dared to hope that it would someday be fulfilled.

But it had been, at least by proxy, and he was glad.

He hadn’t regretted murdering that woman—not for a moment. He’d spent months afterward savoring the pleasure it had given him, the release from those attacks of animal panic that had seized him over the years. Of course, the pleasure had dissipated during the course of a year, and the spells of panic had started to come back.

But by then, he’d known how to find relief from all that horror.

All he had to do was inflict it upon somebody else.

It no longer mattered to him whether his victim resembled Aunt Florence or not. Any woman he found appropriate would serve the purpose.

He knew perfectly well that he’d been lucky to get away with the first murder, which he’d committed too close to where he lived in Colorado. So he prepared carefully, outfitting his motor home for the job and traveling away from home.

Here in Arizona, he’d stalked and claimed his first victim, then his next, and now ...

With his considerable wealth, he figured he could get away with this for a very long time. As a prosperous businessman, he’d learned that money brought great freedom—not just from poverty and need, but also from moral scruples. The way he saw it, morals were for those who lacked the material resources to overcome them.

He’d put morals behind him many years ago. He was too lofty a soul to

bother with them.

But he began to feel that anxiety again. The flow of traffic was still sluggish.

What was going on up ahead?

He peered out the driver's window and glimpsed a police roadblock. The cops there were waving cars on through in the free lane, but the traffic was slowing down at that bottleneck.

Worse, he saw that two big vehicles were pulled over on the side of the road.

They were both RVs—Class A motor homes quite similar to his own.

Fear bit into him sharply now.

Do they know?

Had they figured out that whoever had killed those women drove a large RV, where he had devised his own special “kill room”?

Had he left some telltale clues?

He realized that he might have. He hadn't checked to make sure his vehicle hadn't left tire tracks at the murder scenes. He cursed himself for his carelessness.

Worst of all was the possibility of being undone in such a prosaic way—by perfectly ordinary cops conducting a search. Such a fate was unworthy of him after he had committed such elite and exquisite crimes. How could he have let this happen?

As his panic mounted, he fought off his impulse to flee.

No, he mustn't veer over onto the shoulder and try to charge past the roadblock, or try to force his way along the median strip.

Such rash action would lead to certain disaster. So would trying to fight off the police when they stopped him.

But suddenly an almost eerie feeling of calm came over him.

What am I worried about?

I'm prepared for this.

They won't find a thing.

All he had to do was exercise his charm and cool and self-confidence.

He smiled as he thought ...

I'm very good at that.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Agent Crivaro's eagerness to get back on the road practically took Riley's breath away. Gravel flew up behind their RV as he pulled away from the Spring View Campground.

"What's going on?" Riley asked.

"Just what I told you," Crivaro said. "It looks like we're about to nail our guy."

Then Crivaro said nothing, just eyed the road with an intense expression as he drove. Riley wondered if he was going to offer any further explanation.

"How do you know?" she asked.

Crivaro glanced at her as if he'd forgotten she was there.

Then he replied, "When I talked to the manager back there, he let me look over names of people in the campground register who had come and gone recently. I cross-checked the list with names we had of people who were at the Wren's Nest Campground when Brett Parma was there. I found a name—David Hunter. He left the Wren's Nest the morning after Brett Parma's murder. And according to the register, he pulled out of the Spring View Campground just a little while ago."

Crivaro's face looked even more determined as he steered their camper onto the interstate, a four-lane divided highway.

He added, "I've got Hunter's license number and a description of his camper—a great big Class A RV. Better still, the register showed his next intended destination. He's on his way north to the Cherry Rock Campground. That's between here and the Grand Canyon, and he's sure to be taking the interstate, just like we're going to do. I've already called Chief Wilson to put out an APB to the troopers at the roadblocks, and we're getting someone to watch the campground where the guy's supposed to be headed."

Riley's brain clicked away as she processed what she was hearing.

She could certainly understand Crivaro's excitement. Not only had David Hunter been at both of the campgrounds where the two women had stayed, he'd been there at the same times they had. And he had the kind of camper they were looking for. All that sure didn't sound like a coincidence.

This news also seemed to prove that Crivaro had been right about setting up the roadblocks, and Riley had been wrong. The killer *wasn't* already long

gone, as she had feared—at least not if he really was on his way toward a roadblock right now, which seemed likely.

And yet ...

She wondered whether she should voice her lingering doubts to Crivaro.

For example—how could they be sure that David Hunter hadn't lied when he'd written his next destination into the register? If he'd had any idea that the law might be closing in on him, would he have told the truth about that?

But then she realized something. Even if Hunter had taken off in a different direction, he'd still wind up running into one of the roadblocks, which were placed all around Sedona by now.

Riley let herself breathe a little easier. Yes, it really did seem as though their investigation was about to come to an end. Which made her wonder ...

How will it feel to look that monster in the face?

Crivaro's phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and tossed it to Riley.

"You answer it," he said. "Put it on speakerphone."

Riley took the call, which was from Jay Faulkner, the ME they'd met a little while ago.

Faulkner said to Riley and Crivaro, "I'm just starting to work on the latest victim's body, and I already did what you said and checked under her fingernails. I also cross-checked with Paco about what he found on his victim. They both had cotton fibers under their nails."

"Fabric?" Crivaro asked hopefully.

Faulkner said, "Uh-uh. This isn't threads. It looks recycled—the kind you'd find in soundproofing insulation."

Riley and Crivaro exchanged knowing looks.

Faulkner said, "Like I said, I'm just getting started, but I thought you'd want to know that much."

"We sure did," Crivaro said. "Thanks for getting in touch. Let us know if you find anything else we should know about."

"Will do," Faulkner said, and ended the call.

His expression grimmer now, Crivaro drove on in silence for a few seconds.

Then he said to Riley, "I guess you're thinking what I'm thinking."

Riley nodded and said, "Yeah, we're probably right that he's fixed up a space in his camper for his victims to die in—probably a bathroom. And he's

soundproofed that room so that nobody can hear the victims' screams."

Crivaro shook his head. "Jesus, this is ugly stuff. Well, we can probably count on one thing. Whenever he gets stopped at a roadblock, the cops won't have to search hard to find evidence of the murders."

Riley gulped hard as she realized why he was right. She imagined how the bathroom space was set up, possibly with soundproofing all around the shower or bath stall.

And right now, that soundproofing must be gouged and spattered with the blood of two murdered women.

No, the cops won't have to look too hard for that, she thought.

As they raced northward, Riley was amazed at how much the landscape was changing. No cactuses were in sight, and they soon left the red buttes and hills behind. They were obviously moving to a higher elevation. The highway was lined with tall trees—Ponderosa pines, Riley thought. She found it hard to believe they were still in the same state.

After about an hour on the interstate, Crivaro's phone buzzed again, and Riley put the new call on speakerphone. This time the caller was Chief Wilson.

He asked, "Where are you guys right now?"

"On the interstate heading north toward Flagstaff," Crivaro said.

"Have you gotten to the roadblock yet?" Wilson asked.

"No, but we're almost there," Crivaro said.

"Well, you're in luck. The troopers there stopped the guy you're looking for. The same license plate, the same kind of vehicle, and the same name—David Hunter. They'll have him nice and ready and wrapped up with a bow on top when you get there."

Crivaro looked at Riley with a smile and said ...

"We've got him! We've really got him!"

Riley hoped he was right.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

They were just ending the phone call when the interstate traffic began to slow.

Riley's nerves quickened. The roadblock must be coming right up.

She wondered ...

Is this going to be it?

Had they caught up with the merciless killer who drained his victims of blood?

It sure sounded likely, but she couldn't quite let herself hope.

Once again, Crivaro grumbled about not having lights and a siren, and they had no choice but to stay with the sluggish traffic until they reached the roadblock itself.

Once they were there, a man wearing a tan uniform with a "Smokey" hat tried to wave them through with the rest of the unsuspecting vehicles. Crivaro stopped the RV, rolled down his window, and flashed his badge at the trooper.

The trooper stepped closer to the window, looking skeptical as Crivaro introduced himself and Riley.

The trooper took a step backward, appearing confused as he glanced over Crivaro, Riley, and their modest RV.

"We were told a couple of FBI agents were on their way," he said. "But you aren't exactly what we expected."

Crivaro growled, "Well, we're the real thing, whether we look like it not. You have heard of going undercover, right?"

The trooper nodded slowly and Crivaro continued, "We're here to see the guy you stopped—the one with the license plate you were told to look for. We need to pull on over and see what's going on."

The trooper waved their RV out of the lane of sluggish traffic over to the shoulder of the road, where a Class A RV was parked along with several Arizona Highway Patrol vehicles. When Riley and Crivaro got out of their vehicle, Riley was startled by how chilly it was outside. They hadn't driven very far north, but the weather was already markedly more brisk, and Riley wished she was wearing something warmer than shorts.

She and Crivaro headed straight toward the RV. They could see activity

inside, which looked like it was being searched already.

A trooper wearing sergeant's stripes seemed to be in charge of the operation. When he spotted the FBI agents, he stepped in front of them. Before he could complain that no civilians were allowed near the scene, Crivaro and Riley both produced their badges and introduced themselves again.

A name plate above the trooper's right hand shirt pocket revealed that his last name was Gray.

He took off his hat and scratched his head.

"Are you *sure* we've got the right guy?" he said.

"That's what we're here to find out," Crivaro said. "Where is the driver of the vehicle?"

Sergeant Gray pointed at a Highway Patrol van and said, "We're holding him over there, but—"

Crivaro interrupted, "Good. Don't let him go anywhere. We'll talk to him after we've had a look inside the RV ourselves."

Crivaro stepped around the sergeant and headed toward the RV. As Riley trotted behind him, she glanced back at the confused-looking trooper. He really seemed to doubt that they'd stopped the right guy.

She wondered why.

Maybe we should have stopped to hear what he had to say, she thought.

But Crivaro was in too much of a hurry for that. Riley followed her partner into the RV, where a couple of troopers were pulling out drawers, throwing aside cushions, and generally taking things apart as they searched. Riley and Crivaro exchanged glances, and she knew they were thinking the same thing ...

The bathroom.

An image flashed through Riley's head of gouged and bloodstained insulation.

But she wondered ...

Wouldn't these troopers have found that already?

Crivaro pulled the bathroom door open, and he and Riley both stared inside with shock.

"Damn it," Crivaro said.

The interior was absolutely pristine.

The space was surprisingly large, equipped with a sink, a medicine chest,

a toilet, and a shower stall. It really didn't look possible that anything violent had happened here at all—certainly not a brutal, bloody murder.

She heard Crivaro's growled curse. "Damnation."

As they turned and headed for the exit, Crivaro told the troopers who were still searching the motor home ...

"Keep at it, guys."

But Riley could hear a note of futility in his voice.

She felt that herself. There was no sign a murder had ever happened here. How could this really be the man they were looking for?

Riley followed Crivaro back out of the RV, where they encountered Sergeant Gray again.

Sergeant Gray said, "Did you find anything?"

Crivaro shook his head silently.

Gray added, "I was about to say—I find it hard to believe the guy we pulled over is a serial killer. For one thing, he's traveling with his son."

Crivaro's eyes widened.

"His son?" Crivaro said.

"Yeah, a ten-year-old kid," Gray said. "That's him right over there. Trooper Harris is looking after him."

Riley looked where Gray pointed. Sure enough, she saw a female trooper watching over a small boy next to one of the patrol cars. The boy didn't seem the least bit frightened, and the woman appeared to be keeping him entertained. Right now she was letting him play with her badge, pinning it onto his own shirt.

Gray led Riley and Crivaro over to the patrol van and opened the rear door. He introduced them to David Hunter, who was sitting on a bench inside. Then Gray left Riley and Crivaro alone with him.

Unlike his son, David Hunter appeared to be absolutely terrified.

"Would somebody please explain to me what's going on?" he begged.

Riley and Crivaro both climbed into the van and sat on the opposite bench.

Crivaro began to ask questions, but Riley could see the growing discouragement in her partner's eyes.

David Hunter told them that he was from Dallas, and he was taking his son on a camping tour of the Southwestern states. David's wife was at home, and she expected the two of them to be back in time for Christmas.

Hunter readily admitted that he and his son had, in fact, stayed at both the

Wren's Nest Campground and the Spring View Campground. But he claimed to know nothing about the murders except what he'd heard on the radio. He denied having met either Brett Parma or Shelby Eden. They were on their way to take a look at the Grand Canyon from the South Rim, and then they'd head back home.

Riley believed him.

And she could tell by Crivaro's downcast eyes that he believed him too.

Once he'd finished asking questions, Crivaro awkwardly apologized to Hunter for their unfortunate mistake. They left the unlucky man sitting dumbfounded in the back of the van. Crivaro then instructed Sergeant Gray to let Hunter go.

Riley watched as Hunter climbed out of the patrol van. For a moment he just stood there gazing around, obviously still in a state of confusion.

Then the man's son came running toward him.

"Daddy!" the boy cried. "Can we go to the Grand Canyon now?"

Hunter pulled himself together. Without another glance at the Highway Patrol and FBI agents standing there, he hurried his boy back to their camper.

Riley knew what that camper looked like inside now because of the hasty search by highway patrolmen looking for signs of murder. She half-expected Hunter to pop right back out again and complain. But he simply closed the camper door and drove away. He was apparently too grateful for the chance to get all this behind him.

Crivaro asked Sergeant Gray, "How many other Class A RVs have you stopped here at this roadblock?"

"Just five," Sergeant Gray said.

"What kinds of people were in them?" Crivaro asked.

"What you'd expect, mostly. Couples and families out traveling together."

Crivaro inhaled sharply, then asked, "Any guys traveling alone?"

Sergeant Gray squinted and said, "Now that you mention it, there was one—the last one we pulled over before this one, in fact. I checked him out myself. A pleasant guy, really. Mentioned that he was on his way north to Bryce Canyon, and that he'd be staying in the Crayfish Creek Campground along the way."

"Did you take down his license plate number?" Crivaro asked.

Gray blushed a little and said, "Well, no. Right while I was talking to him, Chief Wilson called in with a license number for us to watch out for. So I

just let the guy drive on through, didn't think anything more about him."

Riley sensed that Crivaro was struggling to keep his impatience in check. She figured maybe she should chime in herself.

"What kind of RV was it?" she asked.

Gray scratched his chin and said, "Nothing unusual. Just a really big white Winnebago, recent make, I think. You know, the kind with the wraparound windshield. You see them all over the place in these parts. This one had a red stripe along the side, if I remember right."

Crivaro asked, "Did you search inside all the RVs?"

Gray shrugged and said, "Not as thoroughly as we did Hunter's outfit. But yeah, we looked through them."

"What about the lone driver's vehicle?" Crivaro asked. "Did it look clean? Especially the bathroom?"

"Clean as a whistle," Gray said.

Crivaro murmured almost inaudibly, "Then it wasn't him."

He looked down at the ground and shook his head.

Then he said to Sergeant Gray, "Take down this roadblock. Get your people out of here. Before you do, call Chief Wilson and tell him send out word to all the troopers to get rid of all the roadblocks we've got around Sedona."

Gray looked startled by the finality of Crivaro's decision.

Riley, too, felt unsettled.

She couldn't remember Crivaro ever sounding so defeated.

Then Crivaro muttered to Riley, "Come on, let's get back to the car."

"Where are we going next?" Riley asked as she walked alongside of him.

Crivaro darted a sharp look at her and snapped bitterly ...

"Well, that's a damned good question, isn't it? Where are we going next, and what are we going to *do* next? Anyway, you were right about the roadblocks. The killer was probably long gone from the whole area before we set them up. All we succeeded in doing was letting him know we're looking for his kind of RV. I'll bet he's dumped the one he had and is driving something new right now. So I was wrong, and you were right. Does that make you happy?"

Riley was stunned.

"No, it doesn't make me happy," she said in a shaky voice as they kept on toward the car. "I always want us to be right—both of us. We're a team,

aren't we? Why are you talking to me that way? Why are you mad at me? What did I do wrong?"

Crivaro let out a long, discouraged sigh.

"I'm sorry, Riley," he said. "I'm really, really sorry. That was way out of line."

They walked the rest of the way to the car in silence and got inside. Crivaro put the key in the ignition, but didn't bother to start the engine. He just sat there staring at the keychain hanging there.

Then he said in a hushed voice, "What are we going to do, Riley?"

"Huh?" Riley said with surprise.

Crivaro looked into her eyes with an earnest, pleading expression.

"I said, what are we going to do? I've got no ideas, kid. I'm stumped. It's up to you. You've got to come up with something."

Riley could hardly believe her ears.

He wants my advice, she thought.

He needs my advice.

But what on earth was she going to tell him?

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Jake Crivaro sat gazing at his young partner. He knew he was repeating himself when he asked her again ...

“What are we going to do?”

He had no answer to the question, and apparently Riley didn’t either.

Instead of replying, she just stared at him with a stricken expression. Jake couldn’t help but turn away. The words he’d just said to her had been remarkably stupid.

“I was wrong, and you were right. Does that make you happy?”

Now he could feel his whole body cringe.

That really was out of line, he thought.

Worse than out of line.

What the hell is wrong with me?

But the truth was, Jake knew perfectly well what was wrong.

He was feeling discouraged. No, more than discouraged.

He was feeling positively burnt out.

And of course, he’d been feeling that for some time now.

Should he just come out and admit it to Riley?

Maybe he should just flat-out tell her the truth—that one of the reasons he’d taken her on as a partner was his own feeling of exhaustion, his worry that it was time to put away his badge and retire from the BAU. He’d wanted to make sure that someone with his own talents would be ready to take his place.

But he couldn’t tell her all of that yet.

She wasn’t ready.

And maybe the BAU wasn’t ready for Riley either. Even though Special Agent in Charge Erik Lehl was usually supportive, he didn’t yet understand what Jake and Riley could do.

It wasn’t Lehl’s fault. The man was perfectly competent. But how could anyone without this ability to see into a killer’s mind understand how it worked—how randomly, how spontaneously those insights came? And how difficult they could be to understand?

Even worse, Riley might be partnered with someone who would try to “shape her up” and make her like other agents.

No, he couldn't leave until Riley was strong enough, secure enough with her abilities, to do this job without him.

Meanwhile, his question, "*What are we going to do?*" was still unanswered.

Jake took a long, slow breath and said, "For starters, before we go anywhere else I think we should get out of these stupid shorts."

He was relieved to hear Riley give a brief laugh.

They took turns changing clothes in the motor home bathroom, and soon they both looked like FBI agents again, with their holstered guns in place.

Theirs was now the only vehicle pulled off on the side of the road. The Highway Patrol had left, and they still hadn't made a decision about what they should do next.

Jake poked into the RV's refrigerator and found some leftovers they'd never finished. He pulled them out and put them on the table, then slid into one of the seats.

"Water?" Riley asked.

He nodded and she poured two glasses and took the seat across from him.

He took a drink of water, and then asked, "What about a profile? We haven't discussed that much. What do you think you can tell us about the killer?"

He watched as Riley stared out the window for a moment. He could tell that her capable mind was clicking away looking for an answer to his question. He felt a renewed pang of admiration for his young protégé.

Then she said, "He's rich, I think we can be pretty sure of that. I mean, he's got some kind of big, expensive motor home all to himself. He's driving it to resort campgrounds all over the Southwest, and he's got time to do it in. He's got to be really well off."

Jake nodded and waited for her to say more.

She said, "We also know he's a misogynist who loves to make women feel helpless and terrified when he's killing them. If he's a high-profile, public sort of personality, he's probably got some kind of reputation to that effect. I doubt there are any actual police records of spousal abuse or rape or assault—with his money, he can get away with just about anything. But things like that might show up in his divorce papers. And he's probably been married and divorced quite a few times. It also might be general public knowledge that he behaves badly toward women. Maybe even a few tabloid stories."

Jake was pleased by what he was hearing so far. Of course, it was completely speculative, and Riley might even be entirely wrong. But since he didn't have any ideas of his own, he was willing to consider anything she might have to say.

Riley squinted hard and said, "I'm having trouble thinking of anything else."

Fortunately, Jake had an idea of how to coach her along.

"You just said he can get away with anything with his money," he said. "What does that tell you?"

Riley looked at him and said, "It tells me he's arrogant. He thinks he's superior and entitled. And he just naturally assumes that justice is never going to catch up with him. Actually, he thinks justice is on his side. He thinks he's got a perfect right to do awful things to other people. He's above criticism, and above the law. And so far he's usually been right."

Jake added, "A rich sociopath, then?"

"I think so," Riley said. "Which means he's also charming, especially toward his victims, and also toward anyone who might start suspecting him."

Riley thought for a moment, then added ...

"But I think but there's one big difference between him and most sociopaths. Murder isn't a game for him. It's ... it's more like a leisure activity, like fishing or hiking. This really and truly is like a *vacation* as far as he's concerned ..."

Riley's voice trailed away. She fell quiet again, but Jake sensed that an idea was growing in her mind.

Then she looked him straight in the eyes and said ...

"Agent Crivaro, we've got to go north."

Jake was startled. He hadn't expected her to say anything like this.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Riley leaned toward him. "Do you remember what Sergeant Gray said about the guy they let go—the only guy they pulled over who was traveling all by himself? I think it was him after all."

Jake squinted hard and said, "But Gray said they checked the bathroom."

"I know, but maybe Sergeant Gray remembers the search wrong. Maybe they didn't get around to that bathroom. After all, they got in kind of a rush while they had him there. Then they suddenly got that other name, Hunter, and a license number to look for. There was no reason to think they should

pay more attention to the RV they were searching. Besides, Gray probably hasn't dealt with a real sociopath before. In a rush like that, the killer could have made him believe just about anything."

Jake stroked his chin and said, "Including that Gray's men had searched the RV more thoroughly than they really had?"

"I think maybe so."

Jake shook his head and murmured softly, "Riley, I don't know. It sounds to me like you're reaching. And anyway, if you're right about it being a guy they let go, he got away without leaving much information about himself. All we know is that he's driving a big Winnebago with a red stripe along the side. God knows how many vehicles there are exactly like it on the road. We can't exactly put out an APB with so little to go on."

Riley nodded and said, "That's why we've got to go after him ourselves. It's up to us, nobody else."

"But why should we head *north* after him?" Jake said. "We don't even know where he's going."

Riley smiled, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Oh, I think we do," she said. "He told Gray he was on his way to the Crayfish Creek Campground up around Bryce Canyon."

"And you think he wasn't lying?" Jake said.

"That's *exactly* what I think," Riley said. "It's like I was just saying, he's arrogant and sure of himself. He didn't bother to lie. He enjoyed the risk—and he didn't even think it was a very big risk, considering all the really huge risks he's been taking lately. He didn't figure anyone was going to follow him."

Jake sat thinking it over silently. He couldn't quite convince himself that Riley was onto something.

In a more urgent voice, Riley added, "Agent Crivaro, I don't have anywhere near the field experience you do. But I've studied a lot about sociopathic killers at the Academy. And I know they're almost always too confident for their own good. Sooner or later, they trip themselves up. And I think that's what's happening right now. He's given us a glimpse of how his mind works."

Jake crinkled his brow as he struggled with what he was hearing. He reminded himself how he'd been feeling—completely burnt out, with no idea of how to proceed.

And the truth was, he still didn't have any ideas.

He couldn't help but wonder ...

Am I in any state of mind to question Riley's instincts?

After all, her gut had been right at times when his own gut was wrong. And right now his own gut wasn't giving him anything at all to work with. The choice seemed to be to either follow Riley's gut and at least drive somewhere, or sit right here for God knew how long wondering what to do next.

But maybe what mattered most was that he still owed her for his cruel outburst a few moments ago—and he owed her a lot more than an apology.

I owe her a chance to follow her gut, no matter whether she's right or wrong.

And if she proved to be wrong—well, mistakes were part of the learning process.

Jake nodded slowly and said, "OK, we'll try it your way."

Riley grinned and clapped her hands with gratitude.

Jake added, "But since this is your idea, it's your turn to drive this damn tub."

Riley scrambled up, cleared away the remains of their snack, then fairly bounded to the RV cab and into the driver's seat.

Still feeling tired and discouraged, Jake climbed into the passenger seat. As Riley pulled out onto the road, he still couldn't help thinking they were following a blind alley.

Even so, he knew perfectly well ...

It's the only "alley" we've got.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Until he felt sure that the roadblock was safely behind him, the man kept driving without giving much thought to where he was headed. He'd passed by Flagstaff without incident, and nobody on the highway seemed to be following him, or paying any attention to him at all.

Not that there's anything to worry about, he kept telling himself.

He'd handled the Highway Patrol sergeant with his usual charm and finesse, and the troopers' search of his RV had been perfunctory at best.

There had been one scary moment, though, when his conversation with the sergeant had been interrupted by a phone call. The sergeant had gotten out of the RV to take the call and seemed to be hearing some kind of breaking information. The man had wondered whether he was about to be identified after all.

But as soon as the call ended, the sergeant had waved him through, wishing him happy camping. The man still had no idea what the phone call had been about. Maybe some unfortunate sucker had gotten identified by mistake.

Anyway, he'd gotten clear of it with little trouble. But he was annoyed with himself for letting the whole incident alarm him. Was he ever going to be able to put the vestigial panic from his childhood behind him?

He reminded himself that soon he'd have to make a decision.

Would he turn west and head toward the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, as most tourists on this road would do? Or would he instead connect with the route east, back to Colorado?

The question was, would he continue his vacation and his recreational activities? Or would he just head home?

It was getting late in the day, and he hadn't eaten since morning, so it seemed like a good time to stop and consider his options. He exited off the interstate and pulled into a truck stop parking lot. It looked like a clean place, so he parked his RV and then went inside the restaurant and ordered coffee and a sandwich.

As he sat waiting for his food, he sipped his coffee and wondered ...

What next?

He really hadn't planned his killings at all to speak of. The last two had

depended entirely on more or less chance encounters with trusting women. He'd assumed that he'd just keep right on driving and killing for as long as he enjoyed it.

But now, he wasn't so sure.

He knew himself to be an intelligent man, and it wouldn't be smart to push his luck too far. And maybe the last killing back in Sedona had been far enough. He smiled at the memory of the woman's screams, audible even through the soundproofing of his makeshift kill room.

That murder had been all the more satisfying because the victim had trusted him even more than the others. He recalled how, after they'd dashed out of the rain to his RV, she'd shyly asked him whether he thought maybe they'd been destined to meet. And he'd replied that, yes, indeed he thought maybe so.

Less than half an hour later, she was dead.

He chuckled softly. Just thinking about it made him feel good.

The whole thing couldn't have gone better. Even the rain had let up at just the right moment for him to carry her body back out onto the trail and leave it exactly where he'd encountered her.

It was perfect, he thought.

He sighed wistfully. Future killings would surely be satisfying. But it wasn't likely that any would go so flawlessly, so beautifully, as that last one. In fact, they'd probably feel somewhat disappointing ...

On top of being risky.

Was it really worth the likely emotional letdown? And did he even really *need* to kill anymore?

He heaved a long, satisfied sigh as he took a sip of his coffee.

While it was true that he'd just had a spell of anxiety about the roadblock, he generally felt better than he'd felt for years—better than he'd ever felt, actually, and truly at peace with himself ...

Like a new man.

Perhaps in the future he'd again feel those old primal fears creeping up inside him from time to time, but ...

I'll always have my memories.

Those memories would assuage any lurking fears that would well up from time to time.

He drummed his fingers on the tabletop and looked out at the RV that had

served him so well in his self-healing endeavor.

All good things must come to an end, he thought.

And three victims were enough.

He knew it was time to bring his murderous spree to a close. It was truly a bittersweet moment, but he felt deeply satisfied with his decision.

At that moment, he heard a woman's voice say ...

"Excuse me, sir."

He turned toward the voice and felt a jolt of alarm. For a split second, he imagined that he was looking at Aunt Florence herself. This woman resembled her even more than the one back in Colorado—the same curly brown hair, the same ruddy, healthy complexion, the same radiant smile.

But most of all ...

Those eyes.

That had been the one significant difference between the woman in Colorado and Aunt Florence. That woman had had green eyes, while Aunt Florence's had been a piercing, brilliant blue.

But now, this one who was staring at him expectantly—this woman's eyes were exactly like Aunt Florence's. He even thought he detected a touch of darkness, of meanness, of cruelty, somewhere behind those warm and cheerful eyes ...

Just like Aunt Florence.

He smiled his most engaging smile and said, "Can I help you?"

The woman blushed a little and chuckled.

"Oh, this is embarrassing," she said. "I don't know what you'll think of me, but ..."

She pointed out the window and said, "Is that your Winnebago out there in the parking lot?"

"It is," the man said.

"I thought so," the woman said, staring raptly at the RV. "It's such a thing of beauty, so majestic! I see a lot of Winnebagos on the road, of course, but they're always on the move. It's nice to get a look at one while it's ... well, standing still."

She pointed to where a car and a trailer were parked and added ...

"That's my rig over there—just a little Starcraft trailer. Not that I'm complaining. It serves my purposes well, and I've been all over the Southwest in it. A single woman like me doesn't need much more than that."

The man smiled at the slight emphasis she'd put on those words ...
... *single woman* ...

She's flirting with me! he realized. He had to stop himself from laughing at the irony—the very image of Aunt Florence standing here, flirting with him, asking to see the very place that she should never visit.

Of course he was sure that his Winnebago was really just an excuse for her to come over here and talk to him. She had no idea that it might be significant.

Again, he had to choke back laughter that he could feel rising in his throat.

He asked her, “Have you ordered something to eat?”

“No, I was just getting ready to.”

He patted the tabletop and said, “Please, sit down. I just ordered a sandwich. Go ahead and order what you like. I'll buy. Afterwards, we can go out to my rig and I'll give you look around inside. I hope it doesn't disappoint you.”

“Oh, it won't!” the woman said excitedly. “I promise you, it won't!”

She sat down and started talking eagerly about herself. Her name was Sally Marino, she said, and she'd come from Topeka, although she'd never really settled down in any particular spot, she'd lived all over the place. She valued her independence and she'd always loved the outdoors.

Indeed, the man could see that she was quite strong and vigorous-looking, considering her diminutive height—nothing at all like his previous victim.

What an interesting challenge she'd be, he thought.

When she happened to mention a motor home resort she was planning to visit, he chuckled and said, “Well, isn't that a coincidence! I'm headed there myself!”

“Wow, that *is* a coincidence!”

As Sally chattered on, the man felt his decision to quit killing dissolve away. This woman seemed like such a gift, as if fate itself had intervened to grant him one last glorious murder.

As he half-listened to what Sally was saying, he began to think ahead to what was about to unfold. He'd show her his RV as soon as they'd finish eating, then they'd both drive on their way. His choice had been made for him, and he'd be driving north into Utah before he took any turns.

At some point very soon, they would each arrive at their mutual destination.

Then they'd meet again, and ...

Don't get too far ahead of yourself, he thought.

After all, an element of surprise was what would make this encounter the most pleasurable of all.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Riley was swerving their RV from the left lane into the right lane when Crivaro yelped out ...

“Car!”

Alarmed, Riley swung the vehicle back into the left lane a little too abruptly, making the vehicle sway and weave a little.

She snapped back at Crivaro, “I didn’t see the car.”

Crivaro pointed out the window and said, “That’s because you’re not using the mirror on this side correctly.”

“It’s so hard to see,” Riley said.

“Then tell me whenever you want to switch to the right lane so I can look out for you.”

Riley stifled a sigh. There seemed to be no end to the complications involved with driving this rig. No wonder Crivaro had wanted some relief from it.

Crivaro chuckled and added, “Don’t forget, you’re driving a small house.”

Riley cringed a little to hear him repeat the words she’d said earlier when he’d been trying to race through traffic.

Maybe I had it coming, she admitted to herself.

After all, maybe she’d been a little cocky about Crivaro’s driving. He’d gotten to be really good with this rig, which was why Riley had expected it to be easy—or at least easier than driving with the tow trailer she and Ryan had used to move their stuff to their new apartment in DC. For one thing, she’d figured she wouldn’t have to worry about jackknifing.

But she’d been driving the motor home for just a few minutes now, and she’d already found plenty of other things to worry about. She especially hated the rearview mirrors on each side. The extension mirrors Ryan had put on his car for their trailer had been hard enough to use, but at least those had been just simple flat planes. Now she had to keep track of reflections in a pair of mirrors on each side of the RV.

Below the larger, ordinary flat-plane mirror was a smaller convex mirror that made reflected objects look smaller than they were. That one was supposed to be useful for dealing with blind spots, but she obviously hadn’t yet gotten the hang of which one she should be watching.

So she'd almost hit a car. She shuddered to think of what that could have meant.

The close shave made her feel shaky, but she was determined to master the skill of driving this bulky vehicle. She was glad she hadn't picked out one of the really big Class A motor homes back at the rental lot. She was having plenty of trouble with their Class C, and it was just mid-sized.

She felt sure of one thing. Crivaro would let her know whatever she was doing wrong. He'd been criticizing her driving pretty much nonstop since they'd left that roadblock area.

But even as Riley glanced anxiously back and forth between the road and the mirrors, she saw Crivaro put his hands behind his head and appear to relax a bit.

He said, "Well, you seem to be getting the hang of this tub. Maybe we should talk strategy. You're the girl with the plan. Now that we're on our way, tell me what we're going to do next."

Riley stifled a sigh. She wished he hadn't asked her that. Sure, it had been her idea to drive north in search of a lone driver in a white Winnebago who claimed to be going to the Crayfish Creek Campground. But she really hadn't thought beyond that. She'd hoped Crivaro would have some ideas.

She thought for a moment, then replied, "We probably should call ahead to the campground, let the security people there know we're on our way."

Crivaro let out a sarcastic gasp.

"What?" he asked. "We're not going undercover again?"

"Not in these outfits," she said.

She was glad she and Crivaro had changed back into the clothes they'd worn when they'd flown out from Quantico. Their ordinary outfits were better suited to the cooler weather, but Riley and Crivaro sure didn't look like campers anymore.

Crivaro let out a mock sigh.

"How will I ever get over my disappointment?" he said.

"Ha-ha-ha, very funny," Riley grumbled. "You make the call, I'm driving."

"Yes, *ma'am*," Crivaro said.

Crivaro took out his cell phone and called directory assistance for the campground phone number. He punched in the number and put the call on speakerphone. When a security officer named Perosky answered, Crivaro

explained that they were BAU agents looking for a serial killer.

“Jesus,” Perosky said. “You mean the psychopath who killed those women down in Arizona?”

“That’s right,” Crivaro said.

“And you think he’s headed our way?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Crivaro said. “We got a tip that he might be stopping at your campground on the way to Bryce Canyon. How are things there right now? Have you noticed anybody out of the ordinary?”

Perosky said, “No, things are actually pretty slow here, not many visitors right now. We’ve had snow, and that keeps all but the hardy types away from here.”

Riley glanced over and Crivaro and mouthed the word ...

“Snow?”

Crivaro shrugged at her and kept talking to Perosky.

“We’re looking for a white Winnebago.”

Perosky said, “Well, I can tell you for sure we don’t have any of those right at the moment. The biggest RVs we’ve got here are Class C. They’re better suited for the roads in these conditions.”

Riley wasn’t surprised to hear this, and she was sure Crivaro wasn’t either. There was no way the driver who’d been stopped at the roadblock could have gotten that far north in so short a time.

Crivaro said to Perosky, “Listen, keep your eye out for a big Winnebago, especially if it’s got a red stripe along its side. If one shows up, call us right away.”

“Got it,” Perosky said.

Crivaro said, “My partner and I are driving a Class C. How is your road?”

“Pretty good. You won’t have any trouble getting here in that kind of rig. But if you continue on up to Bryce Canyon, that’s another story. You’d have to be winterized. You’d need good boots to walk around.” He chuckled and added, “Or show shoes.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Crivaro said, ending the call.

Then he said under his breath to Riley, “Snow. Jesus. We were in the desert just yesterday, and it was mild even in Sedona.”

Riley said, “Hey, don’t forget, it’s almost Christmas. And we’re moving into higher altitudes.”

Crivaro said, “Well, I sure hope we don’t wind up having to follow this

guy any farther north. We're just not equipped to go chasing a suspect through any serious snow."

*

Riley and Crivaro soon passed Flagstaff, and the freeway traffic thinned out, making driving easier for Riley. But after another three hours on the road, darkness was starting to fall. As they drove into higher altitudes, they saw some pines and cedars. Other trees were bare of any leaves. It had been snowing here lately, but the highway was reasonably clear.

Eventually they turned off the highway onto a smaller road. It had been plowed, but not as recently as the highway. A covering of snow was packed down by vehicles that had been coming and going this way.

By the time they were just a mile or so from the Crayfish Creek Campground, they still hadn't heard anything back from Perosky.

Crivaro shook his head with resignation.

"I hate to say it, but this whole trip is a bust. Perosky would have called if our Winnebago guy had shown up. And there's no way he wouldn't have gotten there by now."

Riley didn't reply, but she figured her partner was right.

Which means my hunch was wrong.

Worse, they'd driven way up into Utah on a wasted trip at her insistence. Riley stifled a deep, discouraged sigh. Although he wasn't showing it, she knew that Crivaro's patience with her was surely waning. After this fiasco, would he take any advice from her ever again? She doubted it.

Then Crivaro's phone buzzed.

It was Perosky again.

"Hey, I see a white Winnebago pulling up to the gate right now."

Crivaro asked, "Can you see the driver? Does the vehicle have a red stripe on its side?"

"It's too dark to tell from here," Perosky said. "What should I do?"

Riley and Crivaro exchanged eager glances.

Crivaro said, "Whatever you do, Perosky, don't alarm the driver. Treat him just like any other camper. If he's our guy, we'll apprehend him when we get there."

They ended the call and Crivaro said in an excited voice ...

"I'll be damned. You might have been right after all."

But Riley didn't dare get her hopes up.

When they pulled up to the campground gate a few minutes later, they found a man in a security uniform waiting for them. Crivaro rolled down the passenger window and asked him, "Are you Perosky?"

The man nodded.

"Where's the vehicle?" Crivaro asked.

Perosky pointed and said, "Over there. But I don't guess it's the one you're looking for."

Sure enough, Riley and Crivaro saw the Winnebago that had pulled into the parking area. A man, a woman, and two children had already gotten out of the RV to stretch their legs after their drive here. They were all well bundled up and were obviously enjoying the snow.

A family, Riley realized.

She and Crivaro both knew that there was no way the actual killer would be traveling with a family.

In a weary voice, Crivaro thanked Perosky for his help. The security man nodded and walked over to the check-in booth. Riley turned off the lights and engine. She and Crivaro sat in the cab of their vehicle. A whole minute passed with neither of them saying anything.

Finally Crivaro said in a sullen voice, "Well, so much for your brilliant theory, Riley. Now what do we do?"

Before Riley could think of anything to say, Crivaro snapped at her ...

"Never mind. Your crazy ideas dragged us all the way up here to the goddamn frozen north with no killer in sight. I say we drive back down to Sedona, team up with Chief Wilson again, start from scratch."

Riley could hardly believe her ears.

"What do you mean, start from scratch?" she said. "Do you seriously think the killer is still anywhere around there?"

"Well, he's not around *here*, that's for sure."

"How can we be sure?" Riley said.

Crivaro growled, "We can't be sure of anything. He could be anywhere—east, west, north, or south. That's why we've got to go back and regroup, set up a stable base of operations in Sedona."

Riley gripped the steering wheel and gritted her teeth.

"No," she said.

Crivaro said, “Damn it, kid, you can’t go getting mad every time you’re wrong about something. Let’s get out, stretch our legs for a minute, and then I’ll take over the driving. You’re too pissed off to drive.”

“And you’re not?” Riley asked in an angry voice.

Crivaro stared at her, apparently startled by her tone.

Then he said, “You’re just being stubborn.”

Riley felt a twinge of guilt. Maybe she was just being stubborn. She was angry, all right—but was she angry with Crivaro for wanting to go back to Sedona, or at herself for screwing things up so badly?

She sat there for a moment, trying to convince herself that she’d been wrong all along, and that the killer hadn’t come north after all.

But the more she tried, the more stubborn she felt.

She just couldn’t help herself.

Her thoughts thrashed around as she tried to think of something, anything, to allay her own doubts. Suddenly a single word popped into her mind ...

Boondocking.

It took a moment for her to remember where she’d heard that word before.

When it came to her, Riley said to Crivaro ...

“I’ll bet he’s boondocking.”

Crivaro squinted at her and said, “You bet he’s *what?*”

“Boondocking. The women back at the Spring View Campground told me about it. It means parking an RV offsite without using any campground utilities—you know, like electricity and water and sewage. I think that’s what our guy must be doing.”

Crivaro rolled his eyes.

“Oh come on, Riley—”

Riley interrupted, “Think about it, Jake. He can’t get too settled down in a particular spot. He’s got to stay mobile. After a killing, he’s got to get on the move again right away. That means he’s not a regular camper. He’s a boondocker.”

Crivaro said, “So what? Even if you’re right, which I’ve got no reason to believe, what are we supposed to do with this great new insight of yours?”

That’s a good question, Riley realized.

Without another moment’s thought, she opened the driver’s door and jumped out.

“Where the hell are you going?” Crivaro yelled.

Riley didn't reply. Ignoring the cold soaking into her FBI shoes, she walked straight over to the check-in booth and poked her head inside. Perosky was in there talking to another campground employee. Riley heard Crivaro's footsteps as he came trotting up behind her.

She said to Perosky, "Do you get boondockers in this area?"

Perosky tilted his head with surprise.

"Yeah, we get some," he said.

The employee he had been talking to added, "They really piss us off, staying off the grid when they ought to be camping right here to pay for our services. Just a bunch of bums as far as we're concerned."

Perosky added, "In most other areas, boondockers do their squatting in shopping center parking lots, places like that. We don't have any shopping centers near here. But lately I drove by a few campers who'd hunkered down over at Thorpe Overlook."

The employee nodded and said, "Yeah, I noticed them too. It's illegal there, and I've been meaning to call the Highway Patrol to come and clear them out. Not that it would do much good. As soon as you've kicked out one bunch, more of them set up someplace else. It's a real pain in the ass."

Riley asked for directions to Thorpe Overlook, and the two men told her how to drive there. Then she dashed back to the RV with Crivaro hurrying right behind her. She climbed back into the driver's side, and Crivaro got back into the passenger seat.

As she started the engine again, Crivaro grumbled, "Where are we going now?"

Riley asked, "Where do you think we're going?"

Crivaro let out a groan of frustration as Riley started to drive, fishtailing the vehicle on the packed snow in her haste to get away.

"Riley, you're *wrong* about this," Crivaro said. "And damn it, you *know* you're wrong."

Riley wondered, *Is he right?*

Did she seriously think they were going to find the killer at Thorpe Overlook?

She didn't feel like she was following any real instincts right now. It felt more like that she was acting out of sheer stubbornness. She just couldn't seem to admit to herself that she was wrong.

She growled under her breath and thought ...

If I'm wrong, I'm wrong.

Life would be a lot simpler if Crivaro never trusted her instincts again, and she just went back to following his orders ...

If he doesn't fire me.

And in a way, that would simplify things too.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

When Riley turned their RV off the highway, she found herself driving through deeper snow than she'd encountered before. However there were fresh tread marks left by other vehicles, so she was sure they'd find someone boondocking at Thorpe Overlook.

Would it be the killer they were looking for?

She carefully followed the treads. Soon the RV headlights picked up several RVs in an open area at the end of the narrow road.

This was obviously the overlook, but her spirits fell when she saw the boondockers. Her headlights fell on a couple of cars with trailers and three or four small campers. There weren't any large motor homes in sight—nothing close to the size of a Class A vehicle.

Riley heaved a deep sigh.

It's hopeless, she thought.

She was about to admit her failure aloud when Crivaro spoke up.

"Back up and turn right a little. I think I saw something over that way."

Riley did as she was told. Sure enough, the lights fell on a vehicle some distance away from the ones they'd already seen.

It was a huge white motor home with a stripe on the side.

She pulled their RV a little closer. It was a Winnebago, exactly the type of RV they were looking for.

Feeling a renewed surge of excitement, Riley said, "That's got to be him. Why would somebody in a luxury vehicle like that be roughing it out here, with no utilities in sight? It must be because he doesn't want to attract attention, and also because he needs to be able to move out quickly. And I don't care what you say—"

Crivaro interrupted with a growl ...

"Shut up, Riley. I agree with you."

Riley looked at him, startled by his sudden affirmation.

"Turn off your headlights," Crivaro told her. "We don't want to advertise ourselves."

Riley turned off the headlights, then the engine, and Crivaro took a flashlight out of his go-bag. When they both climbed down out of their vehicle, they were ankle-deep in snow.

As she felt the cold seeping into her shoes, Riley realized just how unprepared they were for this setting. At least her FBI jacket was holding off the chill.

Some of the smaller campers had lights on inside, but the Winnebago was completely dark. Crivaro kept his flashlight pointed downward at the ground right in front of them, taking care not to shine the beam in the Winnebago's windows.

As they neared the door to the Winnebago, Riley noticed Crivaro's hand hover close to his weapon. He rapped sharply on the door and a man's voice answered ...

"Who the hell is it?"

Riley and Crivaro exchanged glances.

"We're FBI agents," Crivaro called back. "We just want to come inside and talk."

They heard a stream of muttered curses on the other side of the door.

Then the voice said, "OK, give me a minute."

Riley could see Crivaro jerk upright at the sound of those words. Riley guessed that he'd heard them before in situations like this.

A light came on inside the Winnebago, followed by a lot of rattling and banging noises.

Crivaro muttered to Riley, "This is bad."

Crivaro pulled the latch, and to their surprise the door came open.

Jake stepped up into the motor home and Riley followed. They were just in time to see a man scrambling out through an open sliding window. Before they could reach him, he was gone.

"Shit," Crivaro said. "Back outside," he snapped as he whirled around and pushed past Riley.

They both dashed outside, and Crivaro searched the area with his flashlight.

The suspect was taking off through the wooded area beside the overlook, wading through the snow as fast as he could.

Crivaro shouted, "Stop, or I'll shoot."

The guy didn't even slow down.

Of course, Riley knew that Crivaro's warning was just a bluff. The man they were chasing appeared to be unarmed, and Crivaro would never fire his weapon under circumstances like these.

With a groan Crivaro took off after him. In the shakily focused beam of Crivaro's flashlight, Riley saw that the fleeing man seemed to be headed off to one side, so she cut in that direction. Even though the woods weren't thick, running was hard here and the footing was slippery. When the runner slipped and grabbed at a sapling for support, Riley closed in and tackled him.

He struggled as they both fell into the snow and rolled over each other. Fortunately, he wasn't a very strong opponent and Riley had him subdued when Crivaro caught up with them.

"Good job," Crivaro told Riley. He holstered his gun and took out a pair of handcuffs. He helped Riley to her feet and handed her the flashlight. Then he pulled the suspect to his feet, put him in handcuffs, and read him his rights.

"This is crazy," the captive exclaimed in a whining voice. "I was scared maybe the Highway Patrol would show up. I never figured the FBI would come after me. Why me? This is too crazy. I can't believe this."

Wondering what he meant, Riley turned the light into the suspect's face.

Something's wrong here, she realized.

The man they had just arrested didn't look anything at all like the killer she'd pictured in her mind. He was a grubby-looking bearded man with stringy hair and bulging eyes. They were looking for a man who had aroused no suspicions at the roadblock, who had charmed several women to their deaths.

She followed along glumly as Crivaro led the captive back inside his Winnebago. Crivaro pushed the man into a seat and said to Riley ...

"Check the bathroom. Make sure he hasn't got another victim."

Riley went to the bathroom and opened the door.

Her spirits fell.

This was no "kill room," just a rather dirty RV bathroom. There was no insulation on the walls, no sign of blood.

There was, however, something dark inside the toilet bowl.

She flashed her flashlight into the bowl and saw what it was.

Marijuana.

There must be several pounds of it stuffed in there.

The suspect, obviously not very intelligent, had tried to get rid of an enormous stash down a toilet that wasn't even hooked up to any sewage system. Even if he got it flushed, it wouldn't be going anywhere.

In a resigned and weary voice, she called out ...

“Agent Crivaro, I think you’d better have a look at this.”

*

Within minutes, Riley and Crivaro pretty much understood the entire situation. The man they had caught was not the killer they had hoped to find.

He was now all too eager to talk, anxious to convince them that he wasn’t guilty of whatever terrible crime they thought they’d arrested him for. He was just an ordinary but reasonably prosperous drug smuggler driving his merchandise north to Salt Lake City.

Crivaro took out his cell phone and called Perosky at the campground, who in turn called the Highway Patrol. The troopers arrived in about twenty minutes.

By then, a few boondockers stood outside their campers gawking at the action. Other faces were peering out through their RV windows. Riley noticed that at least two vehicles had slipped away, perhaps alarmed by the activity or perhaps wanting to avoid any attention to themselves.

Even though boondocking here wasn’t legal, the troopers ignored the bystanders. They took the guy Riley and Jake had caught into custody and whisked him away, leaving a man behind to guard the suspect’s RV until they could pick it up.

Once they were free to go, Riley took a moment to change into dry clothes from her go-bag. She wiped off her wet FBI shoes, hoping that they weren’t ruined. Finally she found a pair of bright-colored sneakers in their camper’s gear and put those on.

She felt angrier than she could remember ever feeling in her life.

And she was angry with no one but herself.

After all, she had no one else to blame.

As she climbed back onto RV driver’s seat, Crivaro asked ...

“Hey, where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I don’t know, Agent Crivaro,” she hissed. “Somewhere. Anywhere. Nowhere. Does it even matter?”

She heard Crivaro heave a deep, weary sigh as she started the engine.

“No, I don’t guess it does,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

As Sally Marino ordered a much-too-expensive margarita in the swank clubhouse at the Delphi RV Resort, she wondered ...

Oh, God.

Have I made a terrible mistake?

Earlier in the day back at that truck stop, she'd told that man, Pete, that she was coming to this exclusive campground. In fact, she had planned no such thing. But she'd come here anyway, just because she'd said she would.

What on earth had she been thinking?

I was just trying to impress him, she thought with a sigh.

As soon as she'd seen him sitting at that table, she had really liked the looks of him—or more specifically his expensive Rolex watch and the fancy Winnebago he was driving. She'd gone straight over to his table and introduced herself. She'd even told him a lot about herself.

The problem was, quite a bit of it wasn't truthful.

While it was true that she was a “free spirit” who liked to travel, it wasn't at all true that she'd inherited a lot of money from her dead parents and was able to do pretty much whatever she liked for as long as she liked.

The reality was, she'd left her working-class family behind years ago and hadn't looked back. She had traveled everywhere, but not in the style she'd led him to believe. She'd actually been backpacking across Europe, hitchhiking wherever it was still legal in the United States, and just generally going wherever suited her fancy. She'd lived by her wits and taken whatever jobs she'd needed to get by, ranging from washing dishes to a brief stint as a disk jockey for a country radio station.

And through it all, she'd relished her freedom and had made few human attachments.

But she'd just turned thirty-five this year, and her nomadic existence was starting to wear her down. For example, it took a lot longer to recuperate after a vigorous hike than it used to. She'd been wondering whether it might be time to finally settle down, maybe even reunite with her long-estranged family ...

She'd also started taking a hitherto nonexistent interest in prosperous-looking single men, which was why she'd started flirting with Pete back at

that truck stop. She'd liked him more and more as she'd talked to him, and she'd even begun to fantasize ...

What?

That he might take an interest in me?

That we might have a relationship?

Now she was shocked by her own romance-novel shallowness. What was getting into her—aside from a fear of winding up old and broke and all alone in the world?

Anyway, here she was, at one of the most exclusive campgrounds in the west. As soon as she'd gotten here she'd maxed out her credit card to become a member, just so they'd let her in.

And all because she'd harbored some hope of meeting Pete here!

She looked all around the clubhouse and didn't see any sign of him.

But then, had she really expected him to show up?

She smirked to herself as she considered the possibility that Pete, too, had been lying about coming here just to impress her, and that he wasn't on his way here at all.

Wouldn't that be a joke?

Of course, the joke would be on her—and it wouldn't be very funny.

She was going to have to start rebuilding her precarious finances all over again.

She glanced over at the bar and wondered ...

I wonder if they're hiring any bartenders.

And yet, if Pete did show up, what would that lead to? If they struck up any chemistry together, wouldn't she have to come clean about the lies she'd told about herself?

What would he think of her then?

He might be amused, she considered.

For all I know, he harbors some secrets of his own.

Meanwhile, she was here and she might as well spend the rest of one night here. Not that any of it looked appealing to her. She looked out the window at the spacious grounds where mostly high-end RVs were spaced nicely apart, rather like an upscale suburban neighborhood where her own little Starcraft trailer looked distinctly out of place.

There were several indoor swimming pools, and she'd just done a few laps in one of them. Then she'd relaxed in a Jacuzzi, dried her hair, and finally

come on over to the clubhouse.

She wasn't used to all this luxury. Roughing it was more her style. As far as she was concerned, life at the Delphi campground was no more like real camping than a trip on a cruise ship.

And this clubhouse was much too cheerful for her liking, with its holiday decorations that emphasized angels and crystals and other New Age paraphernalia, along with the bland, droning versions of Christmas songs piped in over the speakers.

No, she really and truly didn't belong here.

She looked at her watch and saw that it was very late.

He's definitely not going to show, she thought.

It had been silly of her to ever imagine he would.

And yet she thought it was probably just as well.

She signed for her drink, adding a tip that she definitely couldn't afford, and walked on outside. Again, she was startled by the cold—a real change after having just driven up here from Arizona. Fortunately, she was warmly dressed in slacks and a sweater.

She actually enjoyed such variations in the weather. It kept her aware that she was traveling.

As she walked along the paved and well-lighted path that led to her camper, she smiled to see that snow was starting to fall. Of course it would melt off tomorrow, but tonight was going to be quite pretty.

Just then, a shadowy figure stepped right in front of her, silhouetted for a moment against an outdoor floodlight.

A familiar male voice said ...

"Hi, Sally. Where are you off to?"

She squinted and asked, "Pete? Is that you?"

The man stepped squarely into the light. It was Pete, all right, looking as good to her as he had back at the truck stop. She was sure his sweater was cashmere.

"Who else were you expecting?" he said with a rakish smile.

Sally felt suddenly and strangely ill at ease, as though little bells were going off in her mind. People who lived her kind of lifestyle had to develop a warning system regarding certain other people, although she knew that hers didn't always work as well as it should. She'd felt quite at ease with Pete back at that truck stop, even enthusiastic over him. Now she just felt confused

over her own reactions.

She stammered, “I—I just figured you weren’t going to show up.”

Pete shrugged and said, “I told you I’d be here. I always keep my promises.”

For some reason, that struck Sally as an odd thing to say.

She took a quick glance around. No one else seemed to be outside at this late hour.

For an awkward moment, she and Pete just stood there, facing each other. He seemed to be waiting for her to speak, but she couldn’t think of anything to say.

Finally Pete touched her arm and said, “Come on, let’s get out of the cold. My RV’s just a short walk away.”

Well, this is what you came here for, Sally told herself. You’ve already spent a fortune just for a chance to get to know this guy.

She walked beside him toward his RV. Her own trailer was also nearby, which felt somehow reassuring.

She really wasn’t sure why she was feeling so nervous now that it seemed her romance-novel fantasy might be coming true ...

It all seems a little too unreal.

As they drew near Pete’s majestic Winnebago, she noticed something peculiar. She didn’t see any power cord or water line running from the utilities hookup to the RV. Unlike her own trailer, his RV didn’t seem to be hooked up at all. It was as if he were boondocking—only right here in the campground.

She gulped and thought ...

Something’s wrong here.

As she hesitated again, Pete said with a smile ...

“It’s getting colder out here. Are you coming in or aren’t you?”

Sally felt a little embarrassed at her own reluctance. Sure, she could turn down his invitation, but ...

What kind of a free spirit would do that?

As she followed him the last few steps to his fancy motor home, she figured she knew at least one thing for sure ...

This is going to be another adventure.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Riley's teeth were clenched as she drove down through the mountains, away from the Thorpe Overlook and Crayfish Creek Campground. She was furious with herself.

"Stupid," she growled under her breath. "I was so stupid."

Crivaro chuckled from the passenger seat. "What are you complaining about? We caught a bad guy, didn't we? And it was your doing."

It was all Riley could do not to explode with anger.

She replied, "We caught some ordinary dork, Agent Crivaro—a stupid, harmless guy who happened to have a stash of pot that he didn't know how to get rid of."

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Crivaro's shrug.

"Well, the last I heard, pot's illegal," Crivaro said. "Especially smuggling and selling it. Although I hear tell that might change one of these days, at least in some places. Meanwhile, you successfully tracked down a bona fide lawbreaker, and that's something, isn't it? Maybe you should reconsider this whole BAU thing. Maybe you've got a career in the DEA."

Crivaro chuckled some more at this remark.

"You think this whole thing is funny, don't you?" Riley grumbled.

Crivaro sighed and said, "Kid, in our line of work, you've got to laugh once in a while, even when things don't seem very funny. Maybe *especially* at times like this. The job will kill you if you don't keep your sense of humor. That's one thing they didn't teach you at the Academy, I guess. Too bad. It's time you learned."

Riley noticed that Crivaro wasn't laughing anymore. His voice sounded tired and discouraged. She knew he'd just been trying to find something to make light of, now that things were going so badly.

And it's all my fault, she thought.

"I'm sorry," she told him. "I had a hunch, and I insisted that we follow it, and—"

Crivaro interrupted, "Hey, don't beat yourself up about it. A hunch is a hunch. It's not rocket science, and it's not brain surgery either. Hunches are wrong a good percentage of the time. Mine are and yours will be too."

Riley drove in silence for a moment. Then she said, "The killer's still out

there.”

“I know,” Crivaro replied.

“He might be getting ready to kill somebody else right now. Or he might have already done it.”

“I know that too,” Crivaro said.

“So what do we do now?” Riley said.

“That’s a good question. I was hoping you could tell me. I was all for staying right there at Crayfish Creek until we could think of some new strategy. Maybe get a good night’s sleep there first, because I think we could really use it. It was your idea to head right out driving God knows where.”

Riley shook her head and thought ...

“God knows where” is right.

She’d insisted on leaving as soon as the campground’s security people had George Carver safely in custody and the police were on their way. The evidence against the man was obvious, and the security guys had seemed happy enough to take credit for the arrest.

She and Crivaro could write or phone in additional statements if anybody needed them.

Riley had felt as though she couldn’t stand another minute in that place where she’d made such a stupid mistake.

But now that they were on the road again, she had no idea where they were going.

At least it was a bit of a relief to be descending out of the mountains. She’d found it rather nerve-wracking to drive this Class C behemoth through snow on the road at those higher altitudes. Their RV wasn’t equipped for that kind of travel, and she knew they were lucky to have made their way out without getting stuck. By the time they got back to the main highway, the roads were clear. Any snow that had fallen here had melted off promptly.

Rather than retrace their route back toward Arizona, Riley turned right on the highway. Then she said to Crivaro, “Get the map out of the glove compartment.”

“Why?” Crivaro asked.

“Just do it, OK?” Riley said. “Give me some idea of where we might be headed. Because I sure as hell don’t have any idea.”

Crivaro let out a soft groan. He clicked open the glove compartment and took out the map, which rattled as he unfolded it. He peered closely at it with

a little penlight and said in a mildly sarcastic tone ...

“Well, if we keep heading west like this, we’ll wind up in beautiful Zion National Park. Or we can turn north and wind up in the equally beautiful Dixie National Forest. The thing I want to know is, why would *anybody* want to go camping in any of these places at this time of year?”

Riley grumbled, “Campgrounds for RVs, Agent Crivaro. Or even better, motor home resorts. We’re looking for a place to stay for what’s left of this night.”

“Well, we could drive right back to Crayfish Creek and—”

“That’s not going to happen,” Riley snapped at him. “Find somewhere that we can rest and regroup.”

Riley was startled by the sharpness in her own voice.

Who do I think I am, giving him orders like that?

She wasn’t sure why Crivaro didn’t snap her head off in reply, except that he seemed too tired and listless to bother.

As he rustled the map some more, Crivaro said, “Well, we’ve got a lot of choices in this part of the country. There’s the Water Sedge Campground, Kehoe Gulch Resort, Indiangrass Campground, and the Delphi RV Resort—”

“The *what?*” Riley interrupted.

“The Delphi RV Resort. Have you heard of it?”

Yes, I have, Riley thought.

It took her a moment to remember just when or where, but then it came to her. Back at the Spring View Campground, the women she’d talked with had spoken of Delphi in the most glowing way ...

“... a very blessed place ...”

Riley also remembered what the women had said about the people who went there ...

“... the very best people ...”

“... evolved people ...”

“... people with the highest self-esteem ...”

“... people who know their true self-worth.”

Riley heard Crivaro say, “Well, that sounds nice.”

Riley blushed to realize she’d said at least some of those words aloud.

I guess I’m pretty tired too, she thought.

Crivaro added, “Sounds pretty ritzy, though. I’m not sure we should be living too high on the hog at the Bureau’s expense. Maybe we should go with

one of the cheaper places.”

Riley didn't reply. Instead, her own words were rattling in her head now—things she'd said when she'd been trying to profile the killer. Aside from the obvious fact that he was well off financially, she remembered describing him with words like ...

... arrogant ... superior ... entitled ...

She also flashed back to something Crivaro just said ...

“Why would anybody want to go camping in any of these places at this time of year?”

Then she remembered something else one of the women had said.

“Nobody who is anybody would ever miss out on going to Delphi.”

Riley felt a sharp jolt of intuition.

He definitely considers himself to be somebody, she thought.

Somebody very special.

Somebody with lots of self-esteem.

Somebody very ... evolved.

She said to Crivaro, “Tell me how to get there. To Delphi.”

“Huh?” Crivaro said.

“Give me directions,” Riley said.

Crivaro checked the map again. “You're headed in the right direction,” he said. “It's just off this highway, on the right. Should be about an hour.”

Folding up the map, Crivaro asked, “Would you mind telling why you want to do this?”

Riley tried to think of how to explain her gut feeling. But before she could say a word, Crivaro said ...

“You know what? Skip it. I'll take your word for it. I'll leave the whole thing in your capable hands.”

Riley was startled to see that he was unsnapping his shoulder harness.

What's he going to do? she wondered.

Was he going to tell her to pull off the highway and let him out? Was he so discouraged that he was giving up on the case—and on her as well? Was he just going to disappear into the night?

Instead, he awkwardly began to climb between the two seats back into the living section of the RV.

“Where are you going?” Riley asked.

“To get some sleep,” Crivaro said. “I'm bone tired. Right now I'm no use

to you or anybody else.”

He disappeared into the darkness behind her.

Riley felt shaken.

He sounds so discouraged, she thought.

Now that she thought about it, he’d been sounding that way a lot lately. Actually, he’d seemed depressed much of the time since they’d flown out to Arizona.

Now Riley felt a pang of guilt. All this time, she’d been thinking about herself—whether Crivaro was angry with her, whether he even wanted her to be his partner. It really hadn’t occurred to her ...

Something is really bothering him.

Probably something that had little or nothing to do with her.

She wished she could ask him about it, but she figured he was already lying down and dozing off by now. And besides, he hadn’t seemed to be in the mood to talk about anything.

Maybe later, she thought.

Meanwhile, she’d made a decision for both of them, and Crivaro seemed to be resigned to accepting it.

They were going to the Delphi RV Resort.

This time I’d better be right, she thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The man was pleased as the woman named Sally accompanied him the last few steps toward his RV. In glow of streetlamps that illuminated the swirling snow, he was again struck by her healthy, vigorous appearance.

That's not going to last, he told himself.

Very soon, she'd be looking pale and weak, just like the others.

She'd seemed startled to see him just now when they met on the outdoor path.

I caught her off guard, he realized.

Of course, that had been part of his design. When she'd sat alone in the clubhouse sipping her drink, he'd been standing outdoors in the shadows for a while. Although he'd told her he'd meet her in that clubhouse, he'd never had any such intention.

Watching through the window, he'd observed her body language. He'd seen how she'd fingered the rim of her glass in boredom ... how she'd slouched in her chair as it had seemed to occur to her little by little that she was going to be alone here at the Delphi Campground after all. When he felt sure she'd been about to decide that he wasn't going to show up, he'd returned to his motor home to wait for her.

He'd parked where he could watch the walkways she'd be taking on the way back to her own RV. So when she'd given up waiting and started walking back to her trailer, it had been easy to abruptly appear in front of her on the path.

A masterstroke.

He was proud at how disarmed she'd been, and it gave him a feeling of power. And power, after all, was what all these special events were about. He was taking back power over his own life after years of feeling fearful and helpless deep down inside, in a part of his psyche where nobody else could see his pain.

He knew this last murder would complete the process once and for all.

He felt absolutely sure of it.

He heard Sally gasp as she stepped up through the doorway into his motor home. He smiled at her obvious astonishment as he walked in behind her.

The interior of his elegant camper was lit entirely by candlelight. This was partly out of necessity and partly out of cunning. He hadn't hooked up his RV to any of the campground facilities, including electricity, and he didn't want to use up his battery. He needed to be able to pull out of here in a hurry in order to carry out his plan.

But he also found the effect of the candles stunning, rather romantic, and even a bit Gothic.

He only hoped it wasn't too much for her. He didn't want to spook her into trying to leave. Not that he had any intention of letting her get out of the RV alive. But he wanted this killing to be different from the others, much less abrupt.

This time he actually wanted to spend some time with his victim, savor the experience, get to know her better than he already did.

And he'd made all the necessary preparations.

The dining table was set with two crystal glasses and an open bottle of red wine, plus a tray with cheese, crackers, and other snacks. His crowning touch, he thought, was the serrated knife for slicing the cheese. It was the same knife he'd used to kill three other women.

And he was certainly going to use it to kill Sally.

"Please," he said to her. "Make yourself comfortable."

Sally didn't look especially comfortable. Her mouth hung open a little, and her eyes were wide with amazement. Nevertheless, she sat down at the table.

The man sat across from her, watching her closely.

She stared at the candlelit wine and snacks and stammered ...

"Pete, I—I don't know about this."

The mention of his made-up name took him slightly aback and her words worried him a little.

With the most charming smile he could muster, he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to overwhelm you. I just wanted our evening to be ... special."

Sally laughed nervously and said, "Oh, it's *special*, all right. It's just ... not what I'd expected."

He chuckled and said, "I'm told that I have that effect on people. I hope this is all right."

He waited to hear her say it was all right.

But she didn't say anything at all.

Instead, she visibly shivered.

Is she cold? he wondered.

That couldn't be it. His propane heater kept the motor home quite warm. If anything, the man was afraid it might get too hot and stuffy.

Careful not to show his insecurity, the man poured wine into the two glasses.

Then he lifted his glass and said, "Here's to new acquaintances."

The woman smiled a little and raised her glass and clicked it against his. They both sipped the wine.

Still sounding nervous, Sally said, "The last time we talked, I ... I went on and on about myself. I don't feel like I know anything at all about you."

She sounded worried about that.

He reached his hand over the table, hoping she'd offer him her own hand. She didn't.

With a soft, reassuring chuckle, he said, "Oh, I'll be glad to tell you everything. Once I get started, you'll hear much more about me than you could possibly want to hear. But first I want to hear much, much more about you."

Her eyes darted about for a moment.

Then she sat staring at her own glass of wine with a troubled expression.

The candle nearest her on the tabletop flickered and almost went out, and it was harder to see the woman's face clearly. The effect upon the man was unsettling. He wanted to be able to study that face in detail.

But now, in the wavering light and shadow, her face seemed changed somehow, but also more familiar.

He gulped hard as he realized ...

Aunt Florence.

He'd picked this woman out in the first place because of her resemblance to his childhood tormentor—the same ruddy skin, the same curly brown hair, the same piercing blue eyes. Earlier today, the resemblance had pleased him to no end.

But now, here in the flickering candlelight, the resemblance was too uncanny.

He struggled to remind himself that she wasn't a ghost or an apparition. Even so, he was seized by an irrational spasm of that old childhood terror.

He could imagine her smiling and saying those dreaded words ...

“Out of sight, out of mind.”

And if she did, would his strength fail him utterly?

The razor-sharp knife lay on the tray directly between them.

If she picked it up right now, would he have the will to wrest it from her grasp?

Might she smile that glittering smile of hers and take his hand and lead him to the kill room that he had prepared for her? Might he surrender to her passively, as he always had back then? Might he wind up in the dark again, feeling his life ebbing away into the floor—only this time forever?

Nonsense, he thought.

He reminded himself that this was all about power. She had no power over him unless he granted it to her. To do so would defeat his treasured purpose.

Slowly she turned her eyes toward him again. A strange expression crossed her dimly lit face and she said, “There are a few things I ought to tell you.”

She fell silent again, and the man swallowed hard in anticipation of what she might say next.

Then she said ...

“I’m not exactly who you think I am.”

The man gasped aloud. It was purely a reflexive response, and he couldn’t help it.

The woman even *sounded* like Aunt Florence now.

That voice from his childhood echoed cruelly through his head.

“Out of sight, out of mind.”

Then the woman said, “When we met before ... earlier today ... I told you some things ...”

Her voice trailed off. The man struggled to control his breathing.

Then the woman said in a faltering voice ...

“I think I should go.”

As she started to scoot her way from behind the table, the man was completely overcome by panic.

I can’t let her get away, he thought.

He was on his feet in a flash,

He snatched the knife from off the tray. Before the woman could get up, he had the knife at her throat.

She stared at him wide-eyed. Her mouth fell open, but she couldn’t seem

to force any words out.

The candlelight was falling on her face differently now. She didn't look so much like Aunt Florence anymore. She looked like just another terrified victim ...

Which is exactly what she's going to be.

His own terror vanished in an instant, replaced by fierce anger at how she'd thwarted his self-control. His hope of savoring a long and exquisite killing had fled, and he felt bitterly cheated.

He was shaking all over with fury.

He yanked the woman to her feet. Holding her from behind with the knife at her throat, he dragged her toward the kill room.

It was ready for her. He'd already wheeled out the fake interior shelves and put them into the alternate space he'd designed for them.

He pushed down the latch with his free hand and pulled the door open. Then he tried to shove the woman inside the narrow space. But he hadn't reckoned on her being stronger than the others. She seemed suddenly to sprout extra arms as she thrashed away at him.

He finally managed to give her a violent push that sent her hurtling back into the closet. But as the heavy door swung shut, she thrust one arm out and blocked it from closing. He slammed the door against the crook of her elbow. Then he slashed back and forth across her wrist with his knife, drawing blood.

The woman let out a screech of pain, then pulled her hand back inside.

At last he was able to shut the door and lock it.

She was screaming wildly now, sounding as angry as she was terrified, demanding that he let her go. He stood standing there panting from exertion as he stared at the door trying to reassure himself ...

I cut her good.

I saw the blood.

He hadn't delivered his usual multiple wounds, and she might be able to stanch the flow from that one wrist. Even so, she was sure to bleed out. It would just take longer.

But even through the well-insulated closet walls, her screams were loud.

He'd committed his other killings where nobody was within earshot and his victims had faded quickly. He'd enjoyed listening to the final scratching and moaning as they'd died.

But now, if anybody happened to be nearby outside, they'd surely hear this. It was even possible that someone awake in the neighboring motor homes might pick up those sounds of fury and agony.

His anger was turning inward now.

I should have planned better.

But now he had no choice but to make the best of a terrible situation.

He groped his way to the driver's seat and started the engine. A thin layer of snow now coated the windshield. He turned on the wipers, but the glass was fogged up inside from the cold. He turned on the defroster and wiped the glass hastily with his sleeve.

Then he put the vehicle in gear and raced out of his camping space, smashing down a bush on the way.

He had no idea where he was going next, but one thing was certain ...

I can't stay here.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Riley craned forward in the driver's seat as she peered through the windshield into the night. Falling snowflakes flickered brightly in her headlights. She'd expected to be completely free of snow after they left the higher elevations near Bryce Canyon. There was none on the ground here, but these light flurries had started up just moments ago,

Fortunately she could still make out the highway pavement and its shoulder to the right of her vehicle. If she could keep her eye on that, at least she felt reasonably confident that she wouldn't go off the highway.

She had other worries, though.

Did I miss my turn? she wondered.

She hadn't seen any signs for the Delphi RV Resort for quite a while now.

She was annoyed with herself for not being sure she could find her way. But why wasn't Crivaro here and helping instead of in his bed at the back of the camper, apparently fast asleep?

She knew he was tired, and he'd seemed to be in a terrible mood. But couldn't he at least have stayed awake awhile and been a second pair of eyes to help her find her way through this unfamiliar territory in the snow?

She thought about giving him a sharp yell to tell him to get up.

But right then she saw the sign with an arrow ...

DELPHI RV RESORT

"At last!" she murmured aloud.

She braked and tried to take the turn as cautiously as she could, but even so the vehicle fishtailed a little as she steered onto the private road that led the rest of the way to the campground.

She growled under her breath and thought ...

At least Crivaro's not awake to complain about my driving.

And the road was well paved and wide enough for much wider vehicles than hers to travel comfortably. Still, her mind started to fill up with new worries. What exactly did she plan to do when she arrived at the campground? Sure, she'd had a strong hunch, but a hunch wasn't much good if she didn't know how to act on it.

Would she charge into main office and start demanding answers from whoever was on duty?

Would she even find anybody on duty?

It was late, and for all she knew the office would be closed for the night. Then what would she do?

At times like now, she felt sharply aware of her greenness as an agent. She simply didn't know what to do in every instance. Maybe someday she would, but right now that time seemed like a long way off.

She sighed as she thought ...

I'm going to have to wake up Crivaro when I get there.

And he wasn't going to be happy about it.

After a short drive, she arrived at the entrance to the campground. The entryway was marked by two big white brick pillars with lights atop of them. She was on a slight hill, looking down on vast well-tended grounds with lighted walkways. She pulled through the entryway and came to a stop just beyond it to take a better look. She saw an impressive cluster of buildings off to one side, and a few large motor homes spaced well apart on the other side.

The snow added to the strangeness of the view, making it all resemble a snow globe paperweight scene. With its trees and gardens placed between the campsites, the Delphi Campground looked like some kind of upscale neighborhood with RVs instead of houses. The campground seemed to Riley even more like a fairytale setting than the Spring View Campground back in Arizona, with all of its New Age trappings.

She remembered again how those women back at Spring View had described this campground ...

"... a very blessed place ..."

And she had to admit, it did cast quite a charming spell as the snow danced among the streetlights.

Then she realized that something was moving out there. A big white motor home had pulled out of its space and was turning toward the entrance where she had stopped. That struck her as odd. She wondered why someone would be pulling out of here at this late hour, especially now that it was snowing.

But there it was—an enormous vehicle driving none too slowly in her direction. As it drew nearer, Riley could see that it was a Winnebago with a stripe along its side.

A red stripe? she wondered, remembering Sergeant Gray's description of

the RV with the lone driver.

She thought maybe so, but it was hard to tell the color for sure in this light and the snowfall.

She wondered—had her hunch been right after all?

Might this be the killer?

If so, why would he be leaving this elegant setting? Where might he be headed? And most importantly—was he alone?

She warned herself not to jump to conclusions. She really had no idea who might actually be behind that wheel. But how was she supposed to find out?

She was again about to yell for Crivaro to wake up and help her but there was no time for that now. The other vehicle was speeding up.

She flashed her headlights as a signal, hoping the driver would at least slow down.

He didn't.

Riley felt a tingle all over. She knew one thing for sure—she couldn't just let the vehicle go on its way without personally confronting the driver. She fleetingly considered rolling down her window to try to flag him down. But she felt sure that he wouldn't stop on account of that either.

He'd be on his way out of the campground in a matter of seconds if she didn't take action immediately.

She backed up her vehicle slightly, then turned the steering wheel hard as she pulled forward again. With her RV turned sideways on the pavement, she figured she was effectively blocking the other vehicle's approach.

But the oncoming Winnebago veered sharply to its left. The driver was obviously trying to make an end run around her in order to charge on through the space between her RV and the entryway pillars.

I can't let him do that, Riley thought.

She backed up again, fully aware that the driver had no intention of stopping, and braced herself for impact.

The larger motor home slammed into hers, and Riley struggled with the steering wheel to keep her vehicle from spinning around.

But it was hopeless.

The RV she was driving tottered violently.

The whole world seemed to lurch around her.

Riley's head cracked against something hard as her vehicle rolled over on its side.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Riley struggled to grasp what had just happened. Everything around her had been spinning, crashing ... then the chaos had abruptly stopped.

The RV engine was still running, the headlights still shone into the falling snow, and the windshield wipers were still moving monotonously back and forth.

It all seemed perfectly surreal.

Then she remembered. She'd just been rammed by the approaching RV, and her own vehicle was now lying on its side. She had been slammed against the driver's side door and the blow had dazed her for a moment.

She heard a shout behind her.

"Riley!"

Crivaro! She felt a jolt of panic. Had he been hurt?

She unlatched her shoulder harness and shifted around until she could look between the front seats.

In the back of the RV, her partner was sprawled against the side wall that was now flat on the ground. The crash had thrown him out of his bed.

Crivaro yelled again, "Did you hear me, goddamn it? What the hell just happened?"

"We've had ... an accident," Riley called back to him. "Are you all right?"

She saw Crivaro try to pull himself upright. Then he let out a yelp of pain and sat down again, clutching his ankle.

"Ow," he snarled. "Hell, no, I'm not all right. I've sprained my ankle."

Riley was relieved that his injury wasn't worse. He sounded more angry than anything else.

She touched the side of her own head and felt a little bit of sticky blood there, but she wasn't bleeding badly, and otherwise she thought she was all right.

Then she wondered—where was the RV that had hit them?

She peered out through the badly cracked front windshield.

The Winnebago was right there, and it wasn't even overturned. The big motor home was standing upright facing her, but its headlights were off, and its engine didn't seem to be running. The collision must have disabled the

vehicle.

But no one was seated behind the wheel and she saw no sign of motion inside.

Where was the driver?

Had he already gotten away on foot? Could he still be somewhere nearby? Or could he actually still be inside his motor home?

She knew she mustn't let him get away.

Trying awkwardly to find her footing in the sideways RV cab, she yelled back at Crivaro ...

"I think the killer's out there. It was his vehicle that rammed us. I've got to stop him."

"Wait for me, goddamn it," Crivaro roared back. Then he shouted with pain again and said, "This ankle's hurt pretty bad. Give me a couple of minutes to get myself moving."

We may not have a couple of minutes, Riley thought.

She reached for her hip holster to make sure her gun was there. She managed to get to her feet and then climbed across the cab and pushed the passenger door open. She hoisted herself up through the door and onto the high side of the camper.

Looking around, Reilly saw that just down the hill lights had come on both in the resort clubhouse and in some of the parked motor homes. She hoped that civilians wouldn't start showing up to get involved in a dangerous situation. But it might help if some security people would arrive.

She jumped down to the ground and turned around slowly, checking her surroundings. She thought the killer must be on foot, but she didn't see anyone outside. Could he have gotten completely out of the visible areas while she was still in a state of confusion? One of his options would be to go down into the campground and force the staff or campers to help him. Another would be to slip past her overturned RV and out the private road to the highway.

Either of those was possible, but to Riley neither seemed very likely. She thought the wealthy sociopath she was tracking would hesitate to reveal himself to these people as a monster. Although he might do that as a last resort, it didn't fit his self-image. And she really couldn't picture him taking off across wilderness territory on foot.

Riley thought it was just as possible that the killer was still in the

Winnebago.

As she approached the big motor home, she touched her 22-caliber Glock. She'd been given the gun just last Saturday and hadn't expected to need it anytime soon. She hoped she wouldn't need it now.

After all, she'd never shot anyone before.

*

The man pushed a window curtain aside and peeked out at the woman who was approaching the side entrance to his vehicle.

Who is she? he wondered.

Everything had happened so fast, he hadn't had time to think. All he knew was that she had deliberately used her vehicle to try to block him from leaving the campground. When he had tried to evade her, she had maneuvered to keep her RV directly in his path. Rather than slow down to prevent a collision, he had sped up, hoping to shove the smaller vehicle aside and keep right on going.

But the collision had killed his engine, and he hadn't been able to start it up again. He was stranded right here.

As he wondered who the woman was and what she was doing here, he heard a whimpering cry. It came from the kill room. He'd almost forgotten that he'd left a victim in that converted closet.

He knew he'd slashed his victim's wrist, and he'd assumed that the wound would eventually be fatal. Fortunately, her cries were markedly weaker now, so she was fading from the injury he'd delivered and perhaps also from the effects of the crash.

He glanced over at the motor home door. To his alarm, he saw that it was slightly ajar. The crash must have broken the lock. Anybody could walk right in. For a moment he considered leaping out and running.

Too late, he realized.

The woman outside had paused in her approach and was looking at the RV carefully. Then she pulled a pistol from a hip holster and called out ...

"This is the FBI. Come out with your hands up."

The man felt a jolt of panic as he realized ...

She's a law enforcement officer.

For a fleeting moment, he felt absolutely helpless. Then he decided ...

I won't go down without a fight.

Perhaps he'd even take yet another victim down with him, if it came to that. His adversary might be FBI, but she was just a woman, after all. If she entered his RV, he had no intention of letting her get out alive, no matter what his own fate might be.

But she's armed, he thought. I've got to take her by surprise.

He looked around for the serrated knife and spotted it lying on the floor next to the table. He picked up the knife and looked around for a place to hide. His bathroom was right next to the kill room.

He ducked inside and shut the door behind him.

*

As Riley moved toward the Winnebago with her weapon drawn, she heard Crivaro call out ...

"Riley, where the hell are you? I told you to wait for me!"

She was now standing just outside the Winnebago's door, which she saw was slightly ajar.

Crivaro's right, she thought. I ought to stay put.

But then she heard a faint noise from inside the motor home. It sounded like a weak and muffled woman's voice. Riley couldn't understand the words, but she recognized the sound of panic.

The killer had another victim in there—and she was still alive.

Riley's heart pounded. She couldn't wait for Crivaro.

She snapped on a penlight and stepped up into Winnebago. She saw no one inside, and for a moment she heard nothing.

Then she heard it again. The voice was clearer now, coming from somewhere nearby.

"Help me! Please!"

Riley took a few more steps into the motor home. She heard a moan that seemed to be right beside her. It was becoming from behind a door.

She turned the latch, swung the door open, and pointed her penlight inside.

A woman was curled upon the floor in a tiny room. She stared wide-eyed up at Riley, then weakly held out one arm. Her shirt sleeve was soaked with blood.

Riley's Academy first aid training flashed through her mind. She put the

gun down and hastily positioned the penlight to help her see what she was doing.

First, she knew she needed to clear the wound of any clothing. She ripped the woman's shirt sleeve until she could see the wound clearly. Blood was spurting out in a steady pulse.

A cut artery, Riley realized.

She had to stop the bleeding if she possibly could. She tore off a strip of fabric from her own sleeve, then reached into her shirt pocket for her clean handkerchief. She pressed the folded handkerchief tightly against the wound, then tied it in place with the torn fabric.

She held the arm upward and kept pressure on the wound with her palm. Meanwhile, she noticed that the room wasn't what she'd expected. It wasn't a bathroom at all—just a bare little closet-sized space with insulated walls that were badly scratched and bloodstained. It appeared that some sort of drain had been installed in the metal floor to catch the victims' blood.

And this victim was still bleeding. Riley's handkerchief was soaked through, and the bleeding hadn't even slowed. She knew the next step was to apply pressure to the artery at a specific point above the wound.

But before she could act, a sharp force yanked her backward. In an instant, she was lying on the floor. Someone's foot was pressing on her chest. There was very little light and she couldn't see the crouched figure clearly, but she could feel a sharp blade against her throat.

She heard a sinister chuckle.

"This will only hurt for a moment."

Riley's Academy combat training took over, kicking her into action before her assailant could slash her throat. She twisted violently and rolled aside, surprising the man and momentarily throwing him off balance.

He quickly regained his footing and sprang at her again, slashing wildly at her wrist. This time his knife caught her and she could feel that the cut was deep and dangerous.

Riley knew she had to act fast, before she weakened from loss of blood.

She got a hold on the man's arm and twisted his hand, forcing the knife from his grip. Then she threw him on his back onto the floor.

She looked around for her gun. It was there, just within reach.

She managed to grab her weapon and point it at the man as he struggled to get to his feet.

“You’re under arrest,” Riley told him.

But she was getting dizzy and disoriented and wasn’t sure she could successfully get the man handcuffed. For a moment she thought she might die here along with the woman she’d tried to rescue.

Then she heard a voice call out from the open door ...

“Jesus Christ, Riley. What the hell ...?”

Her voice weakening, Riley said, “This is our man. I need you to get him in cuffs.”

As Crivaro started to comply, three people with blazing flashlights charged into the camper. The campground’s security team had gotten here at last.

Riley’s hand was shaking badly now, and she could barely keep her gun pointed at her assailant as Crivaro put him in handcuffs.

Tilting her head toward the victim, she managed to say to the security men ...

“There’s a wounded woman in that room. She’s bleeding badly. She needs first aid—fast.”

She heard Crivaro’s voice chime in ...

“My partner needs aid too.”

Then Riley fainted dead away.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

As a pair of orderlies wheeled Riley into her own hospital cubicle, she wondered ...

Where is Agent Crivaro?

She hadn't seen him since she'd been loaded into the ambulance back at the crime scene. She'd been disoriented, but she distinctly remembered that he'd growled at her ...

"That's the last time I'm letting you drive. Ever."

He hadn't sounded like he meant it as a joke.

The ambulance had whisked her away, leaving him behind at the campground.

Is he still mad at me? she wondered.

The two orderlies cheerfully helped her into a bed with clean sheets and made sure the bed controls and call button were within her reach. Then they left her there alone.

Riley lay still, listening to the muffled voices of hospital personnel as they scurried about nearby. She kept trying to replay in her mind all that had happened. After the fight back at the Delphi RV Resort, she'd lost consciousness a couple of times and the whole ordeal seemed like a blur now.

She remembered that Crivaro himself had kept pressure on her wound until a pair of ambulances arrived, one for the killer's intended victim and the other for her. The paramedics had applied hemostatic dressings to her wound and had successfully stopped the bleeding en route to the hospital. They'd told her she was going to a hospital in the nearest town, called Duckwater.

Since then, her wound had been stitched up by an emergency physician. She'd been checked closely in the ER for a time and finally moved into this bed. The doctor had told her she was out of immediate danger but had suffered a lot of initial blood loss, and she should stay in the hospital for another night.

It seemed that the night when everything had happened was long gone. It was morning now, and there was still no sign of Crivaro.

Riley looked up hopefully when she heard approaching footsteps, but it was just a young nurse checking on her.

She was dozing off when a gruff voice startled her back to attention.

“Agent Sweeney, we’ve got some talking to do.”

Crivaro hobbled into the cubicle using a cane. He had a brace strapped on one ankle.

She was glad to finally see him, but disturbed to hear him call her “Agent Sweeney” instead of just “Riley.”

He’s still mad at me, all right, she thought.

She pushed the button to raise her bed so she could face him. He hung the cane onto the bedrail, then sat down in a chair next to her bed. He crossed his arms and frowned at her.

“I should bust you right out of the Bureau,” he said. “You damn near got yourself killed.”

“I’m going to be all right,” Riley said in a weak voice.

“So they tell me,” Crivaro said sternly. “But that’s not the point. Don’t you know what a partner is for? I was right there. I told you to wait for me.”

Riley was tempted to remind him, “*But you had a sprained ankle.*”

But she figured she’d better hear him out.

Crivaro’s voice was getting loud as he continued, “Next time I tell you to wait for me, you wait for me, damn it. You’re an FBI agent—a trained professional, not some stupid kid with more guts than brains. And you’re sure as hell not a superhero. There *are* no superheroes in the real world. People who try to be superheroes get killed off early.”

The young nurse poked her head into the cubicle and sharply shushed Crivaro.

He turned and snapped at her, “Don’t shush me. This is my partner, goddamn it. I’ve got a right to give her a piece of my mind.”

Looking quite terrified, the nurse disappeared, and Crivaro sat in sullen silence.

Neither of them spoke for a few moments. Then Riley realized ...

He’s actually downright wrong.

If she’d waited for him to get on his feet, the woman in the kill room would probably have died from her wound. But instead of being angry, she felt oddly relieved.

She’d noticed a slight quaver in Crivaro’s voice when he’d yelled at her.

She knew him just well enough to know the quaver meant he was more scared than angry. He’d genuinely been fearful for her safety. Scolding her was his way of giving vent to his concern.

Finally he mumbled, "How are you feeling?"

Riley almost grinned and said ...

"Thanks for asking."

But she thought that might be pushing her luck.

Instead she replied, "OK, pretty much. I'm really weak. I guess that's from the blood loss."

Fingering the bandage on the side of her head, she added, "Really, it hurts most right here, where I got banged up during the accident. I've still got a headache. How's the woman we rescued doing?"

"About as good as can be expected," Crivaro said. "She got cut more than you did and she bled a lot. They had to give her a transfusion. But she's going to be OK."

Riley stifled a sigh as she thought ...

OK might not be the right word.

That woman would be struggling with this trauma for a long time, maybe the rest of her life.

Riley asked, "Is the killer still in custody?"

Crivaro nodded and said, "And he's going to stay that way—probably for good."

Something else occurred to Riley.

"We were wrong about the kill room, weren't we?" she said. "It wasn't a bathroom after all."

Crivaro said, "No, I got a good look at the place. He set things up pretty cleverly. The room with the insulation and the drain was originally a storage closet. He's turned the shelves into a unit he could pull out, kind of like a deep bookcase on wheels. He could easily put the whole thing in another location when he needed the room and then put it back again. Only a very close inspection would have found that. That's why he wasn't caught at the roadblock. It just looked like a little closet at the time."

"Who is he?" Riley asked.

Crivaro let out a slight grunt and said, "There's a lot we don't know about him yet. But the guys back in Quantico are already finding out some stuff. So far, we know that his name is Philip Hague, and he's from really old money, the family heir to an old Colorado mining fortune. He's always lived a life of leisure."

Riley felt a prickle of curiosity as she remembered her own attempt to

profile the killer.

“Did he have a reputation for violence against women?” she asked.

“None at all,” Crivaro said. “Judging from the occasional newspaper or magazine profile, he was considered to be quite likeable, excellent company at a party. A real *bon vivant*, you might say—a playboy. He had a steady stream of girlfriends coming and going, but none of them seemed to ever mention him being cruel or dangerous. From what we know so far, a lot of his acquaintances are going to be as shocked as hell to find out the truth about him.”

Riley squinted and said, “This doesn’t make sense to me. How could a guy like that go through life without anybody realizing ...?”

Her voice trailed off.

Crivaro said, “I’ve seen cases like this before, so it makes some sense to me. He was a ticking bomb of hatred and misogyny. The fact that he kept it bottled up for so long made him all the more dangerous when he really started killing. Anyway, we’ll find out more about him in the near future.”

Riley shook her head and said, “I was wrong about so many things. I even sent us chasing after the wrong man.”

Crivaro shrugged and said, “Well, you were right about some things. Your impressions at the crime scenes were pretty accurate. You just need to learn how to balance your intuitions with logical thinking. Believe me, that can take time.”

“I’m starting to get that,” Riley said.

“At least this undercover thing didn’t turn out to be a complete bust,” Crivaro added with a grin.

Riley knew that was true. The information she’d gotten about boondocking hadn’t been completely off the mark. Although her theory had led them at first to the wrong criminal, the real killer had turned out to be boondocking in his own way. He’d avoided hooking up to utilities even within a campground.

More importantly, if she hadn’t gotten into that conversation back in Sedona, she’d never have heard of the Delphi RV Resort where they’d actually found him.

Then Crivaro slouched a little in his chair.

He said, “Riley, I need for you to ... well, not let mistakes and setbacks get the best of you. We all make them, they’re part of the learning process.

Most of all, I need for you not to quit. You've got to stick with it, become the best agent you can possibly be. You've got to do it ... for me."

Riley was startled by how serious he sounded. She sat staring at him, expecting him to say more.

He smiled and patted her hand and said, "One of these days I'll tell you what I mean. Probably soon. Not now, though. I need to get out of here and let you get some rest. And I need to call Harry Carnes. He'll be thrilled his gut was right on this one, but I'm guessing he'll also be a little mad he couldn't play a part in actually catching the killer."

He got up from his chair, then said ...

"Oh, I forgot something."

He reached into his pocket and took out Riley's cell phone.

"I've had this since you got hurt," he said, setting it down beside her. "It's been buzzing almost nonstop. I guess someone's really anxious to get in touch with you."

Then with a wink he added, "I wonder who that could be."

"Ryan," Riley said.

"Yeah, probably," Crivaro said. "I'll see you later."

He picked up his cane and limped away, leaving Riley alone in her cubicle.

She looked at the cell phone and saw that she had about a half dozen messages from Ryan. She decided not to bother listening to them. What she really needed to do was call him.

She punched in the call and he answered the phone.

"Riley! What's going on out there? I've been worried sick!"

His voice sounded tired. As she considered the time, she figured maybe he hadn't yet gotten out of bed.

She also realized ...

I've got no idea what to say.

Ryan continued, "Last night on the TV news there was this story about a serial killer out in that part of the country. They said the FBI was looking for the killer. Was that the murder case you were working on?"

Riley took a long, slow breath. "Yeah, that's the case Crivaro and I came out here for. Don't worry. We've caught the killer. Everything's ..."

She couldn't quite get the word "fine" out.

He obviously had no idea that she'd been injured. Riley knew he'd have to

find out sooner or later, but now didn't seem to be the time to tell him.

Instead, she said, "Look, Crivaro and I ... we've still got a few loose ends to tie up. I've got to stay out here another night. Then I'll be able to come home."

"So you'll be home in time for Christmas," Ryan said.

"That's right. Anyway, I've got to go. We'll talk again soon."

"OK," he said, "I love you."

This time, Riley was able to say it back to him before he ended the call.

Riley sat staring at the phone for a few moments.

She remembered telling him the last time they'd spoken on the phone ...

"I guess we've got a lot to talk about when I get home."

She knew that that was just as true now as it was then.

They were still a long way from settling into the new lives they'd both chosen, and there were huge challenges ahead.

Meanwhile, Ryan's words just now echoed through her head ...

"You'll be home in time for Christmas."

Riley smiled. It would be the first Christmas she and Ryan had spent together.

That's something to look forward to.

NOW AVAILABLE FOR PRE-ORDER!



STALKING

(The Making of Riley Paige—Book 5)

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery! The author did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side that is so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. The plot is very intelligent and will keep you entertained throughout the book. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.”
--Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone)

STALKING (The Making of Riley Paige—Book Five) is book #5 in a new psychological thriller series by #1 bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose free bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) has received over 1,000 five star reviews.

When two teenage girls turn up dead in different states, each strangled, and each killed within days of each other—the FBI calls in its brilliant new agent, 22 year old Riley Paige, to stop the serial killer before he strikes again.

Riley, fresh out of the academy and off her last case, is settling into FBI life

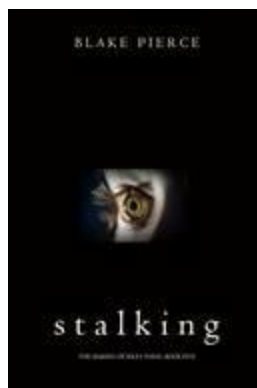
and to her new partnership with her mentor, Jake. She is starting to feel confident in her abilities—when this new case lands. It is a case that shocks her, that stumps her, and that rocks her self confidence to its very core.

What do these two girls have in common? Why can't she figure it out? Is this killer as diabolical as she suspects?

The only way to find out is for Riley to enter the dark canals of the killer's mind, to stare into the precipice of darkness—and to hope that it doesn't swallow her alive.

An action-packed thriller with heart-pounding suspense, *STALKING* is book #5 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. It takes readers back 20 plus years—to how Riley's career began—and is the perfect complement to the *ONCE GONE* series (A Riley Paige Mystery), which includes 15 books and counting.

Book #6 in *THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE* series will be available soon.



[STALKING](#)
(The Making of Riley Paige—Book 5)

Did you know that I've written multiple novels in the mystery genre? If you haven't read all my series, click the image below to download a series starter!



Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fifteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting).

[ONCE GONE](#) (a Riley Paige Mystery--Book #1), [BEFORE HE KILLS](#) (A Mackenzie White Mystery—Book 1), [CAUSE TO KILL](#) (An Avery Black Mystery—Book 1), [A TRACE OF DEATH](#) (A Keri Locke Mystery—Book 1), and [WATCHING](#) (The Making of Riley Paige—Book 1) are each available as a free download on Amazon!

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.

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

A JESSIE HUNT PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

THE PERFECT WIFE (Book #1)
THE PERFECT BLOCK (Book #2)
THE PERFECT HOUSE (Book #3)
THE PERFECT SMILE (Book #4)
THE PERFECT LIE (Book #5)

CHLOE FINE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

NEXT DOOR (Book #1)
A NEIGHBOR'S LIE (Book #2)
CUL DE SAC (Book #3)
SILENT NEIGHBOR (Book #4)
HOMECOMING (Book #5)
TINTED WINDOWS (Book #6)

KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES

IF SHE KNEW (Book #1)
IF SHE SAW (Book #2)
IF SHE RAN (Book #3)
IF SHE HID (Book #4)
IF SHE FLED (Book #5)
IF SHE FEARED (Book #6)

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE SERIES

WATCHING (Book #1)
WAITING (Book #2)
LURING (Book #3)
TAKING (Book #4)
STALKING (Book #5)

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)
ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)
ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)
ONCE LURED (Book #4)
ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)
ONCE PINED (Book #6)

ONCE FORSAKEN (Book #7)
ONCE COLD (Book #8)
ONCE STALKED (Book #9)
ONCE LOST (Book #10)
ONCE BURIED (Book #11)
ONCE BOUND (Book #12)
ONCE TRAPPED (Book #13)
ONCE DORMANT (Book #14)
ONCE SHUNNED (Book #15)
ONCE MISSED (Book #16)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)
BEFORE HE SEES (Book #2)
BEFORE HE COVETS (Book #3)
BEFORE HE TAKES (Book #4)
BEFORE HE NEEDS (Book #5)
BEFORE HE FEELS (Book #6)
BEFORE HE SINS (Book #7)
BEFORE HE HUNTS (Book #8)
BEFORE HE PREYS (Book #9)
BEFORE HE LONGS (Book #10)
BEFORE HE LAPSES (Book #11)
BEFORE HE ENVIES (Book #12)
BEFORE HE STALKS (Book #13)

AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES

CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)
CAUSE TO RUN (Book #2)
CAUSE TO HIDE (Book #3)
CAUSE TO FEAR (Book #4)
CAUSE TO SAVE (Book #5)
CAUSE TO DREAD (Book #6)

KERI LOCKE MYSTERY SERIES

A TRACE OF DEATH (Book #1)
A TRACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
A TRACE OF VICE (Book #3)
A TRACE OF CRIME (Book #4)
A TRACE OF HOPE (Book #5)